STALIN'S COLLECTIVIZATION AND THE 1932–1933 GREAT FAMINE IN SOVIET AND ROMANIAN NARRATIVES: THE CASE STUDY OF THE "MOLDAVIAN PIEDMONT" (Mid-1920s – 1947)

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Received: May 12th, 2023 Accepted for publication: July 3rd, 2023

Abstract: Until 1934, Royal Romania did not establish a diplomatic mission inside the USSR. However, the country shared a common border with the Bolshevik state and dealt with Soviet refugees escaping persecution, repressions, collectivization, and famine throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Romanians were aware of the ongoing tragedy on their eastern border beyond the Dniester River. From the Soviet perspective, the Romanian monarchy was a rival enemy due to incompatible political and economic systems. Romanian and Soviet geopolitical interests were likewise mutually exclusive. While Romanians were concerned about the fate of the Ukrainian SSR's Romanian-speaking population and the Kremlin's claims on Bessarabia, the Soviets intended to recover the latter lost imperial Russian province and export their ideology westward.

Soviet collectivization in the late 1920s–early 1930s and the Great Soviet Famine of 1932–1933 are often discussed by the general public, widely exploited by politicians, and contentiously investigated by scholars. Researchers rely on available archival material and existing scholarship to explore and interpret these dramatic events. This paper examines Soviet and Romanian narratives about collectivization and the famine based on unexplored and, in some cases, rarely used, sources published contemporaneously or shortly after these events. The author relies on books, textbooks, poetry, children's literature, and articles published in the Moldavian ASSR and Greater Romania.

This article's purpose is twofold: first, it will focus on how collectivization and repression were justified and propagated through Soviet publications; second, it will examine how authors in Romania portrayed the USSR, described Stalin's collectivization, and expressed their views about the Great Soviet Famine. In both cases, Moldavian autonomy in Soviet Ukraine—bordering Greater Romania—is the main focus of this research. The paper demonstrates that while Soviet narratives praised Stalin's USSR and its agrarian reforms, by contrast, Romanian narratives criticized all things Soviet. This

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article highlights the suffering of peasants, the ineffectiveness of collectivization and its negative impact on citizens' lives. It also illustrates how the Soviet Union and Romania employed books, children's literature, and other publications as reliable tools to propagate their ideological agenda, justify domestic and foreign policies, and attribute wrongdoings and crimes to their political rivals.

Keywords: Collectivization; Great Soviet Famine; Holodomor in Ukraine; Moldavian ASSR; Romania.

Introduction[1]

From the early stages of its foundation, the USSR was a focus of attention for politicians, the military, journalists, scholars, and other interested members of the public. This interest began with the November 1917 Bolshevik coup d'état when Vladimir Lenin took power in Russia and continued with the consequent Civil War and peace that the Bolsheviks signed with the Germans in March 1918. As a result of these developments, post-imperial Russia became an enemy and rival of the West. Furthermore, the new Soviet state-imposed communist ideology and the nature of Moscow's domestic policies and foreign relations placed the nascent USSR at the top of the West's geopolitical agenda.

The USSR quickly became a popular subject in scholarship and anti-Bolshevik propaganda. John Reed's "Ten Days That Shook the World"—first published in 1919 and in continuous re-print ever since[2]—opened the door to what later became Sovietology or Soviet studies. Echoing Reed's famous title, the world was indeed "shocked" when it later learned the real Soviet story.[3] Books uncovering the other side of the coin and revealing Bolshevik crimes under Lenin's leadership were complimented by thousands of publications revealing the horrors of Stalinism.[4] In addition to themes of industrialization

[1] This research draws on scholarship funded by the Temerty Post-Doctoral Fellowship of the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. I am grateful to Bohdan Klid for his constructive guidance and support throughout my fellowship. Special thanks to Larysa Bilous and the anonymous reviewers of the *Historical Yearbook* for their thoughtful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article. I am also appreciative of Sean D. Patterson's proofreading and editing services. The author acknowledges that proofreading and editing services were covered by the Professional Development Fund from Red Deer Polytechnic in Red Deer, AB, Canada.

[2] John Reed, *Writings of John Reed: "Ten Days that Shook the World", and Other Essays* (St. Petersburg, Fla.: Red and Black Publishers, 2011).

[3] Julien Steinberg, *Verdict of Three Decades: From the Literature of Individual Revolt against Soviet Communism: 1917–1950* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1950).

[4] James Ryan, *Lenin's Terror: The Ideological Origins of Early Soviet State Violence* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012); Martin McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism* (Harlow: Longman, 2014).

and purges, collectivization and the Great Soviet Famine became focal points of scholarly investigation.

Western scholars studied Stalin's collectivization campaign and the Great Soviet Famine of 1932–1933 long before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the USSR's collapse in 1991. While Soviet academics also researched collectivization, such studies generally omitted details about starvation, the negative impact of state food requisitions, and the death of millions in Soviet Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine. Not until Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* did historians and ordinary citizens learn about these "black spots" of Soviet history. The opening of the archives in the late 1980s and the independence gained by the former Soviet republics facilitated the emergence of new scholarly perspectives. Now, academics could shed more light on the dark sides of a largely unknown and often distorted Soviet past. Moreover, they now had better opportunities to study the under-investigated subject of the Great Soviet Famine, better known in Ukraine and globally as the Holodomor—or "death by hunger."[5]

In addition to North American and Western European scholarship, historians in former Soviet satellite states like Poland and Romania also dedicated their research to collectivization and the famine. Due to Warsaw's national interests and interwar geopolitics, Poland constantly monitored the Kremlin's activities in Soviet-occupied Western Belarus and Western Ukraine. The Poles showed great concern for the unfolding collectivization, repressions and famine. Polish consulates in Ukraine and Soviet refugees provided alarming information and reports about people starving to death in Ukraine and other parts of Stalin's USSR.[6] At the same time, while Royal Romania did not have a diplomatic mission on Soviet soil until 1934, it shared a common border with the Bolsheviks' state, accepted Soviet refugees, and was aware of the ongoing tragedy beyond its eastern borders.[7]

The purpose of this article is twofold. After a brief overview of Moscow and Bucharest's relations, the following questions will be addressed: (1) how was collectivization justified and propagated through the publications of the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Moldavian ASSR or MASSR); and (2) how did Romania portray the USSR, describe the collectivization campaign, and expose the Great Famine in the Soviet Moldavian borderland. This article's research is based on materials, primarily in

[5] A collection of essays on this subject is worth mentioning. See *Contextualizing the Holodomor: The Impact of Thirty Years of Ukrainian Famine Studies*, ed. Andrij Makuch and Frank E Sysyn (Edmonton-Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2015).

[6] Robert Kuśnierz, *In the World of Stalinist Crimes: Ukraine in the Years of the Purges and Terror (1934–1938) from the Polish Perspective* (Edmonton, Toronto: CIUS Press, 2020), 4-5.

[7] Alexandru-Murad Mironov, "And Quiet Flows the Dniester. Life and Death on the Romanian-Soviet Border, 1918-1940," *Arhivele Totalitarismului* 19, no. 3-4 (2011): 32-58.

the Romanian language, but also in Russian and English, such as books, textbooks, children's literature, and articles from the MASSR and Romania published contemporaneously or shortly after these events. This article argues that while Soviet narratives praised Stalin's USSR and its agrarian reforms, by contrast, Romanian narratives criticized all things Soviet. It highlights the suffering of peasants, the ineffectiveness of collectivization, and the latter's negative impact on citizens' lives. Lastly, it illustrates how the Soviet Union and Romania employed narratives in publications as propagandistic instruments to support their ideological platforms and justify the domestic and foreign policies they aimed against each other.

The Enemies: Greater Romania and the Soviets

After the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 and the 1905-1907 Russian Revolution, the Great War completely destabilized the Russian state's socio-economic and political situation. The year 1917 proved fatal for the empire. After its collapse, it re-emerged in new forms. First as a short-lived democratic Russian republic under the Provisional Government and then as a Soviet totalitarian state. Complex geopolitical and internal factors caused these changes in political regimes and led to the country's territorial disintegration. The treaties signed by the Bolsheviks with the Germans, Poles, and others not only forced Moscow to accept Russia's circumscribed territory and new international borders but also led to the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Weimar Republic, Poland, and the Baltic States.

Romania, however, was an exception from this cycle of international events. It was not an equal partner in the post-war geopolitical framework after Soviet Russia broke off diplomatic relations with Bucharest in 1918. Generally, relations between the two neighbours had become complicated after the creation of Romania in the mid-1800s. The western part of the Principality of Moldavia and the Principality of Wallachia united in 1859, giving birth to the new Balkan nation-state of Romania in 1862. The political elites of this new polity wished to incorporate Bessarabia (Eastern Moldavia) into their nation-building project.[8] Therefore, after 1812 Bessarabia became a major stumbling block for Russian-Romanian relations. While subjected to Russification, the province's Romanian-speaking Moldavians—or Romanians as per Karl Marx[9]—still preserved their cultural character and fought to maintain their language and traditions.

[8] This principality's eastern territories, known as Bessarabia, were annexed by the Russian Empire in 1812 after the conclusion of the Russo-Turkish War of 1806–1812. A few decades earlier, in 1775, the Ottoman Porte ceded Moldavia's north-western territories of Bukovina to the Habsburgs.

[9] Karl Marx, *Însemnări despre români (Manuscrise inedite)* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei RPR, 1965), 30-31.

Like other non-Russian regions of the collapsing empire, the 1917 February Revolution led to significant transformations in Bessarabia. A revolutionary national liberation movement emerged, and by the end of the year, local elites proclaimed the creation of the Moldavian Democratic Republic (MDR). However, similar to Ukraine and Belarus, locals were divided into various groups with conflicting plans for the future; many foresaw this polity as part of a new Russian state. As the situation evolved, some sought Bessarabia as a Bolshevik-controlled region, while others wished to preserve its newly proclaimed autonomy. However, the declaration of Ukrainian independence in January 1918 and then the MDR's independence in February led to another significant event. In April 1918, the Sfatul Țării (the local assembly) voted for the union of Bessarabia (the MDR) with Romania. This political act produced a significant rupture between Soviet Russians and post-Great War Romanians.

The union of Bessarabia with Romania represented Bucharest's first step towards building a "Greater Romania." In response, the Soviets severed diplomatic relations with Romania. They considered Bessarabia as temporarily occupied by a foreign country and claimed it as Soviet territory. The Kremlin constantly challenged Romania diplomatically, ideologically, and geopolitically to achieve their designs on Bessarabia. They created a short-lived Bessarabian SSR in 1919 and then the Moldavian ASSR in 1924 in the territory of Soviet Ukraine. In 1924 they also instigated an anti-Romanian uprising in Bessarabia and raised the so-called "Bessarabian Question" in the international arena. By contrast, Bucharest insisted that Bessarabia was historically a Romanian land and justified the 1918 Act of Great Union. Moscow, in turn, stated that the region had been unlawfully annexed and must be returned to the Soviet Motherland. Neither Romania nor the Soviet Union was willing to concede, and no compromise was reached over the highly disputed region of Bessarabia. Ultimately, the USSR returned the territory by force in 1940, threatening Romania with military invasion should the latter not evacuate the province within a couple of days—Romania complied.

It is worth noting that while no formal diplomatic relations existed before 1934, political communication continued between these two countries. Bessarabia's status required clarification, the question of Romania's national treasure needed resolution,[10] and the ongoing problem of illegal border crossers and refugees demanded discussion. Romania and the USSR shared a common border on the Dniester River.[11] The Romanians saw the river as an international border, while the Soviets regarded it as a temporary demarcation line, causing many troubles for both sides. Amidst the general chaos of the 1920s, the

[10] Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 2000), 38.

[11] Vadim Guzun, *Chestiunea refugiaților de peste Nistru: documente diplomatice și ale Serviciilor Române de Informații: 1919–1936* (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2012).

Russian Civil War, anti-Jewish pogroms, famine, and other developments east of the Dniester River, thousands were pushed to flee Soviet Russia and the emerging Ukrainian state to find refuge in Romania, Poland, and elsewhere. On the other hand, Soviet spies, agitators, agents, and provocateurs crossed the Dniester to spread Bolshevik propaganda inside Bessarabia and destabilize Romania as a whole.[12] The Soviets accomplished these operations in no small part due to assistance from Romanian communists.[13]

Such were the relations between Romania and its eastern neighbour in the years leading up to Stalin's forced collectivization drive at the end of the 1920s and the famine of 1932–1933. However, even as the famine ravaged areas of Soviet Ukraine bordering Romania and refugees were machine-gunned down by the OGPU[14] on the Dniester, Bucharest had no opportunity to satisfactorily consolidate its relations with Moscow. Territorial disputes and ideological differences resulted in a state of perpetual mutual distrust. Additionally, Ukrainian nationalism and concerns over Soviet Ukrainians' "political reliability and loyalty"[15] toward the Kremlin compelled the Bolsheviks to keep a close eye on Romania and, by extension, Poland.

The Wording of Collectivization and Class Struggle in the Moldavian ASSR

Political rivals use propaganda to denigrate their opponents by depicting them in the darkest colours. On the other hand, this same tool is employed by each side to present itself in the most eulogistic and positive manner and conceal their most undesirable sides.

The Soviets' "Moldavian Piedmont": Self-Praise and Propaganda

The Kingdom of Piedmont and Sardinia served as a political magnet for Italy's unification process and also represented a military force capable of fighting Austria. The Kremlin employed the so-called "Piedmont Principle"—a term coined by Terry Martin[16]—in domestic nationality policy and foreign relations during the interwar era. At home, the Bolsheviks first created several polities that co-founded the USSR alongside Russia. These included the Belorussian and Ukrainian Soviet Republics and the Transcaucasian SFSR.

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[12] Ludmila Rotari, *Mişcarea subversivă din Basarabia în anii 1918–1924* (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2004).

[13] Vadim Guzun, *Indezirabilii: aspecte mediatice, umanitare şi de securitate privind emigraţia din Uniunea Sovietică în România interbelică* (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2013), 163-174.

[14] The OGPU stands for the Soviets' Joint State Political Directorate. The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) was its successor.

[15] George O. Liber, *Soviet Nationality Policy, Urban Growth, and Identity Change in the Ukrainian SSR, 1923-1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 172.

[16] Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 9.

Subsequently, the Soviets created various autonomous ethnic minority districts and republics, such as the Karelian ASSR within the RSFSR, and the Polish National District and the MASSR inside Soviet Ukraine. Through these entities, the USSR aimed to challenge the national territorial integrity of Finland, Poland, and Romania. In addition, the Kremlin planned to spread Bolshevism in Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

The Soviets formalized Moldavian territorial autonomy as an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, appearing on the USSR's political map in 1924. With about half a million inhabitants, its population was comprised of almost 50% Ukrainians and about 30% Romanian-speaking Moldavians. The remaining ethnicities included Russians, Poles, Bulgarians, Jews, Gypsies, amongst others.[17] Although this republic was "Moldavian" in name only, it was intended as a "Moldavian Piedmont" designed to target Romania and attract Bessarabia's population toward Stalin's "paradise." The cities of Balta and, after 1929, Tiraspol were the *de facto* capitals of this Moldavian republic. However, the Soviets claimed Chisinau as the *de jure* capital. According to the Bolshevik's narrative, the city was located in temporarily Romanian-occupied Bessarabia. To Moscow and Kyiv, the western border of the MASSR, Ukrainian SSR, and the USSR extended to the Prut River. Soviet political maps showed Bessarabia as an integral part of the Soviet Motherland, while the Dniester was a temporary demarcation line between the USSR and Romania. By contrast, Romanians wanted to believe that the Dniester was a legitimate international border between the two countries.[18]

Once created, the Moldavian ASSR had to be presented and popularized through propaganda, media, and scholarship. All means were employed to show not only to the Soviet people but also to the entire world that Moscow took care of its ethnic minorities and had not given up its fight to recover Bessarabia. Besides newspapers[19] and journals,[20] numerous monographs and other kinds of publications began to fill the shelves of bookstores, libraries, and classrooms. In 1926, just two years after the MASSR's creation, a certain M. N. Bochacher published a brochure entitled "Moldavia." The author dedicated it to all "who perished in the struggle to liberate a bleeding Bessarabia."[21] The work's twelve chapters and appendix with documents offer readers an overview of the MASSR, its territory, people, borders, and how and why it was created.

[17] Oleg Galushchenko, *Naselenie Moldavskoi ASSR, 1924–1940 gg.* (Kishinev: Tipografia Akademii Nauk, 2001), 23.

[18] See Florin Anghel, "Eastern Borderlands as 'Cordon Sanitaire': Romanian and Polish Frontiers in Interwar Geopolitics," *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio F. Historia* 68, no. 1 (2012): 53-54.

[19] For example, *Plugarul Roş* [*The Red Ploughman*] and *Moldova Socialistă* [*Socialist Moldova*]

[20] For example, *Krasnaia Bessarabia* [*Red Bessarabia*].

[21] M. N. Bochacher, *Moldavia* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1926).

Although written before collectivization and the famine, the publication's narrative reveals the Soviet approach toward state-building on a border with an enemy country.

Since agriculture and the village economy were essential to the Bolsheviks, Bochacher emphasized the fate of the peasants and spoke about life in Moldavia's countryside under Soviet rule. From the book's first pages, the author relies heavily on a compare-and-contrast method. For example, Bochacher argues that peasants from the territories within the MASSR and Bessarabia enjoyed a much better life after the Romanovs integrated them into their realm in 1792 and 1812.[22] According to him, the population in Ottoman-controlled western Moldavia and later in unified Romania suffered from cruelties, "neo-serfdom," and a lack of freedom.[23] Furthermore, he writes that due to Romania's establishment of an "inquisitorial regime" in Bessarabia after 1918, hundreds of thousands of refugees left for the USSR in search of a better life.[24] However, according to modern Romanian scholarship, the picture looks utterly different. Contrary to Bochacher's claims, thousands of Soviet refugees crossed the Dniester River into Romania to escape the ongoing Russian Civil War, famine, pogroms, and terror throughout the 1920s and 1930s.[25]

In the context of the so-called "triumphal march" of Soviet power in the countryside, the first collective farms (kolkhozes) were already organized by the mid-1920s, pre-dating Stalin's forced collectivization campaign in 1928. Bochacher highlights collectivization in a separate sub-chapter, stating that only two percent of the land belonged to collective farms in the MASSR by January 1925. According to the text, these collective farms acted as transformers of the traditional village and "distinguish[ed] themselves with a high productivity."[26] In his view, the kolkhozes played an essential role in the socialist economy, and their numerical growth continued in this "bready" region of the USSR.[27] As for the inhabitants, including peasants of all ethnicities, Bochacher writes that they welcomed Soviet power and supported it against "banditry and counterrevolutionary elements."[28] Such statements are far from the realities of the 1920s and early 1930s. Most peasants within the MAASR, as in the rest of the USSR, opposed and resisted collectivization even prior to when it became

[22] Since the late Middle Ages, Romanian-speaking Moldavians populated the territories east of the Dniester River. After this river became a new frontier between the Ottomans and Russians in 1792, left-bank Moldavians became subjects of the Romanovs. Twenty years later, in 1812, the same happened to right-bank Moldavians in Russian Bessarabia until they united with Romania in 1918.
[23] Bochacher, *Moldavia,* 8-9.
[24] Ibid., 9.
[25] Guzun, *Indezirabilii* 37-57.
[26] Bochacher, *Moldavia*, 25, 39.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 39-40.

mandatory. Bochacher speaks of the class struggle in the countryside, early dekulakization, and tensions resulting from poor land management forced on the peasants by the Soviets.[29] The villagers wanted to benefit from Lenin's Decree on Land,[30] live a peaceful life, and not suffer from War Communism[31] and terrible famines like that of 1921–1922, which the author describes as a "spontaneous famine."[32]

When the Bolsheviks resolved to implement mass collectivization, it was not only announced to the people through the Communist Party's or Soviet government's decisions. In 1929, in Ukraine's Moldavian Autonomous Republic, the authorities published a small-size book entitled "[We] Will Transform the MASSR Into A Collective Farm Entirely" in Moldavian (Cyrillic Romanian).[33] The book's print run was 10,000 copies—a seemingly significant number for a mainly rural population of 172,000 ethnic Moldavians.[34] According to the author, a certain Bogopolski, collectivization was to signal a new era of agrarian transformation and solve the problem of bread and grain shortages in the country.[35] He believed, or at least wrote, that thanks to collectivization, left-bank Moldavia would be transformed into a prosperous collective farming paradise within a mere eighteen months.[36] However, at the time this propagandistic literature reached its readers, only nine percent of land had been collectivized in the MASSR. Bogopolski explains away this statistic as the result of class struggle and sabotage from the side of "the rich [peasants] and their bootlickers."[37] Readers are instructed to fight against anti-Soviet elements and not to let them join the kolkhozes as saboteurs would obstruct the socialist transformation of the countryside. One can only imagine the potential outcomes of such calls against the well-to-do peasantry or anyone disloyal to the Soviet regime and Communist Party. Subjected to social ostracism, dekulakization, and deprived of agricultural land and other possessions, such people were not expected to survive and were doomed to suffer from repression or die of starvation.

[29] Ibid., 40.
[30] David R. Marples, *Lenin's Revolution: Russia, 1917–1921* (England/Longman, Harlow, 2000), 49.
[31] War Communism (1918–1921) affected the post-imperial Russian economy and society. In the the countryside, it involved the mandatory requisitions of surplus grain and other agricultural products from the peasants. See David R. Marples, *Russia in the Twentieth Century: The Quest for Stability* (Routledge, 2014), 42-45
[32] Bochacher, *Moldavia*, 54.
[33] H. Bogopolski, *Om prifaci RASSM în colectiv dilaolaltî* (Tîrgu Tiraşpol: Editura di Stat a Moldovii, 1929).
[34] Galushchenko, *Naselenie Moldavskoi ASSR*, 10.
[35] Bogopolski, *Om prifaci*, 5-7.
[36] Ibid., 8-9.
[37] Ibid., 9.

Further publications by authors praising Stalin's collectivization and mourning the fate of Bessarabia were timed to coincide with Soviet anniversaries. In 1932, a work by M. A. Balukh summarizes the results of the October Revolution's fifteenth anniversary and eight years of the MASSR. It appears this publication pursued two goals. First, it compares in detail the "Two Worlds – The World of Socialism and the World of Capitalism." The sharp contrast was apparent. In the propagandist's view, the Soviet Union was nothing short of a paradise, a country with no unemployment and unaffected by the Great Depression. Secondly, Balukh argues that collectivization had succeeded and that the "giant bread-making factories" represented yet another proof of the socialist economy's advantage over capitalist alternatives.[38]

Balukh dedicates an entire chapter to the Moldavian ASSR. Concerning geopolitics, its title spoke for itself: "The Soviet Republic – On the Two Banks [of the Dniester River]." The title stresses the Soviets claim on Romanian Bessarabia as part of the USSR and how the central authorities in Moscow kept a close eye on developments in the region. The reader is informed how left-bank Moldavia flourished in Soviet Ukraine, whereas right-bank Moldavia, or Bessarabia, was in deep economic decline and whose population suffered from oppression. Balukh describes Romania as a country reliant on European credit to develop its military industry and uncaring for its own people.[39] By contrast, when depicting the Soviet countryside, the author describes life in the MASSR in the brightest colours. Collective farming dominated, the electrification of villages was in rapid progress, and the mechanization of agricultural production had bolstered harvests by up to 200%.[40]

As one may expect, the author presents life in "fascist" Romania as unbearable. In his view, inflation was ravaging people's lives, the prices of crops were catastrophically falling, and suffering and injustice were endemic under the Romanian yoke. Most importantly, considering the book was published in 1932, when millions were dying from hunger in the USSR, one excerpt, in particular, demonstrates how Bolsheviks employed fanciful thinking to create the false image of a "Moldavian Piedmont." Balukh presents the reader with a letter allegedly written by a Bessarabian peasant to his sibling who had left Romania for the USSR and worked in Ukraine's Donbas region:

> Dear Brother! I want to tell you about our situation and how we live [in Bessarabia, Romania]. Well, we enjoy a beautiful life, like a dog in a winter storm. Because I had not paid my agricultural taxes, our village collector confiscated everything I had in the house: tables,

[38] M.A. Balukh, *Cu ce vine URSS către animia Octiabrului a 15-a, şî RASSM în veţuirea de 8 ani* (Tiraşpolea-Balta, 1932), 8-11.
[39] Ibid., 30-34, 39.
[40] Ibid., 44-48.

> chairs, clothing, and rugs. My dear brother! We suffer now as never before. Many of our villagers die from hunger and poverty.[41]

As there is no clear indication of the writer's location, today's reader could conclude that the letter's content is actually referring to daily life in Stalin's USSR during the era of collectivization, grain requisition, and famine. It is well-known that in the USSR, villagers were subjected to heavy taxation and deprived of farmland, livestock, houses, and more.[42]

Similarly, in 1934, when people in Soviet Ukraine and other parts of the USSR had not yet recovered from the famine, a brochure by G. I. Bulat emphasized the glorious celebration of the MASSR's tenth anniversary. The text highlights the autonomous republic's positive developments and assesses, in upbeat tones, the socio-economic situation in 1934 compared to 1924. Besides successes in industry, education, and other spheres of socialist construction, the author describes the transformations in rural areas. Bulat reports that the economic results for 1934—when the Moldavian kolkhozes sowed crops in spring "despite unfavourable climatic conditions" and collected a good harvest in the fall—confirmed that collective farming was the best solution for organizing labour in Soviet villages.[43]

However, one may read between the lines of these claims. The publication fails to mention the grain procurement campaign, the fate of the well-to-do peasants labelled as "kulaks," and the difficulties with food supplies during the Great Soviet Famine. Although the year 1933 appears in the narrative a couple of times, it is mentioned only in the context of Moldavian kolkhozes, which were allegedly the first ones in the Ukrainian SSR to fulfill the state's grain plan and paid farmers up to seven kilograms of grain per work-day [sic!].[44] Furthermore, although the author says nothing explicitly about peasant resistance, when it came to organizing collective farms in this Soviet borderland, the following statement suggests that not everything was progressing smoothly: "In May 1933, the party's regional and raion committees chose and sent the best 400 Communists to the countryside to obtain decisive successes" [in Sovietizing villagers].[45]

Constructing new men, or "homini sovietici," in the urban and rural areas of the entire USSR, including Soviet Moldavia, required considerable

[41] Ibid. 46.
[42] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 26-27, 125, 132, 148, 246.
[43] G.I. Bulat, *10 ani RASSM* (Tiraspol-Balta, 1934), 6.
[44] Ibid., 4.
[45] Ibid., 9.

efforts on the part of the Bolsheviks.[46] In contrast to urbanites, who benefited from more commodities and opportunities in the city, villagers were seen as backward and less fortunate in many ways. As a result, the Soviets opened more schools, libraries and other facilities.[47] In the countryside, the government also created children's institutions and public catering to encourage support for the Party's village reforms amongst peasant women and to convince them to join the kolkhozes willingly. Thanks to such novelties, the authorities believed rural women would have more free time to engage in life and work at the collective farms and not waste their time in the kitchen.[48] In addition to these benefits, as explained in a brochure for peasant wives in the MASSR, their children would be taught in the kindergarten to become true patriots and "hate the priests, *chiaburi* (Romanian for kulaks) and other enemies of the working class people."[49]

Left home alone or attending kindergarten or school, Soviet children represented the populace's youngest group targeted by the state-sponsored propaganda machine. After all, according to Stalin's theory, "building socialism in one country, taken separately" was not an easy task.[50] Therefore, the Soviet educational system managed children's indoctrination, starting at their earliest life stage via textbooks and literature. An educational primer, or *Abecedar* as it was called in the MASSR, was not only meant to teach pupils the art of reading. Everything was important in a Soviet book: concept, narrative, and images. A textbook's components had to serve the primary goal of shaping a New Man—a Soviet Man. From primers, students learned about the advantages of socialism over capitalism and absorbed knowledge about the various urban and rural communist transformations under Stalin's leadership and guidance.

Thus, a few years after the Moldavian Autonomous Republic was carved out of southwestern Soviet Ukraine, the Ministry of Education offered young Romanian-speaking Moldavians their first primer.[51] Although published before mass collectivization had started, the idea of collectivization and the benefit of peasants working together was omnipresent. Hence, the primer reads that "work in a collective farm was easier and more useful" in contrast to individual households, and more productive.[52] A similar narrative surfaced in

[46] Essential research on this particular subject was published by Octavian Ţâcu, *Homo Moldovanus Sovietic: teorii şi practici de construcţie identitară în R(A)SSM (1924-1989)* (Editura Arc: Chisinau, 2019), 194-204.
[47] Frances Saddington, "Modelling the Socialist Kindergarten in the Early Soviet Picture Book," *History* 104, no. 361 (2019): 22
[48] I. Vărticeanu, *Colhoznicei despre grădina de copii* (Tiraspol, 1934), 3.
[49] Ibid., p. 6-7.
[50] Roman Brackman, *The Secret File of Joseph Stalin: A Hidden Life* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2004), 166.
[51] A. Dodul, Raţ-David, *Bucheri Moldovinesc pentru copchii mai în vârstî din şcolili di lichidari a niştiinşâi dei carti* (Balta, 1927).
[52] Ibid., 23, 42-43, 52-53, 91-97

primers published during the 1932–1933 famine. The "collective" and "collective work" persisted everywhere: in the city factory, in the rural kolkhoz, and at school, where even the "desk is collective."[53] Moreover, as the policies of transforming the countryside into a large farming community and dekulakization were made mandatory, children were expected to remember that the well-to-do farmers and the servants of the Church were enemies of the Soviet state. Here is a short excerpt from that textbook:

> *Chiaburul* (the kulak) works against the collective [farm]. He is helped with this by the priests, and they prevent us from building a new [socialist] life. They wish to live on the backs of the poor and exploit them. With total collectivization, we are destroying the kulaks as a class.[54]

Indeed, as documents reveal, Soviet authorities persecuted and punished innocent, hardworking farmers and their families who rejected voluntary membership in the kolkhozes.[55] Furthermore, although the text did not mention "the enemies of people," one may assume that readers, particularly rural children and adults, were well aware of the state's terror and its victims in their villages. Heavy taxes had to be paid, food shortages loomed, and famine followed.

As the 1933 school year approached in a country where millions were starving to death, and hundreds crossed international borders to survive,[56] an updated edition of the *Abecedar*–primer praised the happy life of the Soviet people and the fruitful partnership between workers and peasants. The textbook's narrative told young readers and their parents about the remarkable results of Stalin's collectivization. The primer's pages also reminded students how the Great October Revolution had brought happiness to everyone, including the peasants to whom Vladimir I. Lenin had freely given the land they so desired.[57] One may conclude that Soviet realities did not correspond with what the government taught in schools in order to justify and propagate its harsh policies.

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[53] I. Onufrievici, Ignatovici, Moscalenko, Sandulenco, *Abecedar pentru şcolile moldoveneşti. Grupa.* (Tiraspol: 1932, 4-7), 10, 21.
[54] Ibid., 38.
[55] Arhiva Organizaţiilor Social-Politice din Republica Moldova (AOSPRM), F. 49, Inv. 1, File 1714: 2-8.
[56] Alberto Basciani, "From Collectivization to the Great Famine: Eyewitness Statements on the Holodomor by Refugees from the Ukrainian SSR 1930–1933," *Holodomor Studies* 3, no. 1-2, (2011): 1-27.
[57] *Abecedar*, 5-7, 21-22, 31-33, 52.

Every child born in the USSR was supposed to know the story of a pioneer named Pavlik Morozov. Thanks to mythmakers and propaganda, that little boy became an embodiment of heroism, patriotism, and devotion to the Party cause and Soviet state.[58] As Anatol Rapoport writes, Morozov became "an authentic Soviet saint" for his struggle against the kulaks and especially because of his murder.[59] Generally, the denunciation and exposure of people who resisted collectivization or were dissatisfied with the Soviet regime were a common attribute of daily life in Stalin's USSR. Distrust, watchful suspicion, and vigilance were all "an important part of the Communist mentalité."[60]

The authorities expected such an approach toward one's duty as a Communist or ordinary Soviet citizen to be undertaken in all corners of the country regardless of age, occupation, religion, or ethnic belonging. After all, the USSR was domestically portrayed as a citadel under siege, constantly challenged by "enemies of the people" and internationally threatened by imperialists. Vigilance and the unmasking of all sorts of saboteurs and social vermin were even more critical in areas near international borders. Every citizen's moral obligation was to keep an eye on the border and report any suspicious activities, occurrences, or persons to the OGPU border guards. Soviet education and propaganda prepared children for such tasks by weaponizing children's literature.

In the MASSR, one book focusing on this theme appeared on the shelves in the mid-1930s. It was titled *Micul Grănicier* [*The Young Border Guard*] and contained four short stories. The first story tells of a little boy named Alioşa Verian who loved to play in the kolkhoz's gardens. Notably, the collective farm's property was near the border with Romania, where the boy would pretend to be a vigilant border guard ready to catch the enemy. Thanks to his hand-made improvised binoculars, Alioşa saw that the gardens in Bessarabia were abandoned and that life under the Romanians was tough. The story continues with NKVD border guards befriending the boy and telling him they are confident that the young fellow would know what to do not "if" but "when" an illegal border crossing occurs. The story ends when on one of the darkest nights, Alioşa helps the border guards locate and neutralize an enemy coming from Romania. For this deed, the little hero is awarded a small calibre rifle with an engraving of his name on a silver plaque and the patriotic inscription: "[to a] young guardian of the red border."[61]

[58] More details on this subject in Catriona Kelly, *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero* (London: Granta, 2006).
[59] Anatol Rapoport, *The Origins of Violence: Approaches to the Study of Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2020), 139.
[60] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 19.
[61] Alexii Groza, *Micul Grănicier* (Tiraspol-Balta, 1935), 3-10.

The next two stories specifically emphasize class antagonisms in the Soviet village during and after collectivization. In the first one, the narrative speaks of Goraş, another small child who learns from his father that the kulaks damaged a kolkhoz threshing machine in a neighbouring village. This news concerns the little patriot who worries that a similar act of sabotage might strike his village. Consumed by worries and unable to sleep, the boy assures himself that everything is in order with the kolkhoz's socialist property. But all is not well. Here, readers learn that if not for Goraş's vigilance, then a certain Varlam Vârcolac's treacherous plan to wreck the machinery and cross the border into Romania would have succeeded.[62] Vârcolac[63] had been deported with his kulak father in 1932 and unlawfully returned to his former village intending to sabotage the kolkhoz. However, thanks to young Goraş, the enemy failed. Vârcolac was arrested and faced a fair and harsh punishment.[64]

In the final story, one learns of yet another little fellow named Petrică, whose parents' lives are changed after their village is rid of the treacherous kulaks. The Soviet authorities reward the family with an impressive prize of a cow and two trucks loaded with sacks of wheat after harvest for the father's good work in the kolkhoz. Their house was allegedly so small that they did not know where to store so much grain.[65] The Soviets propagated this kind of imaginary happy world not only in children's literature but in other publications as well. For example, the journal *Red Bessarabia* published an article at the very height of the Great Soviet Famine, claiming that kolkhoz leaders were awarding devoted villagers with pigs, money, and grain.[66]

However, these fictional narratives for young audiences were not simply examples of 1930s Soviet propaganda. They were designed to illustrate the authorities' trust in honest citizens and to signal that the state was prepared to foil any domestic sabotage or foreign provocations while defending the building of socialism in the countryside. Even decades after collectivization was completed, narratives similar to those of the 1930s continued to circulate in educational material and scholarship. My peers and I read such stories, formulated according to official Soviet curricula, for history and literature classes in the 1970s. We truly believed and did not question that Pavlik Morozov was a real hero and a victim of class enemies. Teachers and textbooks

[62] Ibid., 11-27.
[63] The name Vârcolac refers to werewolves or vampires in Romanian folklore and mythology. See Barbara Brodman, James E. Doan, *The Universal Vampire: Origins and Evolution of a Legend* (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2013), 53-55.
[64] According to Soviet penal legislation, for such a crime a person would receive years of imprisonment or be subjected to capital punishment.
[65] Groza, *Micul Grănicier*, 33-36.
[66] A. Manuilenko, "Politotdely AMSSR v bor'be za bol'shevistskie kolkhozy," *Krasnaia Bessarabia* 12 (1933): 16-18; Asap, "Prazdnik truda i urozhaia," *Krasnaia Bessarabia* 12 (1933): 20-22.

taught us that collective farming was a progressive transformation of the backward village and that life in the USSR was better than in "bourgeois-landlord" Romania, an "imperialist" country that "mercilessly exploited" Bessarabia.

During the 1930s, Communist authorities not only relied on prose for their propaganda. Soviet poetry also reflected the specifics of the Moldavian ASSR's geopolitics, class struggle, collectivization, and border crossings into enemy soil. A good example is the work by P.V. Corneliu entitled "The Terrible Attempt," which details an illegal crossing into Romania.[67] The poem comprises the book's entire thirty-seven pages and was distributed in 15,000 copies. Although published in 1934, the book reveals details about Moldavia's socio-political transformations, illegal crossings of the Dniester River, and the unenviable fate of traitors who sold out their Motherland to capitalist Romania. When the author writes of Soviet border guards, he portrays them as protectors of the people's power and the new socialist world. However, when referring to their Romanian counterparts, the poem describes these servicemen as defenders of the threshold of death. Moreover, according to the author, while collective farmers in the MASSR enjoyed a good life, Bessarabians suffered injustice under Romanian oppression. Corneliu also "shares" the story of Soviet refugees who fall prey to exploitation from boyar-landowners. The Romanians label the refugees "Bolsheviks" and treat them with cruelty. A key message of the poem is that the only way for defectors to survive and regain a joyful life is to cross the Dniester River again and acknowledge their grave miscalculation of leaving the USSR.[68]

A Look from Across the Border: The Romanian View of the Soviet Village and Villagers

This section discusses literature from Royal Romania about the fate of Soviet villagers during collectivization and the 1932–1933 famine. However, an analysis of the agrarian question and land distribution in Romania is first presented to provide a better understanding of this topic and offer a comparison between interwar Romania and Stalin's USSR.

[67] P.V. Corneliu, *Amarnica 'ncercare* (Tiraspol: Editura de Stat a Moldovei, 1934).

[68] Corneliu, *Amarnica 'ncercare*, passim. All of these narratives illustrate how Soviet literati wrote poetry or prose under censorship only to fit the political agenda of the authorities and stay safe. However, such an expression of devotion did not save them all from Stalinist purges and repressions. See Igor Caşu, *Duşmanul de clasă. Represiuni politice, violenţă şi rezistenţă în R(A)SS Moldovenească, 1924–1956* (Chisinau: Cartier, 2013, 88-108).

Romania and the Agrarian Problem

Historically, land distribution and possession has been a global challenge for elites and ordinary people. Feudalism and serfdom in Europe, the colonization of the so-called "New World," the theft of Indigenous peoples' ancestral territories, and their segregation in "reservations and urban ghettos"[69] are a few examples in this respect that still echo from the distant past. The Romanovs' abolition of Russian serfdom in 1861 failed to solve the empire's land problem; even Stolypin's agrarian reform in the early 1900s failed to do so.[70] After the 1917 Russian Revolution, new circumstances allowed the Bolsheviks to exploit this issue and win the so-called "Russian *muzhik*" to their side thanks to Lenin's Decree on Land.[71]

From a regional perspective, the scarcity of farming land was not only a problem for Imperial Russia. The situation was equally challenging in neighboring Romania, where peasants lacked the required land for survival and suffered injustice from landlords and land lessors. In 1907, a peasant revolt broke out in western Moldavia (northeast of Romania) near Bessarabia. Some scholars have tried to connect this event with the 1905–1907 Russian Revolution since peasants from both countries shared the same land hunger.[72]

It is symbolic that the 1907 peasant revolt in Romania began in a western Moldavian village named Flămânzi, which translates to "famish" or "going hungry." The revolt failed to a large extent. Romania passed punitive laws after the bloody defeat and carried out reprisals against the revolt's participants. The event also caused collective trauma amongst country dwellers and tarnished Romania's international image.[73] Ten years later, social and political turmoil in Russia, alongside the revolutionized masses of the *Rumcherod*'s Russian army,[74] made Romanian authorities anxious about events in

[69] Jill Vickers, *The Politics of Race: Canada, the United States, and Australia* (Ottawa: Golden Dog Press, 2002), 72.

[70] Abraham Ascher, *P. A. Stolypin: The Search for Stability in Late Imperial Russia.* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 161-163.

[71] David Moon, *The Russian Peasantry 1600-1930: The World the Peasants Made*. (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 353-354.

[72] Irina Marin, *Peasant Violence and Antisemitism in Early Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 266-268.

[73] The number of peasants killed varies from 1,000 to 20,000. See Philip Gabriel Eidelberg, *The Great Rumanian Peasant Revolt of 1907. Origins of a Modern Jacquerie* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1974), 1, n. 5; Keith Hitchins, *A Concise History of Romania* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 135-136.

[74] Marko Bojcun, *The Workers' Movement and the National Question in Ukraine: 1897–1918* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2021), 353-355. The *Rumcherod* (Central Executive Committee of the Soviets of the Romanian Front, Black Sea Fleet, and Odessa Oblast) was a short-lived organ of Soviet power in parts of Ukraine and Bessarabia; it functioned for only one year (May 1917 – May 1918). See Jon Smele, *Historical Dictionary of the Russian Civil Wars, 1916-1926* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 959.

Bessarabia. Before and after Bessarabia became part of Romania in 1918, Romanians referred to it as "Bolshevik" and, alongside the Western Powers, feared the spread of Bolshevism in the region, their country, and Europe as a whole.[75]

There were reasons for the Romanians' concerns: the memory of the 1907 revolt was still fresh; Lenin released his Land Decree in 1917; and Bessarabians, regardless of ethnicity, were infected by revolutionary zeal and land hunger. What followed next was a series of preventive measures by the Crown and government to avoid social unrest in the countryside and meet the Romanian peasantry's demands and expectations. First, King Ferdinand I of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen addressed the Romanian peasants in April 1917, promising to give them more land after the end of the Great War. Next, in December 1917, the Sfatul Țării (the Assembly of the Moldavian Democratic Republic[76]) proclaimed the free distribution of land in Bessarabia, a decision supported by Romania's 1921 agrarian reform. That reform consisted of expropriating farming land from existing landlords and its redistribution to the peasants in all the provinces of interwar Romania, including Bessarabia. However, the size of confiscated land often varied from place to place.[77]

As demonstrated in the previous section, Bolshevik propaganda portrayed Romania in an exclusively negative light. The Soviets focused on the hardship of the toilers and peasants in this enemy country for ideological and geopolitical reasons. Whereas in the Soviet countryside, according to the Kremlin's interpretation, all was good (except for the class struggle and resistance to collectivization), in Romania, particularly those in Bessarabia, peasants suffered exploitation and abuses, injustices, taxes, and starvation. The Kingdom of Romania did indeed face problems after the Great War ended; however, there is no evidence of famine or peasant deaths from hunger in Romania as they occurred in the USSR in the early 1920s and 1930s.

On the other hand, as documents and scholarship confirm, some villagers in Bessarabia were far from enjoying an ideal life under Romanian rule. According to Keith Hitchins, the agrarian reform was only partially successful.[78] Although peasants were entitled by law to receive about six hectares of land, in reality, Bessarabian peasants received just 3.5 hectares per household overall. However, even this small provision of agricultural land depended on the peasants' ethnic identity: Romanian-speaking Moldavians (considered ethnically

[75] Iulian Fruntaşu, *O istorie etnopolitică a Basarabiei: 1812-2002*. Chişinău: Cartier, 2002, 133. Marcel Mitrasca, *Moldova: A Romanian Province under Russian Rule* (New York: Algora Pub.: 2007), 71, 92-93, 210.

[76] In December 1917, Bessarabia was proclaimed the Moldavian Democratic Republic. It united with Romania in April 1918.

[77] Svetlana Suveică, *Basarabia în primul deceniu interbelic (1918-1928): modernizare prin reforme* Chisinau: Pontos, 2010), 153, 172.

[78] Hitchins, *A Concise History,* 178-179.

Romanian by the authorities) received 3.1 ha; Russians – 3.5 ha; Ukrainians – 2.5 ha; Jews – 3.8 ha; Gagauzes – 4 ha; Bulgarians – 3.6 ha; and Germans – 5.09 ha.[79] Moreover, unsatisfactory living conditions, drought, excessive taxation, corruption, and bribery not only ravaged life in rural areas but made villagers consider leaving Romania for Canada or Latin America.[80]

Interwar Romanian publications did not reflect this other side of Bessarabian village life.[81] The situation was, nonetheless, targeted by Soviet historiography for propagandistic and educational purposes[82] and became a topic of nonpartisan research only after the USSR's demise. Thus, for example, the Moldovan scholar Nicolae Enciu offers us a more comprehensive picture of interwar Bessarabia's dramatic past.[83] Nonetheless, despite all the hardship and injustice imposed on the Bessarabian population by the Romanian authorities, it cannot compare to the expropriation, forced collectivization, persecution, starvation, and death Soviet citizens endured in Stalin's USSR. A Ukrainian villager who lived in interwar Bessarabia under the Romanians gave a subjective but eye-opening assessment of life in Bessarabia before and after the Soviets occupied it in 1940:

> I remember [...] the year of 1940 when Bessarabia was liberated from the Romanians. The people rejoiced and welcomed the Soviets with bread and salt, hoping for a good life. They were too tired of the snickering Romanian landowners and the cruel police, who were always ready to hit anyone with a baton on the back for nothing. People had no idea that some seven years later, their life under the rule of Royal Romania compared to their life under the Soviets would seem the epitome of communism itself, the construction of which was just declared in the USSR.[84]

[79] Suveică, *Basarabia,* 182-183.
[80] Ibid., 184-184.
[81] Such an approach should not come as a surprise. Concealing the dark side of history (e.g., the injustice committed against citizens by their own or foreign governments) was a common feature of the past. The true extent of the repressions and collectivization was not revealed to the average Soviet citizen until the late 1980s, while today the tragic fate of the Indigenous peoples continues to shock the world with more and more discoveries of unmarked graves at the sites of Canada's residential schools.
[82] *Istoriya Moldavskoy SSR. Uchebnoye posobiye dlya 9-10 klassov* (Kishinev: Lumina, 1972), 75-91.
[83] Nicolae Enciu, *Populaţia rurală a Basarabiei în anii 1918-1940* (Chisinau: Epigraf, 2002). Enciu emphasizes both positive and negative developments in Bessarabia before its annexation by the USSR.
[84] L. G. Bilousova, ed., et al., *Holodomory v Ukraini: Odes'ka oblast': 1921-1923, 1932-1933, 1946-1947 rr.: doslidzhennia, spohady, dokumenty* (Odesa: Odes'kyi oblasnyi derzhavnyi arkhiv, 2007), 128.

The Unmasking in Full Swing: Exposing Collectivization and the Soviet Famine

The materials published in Romania before it became a satellite of Moscow allow researchers to discover lesser-known and unknown details about the transformation of "Russian" patriarchal rural society into a state-controlled farm zone. Although these publications lack impartiality and should be understood as anti-Soviet propaganda, they cast a new light on what Romanians knew and wrote about Stalin's USSR in the 1920s and 1930s. Like Soviet publications of the time, Romanian ones likewise had a political agenda—in this case, anti-Sovietism and anti-Communism. Romanian authors were expected to conform to particular political, ideological, and geopolitical narratives.

As demonstrated above, authors in the Moldavian ASSR propagated and spread an explicitly positive image of the Communist Party and Soviet government. They highlighted the benefits of building socialism and transforming the backward imperial Russian countryside into a prosperous agro-mechanized Soviet society. Any attempt to resist or oppose Stalin's collectivization campaign was to be crushed. Additionally, there was a specific national component to this Soviet project. From the Soviet perspective, the same nation of Moldavians populated the Soviet-Romanian borderlands of the MASSR and Bessarabia. Those in Moscow and Kyiv envisioned them as all living in a Moldavian Soviet socialist state within Soviet Ukraine.

As findings reveal, the publications of interwar Romania, before the nation fell into the Soviet hands, were also biased. Each side propagated narratives according to their respective propagandistic objectives. As expected, Romanians construed the image of the USSR in the darkest possible colours. However, while Romanian authors criticized the general injustice and terror Soviet citizens faced, their main focus was on the life of Romanians (Moldavians) living in the "Moldavian Piedmont."[85]

The Image of the USSR and the MASSR in Romania's Magazines and Journals

Although the main focus of publications about the USSR was the life of Romanian-speaking Moldavians, Romanian authors also demonstrated interests in other subjects. While they emphasized the suffering of Soviet Moldavians, they did not neglect economic developments, politics, and society. In a Russian-language article published in 1932 entitled "The Flip Side of the Motorization of Agriculture,"[86] it is pointed out that the mechanization of the countryside through tractors was not productive not only in the Soviet Union but also in the world's most advanced countries. After providing the reader with a few

[85] Nicolae M. Popp, *Românii transnistreni şi republica Moldovenească* (Giurgiu, 1935).
[86] "Oborotnaia storona motorizatsii sel'skago khoziastva," *Buletinul agricol din Basarabia. Revistă lunară* 7, no. 9-10 (1932): 13.

examples of the problematic situation in the USA, France, and Germany, the situation in Stalin's USSR is also described.[87] The author writes that the Kremlin believed that once farming became collective and the use of horses phased out, tractors would successfully perform all work. In an experiment conducted in the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, the Soviets utterly ignored traditional horse traction and only used tractors. According to the author, the results were more than catastrophic with 240,000 ha of land remaining unexploited and a much smaller harvest than expected.[88]

Information concerning agriculture and grain production in the USSR during the 1930s famine can also be found in regional Romanian accounts. For example, an author named T. Al. Ştirbu explains why Bessarabian peasants could not fully benefit from the 1932 harvest and sell their wheat as planned. In addition to high export taxes and a lack of proper Romanian road and railway infrastructure, Ştirbu blames the USSR's export strategy. He argues that Moscow was selling its agricultural production in large quantities at ridiculous prices and impeded Romania from using the Dniester River for international trade.[89] According to another author, M. Florin, nobody should trust the Bolsheviks in world politics. He writes that Russians (meaning the Bolsheviks) were "yesterday's bandits" and could not overnight become "defenders of peace," particularly when there is no trust between Soviets and Americans.[90]

Furthermore, in the first paragraph of the section concerning the domestic situation in the USSR, Florin writes that those in the Kremlin systematically covered up the truth about the 1930s famine.[91] He also says that the famine, ravaging the country from periphery to center, was more than real and that Edouard Herriot's—a former French statesman who visited the USSR—statements about it were nothing but lies.[92] Florin writes that in the USSR bread was substituted with potatoes and that no painkillers were available for the starving population. Referring to the collective farmers, the author argues that peasants boycotted fieldwork, showed apathy toward their duties

[87] The article states that in Germany, 7,000 tractors failed to substitute for the same amount of horses. Ibid.
[88] Ibid.
[89] T. Al. Ştirbu, "Bilanţul economic al Basarabiei pe anul 1932," *Viaţa Basarabiei* 2, no. 2. (1933): 113; 114-115.
[90] M. Florin, "Sovietele, Emigraţia şi Republica Moldovenească," *Viaţa Basarabiei* 3, no. 2 (1934): 53, 57.
[91] Ibid., 54.
[92] A former Prime Minister of France, Edouard Herriot, visited the Soviet Union in 1933. Based on what the authorities showed him, he publically announced that there was no hunger or famine in the USSR. This did not correspond to reality but fit well with Stalin's propaganda narrative about the situation in the Soviet Union. Iryna Dmytrychyn, *Le Voyage de Monsieur Herriot: Un Épisode de la Grande Famine en Ukraine* (Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 2018), passim.

and that stealing grain became chronic.[93] A few months later, the same author wrote another article about peasants leaving the kolkhozes, the dekulakization of well-to-do peasants and their deportation to Siberia. Additionally, Florin concludes that the Soviets' rural Machine and Tractor Stations (SMT) were unproductive.[94]

The history of the USSR is an unfortunate one rich in human suffering, state terror, and atrocities committed by the Communist regime against Soviet citizens, including ethnic minorities. The 1944 deportation of the Crimean Tatars is one such widely known crime against the non-Russian inhabitants of the USSR. However, this event was not the only one. Three years earlier, in 1941, NKVD border guards mercilessly machine-gunned down and slaughtered a few thousand Romanians and some Ukrainians in an incident known as the Fântâna Albă Massacre.[95] These people were attempting to cross the new Soviet-Romanian border into Romania after having lived less than a year in Stalin's paradise.[96] Some call this tragedy "a true [Romanian] Katyn."[97]

One may legitimately question the relationship between the Fântâna Albă Massacre in 1941, collectivization, and the 1932–1933 famine. Border incidents and the mass killing of people who tried to escape from the USSR were not unknown to Romanian authorities and society. Hundreds, if not thousands,[98] attempted to cross the Soviet-Romanian border, especially during the 1930s famine. Soviet border patrols detained hundreds of potential refugees, including Romanian-speaking Moldavians, Ukrainians, Russians, and others. NKVD officers wounded and killed dozens of people who tried to escape collectivization, deportation, or death by hunger and cannibalism. It was a perilous journey toward freedom, safety, and food via the Dniester River. In these dramatic circumstances, the river both killed and saved the lives of many Soviet citizens[99]—a reality widely reflected in various Romanian publications.

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[93] M. Florin, "Sovietele, Emigraţia şi Republica Moldovenească," 54-55.

[94] M. Florin, "Situaţia din Republica Moldovenească," *Viaţa Basarabiei* 3, no. 5. (1934): 34-35.

[95] Aurelian Lavric, "Politica de represiune a regimului sovietic în sudul Basarabiei şi nordul Bucovinei: 1940–1941, 1944–1945," *Studia Universitatis*, no. 4-54 (2012): 7.

[96] These Romanians became Soviet citizens as an outcome of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact when the USSR annexed Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, and Hertza district in June 1940.

[97] Maria Bucur, *Heroes and Victims: Remembering War in Twentieth-Century Romania* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 249.

[98] The exact figure still needs to be determined by scholars, but the number of some 20,000 is connected to the Ukrainian Holodomor era. See Ion Dumitraşcu, "România şi Românii transnistreni," *Viaţa Basarabiei*, no. 1-4 (1932): 69.

[99] See Eduard Baidaus, "The River That Killed and Saved: Crossing the Dniester into Romania during the Era of Collectivization and Famine in Ukraine" (public lecture, HREC/CIUS, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, April 14, 2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j28Fdi82_Zo&t=1s.

In April 1932, when the famine had already started ravaging people's lives, the Romanian journalist Sandu Vornea authored one such publication. He based his article on interviews with several refugees who managed to escape the USSR. Among them were 78-year-old Gavrilă Simion and 61-year-old Ion Cătărău.[100] They and other villagers survived a bloody incident on the Dniester River on February 23, 1932, that came to be known as the "Olăneşti Forest Massacre" or the "Dniester Massacre."[101] On that night, Soviet border guards gunned down about 40 out of 60 men, women, and children attempting to escape to Romania.[102]

Vornea published an article with the eye-catching title, "The Dniester – A Second Styx," which included material spread across five separate sections and a significant number of photographs. Vornea aimed to entice the reader to pay close attention to his narrative. The articles' images expose a horror story of escape from Stalin's USSR, and its content details the personal accounts of those who reached Romanian territory. Vornea writes that "Jack London or James Oliver Curwood" could not even imagine the stories he heard from survivors. He describes the life of villagers who trembled with horror remembering the famine and deportations to Siberia or the Solovetsky Islands.[103] Vornea offered Romanian readers an impressive account of life and forced labour within the GULAG, escape from the camps, and the dangerous journey to Romania. Vornea's goal was likely to encourage the Romanian public to reflect on the differences between the capitalist West and an allegedly socialist East and what life might become under Communist rule.

The journal *Moldova Nouă* [*New Moldova*] is another documentary source that was founded in 1924 by Nichita P. Smochină, a native of the territory that became the MASSR. Afraid for his life, Smochină moved to Romania in 1918 and became the most outspoken defender of Soviet Romanian-speaking Moldavians in interwar Romania. For example, in one of his publications, Smochină discusses the economic situation in the Moldavian Soviet borderland, emphasizing how the budget was formed and the taxation system imposed on villagers. According to Smochină, most agrarian taxes did not correspond to the peasants' actual income, and each household had to pay fixed taxes established by the government regardless of its *de facto* income.[104]

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[100] Sandu Vornea, "Nistrul – un al doilea Styx," *Realitatea Ilustrată*. 6, no. 271 (1932): 9-13.

[101] The very next day, Soviet border guards shot more than 100 people who tried to reach Romania near the town of Tighina (Bender). See Ion Chirtoagă, et al., *O istorie a regiunii Transnistrene din cele mai vechi timpuri până în prezent* (Chişinău: Civitas, 2007), 272.

[102] "Protestul românilor transnistreni înainat Ligii Naţiunilor." *Viaţa Basarabiei*. 1, no. 3 (1932): 60; Dumitraşcu, "România," 69.

[103] Vornea, "Nistrul," 13.

[104] N. P. Smochină, "Republica Moldovenească a Sovietelor," *Moldova Nouă* 1, no. 1 (1935): 50.

From Smochină's writings, one can also learn how collective farming destroyed the traditional economy in the countryside and the villagers' existence. In a normal non-Soviet circumstance, nobody would calculate ahead how much milk a cow would produce per day or how many eggs a chicken would produce weekly. However, such was the case in the USSR, where the Bolsheviks enforced a planned economy and "even the cows served the Soviet state's interests first and only after the needs of a family."[105]

The national question and the fate of Moldavians were the cornerstone of Smochină's published materials. In another article, pseudonymously penned as T. Vladică, he claims that Moldavians were more anti-Soviet and resistant to collectivization than Ukrainians, Russians, and Germans. He states that Moldavians more actively destroyed the kolkhozes, confiscated agricultural tools, beat collectivization's emissaries, and drove out the Soviet village councils.[106] One should understand that Smochină wrote his articles in accordance with Romania's regional political agenda and was additionally influenced by his own personal experience and attachment to his former countrymen in the MASSR. He was well aware that the Bolsheviks subjected Romanian speakers to collectivization, ideological Sovietization, cultural assimilation (Russification), and political persecution.

Romanian Books on Stalin's Collectivization, the Great Soviet Famine, and the Holodomor in Soviet Ukraine

Romanians applied the same approach to their wartime publications when discussing life before World War II in the USSR, combining a mixture of pan-Romanian nationalism with an analysis of social, economic, and political developments beyond the Dniester. During the Second World War, when Romania administered the Transnistria Governorate, education and scholarship were employed to justify Romanian expansion into Soviet territory.[107] Written to fit a nationalistic narrative, wartime literature emphasized collectivization and the 1930s famine in addition to an unfolding crusade against Bolshevism. Once the war began, the propagandistic narrative was straightforward: Romania came to liberate all Soviet citizens, but foremost Romanian-speaking Moldavians, from communist oppression and injustice. The goal of such books as educational primers and historical monographs was to assist in achieving this objective and portray Romania as the bearer of freedom.

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[105] Ibid. 52.

[106] T. Vladică, "Aspectul naţional în economia Moldovei Sovietice," *Moldova Nouă* 1, no. 1 (1935): 62-63.

[107] Diana Dumitru, *The State, Antisemitism, and Collaboration in the Holocaust: The Borderlands of Romania and the Soviet Union* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 176-181. The territory of the MASSR was made part of the Transnistria Governorate, which existed from 1941 to 1944 in the territory of Soviet Ukraine.

Officials in Bucharest aimed to mould from the Transnistria Governorate's Soviet population, regardless of ethnicity or spoken language, subjects loyal to the monarchy. Thus, in wartime, schooling in Romanian Transnistria became the same instrument that Bucharest relied on for culturally and politically Romanianizing interwar Bessarabia. However, in Bessarabia, not only ethnic minorities but even Romanian-speaking Moldavians opposed and exhibited reluctance towards Romanianization by continuing to identify themselves as "Moldavians" and not "Romanians."[108] Thus, when the Romanians crossed the border into the USSR, they expected reluctance and opposition due to Soviet propaganda and Romaniaphobia. Therefore, rapid measures were undertaken, starting with (re)educating Soviet children who spoke either Soviet Romanian (Moldavian), Ukrainian, Russian, or other regional languages.

As discussed above, the making of the so-called "Soviet Man" started early in childhood via educational primers from which pupils learned how great it was to live in the USSR. Not surprisingly, the making of "Romanians" out of Soviet Moldavians and other Sovietized peoples also began with a primer.[109] Already in 1942, Romanians published a bilingual Romanian-Russian textbook to be used in Soviet-occupied territory. The intention was to successfully Romanianize Transnistrians and teach them the difference between Royal Romania and the USSR through propagandistic narratives and images. What did this primer offer them? And what image did it construct of the "other" Romania, the country to which Soviet citizens had aspired to flee during collectivization and the 1932 – 1933 famine?

Firstly, the textbook presents many images and drawings depicting an unimaginable paradise in Greater Romania. Considering the recent memory of the famine and its collective trauma shared by Soviet people, such an approach was worthwhile. The primer paints an image of a happy life full of joy, in which the Romanian state cares for children, and the Orthodox religion and priests play an essential educational role.[110] Given the persecution of religion by the apostate Bolsheviks, such a message could not but be welcomed by an ideologically oppressed Soviet populace. The textbook portrays Romania as a place with a peaceful country life populated by wealthy land-owning peasants.[111] It also speaks of cows, horses, and other livestock and harvests that nobody

[108] Rebecca Haynes, *Moldova: A History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2021), 118-122. Petru Negura, "Nation-Building and Mass Schooling of Ethnic Minorities on the Romanian and Soviet Peripheries (1918–1940): A Comparative Study of Bessarabia and Transnistria." *National Identities* 23, no. 4 (2021): 437-440.
[109] Ilie I. Mirea and Andrei T. Niculescu, *Abecedar –Bukvar'– Româno-Rus pentru Transnistria* (Bucharest, 1942).
[110] Ibid., 5-7, 77. 115, 118, 136, 142.
[111] Ibid., 28-32, 55.

would take away from the hardworking people,[112] as the Soviets had done a decade earlier. The authors of the primer highlight the sharp contrast between the life of a Soviet village under Bolshevik rule and a farmer's life in Western society, emphasizing Romania as a positive example of the latter.

This *Abecedar* (primer) was published in wartime when the horror of the ongoing war negatively impacted the lives of Soviet citizens who resided in the Transnistria Governorate. Nevertheless, Romanian authorities in the occupied Soviet territory worked on inculcating Romanian-speaking Moldavians and others with a pan-Romanian national idea. In the view of Bucharest, these people, except Jews and Gypsies—who were subject to the Nazis' "final solution"—had to be de-Sovietized, de-communized, and integrated into Greater Romania. Moreover, the primer emphasizes Romania's new borders, which included Soviet territory between the Dniester and Bug rivers. For example, it portrays a Romanian border guard standing watch to protect the people against the Soviet regime and Romanian soldiers being showered with joy and flowers by villagers who share a piece of bread with their heros.[113]

This bilingual primer states that the territory of the Transnistria Governorate was always Romanian land that the Russians had unfairly occupied in 1792. Readers learn that the region is populated by people who, although they called themselves "Moldavians," are, in fact, Romanians.[114] The fact that the primers' authors describe this Ukrainian territory as "Russian" denotes that they perceived the USSR simply as a Russian state, ignoring that other nationalities and national republics were part of the Soviet Union. To them, there was neither Ukraine nor Belarus but [Soviet] Russia only.

The same year, when the Transnistria Governorate's civil administration released the primer, another author, Emil Diaconescu, published a monograph dedicated to Moldavians in the former MASSR and other Ukrainian territories. Although the book is consistently ethnocentric— focusing mainly on the Romanian-speaking population east of the Dniester River—and portrays the USSR as a "barbarian" state, interesting information about the Ukrainian SSR during the time of the Holodomor can also be found.[115] Diaconescu imagines wartime Transnistria as a "stronghold" of Romania's eastern borders and an "El Dorado" resisting communism.[116] He writes that the peasantry under the Bolsheviks did not want to accept the Soviet regime and that the latter's policies were unchristian and aimed at destroying the fabric of traditional rural society, its moral values, and economy. Diaconescu describes Soviet peasants fiercely opposing and revolting against Stalin's collectivization. He also emphasizes the

[112] Ibid., 34-35, 44, 48, 54, 70, 97.
[113] Mirea and Niculescu, *Abecedar*, 41, 60-61, 73, 87, 107.
[114] Ibid., 108-109.
[115] Emil Diaconescu, *Românii din Răsărit – Transnistria* (Iaşi, 1942), 7.
[116] Ibid., 237, 229, 226.

role of women, describing them shouting loudly, asking for bread, and challenging Red Army units that arrived in villages to repress anti-Soviet riots.[117]

After Diaconescu discusses measures taken by villagers to defend their properties and the authorities' punitive actions to restore public order, he refers to three other essential details. Diaconescu speaks of how the Bolsheviks divided "the peasants and provoked a sense of mutual enmity among them" only, in their view, to build a flourishing socialist countryside for the Soviet state.[118] The author relies on Transnistrians' statements about collectivization in the 1930s, according to which Romanian peasants "could not live in collective farms as Russians did" and wanted their land back.[119] Diaconescu also refers to the names of well-known Romanian public figures who spoke out about the mass killing of refugees from Soviet Ukraine when they tried to cross the border via the Dniester River. For example, members of the Parliament in Bucharest protested against the massacre of peaceful citizens attempting to flee famine. Prime Minister Nicolae Iorga made the following statement:

> What is happening at the Dniester border represents an unprecedented series of savage acts, all the more so as they are committed against a peaceful population. The civilized world has learned with emotion about all these horrors perpetrated [in the USSR] in the country of "all freedoms."[120]

Dr. Nicolae M. Popp was another author who published an insightful work about Transnistria in 1943. In chapter seven, entitled "Social Classes," he describes the region's social stratum. However, he applies an anti-Semitic and anti-Slavic racial perspective alongside pan-Romanianism. In his view, Romanians (here Moldavians)—the only representatives of Western civilization in the Soviet Union—suffered for centuries under the terrible experience of several "Asian actions." Popp alludes first to the "Tatar-Mongol yoke," then to "imperial Russian despotism," followed by an "Asian" Bolshevik "slavery."[121] In other words, according to the author, the Russians were nothing but "barbaric Asians." The author dedicates a considerable amount of text to the Soviet countryside and presents the reader with a detailed portrayal of collective farms, rural poverty, and a ravaged countryside.[122]

Popp employs a consistent antagonistic geopolitical and racial approach in his book. The author claims that most of those who suffered from Stalin's

[117] Ibid., 226.
[118] Ibid., 227.
[119] Ibid., 228.
[120] Ibid., 229.
[121] Nicolae M. Popp, *Transnistria. Incercare de monografie regională* (Bucharest, 1943), 158.
[122] Ibid., 164.

agrarian policy and dekulakization were Moldavians and Germans. Such an approach conformed with Nazi racial theories. After all, according to pre-war and wartime propaganda, Germans were a Nordic Aryan race. At the same time, Romanians had strong links with ancient Rome and, thus, were also part of the same Western world.[123] Popp also writes that in the USSR, Jews "enjoyed the best living conditions," Ukrainians were "ringworms," and the Bolsheviks were more lenient towards the rural Slavic population during collectivization[124]—none of which was true.

Despite such narratives, one can still learn how Romanian authors interpreted, analyzed, and described the Soviets' annihilation of farmers, how the latter were forced into kolkhozes, and how millions died during the Great Soviet Famine. In Romania, collective farming was usually explained as communist serfdom and Romanians wrote that the Bolsheviks used propaganda to brainwash people's minds and transform them into "robots," "Soviet men," and a "Soviet Nation."[125]

Popp refers to the 1932–1933 famine as man-made and a consequence of Stalin's grain requisition campaign. He also states that the grain taken from peasants was exported to the West to purchase armaments for the Red Army.[126] Moreover, according to Popp, cannibalism— an abnormal phenomenon for twentieth-century Europe—became normal in the early 1930s USSR. Popp writes that "insanely hungry parents murdered and ate their children" and that starving people ate dogs and cats.[127] It is apparent from the book's content that the author relied heavily on interviews to collect his data. [128] Thus, in a separate note, aiming to highlight the extraordinary, Popp writes:

> There are unbelievable things, and only by seeing them on the spot can you admit them as real. Or only by talking to people who have eaten human flesh or escaped from being eaten can you believe them. Not to mention the countless people who died of hunger during 1932–1933. This famine lasted six months and was caused by the regime and not by drought, floods, or any other natural phenomenon.[129]

In the concluding paragraphs of the chapter, the author describes the exploitation and hardship collective farmers endured under Soviet rule. He also

[123] See Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2001), 84-97.
[124] Popp, *Transnistria*, 156-158, 162.
[125] Ibid., 161-163.
[126] Ibid., 159.
[127] Ibid., 159-160.
[128] Ibid., 162-164
[129] Ibid., n. 1, 160.

points out that Bolshevik declarations about equal rights and obligations were false and had nothing to do with reality. According to Popp, if there was any equality in the USSR, people were only "equal in misery," regardless of what the Soviet Constitution proclaimed.[130]

Conclusion

In the West, statesmen, politicians, scholars, and journalists focused on the Soviet state as soon as it emerged from the ruins of the failed Romanov monarchy. Due to its nature, ideology, and domestic and foreign policies, many publications have been dedicated to the USSR. Stalinism has received more attention than any other subject. Scholars have researched collectivization, famines, repressions, and Soviet expansionism, among which the Great Soviet Famine of 1932–1933, including Ukraine's Holodomor, has become one of the most popular topics.

After the fall of the USSR, modern scholarship has been based on previously unavailable archival material, providing various insights into this tragic episode of Soviet history. However, alongside existing scholarship, publications contemporary to these historical events from countries neighbouring Stalin's USSR also shed light on this dark side of European history.

This article focused on materials published in the Kingdom of Romania during the interwar period and World War Two and on those published in the Moldavian ASSR in the era of collectivization and famine. It revealed the nature of relations between Romania and the USSR and demonstrated how Kremlin authorities used scholarship and relied on education and propaganda to justify collectivization and class struggle in the countryside during the 1930s. Soviet authors praised the Communist Party and Bolshevik government and blamed the domestic "other" who opposed Soviet power. The indoctrination of Soviet citizens in the territory of the "Moldavian Piedmont" and their transformation into *homines sovietici* was also pursued through children's literature. The content of publications in this national (ethnic) Soviet periphery constructed an imaginary socialist paradise where people allegedly enjoyed life. It sought to reveal the hatred of capitalist Romania and propagated a Soviet-type patriotism and devotion to the Kremlin.

Publications in Royal Romania also suffered from bias. Authors in both countries followed mutually exclusive ideological and geopolitical agendas. Each side worked to defend the values its leadership promoted, creating images of irreconcilable enemies. However, Romanian narratives noticeably differed from Soviet publications, in which class struggle and communist ideology dominated both text and image.

[130] Ibid., 164, 158.

By contrast, Romanian authors emphasized ethnic pan-Romanian nationalism and propagated anti-Soviet and anti-Slavic sentiments among their readers. This approach should not come as a surprise. After the end of the Great War, the USSR and Romania were involved in an ideological confrontation, making territorial claims against each other. Moreover, Romania saw a wave of interest in eugenics[131] while Moscow conspired to spread Bolshevism in the Balkans.[132] In the production of narratives around collectivization and the Great Soviet Famine, ethnic nationalism and communist ideology both served as propaganda tools exploited by policymakers in Royal Romania and the USSR for their ideological war against each other.

[131] Maria Bucur, *Eugenics and Modernization in Interwar Romania* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 30-34, 44-45, 54-55.
[132] Thanos Veremis *A Modern History of the Balkans: Nationalism and Identity in Southeast Europe* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 46-57.