

**Comparative Symbolic Violence: The Chisinau and Tiraspol National
Historical Museums.**

by

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Abstract

In this paper we compare the representations of the exhibitions dedicated to World War II (WW2), located at the National Historical Museums of Chisinau¹ in Moldova and Tiraspol in Transnistria respectively. We provide general descriptions of the museums' contents in order to understand the more subtle policies of the museums, as well as to highlight the meaning-forming points of the countries' histories, as they are presented today. We will show that in Moldova, the national museum engages in rampant symbolic violence, while in Tiraspol symbolic violence, accompanied by classic displays of Sovietism such as, industrialization, militarism and sports prowess, is used as an element in the legitimization of Transnistrian independence.

Introduction

Both Moldova and Transnistria (as they now call themselves) were parts of the various state associations to the middle or end of WW2; both countries were subsequently transformed into republics of the Soviet Union. Thus, Bessarabia was part of Greater Romania for period of 1918-1940 and between June 28, 1940 and July 1941 it became part of USSR. After 19 August 1941 it was included into Romanian-administrated territory called "The Transnistria Governorate" which existed until 29 January 1944. And before 1917 Bessarabia for more than 100 years was called Bessarabia oblast (region) and then Bessarabia Gubernia, being part of Russian Empire.

The area which is called today the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR or Pridnestrovia or Transnistria²) had been part of the Russian Empire (Podolia and Kherson Gubernias), then part of it (Bendery and villages around) was annexed to Bessarabia, which became Greater Romania. The other part (bigger in terms of territory) became the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic.

Both researched cities had periods of German occupation (German-Romanian in Moldova).

The chosen countries had a significant Jewish population which was decimated by genocide during the Second World War (Gregorovich; Burakovskiy; Dumitru). The

¹ "Chisinau" is the Romanian equivalent of "Kishinev", from the Russian "КИШИНЁВ". The terms are used interchangeably in the paper.

² "Transnistria" is the Romanian word for "beyond the Dniester River" whereas "Pridnestrovia" is a transliteration of the Russian "ПРИДНЕСТРОВЬЕ", meaning [a land] by the Dniester [River]. We use the two works interchangeably.

problematic and incomplete reflection of the Jewish question is typical for both museums. It is interesting that with respect to the Holocaust both museums agree. There is no denial but, equally pernicious, no blame is apportioned to anyone; it was simply something that happened during the Second World War. As we shall see, aside from this issue, the museums under consideration differ markedly with respect to the history of the two sides of the Dniester River.

Our basic research method is discourse analysis in the interpretation of researchers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Jørgensen M., Phillips L. J). The essence of their method is closely related to the logic of the selected methodology: to understand the context, and not to take fragmentary objects for analysis. For a detailed analysis they developed the necessary elements, such as: articulation, nodal point, and locus. These elements help to analyze, explain and interpret data. We then show how this view of the exhibits helps bring out the various layers of symbolic violence.

We pay particular attention to plaques located near the stands, because we see them as providing essential information about the way and point of the exhibition. Being communicative acts, they construct the imaginable myths of history, which play a role in the projection of identities. We proceed with a separate presentation of the two museums and interweave the analysis with the descriptive presentation.

National Museum of Archaeology and History of Moldova

At the entrance of the museum stands the monument of the Capitoline Wolf, which, of course, symbolizes the founding of Rome (pic 1). A similar monument stands near the central entrance of National Museum of Romanian History in Bucharest. This is a clear indication that Chisinau is a Latin and, by implication, not a Slav city.

Chisinau museum has two floors and one basement floor, where the newest exhibition is presented (photo 1). Its title is »Soviet Moldova between Myths and the Gulag«. The right part of the first floor is occupied by the furniture store. For the period of observation, which took place in November 2012, there were four temporary and two permanent exhibitions. Temporary were: an exhibition dedicated to the “Russian-Turkish” war of 1812 and to the “Gulag”. The permanent exhibition presents the history of Moldova from 500,000 B.C.E until the day of independence. Each exhibition hall employs a different mix of languages. Some use three languages (Romanian, English and Russian), while others provide only Romanian and English. The second option is more typical for newer expositions, such as the presentation of the Gulag, although whether this is related to the topic or not is unclear.

The exposition begins from the second floor. The first hall is »500 000 – to middle of 14th century«, after which follows narration of the Medieval Moldavian state period, the

chronological frames being the 13th through 18th centuries. The central figure located here is Stephen the Great. He is one of the key heroes for post-Soviet Moldova; the product of a re-actualization of the national emancipation discourse of “moldovisation” (Portnov). A monument of the emperor also decorates the main square of the central park and Chisinau’s main street is named in his honor. Historically, Stephen the Great has several characteristics which add to his status: as Prince of Moldavia between the middle of the 15th and the beginning of 16th centuries, as a holy person within Christianity and as an opponent of the Ottoman Empire. The other important figure but less powerful in terms of visibility in the process of constructing the modern Moldavian identity is Dimitrie Cantemir (Gusterin P.). He symbolizes the “cultural face” of the country.

The exhibits in the next hall »present history of Bessarabia« during the tsarist occupation (1812-1918). It should be noted that this is the first time the term »occupation« appears. It seems to be a modern approach to automatically mark everything connected with Russian power as an occupation. On the other hand, the term »occupation« is never used when the territories of the modern country were part of other political associations. Why not say “Nazi Occupation” or “Romanian Occupation” or “occupation by medieval kings”? Further, the implication that only one foreign country has been an aggressor follows from the observation that other terms such as »annexation« and »foreign domination«, are all related exclusively to either the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. This failure to distinguish between these two “occupiers” does mean, however, that the official aversion is ethnically rather than politico-ideologically based³.

The 19th century is presented via every-day life perspectives. We find clothes and other items belonging to the country’s peasantry, the magazine »Bessarabia life«, and a photo of mill factory workers.

Finally we stand near the last chronological temporary exhibition hall covering the years 1900-1940. It claims to present the social-cultural development of Moldova from the beginning of the 20th century, World War I, and the national movement of 1917. 1917 has a special connotation in the grand historical narrative of the museum and is highlighted by the creation of the first Bessarabian parliament (Sfatul Tarii). Sfatul Tarii would appear to be the other nodal point of Moldavian history together with Stephen the Great as presented from a modern perspective.

Another event closely connected to parliament's appearance is becoming a protectorate of Romania (27 March 1918). This event is represented first as a »consolidation« and second as a »high development of culture and education« period. As the relevant plaque

³ It is as well to be reminded at this point that Transnistria, situated just across the river, is inhabited largely by Slavs.

states: »the integration process of Bessarabia into political, economic and cultural life of greater Romania leads to important socio-economical changes, especially to a high development of culture and education. Documentary evidence displayed in the exhibition testifies this fact«. Analyzing this short piece of information presents the opposite strategy to that of relations with Russia. Here there is the construction of positive relations regarding Romania. The construction of the dichotomy of Great Romania-Russian/Soviet Empire appears as the main conflict in the museum's temporal exhibitions. It is a seeming paradox, but the relation to “Other”⁴ creates the presentation of Moldavian history from the current viewpoint. This position of relation divides the space into black and white, where black is the Russian Empire (tsarist occupation) and white is Great Romania (consolidation, development). This period is shown through World War One and through significant figures from politics (political activists and writers like Constantin Stere, Liviu Deleanu) and cultural life (opera singers like Anastasia Dicescu, Maria Cebotari and others; conductor, composer Alexandru Cristea; painters Nicolae Coleadici, Rostislav Ocusco and Claudio Cobizev). The economic success is shown through »Production of the industrial enterprises from Bessarabia« . The requirements of Symbolic Violence demand that the Latin-Slav dichotomy be unstated; the point comes across clearly as it is. To invoke ethnicity would be politically incorrect!

The exhibition is situated at a room with a corridor which is used as a continuation of stands about famous opera singers of the »union period« with a smooth transition into the presentation of the other topic: World War Two. This war consists of a small number of ambiguous stands. A stand with a Romanian soldier is located near that of a Soviet soldier. Chronologically this is correct because before the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, Moldova (the Bessarabian part) was under the Romanian protectorate and began the war under the control of the Nazi Wehrmacht. However, chronology aside, the other part of the then Moldova never fought under the Romanian army and was part of the Soviet Red Army. In other words, what is today Moldova was part of the Axis while a large part of what is today Transnistria was then part under the control of the Red Army. So, here too, Symbolic Violence dictates that some (trivial?) facts be glossed over.

A stand with personal items of the WW2 participants in the ranks of the Romanian Army proceeds with the same stand with Soviet soldiers' personal items (photo 2). After this, we see two stands about collectivization and then a stand about the deportation of the Bessarabians to Siberia. Important construct – »Bessarabia« was created during the Russian Empire's "occupation" (Clark Charles Upson). Even though the national

⁴ “Other” in terms of Schütz and Luckmann

museum has to present some kind of »national history« it is difficult to apply. We also notice one stand and several photos on the wall presenting the Holocaust: children (in one photo) and adults (in another) behind barbed wire and people prepared for collective shooting. When the guide was asked if she thinks that the question receives sufficient coverage she suggested a visit to the Museum of the Jews in Chisinau⁵. The exhibition concludes with a stand on »armed conflict on the Dniester« with the The Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic. As is noted below, the same event is marked as »war« at the Pridnestrovian museum. Another interesting aspect of the naming for the conflict is the name of the enemy, or rather, its anonymity. The Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic is not recognized by Moldova, so the name doesn't appear in the display. The apotheosis of symbolic violence: there was an armed conflict sufficiently important to warrant coverage at least equal the equivalent of that accorded the Holocaust and yet the enemy must not be named. The “armed conflict” existed, it was confirmed but the reasons or results of it have not been clarified by the exhibition.

The last stand presents the events of gaining independence. At the centre we can see the declaration of independence. On both sides of the declaration are photos with president and people, who are hanging the national flag.

The next hall »reflects[s] spiritual culture and religious identity of the inhabitants of the republic«. Here we see different artifacts, showing the Orthodox, Catholic and Jewish religions. The exposition is of a generalized nature with no exact data on the presented religions regarding the specifically Moldavian case. It tells us which religions exist and what kind of art they contain: icons, Bible, Torah, holy clothes etc.

The second floor temporary exhibitions are finished with this one. Other temporary exhibitions are presented on the first floor and one of them is the latest: »Soviet Moldova: Between Myths and the Gulag « (photo 3). It consist of two rooms, presenting the issue of deportations, the chronological frame being 1920-1951. The plaques are prepared in Romanian; there is only one English plaque which is located near the entrance. Also near the entrance we see Stalin's cabinet. Then come some Soviet attributes like a little monument of Lenin, Soviet posters and newspapers. Everything else is stands representing the victims (pic.). On the wall is located a new map with the title »Archipelag Gulag«, showing the territory of Russia, part of Ukraine, Cuban, Caucasus and the Baltic.

⁵ An analysis of this museum is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to note that in this museum, the Holocaust is presented in such a way that the reader might consider the Kishinev Pogrom, with its fewer than 50 murders, as a more important manifestation of anti-Semitism in Moldova.

The last temporary exhibition located on the first floor in English is presented as »The diorama «Operation Iasi-Chisinau« (20-29 August 1944). While it is possible to translate this as the Jassy–Kishinev Operation, this has not been done. The diorama was created and released by two painters and opened in August 1990. This operation may be viewed either as an end to the Nazi occupation of Chisinau or as the beginning of Soviet occupation. While the exhibition is unclear on this point, Moldova is evidently conflicted on the issue. Moldova’s President celebrated the 61st anniversary of the battle as the end of Nazi occupation, while the Chairman of the “Molotov-Ribbentrop Anti-Pact” organization Jacob Golovca explained, "With this action, the true patriots of Moldova want to make the authorities and population understand that August 24, 1944 is not the date of our liberation from the Nazi, but the date of our occupation by Stalin's regime".⁶

In summary, it is clear that the authorities determining the nature of the presentations at the Chisinau National Historical Museum have demonstrated proficiency in the use of Symbolic Violence in order to convey the following messages:

1. The Russians, be they Tsarist or Communist, have been evil occupiers of Moldova and contributed nothing positive to its economic or cultural development.
2. Moldova is a Latin country whose language is essentially Romanian and Romania has assisted in all aspects of Moldovan development.
3. The Nazis were an ambiguous force in modern Moldovan history.
4. Moldovan Jews suffered during the Second World War, but at whose hands and for what reason remains unclear.

Tiraspol museum

If the Capitoline Wolf provides a Latin welcome to the Chisinau museum, the Tiraspol museum is in an evidently Soviet-style town both in terms of architecture and such symbols as Lenin’s statue. The Museum itself is a one story building located on the central square of the capital (photo 4). Currently, there are two exhibitions: »In memory of the fallen defenders of Transnistria« and »Tiraspol is 220 year old«. For research purposes we not only observed the museum, but also ordered an excursion. This was conducted by a young woman, perhaps of student age, who was very surprised to make an excursion for only one person, especially also for another young student. It was officially forbidden to take any photos, but we were allowed to take several, once the main controller had left the room.

⁶ <http://www.mdn.md/en/index.php?view=viewarticle&articleid=1582>

The excursion was short, around twenty minutes, and it contained observation of three rooms. First room presented »Tiraspol in nowadays«: a stand with the Sheriff Football team, Sheriff Stadium, one stand with factory production »Kvant«, most well-known for its cognac production (photo 5). Nearby was located a stand with the output of another factory, specializing in the production of sockets and pans. Other stands presented »cultural life« (posters from a cultural evening, a newspaper with a photo of the Orthodox Church with the title »Orthodox Pridnestrovie«) and presents and medals given to Pridnestrovie. Strangely, there appeared an award winning shipbuilder over the stand about cultural life. It would seem that Transnistria, unlike Moldova, is unable to boast of internationally unknown opera stars but, like the old Soviet Union, is proud of its industrial capacity.

The second room presents the events of the years 1990-1992, when the region was in armed conflict with the Moldavian army. The main accent of the exhibition is on the mood of opposition of that period among citizens and workers. We are shown the “durability, courage and hardball of Pridnestrovian folk”. Alongside such photos can be seen »workers of the factory «. The core element uniting all workers is the figure of ex-president of republic Igor Smirnov. The hall is full of photos which purport to represent his leadership qualities and the high ideals for which he was fighting. Typical titles of the photos: »Smirnov with women«, »Smirnov at the prison «. This is classic Cult of the Personality.

The last room is the most modern exhibition in terms of equipment. It presents the soldiers who died during the battles for independence of 1990-1992(photo 6). The walls are decorated with the photo prints of the soldiers and military life in general. The issue of 1990-1992 is the central nodal point for the construction of a (relatively unrecognized⁷) national identity. It is the kind of construction where national identity is based on existence of an “Other”. Another important aspect of being recognized as a country is its level of national self-consciousness. A common strategy of such presentations is adopted by presenting the number of battles and victims. The more battles, the more tragic the results, the greater the probability that the majority group involved country/location will find sufficient sympathizers to gain independence. Such a construction is usually based on ideological or ethical opposition and our case seems to be of the latter kind. The ideologies are not different: both official Moldova and Pridnestrovie wanted to receive independence and to build the country under a purportedly democratic ideology. The question of the language (together with underlying ethnicity) was the important reason for the beginning of the conflict (Rupesinghe, Kumar;

⁷ Transnistria is currently recognized only by Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia. Transnistria is also one of the few countries which recognizes these three countries.

Tishkov Valery A). The Moldavian constitution proclaims that the official language of Moldova is Moldavian. The history as taught in Prindestrovian schools and also as presented at the museum shows that the territory »beyond the River Dniester« is essentially a Russian-speaking area and has been an area of interest for Russia for years: the emergence of a new living area for Slavs was made possible by Catherine II's decree and Graf Suvorov's implementation (Cojocaru Natalia, Suhan Stela). After the establishment of the Soviet Union it was taken under Soviet control. Tiraspol was the capital of the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic until 1940. Then, after 1944 when Bessarabia became part of the Soviet Union, both sides of the Dniester were proclaimed as the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (Waters, T.R). The myth⁸ that no Transnistrian territory has ever been part of Greater Romania is still the main form of argumentation for legitimizing its independence (Cojocaru Natalia, Suhan Stela) and symbolic violence is here evident for the first time in one of the museum's exhibition.

»A Soviet Society in Miniature« seems to be the adequate term to describe the projected identity of Transnistria. It is so not only owing to the evident pride in industry displayed in the museum and the sports prowess implied by the Sherriff display, but also in the official public sphere (the central avenue of the city is occupied with the eternal flame, plaques with the lists of dead heroes and a statue of Lenin). Symbolic violence in the museum is necessary to cut the last tie with the Moldovans and that is, of course, the removal of Greater Romania from any place in Pridnesrovian history. Further, even when Transnitria as it exists today was and "independent" Soviet Republic before the Second World War, this cannot be mentioned since it was named the Moldavian Soviet Republic!

Conclusions

The results of discourse analysis which took place at two historical museums has shown that the narrative is different as well as the strategies of its representation. The important point which we have established is that each museum has been an active instrument for the implementation of the ideological strategies of the modern political system. We may assume that the neutrality is something which it is not possible to find at the modern Moldavian and Transnistrian museums.

The major points establishing this result are as follows:

- »A Soviet Society in Miniature« seems to be the adequate term to describe the projected identity of Transnistria. (Museums space and the central avenue of the

⁸ Those parts of Transnistria belonging to Bessarabia were part of Greater Romania from 1919 to 1940. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greater_Romania

city are occupied with the eternal flame, plaques with the lists of dead heroes and a statue of Lenin).

- Symbolic violence in the museum is necessary to cut the last tie with the Moldovans and that is, of course, the removal of Greater Romania from any place in Pridnesrovian history. This is implied by the absence of any reference to the history of the whole 20 century period prior to 1990 in the museum's exhibitions.
- A trend typical for most National historical museums in Eastern Europe has emerged which represents the Soviet Union as an "invader" and actualizes the close connection with the topic of the Soviet Gulag (the term "occupation" is used initially in the context of the Russian Empire in the Chisinau museum). The Chisinau museum is not the exception with respect to these changes. The exception is the Tiraspol museum for understandable reasons.
- The Tiraspol Museum perhaps might be described as "fuzziness and forgetfulness." Thus, the "key aggressor" of Pridnesrovian Republic is constructed and termed "Moldovan nationalists". As a result of such denomination their appears the "key hero" of the republic – the soldier. The Chisinau museum has another strategy which we call "dissolution", when the historical events of WW2 or the Pridnesrovian conflict are glossed over without any clarifying facts.
- There is no mention at the Tiraspol museum the 20 century period prior to 1990. The museum constructs its history from the "nova days needs" perspective. The virtually unrecognized state tries to create its justification as "unique" and does so by the simplification of its exhibits. That is why we will find only two main exhibitions: the ethnographical (the "imaged roots" of the territory) and the modern (post-1990) militarized history of the region.

Additional material:

Photo 1. National Museum of Archaeology WW2 and History of Moldova, external view



Photos 2. Romanian and Soviet uniform, period



Photo 3. Exhibition »Soviet Moldova: Between Myths and the Gulag «



Photo 4. Tiraspol museum, external view



Photo 5. Exhibition “Tiraspol is 220 years”



Photo 6. War of 1990-1992 years



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