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Historical and Ethnological Characteristics of Ethnic Romanians of Bessarabia

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to study the main stages of the development and settlement of the territory of Southern Bessarabia by ethnic Romanians, as well as the peculiarities of the formation of Romanian folk culture. In order to achieve this aim, it is necessary to solve the following tasks: to study ethnogenetic and demographic processes in the formation of the folk culture of the Romanians of Southern Bessarabia, to identify the influence of other ethnic groups on Romanian national self-awareness. In this study, a set of research methods is used: genetic and historical method; formal and typological method; functional method. The actuality of the research lies in the fact that for the first time the folk culture of the Romanian population of Bessarabia is considered as a result of the interaction of integration, adaptation and transformation processes that formed the multiethnic community of the Romanian ethnic group. The paper examines the state of two parallel vectors – «Moldovanism» and «Romanism» – which define two identities, and also distinguishes two stages of Moldovan ethnogenesis: the formation of the Eastern Romanian ethnic community and the formation of the Moldovan nation itself. The study shows that the formation of the modern national-regional picture of the Bessarabian region is evidence not only of the long process of formation of the ethnogenesis of the Romanian-speaking population, but also of the life of representatives of other ethnic groups.

Keywords: Bessarabia region; ethnic; population; Romanians; Moldovans; identity

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1. Introduction

The solution of modern topical problems related to ethnicity, interethnic and cultural interaction is practically impossible without studying ethnogenesis and analyzing the lifestyle of the people.

The study of the traditional culture of the Romanian population living in southern Bessarabia should begin with prehistory, with the question of the appearance of the first people and nations on these lands. This will help to understand the specifics of the Bessarabian region, to identify the peculiarities of settlement and development of the territory, to clarify the status of two parallel vectors – “Moldovanism” and “Romanianism” – which define two identities (Thiesse, 1999, p. 12).

Often drawing evidence for their ideological postulates from historical sources (Saca, 1998), “Romanianism” and “Moldovanism” are characterized by fundamental conceptual differences. While “Romanianism” can be characterized as ethno-cultural nationalism that affirms the ethnic and linguistic identity of Moldovans and Romanians, “Moldovanism” has evolved over time into civic nationalism, for which both the historical past and the future are legitimate.

2. The Main Stages of the Ethnogenesis of the Romanesque Population of Southern Bessarabia and the Formation of its Folk Culture.

In the ethnogenesis of Moldovans, two stages are distinguished: the formation of the East Romanian ethnic community – Vlachs (Wallachians), and the formation of the Moldovan nation itself (Kisse et. al, 2014, p. 439). Regarding the first stage, it should be pointed out that “the Vlach community was formed in the north of the Balkan Peninsula and in the foothills of the Carpathians, on the basis of Thracian tribes that were Romanized in the first centuries AD” (Kisse & et. al, 2014, p. 439).

At the beginning of the XX century, L. Berg wrote that “the Romanized population of Bessarabia tends to derive itself from the Romans, namely from the descendants of those Roman colonists who were settled here by Emperor Trojan after the conquest of Dacia and its transformation into a Roman province (105 y.)” (Berg, 1993, p. 7).

In the process of ethnic development, the Moldavian nation stood out from the general mass of Vlachs. Its formation took place in the foothills of the Eastern Carpathians. Slavic (mainly southern and eastern) tribes took part in this process.

The Moldavian principality emerged in the mid-14th century and united the territories from the Carpathian Mountains in the east to the Black Sea in the southwest. The territory of the present-day Republic of Moldova, which is located between the Prut River in the west and the Transnistrian regions in the east, has been known as Bessarabia since the nineteenth century, and is only a part of the historical “great” Moldovan Empire (History of Bessarabia, 2001, p. 15).

The Moldavian principality achieved particular success in the early XV century during the centralization of individual feudal possessions during the reign of Alexander the Good (1400-1432).

History shows close ties between Moldovans and the Zaporizhzhia Cossacks, who repeatedly came to the rescue of the Moldovan people. For instance, the campaign of Cossack leader Ivan Pidkova in 1574 was a major collaborative activity in the fight against the Turks, and in 1595 Cossack hetmans Ivan Nalyvaiko and Loboda conducted a number of successful operations in Moldova against the Turks, namely, they began the siege of the Turkish fortresses of Bendery and Kiliya and captured the fortification of Smil (Izmail) (Andreeva, 1996, p. 66).

Being under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, the Moldovan people turned to neighboring nations for help in the fight for their national independence. This explains the “Moldovan vector” in Bohdan Khmelnytsky’s policy.

The rapprochement of peoples and their cultures was largely facilitated by religious commonality. In 1807 (factually) and in 1812 (legally), the part of Moldova between the Prut and Dniester rivers was annexed to Russia. There was formed an autonomous Bessarabian region (Kisse and others, 2014, p. 440).

The annexation of Bessarabia by the Russian Empire as a result of the Treaty of Bucharest signed in May 1812. Treaty of Bucharest with the Ottoman Empire meant the inclusion of Moldovan territories east of the Prut (i.e. Bessarabia) into the empire of Alexander I. Under the terms of the Treaty of Paris of 1856 Russia ceded the southern part of Bessarabia, which was annexed to the Moldavian principality, which was under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire.

Therefore, the south of Bessarabia became not only a part of Moldova, but from 1859 it was also part of the latter’s state unification with Wallachia, and from 1866 it became part of a new state called the Kingdom of Romania (1881). According to the Berlin Peace Treaty of 1878, the Russian Empire was returned a part of the territory of Bessarabia, which had been torn away from Russia as a result of the Treaty of Paris in 1856 (History of Bessarabia, 2001, p. 58).

As the Romanian historian Fl. Solomon rightly pointed out, by the time of the first annexation of Bessarabia by the Russian Empire in 1812, Romanian self-awareness in the region was just beginning to form among scribes (Solomon, 2001, p. 74). Only after the creation of a unified Romanian state in the mid-19th century did elements of the idea of national Romanian unity begin to spread on a mass level in Bessarabia.

At the same time, the main obstacle to the development of Romanianism in Bessarabia was the very fact of Russian presence. The Russian regime isolated the province from other Romanian regions not only economically, politically, but also culturally. The modernization of the nobility according to the European model and the accompanying process of perception of European ideas and values, which were observed in Romania during this period, bypassed Bessarabia (Cusco, 2002, p. 8).

All this led to a feeling of estrangement among the Bessarabians, as a result of which they began to identify themselves not with Romanians, but with Moldovans. This situation did not change significantly even during the period when Bessarabia was part of a united Romania in 1918-1940. Despite the considerable efforts of the Romanian authorities, the Moldovan regional identity did not turn into a Romanian identity (Solomon, 2001, p. 750).

Therefore, even during the existence of the largest Romanian state, Bessarabians did not fully identify themselves with Romanians, unlike residents of other Romanian provinces – Oltena, Muntinia, Transylvania. In this regard, it is difficult to disagree with academician S. Berezhan, who states the following: “while in other Romanian provinces local processes were centripetal in nature in relation to the pan-Romanian identity, in Bessarabia local peculiarities of national identity, which were directed from the Romanian “core”, acquired a centrifugal character” (Berezhan, 2001, p. 262).

The consolidation of the Romanian nation culminated around 1918. The Bessarabian publicist P. Leonard characterizes this ethnic group as follows: “The good-natured Moldovans welcomed me with open arms, with sincerity, with ease, with a kindness even, they sacrificed to me their historical traditions, their religious beliefs, their national customs, and even their flexible language – a whole nation was impoverished morally, politically, and religiously” (Leonard, 1871).

From 1918 to 1940, Budzhak, like the rest of Bessarabia, was part of the Romanian Kingdom. In all settlements, the Romanian population was the main one. This is confirmed by statistical data from the previous period. For example, a study of the ethnic composition of the population of Southern Bessarabia in the late eighteenth

and nineteenth centuries states that according to the 1897 census, 183,043 people lived in the Izmail district at that time, including 46% Moldovans, 17% Ukrainians, 11% Bulgarians, 10% Turks, 9% Russians, and 2% Jews (Tsiganenko et. al, 2011, p. 144).

Over time, the demographic composition of Southern Bessarabia changed with a decrease in the Moldovan population, especially in the Izmail county. This was due to two factors: the resettlement of Moldovans to the eastern parts of steppe Ukraine, the North Caucasus, and other parts of Russia (Kisse et all, 2014, p. 442). The forced Romanization of the urban and rural population of Bessarabia, directed against the ethnic and cultural traditions of the peoples of the region, could not change the demographic situation. Ukrainian, Moldovan, and Bulgarian villages in these conditions showed high ethnographic and demographic conservatism, preserving their national discretion. Perhaps this is why the inhabitants of Bessarabia lived autochthonously in rural areas until recently. Active economic, social, and cultural ties between the ethnic groups of Bessarabia influenced the development of Moldovan traditions, life, and culture. This is evidenced by the observations of P. Chubynsky, who noted: “The Moldovans of Podillia province, although they retained their native language, learned the Ukrainian language and customs” (Chubynskyi, 1872, p. 316). This indicates deep assimilation. Sources of the mid-19th century record, information that residents of some settlements, being Moldovans by origin, do not know the Moldovan language, and the traditional way of life under the influence of neighboring peoples has undergone serious changes. Many of them consider themselves Ukrainians, and less often Russians. Even at present, it is not uncommon for inhabitants of Bessarabia, who are Moldovans, Ukrainians, or Russians by passport, to have difficulty speaking the relevant language, and the traditional culture may be foreign to them. In the late XIX and early XX centuries, an active process of consolidation of Moldovan national culture took place. This process also involved large groups of nationalities and ethnic minorities that lived mixed with the Moldovan population – Ukrainians, Russians, Bulgarians, Gagauzes, Gypsies, Poles, Armenians, Greeks, and others. Due to different historical and social conditions, their participation in the formation of Moldovan folk culture was unequal. Some ethnically close to Moldovans, for example, Western Ukrainians (Rusnaks), have completely merged with Moldovans.

Others, such as Ukrainians from the southern Russian provinces, Russians, Belarusians, and Poles, have partially assimilated. At the same time, Ukrainian, Russian, and Polish cultures had a certain influence on the formation of Moldovan

culture, and those groups of Poles, Russians, and Ukrainians who retained their national specificity were heavily influenced by Moldovan culture.

Some nationalities and ethnic groups (Bulgarians, Gagauzes) were less exposed to the process of assimilation with Moldovans, but at the same time played a significant role in the formation of Moldovan folk culture. All this is evidence of a complex process of mixing Moldovan culture with the cultures of other peoples (Jews, Armenians, Gypsies etc).

In general, the tactics of national oppression pursued by tsarism and Romanian expansion in Bessarabia could not delay the ethnic development of Moldovans, which continued in the new conditions and acquired a peculiar nature.

The analysis of folklore and ethnographic sources makes it possible to highlight in a new way the main tendencies of the ethnic development of the Moldavian population of Bessarabia in the XX century. During this period, the main direction of this development was the emergence of new features that arose under the influence of long-term ethnocultural contacts with the cultures of Russian, Ukrainian and other Slavic peoples.

In addition, the geographical location, economic situation, and national policy largely determined the distribution of ethnic groups within the region. In this regard, the villages of Izmail district (Ozerne, Utkonosivka), Reni district (Orlivka, Dolynske, Lymanske), Tatarbunary district (Hlyboke, Dmytrivka, Novoselske) of Southern Bessarabia are predominantly populated by Moldovans. This is clearly shown in the table of the number and distribution of the Moldovan population as of 2001 (Kisse et al., 2014, p. 448).

Table 1. The Number and Distribution of the Moldovan Population

Name of the settlement	ths. of people	in % of the total population	% of the total Moldovan population of Budzhak
towns	4,7	3,2	6,0
Belgorod-Dniester	1,0	2,0	1,3
Izmail	3,7	4,3	4,7
districts	73,6	13,7	94,0
Artsyzskiy	3,3	6,4	4,3
Belgorod-Dniester	3,9	6,3	5,0
Bolgradsky	1,2	1,6	1,4
Izmail	15,1	27,6	19,3
Kiliya	9,4	15,7	12,0
Reni	19,9	48,9	25,4

Saratsky	9,4	18,8	12,0
Tarutino	7,5	16,6	9,6
Tatarbunary	3,9	9,4	5,0
Total	78,3	12,7	100,0

Conclusions

As we can see, the Romanian-speaking population is represented in all administrative-territorial formations of the southwestern Odesa region. Most of them are rural people.

In the towns, which play a leading role in interregional, trading and cultural interaction and are the main centers of economic development, the ethnic composition of the population is characterized by considerable diversity.

The ethnogenetic and demographic processes of the late XX – early XXI centuries led to the absolute dominance of representatives of such peoples as Ukrainians, Russians, Bulgarians and ethnic Romanians. Ethnogenetic processes and ethnic composition of the region's population are also conditioned by the factor of the collapse of the USSR and, as a result, the desire of some people to return to their historical homeland (Moldova, Romania).

Therefore, the settlement, development of the territory, and formation of the modern national and regional picture of the Bessarabian region is evidence not only of the long process of ethnogenesis of the Romanian-speaking population, but also of the life activities of representatives of other ethnic groups.

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