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Romania and the Refugees from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina after 1944

by *Viorel Achim*

Abstract – From March to August 1944, with the Red Army approaching and the Romanian army and administration retreating from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, around 300,000 residents from the two territories (10% of the total population) moved west of the newly established Romanian-Soviet frontier. The situation of these Romanian citizens was seriously threatened after the Armistice Convention between Romania and the United Nations was signed on September 12, 1944. Moscow insisted the Romanian government turn over the refugees from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina because of the fact that they were Soviet citizens. This paper deals with the forced repatriation of Bessarabians and Bukovinians, carried out by the Soviet commands and the local delegates of the Allied (Soviet) Control Commission with the support of the Romanian administration. Most of these repatriations took place in 1945. Spontaneous repatriations continued at least until 1948. According to official statistics, 56,450 persons were forcibly repatriated during the period from August 23, 1944 to September 30, 1946. The final number was higher, but the majority of refugees escaped repatriation and stayed in Romania. This paper also addresses the issue of the integration of the refugees with the local population and their relations with the authorities between 1944-1948 and later, during the Communism.

1. *Introduction*

For the past fifteen years, the subject of refugees from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina has been dealt with intensively. Authors in both Romania and Moldova, but not only there, have examined at length the fate of Bessarabia and Bukovina during World War II and the ordeal hundreds of thousands of people went through in those circumstances could hardly have gone unnoticed. The refugees themselves recalled their experiences in articles and memoirs¹. A number of historians dwelt on the subject, too, in either independent studies or separate chapters in their broader

¹ Some of these titles: V. ȚEPORDEI, *Amintiri din Gulag*, București 1992; R. PĂTRAȘCU, *Vremuri de bejenie*, in «Memoria», 27, 1997, pp. 20-27; A. PANTIȘ, *Ultimul tren din Basarabia*, in «Memoria», 26, 1998, pp. 47-54; E. MĂRZA, *Saga unei străvechi familii basarabene*, in «Memoria», 35, 2001, pp. 32-41. One can also mention the autobiographical writings of Paul Goma, for example the novel *Chassé – croisé*, Paris 1983.

works². They usually focused on specific sides of the problem and some of their approaches are quite relevant. Unfortunately, the huge amount of archival documents on the subject is still largely unexplored. No sizable study entirely devoted to the Bessarabian and Bukovinian refugees in Romania exists³.

These refugees were a consequence of the Soviet Union's occupation, in the international context of the summer of 1940, of some Romanian territories: Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, as well as the Herța district (which belonged to the Old Kingdom). And since at that time Romania was completely isolated on an external level and threatened to be dissolved as a state, the government in Bucharest surrendered to the Soviet ultimatums of June 26 and 28, 1940, withdrawing its administration from the above-mentioned territories. The new territorial modification on the map of Eastern Europe was, as a matter of fact, the practical transformation of one of the clauses of the secret protocol of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact from August 1939. On June 22, 1941, Romania, ally of Nazi Germany, went to war against the Soviet Union and regained the provinces it had lost a year earlier. In the spring of 1944, though, facing the offensive of the Red Army, the Romanian administration and army had once again to withdraw from Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina and the Herța district and as a consequence of the armistice signed in Moscow, on September 12,

² Some titles: I. SCURTU - C. HLIHOR, *Anul 1940 – Drama românilor dintre Prut și Nistru*, București 1992, pp. 81-94 (chapter «Români pe drumuri de bejenie»); I. ȘIȘCANU, *Refugiații din Basarabia și nordul Bucovinei la 1940*, in «Revista de Istorie a Moldovei», 4, 1992, pp. 28-33; I.I. DRĂGOESCU, *Consemnări despre masacrarea de către sovietici a unor refugiați români în lunca Doroboiului*, in «Revista Istorică», NS, 3, 1992, 1-2, pp. 159-161; D. ȘANDRU, *Refugiații basarabeni, bucovineni și sovietici în România (1944-1948)*, in «Destin Românesc», 2, 1995, 2, pp. 69-88; I. ȘIȘCANU, *Uniunea Sovietică – România. 1940 (Tratative în cadrul comisiilor mixte)*, Chișinău 1995, pp. 53-60 (subchapter «Chestiunea evacuării cetățenilor români»); C.I. STAN - Al. GAIȚĂ, *Refugiați din Basarabia și Bucovina de nord la Râmnicu Sărat, Buzău și Mizil (1940-1941)*, in «Destin Românesc», 4, 1997, 2, pp. 73-85; D. BANCOȘ, *Social și național în politica guvernului Ion Antonescu*, București 2000, pp. 63-70 (subchapter «Mișcări de populație la granița româno-sovietică în urma cedării Basarabiei, nordului Bucovinei și ținutului Herței»), pp. 320-339 (subchapter «Refugiații din teritoriile cedate în vara și toamna anului 1940»); D. ȘANDRU, *Mișcări de populație în România (1940-1948)*, București 2003, pp. 17-38 (chapter «Mișcări de populație în Basarabia și nordul Bucovinei după ultimatumul sovietic»), pp. 207-224 (chapter «Refugiații basarabeni, bucovineni și sovietici în România»). Other titles in notes 3 and 15.

³ One exception is a collection of documents concerning the juridical dispute between the Soviet and the Romanian authorities on the «repatriation» of the refugees: L. BRÂNCEANU - A. BERCIU-DRĂGHICESCU (eds), *Basarabeni și bucovinenii între drept internațional și dictat. Documente 1944-1945 (art. 5 din Convenția de armistițiu)*, București 1995.

1944, by the United Nations and Romania, the Romanian government had to acknowledge the new frontier imposed by the Soviets. The peace treaty with Romania, signed in Paris on February 10, 1947, legitimated the new political and territorial situation on an international level⁴.

I have to point out from the start that there were two distinct waves of refugees from Bessarabia and Bukovina: 1) The first one occurred as the Soviet Union first occupied these territories in 1940: a great number of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina residents moved west of the newly established border as the Romanian administration was pulling out in late June – early July 1940 and in the next few months. 2) Then once again, as the Romanian army and administration were retreating in the face of the Red Army offensive in March-August 1944, a large number of people followed on their heels. As is known, in June 1941, Romania went to war against the Soviet Union and regained the two provinces only to lose them once again. As a result, a second, larger, mass of Bessarabians and Bukovinians sought refuge in the west in 1944.

The two waves of refugees, which occurred during World War II, even if similar in many regards, are, nevertheless, two distinct issues. We will not consider only the fact that the two refugee waves occurred at different moments in time. There are also some other elements that distinguish them: the refugee wave of 1940 differed from that of 1944, the number of refugees was different, the situation of these people on the Romanian territory as well as their relation with the Romanian authorities was different. While the Romanian state had sheltered the Romanians fleeing Soviet occupation in 1940, in 1944 and the following years, Romania itself slipped under Soviet control and was unable to protect them. Consequently, many refugees were forced back into the provinces under the so-called «repatriation» program imposed by the Allied (Soviet) Control Commission, to which the Romanian government was subordinated.

⁴ For the territorial losses imposed on Romania in 1940, as well as the participation of Romania in World War II, there is a vast literature. I limit myself to mentioning D.C. GIURESCU, *Romania in the Second World War (1939-1947)*, Boulder CO - New York 2000. Among the studies especially devoted to Bessarabia and Bukovina in those years, see I. SCURTU - C. FLIHOR, *Complot împotriva României 1939-1947. Basarabia, nordul Bucovinei și ținutul Herța în vâltoarea celui de-al doilea război mondial*, București 1994; V.F. DOBRINESCU - I. CONSTANTIN, *Basarabia în anii celui de-al doilea război mondial (1939-1947)*, Iași 1995; A. PETRENCU, *Basarabia în al doilea război mondial 1940-1944*, Chișinău 1997; V.F. DOBRINESCU, *The Diplomatic Struggle over Bessarabia*, Iași 1998; I. ȘIȘCANU, *Rășluirea teritorială a României 1940*, Chișinău 1998; A. PETRENCU, *România și Basarabia în anii celui de-al doilea război mondial*, Chișinău 1999.

Historians – those who were interested in the refugee problem – have treated these two refugee waves distinctively. Nevertheless, I have to underline the fact that the interest of historians for the refugees of 1940 and those of 1944 was not equal. Their interest in the refugees of 1940 was relatively high. This situation can of course be explained by means of the great attention conferred on the moment of 1940 in Romanian history. The refugees of 1944 and their suffering on Romanian territory or, in the case of those «repatriated» to the USSR, in their new homeland, in the following years have been of less interest to research, at least until this moment. As for the refugees of 1944, in the years following the war there was nothing that could be written about them and after the changes of 1989 nobody seemed to manifest comparable interest in them – at least not in the way it had happened with the refugees of 1940.

Therefore, the problem of the Bessarabians and Bukovinians that were seeking refuge in Romania stretched over several years. To the Romanian state, it was a problem of primary importance from 1940 to 1948, and its consequences extend up to the present day, considering the steps the Bucharest authorities have taken over the past few years to compensate those people for the suffering they endured and property they lost back then⁵.

2. The Bessarabian and Bukovinian refugees of the year 1944

In 1944, more precisely in the period of March-August 1944, with the Soviet offensive approaching and the Romanian army and administration once again retreating from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, a new wave of refugees, more numerous than in 1940, flowed into Romania.

In 1940, the evacuation had been performed in an extremely rough manner, mainly due to the very short time granted by the Soviets – practically only six days: between June 28 and July 3 – but also due to other reasons. The population was taken by surprise by the Government's decision to surrender to the Soviet ultimatum and there were no evacuation plans for the civil population in case of a Soviet invasion either. The organization of the evacuation process up to the new frontier was precarious, if not inexistent. Consequently, only a part of those who wanted to flee the Soviets was able to do so. Nonetheless, according to some evaluations, the number of Bessarabian and Bukovinian refugees – adding to their number those

⁵ See the last paragraph of this paper.

who came to Romania as the result of some later repatriation – reached 100,000 people by June 1941⁶.

In 1944, the number of those leaving was even greater. It seems that the one year in which the Soviets controlled the two territories (July 1940 - June 1941), a time in which they employed drastic measures (including deportations) against the elements considered to be bourgeois, as well as certain Russification⁷, was enough to open the population's eyes to the ways of the Soviet regime. As a result, those who did not want to live under Soviet rule once again, fled in great numbers.

In the spring of 1944, even if the events on the front (the Red Army's advance) evolved quicker than the worst expectations of the Romanians, the evacuation of the people in Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina were performed under better conditions. The evacuation process was prepared in time by the army and the civilian administration. The first measures of this kind were taken towards the end of 1943, when the front approached the Dniester. Therefore, there was enough time for the evacuation and it was performed in order. That time, virtually anyone that wanted to cross west of the Prut was allowed to do so although the Romanian authorities did not encourage the flight.

The government and the provincial authorities tried to impede an exodus of great proportions of the Bessarabians and the Bukovinians, that would have lead not only to the complication of the economical and social problems in the territory that remained under Romanian administration, but also to the diminishment of the Romanian element in the above mentioned territories, something that – for political reasons – was not acceptable. During the war, the government of Marshal Ion Antonescu had planned for Bessarabia and Bukovina, the provinces threatened by the Soviet Union, an operation of great proportions, which would have lead to their total Romanization by means of a «population exchange» that would have meant sending the Russians and Ukrainians from the two Romanian provinces over the borders to Transnistria (at that time under Romanian occupation) and bringing the Romanians in Transnistria and in the other Soviet territories «home» their stead. Although it was planned in all details, and thought to be real-

⁶ See V. STĂVILA, *Populația Basarabiei în perioada celui de al doilea război mondial*, in «Revista de Istorie a Moldovei», 4, 1993, 3, p. 9 with note 7.

⁷ For the Soviet regime and terror in Bessarabia in 1940-1941, see, among others, E. ȘIȘCANU, *Regimul totalitar bolșevic în R.S.S. Moldovenească. 1940-1952*, Chișinău 1997; A. PETRENCU, *România și Basarabia*, pp. 35-55.

ized in the fall of 1943, this project was not put into practice because of the precipitation of the evolution on the front⁸. Bessarabia and Bukovina had a special place in the Romanian political and ethnical projects and for most of the Romanians, the territorial losses in favor of the Soviet Union were not considered to be something permanent. This fact also explains why in 1944 the authorities did not encourage the population to leave. The authorities wanted the number of the civilian refugees to be as small as possible. They did not hinder those who wanted to leave to the western side of the Prut though.

During March-April 1944 a great number of civilians from the two territories withdrew along with the civilian and military authorities. The refugees mostly came from the cities and towns, particularly Chişinău (Kishinev) and Cernăuţi (Czernowitz), the capitals of the two provinces, but also from the villages. Many of the refugees were public employees, but they also included private employees, teachers, and priests, well-to-do city people, members of the intelligentsia, and so on. Some of them were from the Old Kingdom, but others were Bessarabian and Bukovinian natives. There were many people who experienced flight for a second time. They had taken refuge in 1940-1941 as well, and after Romania's regaining the two territories they had returned to their homeland. Now though, they were forced to leave again. The local intellectuals departed almost entirely. In Lapuşna County, for example, as few as 120 schoolteachers out of a total of 1,200 were left when the Soviets marched in; in Bălţi, Sorooca, and Cahul counties 260 out of a total of 4,500⁹. The consequences will be disastrous, since this almost mass flight of the intelligentsia cleared the ground for the denationalization policy the Soviet authorities would later on pursue. While four years earlier few peasants left their homes, in the spring and summer 1944 a great number of them crossed the Prut.

The overwhelming majority of the refugees were ethnic Romanians, but there were minority nationals among them as well: Ukrainians and Poles, but also Jews who, in spite of the persecution they suffered at the hands of the Romanian authorities during the war (which culminated in their deportation to Transnistria), preferred to take refuge in Romania.

⁸ For these issues, see V. ACHIM, *Proiectul guvernului de la Bucureşti vizând realizarea schimbului de populaţie româno-ruso-ucrainean (1943)*, in «Revista Istorică», NS, 11, 2000, 5-6, pp. 395-421. For the Romanian ethnic projects of the time, see V. ACHIM, *The Romanian Population Exchange Project Elaborated by Sabin Manuilă in October 1941*, in «Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento», 27, 2001, pp. 593-617.

⁹ V. STĂVILĂ, *Populaţia Basarabiei*, p. 11.

The Romanian authorities never provided an official count of the 1944 refugees, but their number has been estimated to be around 300,000, or at least 10% of the total population of the respective territories¹⁰.

Most of these refugees came to Romania in March-April 1944, but there were some who left later, up until August 23, 1944, when – as a result of the overthrow of the Antonescu government – the state of war between Romania and the USSR ceased and the Romanian army left from the last pieces of land it controlled in Bessarabia. Some last stragglers also left after that date.

There were Bessarabians and Bukovinians who illegally reached Romania as late as the end of 1949. Romanians, as well as Jews, crossed the new border. As a rule, they were caught by police officers and handed over to the Soviet occupation forces for them to be «repatriated». Only a few of them succeeded to hide, to get fake documents and to stay in Romania for good. There were even networks that organized illegal border crossings¹¹.

There were also some people, among the refugees, who left their hometowns as a result of border rectifications performed in 1945, along a line further south than that reached in 1940, as a result of the ultimatum of June that year. Some new villages in the northern parts of the country were in this way incorporated into the Soviet territory, and part of the inhabitants of those villages preferred to go to Romania¹².

3. *The situation of the Bessarabian and Bukovinian refugees until August-September 1944*

The Bessarabian and Bukovinian refugees from 1944 were placed in certain counties and towns where the central and local administration took care of them¹³. Apartments were allocated them especially in buildings that had

¹⁰ Evaluation in V. STĂVILĂ, *Populația Basarabiei*, p. 11. By March 16, 1944, the Government of Bessarabia had already evacuated 82,580 persons, and the Government of Bukovina had evacuated 32,958 persons by March 24; I. SCURTU - C. HLIHOR, *Complot împotriva României*, pp. 140-141. These figures do not include the many people who left on their own account. The evacuation operations continued after these dates.

¹¹ I. SCURTU - C. HLIHOR, *Complot împotriva României*, pp. 179-181.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 173-176.

¹³ Some elements of the situation of the Bessarabian and Bukovinian refugees after 1940 in D. ȘANDRU, *Mișcări de populație*, p. 17 ff.

been confiscated from Jews. Canteens for the refugees were opened in the towns. Those who were public servants were given jobs at town halls around the country and in Bucharest, teachers were offered tenures, and so on. In most cases, the refugees would be directed to a specific town in Romania from the start, in general where the likelihood of finding a job was greatest. It was a consequence of the war years that workforce was hard to find; hence finding employment was, in most cases, not an insurmountable problem.

Of course, since the country itself was in dire straits, the refugees' lives were far from easy. There were also some other categories of refugees in Romania which the authorities had to take care of: over 200,000 refugees from Northern Transylvania; tens of thousands of Romanians who had been evicted from the Cadrilater (Southern Dobrudja) in 1940 and who could not be settled in Northern Dobrudja in 1940; thousands of ethnic Romanians from Crimea, Transnistria and other regions of the USSR, whom the Romanian army and government had «repatriated» during the war. Moreover, a great number of Polish refugees who had left their country in 1939 lived on the territory of Romania, thousands of Ukrainians, Russians, Tatars, Armenians, and other nationalities who had fled from the Ukraine and from Russia, most of whom had worked for the Romanian occupation administration in Transnistria or for the Romanian army and whom the Romanians, when withdrawing from the USSR, had taken with them, in order to protect them from retaliation by Soviet authorities.

The Bessarabian and Bukovinian refugees were treated like all other refugees of Romanian ethnical origin. The government took a series of measures – legislative and other – to improve their condition. Industrialists and merchants were granted loans and other facilitations. Some goods confiscated from Jews were leased to the refugees. In some regions, the refugees were accommodated on small farms and were given land. The refugees were directed especially to the western parts of the country (to Banat and Oltenia), where the economic situation was more favorable so as to insure their sustenance. As for the local population, it generally expressed solidarity with these people and donated money, clothing, and food. There were local assistance committees for the refugees; very active in this respect were the local subsidiaries of the Red Cross. The institution dealing with the refugees was the General Commissariat for Refugees, which was directly subordinate to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (the Government). At the end of March 1944, the Commissariat elaborated a set of measures concerning the social assistance and the placement of

the refugees¹⁴. The refugees had their own organizations, like the Cercul Basarabenilor (Bessarabians' Circle), established in 1940 and still extant in 1944.

4. *The forced repatriation to the Soviet Union*

The situation of these refugees was seriously threatened after Romania switched alliances on August 23, 1944 and turned into an ally of the Soviet Union. With heavy Soviet forces deployed all over its territory, the country simply slipped under Soviet control. Moscow then pressed the Romanian government to turn over all refugees from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina on account of the fact that they were Soviet citizens. For the next few years, the status of the refugees turned into a bone of contention between Bucharest and Moscow¹⁵.

Under Article 5 of the Armistice Convention, that Romania and the United Nations signed in Moscow September 12, 1944, the Romanian government had the obligation of sending back the Soviet citizens that were on its territory. As proposed by the Soviets, Article 5 had an ambiguous wording but was included in the final text as such, as the Romanian negotiators did not object. In this form, a provision could be construed permitting the refugees to stay in Romania. The article read as follows: «The Government and High Command of Romania shall turn over to the Allied (Soviet) High Command all Soviet and Allied prisoners of war and citizens interned or brought into Romania by force»¹⁶.

¹⁴ I. SCURTU - C. HLIHOR, *Complot împotriva României*, p. 142.

¹⁵ The forced repatriation of the refugees from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina treated in L. BRÂNCEANU - A. BERCIU-DRĂGHICESCU (eds), *Basarabeni și bucovinenii* (documents); D.C. GIURESCU, *Guvernarea Nicolae Rădescu*, București 1996, pp. 116-118; H. GLASS, *Minderheit zwischen zwei Diktaturen: Zur Geschichte der Juden in Rumänien 1944-1949*, München 2002, pp. 59-62, and especially D. ȘANDRU, *Mișcări de populație*, pp. 207-224. There is an extensive research of the «repatriation» of the Bessarabian and Bukovinian refugees in one county (Bihor): A. FAUR, *Aspecte ale situației românilor basarabeni și bucovineni de pe teritoriul Bihorului (septembrie 1944 - septembrie 1945). Contribuții documentare*, in V. CIUBOTA - Gh. LAZIN - D. OLTEANU - C. PORUMBĂCEAN (eds), *Sovietizarea nord-vestului României (1944-1950)*, Satu Mare 1996, pp. 107-116; A. FAUR, *Destinul tragic al românilor basarabeni și bucovineni aflați pe teritoriul Bihorului (1944-1945). Documente*, Cluj-Napoca 1998. What happened in those years with the refugees in Romania was, of course, part of the Soviet policy of repatriating Soviet displaced persons from the European countries.

¹⁶ «Monitorul Oficial», Partea I, no. 219, September 22, 1944, p. 6372.

In the view of the Romanian authorities, «Soviet citizens» meant the residents of Transnistria that had sought refuge in Romania when the Romanian occupation administration pulled out from that region, as well as people from other Soviet territories that had come to Romania during the war. (Approximately ten thousand persons fit this description.)

Yet, as Article 5 provisions began to be enforced, the Soviet authorities explained that «Soviet citizens» included the former residents of Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, and the Herța district that had moved to Romania. They cited a March 8, 1941, decree of the Supreme Soviet Presidium of the USSR that identified as Soviet citizens all of the former subjects of the Russian Empire on record by November 7, 1917, as well as their offspring, whether or not they were Romanian citizens when the provinces were annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940. (Between 1812-1918 Bessarabia was under Russian rule.) All of them had their Soviet citizenship restored starting June 28, 1940. Under the same Moscow decree of 1941, any of the above that were no longer residents of Bessarabia on June 28, 1940, were supposed to register as Soviet citizens with the Soviet diplomatic missions unless they had meanwhile obtained different citizenships. The provision also applied to the residents of Northern Bukovina and Herța although these people had not been Russian subjects prior to November 7, 1917. In short, everyone who had resided in Bessarabia or Northern Bukovina until June 28, 1940 was considered a Soviet citizen¹⁷.

Such an interpretation not only clashed with the Romanian laws on citizenship, but also completely disregarded the international legal principle holding that the residents of territories transferred to a different state were free to choose their citizenship. The 1941 Soviet decree in this form and especially in this particular interpretation given by the Soviet authorities ran counter to Romanian law, which held that the residents of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina on record by June 28, 1940, were rightfully Romanian citizens.

In accordance with national law, the Romanian government granted Romanian citizenship to all those that had moved from Bessarabia and Bukovina. In October 1944, the Ministry of the Interior issued an order under which the refugees from Bessarabia and Bukovina were free to settle permanently in the counties in which they lived. But the Allied (Soviet) Control Commission canceled the order and on November 11 verbally requested

¹⁷ The Soviet and Romanian documents on the status of these people in L. BRĂNCEANU - A. BERCIOU-DRĂGHICESCU (eds), *Basarabeni și bucovinenii*.

that the Bucharest authorities «immediately» send all former residents of these provinces then living on Romanian territory back to Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina¹⁸. The government responded by a diplomatic note dated November 15, contending that those people had the right to choose according to international law. On December 3, the Allied Commission quashed the government's case on grounds that Romania had forcibly seized Bessarabia from the Soviet Union.

The Soviets actually did not even wait for the legal argument to end: no sooner had they filed their November 11 demand, they started rounding up the Bessarabian and Bukovinian refugees. A Central Repatriation Commission that was set up in Bucharest and similar commissions at the local (county) level began to register the refugees, constraining them to leave, although they were declaring in writing before the local authorities that they wanted to stay in Romania. In December 1944 a great number of Bessarabians and Bukovinians were forced to cross the Prut into the Soviet Union. According to contemporary documents, a considerable number of suicides occurred. Most of the people – being treated as traitors – were not sent to their homelands, but deported to Siberia or other parts of the Soviet Union. Under these circumstances, the Romanian government decided to negotiate with Moscow and proposed a number of exemptions from the «repatriation» measures, some of which were accepted. During a discussion on December 30 between the deputy chairperson of the Allied (Soviet) Control Commission, general V.P. Vinogradov, and the chairperson of the Romanian Armistice Enforcement Commission, Savel Rădulescu, the latter insisted on a short delay in the repatriation. Vinogradov refused any postponing and sincerely admitted the reason for the obstinacy with which the Soviets wished to «repatriate» the Bessarabians and Bukovinians: «The work force is so necessary to us that we can not delay [the repatriation]»¹⁹.

In January 1945, under the combined pressure of the Soviet military commands and local delegates of the Allied (Soviet) Control Commission, the Romanian gendarmerie and police initiated a real manhunt against the Bessarabian and Bukovinian refugees to send them back. The main outcome of the operation was that many refugees vanished from the places where

¹⁸ D.C. GIURESCU, *Guvernarea Nicolae Rădescu*, pp. 116-117, also D. ȘANDRU, *Mișcări de populație*, p. 209.

¹⁹ L. BRĂNCEANU - A. BERCIU-DRĂGHICESCU (eds), *Basarabienii și bucovinenii*, pp. 78-82, especially p. 81.

they had settled and a pursuit had to be launched to trace them²⁰. The refugees nevertheless continued to disappear without the police or gendarmes doing much to stop them and sometimes even with the connivance of the authorities. Some of the fugitives crossed the borders into neighboring countries and from there fled to the West. Others managed to obtain fake papers proving they had come to Romania in 1940 rather than 1944, so that they could no longer be considered Soviet citizens. The trafficking of such certificates grew into a thriving business. The Allied (Soviet) Control Commission even accused the Judicial Office of the General Commissariat for Refugees of harboring a «factory for forging papers». The investigation made by the General Direction of the Police confirmed this accusation²¹. People went to any length in order to escape «repatriation».

The Romanian authorities repeatedly attempted to discuss the problem with the Soviets, hoping to win their approval for additional exemptions. On April 9, 1945, Romanian Prime Minister Petru Groza tackled the issue during talks with the Soviet plenipotentiary minister, A.P. Pavlov, but to no avail. A meeting entirely devoted to the «repatriation» of the Bessarabians and Bukovinians took place on May 22 in Bucharest between Pavlov and a Romanian delegation headed by Mihail Ghelmegeanu, the new chairperson of the Romanian Armistice Enforcement Commission.

On orders of the Allied (Soviet) Control Commission, Soviet citizens all over Romania had to be gathered in sorting centers and turned over to the Central Repatriation Commission by July 12, 1945. The operation, however, could not be completed by the deadline. The Soviet authorities that were in charge of it had to make some concessions. It was thus agreed that only the Bessarabians and Bukovinians that had come to Romania after June 22, 1941, would fall under the Soviet decree of March 8, 1941. The refugees of 1940 were consequently allowed to stay.

During a visit to Moscow in September 1945, the Romanian government delegation headed by Groza broached the refugee problem once again. The Romanian prime minister wrenched assent from Stalin that seven categories of Bessarabians – first of all persons considered indispensable for the national economy – would be exempted from repatriation. The Soviet leader agreed that anyone who wanted to return to Bessarabia should do so, and anyone who wanted to stay should do so too. Besides, keeping track

²⁰ See D. ȘANDRU, *Mișcări de populație*, pp. 211-213.

²¹ Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale, Bucharest, *Direcția Generală a Poliției*, dosar 74/1945. See also V. ȚEPORDEI, *Amintiri din Gulag*, p. 46.

of the refugees was becoming an internal affair of Romania and the Soviet authorities were losing control over those who wanted to stay²².

Based on this understanding and with the assent of the Allied (Soviet) Control Commission, the Romanian Armistice Enforcement Commission issued a set of instructions on December 7, 1945, the gist of which was that the Soviet citizens, namely those to whom the March 1941 Soviet decree applied, were free to choose whether or not to repatriate, and that no one could be made to repatriate against his or her will. Consequently, those that did want to repatriate had to state so in writing, while those that did not were not obliged to make any written statement. People from Bessarabia and Bukovina could no longer be tracked in connection with their repatriation and were free to decide whether to leave or stay. The Soviet delegates, however, took little account of these instructions.

The archives contain many pleas and protests of the refugees against this situation. They were asking the Romanian authorities to protect them from Soviet repatriation. Former Bessarabian and Bukovinian politicians were very active in this respect. Pantelimon Halippa, former chairperson of the Bessarabian Parliament in 1917/18, minister in several governments in inter-war Romania, addressed memoranda on Bessarabia and the refugee problem to American and British diplomats in Bucharest. In one of these documents, a memorandum from late 1945, sent to Mark Etheridge, a special delegate of the U.S. Government in Romania, Halippa demanded an American intervention with the Allied Commission on behalf of the refugees²³. Repatriations based on free will continued at least until 1948. Moscow authorities made several attempts at coaxing refugees to go back. They would let them know, *via* the Romanian administration, that they were welcome to return to the USSR, that the Romanian state would cover their repatriation expenses, that transport facilities would be provided, and so on. Since many refugees were marrying Romanian citizens to eschew repatriation, the Soviets repeatedly asked the Romanian authorities to put a ban on such marriages. As a result, in 1948, the ministry of the interior asked that Soviet citizens should no longer be wed to Romanians unless they sought the approval of the Soviet embassy in Bucharest beforehand²⁴.

²² J. SCURTU (ed), *România. Viața politică în documente. 1945*, București 1994, pp. 349-350.

²³ L. BRÂNCEANU - A. BERCIU-DRĂGHICESCU (eds), *Basarabienii și bucovinenii*, pp. 213-217. Another memorandum by Halippa, *ibidem*, pp. 205-212.

²⁴ D. ȘANDRU, *Mișcări de populație*, pp. 222-224.

Eventually the Romanian-Soviet argument over the repatriation of the Bessarabians and Bukovinians slowly died down.

No final figures are available as to how many people the Soviets managed to repatriate with the support of the Romanian authorities. According to official data of the Romanian Armistice Enforcement Commission, 56,450 persons were forcibly repatriated during the period from August 23, 1944 to September 30, 1946. Of them, 38,352 were Bessarabians, 8,198 were Bukovinians, and 9,900 were Romanians from the area east of the Dniester River²⁵. The report, as can be seen, includes the residents of Ukraine and Russia that took refuge in Romania during the war. The final number was certainly higher as repatriations went on even after September 1946. On the other hand, it is a fact that the most important part of this relatively large group escaped repatriation and stayed on in Romania.

The refugees from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina were not the only population group which left Romania for the Soviet Union. Between 1944 and 1948 several thousand people belonging to the Lipovan (Russian), Ukrainian, and Armenian minorities voluntarily moved to the USSR. They were attracted by Soviet propaganda and reacted to the call of the Soviet Military Commandment in Bucharest²⁶.

It should also be noted that while «repatriating» refugees from Bessarabia and Bukovina – most of them Romanians – the Soviet authorities approved the requests of the Jews from the two territories to be «repatriated» to Romania. On August 8, 1945, the Soviet government issued a decree in this respect. By the end of the summer of 1946, at least 40,000 Jews had been repatriated from the USSR, most of them from Czernowitz and Northern Bukovina²⁷.

5. *The refugees and their integration in the Romanian society and their relations with the authorities*

The refugees appeared to have no special trouble integrating with the local population. The authorities treated them like all other citizens. For exam-

²⁵ A. PETRENCU, *România și Basarabia*, p. 158.

²⁶ D. ȘANDRU, *Mișcări de populație*, pp. 270-276.

²⁷ D. ȘANDRU, *Imigrarea și emigrarea evreilor (1944-1948)*, in «Anuarul Institutului de istorie 'A.D. Xenopol'», 34, 1997, pp. 251-270; D. ȘANDRU, *Mișcări de populație*, pp. 376-392; H. GLASS, *Minderheit zwischen zwei Diktaturen*, pp. 62-67.

ple, many Bessarabians and Bukovinians benefited from the 1945 land reform, especially in Banat and Oltenia.

Generally, the relationship between the refugees and the local population can be considered as good. But there were also some problems. In Banat, the land and households seized after August 23, 1944, from the ethnic Germans, who were generally considered to be war criminals – some of them had been deported to forced labor camps in the Soviet Union in January 1945 – were distributed on occasion of the agrarian reform from 1945 to local Romanians as well as to people from other areas of the country (the so called «colonists») and to Bessarabian refugees. The way in which the land reform was handled in some villages lead to conflicts between the «colonists» and the Bessarabians.

Much of the time, however, Bessarabians and Bukovinians lived in the fear the Soviets would demand their extradition. This topic is a recurrent one in the memoirs published in the past few years.

It seems that after the Communists had taken complete control of the country (during the year 1947), the authorities treated this part of the population with suspicion for many years. Even if this fact is stated only few times, and quite shyly by the those putting their experiences in writing²⁸, I was able to ascertain this feeling in my conversations with the Bessarabian refugees.

It is certain, that in June 1951, when the authorities deported the population considered to be suspect from the Romanian-Yugoslavian border, on the pretext of securing the border in case of a war with Tito's Yugoslavia, all Bessarabian refugees in the area became victims of this act. During this operation, 40,320 persons, forming 12,791 families, were taken from Banat and from south-western Oltenia and were deported to Bărăgan (in the south-eastern part of the country). The Bessarabians were all deported, without exception. Directive no. 117 issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, on June 14, 1951, summarizes the categories of deported people: from the already mentioned total sum of 12,791 families and 40,320 persons, the Bessarabians hold the second position, counting 2,998 families and 8,477 persons. The kulaks occupy the first position, with 5,570 families and 19,034 persons. Another category of people – 841 families with 3,557 persons – dislocated from their homelands to find themselves on this list were the «Macedonians», i.e. persons of Romanian ethnical origin, native of the Balkan countries (especially Greece), that had been settled by the

²⁸ So, for example, in Gr. FILIP-LUPU, *Să nu te naști la margine de țară*, București 1995, pp. 11-12.

Romanian State after 1913 in the Cadrilater, but had been displaced from there after the retrocession of this territory to Bulgaria in 1940, some of them finding a place to live in Banat during or after the war²⁹.

During Communism, the refugees in Romania – not only those from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina – were silent groups. Actually, in the political conditions of the time, they could not voice their concerns as a group before 1989.

When, in the 1960s, the taboo on Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina became less severe, and especially during the short-lived Communist «liberalization», when the Ceaușescu regime tried to instrumentalize the Bessarabia issue – of course, in its own political interest –, the Bessarabian and Bukovinian intellectuals spoke out publicly. We see some prominent intellectuals, released from Romanian political prisons, who wrote to Nicolae Ceaușescu, the General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, asking for a policy on Bessarabia³⁰. Upon invitation from Ion Ionescu-Puțuri, the director of the History Institute of the Romanian Communist Party, these Bessarabians elaborated documentary material about the Romanian character of Bessarabia and about the way in which the union of Bessarabia with Romania had been realized in 1918³¹.

²⁹ V. MARINEASA - D. VIGHI, *Rusalii '51. Fragmente din deportarea în Bărăgan. Studiu istoric*, Timișoara 1994, p. 228. Along with the kulaks, Bessarabians, and the «Macedonians», the other categories of persons deported in 1951 to Bărăgan were former landlords and industrials: 57 families with 162 persons; persons of German nationality enrolled in the SS: 782 families with 2,344 persons; persons from the leadership of the local organizations of the former German Ethnic Group: 89 families with 257 persons; persons of Serbian nationality, considered to be Titoists: 304 families with 1,054 persons; political and common law convicts: 179 families with 341 persons; former state clerks and military men that had been purged from their functions, lawyers that had been excluded from the college: 456 families with 1321 persons; smugglers and border guides: 224 families with 657 persons; supporters of persons that had been «liquidated or were about to be liquidated» because of their resistance to the regime: 112 families with 367 persons; relatives of persons who had fled or illegally emigrated: 413 families with 1218 persons; foreign citizens that were living in the border area: 659 families with 1330 persons; former businessmen that had connections with the West: 7 families with 21 persons; other categories: 100 families with 180 persons; *ibidem*. The experience of a Bessarabian deportee in Bărăgan is recounted in P. COZMA - Gh. COZMA, *Toată viața am înălțat case*, in S. SAKA (ed.), *Basarabia în Gulag*, Chișinău 1995, p. 103 ff.

³⁰ This was the case of Gheorghe Pop and Onisifor Ghibu, who forwarded a project concerning the recovery of Bessarabia by Romania to Nicolae Ceaușescu in November 1966. O.O. GHIBU - Gh. POP, *Două memorii din 1966 în probleme Basarabiei*, in «Manuscriptum», 13, 1992, 86-89, pp. 132-154.

³¹ Gr. FILIP-LUPU, *Să nu te naști la margine de țară*, p. 26.

In the 1960s, a number of leading Bessarabian intellectuals asked the Bucharest authorities that people coming from the then Soviet territories be treated as political refugees. Pantelimon Halippa made the same request to U.S. President Richard Nixon in a petition dealing extensively with Bessarabia that he managed to hand the American guest during his visit to Romania in 1969³².

After the political changes of 1989, the Bessarabian and Bukovinian refugees left anonymity. The Romanian mass media began to speak about them, but they did not become subject of major interest though. Their organization – Asociația Culturală Pro-Basarabia și Bucovina (Pro-Bessarabia and Bukovina Cultural Association) – was very active in the political struggle, which took place in Romania in the early 1990s, distinguishing itself by strong anti-Communism. As a result of the lobby they created, in the year 2000 the refugees from Bessarabia and Bukovina were introduced into Law-Decree no. 118/1990, as victims of persecutions for ethnic reasons³³. They are entitled to an indemnity and to a compensation for the property they abandoned in those territories. These people are nevertheless aware of the fact that the law will never be applied, because they have no documents testifying to their lost property.

³² L. BRÂNCEANU - A. BERCIU-DRĂGHICESCU, *Basarabienii și bucovinenii*, pp. 246-253. An excerpt from this memorandum: «The people from Bessarabia and Bukovina who had taken refuge in Romania were formally granted Romanian citizenship by the Romanian Government but not even today is the situation of these Romanians clear. It would be enough for the Soviet Government to demand the handing over of Romanian citizens today who have fled from Bessarabia, and the Romanian Government would be confronted with the situation of having to comply with this demand. The Bessarabian citizens have an unhappy fate, they find themselves in Romania as if in a ghetto, always being at the Soviet Government's disposal ...»; *ibidem*, p. 250.

³³ «Monitorul Oficial al României», Partea I, no. 553, November 8, 2000, pp. 2-3.

