Memory and Identity on the Border with the USSR

Arguments for an Experimental Research Project

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The Historical Context

On his way from Vienna to Constantinople, where he would join the Ottoman troops as a military doctor, James Oscar Noyes crossed the Danube principalities in 1854. The young American doctor reached these lands shortly after the retreat of the Russian troops, during the Crimean War. Standing in front of a local village inn, he saw a group of peasants frolicking. His guide told him that they were enthusiastic about the retreat of the Russians and that they were singing "Cântecul Prutului" (The song of the Prut), a song which—he said—was known to any Dacian-Romanian. In addition, Noyes notes in his memoirs that "for the Dacian-Romanians, the Prut River was a Cocytos with dark waters, separating Romania from the realm of horror."[1] Thus, we can easily read into this eyewitness' account and see how someone coming from a world which is very different from Eastern Europe talks about the negative symbolism that the inhabitants of the two Danube principalities projected onto this river which in 1812 formed the border between Moldavia and Tsarist Russia.

After 1918, when Bessarabia was annexed to the Kingdom of Romania and the border between the Kingdom of Romania and Bolshevik Russia ran along the Dniester River, these symbolic projections were overlaid on the new natural boundary. During the interwar period, the interplay of intelligence activities, smuggling operations, military revolts and the forced migration of people who were facing starvation or the terror of the Bolshevik power structures led to the creation of a whole mythology around these borders. Some events entered the field of canonical literary works, like Gib I. Mihăescu's novel, *The Russian Woman* (1933).

The year 1940 brought about a new shift of boundaries. On account of the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact of 28 June 1940, Romania agreed to cede to the USSR the territory bounded by the Prut and Dniester rivers. The retreat of the army and of the administration occurred under the close surveillance of the Soviet troops which gave rise to a great deal of tense and dramatic moments. The Prut was once again the border between Romania and Russia. Shortly after the occupation of Bessarabia, the Soviets initiated an ample process of communization, which also relied on mass terror and deportations.

On 2 August 1940 the Supreme Soviet in Moscow approved the establishment of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, encompassing a region which did not coincide with the territory of Bessarabia, as some of its northern and southern counties were included in the body of the Ukraine. On 21 June 1941, Germany and Romania attacked the USSR, thus making the Prut an internal river again. In 1944, Romania no longer held the territory between the Prut and the Dniester.[2] The border's many permutations also involved massive dislocations of the population and phenomena like mass murders and ethnic cleansing, which profoundly impacted the daily lives of the population as well as their representation of the border between Romania and the USSR which was beginning to be crafted in strictly negative terms.

The Armistice Convention, signed by Romania and the Allied Powers on 12 September 1944, officially re-established the border between Romania and the USSR along the line designated on 28 June 1940. From the Romanian standpoint, the re-institutionalization of the border on the Prut River was not a simple task. Moreover, in the autumn of 1944, Moldavia was not under the authority of the Romanian government. The administration and the law enforcement apparatus had been evacuated in the spring and the Soviets persisted in preventing their return. As a matter of fact, it was the Soviets who greatly hindered the deployment of security forces on the Romanian border with the USSR and Hungary.[3] The Romanian government failed to exercise control over the border, which made it possible for the Soviets to easily transfer the illegal requisitions they carried out at the expense of the population. After a trip to Moldavia, in the autumn of 1944, General Aurel Aldea declared to have spotted large herds of animals (horses, cattle, sheep) making their way from Iaşi to the Prut River.[4] However, the Soviets kept full control over the border, as the troops of the 2nd Ukrainian Front reaching the Prut River in early April 1944 were accompanied by regiments of border guards of the NKVD. On 20 May the "Moldavian border district" was created and by the end of 1944, 44 detachments of border guards[5] reinforced the Soviet side of the Prut River.

In the autumn of 1945, the Romanian government, through its representative, Mihail Ghelmegeanu, president of the Romanian Commission for the Terms of the Armistice, asked the Soviet ambassador in Bucharest, Sergey Ivanovich Kavtaradze, to authorize the establishment of border guard posts on the border along the Prut. In all likelihood, Ghelmegeanu did not want his gesture to be taken as a sign of hostility towards the USSR and further suggested that the issue had been previously discussed with General Vladislav Petrovich Vinogradov and the Military Section of the Allied Control Commission. In addition, it is considered that Petru Groza had also received support from Moscow to increase the strength of the border guards. The Romanian side argued that the deployment of border guard posts would reduce smuggling, a phenomenon which adversely affected the country's efforts to observe the terms of the armistice. However, no border guard posts would be created in the Soviet transit area. The talks between the Romanian and Soviet officials were held without informing the other Allied forces within the Allied Control Commission, a situation that irritated to a certain extent the British officials in Bucharest.[6]

The definitive establishment of the border along the Prut River in 1944 had consequences that were impossible to calculate for the inhabitants on both sides. Com-

munities that used to be at the very center of a historical province suddenly became geographically marginal, spanning across two different states and being submitted to repressive policies and propaganda campaigns aimed to diminish their strong sense of identity.[7] The manner in which the Soviets secured the frontier with Romania led some historians to declare that the Prut River was the setting of a genuine "iron curtain" cast to break all ties between Bessarabia and the rest of Romania.[8] Barbed wire fences with alarm systems and observation posts were built while the presence of the board patrols signaled an excessive militarization. Nevertheless, the degree of control and security of the Soviet border was successively tightened and modernized throughout the period of the Cold War. In the view of the officials of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Prut River was in fact the border with the "West."[9] During this time, the borders between the communist countries of Eastern Europe were as tightly guarded as the frontiers with the countries beyond the Iron Curtain.[10] Romania had a different approach to the border with the USSR and, as it will be argued later, its representation of the border did not exude a hostile dimension, as the population was less mobilized in identifying the potential "foreigner."

Border Studies: Historiographical Perspectives

Border studies is a multidisciplinary and highly dynamic field of research, which has been periodically redefined and revived by new methodological and conceptual perspectives. It is important to recall that the pioneer of the field is the German geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904), who developed the theory of the organic relationship between individual, state and land. His ideas informed the work of Rudolf Kjellén (1864–1922), considered to be the founder of geopolitics.[11] In time, there has been a proliferation of approaches encompassed by border studies, as the field became more diverse and more integrated. Otto Maull focused on the morphological characteristics of the borders and on their relationship with the nation-state. In his view, one category were the good borders, corresponding to the natural or social-ethnic limits, and other were the negative ones, which did not overlap with the physical characteristics of the landscape and did not reflect the social and cultural delimitations of space. The latter were not tied to an area which would allow the contact between states and were regarded as a potential hotbed of conflict.[12] The French School rejected the German determinist view of the territory and argued—through its representative, Paul Vidal de La Blache (1845–1918)—that society evolved solely as a result of how it profited from the advantages that nature bestowed upon us. For his part, Élisée Reclus (1830–1905) described space as a social construct, inseparable from the development of society. To support his idea, Reclus suggested that geography was nothing more than "history in space."[13]

An overview of the theories relating to the issue of borders during the first half of the 20th century reveals a large body of works. However, border studies have been

regarded for a very long time as a sub-field like regional politics, regional economy, political anthropology, political geography or geopolitics. The main focus of the majority of studies revolved around the description, the classification or the morphology of the border.[14] The end of the Cold War and the ensuing "confusion" marked the beginning of border studies as a field in its own right. Borders were no longer simply viewed as territorial landmarks of sovereignty and gained momentum as a multidimensional social institution.[15]

During the entire process of expansion and development of the field, the borders between states were the main focus of research in border studies. Anton Kireev defined the border "as a subsystem of the state that outlines the spatial limits of its sovereignty and ensures the regulation of transborder social realities." The organization and functioning of this subsystem depends on a series of factors, such as: the political regime, the form of government, social and economic development, social security, the length and severity of the borders.[16] Nevertheless, it is important to underline that borders can also signify a complex system of institutions or a set of behavioral practices and social representations.[17]

In recent years, researchers Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson have systematically covered the field of border studies. In their view, borders can simultaneously be seen as sites and symbols of power. Under particular circumstances, such as the case of the Soviet Union, the power and sovereignty of the state manifest in an ostentatious or extreme manner, through barbed wire or observation towers.[18] A border can be much more than a stretch of land or a watercourse separating two states. When we speak of the history of borders, we speak in fact of the history of border areas. This is a territory where cultures and distinct social practices—more or less legal, formal and informal—congregate. According to Donnan and Wilson, we could even speak of a "border culture" that encompasses all dimensions of the life of border residents. Such a culture is not always controlled by the centre. The people are the ones building their own local or regional cultural practices.[19]

Border zones should also be regarded as a process, defined by its own dynamics. Donnan and Wilson argue that border societies could be regarded as more or less conscious agents of the state.[20] Communities from both sides of the border have a specificity of their own, they influence each other, they defy rules, establish contacts, especially in cases when they belong to the same ethnic and linguistic groups. In fact, ethnicity and national identity are, and always have been, the main driving force behind the actions of borderland communities. Ethnic or national groups usually transcend the limits of the state wherein they reside and this can prove problematic for states and their border zones.[21] The popular imagination associates borders with dangerous areas where illegal activities prevail and where, as a result, people make their own rules and test the limits of the state's actions.[22] Such phenomena are more salient in areas where borders divide strong ethnic-linguistic communities. In many cases, the desire to preserve national identities has been shown to be more powerful than any totalitarian state.

Borders and the Cold War

The Cold War is one of the most fertile grounds for border studies discussions. For over fifty years, the countries behind the Iron Curtain were dragged into a whirl of alterities and societal reinvention and this complex period provided an extraordinary field of investigation. After 1990, many researchers and research institutes have systematically focused on the issue of borders within and across the Iron Curtain.

During 2010–2016, the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for European History and Public Spheres in Vienna developed the project "The Cold War in Communicative Memories and Public Spheres: Ten Case Studies in European Border Communities." The aim of the project was to initiate a series of research campaigns reuniting ten borderline communities, either towns separated by the new frontiers of 1945 or neighboring towns situated on opposite sides of the border.[23] Part of the research output was published in individual studies or laid the foundation for more comprehensive research.

The research on borders and, better yet, on border areas consequently becomes an important tool for the analysis of the way in which Eastern European communist regimes defined themselves in relationship with the others. Furthermore, such inquiries enable us to have a better grasp of the way in which major political decisions influenced the lives of border communities, how they altered the life of the individuals and what sort of cultural or identity transformations they entailed, both at a local and at a regional level.

Muriel Blave and Thomas Lindenberger give us an account of the history of České Velenice, a town on the border with Austria that served as a small fortress of communist Czechoslovakia. For the Prague regime, the control and security of the border were not more important than the influence over the daily lives of the border residents, over their political and social policies. It is important to note, however, that the two researchers also refer to a "Soviet-style borders governance." At first, the USSR had a relatively permissive policy concerning the border flow and relied heavily on instrumentalizing ethnic tensions in the border area to support the export of the revolution. Once the strategy of "socialism in one country" was adopted, the borders of the USSR shifted from an area committed to the export of the revolution to a battleground against capitalism. A restricted area of 7.5 km was established, ranging inwards from the border, and residents were forced to participate in border raids, while insubordination was punishable by deportation. After World War II, the Red Army exported not only the communist dictatorship, but also the set of border management practices[24] to its Western neighbors.

Maximilian Graf and Sarah Knoll dwell on the issue of the Austrian border with the states behind the Iron Curtain. Their study features Austria as the main gateway for the flow of immigrants from the countries of the Eastern bloc. During times of crises, like the years 1956, 1968 or 1981, hundreds of thousands of Hungarians, Czechs or Poles crossed the Austrian border.[25] While in Vienna, in October 1960, Ion Raţiu wanted to find out on his own what the border between Austria and communist Hungary looked like. Thus, the pages of his *Journal* are a vivid testimony of the way in which "Khrushchev's empire" was separated from the rest of Europe: "There are four rows of two meters high barbed wire, mounted on concrete pillars, two on each side of a 25 m wide stretch of land. Three quarters of this stretch of land is a minefield and the rest was

ploughed ground so that the footprints of the ones crossing or trying to cross towards the West would show."[26] In a gesture that was both ritual—signifying the end of the Stalinist isolation—and practical, allowing the flow of refugees to pass in May 1956, the barbed wire fences and the minefields from the border between Hungary and Austria were cleared.[27]

Alena Pfoser was one of the researchers involved in the project of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute. Once the project was completed, Pfoser continued her investigation on the towns of Narva and Ivangorod, situated on the border between Estonia and the Russian Federation and described the results of her inquiry in a doctoral thesis defended in 2013.[28] Resorting to the instruments of oral history, the author developed three main axes of research: firstly, Pfoser looked at the way in which the residents of the city experienced the narrative and structural changes brought to the status of the border; secondly, she aimed to explore the way in which the relationship with the other side was re-evaluated and how the memory of a common past was reconsidered; thirdly, the researcher was concerned with the way in which the residents assimilated the official discourse that marked a spatial and temporal turning point. The objective of this research was an analysis of the relationship between memory and border construction and of the link between the popular/local discourse and the official one.[29]

More recently, Astrid M. Eckert has approached the border between the two Germanies from a Western perspective.[30] The author describes the position of Federal Germany in relation to the border with Democratic Germany, on the one hand, and to the border area, on the other. The definitive demarcation of the border in 1952 had serious consequences for the localities situated in the close proximity of the border.[31] The border area immediately became a stage for propaganda and had a slower economic development than the rest of the country. Consequently, the Bonn government had to put forward various stimulus packages.[32] As a result, the area developed an identity of its own and even started to be frequented by tourists. People from all over Europe were attracted by this disturbing area, seen as a site of crime, violence and kidnapping.[33] Eventually, Eckert's volume highlights this particular case of state intervention in the issue of a border shaped by very specific ideological and identity factors underpinning its whole symbolism.

Oral History Research in the Prut Valley

Much too concerned with its borderline status or with its position on the fringes of Europe, Romania paid little attention to its own borders. It could be argued that such a situation was also the outcome of a lack of systematic strategy in promoting good standing relationships with the neighboring countries at a micro-regional level. In other words, to this day, the Romanian state shows little interest towards border communities, especially regarding the non-EU countries.

Historians have devoted their attention to the process of negotiation and demarcation of Romania's borders, especially following World War I and World War II. Nev-

ertheless, several questions surrounding this aspect are still pending. What happened in the border areas after the border was established? How did this process influence the local communities? How did communities adapt to this new status? These are definitely open lines of research waiting to be addressed. In this context, it becomes important to underline the pioneering research of Romaniţa Constantinescu,[34] who approaches borders, including Eastern borders, from a perspective of symbolic constructions. For the communist period the Romanian western border was more interesting and we have the research of Johan Steiner and Doina Magheţi.[35] I must mention here the studies of Alexandru-Murad Mironov[36] or the studies of Philippe Henri Blasen and Andrei Cuşco on Noua Suliţă,[37] a locality that, before 1914, was situated at the crossroads of three frontiers, with the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with Tsarist Russia, and with Romania.

For the inhabitants on both sides of the Prut River, both the communist and the post-communist years showed a multiplication of the stereotypes of identity and cultural differentiation based on an aggressive propaganda coming from the East. The negative influence of the official ideology developed during the communist regimes had profound long-term repercussions, distorting the memory of the communities from Romania and the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. Within the communist bloc, external threats paired with internal ones. A combination of foreign enemies, dissidents and opponents emerged, leading to the formation of a specific type of border community after 1945.[38] For this reason, our project was aimed at exploring those particular aspects of local memory that were kept undisclosed—either due to the absence of freedom of speech or to ideological distortions—and at identifying the tangible effects of propaganda and ideology in the last 70 years. Ideological habits were perpetuated even after the disappearance of the communist regimes amid a low level of interest regarding the border between Romania and the Republic of Moldova.

The present study is intended to make contribution to the study of the communities from the Eastern border region, an area that rarely engaged the attention and scrutiny of the scientific community, and to provide a conceptual frame for the marginalization process to which the small Romanian towns situated along the Prut River were subjected. Therefore, a group of historians with a keen interest in the chronicle of everyday lives on the border, who also rely on personal experience and observation, initiated an experimental project entitled "Memory, Identity and Community: Studies in Oral History on Prut Valley in Romania and the Republic of Moldova," which was first conceived and developed in 2018. The project was conducted by the Association of International Relations "Est-Democraţia," in collaboration with the Alexandru Ioan Cuza Museum, the Faculty of History and Philosophy of the State University of Moldavia and A. D. Xenopol Institute of History, financed by the Government of Romania, the Ministry of Romanians Abroad. The research teams included experienced historians, young researchers and Ph.D. students from all partner institutions. The team conducted over 100 interviews in 8 small towns of the Republic of Moldova (Lipcani, Costeşti, Sculeni, Ungheni, Costuleni, Leuşeni, Leova, Cantemir) and 7 small towns in Romania (Rădăuţi-Prut, Ştefăneşti, Bosia, Ungheni, Costuleni, Vetrişoaia, Fălciu).

The subjects were mostly intellectuals, teachers, elementary school teachers, officials in the local administration, but also workers, agriculturalists and peasants without any

qualification. For the most part, the interviews included persons born after World War II, yet a small number were born during the interwar period or even during the war. As a result, we collected mainly indirect testimonies regarding the interwar years, as historical memories were usually passed on from one generation to another, through the stories of grandparents or parents, and these memories reached us through the words of their grandchildren. The objective of the project was to facilitate the public debate on a series of issues such as: the lives of the Romanian communities throughout several historical periods (communism, post-communism), the projection of an image of the other along the border, the need for closeness, the development of means of reciprocal knowledge throughout various historical periods, practical methods of collaboration, and the role of ideologies and propaganda in shaping the contemporary imaginary.

Borders are sites of division, but this is what makes them inhabit our thoughts, perceptions and representations. As a place so rich in symbols, images and narratives, borders are also sites of discursive practices which periodically reshape their identity.[39] Thus, the instruments of oral history appear as perfectly adapted to explore perceptions, representations, prejudice, in sum, variables which influence the relationship between communities and their own past. History explores historical memory, the instrument that people use to relate to their own past. And the past is suffused with formative individual experiences. People use the past to give meaning to their present actions and to provide explanations for the reality of life and of the world.[40]

Oral history shares a particular type of knowledge of the past, seen through the subjective eyes of direct or indirect witnesses. Alessandro Portelly suggests that oral history doesn't simply tell us what people actually did, but also what they wished they had done, what they thought they were doing and what they think, in the moment of speech, they did.[41] Oral history was defined by some historians as a primary-source material, recorded or created through an interview set with an actor or with the witness to an event, in order to preserve and transmit information to others.[42]

Oral history is not a counter-method to archival research. On the contrary, it aims to provide documented information within a more comprehensive perspective relying on the testimonies obtained from the participants to a particular situation. It is both a form of retrieving events and a way to cast light on the transformations wrapped around the perceptions of the past. According to Paul Thompson, oral history breaks barriers and lets the voice of the ones who experienced and lived history be heard: "Oral history is a history built around people."[43] Interviews can highlight different forms of memory, different representations or perceptions which serve both as historical sources and as object of research.[44] This type of instruments enable us to dwell on the discursive structure of the border, on the solidarities and alterity emerging on both sides of the border, seen as the "fields of heightened consciousness," as Astrid M. Eckert defines it while referring to the border separating the two Germanies during the Cold War.[45]

The disappearance of the border established in 1812 allowed free movement and, implicitly, the development of unprecedented economic and cultural exchanges to a level that elicits nostalgia. The old people from the abandoned villages along the Prut River, the *Pruteni*, as they like to be called, remember how they used to attend the fairs and

markets of Bessarabia and how, at the village stalls, you could purchase goods from Lvov or from the ports of Odessa. More than 20 bridges across the Prut also facilitated the relations between the localities along the river. Progressively, the Prut Valley started to form an organic whole. The year 1944 changed everything and it was perceived as the dawn of a tragedy on both sides of the river. The re-establishment of the border changed the everyday lives of the riverside localities, it separated families and incited an ample process of identity transformation on the left bank of the Prut River.

Overall, the localities situated along the banks of the Prut are very similar from a geographic, economic and social point of view. However, behind the inhabitants of both sides there are very different biographies, even though it could be stated that up to a point the common elements of the communist experience mainly involved terror, deportations, and collectivization. Nevertheless, the effects of propaganda and education unfolded dissimilarly. Unlike on the right bank, the construction of the communist society was experienced differently on the left one, as it resorted to identity politics. The construct "Homo Moldovanus Sovieticus," as coined by Octavian Ţîcu, was closely associated to an aggressive Romanian-phobia and to the endorsement of a set of practices aimed at refuting the "Romanian influences" on the cultural, political and social life from the left side of the Prut River.[46]

The border is integrated into the everyday lives of the people inhabiting the river banks. Their memories, the memories passed down from one generation to another, reveal the influence of the border on the everyday lives of the *Pruteni*. The presence of the barbed wire fence, symbol of an almost total isolation from the world outside the Soviet paradise, made the border appear as even more present in the everyday imaginary of the left side of the Prut River than on the right side. In Romania, the memory of the border is more tightly connected to dramatic family events or to memories transmitted from one generation to another. In the small cities of the Republic of Moldova, the feeling of rupture is predominant. Beyond the border, there was a whole to which they justly belonged on account of their past and of the ethno-linguistic ties. On the right side, in the Romanian localities, people fostered a feeling of connection with the other side, they feel and acknowledge the common elements they share with the others, even if this connection is altered by the fact that beyond this river lies the "evil," not just the one from James O. Noyes' memoirs, but also the one that brought about communism, after World War II.

First and foremost, oral history reveals the traumatic history of a family, of a community. Individual and collective tragedies left a strong mark on individuals and on collectivities[47] alike, while the event that shattered the lives of the *Pruteni* was World War II. The war was a shared drama and its memory was passed on from generation to generation leaving no room for competing narratives. There wasn't a single interviewee who did not have a tragic event to share from the years of the war, either as a direct participant or as someone who heard it from a family member. For Teodor Anton Benea, the war firstly signified the loss of his father. Even if he does not hold a strong memory of his father, he still experiences his loss as a tragedy.[48] On the left side, however, the most salient memory is connected to the arrival of the Soviet troops to the village:

> *When the Russians came to the village, they were on horseback. Everyone came out with sticks and white towels, this is how they welcomed them. Some 30 people crossed the village on horseback, they were tall Russians, large men, and behind them carriages started to arrive. That night they broke into gardens, they tore down fences, they stole sheep and cattle. They killed a calf right beside us and four or five sheep and fried them and made a meal . . .*[49]

After the end of the war, communism took hold and it was instated a lot sooner and more brutally on the left side than on the right side of the Prut. If in Romania the construction of the communist society was carried out in relationship with the "exploitative classes," in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) this process raised another dimension. On the left side of the Prut, the *chiabur* (kulak), the bourgeois, the fascist had a concrete impersonation, symbolized by the Romanians, who had allegedly "subjugated" and pillaged the territory between the Prut and the Dniester. In other words, in the MSSR, the construction of political identities was achieved by constant confrontation of the danger arriving from the West. In this particular case, the West was synonymous to Romania, though, officially, the country was presented by propaganda as a friendly neighbor, whereas unofficially Romania was a territory harboring many dangers. Based on these reasons, the population along the border had to be vigilant, the children had to be careful, to signal the presence of any foreign person or anyone who showed a special interest in the "frontier."

> *Let us know at once, be vigilant. There were some negative cases, also, two neighbors were arrested because they were actually willing to help the ones who wanted to cross. We knew how to react, someone kept him busy and I once went to the border guard saying "someone is really interested in the border." And within a few minutes the border guards were there, with dogs, and took him away. They told us: "Good job, that's it, patriots!" After a few days, when we went to the arts class, we entered the classroom and saw that very man, he was the teacher who had been sent to teach us art history . . .*
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> *The ones who were more active . . . for example, that case I was telling you about when he came and we denounced him as a foreigner, in autumn, the border guards came when we started school and gave us a bag as a present. The ones who were more active were allowed to get some rest . . .*[50]

The creation of a feeling of fear towards imaginary dangers, which necessarily came from the West, was one of the large scale strategies employed by the Soviet regime, especially in the border area. The creation of a feeling of fear between one another was mostly trading on the demonization of the other and on the mobilization of a sense of threat—the ones from the other side were all thieves who came to steal. That is where wild animals come from and, after all, that is where American imperialism would come from. The dissentions affecting foreign policy were also mirrored in a play of rumors that spread at the local level and which were intended to escalate a remote, symbolic conflict between the two sides of the Prut. Consequently, this amounted to a state of permanent mobilization of the population from the left side of the river, who had to be prepared and face the dangers coming from the right side of the Prut.

I remember this psychosis, on the radio, when they would talk about the danger of American imperialism, of the war, and I was thinking that very day or the day after a war might start. All my life, during the Soviet period, I lived with the fear of a war because I saw that this fear was promoted anywhere, at school, everywhere. It was rooted inside us and it dwelled there.

There were rumors that Ceauşescu intended to bring some Chinese to settle in the Prut meadow. Back then, the relationships between the USSR *and China were pretty tense. The people of the village said that Ceauşescu would bring the Chinese in the Prut meadow and that they would cross the river and come steal from us, that they would kill us and give us a lot of trouble. I remember I couldn't sleep because of this, I was afraid some Chinese would come and knock on my door and kill us, and do something bad to us.*[51]

The Soviets attempted to disrupt any contact between the inhabitants of the two sides of the Prut River. To this end, they built massive fortifications in the border area and erected three rows of barbed wire fences, all very high and with electric wires between them. Observation towers, which can be still seen to this day, dominated the border landscape. Also, the people who came from the border area of the MSSR needed to have a set of special permits that allowed them to cross from one side to the other. There was less security on the Romanian side and, especially during summer, people could take their animals out to graze and drink water. In spite of the strictness of the regime, people would try to talk with each other when they had the opportunity, although many of the testimonies from the right side suggest that the people from the left side refused any sort of dialogue and even took flight to avoid it: "We had connections with the Russian border guards there, with the civilians. But civilians would run away when they saw us, they were indoctrinated that we were the capitalists. When we saw them we used to shout at them, but they ran, they did not want to talk."[52]

Children often defied the strict rules imposed by the regime and managed to communicate across the river. Taking advantage of the fact that were not considered a direct threat, while they were taking the animals pasturing on the fields, probably fascinated with the unknown other side of the river and most likely unable to grasp the full extent of the socio-political realities, they would find themselves talking to each other by the river stream. In most cases, these conversations would turn to teasing and calling names, repeating what they heard from adults. The Bessarabians were called Russians or Russophones, and they found this quite bothering, whereas the Romanians were called gypsies or "hey, Romanian, you dog head."[53]

For Ion Şoşu, of Costeşti, childhood meant ponds filled with fish: "If the Prut swelled, it would raise and there would be ponds filled with fish, and we came home, took the *napatka* and walked for a couple of hours, I didn't need much, like I do now. We would catch enough fish for one meal or two and that was it, we came back home, we fried it and ate it." [54]

The children were also the ones who crossed the river by accident. Ioan Prodan of Ştefăneşti, Romania, told us in a very detached manner about the time when, as a child, he used to join other children his age to go swimming and while they played they were carried by the current and reached the other side:

The water was shallow and we went to the other side. They did not do anything to us, they realized we were kids. They took us to the customs checkpoint, through Iaşi, they did not get us across the Prut through this place. Somebody from the embassy came, I think they were from the Romanian embassy, we didn't know much, we were small back then. After that, the border guards targeted us and they wouldn't let us walk through the woods and told us—you punks, you crossed to the other side.[55]

The ones who were born by the Prut River after 1944 first came into contact with the reality from the other side through the members of their family. Grandparents, parents and relatives mediated this interest for a territory wrapped in mystery. It was the parents who passed on from generation to generation the image of the interwar fairs, of the years when they would cross the Prut to find customers for their goods, they would also talk about the relatives from the other side or about the tragedies of their fellow villagers whose families had been separated by the games of big league politics. The elders recall or have told their children or grandchildren about the years when the Romanians used to cross the Prut toward Lipcani or Ungheni while the Bessarabians would get across the river, to Ştefăneşti, Iaşi or Huşi. They have a particularly clear memory of a period when, in the fairs held along the river, one could buy goods from Lvov or Odessa, a period that sharply contrasts with the present day poverty and isolation.

Valentin Chiriac of Vetrişoaia, Vaslui recalls that: "There was a bridge, here, in Vetrişoaia and my father was telling us how they used to go to the fair of Leova, then the war made things difficult for them as they were accustomed to all this, they had friends, and many people from over there remained here and got married."[56] Gheorghe Fantaziu of Bosia, Romania, in spite of being 95 years old, still keeps a very vivid memory of the time when, before the war, he went with his grandfather to the fair of Ungheni to buy horses, and even recalls the names of innkeepers or of famous fiddlers who livened up the small town that bounded the river:

*There was a **fair** in Ungheni, that is where my grandpa bought my horses. People were managing and we used to go there when we were lads. There were pies and sweet bread, sausages, all sorts of things, and we would get something every once in a while. Then we used to go to a tavern and get some wine. There was an old man there, and, my dear boys, he had a wine as black as pitch. We had drinks there, at the old man's, it was about 3 lei a liter of wine . . .* [57]

Personal tragedies, official propaganda and the spread of rumors carefully orchestrated by the authorities generated a feeling of superiority amongst part of the Bessarabian population over the ones who lived across the Prut River. In this respect, the example of Vasile Iucal, who recalls the time when his aunt who lived in Romania came to visit his parents for the first time after 1944 and his father welcomed her somewhat patronizingly, is most revealing. The Soviet authorities were skilful enough to exploit the socio-economic hardship of the population from the right side of the river, in order to instill a negative image:

In our area, there was a feeling of superiority of the Bessarabian over the Moldavian who lived across the Prut. We were told they were paupers. I remember that this aunt came and moaned: "We live in hardship, we are poor." I remember that my mother had a sewing machine and that she gave it to her and she took it gladly. She told us: "We don't have access to something like this, back there."[58]

For the Romanians, the Bessarabians were good people. They noticed each other from across the river, they sometimes talked, there were also some Bessarabians in the village who married Romanian women, but they were "under the tutelage of the Russians." Some of the ones who used to work at the Stânca-Costeşti Dam pretended that Bessarabians treated them with a certain coldness. The ones who engaged in closer discussions risked being relocated, the Romanians said.[59] On the construction site of the dam, there were limits that the workers from one side or the other had to comply with. The ones working at the dam had border identification cards and they were very thoroughly checked. Those with a criminal record, the ones who had problematic political files or those who had relatives abroad were not accepted.

On the other hand, Teodor Anton Benea of Costeşti, the Republic of Moldova, argued that the workers from the dam became friends, and that the Bessarabians would go speak to the Romanians and vice versa. Long lasting friendships were formed there and the people got reconnected after 1990, after the fall of communism, regardless of what side of the Prut they were from, and the ones who worked at the dam visited each other. The construction site was also the perfect ground for small trafficking in goods, and cigarettes or religious books were passed from one side to the other... The danger to which these people exposed themselves was not to be ignored and some of the workers were caught and relocated.[60]

The Soviets strived to maintain the population of the left side of the Prut away from any Romanian cultural influence. Dumitru Verdianu, an artist from Ungheni, the Republic of Moldova, reminisces about how he had found out about the great Romanian painters and sculptors only after he got to the Academy of Arts, in Moscow. Even the proletkult artists from the right side of the Prut were banned. The same Dumitru Verdianu relates how he almost got expelled from high school, together with some other colleagues, for the simple reason that he had taken some of the most passionate ones to see an exhibition of the painter Corneliu Baba in Odessa.

Mircea Blajin, a psychiatrist born in Lipcani, in 1965, recounts in the pages of his memoirs that when he was in school, there were paintings of various Romanian writers on the walls and that they had been told those were, in fact, Moldavian authors.

No allusion to Romania was made, despite the fact that it was at a stone's throw and every time I would walk close to the border, I saw it as an estranged land . . . it was forbidden to speak of the Kingdom of Romania. Yet the connection with our brothers from the other side persisted in everyone's subconscious.[61]

The ideological and propaganda wall that the Soviets erected along the Prut was breached by the Romanian radio waves and by the visits from relatives, allowed after 1960, after the thaw. During the years 1965–1968, the leading forum of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic increasingly spoke of the "nefarious influence" of the Romanian radio and television station over the population of the left side of the Prut. Ivan Bodiul, first secretary of the Moldavian Communist Party, noted in 1966 that the radio of Chişinău could not reach the whole population of the Republic and that, consequently, 600,000 inhabitants were under the influence of the Romanian television. The same Bodiul wrote in 1968 to Alexei Kosygin, president of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, that the population residing the border with Romania was exposed, due to the Romanian radio and television, to western nationalist information and to news about China.[62] In spite of the investments in technology and of the upgraded quality of the radio and television station broadcasting in Chişinău, the problem of the Romanian influence was left unsolved. In 1978, the Moldavian authorities deplored the fact that the Moldavian television still required very tall antennas in the Prut Valley, whereas the Romanian television signal needed only a simple room antenna.[63] Although the radio waves undermined the official propaganda of the Soviets, no punitive or police control measures were taken against those who were listening to the Romanian radio station or who were watching the TV station from Bucharest.[64]

People from the left side of the Prut recalled growing up with the Romanian radio and television shows, listening to radio plays and watching folk music artists perform. The success of the Romanian sportsmen brought the young Bessarabians closer to the Romanian space. Adults today remember that when they were children during the years 1970–1980, they used to play football and call each other using Romanian football players' names. On the right side, however, the Moldavian radio did not have the same cultural influence, at least not until the end of the 80s. As Ioan Prodan of Ştefăneşti suggests, the Moldavian radio did not manage to change his opinion about what was happening on the other side and that he knew that over there people were "also Romanians, except that they were confined and they had been indoctrinated that we were their enemies."

In turn, geography also served as a facilitator of emotions and symbols across the barbed wire fence built between the two side of the river. Religious practices or winter traditions also preserved and strengthened the connection between the two riverbanks throughout the communist period. The calendar difference made it possible for the *Pruteni* to listen peacefully to Romanian carols and to convince themselves they were the same as theirs. Carols and traditional music defied both the barbed wire fences and the official propaganda, making themselves heard across the river. In the village of Călineşti, of Făleşti Rayon, located close to the border, it was considered that candles lit next to the cemetery crosses might be a threat to the security of the Soviet Union and it was, consequently, ordered that "these crucifixes be demolished." Against this backlash, remembrance services and bell tolls coming from the right riverbank made cracks in the small iron curtain that had been created and stimulated the religious feelings of the population of Bessarabia.

Visits to relatives were among the best kept memories of the interviewees, especially for the Bessarabians. The return of children, brothers or sisters usually made people hold large parties and sing popular Romanian songs of the time. Generally, the ones who arrived from Romania were received with a certain consideration. Although in most cases Romanians lived in more precarious conditions and although Romania was also a communist state, they were considered fortunate to be able to speak Romanian freely and create a cultural environment without hindrance. After 1983, the Romanians who visited the Republic of Moldova appreciated the openness of the country and seemed pessimistic about the situation in Romania. The difficult conditions in Romania led to a growing phenomenon of smuggling. For example, while one could find coffee in Moldova, in Romania it was scarce. Consequently, in order to transport large quantities of coffee, the smugglers stashed it in baby food boxes. The type of expectations regarding the Romanians spread easily and people were always waiting for something to happen.[65]

In 1962, the USSR adopted a series of measures regarding the involvement of young people in the activities of the border guards. The camps "Young friends of the border guards" were established along with the badge "Young friend of the border guards." The purpose of this action was to increase the level of militarization of the border communities and to cultivate the "military-patriotic values among the youth."[66] By virtue of this policy, for example, the young people of Sculeni, the Republic of Moldova, were requested to carry out a series of maintenance works of the border. In winter time, they had to create snow trails next to the barbed wire fences for the border guards on patrol duty.[67]

V. Iucal watched the Revolution of December on TV. The event was unusual and it gave the impression of a well directed act that went on the air. The Flower Bridge was a well embedded memory. The Museum of Ungheni, hosted by the building of the Cultural Center, a Soviet construction overlooking the railway bridge across the Prut designed by Eiffel, was a privileged institution. Placed in the centre of the events, it received numerous book donations. Many Bessarabians welcomed Romanians into their homes, extraordinary friendships were built. Nevertheless, this euphoria did not last long, and a state of suspicion took over in the aftermath of the event. V. Iucal ascribes this state of events to the exceedingly high expectations of the Bessarabians. Clichéd speeches started emerging, suggesting that the Romanians were looking forward to the union just to turn the Bessarabians into their slaves.[68]

In Ştefăneşti, the Romanians were really welcoming to the Bessarabians who came to sell goods, offered them accommodation and so on. However, there was a certain unresponsiveness of their brethren, viewed as an effect of the terror and of the changes associated with the ethnic structure of the population: "As so many nations have passed by there, they didn't trust anyone anymore."[69] The general feeling of the Romanians, after the Flower Bridge event, was that the people on the other side had a better life.

Provisional Review

The re-establishment of the border along the Prut in 1944 abruptly changed the way of life of the residents of the two sides of the river and irretrievably influenced their destinies. The subsequent events made the Romanians from the Prut Valley perceive the border in a different light. For the Bessarabians, it signified the separation from the mother country, from their culture and from their mother tongue. The stricter regime in the border areas, the fortifications, the interdictions imposed by the authorities triggered an enhanced desire to hold on to something that progressively became quite remote. In addition, the propaganda directed towards the inhabitants of the left side of the Prut was purposefully designed to alter their Romanian identity and to create a new, Moldavian one. The Romanians also experienced the new border as a tragedy and they empathized with the ones who had relatives on the other side. Nonetheless, they were not confronted with a similarly strict regime, nor were they subjected to a process of identity change. Besides, if someone mentioned Bessarabia, the consequences were not necessarily harsh. In spite of all the efforts of the Soviets or of the Romanian communists, the Prut border was not a hermetic one. There was a two-way population flow and the same was valid for information, a situation that largely contributed to the preservation of a feeling of identity.

The research on oral history in the Prut Valley reveals a manifold universe, a multiplicity of alterities, representations, opinions, which amount to a set of feelings that harbor 70 years of history. Most of these communities appear stuck in time, yet the discussion about the life on the border, about their everyday lives, about solidarities, identity and alterity apparently enable them to acknowledge their own border identity. There is no official narrative of the border and not even the cultural elites seem to have been interested in this topic. It is our opinion that the reluctance surrounding the eastern border, a topic of communist origin which is better left behind closed doors, still lingers to this day.

Ideology and propaganda had significant long-term effects, especially in Bessarabia. Artificial images of the "enemy" were constructed. They persist to this day, distorting the relationship between the two sides of the river. The inhabitants of the left riverbank were dragged into a propaganda and identity war at the sight of which the right side did not react. The only response of the Romanian officials regarding the Soviet identity dilution politics was enacted on television or on the radio.

Considering the limited tools and resources available, the present project is the first attempt within the Romanian cultural space to investigate the elements of closeness/distance that exited and still exist between the Romanian communities situated along the Prut River after 1945, on the one hand, and, on the other, to provide an analysis of the way in which the political and cultural transformations occurring in the border area during 1945–2018 prompted a shift in identity perceptions and in the everyday lives of the people.

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Abstract

Memory and Identity on the Border with the USSR:
Arguments for an Experimental Research Project

Mainly concerned with its own status as a European border, Romania neglected its own frontiers. If during the communist years it was impossible to focus on borders as an object of historical, sociological or ethnographic research, nowadays, almost 30 years after the fall of communism, border studies appear as an inconsistently defined field. The present research looks to outline a theoretical framework, an introduction to a field that has produced a sizable body of literature regarding other historiographical spaces, and to bring arguments for further research in the area of oral history in the case of these particular areas. Our project retraces the development and conclusions of an experimental project conducted on the border between Romania and the Republic of Moldova. This border can be regarded as a special case, as it separates Romania from a territory that was carved out of its national body and to which it has strong ethno-cultural ties. The present day territory of the Republic of Moldova was subjected to important identity change programs and the border reacted more acutely to this phenomenon. Our study resorts to the instruments of oral history in order to identify the mechanism through which people on the border created their own identity, the means that allowed them to cultivate and preserve older identities, their reaction to the propaganda of the communist regimes and, eventually, their position regarding the relation between alterity and solidarity.

Keywords

border studies, Prut River, Republic of Moldova, identity, memory, oral history