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## REPRESSION OF BESSARABIAN BULGARIANS BY RUSSIAN AUTHORITIES DURING WORLD WAR I (1914–1917)

Artur LEȘCU\*

## РЕПРЕСИИ СРЕЩУ БЕСАРАБСКИТЕ БЪЛГАРИ ОТ РУСКИТЕ ВЛАСТИ ПРЕЗ ПЪРВАТА СВЕТОВНА ВОЙНА (1914–1917)

Артур ЛЕШКУ

**Abstract:** *Based on the original documentary material collected by the author in the National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, an attempt has been made to investigate some unknown aspects of the struggle of Bessarabian Bulgarians against the tsarist policy of assimilation during the First World War. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Bulgarians ranked fifth in terms of population in Bessarabia – a province annexed to the Russian Empire in 1812. In all these years, they preserved their language, culture, and national traditions, transforming the Alexander III Boys’ Gymnasium in Bolgrad into a true centre of national culture. Many Bessarabian Bulgarians played an important role in the history of Bulgaria, holding positions of responsibility in the Bulgarian state. Some of them were the Prime Minister of Bulgaria Aleksandar Malinov, the Minister of War Danail Nikolaev, the Mayor of Sofia Martin Todorov and his brother General Georgi Todorov, and General Ivan Kolev. Despite this fact, and in contradiction with Russian historical mythology about special relations privileged with Bulgarians, the Russian authorities treated them equally with other national minorities, exposing them to forced assimilation, deportations, expulsions, repressions, and arrests of representatives of the Bulgarian national movement in the Russian Empire.*

**Keywords:** *power; legislation; gendarmes; army; crime; reprisals; government; Russian Empire; Bessarabia.*

The Russian Empire, the autocratic state, was based on the hegemony of the Russian people and the suppression of nationalities captured through the intensive process of assimilation. Bulgarians were no strangers to this process, who, for various reasons, were displaced to Russia, settling mostly in Bessarabia. The objective study of the repressive measures against the Bulgarian population by the tsarist authorities at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to which this research is dedicated, is of major importance to restoring the historical truth. This topic is all the more important because, both in the past and now, Russian historiography deliberately avoids this topic, which contradicts the propaganda

\* Artur Leșcu – PhD in history, State University of Physical Education and Sports, Chișinău; Moldova;  
@ arturlescu@gmail.com

myths regarding the practically absolute coincidence of Russia's interests with those of Bulgaria, and the Bulgarians' unconditional support of all the actions of the Russian state. The topic of reprisals by Russian authorities against Bulgarians was not even discussed, being a historiographical taboo. Based on unpublished documents, this paper tries to demonstrate that the tsarist position towards Bessarabian Bulgarians did not differ from their position towards other nationalities, as they were subjected to various measures of reprisal and attempts at assimilation.

Bessarabia, the eastern part of Moldavia, annexed by the Russian Empire following the Russo-Turkish War of 1806–1812, became the target of an intensive process of colonization by the tsarist government. Among the settlers were the Bulgarians who enjoyed some privileges from the Russian government. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the number of Bessarabian Bulgarians exceeded 100,000, accounting for 5.3% of the region's total population, ranking fifth among Moldovans, Ukrainians, Jews, and Russians [*Istoria Republicii Moldova*, 2002, p. 146]. Only in the Akkerman, Ismail, and Bolgrad lands in 1913, a total of 112,201 Bulgarians lived, regardless of the Bulgarian settlements in the Bender County [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 305, f. 7 verso**]. Living compactly in southern Bessarabia, particularly in Budjak (with its centre in the city of Bolgrad, and favoured for decades for pragmatic reasons by tsarism), they became an economically strong social group based on extensive land ownership. From this point of view, the Bessarabian Bulgarians were considered the richest social class not only in Bessarabia, but also in the entire Russian Empire. The minimum plots of land in the possession of the Bulgarian settlers were 10 dessiatins<sup>1</sup>. Among them were large landowners who possessed tens of thousands of acres of land, such as Gheorghe Ivan Țanko-Cîlcic (whose estates covered an area of over 50 thousand acres of land), the brothers Ivan, Nicolai, and Liubomir Atanasiu (over 20,000 acres of land), and the millionaires Nicolai Stepan Buclukci (over 10,000 acres of land) and Vasili Shopov (3,800 acres of land) [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 305, f. 2**]. This material well-being was enhanced by a high level of culture and literacy compared to other peoples in the Empire. In addition to primary schools, existing in every Bulgarian town in the country, in Bolgrad there was a gymnasium named after Alexander III, the richest secondary school in Russia, as well as a girls' gymnasium, while in Comrat there was a real gymnasium (school) which became a real hotbed of the spread of Bulgarian culture. After graduating from high school, many of the students left the Russian Empire and moved to Bulgaria where, thanks to their knowledge, they had a brilliant career, reaching important state positions. Among them we can mention the Prime Minister of Bulgaria Aleksandar Malinov, the Minister of War Danail Nikolaev, the Mayor of Sofia Martin Todorov and his brother General Georgi Todorov, General Ivan Kolev, and many others [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 305, f. 2 verso**].

The attitude of Russian authorities towards Bessarabian Bulgarians changed once the newly established state, Bulgaria, refused to become a political satellite of the Russian Empire, promoting an independent policy based on its national interests. The period between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries marked a gradual change in the attitude of the Russian authorities towards the Bessarabian Bulgarians from a favourable to a hostile one. Unsuccessful attempts were made to assimilate the Bulgarian settlers who were increasingly seen as promoters of pan-Bulgarian nationalism and separatism. The persecution of Bessarabian Bulgarians began in 1904 when Aleksei Haruzin was appointed governor of Bessarabia. Despite his reputation as an ethnographic scholar, he proved to be a Russian chauvinist who, while inspecting the region, found that “there is real dissatisfaction among Bulgarians [...], as well as nationalist aspirations and internal solidarity. [...] Bulgarian intellectuals influence the masses [...] which imposes the need for strict control over the entire population of Bessarabian Bulgarians” [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 305, f. 17**]. To this end, at the insistence of Maximilian Trusevici, Director of the Police Department at the Ministry of Interior, the gendarme station was transferred from Ismail to Bolgrad, which displeased the

<sup>1</sup> Dessiatin – a land measurement unit used in Russia in the past, equal to 1.09 ha.

military authorities who were left without the opportunity to observe the eventual theatre of operations in the southwest.

In the years that followed, the situation did not change. Moreover, due to the Russification policy promoted by the government, the Bulgarians were moving further and further away from the Russians. As head of the gendarmerie in Ismail, Lieutenant Colonel Afanasiev reported on the eve of the outbreak of World War I that “[...] Bulgarians do not want to have Russians in their localities, treating them with contempt” [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 305, f. 7 verso**]. From the perspective of the Russian authorities, the situation was becoming alarming, because the Bulgarians, due to their well-being, seized all elective functions of the local public authorities in the Bolgrad district, showing a tendency to isolate themselves from the rest of the population. If, however, the separatist aspirations of the Bulgarians, as well as those of the ethnic Germans or Bessarabian (Moldovan) Romanians, were not seen in peacetime as a direct threat, then the situation could explode in time of war [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 305, f. 12**].

With the outbreak of World War I, the situation of the Bessarabian Bulgarians did not change radically, and they continued to be viewed with suspicion by the tsarist authorities, who remarked that the latter, unlike other peoples of the Empire, were hostile to the start of the war which endangered their economic activities and traditional way of life [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 312, f. 4**]. The situation changed radically in the autumn of 1915 when Bulgaria entered the war on the side of the Central Powers and became a direct opponent of the Russian Empire. Under these conditions, the Russian authorities began to carry out a series of retaliatory measures against the Bulgarians, based from a legislative point of view on the Rules of War declared in the state of war of 18 June 1892. This law provided for confiscation of the property owned by subjects of the countries with which Russia was at war, or by Russian citizens, descendants of these countries with their deportation to the remote parts of the Empire. Exceptions were men over the age of 45, children up to the age of 18, and unmarried women. Thus, all Bulgarian citizens were deported from Russia to Bessarabia. Their exact number is not known, except that 99 Bulgarian citizens from Bender (Tighina) were exempted from deportation [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 408, f. 18-21 verso**]. As for the deportation of Russian citizens of Bulgarian origin, such cases have been registered, but their number is uncertain, except for some persons against whom criminal cases have been opened.

The repression of Russian authorities against Bessarabian Bulgarians was manifested not only in deportations, but also in the persecution of representatives of this ethnic group, regarded as separatists and political opponents of tsarism, in the persecution of local intellectuals against whom political trials were initiated, and in the fight against the national spirit. Secret investigations by Colonel Shamsev from the gendarmerie corps have shown that, despite the war, especially after Bulgaria entered into World War I, Bessarabian Bulgarians did not assimilate with the Russians, who saw some foreigners and did not support the Russian cause in the war. It was found that the Bulgarian movement was divided into two parts: illegal and legal. The illegal part was led by the Bulgarian army officer Simion Drenkov, who came from Bulgaria to Bolgrad in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century where he married and opened an ironmonger's, becoming the owner of two buildings in the city. In 1913, during the Balkan wars, he returned to Bulgaria and took part in the fighting as an officer. After the war, he returned to Bolgrad (Russia), openly criticizing Russia as responsible for Bulgaria's defeat in the war. With the outbreak of World War I, S. Drenkov openly sympathized with Germany and predicted Russia's defeat [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 312, f. 10 verso**]. In September 1915, the local gendarmes received information that Drenkov was illegally selling rifle barrels in his shop. At the same time, it was discovered that, every day, some people gathered in his shop in the time period between 12:00 and 1:00 a.m. Following the secret investigation of the store, the gendarmes found that these people were:

1. Nicolae Spasov, Bulgarian locksmith and member of the Social Democratic Party of Russian Workers, on whom, as a result of the search, they found revolutionary literature, proclamations from the 1905–1907 revolution, and correspondence in Romanian and Bulgarian;

2. Nikolai Hristev, a local doctor who was being planned by the police for deportation to remote parts of Russia;

3. Filipp Stoev, official at the Agrarian Bank of Bolgrad;

4. Iordan Volkov, landowner;

5. Panaiot Bakalov, owner of a local birt [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 312, f. 11**].

The gendarmes' suspicions that they were part of the Bulgarian spy cell did not materialize, especially since Drenkov returned to Bulgaria in September 1915, where he was mobilized in the army as a reserve officer. He escaped prosecution, but his wife who remained in Bolgrad was deported outside the borders of Bessarabia.

As for the national legal part of the movement, it was led by Fyodor Kurtev, a well-known lawyer from Bolgrad. Following discreet investigations by the Russian security forces, he was described by the gendarmes as a person of Bulgarian descent, extremely intelligent, energetic, a convinced Russophobe who hated Russia from the bottom of his heart, a follower of the revolutionary movement, and therefore very dangerous. Having great influence on the people, he was elected in all elective public bodies and commissions. A circle of Bulgarian patriots was formed around him, composed of Gheorghe Dimov, Stepan Titorov, and others. It is important to note that the Bulgarians' national movement was openly supported by representatives of the Bessarabian (Moldovan) Romanians, such as Nicolae Vulpe, president of the local zemstvo, and Mereacri, inspector of the Bolgrad Gymnasium [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 312, f. 13**]. Initially, their activity was reduced to informing the population about the real course of the war, the failures of the Russian armies, the possibility of Romania to enter the war, and the information which displeased Russian authorities. To keep up to date with objective and independent information, Mereacri made a radio in the physics auditorium that was able to catch the French radio stations installed on the Eiffel Tower in Paris [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 312, f. 12**]. This news was discussed at the local club, which was forbidden for Russians, and especially for the military.

Another aspect of the struggle of the Bulgarian patriots was the attempt by Russian authorities to turn the Bolgrad Gymnasium from a centre of Bulgarian national culture into a promoter of imperial and assimilating ideas. This process began in 1912 with the appointment of Andrei Smirnov as headmaster of the school, who was a representative of the official velicorus (Great Russian) movement, an energetic person, and an experienced pedagogue. To end the influence of patriotic ideas in the gymnasium, persecution began against teachers who showed a critical attitude towards tsarist politics in national affairs. Thus, he managed to dismiss Professor Mikhail Panicersky, a Bulgarian by origin who was conducting open anti-Russian propaganda. At the same time, in addition to the local gendarmes, he insisted that Inspector Mereacri be removed from the gymnasium [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 394, f. 9 verso**]. In an attempt to free high school students from the influence of revolutionary and patriotic ideas, the new headmaster focused on extracurricular activities, and especially on sports. In order to win the sympathy of the students for his ideas, he set up a real flotilla of boats on Lake Yalpuh, consisting of two 12-frame boats and three large boats for primary school students. He also opened gymnastics and sports sections. Simultaneously, he organized literary and dance evenings that attracted, especially the dances, the local youth to these events with a propagandistic touch. The aim of such activities was to free the young generation from the influence of the traditional way of life based on respect for Bulgarian national traditions. All this could not fail to alarm the representatives of the national movement, who started the fight for a new headmaster of the gymnasium. A deputy from the local Bulgarian community, led by Stepan Titorov, was sent to Odessa (the headquarters of the regional education directorate) with a request to remove A. Smirnov from office. This request was partially satisfied, as he was dismissed

from the position of chairman of the Board of the Bolgrad Girls' Gymnasium, but he remained in charge of the Alexander III Gymnasium [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 394, f. 8 verso**].

Unable to stop the Bulgarians' antipathy towards the Russians and their lack of desire to be assimilated, the Russian authorities resorted to the last possible tool – open repression against the leaders of the national movement. On 18 September 1916, a criminal case was filed by the officers of the Independent Gendarmerie Corps against the leaders of the Bulgarian national movement: Fyodor Kurtev, Gheorghe Dimov, Filipp Stoev, and others, or a total of 27 people, ten of whom were arrested and imprisoned in Ismail Prison on 20 September [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 437, f. 6**]. The accusations of the Russian authorities were truly aberrant. Thus, the defendants Filipp Stoev, Panaiot Bakalov, Iordan Volkov, Stepan Kolev, Procopi Penev, Fyodor Parushev, and Nikolai Tura, accused of being of Bulgarian descent, campaigned for the creation of a Greater Bulgaria, whose territory was to extend to Kiev, carrying active criminal propaganda in this sense among the local population. For those crimes, they were to be deported for five years to remote parts of Russia. Other defendants, such as Fyodor Kurtev, Vasile Baldurski, Nicolae and Dimitrie Mumjiev, Dimitrie Parushev, Dimitrie Tuvcev, Andrei Rainov, Gheorghe Kalaidjiev, and Gheorghe Dimov, were accused, although they did not campaign for the creation of a Greater Bulgaria. Enjoying authority among the population, they favoured the activity of the first group to carry out pro-Bulgarian propaganda. They were required to be expelled from the region for the duration of the war [**National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 437, f. 98**]. Due to the events in Russia in 1917, their deportation to the far reaches of the Empire and their expulsion from Bessarabia did not take place, and they were released from prison on 15 January 1917, actively participating in the revolutionary events in the region.

In conclusion, we can say that the tsarist policy towards the population of Bulgarian descent in Bessarabia was part of the traditional practice of tsarism towards national minorities, aiming at their forced assimilation. Their attitude towards the Bulgarians, against the myth spread by Russian propaganda about special relations privileged with the Bulgarians, did not differ at all compared to other national minorities and included deportations, expulsions, repressions, and arrests of representatives of the Bulgarian national movement in the Russian Empire. In particular, this process was expanded with the beginning of the First World War and Bulgaria's entry into the war on the side of the Central Powers.

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