

one another, agreed and disagreed, and generated mutual understandings. In many cases these transcripts represent the first discussions between veterans and victims, activists and volunteers, and people who had played analogous roles on different sides of the divide that the violent conflict created.

The work is methodologically innovative in its approach to the transcripts. It applies the deep contextual awareness that the author has in her long experience studying the region, initially as a journalist and later as a scholar. But the search for unacknowledged patterns of deliberation and for expressions of discursive solidarity lead her to take advantage of the enormous volume of text in the transcripts. In addition to the field analysis and observation carried out as a participant in the observations, the research applies statistical techniques of qualitative content analysis to the transcripts. This has the advantage of being able to identify frequencies that are often not apparent through participant observation—phenomena like whether speakers are acknowledged by others or not, whether they are interrupted or not. A principal finding is that there was a clear willingness of participants to move beyond self-interested and self-justifying positions, and to demonstrate respect and openness toward fellow participants. This evidence is used, in Kostovičova's argument, to contest the dominant position that the REKOM campaign was a failure. It may not have persuaded governments in the region to form a commission, but it opened up new paths of mutual recognition and understanding.

On the conceptual level the work is of a piece with newer analyses inviting readers to interrogate the boundaries of what constitutes justice, and to upset the monopoly of legalistic approaches, concentrating on criminal trials and penalties, over researchers' understanding of justice. The advocates of REKOM and related initiatives often discussed the difference in their approach of being one that places victims rather than perpetrators at the center of the discussion, and that affirms an overall "right to truth" that can be realized by producing and publicizing accurate information.

Of course the work is open to a critique of its sampling, considering that participants in the REKOM initiative constitute a self-selected and nonrepresentative group of people sharing an interest in dialogue. But this would miss the important point that dialogue once engaged has the consequence of producing shared understandings. The fact that states resist it was already known.

On balance this is a work of research that both opens avenues for new innovations in methodology and moves the discussion forward. The traditional discourse around justice and reconciliation, dominated as it is by lobbyists and lawyers, will still be available for people who want it. But scholars have a broad and exciting range of productive new options.

## **Eduard Baidaus. *An Unsettled Nation: Moldova in the Geopolitics of Russia, Romania, and Ukraine.***

**Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2023, 669. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Tables. Maps. \$ 69.00, paperback.**

Igor Cașu 

National Agency of Archives, State University of Moldova

Email: [igorcasu@gmail.com](mailto:igorcasu@gmail.com)

doi: 10.1017/slr.2024.444

After Russia commenced its full military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Moldova received the greatest number of Ukrainian refugees of any European country proportionally

(Poland received more in absolute numbers). Most of the refugees chose to go to the right bank of the Dniester River, to historical Bessarabia. Some, however, went to the left bank, to the breakaway, Russia-supported unrecognized state called the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic (TMR). The TMR was established in the final years of the existence of the USSR as a strategy to discourage a union of Moldova with Romania like that at the end of the WWI after the collapse of the tsarist empire.

In Moldova and Ukraine, as in other parts of the ex-USSR, ethnicity is a flexible and complicated category. Eduard Baidaus's book investigates this thorny issue, focusing particularly on the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic and its significance for regional, wider European, and, after February 2022, global security. More exactly, the book deals with the conflict between two forms of identity: pan-Romanian and pan-Russian, reflecting the tension between Romanian-speaking and Russian-speaking populations in Moldova.<sup>14</sup> About one third of the book is dedicated to the pre-Perestroika period, and two thirds concentrates on the late 1980s and the post-Soviet period. Baidaus's work is based on a wide range of published and unpublished sources in several languages, as well as interviews with people from both sides of the Dniester River. The book contains the most complete bibliography to date on the recent history of Transnistria, but also on the Republic of Moldova as a whole, in Romanian, Russian, and English. It includes a list of the most important history textbooks from both sides of Dniester River—though not the most recently introduced after 2012—all these being analyzed in great detail in a chapter on cultural wars between two identities.

The story of the identity clashes between Russian and Romanian speakers is centuries old, though the turning point in the modern history of this conflict is 1924. In that year, the Soviet Union created the autonomous Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic on the territory of the Ukrainian SSR across from Bessarabia along the Dniester River, which in the interwar period formed the border between Romania and Soviet Ukraine/Russia/USSR. Local Romanian-speaking Moldovans made up only about a third of the population in the MASSR. In its creation, the Soviets used for the first time the so-called "Piedmont principle" in nationalities policy, linked intimately with their foreign policy agenda: the expansion of communism in the medium or long run perspective.<sup>15</sup> The MASSR formed a bridgehead for Moscow to expand into Bessarabia, and later into Romania and the Balkan Peninsula. But the minimal agenda was Bessarabia, the only former tsarist territory (1812–1917) marked on all Soviets maps in the interwar period as temporarily lost to an "imperialist" neighboring country. Officially, the Soviets claimed Bessarabia on the basis of a combination of social and ethnic arguments. Baidaus addresses these but fails to put the Bessarabian issue in a wider European context. As Soviet and Romanian diplomats discussed in private conversations in the 1930s, Moscow desperately needed the province to secure Odessa (Odesa), the biggest Soviet port on the Black Sea coast. Without Bessarabia, Odessa was too close to the state border and thus vulnerable to external attack (much like Leningrad, which likewise combined unique importance with being too close to the border).

The most pertinent and original contribution of Baidaus's book is related to the role of Ukraine in Moldovan-Russian relations and particularly to Kyiv's role in the "frozen" Transnistrian conflict and in the preservation of the breakaway territory as Russia's puppet quasi-state until today. He describes in great detail and precision Ukraine's ambiguous position during the "hot" period of the conflict in the Dniester valley (as he calls it) in March–July 1992. On March 2 that year, Moldovan President Mircea Snegur was in New York at a United Nations session to decide on the question of Moldova's entry into the UN. To prevent this or, more exactly, signal that it did not agree with the decision, the Transnistrian leadership, supported by the ex-Soviet, Russian-controlled 14<sup>th</sup> Army in the area, launched an

<sup>1</sup> Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, 2001)

attack on the Chişinău police forces in Bender (Tighina). Officially, Kyiv authorities tried to prevent Russian citizens from passing into Transnistria during the Moscow aggression against Moldova. In fact, they largely failed to do so. In the author's words, "the military interference of Ukrainian nationalists, officially unauthorized but tolerated, was a demonstration of patriotism and a response to how the government in Kyiv positioned itself toward the events in Moldova's Transnistria" (263). Other actors in Ukraine, however, expressed discontent with Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk's stance on the Transnistrian war. The People's Movement of Ukraine (Rukh, the Ukrainian Popular Front during Perestroika) criticized the Rada (Ukrainian parliament) and the President for *de facto* supporting Russia's war in Moldova. Moreover, with hindsight, some of the Rukh's founders and activists linked the creation of the TMR to Russia's wider destabilization policies in the post-Soviet republics that one day could spread to Crimea and Donbas (267). As a whole, however, the bulk of the political elites in the Rada and large swaths of Ukrainians sympathized with the TMR for various reasons, not least because Russia mobilized support in the name of Slavic solidarity and collective identity threatened by "Romanian fascist hordes," that is, Moldova and Romania. The author justly mentions though that overall, "the weakness of the re-emerged Ukrainian state and Russia's geopolitical interests in Crimea, Donbas and Transnistria significantly reduced Kyiv's capacity to act more independently and decisively during the war in the Republic of Moldova" (269).

Baidaus's book, published in 2023, went to press in January 2022 just two months before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, Transnistria and Moldova as a whole became more important than ever for the dénouement of the war and thus for European and world security. In 2023–24, on the one hand, Ukrainian political elites and society expressed gratitude to Moldova for harboring large numbers of refugees. On the other hand, Ukrainian officials articulated dissatisfaction and even sheer exasperation with the fact Moldova is not sufficiently anti-Russian, as the war context requires: it is not determined to ban pro-Russian parties and does not participate more proactively in the Russo-Ukrainian war. A special focus of the Kyiv government's critical stance toward Chişinău is related to the TMR. President Volodymyr Zelensky declared several times that Moldova should establish its constitutional and internationally recognized authority in the breakaway region. Moldova is very prudent, however, reminding Ukraine that it is a democratic country obliged to respect the rule of law. To comply with Ukraine's claims, Moldova would have to introduce martial law, which is unfounded unless its territory is attacked by Russia. Besides, Moldova can afford to function as a fully-fledged democracy while Russia does not control Odesa. If the latter falls, the TMR (and Gagauz-Yeri, an ethnically and territorially-based autonomous region of a Turkic-speaking Orthodox minority in the south of Moldova) will become essential for the establishment of fast and total control over the whole of southern Ukraine. With Odesa in Russian hands, the Russo-Ukrainian front would increase automatically by 300 km from south to north along the Dniester River, making possible a decisive Russian offensive against Kyiv from all directions except the west.

Baidaus's book is timely and original in reminding Ukrainians of their recent role in maintaining and consolidating the TMR that could now contribute decisively to the end of the war and the end of Ukraine as we have known it since 1991. It is also a reminder to politicians and society at large in Moldova that the errors and blunders of the recent past, for which Moldova and Moldovans also bear some responsibility, can be avoided if Ukraine wins the war against Russia. For this, Moldova must do its share to overcome its historical grievances in the matter, especially those related to the Russo-Moldovan war of 1992 over Transnistria and to Ukraine's role in it. Furthermore, Moldovans should accept that south Bessarabia is a Ukrainian territory, contrary to what some extreme right nationalist parties in Moldova and Romania claim. As in the case of many other European contested borderlands, this one will be solved once Moldova and Ukraine become EU member states—both received candidate status in 2023—and borders between nation-states become symbolic, rather than dividing lines between cultures and peoples.

Altogether, Baidaus succeeds in conveying to readers a complex, balanced, and fascinating picture of an unsettled nation that is a reminder of how entangled local, national, European, and world history can be, and that history, its interpretation and manipulation, is intimately connected to security issues and to the survival of the world we used to know.