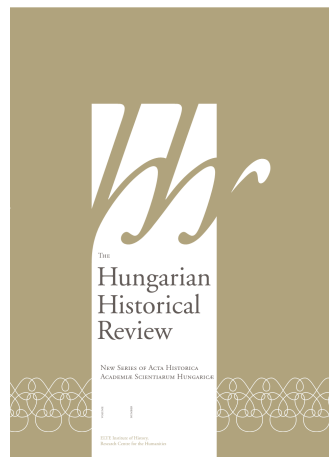


Citation style

Berecz, Ágoston: Rezension über: Andrei Cușco, A Contested Borderland. Competing Russian and Romanian Visions of Bessarabia in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century, Budapest ; New York: Central European University Press, 2017, in: Hungarian Historical Review, 2019, 4, S. 869, DOI: 10.15463/rec.1875693267



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A Contested Borderland: Competing Russian and Romanian Visions of Bessarabia in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century. By Andrei Cușco. Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2017. 327 pp.

Andrei Cușco has broken new ground in international scholarship with his book on the prehistory of today's Moldavia's troubled identities, although he disclaims the role of pioneer. Moreover, he is attentive to multiple perspectives, from both the "hard" and "soft" sides of history, in accordance with Terry Martin's synthetic approach to imperialism, which he cites as his guiding principle. Aside from the competing visions in the title, Chapters 1 and 5 in particular also give a glimpse into the national affinities—or rather, the lack thereof—among contemporary Bessarabians, and also into cultural initiatives on the ground and roads not taken. To my mind, this dual scope is one of the main assets of the book.

On the former, his major claim is about the asymmetry between the Russian and Romanian visions. Imperial and nation-state projects, Cușco argues, had different ways of imagining and appropriating frontier regions. He also contends, however, and persuasively shows that both intellectual imaginaries drew massively from Western Orientalizing discourses. While apologists for Russian rule mobilized metaphors of the exotic, the pristine, and the backward when depicting Bessarabia, Romanian authors equipped themselves with Russophobic tropes of French (and, I should add, Polish) provenience. In another common element, both projects treated locals as mere props for their discursive construction of the Bessarabian space.

Regarding the intellectual horizons of said locals, Cușco recurrently makes the connection between the low levels of ethnic mobilization as late as the eve of World War I and the virtual absence of a home-grown intelligentsia in the province. Ordinary Bessarabian peasants were more responsive to calls for loyalty to the czar than they were with calls for ethnic solidarity with Romania, all the more so, since they felt better-off economically than their peers on the other side of the Prut River.

If Cușco falls short of his goal to write an "intellectual history of the Bessarabian problem," that is because of the fragmented structure of the book. Instead of laying out a more or less even and continuous timeline, he directs his attention to a few key or typical episodes. He makes an exposition of his lines of inquiry and summarizes many of his findings in a first chapter which is succinct and commendable, except for a lengthy aside on the nationalism of Romantic poet Mihai Eminescu. Then he combines two loosely connected subjects in

Chapter 2—the Bessarabian crisis of 1878 and the Russian administration of the Budjak region—to rush ahead to the year 1912 in Chapter 3.

Romanian reactions to the transfer of the three southern Bessarabian counties in exchange for northern Dobrudja, imposed on Romania at the Berlin Congress, as well as Mihai Kogălniceanu's role in turning public opinion around on this question are given more detailed coverage here than in Constantin Iordachi's *Citizenship, Nation- and State-Building* [2002] or Barbara Jelavich's *Russia and the Formation of the Romanian National State 1821–1878* [1984], which, however, would have merited mention in this context. The attention given to the perception of Dobrudja is justified here and does not distract from the analysis.

In the second half of Chapter 2, Cușco interrogates the archives and brings to light protracted debates in the Russian imperial civil service over what he calls the Ismail anomaly, the curious fact that the three Southern Bessarabian counties were not fully incorporated into the Russian Empire, but were given special status and were governed by Russian bureaucrats under the Romanian legal code introduced before 1878. While some Russian officials slammed this unique status as a reckless example of bureaucratic sloppiness, others presented it as a sound and deliberate administrative experiment and a civilizing mission. As the polemics spanned over the four decades of Russian sovereignty, I would have been interested to see full justice done to this puzzling anomaly, with more space devoted to it.

In Chapter 3, Cușco jumps to the 1912 Russian celebrations of the hundred-year anniversary of the conquest of the province, one in a series of imperial jubilees in the *début de siècle*, which operated with family metaphors in a bid to strengthen bonds of affection for the dynasty among peoples living on the empire's peripheries. Cușco offers an overview of the context and interprets the rhetoric of the celebrations, and he also points out that the centenary brought the grief over Bessarabia and the specter of unbridled Russian expansionism back into the forefront of Romanian public discourse.

Chapter 4 returns to the Romanian side by engaging with the writings of three intellectuals of Bessarabian birth who made careers in Romania: Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu, Constantin Stere, and Dimitrie C. Moruzi. Somewhat unexpectedly for a reader unfamiliar with contemporary stereotypes in Romania, all three had to struggle with a stigma on account of their “Russian” background. This chapter is rather digressive, in particular the twenty-two pages on Hașdeu's thought, only the last three of which deal with his relationship to Russia and none with his stance on the Bessarabian question.

Covering the period between the 1905 revolution and Romania entering the war in 1916, Chapter 5 is again more balanced. Cușco's emphasis, however, clearly lies in the first years of the war, when, on the one hand, the mobilization and war propaganda submitted the Russian population to a rapid process of nationalization and, on the other, the question of Bessarabia became a significant argument in Romanian political debates about whether the country should join the war and, if so, on which side. While the first question has been the subject of intense research recently, the latter context is mostly familiar from Lucian Boia's *Germanofili* [2009], even though Cușco concentrates on the opinions of Bessarabian-born intellectuals.

As a comprehensive history of the topic, on balance, the book is a mixed bag, which may work better as a collection of essays than as a monograph and leaves several decades unaddressed. At the same time, it contributes with precious insights to the recent literature on nationalizing empires and imperialist nation-states from the unique viewpoint of a borderland so far rather neglected in that respect. It is a compelling read both for students of nationality policies in the late Romanov Empire and of Romanian nationalism.

Ágoston Berecz
Central European University