

## DEFORMED IMAGES OF AN OCCUPIED PROVINCE. RUSSIAN TRAVELLERS IN BESSARABIA<sup>1</sup>

■ Romanița Constantinescu  
■ University of Heidelberg  
■ Germany

The question Galina Corman asks herself in her PhD thesis aims at the elements that make up the image Russian travellers (soldiers, clerks, scholars, educated people) had in their minds about Bessarabia during the occupation of 1812-1918 and at the way they interact, by stabilizing it or modifying it in time. This image is shown as being the complex result of a special colonial discourse (the colony being a territory in the immediate vicinity of the Empire), shown as Eurocentric and Orientalizing (although the conquered territories lie in the West of the Empire), imperial and only then nationalistic, animated by various mythologies, with Messianic accents as well as of utopic modernism, in itself an answer to the Orientalizing discourse, untouched by the Enlightenment. Russia is, on the other hand, the object of this discourse which has been Orientalized according to the Western ‘mental map’.

Bessarabia, as region between the rivers Prut and Dniester and as political entity appears only in 1812 along with the Russian occupation, after the sixth Russo-Turkish war of 1806 and as a result of the Peace of Bucharest, by means of which the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire divided the Principality of Moldavia among themselves. The Russian Empire also took the eastern part of Moldavia, while the western part, between the Prut and the Carpathians, stayed under Ottoman sovereignty.

Initially, ‘Bessarabia’ only designated the southern part of the region, nowadays known as the Budjak, governed by the Basarab princes of Wallachia. In 1918, Bessarabia proclaims its independence, and in the same year the historic Moldavia is remade within the borders of modern Romania by means of the unification decided by the Country Council. The history of Bessarabia during the Russian period bears some common traits with the

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<sup>1</sup> Galina Corman, *Das Bessarabien-Bild in der zeitgenössischen russischen Reiseliteratur 1812-1918*, Veröffentlichungen des Moldova Instituts Leipzig (MIL), herausgegeben von Klaus Bochmann und Vasile Dumbrava, Band 6, Leiziger Universitätsverlag, Leipzig, 2015, 373 S.

history of Finland's occupation (1809-1917), although there are some notable differences: while the Grand Duchy of Finland kept its independence until 1917, Bessarabia lost its autonomy in 1828. Galina Corman suggests a periodization of this era of Bessarabian colonization based on the image circulated by the travellers, as well as on the annexation policies, often contradictory, succeeding during this time. The investigated set of texts is remarkable, counting more than 40 authors, among them being Pushkin, Alexander Fomich Veltman, but also General Alexandre F. Langeron, a gifted negotiator for the Russians at the Bucharest Peace Treaty of 1812 (as a result of which Bessarabia got under Tsarist rule, despite the imminent danger represented by Napoleon's offensive, which the Turks were not aware of). Thanks to this large set of literary, travel, fiction and field research texts, the results of the analysis are trustworthy as well as a true revelation.

A typical image of Bessarabia in the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is that of a territory that was half Asian. In the imaginary Russian geography, the identification – not only political, but also social, and cultural – of the territory between the rivers Prut and Dniester with the Ottoman/Turkish land is more convenient, although, at the time of the annexation, there were not any Turks or Tartars living there. The landscape, society, the aristocratic elites – everything seems to the travellers to be Asian even if contrary to evidence.

Of course, except for the faith, which was Christian-Orthodox and, as such, 'European'. At the same time, Russia was being confronted with a new situation, in which the newly conquered western peripheries proved to have a political, social, economic, and cultural organization that was superior, even from a Russian perspective, to that of the metropole (see Kappeler, *Russland als Vielvölkerreich*, 2008). Pushing Bessarabia to the south on an imaginary map and the reduction applied to the history of the respective territory served, in a broader sense, to the disqualification of the western border of the Empire, as well as to the promotion of a better self-image as an element of civilization in this area of competition and contact. At the same time, Bessarabia, as an occupied region, was deprived of its own symbolic capital.

Thus, Catherine II legitimated her intervention in the Balkans by means of her wish to answer to abstract, idealized duties towards the Byzantium, which was conjecturally and provisorily moved to Athens. Athens takes over the symbolic attributions of the Byzantium, the Russian Empire was not able yet to reach.

The discovery of Bessarabia as a 'locus anticus' did not lead to the increase of the prestige of the region or its inhabitants in the eyes of the Russian travellers, which did not stop it from seeing itself as a continuator of the

Roman antiquity (*translatio imperii*), whose traces it just happened to find in the civilized Europe. Through a very efficient perspective reversal, Ovid, the Roman poet, became a Russian character, exiled among the local barbarians. Svinin confuses things in such a manner that he places Ovid not among the Gaete and Sarmatians, but among the... Slavs, whose language he supposedly learned and used to write his poetry. The Latinity of these places is confiscated to their own benefit. The same decapitalization process, followed by confiscation is applied to the language of the locals as well, which was a Latin language: the language of the Moldavians is a Romance language, yet somehow archaic and unable to serve superior goals, which is why it massively uses helpful Slavic words. Despite possible mystifications, the local population is not able to use the cultural Latin argument and so much the less the historic one. Svinin is also the author of a legend saying that when Voivode Dragoș, a descendent of the Roman colonists, returned to the area in order to found the Moldavian Principality, he met Jazko, a Slav beekeeper, who had rights over this deserted territory. And even if the multi-centennial existence of the principality could not be contested, at the moment of the Russian occupation, the Principality of Moldavia was a state at the end of its rope, whose history was about to come to an end. The territory between the rivers Prut and Dniester thus receives a short, Russian history. This territory becomes a 'recent' territory, and the travellers discover here their own places of memory, connected to the fights with the Turks. Galina Corman identifies a positive image of the region in this era, yet it does not freely alternate with the negative image, but only refers to this 'recent' and 'Russian' territory, which does not clearly emerge from the analysis suggested by Galina Corman: only this way the nature becomes paradisiac, southern, and Bessarabia, 'Little Italy', when it serves the supply needs of the Empire and the policy of colonization with new populations. As soon as it is regarded as a foreign territory, with another history, with another population, it turns into an exhausted, failed territory or, in view of the multi-ethnicity otherwise stimulated by the colonization policies, 'Sodom' or, in the best case, 'Babel'.

At the end of the 1820s and up to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Bessarabian territory became normal, i.e. it was integrated in the Empire, which allowed it to appear exotic, southern, and Italy-like. The quarrel with the past became less important than the administration of the 'future'. 'Home' in Bessarabia means, especially the parts inhabited by the Lipovans (Old Believers, *raskolniki*) who took refuge here, in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire due to religious persecutions. They were revalued now as being the true Russians, the guardians of the old traditions, like the Russian peasants, who had escaped serfdom in Russia, and had settled in Bessarabia and Bugeac.

The Bulgarians also have a good image, even better than that of the German colonists, which allows the Russian travellers to feel more comfortable when travelling in this area.

Anyway, the present is all that matters and it is superior to the past thanks to the new facilities developed: roads, coffee houses, etc. Yet, it does not completely satisfy the travellers' expectations.

The development of the province leaves a lot to be desired, similarly to Georgia. According to the travellers, this is the exclusive fault of the local inhabitants and, of course, never the fault of the administration. Here, Galina Corman is a victim of her own sources, which happens frequently with imagology studies. The author blames the local elites, yet she analyses them by means of the same sources. The sources are biased and subjective and avoid any control of the other side: the words of the travellers are never written with the possibility in mind that those depicted by them, the locals, could read and, possibly, revolt, take attitude or wish to correct the perspective they are seen in.

There is no principle of dialogue in these texts. This is why even the local elites – at least the men – who keep the Ottoman clothes cannot be only interpreted as a refusal to become more civilized, but also as a form of resistance, of keeping one's own identity, which the colonizing discourse wants to eliminate. The hospitality itself of the local elites is seen as a sign of cultural inferiority and discredited as such. The author also shows that the limitation and the subsequent total elimination of autonomy, which go well along with the neutralization and marginalization of the local elites, lead to the progress of the regional development. The author gives the example of the agricultural exploitation of the fields and the exports. The legitimate question is, nonetheless, who takes profit from this development, and Corman must concede that it has barely served the region as such. On the other hand, this study lacks a comparison with the progress made in the Romanian Moldavia, since society modernizes here as well. Given the fact that both regions are progressing, the question that arises is whether the progress they make has the same pace. The same kind of optical deformation can also be observed when the progress of the communist society is estimated as such, without reference to the parallel development of neighbouring states and regions. Progress cannot be measured but by comparison. Moreover, the tendency of the province to stay behind is certain as compared to the Russian metropolises, where the travellers come from, or as compared to Poland or Finland, but not as compared to other regions of the Empire. The logical question in this respect is the following: what are its causes (since Moldavia was the territory where the Russo-Turkish wars are being fought), and how much could be recovered considering the occupation

(of Bessarabia) as compared to the conditions of development in Western Moldavia. The discussion itself initiated by Galina Corman regarding the development of the school system in Bessarabia shows that the Russian policies were inconsistent and did not aim at raising the level of alphabetization as such, but at integrating and ‘normalizing’ the territory by means of its Russification, represented by the lowering of the number of schools. Starting with 1870, the Romanian language was prohibited in schools, in the official and confessional correspondence and in public institutions. The fact that the local elites would not have had any chance to contribute on a sustained basis to the prosperity of the region, due to the simple fact that they represented the foreign element, especially beginning with the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is implicitly proved by the author’s analysis of the Jewish minority of the province. The Jewish minority was also stigmatized for the simple fact that the Jews had often been economically successful.

The same thing happened with the German minority, which also became the subject of an aggressive marginalizing discourse during the reign of Alexander III, during the effervescence of Russian nationalism. The author feels the need to return to this matter at the end of the thesis, by showing that Russia’s expansion in this territory did not bring the benefits in the region that the travellers claim.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, Bessarabia was a ‘Russian garden’ that did not resemble Italy anymore, and also a territory that was more and more foreign and mixed due to the decrease of imperial patriotism and the emergence of Russian nationalism. This generalized impression is due to the observation according to which the russification process seemed to have failed. The towns were mostly inhabited by Jews and the Moldavians townspeople seemed to have been assimilated by them. This was a new occasion to attack the myth of the Romanian Latinity: there were voices saying that the Roman colonization was made with legions of Jews from Palestine. The general impression was of resistance to integration, which was considered to be a Russification. The local population was also said to be ungrateful for the efforts made by the Russian administration. There also appears the fear that the so-called ‘Pan-Romanianism’ could claim Bessarabia.

The Russian imaginary investment process in Bessarabia stops along with the end of the Tsarist domination in the year 1918. It cannot be depicted in a simple narrative manner, since territorial policies and the context of ‘reading’ the territory change during a century. Moreover, some personal perceptions could be out-of-phase, contributing to an inconsistent, sometimes even contradictory picture. This is why the periodization suggested by the author,

as well as the resumption of the analysis of certain *topoi* in different eras are welcome for the understanding of the complexity of this phenomenon. After 1918, the phantom picture of Bessarabia shall be depicted by Romanian travellers. It is another kind of image, whose main feature is the dialogue. This image is accessible due to the language and to the dissemination to the locals and must answer to their representation needs and requests. The research performed by Galina Corman stops at this point. A comparison of the two images would have outrun the intent of the paper, although it would not have made it less interesting. Although the study is well documented and intelligent, it suffers from a certain academic pedagogic and scholastic style, for which the author cannot be made responsible, but the current manner in which the PhD programmes are being led nowadays.

A doctoral thesis is not a workshop paper, in which the author needs to exhaustively prove the fact that he/she understands the instruments and methods used. It justifies itself by means of the results obtained after the rigorous employment of methods and the correct use of concepts and instruments. Galina Corman's remarkable work loses in the chapters dedicated to explaining essential concepts or historical facts (which are less known, though) what it could have won by means of a broader comparative analysis.