

**Research Project: New and Ambiguous Nation-Building Processes  
in South-Eastern Europe**

**Working Paper Series**

**BETWEEN *TOLERANCE* AND *EXCLUSION*: AGENTS AND AGENCIES OF  
THE SECOND WORLD WAR REMEMBRANCE IN POST-SOVIET MOLDOVA**

Gabriela Popa

[http://www.oei.fu-berlin.de/nation-building/resources/wp/popa\\_01](http://www.oei.fu-berlin.de/nation-building/resources/wp/popa_01)

The project is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation and the Austrian Science Fund (FWF).



## **Between *tolerance* and *exclusion*: Agents and Agencies of the Second World War Remembrance in post-Soviet Moldova**

Gabriela Popa

“Our Fathers and Grandfathers, forgive us for loosing, in the critical moment - the bravery to maintain and continue the cause that you started and defended at the expense of your lives, which ensured peace on earth, which brought the future that you wished for us. Forgive us for not opposing to the shadowing of the national consciousness, even if for a short period; for the attempt to forget and distort your heroic deed. Forgive us for allowing your marginalization, bringing you to poverty and humiliation. Today the feeling of guilt is overwhelming...” This remark belongs to the larger discourse of the newly inaugurated president Vladimir Voronin at the Victory Day celebrations in 2001. He is apologizing to the veterans of the Soviet Army for the attempts to reinterpret the history of the Second World War and the indifference of the authorities towards the veterans and the Soviet legacy after Moldova gained independence in 1991. In this same vein, President Voronin asks for national unity and civic peace.

In this paper, I examine the main actors of the Second World War commemorative practices in post-Soviet Moldova. I focus on the agencies and agents (using T.G. Ashplant’s concepts) to analyze how war remembering is being negotiated or contested by different entities, either veterans’ associations or organizations protecting monuments, museums or military cemeteries. All of these actors interact, shape and determine not only the narratives of the war, but also bring their own views on the post-Soviet Moldovan national project. I do not follow the differences between the urban and rural spaces, although I am aware that in small communities the remembrance of the Second World War is being crystallized in different ways as compared to urban, much larger communities. However, my intention is to look at specific organizations which are directly involved in shaping the remembrance of the war, the way they collaborate with the local authorities or contest the official discourses.

### **Introduction**

To approach the politics of the Second World War remembrance in Moldova, a few remarks on the larger post-Soviet space should be made, more precisely, on the interpreta-

tions of the Soviet period and the Victory of 1945 after the break of the Soviet Union. Beginning with the transformations from the mid 1980s and with Gorbachiov's encouragement "to fill in the blank spots" of the historical accounts of the past events, accompanied by the "quiet revolutions", which were carried out in areas of cultural industry (visual culture, specifically, cinema), commemorations of the Second World War, together with the iconic images of the war period (banners, medals, uniforms) - all became sites of conflict over the meanings of the Soviet past. Subsequently, the emergent counter-narrative referred to the Soviet period as a tragic historical mistake "that derailed Russia from its 'normal', capitalist track onto a road to 'nowhere'"<sup>1</sup>. Similar voices in Moldova regarded the Soviet period as a regression in the development of the region as compared to the interwar period when it was a part of Romania. They supported the idea that what was the Soviet historiography called "liberation" from fascism was in fact an occupation of the Romanian territory of Moldova by the Soviet authorities.

At the same time, as Anna Krylova points out "the reduction of the seventy-three years of the Soviet period to a single, grievous error in need of immediate correction posted a retroactive challenge to each alleged Soviet accomplishment". The Great Victory of 1945 became a prime target for further historical investigations in the early 1990s, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In the course of a few years the victory was transformed from what one historian called a 'life-giving well from which one could always derive self-confidence, pride, and greatness' into a grand national defeat."<sup>2</sup> However, in the case of Russia, for example, in 1995 with the first official commemorations of the Second World War since the break of the Soviet Union, the emphasis on understanding the Soviet past and approaching the history of the Second World War changed. The new authorized version of the war story removed the soldier from his Soviet historical context and placed him in the less politically sensitive and virtually trans-historical domain of 'Russian imperial might'. Heroism, patriotism, and sacrifice, infused with orthodox Christian motifs of willful self-sacrifice and imperial militarist valor, were refigured as inherently Russian qualities that endured throughout the Soviet period.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Anna Krylova, "Dancing on the Graves of the Dead: Building a World War Memorial in Post-Soviet Russia", *Memory and the Impact of Public Transformation in Public Space*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Yurii Afanas'ev, "Drugaiia voina. Posleslovie k torzhestvam po sluchayu 50-letiiia Pobedy", *Izvestiia*, May 17, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Krylova, "Dancing on the Graves of the Dead: Building a World War Memorial in Post-Soviet Russia", *Memory and the Impact of Public Transformation in Public Space*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

Similarly, in the case of Moldova during the first decade of independence, the emergence of the national symbolism and search for state legitimization (new national holidays invented, names of the streets changed, some of the Soviet monuments removed, pro-Romanian history promoted) was accompanied with the attempts of integrating the Soviet past into the national narrative. Consequently, the indifference of the authorities and population towards the Soviet legacy, including monuments to the Second World War, which lost their former importance and role, generated a state of marginalization and uncertainty for the war veterans of the Soviet army who, over night, lost their prestige and status. The biggest challenge for the post-Soviet independent states was to create a national story of the Second World War avoiding the exclusion of the groups which fought on the “wrong” side, be it Romanian or German armies or collaborationists. In Belarus, up until today it is not officially recognized that Belarusians collaborated with Germans, and research in this area is highly discouraged. In Ukraine, just as in Moldova, a law was passed, giving equal rights to the soldiers who fought both on the side of the Soviet army and German (or Romanian in the case of Moldova). However, as it will be shown later, the equity of such laws was not reflected in the official commemorative practices. In what follows, I will examine the case of Moldova and the activities of several organizations and main actors of Second World War remembrance.

### **“They fought for Moldova”**

The most active organization in preserving the museums, monuments, and memorials dedicated to the Second World War is the Organization in Defense of Slavs rights “VECE” (in Romanian: Organizatia pentru apararea drepturilor slavilor “VECE”). This organization emerged as a response to the attempts of rewriting the history of the Soviet period and Second World War by the nationalist, pro-Romanian historiography. Its aim is to rebuild the commemorative sites of the Soviet army most particularly those related to the liberation of Moldova from German and fascist occupation, as they call it. In one of his interviews, the President of VECE, Nicolai Gutul, reiterated the aim of the organization to not allow the profanation of “the truly sacred national values”, without which, according to him, the young generation will not be able to survive. Since 1996 when the first conference of the organization took place, considerable work in this regard was done. VECE’s activities were supported by most of the veterans’ associations and councils from Moldova as well as from several Russian regions, Ukraine and others.

As a result of the first campaign, “No one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten”, several monuments and memorials were rebuilt, but the most important was the inauguration of the newly rebuilt Museum to the Second Ukrainian Front in the village Malinivskoe, which between 1978 and 1992 was a National Historical Museum subsidiary, and which lost its status after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The local and central authorities did not respond to VECE’s request for financial support to rebuild the museum, thus the funds were accumulated thanks to diverse donations from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Moreover, according to Gutul, the non-official condition imposed by the authorities to VECE in order to give permission for the reconstruction of the Museum in Malinivskoe and later inauguration of a “Heroes Alley”, was not to allow the propagation of the idea of the restoration of the Soviet Union, an idea which is very common among the veterans of the Soviet army. Many of them considered the collapse of USSR as a betrayal of the cause for which they fought.

This museum became an important site of the Second World War commemorations for the following years after its reconstruction in 1998. It was not only an attempt to decentralize the celebrations of the Second World War and to bring them to the actual sites of the front, but also to focus on significant dates other than 9 May. Thus, the twentieth anniversary of the Museum in Mainivskoe, celebrated on 27-28 September 1998, was transformed into a grandiose event with the participation of hundreds of veterans from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus who fought on the Moldovan fronts.

The role of this institution in organizing the celebrations dedicated to the Second World War, as well as in implementing important projects for rebuilding memorial complexes, increased significantly after the advancement of the Communist Party to power in 2001. It is a period when the myth of the Second World War became the main reference for the legitimization of the Moldovan nationalism and statehood.

With the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Moldova from fascist occupation and the sixtieth anniversary of Victory Day, VECE published an album called “They fought for Moldova” (in Romanian: *Ei au luptat pentru Moldova*), which includes documents about the war years of 1941-1945. The main idea of the publication is to praise the Soviet army, emphasizing the idea that the German and Romanian armies illegally occupied the Moldovan territory in 1941. Some documents testifying the Romanian “invasion” are being published together with materials proving the Holocaust in Transnistria. It is worth mentioning that even if the idea of this publication came from VECE, it was financially supported by the Moldovan Defense Ministry and by Vladimir Voronin.

Various organizations, political parties, and intellectuals expressed disagreement with the activities of VECE, the dissatisfaction referring to the possible financial fraud as well as for imposing “foreign values” on the local population. Similar voices opposed the projects of rebuilding the Memorial Complex “Capul de Pod Serpeni” near the village Serpeni, with the occasion of sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Moldova from fascist occupation and the Memorial Complex “Eternity” in Chisinau for the sixty-first Anniversary of the Victory Day.

### **“Russians overwhelm us with starry obelisks!”**

The opposition to the activities of VECE was most strongly expressed by the Association of the Victims of Communism and the Veterans of the Romanian Army. In an article published by the daily newspaper Flux called “Russians overwhelm us with starry obelisks!”, the then president of the Association, Gheorghe Ghimpu, claimed that “this is another attempt from the Russians to impose some pseudo-values, which are not common to our people, and which are something that we never felt”. He continues by emphasizing that the veterans of the Romanian army never got any support from the government and were constantly neglected.<sup>4</sup>

The members of this Association are former political prisoners and deportees and approximately three thousand veterans of the Romanian army. During the Soviet period all these people were regarded by the Soviet regime as fascists, Romanian agents and enemies of the people. The experiences of those who fought on the “wrong” side during the war were reduced to silence during the Soviet period and the memories of those experiences were difficult to recover. I had the opportunity to talk with one of the former soldiers from Moldova, who fought with the German army. Mr. Hachi (I am using the real name with the interviewee’s approval) recalled that upon his return in 1953 from a Soviet concentration camp where he was held after he was captured by the Soviets in 1945, he was obliged to destroy all the documents confirming his former activities and detention. This was the condition for allowing him to gain a job and marry. “I was fighting for my country... I was young, I was eighteen... I didn’t know I was fighting on the wrong side...” Up until today, for most of the veterans of the Romanian army, it is difficult to integrate the war experience into the national narrative based on the mythical “sacrifice of the Moldovan people fighting for the liberation of Moldova from fascist occupation”.

---

<sup>4</sup> Inga Dohotaru, “Rusii ne coplelesc cu obeliscuri instelate” (Russians overwhelm us with starry obelisks), *Flux*, nr. 134, 19 August 1998.

However, there was a change in attitude and an attempt to legally rehabilitate them was made. As mentioned above, in 1993, the Moldovan parliament adopted the law for equalizing the rights of the citizens of Moldova who, during the Second World War, participated on the side of Romanian Army with those of the Soviet Army. The law also stipulates that the military ranks and medals, both Soviet and Romanian, are valid on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. Accordingly, the medal for “The Commemorative Cross of the Second World War, 1941-1945” (Romania) was made equal with the medal “Military Merit” (Republic of Moldova). The bearers of these medals were also beneficiaries of a financial contribution from the Moldovan state. Up until today, 3,300 veterans of the Romanian army have been recognized. At the same time, 987 veterans were awarded the Romanian medal “Commemorative Cross, 1941-1945”. However, this law did not have the expected impact on the commemorative practices of the Second World War in Moldova. The veterans of the Romanian army continued to be neglected by the public authorities and the tension between the Soviet and Romanian veterans did not diminish. In this sense, an example is the annual meeting of the mayor of Chisinau with the veterans’ associations for the occasion of Victory Day, where both Soviet and Romanian veterans are invited, but for separate ceremonies.

With reference to the military cemeteries, those of the Romanian Army were destroyed immediately after the war by the Soviet authorities and remained dilapidated and neglected after the end of the Soviet Union. Only in consequence to an initiative and financial support of the National Office for Heroes Cult from Romania, a few of them were rebuilt. According to the National Office for Heroes Cult, there are 300 identified cemeteries and common graves from the Romanian militaries from the period of the Second World War on the territory of the Republic of Moldova (including thirty on the territory of Transnistria). Until today, two cemeteries have been re-built and officially inaugurated, one of them being the cemetery in Tiganca and another one in Nicolaevca.

The cemetery in Tiganca was opened on 22 June 2004 and 1,020 Romanian militaries and 190 unidentified soldiers are buried there. During the Soviet period, there was a pig farm in place of the cemetery; immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the territory was cleaned and in 2004 a wooden cross was put up. The National Office for the Heroes Cult launched 9 June 2005 the project for the reconstruction of the cemetery and on 25 October 2005 the works for reconstruction begun. On 6 June 2006 the cemetery was officially inaugurated with 9 mass graves, 142 Christian crosses, 11 marble plaques, and a monumental gate. Even if the Moldovan authorities did not participate in the inau-

guration of this cemetery, a representative of the government declared that in Moldova there is considerable tolerance and understanding towards all the soldiers who participated in the war regardless of the side.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I examined the main actors of the Second World War remembering in post-Soviet Moldova. The starting point of this analysis was the assumption that during the Soviet period, the Second World War monuments represented the spaces around which the main public and private rituals were centered, starting from celebrating Victory Day with military parades and ending with family celebrations such as weddings. Subsequently in the post-Soviet period, memorials dedicated to the Second World War became contested terrains, reflecting the whole range of metamorphosis occurring during the period. In the case of the rebuilt monuments, the symbolism attributed to these sites was challenged by introducing new elements, such as religious symbols in an attempt to appropriate them to the nationalist discourses.

I focused on the agencies and agents to analyze how the war remembering is being negotiated and contested by different entities, either veterans' associations or organizations protecting the monuments, memorials, museums or cemeteries. All of these actors interact with shaping not only the narratives of the war, but also bring their own views on the post-Soviet Moldovan national project. Many of these agencies are politically involved and this makes collaboration between them very difficult.

I agree with Ashplant's argument that the nation-state plays a leading role in striving to preserve and adapt existing national narratives around war memory and commemoration, through a wide range of public institutions - museums, libraries, archives, and official histories (Ashplant, 2000). According to him, the state either relies on and responds to the initiatives originating from various components of civil society, or not, generating a process of contestation within which various agencies seek recognition for the experiences of those social groups acting through them (Ashplant, 2000).

I argue that the conditions of departure from the old Soviet regime and the ways in which those conditions allowed for the mobilization of national sentiments and symbols, had a crucial impact on the activities that the agents of the Second World War commemorations adopted. Most of the current day conflict is a consequence of the exclusivist and discriminatory policies promoted immediately after 1991, for both sides, and which have prevailed over the more tolerant commemorative practices. Occasional rhe-

torical gestures that were meant to appeal to certain groups in search of national unity and non-exclusivist commemorative practices, as expressed in the discourse of the president Vladimir Voronin, did not find an enthusiastic response from either side.

## **Bibliography**

**Ashplant, T. G., Graham Dawson and Michael Roper (eds.). 2000. *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, London and New York: Routledge.**

**Gutul N. F. and P.I. Sisoiev. 2001. *Они защищали и освобождали Молдову* (They defended and liberated Moldova). Perm’.**

**Gutul, Nicolai. 2004. *Ei au luptat pentru Moldova* (They fought for Moldova). Chisinau: Tipografia Centrala.**

**Krylova, Anna. 2004. “Dancing on the Graves of the Dead: Building a World War Memorial in Post-Soviet Russia”, *Memory and the Impact of Public Transformation in Public Space* Durham and London: Duke University Press.**

**Pons, Silvio and Andrea Romano. 1998. *Russia in the Age of Wars 1914-1945*. Milano: Feltrinelli.**

**Weiner, Amir. 2001. *Making Sense of War. The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.**