

PARALLEL RUPTURES: JEWS OF BESSARABIA AND TRANSNISTRIA BETWEEN
ROMANIAN NATIONALISM AND SOVIET COMMUNISM, 1918-1940

BY

DMITRY TARTAKOVSKY

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Mark D. Steinberg, Chair
Professor Keith Hitchins
Professor Diane P. Koenker
Professor Harriet Murav
Assistant Professor Eugene Avrutin

Abstract

“Parallel Ruptures: Jews of Bessarabia and Transnistria between Romanian Nationalism and Soviet Communism, 1918-1940,” explores the political and social debates that took place in Jewish communities in Romanian-held Bessarabia and the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic during the interwar era. Both had been part of the Russian Pale of Settlement until its dissolution in 1917; they were then divided by the Romanian Army’s occupation of Bessarabia in 1918 with the establishment of a well-guarded border along the Dniester River between two newly-formed states, Greater Romania and the Soviet Union. At its core, the project focuses in comparative context on the traumatic and multi-faceted confrontation with these two modernizing states: exclusion, discrimination and growing violence in Bessarabia; destruction of religious tradition, agricultural resettlement, and socialist re-education and assimilation in Soviet Transnistria. It examines also the similarities in both states’ striving to create model subjects usable by the homeland, as well as commonalities within Jewish responses on both sides of the border. Contacts between Jews on either side of the border remained significant after 1918 despite the efforts of both states to curb them, thereby necessitating a transnational view in order to examine Jewish political and social life in borderland regions. The desire among Jewish secular leaders to mold their co-religionists into modern Jews reached across state borders and ideological divides and sought to manipulate respective governments to establish these goals, however unsuccessful in the final analysis. Finally, strained relations between Jews in peripheral borderlands with those at national/imperial cores, Moscow and Bucharest, sheds light on the complex circumstances surrounding the inclusion versus exclusion debates at the heart of all interwar European states and the complicated negotiations that took place within all minority communities that responded to state policies.

Acknowledgements

This project would have never seen the light of day if not for the consistent support and encouragement of a group of generous scholars and intellectuals at the University of Illinois. First of all my advisor, Mark D. Steinberg, has always extended steady and unyielding positivism that has been paramount. Diane Koenker provided critical readings and ideas about Soviet history throughout; Keith Hitchins gave me many good suggestions and kept me honest on my interpretations of Romanian life and politics; Eugene Avrutin importantly put my work in broader perspective in relation to Jewish history; Harriet Murav prepared me for researching in Yiddish, helped me appreciate the uses of literature in historical writing and generously introduced me to a family of young scholars whose input was important to me. Among these were David Shneer, Jeffrey Veidlinger, Simon Rabinovitch, Gennady Estraiikh, Jarrod Tanny, Deborah Yalen, and Rebbeka Klein-Peišova. Even more certain is that without the personal support I received from family and friends, I would have failed also. I will always remain grateful to my mother, Rita, for her patience, support, and prodding; for my great friend, Matt, who donated hours of his time to force me to speak to a non-specialized audience and in the process taught me the meaning of real friendship; to my son Alex for his inspiration; and most of all to my wife Elena, who understood me and maintained faith in me, and through her sacrifice and love allowed me to complete this endeavor. This project is dedicated to the memory of Alexander Polevoy, a man who saw the beginning of my scholarly development and believed in me always.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: A Borderland Transformed.....	31
Chapter 2: Under a New Roof: Hope and Disappointment in Post WWI Bessarabia.....	90
Chapter 3: The Rise of Jewish Nationalist Politics in Bessarabia after 1924.....	156
Chapter 4: Jews in Transnistria: Against the Grain.....	221
Chapter 5: Jewish Politics and Identity across the Divide: Dreams in Common.....	291
Epilogue.....	369
Bibliography.....	379

Introduction

At the coming of the Russian Revolution in 1917, most Jews of Transnistria and Bessarabia, regions along both banks of the Dniester River that today comprise the Republic of Moldova, still maintained traditional lifestyles marked by particular Jewish dress, food, festivals, religious observance and urban life in shtetls that culturally, linguistically, and physically set them apart from surrounding peoples. These “Dniester Jews” maintained extensive contacts not only with co-religionists across the Dniester, but also with communities throughout the southern Pale of Settlement. Their economic condition and occupational distribution differed not significantly from the rest of Russian Jewry, although many more made their living through agriculture than was common across much of the Pale. Travel by Jews throughout the region, especially between market centers such as Odessa (first and foremost), but also Kishinev, Soroca, Benderi, and Tiraspol, formed a regional identity that traversed the Dniester River and recognized no boundary along its length.

Less than one generation later, by the onset of military operations in the region in 1939, circumstances had changed significantly. As a result of the Soviet occupation of Bessarabia, a term of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed in August 1939 with Nazi Germany, all of the region’s Jews again found themselves united under Russian (now Soviet) rule as before 1918. The preceding two decades, however, had witnessed Bessarabia under Romanian control and Transnistria under Soviet authority, when the Dniester River was a zealously guarded and patrolled border between the Soviet Union and Greater Romania. On the left or Soviet bank of the Dniester, Jews had to a great extent ceased to live as they had before under autonomous Jewish traditions: many had become integrated into Soviet culture and had moved toward Soviet cultural and economic centers and away from the region despite state efforts to support



Map 1: Eastern Europe, 1919-1929, *Times Atlas of European History* (London, 1994), 173.

indigenous minority cultures. Those that remained witnessed Soviet domination of economic and cultural life. There were many Jews in positions of authority, yet the primacy of Jewish concerns was no longer central for Jewish leaders as before—divisions within the Jewish community far outweighed the common ground.

On the opposite side, in Romanian Bessarabia, because of the arrival of refugees first from Ukraine, then from Germany, and finally Poland, there were more Jews residing in 1939

than before 1918, even though the state did everything possible to make the place inhospitable for them. Many Bessarabian Jews continued to live on much as they had, with traditional institutions and leaders still largely intact, despite tremendous economic difficulties. The challenge to their authority from new ideas and a new generation of Jewish youth was unprecedented, however. Vast gulfs of opinion among residents had formed over the Jewish future, which, in the context of European-wide debate over responses to modern transformations, was standard. Yet, there remained a sense of Jewish community; in fact in the late 1930s, Bessarabian Jews moved toward greater unity in the face of extreme discrimination and political isolation. Overall, increasingly virulent discrimination and rigid exclusion from Romanian society kept the community together, while in the Soviet case the already present centripetal forces within the Jewish community were successfully exploited by Soviet policy makers.

Within the span of just over twenty years, a regional community that was more or less one was torn violently into two. Even more remarkable was the level of social, political, institutional, and cultural transformation achieved. The modern had been encroaching on the traditional here for at least the previous century, but in the interwar years the pace of change quickened to render the past almost unrecognizable: historical continuity of the gradual if quickening transformation of Jewish society toward a West European standard was ruptured. This rupture was not unitary, but rather took place on opposites sides of a created political divide along the Dniester River, occurring simultaneously and in different directions; in parallel. How could such radically abrupt changes have been accomplished? Jews on both banks of the Dniester came to bestride the greatest ideological separation in an age of extreme ideologies: ethnic and racial nationalism on the one hand and socialist internationalism on the other.¹ Was this political division, perpetrated by two eagerly modernizing, authoritarian or near-

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York, 1994).

authoritarian states, the unquestionable determinant of Jewish life, identity and culture by the end of this interwar era? Are modern states, such as those that ruled and divided this borderland after 1918, sufficiently powerful that they can profoundly shape people's identity and daily lives in such a short period of time, or are they rather too weak to do so and thus forced to negotiate with strong national groups and identities, as Kate Brown suggests?² Are the modern borders constructed by non-democratic regimes powerful "institutions of isolation" as Andrea Chandler asserts, capable of shaping identity in the people they isolate, or are they permeable and fluid enough to permit the coalescence of modern identities governed by transnational forces?³ Or is it possible that the historical reality lies in between the binaries?

How strong were transnational forces for Dniester Jews? Was it true, as Ezra Mendelsohn asserted some time ago, that the environment in interwar Eastern Europe was bad for Jews while not necessarily bad for Judaism, because virulent anti-Semitism and exclusionary state policies elicited a response of unprecedented Jewish cultural creativity; while the interwar Soviet system proved good for Jews but bad for Judaism, because new political and economic opportunities came at the cost of assimilation?⁴ In other words, was Soviet Jewry well on its way toward becoming a "Western type" Jewry, meaning secular and assimilated, or modern, while because of antisemitism and exclusion, Romanian Jews (among others in Eastern Europe) had remained the "Eastern type," that is traditional and religious, or non-modern? Such a powerful division suggests that modern states are strong enough to make people into whatever is necessary, was this the case here? Such questions delve into the heart of the role of nation and

² Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, 2004), 13-14.

³ Andrea Chandler, *Institutions of Isolation: Border Controls in the Soviet Union and Its Successor States, 1917-1993* (Montreal, 1998), 9-14.

⁴ Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars* (Bloomington, 1983), 6.

state in modern society. The place of the Jewish minority in this borderland region, because it was divided between two state-modernizing projects, is a fertile laboratory to examine issues.

Of course, the utility of studying the Jewish minority in a provincial borderland would be limited if the only increase in understanding came concerning specifically the Jews. In attempting to examine the experience of interwar Jewish communities on both sides of the Dniester, it is important to understand first of all the points of similarity of their experience as well as the points of difference, and secondly to understand the reasons for those differences. What were the causes that served to move the Jewish community and politics toward marginalization toward the late 1930s in Bessarabia (representative for Eastern Europe more broadly), while the experience in Transnistria was marked by continued participation, even if circumstances changed significantly? Clearly, official antisemitism was much more a problem west of the Dniester than east of it, but what role did popular antisemitism play? More broadly, what role, if any, did the growth and prestige of racism and racial sciences such as eugenics, both as a system of establishing a healthy, hygienic and racially advanced social body for the nation and as a system of exclusion and branding as Other those outside the nation, have on circumstances for interwar Dniester Jews? What does the impact of such policies say about the society and political system that displays them?

Historical Outline

Before WWI, confessional and ethnic communities of the region were not untouched by state-backed modernization programs, but their lives were significantly less in contact with state bureaucracies than after 1918. Like many other borderlands on the periphery of the Russian Empire, the Dniester area, part of the Jewish Pale of Settlement in the 19th century, had become a

highly heterogeneous region of numerous ethnic groups after a century of Russian rule.

Transnistria had become a part of the new territory acquired by Catherine the Great after the Treaty of Jassy (Iași) was signed on January 9, 1792, ending the second Russo-Turkish War and extending Russia's southern frontier to the Dniester River.⁵ Bessarabia was annexed by Russia in 1812, recognized by the Treaty of Bucharest, after another successful war against the Ottoman Empire, and was later given the status of a *guberniia*.⁶ Transnistria and Bessarabia were thus really part of a region of the Russian Empire and one part of the Jewish Pale of Settlement—a region known as “New Russia,” comprising of territory along the north and west Black Sea shore taken in stages from the Crimean Tatars and the Ottoman Empire.⁷ The economic and cultural heart of Jews in New Russia was the port city of Odessa, which toward the latter part of the 19th century became a center of the *Haskalah*, or the Jewish Enlightenment, in the Russian Empire.

The region's most numerous inhabitants around the time of Russian annexation were the titular Moldovans (Eastern Orthodox Romanian-speakers), who comprised 86% of the Bessarabian population in 1817. While not a majority in Transnistria, Moldovans together with the Ukrainians constituted the overwhelming majority of the population—even though in Romanian nationalist mythology the Dniester River formed the northeastern boundary of Romanian civilization. Minorities increasingly composed a greater share of the population through the settlement of runaway serfs and religious dissenters from inside the empire together with Bulgarians, Germans, and Gagauz (Orthodox Christian Turkic-speakers), who were enticed to settle in Bessarabia by land allotments and military service exemptions until 1874, as well as

⁵ Keith Hitchins, *Rumania, 1866-1947* (Oxford, 1994), 4.

⁶ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark D. Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, 7th edition, (New York, 2004), 246, 287-88.

⁷ On the question of conquest of New Russia see Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multi-Ethnic History* (Harlow, 2001), 60-108; for the Jews of New Russia see Mikhail Polishchuk, *Evrei Odessy i Novorossii: sotsial'no-politicheskaia istoriia evreev Odessy i drugikh gorodov v Novorossii, 1881-1904* (Jerusalem and Moscow, 2002). For insights into Jewish Chișinău (albeit from a Russian perspective), see Sergei D. Urussov, *Zapiski Gubernatora: Kishinev, 1903-04*, (Moscow, 1907).

by a favorable climate and productive land.⁸ In addition, serfdom was never imposed in Bessarabia despite initial fears, a fact that caused thousands of peasants, if they were able, to move to Bessarabia from within the empire.⁹ Thus, at the time of the 1897 all-Russian census, the Moldovans who after WWI would be considered by the Romanian government as the titular nationality, on whose behalf policies would be enacted containing various degrees of exclusion for the other ethnic groups, was no longer a majority in the province.¹⁰ Well before the post-WWI contestation for the province between Romania and the Soviet Union, Bessarabia had been a Russian Imperial borderland. Multi-ethnicity on its borders was the policy pursued by Russian monarchs and state builders during the 19th century for the same reason that Romanian leaders would later desire mono-ethnicity: state security.¹¹ Transnistria, not a province in its own administrative right, was inland and received less attention from Russian policy-makers. It was part of the Kherson guberniia and in terms of Jewish culture a provincial area, culturally and intellectually revolving around Odessa.

As the Russian government, intelligentsia and society struggled with the questions posed by modern changes, Russia's Jewish minority had also been confronted with debate over the direction of modern Jewish identity. Since the era of the French Revolution, the possibility for Jews to choose their religion and national identity opened for the first time in European history. West European Jews often chose assimilation; East European Jews more often tried to maintain

⁸ For a good summary of the population movements of 19th century Russian-ruled Bessarabia see: Michael F. Hamm, "Kishinev: The Character and Development of a Tsarist Frontier Town," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 1998, 19-37.

⁹ See Rebecca Haynes, "Historical Introduction," in *Occasional Papers in Romanian Studies No. 3: Moldova, Bessarabia, Transnistria* (London, 2003), 77-80.

¹⁰ The Russian policy of ethnic mixing to legitimize and solidify its claims to Bessarabia has been noted by Moldovan historians, see for example Ion Chirtoagă, *Din istoria Moldovei de sud-est până în anii '30 al sec. Al XIX-lea*, (Chișinău, 1999), 184, op. cit. Haynes, "Historical Introduction," 80. Moldovan pan-Romanian historians usually note this point of Russian imperial policy as implicit justification for Romanian ethnic policies from a need to reverse generations of Russian administrative abuse, a deliberate taking of Moldova away from its rightful possessors, the Romanians. As a recent example, see Octavian Țăcu, *Problema Basarabiei și relațiile sovieto-române în perioada interbelică, 1919-1939* (Chișinău, 2004).

¹¹ Kappeler, *The Russian Empire*, 283-323.

culture, faith, and community.¹² Yet in Bessarabia as elsewhere, the pull of Russian high culture, especially the critical idealism of the intelligentsia, was for Jews strong despite a deeply ambivalent history in Russian Bessarabia and Transnistria marked by antisemitism. Partly because of Jewish economic dominance, the province's Jews had known difficult times and violence, most famously during the Kishinev pogrom of 1903.¹³ Despite the strength of Hasidism in the southern Pale, the influence of the Haskalah, which spread steadily into the Dniester region from Odessa, had also been notable since the late 19th century. Indeed, Odessa had been a center for Haskalah proponents, the maskilim: in 1847 it became home to the first secular Jewish school (together with Vilna) in the Russian Empire.¹⁴ Within Jewish lore in the Pale of Settlement, the southern Jewish towns to some extent inherited the reputation of Odessa, its cultural center: a wild place, torn from Jewish tradition and home to thieves and prostitutes.¹⁵

For outlying regions such as those along the Dniester, this was mostly rumor, although their economic links to Odessa were real enough. Local Jewish thinkers and leaders, often in connection to the intellectual ferment taking place in Odessa, turned to new ideas to wrestle with traditional Jewish issues as much as they were shaped by new and changing circumstances. Publishing in both Hebrew and Yiddish spread in the Dniester region prior to WWI, and Bessarabia particularly was not far behind Poland and Lithuania in the concentration and number of Hebrew-language institutions. Particularly strong was the Tarbut cultural and education movement, modern Hebrew schools from kindergartens to high schools that numbered about 70

¹² Best captured by the collection of primary sources in *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds. (New York & Oxford, 1995); Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Seattle & London, 1995).

¹³ See Edward Judge, *Easter in Kishinev: Anatomy of a Pogrom* (New York, 1992).

¹⁴ Howard Sachar, *A History of the Jews in the Modern World*, (New York, 2005), 69.

¹⁵ For history of Odessa Jewry see Steven Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa, A Cultural History, 1794-1881*, (Stanford, 1985); for the place of Odessa in Russian-Jewish cultural memory, see Jarrod Tanny, *City of Rogues and Schnorrers: The Myth of Old Odessa in Russian and Jewish Culture* (PhD. diss, Berkeley, 2008).

in Bessarabia before the arrival of Romanian troops in 1918.¹⁶ Jewish political activism was strong in the years prior to 1917, influenced especially by socialism and Zionism as was much of Russian Jewry prior to the revolution.¹⁷ The tremendous political activity during the final years of the Empire increasingly challenge the autocracy, leading to expectations of greater economic and cultural autonomy among many Jews.

Thus, many Jews greeted Romanian annexation of Bessarabia sourly, particularly because they were aware of the revolution taking place across the border and the enthusiasm with which many of their co-religionists greeted it there (not to mention that some had been active revolutionaries themselves). This could not but influence relations between Jews and Romanian military administrators in Bessarabia. Nonetheless, along with repression, the Romanian army brought with it stability. The Romanian government annexed Transylvania, Bukovina, Bessarabia and part of Dobruja in 1918, thus attaining very quickly the proportions of Romanian ethno-nationalist mythology: finally all ‘Romanians’ were united within the borders of their motherland.¹⁸ As a result, hostile neighbors that desired the return of land lost to Romania surrounded it. For the first time in its history, the state became host to millions of Hungarians, Germans, Jews and other minorities (35% of the overall population), a sharp contrast to the relative ethnic homogeneity of the Old Kingdom which had been comprised of Wallachia and Moldavia (Moldova) that achieved de facto autonomy and union in 1859.

¹⁶ Carol Iancu, *Evreii din România: de la emancipare la marginalizare, 1919-1938*, (Bucharest, 2000), 71.

¹⁷ See Gassensmidt, Christoph, *Jewish Liberal Politics in Tsarist Russia, 1900-1914, the modernization of Russian Jewry* (New York, 1995); Hans Rogger, *Jewish Policies and Right-Wing Politics in Imperial Russia* (Berkeley, 1986).

¹⁸ The impact of the unified ethnic nation living under one government that served and protected their interests was the core of nationalist ideology among most intellectuals in Eastern Europe, living as they did during the 19th century under either Russian, German, Hapsburg, or Ottoman imperial domination. In Romanian national formation, the role played by “Romanians outside Romania” cannot be overstated: see Keith Hitchins, *The Romanians, 1774-1866* (Oxford, 1996); and *A Nation Discovered: Romanian Intellectuals in Transylvania and the Idea of Nation, 1700/1848* (Bucharest, 1999).

On the opposite side of the Dniester there was no stability: chaos and bloodshed were commonplace during the Russian Civil War from 1918-1921. Jews in Transnistria were devastated by pogroms and the violent establishment of Soviet economic policies known as War Communism, which together caused the flight of tens of thousands of Jews (and others) across the Dniester River into Bessarabia. Circumstances began stabilizing only in the mid-1920s, although soon traumatic upheavals would follow—the Ukrainian famine of the early 1930s hit Transnistria hard, and Jews did not escape. Such turmoil kept people moving back and forth across the Dniester River border between Romania and the Soviet Union despite great risks.

Interwar policies in Bessarabia were driven by the need to create loyal subjects trusted to preserve Romanian cultural and territorial integrity, particularly in the newly acquired regions of Transylvania, Bukovina, and Bessarabia. Such loyalty, very much in line with interwar ethnonationalist politics Europe-wide,¹⁹ became increasingly defined along ethnic and later on a racial basis.²⁰ Jews in the Old Kingdom, in contrast to those in Hungarian Transylvania or Austrian Bukovina, had never achieved equality under the law. Romanian leaders, despite external pressure from “Europe,” particularly during the Berlin Congress in 1878, managed to avoid granting them civic rights.²¹ At the Paris Peace talks after WWI, the issue could no longer be avoided since minority rights was a condition of recognizing the expanded Romanian state—Jews grudgingly received civic equality. But for leaders in Bucharest of most stripes, all minorities, but Jews in particular, were suspected of representing foreign revisionist interests,

¹⁹ The term ethnonationalism belongs to Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*, (Princeton, 1994).

²⁰ See Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York, 1998), especially, 41-75. Mazower shows that new states during these years were viewed as homes for the titular national majority, which had a right to absorb into itself minority groups as the best way to prevent ambiguous spillovers of non-state populations into neighboring states. On race as governing ideology in Eastern Europe see *Blood and Homeland: Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900-1940*, Marius Turda and Paul J. Weindling, eds. (Budapest, 2007).

²¹ See Carol Iancu, *Jews in Romania 1866-1919: From Exclusion to Emancipation*, Carvel de Bussey, trans., (Boulder, CO, 1996).

particularly from Hungary and the Soviet Union. In Bessarabia especially, Jewish cultural and religious institutions were perceived and treated as political by the Romanian security police because they were seen as foreign and dangerously subversive to Romanian national-cultural aspirations in a sensitive border region.

In the provincial borderland of Soviet Transnistria, literate cadres were in desperately short supply, and the Bolshevik leadership found willing participants among the Jews, who led in the creation of Soviet Moldovan culture while also spearheading the propaganda campaign to undermine Romanian control of Bessarabia, both locally and internationally. For this very reason the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) was founded in 1924. Jewish communists in the MASSR were often much more concerned with Jewish events and circumstances in Romanian Bessarabia, across the ideological and state border, than they were with what transpired in distant places in their own Soviet Union. The construction of Soviet consciousness took time, but the desire to use Soviet power to achieve desired goals in a traditionally imagined homeland (as Bessarabia remained for many MASSR Jewish communists), was immediate. For them the division between the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was temporary, permeable, and something to be overcome. In Bessarabia, many among the minorities, including Jews, Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, and Germans, looked longingly toward the promise of a liberal revolution that they had initially welcomed with enthusiasm in 1917, enthusiasm that Soviet propagandists worked hard to maintain by emphasizing Romanian chauvinism and concealing the abuses of Soviet power. Romanian state policies and popular attitudes that grew increasingly anti-Semitic especially into the 1930s in turn encouraged receptivity to the Soviet message among many Jews, just as it did among Russians, Ukrainians and even Moldovans. The resulting enthusiasm of Jews in the MASSR (and elsewhere) for

Soviet power and Bolshevik culture was of central importance in understanding the effectiveness with which the Soviet state was able to divide and conquer Jewish traditional society much better than Romanian exclusionary policies were able to.

Historiographical Themes

As the violence and chaos of WWI still raged in 1918, two states with radically different modernizing ideologies and conflicting territorial interests moved toward consolidating their positions in the region. Armed forces on both sides mobilized and encamped along the Dniester River, dividing Jews and other peoples who had previously lived in a fluid and undivided community. Each state began mobilizing its citizenry beyond the armed forces—seeking the establishment of reliable state subjects to maintain its hold on its geographical perimeters, especially contested peripheries such as Bessarabia. The process of state colonization of peripheral subjects, the creation of model subjects to serve each state’s needs, proved traumatic for local residents in terms of cultural, political and economic changes that accelerated rapidly under the political programs of the Soviet Union and interwar Romania. For the Dniester region, the interwar years were marked by the reach of the modernizing state into rural areas and toward the entire social spectrum, no longer limited to the educated and urban social elements as had largely been the case before WWI in these borderlands.²²

In Eastern Europe more broadly, the interwar era was marked by accelerated state intervention into the routine of daily life in the service of accepted values of the state elite. In

²² Here I refer to Eugen Weber’s *Peasants into Frenchmen: the modernization of rural France, 1870-1914*. (Stanford, 1976), in which he famously showed just how modern a phenomenon the creation of national identity was—in the French case, it largely took place during the two generations prior to WWI. Despite arguments that place the national movement in Romania back to Roman Dacia, the interwar period was the era of “Bessarabians into Romanians,” although it was more sloppy, heavy-handed, ineffective and controversial than in the French case, especially for the national minorities.

much of European society, this social engineering was directed toward the ‘higher’ civilization understood as national community striving for patriotic ecstasy increasingly defined in racially pure terms. Eugenics, the social engineering ambitions of the “gardening state” as the means to develop the desired type of human being for the fatherland, spread from Central Europe to the new states of Eastern Europe especially during these years.²³ The series of treaties signed after WWI in 1919 and 1920 re-drew the map of entire region, ending multi-national empires in order to create national communities based on ethnic self-determination in accordance with Wilsonian principles. As Mark Mazower puts it: “Such was the logic of European nationalism as it tried to rationalize the end of multi-confessional empire. People were re-defined, nationalities created.”²⁴ Kate Brown has shown in her work on the kresy region of Poland that an ethnically diverse borderland proved problematic for nationalizing state officials from all sides, who tried to alter it “by making it comprehensible as ethnically pure national space.”²⁵

Despite the tremendous importance of borders in interwar Europe, they have largely only been looked at from the center out. Only recently has the transnational identity of people living within state borders come to attract significant interest and indeed come to challenge, through a cross-border, regional historical analysis, the very notion of the state as the sole constructor of modern identity.²⁶ For Moldovan historians, the *international* setting has always been important

²³ Marius Turda, “The Nation as Object: Race, Blood, and Biopolitics in Interwar Romania,” *Slavic Review* 66, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 413. For the growth of racial order in Germany see Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge, 1991), 26-52; the important place of eugenics in the interwar European political system see Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 76-103. For the appeal of biopolitics and eugenics in Eastern Europe see Turda and Weindling, eds., *Blood and Homeland*.

²⁴ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 62.

²⁵ Kate Brown, *Biography of No Place*, 2.

²⁶ For examples of such works in Eastern Europe see Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place*; Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999* (New Haven, 2003); Omer Bartov, *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine* (Princeton, 2007); Larry Wolff, “Kennst du das Land? The Uncertainty of Galicia in the Age of Metternich and Fredro,” *Slavic Review*, vol. 67, no. 2, Summer 2008.

in examining the interwar years,²⁷ although their focus is diplomatic and political history. The examination of peripheral subjects and their identity in a non-state paradigm, that is to say a *transnational* perspective, is not an issue of interest. The history of the Dniester region has never been analyzed in an integrated perspective precisely because it has been treated as a peripheral region divided by different cores.²⁸ In the case of East European Jews, the national framework is clearly inadequate: Jews found themselves confined within the newly created nation states and were hard-pressed to accept the mono-ethnic designs of the national elites that came to govern them.²⁹ Again, the international setting has of course been central to histories of Zionism; likewise the impact of transnational concerns on antisemitism, for example Polish suspicions of pro-Soviet Jewish communism, has been a subject of scholarly investigation.³⁰ However, the impact of transnational relationship on Jewish history, or specifically the impact of the movement of people and ideas across national borders on circumstances of Jewish life is new as a field of inquiry.³¹

The growing weight faith in racial traits based on genetics as determinative of the social, cultural and political threatened the Bolshevik faith in inevitable historical process based on Marxism: in the 1930s, specialists were tasked with proving that social and economic conditions

²⁷ Romanian historians are hyper-sensitive to the pressure of Soviet revisionist aims toward Bessarabia during the interwar years. For a recent review of Soviet-Romanian relations during these years and their impact on Bessarabia see Octavian Țăcu, *Problema Basarabiei și relațiile sovieto-române*.

²⁸ For example Viorica Nicolenco, *Extrema Dreaptă în Basarabia, 1923-1940* (Chișinău, 1999); Nicolae Enciu, *Populația Rurală a Basarabiei în anii 1918-1940* (Chișinău, 2002); and Elena Negru, *Politica etnoculturală în R.A.S.S. Moldovenească, 1924-1940* (Chișinău, 2003) all examine political extremism on the left and the right on both sides of the Dniester and its impact on the Moldovan people, but they do not present the events as inter-related.

²⁹ For a broader perspective on this question, Ezra Mendelssohn's, *The Jews of East-Central Europe between the Two World Wars* is still an excellent overview.

³⁰ On Zionism see Michael Stanislawski, *Zionism and the Fin de Siècle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky* (Berkeley, 2001); and Jeduda Reinharz & Anita Shapira, eds. *Essential Papers on Zionism* (New York & London, 1996). On Polish suspicions of Jewish communism see Jan Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz, An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (New York, 2007).

³¹ An important recent example is Tony Michels' *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, 2005) examines the impact of American socialism on political circumstances of Jews in Eastern Europe, as well as vice versa.

determined human development rather than racial ones.³² In Russia also there existed a long tradition of the authoritarian state as modernizer (in a European understanding of the term modern) that stretched back at least to the reign of Peter the Great, what Richard Wortman has called “the civilizing role of force imposed from above.”³³ The Soviet Union, despite the radically new, revolutionary Bolshevik culture, remained true to the Tsarist ideals of modernization, in fact its leaders intended to greatly pick up the tempo, especially in the 1930s. Thus, both socialist internationalists and ethnic nationalists were modernists: they were utterly unsatisfied with the ambiguity of the present and fully ensconced in constructing a better and more orderly future, which would be ensured through state power and repression if necessary—what Zygmunt Bauman calls an obsessive march forward that is by definition intolerant of ambiguity and violent.³⁴

This intolerance of ambiguity was central to the Jewish experience in Europe during these years. While Romanian antisemitism has been well documented,³⁵ the impact of interwar political interests, when Jews became dangerous not only for religious and economic reasons but as seditious servants of foreign interests—especially in Bessarabia where “Jew” became synonymous with Bolshevik—has not been seriously studied. As Mariana Hausleitner has noted,

³² Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca and London, 2005), 16. Hirsch sees Soviet interest in race particularly in connection to competition with Nazi Germany; Soviet planners were interested in eugenics, but they did not accept racial conditions as the most important determining factor of cultural and social development. See chapter 6 in *Empire of Nations*, 231-272. Eric Weitz does not see racial politics in the Soviet Union as a significant matter until after Stalin’s purges, when entire nations could be considered dangerous, like the Jews at the end of Stalin’s life, and even interned en masse, like the Chechens. Eric D. Weitz, “Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges,” *Slavic Review*, 61, no. 1, Spring 2002, 1-29.

³³ Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, vol. 1 (Princeton, N.J., 1995).

³⁴ Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 8-17.

³⁵ See for example, Leon Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology and Antisemitism: The Case of the Romanian Intellectuals in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1991); Randolph Braham, *The Tragedy of Romanian Jewry*; Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944* (Chicago, 2000); Mihail Sebastian, *Journal 1935-1944: The Fascist Years* (Chicago, 2000); and Carol Iancu, *Evreii din România: de la Emancipare la Marginalizare, 1919-1938* (București, 2000).

for historians of Romania and Moldova, the Jewish minority has not been a subject of interest, while Western scholars interested in Jewish history in the region have been concerned primarily with the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903 and the Holocaust.³⁶ Indeed, in terms of Jewish history of Russia and Eastern Europe in general, study of Romanian Jewry, third in size only to Poland and the Soviet Union, remains conspicuously absent.³⁷ Romanian Jewish émigrés in Israel or Jewish scholars in Bucharest have focused overwhelmingly on the assimilated, Romanian-speaking communities of the Old Kingdom, lacking access to the multi-lingual communities of the Romanian periphery that came under Romanian rule in 1918.³⁸ Exceptions to this are works by Irina Livezeanu, Carol Iancu, and Mariana Hausleitner, who address more broadly questions of antisemitism in interwar Romania that go beyond traditional economic explanations. Yet, the focus of these works is the state's attitude toward the Jews; Jewish voices and local politics, especially in interwar Bessarabia, have essentially not been examined at all. Jewish responses to Romanian state policies, from the explosion of Zionist youth groups in Bessarabia to the rapid increase in membership and leadership roles attained by Jews in the Komsomol across the river in Transnistria, have not been dealt with. The best work done on this question for this region is by a local Jewish historian, Jacob Kopansky, whose work in Russian on Jewish communal

³⁶ Mariana Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien 1814-1991: Zur Minderheitenpolitik Russlands und Großrumäniens* (München, 2005); on the Kishinev pogrom see Edward H. Judge, *Easter in Kishinev: anatomy of a pogrom* (New York, 1992); on the Holocaust see Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*.

³⁷ Just how much absent was made apparent to me during a conference on international Jewish philanthropy on behalf of East European Jews held at NYU in April 2008.

³⁸ Examples of works, although not all accessible to American readers, include Bela Vago and George Mosse, *Jews and Non-Jews in Eastern Europe, 1918-1945* (New York, 1974); Leon Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology and Antisemitism*; and Raphael Vago, *Toldot ha-Yehudim be-Romanyah*, (Tel Aviv, 1996). See also the works of Jean Ancel and Lya Benjamin for examples of Romanian historians, though not all of their works have been translated into English.

philanthropic organizations, although funded by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, remains largely inaccessible to readers of English.³⁹

For Jews living on lands along both riverbanks of the Dniester River, the tearing of one community into two was the result of two states seeking to establish unambiguous control over their understood resources and populace. Not only was this separation itself violent, but for the Bessarabian Jews who struggled to maintain Jewish cultural autonomy under Romanian nationalist policies and the Transnistrian Jews who endured Soviet policy endeavors to integrate Jews into socialist visions, the interwar years were marked by the violent onslaught of modernizing and homogenizing state policies from both regimes: parallel ruptures of continuity. These ruptures challenged traditional understandings of the space between Jew and non-Jew; they undermined the power of long-standing Jewish communal leaders and institutions; and they thrust new actors and ideas into the public sphere and facilitated the spread of new national, secular, and gendered conceptions of Jewish identity.

Yet despite the more clearly visible ruptures, in important ways the struggle to maintain Jewish identity against the homogenizing forces of national consolidation, even when defined in accordance with radically different modernizing state visions, was marked by similarities and continuities, both geographically and temporally. Significant strands of social continuity, particularly in how Jews in both Bessarabia and Transnistria dealt with rapid and dislocating change by relying on or trying to reconstitute communal institutions, remained significant into the interwar years on both sides of the river. It is in this sense that the regional term “Dniester Jews” for Jewish communities in Bessarabia and Transnistria is useful: not as a distinct unit of concrete territorial or regional identity, and clearly nothing to rival national identity construction,

³⁹ Jacob Kopansky, *Blagotvoritelnye organizatsii evreev Bessarabii v mezhuvoennyi period, 1918-1940* (Kishinev, 2002).

but rather as something more ambiguous yet certainly a signifier of a local sentiment based on local traditions and social relations that were at least to some extent resistant to impositions of broader, state-sponsored identity from either the Soviet Union or Greater Romania. This resistance, which was indicative of the frayed edges around the project of the modernization employed by both states, was stronger here precisely because of the Dniester Region's location on the periphery of both states—a borderland between them.

Nevertheless, Jewish life in interwar Bessarabia and Transnistria was much more profoundly marked by the ruptures imposed by the two new states than by its continuities from existence in multi-ethnic empires from before WWI. These ruptures were radical, often violent changes in the social fabric resulting from the lethal combination of what James C. Scott has called high-modernist ideology, or the modern state's need to make its population legible in order to facilitate social engineering toward a particular goal, together with authoritarian government that disregarded the local and individual interests of its subjects.⁴⁰ This imposition of legibility⁴¹ entailed labeling and classifying residents as members or foreigners and as loyal or seditious, a process that was necessarily violent but common to all modern states and institutions—understanding order as task and battling with ambiguity.⁴² Through what Nicholas B. Dirks has called the “cultural technologies of rule,” whether censuses, centralized education systems, and/or literacy campaigns, state-sponsored programs clashed violently with the traditional organization and privileges of Jewish communal governments, the *kahals* or *kehilot*, even as many individual Jews, particularly in Soviet Transnistria, were attracted to the modern

⁴⁰ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, (New Haven, 1998), 4-7.

⁴¹ The attempt to make Jews legible in Russia was by no means new, but the terms had changed. For the project to normalize or make Jews legible in Russia see Eugene Avrutin, “The Politics of Jewish Legibility: Documentation Practices and Reform During the Reign of Nicholas I,” *Jewish Social Studies* 11, no. 2, (Winter 2005): 136–169

⁴² Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 4.

ideas they espoused. A central theme of this dissertation analyzes this structural change in Jewish organization and its impact on Jewish society and place in the broader national culture.

Because these changes took place in a contested borderland region that was politically sensitive for both regimes, the interwar years witnessed a redefinition of the relationship between Dniester Jews as subjects and the state ideologies that sought to manage and control them. This region had for generations been a classic borderland—a region that, like the Kresy between the Polish and Russian spheres of influence, had never in recent centuries been a seat of political power or independence but was rather a complex and interwoven cultural and linguistic fault line between Slavic and Romanian civilizations.⁴³ The Dniester borderland was turned into a cultural battlefield between state conceptions of the modern versus the backward in the interwar years. But exactly what was modern and what was backward?

In Soviet Transnistria on the left or east bank of the Dniester, civic belonging in Soviet society was made possible for Jews provided they internalized Soviet ideological principles by abandoning their “bourgeois nationalist” faith and adopt instead a communist, proletarian ethos—in Yiddish. Proletarianization was largely carried out here (as in much of the former Pale) by Jews themselves—communists sharing many of the modernizing ideals of Soviet communism as goals for their co-religionists. Methodologically, it included resettlement of unemployed Jewish artisans from the shtetls (primarily Jewish towns or villages) into agricultural colonies, either collective or individual, and a displacement of traditional Jewish religious education with pro-Soviet indoctrination in state-funded, Yiddish language schools. The new occupations intended for Jews would transform the backward old, weak, bookish, “feminine” and bourgeois Jew of the past into the modern new, strong, physical, masculine and proletarian Jew of the future. Transnistria required considerable state attention because like other border areas, it was

⁴³ Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place*.

designated as a launching platform for exporting communist propaganda to the lands and peoples beyond Soviet borders. In establishing order, the young Soviet bureaucracy relied on Jews as some of the most literate people in this area on the farthest European fringes of the Soviet empire. Thus, in terms of ethnicity, Soviet modern did not mean a reversal of the pre-revolutionary multi-ethnicity that was very much the hallmark of the region.

But while Russia and the Soviet Union have of course received much greater Western scholarly interest than Romania, including on matters of Jewish history, the examination of the imposition of modernity has been viewed primarily from the center rather than the periphery. The seminal text about the early Jewish communist movement in the Soviet Union by Zvi Gitelman deals mostly with the center of the Jewish Sections in Moscow;⁴⁴ much less work has been done on the boerderland areas of the socialist empire. The record of this borderland is imperative to integrate into the Soviet Jewish narrative because, as Charles King has shown in his work on Transnistria, there was a real discrepancy between Soviet ideology and its application on the ground in this tumultuous border region.⁴⁵ Even as a new communist regime eschewed anti-Semitism, much of the populace maintained their pre-revolutionary attitudes. Inter-ethnic relations were sometimes improved by the new state, but often strained by state policies that in attempting to implement a broad vision toward modernizing the nationalities often hindered specific national realities on the ground. The noted concern among state officials to the rising anti-Semitic violence in the countryside by the late 1920s, caused largely by the competition felt by Ukrainian farmers from the state-sponsored settlement of Jews on contested land, was one example of the unplanned consequences of Soviet modernizing policies.

⁴⁴ See Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics, 1917-1930: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1917-1930* (Princeton, 1972).

⁴⁵ Charles King, "Ethnicity and Institutional Reform: The Dynamics of 'Indigenization' in the Moldovan ASSR," in *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 1998: 57-72.

Although arguably Soviet patterns for Jewish modernization were similar across the USSR, the examination of local circumstances in this border region incorporates and builds on the existing scholarship. Recently, new work on Soviet-Jewish history has shown that there was more to Jewish participation in the socialist project than just modernization, and challenged the idea that Jews incorporated Soviet ideology wholesale, rather than appropriating some aspects of it to suit their own ends.⁴⁶ Again, most of these works focus on the centers of Soviet policy, while much less study has been conducted of the periphery. Likewise, the question of popular negotiation with state policies is a contemporary scholarly conversation, but only beginning for Soviet Jews.⁴⁷ In particular, creating the “Soviet Jew” through a Soviet-Jewish homeland has attracted scholarship, but the impact of agricultural re-settlement on Jews in the provinces has only recently gained serious scholarly attention.⁴⁸ In addition to examining the ideas and motives of local Jewish state and party activists who sought to create Soviet-Jewish culture, piecing together the popular calls from everyday Jews to describe Jewish reactions to Soviet policies is fruitful for understanding broader reactions to policies; part of a greater scholarly interest in the initial Jewish encounter with the Soviet project.⁴⁹ The evidence suggests that, despite Soviet ideology, many Jews maintained their faith and tried to re-create Jewish communal structures in this distant periphery.

⁴⁶ See David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918-1930* (Cambridge, 2005); and Jeffrey Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Jewish Theater* (Bloomington, 2000).

⁴⁷ Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Bloomington, 2006).

⁴⁸ On Birobidzhan, the Soviet Jewish homeland, see Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland* (Berkeley, 1998); for Jewish agricultural re-settlement within the former Pale of Settlement, see Jonathan L. Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet Power, 1924-1941*, (New Haven, 2005).

⁴⁹ Examples of this include Mikhail Beizer, *Evreii Leningrada 1917-1939: Natsional'naia zhizn' i sovietizatsia*, (Moscow & Jerusalem, 1999); and the three volume collection *Arkhiv Evreiskoi Istorii*, edited by Oleg Budnitskii, (Moscow, 2006). See also Lionel Kochan, *The Jews in Soviet Russia since 1917* (Oxford, 1978); and Nora Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917: Paradox of Survival* (New York, 1988).

In Bessarabia, the meaning of modern and backward was in many ways similar, but in ethnic legibility quite the reverse from across the Dniester. From the perspective of Romanian administrators, Bessarabia, on the right or west bank of the Dniester, was their most backward region—lowest in literacy, urban development, and national sentiment. Part of the Romanian historical nation as imagined by Romanian intellectuals, Bessarabia was Romanian but had been “made” multi-ethnic by one hundred years of deliberate Russian imperial policy. Now part of the Romanian state, Bessarabia required not only greater ethnic normalization for purposes of state security (meaning homogenization, or Romanianization) but a reversal of ethnic fortunes: the Romanians (Moldovan identity was not recognized by Bucharest) were to become dominant among the urban middle classes, rather than remaining relegated to the countryside as illiterate peasantry, a result of their historical abuse by foreigners. For Bucharest policy makers, invested in a Romanian ethno-nation and part of the European-wide faith in the unbreakable link between social engineering and racial purity, the multi-ethnic state of affairs they inherited from the Russian Empire was clearly backward and in need of overturning. Like other modern visions modeled on the West, Romanian subjects should also become strong and vibrant in the service of the fatherland, but this vision, unlike the Soviet, clearly excluded Jews.⁵⁰

For Dniester Jews, the state notion of backwardness was imposed; their own sense of identity was not so neatly rooted in ideas of progress as understood in the Western sense as technological, material and cultural but rather in the strength of communal autonomy and support networks, as well as faith. Nevertheless, this is a broad stroke—there was significant divergence of opinion between Zionists, socialists, devout Orthodox, secular Yiddishists, Bolsheviks supporters, etc. In Bessarabia, however, there was near complete agreement on opposition to the

⁵⁰ It should be noted that there was no clear agreement among Romanians on the direction of the nation and the place of Europe as role model—in some sense the debate mimicked the older and larger one in Russia between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers; see Keith Hitchins, *Rumania, 1866-1947*, 292-334.

state policies Romanian chauvinism. Multi-ethnicity had been the norm throughout the long nineteenth century, an important factor in understanding the resistance and resentment toward Romanianization after WWI, since Jews felt that Bessarabia was rightfully as much their homeland as the titular Moldovans’.

Using the ideas of modern national construction as a springboard, Larry Wolff has presented the history of certain contested parts of Europe, even of contested peoples, in a new light. The successful integration and establishment of distinct national units in the modern era out of a multitude of geographical and confessional identities in the medieval and early modern centuries was never an exercise in certainty, much to the contrary from all nationalist mythology that seeks to stretch national bonds to the distant, mythic past. The winners established their historical line as justification for their victory, always after the fact. Wolff presents the Morlacchi of 18th century Venetian Dalmatia as one possible nation that never made it, although their defeat was by no means clear during the Enlightenment.⁵¹ Likewise, eighteenth and early nineteenth century Galicia was a contested place: there was a significant effort to create Galicians as their own identity and no certainty until later in the 1800s that Galicia would become divided between Poles, Ukrainians, Slovaks and Jews.⁵²

In the same vein, Romanian military and political leaders in the interwar years imposed a definition of Bessarabia as Romanian national space on a local populace that had a different perception of the land and of their place in it. National identity was not already established among a Moldovan population that was less than 10% literate with minimal if any standardized education with which to imagine national community: this identity had to be constructed and that construction was violent and naturally resisted. Bessarabian Jews had plenty of reason to

⁵¹ Larry Wolff, *Venice and the Slavs: the discovery of Dalmatia in the Age of Enlightenment* (Stanford, 2001).

⁵² Larry Wolff, “Kennst du das Land? The Uncertainty of Galicia in the Age of Metternich and Fredro,” *Slavic Review*, vol. 67, no. 2, Summer 2008, 277-300.

consider themselves native to the land. They had a more developed cooperative economic system that by its example influenced the move toward greater Jewish economic autonomy across Romania in the interwar years. Bessarabian Jewish writers led the way in Yiddish literature for the entire country. Jews were more urban, more literate, more wealthy and were tremendously important to the local economy. Despite their inexperience with modern mass politics in a nominally democratic state structure, their classification as backward represented the view of the government in Bucharest—their own political activity was a rejection of this view and came into conflict with state agendas and agents, which made integration and civic belonging increasingly challenging for the Jews into the interwar years. In many ways, the healthy debates among Jews concerning their future as reflected on the pages of Bessarabian Yiddish and Russian newspapers was a more democratic debate than that taking place in Romanian society.

For Jews on the Soviet side of the Dniester circumstances were clearly different: ethnicity was something to be transcended on the road to communist construction, but it was a useful tool for incorporating a huge number of national minorities into a state that was scarcely able to force them to do it. Backwardness was reserved for religion and capitalism, or any combination of the two. Nationalism was tolerated if it could serve to promote communism; as long as it was not bourgeois nationalism, such as Zionism. Thus in contrast to Romania, Jews in the MASSR were not discriminated against by the state for being, but only for doing—practicing Judaism or capitalism.

For the Jewish elite on both sides of the Dniester, modern meant the Universalist cultural ideals of modern European civilization as interpreted and expressed by the Russian intelligentsia: civic equality and legal rights, democracy and political participation, and an end to hierarchies

based on birth. For everyday Jews from “the Jewish street,” to the extent that positive qualities were conceived in connection to being modern, it meant regional and religious autonomy, the latter particularly important as the means of protecting future generations of Jews from assimilation. For increasingly more Jews, it meant the right to leave and emigrate to Eretz Israel, to take part in what was understood as the Jewish people’s rightful claim to be a nation like other civilized peoples, and for even more Jews on both sides of the Dniester it meant understanding the Jewish past as one of victimization and desiring to construct a Jewish future of heroism and masculinity. Taken together, these ideals were a means of assuring Jewish cultural, linguistic and religious survival under new authority: Jewish intellectuals and leaders voiced their demands in the language of Enlightenment ideals while everyday people fought to maintain cultural and religious control over their lives. The Romanian and Soviet governments, on the other hand, were not necessarily invested in the ideals of individual freedom so much as collective achievement, and national political leaders sought to ensure the legibility of the society for the benefit of the state—“to arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion.”⁵³ In essence, this is a story of the confrontation between competing visions of modernity, or competing modernities: on the one hand the state’s use of efficient and advancing administrative power and control to create model subjects; on the other a minority population pursuing its own agenda to achieve and/or maintain religious and cultural autonomy as promised by contemporary political ideals.

Thus, there was no firm agreement on what it meant to be modern. Both states attacked what they labeled as backward as the first step toward constructing what they labeled as modern. Not only was this an appeal to better organization, greater technical specialization, notions of social progress and centralization of state power, but also a direct political program for state

⁵³ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 2.

security. Each state sought to inculcate into its citizens what its leaders saw as superior values while at the same time training them to resist the political aspirations of the opposing regime. Dniester Jews, as the most urban, economically dynamic, and often most highly educated population among mostly rural, provincial residents, were caught between two state projects. They found themselves either in demand as agents of socialist order (Soviet Union) or dangerous by definition as subversive foreigners (Romania).

Yet, despite the increasing administrative authority and drive to make its population legible within the needs of a modern state, what I call the Dniester region cannot be understood without appreciating its position as a contested border region infused with transnational political and cultural activism: its interwar past was dominated by the fact that it lay between two states with radically different visions of modernity. Perhaps the most lasting ideology of the modern perspective is the national framework itself, not only for political and social organization but historical interpretation as well. Much of the history of marginalized groups in general, and ethnic and religious minorities in particular, has been written from a national perspective. In the case of Dniester Jews, this has limited historical investigation to their role as either Soviet or Romanian Jews. As such, the history of Dniester Jews has been written, if at all, from national historiographic perspectives seeking to mold Dniester Jewry's historical narrative to the contemporary political interests of the state. Thus among historians of contemporary Moldova, who overwhelmingly seek to construct Moldovan history as inseparable to Romania, Jews are the other, the enemy, the treasonous, pro-Soviet communists—precisely because the only real interest is the national interest which Jews don't serve.⁵⁴ In the case of the current illegal, unrecognized, breakaway Transdneistrian Moldovan Republic, historians seek to construct a past

⁵⁴ Dmitry Tartakovsky, "Conflicting Holocaust narratives in Moldovan nationalist historical discourse," *East European Jewish Affairs*, Vol. 38, No. 2, August 2008, 211-229.

of multi-ethnicity as higher path.⁵⁵ In such a place Jews fit better, but again secular, Soviet Jews generally devoid of religious practice.

The most important goal of this work is therefore simply to write a history from outside the confines of the nation-state that necessarily maintains a dialogue with the state as mover of history. Political identity and interests of most Dniester Jews remained quite independent from the modernizing interests of either state, which is precisely why I have introduced referring to them by a non-national, geographic description, Dniester Jews, as opposed to Bessarabian or Transnistrian Jews. Not only were these categories resisted through political activities that sought to re-affirm a Jewish religious and increasingly a secular national identity through communal politics, economic connections, and youth activity, but they were subverted on some level by physical reality as well. Jews, like some (though fewer) Ukrainians and Moldovans, crossed the Dniester and tried to join society on the other side often during the interwar years, most especially during times of political crisis or famine. Economic circumstances were difficult in the best of times and catastrophic during the worst, and people fled repeatedly across the border when they believed life to be better “over there.” Appreciating such tense political and economic circumstances is vital for analyzing the ways in which Jews negotiated with Romanian and Soviet state building programs—it cannot be done without taking into account the reality of being able to physically leave, despite the dangers, even as both states did their best to control human mobility as much as possible. Furthermore, while physical mobility could be controlled to a considerable degree, it proved more difficult to control people’s thinking. Imagining greater freedoms or better prospects across the border had an impact on politics, most clearly in the underground communist movement in Romanian Bessarabia.

⁵⁵ Vladimir Solonari, “Creating a ‘People’: A Case Study in Post Soviet History-Writing,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, vol. 4, no. 2, Spring 2003, 411-438.

For Dniester Jews, modern national identity—meaning speaking the state language fluently, voting in elections, dressing in urban fashion but also working in factories or farming and having nationalist sentiment—clearly formed in relationship with the modern state, but by no means exclusively so. Much of what Jewish understanding of what being Jewish in the modern world meant, particularly in Bessarabia, was shaped by political forces from outside the state through interaction with Jewish culture across a broader geographical space. The formation of their modern, national identity was constructed in a transnational context—not only in terms of the supra-national, European-wide Zionist movement but even closer to home, across the culturally permeable Dniester border between interwar Romania and the Soviet Union. For better or worse, their setting close to the contentious and closely guarded yet transversable border shaped their interwar experience: it meant greater opportunity for involvement in Soviet revisionism toward Bessarabia just as it led to greater oppression in Romania for fear of their pro-Soviet, anti-Romanian activities.

Jewish political aspirations in this region thus shed considerable light on how states sought to create model subjects. By examining in comparative context the history of these separated Jewish communities of Romanian Bessarabia and Soviet Transnistria during the interwar years, we see how a confessional community confronted two ideologically distinct modernizing states and was changed by them in accordingly different ways. However, changes that resulted from the confrontation cannot be understood properly unless historical developments in the region are situated as the interplay of these two states—that is to say, the Dniester Region as a political and cultural fault line between Romanian and Soviet cores of influence in competition for control over the subjects of this borderland. Jewish voices within the community, which can be heard in debates over communal politics, efforts at continued

economic cooperatives and Zionism and communism, are imperative to understand their political perspectives, goals, and fears—the everyday lives of Dniester Jews themselves, many of whom felt that tsarist stagnation and oppression had given way to traumatic and violent change: a new oppression.

This dissertation was initially imagined as grounded in popular culture, but two things turned it in a more political direction. First, the wealth of archival and newspaper materials created such a powerful picture of state policy toward the Jews that I was moved to explore the relationship between national policies and Jewish politics. Secondly, the comparative perspective did not work in terms of popular culture because the wealth of voices from interviews and the press in Bessarabia truly put in perspective the paucity of such sources across the Dniester. The first chapter explores the state perspective from both sides of the Dniester and examines in depth some examples of the efforts made by each state to make their populations more “legible:” the secret police surveillance of the Yiddish Cultural League, an autonomist cultural group in Bessarabia, and Soviet attempts at controlling international Jewish philanthropy in Transnistria. Chapters 2 and 3 turn from the state to deal with Jewish political and social life in Bessarabia, including the effect of modern ideas on communal organization, the birth of the Jewish National Party and the debates within the Jewish community itself, particularly over philanthropy, education and reactions to increasing Jewish exclusion. The theme throughout is the effect on Jewish integration, culture and identity that their status as “disloyal foreigners” had.⁵⁶ Chapter 4 describes the crisis in Jewish life resulting from the spread of Soviet power into the region on the left bank and the founding of the MASSR as a launching platform for anti-Romanian propaganda into Bessarabia, as well efforts to destroy Jewish religious infrastructure

⁵⁶ Primary materials for this chapter are from the National Archives of the Republic of Moldova (Arhiva Națională Republicii Moldova, hereafter ANRM) in Chișinău and the Bessarabian press, especially the newspapers *Unzer Tsayt*, *Bessarabskaia Pochta* and *Bessarabskoe Slovo*, in the Romanian Academy of Sciences Library in Bucharest.

and Zionism and replace them with socialist spirit.⁵⁷ Significant attention is paid to Jewish agricultural re-settlement projects and Yiddish-language education politics. Chapter 5 attempts to understand Jewish political aspirations through a comparative inquiry into the idea of Jewish transformation at the core of both Bessarabian and Transnistrian Jewish youth culture—Zionism on right bank and the Young Communist League as part of Bolshevism on the left. In addition, the chapter explores the Yiddish Cultural League as an example of autonomism and argues that this same sentiment in Jews in the MASSR was expressed through attempts at communal cohesion.

The research ends before the Soviet occupation of Bessarabia, which sets the stage for several years of war and Holocaust when the two communities, separated by national politics during the interwar years, were reunited in extermination. Romanian troops, after being forced out of Bessarabia in 1940, returned in 1941 under the auspices of a Romania-Nazi alliance and penetrated deep into Soviet territory, to the Bug River. They implemented a campaign of genocide that was second only to Nazi Germany's in brutality, in which some 250,000 Jews, and by some estimates more, were murdered. Yet by focusing on the Holocaust, as historians of Romania and more recently Soviet Jewry have done, we forget that the interwar years were an era of incredible Jewish cultural and political mobilization and activism. The interwar history of Dniester Jewry serves to remind us that Jewish life in interwar Europe lay not in the shadow of the Holocaust as it does for us today, but at the borderland of new, modern states and conflicting ideologies, as well as at the confluence of temporal and cultural continuity and rupture.

⁵⁷ These materials are from the Archive of Socio-Political Organizations (Arhiva Organizațiilor Socio-Politice a Republicii Moldova, former Moldovan Communist Party archive—hereafter AOSPRM); and Moldovan Soviet journals held at the Moldovan Academy of Sciences Library, both in Chișinău.

Chapter 1

A Borderland Transformed



Map 2. Greater Romania, Soviet Moldova, and after, 1918 to the Present

For millions of Jews in Eastern Europe, modern Jewish national identity took shape in the interwar years within an international context influenced by Zionist mobilization and the desire for cultural autonomy across the region, in sharp contradistinction to the nationalizing policies of the young states across much of Eastern Europe where Jews lived. The newly drawn national borders separated Jewish communities and placed Jewish intellectuals in positions where they often did not know the national language of their new state of residence. In addition to the extreme decimation of the Jewish economy across the region as a result of the Great War, many Jewish professionals (such as teachers, engineers, lawyers, and bookkeepers) could not subsist as they had done before the war, and became unable to support their families. Many businesses from before the war could not re-adjust to the radical re-alignment of political borders after its

end, often suffering not only from loss of broader markets but also from the impoverishment of the remaining Jewish market. Because many Jews in Eastern Europe understood Jewish life and politics as traversing the constricting national borders drawn at Versailles, national leaders suspected them of disloyalty to the newly created states in which they resided.

In the newly created Greater Romania, Romanian intellectuals and politicians suspected Bessarabian Jews of sympathizing with Soviet interests. This was also the state of affairs in Transylvania and in the Slovak area of Czechoslovakia, where Romanian and Slovak local administrators assumed that Jews identified with Hungary, their former host culture. Because of this tension between the national and transnational as it pertained to Jews in the outlook of Romanian policy makers, it is reasonable to ask to what extent was Jewish public debate in Bessarabia, as well as a modern Jewish national identity, shaped by Romanian state policies. Even more important to this project—how important was the position of Bessarabia as a tense borderland lying at the conflict zone between Romanian and Russian spheres of cultural influence?

In Bessarabia in particular, the reality of Romanian identity among the population, an identity that the state sought to foster, was, if not the most ambiguous and contested among the newly acquired territories of the country, then certainly the most underdeveloped. Creating a Romanian national identity in a multi-ethnic borderland that historically lay at the confluence of competing zones of influence from different civilizations would require reversing the ambiguity that Bessarabians felt about national identity. The process of labeling and classifying members and foreigners, loyal and seditious, began in earnest, a process that Zygmunt Bauman has noted is common to all modern states and institutions—understanding order as task and battling with

ambiguity.¹ This process, he further maintains, is always violent. The unwillingness of some Jewish leaders to see a mono-ethnic future in Bessarabia put them in conflict with Bucharest politicians and more directly with the regular, secret and military police that served as their representatives in this distant borderland.

Seen from the perspective of Bessarabian Jews, the interwar years were characterized primarily by the intermittent, unsteady yet inexorable expansion of an alien and hostile institution into their daily lives and cultural institutions. For Romanian policy makers, of course, the process of national consolidation was a legitimate historical mission, a national right; one which they must fight for against foreign influences and were destined to win, having suffered long enough through past centuries. A central component of the conflict was that for Romanian administrators, Jews were occupying Romanian space specifically, while for Bessarabian Jews little of their outlook and identity was tied specifically to Romania—in fact their perspective cannot be understood if looked at only through a specific national paradigm.

Establishing Control of the (Romanian) Borderland

For both the Soviet Union and Greater Romania, integrating foreigners into its social fabric was less important than the uncontested control of its territory. For Romanian politicians, the wartime realities brought into focus the contrasting historical legacies between the Romanian center and peripheries, further solidifying their deep anxiety toward the complex ethnic reality in the northern borderlands that contradicted sharply with their perception of a unified Romanian national future, informed by their relatively mono-ethnic, pre-Versailles national past.

Annexation of Bessarabia was the result of wartime political upheavals stemming from the Russian Revolution and the successful Romanian diplomatic maneuvering during the last year of

¹ Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 4.

the Great War. This was the political reality despite Romanian national historiographic arguments that union with Romania was achieved after centuries of struggle against foreign occupation and the will of the Bessarabian people.² Members of the Moldovan *Sfatul Țării* (General Assembly), first convened in June 1917, had sought Moldovan autonomy within a Federated Russia, but Bolshevik military incursions, Ukrainian nationalist claims on Bessarabia, and the reality of Romanian military occupation together decided the region's political future within Greater Romania, culminating in its "decision" in March 1918 to join with their "motherland" "in accordance with historic and ethnic rights."³

² For examples of this perspective see Andrei Popovici, *The Political Status of Bessarabia* (Washington, D.C., 1931); and P. Cazacu, *The Truth about the Question of Bessarabia* (Bucharest, 1926); and to a lesser extent (but still inherently anti-Russian), Charles Upson Clark, *Bessarabia: Russia and Roumania on the Black Sea* (New York, 1927). For the Soviet propagandistic perspective, see Artem Markovich Lazarev, *Moldavskaia sovetskaia gosudarstvennost' i bessarabskii vopros* (Kishinev, 1974); and Jacob Mikhailovitch Kopansky, *Internatsional'naia solidarnost' s borboi trudiashchikhsia Bessarabii za vossoedinenie s sovetskoi rodinoi, 1918-1940* (Kishinev, 1975). For a detailed and more objective perspective, see Rebecca Haynes, "Historical Introduction," in *Occasional Papers in Romanian Studies No. 3: Moldova, Bessarabia, Transnistria* (London, 2003).

³ Andrei Brezianu, *Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Moldova: European Historical Dictionaries, No. 37* (Lanham, 2000), xxx-xxxiii. For a review of this highly contentious historiographic debate, see Rebecca Haynes, "Historical Background," 95-103; Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford, 2000); Mariana Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien 1814-1941: Zur Minderheitenpolitik Russlands und Großrumäniens* (Munich, 2005), 69. Hausleitner argues that the Romanian government, worried about the potential spread of communist propaganda into Romania, had decided to invade Bessarabia on December 30, 1917, even before the traditionally accepted date of invasion in January 1918.



Figure 1. Official photograph of members of the *Sfatul Țării*. The caption below reads: “This photograph shows fighters in the cause of the Romanian nation, former deputies of the *Sfatul Țării* who voted for unconditional Union of Bessarabia with its Motherland and for agrarian reforms in Bessarabia—November 27, 1918.” Not all members of the *Sfatul Țării* voted for union, but one doesn’t get that sense here. ANRM photo collection.

With the establishment of a de facto, militarily controlled border between Romania and the Soviet Union along the Dniester River, Jews in Bessarabia became isolated from their former cultural centers, most notably Odessa and Kiev, and were forced to confront the idea of life under Romanian rule. The political and cultural status of Bessarabian Jews as an urban minority with significant economic power in a contested borderland could not but shape the terms of their confrontation with Romanian military control. The idea that Bessarabia had always been Romanian land that was illegally seized by Russian Tsars and now needed to be not only reclaimed but purified of foreign interests would comprise the core of Romanian state understanding of not only the Jewish Question but of minority problems more broadly in

interwar Bessarabia.⁴ Faced with Soviet anti-Romanian propaganda, repeated attempted incursions into the territory,⁵ and open rebellion in Hotin in 1919 and Tatar Bunar in 1924, Romanian administrators in Bessarabia believed that local minorities were responsible for undermining Romanian national interests and that greater military force and repression were needed to silence them. A considerable amount of this concern was focused squarely on Jews in particular. Building on well-established precedents dating back to the mid-19th century, many interwar Romanian intellectuals and politicians saw national identity along ethnic lines: Romania was the motherland of all Romanians, including those who lived in Bessarabia.⁶ Those borderland residents who did not welcome Romanian rule as liberation and “union” or did not share Romanian national pride were considered foreigners.

In fact, there was significant resistance to the arrival of Romanian occupation, especially since the campaign to reverse the multi-ethnic identity of the locals began almost immediately. In Bălți, for example, military administrators executed leaders of a peasant conference who demanded the removal of the Romanian Army almost immediately after their takeover of the region, in mid January 1918.⁷ Minority leaders who expressed opposition to Romanian rule, such as the Social Democrat Nadia Greenfeld or the newspaper editor N. Kovsan, were also

⁴ For example, in a compilation of historical essays from several Moldovan historians, edited by Ion Scurtu and published in 2001, Chapter 7, titled “The Integration of Bessarabia into the Romanian National-Unitary State: The March 1923 Constitution,” begins: “The realization of the Great Unification—the many centuries old Romanian dream—presented many unique problems before the government of that time...” Ion Scurtu, ed., Nicolae Encu, trans., *Istoriia Bessarabii ot istokov do 1998 goda*, (Chișinău, 2001), 129.

⁵ Future Romanian Prime Minister Gheorghe Tătărescu reported in 1925 that between 1921 and 1925, there were 118 attempts at military incursions into Bessarabia from across the river and several thousand smaller incidents of spying on behalf of Soviet authorities; *Bessarabie et Moscou. Discours prononcé a la chambre des deputes de Bucarest le 9 dé1925* (Bucharest, 1925), 5-35, op. cit. Haynes, “Historical Introduction,” 104.

⁶ It is important to note that few Romanian speakers in Bessarabia (Moldovans) necessarily identified themselves as Romanian in 1918—the construction of this identity, and thereby their difference from other national groups in Bessarabia, was the goal of Romanianization policies. The idea that ethnic Moldovans did not approve of Romanian rule was generally either rejected or seen as a product of Russification that required reversal through Romanianization in education and national-cultural programs.

⁷ Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 70. Such stories have been silenced to a great extent in Romanian and Moldovan national historiographies.

summarily executed. In the successive meetings of the *Sfatul Țării*, some delegates were frightened by personal violence from speaking out against Romanian rule. The expression of displeasure with the idea of being a part of Romania, something that had been previously tolerated as legitimate opinion, began to be seen as dangerous or anti-national. Jewish lawyer and *Sfatul Țării* member Eugene Konigschatz, together with another “Jew” named Grossman, were blamed by the Siguranța for spreading rumors that Bessarabia would be taken over by Ukrainian forces, highly unlikely given the general Jewish sentiment about Ukrainian independence. Allegedly, Konigschatz stated publicly that only in a Bessarabia free from Romania could Jews hope to achieve equal rights, and that the Romanians “have cut us off from our mother country.”⁸ Some Moldovan politicians who grasped the essence of Romanian military policy began to describe non-Romanian speakers as “guests,” whereas previously they had been residents of equal status.⁹ Romanian efforts to establish legitimacy and control of Bessarabia, especially in the face of Soviet claims to the province, clearly would require silencing competing claims of national identity.

As the Romanian government set out in the 1920s to conduct an official census across the entire country, its methodology comprised a politically motivated effort not only to make this Bessarabian population more legible, but also to show the validity of Romanian claims to the province based on the majority Romanian ethnic composition of the population. According to the last Russian Imperial census in 1897, after decades of population movements facilitated by the interests of the Russian state to control its Balkan borderland, Bessarabia had become ethnically mixed and Moldovans were no longer the majority: 47.6% Moldovans; 19.6%

⁸ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 6, l. 180.

⁹ Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 72.

Ukrainians; 11.8% Jews; 8% Russians; 5.3% Bulgarians; 3.1% Germans; and 2.9% Gagauz.¹⁰

Romanian historians focus much on this creation of multi-ethnicity as something that destroyed part of Romania by purposefully introducing foreign bodies.¹¹ Indeed, the last years of the Russian Empire were marked by tremendous population growth in Bessarabia: from 1,935,000 in 1897 to 2,686,000 in 1915. This continued the 19th century pattern of Russian efforts to settle an imperial borderland region: Bessarabia's population increased roughly twice faster than the Imperial population did as a whole.¹²

Almost immediately after annexing the province in 1918, Romanian administrators, many of whom had internalized the late 19th century nationalizing narrative of the ethnic and national unity of Bessarabians and Romanians, came up against the fact that Russification of the elite in Bessarabian society was strong: most privileged, urban Russians, as well as Jews, Germans, Ukrainians and even Romanian-speaking Bessarabians (Moldovans), were devout followers of Russian high culture. To these people, who were absolutely vital for the local economy, Romania was "uncivilized." Romanian military administrators realized quickly that much work would need to be done to reverse the level of Russification in the state bureaucracy and middle classes.¹³ It became also clear to Romanian leaders that the pan-Romanian nationalism necessary for Bucharest's Romanianization of the newly acquired territory would have to be

¹⁰ *Pervaia vseobshchaia perepis' naselen'ia Rossiiskoi Imperii, 1897 g.* N.A. Troitsky, ed. (St. Petersburg, 1897-1905), as cited in Lev Semenovich Berg, *Bessarabiia: Strana-Liudi-Khoziaistvo* (Petrograd, 1918), 75.

¹¹ For example, Berg's ethnographic work was re-published in Chişinău in 1993, with an introduction by Anton Krikhan, who directly referred to Berg as a "Russian" and an "enemy," because of his hardly veiled position as Russian Imperial colonialist.

¹² Michael F. Hamm, "Kishinev: The Character and Development of a Tsarist Frontier Town," *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1998, 19-37; "Kishinev," 19. The Gagauz were a Turkic people that had converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

¹³ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 8, l. 56; a letter from the Siguranța to a local police prefect complaining that most of the civil servants in both the courts of justice and in central finance of the municipal administration are "Russians that provoke pro-Russian ideas and act like they have no idea" [that power has changed hands]. Correspondence between highest administrative agencies continued in Russian out of necessity for some months despite the efforts of Romanian military administrators; f. 679, op. 1, d. 8, l. 75.

“wholly imported to Bessarabia by Transylvanians, Bukovinians, and propagandists from the Old Kingdom.”¹⁴

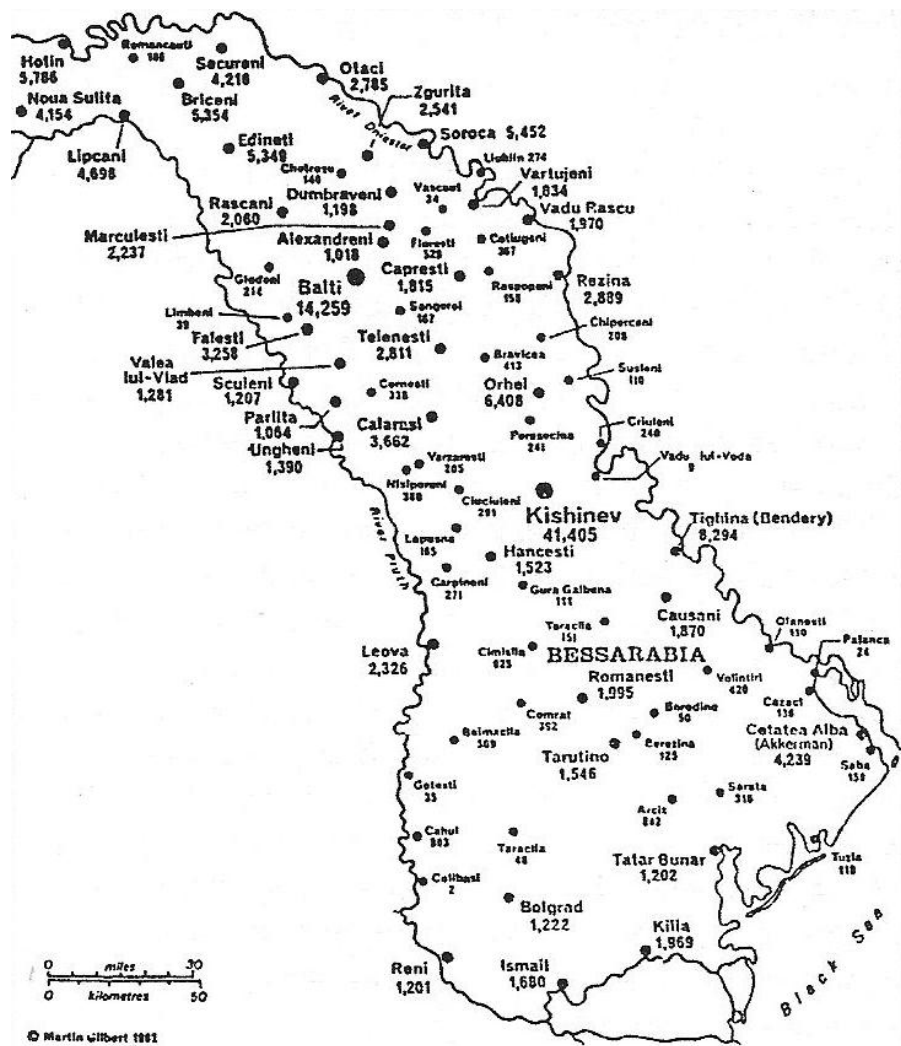
In Bessarabia, as in other peripheral parts of the previously expanding Russian Empire, Russian had been the language of state administration and of elite society. Identification with Russian high culture was notable among the urban classes who in Bessarabia were typically not Moldovans but Russians, Germans, and to a much lesser extent Poles, Armenians, Czechs, and Greeks—but especially Jews. Jews represented 37.18% of the urban population in 1897,¹⁵ but their urban concentration was most pronounced in the largest towns: 60,000 in Chișinău (Kishinev), or over half the town’s residents; and over 60% of the population of Bălți,¹⁶ Soroca, and Orhei. Because Russian was the language of inter-ethnic communication, Jews contributed significantly toward making Bessarabian urban centers islands of Russian surrounded by the Romanian spoken in the countryside. Moldovans that moved into the urban centers assimilated into this Russian milieu. In many smaller towns particularly in the Bessarabian north, where it was not unusual for Jews to be 90-95% of the town populace, there was not this same effect because Yiddish was heard exclusively on the streets.¹⁷

¹⁴ Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930* (Ithaca, 1995), 96-97.

¹⁵ Michael Bruchis, “The Jews in the Revolutionary Underground of Bessarabia and their Fate after Its Annexation by the Soviet Union,” in *Nations—Nationalities—People: A Study of the Nationalities Policy of the Communist Party in Soviet Moldavia* (Boulder, 1984), 141.

¹⁶ Pronounced *Belts*. This was the second city of the province after the capital, and would become the heart of Bessarabian Zionism by virtue of the much greater Jewish concentration in the north.

¹⁷ *Recensământul general al populației României din Decembrie 1930. Vol II: Neam, limba maternă, religie* (General Population Census of Romania from December 1930, vol. 2, Nationality, Mother Tongue, Religion), Manuila Sabin, ed. (Bucharest, 1938), XXVI-LVI, concerning declared nationality.



Map 3. Map of the Jewish population of interwar Romanian Bessarabia according to official totals from the 1930 Romanian national census. The concentrations of Jews in the largest urban areas are characteristic; significantly more Jews lived in the Bessarabian north and east than south and west.

Jews were the most highly urbanized ethnic group because the Russian administration relied on them to develop the region's commerce and industry throughout the 19th century. Jews had begun to move into the territory in greater numbers beginning in the 1820s, as local autonomy confirmed by the 1818 Russian administrative statute granted greater freedom in economic life. By 1897, most of the non-agricultural economic sector was controlled by Jews.¹⁸ Unlike Jews, Moldovans generally lived in the countryside, although the rapidly growing

¹⁸ Haynes, "Historical Introduction," 82.

economy was providing impetus for many Moldovans to move into the urban areas, in some cases seasonally, as was common throughout much of the empire during these years. For Romanian administrators, the reality of urban settings across the northern periphery of the country being culturally and economically dominated by “non-Romanians” was untenable. They pursued policies that sought to reverse generations of Russian ethnic policies in order to raise the status of the Romanian-speaking peasantry (whom Bucharest politicians viewed as “disadvantaged” after centuries of deprivation)¹⁹ and ensure their loyalty to the Romanian crown. Their task was a difficult one, and not only in the urban centers: nineteenth century Russian policies of forbidding Romanian-language instruction in the schools or prayer in the churches had fostered significant attachment to Russian Orthodox Christianity among the Moldovan peasantry even outside the towns. As late as the 1930s, Romanian police reported how frustrating it was to find Moldovan peasant families in villages with pictures of Nicholas II and Alexandra still hanging on their living rooms walls.²⁰ Nor was the difficulty of the task limited to the cultural sphere or the problem of imposing order one of language preference and multi-ethnic identity—basic economic realities worked against a century of inertia. The entire railroad system was constructed over the 19th century to link the province directly with Odessa. The railroad lines themselves were the wider Russian variety and practically no new lines linking the region with the rest of Romania were built until 1923.²¹ For the first five years of Romanian rule, train transit in Bessarabia was made useless by new national borders.

No modern state can achieve control over its residents unless it can first control knowledge of who they are, which is why Romanian administrators began in earnest with plans

¹⁹ Haynes, “Historical Introduction,” 103.

²⁰ Haynes, “Historical Background,” 107.

²¹ Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars: A History of East Central Europe, Vol. 9* (Seattle & London, 1974), 319.

to count and categorize Bessarabians in accordance with nationally understood categories.²² In 1923, the Romanian state conducted preliminary census research on which it based the 1924 Mărzescu Law on obtaining and losing citizenship. It conducted a preliminary census in 1927 but never published the results. Rumors spread that the decision not to publish these findings was because the result showed insufficient numerical predominance of the titular nationality.²³ According to the 1930 national census, the only official one compiled in Greater Romania, the ethnic distribution in Bessarabia differed significantly from the last Imperial Russian census, showing a significant growth in the Moldovan population in particular.²⁴ Jews were 7.2% of the population, a significant drop from their nearly 12% from the last Russian census—and the statistical change was most prevalent for the urban areas. Jews were 26.6% of urban residents (down from 37% in 1897) while comprising only 4.3% of the total rural population (down from 7% in 1897), even though more than half of Bessarabian Jewry—107,566 out of a total of 206,958—was classified as rural.²⁵

These numbers are especially problematic when compared to the preliminary calculations made in 1923 in preparation for the publication of the Mărzescu Law. According to these numbers, 238,000 Jews lived in Bessarabia, with some 129,000 urban and 109,000 rural.²⁶

²² Recent scholarship has pointed to the importance of the national census for the modern state as primary means to calculate its population in order to make the greatest use of it. See for example James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*; Kate Brown, *A Biography of no Place*, particularly “Counting National Bodies,” 36-47; Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*; Larry Wolf, “Kennst du das Land?”

²³ For example, a group in Paris that called itself “The Union of Bessarabian Émigrés in France” propagandized against the Romanian government as falsifying statistics for political reasons. This was also the position of Soviet organs concerned with the Bessarabian question, such as *Krasnaia Bessarabia* (Red Bessarabia) published in Moscow, which called the census so scandalous that it had to be redone; #3 (45), March 1931.

²⁴ *Recensământul general al populației României din Decembrie 1930*, XXVI-LVI.

²⁵ Berg, Bessarabia, 118; *Recensământul general al populației României*, LXXXIV-CVIII—Table for declared religion for Bessarabia. There was an inconsistency with the rural classification; it was in fact too high for Jews in Bessarabia. For example, in Bălți județ (county), the census considered every Jew (and every person for that matter) living outside Bălți town as living in rural areas, but this was not strictly so since there were fairly large towns where most Jews worked in non-rural professions. Some towns in Bălți and Hotin județ were in fact bigger than Calarasi, such as Edineț, but were classified as rural while Calarași was classified as urban—thus, inconsistency existed.

²⁶ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 51.

Clearly, there was a notable drop in the Jewish urban population in only a few years of peacetime, where Jewish economic predominance was most prevalent (and most problematic for establishing urban areas as centers for pursuing policies of Romanianization). In the 1920s the Soviet Union consistently challenged Romania's claim to Bessarabia, and statisticians desired to numerically solidify the legitimacy of Romanian claims.²⁷ Many educated members of the minorities regarded the census as a numbers game to establish Romanian administrative legitimacy and underscore the necessity of pro-Romanian ethnic policies. For example, a joke that circulated among Chişinău Jews in 1931, carried in the Russian-language press soon after the results of the national census became known, questioned the census's legitimacy:

A census taker comes to the door and knocks. A servant answers the door and is asked what language the owner of the home speaks. She replies "he speaks to his wife in Yiddish, to his children in Russian, and to his servants in Moldovan." The census worker writes down "Romanian." Question 2: "How old is the owner?" Reply: "I don't know!" The census worker writes down: "35." "His education?" "I don't know, but every Sunday he buys a newspaper." Writes down: middle education. When the census bureau at the League of Nations got the results, they saw that most Romanians were 35 years old, had a middle education and spoke Romanian well. In such a way, it is possible to hide the fact that in Romania, there are 8 million Romanians and 10 million minorities.²⁸

There was an undeniable desire on the part of the new authorities to show the numerical predominance of those whom they considered ethnic Romanians, thereby ensuring legitimacy of the annexation of the new territories as "re-uniting with the historical motherland."²⁹

Recognition of Romanian rule in Bessarabia at the League of Nations was lukewarm at best, and the Soviet Union, often by using Bessarabian voices, consistently refuted Romanian historic claims to the land. For example, Bessarabian- Russian aristocrat Aleksandr Nikolaevich Krupensky spoke at the Paris Peace Conference and argued that Russia cannot be seen as having

²⁷ Kopansky, *Blagotvoritelnye organizatsii evreiev Bessarabii*, 20.

²⁸ *Bessarabskoe Slovo*, #3323, April 8, 1934, Special Easter Edition, humor section.

²⁹ This has been the traditional argument of Romanian historians, the modern national myth of Greater Romania. For review of this perspective, see Haynes, "Historical Introduction," 95-103.

taken Bessarabia from Romania because Romania was not a country in 1812.³⁰ The Soviet authorities called for a plebiscite of the local population at every opportunity, which the Brătianu-led Liberal government consistently refused to allow and thereby added tension to the political life of an already tense region.³¹

Many members of minority groups looked upon the Romanian Army, especially because of its policy of harsh suppression of resistance, as trampling upon the promise of equality that the Russian Revolution represented for them. After February 1917, the Provisional Government granted Jews full civic rights across the Russian Empire while in Romania they remained second-class residents, without equal access to education and public life.³² When word of the results of the Paris talks later spread to minorities in the newly-acquired territories, many Jews in Bessarabia looked upon Romanian rule with ambivalence: initial negativity mitigated by the promise of equality. This was much more positive than the outright hostility with which many Hungarians, Germans and Jews in Transylvania and Bukovina greeted Romanian rule. In the chaotic months after the Bolshevik coup, however, there was much fear that Bessarabian Jews would miss out on the freedoms granted their co-religionists across the Dniester. On July 23, 1918, at a meeting of Bundists, Social Democrats, Zionists, and many Jewish activists belonging to local unaffiliated workers' parties that took place in the Chişinău mayoralty, local Zionist

³⁰ Haynes, "Historical Introduction," 103; Hausleitner *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 85. The Romanian officials were closely monitoring Krupensky even before his speech in Paris: the Chişinău Tribunal informed the Siguranţa on November 20, 1918 that he was spreading propaganda from Odessa claiming that Russia would re-annex Bessarabia. Those that assisted him, according to the report, were all "jidani," the anti-Semitic Romanian term for Jews (equal to zhidy in Russian—kikes), ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 7, l. 7.

³¹ Hausleitner *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 84.

³² The history of the Jews in Romania before 1919 is similar to Russia in so far as civil rights were denied, but unlike in Russia where they were denied essentially everybody in Romania they were denied the Jews specifically. Romanian leaders did not imagine Romania a place where Jews should have equal rights with native Romanians, particularly because they were viewed as a threat. See Carol Iancu, *Jews in Romania 1866-1919*.

leader Yakov Bernstein-Kogan³³ spoke to the crowd in a manner that drew a clear and direct connection to Jewish politics across pre-revolutionary Russia, as well as giving grounds for concern for Romanian police: “Workers have created a revolution in Russia, and it will find its way into Bessarabia also, after which we will create Jewish rule that will protect the independence of Jews in Bessarabia and will continue to fight for the idea of revolution.”³⁴ Others from the Jewish crowd spoke about the need to create a unified group of Jewish revolutionaries that would fight for socialism.

Given such publicly voiced opinion, which police monitored carefully, almost immediately after the arrival of Romanian military rule in Bessarabia, police officials in this borderland began to be concerned with Jewish politics, focusing on those political expressions that were potentially contrary to Romanian state interests of establishing full control of Bessarabia. International circumstances contributed much to the fear among Bucharest leaders. None of the parties involved—neither the Soviet nor Romanian governments nor the local residents of the land contested by them—felt that the borders drawn at Versailles were secure. In the spring of 1919, a serious fear about the communist threat spread across Romania after a successful takeover of the government in Budapest through a revolt led by Jewish communist Bela Kun. Anti-Semitic advertisements warning residents of the “Red Beast,” which equated Jews with communism, could be seen across the country and were in many cases spread by the police.³⁵ In the first several years of Romanian rule, military governors and police agents in Bessarabia would paint a portrait of Jewish politics in a manner that clearly represented Jewish

³³ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 4798, ll. 9-10: Dr. Jacob Kogan-Bernstein was a highly suspect man for the Siguranța in Bessarabia. A respected medical doctor and organizer of the committee for the relief of Jewish refugees from Ukraine, the first organization in Bessarabia supported by Joint, he would become a leader of Bessarabian Zionism. Born in Odessa in 1859, he moved to Chișinău in 1887 after his father’s death. He held Romanian citizenship, which helped protect him in some cases. Still, he was arrested and interrogated from time to time.

³⁴ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 6, l. 21.

³⁵ Iancu, *Evreii Din România*, 143.

political expression as anti-Romanian activities, doing much to convince leaders in Bucharest of Jewish “disloyalty.”

In the minds of policemen and administrators, calls for Jewish autonomy represented a clear conflict for Romanian national ideals. For example, letters from 1918 from local officers of the Siguranța, the Romanian secret police charged with preserving national integrity in the new territories, accused Jewish members of the *Sfatul Țării* of being most resistant to union with Romania, thereby partaking in an act “against the will of the people.”³⁶ Likewise, Jewish merchants were accused of desiring either independence or conspiring to unite with the “new Russia.”³⁷ As the Romanian government’s relationship toward the Soviet Union grew increasingly difficult, military administrators representing Bucharest clamped down on cross-border relations, displaying intolerance toward cross-Dniester traffic.³⁸ There was among the local people memory of significantly freer movement prior to 1918: Count Sergei Urussov wrote in his biography that farmers moved relatively freely not only across the Dniester but even across the Prut, the then border between Romania and Russia.³⁹ With the breakup of empires, the governing elites of the new modern nation states across Eastern Europe zealously guarded the political borders that bounded and insured their realms of influence.⁴⁰

The question of Romanian border control took on more urgency in the immediate post-war years because of the ongoing violence against Jews in much of the Pale of Settlement,

³⁶ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 6, l. 131—a September 1918 Siguranța letter to a police prefect noting that among the anti-Romanian leaders in the Sfatul Țării are Königschatz, Gherman, Grossman, and Stanievici.

³⁷ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 6, l. 183; f. 679, op. 1, d. 46, l. 48: some agents in the Romanian Siguranța particularly feared that Jewish deserters from the Romanian Army (whom they felt were many) were particularly susceptible to propaganda for socialist revolution because they wanted to escape punishment for desertion. They investigated Jewish merchants in Bessarabia as particularly dangerous spreaders of propaganda.

³⁸ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 6, l. 103—a case where a Jewish merchant from Benderi was accused of conducting contraband trade across the Dniester in meat and sugar.

³⁹ Count Sergei D. Urussov, *Zapiski Gubernatora*, 51.

⁴⁰ See for example, Ezra Mendelsohn, *Jews of East-Central Europe*; George L. Mosse, *Confronting the Nation: Jewish and Western Nationalism* (Hanover, NH, 1993); and *Jews and Non-Jews in Eastern Europe*, Bela Vago and George Mosse, eds. (New York, 1974).

including across the border in Transnistria. Jewish refugees began to flow across the border into Bessarabia to escape the violence; many individuals, unable to find means to sustain themselves, later tried to return across the border. Some tried to return to aid family still there. Given the antagonistic atmosphere between the two states and the complete lack of diplomatic relations between them during these years, the formerly readily transverseable Dniester River became a closely watched and guarded border; something of a no-man's land in urban rumor once stories began to spread that military police on both sides often shot civilians trying to cross over the frozen ice in winter. Romanian military administrators were deeply concerned about the uncontrolled movement of thousands of people across the newly established national border, and took immediate and often harsh steps to curb and control it.

They were nevertheless overwhelmed with refugees in Bessarabia, making thousands of arrests in the early 1920s. Romanian statistics placed the number of total refugees at 168,000 between January 1918 and April 1922. Such numbers overwhelmed local communities in Bessarabia: in several cases refugees represented over 60% of the town's population.⁴¹ According to Romanian administrators they were mostly Russians, Ukrainians and Jews, but in fact the majority of these were Jews.⁴² One such example was Rachel Deich, an unmarried Jewish woman of 25 from Ukraine who fled into Bessarabia, and was arrested on May 4, 1922,

⁴¹ Nicolae Enciu, *Populația Rurală a Basarabiei Î Anii 1918-1940* (Chisinau: Editura Epigraf, 2002), 100-101.

⁴² Ștefan Ciobanu, *Cultura românească în Basarabia sub stăpânirea rusă* (Chișinău, 1923), 51, op. cit. Haynes, "Historical Introduction," 105. David Doron, *Kishinevskoe getto—poslednii pogrom* (Jerusalem, 1991), 82 (in Hebrew) puts the number of Jews at 80,000; Jacob Kopansky, *Dzhoint v Bessarabii: Stranitsy Istorii* (Chișinău, 1994), 11, raised it to 100,000. In estimating this number the Doron did not have access to the National Archives in Moldova, and rely more on the testimonies of Bessarabian Jewish dignitaries, such as the lawyer Michael Landau, who were instrumental in assisting the refugees. Kopansky had more access to archival materials during the 1990s (*Blagatvoritelnye Organizatsii Evreiev*, 9). It remains impossible to calculate exactly how many Jewish refugees fled across the border because the NARM files, numbering over 10,000, do not reflect every person who fled across the border, despite considerable effort on the part of the Romanian police. Given the level of strain of Romanian military control here, the figure cited by Ciobanu is uncertain. Many of the files are for entire families and do not indicate exactly how many family members there were. While it is possible that this estimate is too high, there were clearly tens of thousands of Jewish refugees that, as it turned out, spent most of the interwar years camped in refugee camps in or around Chișinău due to the resistance of the Romanian authorities to legalizing them.

for illegally entering Romania. She intended to proceed to the United States to join her mother in New York, who sent her money to Chişinău to pay for her way. It was months, however, before Deich was released and unclear that she ever received the money sent for her.⁴³ In other cases, Jews were arrested for heading in the other direction. Some, like Felix Melobensky from the town of Napadova near Soroca, were arrested and charged with trafficking in persons on June 2, 1922. Typically, those charged with trafficking in persons were assisting people fleeing toward what they hoped would be better circumstances.⁴⁴

The history of the refugee crisis has remained a difficult issue for Moldovan historians who desire to place a pro-Romanian bias on its interpretation. For example, a recent work by Nicolae Enciu admits that most of the refugees were indeed Jews, but also cites and repeats an earlier source that argued that most of the arrivals were “communists, anarchists, and criminals.”⁴⁵ The reality of so many foreigners arriving uninvited complicated political efforts to create a mono-ethnic homeland. Part of the problem was that determining what ethnicity the refugees belonged to was not always easy: arrested August 9, 1921, Meer Davidovich Tartakovsky had no papers with him. He told the arresting Tighina officers that he was headed to Bălţi and then to America, but they nonetheless held him in prison for weeks and classified him only as “of the Mozaic faith.”⁴⁶

The refugee problem was not the only example of unequal treatment of Bessarabian residents based on their national categorization. As would also be the case in 1940, accusations of anti-Romanian activities fell disproportionately on Jews despite the fact that members of other minorities together with members of the titular nationality also acted according to their own

⁴³ ANRM, f. 171, op. 8, d. 23, l. 1-20.

⁴⁴ ANRM, f. 171, op. 8, d. 23, l. 227.

⁴⁵ Nicolae Enciu, *Populația Rurală a Basarabiei*, 100.

⁴⁶ ANRM, f. 693, Op. 3, d. 3844.

interests that might similarly be perceived as contrary to state interests.⁴⁷ Moldovans living outside the borders of Bessarabia within the Russian Empire had been instrumental in founding the Moldovan National Party that had struggled for Moldovan autonomy under Tsarist rule; but many of them were not eager to join with Romania.⁴⁸ The influential Bulgarian communist Cristian Rakovsky, for example, who himself was from Dobruja, organized in Odessa groups of Romanian-speaking troops by using propaganda in Romanian to fight against the Romanian occupation of Bessarabia.⁴⁹ Clearly, joining the historic motherland was not as obvious for local residents as for Romanian policy makers—the discrepancy was understood in terms of enemies to the national project (enemies of the nation), who logically were more easily targeted if they were non-Romanian.

Jews were a particularly ready-made “other.” The Siguranța chief in Bessarabia warned the Romanian administration on September 30, 1918, that the “Jewish nobility” have decided to inspire the Jewish masses “against the security of the state”: they propagandize that Jews should be allowed a separate entity within Romania. There were even those, such as Solomon Shur, described by the report as a wealthy Zionist and a parasite, “who openly does not desire to be a subject of the Romanian crown.”⁵⁰ Jewish national autonomy was untenable in a contested Bessarabia under questionable control: the Jewish Bund, for example, was regarded as a separatist political movement and made illegal within a month of the establishment of Romanian military control. Yet the Bund remained legal in its heartland in interwar Romania, Bukovina,

⁴⁷ Most of those most vocal in calls to resist Romanian occupation were in fact not Jewish, as described in detail by Mariana Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 73-80.

⁴⁸ Rebecca Haynes, “Introduction,” 97.

⁴⁹ Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 73.

⁵⁰ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 6, l. 96. Solomon Shur was in fact not a Zionist; he was head of the communal government and a religious conservative that was hated by Zionists and Jewish socialists alike. Nevertheless, it is accurate to say that he was less than keen on being a subject of the Romanian crown.

which had a significant impact on Jewish politics in Bessarabia.⁵¹ Bessarabian Bundists with links to parent institutions in Bukovina had been active in the Russian revolutionary movement and were forced underground almost immediately after the arrival of Romanian power. They, along with other Jewish political activists, would be persecuted to a greater degree largely because they represented interests that were widely understood as anti-Romanian.

The right wing press consistently denounced Bessarabian Jews as “Soviet agents,” a notion that by the 1930s had spread sufficiently through Romanian society that most aspects of Jewish life were suspect. The Iron Guard paper, *Porunca Vremei*,⁵² for example, complained about Jewish reading rooms and libraries in Bessarabia as representing the spread of “nests of Judeo-communism.”⁵³ Such views were not limited to the far right. In September 1924 there was a serious uprising against the Romanian military administration in the southern Bessarabian town of Tatar Bunar. The Romanian Army occupied the town outright and killed hundreds; hundreds more were arrested. Gheorghe Tătărescu, then State Secretary of the Interior Ministry and later Prime Minister, reported on the incident as having been directly provoked by Russian and Jewish agents from across the border. At the trial of the accused, however, the defense attorney Jacob Pistiner carefully pointed out that all the defendants were locals. There were very few Jews among them, as this was an area populated mostly by Bulgarians, Germans, and Russians. Local Jews, in fact, were largely rural and had remained neutral in the conflict for fear of being defenseless in the face of reprisals. The uprising was provoked by the economic trauma caused by the loss of Odessa as a traditional market for Bessarabian agricultural products, and by the exceptionally corrupt and destructive administrative methods of Romanian military

⁵¹ In his sworn statement to the police upon his arrest in Chisinau on February 21, 1921, founder of the Bessarabian Yiddishist organization the *Yiddish Cultural League*, Gherș Gelișenschi, confirmed that he was a Bundist and often traveled to Cernauți because the organization was legal there; ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 41.

⁵² This phrase does not translate easily; it means “the urgency of our time.”

⁵³ *Porunca Vremei*, March 2, 1935.

governors, who within six years had bled the local peasant economy so badly that a serious famine took place that winter. Several politicians from Bessarabia that had fought for Moldovan autonomy in the Russian Empire and then joined Romanian national parties after 1918 complained about this corruption and asked for administrative autonomy, going so far as sending an appeal to the king in July 1924 in which they lamented that “Bessarabia is administered like no one [in Europe] would administer a black colony in Africa.”⁵⁴ Romanian military cruelty was well known across the border, where it was exaggerated whenever possible for political gain. A sketch from the Soviet anti-Romanian propaganda journal *Krasnaia Bessarabia* makes clear the suffering of poor Moldovan peasants by corrupt Romanian military administrators:



Figure 2. “The collection of taxes from Bessarabian peasants,” from Soviet anti-Romanian journal *Krasnaia Bessarabia*, 1927; ANRM photo collection, #41340.

⁵⁴ Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 103.

The National Liberal Party in power at the time, however, continued to pursue a policy of rigorous centralization and Romanianization, which took a toll not only on Jews in Bessarabia.⁵⁵ The notion that Judeo-communists were responsible for the uprising was an important tactic to shift the blame from government incompetence in order to maintain Romanian administrative control over a disputed territory, and it took strong root in the minds of Romanian administrators.⁵⁶

Numerous other incidents during the early establishment of Romanian control of the province point to the conflict between state policies and the political interests of the Jewish minority. Despite the willingness of Bucharest to leave Jewish organizations in tact (unlike Soviet modernizers across the Dniester), Jewish organizational prowess made Romanian administrators nervous. Already suspecting that Jews controlled too much of the Romanian economy, a Siguranța agent observing the opening meeting of the Union of Bessarabian Jewish Credit Cooperatives in October 1920 wrote in his report: “through their cultural, commercial and worker organizations, and under the leadership of the Zionists, the Jews have a well-organized state of their own within our state.”⁵⁷ As tackling this would take time, Siguranța agents focused on observation, taking direct action only when Jewish activity posed immediate threat, such as in cases of illegal border crossing or transaction, or communism—which was considered a threat by definition. Police reported with obvious concern that Jews were speculating on the open market, converting between Romanian lei and Russian rubles⁵⁸; Romanian Army cadets were fleeing into Ukraine and “spreading anti-Romanian propaganda there,” ostensibly because they fell under the

⁵⁵ For a detailed analysis of early Romanian interaction with locals see Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*, 97-100.

⁵⁶ For a concise review of politics surrounding Tatar Bunar, see Hauseleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, pp. 90-95.

⁵⁷ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 5043, l. 27.

⁵⁸ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 6, l. 23.

sway of Soviet propaganda.⁵⁹ A newspaper “smuggling ring” was “discovered” in August 1918 at the Benderi (Tighina) paper *Bessarabskii Krai*, which was “bringing into the country” the Russian-language leftist paper *Odesskii Novosti*.⁶⁰ With consternation, Siguranța agents informed the Chișinău police prefect that they had “uncovered” communication between a local Bundist group and Bund leaders in Odessa.⁶¹ Thus, cultural activities that had only weeks or months before been normal interaction became marked and categorized as national sabotage.

Nor was this concern only a police matter, but rather an outlook that had taken shape among urban classes on a deeper cultural level. The Siguranța informed Chișinău police on October 19 that a certain teacher named Veisman at a local Jewish school was not teaching his pupils positive things about the Union of Bessarabia with Romania. The letter surmised that the preponderance of Russian and Jewish teachers in the schools presents a very serious danger to the security of the state.⁶² Leaders in the Romanian 5th Army Corps that had occupied Bessarabia were also concerned: they often informed Siguranța agents of potential or actual disloyalty among residents.⁶³ Despite the fact that these activities were hardly controversial to people attempting to live as they always had, national order as perceived in Bucharest was being subverted, requiring action from the Siguranța in defense of the nation.

Despite the harsh suppression of resistance by Romanian military governors, there was indeed significant chaos across the border, and this was well known by the Bessarabian public and used by its administrators. Romanian military administrators realized that public fear of the

⁵⁹ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 6, l. 36. List 130 warns of Bolsheviks illegally crossing the Dniester in Kamenets-Podolskii and seeking contact with “our” soldiers in order to spread communist propaganda.

⁶⁰ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 6, l. 78.

⁶¹ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 6, l. 88.

⁶² ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 6, l. 184.

⁶³ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 46, l. 38, 39. Two examples include a woman named Mrs. Cara, who had professed to be pro-Romanian but was allegedly spotted (according to a letter from January 24, 1919) in Odessa at a congress for unifying Bessarabia with Russia; and a Mr. Erhan, who allegedly (letter from February 25, 1919) spreads pro-independence propaganda and is well financed. Both these suspects were non-ethnic Romanians, which served to increase suspicions during these years.

chaos and violence across the border was a useful propaganda tool in helping them secure control of the province. In the spring of 1919 rumors spread across Bessarabia that an entire Bolshevik army was coming to take over the province, finding fertile soil among residents who during the previous winter witnessed Soviet troops bombing the town of Tighina (Benderi) on the Dniester River after being driven out of Bessarabia by the Romanian Army.⁶⁴ In response to rumors that Tiraspol had become a completely empty city due to the chaotic violence there, Romanian chief minister for Bessarabia D. Cugurianu noted in an interview in April 1919 that Soviet forces have terrorized the people there and the Romanian Army did battle with them from across the river. He also noted that Romania has been accepting thousands of Romanian refugees from across the river that fled Soviet oppression, although he left out the fact that most refugees were Jews fleeing not from the Bolsheviks but from their opponents.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, distorting facts about the “other side” helped the authorities maintain control: it was one of few examples when its position as borderland actually served to the state’s advantage in terms of security. Bessarabia was indeed spared much of the terrifying violence that took place in Ukraine at least in part because the Romanian Army was professional and well-supplied while roaming bands of royalists, Ukrainian nationalists and even sometimes Bolsheviks needed to live off the land and thus terrorized local residents.

Most instructive in understanding this conflict between the interests of Romanian state centralization and local desires for cultural autonomy among Jews is a close examination of the problems encountered by one Jewish cultural organization, the Yiddish Cultural League

⁶⁴ *Bessarabia*, #19, April 12, 1919.

⁶⁵ *Bessarabia*, #19, April 12, 1919.

(YCL),⁶⁶ founded in Chişinău in 1919 by a Jew from Cernauţi,⁶⁷ Gherş Gelişenschi.⁶⁸ At the time when the YCL was registered with Romanian military administrators, peace negotiations were still underway in Paris. Western leaders fixed their gaze on Romania and its treatment of minorities, and Jewish organizations were not really impeded from operating. As the closing of the local Bund and communist party attest, however, Bucharest was very concerned almost immediately with Soviet designs on Bessarabia, and increasingly distrustful of the region's Jewish residents whom it feared were pro-Soviet sympathizers.

Not long after the YCL began functioning, the Chişinău Siguranţa became increasingly concerned with its activities and began to monitor the organization members and its meetings. Beginning barely a month after registering with the new authorities, Siguranţa reports about Gelişenschi clearly show that he was highly suspect as a Bundist from Bukovina—the Bund's messenger in Bessarabia, in fact, where the Bund was already illegal. Police reports noted concern that he traveled often to Russia and brought back with him Bundist manifestos.⁶⁹ From as early as January 1920, the Chişinău Siguranţa decided that Gelişenschi was a dangerous man and had him closely followed.⁷⁰ In February 1920, members of a Siguranţa Brigade from Chişinău entered Gelişenschi's home and found "suspicious literature" there. Within hours, the Siguranţa arrested Gelişenschi for suspicion of communist activities while he taught evening class, confiscating his books and personal papers. The Siguranţa produced a detailed and descriptive list of his articles for their superiors that pointed to his educational and activist past

⁶⁶ This organization was the primary vehicle of Yiddish cultural revival in Bessarabia during the interwar years. It organized and ran dozens of libraries across Jewish towns and city sections in Bessarabia; it was a leftist group and most of its founding members were Bundist sympathizers. It will be described in detail in the next chapter.

⁶⁷ This is the Romanian name for Cernowitz, the capital of Bukovina and site of the famous Yiddish language conference of 1908. This was the recognized Romanian name of the city by 1920.

⁶⁸ I have preserved the Romanian spelling of the name; transliteration of the Yiddish is Gersch Gelishensky.

⁶⁹ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 2.

⁷⁰ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 9-13.

reaching across the newly drawn national boundaries.⁷¹ While this evidence of activities indicated a young man of energy and deep involvement in Jewish politics in a direction not uncommon for young, secularly educated Jewish men of the former Russian Empire, it was interpreted by the Siguranța to mean that he displayed clearly pro-Bolshevik and anti-Romanian sympathies. His “wandering” into lands that had come to represent the archenemy of the Romanian state, the Soviet Union, was highly suspect, even if he had gone there while Bessarabia was part of the Russian Empire.

As a member of an organization suspicious in Bucharest, he was tortured by the Siguranța, even though Gelișenschi openly admitted to the police that he was a member of the Bund. He displayed clear Jewish national identification, explaining that he engaged in cultural work because it was his duty as a Yiddishist, and that he desired for Yiddish, which he called the mother tongue of the Jewish people, to be taught to all Jewish children.⁷² He was indeed charged and tried for anti-Romanian activities, although he was eventually acquitted. Almost all of his documents, the police wrote in consternation, were written in the Jewish “jargon” (Yiddish), requiring the hiring of a Yiddish-speaking agent by the Siguranța in order to decipher them. The suspicion of Jewish communism only made more immediate in the minds of Siguranța agents the need to infiltrate Jewish organizations.⁷³ Yet, even aided by difficult economic circumstances

⁷¹ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 58. Among the noteworthy articles found were: a teacher identification card from 1920 for a Jewish school in Cernauți; personal correspondence that the Siguranța reported proved he was a member of “the Zionist organization Der Bund” in Bessarabia; an ID from a Jewish teachers’ conference in Ukraine; literature and programs from a Cernauți Jewish Cultural Federation conference attended by members from all over Romania; a brochure about the world socialist revolution; notes from an international conference of Jewish teachers to determine the future direction of Jewish education; a description of a socialist education system; the statute of the Bessarabian Jewish Cultural League from 1920; a picture student ID of Gelișenschi from the University of Kharkov dated from the Russian Empire; a brochure written by Gelișenschi and approved by a Rabbi, called “the Itinerant Musicians”; information about music lessons and a membership in the Cernauți music club of the same name; and post cards from members of the Paolei Tsiyon Party in Palestine.

⁷² ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 93-97.

⁷³ This complaint was also noted by agents reviewing the Zionist sports club Maccabbee, also suspected of communism, ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 4837, l. 45. The Chișinău police prefect reported to the security police about Maccabbee on December 12, 1918 that “this is a society that has doubtful aims, which is why they [the police] have

that motivated some Jews to join the Siguranța to spy on their co-religionists, the linguistic-cultural barrier was only partially overcome. As Siguranța records indicate, Jews typically did not serve for very long because most clearly had issues with playing for the Romanian side.⁷⁴ In some cases, the hiring of certain Jewish agents displayed either bureaucratic ineptitude and/or desperation on the part of Romanian authorities.⁷⁵ The failure to maintain Jewish agents speaks volumes about the emotional direction of Jewish national sentiment, which for some more clearly than others made serving the Romanian state, especially against other Jews, very uncomfortable. The fact that there is essentially no evidence of Jews working for the Siguranța after 1925 is also important, pointing to a solidification of the Romanian police position on the

to send secret and clever agents to their meetings, who have to know the Jewish language and then collect information,” ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 4798, l. 32.

⁷⁴ As expected Siguranța files were very detailed about any Jews that were hired and paid by them. Given the concern with Jewish communists, there were relatively few Jews in Siguranța service, such as David Weismann and Iankl Kleinberg from Bolgrad who were hired but never showed up for work (ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 502, l. 3); Moisei Voiculescu, hired in Tighina as a “special agent” but removed himself from service a month later in September 1924 (d. 584, l. 2); Moisei Germansky, hired April 25, 1925 and described in glowing terms for his linguistic ability, but terminated on August 1st for not showing up to work for 15 days (d. 672, l. 1); and Lazar Grinberg, who worked as a translator of the Yiddish press for two years, August 10, 1920 through March 20, 1922, which was a very long service as far as Jews working for the Siguranța were generally concerned (d. 751, l. 1). He was eventually fired from service for “complications of his activities that undermined his reputation in the service” (d. 751, l. 17).

⁷⁵ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 149, l. 1-26; Grigore Aizenberg was been hired by the Chișinău Siguranța as a special agent on December 1, 1922. Unlike most of the others in the files, Aizenberg had a lengthy military career (l. 2). Drafted in 1911; he served during the war as a military photographer in Odessa, leaving only after the Bolshevik revolution on December 9, 1917. He was hired despite the fact that he spoke no Romanian (!). However, he was suspended, tried and imprisoned for abuse of power for extorting money from Chișinău resident Dina Endlea while conducting police business (l. 10). He wrote a letter (12/13/22) contesting his innocence (l. 11), but was not influential because the Siguranța found him insubordinate (12/23/22) and he was relieved of his post (1/11/23) (l. 16) but not fired, rather he was moved to the village of Novo-Botievo on 2/15/23 (l. 21). The Siguranța then discovered (11/14/23) that he had a foreign wife who had no Romanian status and had been living and working illegally (for a Jewish family) in Chișinău for almost an entire year. Aizenberg, who had by then received a Romanianized name (Aizirescu) and was working in Constanța for the section on spying, had never told the Siguranța about this. The police discovered this when they intercepted (in routine procedures of censorship) one of his illegal wife’s letters to Aizenberg’s brother in Odessa, complaining that she never saw him anymore (l. 24). She was arrested, and he was fired on 12/29/23 (l. 26). In Aizenberg’s case, at least, not having foreign connections was more important than being competent.

Jews and their leaning toward other means (such as imprisonment and torture) for obtaining information.⁷⁶

The month after Gelişenschi's arrest, the office of the Bessarabian Regional Inspectorate received a letter of concern from the Chişinău police, noting that the YCL, an organization described in the report as "literary with a Jewish character," had begun to operate "in a mode of serious activity." The report asked for assistance in the form of "a good agent that understands 'Jewish' and can talk of their tendencies and mood."⁷⁷ This report indicated a problem for the Siguranţa that would persist: the difficulty in gathering information on people that did not use Romanian for either their meetings or their written communication meant often relying on Jewish agents or at least interpreters accompanying agents.

Some days later in February 1920, an agent observing a meeting of the YCL in Chişinău noted in his report to the office of the regional inspector that among the Jews present was a man who recently arrived from Russia and was suspected of being a "red Bolshevik revolutionary;" the agent thus concluded in his report that the YCL is "simply a mask for Bolshevik revolutionary organizations."⁷⁸ This description of the YCL would stick, used by dozens of Siguranţa agents throughout the interwar period to describe the organization and its perceived goals.⁷⁹ A March 13, 1925, report from a military officer described the YCL as being a part of

⁷⁶ Not all Jews hired by the Siguranţa were used exclusively as spies: a Meer Greenberg was hired in August 1922 exclusively for work in the "border regions," allegedly to help police extract information from captured Soviet spies. It appears that he managed to direct his work almost exclusively toward helping the authorities communicate with Jewish refugees from Ukraine. He was fired in October, after about three months of secret police service, ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 753, l. 1.

⁷⁷ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 15.

⁷⁸ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 20.

⁷⁹ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 40 from January 1921, "the Bund (YCL) is just a mask for communist interests"; l. 83, a report from May 27, 1925 described the director of the Chişinău YCL library as "a known communist," a description that stuck with her for the remainder of the interwar period even though evidence of her communist activity can only be found for the revolutionary years; ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 89, a telegram from the Bessarabian regional inspector to the Ministry of Internal Affairs on March 3, 1930, stating that "the Cultural League masks itself as a cultural organization when it is in fact a communist organization with members active in communist activity."

the young communist league with connections across the Nistru (Dniester). He maintained that the money it received for plays and cultural gatherings come from the communist party, a serious and in fact inaccurate accusation made with no supporting evidence.⁸⁰ Other reports from Siguranța field agents show that during 1925, books held in YCL libraries came under suspicion,⁸¹ and that YCL programming—in this case pertaining to youth theatrical performances that were already censored—began to be impeded more actively from being staged because “this group has communist sympathies and partakes in subversive acts—their plays can bring no benefit.”⁸² While there were reports to the contrary, such as that of a Bălți agent from January 1922 arguing that this really is a cultural organization, most accused the YCL of communist activity.

Over the course of the 1920s and into the 1930s, the focus of the police clearly became fixated on the members themselves and their suspected communist activity rather than on the work of the organization. For example, a note from an officer in the Romanian 3rd Army Corps in Chișinău to the regional inspector from November 23, 1929, noted with horror that at a performance staged by the YCL, most of the audience in attendance were, according to him, participants in communist activities.⁸³ A telegram from the Soroca police to the regional inspector from January 27, 1930, noted that several YCL members were arrested immediately when during a performance attended by about 300 people, they attempted to stage a play that

⁸⁰ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 71. Other police reports, indicated that YCL chapters were plagued by lack of funds, for example an agent report from December 9, 1925 relating that the Tighina branch of the YCL (the town through which communist money was indeed channeled) had been closed for 6 months due to lack of funds, ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 100. The Chișinău office of the police chestura, in its own official report to the regional inspector in 1932, reported that the YCL was subsidized by the state, an impossibility if the organization was truly receiving money from the Soviet Union: ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 248-285.

⁸¹ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 83, the agent reported of the Chișinău YCL library that the books were all in the “Jewish” language and were not properly reviewed by state censors even though as far as he could tell, they were all of “revolutionary, Bolshevik, and anti-Romanian” in character.

⁸² ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 76. Evidence of police impeding the spread of the YCL exists from as early as 1920, when the Chisinau Siguranța refused permission to the Rezina community on October 6 to open a local YCL chapter, d. 3354, l. 58.

⁸³ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 65.

they called “Down with Politics.” This incident began a furious review of the organization, with many local police branches, led by Soroca, calling for the closing of this organization on the grounds of its connections with communism and anti-state activities.

Indeed, it is clear that over the course of the interwar period, the Siguranța came to view Bessarabian Jewish organizations in general, even cultural or religious ones, as political, since any organization that sought to resist Romanianization was seen as having political aims contrary to state interests. In September 1925, the Bessarabian regional inspector wrote to the Siguranța Directorate in Bucharest that the Tarbut organization, which they correctly described as supporting a network of Jewish primary, secondary, lyceums and professional schools in Hebrew, is nevertheless under close Siguranța supervision because of its suspected leftist political activity.⁸⁴ Although less common, some Siguranța agents even suspected the Orthodox religious society Agudat Israel of communism.⁸⁵ The YCL, with members that really were in some cases connected to underground communist and Bundist organizations, was not surprisingly tolerated with extreme tenuousness, especially as the 1930s progressed.

The regional police, particularly in the newly joined territories, were required by superiors in Bucharest to submit annual reports detailing “the mood of the population.” The serious misconceptions evident in the report filed on September 3, 1929, from Bessarabia serve as an excellent example of state attitudes toward Bessarabian Jews. The report stated that the public mood was mostly fine, but that the Jews were a notable exception to this, because they are against the Romanian state—they harbor communist ideas and want a revolution like in Russia, even though more than 90% (!) of them were Zionists. Apparently, this did not interfere with their communist, revolutionary ideas. The police reported that this was particularly true among

⁸⁴ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 21.

⁸⁵ ANRM f. 679, op. 1, d. 5410.

the youth, but even the Orthodox were ‘guilty.’ The report went on to explain that antisemitism was strong in the region among Christians that were opposed to Judaism because of their support for the ideas of true Christianity, implying that antisemitism is understandable for devout Christians.⁸⁶

Among the police reports from the peripheral towns of Bessarabia to the Chisinau regional inspector, police prejudice against the YCL organization and against Jews in general can hardly be discounted. The tone betrays a consistent theme of surprise that this organization received permission to operate at all, asking for assurance that it is in fact legal and permitted to have branches in the country.⁸⁷ Police descriptions of the organization’s activities throughout Bessarabia were consistent in describing cultural objectives—the reading of Jewish authors like Haim Nahman Bialik and Sholem Aleichem, dancing and theatrical groups of Jewish youth, a growing list of Zionist speakers—yet the conclusions drawn, based largely on the fact that sometimes some of the members had been arrested and served time in jail for communist and anti-Romanian activities, was that the association was a cover for Soviet-inspired and influenced communism.⁸⁸

Other police reports betray strong misconceptions of Jewish political movements. For example, reporting from Lipcani in July 1930, the police complained that the YCL members read modern Marxist writers like “Bukharov (!), Henry Barbusse, Sholem Aleichem and Sholem

⁸⁶ ANRM f. 679, op. 1, d. 674, l. 15.

⁸⁷ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 48.

⁸⁸ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 148: a July 1930 letter from the Orhei Siguranța describe the local YCL as being a cultural, theatrical and artistic organization, but with several communist members and illegal migrants that “carry on subversive discourse” and “have...communist and anti-Romanian tendencies;” ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 154: a broad report from July 20, 1930 about the YCL by the Bessarabian regional inspectorate argued “the Bund, which by its nature is a subversive and clandestine organization, decided to change its name, in order to keep functioning in Bessarabia, to “Yiddish Cultural League.” The report goes on to say that unlike Zionist organizations, the reading materials of the YCL are not religious-cultural in nature, but rather communist and anti-religious.

Asch.”⁸⁹ A March 26, 1929 report from Orhei accused the local YCL leader and most members of communism and “Red ideas” because they were teachers in Tarbut schools with strong contacts with the Tarbut organization.⁹⁰ Other reports display clearly anti-Semitic attitudes. For example, in their assessment of the central Chişinău YCL chapter, the Bessarabian Regional Inspectorate recommended to the Ministry of Internal Affairs that the organization be closed because, while “the membership is mostly youth, their elders have no moral standing,” and “are mostly communist propagandists.”⁹¹ Others were obviously reaching in their efforts to show that “Jew” and “Communist” were synonymous: the Orhei Siguranţa wrote on May 8, 1929, that “because the YCL welcomes members from all social levels, it cannot be excluded that they have communist tendencies.”⁹²

By 1933, the National Liberals returned to power and pursued internal state policies that proved less tolerant toward ethnic minorities. The persecution of the YCL was stepped up. In 1934, the Siguranţa increased its efforts to control the books that the organization received from abroad, and began doing thorough inspections of YCL library holdings with the aid of translators.⁹³ On September 25, the regional inspector wrote to the Siguranţa Directorate in Bucharest that 115 books of communist character were found in the Chişinău Jewish library and confiscated.⁹⁴ On January 28, 1935, the Chişinău central chapter of the YCL was physically closed, and on February 4 deemed permanently closed for acts against the security of the state and the library for spreading communist propaganda. It is likely that debt may have been an additional immediate factor for the closing of both the organization office and library.⁹⁵ Soon

⁸⁹ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 165.

⁹⁰ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 180.

⁹¹ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 173.

⁹² ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 179.

⁹³ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 325, 327, and 330.

⁹⁴ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 399.

⁹⁵ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 353, 359, and 361.

after this, Siguranța brigades from other Bessarabian towns, most notably Bălți, began writing to the regional inspectorate asking for permission to close down the YCL chapter in their towns. Bălți police made the case that since the YCL charter allowed it to open affiliates in the province, these affiliates should be closed if the central office was closed, but were informed by the regional inspector that the chapters cannot be closed without proof of illegal activity. Final approval for the closure was granted on March 12, 1937, after the Bălți YCL library was thoroughly searched and several books deemed to be of communist character were found.⁹⁶ By the end of August 1937, it appears that only one YCL chapter remained open, in Hotin.⁹⁷

There is little evidence that local police were interested in understanding that contacts between Jews on both sides of the river may have been perceived as perfectly normal to them, and that cutting them off entirely because of Romanian state interests were unnatural and greatly disruptive to social, cultural, and economic relations. The Romanian state policy toward Bolshevik Russia was unambiguous, and the reality of Jewish political relations with co-religionists across the border quickly made them suspect. In local historiographic treatment of the subject there is focus on the extreme right as the only agent of anti-Semitic discrimination, but in fact the normal process of creating model subjects that all post-WWI states expanded great resources on partook in discrimination. In the interwar period discrimination against minority rights was not monopolized by conservatives or reactionaries—its primary advocates were modernizing liberals who often believed that minorities stood in the way of the modern state's effort to create a national community.⁹⁸ Already predisposed to looking upon Jews as foreigners, military police and administrators quickly came to view Bessarabian Jews in particular as

⁹⁶ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 448, 457, 462, 472, 474, 483.

⁹⁷ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 544.

⁹⁸ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 59.

subversive and dangerous foreigners because of Jewish contacts with co-religionists across the Dniester, especially given the state of deteriorating Soviet-Romanian relations.

As the interwar years progressed, stronger national community was increasingly understood in racial terms across much of Europe, and Romania was no exception. Societies and organization dedicated to racial hygiene and promotion of educating the public in eugenics spread grew in England and Germany at the turn of the century, spreading to central European capitals before the war and to the Romanian capital by 1919.⁹⁹ By the second half of the 1920s, Romanian eugenicists had interpreted West European ideas of Social Darwinism and applied them to serve national needs: to justify the domination of the titular nation, the Romanians, as *the* nation. Eugenics re-organized the way that the body politic was perceived: the nation became a living organism that derived its health from racial purity. Romanian society also, the argument went, was subject to biological laws of health and degeneration very much in relation to its racial purity.¹⁰⁰ Becoming modern, in the liberal democratic sense or later in the corporatist fascist sense, meant not only modernizing infrastructure, education, the military, etc, but modernizing (meaning purifying) the people themselves.¹⁰¹

Aggressive measures taken by the police served to increase resistance among those unwilling to accept the new order. Almost immediate also were Soviet politicians' urges for international resistance to Romania's acquisition of Bessarabia and the organization of underground efforts to undermine it.¹⁰² Romanian leaders in turn were quickly concerned with

⁹⁹ Turda & Weindling, eds., *Blood and Homeland*, 3.

¹⁰⁰ Marius Turda, "The Nation as Object: Race, Blood, and Biopolitics in Interwar Romania," *Slavic Review* 66, no. 3, (Fall 2007), 413.

¹⁰¹ Turda & Weindling, eds., *Blood and Homeland*, 7-8; see also Maria Bucur, *Eugenics and modernization in Interwar Romania* (Pittsburgh, 2002).

¹⁰² The most virulent instrument of Soviet propaganda in this direction was the journal *Krasnaia Bessarabiia* (Red Bessarabia), a monthly journal and press review that was the official mouthpiece of the Soviet "Society of Bessarabians," the frontal organ in the Soviet revisionist effort against the Romanian occupation of Bessarabia; every issue began with the slogan "Romanian occupiers, hands off of Bessarabia!" (In place of "Proletariat of all

Soviet designs on Bessarabia, and increasingly distrustful of the region's Jewish residents, whom many in Bucharest already considered to be pro-Soviet sympathizers. Concerns about anti-national activities of "foreigners," especially Jews, became greater as the economic crisis caused by the Great Depression worsened and the international order defended by liberal democracies seemed unappealing compared to the dynamic state ideologies of Germany and Italy. The geopolitical struggle for Bessarabia between Moscow and Bucharest made any real understanding of Jewish cultural activities practically impossible for Romanian leaders.

On the Other Side: Creating the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic

Across the Dniester River, the battle for the establishment of Bolshevik control over the vast remnants of the Russian Empire determined considerably different circumstances for Jews. The builders of Soviet communism had at first been ambivalent about the Jewish Question.¹⁰³ In the early years of Bolshevik power, the new regime treated the Jews as a distinct national minority while rejecting their religious distinctiveness. The Bolsheviks had been surprised and disturbed by the strength of national movements during the revolutionary years, particularly in Ukraine. They did not possess a coherent nationalities policy when they seized control, although they proclaimed faith in national self-determination, in part as a means of consolidating support for the revolution among the national minorities. In the years after the revolution, the nation-

countries, unite!") The journal was a constant bombardment of Soviet anti-Romanian and generally anti-capitalist propaganda that the Party hoped would infiltrate Bessarabia in such massive quantities that they would regain the territory through popular revolt. It was published in Moscow.

¹⁰³ Stalin's definition of nationality, espoused in his treatise *Marxism and the National Question* in 1913, denied national status to the Jews primarily because Jews lacked a national territory and a national language; see Joseph Stalin, "Marxism and the National Question," in *The Essential Stalin: Major Theoretical Writings, 1905-1952*, Bruce Franklin, editor, (Garden City, 1972), 57-61. Stalin's nationalities theory, in turn, was largely based on the ideas of Lenin, whose own position on the Jewish Question was formulated in almost two decades of polemic debate with the Jewish Bund, the Jewish workers' party based in Vilna that stood for an inseparable joint ideology of socialism and Jewish nationalism. Lenin argued that the idea of a Jewish nationality runs counter to the interests of the Jewish proletariat. He maintained that Bundist notions of Jewish-cultural autonomy undermine assimilation, which he favored, and thus fostered within Jews a spirit of the "ghetto," see V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow, 1961), Vol. VI, 99-101.

builders, led by Lenin and Stalin, succeeded in implementing a system of national “affirmative action” as governing policy rather than simply revolutionary sloganism over the objections of the internationalists led by Piatakov and Buhkarin.¹⁰⁴ Lenin recognized that the reality on the Jewish street would require specific policies toward Jews, including setting up special agencies within the state and party to deal with Jewish issues and bringing the Bolshevik message to the Jewish masses in their own language.¹⁰⁵

For this purpose, party leaders set up in 1918 the Jewish Sections of the Communist Party, the *Evseksiia*, and the Commissariat for Jewish National Affairs, the *Evkom*, within the People’s Commissariat for Nationalities (*Narkomnats*). These were to be agencies run by Jews for Jews. They would manage Jewish life while simultaneously implementing Soviet policy, i.e. to bring Russian Jews into Soviet modernity. The *Evkom* dealt with the social and economic problems of the Jews, including the regulation of philanthropic assistance to refugees, the establishment of secular schools in Yiddish, and increasing the circulation of pro-Soviet, Yiddish-language newspapers. It was the responsibility of the *Evkom* to work with Jewish institutions and bring them in line with Bolshevik national policy. Thus, an important early distinction between Jewish policies pursued by the nation states of interwar Eastern Europe, including Romania, and the Bolsheviks, was the desire on the part of the latter to co-opt Jews and utilize them to create and disseminate Soviet culture while in the former case the chief aim was to exclude Jews from the rungs of political power.

Jewish policy-making from within the Communist Party was of course not the only or even an initially popular alternative: autonomous Jewish political parties and organizations had

¹⁰⁴ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca and London, 2001), 2.

¹⁰⁵ Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*, 119.

been devastatingly weakened before coming under attack from the Soviet authorities.¹⁰⁶ In the years after 1917, the Bolsheviks took every advantage of the perception on the Jewish street that in the face of violence from white armies, Ukrainian nationalists and Polish legions, the Red Army was the Jewish people's only protector. In Ukraine Jews were very wary of Ukrainian independence due to widespread suspicion that any Ukrainian government would sooner or later take an anti-Semitic position.¹⁰⁷ The Communist Party's drive toward political monopoly among the Jewish people gained steam thanks to its military superiority as well as the legacy of antisemitism under the old regime, as the ranks of Jewish communists swelled and provided vital assistance to the Bolsheviks in pushing Jewish political alternatives to Bolshevism out of the picture.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ The pre-revolutionary Jewish political spectrum was tremendously vibrant, marked by political parties representing ideologies from across the political spectrum: several branches of Zionists (the Socialist Zionists, including Agudat Israel and Poalei Tsiyon; the religious Zionists of Mizrahi and the Zionist Revisionists of Betar); the Zionist-Socialist Workers Party and Jewish Socialist Workers Party or SERP; the combined concerns of socialism and Jewish nationalism in the Bund and Ber Borochov's Marxist Zionism; the Yiddishism of Chaim Zhitlovsky and the Folkspartei of the champion of Jewish cultural and territorial autonomy within Russia, Simon Dubnow—to mention only the better known and larger Jewish movements. The subject of pre-revolutionary political movements among the Jews in the Pale of Settlement, understood as the rise of modern Jewish politics in Russia, has received more attention from scholars than any other issue in Russian Jewish history. The works addressing the ideas and histories of Jewish parties and ideologies are numerous, some of the best include: Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917*, (Cambridge, 1981); Ezra Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale: The Formative Years of the Jewish Worker's Movement in Tsarist Russia*, (Cambridge, 1970); Hans Rogger, *Jewish Policies and Right-Wing Politics*; and Zvi Gitelman, ed. *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh, 2003), especially "A Century of Jewish Politics in Eastern Europe: The Legacy of the Bund and the Zionist Movement."

¹⁰⁷ When the Ukrainian Rada issued its Fourth Universal on January 22, 1918, which declared complete Ukrainian independence from Russia, Jewish parties in Kiev either voted against it or abstained, which did little to improve Jewish-Ukrainian relations. That same month, a proposal was heard at the Central Rada to expel all Jewish refugees from Kiev; Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*, 156-57, 159.

¹⁰⁸ Gitelman *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*, 151-230.



Figure 3: Bolshevik troops in Tiraspol, 1920. ANRM photo collection #50145.

Across the Soviet Union, in fact, Jewish communists engaged in heated debates with Jews of various other political persuasions and cultural beliefs for the hearts and minds of “their masses” precisely because they believed that the Soviet bureaucracy and ideology could help the Jews. Such views had no significant historical popularity: the pre-revolutionary Komfarbund (Jewish Communist Party) was profoundly weak with very little support among Russia’s Jews before the revolution. Yet in the years immediately after the Bolshevik seizure of power it became, with the support of the Communist Party, the most powerful Jewish force for pro-regime change of traditional Jewish life. The Komfarbund was incorporated into the Communist Party and organized politically as the *Evseksiia*. As David Shneer points out, the policies pursued by the state and party to create a Soviet-Jewish culture were complex, multivalent, and sometimes conflicting—one cannot focus simply on the *Evseksiia* as the mover of state ideology.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, it was the *Evseksiia* members that were often seen as implementing state policies that undermined Jewish culture, and as doing this quite enthusiastically; it was

¹⁰⁹ Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture*, 12.

popularly held belief within Jewish society that the *Evseksiia* members were “more communist than the Communists.”¹¹⁰ Nor was the Jewish acceptance of communist ideology limited to the sections of the party: Jews were vastly over-represented in the Komsomol organization (the Young Communist League) and the NKVD, for example.¹¹¹ As expressed by many contemporary Jewish writers such as David Bagritsky and Itsik Fefer, the aggressive anti-traditionalism of pro-Soviet Jews resulted from a profound frustration with traditional Jewish culture and authority among many well-educated, secular and progressive Jewish youth with little previous economic opportunity.

The attack on Jewish tradition cannot be understood otherwise, including in the MASSR. By 1924, the Soviet economy had improved significantly after the extreme conditions during War Communism. The Party’s ideological firmness toward less harmful unwanted classes such as the Jewish *kustars* (artisans), gave way to a more gradualist approach toward their assimilation into the proletariat championed by Nikolai Bukharin, who was at the apex of his influence within the party during the early-middle twenties.¹¹² Always treading carefully due to consistent insecurity, the *Evseksiia* Central Bureau slowly followed suit in its politics toward the Jewish petit-bourgeois traders and *kustars* of the former Pale, as Bolshevik politics toward the latter would shift throughout the 1920s. Having been extremely mindful not to overstep the party line in its early years, during this period of general calm between the calamities of 1917-21

¹¹⁰ By way of example, when Moscow Chief Rabbi Jacob Maze was invited in 1919 by Education Commissar Lunacharsky to present his case in defense of Hebrew schools (which the government would soon close), Maze made the case that shutting down schools was against the principles of liberty and freedom, which he understood the revolution to stand for. Lunacharsky countered that it was the rabbi’s own brothers, the Jewish communists, who were most vocal in pushing for the closure of Hebrew schools, on the grounds that Hebrew was the language of the bourgeoisie and not the masses. Rumors about encounters such as this circulated in Jewish society and would serve to make the task of making Jews Soviet more difficult more difficult. See Halevy, *Jewish Schools Under Czarism and Communism: A Struggle for Cultural Identity* (New York, 1976), 131; also Solomon Schwarz, *The Jews in the Soviet Union* (Syracuse, 1951), 253.

¹¹¹ In Transnistria in 1934, for example, 7 of 31 members of the NKVD, or almost 23%, were Jews, AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 106, l. 2.

¹¹² William B. Husband, “The New Economic Policy and the Revolutionary Experiment,” in Gregory Freeze, ed. *Russia: A History*, 266-68.

and Stalin's Cultural Revolution at the end of the 1920s, the Jewish communists gingerly felt out their own path.

Educational transformation and agricultural re-settlement became the central methods by which state-sanctioned, secular Jewish reformers attempted to merge their own solutions to the Jewish problem (leading them from what they saw as a stunted, backward, religious, petty-bourgeois past into a bright, secular, muscular, proletarian future), with broader Soviet modernization policies. Agricultural colonization of mostly Ukrainian Jews had a history dating to the 1890s, when the Jewish Colonization Association based in Paris began to support colonization efforts. After 1914, the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee (JDC or Joint) became the largest sponsor of efforts to re-settle Russian Jews, spending millions of dollars over the interwar years.¹¹³ As the war devastated Jewish life in Western Russia, the need to help Jews only increased and became more urgent, while the Soviet government proved a mixed blessing to agricultural colonization. While at first not overtly opposed to the project and in any case too weak to tightly control its peripheral areas, the Soviet government eventually greatly exacerbated Jewish economic woes by relegating huge numbers of shtetl Jews (in some Transnistrian towns as much as 65% of the working population)¹¹⁴ to the category of *lishentsy*—"nonproductive" members of petit bourgeois professions—and thereby depriving them of housing, employment, and education for their children.¹¹⁵

On the Soviet side of the Dniester River in Transnistria, Jewish communist party members that quickly reached positions of mid or even high administrative capacity, particularly in the Agitation and Propaganda (Agitprop) Division, instituted modernization campaigns for the

¹¹³ Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land*, 2-7.

¹¹⁴ AOSPRM, f. 49. op. 1, d. 1555, l. 11.

¹¹⁵ Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land*, 7. Dekel-Chen summarizes the number of Jews effected: Joint believed that as many as 70% of Ukrainian Jews were thus classified, while Soviet statistics put the number at between 40-45%.

Jewish people with equal enthusiasm as in Moscow. The goal was not only to transform the Jewish street, but also to extend effective Soviet government control over the entire unruly borderland area. To be sure, the personal motivations among Jewish secular activists varied and cannot all be ascribed to strong support for the Soviet project. Most did not condone the complete destruction of traditional Jewish culture in the name of Soviet progress and desired the use of state resources to assist devastated Jewish communities. Some saw playing ball with Soviet leaders as the best means of ensuring a Jewish voice among the power brokers; many maintained ideals of Jewish autonomy within the Soviet Union and attempted to use Soviet policies to pursue such aims.¹¹⁶ Others used their position in the new government to avenge personal suffering caused their families or loved ones during past years of chaos and violence. Without question, the political activity of such workers served to extend and solidify Soviet influence and control first and foremost.

The solidification of Soviet power in Transnistria was thus by no means established through repression alone. The appeal of the Soviet vision of modernity was inculcated through progressive policies of social engineering that would “build” better citizens: orderly, healthy, clean, hard working, and committed to socialism.¹¹⁷ The interwar years were the heyday of policies designed to improve the collective body of society—and the terms of this improvement, as many scholars have shown, were increasingly racial in their understanding. Soviet scientists were also interested in racial theories and hygiene, and worked closely with German scientists on issues concerning social medicine and racial theory, or eugenics. To that end, the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics, as well as the German-Soviet

¹¹⁶ See Gitelman’s *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics* for insight into the motivations of many high profile Soviet-Jewish politicians such as Esther Frumkin. See Dekel-Chen’s *Farming the Red Land*, especially chapter 2, “Building a Colonization Movement,” 34-59, on the persistence of Jewish efforts at regional autonomy.

¹¹⁷ For some of these values see Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York & Oxford, 1989), especially Part III, 167-222.

Racial Laboratory, were set up in Moscow in 1927.¹¹⁸ But unlike scientists in Romania and other nation-states of central and eastern Europe, Soviet eugenics remained focused on the realm of improving medicine and health as means of assisting modernization, but without going down the dark path of using science to justify racial discrimination.¹¹⁹ The fascination with blood as direct connection to homeland and the peasant as the “racial repository” of the nation that became so common across Eastern Europe, particularly in Romania, never took in the Soviet Union because of the Marxist commitment to the proletariat (with the accompanying focus on technological and industrial modernization and urbanization), but also because tolerance of multi-ethnicity was a necessity and not simply about respecting peace treaty obligations that could be entirely jettisoned once Hitler came to power and superseded France and Britain as Western model and defender.

No clearer example exists of the difference between the nationalistic regimes of interwar Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and their uses of racial constructions of ethnic utopias based on blood, than that of the inclusion versus exclusion of the national minorities (especially Jews) in state-sponsored modernizing policies, often precisely because in states such as Romania Jews were placed outside the imagined nation that was more and more based on Romanian intellectuals’ construction of blood and racial ties as the basis for the nation.¹²⁰ Quite simply, racial discrimination was used in Romanian Bessarabia to exclude Jews from policy decisions concerning them, while in Soviet Transnistria they were very much involved in the process.

The region of Transnistria had little of the territorial integrity in the imperial administrative imagination that Bessarabia enjoyed even before the revolution. The word itself,

¹¹⁸ Turda and Weindling, *Blood and Homeland*, 10.

¹¹⁹ Turda and Weindling, *Blood and Homeland*, 12-13.

¹²⁰ For example, the established Romanian national mythology of the connection to the ancient Romans through the Dacians, became translated into new language based on blood superiority: only an inherently superior nation could survive for centuries of foreign domination as the Romanians had, Marius Turda, “The Nation as Object,” 421.

meaning “across the Nistru” (the River’s name in Romanian) was used in general and did not imply a specific bordered region. Appropriately from the Russian perspective, the term for the region is Pridniestrovie, which means “before the Dniester.” Although in Romanian nationalist imagination Transnistria lies beyond historic “Romanian lands,” the reality is that many Moldovans had lived in this region since well before its Russian occupation. The population statistics from the last Imperial Russian census of 1897 offer strong indication of how ethnically mixed both Bessarabia and Transnistria were, although it is difficult to be precise for Transnistria because it was not a province onto itself at this time but rather part of the Kherson Gubernia. Transnistria only became a bounded political entity in 1924 with the creation of the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) within the Ukrainian SSR: the Soviet census of 1926 was the first evidence of a specifically “Transnistrian” populace because the territory had before been part of the larger Kherson gubernia and no separate statistics existed until that year.

The MASSR, at only 8,429 square kilometers (smaller than Rhode Island), accounted for only 2% of Ukraine’s total land mass and population. Like Bessarabia, Transnistria had never been the center of any regional or even local power—it had always been peripheral; a borderland of other powers including the Ottoman Empire, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire, and in the interwar years the Soviet Union. Like other borderlands of Eastern Europe, it was tremendously diverse in terms of ethnic composition and languages spoken, although the overwhelming majority of the population professed Eastern Orthodox Christianity. This was similar to Bessarabia, except for the majority nationality: the creation of an autonomous republic was justified on the basis of a Moldovan majority population, but the majority population was in fact Ukrainian, especially after the extension of MASSR territory deeper into Ukraine in 1926. Out of a total population of 572,339 in the MASSR in 1926,

Moldovans comprised 30.13%, Ukrainians 48.49%, Russians 8.54%, and Jews 8.48%.¹²¹

Additional censuses in 1930¹²² and 1936 noted similar population distributions except for a decrease in the Jewish population and an increase in the numbers of Russians and Moldovans.¹²³

By the 1939 census, the Ukrainian population had risen to form the overall majority while the Moldovan population decreased slightly and comprised 28.54%. Significant demographic change came also in the influx of Russians into the region, whose number increased to 10.23% by 1939, but especially in the even more dramatic out migration of Jews from the MASSR into the larger urban centers of the Soviet Union, a wider trend in Soviet Jewish life in the interwar years. Jews were only 6.18% in 1939, representing a population drop from 48,868 in 1926 to 37,035 in 1939.¹²⁴ A full quarter of MASSR Jews left in half a generation.

Initially, the capital of the autonomous republic was located in Balta because the Tiraspol was too close to the border and insecure. The government was eventually moved to Tiraspol in 1931, largely because Balta—located further inland from the Dniester River on territory added to the MASSR in 1926—contained too few ethnic Moldovans to justify housing the republic capital there. After 1924, the local party propaganda aimed at constructing Tiraspol as the heart of the republic was intense; it had to become the most industrialized and culturally leading city, even though this was not easy since it had been devastated between 1914 and 1920 and had become a backwater. Birzuli was the most important industrial town and Balta was the local trade

¹²¹ *Vsesouznaia perepis' naseleniia 1926 goda*. Moskva. Izdanie TsSU Souza SSR, 1929, t. 13 (Ukraine), as cited in Oleg Golushchenko, *Nasel'eniie Moldavskoi ASSR (1924-1940 gg)*, (Chişinău, 2001), 43. These numbers are a bit different from the party's at the outset of the MASSR at the end of 1924: then the Jew and Russians were considered to represent 11% of the population each, f. 49, op. 1, d. 6, l. 13.

¹²² Arhiva Organizatiilor Social-Politice a Republicii Moldova (Archive of Social-Political Organizations of the Republic of Moldova, henceforth AOSPRM), f. 49, op. 1, d. 1871, l. 25, Preliminary Population of the MASSR on January 1, 1930, divided by Nationality.

¹²³ *Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naeleniia 1926 goda*, Vol. 13. Moscow: Izdanie TsSU Soiuza SSR, 1929, 39-41; and AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 3997, l. 108; both as cited in King, "Ethnicity and Institutional Reform," 60.

¹²⁴ Golushchenko, 46; On Jewish urbanization in the interwar years, see Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, 2004).



Map 4. The Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.

center.¹²⁵ The importance of Tiraspol as the heart of a Moldovan Republic “built on socialist principles” was stressed by Ukrainian party leaders charged with overseeing the MASSR. By October 5, 1933, the Tiraspol Gorkom (city committee) opened a new city theater commemorating the anniversary of the MASSR and the success of Tiraspol as “a socialist city and the real center of national construction in Moldova.”¹²⁶ The establishment of Tiraspol as center was symbolically important for the Soviet regime’s control of the borderland and imposing a new socialist order being created from Moscow.

Similarly, the urban/rural dichotomy was another source of tremendous concern for Soviet leaders, who saw the preponderance of rural residency, like Romanian administrators across the Dniester, as a clear sign of backwardness. For the Bolsheviks, who carried out a

¹²⁵ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 11, l. 61.

¹²⁶ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 11, l. 62.

revolution on behalf of the proletariat, however, this overwhelmingly rural reality was especially problematic—in Romania, the national elite were focused on their own national path toward progress that maintained respect for the peasant, at least in romantic visions if not in real life, as the soul of the nation. Soviet modernization left no room for romantic notions of traditional agrarian life, nor was it wedded to service to any particular national group, at least in the 1920s. Aside from the need to show the Moldovans as significant enough to warrant a Moldovan national autonomous republic, Soviet census takers, unlike those in Romania, were not motivated to display ethnic homogeneity. Transnistria was understood as a multi-ethnic region; what was demanded and sought at great pains was homogeneity of socialist consciousness. Thus, there is reason to understand the census statistics of national composition as more accurate than those for Bessarabia taken in the same year by the Romanian government.¹²⁷

This urban/rural dichotomy in Transnistria was similar to the Bessarabian case, although the division was even more pronounced and the obvious lack of sizeable urban communities pointed to the even greater provincialism of Transnistria. In 1926, 96.5% (!) of Moldovans in the MASSR lived in areas classified as rural, while 89.4% of the Ukrainians were likewise classified. The urban centers of the MASSR were also dominated by minorities: 52.5% of all Jews in the MASSR resided in the urban centers and 40.2% of Russians did likewise, but only 10.9% of Ukrainians and 3.7% of Moldovans lived in urban centers. Similarly according to the 1930 census, only the Germans and Bulgarians, who for generations had maintained autonomous farming communities, were more rural than the Moldovans, while Jews, at just over 8.5% of the total population, represented more than 30% of MASSR urban centers:

¹²⁷ There were several Soviet censuses during the interwar years, including one in 1926 and 1939, compared to only one completed and published census in Greater Romania.

Table 1: 1930 Soviet Census results for the Moldovan Autonomous Republic

	Total	Mold.	Ukrain.	Russ.	Jews	Poles	Germ.	Bulg.	Others
Total	605,679	181,838	293,229	52,249	52,184	5002	11,301	6313	3563
Urban	89,839	6791	32,145	20,991	27,338	1417	189	75	843
Tiraspol	23,707	331	2822	12,992	6970	118	71	47	356
Balta	25,066	501	9575	4562	9901	375	1	1	150
Ananeev	19,341	4042	9786	1566	3732	77	38	4	96
Birzuli	11,487	218	6491	1390	2884	264	68	12	160
Rybnitsa	10,238	1699	3471	481	3901	583	11	11	81
Rural	515,840	175,047	261,084	31,258	24,796	3585	11,112	6238	2722
% rural	85.2%	96.3%	89%	59.8%	47.5%	71.7%	98.3%	98.8%	76.4%
% urban	14.8%	3.7%	11%	40.2%	52.5%	28.3%	1.7%	1.2%	23.6%

Demographic statistics taken from AOPSRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1871, l. 25.

By 1939, this figure had changed by only 4% for both “titular nations:” 92.5% of Moldovans and 85.6% of Ukrainians were still rural in the MASSR. Also, by 1939, only 23% of the Jews were left in rural areas in the region, again reflecting the rapid movement of Jews into larger urban areas, despite the state-sponsored efforts to resettle thousands of Jews onto agricultural land (mostly outside the MASSR).¹²⁸ Unlike in Bessarabia, where there was a significant presence of Jewish farming communities, in Transnistria rural classification for the most part meant village life in traditional Jewish occupations, although some exceptions, such as the successful Jewish tobacco growers of Dubassari, did exist.

The demographic reality in Transnistria would prove significant for the establishment of Soviet power and control of the region. Hardly any part of Soviet space in Europe was as

¹²⁸ Golushchenko, “Naselenie MASSR,” 45.

heavily rural, with the Jewish population in typical fashion being the only ethnic group that was majority urban. Even the Russian population—newcomers to these lands, arriving as administrators, architects and engineers over the course of the 19th century when the region was part of the Russian Empire—was more rural than the Jews. Of even more importance was the fact that the overwhelming majority of the population, the Ukrainians and Moldovans, more than 9 of every 10 people, lived in rural areas. The reliance of the Bolsheviks on Jews to implement policies in Transnistria would prove important.

Transnistria had been hard hit by the war, revolution, and famine. Years of shifting front lines during the civil war, followed by expulsions and pogroms at the hands of White Armies, decimated many Jewish communities of the Dniester borderland, just as it did with many others across much of the former Pale of Settlement. These pogroms increased markedly in their brutality from those that took place before. Henry Abramson noted the difference in multiples of ten—during 1881-84 Jews were killed in the tens; during 1903-05 in the hundreds, and in 1919-21 in the tens of thousands.¹²⁹ Elias Haifetz, who was in Ukraine during the revolutionary years operating the Red Cross that supported the All-Ukrainian Committee for the Victims of the Pogroms, put the number of Jewish dead at 120,000, and some estimates ran as high as 150,000.¹³⁰ Even Samuel Agurskii, a Jewish member of the Communist Party since before the

¹²⁹ Henry Abramson, *A Prayer for Government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917-1920* (Cambridge, 1999), 16.

¹³⁰ Elias Heifetz, *The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine in 1919* (New York, 1921), 180. The pogroms during these years attracted significant scholarly attention during the 1920s but then not again until the 1990s when documentary evidence became available again. Some of the other works include: S.I. Gusev-Orenburgskii, *Kniga o evreiskii pogromakh na Ukraine v 1919 godu* (Petrograd, 1921); I.M. Cherkover, *Antisemitizm I pogromy na Ukraine: k istorii ukrainsko-evreiskikh otnoshenii* (Berlin, 1923); Iosif Shekhtman, *Pogromy dobrovol'cheskoi armii na Ukraine: k istorii antisemitizma na Ukraine, 1919-1920* (Berlin, 1932) and *The Pogroms of the Ukraine under the Ukrainian Governments 1917-1921* (London, 1927). Most notable after 1991 are the edited volume *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, eds. John Klier and Shlomo Lambroza (Cambridge, 1992) and *Kniga pogromov: pogromy na Ukraine, v Belorussii i evropeiskoi chasti Rossii v period grazhdanskoi voiny 1918-1922gg: sbornik dokumentov*, ed L.B. Miliakova (Moscow, 2007). More recently, scholarship in Ukrainian has contested some of the traditional arguments of this literature, most notably the involvement of famous Ukrainian nationalist

revolution, a staunch defender of Bolshevik policies toward the Jews and the officially sanctioned historian of the Jewish workers' movement, wrote that at least during the revolutionary years, widespread displacement of Jewish civilians and the inability to resettle them with gainful employment led many toward petty trade and speculation, the very things the party proclaimed to be fighting against.¹³¹

Such widespread and staggering violence against Jews during the revolutionary era took a toll on the traditionally urban Jewish economic structure. The urban population as a whole in what would become the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) decreased during the turbulent years of war and revolution, as it did across much of the former Russian Empire. A session of the MASSR branch of *Narkomnats* in 1927 reported the terrible suffering of the national minorities during the years of the "imperial and civil war" was marked by many locales still in ruins. Thanks to the government of the MASSR, however, the report continued, things have improved economically and socially.¹³² In fact, prior to the formation of the MASSR in 1924 when the most widespread violence had ended, Soviet officials struggled to gain control this distant region. The Central Executive Committee (TsIK) of the MASSR, which helped solidify the Soviet presence along the Dniester left bank, was in part an effort to extent effective Soviet administration into an otherwise lawless area. While across the Dniester the Romanian Army instituted stability in Bessarabia (albeit brutally), in Transnistria chaos reigned until well into the mid-1920s. By 1924 when the MASSR was formed, effective administration was clearly the government's most important mission despite widespread suffering from the violent chaos and famine on the ground.

Simon Petliura, including T. Gunchak, *Petliura ta Evrei* (Kiev, 1993); S. Ekel'chik, *Tragichna storinka Ukrainskoi revoliutsii: Simon Petliura ta evreiskii pogromy v Ukrainii 1917-1920* (Kiev, 1995).

¹³¹ S. Agurskii, *Evreiskii Rabochii v Kommunisticheskom Dvizhenii, 1917-1921* (Minsk, 1926), 7-8.

¹³² AOSPRM, f. 49, op.1, d. 1162, l. 5

State administrators demanded that Jewish representatives gain complete control over Jewish life, including over the distribution of foreign Jewish assistance. In an illustrative example of Soviet efforts to assert control, very similar to what was occurring on the opposite bank of the Dniester (albeit for different ideological reasons), the Ukraine *Evobshestkom* (Jewish Social Committee—within the *Evkom*), which was responsible for maintaining state control over assistance from abroad for pogrom victims, grew increasingly uneasy between 1922 and 1923 with the apparent lack of supervision over local relief work and insisted on its own control even if this hampered assistance efforts. On January 25, 1923 it sent a circular to all Odessa Raion Committees (which included Transnistria until 1924) demanding that they “make sure to inform us of any dealings with Joint—we remind you that you are not to deal with Joint independently but only through us. We have informed them of this fact as well.”¹³³

Relief for suffering Jews was of course important, but it would have to occur on the state’s terms: on February 28, 1923 the Ukraine *Evobshestkom* informed *raion* (county) committees in these devastated regions that they should help suffering Jewish families by “sending them [the *Evobshestkom*] photos of talented children, regardless of the talent, to help these kids,” although it was not specified how they might be helped.¹³⁴ A week later, another circular to the raion committees expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of photos being sent, noting that “they understand the situation is difficult in the area of Odessa,” but they insist that every effort be made to speed-up the processing of their request in order to “keep records not only of the tragedy of pogroms in the area, but also of the positive work of children, including drawings, clay and other [artwork].”¹³⁵

¹³³ AOSPRM, f. 2670, op. 1, d. 1, l. 9.

¹³⁴ AOSPRM, f. 2670, op. 1, d. 1, l. 17.

¹³⁵ AOSPRM, f. 2670, op. 1, d. 1, l. 25.

Jewish emigration, which in this area was intense given the chaos and bloodshed on the ground, would also have to come under bureaucratic control: in March 1923 the *Evobshestkom* in Moscow sent circulars to local party committees (partkoms) notifying them that intending immigrants would now need a visa for the country they desired to go to, a visa to exit the Soviet Union, and to present transit visas for all the countries they planned to pass through en route to their destination! Furthermore, to get an international passport, intending émigrés would have to present proof of residence in the gubernia (county in pre and post-Soviet parlance) in question to the *Gubotdel* (the provincial party section) in order to receive the necessary documentation that they do not owe military service. If all was well, then the intending émigrés would have to pay 24 rubles in gold to the local section of the NKVD, understandably for the state's loss of the said person's potential productivity.¹³⁶

As Romanian Army statistics across the river reflect, however, few Jews that fled into Bessarabia bothered to do this, not only because of the chaotic urgency of flight in many cases, but also because of the extreme difficulty involved in getting the papers together given that the Soviet state had not achieved recognition or diplomatic relations with most other states. In this sense, the impossible bureaucratic demands of the state given the circumstances of the day were similar on both sides of the river. Animosity from Romania was strong because of Soviet claims to Bessarabia, and because official relations were not renewed between the two states until 1934. The *Evobshestkom* nevertheless tried to control all aspects of Jewish flight; in another circular dated May 14, 1923, it expressed concern over the “democratization” of the immigration process,

¹³⁶ AOSPRM, f. 2670, op. 1, d. 1, l. 26. Emigration procedures addressed emigration to various destinations, including Argentina and Chile, as well as the USA; they addressed restrictions concerning departing the Soviet Union through particular ports, such as Riga; finally they warned local party committees to make clear to intending emigrants that the United States was now effectively closed to those departing from “Russia,” the quota already filled for the year by March.

noting that American families were sending documents directly to their families in the desperate regions rather than going through the Soviet administration.¹³⁷

Evobshestkom circulars to local committees were also clear about the importance of information collection and control. The Odessa *Evobshestkom* demanded that local party affiliates take better accounting of Jewish children's homes and report at least twice monthly on their level of supplies and numbers of children there.¹³⁸ The *Evkom* presidium in Moscow called for detailed reports about the number of Jewish associations formed in previous years, including numbers of workers and amount of funds brought in.¹³⁹ Most vehemently, the presidium warned they were aware that foreign Jewish associations had been conducting local inquiries about Jewish circumstances in the peripheral areas of upheaval, and reminded local affiliates that it was their duty to carry out policies based on information at the center, not the other way around. Only the Okrug committees and at their discretion the raion committees would have authority to devise policies and initiate distribution of assistance to victims.¹⁴⁰

Control of information was pivotal to establishing complete control of the region, and the *Evkom* was reflecting the party demand to complete control of information about circumstances within the Soviet Union to the outside world. On May 3, 1923, for example, a circular to Odessa raion committees expressed great displeasure with the fact that independent of *Evobshestkom* control, local affiliates had provided information about Jewish circumstances to Joint, which had written about how Jewish life in the provinces was affected by pogroms. They reminded the local affiliates that Jewish correspondents in "Der Emes" and "Komfon," state-sanctioned and controlled Yiddish-language newspapers, were working to present a clear picture both in order to

¹³⁷ AOSPRM, f. 2670, op. 1, d. 1, l. 33.

¹³⁸ AOSPRM, f. 2670, op. 1, d. 1, l. 24, March 3, 1923.

¹³⁹ AOSPRM, f. 2670, op. 1, d. 1, l. 27, April 2, 1923.

¹⁴⁰ AOSPRM, f. 2670, op. 1, d. 1, l. 29, April 12, 1923.

secure assistance from ORT and other philanthropic organizations while also seeking to fight Soviet enemies. Disorganization did not help, so they vehemently demanded, in repetition of past circulars, that all information about local conditions be communicated to the central *Evkom* office.¹⁴¹ The Tiraspol *Evkom* office was warned on May 2, 1923 that packages sent from America would have to be sent through the Odessa office and not directly to the families in the provinces.¹⁴²

Finally, there was the question of state finance. The All-Ukraine *Evobshestkom* had earlier in 1923 informed local party committees that Joint donations would be taxed at a rate of 21%.¹⁴³ Clearly not enough collection of such funds was taking place and the Moscow *Evkom* presidium was angry with this by the Spring of 1923. On May 3, 1923, it scolded raion committees that they were not sending the necessary share of foreign assistance to the presidium, calling this “unacceptable.” Local Jewish committees were warned that the *Evkom* survived on foreign remittances (!) and that failure to send assistance up the chain could jeopardize the entire operation. To remedy this state of affairs, *partkoms* would now be required to submit daily accounts of their activities rather than the previous norm of weekly accounting.¹⁴⁴ As with education, *Evobshestkom* directives from the central organs to the outlying regions make clear the priority of Jewish administrators within the young Soviet state—the most important thing was to establish state control (and the *Evkom*’s indispensability to the bureaucracy in doing so); helping suffering Jewish families would be relegated to secondary status. Thus, despite the fact that much of state policy was being executed through Jewish administrators, in sharp contrast to the circumstances in Romania where Jews were not invited to perform important tasks of state

¹⁴¹ AOSPRM, f. 2670, op. 1, d. 1, l. 31.

¹⁴² AOSPRM, f. 2670, op. 1, d. 1, l. 30.

¹⁴³ AOSPRM, f. 2670, op. 1, d. 1, l. 10, January 26, 1923.

¹⁴⁴ AOSPRM, f. 2670, op. 1, d. 1, l. 32.

administration, the initial impact of the expansion of state power into the Dniester borderland was remarkably similar for lower-class Jews. For many Jews in positions of authority, faith in socialism as espoused by Bolshevik leaders was mixed with the opportunity to improvement of their own lot and that of their families.

But aside from the extension of effective state institutions to all peripheral regions of the western borderlands plagued by violence and chaos, the area along the Dniester River was of particular political interest to Soviet planners. As justification for more efficient Soviet control of the area, leaders at the All-Ukraine *Narkomnats* declared the need to recognize the national rights of the ethnic Moldovans living in the area. This part of southwestern Ukraine was given the status of an autonomous republic in 1924 and called the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.¹⁴⁵ The move was part of the new policy of *korenizatsiia*, “nativization,” or “indigenization,” that was initiated at the Twelfth Party Congress of April 1923. On October 12, 1924, Ukraine *Narkomnats* Chairman V. Chubar stated before the Ukrainian Communist Party Central Executive Committee (CEC) that the MASSR would be comprised of about 400,000 people, including some 58% Moldovans. This was already an exaggeration of the Moldovan population in 1924, but after Moscow pressured the Ukrainian CEC to extend the MASSR border on September 29, 1926, the Moldovan population was diluted further.¹⁴⁶ As in Romanian Bessarabia, state censuses reflected political interests first and demographic reality second.

The reasons for the formation of the MASSR were several-fold, serving both Soviet foreign policy objectives and internal issues relevant to those living in the region. The

¹⁴⁵ In Russian the name for the region is Moldavia, as are the people and the language called Moldavians and Moldavian, the latter in opposition to Romanian. In deference to the name in Romanian that is used presently and was used historically to describe the Kingdom of Moldova of Stephan Cel Mare and other medieval kings, I will use the name Moldovan throughout.

¹⁴⁶ Golushchenko, “Crearea Republicii Autonome Sovietice Socialiste Moldoveneshti,” in *Revista de Istorie a Moldovei*, 1997, no. 3-4, 76.

nativization campaign was supposed to fight against Russian chauvinism and institute more equal and humanitarian relations with Russia's neighbors, as well as to maximize Moscow's influence in the non-Russian periphery by "restructuring recruitment policies in the party and state organs and reorganizing local organs of power to reflect the multinational character of the Soviet state."¹⁴⁷ Moscow leaders hoped also to increase institutional efficiency and training of local cadres by allowing training in their own languages (which would also raise the cultural level of the peoples on the periphery) in order to solidify support for the revolution among local peasants who were feared to be skeptical to Bolshevik ideas.

The Soviet government wished also to create an institution that would facilitate the penetration of Soviet propaganda into the Kingdom of Romania, in the hopes of fomenting a socialist revolution there.¹⁴⁸ A special "Bessarabian Bureau" was created and headquartered in Odessa for this purpose soon after the Romanian annexation.¹⁴⁹ In addition, a supposedly non-government "Salvation of Bessarabia" organization had existed in Odessa since early 1919.¹⁵⁰ It was precisely because of Soviet propaganda goals in Romania and the Balkans beyond that an autonomous republic, rather than an autonomous region, was set up along the Dniester's left bank. Autonomous regions were not granted their own constitutions or a sense of quasi-statehood. Soviet leaders felt that such elements, granted to the MASSR, could better spread pro-Soviet, anti-Romanian propaganda.¹⁵¹ They were willing to pay for the extra level of bureaucracy: at initial budgetary meetings, TsIk members calculated and reported to superiors that they expected a budgetary shortfall of at least 500,000 rubles annually for several years for

¹⁴⁷ King, "Ethnicity and Institutional Reform," 60.

¹⁴⁸ King, *The Moldovans*, 63-88.

¹⁴⁹ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 46, ll. 42-50; The Romanian Siguranța confiscated letters addressed to the "Bolshevik Communist Committee of Chișinău" noting the need for the Odessa Bessarabian Bureau to support agent Dumitru in Chișinău in "our efforts to spread propaganda among Romanian soldiers and the general population."

¹⁵⁰ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 46, l. 89.

¹⁵¹ Galushchenko, "Crearea Republicii Autonome," 65-82; see also King, *The Moldovans*, 60.

the MASSR, especially as they fully expected that they would need to support refugees that would continue to traverse across the border.¹⁵² The willingness of the Soviet bureaucrats to accept and plan for refugee needs stands in stark contrast to the way the problem was dealt with on the Romanian side of the border. The creators of the MASSR also sought to ensure that the Bessarabian question would continue to be a difficult issue for Romanian diplomats at the League of Nations. Finally, the “Moldovanization” campaign was not simply the putting into action by local politicians and intellectuals of a policy laid out entirely in Moscow, but the result of the convergence of Soviet policy and local mobilization.¹⁵³ Charles King argues that the eventual abandonment of the *korenizatsiia* (indigenization) campaign, at least in Moldova, had as much to do with the failure of local political elites to improve political and economic efficiency to meet Bolshevik expectations as with the broader turn away from national affirmative action policies because of “right deviations” during the late 1920s.¹⁵⁴

The MASSR was unusual in that its Moldovan population, the autonomous region’s titular nationality as far as the state was concerned, was more numerous across a hostile Soviet border that remained permeable despite efforts by both regimes to close it. Thus, its very existence, at least as a semi-autonomous political entity, was justified only through transnational action to return the “Moldovan people” to their motherland. The Romanian categorization of Moldovans as Romanians was stridently rejected, so much so that a Cyrillic-based Moldovan, as opposed to the Latin-based Romanian that had been constructed by Romanian intellectuals in the 19th century, was created for Moldovan speakers and taught in Soviet Moldovan state schools.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1, l. 2.

¹⁵³ King, *The Moldovans*, p. 63.

¹⁵⁴ King, “Ethnicity and Institutional Reform,” p. 70.

¹⁵⁵ This was actually not so unnatural, given that Bessarabia, having been annexed by Russia prior to the pro-Latinization nationalist campaign of Romanian intellectuals during the 19th century, had never changed to the Latin script from the Cyrillic that all Romanian speakers had inherited from the Eastern Orthodox Church. For more on this, see Haynes, “Historical Introduction,” 91.

Journals, such as the literary journal *Moldova Literară*, were published in this Cyrillic Moldovan while Romanian was banned, although Soviet cultural planners went back and forth between the two alphabets over the course of the interwar years.¹⁵⁶ Monthly editions of the Moscow-published *Krasnaia Bessarabia*, the official mouthpiece of the Soviet government on the Bessarabian question, always began with the slogan “Romanian occupiers, hands off Bessarabia!”¹⁵⁷ The journal was the most virulent and consistent condemner of “Romanian bourgeois imperialism” and sought to construct a Soviet Moldovan identity in contradistinction to the Romanian one across the river. In many ways the Soviet project mimicked the nationalist discourse from Bucharest that sought to convince Bessarabian Romanian speakers of their unquestionable Romanian credentials.¹⁵⁸ MASSR Jews were over-represented as editors of and contributors to these journals, as they were more broadly in Soviet Moldovan nation building. The ethnicity of the top party position in the MASSR, the chair of the Moldovan oblast party committee, is telling: of 11 different chairmen between 1924 and 1940, 5 were Jews and not a single one was an ethnic Moldovan (3 Russians, 2 Ukrainians, 1 Armenian), reflecting not only the state’s effective use of Jews to implement its policies in the borderlands of the former Pale, but also the Machiavellian use of the nationalities question to fulfill other party aims.¹⁵⁹

Conclusion

As in many parts of the new Soviet state, in the southwestern border region of interwar Ukraine that became the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, Soviet leaders sought

¹⁵⁶ *Moldova Literară* #2 (12), February, 1929. On the history of Soviet language policies in the MASSR, see King, *The Moldovans*, 64-70.

¹⁵⁷ *Krasnaia Bessarabia*, #7-8, July-August, 1930.

¹⁵⁸ The best work on this question is Charles King’s *The Moldovans*.

¹⁵⁹ Kyryl Vasilievich Stratievski, “Parteinaia elita Moldavskoi SSR, 1924-1940,” in *Moldova Academic Review*, No.1, 2002 (electronic version).

to expand the reach of Soviet institutions and political culture by integrating all national minorities, not just Jews, within the Communist project. As a border region and a launching platform for Soviet socialist propaganda into the Balkans, the MASSR was closely monitored to ensure ethnic and national harmony in the project of creating a new Soviet citizen, a project that included the transformation of the Jew from traditional into modern, or more specifically, modern Soviet. Yet, as an administrative part of Soviet Ukraine, the MASSR was subject to the same centrist policies that governed the rest of Soviet Ashkenazic Jewry. Just as Dniester Jews on the left bank slowly assimilated into broader Soviet culture, they participated in the more narrow project to undermine Romanian claims to Bessarabia, which earned Jews in Bessarabia growing animosity from Romanian administrators who were able to scapegoat Jewish communist proclivities (which were tiny compared to the growth of Zionism, Yiddishism, and the maintenance of Jewish religious tradition) rather than suffer public blame for often corrupt, brutal and destructive policies. Some Jews took active part in Soviet state building because they had internalized Soviet policy objectives out of faith in the communist ideal; some sought to remove the political distance between themselves and their families and relatives across the Dniester; some did it out of nostalgia for their own pre-revolutionary past.

Both state-building projects had powerfully ruptured traditional Jewish life, the chief difference being only that in Bessarabia the road toward exclusion of Jews quickened pace as state policies increasingly discarded Jewish interests, particularly as the understanding of the Jews as outsider and/or foreigner grew and hardened with the development of racially-inspired theories of social engineering. In Soviet Transnistria certain Jewish interests were effectively co-opted within the broader aims of Soviet modernity and it was primarily Jews themselves in the service of the state and party that undermined traditional Jewish life, bringing economic

dislocation and ruin together with war against religion and traditional Jewish communal institutions that had been the source of autonomy for centuries. The specific changes are the subjects of the next chapters. What is clear, however, is that the histories of Bessarabia and Transnistrian Jewry were intricately linked: Dniester Jews cannot be understood in one national paradigm, for their political and social reality traversed the Dniester River and affected the shape of Jewish life on each bank.

Chapter 2

Under a New Roof: Hope and Disappointment in Post WWI Bessarabia

In many respects, there was little opportunity for constructive relations between Romanian leaders and Romanian Jews, particularly in the newly acquired territories. There was a fundamental conflict of interests between Romanian and Jewish nationalist agendas. Jewish political interests stood to gain nothing from the state goal of bringing together all members of the understood Romanian ethno-nation. Additionally, for Bessarabian Jews their province was a land noted for its multi-ethnicity and relative cultural autonomy, often simply because the territory had always been a distant provincial land where the reach of the Russian Imperial government was limited. Bessarabia had remained throughout the 19th century outside the Romanian nationalist awakening,¹ and most of its local politicians were not looking to Romania as homeland when Romanian troops arrived. In the minds of its ethnic minority population, officially more than half its residents in 1897, Bessarabia was a provincial place where cultural autonomy was possible and where much of their identity beyond family and faith was tied to locality, such as their town of residence. Recalling his childhood in interwar Benderi, Victor Kucherenko notes clearly that the arrival of Romanian state control was strange for residents because they had always considered themselves as residents of Benderi before subjects of the Russian Tsars—becoming subjects of the Romanian crown was equally, if not more so, alien to them.²

Furthermore, many of its people perceived their identity in numerous ways that were usually not at all in accordance with the desires Bucharest politicians who sought the

¹ Rebecca Haynes, “Historical Introduction,” 86-92.

² Victor Kucherenko, *Bendery: zhyzn’ tamu nazad...* (Benderi, 1998), 11.

implementation of a secure ethno-national, indeed increasingly racial, Romanian order. This is made abundantly clear when one examines the Bessarabian police records of citizens' own petition for citizenship in Greater Romania in 1922.³ There was no clear pattern for national self-identification for local Romanian speakers, much to the chagrin of Romanian administrators: Ion Greico (file 199) declared himself Moldovan while Fidusia Manolachi (143) declared herself a Bessarabian by nationality. Nicolae Chivula (208) declared himself Bessarabian by nationality, and below for the second listing amended this to "Romanian Bessarabian." A more educated man, a member of a liberal profession, Gheorghe Crudu (212) declared himself Moldovan twice, obviously consciously and deliberately. Zinovia Margoci (219), a day worker, and Nicolae Harnocu (220), who also described himself as a "lucrator" by profession (a worker, but in language that betrayed his poor knowledge of Romanian), did the same. Iulian Lebedev (214), a worker, skipped nationality at the top of the form, and below wrote "Orthodox" for religion and "Romanian Christian" for nationality. Vichenița Gorodev (215) considered herself Catholic by religion, but also wrote "Romanian Catholic" under nationality. Marea Lev (223, possibly a converted Jew) wrote Moldovan in both spaces for nationality. Vasili Munteanu (226) wrote "Orthodox" and "Romanian Christian" for nationality in different places on the declaration form. Marfa Efremovna Banah (508) wrote Orthodox for nationality and Christian for religion. Taken together, it was clear that local residents by no means displayed the kinds of national leanings that were considered desirable for "good Romanians."

In fact, Russians, Germans and Ukrainians had an easier time declaring their nationality and being firm on Orthodoxy as religion, while declaring "subject" to Romania for citizenship. The Moldovans had the most difficulty subscribing to the state category of Romanian nationality; clearly many knew nothing about this, but it meant very little to them or they

³ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 256, ll. 1-597.

disagreed with the assertion even when they knew more. The process of creating a nationally-decipherable, ethnically legible space in Bessarabia, i.e. the process of getting people to understand and internalize state-created and sponsored categories by which their identity could be marked, would be a long and arduous one, especially for members of the minorities who challenged the new regime's national order. This challenge was unavoidable in numerous spheres of life where the imposition of a Romanianization policy stepped on the local multi-ethnic reality. For example, the establishment of Romanian rule in the southern Bessarabian town of Cahul, founded in 1835 by Russian Governor General Fiodorov, was perhaps most keenly felt by locals through the implementation of Romanian language teaching in most of the public schools. The speed with which the change in language instruction was carried out created havoc in the schools because most children (and even many educators) did not know any Romanian, as this was a multi-ethnic area where Moldovans were not the majority. In fact, they were a tiny minority of the children attending school in the town: 1.7% of female pupils and 10.5% of male pupils were ethnic Moldovans (or Romanians as the state saw them), compared to Jews who were 49.6% of the male and 24.2% of the female pupil body.⁴ This was not the only case where the language of the minority was made the new requirement for the majority.

Jews had been very active in the economic and political life of the Russian province. Having been part of the great debates about the future of the Jewish people across the wide area of the former Pale, Jewish leaders in Bessarabia did not share a common, firm vision of a Jewish homeland in the region—but they certainly imagined widely held autonomy for Jews across Eastern Europe, including Bessarabia, which as residents they considered their home no less than for any other group of people, even though popular antisemitism was common. Confronted by state interests that repressed Jewish hopes for autonomy, Bessarabian Jewry reacted in many

⁴ Constantin Negru, *Școala Pedagogică din Cahul: pagini de istorie* (Chișinău, 2003), 16.

different ways, but what they shared was a rejection of the state-building project of the Romanian metropole when it became increasingly clear that the project left no room for Jewish autonomy. Once the values and goals of Romanianization became clear, it met resistance across a broad spectrum of Jewish society. What was important and not tremendously surprising was that the increasingly discriminatory policies of the Romanian administration over the course of the interwar years succeeded in unifying initially tremendously disparate Jewish minority interests to a considerable extent—something completely different from the Soviet situation where Jewish differences, including generational, religious, and socio-political, were successfully exploited by the state to much more successfully silence Jewish national autonomous interests.

Strength of their own tradition as well as links to Russian culture remained that intensified a feeling of otherness for Jews in Romanian society. Jewish political and cultural movements in Romanian Bessarabia, including Yiddish Diaspora revival, Orthodox religious traditionalism, socialist and communist underground activism, and Zionism from the Marxist Paolei-Tsiyon on the left to the right-wing Revisionism of Vladimir Jabotinsky on the right, resembled the pattern of Jewish cultural activism in Eastern Europe more broadly. That is to say, as in most other young and unstable interwar East European nation-states, Jewish political endeavors failed to significantly improve Jewish life or to seriously affect the persistence of the Jewish Question even in cases where there was considerable unity of national-political orientation, a state of affairs that Ezra Mendelsohn has called “the dilemma of the powerless.”⁵ Jewish cultural groups to some extent struggled against the suspicion of the local Siguranța and the intolerance of the central government in Bucharest, based on its misunderstanding of Jewish

⁵ Ezra Mendelsohn, “The Dilemma of Jewish Politics in Poland: Four Responses,” *Jews and Non-Jews in Eastern Europe* (New York, 1974), 204.

politics and a predisposition to view all Jewish political activism as communist-oriented and Soviet-inspired. By the mid-1920s not only Jewish leaders and activists but also many lower-class Jews that had until then remained outside politics increasingly were forced to personally confront the direction of Romanian state policies. Hope and faith in Jewish autonomy within a Romanian parliamentary system, where national parties represented Jewish interests, slowly gave way to increasing dissatisfaction and efforts to fight for Jewish autonomy on their own terms. This chapter will outline the political circumstances facing Bessarabian Jews and describe how Jewish politics began changing in light of Romanian state policies.

Jewish Identity and Romanian Politics: Background to Discrimination

As the Romanian Siguranța increasingly viewed Jewish cultural activity in Bessarabia through the prism of assumed communist conspiracy and a perceived anti-Romanian bias, the policies they formulated and pursued aimed at what they believed safeguarded the state's interests while containing possible problems from the Jews. Due to their fear of Jewish and Soviet influence (which for many agents became increasingly synonymous), Romanian leaders took more repressive measures in the northern newly-annexed territories and particularly in Bessarabia. Unlike in the rest of the country, where communist parties remained legal and participated in national elections until 1924, the Romanian authorities suppressed socialist and communist activity in Bessarabia almost immediately; activities of the Bund were suppressed soon thereafter.⁶ All communist and socialist organizations were closed in Bessarabia by official

⁶ Interview with Jacob Mihailovich Kopansky, November 17, 2004.

decree on November 13, 1918, within the first year of Romanian military occupation of the province.⁷ Jewish political and cultural leaders quickly felt the pressure of the new state system.

Romanian intellectuals, defining Romanian national identity on ethnic terms and increasingly on arguments of racial purity that stretched back to the conquest of Dacia by Roman legions in 101 C.E, generally saw non-ethnic Romanians in the country as foreigners.⁸ In the case of the Jews, this foreignness was especially alarming because of the widespread perception, actively spread by public officials and much of the state press, to say nothing of the right-wing, that Jews dominated the Romanian economy, particularly in the urban areas. Romanian administrators were concerned with this apparent preponderance of urban Jews and their perceived economic dominance and “control” of the Romanian, and especially the Moldovan⁹ and Bessarabian, economies. Such concerns existed not only among state officials. In November 1918, police reports noted much talk in the Bessarabian capital of impending pogroms against the Jews because of the high prices in town. Apparently, Jews held a monopoly on speculation in the minds of many Chişinău residents.¹⁰ As with many stereotypes, there was some basis in reality. According to Romanian statistics, Jews represented 7.2% of the Bessarabian population but owned 21.3% of industrial enterprises in the early 1920s. In the

⁷ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 7, l. 2; a letter from the Siguranţa Directorate in Bucharest #22829 from Nov 13, 1918 reported to police in Bessarabia and Moldova (part of pre-WWI Romanian kingdom west of the Prut) that all organizations deemed to “have links with socialist syndicates” are to be closed immediately. Surprisingly, this is not a commonly known fact in Romanian and Moldovan society—most believe 1924 was when communism was banned in the entire country, thereby maintained a national memory that state policies toward communism was justified (after initial freedom, the state sought security). This was not the case across the entire new state.

⁸ Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944* (Chicago, 2000), 4. On the construction of Romanian national identity and the imagined Roman lineage see Keith Hitchins, *A Nation Discovered: Romanian intellectuals and the idea of nation, 1700-1848* (Bucharest, 1999).

⁹ Moldovan here refers to the land West of the Prut and east of the Carpathians that together with Wallachia comprised modern Romania before WWI.

¹⁰ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 2, l. 8.

urban centers as a whole, 58.2% of industrial enterprises were Jewish-owned, or exactly three times as many as were owned by ethnic Romanians, the next most important owners.¹¹

Table 2: Rural/Urban ownership of industrial enterprises in Bessarabia, 1923

Owner's nationality	Urban communes	Rural communes	Total
Romanians	58	527	585
Russians	48	374	422
Ukrainians	1	42	43
Germans	3	24	27
Bulgarians	6	102	108
Turks	3	247	250
Jews	174	247	431
Greeks	4	17	21
Others	2	114	116
Total	299	1725	2024

Statistics compiled from *Calendarul Basarabiei*, 1923 annual edition.

Nevertheless, significant evidence exists, much of it from Romanian state and police documents, that Jewish communities faced extreme economic hardships by the mid-twenties: in 1925, as only one of many examples, Jewish orphanages and societies for the poor in Chişinău petitioned authorities and received the right to beg on city streets.¹² Jewish parts of Bessarabian towns, even Chişinău, were among the poorest—those that remember those years recall how Jews were much less likely than other residents to plant gardens or hang art on their walls, out of the traditional Jewish fear that they would have to answer to jealous neighbors should they display good living and because they had been conditioned to be prepared to leave quickly if necessary.¹³

¹¹ *Calendarul Basarabiei*, 1923. This was an annual publication in Chişinău, part of the *Cartea Românească* series. It was essentially a democratically oriented journal with some excellent informative articles on literature written by some of the major intellectual figures of interwar Romania. Nevertheless, it was clearly an official journal dedicated toward nation-building; it was packed with articles celebrating the ethnic and historical same-ness of Moldovans and Romanians; pages filled with songs and poetry honoring the Romanian nation and Romanian Bessarabia, as well as the Romanian royal family; and numerous articles denouncing the evils of Soviet propaganda; praise for the qualities of Romanian peasants, etc.

¹² ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 424, l. 40, 181; these letters from the Romanian Ministry of Public Health to the Chişinău police prefect from June 3 and September 26, 1925 allowing begging for a Chişinău Jewish orphanage and society to aid the poor in order to increase revenue by non-state means—the police would even provide assistance to ensure that as much collected funds as possible would go directly to the organizations and not to the collectors' pockets.

¹³ Interview with Dorina Shlein, April 10, 2005.

New issues at the national level compounded the problems of traditional peasant attitudes toward Jews which made Jewish daily existence often times problematic. Antisemitism had a strong tradition in Romania.¹⁴ Equal civil rights for Jews had never been granted in the Old Kingdom,¹⁵ and was in fact seen as not representing the natural desires and evolution of Romanian society but rather as an imposition from the West—which many Romanian intellectuals believed did not have Romania's best interests in mind. Romanian antisemitism changed with general European patterns: by the 1880s, the primary basis of new thinking dealt with the perceived negative impact of Jews on the romanticized peasant—the source of the true Romanian nation.¹⁶ Jews, as leaseholders and tavern-keepers were seen as “bloodsuckers of the villages,” resulting in part from the fear among Romanian intellectuals that capitalism was undermining the traditional lifestyle of the peasantry—nearly all Romanian intellectuals were strongly opposed to granting equal rights to Jews.¹⁷ Civic equality for Jews was avoided during all critical moments when the question was up for examination; the Treaty of Paris in 1858, the inclusion of Article 7 in the 1866 Constitution, at the Congress of Berlin in 1878,¹⁸ but most notably in peace talks in Paris in 1919, when Prime Minister Brătianu famously walked out of talks with the Great Powers rather than agree to Jewish rights to citizenship in the newly created

¹⁴ On Romanian antisemitism, see Leon Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology*; Carol Iancu, *Jews in Romania 1866-1919: From Exclusion to Emancipation*, translated by Carvel de Bussy (Boulder, 1996); and Stephen Fischer-Galati, “The Legacy of Anti-Semitism,” in Randolph L. Braham, *The Tragedy of Romanian Jewry* (New York, 1994).

¹⁵ This was used to describe rump, pre-1918 Romania, especially after it became the heart of Romania after the tremendous expansion after 1918.

¹⁶ This was by no means limited to Romanian intellectuals, rather it was part of most romantic thinking, from the Jules Michelet, Herder, many of the Slavophiles, Adam Mickiewicz, etc.

¹⁷ Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology*, 7. This mentality played a role in Bessarabia under Romanian military and police control—Siguranța letters sometime warn of the need to stop Jewish propagandists from getting to the rural areas where they could “poison the peasantry,” for example, f. 679, op. 1, d. 46, l. 48.

¹⁸ Carol Iancu, *Jews in Romania, 1866-1919*; for greater detail, see Andrei Căpușan, “The Romanians and the Jewish Question between 1st of June 1878 and 20th of February 1880: The Recognition of the Romanian Independence” in *The Jew in the Romanian History: Papers from the International Symposium* (Bucharest, 1996), 109-114.

Greater Romania.¹⁹ The Jewish question became intertwined with the agrarian question, the central economic problem of Romanian society before and after the First World War. Romanian intellectuals inhaled modernity through the prism of perceived foreign threat and an inferiority complex before Western Europe—xenophobia was a central element of Romanian elite culture. External foreigners such as Turks, the Russians, and Hungarians were dangerous, but it was the internal foreigner, the Greeks and the Jews, that was most menacing. Greeks had over the centuries assimilated, however, but Jews had not.²⁰ By the close of the 19th century the European intellectual climate of racial hierarchy and purity, very much consumed in Romania as well, precluded this option.²¹ The importance of the Jew in Romanian national identity formation should not be understated: the Jewish Question became in the words of Leon Volovici “a catalyst for the consolidation of nationalism and a stimulus to national awakening.”²²

The lines became particularly sharply drawn in the interwar years. Romanian politicians and intellectuals saw the accomplishment of Greater Romania as a precious and triumphant attainment after centuries of striving and deprivation, an attainment that was threatened by openly revisionist policies from the Soviet Union and from Hungary, and to a lesser extent Bulgaria. In contrast to pre-war Hungary, where the Hungarian “core nation” represented less than 50% of the population but held unparalleled cultural, economic, and political power, interwar Romania was a state where Romanians represented the clear numerical majority but

¹⁹ For a detailed account of diplomatic circumstances leading to the treaties, see N.M. Gelber, “The Problem of the Rumanian Jews at the Bucharest Peace Conference, 1918,” *Jewish Social Studies*, July 1950, Vol. XII, No. 3, 223-246.

²⁰ Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology*, 6.

²¹ There is tremendous amount of literature available on the appeal for national governments of biological definitions of racial differentiation and their pursuit through socio-biological engineering in the interwar years especially. Some of the theoretical ones include Bauman’s *Modernity and Ambivalence*; on the issue in Central and Eastern Europe see Marius Turda and Paul J. Weindling, eds., *Blood and Homeland: Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeastern Europe, 1900-1940* (Budapest, 2006).

²² Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology*, 8. For another example, prominent interwar thinker Professor C. Rădulescu-Motru noted that Romanian commercial law, while setting liberalism as its goal, contained antisemitism as its base: *Țărănismul, un suflet și o politică*, 43, op. cit. Henry Roberts, *Rumania*, 116.

held much less cultural and economic influence. Therefore, the central thrust of state modernization in the interwar years took on an ethnic flavor: not so much to integrate the powerful minorities, since their numbers were not needed as they had been in imperial Hungary, but rather to economically and culturally empower the core nation at their expense.²³ The arrival of Romanian military control (in Transylvania and Bukovina also, not only Bessarabia) clearly brought with it this ethnic frame of reference in governing: Siguranța officials were instructed to cleanse the local police of minorities, as there was a need “to enlist elements of good Romanians that will work together in the interests of the ideas of State and Nation.”²⁴ Greater Romania sought to embrace European modernism: multi-ethnicity was an intolerable ambiguity.

Following the redistribution of agricultural land by the new government immediately after the war, the interests of Romanian leaders remained fixed on agricultural improvement and affirmative action policies on behalf of ethnic Romanians, such as in business and education. Part of the special path of Romania toward national regeneration free from Western tutelage, this policy was long before the war associated primarily with the platform of the National Liberal Party, “through ourselves alone.”²⁵ While their platform was pro-industrial, it also understood the need to address immediately the pressing agrarian problem. Liberals were also nationalist—they focused on improving conditions for ethnic Romanians at the expense of the previously privileged minorities, as they saw it.²⁶ Because three-quarters of industrial labor was ethnically non-Romanian in 1930 and represented less than 10% of the labor force overall, the pro-industry

²³ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton, 2006), 70.

²⁴ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 7, l. 2. Out of a total of 187 policemen hired in Chișinău between June 1918 and August 1919, nearly all were Romanian speakers, or what the Romanian government at the time considered as ethnic Romanian, f. 679, op. 1, d. 46, l. 42-50.

²⁵ Henry L. Roberts, *Rumania: Political Problems of an Agrarian State* (New Haven, 1951), 110; Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 175; see also Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 70.

²⁶ Especially in the newly acquired territories, Romanians had always lived as second class citizens to Magyars and Germans, even when they had numerical superiority. Jews had also recently been doing better than Romanians. See Henry L. Roberts for a brief review of Liberal political principles, *Rumania*, 108-116.

Liberals were a mixed blessing for Hungarians, Germans, and Jews.²⁷ As the most urban ethnic group in Romania, and one concentrated in trade and crafts, Jews found that the pro-agricultural and ethno-culturally chauvinistic policies of Bucharest leaders were often sharply in conflict with their own interests, a state of affairs that reinforced a sense of Jewish difference.

This “Romanianism” as governing ideology gained strength in the interwar period because of the inexperience of Romanian leaders in managing a multi-ethnic society. Developed toward the end of the 19th century as an ethno-national myth centered on Christian Orthodoxy, Romanianism placed the Jews firmly outside the national margins.²⁸ Closely connected to the notion of Jew as permanent foreigner or outsider to the organic community was the trope of Jewish disloyalty that gained its greatest currency during the interwar years particularly in reference to Bessarabia, where Romanian leaders assumed Jewish support for communism and the Soviet Union in direct opposition to Romanian national interests. “When I say communist, I mean Jew,” wrote to his legionnaires Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the interwar leader of the Romanian right-wing Iron Guard movement, capturing and in fact influencing the sentiment of many Romanian intellectuals and politicians of his era.²⁹ It was a sadly paradoxical reality that both local and national leaders suspected Jews, particularly in Bessarabia, of capitalist speculation and communism simultaneously.³⁰

²⁷ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 24. For example, the Liberals were against allowing foreigners to mortgage agricultural land, a policy that impeded agricultural development in the 1920s.

²⁸ Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology*, 16.

²⁹ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *For My Legionaries: the Iron Guard* (Madrid, 1976); for more on the Iron Guard, see Radu Ioanid, *The Sword of the Archangel: Fascist Ideology in Romania*, Peter Heinegg, trans. (Boulder, CO, 1990).

³⁰ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 7, l. 8.

The “Problem” of Jewish Autonomy

Yet despite such views not only in Bessarabia but in much of Eastern Europe outside the Soviet Union, Jewish institutions persisted and in many instances thrived despite the gravest of political pressure and economic hardship. Despite rapid advances made by the Romanian state school system, autonomous Jewish education, both religious and secular, persevered and in a few cases prospered. Hassidism, very strong in Bessarabia throughout the 19th century, remained so into the interwar years and supported an established network of *hadorim* and *yeshivot*.³¹ Russian Kishinev had also been home to a strong *Hovevei Zion* movement beginning in the 1880s that began training Jewish youth for emigration to Eretz Israel and founded a network of “modernizing heders” called *hadarim metukanim* before 1900. The latter became the Tarbut schools with the expansion of political Zionism in the province by the early 20th century.³² In addition to the mainstream Zionist parties, *Keren Kayemet* (Jewish National Fund) and *Keren Hayesod* (United Israel Appeal) were very active in collecting funds for the purchase of land in Eretz Israel. Zionist youth movements grew strong during these years: *He-Haluts* (The Pioneers), *Ha-Shomer ha-Za’ir* (The Youth Guard), *Dror*, *Gordonia*, *Brit-Trumeldor*, *Betar*, *Maccabee*, *Hacoah*, and several others made their impact on Jewish life. Literary life blossomed in the interwar years. Over 50 Bessarabian Jewish writers, many of the best known from the shtetl of Lipcani, which Haim Nahman Bialik called the “Mount Olympus” of Bessarabian Yiddish literature, had a significant impact on the Yiddish literary scene outside their province. Bessarabian Yiddish writers led and dominated the Yiddish-language literary movement across Greater Romania; Itzik Manger, Moshe Altman, Eliezer Steinbarg, Yakov Sternberg, Yehiel Schreibman and many others migrated to Bucharest or Iași where their essays

³¹ Avigdor Shachan, *Burning Ice: The Ghettos of Transnistria*, translated by Shmuel Himelstein (Boulder, 1996), 19.

³² Ibid; Meir Dizengoff was a *Hovevei Zion* activist from Russian Kishinev before becoming mayor of Tel-Aviv.

and plays were staged in Jewish theaters.³³ Manger, the best known Yiddish poet of Greater Romania, became established in Iași while Sternberg created the Bucharest Yiddish Theater *Bist*, where his own works were set to stage side by side with those of Peretz, Sholem Aleichem and Avrahm Goldfadn. Yakov Fishman and Shlomo Hayes led the way among Bessarabian writers in Hebrew.³⁴

Politically, some Jews had turned toward revolutionary activism before the Russian Revolution in the hope of creating greater autonomy and equality, and radicalism on the left certainly did not end with the arrival of the Romanian Army. Jewish and non-Jewish radicalism sometimes was associated with Bolshevism across the Dniester and in Bessarabia, a fact which seemed to confirm the idea so common among Romanian military administrators and police that Jews in particular were Soviet conspirators. Revolutionary sentiment among Bessarabian Jews cannot simply be explained through the prism of Soviet influence, however; rather it reflected a broadly-defined hope in Jewish national-cultural autonomy held by many, coupled with romantic faith in the Bolshevik revolution as bringer of equality for the Jewish people and an end to discrimination.

The case of interwar Bessarabia was representative of the wider condition of East European Jewry during these years, although there were particularities that were specific to the region. Due to Jewish economic, social, cultural, and political difference and exclusion common to all East European societies during previous centuries, but also partly because most of the Jewish population had migrated to the region during the previous century of Russian rule, there was very little connection to Romanian culture among Bessarabian Jews. In 1918, few Bessarabian Jews spoke the language of the majority—Romanian, unlike in Poland, Hungary, or

³³ Moshe Lempster, *Evreiskii Dozhd'*, (Chișinău, 1997).

³⁴ Iancu, *Evreii Din România*, 78.

Ukraine where many Jews, if not most, knew the majority tongue. Nevertheless, given their extremely difficult relationship with the Russian Imperial authorities, many Bessarabian Jews harbored ambivalence about becoming part of Greater Romania—a feeling that was markedly less extreme than the hostility with which many Jews in Transylvania and Bukovina, the other territories acquired by Romania as a result of the Paris treaties, greeted the idea.³⁵ Some of this cautious optimism is evident in the names of Yiddish-language newspapers like “*Der Morgn*” (The Morning), “*Unzer Tsayt*” (Our Time), and “*Das Naie Lebn*” (The New Life), many of which were founded soon after the Great War’s end.³⁶

Compared to the Jews of Bukovina or Transylvania, who had enjoyed complete legal emancipation under Austro-Hungarian Imperial rule since 1867; or the Romanian Jews of the Old Kingdom, who were never granted equal rights but enjoyed greater urban concentration and economic modernization; Bessarabian Jews were the most politically immature in Greater Romania. They had never been given opportunity to share political power under Russian rule and remained disproportionally engaged in traditionally Jewish economic activities; i.e. petty trade, crafts, etc. Nevertheless, Jewish popular political movements within the Russian Imperial framework had grown rapidly in the inter-revolutionary years, between 1907 and 1917. Jewish political radicalization, largely the result of rising popular antisemitism and unwillingness on the part of the Russian government to address Jewish popular concerns, had also greatly increased.³⁷ As Zvi Gitelman has shown, during the All-Russian Constituent Assembly elections in 1917,

³⁵ For example, poetry in an article in *Der Morgn* describes circumstances in the Jewish provinces of Bessarabia in an upbeat mood, noting that life is hard but filled with good humor. *Der Morgn* #94, March 24, 1920.

³⁶ Most Yiddish dailies failed; Landau’s *Unzer Tsayt* was supported almost entirely by money from the American JDC, which is the major reason it was successful, ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 687.

³⁷ On this question see Christoph Gassenschmidt, *Jewish Liberal Politics in Tsarist Russia, 1900-1914: The Modernization of Russian Jewry* (New York, 1995); and Hans Rogger, *Jewish Policies and Right-Wing Politics in Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

Jews voted for myriad Zionist parties as well as the national parties on the left (Social Democrats) and center (Kadets).³⁸

Yet the reality of Romanian annexation—resulting in a new managing metropole in Bucharest enforcing a new political culture with new rules, goals, categories, and most importantly, a new language—left Bessarabian Jews in a state of collective political confusion until well into the late 1920s. The interwar experience of Romanian rule was a harsh political baptism for them. By all accounts, it took several years after 1918 for the Romanian takeover to feel like something relatively permanent. Bessarabian Jews seemed initially to be expecting a reversal of the post-war status quo: undercover Siguranța agents attempted to interview market Jews on numerous occasions during 1918-20 after gaining their trust and reported that most believed Bessarabia would be re-annexed by Russia, that it had no future in Romania. One agent warned of the Jewish “pentagon” he saw on a copy of the “Jewish paper” *Der Shtern* in 1920: in their desire for communism Jews had brought down the Russian provisional government in St. Petersburg he reported, and they will do the same in Romania if given the chance.³⁹ Consistent rumors about Soviet designs on Bessarabia helped fuel this sentiment—here the position of Bessarabia as a political and geographic borderland was influential to both Jewish perceptions and attitudes toward the Romanian state and vice versa. Jews that had been politically active and fought for greater freedoms under Tsarist rule had a difficult time accepting Romanian nationalist chauvinism as the outcome of years of war and revolutionary struggle; like Kogan-Bernstein they spoke about coming change in a manner that could not but be seen as subversive by Romanian police. There is ample evidence suggesting that Jewish identity was and continued to be for many lower-class Jews not something easily classifiable in the terms desired by a

³⁸ Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*, 79; see also L. M. Spirin, *Rossiia 1917 god: Iz istorii bor'by politicheskikh partii* (Moscow, 1987).

³⁹ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 7, l. 8.

modern state. According to Bessarabian police files of petitions for citizenship, Jews displayed no clear pattern for national self-identification, just like the Moldovans, although arguably not to the same extent. A Iosif Ghelam (l. 198) declared himself Moldovan by nationality and Jewish by religion; Baruh Ghelfer (l. 144) left his religion blank but declared himself a Jew by nationality, as did a Shmil Duma (147); Sara Gresner, apparently a convert, wrote Orthodox for religion and Jew for nationality (222).⁴⁰

Many continued to display the mindset of the Pale, which after 1918 can be called a transnational mindset in that they remained more interested in issues affecting their co-religionists in distant lands than those affecting the state in which they lived.⁴¹ Toward the close of the 1920s, however, more than most other ethnic or national groups in interwar Romania, Bessarabian Jews became highly politicized, especially toward Zionism, and developed, as noted by Raphael Vago, something of a siege mentality.⁴² It was not that Bessarabian Jews became Zionist during the interwar years—they already were in many cases—rather, they required some years to learn how to negotiate with a new state to institutionally express their collective political interests and perhaps more to the point, lose any faith in democratic integration into Romanian society.

Indeed, what becomes apparent through an examination of the Bessarabian Yiddish and Russian language press (with Jewish concerns being front and center in the latter also), as well as through details of meetings of various social, cultural and youth groups, is a growing sense of unease and desperation at the state of Jewish life in Romania. Theatrical performances in Yiddish across Bessarabia, carefully watched typically by Jewish agents working for the

⁴⁰ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 256, ll. 1-597.

⁴¹ The early interwar Yiddish paper *Der Yid* clearly expressed a sense of collective spiritual distance from Romania.

⁴² Raphael Vago, "Romanian Jewry During the Interwar Period," in Randolph L. Braham, *The Tragedy of Romanian Jewry* (New York, 1994), 30-32.

Siguranța, focused overwhelmingly on Jewish and to a lesser extent Russian subjects, despite state support and encouragement for Romanian-national themes.⁴³ For example, a Yiddish troupe performed J. Gordin's "Der Vilder Mentsch" several times in December 1918 and again in 1922; another performed a dance-play called "The Last Ballet Party," which included a Gypsy dance, a Mazurca. Jewish dramatists also performed an interpretation of Dostoevsky's "Idiot," but nothing, local Siguranța reports noted, from Romanian authors or depicting Romanian life.⁴⁴

Not only did Bessarabian Jews not find a home in Greater Romania, but because of their having been a part of the Russian Empire they maintained a distinctive identity separate from the other regional Jewish communities that became a part of the expanded Romanian kingdom.⁴⁵ The central interwar question for the Jews in Bessarabia, as in other newly-acquired territories of Greater Romania and, indeed, as in other young nation-states of Eastern Europe, became the extent to which they could appropriate the national identity of their host state in addition to a Jewish one, as a barometer of wider socio-economic conditions and cultural and political integration. In the case of Bessarabian Jews, this appropriation proved highly problematic. Most Bessarabian Jews arguably never considered themselves "Romanian," and by the late 1930s the Jewish minority was marginalized in national life and isolated politically to such an extent that this was no longer possible. By this point, as shown most clearly by the research of historian of Romanian Jewry Carol Iancu, Jewish institutions and leaders moved toward unity out of necessity despite vast gulfs separating their views on Jewish life in modern European society.

⁴³ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 27, l. 1.

⁴⁴ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 27, l. 27-63.

⁴⁵ Keith Hitchins, "Jewish Credit Cooperatives in Bessarabia and Integration 1920-1940," in *The Jews in the Romanian History*, 193-194.

Politics in a New House

Nevertheless, Jewish leaders did engage, often intensely, with Romanian political realities in attempting to secure for their co-religionists greater legal and civic rights, economic circumstances, and cultural autonomy. Jewish leaders from the newly annexed territories needed to adjust to a new system that spread to Bessarabia from the Old Kingdom—that is, pre-war Romania. In making decisions about the newly enlarged Jewish minority in their country, Romanian politicians referenced their own political relationship with Jews in the Old Kingdom,⁴⁶ where since 1862 the Romanian government had stayed out of internal Jewish affairs while denying Jews legal and civil equality.⁴⁷ The Jewish religion, in fact, had no legal status at all in pre-1918 Romania—it was juridically non-existent. This was not the case for the communities of Transylvania, Bukovina, and Bessarabia, which all had legal status before 1918. This legal limbo was extended to the new territories after 1918 rather than being reversed for the Old Kingdom community. In the 1920s, Jewish leaders embarked on a course to achieve legal recognition for the Jewish community along the lines of the other faiths in the country, culminating in the promulgation of the Law of Cults in 1928, which nevertheless left many Jewish issues unsolved.⁴⁸

If there was anything like a period of hope held by Bessarabian Jews for the Romanian state, it was in the early interwar years. After Romania finally signed the Minorities Treaty on December 9, 1919, then Romanian Prime Minister Alexandru Vaida Voevod made a speech in Parliament to mark the event, calling on Jews and Romanians to reconcile their past and work together to take the country toward progress and civilization. Others voiced similarly hopeful

⁴⁶ This is the term used to describe rump Romania before its vast territorial acquisitions after 1918. In marked contrast to post-1918 Romania, the Old Regat was quite ethnically homogenous.

⁴⁷ Iancu, *Evreii Din România*, 110.

⁴⁸ Iancu, *Evreii Din România*, 110-116.

future plans, including Conservative leader and former Prime Minister Alexandru Marghiloman and liberal leader Ion Duca. Even Nicolae Iorga, the greatest Romanian historian, nationalist intellectual and influential politician noted that Romania should honor all its treaty obligations even though they were accepted under pressure from foreigners. Such statements by Romanian leaders were of course closely followed by the Jewish press, particularly the *Curierul Israelit* (Jewish Messenger), the Bucharest-based, Romanian language Zionist daily from which political news from the capital was often re-printed in Jewish papers throughout the country in Yiddish, Hebrew, Hungarian, Russian, and German.⁴⁹

As Romanian administrative control solidified in the years after the takeover, Bessarabian Jews struggled to understand the nature of the new government. State control over the economy proceeded intently but at first carefully; quicker and bolder were state propaganda campaigns initiated for the formation and spread of national myths to foster ethno-national pride in Romania among the residents of the newly annexed territories.⁵⁰ The Russian language newspaper *Bessarabia*, for example, printed as its front-page article on March 24, 1919 a celebration of the one-year anniversary of the “Bessarabian-Romanian Union,” calling it “a great day that ended a historical injustice that had lasted for over a century,” when Bessarabian Romanians “had been forcefully torn from their mother country but never forgot their homeland or their brothers across the Prut.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 82.

⁵⁰ *Bessarabia*, #4, March 21, 1919; the Romanian military administration declared the establishment of a regional state monopoly in the leatherworking industry, in which Jews were dominant in the towns. They were not forced from their jobs, but were increasingly subject to state regulations that were not always favorable. Also in March 1919, a commission of the now liquidated *Sfatul Țării* began organizing a publication on the Bessarabian struggle for freedom between 1917 and 1919, and called for interested parties to send them photographs chronicling their experiences under Russian rule since 1812.

⁵¹ *Bessarabia*, #7, March 28, 1919; it is particularly telling to find such an article in the Russian language press—censorship in Romania focused on several issues of core, state interest rather than a broad ideological perspective that colored the view on all issues such as the Soviet censorship system, but newspapers that did not accept the demands of state censorship were shut down.

The Romanian state point of view as expressed through the state-censored press was often at odds with Jewish interests, feeding a sense of otherness and exclusion. For example, there was considerable news from the Soviet Union in the press during these years, much of it obviously dogmatic in its consistent anti-Soviet sentiment. Sometimes such reporting was peripheral to Jewish interests and not controversial, such as news that the Bolsheviks had lost Ekaterinoslav, which was greeted with completely unveiled glee by the Romanian-censored press.⁵² Other times the position or interpretation taken was very problematic for a Jewish audience, such as when a local article completely exonerated Symon Petliura, the anti-Bolshevik Ukrainian nationalist leader during the Civil War, of any of the anti-Semitic violence taking place in Ukraine at the time, something Jews did not accept for obvious reasons.⁵³

Increasingly more troubling for Jewish social and political life in the new state was the problem of citizenship and legal equality. Jews were allowed to participate in elections, for example, only by virtue of citizenship acquired through individual petition. Citizenship remained subject to individual petition through the signing of the Minority Rights Treaty, even though the treaty obligated the Romanian government to grant unconditional citizenship to all Romanian Jews. By July 1921, the Union of Native Jews⁵⁴ asked for and received a meeting with the Justice Minister, only to learn that not only would individual petition remain the basis for acquiring citizenship for Jews, but also that there would be a deadline for naturalization

⁵² *Bessarabia*, #8, March 27, 1919.

⁵³ *Bessarabia*, #14, April 17 (4), 1919. It was during this time that the Romanian government changed from the Orthodox Julian to the Catholic Gregorian calendar.

⁵⁴ The Union of Native Jews was founded in 1910 with the goal of combating injustice caused Jews because of their status as foreigners; see Shachan, *Burning Ice*, 4-5. The organization was renamed on February 20, 1923 the Union of Romanian Jews (URJ); this organization was led by Wilhelm Filderman and served as the intercessors of Romanian Jewry before the Romanian Government, although they most directly represented the better-off, culturally assimilated, Romanian speaking Jews of Bucharest. Its members had contacts with Romanian politicians and in some cases managed to intervene on the behalf of all Jews in Greater Romania.

demands, September 1, 1921.⁵⁵ The Union appealed to the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, members of which met with the Romanian Foreign Minister Take Ionescu in Paris on October 7, 1921. Ionescu explained that his government was dedicated to honoring the terms of the treaty and any problems would be solved by a new Constitution that the Parliament was working on, but nothing was done on this question over the course of 1922, a year of rapid political turnover at the national level.⁵⁶ The Union of Native Jews organized a congress in the capital and made public a motion in which they called for measures expediting Jewish naturalization. They also called for the legal recognition of Jewish communities, institutionalization of a Jewish cult like that of each of the other minority groups that could receive state support, and state recognition of Jewish community schools, including the granting of state-recognized diplomas—all issues for Romanian Jews.

Union leaders also voiced their strategy to politically achieve these goals for all Romanian Jews—they called on Jews not to run on separate Jewish party lists in national elections but rather vote for representatives from large, national parties that could be trusted to serve Jewish interests, which at this time meant the Democratic Party of Take Ionescu and the Peasant Party led by Nicolae Lupu. In the early 1920s, this was indeed the strategy pursued by most Jewish leaders in the new territories, although concerns were raised because some members of the influential Liberal Party led by the Brătianu family were already making anti-Semitic speeches.⁵⁷ In March 1922, eight Jews entered the Romanian Parliament for the first time: 6 deputies (of 376) and 2 senators (of 198). For the remainder of the year this Parliament and

⁵⁵ This date was not strictly enforced and citizenship petitions were submitted after this date. Romanian authorities consistently attempted to set deadlines for citizenship applications in Bessarabia but they usually were unable to enforce them due to fierce resistance. Nevertheless, the fact that a date was initially set frightened many Jews and convinced many others that the Romanian government wanted to welcome as few of them as it possibly could.

⁵⁶ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 82-83. After the resignation of a cabinet headed by General Averescu on December 13, 1921, Ionescu presided over a new cabinet that lasted only until January 17, 1922. A new one did not take office until January 22, 1923—a full year later.

⁵⁷ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 85.

much of national cultural debate became focused on the question of the new Romanian Constitution. For a time it appeared that emancipation and autonomy promised by Article 7 of the Minority Rights Treaty would be enshrined in the new document, but after the January 1923 assumption to power by the National Liberal Party the conversation about the Jews turned toward limitations. The status of Jews in Greater Romania became codified in the Constitution of March 28, 1923 by Article 133: “the Jews that on August 2, 1914 resided in the Old Kingdom and that claimed no other citizenship are recognized as full Romanian citizens without any formality.”⁵⁸ This measure intentionally excluded from citizenship tens of thousands of Jews, and was a significant step back not only from the Minority Rights Treaty but even from the Decree Laws that regulated Jewish legal status in years prior. Jewish deputies in Parliament refused to vote for the new Constitution.

Because the newly ratified constitution did not provide any legal basis for managing questions of citizenship in the annexed territories, the Parliament drafted laws governing the attainment and loss of Romanian citizenship for Jewish residents there. An initial draft in October 1923 was supplanted by the ratification on February 23, 1924 of what became known to Bessarabian Jews as simply the Mârzescu Law, after the last name of the new Justice Minister. The previously established concept of “residency” became replaced by that of “indigenoussness,” which allowed those in the annexed territories to individually apply for Romanian citizenship if they could prove that their parents were born or had residency in the Old Kingdom. However, “citizens of the former Russian Empire residing on Bessarabian territory” were required to prove that they themselves were residents there on or before March 27, 1918 (the date of the Act of Union with Romania). A special law was made for Jews, specifying that Jews in any of the

⁵⁸ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 88-90.

annexed territories would be governed in accordance with Article 133 of the Constitution on this question, i.e. they would have to prove residency as of August 2, 1914.⁵⁹

The drafters of the law were clearly interested in limiting application for citizenship in general, but for Jews especially. Minister Mârzescu later justified this project by stating that the state needed to control the populations of the annexed territories, excluding foreigners “that did not have a right to Romanian nationality.”⁶⁰ By these he meant refugees from Russia, whom all public officials knew were mostly Ukrainian Jews.⁶¹ The Mârzescu Law continued to govern questions of citizenship for Bessarabian Jews until more restrictive laws were introduced in 1938. The Union of Romanian Jews (URJ)⁶² and other Jewish politicians repeatedly and unsuccessfully made attempts to change the law; attempts that Carol Iancu argues were not counter-productive despite total failure because they likely prevented the introduction of even more restrictive legislation. Jewish hopes for a modern and inclusive Romania where they enjoyed equal rights were buried by the one-two punch of the new Constitution and the Mârzescu Law, which together made clear that Romanian politicians desired to limit the number and rights of Jews in Romania and were seeking as much as possible to circumvent the promises made in Paris on behalf of their state. In this sense 1924 was a turning point for Bessarabian Jews, as hope and apprehension increasingly and steadily gave way to fear and radicalization.

Economic Conditions & Jewish Institutions: Credit Cooperatives

The pressures on Jewish life were not only political. The Jewish economy was devastated during the Great War, and it never recovered throughout the interwar years largely

⁵⁹ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 97-98.

⁶⁰ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 96.

⁶¹ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 96-99.

⁶² This was the renamed Union of Native Jews, under the new leadership of Wilhelm Filderman.

due to the violent readjustment that well-established markets had to endure because of the drawing of national borders that were much more jealously guarded than under pre-war multi-national empires.⁶³ Jewish socio-economic conditions in Bessarabia resembled those of the Tsarist Pale in that a few Jewish magnates were interspersed among a majority of Jewish poor, an over-preponderance of whom remained in the artisan and craftsmen fields that increasingly subsisted by day labor and begging. But there is no question that economic circumstances, at least in Bessarabia, were worse in terms of direct comparison: according to statistics compiled by the Chişinău branch of the JDC, Jews represented nearly 25% of all Bessarabians classified as having “occasional and accidental work.”⁶⁴ The promising conditions that had attracted Jews to Russian Bessarabia in the 19th century were clearly history.

Corruption added to the economic malaise. Many Romanian officials sent to Bessarabia were corrupt and wanted to make a quick profit during their tenure, and often badly damaged the local economy in the process.⁶⁵ Despite the deep anxiety felt by Romanian politicians toward Bessarabia as the most backward region of Romania in terms of living standards, health, literacy and Romanian national sentiment, Bucharest sent its most inept administrators there. Nor was this unique to Romania, according to Joseph Rothschild:

Yet another experience shared by the three states [Poland, Yugoslavia, and Romania] was the existence of a particularly backward, refractory, and incendiary region (Bessarabia, Macedonia, or Eastern Galicia and the *kresy*) whose problems were then compounded by its use as a bureaucratic exile for incompetent, corrupt, sadistic, or politically out-of-favor administrators.⁶⁶

⁶³ Bessarabian Peasant Party member and later nationally prominent politician Pantelimon Halippa related during these years how traumatic it was for local business interests to suffer being cut off from the traditional Russian market, a fact that was perhaps only more true with the local Jews. See Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 92.

⁶⁴ Jacob M. Kopansky, *Blagatvoritelnye Organizatsii Evreiev Bessarabii v Mezhoeniy Period, 1918-1940* (Chişinău, 2002), 20.

⁶⁵ Halippa, among others, desired autonomy for Bessarabia as the only means to get qualified people into administrative positions that would look to the benefit of their local constituents. Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 92.

⁶⁶ Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars: A History of East Central Europe*, vol. 9 (Seattle, 1974), 286.

Institutionalized corruption was the norm in interwar Romania; as witnessed by the wild swings in election results that could not possibly reflect actual voting trends of the populace. But corruption at lower levels was even more endemic, and generally more debilitating the further from the capital one ventured. Bessarabia was among the worst regions: in 1929, the American Committee on the Rights of Religious Minorities conducted surveys in Bessarabia and found that corruption was rampant and deeply imbedded. Representatives were told openly by one Chişinău civil servant, for example, that minority rights was a question of bribery—the civil servant needs money while the minority applicant needs the protection of the state; this is simply a circumstance of supply and demand.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, in cases pertaining to Jewish questions, especially Jewish petitions for naturalization, Romanian bureaucrats were particularly negatively predisposed. A corrupt bureaucracy that was typically perceived as malicious among Bessarabian Jews did nothing to quell Jewish apprehension about life in Greater Romania.

Romanian state policies toward minorities in the newly acquired territories caused additional havoc in other ways also. Citizenship rights were denied to thousands of Jews, many of whom had lived in Bessarabia all their lives, because they could not prove fulfillment of residency requirement due to their inability to produce many documents demanded by the Romanian “Committee of the Three” (responsible for investigating local citizenship claims) that had been lost during the war. Many others lost rights to petition for citizenship because they missed set deadlines, usually not knowing about them.⁶⁸ Without citizenship, legal work was difficult to maintain and deportation an increasingly looming reality. In addition, tens of thousands of Jewish refugees from Ukraine and Poland were also mostly denied citizenship, and without means for subsistence they threatened to overwhelm Bessarabian Jewish philanthropic

⁶⁷ American Committee on Religious Rights and Minorities, *Roumania, Ten Years After* (Boston, 1929), 42, op. cite Iancu, *Evreii Din România*, 102.

⁶⁸ Iancu, *Evreii Din România*, 104-105.

organizations. During the early interwar years there was considerable help for the refugees from the JDC, but this assistance eventually diminished, and in any case Joint later ran into problems with the Romanian government and its efforts became more difficult. In 1935, JDC leaders attempted to implement “Jewish colonization in Bessarabia,” whereby Jews would move to farmland and take up agriculture, much like the hope of Jewish communists in Soviet Birobidzhan and socialist Zionists in Palestine. Romanian leaders did not take kindly to this, and some wanted to forbid Joint from further functioning in Romania. At a session of the council of ministers on Saturday, Nov 11, 1935, Interior Minister Inculeț made clear that instead of working toward philanthropy, the Joint colonization project attempts to spread Jews around Bessarabia, and thus its functioning must be stopped. Minister of Agriculture Sassu added that because of this organization, a lot of Romanian land has fallen into the hands of Jews.⁶⁹ The work of the JDC was made more difficult but they were not driven out of the country until the war.

Unlike many Jews in the other newly annexed parts of Greater Romanian such as Transylvania or Bukovina, who had known the benefits of relying on an enlightened, relatively benevolent Imperial system, most Bessarabian Jews had never considered the Russian state as protector and defender of their rights and livelihood. The interwar experience of violence and discrimination under Romanian military administration in Bessarabia confirmed previously developed prejudices that underscored their wariness of the modern state. In the early years of Romanian rule, however, many Jewish institutions functioned with relatively mild state interference (so long as they were not suspected of communism) and allowed to establish the institutional framework necessary to support a modernizing and increasingly fractured Bessarabian Jewish culture. Romania was ill-equipped to provide much support to its newly incorporated residents, many of whom were in desperate need. Most leaders in Bucharest and

⁶⁹ *Bessarabskoe Slovo* #3898, November 14, 1935.

their administrators in the “newly acquired territories” had a specific pro-Romanian ethnic agenda that did not favor state aid for minorities, especially Jews. As they had in the past, Bessarabian Jews turned toward Jewish institutions, the persistence and importance of which helped build and sustain growing Jewish national separateness.⁷⁰ Local Jewish cultural institutions in Bessarabia faced tremendous strain during the interwar years and likely would not have survived if not for the considerable assistance from international Jewish funds, particularly from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, or JDC.⁷¹

Despite the presence of successful, Jewish-owned enterprises and a significant level of integration of the Jewish economy into that of the region as a whole, Bessarabian Jews maintained throughout the interwar years considerable communal and administrative autonomy, supported by economic self-reliance. Of tremendous importance in financing Jewish economic autonomy were Jewish credit cooperatives, which were self-organized trade and banking groups that pooled resources in order to provide low-interest loans to assist Jewish entrepreneurship and support communal life. In Bessarabia, Jewish credit cooperatives dated to the turn of century, when the first such organization opened in Russian Kishinev (Chişinău) in 1901, followed by one in Bălţi in 1907.⁷² Following legal reforms that eased restrictions on forming cooperatives without a majority Christian membership in 1904-05, more credit cooperatives were opened in 1906, 1907, and 1908, reaching 35 by 1910.⁷³ In addition to the box tax and individual contributions of wealthy Jews, Jewish credit cooperatives had been an important means in the

⁷⁰ Kopansky, *Blagatvoritelnye Organizatsii Evreiev*, 15.

⁷¹ Kopansky, *Blagatvoritelnye Organizatsii Evreiev*, 17.

⁷² Pronounced “Belts;” Moshe Ussoskin, *Struggle for Survival: a history of Jewish credit co-operatives in Bessarabia, Old-Rumania, Bukovina, and Transylvania*, (Jerusalem, 1975), 7; and Keith Hitchins, “Jewish Credit Cooperatives in Bessarabia,” 193.

⁷³ Ussoskin, *Struggle for Survival*, 22.

Russian Empire of maintaining communal, cultural and religious life that remained largely unacculturated into the Russian milieu up to and through the revolution.

Credit cooperatives were the central means for Jewish economic growth in an imperial system that developed late in terms of modern finance and banking, and even then discriminated against the middle and lower classes and certain minority populations, including Jewish artisans and craftsmen.⁷⁴ Jewish businessmen thus often had to approach private lenders who typically charged 18-24% per year in interest.⁷⁵ In such a business climate, Jewish credit cooperatives filled a very necessary and important economic niche, as evidenced by their rapid growth throughout the Russian Empire after 1905 once legal restrictions were eased. According to pre-revolutionary cooperative member Moshe Sharand, Jewish credit cooperatives spread rapidly in Bessarabia, reaching almost 38,000 members in the province by 1913, with more than 5,000 in Kishinev alone.⁷⁶

Credit cooperatives were run with a significant spirit of philanthropy in addition to profit making. In times of loss and difficulty, such as the war years, cooperative members often agreed to write off much of their capital to help those that could not repay their loans, sometimes as much as 90%. In addition, emergency funds were used to bail out cooperatives that were threatened with financial ruin.⁷⁷ The Jewish Colonization Association (ICA) had begun working with Jewish agricultural colonies in Bessarabian in 1899, but they increasingly relied on cooperatives after the turn of the century to distribute assistance, and this would be true with the JDC during the years of Romanian rule as well. Credit cooperatives functioned in effect as the

⁷⁴ On credit issues in Imperial Russia, see Peter Gatrell, *The Tsarist Economy, 1850-1917* (London, 1986), 188-191; also Harley Balzer, *Russia's Missing Middle Class: The Professions in Russian History* (Armonk, NY, 1996).

⁷⁵ Ussoskin, *Struggle for Survival*, 19.

⁷⁶ Moshe Sharand, *A dritl yahrhundert yidishe kooperatsie in Bessarabie, 1901-1933* (Chisinau 1934), pp. 11-12, op. cite in Hitchins, "Jewish Credit Cooperatives," p. 194; Ussoskin, *Struggle for Survival*, 26.

⁷⁷ Ussoskin, *Struggle for Survival*, 11.

face of the Jewish economy that international Jewish aid worked with. Cooperatives were also at the heart of maintaining Jewish communal structures that, in the absence of significant state support and a weakening ability to sustain themselves by traditional means such as the box tax, sought to provide for every conceivable need for their members. Such needs included a wide array of Jewish traditional functions from schooling to health care and from burial services to famine relief. Indeed, Jewish life functioned as parallel but separate from the general socio-political life of Romanian society, although the Jewish economy in the region never grew like in the years immediately prior to WWI, and supporting Jewish communal organizations became increasingly difficult.

The chaos of WWI decimated the Jewish economy and cooperative membership with it. Jewish businesses in Bessarabia never fully recovered from the loss of traditional markets, most notably Odessa. Still, following a brief period of precariousness after Romanian annexation, membership began to grow again, helped this time by the organization—spurred by the JDC—of the individual cooperatives into an umbrella “Union of Bessarabian Jewish Cooperatives,” which was legally recognized by the Romanian government on October 14, 1920.⁷⁸ As evidence of the high hopes held by many Bessarabian Jews for Jewish life in a democratic Romania, during an electoral meeting of cooperative members in May 1920, there was significant rejoicing over the agreement to form a Union, and much discussion over the need to elect Union members to the Romanian Parliament in order to ensure furthering Jewish interests. Yet the problematic nature of such hopes was already apparent in the report on the meeting filed by the attending agent of the Siguranța, who viewed such plans as “directly against the security of the state.”⁷⁹

⁷⁸ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 5043, l. 3.

⁷⁹ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 5043, l. 39.

The statute of the Union provided for significant powers and economic levers over the individual cooperatives, which upset many older cooperative members at its founding meeting in October 1920.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, by placing Union leadership in the hands of experienced and knowledgeable economists such as Nahum Roitman and Moshe Ussoskin clearly helped steer thousands of members through the very harsh waters of the interwar East European economy, especially during the 1930s.⁸¹ A total membership of 30,000, after the traumatic revolutionary years, was the highest membership achieved in the interwar period, in 1930. After this date, economic problems and increasing discrimination led to steady impoverishment that reduced membership to 19,000 in Bessarabia by 1937.⁸² Nevertheless, the activism of cooperatives grew rapidly in the post-war years. By 1926, for example, 35 credit cooperatives made 47,130 individual and group loans valued at over 230 million lei (\$1.15 million) to Jews across Bessarabia.⁸³ Throughout these years, Jewish cooperatives remained very self-reliant or supported by international Jewish donations: only 7% of Union funds come from state subsidies.⁸⁴ The long history of credit cooperatives in Bessarabia compared to the novelty of the idea in the rest of Jewish Romania, paradoxically placed Bessarabian Jews in a leadership role in the development of the Romania-wide Jewish cooperative movement.⁸⁵ The first such

⁸⁰ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 5043, l. 3-26, Statute of the Union of Bessarabian Jewish Cooperatives. These powers included setting interest levels for all, payment and bookkeeping methods and standards, and a separate investment policy for the Union's own funds. There were 40 representatives present from 16 cooperative associations across Bessarabia.

⁸¹ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 5043, l. 27.

⁸² Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 64; Ussoskin, *Struggle for Survival*, 26.

⁸³ Ibid; Ussoskin, *Struggle for Survival*, 26.

⁸⁴ *Das Kooperativ Vort*, #2-3(92-93), February-March, 1933. The Liberal Party that was in power for most of the 1920s, while no friend to the Jews, put business interests first and sometimes helped the Union.

⁸⁵ The paradox is set in the East-West divide that ran through the country: the assimilated Jewish elite of the Old Kingdom (especially Bucharest), and to a lesser extent Transylvania and Bukovina, looked upon the Yiddish-speaking, traditional Jews of especially Bessarabia very much the way French or German Jews looked upon the *ostjuden* more generally.

cooperatives outside Bessarabia opened only in 1925 in Bucharest, although they developed very rapidly during the late 1920s.⁸⁶

In addition to small business loans, the cooperatives, known to Bessarabian Jews as “kasses,” had special programs to help artisans purchase equipment necessary to manufacture their wares, and even a program to help artisans sell their products. With the help of international Jewish funding, mostly from the JDC, the cooperatives helped give long-term, low-rate credit for instruments and short-term credit for renewables, such as gas and feed. Sometimes, help was available for taxes.⁸⁷ Many of the kasses purchased from the individual artisans, particularly poor ones, and then resold their products in bulk, functioning in effect like a guaranteed buyer. The cooperative directors saw benefit for the individual craftsmen by keeping them in greater contact with others in their field, thus informing them about what kind of products were in demand, while the cooperative would be better informed of potential buyers to whom it could then sell at a profit. It could more accurately calculate products’ real market value. This was socialized capitalism at its grass roots level—protecting the artisan from ruin by picking up most of the risk, perhaps then allowing the non-competitive among them to make a smoother transition out of the market and into something else, whereas otherwise they would likely starve along with their families.⁸⁸ The importance of the cooperatives’ role as helping the Jewish community only increased with time; by the 1930s, the economic problems were much worse and came hand in hand with increasing anti-Semitic popular violence and legal and civic marginalization of Jews across Greater Romania.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, the credit cooperative

⁸⁶ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 64.

⁸⁷ The annual tax for an independent craftsmen in Chişinău, for example, was 13,000 lei annually around 1920. Considering that monthly average wages were around 200-300 lei, this was a considerable sum, ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 5049, l. 1.

⁸⁸ *Das Kooperative Vort*, #1(19), January, 1927.

⁸⁹ Hitchins, “Jewish Credit Cooperatives in Bessarabia,” 196.

philosophy was focused on self-help; members worked heart to avoid being viewed as offering handouts.

Many cooperative members felt a particular attachment to associations that reinforced their own perception of Jewish difference on this “organically socialist” basis: here was a system that cared for individual members as opposed to the capitalist state that did not and instead favored the rich.⁹⁰ The leaders of the cooperatives, and later of the Union of Jewish Cooperatives, were cognizant of the socialist base of their economic visions: they clearly saw themselves as not capitalist and were proud of it. In the monthly journal that served as the voice of the Jewish cooperative movement, *Das Kooperative Wort*, later *Cuvântul Cooperatist* (The Cooperative Word), members addressed their difference from capitalism.⁹¹ The cooperative movement had a different attitude toward competition because they believed there was room for cooperation to ensure employment for all workers in achieving good production. The cooperatives were not against competition, but against exploitation. Furthermore, there was a difference between cooperatives and professional associations as they saw it; the latter represented a particular class that typically professed to do battle against capitalism; a cooperative was composed of people of all classes focused on cooperating to help each other and did not profess to battle against anyone. The cooperative movement saw itself as between anarchy on the one side and socialism on the other.

Jewish cooperatives often demanded respect for worker rights; in fact members often were among the most vocal in calls for improved conditions for all workers. The cooperative of washers, dyers, and pressers for example submitted on July 5, 1920 to the Chişinău municipal government a demand for the establishment of regular working hours, acceptable conditions for

⁹⁰ “Der Untershid Tsvishn Kooperatism un andere Sotsiale Bavegungen,” (The Difference between Cooperativism and the Other Social Movements), *Das Kooperative Wort*, #5(35), May 1928.

⁹¹ Ibid.

negotiating with owners, financial assistance to workers in need, better provisions for medical needs, and the establishment of cheap living spaces and dining halls.⁹² As in Imperial Russia, the cooperatives continued to grant reasonable interest on loans compared to the broader economy: in 1922, banks averaged between 36% and 42% interest on loans in Bessarabia while the Jewish credit cooperatives set a maximum of 18% interest on all their loans.⁹³ They organized a rally in Chişinău on September 8, 1920 that was joined by non-Jewish workers. In addition to demands for better working conditions, organizers included calls for an 8-hour day and a day off on Saturday for Jews and Sunday for Christians. Siguranţa reports noted that the rally leaders were two women from Ukraine living in Chişinău since 1909—this did not elicit their sympathy for whom they openly referred to as “parasites.”⁹⁴ Given such reactions, together with numerous incidents of discrimination in the Bessarabian marketplace, the overall effect of the vibrancy of and self-sufficiency of Bessarabian Jewish economics served to underline Jewish independence and eventually greater calls for political and cultural autonomy. Without question, the economic basis of these cooperatives enabled more vocal demands from a new generation of leaders in the Jewish community for more consideration and respect from the Romanian leadership.

⁹² ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 5045, ll. 8-14.

⁹³ Jakob Kopansky, *Dzhoint v Bessarabii: Stranitsy Istorii* (Chişinău, 1994), 73.

⁹⁴ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 5045, l. 1. Nothing discredited a minority-led movement in the eyes of the Siguranţa quicker, especially a leftist, pro-worker one, than being attached to “foreign” elements. In the end, it was the cooperative itself, under Union of Cooperative aid, which saw to some of these needs, rather than the local administration.



Figure 4: *Das Kooperative Vort*, May 1927 edition (Romanian Academy of Sciences). Monthly newsletter of the Union of Bessarabian Jewish Credit Cooperatives, edited for much of the interwar years by Moshe Sharand. It began publication from the cooperative headquarters on Kiev Street, #56, in Chişinău. The subscription price was 30 lei (15¢) per year or 3 lei per issue; circulation reached 6000 during the best years, 1928-30. The first 91 issues came out in Yiddish; in February 1933 a Romanian supplement was added as the journal started circulating in Romania as well. Despite this, circulation went down from a peak in 1931. By 1936, it was the central publication of the Romania-wide Jewish cooperative movement. The dual-language format came out until February 1938, when the last issue in Yiddish, #152, was printed. Starting in March 1938, resulting from new state regulations limiting printing in foreign languages, the journal came out only in Romanian. It was the only Jewish paper in Bessarabia that made this transition and thus survived into the war years—other papers, including Russian language ones, closed down in March 1938.

As with much of Jewish civil society in the interwar years, the interests of Bessarabian Jewish cooperatives were markedly international—with more attention paid to Jewish cooperative news from outside Romanian borders than within them. On the pages of *Das Kooperative Vort* there was consistent and prominent focus on the cooperative movement in Palestine. The movement in Poland, however, where by far the greatest number of Jewish cooperatives was centered, took up the greatest print space. In the immediate post-war years Jewish cooperative leaders raised the question of a united institution that would link cooperatives from several countries. In 1923 in particular, discussions floated of designating Berlin as the center of a region-wide cooperative—an idea that never materialized because leaders from Poland resisted the location choice. Nevertheless, these discussions, in which Bessarabian members were active, are a clear insight into the transnational thinking of Jewish economic leaders at a time when they were also committed to Jewish economic autonomy.⁹⁵

Jewish credit cooperatives were even more imperative for Jewish farming, which was important to the Bessarabian Jewish economy overall. The Jewish Colonization Association (ICA) had been active in Bessarabia during the pre-revolutionary period, and it was especially interested in investing in Jewish agricultural training and development in preparation for emigration to Palestine. ICA aid was an important factor in explaining the survival of Jewish farming in the province throughout the revolutionary years.⁹⁶ Agricultural land in Romania, previously held disproportionately by the aristocratic elite, was redistributed after the Romanian agrarian reform acts of October 1920. Some 4500 Jewish farmers in Bessarabia received

⁹⁵ *Das Kooperative Vort*, #2(20), February, 1927.

⁹⁶ Ussoskin, *Struggle for Survival*, 23. The ICA, founded by Baron de Hirsch in 1891, had been active in Russian Bessarabia promoting agricultural training and immigration mostly to America and Argentina, although by the interwar years, especially after the U.S. closed its doors in 1924, Palestine became the most important destination.

between 4 and 6 hectares of land as a result.⁹⁷ Yet despite the necessary redistribution of land from the few to the many, there were numerous problems with the agrarian reform, most notably that no significant means was secured, such as state-backed low interest loans, for poor and small scale farmers to acquire the equipment necessary to successfully farm their newly allocated land.⁹⁸

The effects were problematic for Jewish farmers also. Jewish agriculture in Bessarabia had traditionally been sharply divided between the poor (individual farmers) and better off (usually *arendashi*—managers of the aristocratic lands). Many individual farmers found it very difficult to set up successful operations without inventory under the jealous competition of peasant farmers who also received new lands—many found the work hard and failed through their inexperience and lack of credit.⁹⁹ The former *arendashi* (certainly the peasantry's most hated segment of the Jewish population) often found themselves out of work as aristocratic land holdings were reduced. The JDC, together with the ICA, lent the credit cooperatives \$10,000 in the spring of 1922 to allow Jews that received land as a result of the agrarian reforms to have credit to purchase the tools and equipment they needed for farming (land that they would have lost had it not been cultivated, in accordance with the rules of the reforms). The JDC also later helped Jewish farmers pay for some of the land that had been allocated them by the government but required payment.¹⁰⁰

The importance of JDC and ICA money, and its distribution to the broader Jewish population through the credit cooperatives, cannot be overstated for Bessarabian Jewish

⁹⁷ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 64.

⁹⁸ For excellent treatment of the history of the agrarian question in Romania, including the reforms of 1918-1921, see Roberts, *Rumania: Political Problems of an Agrarian State*, 60-66 for an analysis of the agrarian reforms.

⁹⁹ *Das Kooperative Vort*, #4(22), April 1927. As limited as it was, state credit focused not on individual farmers but on farming communities.

¹⁰⁰ *Das Kooperative Vort*, #5-6(107-108), May-June 1934.

agriculture in particular: between 1924 and 1930, Bessarabian Jewish farmers received 74 million lei (about \$350,000) in loans—by 1930, 71% of Jewish credit cooperative members from rural areas, or at least 7000 Jewish families, were relying on such loans for survival.¹⁰¹ Credit cooperative leaders were very aware of their pivotal importance for Jewish agriculture in particular—members sometimes noted how Jewish farmers were completely dependant on the local kasses, which sometimes even served as grain storage for them.¹⁰² In times of draught, money was set aside by the Union specifically for Jewish farmers.¹⁰³ Ironically, in many cases such assistance earned Jewish farmers animosity from their peasant neighbors who had less help from a corrupt and largely unresponsive state administration in the province.¹⁰⁴ It seems that among the hardest hit by the agrarian reforms in Bessarabia were actually Slavic farmers, who could not turn anywhere for serious support. The Ukrainians in particular were often forced to serve as day laborers on others' farms and many became more susceptible to Soviet anti-Romanian propaganda as a result.¹⁰⁵ Considerable assistance not only from the Bessarabian Jewish credit cooperatives but also from international Jewish philanthropy kept Bessarabian Jewish farmers in business through difficult times.

The JDC was in fact the most important donor during the interwar years for Bessarabian Jewry, as was true for East European Jewry as a whole and for the Jewish agricultural resettlement campaign within the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁶ Hundreds of thousands of Jewish families whose livelihood was destroyed during the war were helped by JDC money; many were helped

¹⁰¹ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 64.

¹⁰² *Das Kooperative Vort*, #6(24), June 1927.

¹⁰³ As in August 1925, when the Union of Jewish Cooperatives set aside 3 million lei for farmers only; *Bessarabskaia Pochta*, #1026, August 19, 1925.

¹⁰⁴ For example, a permit was required to sell produce legally—costing about 3000 lei annually in Bessarabia about 1920. For many farmers, even this modest amount (\$15-16) was difficult to come by, and Jewish credit cooperatives aided Jewish farmers in such needs, ANRM f. 679, op. 1, d. 5049, l. 1.

¹⁰⁵ Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 95.

¹⁰⁶ For the role played by Joint in the early Soviet Union see Jonathan Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet Power, 1924-1941* (New Haven, 2005).

to emigrate and settle into new places while others given direct aid. When emigration to America became extremely difficult after 1924, the focus of JDC changed toward assisting Jews in their respective countries of residence.¹⁰⁷ Much of this help was directed toward working with the local credit cooperatives, including in Bessarabia.¹⁰⁸

The JDC's first representative to Bessarabia, Baruch Zuckerman, arrived in May 1919 and met with cooperative leaders. In June 1920 Joint forwarded a \$200,000 loan under the stipulation that a Union of cooperatives be created. After the creation of the Union that October, JDC assistance went directly to it, from which the individual cooperatives in turn borrowed. In May 1924, the JDC and the ICA joined forces by forming the American Joint Reconstruction Foundation, known to locals simply as the "Foundation." Foundation loans helped ease the hardship during the famine in northern Bessarabia in 1925 and in the south in 1929.¹⁰⁹ Bessarabian concerns were high on the agenda of the Foundation executive committee for East European Jewry, only Polish and Lithuanian representatives were more influential.¹¹⁰ Financial assistance helped with reconstructive funds for other specific plights, such as during floods in Romanovca, Petrovca, and Căusenii in 1928 and in Rezina and Soroca in 1932; and after fires in Soroca and Hotin in 1930 and Lipcani in 1932.¹¹¹ Later, as the economic crisis of 1930s spread, Foundation money helped cover some losses from the loans made by the cooperatives, as well as providing some financial inspectors who helped in examining the loans being granted in order to prevent future loss. The importance of the cooperatives, supported by Foundation money, cannot be understated: Mariana Hausleitner estimates that given its membership of 30,657 in 1930, well

¹⁰⁷ And emigrating to different places such as Argentina, as advertisements in the non-Zionist Russian language press often indicated even before it became difficult to visas for America; for example *Bessarabskaia Pochta*, #240, March 27, 1923.

¹⁰⁸ *Das Kooperative Vort*, #5-6(107-108), May-June 1934.

¹⁰⁹ Kopansky, *Dzhoint v Bessarabii*, 75.

¹¹⁰ Yehuda Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper: A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1929-1939* (Philadelphia, 1974), 36.

¹¹¹ Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 117; *Das Kooperative Vort*, #5-6(107-108), May-June, 1934.

over half of Bessarabian Jews were directly connected to and often dependant on cooperative programs. Throughout the interwar years, cooperation between the JDC, ICA and the Bessarabian cooperatives remained central: representatives of the Foundation and especially from the JDC often attended meetings of the Union of Jewish Cooperatives.¹¹² By 1930 the local cooperatives were already in debt to the Union by over 90 million lei (about \$50,000), although many Jews acknowledged that without the assistance of the JDC to the Union there would only have been weak Jewish banks that would not have been able to sufficiently alleviate the economic crisis.¹¹³ Even as debt mounted, the credit cooperatives remained open throughout the difficult 1930s and even through the war; the last ones were finally closed in 1945 by the Soviet government.

Cooperatives, again with Foundation funds, were also instrumental in assisting important Jewish institutions, which suffered from lack of funds consistently throughout the interwar years. Important Jewish health organizations like *Ezras-Hoilim* and *OZE*, and poor-aid societies like *Soimekh-Noiflim*, all received most of their funding from the JDC and ICA, either directly or by borrowing from credit cooperatives. An excellent example is Jewish hospitals, which functioned in all the major Jewish communities across the province and in some towns remained throughout the interwar period the only medical facility for miles around. Hospital records, painstakingly reviewed by Jacob Kopansky, clearly show that all patients were cared for in Jewish hospitals, not only Jews. Despite this fact, Romanian government support for such hospitals was inconsistent and hospital administrators often turned to private fundraising that relied on support from local Jewish benefactors and international Jewish money, mostly from the ICA and JDC, even though Jewish hospitals were likely the most strongly and openly supported of Jewish

¹¹² Such as on April 10, 1923 to determine means to expand support for Jewish farmers, *Bessarabskaia Pochta*, #255, April 13, 1923.

¹¹³ Ussoskin, *Struggle for Survival*, 31; *Das Kooperative Vort*, #5-6(107-108), May-June 1934.

institutions by Romanian legislators.¹¹⁴ The most visible in terms of its longevity (it was founded in 1834) and attention in the local press was the Chişinău Jewish hospital, whose administrators consistently fought against bankruptcy, eventually turning to private fundraising and finally raising its rates and cutting back on patient care.¹¹⁵

Jewish hospitals in the provinces suffered similarly (and often worse) from lack of funds, and taken together served to increase Jewish insecurity and sense of separateness from broader society in Greater Romania. Financial problems of the Jewish hospitals, as well as burial societies, health organizations, and cafeterias for the poor, were consistently newsworthy on the pages of Russian and Yiddish Bessarabian papers, and again served to undermine faith among everyday Jews in the Romanian state system due to a growing perception that Bucharest was not favorably inclined toward Jewish institutions. In the final analysis, credit cooperatives and the institutions they supported provided the economic backbone that served as the base from which the continued existence of a separate Jewish society was made possible. Without an economic basis, even if an ailing and unstable one, such a society could not exist and would be bound to disintegrate, as the case of the Transnistrian situation across the Dniester will make clear.

Refugee Crisis and the Growth of Jewish National Separateness

Although such concerns over needy Jewish institutions highlighted the growing distance between Romanian and Jewish national interests in Bessarabia, the initial push toward widening the chasm of misunderstanding was given in the immediate postwar years by the Ukrainian refugee crisis. During the Russian Civil War, the overwhelming focus for not only the JDC and ICA in Bessarabia but for Jewish philanthropy in general, including the cooperatives, was to help

¹¹⁴ Kopansky, *Blagatvoritelnye Organizatsii Evreiev*, 34-35; Hitchins, "Jewish Credit Cooperatives," 194-195.

¹¹⁵ Kopansky, *Blagatvoritelnye Organizatsii Evreiev*, 34-37.

the huge number of Jewish refugees from Ukraine. In order to escape the violence of the pogroms there, tens of thousands crossed the Dniester into Bessarabia, usually on foot, especially in the winter when the river froze, despite the efforts of Romanian military police to patrol the border. The majority of the refugees were Jews: at least 80,000 made this journey from 1919-1923, but likely many more. Official statistics capture only part of the number but clearly support the hypothesis that Jews were the majority: according to the Ministry of Interior (which was in charge of the Siguranța that commanded the border police) between 1918 and 1922, 38,116 refugees were registered by military police in Bessarabia, and of these fully 33,449, or 88%, were Jews.¹¹⁶ Many arrived without any means of subsistence and needed much assistance in attempting to proceed to either to the United States, South America or Eretz Israel. Most came from regions close to the border, such as Moghilev-Podolskii and Uman', and they were disproportionally young. Statistics for arrivals in Chișinău in November 1920 are revealing: of 194 arrivals, 25 were 18; 25 were 19; 38 were 20; and another 86 between the ages of 21 and 24. Clearly, escaping the Ukrainian pogroms was for the young—the elderly perished if they could not manage to hide. Leaders of the Zionist group *Zeiri Zion* lamented this state of affairs while noting the potential strength of so many young Jews arriving every month.¹¹⁷

Together with local Jewish organizations, the JDC worked to provide basic necessities for as many as possible. In response to the petition from prominent Chișinău Jewish leader and Zionist Jacob Bernstein-Kogan, officially supported by the government of Great Britain, Romanian leaders reluctantly agreed to allow Jewish refugees to remain in the country on June 23, 1920 with the understanding that their presence was temporary and that the responsibility for

¹¹⁶ Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 115.

¹¹⁷ *Erd und Arbet*, #1, December 5, 1920.

their provisioning and behavior rested entirely with the Bessarabian Jewish communities.¹¹⁸ By this point tens of thousands had already fled into Bessarabia and mass deportation was impractical and problematic for Romania's international image. In 1919 there was already established an organized effort to distribute Passover matzo and food to aid starving Jewish refugees in Bessarabia. Some of the food was sold, but most was donated to over 12,000 people through four distribution centers in Chişinău and a few other towns.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, there was not nearly enough matzo for Passover in 1919, when Bessarabian Chief Rabbi Tsirelson publicly permitted Jews to consume mămăligă out of necessity.¹²⁰

With all responsibility for provisioning the refugees falling on the local Jewish communities, helping the Jewish refugees became a frantic and emotional mission that rallied members of all classes of Jews to help the less fortunate. The press was very important in galvanizing Jewish attention and support, and not only in Bessarabia. Money was also collected throughout the communities of Greater Romania, where local "Ukrainian committees" were founded to collect funds.¹²¹ The leader of the Union of Romanian Jews and President of the Romanian JDC branch in Bucharest, Wilhelm Filderman, did much to assist in this effort.¹²² In Bessarabia itself, the Jewish credit cooperatives were also an important source of aid. The crisis greatly increasing the visibility of the Jewish credit cooperatives because of the Union leaders' noted efforts to help suffering victims. Credit cooperatives maintained a consistent effort to help the helpless and starving and often noted in their press and meetings the communal function

¹¹⁸ Kopansky, *Dzhoint v Bessarabii*, 12-14. In an official response of June 23, 1920, the Ministry of Internal Affairs instructed Romanian military police stationed in Bessarabia to allow the Jewish refugees, out of humanitarian principles, to remain as long as the violence persisted in Ukraine.

¹¹⁹ *Bessarabia*, #9, March 28, 1919.

¹²⁰ *Bessarabia*, #16, April 6, 1919. Mămăligă is a traditional Moldovan and Romanian cuisine made from polenta. Despite the war during previous years, inability to acquire enough matzo for Passover in 1919 for the first time is as strong an indication as any about how problematic it was for local Jews to be cut off from cultural centers, especially Odessa.

¹²¹ Kopansky, *Dzhoint v Bessarabii*, 14.

¹²² Hauseleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 116.

fulfilled through charity that binds the giver and taker of the aid within the same community. An important part of the cooperatives' philosophy of giving was based on equality: not to make anyone who comes for aid to feel that they are lower for asking, because "we are all part of one community and tomorrow the roles of giver and taker may be reversed."¹²³ Zionist youth organizations were also very active in Bessarabia, especially in the capital and in the northern town of Bălți where Jewish youth attempted to aid refugees as well. Most focused on re-locating them to Eretz-Israel, but some did considerable legwork in raising money for their immediate support.¹²⁴

Yet, as respected interwar Chișinău lawyer and prominent Zionist Michael Landau later recalled in his memoirs, most of the money needed to keep the refugees alive, especially in the first years before an effective infrastructure was set up to deal with the extent of the crisis, was provided directly by the JDC.¹²⁵ JDC money was instrumental in providing funds necessary to rent the required shelter and purchase needed provisions. JDC representatives secured apartments, warehouses and even space in synagogues mostly in Chișinău for the refugees, where thousands were housed.¹²⁶ JDC funds paid for free cafeterias that fed thousands while they waited to determine their fate.¹²⁷

Efforts to institutionalize refugee assistance led to the formation by Bessarabian Jewish leaders, in conjunction with the JDC, of the "Society for the Defense of the Interests of Jewish

¹²³ *Das Kooperativ Vort*, #5 (23), May 1927. Of course, the reality of giving was not nearly as pretty—this article in fact addressed the broader Jewish populace in calling for honesty because cooperative members were concerned that shysters and frauds were being given cooperative aid and thus draining resources that were desperately needed for those truly suffering. The level of attention given to aiding the poor, many of whom were still unsettled or illegal Ukrainian refugees, points to how involved the cooperatives were in the Jewish charity movement.

¹²⁴ In particular the socialist leaning Zeiri-Zion was interested in raising funds Jewish cooperative banks specifically for the purpose of helping refugees support themselves (in Zionist fashion they were concerned about the affect that economic helplessness would have on future settlers in Eretz-Israel that needed to be strong and self-reliant); see "A Cooperative Bank," *Erd und Arbet* (official newspaper of Zeiri Zion), #1, December 5, 1920.

¹²⁵ Kopansky, *Dzhoint v Bessarabii*, 17.

¹²⁶ ANRM, f. 694, op. 1, d. 43, l. 29.

¹²⁷ Kopansky, *Dzhoint v Bessarabii*, 17.

Émigrés,” or SDIJE. It was registered with the Romanian authorities July 14, 1921, and its executive committee chair was Bernstein-Kogan.¹²⁸ In addition to assisting new arrivals in Bessarabia, the society sent out aid to Jews on the left bank of the Dniester through couriers that crossed illegally into the Soviet Union at considerable risk to themselves.¹²⁹ As well as permanently based representatives, JDC delegates from the United States made periodic visits during the postwar years to examine the refugee circumstances. One such visit was by a Naum Simchin on November 5, 1920, who made visits to camps in Chişinău and the Dniester town of Vortejeni, whose Jewish community was struggling to provide for the massive numbers of refugees. Despite being American, Simchin was registered as part of the Zionist organization and closely followed, according to Siguranța reports.¹³⁰

Much effort was made by many Jewish communities to take in as many refugees as possible. In Seculeni, for example, a Jewish boarding school took in numerous refugee children in March 1920.¹³¹ The Chişinău police prefecture was inundated with petitions from SDIJE on behalf of fleeing Ukrainian Jews, asking for them to remain in Bessarabia until they could receive papers necessary to emigrate to Palestine. Romanian leaders were quite agreeable in granting exit visas to Jews embarking (usually from Galați) to Eretz-Israel, although Jews remaining in Bessarabia was becoming a growing problem for them.¹³² Given that the refugee crisis occurred quite early in the relationship between Bessarabian Jewry and the Romanian military administration, considerable problems resulted simply from a lack of established norms

¹²⁸ Kopansky, *Dzhoint v Bessarabii*, 12.

¹²⁹ *Bessarabia*, #16, April 6, 1919.

¹³⁰ ANRM f. 679, op. 1, d. 5050, ll. 3-4.

¹³¹ *Der Yid*, #94, March 24, 1920.

¹³² ANRM f. 679, op. 1, d. 5131. The files in this delo are all on refugees who were granted visas for Palestine in 1921, but there were exit visas granted by Bucharest to other destinations, such as the United States until 1924. As petitioners were required to write their new addresses on the applications, the SIDJE was instrumental in providing living arrangements, donated by Jewish businessmen, on Benderi st. 20 and Nikolaevsky str. 79. Most did not in fact stay in these buildings, but rather were placed with Jewish families throughout the city—the process was similar in other Bessarabian Jewish towns, most especially Soroca and Benderi.

that made effective communication and understanding between Jewish leaders and Romanian administrators difficult. A clear example of this was a letter dated January 11, 1919 received by the Chişinău police prefect office from Rabbi Tsirelsohn on behalf of an arrested Jewish refugee named Haim Trocker. The letterhead carried the Russian stamp “Kishinevski Gorodskoi Ravin” (Kishinev City Rabbi) while the letter itself was written in French. Even as the Chief Rabbi’s office continued to use stationary from the Tsarist era, Tsirelson did not feel competent enough to make requests in Romanian and understood that official addresses in Russian would not be appreciated. Such was the political tension in the province at the time.¹³³

Despite consistent appeals from Jewish institutions, the Romanian government did not allocate aid for the crisis and was in fact increasingly concerned about the number of refugees residing within its borders.¹³⁴ Despite formal requests from Rabbi Tsirelson, Romanian authorities never permitted the arrival of undocumented refugees. Given what the refugees were fleeing from, however, many were without papers and attempted to cross the border illegally. The fate of many such Jews that were not fortunate enough to evade the Siguranţa appeared routinely in the press, such as that of a Jewish teenager named Kirsanov, who was tried and convicted in 1922 before the Chişinău municipal tribunal for illegally crossing into Romania and sentenced to 10 months in prison.¹³⁵

Romanian military administrators in Bessarabia reacted with initial ambivalence and with increasing concern to the influx. Already in 1918, Minister of Education Simion Mehedinţi voiced his fear that Romania as undergoing “a Jewish invasion,” and lamented that only in

¹³³ ANRM, F. 679, op. 1, d. 46, l. 22-23.

¹³⁴ An example of such an appeal was made on August 24, 1918 on behalf of a Masha Tarnovitsky, who was residing at the time in Chişinău without any means of subsistence. The letter complained that Romanian refugees during the war received assistance from the Austro-Hungarian government, but the Romanian government was not doing its part to help refugees, ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 8. l. 34.

¹³⁵ *Bessarabskaia Pochta*, #160, January 3, 1923.

Romania were towns mostly comprised of foreigners.¹³⁶ By 1922, additional funding allocated for the creation of special police units assigned to deal specifically with border issues were justified on the basis of “restless elements in Bessarabia, mostly Jews and refugees from Russia,” who were deemed increasingly dangerous.¹³⁷ With the passage of the Mârzescu Law on February 23, 1924, Jews became subject to special legislation requiring them to prove their residency in the province as early as 1914 in order to receive permission to remain.¹³⁸ After 1924, police made regular and irregular checks of papers in the refugee camps, and succeeded in expelling as many as 16,000 to 20,000 Jewish families despite the appeals of SIDJE on their behalf.¹³⁹ Despite such police efforts, widely viewed by the Jewish public as draconian, there likely remained in 1925 at least 100,000 undocumented Jews in Bessarabia.¹⁴⁰ The Romanian Interior Ministry received numerous direct appeals on the refugees’ behalf during these years.¹⁴¹ Part of the problem was the consistent discrepancy between orders issued by the Interior Ministry in Bucharest and their implementation at the Bessarabian frontier, where considerable hardship was caused the refugees by the already noted severe police corruption in the province. Without question, Romanian state policies toward the Jewish question hardened and problems intensified as a result of the refugee crisis.

Much of the Romanian intellectual and political establishment would later mimic its Education Minister at the time in referring to the refugee crisis as a “Jewish invasion,” a reaction logical given the rising antisemitism in the country in the 1930s. Since evidence exists that Bucharest was willing to help ethnic Romanian refugees from abroad but not those of other

¹³⁶ Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930* (Ithaca, 1995), 194.

¹³⁷ Hauseleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 116.

¹³⁸ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 97-98.

¹³⁹ Hauseleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 116.

¹⁴⁰ *Bessarabskaia Pochta*, #858, February 5, 1925.

¹⁴¹ *Der Morgn*, #75, March 2, 1920.

nationalities, the policies pursued were of specific discrimination rather than simply the desire for order.¹⁴² In the contemporary Romanian historical imagination, the refugee crisis remains an episode when Romania extended its hospitality to the Jews, who wished to come because Romania was a desired place to live, and then suffered because of Jewish ingratitude.¹⁴³ The Jewish popular opinion on this question was and is quite different, of course. The refugee crisis and the effective response of solidarity from the province's Jewish community, together with the state's indifference to the problem, strengthened Jewish separatism and national sentiment among thousands of lower-class Jews who had until then mostly been unconcerned with political questions.

The Jewish press in Bessarabia was instrumental in raising financial support for refugees and in galvanizing and unifying Jewish national solidarity around the issue. News of the refugees' plight and of state reactions reached the Jewish public, both in Bessarabia and Greater Romania more broadly, through the Yiddish Zionist dailies such as *Der Yid*, published in Chişinău until 1922, and afterward on the pages of the longest surviving Yiddish daily of interwar Romania, *Unzer Tsayt*, published by Michael Landau until 1934 (and then after his emigration to Eretz Israel by contacts until 1938). Some of these articles were re-published by Romanian Jewish papers in Romanian, Hungarian, and German, as well as by several American Yiddish papers, including the New York-based daily *Forverts*.¹⁴⁴ Also, the Russian language press in Bessarabia, where many of the journalists were Jews, was important in reporting on the problems associated with the state's treatment of the refugee problem. Throughout 1920 another Yiddish daily, *Der Morgn*, carried articles about the violence in Ukraine and the plight of the

¹⁴² ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 8. l. 36; in August 1918, 32 ethnic Romanians displaced to Bessarabia from Macedonia received state support through a special commission.

¹⁴³ An example of this are comments of Romanian emeritus historian Radu Florescu in response to a panel "Jewish History in Interwar Eastern Europe," 8-08, presented at the 2006 AAASS annual convention in Washington D.C.

¹⁴⁴ Kopansky, *Dzhojnt v Bessarabii*, 18.

refugees in almost every issue. Advertising sections often contained numerous institutional requests for donations as well as proudly paraded lists of donations given and by whom, which were intended to increase donations through the pressure of maintaining one's public image in communities small enough that those with money were known by all.¹⁴⁵

Editors published many desperate letters that they received from readers, pregnant with a tone of impending death. To the extent that local news was conveyed at all in *Der Morgn*, it was relegated to a single section called "News from the Provinces," since interest among Bessarabian Jews in what occurred to Jews in other lands was so great.¹⁴⁶ In many of the articles and letters in *Der Morgn*, the implicit connection drawn between those Jews dying en masse from the most violent pogroms in history and those watching helplessly is unmistakable: "Ladies and Gentlemen! Our day of reckoning is coming for our lack of concern for our people. We have no excuses. Quietly but intensely increasing is our fear for our lives, a fear that only we can know."¹⁴⁷ The article goes on to call for Jewish unity to use "the spirit that remains within us still" to defeat the surrounding evils.

It was through the press that residents and refugees alike learned of new legal developments in Bucharest that would affect their ability to register and establish residency. Consistent announcements were carried in the Russian press throughout 1923 and 1924 in anticipation of and reaction to the Mârzescu law.¹⁴⁸ Frantic articles alerted Jewish organizations to local police efforts in Bălți to round up Jewish refugees in 1923 into something like a prison

¹⁴⁵ Only one such example is *Unzer Tsayt* #447, February 24, 1924, which contained a large advertisement and report/article from ICA requesting donations to assist refugees from Ukraine; on the back page was a large advertisement purchased by the Union of Jewish Cooperatives listing the amount of money raised over past weeks for the cause of the refugees and showing the financial power of the cooperatives to help their respective members.

¹⁴⁶ *Der Morgn*, #94 & 95, March 24, 25, 1920 were representative of this paper in general. Also, the same was true for other Yiddish language papers during these years.

¹⁴⁷ *Der Morgn*, #75, March 2, 1920.

¹⁴⁸ *Bessarabskaia Pochta* #269, April 27, 1923—well before the passage of the law in February 1924, discussion surrounding its impact was widespread in the Jewish community, adding a tremendous sense of tension from the perceived impending doom.

camp and likewise to transport outside the country several trainloads of refugees from Chişinău by force. In both instances Jewish lobbying halted the police actions.¹⁴⁹ In the years following, the press informed Bessarabian Jews of state plans to deport undocumented refugees¹⁵⁰ as well as of the consistent postponement of such plans due to the efforts of Jewish dignitaries in Bucharest and sometimes pressure from international lobbying.¹⁵¹ For Bessarabian Jews, these issues were closer to home than just support for suffering co-religionists: more than 100,000 Jews in Romania, mostly in the new territories like Bessarabia, were never able to establish legal residency and remained, in terms of civic rights and economic opportunities, stateless.¹⁵²

The tone of the articles was thus clearly short-tempered with Romanian policies. Sometimes articles addressed heart-wrenching problems caused Jewish families because of the difficulty in establishing legal residency, as in the case of a Jewish artisan from Tiraspol whose daughter could not begin school because he could not prove residency in Bessarabia.¹⁵³ When not censored, vocal complaints were printed about the unfairness of the residency requirements, such as in October 1925:

In demanding this or that document from years past, it's as if they [the commission for establishing residency] don't realize what Bessarabia and Bessarabians went through! The entire Russian Empire collapsed in a matter of days—the revolution can't be forgotten, but it is by our residency commission...it is imperative that people be allowed to verify they claims through witnesses as well as documents.¹⁵⁴

Taken together, the Jewish press's highlighting of the refugee issue, together with broader legal problems faced by Bessarabian Jews, did much to raise anger about discrimination from the

¹⁴⁹ Kopansky, *Dzhoint v Bessarabii*, 18.

¹⁵⁰ *Bessarabskaia Pochta*, #949, May 21, 1925.

¹⁵¹ *Bessarabskaia Pochta*, #298, May 28, 1923. All throughout the year refugees awaited December 1 as deportation date in unable to change their status; rumors that this would happen sooner were constantly being thwarted by articles in *Bessarabskaia Pochta*.

¹⁵² Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 19. Such a status forbade legal employment, state schooling for children, etc.

¹⁵³ *Bessarabskaia Pochta*, #1038, September 1, 1925.

¹⁵⁴ *Bessarabskaia Pochta*, #1071, October 3, 1925.

Romanian authorities, and a direct corollary, also raised Jewish national sentiment in the province.

The Press and Jewish Concerns

As with the refugee crisis, the Jewish press played a central role in cementing a modern, national Jewish identity in Bessarabia not only through steady focus on Jewish issues but also through galvanizing public perception about the ever present and indeed growing threat of Romanian antisemitism, even though this question could not openly be discussed in the censored press. Despite the very short life span of many Yiddish papers that began publication especially in the 1920s, there was certainly a flowering of the Jewish press in the region compared to the publication limitations under Soviet rule. Fully 22 publications devoted to Jewish issues were founded during these years mostly in Yiddish, sometimes in Russian, and in one case in Romanian. Of these 19 were published in Chişinău, 2 in Bălţi, and one in Hotin. A significant number of Jewish journalists worked both for Jewish and non-Jewish journals, although not all Yiddish newspapers could support their own journalists and simply re-printed news from other sources.¹⁵⁵ In addition—Bessarabian Jews read Jewish papers from other countries, particularly Yiddish-language Zionist papers, especially from the later half of the 1930s when publishing in foreign languages became increasingly problematic in Greater Romania. Romanian Siguranţa officers in Bessarabia frowned upon such foreign papers, and archival files contain numerous confiscated copies of foreign Jewish newspapers.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Kopansky, *Blagatvoritelnye Organizatsii Evreiev*, 12.

¹⁵⁶ These included *Dos Yidishe Togblatt*, *Der Tog*, *Der Moment*, *Naye Folksdaytung*, *Dos Naye Vort*, and *Haynt* from Warsaw; *Di Naye Tsaytung*, *Di Frayhayt*, and *Dos Naye Lebn* from Cernăuţi; *Morgen Tsaytung* and *Di Presse* from Buenos Aires; *Yidishe Tsaytung* from Sao Paulo; *Naye Presse* from Paris; *Di Yidishe Shtite* from Vilnius; *Dos Vort* from Kaunas; and *Frimorgn* from Riga. All of these journals I found in the police files of various Chişinău Jews either arrested or detained by the Siguranţa, ANRM Fond 679—most of them were labeled with the receiving address.

As expected, the pressing issues of the day comprised much of the coverage of local Jewish papers, although the hidden and carefully presented underlining theme was often the struggle for Jewish autonomy and equality against Romanianization. The solution advocated reflected the political leaning of the editorial staff—as educated and urban, Jewish journalists generally leaned toward European liberal tolerance as the means to ensure respect for Jewish civil rights in Romania, something that in the 1930s especially earned many Jewish journalists warnings and attacks from the extreme right not just in Bessarabia but throughout the country. Jewish concerns were prominent in articles that pointed to unfair treatment, consistently referring to the Paris Peace talks and particularly the Treaty of St. Germaine and its Minority Rights component, signed by all new states including Romania, as the basis for higher expectations. Yet these efforts failed to win support from an intellectual and political Romanian elite that overwhelmingly considered these treaties as something forced upon Romania and therefore not binding morally, if potentially enforceable legally.

As already seen, in the early interwar years the press was full of heart-wrenching concern about the suffering of Ukrainian Jews across the Dniester, victims of massive and widespread pogroms across much of the former Pale of Settlement. There was typically little mention of Romania in the Yiddish press during these years, the focus being the problems of European Jewry across the continent. Many Jewish intellectuals, journalists, and social activists that had been brought up following and being involved in Jewish politics, discussions and demonstrations across the vast Pale of Settlement, continued to see Jewish identity across the newly-drawn national boundaries during the interwar years. They reacted very emotionally and personally to violence taking place, as if the state borders now separating them from suffering co-religionists were implicated in the suffering as well. With shock and revulsion journalists described how in

March 1920, 125 Jewish families from the Krakow district of Galicia were beaten and hung by mobs, and nothing was done to help.¹⁵⁷ The lessons drawn were varied: one author bemoaned the days of lost Jewish unity of mindset, such as in the days of Moses Mendelssohn; another blamed assimilation of the Jewish elite because many already wrote in foreign languages; another blamed Jewish poverty and dependence on American Jewish money.¹⁵⁸ Most, but not all, agreed on the need to leave Europe, especially Eastern Europe, and go to Eretz-Israel.

Not only Yiddish or Hebrew newspapers reflected such strongly Zionist leanings; at least one Zionist paper, the monthly journal *Răsăritul* (Sunrise), was published in Romanian in Iași and also circulated to a considerable extent in Bessarabia. Besides news from across Romania, Palestine and Europe, the paper's staff published translations of Yiddish writers into Romanian, such as Y.L. Peretz, who's "Three Gifts" as translated in the September 1922 edition.¹⁵⁹ The paper's editorial staff was composed of strong adherents to the broader philosophical arguments expounded by Western European champions of Zionism during the interwar years, and their editorials in the journal were clear evidence of this: Zionism was a movement that promised "normalization" for the Jewish people. The Jewish people have been "in physical and moral decline," and need a strong shot of national pride in order to experience a collective resurgence. In the same issue, an article about Winston Churchill quoted him as supporting the merits of Zionism because it "brings together in one national home Jews from all over the globe, who nevertheless are all of one race."¹⁶⁰ Very much a product of the era's preoccupation with racial purity and national ethnic-uniformity, Zionist papers like *Răsăritul* and *Unzer Tsayt*, argued that Jews have no place in Romania and need to emigrate to Eretz Israel, thereby clashing with the

¹⁵⁷ *Der Morgn*, #95, March 25, 1920.

¹⁵⁸ *Der Morgn*, #96, March 26, 1920.

¹⁵⁹ *Răsăritul*, #2, September 1922.

¹⁶⁰ *Răsăritul*, #4, November 1922.

basic theme of Jewish autonomy and civic equality in Europe. The Yiddish press especially was instrumental in indoctrinating the lower-class Bessarabian Jewish masses in the national message.

Răsăritul began publication in 1921 but barely stayed afloat; it had more success after a lapse in autumn 1922, in part because of the mass demonstrations that summer by Iași University students, members of the “Generation of 1922,” who sought the establishment of *numerus clausus* to limit the enrollment of Jews in Romanian universities.¹⁶¹ In addition to being shocked by the anti-Semitic student demands, *Răsăritul* provided editorial coverage of the July 24, 1922 decision by the League of Nations to enforce the Balfour Declaration, widely interpreted by Jews as a recognition of their right to settle in Palestine:

We are certain that all Jews have been following the debates in the League of Nations, and their decision to mandate the creation of a new nation in Palestine. After 18 centuries of wondering, humanity has recognized us a nation with a right to our own home and to feel ourselves like other people and nations. This is a fantastic thing and a huge event in Jewish history.¹⁶²

Thus as early as 1922, the pro-Zionist press in the newly acquired territories was becoming more vocal due to the clearly rising anti-Jewish movement among the educated youth on the one hand, and the growing hope in a Jewish future in Palestine on the other. This article informed readers that the collection activities of the Jewish National Fund (Keren-Kayemet) have vigorously spread to hundreds of synagogues and community centers throughout Romania, and that all Jews should join in giving what they can for the Zionist cause.

The most successful interwar newspapers in Bessarabia that catered partly or completely to a Jewish readership were two Russian-language papers, the dailies *Bessarabskoie Slovo* (Bessarabian Word) and *Bessarabskaia Pochta* (Bessarabian Post), and the Yiddish daily *Unzer Tsayt* (Our Time). The latter two each surpassed a circulation of 15,000 in their best years,

¹⁶¹ See Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*, for a review of the 1922 Generation.

¹⁶² *Răsăritul*, #2, September 1922.

1928-32.¹⁶³ No other Jewish publications in any language in Bessarabia came close to these numbers. There was much more consistency in the Russian language press than in Yiddish, as evidenced by the noted fact that Yiddish newspapers sprang up throughout the interwar years but tended to not survive for more than several issues, and very rarely for more than a year.¹⁶⁴ Generally, Yiddish language papers failed to become economically viable in Bessarabia and closed quickly. The most notable exceptions was *Unzer Tsayt* noted above, which remained open from 1922-1938, and the trade and business cooperative monthly newsletter, *Das Kooperativ Vort*, which, due to the leadership of the Bessarabian credit cooperatives among Romanian Jewry, survived from 1925 to 1940.¹⁶⁵

Yiddish-language papers charged more because of usually more limited circulation and because printing and typesetting in Yiddish cost more. Higher cost meant less circulation than the Russian papers, especially since the most important newspaper market was in Chişinău where most Jews were able to read Russian, not to mention the additional readership for such papers among other ethnic groups, especially the Russians. In the minds of many Bessarabian Jews, the press remained something associated with the intelligentsia, which had during Russian Imperial times and still during the interwar era gravitated toward Russian as the language of modern civilization. The greater success of, and Jewish participation in, the Russian press, particularly in the immediate post-war years, reflected the experience of journalists working in the Russian language from the days of the Russian Empire. Yiddish papers eventually did gain ground in Bessarabia, however. The political leanings of the papers were also a factor in their circulation;

¹⁶³ *Bessarabskaia Pochta* #3000, February 10, 1931.

¹⁶⁴ *Presa Basarabeană: de la începuturi pînă în anul 1957, Catalog*. Lidia Kulikovski, et. al. Electronic version, 2002. Only a small fraction of these have survived, mostly in the Romanian Academy Library in Bucharest, the repository for the main censorship office during the interwar years.

¹⁶⁵ Hitchens, "Jewish Credit Cooperatives in Bessarabia," 197-198.

the Yiddish press bent increasingly toward Zionism,¹⁶⁶ while the Jewish perspective in the Russian press bent toward liberal participation in Romanian politics and sometimes toward pro-Soviet leftist ideas, though particularly vocal leftist papers did not last long. The best example of this was the openly pro-Soviet *Raboche-Khristianskaia Pravda* (Worker-Peasant Truth), which was tolerated briefly by the more liberal National Peasants in 1928-29, but quickly closed nonetheless. The National Liberals, who held power for much of the 1920s and then again after 1933, had much less tolerance for anything but pro-Romanian perspectives and more stringently curtailed freedom of the press.

In commenting on political and public life, the Russian press was the vehicle by which Jewish socialists, liberals, and Yiddishists denounced both the Orthodox and the Zionists. The broader success reflected in the wider circulation of the Yiddish language papers toward the late 1920s and early 1930s, indicated not only greater experience of local journalism in Yiddish but also a greater appeal of Zionism for lower-class Jews, who increasingly felt sufficiently pressed by the discriminatory policies of the Romanian state to invest in a Zionist newspaper. The handling of Jewish concerns in the sometimes relatively freer press in Romania, at least in comparison to the firmer grip on the press in the Soviet Union, served as a barometer of rising Jewish nationalism as well as a reinforcement and an outlet of it. But again, as the next chapter will explore, this was no longer true by the late 1930s when Jewish interests and concerns were sufficiently marginalized to deprive them of any serious voice in the national political arena. Most people in Romania read about the Jews what others, especially the right, said about them.

¹⁶⁶ For example, in *Der Morgn*'s section on international Jewish politics, called "In Jewish Life," an article chastised the British for forcing Jews arriving in Palestine to learn English, especially because the Arabs did not have to do so. The staff of this Zionist paper viewed Palestine as Jewish land, not British land. *Der Morgn*, March 24, 1920.

Jewish Education and Religion

No issue raised emotions among Jewish communities more than education. The state education system, like other Romanian institutions, was designed to uplift the peasants and Romanianize the foreigners, with little benefit, in the minds of central administrators, in supporting a separate Jewish education system, which had existed in Bessarabia for centuries. Constantin Angelescu, who served as Education Minister for much of the interwar years, was quite clear that the unification of the four disparate education systems inherited in 1918, and thus implicitly the unification of the nation as a whole, was for him the most important goal of the national education system.¹⁶⁷ Thus, Jewish education, to the extent that it was tolerated, remained separate, with extensive communally-supported parallel school systems emphasizing several approaches toward Jewish modernization.

Politicians across the mainstream political spectrums in Romania viewed the university system as a training ground for the national elite. Law school especially was training ground for national politicians—which was why Jews were most stringently excluded from institutions of legal training: foreigners had no business training to be national leaders. Jews gravitated toward other faculties, especially medicine, and increasingly sought higher education outside Romania.¹⁶⁸ Generally, public intellectuals purveyed the perception that minorities, especially Jews, were over-represented in national universities, even though in fact Romanians were 80% of all students while only some 70% of the total population by the 1930s.¹⁶⁹

Perception proved more important than fact in this case. Both students and faculty gradually but more loudly began to call for stricter implementation of *numerus clausus* to limit the number of ethnic minority, especially Jewish, students. In the primary and secondary

¹⁶⁷ Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*, 41.

¹⁶⁸ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 190-196.

¹⁶⁹ Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*, 235-240.

schools, *numerus clausus* had been on the books since 1882 after large numbers of Jews entered the public schools in the late 1870s. Romanian politicians responded to the “Jewish invasion” by mandating quotas for Jews in the public schools.¹⁷⁰ Jews were seen as foreigners who were subjugating the Romanian education system for their own benefit.¹⁷¹

Jewish schooling in Romania had been an indicator of the wider problem of remaining a juridically non-existent community in pre-WWI Romania: the *kehilot* could not own their own property, nor could their leaders have full authority to collect communal taxes, such as the kosher tax. The Romanian government remained consistently opposed to granting total legal recognition—as late as 1896 when the issue was up for debate before Parliament, Romanian deputies killed the measure, arguing that recognizing the *kehilot* would strengthen the greatest obstacle to Jewish assimilation, even though there was already by then little real interest in assimilating the Jews.¹⁷² After the establishment of Greater Romania, the legal problems of the Old Kingdom Jews were exported to the new territories, where the Jewish communities had enjoyed more solid legal footing prior to Romanian annexation. Jewish leaders in the country maintained considerable pressure on Parliament on behalf of Romanian Jewry to achieve a common legal status that ensured Judaism’s position as a unitary religion of equal standing to other existing faiths.¹⁷³ Considerable progress took place under Minister of Cults Constantine Banu, but after his departure legislation was promulgated that undermined the legal unity of the

¹⁷⁰ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 123-124. Quotas were set at 5.5% in primary schools, and eventually at 7.5% for secondary schools, resulting in the eviction of tens of thousands of Jewish students in the years when the new quotas were implemented in 1891-92, 1898-1899, and 1899-1900.

¹⁷¹ Carol Iancu addresses the public debates on this issue in Greater Romania in some detail in *Evreii din România*, 235-43.

¹⁷² Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 111.

¹⁷³ Among the demanded items were that *kehilot* be recognized in their religious, cultural and administrative autonomy with the right to collect internal taxes and have legal title to communal property; that the state contribute to supporting the Jewish faith as it did other faiths, etc.

Jewish religion in the country.¹⁷⁴ In 1928 this fragmentation was reversed in the official Law of Cults, but the damage had already been done—hundreds of articles in the press had pointed in the interval to the negative predisposition of the government toward the Jewish religion.¹⁷⁵ By then a robust Jewish nationalist movement flourished in the new territories that flatly rejected working with Romanian national parties, choosing instead to support Jewish parties that demanded autonomy. The problem of Jewish legal status was deeply embittering particularly for Jews from the new territories and served to increase their political radicalization.

The problem of Jewish public education contributed greatly to this sentiment even earlier, beginning in 1922. Romanian administrators inherited a highly diverse educational system in Bessarabia alone, to say nothing of the various education systems across the country. In Bessarabia in 1918 there were beginning church schools of 3-4 years; 4-year *zemstvo* schools; and 4-year middle schools of various types and specializations. In addition, there were numerous schools systems supported and maintained by national minorities. What must be stressed, however, is that in 1918 there were no Romanian language schools in Bessarabia, since all state-funded schools had been run in Russian.¹⁷⁶ Immediately after annexation, schools began to undergo re-organization according to the educational principles in place in the Old Kingdom. By 1921, significant inroads had been made in Romanianizing the education system and even the pupils attending school: out of a total of 1747 rural and urban schools in Bessarabia, 1233 were Romanian language schools; 200 were Ukrainian; 120 Russian; 73 German; 38 Jewish, 3 Polish and 2 other. No statistical separation was made between Hebrew and Yiddish for the Jewish

¹⁷⁴ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 112-115, essentially by allowing for separate registration for any community that applied for it in the same location, thereby downgrading the status of the Jewish religion to that of a business, which could of course not claim any sort of monopoly over its adherents' faith.

¹⁷⁵ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 117-119. Even then, changes proposed and effected by new Cult Minister Aurel Vlad in 1929 threatened again to undermine Jewish religious unity and were not settled until 1931.

¹⁷⁶ ANRM, f. 171, op. 8, d. 60, l. 163.

language reaching.¹⁷⁷ While progress in Romanianization was swift, Bucharest was careful until 1922 to not offend the educational needs of the minorities in accordance with its compliance with the minority rights treaties it had signed in St. Germaine.¹⁷⁸

After the National Liberals took power in 1922, however, Romanianization was extended to the private religious schools of the minorities, over their consistent pleas and complaints. In 1922 Education Minister Angelescu began implementing radical changes for private education: all confessional schools required permission from the Ministry to remain open; all schools had to meet state school obligations for Romanian subjects; exams for these subjects had to be conducted in Romanian before committees appointed by regional state inspectors. During the 1923-24 school year additional restrictions, known as the Angelescu Laws, were implemented: teachers and directors in private confessional schools had to swear loyalty to the Romanian king and pass exams in Romanian history, geography, constitutional law and language; Chişinău Jewish High School #4, the single previously state-approved Jewish high school in Chişinău, was targeted for closure, as were all kindergartens in Yiddish and Hebrew. All Jewish teachers were to conduct classes in Romanian only. Holding classes on Sunday was banned, and all schools unable to secure a Ministry permit were to close.¹⁷⁹ The law maintained a provision that allowed minorities to study in their own language, but the fundamental problem for Jews was that their

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, I. 164; much of the statistical research on education in Bessarabia was done by wealthy and dedicated communist Alexander Rubinstein, who collected data on the progress made by the Romanian education system in Bessarabia for Soviet agents until his arrest in 1926. While meant to give ammunition for the dissemination of Soviet propaganda into Bessarabia from the MASSR, his notes in fact confirm that there was significant progress made by Romanian military administrators in the education realm: the number of state primary school graduates had doubled between 1921 and 1923.

¹⁷⁸ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 126.

¹⁷⁹ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 127. The issue of exams was a historically sensitive one for Jews in Romania. Jews alone had since the late 19th century in Romania been required to pay special taxes for their year-end exams, a system that was preserved in Greater Romania and extended into the newly acquired territories after 1918 (although as noted not enforced until 1922). In addition to being greatly open to corruption and abuse by local teachers and school administrators, this system greatly angered Jews because while special taxes netted the state considerable proceeds from the Jewish pupils, it failed to ease Jewish quotas for public schools (in fact public sentiment seemed to strengthen for them after mass student demonstrations in 1922) and no return of funds from the state in terms of the subsidies for separate Jewish religious schools that Jewish leaders consistently asked for.

mother tongue was deemed Romanian: “In the schools where there are pupils with a mother tongue other than the state language, this language can be the language of instruction...For Jewish pupils, the mother tongue is the state language.”¹⁸⁰ Hebrew was permitted in limited instances for religious instruction, but Yiddish would no longer be allowed. Clearly, Romanian administrators judged a nationally varied and multi-lingual community based on the circumstances of Jews in the capital, many of whom had indeed linguistically assimilated into Romanian. Jews in Transylvania, many of whom were Hungarian speaking, were similarly negatively affected by this legislation.¹⁸¹

Protest erupted among Jewish organizations in Bucharest in May, and among Bessarabian Jews by September 1924, evident especially in the Yiddish press, in reaction to what most considered as draconian measures. Jewish leaders in the Senate and Chamber of Deputies, including Rabbi Tsirelson, the lawyer Jacob Pistiner from Bukovina, and Adolph Stern from Bucharest, continually spoke against the new legislation. A Congress of 6000 parents of Jewish pupils took place that month: a mass letter of protest was handed to Interior Minister Tătărescu on a visit to Chişinău, but with no effect.¹⁸²

Using pseudonyms, *Unzer Tsayt* editor Michael Landau began protesting against the private education laws even before their passage. In June he published an article titled “The Tragedy of Our Schools,” denouncing the closing of Jewish schools and forced Romanianization as “the politics of destruction.” Bitterly, he accused Romanian officials of using Jewish money to support public institutions that then suppress Jewish private schools, and called on officials to

¹⁸⁰ Paragraph 35 of the Angelescu Private Education Law, cited in Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 130.

¹⁸¹ Only members of the national minority whose mother tongue was established would be allowed to attend classes in that language, i.e. Jews would not be allowed to attend classes in Hungarian since they are Jews, not Magyars, whose mother tongue was proclaimed Romanian.

¹⁸² Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 128.

respect the Minority Rights treaties they had signed.¹⁸³ On May 26, 1925, *Unzer Tsayt* again carried Landau's complaint that only the Jews apparently do not have a language of their own—unlike the other minorities, Romanian is the mother tongue of the Jews according to the Angelescu Laws. Landau called the law a ruin for the Jewish people, taking away their last freedom to preserve their identity through education. It is enforced educational assimilation targeted specifically and only at the Jews. Accompanying the article was a long list of signatures in protest, many from well-known political opponents side by side. The Angelescu Laws served to unify a Jewish community that had grown accustomed to communal infighting.¹⁸⁴ On December 12, 1925, Rabbi Tsirelsohn gave a stirring speech on the floor of the Romanian Senate, something of a war cry in anticipation of the passage of a modified education law later that month:

The Jews represent a specific ethnic group, a nation like other nations, despite the fact that they are spread across numerous states. Yiddish, the mother tongue of the majority of the Jewish nation, in which a rich literature developed, remained also a language of instruction. Hebrew, the eternal language, joins the Jews from all over the world...Hindering the Jews in instructing their children in their national languages represents a great discrimination. In the case that the project of Minister Angelescu is not modified, the Jews will resist, as they have done throughout their long history.¹⁸⁵

Tsirelson also made reference in his speech to the revolt of the Maccabees against Antiochus Epiphanes, an unveiled warning about what can happen if Jews are pushed too hard. Other Jewish parliamentarians also made strong speeches in the days after Tsirelson. The head of the Union of Romanian Jews in Bucharest, Wilhelm Filderman, met with Minister Angelescu and presented a lengthy list of demands. The total effect of the protest, hardly surprising given the crushing implications of the proposed legislation, had their effect. The finalized Law on

¹⁸³ *Unzer Tsayt*, June 15, 1924. Landau was most fervent in attacking Angelescu's law; on September 3, 1924 he read another article titled "The Last Attempt," that spurred all Jewish leaders to fight against forced Romanianization and anti-Semitism. He wrote another article on September 13 that was even more critical, Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 128-129.

¹⁸⁴ *Unzer Tsayt*, #822, May 26, 1925.

¹⁸⁵ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 133.

Private Education of 1925 averted the greatest crisis feared—it permitted private Jewish education in Hebrew and Yiddish. It alleviated some of the most abusive problems of state exams by giving private Jewish school teachers five years in which to pass state exams and it slowly lowered the exam fees for Jewish students. Nevertheless, struggles went on with the Education Ministry on a number of issues such as the right to schooling on Sundays, the right of private schools to have diplomas recognized by the state, the discrimination against Jewish schools in terms of state subsidies when compared to other minority groups, and most prevalently, against *numerus clausus* for Jews in state institutions, especially universities. Despite all efforts, the Angelescu private education law remained in effect until 1940, when far more restrictive legislation was introduced.¹⁸⁶ The net effect of these problems was culturally and politically to solidify nationalist calls at the expense of those who called for cooperation with the state. Prior to the 1928 elections, the Bucharest Jewish leadership was largely able to persuade Jews from the new territories to vote for the National Liberals. In 1928 the Zionists in particular voted for the National Peasants, in part in retaliation for the problems caused by the private education law under Ministers representing the National Liberal Party.

Ironically, there was a certain level of cultural assimilation that was naturally taking place that was undermined by such widely-interpreted draconian proposals. State schools were free to all citizens while the Jewish schools remained, with practically no state support, privately funded—thus they were often out of reach for the increasingly impoverished Jewish masses. By the 1930s, the majority of Jewish children in Bessarabia were attending Romanian state schools.¹⁸⁷ Modernizing Jews like Bucharest lawyer Adolph Stern thought it necessary and reasonable for Jews all over the country, including in the new territories, to linguistically

¹⁸⁶ Iancu painstakingly reviews all the twists and turns of this issue throughout the 1930s, *Evreii din România*, 133-142.

¹⁸⁷ Kopansky, *Blagatvoritelnye Organizatsii Evreiev*, 12.

assimilate toward Romanian the way that Jews in Bucharest had done, but he warned that forcing the hand of a natural process that must be allowed to take years would backfire—oppression only strengthened national consciousness, he argued, citing the Romanians of Transylvania as his example.¹⁸⁸ This was indeed what occurred.

The Jewish school in Bessarabia not only survived but expanded in certain areas in the interwar years. A network of Talmud Torah schools continued functioning into the interwar years, administered largely by traditional leaders that were affiliated with the Agudat Yisrael religious organization. A Hebrew teacher, Itshal Alterman, opened a teacher training school in Chişinău in 1920—many of the teachers who graduated from the school went on to teach at Jewish schools, in both Hebrew and Yiddish, in other parts of Greater Romania, especially the Old Kingdom. In 1923, mostly through the effort of Chief Rabbi Tsirelson, an Orthodox high school in Hebrew was opened in Chişinău, and remained open until 1935.¹⁸⁹ By far the most active and successful of the Jewish schools were the modern Hebrew Tarbut schools. The Tarbut schools' curriculum was approved by the Ministry of National Enlightenment, which required them to ensure the teaching of Romanian language and history. In 1930, in 9 towns and tens of villages across Bessarabia, the Tarbut organization was administering 11 high schools, 38 elementary schools, and 17 kindergartens with a total enrollment of 6000 pupils between them.¹⁹⁰ There was a greater number than this studying in Yiddish. All of these struggled to make ends meet, largely through local and international charity, due to the almost complete lack of state support. They all served, in general, to cement a modern sense of Jewish national identity very much in response to the rising ethno-nationalism of the Romanian state.

¹⁸⁸ Iancu, *Evreii Din România*, 134.

¹⁸⁹ Iancu, *Evreii Din România*, 78.

¹⁹⁰ Kopansky, *Blagatvoritelnye Organizatsii Evreiev*, 12.

Conclusion

In the early interwar years, when much of European society attempted to move past the shock and horror of the Great War and the redrawn map of Eastern Europe was supposed to bring about an era of national self-determination, Bessarabian Jews' expression of a transnational national sentiment was unwelcomed. The Great Powers were uninterested in expanding resources badly needed at home or felt that these newly created national "democracies" needed time to coalesce into a viable, unified national public, just as had taken place gradually in the West. Ironically, Weimar Germany, given the number of Germans living across Eastern Europe (and the Soviet Union), was most interested in forcing compliance with minority rights treaties—France, Britain and the United States did little in response to cries of antisemitism in Poland, Romania and Hungary voiced occasionally in the press and by Jewish representatives of international philanthropic agencies or by Zionists. Jews were left stateless in an era and place of national states: with the exception of Czechoslovakia, they were unwanted foreigners and their attempts to bring the abuses of the host governments to the attention of the world by relying on Jewish brethren in the West was seen as proof of their treason, as was their propensity for communism.

As the political dust settled after the Great War's end, Bessarabian Jews found themselves in unfamiliar but potentially unfriendly circumstances. The process of familiarization took the better part of a decade, but led inexorably toward louder calls for national and religious autonomy and resistance against state efforts to categorize Jews in a manner that contradicted with Jewish collective identity. Conditioned by a repressive Russian Imperial regime, Bessarabian Jews developed communal economic, social and cultural institutions very much in parallel with those across the former Pale of Settlement. The end of

Tsarism came as an understandable shock, given especially the constricting reality of newly drawn and militarily enforced national borders that cut Bessarabian Jews from their co-religionists in other parts of the former Pale, which they clearly felt most painfully in economic terms with the loss of Odessa as market for their agricultural and manufacturing production.

Jewish ambivalence toward becoming subjects of the Romanian Crown, given the history of Romanian antisemitism, should hardly have been surprising, but state officials and military administrators assigned to rule Bessarabia were not given toward patience and understanding of Jewish concerns given their own efforts at establishing unchallenged control of this deeply contested borderland. Early issues of border control and refugee assistance served as foreshadowing for the greater fights against which most Jews from all political, social and cultural persuasions agreed spelled destruction for Jewish religious and educational freedoms. In responding to Romanian insensitivity to the plight of Jewish refugees from Ukraine; the blatant disregard to honoring minority rights' treaties signed in St. Germaine only several years before; but particularly in arising in shock and concern from the culturally destructive intentions of the profoundly ethno-chauvinist Angelescu Laws concerning Jewish education—Jewish national sentiment, as it would become shaped in this provincial borderland region of Romanian Bessarabia, was galvanized. The early years of uncertainty, when hope for a democratic Romania combined with the bitter memory of life in Tsarist Russia, passed quickly and Bessarabian Jews learned quickly the uses (and hopelessness) of political activism as the walls seemed to close in around them. The economic basis for a continued “state within a state” existence for the Jewish community in interwar Bessarabia, something that was not unfamiliar given the Russian Imperial heritage, was made possible by the functioning of the “kasses,” the

independent Jewish credit cooperatives supported by international Jewish philanthropy, particularly from the United States.

This Jewish separateness picked up cultural and spiritual strength in the early interwar years in Bessarabia even as economic realities made it increasingly unviable. This was, very notably, in contradistinction to what was going on in Soviet Transnistria, and indeed to Soviet Jewry more generally. The spread of Soviet power in the Dniester borderland across the river effectively supplanted Jewish economic autonomy while the successful incorporation of a significant portion of the local Jewish population in the multi-ethnic project of constructing communism undermined Jewish cultural and communal unity.

Chapter 3

The Rise of Jewish Nationalist Politics in Bessarabia after 1924

The reality of life in the Russian Pale of Settlement had seen the blossoming of Jewish institutions that sought to respond to the needs of their people when the state failed to provide them. When Bessarabian Jews came under the control of the Romanian government, they had little political experience outside of communal politics and the Jewish worker movement, the Bund. This inexperience was in marked contrast to the other Jewish communities in the country, most notably those of Transylvania and Bukovina.¹ Pre-1918 Romania (Old Kingdom) had never emancipated its own Jews, but at the Paris Peace conference was forced to promise granting all Jews residing on the now vastly extended Romanian territory civil and legal emancipation, although as previously described, the obligations that Romanian representatives nominally accepted at the peace talks were circumvented.² It was Romanian national-chauvinist policies that thrust traditional Jewish leaders and institutions into modern political life very much in an atmosphere of confrontation, thereby determining their nationalist direction. The reality of segregated, communal institutions continued, only dissolving (and even then not completely) when significant internal challenge to them had mounted.

This challenge was strongest from members the Jewish community of the capital city, Chişinău, the most Russified and modernized Jewish community in the province and the de facto leading *kehila* by virtue of its size, wealth and being the base of Bessarabian Chief Rabbi Tsirelson. Reform-minded Jewish intellectual leaders here, most notably Zionists, wanted

¹ David Schaary, "The Jewish Policy in Great Romania between the Two World Wars: The Controversy between 'The Romanian Jewish Union' (R.J.U.) and 'The Jewish Party,'" in *The Jews in the Romanian History—Papers from the International Symposium* (Bucharest, 1996), p.143.

² Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 83-90.

Jewish autonomy within a democratic Romania and desired for *kehila* administrations to be more representative of the Jewish population as a whole. The challenge was mounted in large part because of the upsurge of modern nationalist sentiment among lower-class Jews in response to rising antisemitism and discrimination in Greater Romania. Along with this sentiment arose a growing dissatisfaction with the direction taken by traditional Jewish leaders vis-a-vis the Romanian authorities. As calls to reform the communal administration and end Jewish traditional segregation grew louder, Romanian policies contributed indirectly but significantly to modernizing Bessarabian Jewish communal organizations. This chapter examines the debates surrounding the desire for institutional change among Chişinău's Jews within the context of broader Romanian policies toward its Jewish minority. It seeks to delve into Jewish public debate in order to ascertain the extent to which Romanian state policies shaped a modern Jewish national identity in Bessarabia, a province that was distant from the Romanian heartland and was for many residents, at least at the time of Bessarabia's annexation, certainly quite removed from a sense of Romanian national identity.

Kehila Modernization Issues

In order to understand the internal changes wrought it is important to understand the place of Jewish communal politics in a traditional sense. Although modernizing challenges were very much already woven into the fabric of Bessarabian Jewish life by the arrival of the Romanian Army, especially in Chişinău, it is important to remember that this was a religiously devout community as a whole. Most everyday Jews continued to strictly observe Orthodox Jewish tradition, and the rabbinic leadership maintained much of its influence and respect. In fact, an important avenue of Jewish collective expression during the interwar years remained

Jewish tradition; Jewish political activity had to contend with the tremendous power retained and wielded by rabbis. A very important factor in this support for traditional rabbinical leaders was the tight connection between the economic and religious elite in the community. For example, during elections of new or replacement rabbis, the pivotal vote was usually from the chief benefactors of the individual synagogues, to say nothing of their influence behind the scenes.³ Toward the end of the 1920s, there remained throughout Bessarabia 366 functioning synagogues and houses of prayer, including 77 in Chişinău, 60 in Soroca, 49 in Bălţi, 44 in Orhei, 31 in Benderi (Tighina), and 20 in Cahul.⁴ The most powerful organization of traditional Judaism in interwar Bessarabia was the Orthodox Agudath Israel, or Aguda, which had existed in the Tsarist period, and was successfully registered with the Romanian authorities on February 18, 1920.⁵

Aguda in Bessarabia was led by the Bessarabian Chief Rabbi, Yehuda Leib Tsirelson. Tsirelson, son of a rabbi, was a child prodigy in rabbinical studies and became the rabbi of the town Priluki (east of Kiev) at the age of 19; he was sent to “Kesheneff” (Chişinău in Yiddish) in 1906 to preside over the Orthodox community there. A leading voice in the creation of Aguda in 1912, Tsirelson led the religious institutions of Bessarabian Jewry until his death in 1941, and served as the most visible leader of the region’s Jews to the Romanian authorities in Bucharest for many years, even serving in the Senate in his capacity as head of the Bessarabian Jewish Cult.⁶ By all accounts he was deeply respected and held significant religious authority; this authority was augmented by the status conferred him by the Romanian government, making him

³ ANRM f. 679, op. 1, d. 5202, l. 24.

⁴ Kopansky, *Blagatvoritelnye Organizatsii Evreiev*, 12; for Soroca see also Judeţul Soroca, <http://romaniainterbelica.memoria.ro/judetele/soroca/index.html>

⁵ ANRM, Fond 679, Op. 1, D. 5410, L. 10, the statute of the organization. Aguda was founded in Russian-controlled Poland in 1912 and spread particularly among Hasidim in Eastern Europe in an effort to maintain the centrality of religion in Jewish education.

⁶ *Nash Golos (Unzer Kol)*, (Kishinev, 1992), pp. 6-7. It was the policy of the Romanian government to accept a leadership for each group that received official recognition and grant them representation in the Senate—for the Bessarabian Jewry this was Tsirelson. For more on this system see Carol Iancu, *Evreii din România*

the de facto leader of Bessarabian Jewry although he was bitterly opposed by Jewish secular leaders from all political leanings. Tsirelson's legitimacy from the Romanian government earned him animosity from Jewish youth, especially secular Zionist radicals, who saw him as supporting a regime that was anti-Semitic to its core. As only one example, the Chief Rabbi spoke to a gathering of local rabbinical leaders in the Chişinău's Choral (central) Synagogue about the dangers of Bundism and Zionism on August 8, 1924. He was rudely interrupted by a group of Zionist youth shouting that it was time to focus on things other than religion and blaming him for being limited in his interests and especially as a pawn of the state. According to Siguranța agents, who attended all such meetings and kept detailed notes, such disturbances plagued the Orthodox leaders on a regular basis in synagogues and religious schools.⁷

Orthodox rabbinical leaders strove to become involved in communal politics because they knew that traditional means of communal control were slipping away, and they feared the assimilation of future generations. Often this concern was voiced explicitly, increasingly so toward the close of the interwar years particularly as a huge majority of the Jewish youth were attracted to Zionism, especially socialist-Zionism. At an Aguda conference on June 8, 1937 chaired by Tsirelson and attended by about 50 rabbis from communities across Bessarabia, the Chief Rabbi told his flock to set examples for Jewish youth to respect their religion "because today, most young people are working on Saturday and eating food forbidden by Jewish law."⁸ For Aguda members, politics was always seen from the perspective of preserving religious orthodoxy as the only means of preserving Judaism itself. The very statute of the organization

⁷ ANRM f. 679, op. 1, d. 5202, l. 28.

⁸ ANRM, F. 679, O. 1, d. 5410, L. 66. Aguda leaders championed this perspective consistently, especially in the late 1930s in the face of virulent antisemitism and Jewish division: Tsirelson's personal secretary Chmerl Epelboim, for example, spoke in place of Tsirelson in Hotin on August 25, 1936, where he demanded an increase in religious teaching for Jewish children because "the Jewish youth today, under subversive and atheistic movements, are not taught the Jewish truth anymore." Jewish people today, he bemoaned, are not resting on the Sabbath or respecting Jewish holidays; many are even eating non-kosher foods; ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 995.

approved by the Romanian authorities was very explicit about the purpose of the organization: “to unite all Orthodox Jews into one society and organization in order to observe Jewish religious principles...even to the exclusion of modern ones, for the benefit of the religious-national interests of Judaism.”⁹

The activism of Aguda was impressive, and the group provided means and hope to many devout, lower-class Jews to help them deal with stressful and insecure times. Tsirelson’s long-time personal secretary in Aguda, Chmerl Epelboim, also published a weekly newsletter in Yiddish, *Di Vokhe* (The Week), addressing the concerns of the faithful in Romanian Bessarabia. Epelboim printed the paper in his own home in a relatively small and private operation.¹⁰ Its stance was a reflection of the views of Bessarabian Judaism’s Orthodox leadership: Tsirelson was not a democrat—he was strongly opposed to any other religious Jewish organizations, believing that they weakened the already existing Aguda that served Jewish religious interests.¹¹ Aguda members organized religious conferences across Bessarabia throughout the interwar years; they demanded (unsuccessfully) Jewish teachers be permitted to teach in Hebrew and Yiddish in Romanian state schools with a significant Jewish population; they championed rural teaching of Hebrew; finally Tsirelson himself championed a separate tax system for religious needs that he wanted addressed by placing collection boxes in all synagogues and schools.¹² As it turned out, collection drives for Zionist causes were much more successful.

Tsirelson was particularly devoted to an Orthodox high school he founded in 1920 called Mogen-Dovid. The high school was registered and authorized by the Public Instruction

⁹ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 5410, l. 10. For the fulfillment of such goals, Aguda supported kindergartens, heders, Talmud-Torahs, primary and secondary schools, professional schools for girls and boys, religious seminaries for teachers, courses during evenings, holidays and Saturdays, sports clubs for physical health (in competition with Zionist ones), cooperative trade and philanthropic organizations.

¹⁰ Interview with Epelboim’s granddaughter Dorina Shlein, March 23, 2005.

¹¹ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 5410, l. 12. He spoke in favor of maintain one organization for all in order to maximize institutional strength.

¹² ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 5410, l. 16.

Inspectorate; the curriculum included courses on Romanian history and language. The Education Ministry provided no money for the school, and Tsirelson worked hard to raise funds for it, especially from American Jewish donors; formal recognition of the school until 1938 was quite remarkable. It was licensed only a few years later, and Siguranța agents, reporting in 1927, expressed shock and concern that this school where everybody speaks an “antique Jewish language” was permitted to function. Despite some Romanian lessons, the general plan is to “preserve in Jewish children the antique Jewish language; there is nothing here connected to Romanianization.” Apparently most disconcerting were the symbols: “in the place where there should be a portrait of the royal family hangs a portrait of Rabbi Tsirelson!”¹³



Figure 5: Chmerl Epelboim with his family, Chișinău, circa 1925; taken in the Jewish Museum of the Republic of Moldova; permission from granddaughter Dorina Shlein.

¹³ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 62.

Thus, despite chasms of difference within the Jewish community itself, antisemitism clearly and powerfully affected the organization's political direction. As previously outlined, long existing nationalist arguments that Jews were exploiters of the peasantry—the real vessel of the Romanian nation—became entwined with broader political-cultural ideology that Romanian nationalism justly aimed at redeeming the Romanian people from centuries of humiliation suffered at the hands of foreigners, including Turks, Russians, Hungarians, and Jews.¹⁴ Coupled with fear of Jews as communist national usurpers that were nonetheless profiting from Romanian educational institutions and business and employment opportunities at the expense of the “real” Romanians, Romanian anti-Semites during the 1920s produced an explosive hatred that maintained the intensity of the wide-spread student demonstrations of the early 1920s and served to isolate Jews from Romanian society and feed Jewish nationalism. The rapid onset of discrimination against Jews at the official level combined with toleration by the central government of ever increasing popular violence against Jews and Jewish institutions led rapidly toward a radicalization of Jewish politics in interwar Bessarabia and significantly, toward rapprochement between communal rivalries by the late interwar years. For example, antisemitism was influential for Tsirelson, who was initially ambivalent about Zionism but over the course of the interwar years came to see Zionism as a possible solution to Jewish problems, provided that the settlements be assured of abiding by religious law.¹⁵ The Bessarabian Aguda under his authority thus began, together with the Mizrahi Zionist group in the early 1930s, to organize its own purchases of land in Palestine where it sought to create its own Orthodox communities of *halutzim*.¹⁶

¹⁴ Stephen Fischer-Galati, “The Legacy of Anti-Semitism,” in Randolph L. Braham, *The Tragedy of Romanian Jewry* (New York, 1994), 3-4.

¹⁵ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 5410, l. 12; Tsirelson expressed interest in Zionism as early as January 23, 1924, during a meeting of Bessarabian Orthodox Jewish leaders following a world-wide summit of Orthodox Jewry in Vienna.

Clearly, it appeared to many Jews that the Romanian government was not invested in ending Jewish segregation, and for Tsirelson and his supporters, it became impossible to focus on religious preservation and ignore the political realities of Jewish life in Greater Romanian Bessarabia. After 1924, it had become clear that Romania would not honor its minority rights treaty commitments from Versailles.¹⁷ News in the press about the acquittal and release of murderers of Jews (such as Corneliu Codreanu, the leader of the Iron Guard, in 1925 and Nicolae Toțu in 1926) served to increase fear that Romania was becoming a dangerous place for Jews. On December 2, 1926, 200 hundred nationalist students from Bessarabia returning from a far-right meeting in Iași caused disorder in many Bessarabian towns along their way, including Chișinău, Calarași, Edineț, and Ungheni. In addition to disturbing the Jewish population, they broke doors and windows of Jewish homes, attacked Jewish shops and synagogues, and began a new and potent anti-Semitic hooliganism that increasingly gained in popularity in the 1930s: throwing Jews from moving trains.¹⁸ Much of this extreme violence was not permitted to appear in the press, even though it was relatively democratic especially when compared to the level of journalistic control exercised across the Dniester. Sometimes Bessarabian Jews read stories about violence in Bessarabia months later through Yiddish papers smuggled from abroad. Quite often these papers were sensationalist, like *Die Yiddishe Tsaytung* from Buenos Aires, which reported that numerous pogroms occurred across Bessarabia during Christmas 1927 and the Jews live in “indescribable fear,” while that Romanian universities have achieved a “numerous nulus” on Jewish admission.¹⁹ Such stories often served to further frighten the local Jewish public and add to a mood of national separatism, which was influenced by international solidarity in some

¹⁶ Such an opinion was voiced for example, not for the first time, at the June 8 Aguda conference,

¹⁷ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 81-87.

¹⁸ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 189.

¹⁹ *Die Yiddishe Tseitung*, #3678, January 30, 1927.

cases: Bessarabian Jews read that Zionist association in Palestine had organized Jewish protests against pogroms in Bessarabia.²⁰

Nevertheless, the state's lack of concern for its Jewish minority ensured the need for Jewish economic self-reliance. Despite the prominent and important growth of Jewish credit cooperatives described in the previous chapter, the financial heart of Jewish communal life in interwar Bessarabia continued to be, as it had been in the Pale, the *korobka* or box tax, which was established as a means to maintain the traditional community governments, the *kehilot*, and to see to the religious needs of community members. This special fund, which was managed by communal leaders usually in close association with the rabbinical leadership, was comprised mostly from fees charged for the slaughter and sale of kosher meat, although in interwar Bessarabia it was also fed by a tax on Jewish artisans. Across the Dniester River that now formed the international border between Romania and Soviet Russia, the new Soviet Jewish intelligentsia was dismantling the *kehilot* and the box tax in order to expedite the construction of a new Soviet Jewish culture. In Bessarabia, *kehilot* remained until the late 1920s and early 1930s, although this was a topic of heated debate among members of the Jewish community, particularly in Chişinău. In the end it was the state, through its campaign of modernizing the legal status of all religions in Greater Romania that provided the impetus for the Jews to partly dismantle the old institutions themselves.

Communal politics remained dominated throughout the interwar period by local Jewish elite in the traditional manner of Jewish reliance on the *gevirim* or *shtadlanim*, men of material means that served as “intercessors” to protect the general Jewish public from the excesses of the broader public and the ruling authorities.²¹ In general these intercessors were not elected; they

²⁰ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 84.

²¹ David Vital, *A People Apart: the Jews in Europe, 1789-1939*, (New York, 1999), “The Old Dispensation,” 9-17.

served typically on the basis of their personal wealth, and remained in positions of authority either as long as they desired or broader political circumstances permitted. Not surprisingly, there was often corruption and abuse of power within such an arrangement. Such was the case in Chişinău. In particular, one man was the locus of complaints from many Jewish voices: the manager of the box tax funds, Solomon Abramovich Shur. Shur had taken this post in May of 1909, and had served in this capacity for over 15 years when serious public complaints against him began to mount. Shur had come from one of the richest Jewish families in Bessarabia, but by the mid-1920s, when most Bessarabian Jews were struggling, Shur had become notably richer. Furthermore, he represented the Orthodox religious community, and had the support of Chief Rabbi Tsirelson, the most revered Jew in the province.²²

Calls for reform within the communal administration were in fact closely associated with the growing challenge from modernizing Jewish ideologies to the continued autocratic control of communal institutions wielded by the Orthodox. Jewish communal relations in the Bessarabian capital were not unlike the battles that had gone on in communities in pre-revolutionary Russia or were ongoing in other parts of Eastern Europe, between a wealthier and more integrated, modernizing economic elite and a traditional religious leadership supported by a majority of more traditionally-minded, lower-class Jews.²³ As these debates came comparatively late in the case of Chişinău, the modern elite often pushed emigration to Palestine rather than acculturation as in previous generations.

Relations with the Romanian government often spurred the demands for reform from within the community. Under the new authorities, the Jewish community in Chişinău was permitted to maintain its status on June 23, 1923, when the Ministry of Culture approved the

²² *Bessarabskaia pochta* #854, February 2, 1925.

²³ See Benjamin Nathans' account of the battles in St. Petersburg during late Imperial Russia, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia*, (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 2002), 143-152.

statute of the community, although full legal recognition would come later. According to Bessarabian Inspector General Roshanu, the government would continue to recognize the communal administration as it currently existed, that is, organized from among those elected by members of the community who then chose an executive commission.²⁴ Under rules in place under the Orthodox *kehila* leadership, the electors had to be comprised of religious leaders and/or leaders of Jewish organizations and/or enterprises that used or contributed to communal funds. Furthermore, only those that had maintained Kosher for at least two years prior to the election could be eligible to run.²⁵ Thus, the range of people who could form an executive committee was off-limits to many would-be reformers, thereby ensuring the sort of executive committee desired by traditional leaders. The position taken by the occupying Romanian military forces served to bolster traditional authority within the communal government, something that was not accidental—religious Jews were preferable to political ones as far as the Siguranța was concerned.²⁶

When news that there would be no changes made to the communal statute under the new authorities was announced to an audience of hundreds of Chișinău Jews at a community administration meeting on June 28, 1923, it evoked a considerable disturbance from the attendees. The meeting foreman was from the Orthodox camp and would not allow anyone to address the audience, explaining that he would not dare jeopardize the decision of the government.²⁷ In fact, the Orthodox leaders' loyalty to the National Liberal Party then in power would put them at odds with reformers, especially the Zionists.

²⁴ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #330, June 29, 1923.

²⁵ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #331, June 30, 1923.

²⁶ Numerous examples of this in the archival police records, especially the level of harassment visited upon Aguda in comparison to certainly the communist movement, but also the Yiddishist-autonomists and the leftist Zionists.

²⁷ *Bessarabskaia pochta*, Ibid.

Some early calls for the democratization of the communal administration had come only a few days before from a representative of the Jewish community to the temporary town commission, a Mr. M. Sibirsky.²⁸ As town residents, Jews received the right to serve on municipal councils in interwar Romania. Since Chişinău was still more than half Jewish and most businesses were Jewish owned (official statistics notwithstanding), their voice was important. Yet, the separate status of the central Jewish communal administration, at the center of which was the box tax council headed by Mr. Shur, interfered with the integration of the Jewish political leadership, and to some extent of Jewish interests, with those of the city government. Wider circumstances in the country also were important in understanding this hesitation; anti-Semitic violence from students was already underway in several Romanian cities of the Old Kingdom, while Romanian police and the courts were seen as hesitant in prosecuting the assailants.²⁹ Furthermore, the government was not seen as friendly toward local Jewish issues, particularly toward the huge refugee problem plaguing the city from the tens of thousands of Jews that fled to Bessarabia from across the border during the civil war years. Institutional inertia also favored maintaining a traditional separation that had provided for Jewish needs for generations, and it seems that the interests of Romanian Cultural Ministers and Jewish traditional leaders coincided here.

During the next months calls for democratic reform continued to be voiced in community meetings, and perceived intransigence was blamed on Shur, who was consistently denounced by reform-minded Jews in both the Russian and Yiddish local press. For example Michael Landau, the locally well-known Zionist, lawyer, and editor of Bessarabia's longest running Yiddish daily, *Unzer Tsayt*, lamented that the municipal elections that were to take place across Bessarabia in

²⁸ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #329, June 28, 1923.

²⁹ *Unzer Tsayt*, #323, September 30, 1923.

March 1926 did not include the Jewish communal council, whose mandate “had long since expired.”³⁰ Aside from demanding democratization of the communal council, there was mounting frustration that Jewish schools, philanthropic organizations and medical institutions, especially the Jewish hospital in Chişinău, were not receiving sufficient subsidies from the box tax. In numerous cases, the allegation was made explicitly that this was because Shur was corrupt, and he and his cronies on the communal council were bleeding Jewish public funds for their own benefit. The main issue for reformers was political: because there was no voice given to non-Orthodox groups, Shur did what he wanted with the money.³¹

Not surprisingly, debates at communal meetings often became heated, as on January 17, 1925, when some members walked out of a communal election in protest to Shur’s dictatorial style and sent a letter of complaint to the Romanian Culture Ministry.³² There was in Bessarabia, as in other parts of the former Pale of Settlement, a tradition from earlier times of competing Jewish groups occasionally petitioning the secular authorities to help settle internal Jewish debates.³³ By the mid-1920s, Shur’s dictatorship over the communal council was legendary: if dissenting members refused to be brow-beaten, he would simply exclude them from future meetings until they submitted.³⁴ He was also known at times to be irrational and contradictory, as on November 4, 1925, when in selecting who would vote for Jewish representatives to stand for city elections the following March he reneged on a deal that had been brokered between the communal council and the Union of Jewish Cooperatives; Shur scrapped the entire session, stating that the communal council alone was the true representative of the Jewish masses.³⁵ In

³⁰ *Unzer Tsayt*, #1061, March 5, 1926

³¹ *Unzer Tsayt*, #447, February 24, 1924.

³² *Bessarabskaia pochta* #841, January 18, 1925.

³³ David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture*, 43: such as when Hasidim and Mitnagdim attempted to address the Tsar to settle their disputes.

³⁴ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #855, February 3, 1925.

³⁵ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #1103, November 4, 1925.

the end, a compromise had to be reached through the intervention of Chief Rabbi Tsirelson. Shur's style may have indeed been dictatorial, but his tenure for years despite bitter resentment from so much of the community attests to the continued power and influence of the Jewish traditional elite within the Chişinău communal government. Tsirelson continued to support Shur because he felt confident in the latter's support for religious issues, such as support for education, but also because he feared giving ground to secular, socialist, and/or Zionist reformers much more than he feared Shur's unpopularity. The arguably effective resistance to reform until well into the 1930s in Bessarabia stands in stark contrast to circumstances inside the Soviet Union, where modernizing Jewish activists had full state support in dismantling these traditional structures.

Jewish complaints from members of the community remained focused on Shur, in part because his politics angered many, but largely because the more serious problem, the socio-economic and national policies of the Romanian government, could not be freely criticized in the press and in any case could hardly be solved by Jewish leaders struggling to help their co-religionists survive. Shur served as something of a scapegoat for bigger problems. By the mid-1920s, even if Shur had not been corrupt and dictatorial, Jewish traditional institutions could no longer provide for the needs of Jewish communal life. In 1925, the communal council devised a two-tier ranking system for Jewish institutions, whereby those of the first tier would always receive some funding while those from the second-tier would get support only if money was left over. Not surprisingly, there was conflict over which institutions would occupy which tier. At a council session in September, conflict erupted between Landau and Shur over this question. Shur originally stated that there was money for all, but later noted that there would not be money specifically for second tier establishments. Landau screamed to the entire hall: "Shur will betray

all Jewish establishments!”³⁶ Jewish institutions were in a constant state of crisis, and battles such as this raged at communal council meetings over the limited funds available to support Jewish life.

Economic problems were contributing to a disintegration of Jewish communal cohesion. The problem was magnified by the growing perception among Jews from various classes that their traditional communal structure was hopelessly outdated in the face of modern realities. Because much of the money for Jewish institutions came from taxing ritual slaughter, much of the brunt of this tax was born by the devout Jewish masses, and those that did not eat kosher were seen as not contributing.³⁷ Worse, in Bessarabia the Jewish masses were poor and getting poorer, so not only did a communal structure based on taxing the poor seem unfair (and received increasingly virulent criticism), but as circumstances grew worse, kosher meat became prohibitively expensive for most. Many rabbis and even secular Jewish leaders feared and complained that Bessarabian Jews were eating non-kosher for economic reasons.³⁸ Yet, raising the kosher tax was the only means available to communal leaders to raise revenue for Jewish institutions, even though this came to be seen by many as a conspiracy of the Jewish rich against their poor.³⁹ According to box tax council vice-president Tumarkin there was a definite and steady fall in the revenues of the box tax, upon which 26 Jewish philanthropic associations were completely dependent, to the point that things had reached a crisis point by 1925. Given the overall impoverishment of the Jewish people locally, many had turned away from Kosher meat, according to Tumarkin. This is why the council had to break up the recipients of box tax money

³⁶ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #1053, September 16, 1925.

³⁷ *Bessarabskaia pochta*, #908, April 6, 1925.

³⁸ *Bessarabskaia pochta*, #939, May 11, 1925.

³⁹ In Benderi, when taxes on kosher meat were raised in October 1925, many voices accused the council members of paying off the local Romanian police officials in order to not interfere with their collecting money from the poor Jewish masses; *Bessarabskaia pochta* #1071, October 3, 1925.

into two categories based on tiers, and give associations like OZE and ORT funds only if available. He argued during a meeting of the council that the way forward was to search for new sources of income, for which a special commission could be appointed—but the decision was made by Shur to keep the traditional structure intact and opt for dividing recipients into the two camps. Tumarkin complained that this would not relieve the crisis long term.⁴⁰ Certainly, the question of state support was raised often during these years, especially when some Jewish institutions, such as the Chişinău hospital and cafeterias for the poor, served all residents, not just Jews. Yet, support was inconsistent, coming largely from city funds; central government money was on hold while debate in Bucharest was ongoing about the final status of Romania's numerous minority religions.

The Law of Cults and Communal Recognition

After pursuing a path with numerous stops and starts with several Romanian administrations and ministers, the Jewish community was finally recognized as a unified legal entity across the entire country on April 22, 1928, when a national law on religious cults, known simply as the Law of the Cults, was promulgated. The law recognized an umbrella organization of which Jewish residents became a part.⁴¹ Prior to this, religious leaders, such as Rabbi Tsirelson of Bessarabia, were given representative rights in the Romanian Senate, and Jews who had secured citizenship rights could vote to popularly elect Jewish representatives in national elections as private citizens. However, there had been no hierarchical structure within the Romanian-wide Jewish community and very little Jewish unity across it. The Union of Romanian Jews, a secular organization of mostly better-off, Romanian-speaking Jews based in

⁴⁰ *Bessarabskaia pochta*, #939, May 11, 1925.

⁴¹ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, p. 115-116.

the capital and led by Adolf Shtern and later Wilhelm Filderman, had served as “national intercessors,” defending the interests of the new state’s various Jewish communities as best as possible.

Now with legal recognition, Jewish communities throughout the country were asked to participate in electing Jewish political representatives to the government as each recognized “cult” would be permitted representation, in theory. The Jewish “cult” also became entitled to state subsidies after 1928, which did aid the community until they were curtailed entirely in 1936 after successive reductions in the middle 1930s.⁴² Even then there were complaints about unequal distribution that were, in fact justified because the amount of the subsidies received by the Jewish community compared to that given other religious minorities clearly attested to the anti-Jewish bias in Bucharest. In 1931, some 800,000 Jews received just over 9 million lei in subsidies from the state, compared with the 12.5 million lei received by a 200,000 strong Muslim community. Likewise, 720,000 Protestants received over 53 million lei; 1.2 million Catholics received the same amount; and 1.3 million Uniates received over 105 million lei. This subsidy never amounted to more than 1-2% of the community’s religious needs. Jewish politicians consistently and unsuccessfully attempted to raise the amount, citing discrimination to support their arguments.⁴³

Legal recognition of the *kehilot* on a national political level emboldened Jewish leaders not only in Bessarabia but also in Bukovina and Transylvania to seek better representation in the capital for their own interests directly because many Jews in the annexed territories increasingly looked upon the URJ as Romanian assimilationists for their efforts to convince Jews in all parts

⁴² Ibid. The law fell short of expectations because it did not formally proclaim the full autonomy of the Jewish Community, did not promise state subsidies, and did not guarantee community control in the realm of education.

⁴³ Carol Iancu deals in detail with the political treatment of religious communities in chapter 4, section 2, “The Law of the Cults from 1928 and its Consequences,” in *Evreii din România*, 115-121.

of the country to support Romanian national parties. For example, when one of the leaders of the URJ, Horia Carp, spoke in Bălți in January 1928 after months of postponement, local Jewish supporters attempted to screen the audience, but his speech was nevertheless interrupted by detractors who criticized the URJ for supporting the Cult Law and for refusing to allow its organization, which claimed to be representative of all Romanian Jews, to stand for election of its members to Jewish voters from the whole country.⁴⁴ This boldness was also a factor of the greater commitment to democratic tolerance on the national political stage—the National Peasant Party (NPP) came to power in 1928 and was led by Iuliu Maniu, a long-time Transylvanian moderate whose career stretched back to the Austro-Hungarian Parliament in pre-1918 Vienna. The NPP was much tolerant and liberal-minded than the National Liberals led by one of the leading noble families in the country, the Brătianus.

Much of the tension between the URJ and the leaders of annexed territories reflected the overall lack of cohesion within Romanian Jewry, an understandable result of different historical developments that could only superficially be captured in the official state census of 1930. Tremendous diversity within the Romanian Jewish community, particularly linguistically, was a reflection of life in different empires. In 1930, of 206,958 people who identified themselves as Jews by religion in Bessarabia, or 7.2% of the population, 201,278, or over 97%, declared Yiddish their mother tongue.⁴⁵ This did not reflect the overall picture for the country, however: of 756,730 self-declared Jews by religion across Greater Romania in 1930, or 4.2% of the overall population, 518,754, or 68%, declared Yiddish as their mother tongue, the rest indicating mostly Hungarian (Transylvania), German (Bukovina), or Romanian (Wallachia, especially Bucharest). The level of assimilation into a non-Jewish society was least pronounced in Bessarabia, and

⁴⁴ *Bessarabskoe slovo* #1098, January 19, 1928.

⁴⁵ This number was unchanged from the 1897 All-Russian Imperial Census.

these Jews were the most traditional and “Eastern” of the territories acquired by Bucharest in 1918, albeit with a Russian-speaking core intelligentsia community in Chişinău and other towns with large communities like Bâliţ, Tighina and Sorocca.⁴⁶

The terms of this new status were thus not acceptable to all, and the debates that took place in the Chişinău community over the numerous questions concerning legal recognition sheds much light on the deep divisions within Jewish life at this time. In the run-up to the passage of the Cult Law, Chişinău Jewish leaders had been notified in October 1925 that they were welcomed to send two representatives to Bucharest to partake in the debates over the drafting of the law. Debates broke out at the communal council over who should go, since no electoral system existed for this purpose. Rabbi Tsirelsohn was of course one of the two chosen over the dissent of the non-Orthodox.⁴⁷ Orthodox leaders could not imagine being represented by Jews from outside their own sphere. The political inexperience and depth of conflicting opinions among Bessarabian Jewish leaders was very serious, as noted by Jewish secular journalist Dad’ in one of his reports from inside the communal council meetings: “Instead of debate, there are evil glances of hatred. Instead of dialogue, smashing of fists on the table.”⁴⁸

There were also significant concerns about the reality of the negotiations going on in Bucharest—the URJ was negotiating with the Romanian government on behalf of all the Jews in Greater Romania. In Bessarabia in particular, as noted, the URJ had long been suspected of having assimilationist tendencies: its members were Romanian-speakers while Bessarabian Jews spoke Yiddish and Russian. Perhaps even more importantly, the political policy of the URJ that

⁴⁶ See *Recensământul general al populaţiei României din Decembrie 1930*. Note that this number reflects exactly the percentage claimed by all Russian Jewry in the last Imperial Census of 1897. This number is slightly misleading because many urban, acculturated Jews who were more comfortable in Russian than Yiddish nevertheless declared Yiddish their mother language because to declare Russian was more problematic under Romanian rule.

⁴⁷ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #1082, October 14, 1925.

⁴⁸ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #1084, October 16, 1925.

it fervently pressed upon the Jews of the new territories was that in the face of growing political antisemitism in the country, Jews should vote for the major national party that would protect their interests. Talk of a separate Jewish party, which was raised by Zionists in Transylvania and Bukovina soon after annexation, was strongly opposed by the URJ for fear that it would make Jews appear disloyal. The differences over the promulgation of the Cult Law, which Bessarabian Jews resisted right up to its acceptance in Parliament, was an important final split that led to a loss of authority by the URJ in the new territories and the eventual formation of a Jewish National Party, with its strength in these territories, in 1931.

As negotiations went on throughout the mid-1920s, Chişinău Jews of all persuasions, including Zionists, the Orthodox, socialists, Yiddishists, and the so-called “non-aligned,” seemed to agree that their interests were not being properly spoken for. In a powerful statement to this effect, the Chişinău communal council members and representatives of the various synagogues in the city responded sharply in January 1928 to a request from the URJ leadership that they send representatives to Bucharest to determine how to divide the subsidy of 10 million lei offered by the government to all Romanian Jewry.⁴⁹ They sent a letter to the URJ and the Minister of Cults declining the money, noting two principle reasons: 1) Jewish communities themselves must have the prerogative to comprise their budgets, without the demand for agreeing with state proposed subsidies; 2) the government must include in its annual budget a subsidy to the Jewish community based on its needs and in proportion to the taxes that Jews pay the government. They

⁴⁹ 10 million lei in interwar money was about \$50,000 (although this fluctuated based on the exchange rate). By way of comparison, the 1935 budget of the Bălţi community box tax, based overwhelmingly on the tax on ritual slaughter, was just under 3 million lei. The Jewish population of Bălţi was about 15,000; the Romanian Jewish population was about 750,000. This was understood among Bessarabian Jews as not much money and not a serious honoring of the St. Germaine Treaty.

called for these points to be written in as part of the Law of Cults in the chapter on communal organization.⁵⁰

This statement reveals much of how Bessarabian Jews felt about their position in the country—they wanted Jewish cultural autonomy and demanded the state respect, support and protect this wish. Hardly any among them trusted the Jewish leadership in Bucharest to press for autonomy, understanding that they were not invested in this issue like they were.⁵¹ Carol Iancu compares the perspectives of the Zionists, who wanted to democratize but maintain the *kehilot* as a marker of Jewish national autonomy, with that of the Unionists (supporters of the URJ), who believed the *kehilot* were an important Jewish institution that could facilitate Jewish integration into Romanian society.⁵² In Bessarabia, however, the major split was between Zionists and the Orthodox, and both agreed on the need for Jewish cultural autonomy based on preserving the *kehilot*. They disagreed on the form and purpose of the *kehilot*, with Bessarabian Zionists generally having social, national and secular interests, as well as a need to support preparing young Jews for *aliyah*, while the Orthodox desired maintaining the *kehilot* institutions as means to preserve the Jewish religion. As a result, Zionists demanded democratization of the *kehila* council in order to wrest control from the Orthodox leaders and support Zionist interests while the Orthodox resisted democratization because they did not trust anyone else to maintain the traditional status quo that they felt protected the Jewish religion from disappearance through assimilation.

⁵⁰ *Bessarabskoe slovo* #1110, February 2, 1928.

⁵¹ At Feb 26 meeting of the box tax council along with various synagogue elders, where the members again declined the “offer” of the government to grant Bessarabian Jews 2 million out of the 10 million lei that had been allocated to Romanian Jewry, Zionist Landau heatedly denounced the “unparliamentary tone of the government decree and the hidden message of the role of the Union of Romanian Jews in getting this deal through,” *Bessarabskoe slovo* #1138, March 1, 1928.

⁵² See Iancu, *Evreii din România*, p. 112.

While there was agreement among many Bessarabian Jews that the Cult Law was destructive for their collective autonomy, national politics soon would magnify communal differences and lead to the democratization of the box tax council as demanded by Chişinău Zionists. In the national elections of December 1928, the URJ continued to support the National Liberals while Zionists from across the country threw their support behind the National Peasants. The Orthodox leadership in Chişinău also supported the National Liberals, in part because this party had allowed the Orthodox leaders to maintain their control over local Jewish politics, and also because more than the Zionists, Orthodox leaders held to the URJ line that Jewish politics should “stay quiet,” i. e. maintain alliances with moderate national Romanian parties. Rabbi Tsirelson had made his views known to his flock five years earlier in 1923, when fear was mounting that unfavorable legislation concerning Jewish citizenship in Romania would pass through Parliament (which it did). Asked quite sharply by members of his community then if Jews should take a more active and oppositional stance when they felt the government was against them, Tsirelson replied that despite the presence of anti-Semites and anti-Semitic actions, Jews in Romania have either received full rights or are in the process of gaining them. Therefore, as a peaceful people loyal to their state of residence, Jews should not participate in oppositional acts and demonstrations against the government.⁵³ This was a political line from generations past, but by the 1920s, many Jewish leaders in Chişinău were bold enough to challenge it. They used this stance taken by Tsirelson and other rabbinic leaders to undermine them as much as possible.

When the National Peasants won a resounding electoral victory in December 1928, Jewish politics in Bessarabia were immediately affected, as all five Jewish candidates elected on the NPP ticket to Parliament, (Michael Landau, Solomon Berliand, S. Dubinsky, Meir Ebner and

⁵³ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #264, April 22 1923.

M. Iahinsohn) were Zionists. Pressure on the Orthodox, still holding on to the reins of power in the *kehila* council, to give up their control became intense. Even before the elections, when an NPP victory seemed very likely (interwar Romanian elections were corrupt and never really democratic), concerns from the Orthodox mounted. At a November 6 *kehila* council meeting, a full month before the elections, Reb Vekker from Shur's camp gave a lengthy speech arguing that no matter what kind of Parliament was chosen; Rabbi Tsirelson had to be among the representatives there. Landau spoke about the realities of politics, coming close to denouncing the Rabbi—"Reb Tsirelsohn has become a handmaiden of the Liberal Constitution, for which we have shed blood."⁵⁴

Democracy comes to Jewish Chişinău

With the Cult Law coming into force and with Bessarabian Zionists in positions of influence at the national level, the Orthodox grip on local power was weakened and communal re-organization became inevitable. Jewish lobbying in Bucharest had succeeded in recognizing various aspects of Jewish life such as schools, synagogues, and philanthropic and cultural organizations. These organizations in turn came to belong to one unified communal organization represented before the Romanian authorities by a council of all Jews in Romania. Elections of local council representatives followed for several years after the Cult Law's promulgation across Greater Romania. In Chişinău the vote took place November 3, 1929, when 71 members representing 14 different party lists ran for office. The election was not without controversy within the community, because in order to have the election represent all ideological and religious perspectives of the community members, the "democratic" bloc, which included varied secular, Zionist, and trade union interests, compromised with the demands of the Orthodox bloc

⁵⁴ *Unzer Tsayt* #1867, November 8, 1928.

to forbid Jewish women from voting for this council. In following years similar communal organizations were chosen in various Bessarabian towns with significant Jewish populations, including Bălți, Bender, Orhei, Calarași, Soroca and Hotin. In the spring of 1933 a unified council was elected to represent all the Jewish communities of Bessarabia, and this time women were allowed to vote.⁵⁵ With the creation of an institution that gave voice to common Jews in communal affairs, the box tax administration finally became accountable to a broader number of local Jews, although it was not discarded.

The debate over the elimination of the box tax and the communal elections had reached a fever pitch in the run-up to the Chișinău council representative elections. These local debates, in turn, clearly pointed to wider questions of changes within Jewish identity that had already been ongoing. For many Jews the elections were a natural process—Jews must make their institutions democratic in order to become a normal and active part of political life in a democratic, European Romania. In many of the communal elections that took place in the early 1930s, this understanding was quite explicit, for example in Tighina on March 19, 1933: “The communal council makes this heartfelt appeal to all the Jews of Tighina town and suburbs to fulfill their civil and national obligation to take part in the creation of the Jewish community of Tighina for the purpose of uniting and defending the Jews.”⁵⁶ Yet even at the communal level, different opinions clashed violently. For example, at a conference about the Chișinău communal elections in October 1929 of the Bessarabian branch of ORT (*Obshestvo Remeslenogo zemledelcheskgo Truda*, The Society for Trades and Agricultural Labor),⁵⁷ a Zionist youth from He-Halutz angered conference participants by refusing to speak Yiddish, the standard language of Jewish

⁵⁵ Kopansky, *Blagatvoritelnye Organizatsii Evreiev*, 15-16.

⁵⁶ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 361.

⁵⁷ ORT sought to train Jews to farm in order to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Some of its members were Zionists but not all. It was begun in St. Petersburg in the 1890s but became based in Berlin in the 1920s.

communication in Bessarabia even among most Zionists, and insisting on Hebrew instead.⁵⁸

Such ideological differences over political, cultural and religious issues sometimes lead to fistfights.

Not all Jews wanted to abolish the box tax, which had for better or worse managed to maintain Jewish religious and cultural institutions, such as they were, for more than a century of rule by the Tsars. However, support for maintaining the box tax was perceived by many lower-class Jews (generally accurately) as limited only to the wealthy and Orthodox, which earned both these camps of traditional Jewish leadership considerable animosity from many Jews and served to shake-up communal politics.⁵⁹ With recognition of the *kehilot* came the opportunity for state subsidies (which proved disappointing but this could not be foreseen clearly in 1928), but to collect these funds, taxation had to be organized on modern means other than the kosher meat tax. Many Jews, particularly younger and more nationalist voices, looked upon the box tax as a relic of the past; as something preventing Jewish collective modernization. Thus, despite traditional sensibilities, proponents of maintaining the box tax recognized the unpopularity of the idea, especially given the shift in power toward the Zionist, and largely dropped it.

Political involvement dramatically increased among lower-class Jews by the last years of the 1920s across Bessarabia as a result of these changes, but especially in Chişinău. According to a Jewish joke at the time: “if you see a Jew on the street gesticulating wildly, chances are, he is making an argument for his favorite candidate.”⁶⁰ State records also indicate that Jewish interest in the elections and, by extension, in the political process more broadly, was remarkably vibrant. Siguranţa agents reported that the week before the planned elections on November 3, the level of ‘propaganda’ was intense because of the “need to elect a communal council that

⁵⁸ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #2528, October 25, 1929.

⁵⁹ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #2522, October 19, 1929.

⁶⁰ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #2538, November 4, 1929.

would protect the rights of the Jews.”⁶¹ While Jews likely saw connections between their internal reforms and national politics, it would seem that Romanian police clearly looked upon Jews and their internal politics as completely foreign. Jews’ expression of interest in national politics as a means of protecting their people specifically and not serving the state was also highly suspect as anti-national and perhaps treasonous. Romanian police wanted no part in Jewish affairs other than to keep them under control and away from other citizens, perhaps the starkest difference from the Soviet-Jewish reality across the river.

Such rapid politicization worried traditional Jewish leaders, particularly the Orthodox, who worried not only about the loss of their own political power, but also about the future of Jewish life. For members of Aguda, the organization that pressed both Jewish institutions and national governments on behalf of Orthodox interests, politics was always seen from the perspective of preserving religious orthodoxy as the only means of preserving Judaism itself. Members feared the assimilation of future generations. Often this concern was voiced explicitly and this only intensified after the 1928 elections.⁶² This is the key to explaining why democratic proceedings proved difficult to accept when there were questions of power sharing with those considered to bode ill for the future of Judaism. Within religious structures themselves, election proceedings were hardly new; nor were rabbinic leaders unfamiliar with secular politics or with the plight of their people under the new regime. But religious leaders simply did not trust the secular elite to maintain Jewish life.⁶³

Extreme positions from all sides raised the political debate to a fever pitch on the pages of the Russian and Yiddish-language presses in autumn 1929. In a letter published in

⁶¹ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 674, l. 110.

⁶² At an Aguda conference on June 8, 1937 chaired by Rabbi Tsirelson and attended by rabbis from communities across Bessarabia, the Chief Rabbi told his flock to set examples for Jewish youth to respect their religion, law.”ANRM, f. 679, o. 1, d. 5410, l. 66.

⁶³ See also Orthodox debates from Aguda conferences from the early 1920s, ANRM, f. 679, o. 1, d. 5202, l. 22, 24.

Bessarabian Post, a secular, left-wing Yiddishist named M. Uchitel' blamed both Zionists and Orthodox leaders for working against a Jewish "Workers' Democracy." He blamed the Zionists for raising the question of emigration for political expediency while not doing enough for actual resettlement in Palestine; and argued that the emigration question itself undermined Jews' local political connections. He lambasted the Orthodox, calling them "our parents" who had represented 'us' before the Tsars but failed in demanding national rights, and were now insisting on an unreasonable share of power in communal affairs. Uchitel' did represent the views of many in drawing a connection between Jewish oppression in Tsarist Russian and Greater Romania as both something that Jewish leaders have been unable to successfully address: "We don't need the Saturday worship of the Orthodox or the 'violent Judaization' and chauvinism of the Zionists," Uchitel' wrote, "who are making Yiddish—the actual language of Jewish culture, the living entity that holds Jews together—into a panacea."⁶⁴

The election results were controversial, as the campaigning had been, but the level of tension was undoubtedly greatest when time came to actually implement the mandated changes. Extremely tenuous negotiations among the leading parties, marked particularly by their inability to compromise, exposed the simultaneous embracing of and discomfort with the democratic process. Most prominent among the 14 competing electoral groups were the Zionists and the Orthodox, the latter led by Chief Rabbi Tsirelson. These two were by far best organized and already had a reputation as the political leadership of the community, yet they captured only 10 and 12 of 71 council seats, respectively. The largest share of 13 seats went to a loose confederation of craftsmen led by Alexander Zilberman,⁶⁵ and the rest (actually a majority of 36

⁶⁴ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #2523, October 20, 1929.

⁶⁵ Zilberman was originally from Orhei but moved to Chişinău in 1918. He was a Social Democrat in revolutionary Russia and was fired for his radical views from a journalist job for the paper "Bessarabian Life," but slowly moved

seats) went in smaller numbers to various blocs representing Jewish philanthropic associations, individual synagogues, and other religious affiliations. Voter turnout was 5471, or over 60% of eligible Jewish voters.⁶⁶ The result was clearly a set-back for the Orthodox religious leadership of Chişinău Jewry, and was publicly perceived as a defeat for them. This was true for the Zionists also, who enjoyed greater political experience, more financial support and a particular appeal to the youth than any other reforming party.

Not surprisingly, both factions refused to accept these election results, with the Orthodox using religious influence over devout Jews to maintain control despite their numbers; “only if God is in our hands will we enter the communal government,” said Orthodox bloc leader Solomon Shur.⁶⁷ The insistence upon their traditional authority by Orthodox leaders in the face of modern politics, such as democratic elections, was a specific response against modernity identified as the doctrine of *daat tora*.⁶⁸ In Chişinău in 1929, traditional authority was clearly challenged through modern political ideas as never before, and Orthodox leaders retrenched themselves in religious ideologies in an attempt to avoid the repercussions of the changes. The Orthodox and the Zionists soon formed competing coalition blocs in vying to select from their midst the leader of the communal government. Despite a Zionist-led coalition majority, the Orthodox threatened to pull out of the communal government all together if Rabbi Tsirelson was not chosen president of the new communal administration.⁶⁹ The warring camps finally reached

toward Jewish nationalism in Romanian Bessarabia, consistently voting for the Jewish Party by the early 1930s; ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3046, l. 50.

⁶⁶ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #2541, November 7, 1929. This is a low number for a community of over 40,000, was explained largely by the fact that women were not allowed to vote, and by the fact that only those male Jews with Romanian citizenship could vote.

⁶⁷ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #2542, November 8, 1929.

⁶⁸ Aharon Rose, “The Haredim: A Defense,” in *Azure: Ideas for the Jewish Nation*, No. 25, Summer 2006, 33-34. Rose defines *daat tora* as the principle “which grants great rabbis the authority to issue rulings on matters not directly concerned with Jewish law.”

⁶⁹ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #2550, November 16, 1929.

a compromise when the aging Dr. Slutsky, chief doctor at the Chişinău Jewish hospital for over fifty years, was chosen as president.

The impact of modern ideas on Jewish life, which Chişinău's Jews had been reading about in the press throughout the 1920s, was evident in Slutsky's ceremonial speech on November 19, 1929. His words served as an affirmation of Jewish national identity and of the power of democracy: he described Jewish education as the means to preserve Jewish national identity, and emphasized that this communal government, the first actually chosen by the Jewish people of Bessarabia, would "see to their interests rather than rubber-stamping the dictates of the state as the old communal government did." At the ceremony, two women leaders from the organization of Jewish women, Mrss. Babich and Schechter, stood up and protested that Jewish women had still not been allowed to vote, shocking many of the Orthodox men present as such an outburst would have been unimaginable only ten years before.⁷⁰ In fact, it had taken over ten years since the end of Russian rule for Jews to form a nominally democratic municipal authority in Bessarabia for representation in Bucharest. Nevertheless, the debates taking place clearly show that Bessarabian Jews were aware that they were living in an era of unprecedented change.

Worsening Circumstances

The financial crisis and the rapidly deteriorating economic circumstances facing Jewish life and institutions were imperative in understanding the Jewish popular vote—the failure of the two most prominent forces in local Jewish politics to do better clearly point to a high level of dissatisfaction. Faced with growing insecurity in broader Romanian society, Chişinău Jews feared the loss of the Jewish institutions that they had come to increasingly depend upon. Many chose new leaders out of personal connections, but many also expressed with their vote a hope in

⁷⁰ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #2554, November 20, 1929.

running Jewish affairs more competently and with greater interest for the welfare of all involved rather than just the privileged. The weakening of Orthodox hegemony on power was not unusual, but the failure to convincingly embrace Zionism, even if temporarily, was an important indicator that many Jews wanted better representation and were not necessarily ideologically driven in a pro-Zionist direction. After a decade in Greater Romania, many lower-class Jews, with the exception of the youth, still hoped to enjoy cultural autonomy in their place of residence and were not sold that the only salvation for Jews was to leave their home and migrate to the land of Israel. Here again, the broader picture of growing antisemitism must be considered in understanding the course of politics after 1930: by the early to mid 1930s, this hope in autonomism was largely dashed and Zionist solutions to Jewish problems made more appealing.

In November 1929, with the official formation and state recognition of the Chişinău Jewish communal government structure, the community was able to make democratic decisions concerning its budget and expenditures, among a host of other matters. There was little, however, that Jewish communal policies could have done to avert the coming financial disasters facing Bessarabian Jewry. Communal governments were never able to do much other than try to alleviate an atmosphere of crisis, marked as it was by perpetual, unsolved problems from the post-war loss of markets made severely worse by the onset of the Great Depression. By early 1931, the Chişinău Jewish hospital deficit reached 1.6 million lei (\$10,000), a fact reflected by articles in the local Russian-language press that expressed continued concern and foreshadowed the closure of the hospital. As not only the hospital but also many philanthropic organizations and individuals were in a sad economic state, communal taxes suffered. In late summer 1931 hospital staff staged a brief strike against the hospital administrators for not alleviating the budget deficit, which they blamed for the delay or non-payment of their salaries. By this time,

over 90% of all hospital patients were being treated for free because of their inability to pay for any of the services received. The deficit of the hospital reached 2 million lei by the end of the year, and Chişinău Jewish community president Zilberman presented a memorandum outlining the state of crisis of the Jewish hospital and secured state funds of 1.3 million lei for 1932, managing to avoid going further into debt.⁷¹ Other Jewish hospitals in the smaller cities throughout Bessarabia, such as Balţi, Tighina, and Calaraşi, witnessed similar funding difficulties in the interwar years. The small hospital in Calaraşi, serving a town that was more than 75% Jewish, did receive proportionally more funding from Joint, although it also often fell short.⁷² Hospitals are a good indicator that things were at least as bad, but likely worse, among other Jewish institutions, since hospitals usually received greater support from the state.

All branches of Jewish public life were deeply affected by the deepening financial problems. There remained a tremendous discrepancy between the rich and poor among Jews, often resulting in bribery that outraged the Jewish public. In February 1931 uproar arose over the fact that the *Hevra Kadisha*, the Chişinău burial society, had accepted large bribes from wealthy Jews in order to secure the best cemetery plots. The organization had not only violated an apparent public trust in not making such decisions democratically, but also for holding on to a large amount of money. Private wealth was grudgingly left alone, but when Jewish social organizations were noted for holding significant money during a time of extreme hardship for many, they were viciously attacked.⁷³ Bickering over dispersing of funds among Jewish organizations became so intense by early 1931 that a representative organization was formed

⁷¹ Kopansky, *Blagotvoritelnye organizatsii Evreiev*, 40-45. Despite continuous difficulties into the later 1930s, the hospital managed to open an internal medicine section and a tuberculosis ward in 1936, although these sections were overrun because of a malaria outbreak in the city that year. The Chişinău Jewish hospital survived the war; in 1944 it was occupied by the Soviet Army and transformed into the 4th hospital of the Kishinev city health section, Kopansky, 58.

⁷² Kopansky, *Blagotvoritelnye organizatsii Evreiev*, 59-78.

⁷³ *Bessarabskaia Pochta* #3002, February 12, 1931.

consisting of members from traditional religious aid groups such as *Ezras Hoilim*, the Jewish schools, and modern associations like ORT. The organization met monthly from February 1931 to determine how best to use the funds available for Jewish life, although decisions there were hotly contested also.⁷⁴

Because of the consistent financial problems facing most Jewish institutions, a well-developed publicity campaign for supporting them through private donations developed over the course of the interwar years on the pages of the Russian and Yiddish dailies. In addition to calling for donations through heart-wrenching pleas for worthy causes, journalists would shamelessly list those community leaders, whom everyone knew, who failed to give to various worthy causes. Just as public pride was sought in supporting these causes, public shame was feared by wealthy Jews who failed to pledge support for those less fortunate, serving together as a powerful motivator for communal philanthropy among the better-off.⁷⁵ In January-October 1928, for example, Chişinău Jewish hospital head physician Dr. Slutsky led a fundraising campaign, mostly through the press, which raised half-a-million lei (\$3000) for the hospital.⁷⁶ The number of charitable organizations that either organized philanthropic drives or benefited from them, as well as the number of poor and needy, was large. On the eve of WWII, there were across Bessarabia 13 age-old homes; 27 committees for assistance to sick people (*Ezras Hoilim*); 57 committees and organizations of different kinds for assistance to poor people (*Ezras Anim*), and many other smaller institutions as well.⁷⁷ Yet, the effect of such charitable drives seemed to underscore the growing feeling of desperation and deepening crisis on the Jewish street. This

⁷⁴ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #3003, February 13, 1931.

⁷⁵ Almost any issue of the *Bessarabskaia pochta* or *Bessarabskoe slovo* listing the names of donors to various causes, such as, for example, #269 of the *pochta*, which listed the names of contributors to Jewish charity organizations “Soimekh Noiflim” and *Ezras Hoilim*.”

⁷⁶ Kopansky, *Blagatvoritelnye Organizatsii Evreiev*, 39.

⁷⁷ Moshe Ussoskin, *Struggle for Survival*, 19.

was doubly so because the economic problems grew in the early 1930s together with the rapidly disintegrating political status of Jews in the country.

Nationalism and Antisemitism

Harder economic times were obviously not only hitting Bessarabia but much of the world. All of Romanian society was hard hit, especially the peasantry, too many of whom produced for export and had become dependent on international grain prices that now collapsed. Difficult circumstances made it easier for extremists to fan the flames of anti-Semitic hatred, and the threat and fear of violence continued to grow. Anti-Semitic violence from students had been intermittent since 1922; the level of violence in terms of pogroms across the country spiked notably in 1927, led by student riots in Cluj and Oradea Mare that spread like waves into more rural areas where they became pogroms.⁷⁸ In 1930 violence and anti-Semitic protests picked up again in several Romanian cities and began spreading to smaller urban and in some cases rural areas, while Romanian police and the courts were seen as hesitant to prosecute the assailants.⁷⁹ As reflected in press reporting, a growing panic began to grip Bessarabian Jews, which was of course very important in understanding Jewish politics. The popular Jewish mood during the communal elections in 1929 had been influenced by rising fear of violence from anti-Semitic hooliganism; by the early 1930s, this threat increased and came together with economic crisis. Taken together, the effect was devastating on Jewish security.

Zionist public activism had been increasing since the middle of the 1920s, particularly from the local members of Vladimir Jabotinsky's Zionist-Revisionists. On September 17, 1929 they organized a public meeting in front of the Mayoralty building in Chişinău on the question of

⁷⁸ William Oldson, "American Diplomatic Assessment," in *The Jews in the Romanian History* (Bucharest, 1996), 173.

⁷⁹ *Unzer Tsayt*, #323, September 30, 1923.

British policies in Palestine, calling for Jews to circumvent British immigration quotas and simply go on their own.⁸⁰ The timing was in part a reaction to an article in the local Romanian-language anti-Semitic paper *Scutul Național*, which printed an article on September 8 titled “Long Live the Arabs.” The article opened with a glowing tribute to the long-deceased Pavel Crușevan, the former chief editor of the locally well-remembered anti-Semitic daily *Bessarabets*, which had been instrumental in instigating the 1903 Kishinev pogrom. His photograph in the article included the caption “now dead for 20 years after having been poisoned by kikes.” The article was met with a public outcry from the local Jewish community.⁸¹ In addition, news broke of Jews being attacked in Bessarabia while on board a train from Cernauți to Bucharest, with victims reporting that Iron Guard hooligans threatened greater terror against the Jews and promised them that the Romanian government would never know or do anything about it.⁸²

Indeed, the growing state of perceived besiegement was largely connected to the fact the Romanian authorities seemed more willing to protect anti-Semites while failing to protect the Jews. Much of the complaints were related to events in everyday life. In October 1929, for example, 23 Jewish merchants from the New Market in Chișinău filed a complaint with the mayor against the controller of the market, a well-known anti-Semite named Vladimir Novitsky, for crimes against Jewish businessmen including extortion, beatings, and random organized theft. Romanian municipal administrators, however, did nothing.⁸³ Complaints against Novitsky can be found in the press for many months after this date, as little was done to control him.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 674, ll. 36-37.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ *Bessarabskaia pochta* #2518, October 15, 1929.

⁸⁴ This same Novitsky would be accused of causing anti-Semitic disturbances in Bălți and of being Russian spy by the Romanian press during the summer of 1940 (see Romanian papers *Dimineața* #8445, June 28, 1930 and *Adevărul* #14258, June 22, 1930). Apparently if antisemitism could not be denied, then the Russians were responsible for it.

Little comfort came from government representatives. Following the events that preceded the communal elections, Jewish leaders petitioned the Romanian police to closely observe such disturbances, but a police report from September 25, 1929 noted that the only noteworthy popular movements were Zionism and communism among the Jews themselves.⁸⁵ As in many other instances, antisemitism was indeed observed but silenced in Siguranța reporting, just like in other police actions. For example, in order to ensure protection from antisemites rallying nearby at a joint meeting of the proto-fascist, anti-Semitic Iron Guard and League of National Christian Defense, organizers of a Zionist meeting in Calarași on November 28, 1929 petitioned local authorities for six additional gendarmes. It is unclear if the additional gendarmes were provided, but noteworthy that the police report agreed that violence could be expected against the Jews.⁸⁶ A follow up report from December 4, however, noted that no antisemitism was observed.⁸⁷ As a corollary to this, it was clear from Siguranța reports that most police firmly believed that communism was being imported into the country to destabilize the state: the idea that it had inherent ideological and economic appeal was rejected wholesale. Several reports from the turn of the decade, for example, indicated that communism among the ethnic Moldovans was prevalent, but Siguranța reporting, aiming to show that that communism was a foreign (especially Jewish) ideology explained this as resulting from local antipathy among “ethnic Romanians” to the changing of the calendar.⁸⁸ Moldovans were on occasion arrested, especially urban workers such as handicraftsmen, yet it seemed impossible for agents to accept that there was anything naturally appealing for them in the movement.

⁸⁵ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 674, l. 48.

⁸⁶ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 674, ll. 149-150.

⁸⁷ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 674, l. 175.

⁸⁸ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 674, ll. 55. From a report dated September 28, 1929. The Romanian government implemented a change in the Orthodox Christian calendar in Bessarabia after annexing the province from the older Julian calendar to the Western Gregorian, a move that was resisted by many Moldovans that remained loyal to the old calendar throughout the entire interwar period.

Particularly psychologically traumatic for Bessarabian Jews were the events of the summer of 1930, when a panic spread among Bessarabian Jews that detachments of the Iron Guard would be allowed by the Bessarabian regional authorities to march through towns as they requested. By all accounts, events of this summer moved popular expectations from isolated incidents and unfriendly bureaucrats to a state of consistent fear that in some cases bordered on panic. In days before reports spread of Cuzists (named after far-right, anti-Semitic, Christian nationalist Iași University Professor Alexandru C. Cuza) recruiting children to join their parades⁸⁹ or walking through Jewish parts of towns and shouting anti-Semitic taunts.⁹⁰ Reports, mostly in the Russian and Yiddish press, noted that in response to inquiries from Jewish leaders about the anti-Semitic marches, Romanian leaders explained that the Cuzists were planning to engage in pro-national propaganda, implying that the Jews should not feel threatened.⁹¹

Reports circulated that advanced members of the Iron Guard crossed the Prut on July 15 and attacked Jewish stores in Ungheni. Codreanu himself would reportedly arrive shortly “to beat the Jews” and “the authorities will do nothing to stop him.”⁹² The article held that the government had spoiled Codreanu by doing nothing to him in the past and now could not stop him (he had been acquitted in a clear murder case in 1925). The author also expressed concern that the economic plight in the country was hitting the peasantry very hard, making it easy for the guardists to motivate them into violence against the Jews.⁹³ Indeed, the level of antisemitism in much of the press and popular rhetoric was growing more extreme. Already, articles had recently appeared in the popular Romanian language paper *Universul* defending the Iron

⁸⁹ *Dimineața* #8460, July 13, 1930.

⁹⁰ *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #1990, July 9, 1930.

⁹¹ *Kishinovskii Listok*, #262, July 16, 1930.

⁹² *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #1997, July 16, 1930.

⁹³ *Ibid.*



Figure 6: Iron Guard leader and popular hero Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, dressed in national peasant garb, with supporters on a visit to Bessarabia, Ungheni, 1930. ANRM photograph collection, # 3-62.

Guard—complaints against their march were apparently being organized by communists in Moscow: “How else can it be explained that there are no complaints against the communists, who are everywhere in Bessarabia? But when a few teenagers, 15 year-old boys want to march around, they are labeled “Cuzists” and other names by the press!”⁹⁴ Communism, the argument went, was completely foreign to the Romanian national character—a foreign import—while expressions of nationalism affirmed the strength and vitality of the nation; the only people opposing it are foreigners themselves.

Undoubtedly, Jewish voices in the comparatively open press during these years were also instrumental in raising Jewish awareness and fear to the hatred around them. The press was very important as a venue for voicing concerns—particularly during the government of the National Peasant Party from 1928-1932. National Peasant leaders, Iuliu Maniu in particular, were

⁹⁴ *Universul*, #148, July 2, 1930.

committed to democracy and maintaining European norms. Ironically, this greater level of press freedom allowed Jewish interests freer expression to condemn state abuses, particularly those of local police and bureaucracy that did much to make Jewish national sentiment stronger. Press reports noted that Jews had been attacked outside Chişinău but especially in Bălţi, where serious recent attacks against them were met with unwillingness from local authorities to do anything about them. Not surprisingly this frightened and isolated the entire community.⁹⁵ To calm these spreading fears, notable also in Ungheni where Iron Guard youth camps were often organized, the Bessarabian Governor insisted publicly that he would not cooperate with the Iron Guard and would not let them into Bessarabia. Nonetheless, hundreds of Jews packed up and moved toward the north in early July.⁹⁶ Yet the anti-Jewish perspective of the authorities became clear the same week when a delegation of Jewish communal leaders from various Bessarabian towns met with Deputy Governor Florescu. In response to complaints that Jews were in a constant state of panic because of consistent anti-Semitic agitation among certain elements of the population, Florescu replied that “Jews should be more sensible for their skin when they talk.” He asked why the Jews were always concerned with Cuzism and never with communism: “Communism is dangerous for all, but Cuzism is dangerous only for a certain segment of the population, only for Jews.”⁹⁷ Indeed, police reporting on Jewish residents was by the late 1920s formulaic in its assumptions: “antisemitism is not observed, but there are slight signs of communist movement.”⁹⁸ The hypocrisy of such reporting was abundantly clear: Siguranţa agents attempted to silence the danger of antisemitism in their reports while simultaneously

⁹⁵ *Golos Bessarabiei*, #151, June 20, 1930. Parliamentary Deputy Rosenberg from Bălţi had spoken against the June attacks there, and stated for the Jewish community that he felt confident in the intentions of the central government but lambasting the local authorities for doing nothing to prevent the violence.

⁹⁶ *Bessarabskoie slovo* #1998, July 17, 1930.

⁹⁷ *Bessarabskoie slovo* #1998, July 17, 1930.

⁹⁸ ANRM f. 679, op. 1, d. 674, l. 79; this was standard phraseology for a huge number of police reports.

granting Jewish requests for additional gendarmes to prevent public disturbances because of *expected* violence from right-wing groups.⁹⁹

Many Jews refused to wait for assurances of security from authorities, rather taking matters into their own hands as panic spread. A local union of Jewish businessmen promised to blockade all roads into and out of Călărași in order to prevent the Iron Guard from arriving in their town.¹⁰⁰ Rising panic also triggered a noticeable rise in Jewish migration out of Romanian Bessarabia beginning in 1930, although certainly economic collapse was also a very important factor in this.¹⁰¹ Hundreds of Jewish families were leaving Bessarabia every month beginning with 1930, mostly to Western Europe and more rarely Eretz Israel, but in some cases across the Dniester into Soviet Transnistria.¹⁰² Migration certainly existed since the establishment of Romanian state control in Bessarabia in 1918, but in terms of the Jewish population it was a net population increase; after 1930 the trend was clearly toward outmigration. Leaving the country was quite difficult, however, and was of course never feasible for the entire Jewish population, just as had been the case during the waves of pogroms in the Russian Empire.¹⁰³ Jewish reactions to circumstances in Romanian Bessarabia followed other avenues as well. There was an upsurge in youth activism, particularly among the Zionists. Many continued to lobby for Jewish interests on the local and national political stages. Another was withdrawal into traditional religious life.

⁹⁹ A clear such case took place in late November 1929: in two separate reports from December 4, police inspectors noted there was no antisemitism observed around the capital, ANRM f. 679, op. 1, d. 674, l. 175, while at the same time granting a request from November 30 to leaders of the Zionist-Revisionists in for a meeting in Călărași because of the expected public disturbance from right-wing student members of the Iron Guard and League of National Christian Defense, *ibid*, ll. 149-150.

¹⁰⁰ *Golos Bessarabiei*, #177, July 16, 1930. Concern in this town was notably high given that it was more than 75% Jewish and could certainly expect a visit.

¹⁰¹ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 60, l. 27: in the Hotin județ alone, from April 1930 thru January 1931, about 300 people were granted Romanian passports, the overwhelming majority of these, well over 80%, were Jews. Chisinau police had routinely granted only between 20 and 40 passports per month to Bessarabian Jews for the purpose of leaving the country.

¹⁰² ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 60, l. 229; also 88, 106, 116, 144, 148, 155, and 164 on Jews leaving Bessarabia.

¹⁰³ See, for example, the thinking of Simon Dubnov on this question, discussed more in Chapter 5.

The modernization of communal administration that took place during these years was an important step toward greater politicization of Bessarabian Jewry. Extreme divisions among political factions and interests, clearly visible in the late 1920s, began to subside by the mid 1930s in the face of political isolation and real physical danger. The Jewish National Party (JNP), formed in 1931, threatened the URJ's policy of persuading Jews to vote for Romanian national parties in power, so long as they were not overly anti-Semitic, in order to maintain perceptions of Jewish loyalty to Romania. This was no longer acceptable to Jewish leaders in Transylvania, Bukovina, and Bessarabia in particular, where rising antisemitism and violence against a background of official indifference undermined the argument of the URJ—loyalty to Romania seemed pointless. The nationalist perspective of the JNP, most clearly expressed in the following article carried in the only issue published of the Russian language Jewish nationalist paper *Evreiskaia Tribuna* (Jewish Tribune), turned away from cooperation with national parties. The article speaks loudly to the growth of a Jewish national identity that no longer can be contained within individual European nation-states but rather demands a Jewish national unity, even as historically apologist notions of the “Jewish national character” are notable. Over the next few years such views increasingly came to represent the sentiment of Jews not only in the new territories but in much of the Old Kingdom as well (certainly in Moldova, if less so in Wallachia) because of the spread of an increasingly virulent antisemitism:

There has been a lot of talk about a Jewish national party, even among the Jews of the Old Regat, who have traditionally pushed for assimilation and have been viewed from Bessarabia as the assimilators of Jews into Romanian culture. A Jewish national party is profoundly necessary and important, because we are not an ethnic group—we are a nation. We have our own language and our own culture, our own literature and our own history, and in compact masses we live in one territory. We have an unusual history, brought up with particularities shared by no other people, which entitle us to be called a nation. Our people have their own characteristics...we are special. When other nations were fighting for their rights we were hiding in cellars like the living dead. The past has shaped our characteristics, our national response. We have survived despite thousands of years of efforts to destroy us. We have triumphed and preserved our religion. Despite having lost our political unity and being strewn about the globe, we have contributed to almost every field of knowledge. Complaints swirl that national sentiment is not present in all segments of Jewish society, that some are more inclined toward assimilation. This is unfortunate

and a result of improper upbringing not sufficiently entwined with our national spirit. We must petition our national leaders to work to strengthen our national unity. Assimilation is utopia. No matter how Jews may try to change their national characteristics, this will not lead to anything positive. We need a Jewish party we as we need life itself—other parties will only divide the Jewish nation.¹⁰⁴

Turning Point

This perspective voiced in *Evreiskaia Tribuna* exemplified the heights of Jewish political optimism at the close of the 1920s that would be subject to disappointment by the mid 1930s. It represented the maturation of popular politics in Jewish Bessarabia, the ebbing of the appeal of centrist voices that called for maintaining the status quo and of the rise of radicalism on both the right and left to replace it. Jewish nationalism in particular grew in strength and influence among not only the Jewish poor but also the most respectable elements of society. The solution to the Jewish Question, that is, the search for a personal identity that would reconcile one's fluctuating Jewish identity with the demands and pressures of the modern world, had daunted Jewish leaders and intellectuals in Russian Bessarabia (and the rest of Eastern Europe) and continued to do so in interwar Romanian Bessarabia on similar terms. Increasingly, many intellectuals that had been steeped in Russian high culture gravitated closer to their Jewish identity and embraced the Jewish masses as they were pushed to the margins of Romanian society. Just as 1924 had been a turning point from hope to political interaction, and 1930 began to see the limits of interaction and made nationalist separation more appealing, 1933 witnessed another change in Bessarabian Jewish psychology; this time from interaction toward circling the wagons. In 1933, a swift and brutal one-two blow was dealt all Romanian Jewry, not just in Bessarabia: Hitler took charge in Germany and Romania began moving closer to it economically and politically, and in the parliamentary elections in December 1933 Jewish parties were

¹⁰⁴ *Evreiskaia Tribuna*, June 22, 1929, 1 (front page article). Unfortunately, I have been unable to determine exactly why this paper was discontinued, although it would be logical to assume the reason was connected to its overly vocal and open call to Jewish nationalism in Romania.

completely shut out. Circumstances after 1933 grew rapidly worse. Yet the gradualism of popular attitudes and their reception among Jews across the entirety of the interwar period, as well as its legacy from decades before, is an important point to make, since often in treating the rise antisemitism in the country it is portrayed as something sudden and perhaps even limited to the growth of anti-Semitic legislation in 1938. This is only part of the story, as the changes in legislation could not be implemented without the context of the previous years.

The appeal of the Jewish National Party remained very strong and grew rapidly after 1930. Despite growing national problems, the political mood at the outset of 1933 was very positive, as witnessed by a visit of Michael Landau to Orhei on January 17 in which the well-known newspaper publisher spoke at a political rally for the JNP attended by about 300 local Jews. Landau touched on many of the reasons Jews were looking for political change.¹⁰⁵ He spoke of the need to organize the Jews in towns like Orhei where they were a powerful majority but remained unorganized and thus their needs went unmet: committees of the JNP would be forming in Telenești, Bravicea, Cinișeuți and Rezina, Landau declared. He argued that in recent years, Jewish deputies in Parliament have failed to attain proportional representation while the impoverishment of the Jewish people in Romania continued. He promised that a Jewish National Party would be able to better serve Jewish interests, especially when the movement of the Cuzists was on the rise. Jews controlled only 5 seats in the Chamber of Deputies while various Cuzist parties control 20 seats, Landau maintained: such a state of affairs could only be explained by the fracturing of Jewish interests in Parliament and of the need to unite them. Jews were divided among too many political parties and unable to achieve anything for their people as a result. He called for an end to this. Local communal leaders were very taken with these ideas,

¹⁰⁵ The Siguranța called this the “party of Jewish power,” as local Jews were apparently calling it at the time.

and thanked him very warmly and threw a banquet for him that lasted well past midnight.¹⁰⁶

There was a general belief that Jews, now with greater understanding of the political process, had faith in their own ability to organize and affect a positive change in their own lives.

Yet Jewish political sentiment in Bessarabia, and indeed across Europe, remained fragmented precisely when it was possible to affect politics through unity. Soon that moment passed. In Romania, the JNP and URJ disagreed on a Jewish future in the country only more bitterly when they enjoyed relatively more freedom to do so. After the formation and successful performance of the Jewish National Party in 1931 and 1932, it was effectively blocked from representation by the National Liberals, who returned to power in 1933. By that year Jewish concerns with Romanian antisemitism had become intense, eventually uniting Jewish activism of different stripes against a common danger. At Zionist youth meetings, Jewish activists discussed growing threats from Romanian nationalist groups, which increasingly allied themselves with Nazi Germany by signing threat letters with swastikas. For example, in February 1933 in Chişinău, Zionist fervor was whipped up at a youth meeting of Brit Trumpeldor (right-wing Zionists) when the following post card from LANC (Cuza's League of National Christian Defense) was received, passed around and discussed:

To the death to save our country from being sold to the jidani (kikes)...you are blind, don't you see where, in what country you are? You are those that don't like our land and our nation. Confess yourselves, receive the Eucharist, if you believe in our law. Today, two of us go to make virulent justice. In vain you defend yourselves—we swear by our law, and we are not afraid of anything.”¹⁰⁷

The post card was signed with a swastika mark. Jews began organizing boycotts of German products, which were becoming increasingly common on store shelves across Romania as

¹⁰⁶ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 323.

¹⁰⁷ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 276.

economic relations between the two countries deepened.¹⁰⁸ Particularly the right-wing Brit Trumpeldor voiced loud and determined desire to emigrate to Palestine, demanding unlimited emigration rights irrespective of negotiation circumstances between the British government and international Jewish representatives.¹⁰⁹

Vocal and united protest against Nazi Germany in 1933 and Romania's growing links with it united disparate Jewish perspectives on obvious common ground. On March 23, 1933 Chişinău Jews put together a committee to organize a boycott of German products in protest against the Nazi government and Romania's ties with it.¹¹⁰ The boycott committee grew into a major effort, with a women's section responsible for investigating the resources necessary for conducting the boycott. By October 1933, a "contact committee" was organized that saw to the enforcement of the boycott by examining Jewish businesses every Tuesday.¹¹¹ Its members took the name "Central Committee of the Anti-Hitler Campaign" and thru the local press called upon Jewish industrialists and merchants to fight against discrimination and forceful exile of German Jews.¹¹² A manifesto of the committee from March 1933 aptly puts the goals of the anti-Hitler boycott and represents the appeal to Jewish national sentiment in interwar Romanian Bessarabia:

Jews! The aggression of the new German authorities upon the rights of 600,000 German Jews, participants in the centuries-old project of the enrichment of Germany, everyday takes on a more beastly form. German Jews are subject to treatment without any regard for the law, their lives threatened, their property destroyed. Before this horror of the middle-ages, we cannot leave our German brothers without aid; every Jew must stand in their defense. Their interests are our interests. If the Hitlerites are allowed to win, then the program of these enemies will spread to all countries, as this is only the first point of the battle. The victory of the Hitlerites carry with it dark times for the entire world, bringing with it the death of freedom, human progress, civilization and culture; the Hitlerites carry disrespect for peace agreements, current borders, and the horrors of a new war for humanity. This is why, in the interests of self-defense, we must fight with the Hitlerites. This task world Jewry has recognized by boycotting German products, and now it is the turn of Kishinev Jews to do the same. Jews of Kishinev! Remember—the economic

¹⁰⁸ Germany became the leading provider of technology and manufactured goods to not only Romania but much of Eastern and Southeastern Europe after 1933.

¹⁰⁹ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 330. They issued an official statement to this effect on March 7, 1933, calling on "Jews to take matters into our own hands and emigrate to the country of our national right," l. 331.

¹¹⁰ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 329.

¹¹¹ *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #3172, October, 20, 1933.

¹¹² *Bessarabskaia pochta*, #3772, March 24, 1933.

destruction of Hitlerite Germany will force it to release from its claws Germany's Jewry. It will serve as a warning against all others that might follow Hitler's example. Remember that Germany's economic destruction is the destruction of the nest of death for the Jews! Every product you buy of German make assists the enemy of the Jewish people, the current destroyers of the German Jews. Remember! Only with a united Jewish front can we defeat the Hitlerites. Remember to hate Hitlerism! Don't purchase German products—they all come to us stamped with the blood of our brothers! Don't purchase German products! Avoid those dirty marauders in our very midst that buy and trade in products that are given life by the blood of our brothers, that enrich our enemies to the death! Avoid them! Defend your interests; your deserved inheritance! Don't purchase German products!¹¹³

On March 26 the first large protest meeting took place in Chişinău that was organized by communal government president Alexander Zilberman. It was attended by more than 1000 Bessarabian Jews to show solidarity with co-religionists in Germany and Poland. Speakers included Monera Bronfman, who spoke in Russian, Carol Steinberg, a well known Zionist who spoke in Romanian (perhaps to show loyalty to the Romanian state); Nuhim Buchurnsky spoke in Russian, harking back to the anti-Semitic movement of Crushevan that instigated the 1903 pogrom. Haim Kogan spoke in Yiddish and complained about the danger for the Polish Jews, so close to Hitler; Teodor Stancevici spoke in Russian against racial theory and politics; Moise Epstein from the Commerce Bank spoke in Yiddish; Luma Friedman spoke in Hebrew at the New Market against Hitler; led by Zilberman, they decided to meet the next day to organize a committee to assist German Jews.¹¹⁴

In the next several months, similar rallies took place across much of the province, sending Siguranţa agents scurrying to follow, interpret and report on the proceedings. On April 5, 1933, a Sunday, all Jewish stores in Chişinău were closed and a great majority of the city's Jewish residents went to their synagogues for special services of protest.¹¹⁵ That same evening,

¹¹³ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 624.

¹¹⁴ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 334.

¹¹⁵ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 370.

nearly 2500 people showed up to the Theater Express for a public protest rally.¹¹⁶ Rallies also took place on April 5 in Bolgrad, Bălți, and Izmail.¹¹⁷ The following Monday, concerned Siguranța agents reported that protesting Jews filled all Chișinău synagogues. The Bălți community sent a protest letter to the Parliament in Bucharest: “We assembled at the Bălți Central Synagogue, and representing the Jews of Bălți, 30,000 strong, protest against the treatment of our brothers in Germany and vow not to buy a single product coming from that country.”¹¹⁸ In Orhei, local merchant Moise Ravich spoke to hundreds of Jews assembled and reminded them that world Jewry was 20 million strong (!) and that if banded together they could cripple the German economy.¹¹⁹ Indeed, the victory of Hitler in Germany clearly struck an immediate nervous chord. Local Jewish leaders were interviewed and some spoke explicitly about the danger in Romania. Signs went up all over the Bessarabian capital: “Boycott all German Products—Don’t Buy Them!”¹²⁰ Rallies and meetings typically filled to capacity before the organizers could show up. A journalist captured the flavor of one such March rally:

The hall [Chișinău stock market] was overflowing by the time the meeting was called and it was forced to actually start on time. There were Jews from all walks of life, and among them could be seen the faces of the secret and open police agents, who want to know what kind of public comes to this kind of protest. Outside, in front of the entrance to the stock market, Cuzist students protest against “kike settlement.” The lawyer Steinberg announces that he never could have imagined that the vilest of hate could emanate from Germany—the cultural heart of civilization, where the Jews have contributed much. He expressed confidence that Hitlerism would not survive the year, that Judaism would overcome the “brown shirts” as it had overcome other terrors in the past. He invited not only the Jews but the entire Christian population to a moral boycott of German products.¹²¹

For many of the agents always present at such meetings, here was a case where Jews were clearly acting in a manner that set them apart from the general direction of the state: they

¹¹⁶ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 374. The Express Theater was a popular venue for Jewish and Russian cultural performances in central Chișinău. This number clearly impressed the Siguranța agents there that day, and not in a positive sense.

¹¹⁷ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 376.

¹¹⁸ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 381.

¹¹⁹ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 392.

¹²⁰ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 356.

¹²¹ *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #2976, March 28, 1933.

were protesting against the foreign policy direction of the Romanian government. Clearly, this was against the national interests as far as they were concerned—an obvious display of foreignness. What was also very worrying for the agents was the apparent effectiveness of the boycotts—urban economies ground to a halt in Bessarabia, so much so as to make recent census results seem questionable given their underestimating the Jewish population. Boycotts seemed to be going up all over—Bessarabian Jews talked of the better organization already underway in Bukovina, for example.¹²² Siguranța agents in the field sent flurries of disconcerted letters back and forth to their headquarters in the spring of 1933, the first months of relations between Bucharest and Hitler’s Germany.

The broad public outcry against the German economy must be understood against a background of growing concern among Bessarabian Jews for rising Nazi activism and local anti-Semitic extremism at home. Press reports of hooligan violence against Jews in the Russian and Yiddish papers consistently appeared, as in February 1931 when several Jewish merchants were found murdered on the road from Călărași to Chișinău.¹²³ By March 1933 these reports reached a level that began to concern Siguranța agents. Noting the Bessarabian popular mood, a Chișinău Gendarmes Lieutenant Colonel reported that Jews were very upset about the situation in Germany, and warned that rumors were spreading around town that a Chișinău rabbi was murdered by Cuzists and then hacked into 180 pieces. Not surprisingly, Jews were reacting with extreme shock and anger, so strong that he was concerned by it.¹²⁴ By April the JNP made boycotting German goods an official platform: defending Jewish national identity and public

¹²² *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #2975, March 27, 1933.

¹²³ *Bessarabskaia pochta*, #3003, February 13, 1931.

¹²⁴ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 333; report from March 26, 1933, reflecting public sentiment the previous weeks.

safety became a central party issue.¹²⁵ By early May, Jews in Chişinău began to organize funds for arming themselves against extremists, particularly LANC and Iron Guard but also the Hitlerites, Bessarabian Germans newly indoctrinated into Nazi anti-Semitic ideology.¹²⁶ Violence was sporadic in Chişinău throughout the summer of 1933, as Zionist youth exchanged blows with members of LANC and the Iron Guard.¹²⁷

Activism against Germany continued steadily. On June 13, a notable rally organized by leading Jewish women of Chişinău took place. Prominent Bessarabian Jews like Michael Landau and Elena Babich, a vocal feminist leader, spoke in praise of efforts to boycott German products.¹²⁸ Throughout these months, organization of the boycott committee became better and its reach through the community increased. By November, when the committee called for a public rally and the closing of all Jewish stores in Chişinău, it was able to rely on several Zionist groups, including Maccabee, Brit-Trumpeldor and Hacoah, to go door to door to enforce store closings.¹²⁹ By the early fall there were daily rallies in support of boycotting Germany, and even Rabbi Tsirelson, despite his previous admonitions for Jews to remain politically quiet, voiced ardent support for the boycott and the committee's criticism of Nazi Germany and, implicitly, Romania's growing ties with it.¹³⁰

Enthusiasm for Jewish national solidarity spilled over into relations with other residents, not only the authorities. On April 23, Bălţi police reported that when a German movie was noticed playing in a theater by local Jew, he demanded that it be stopped. When the movie house owners refused, some 500 Jews soon entered the theater in protest and interrupted the showing.

¹²⁵ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 405.

¹²⁶ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 410.

¹²⁷ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 530.

¹²⁸ *Bessarabskaia pochta*, #3846, June 13, 1933.

¹²⁹ *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #3190, November 7, 1933.

¹³⁰ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 400, 570.

A fight ensued among some of them and members of the audience. A similar event took place again in May.¹³¹ On October 27, a fight ensued between Jewish and Christian pupils at a French Lyceum after reports in the Russian language press circulated that there was “Hitlerism” at the school.¹³² The owners of the cinema “Orpheum” were asked by the Jewish boycott committee not to show German movies; when they showed in early October the film “One Song for You,” a group of Jews walked into the movie house and tried to stop the film. Another film shown later at the Orpheum called “Bombs in Shanghai” (Figure 7 below) was also boycotted and publicly declared a provocation of the Jewish people by the boycott committee.



Figure 7: Poster placed on buildings in Chişinău, October 1930, reads: “The Cinema ‘Orpheum’ helps Hitler!”
From ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 571.

¹³¹ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 400, 569.

¹³² ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 400, 595.

By autumn the Orpheum had become the symbolic epicenter of pro-Nazi support in Chişinău for the boycott committee, and the theater was aggressively pinpointed by organized protest.¹³³

The Bessarabian anti-Hitler campaign was effective: by October it had earned significant attention, so much so that Interior Minister Armand Calinescu demanded information about the “Jewish disturbances.”¹³⁴ The explanation provided by the Siguranţa for the increased activity was focused on Jewish communism: some of the Siguranţa agents’ reports noted communism was the inspiration for many of the Jews; one report to the Interior Ministry claimed that some 40% of the Jewish protestors were communists (!)¹³⁵ This was very disconcerting for the Siguranţa, whose agents followed such reports until becoming convinced that the Jewish self-arming was not dangerous.¹³⁶ In August 1933 a city-wide commotion erupted involving the Jewish community. Much of the Chişinău Christian population became very agitated because of occasional attacks against them by Jews who believed that they were providing housing for members of the Iron Guard that had in recent weeks been attacking Jews on the street. On the nights of August 5, 6, 8, and 14, Jewish mobs attacked and beat several Christians.¹³⁷

In addition to daily reports of violence, usually anti-Jewish but sometimes eruptions of Jewish anger, the tension over Nazi Germany began to include new concerns toward the end of the year. In parts of the province populated by a significant ethnic German minority, such as the south and southeast, Jews began to feel the rapid growth of Nazi antisemitism as the reach of Nazi propaganda, either through Germans returning from indoctrination trips to Germany or

¹³³ *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #3587, October 4, 1935.

¹³⁴ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 584.

¹³⁵ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 625.

¹³⁶ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 520, 527.

¹³⁷ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 531; Siguranţa reporting questioned the reality of the Iron Guard provocations, surmising rather that they may in fact be entirely from the Jews themselves, who in this manner seek to blame and pressure on the Iron Guard, thus discrediting them. The Russian press has apparently played a role in aggravating relations and egging on the violence, especially the newspaper *Vreme*, which had reportedly incited spirits on both sides. The result of the Jewish actions has produced sympathy for the Iron Guard on the part of many local Christians. In retrospect, it is not surprising that their interpretation should take an anti-Jewish slant.

through local Nazi organs that were permitted by the Romanian government, began to be felt. In May 1934, Cetatea Alba (Akkerman) communal president M. Elman pleaded for help from the local authorities to protect Jews from the Hitlerites, stating that if they spread their hatred to the ethnic Russians the Jews would be enveloped in pogroms.¹³⁸ By the next year and even more into 1935, circumstances for rural Jews particularly in such areas became dire. In October 1935 delegates from Arțiz arrived in Chișinău to meet with Rabbi Tsirelson and community president Steinberg and reported on events in their town. A place where Jews and Germans had lived amicably for generations turned almost overnight into an orgy of violence against Jews. The Germans had become livid with Nazi propaganda: they boycotted all Jewish businesses and were organizing a campaign to run the Jews out of town. Worse still, Cuzists had also set up shop in the town and were making rapid progress in turning the non-Germans into anti-Semites. The lack of police presence in rural areas, together with dire economic circumstances that was causing famine throughout the southeast, made the Jews extremely vulnerable—the very condition that had prevented Jews in the area from participating in the Tatar Bunar revolt in 1924. Arțiz representatives pleaded with Bessarabian Jewish leaders to petition the Romanian government for assistance.¹³⁹ At a Lapușna county (Chișinău) meeting of the National Liberal Party, Jewish deputies bombarded Minister of Interior Ion Inculeț with complaints about antisemitism. Steinberg used his minutes at the podium to address the same problem in an emotional speech that displayed a clear understanding of the Jewish predicament in the country:

Every day I am told of the plight of Jews in the small towns and villages, where anti-Semitic agitation moves toward hysteria. There is an entirely new understanding of the concept of citizen among the population—that it means someone of pure Romanian blood. This is a completely voluntary concept being brought forth against the very meaning of the constitution.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 672.

¹³⁹ *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #3588, January 7, 1935.

¹⁴⁰ *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #3889, November 5, 1935.

Reports in the press by 1935 contributed daily to an overall sense of Jewish besiegement. The situation of rural Jews in Akkerman county (Bessarabian south), including the capital town of Cetatea Alba, where Jews lived in constant fear for their lives, maintained their place among the daily headlines in the liberal Russian press. The atmosphere was bordering on rapid descent into pogroms—Cuzists and Nazis controlled city streets and beat up Jews unfortunate enough to pass by. Constant Nazi meetings took place with participants in full Nazi regalia and put up Jew-hating placards all over town. In the center Cetatea Alba a chapter of the anti-Semitic Romanian party “Frontul Romanesc” opened operations. Despite the presence of censorship laws that forbade circulating literature that threatened to disturb the peace, Romanian police did nothing to stop virulent anti-Semitic publications in Romanian, German, and Russian from spreading hand to hand and through the local press. Delegate Brodsky from Cetatea Alba related to co-religionists in Chişinău in November 1935 how propaganda was spread: since the Nazi Party remained officially illegal in Romania, Nazis organized under the cover of the Cuzist organization. Literature inciting Germans to commit pogroms spread in mass quantities, although it was illegal. Brodsky laid out the collapse of German-Jewish relations: young Germans went to Germany where they were indoctrinated in Nazi propaganda. They came back spewing hatred for Jews and focused on converting fellow Germans. Besides boycotts, there were methodical attacks on Jewish homes, and Jews were fleeing to the cities where they joined the impoverished.¹⁴¹ During the Jewish high holidays in 1935, posters had gone up around town: “Rabbi Katz has sucked the blood of your Christian child in order to bake his matzo.”¹⁴² Not all such reports from the south were completely accurate, but they elicited a reaction from the Jewish public nonetheless, pushing collective psychology closer to panic in the capital. This was

¹⁴¹ *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #3891, November 7, 1935.

¹⁴² *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #3885, November 1, 1935.

more so because while such violence was worst in 1935 in the majority-German areas, it was not limited to them. Incidence of violence were on the rise all over the province, with many Moldovans, typically young men unable to find satisfactory work in an era of depression, joining the Iron Guard that blamed Jews for all Romanian problems. Not surprisingly, Jewish refugees that were unable to get out of the country began to trickle into Chişinău, joining the tens of thousands already there.

New Legislation: Jewish Unity in Marginalization

Real physical violence, even as it increased dramatically by the mid-1930s, was not the only form of anti-Semitic violence, however. Legislative violence was implemented during the second half of the decade through new rounds of laws that over time undermined completely any claim to rights and legal protection for Jews, including citizenship for many, thus destroying both their protection under the law and any opportunity for a reasonable livelihood. Jewish political isolation and social marginalization was so complete by 1939 that no pressure by the Jewish community, Romanian or international, had any real impact. After a stronger electoral showing in 1932 than the year before, temporarily feeding hopes for Jewish autonomy and motivating Jewish political activism, in the December 1933 elections to Parliament the Jewish National Party received only 1.29% of the vote. While many Jews, especially in the new territories, failed to show up at the ballot box for their own reasons (like lack of faith in democracy), many were turned away by brutal and effective electoral terror tactics by right-wing youth groups even though the police did attempt to keep order. In Chişinău, 55-year old Nuta Bernshtein had his ballot card torn from his hands by Cuzist youths, for example, who called upon him to “direct himself toward Palestine.”¹⁴³ Thus failing to pass the minimum 2% threshold for parliamentary

¹⁴³ *Bessarabskaia pochta*, #5450, December 22, 1937.

parties, the JNP lost all its seats in Parliament. At the same time, the URJ failed to find any national Romanian party willing to share an electoral ticket with it and thus lost all its seats as well. After 1933, unless they held places on other party lists, the only Jew free to pursue Jewish interests who held a seat in the Romanian Parliament was Romanian Chief Rabbi Jacob Niemerower, in his capacity as head of the Jewish cult.¹⁴⁴

With the swing of national culture to the political right, no longer limited to popular attitudes or discrimination by local police, the national government increasingly overturned the rights it had granted the Jews, however flawed, in the 1923 Constitution. As early as 1934, a new employment regulation, “The Law of Using Romanian Personnel at Enterprises,” was passed in order to ensure ethnic Romanian economic gains by requiring that at least 50% of all management personnel and 80% of all workers at all public and private enterprises must be ethnic Romanians, which was the first such discriminatory law passed at the national level in post-1918 Europe, preceding the Nuremberg Laws.¹⁴⁵ Beginning in 1935, state inspectors went around to individual businesses to check on not only observance of this law, but the legal status of workers employed.¹⁴⁶ The law clearly stipulated that workers beyond this quota would be considered “foreign,” irrespective of their citizenship. Not surprisingly, this move of the Romanian government received vehement criticism from international Jewry, most especially from the French *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, but it was largely not backed up by the French government which was more concerned with the potential of the minorities treaties to weaken its East European allies, including Romania.¹⁴⁷ The most visible impact, in fact, was a popular reaction in parts of Romania against Jews and against France, such as a pogrom in the town of

¹⁴⁴ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 224.

¹⁴⁵ Kopansky, *Blagatvorit'el'nye Organizatsii Evreiev*, 22; Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 237-243.

¹⁴⁶ *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #3588, January 7, 1935.

¹⁴⁷ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 66.

Constantine where pogromists shouted “down with Jews” and “down with France.”¹⁴⁸ In the small artisan, trade and craft shops of Jewish Bessarabia, this law was devastating, even if it often proved nearly impossible to enforce. By 1939 the unemployment rate among Bessarabian Jews was over 50%.¹⁴⁹ The Great Depression hit Romania hard, and consecutive governments sought to increase ethnic Romanian employment at the expense of minorities who were progressively more isolated from political power, which was most true for the Jews. Government guilt at its inability to improve the economic malaise could be diverted by scapegoating Jews.

By the end of 1935, new regulations had been passed limiting, for example, the ability of workers who failed to pass a Romanian language exam to draw a pension.¹⁵⁰ Other examples of Romanianization included the successful exclusion of Jewish attorneys from the Romanian bar; at the same time attending a Romanian university was becoming increasingly difficult for many Jews, making study abroad (particularly Italy) a more reasonable option.¹⁵¹ Taken as a whole, there were never sufficient personnel at the state’s disposal to fully implement employment laws across the entire country, and many undocumented Jews in Bessarabia and elsewhere continued to work in secret.¹⁵² Nevertheless, many Jews were affected by such regulations, often with disastrous circumstances, serving to further anger and appall Jewish public opinion.¹⁵³ In February 1935, for example, the Chişinău municipal government fired 43 workers without citizenship. These were all experienced specialists; some were in fact doctors who could not be replaced by any others at the time. Many had lived in Bessarabia all their lives and had no other

¹⁴⁸ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 242.

¹⁴⁹ Kopansky, *Blagatvoritelnye Organizatsii Evreiev*, 5.

¹⁵⁰ *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #3860, October 7, 1935.

¹⁵¹ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 243-246.

¹⁵² Interview with Jakob Mikhailovich Kopansky, 2005.

¹⁵³ *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #3603, January 18, 1935.

means of providing a living for their families. The fact that it was the middle of winter made the decision seem particularly harsh, but there was little effect from Jewish public opinion. Politics swung sufficiently to the nationalist right that any party seen as catering to or even being concerned with Jewish opinion would be punished in the court of national politics: by the late 1930s, Jews had become a liability in political terms.

Thus, it had become readily apparent by 1935 that little aid or increased attention to Jewish concerns could be expected from the central or local governments, and Bessarabian Jews increasingly set differences aside out of necessity in order to attempt to prevent circumstances from deteriorating further. On November 5, 1935, 92 Jewish representatives from 40 towns across the province met in the Chişinău Choral Synagogue and drew up a charter for a centralized Jewish communal structure for all of Bessarabia, something like a de facto separate Jewish government. Against an air heavy with despair, Chişinău communal president Carol Steinberg mirrored common sentiment that the meeting was taking place not out of hope for the future but out of fear for the present: “to try to let out a cry of protest so loud that politicians in Bucharest would hear it, for Bessarabian Jews had lost faith in the observance of Romanian laws.”¹⁵⁴ He opened the session with an outline of the goals of such a structure. The congress would be called every three years, when it would be attended by secular and religious leaders (a rabbinical representative for every 1000 members of a community).¹⁵⁵ Detailed rules were set down for electing an executive committee that would sit for three years, that is, in between each meeting of the congress of Bessarabian Jewry. This committee would be heavily weighted toward Chişinău, which would have 8 representatives of 16, the other half to come from the rest of Bessarabia. The 17th member of the committee would be Rabbi Tsirelson. The goals of the

¹⁵⁴ *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #3891, November 7, 1935

¹⁵⁵ *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #3860, October 7, 1935.

organization included to protect the interests of all Jews in accordance with national jurisprudence, and to support Jewish institutions and schools.¹⁵⁶ The congress was mostly used in the immediate to express despair, with the greatest attention paid to the rise of Nazism among Germans in the Bessarabian south. As it turned out, the congress met only once again and had little influence on broader political and economic problems.

Unification of Jewish institutions and politicians was also taking place on the national level, not just in Bessarabia. A shift in the fundamental focus of national Jewish leaders had in fact occurred in 1934 after the ugly exclusion and crushing of Jewish political interests in the 1933 election: they would no longer fight primarily for recognition of Jewish national rights and autonomy as previously, but rather now focus entirely on battling antisemitism directly together with working toward Jewish emigration from the country. In 1935 friction between the government and Jewish leaders in Bucharest led to the formation of the Federation of Jewish Communities, under the leadership of Wilhelm Filderman. This was not yet a unifying organization of the various Jewish communities but rather replaced the Union of Romanian Jews as the main Jewish lobbying arm in Bucharest, because the URJ had grown ineffectual—Romanian politicians knew that it could not speak for all of Romanian Jewry.¹⁵⁷

By 1936 this hardly mattered because of the level of Jewish political marginalization in the country, but that year the Jewish National Party and Union of Romanian Jews, both largely isolated and powerless, finally set aside their differences and united into a central structure, the Central Council of Romanian Jews, on January 29, 1936. It consisted of three leading members: the chief Rabbi of Romania (Niemirover until his death and then Alexander Șafran during WWII); the leader of the Union of Romanian Jews Wilhelm Filderman; and the leader of the

¹⁵⁶ *Bessarabskoe slovo*, #3889, November 5; #3891, November 7.

¹⁵⁷ Vago, Raphael, “Romanian Jewry during the Interwar Period,” in Randolph L. Braham, *The Tragedy of Romanian Jewry*, (New York, 1994), 41.

Jewish National Party Theodor Fischer from Bukovina.¹⁵⁸ The leaders of the new organization pursued two strategies. First, they attempted to end Jewish division and collect Jewish political will toward winning more seats in Parliament. This failed in the last Romanian elections of December 1937: the more unified Jewish Party was shut out from the halls of power as in 1933, this time receiving 1.42% of the vote.¹⁵⁹ By way of comparison, the virulently anti-Semitic and racist Iron Guard political party “Totul pentru Țara” received 17% of the vote, becoming the third most powerful political formation in the country. Shock and despair on the Bessarabian Jewish street spread quickly in reaction to members of both the National Liberals and the National Peasants signing a treaty of “non-aggression” with Codreanu.¹⁶⁰

The second objective of the Central Committee involved bypassing the Romanian government and the national parties and attempting to appeal directly to the Romanian people largely through the press. Appeals such as the following appeared in Romanian language Jewish press (because mainstream papers wouldn’t carry them) on numerous occasions:

Romanian fellow citizens, we are living together on Romanian land, and there were never between us differences of interests or aspirations or ideals or needs; in times of peace we enjoyed together the success of our work, and during war we lost together blood on the battlefields. For several years we are the aim of a campaign of hate spread all over the country and across different classes of the nation. We are considered to be foreigners and held responsible for all the ills plaguing the country. We are not foreigners, we belong to this country, we are not hazardous and are not responsible for the bad things in the country. We did not govern it and did not administer it. Like you we suffered from the defections of the laws because of incapable governments, like you we benefitted from good laws, from intelligent rulers and honest administrators...Fellow Romanian citizens, we appeal to your consciousness in these difficult moments when we are more than ever ignored.¹⁶¹

Obviously, the attempt was desperate and bore no fruit: few Romanians read the Jewish press while comparatively (and increasingly) many more trusted Romanian leaders to interpret for them who the Jews were and what they were doing. In fact, there was little that could be done by this point. Raphael Vago has argued that the formation of this organization came too late to be a

¹⁵⁸ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 224.

¹⁵⁹ *Bessarabskaia pochta*, #5458, January 1, 1938; Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 228.

¹⁶⁰ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 228; Rothschild, *East Central Europe*, 310.

¹⁶¹ *Tribuna Evreiasca*, February 2, 1936, op. cite Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 225.

sufficiently powerful force for change that could prepare Romania's Jews for the Holocaust.¹⁶²

Carol Iancu argues that unity was incomplete and largely insignificant in the face of a strong native antisemitism combined with Nazi Germany's growing influence in Romania.

In any case, isolation grew worse. The new government resulting from the 1937 elections was a frightening prospect for Bessarabian Jews: it was led by nationally renowned poet and anti-Semite Octavian Goga (Figure 8 below), together with the father of the Cuzist movement, Alexandru C. Cuza. Both men, particularly the latter, were well known as enemies of the Jews. Even before his appointment was officially announced by King Carol on New Year's Day 1938, Prime Minister Goga gave an interview to the British *Evening Standard* in



Figure 8: A younger Octavian Goga as Minister of Interior in the mid-1920s, from *Calendarul Bessarabiei*, 1927.

which he explained: "Jews have control of the rail and oil industries and the mines in their hands. Under the principle of 'Romania for Romanians,' we will replace the Jews with Romanians. The change will take place peacefully, so that new life can be given to our people."¹⁶³ "Romania for Romanians" was a central policy direction of the Goga-Cuza government. One of the

¹⁶² Vago, "Romanian Jewry," 43.

¹⁶³ *Bessarabskaia pochta*, #5459, January 2, 1938.

government's first acts was to "nationalize" or "purge" the press, closing down newspapers edited by Jews, including many of the remaining democratically-oriented papers in Romanian like Bucharest papers *Adeverul* and *Lupta* (which in most cases still employed some Jews), and many other papers in Hungarian, Yiddish and Hebrew throughout the country.¹⁶⁴

Other purging campaigns began in earnest. Jewish journalists, lawyers, doctors in state service, and civil servants were increasingly forced from their jobs to make room for ethnic Romanians.¹⁶⁵ As in Germany, Jews were forbidden from hiring Christian servants.¹⁶⁶ The Yiddish and Russian press in Bessarabia closely reported on such developments, deeply increasing the collective insecurity of the Jewish public. Ironically but understandably, the more anti-Jewish legislation emanated from the national government the more Bessarabian Jews paid attention to national events and news, something that they had tended to do much less during the early years of their incorporation into Greater Romania. Most disturbing were reports on government plans to revisit the issue of Jewish citizenship,¹⁶⁷ which proved to be true. The decree law "Revision of Jewish Romanian Citizenship" was passed January 21, 1938. The stated goal of the law was to re-evaluate, in accordance with the Constitution of 1923 and the Mârzescu Law of 1924, Jewish claims to citizenship, particularly in the new territories, using a later date (November 11, 1918) as a requirement for establishing proven, continued residence. The process of re-evaluation caused consistent panic because it involved local administrators receiving from the Ministry of Justice and/or Internal Affairs lists of local Jews whose claim to citizenship was under question.¹⁶⁸ Those who were able to prove their claim would be left alone while those who could not would lose their status as Romanian nationals; but this was only in theory. In

¹⁶⁴ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 256-257.

¹⁶⁵ *Bessarabskaia pochta*, #5459-5471, January 2-15, 1938

¹⁶⁶ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 258.

¹⁶⁷ *Bessarabskaia pochta*, #5462, January 6, 1938.

¹⁶⁸ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 258.

reality, problems of administrative corruption made circumstances unbearable particularly in Bessarabia, especially since the rumor-mill concerning the direction of national culture (Romania for Romanians) left little doubt that the goal of the policy was to remove Jews from the Romanian social body—a purification measure. Once again Romanian Jewish leaders attempted to launch protests internationally, especially in Paris, but once again they proved counter-productive: in response to questions that the League of Nations would step in to protect the Jews, joint Prime Minister Alexandru C. Cuza replied that he considered the League like “a dead person not yet buried.”¹⁶⁹ The West was not going to save the Jews from Romanianization.

The Goga-Cuza government was in power for less than two months, however, becoming very quickly unpopular for poor handling of economic issues. It was dissolved on February 10, 1938 by King Carol in favor of his own royal dictatorship—however flawed, democracy was officially over in Greater Romania. Carol’s royal dictatorship set out to increase central control at the expense of regional autonomy (new administrative reorganization of the country into ten regions and establishment of military control where civilian rule had existed) and to establish usable myths of legitimacy designed to win favor for his dictatorship with the populace. Not surprisingly, these myths focused on themes that resonated with the public and had served former governments: family, church, work, and an organic national community (now with the king fully at its helm).¹⁷⁰ The nation, people were taught, was an organic rather than a civic or even a historic entity bound by “blood community” and serving the interests of the “dominant nation.”¹⁷¹ King Carol continued the Romania for Romanians policy of the previous regime, closing down on February 5, for example, the last remaining Russian-language dailies in

¹⁶⁹ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 260.

¹⁷⁰ Rothschild, *East Central Europe*, 310.

¹⁷¹ *Evreii din România între anii 1940-1944, vol. I: Legislația Antievreiască*, Lya Benjamin, editor (Bucharest, 1993), lix.

Bessarabia.¹⁷² Carol was an astute political player who understood the mood in the country: before taking over power he gave an interview for the British *Daily Herald* in which he explained that the Romanian state cannot stand idle as foreign Jews “flood into our villages.”¹⁷³ The descent into social isolation and political marginalization for Jews in Romanian society during the latter half of the 1930s served to confirm that Jewish political activism in the interwar years, as Ezra Mendelssohn has aptly called it, remained a “dilemma of the powerless.”¹⁷⁴ The idea of Romania for Romanians remained powerful throughout the political turmoil of the next years leading to war: the Romanian extermination of the Jews in Bessarabia undertaken by the regime of Marshal Antonescu beginning in 1941 was aimed at making Bessarabia into a model province of pure Romanian blood.¹⁷⁵ Cleansed of foreign elements, Bessarabia (and Bukovina) would stand as an example for the rest of the country to follow. Fortunately at least for the Jews of the Old Kingdom, the plan never got beyond the new territories under Romanian control. For the Jews of Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transnistria, however, Antonescu’s efforts to create racial purity was the greatest of tragedies.

Conclusion

Jewish national sentiment strengthened as a result of anti-Semitic Romanian state policies over the course of the interwar years, particularly after the passage of the Mârzescu Law in 1924 which made Jewish nativization procedures toward citizenship and the rights derived therein contingent on individual petition and thus in violation of the minorities rights treaties that

¹⁷² *Bessarabskaia pochta*, last issue, #5491, Feb 5, 1938,

¹⁷³ *Bessarabskaia pochta*, #5470, January 14, 1938.

¹⁷⁴ Ezra Mendelssohn, “The Dilemma of Jewish Politics in Poland: Four Responses,” in *Jews and Non-Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. Bela Vago and George Mosse, (Jerusalem, 1974), 204.

¹⁷⁵ Vladimir Solonari, “‘Model Province’: Explaining the Holocaust of Bessarabian and Bukovinian Jewry,” *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 34, no. 4, 471-500.

Romania had signed in St. Germaine and Trianon. Very inexperienced collectively in terms of modern democratic politics, Bessarabian Jews over the course of the 1920s learned to express their will through political organization. Their political expressions were focused in the realm of communal reform, particularly on the well-publicized divisions over modernization and democratization of the *kehillot*, or communal governments, as exemplified well by the battles at the Chişinău *kehillah*. These calls for modernization and reform triumphed to a large extent: reforming voices, led by Zionists, successfully challenged the control of traditional politics at the communal level all over Bessarabia. This was due in part to the interagency and obstinacy of the traditional religious leaders, but also very influential were national political and economic realities.

Specifically, divisions occurred not only within communal organizations but also between the leaders of the Jewries from the newly acquired territories, such as Bessarabia, and the leadership of the Old Kingdom Jews in Bucharest. Their differences, in many ways representative of the differences between the “Western Jews” and the *ostjuden*, clearly differed on the question of *kehillot* reform in the debate concerning the legal status of Jewish communities. Assimilated Bucharest Jews were generally unconcerned with gaining legal status for the *kehillot*, which they saw as transitional and detrimental to broader Jewish acceptance in a modern state that they hoped Romania would become (and Romanian Jews would be a part of). Jewish leaders in the new territories, particularly in Bessarabia, saw the *kehillot* as protectors and preservers of Jewish culture, religion, and identity, and insisted on recognition of Jewish minority rights (not just individual Jewish civil rights) in effort to protect their autonomy. This difference was most visible in conflict over the Law of Cults, promulgated in 1928. After this, given the greater political freedoms in the country at the end of the decade, political expression

in the new territories broke with the hitherto de facto Jewish leaders, the URJ, in Bucharest and moved in a nationalist direction, forming the Jewish National Party, the JNP. In breaking from the more-integrationist leaning Bucharest Jewry, Bessarabian Jews were able to preserve and democratize their *kehilot*.

Broader national politics undermined Bessarabian Jewish attempts at autonomy and political rights in the 1930s, however. Here, the year 1933 was a turning point, because dialogue between Jewish leaders all over the country of all persuasions were soured by the direction of Romanian foreign and especially economic policy generally in favor of Nazi Germany, and by the harsh and undemocratic defeat of all Jewish political interests during the 1933 parliamentary elections. Jewish political isolation and the steady rise of the extreme right that gained popularity because of the drastic problems facing the country, fueled not only fear and despair among Bessarabian Jewish adults, but also Zionist enthusiasm among the Jewish youth. Before Jews eventually found common ground in marginalization by the late 1930s, divisions on all questions of Jewish life remained strong. All generations shared, however, a general turning toward internal Jewish matters as the hopes for productive political dialogue with Romanian society plummeted.

Yet, while the interwar history of Jews in Romania has been written through the trope of tragedy by looking from the Holocaust backward, we should remember that interwar Jewish policies were at one time hugely positive and infused with cultural creativity for securing an acceptable solution to the Jewish Question.¹⁷⁶ This experience differed markedly from that of their co-religionists across the Dniester River in what became after 1924 the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, or MASSR. Precisely because Jews were very

¹⁷⁶ This language is from Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination of Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973).

effectively co-opted into the state ideology and given tremendous opportunity to develop, implement, and even shape Soviet policies, it is not possible to speak of Jewish political isolation in Soviet society—at least not until the late 1940s. Yet, there was a tremendous price to pay for inclusion, and just as in the Romanian case, certain aspects of regime ideology—its leaders’ understanding of modernity—were non-negotiable.

Chapter 4

Jews in Transnistria: Against the Grain

Life for Jews in Transnistria across the Dniester River took on a drastically different turn from their co-religionists in Bessarabia following the imposition of Soviet power after 1918. Soviet ideology and regime goals created space for thousands of Jews to actively enter Soviet life and participate in building socialism. Yet, Soviet policies toward the Jews, as well as toward other minority groups, were hardly consistent throughout the interwar years. In the two areas that embodied the main thrust of Soviet efforts at cultural and social transformation of Jews from the former Pale of Settlement, agricultural resettlement and socialist education in Yiddish, significant policy changes over the course of the interwar years resulted in spotty and unsatisfactory results that in the end were completely overshadowed by voluntary assimilation into urban life and mass Russian-speaking Soviet culture. This chapter examines in depth these policies and their impact on Jews in the MASSR. In truth, these changes were already occurring quite rapidly in the years before the revolution, but they notably picked up pace with the brutal economic displacement affecting so many people, including Jews, caused by Soviet cultural and economic policies.

The Soviet-Jewish experience was markedly different from the nationalist regimes of Eastern Europe in that divisions existing and widening among Jews since the outset of the growth of modern, Western liberalism were successfully exploited—the path to power and the opportunity to modernize their co-religionists proved enticing to many while the ability to join an officially atheist mainstream society to avoid discrimination proved liberating for many others. Unlike in Bessarabia, where Jews were more clearly on the receiving end of discrimination by

the state, in Transnistria Jews were victims of discrimination and representatives of the discriminating state. If Jews in Bessarabia needed a decade to adjust to their new ruling regime, at least they were very familiar with the terms of its discrimination, which seemed in most tangible ways, certainly from an everyday perspective, to continue the anti-Semitic legacy of the Russian imperial government. In the interwar Soviet Union, however, things were radically different from the vantage point of common people: they were no longer a problem because they were Jews, but only if they were worshipping Jews, and worship was something they could stop doing. The Jewish institutions of the 1920s were “intentionally transitional,” that is designed to bring Jews up to speed with Soviet culture so that they could then take part in it directly, without the need for Yiddish-language schools or the *Evseksiia* (the Jewish sections of the communist party) as a crutch.¹ Especially by the 1930s when Jewish institutions were discontinued, Transnistrian Jewry was headed in a vastly different direction than Bessarabian Jews.

The solidification of Soviet power in Transnistria was by no means established through repression alone. The appeal of the Soviet vision of modernity was inculcated through progressive policies of social engineering. The interwar years were the heyday of policies designed to improve the collective body of society—and the terms of this improvement, as many scholars have shown, were increasingly racial in their understanding.² Soviet planners also believed in racial differences, but they believed that these differences could be overcome through socialist ideology that could liberate and bring up backward peoples.³ Perhaps no clearer

¹ Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Bloomington, 2006), introduction, xvi. The intentionality of *Evseksiia* activists varied, many were committed to Jewish goals within the Soviet Union; others understood that they were expediting complete Jewish assimilation. On the broader Soviet level also, there remains debate over the real concern for minority issues versus the use of those categories by the communist leaders to facilitate their breakdown and the state’s control over them. In the MASSR, many Jewish communists desired modernization and transformation of the Jewish street, but not its complete disappearance.

² Marius Turda, “The Nation as Object: Race, Blood, and Biopolitics in Interwar Romania,” *Slavic Review* 66, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 413.

³ See Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca & London, 1994).

example of the difference between the nationalistic regimes of interwar Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union exists than that of the inclusion versus exclusion of the national minorities (especially Jews) in state-sponsored modernizing policies, often precisely because in states such as Romania Jews were placed outside the racially-imagined nation, which was based on Romanian intellectuals' construction of blood and racial ties as the basis for that nation.⁴ Quite simply, in Romanian Bessarabia Jews were excluded from policy decisions concerning them, while in Soviet Transnistria they were at least involved in the process.

Across revolutionary Russia Jewish communists engaged in heated debates with Jews of various other political persuasions and cultural beliefs for the hearts and minds of “their masses” precisely because they believed that Soviet bureaucracy and ideology could solve, finally, the Jewish Question, i.e. create a society in which Jews would be accepted as equals, free from discrimination. Such views were of course the core of the Haskalah and later Jewish participation in the Russian revolutionary movement, but there was no significant historical precedent in gravitating toward Bolshevism specifically as savior: the pre-revolutionary *Komfarbund* (Jewish Communist Party) was profoundly weak with very little support among Russia's Jews before the revolution, even though the radical left taken more broadly was of course attractive to Jews. Yet in the years immediately after the Bolshevik seizure of power it became, with the support of the Communist Party, the most powerful Jewish force for pro-regime change of traditional Jewish life.

The *Komfarbund* was incorporated into the Communist Party and organized politically as the *Evseksiia*. As David Shneer points out, the policies pursued by the state and party to create a Soviet-Jewish culture were complex, multivalent, and sometimes conflicting—one cannot focus

⁴ Turda, “The Nation as Object,” 420-421.

simply on the *Evseksiia* as the mover of state ideology.⁵ Nevertheless, it was the *Evseksiia* members that were often seen as implementing state policies that undermined Jewish culture, and as doing so quite enthusiastically; it was a popularly held belief within Jewish society that the *Evseksiia* members were “more communist than the Communists.”⁶ The aggressive anti-traditionalism of pro-Soviet Jews resulted from a profound frustration among the secular, progressive Jewish youth with little economic opportunity at home, where religious Jewish culture and traditional rabbinic authority still dominated. This generation wanted out of the ghetto and grew increasingly frustrated with their traditional co-religionists who seemed to them ever more backward. This backwardness of tradition only grew the more they internalized the universalist radicalism of the Russian revolutionary left: their relationship to their own Judaism became characterized by self-hatred. The attack on Jewish tradition cannot be understood otherwise, including in the MASSR. According to Sander L. Gilman, self-hatred arises when a peripheral group, be it social, religious, and/or ethnic, attempts to find acceptance from a dominant one, but is rebuked at least on some level. In making the rebuke, the dominant group focuses on the points of difference between itself and the peripheral group vying for acceptance in order to maintain that group’s status as an “Other.” In attempting to win acceptance, some members of the peripheral group inevitably come to identify with the dominant group and begin to vilify and criticize those aspects of their own group that they see as the source of difference, as

⁵ Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture*, 12.

⁶ By way of example, when Moscow Chief Rabbi Jacob Maze was invited in 1919 by Education Commissar Lunacharsky to present his case in defense of Hebrew schools (which the government would soon close), Maze made the case that shutting down schools was against the principles of liberty and freedom, which he understood the revolution to stand for. Lunacharsky countered that it was the rabbi’s own brothers, the Jewish communists, who were most vocal in pushing for the closure of Hebrew schools, on the grounds that Hebrew was the language of the bourgeoisie and not the masses. Rumors about encounters such as this circulated in Jewish society and would serve to make the task of making Jews Soviet more difficult more difficult. See Halevy, *Jewish Schools Under Czarism and Communism*, 131; also Solomon Schwartz, *The Jews in the Soviet Union*, 253.

the reason for their group's being labeled as Other. As Gilman succinctly argues, this project is inherently flawed:

Thus outsiders hear an answer from their fantasy: become like us—abandon your difference—and you may be one with us. On the other hand is the hidden qualification of the internalized reference group, the conservative curse: The more you are like me, the more I know the true value of my power, which you wish to share, and the more I am aware that you are but a shoddy counterfeit, an outsider.⁷

In revolutionary Russia, Bolsheviks sought to establish a vision of modern order that left room for transcending ethnic and national difference through socialism: Jews were encouraged to join and rebuke their co-religionists that refused to join with them. The non-joiners in Transnistria responded to modern state construction and its sweeping transformative power with complex combinations of resistance and accommodation that were taking place in Bessarabia and other parts of Eastern and Central Europe. In fact, the collective responses in Transnistria and Bessarabia, given the amount of cross-border contact between the Jews, could not be entirely separated from each other in the interwar years. Nevertheless, the direction of Jewish life in Soviet territory underwent tremendous change different from that of interwar Eastern and Central Europe under the new nationalist regimes created in 1919 in Paris. The growing influence of Soviet communism in local Jewish affairs and circumstances in Transnistria, particularly after the end of imperial affirmative action policies by the 1930s,⁸ made the maintenance of any type of communal contact across the Dniester border increasingly difficult: despite continued border crossings, one community was slowly pulled apart into two. Even more importantly, the presence of an inclusive, modernizing state provided opportunities for some Jews while leaving out others. Jewish divisions grew severe, more serious than in Bessarabia, and served to assist the Soviet state in undermining traditional Jewish society.

⁷ Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*, (Baltimore, 1986), 2.

⁸ Terry Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*.

Dniester Jews' fate throughout the interwar years was determined not only by the success of Communist Party policies, however, but also by their failure; the result of the MASSR's distance from the center of Soviet power and their proximity to a contested border. Much of this chapter deals with the main policy directions of Soviet state toward incorporating Jews: agricultural re-settlement and socialist re-education in Yiddish. But these policies had limited success. The failure of state policies, or rather the limits of authoritarianism, left options available to Dniester Jews—fight to preserve tradition despite the potential bureaucratic wrath of the state; flee across the border into Romania; or move to a large city and get a job. Transnistrian Jews were also enlisted in the cross-border propaganda initiative to get back Bessarabia, which left another small opportunity for some. This chapter will examine the problems with the implementation of Soviet policies.

Despite the obvious differences in state ideologies between the Soviet Union and Romania (or Poland, or Yugoslavia, for that matter), Transnistrian Jews reacted in many important ways similarly to their co-religionists across the ideological and political boundary. They attempted as much possible to maintain communal cohesion or at least Jewish links that included, for example, capitalist ventures and collective self-help efforts; and they continued to fight for Jewish cultural autonomy within the Soviet system. Still, greater space for Jewish participation in Bolshevik culture led to widening rifts: many participated in the efforts of the *Evseksiia* “to create modern Jews,” that is, in accordance with communist ideology, to use Soviet state and party institutions to lead the traditional Jewish masses away from their petty capitalist economic past toward a muscular future as productive and physically strong workers and farmers. The latter in particular was not unlike what Zionists were attempting to do across the Dniester.

Establishment of Soviet Order, or Propaganda across the Border

As in much of the former Pale of Settlement, the end of the First World War did not bring about a cessation of violence on the left bank of the Dniester. In the years that followed, civil war raged between Reds and Whites, and together with the harsh Bolshevik policy of War Communism made survival itself a tremendous struggle. For Jews this struggle was typically much more difficult, for in addition to problems of law and order and sustenance faced by many, Jews were plagued with the additional violence of pogroms, which destroyed many communities across Transnistria. The people of these regions, like many of those of the borderland regions between the Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian historical spheres of influence, suffered from continuously shifting front lines as armies moved back and forth across the land and spelled disaster for locals. In many cases, for Jews this was made worse when other locals sought to settle old scores and use the invading armies to remove Jewish competitors.⁹ Spontaneous violence in the countryside from roaming armed bands of anti-Bolshevik, Ukrainian nationalist gangs that terrorized and murdered Jewish villagers lasted well into the mid-1920s, by when tens of thousands of Jews fled into Romanian Bessarabia to escape the violence. Despite the problems of mounting discrimination faced by Jews in Romania, during the chaotic post-war years Jews in Soviet-controlled Transnistria looked across the Dniester with longing for the relative peace that arrived with Romanian military occupation. Many attempted to flee across the border, a fact that would remain a problem for both states because control of mobility was an essential aspect of their coercive power.

⁹ For a first hand account of pogrom violence in Galicia, see S. Ansky, *The Enemy at His Pleasure: A Journey through the Jewish Pale of Settlement during World War I*, Joachim Neugroschel, ed (New York, 2002).

The violence not only undermined stability, but economic circumstances as well. At the end of 1924, party officials described the MASSR Jewish population as “desperately poor.”¹⁰ Nor would this change significantly: in 1930, villages with the highest concentrations of Jews also had the highest number of households that were classified as poor.¹¹ The young Soviet government struggled to gain control over this borderland in the most basic administrative sense, there was little that could be done for Jewish pogrom victims.¹² By 1924, the Soviet economy had improved significantly after the extreme conditions of War Communism. The Party’s ideological firmness toward less harmful unwanted classes such as the Jewish *kustars* (artisans) gave way to a more gradualist approach toward their assimilation into the proletariat championed by Nikolai Bukharin, who was at the apex of his influence within the party during the early-middle 1920s.¹³ Yet on the ground in this region of peripheral Bolshevik power, insecurity among many in the *Evseksiia* led to zealous enforcement of Soviet economic structures during these years as well.

Among the greatest problems facing the Bolsheviks was the lack of trusted, competent and literate cadres to implement their policies. Applications to join the party were indicative of the problem faced: on top of the front page of party applications used in Balta is a bold note “if you cannot read or write, don’t be shy: tell your party representative and he will fill out the form for you.”¹⁴ After 1921, the transition from War Communism to NEP in a region where law and

¹⁰ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 6, l. 11.

¹¹ In Rybnitsa raion, the shtetl of Gershunovka, primarily Jewish, had a non-poor rate of 8% (!), compared to surrounding villages that averaged between 11-12% non-poor, AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 258, l. 23.

¹² During the second half of 1921 and the first half of 1922, for example, nearly every Rybnitsa party cell meeting was concerned with implementing a successful tax collection regime in the local area, AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 30-40.

¹³ William B. Husband, “The New Economic Policy and the Revolutionary Experiment,” in Gregory Freeze, ed. *Russia: A History*, 266-68.

¹⁴ Communist party information forms from 1920 for the Rybnitsa rayon of the Odessa Organization of the Communist Party are enlightening in this regard. The forms are primarily concerned with the exact past of the applicant—what parties they served with, what they were doing during the February and October revolutions, what

order were far from the norm was difficult: the local administration was rife with abuse by opportunistic state and party officials far from the Bolshevik centers of power. For example, a secret circular from Odessa Gubkom secretary M. Khataevich from November 6, 1923 expressed deep concern for the ongoing problem of communists abusing their positions for personal gain. This is described as the vilest abuse of the people, for which the accused were answerable to the party, as only through the strictest control of spending could the party hope to survive this very difficult position they found themselves in. All party members in personal possession of horses, carts, or cars were immediately asked to give them up to the state and use them only when necessary for state business. Party members were asked to remember the peasants and workers, who should not have to spend all their time working for bread because they would not have any time left for party work. State money must be spent rebuilding damaged dwellings, not on equipping them with all sorts of luxuries. The party must be made aware of all excesses, as must the non-party population at large, including the peasants: “We must watch out for the negative side of NEP,” Khataevich warned his fellow party members.¹⁵

By early 1924, a much greater handle had been gained over the borderland than in previous years, although new challenges surfaced constantly. The struggle to create an adequate supply of literate, dedicated cadres—something that was an issue for the state in general—remained a particular problem in the MASSR after its founding in October 1924 as part of the Communist Party policy that began that year known as *korenizatsiia*, or nativization: the establishment of political and cultural institutions in the minority republics in their native

they were doing during the Denikin and Wrangel civil wars, were they repressed during the civil war, did they serve in the Tsarist Army, especially if he fought against the revolutionaries, and so forth. Also general questions of health were asked, as well as languages known, and separately if he spoke Russian. AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 1, l. 3.

¹⁵ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 7, l. 2.

languages.¹⁶ Additionally, local party members were concerned about the reach of the party's message to the region's majority rural population, where it was feared even party members were isolated from party information.¹⁷ At the end of 1924, the party numbered only 680 members among a population of over half a million in the MASSR, with 400 of this number located in urban centers despite the overall population being overwhelmingly rural.¹⁸ The need to recruit, as well as to "increase culture" and facilitate "Sovietizing" the peasants was already on the table at local party meetings before the formation of the MASSR.¹⁹ This was especially the case for the Moldovans, who were generally understood to have been victims of not only of the Russian imperialists, but of other nationalities as well.²⁰

Despite the pro-Moldovan rhetoric, however, the primary purpose of the MASSR was to get back Bessarabia. From the outset of the new autonomous government, there was a strong, almost mystical, revolutionary sense of mission directed at regaining Bessarabia from the "Romanian bourgeois occupiers" in addition to the shared goals of building communism. Members at the first All-Moldovan Party Conference, which opened on December 18, 1924, some of whom were Jews from Bessarabia, were moved by a sense of tragedy of exile and longing not unlike that already understood by Jews: "as we meet here in such meager conditions, let us remember that there are better buildings for our meeting in Kishinev, on the other side of

¹⁶ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 7, l. 7. Terry Martin calls Soviet policies toward the nationalities part of a administering an "affirmative action empire": *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca and London, 2001). Francine Hirsch disagrees, arguing that the end goal of the historical process was never to establish minorities' cultures but rather to smooth their transition toward assimilation into broader Soviet communist culture. Some communists felt that creating a USSR as a multinational socialist state was a betrayal of Marxist internationalism. See *Empire of Nations*, especially 62-98; see 103-104 on comments about affirmative action.

¹⁷ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 7, l. 21.

¹⁸ AOSPRM, f. 49, op.1, d. 6, l. 19. In addition, there were issues with the 'Moldovaness' of the party members: there needed to be legitimacy granted to the need for a Moldovan autonomous republic, but only 43 of these members could be considered Moldovans, while only 63 could speak "Moldovan."

¹⁹ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 7, l. 17.

²⁰ AOSPRM, f. 49, op.1, d. 6, l. 31.

the Dniester.”²¹ Members heartily welcomed representatives from the public (but state controlled) organization MOPR (International Aid Organization for Revolutionary Fighters) in combating the “oligarchic bourgeois” Romanian state.²² In contrast to military administrators in Bessarabia, whose function was to maintain control of the province and thwart Soviet revisionist efforts, the very essence of an MASSR government (especially at the outset) was transnational—looking towards Bessarabia as the homeland of the Moldovans that one day would be re-united

Figure 9: “Long Live Revolutionary Bessarabia United with MASSR! We Demand Bread and Work! We Demand an 8-hour Work Day!” reads the placard. Members of the revolutionary underground in the MASSR, circa 1925, pose for a photograph. As this is a photograph from the Siguranța collection, the numbers on the individuals indicate that Siguranța agents have knowledge of their identity, indicating likely arrest. ANRM photograph collection, #34701.



²¹ AOSPRM, f. 49, op.1, d. 6, l. 2. This was the opening statement at the meeting by Odessa Gubkom President Khvyliia.

²² AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 6, l. 1.

under Soviet communism. In the interwar years, MOPR was an important agency for furthering Soviet revisionist aims in Bessarabia, and Jews were very active members of it. The Tiraspol branch of MOPR, for example, was almost 25% Jewish by membership, a significant over-representation in terms of the general town population.²³

In contrast to the Romanian view described previously, the official Soviet view of Moldovans, also espoused by Bessarabian Jew and high-ranking member of the Ukrainian Communist Party (CP) in Kharkov, Comrade Badeev,²⁴ was that they constituted a part of “the Romanian race,” but “as Romanian culture matured under French influence...the Moldovan branch matured under the Slavic, and particularly Russian, influence.”²⁵ For Soviet planners, this division became doubly evident after the occupation of Bessarabia by the Romanian Army. Very much products of intellectual currents of the day, Soviet planners understood racial differences to be very real. They used these differences to underpin the construction of national differences suitable to political goals. The differences between Moldovans and Romanians included racial characteristics, including different cranial structures and even different styles of walking and moving.²⁶ Soviet understanding of racial difference was just as invested in a state-organized and readily decipherable racial order, but Marxist understanding of historical process made the immutability of racial hierarchy impossible for Bolsheviks: racial characteristics were perhaps a starting point, but change and self-improvement through socialism was always

²³ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 4, l. 5.

²⁴ Badeev's real name was Iosif Isaakovich Suslik. He joined the Bolshevik party in 1917 before the October Revolution; soon after he joined the Bessarabian communist underground and served time in prison there. He crossed illegally into the Soviet Union in 1920 and joined a party cell in Nikolaevsk, before making his way up the ranks to be recruited as first MASSR party secretary. *Sovetskaia Moldavia: Kratkaia Entsiklopediia* (Kishinev, 1982), 29; also AOSPRM, f. 49, op.1, d. 10, l. 35.

²⁵ AOSPRM, f. 49, op.1, d. 5, l. 6. This from a letter Ukrainian Party Bureau Secretary Badeev concerning MASSR party membership dated November 27, 1924. The thinking reflected the general direction of Soviet nationalities policy toward the Moldovans, as formulated on the ideas of linguists Leonid Madan, Gabriel Bucușcanu, and M. V. Sergievskii, who developed the idea of a firm separation between Moldovans and Romanians. See Charles King, *The Moldovans*, 65-70.

²⁶ Charles King, *The Moldovans*, 68.

possible, at least theoretically. When racial categories were assigned as immutable, it was usually done as punishment for rebellion, as with the Cossacks during the Civil War and the Ingush, Chechens, Germans and Crimean Tatars during WWII.²⁷ Jews were understood also to be part of a different race, one that would now be part of the wide brotherhood of socialist nations, but the Jewish homeland was clearly not in Moldova, so Jewish *korenizatsiia* policies would be effectively moved to Birobidzhan and end in the MASSR by the end of the decade.

In addition, newly appointed bureaucrats representing Soviet power focused on problems in Bessarabia through an economic lens: Bessarabia used to export agricultural products to an international market through Odessa and import industrial goods. Now cut off from Odessa, industry suffered greatly as had agricultural exports. This, together with the “class hatreds between the Bessarabian proletariat and Romanian boyars” had led to a “potentially revolutionary situation in Bessarabia,” according to Comrade Badeev.²⁸ Such a situation could not be remedied by the selection of “Moscow Romanians and Bessarabians” to the MASSR Revolutionary Committee and Party Bureau, who “posed a problem for our work.” Badeev argued that “in this situation, it is extremely necessary to appoint local Bessarabians who know local circumstances and understand the Soviet system to positions of influence in the MASSR...particularly in working with members of the Romanian Communist Party.”²⁹

Badeev’s recommendation was influential and largely heeded; in fact he would soon become the first chair of the MASSR Central Executive Committee (TsIK), the highest ranking communist bureaucrat in the autonomous republic. The fact that within months of its creation, the MASSR government was headed by a Bessarabian Jew speaks volumes about the difference

²⁷ Eric Weitz, “Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges,” *Slavic Review*, vol. 61, no. 1, Spring 2002, 12-14.

²⁸ AOSPRM, f. 49, op.1, d. 5, l. 6.

²⁹ AOSPRM, f. 49, op.1, d. 5, l. 6.

between Romanian and Soviet policies in the region, perhaps even more so because of the desire on the part of the Soviets to trust and rely on local cadres—which stood in sharp contrast to the Romanian political practice of importing ethnic Romanian outsiders to govern Bessarabia. Many educated revolutionaries fled from Bessarabia in the wake of Romanian occupation; some of these attained positions of authority in the Soviet government. Not surprisingly, many of those most interested in overturning Romanian rule in Bessarabia were national minorities—most sensitive to Romanian chauvinism as ruling ideology—particularly Russians and Jews among whom levels of literacy, familiarity with urban settings, contacts, and willingness to embrace a regime that welcomed and empowered them made them invaluable local purveyors of Soviet policies across the border.³⁰ It is also logical that during these early years, the recruitment of Jews into the party was important, thus explaining in large part the particular attention paid to Jewish concerns on par with (if not often above) issues concerning other minorities in local *natsmen* (national minorities) and *agitprop* (agitation and propaganda) meetings.³¹

Jewish questions dominated discussions at local party meetings during the early years of the MASSR just as Jews remained a very prominent element of the urban landscape in Transnistria. Increasing the circulation of *Der Emes* (Pravda in Yiddish) was discussed constantly and specifically as of paramount importance to Jewish workers' enlightenment, and Jewish education took up the overwhelming majority of discussion time at local party

³⁰ This is also the reason why the Romanian government looked upon minorities in general, and Jews specifically, as traitors to the Romanian state and supporters of the Soviet Union and its efforts to grab Bessarabia from its rightful homeland. This is also the apologist lens through which nationalist historians in Moldova in the post-Soviet era have sought to paint renewed discussions of interwar Greater Romania and its legacy of chauvinism and anti-democratic traditions. This notion is patently problematic because of the great support for Soviet communism (as well as resistance to Romanian political oppression and economic exploitation of the local population) among all groups, including Moldovans. See my article, "Holocaust Debates in Moldovan Nationalist Historiography," *East European Jewish Affairs*, vol. 38, no. 2, August 2008, 211-229.

³¹ This was not the case overall—local party members had strict directives to focus on the uplifting of the Moldovans. But at the *natsmen* bureaus the focus early on was on the Jews, AOSPRM, f. 49, op.1, d. 6, ll. 38-40.

meetings—only the need to increase education in Polish came remotely close.³² Indeed, so many of the *obkom natsmen* members were Jews at the outset of the MASSR regional government that some had to be reminded that they wielded great responsibilities not only over Transnistrian Jews but over other national minorities and bureaucratic and cultural goals as well.³³ This would change by the late 1920s and soon thereafter a specific focus on Jewish matters would be strongly de-emphasized. Nevertheless, not every Jewish communist in a position of local or regional authority was a zealous defender of Bolshevik culture—abuse of power took place and contributed to perceptions among some Ukrainians and Moldovans that Soviet power served Jewish interests and undermined their own.

In the towns, where Jews often formed the largest ethnic group, there were specific goals for the Jewish sections for inculcating their co-religionists in Soviet culture and ideology. An important means of Sovietization (as well as a marker of its progress) was the circulation of the Yiddish-language press, which was seen by state and party activists as a primary instrument of modernizing Jews in a socialist direction away from their petty bourgeois past.³⁴ The *Evseksiia*

³² AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 75, l. 56. This was the case despite the fact that higher-up officials were aware that the MASSR was formed for the Moldovans, thus often attempting to steer the discussion toward them. The reality was that in the early years there were simply too many Jewish party members to ignore Jewish issues. One such notable example was the debate between Trakhtenbroit and Badeev (both Jews) at the first All-Moldovan party conference: f. 49, op. 1, d. 6, ll. 11-12.

³³ These included organizing electoral campaigns at the village level to include national minorities; preparing workers for agricultural colonization; conducting training sessions for Jewish sections; holding special sessions with Jewish colonization activists; and conducting city sessions for Jewish non-party students and non-party Jewish artisans. In the Jewish re-settlement colonies, this meant conducting a Jewish rayon conference in Nikolaevskii and Khersonskii rayons for Jewish women settlers and a single Jewish workers conference for workers of the towns of Nikolaevsk, Kherson, and Pervomaisk; conducting a census of the national composition of the KNS (Committee of Dispossessed Settlers); organizing thru Rabotpros (Workers' Enlightenment) a conference of minorities' teachers; organizing minorities into agitprop sections and conducting anti-religious campaigns; regulating publishing for the national minorities in their languages, aiming at the youth, women, and anti-religion; running affairs of Sovietization; regulating the work of forming Gubernia party schools for the minorities; regulating the work and membership of the international club; conducting a count of village minority journalists and deciding on their continuing work; planning and conducting a week of minorities' culture; determining minorities' membership in the Pioneer organization. The implementation of Bolshevik culture was a demanding process, AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 46, l. 1.

³⁴ These goals included conducting a count of enterprises and unions where significant numbers of Jews are employed; conducting a count of directors of Jewish schools that have political literacy; thru the Gubernia-wide

always strove to increase the circulation of communist newspapers in Yiddish, particularly the central organ of power, *Der Emes*, but with only moderate degrees of success.³⁵ Some success was attained in the MASSR, although the numbers were still disappointing to *Evseksiia* activists.³⁶

In the increasingly insecure years toward the late 1920s, correspondence between the local *Evseksiia* and the central bureaus of both the Ukrainian and Russian Jewish Sections shows not only that considerable attention was given to the need to increase the circulation of Soviet Jewish newspapers, but also that the local sections were under significant pressure to show results that underscored the success of the publication campaign. The Jewish Section Central Bureau in Moscow on October 27, 1927 condemned as impermissible the failure to increase the circulation of *Der Emes* in the MASSR, the “central Communist newspaper in Yiddish.” The directive purported that there were far too many towns and villages that still failed to receive this newspaper.³⁷ The tone of the directives from center to periphery were in the typically polemic Soviet style.³⁸ With growing ire, central directives demanded immediate recommendations for action by the local *Evseksiia* against any slowdown in literacy expansion. Furthermore, lists of

political enlightenment, conducting a count of workers’ clubs and associations with significant numbers of Jewish workers; ensuring the enforcement of work in Yiddish by local unions; attaching workers to Jewish agencies and enterprises to feel out cultural work in Yiddish; to begin putting Yiddish literature in right direction, measured by attaining in the near future a circulation of 1000 for the newspaper *Der Emes*; to regulate the work of urban worker-correspondents for *Der Emes*, and begin placing of correspondents in rural areas, AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 46, l. 1.

³⁵ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1112, l. 30: from 70 to 75 from October to November, 1927.

³⁶ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1112, l. 31. For example, the circulation of *Der Shtern*, “The Star,” apparently increased from 102 circulated copies in the MASSR in September 1928 to 188 copies the next month, a huge change of 86% that could hardly explained by a sudden increase in interest among readers

³⁷ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1112, l. 26. This directive, typed in Soviet Yiddish, which is easily recognizable by the altered spelling of the Hebrew words, was signed by Jewish Communists Natanov and Finkelshtein, although it is unclear from the document to whom the directive was addressed. Likely, it was sent to all local party sections, including the one in the MASSR.

³⁸ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1112, l. 28; a December 14, 1928 letter in Russian from the Ukrainian Central Publishing House for the Nationalities in Kharkov (*Tsentrizdat*) to the MASSR *Evseksiia*: “Under direction of the Jewish Section Central Bureau of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party, during the present time across all of Ukraine there is underway a large drive to increase the circulation of the Jewish communist press, and first of all the newspaper “*Der Shtern*,” but the last circulation results show that circulation not only did not increase, but actually fell!”

enterprises employing at least ten Jews, including addresses, were demanded so that Jews may be “grabbed” (in the cultural sense) at their place of work. The campaign to increase communist newspapers in Yiddish dovetailed with the Soviet desire to implement order and control in the borderlands: Jews were useful and thus important to the overall project. But like with other social and cultural spheres, this emphasis changed by the 1930s: on August 15, 1934, an angry letter from *Der Shtern*’s central publishers in Kharkov was carried in the all-Ukraine Yiddish daily criticizing the Tiraspol *raikom* for not increasing the circulation of the Soviet press in “the minorities’ languages.”³⁹ Such letters were numerous in previous years, but were addressed to the needs of the Jews and Yiddish newspapers specifically; this was no longer the case. Increasing Yiddish newspaper circulation was now solely about the interests of modernization, no longer Jewish national interests (in the borderlands—it was doubtful that it was ever a goal for Moscow).

Problems at the Periphery, or Resisting the Reach

The Sovietization of Transnistrian Jews of course involved all state and party organs, as well as those under the obkom committees, not just the *Evseksiia* or the press. Clearly, the consolidation of Soviet authority and the establishment of its mechanisms of control depended in large measure, in contrast to the way Romanian control of was established in Bessarabia, on the integration of Jews and their active participation in internalizing and espousing socialist values and culture. Numerically speaking, however, this did not include, at least not at the outset of Soviet power, most Jews but rather only a minority. In terms that concerned the region’s lower-class Jews, the consolidation of Jewish communal resources and communist re-education was well under way in Transnistria already before 1924. A minority group of mostly urban, educated

³⁹ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 126, l. 33.

Jews espoused revolutionary ideology and used Soviet power to force their ‘backward’ co-religionists into the modern era, as they saw it.

But to the masses of poor and struggling Jews things looked different. Very quickly, traditional Jewish life in the region was attacked with new ideas that challenged its very existence. The Jewish section of the Balta *okrugkom Natsmen* bureau, for example, had by 1923 converted the main Balta synagogue into the Jewish Workers’ Auditorium.⁴⁰ In Tiraspol, the building of the old synagogue became the home of the artisan and trade cooperative “Moldcoopinsoyuz,” used also as meetings ground for the invalid cooperative.⁴¹ The choral synagogue of Birzuli became the Jewish Workers’ Club, where bureau chair Rabinovich led weekly lectures in party ideology, and two other members led workers’ group readings of *Der Emes* and another on *profgramota* (professional literacy).⁴² For the majority of everyday Jews in this devastated borderland, Soviet-Jewish culture was imposed by the state and its ‘evseks.’

Representing the state but with a modernizing agenda of their own, *Evseksiia* activists re-organized significantly the local Jewish economy. They took over the reins of the existing Jewish artisans’ credit cooperative by organizing a party artisans’ club to provide a state-supported credit system for working artisans.⁴³ In Tiraspol, for example, the state artisanal artel “Kotovskiy,” became part of the state-sponsored Vsemoldpromsoyuz (All-Moldovan Industrial Union). It was composed of about 60 local tailors, overwhelmingly Jewish, organized into 7 divisions with locations around Tiraspol. Only the head of the artel, a Mrs. Frimerman, was a

⁴⁰ This would become the obkom natsmen bureau, the highest office for implementing Soviet policies regarding minorities in the MASSR once Balta became the autonomous region’s capital in 1924.

⁴¹ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 166, l. 108.

⁴² Every Jewish communist earning more than 130 rubles per month was required to subscribe to *Der Emes*, the official party newspaper in Yiddish, AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 12, l. 1.

⁴³ The taking over of artisans’ businesses proceeded very quickly in extremely difficult circumstances: by autumn 1924 there were thousands of *Gosfond* supported economic cooperatives operating in Transnistria, pushing out individual craftsmen by capitalist methods when suffocation by decree didn’t work. In the Balta okrug alone there were 494 cooperative organizations operating in 1924, including 96 consumer cooperatives and 108 industrial ones; AOSPRM, f. 49, op.1, d. 6, l. 23.

party member.⁴⁴ Organizing labor into artels not only served to destroy as quickly as possible the traditional Jewish artisanal collectives, which until the 1920s remained organized into *kasses* just like in Bessarabia, but also made Jewish workers more accessible to party propaganda.

While there were certainly some Jews attracted to Bolshevism, it appears that most were not interested. In Jewish communities, Jews that were willing to work with party representatives, often to their personal benefit, were not well regarded. Indeed, it seems communal divisions were certainly a factor in the local spread of Soviet power: many Jews who remained in Transnistrian towns and became members of state-sponsored artels were often not the best examples of law abiding citizens, nor were they the best educated or the best workers, but were able to get ahead by relying on support from the artel. An M. Shepsman from Gershunovka, a shoemaker by trade, served in the Tsarist and then the Red Army from 1919-21; he worked as a journeyman cobbler in numerous places around Transnistria from 1921-25 and then became president of the Tiraspol artisans' union. In 1927 he was promoted to run the artisan artel "kustpishchevik," but was fired in 1929 for graft so serious that the artel went into bankruptcy, its membership falling from 125 to 8!⁴⁵ Another artel member, Avrahm Kremer from Tiraspol, was barely literate, working throughout the years of NEP as an individual artisan when he was sued three times for "producing poor quality products." Nevertheless, in 1928 he successfully joined the Tiraspol tanners' artel and in 1931 successfully submitted his candidature for the communist party (likely due to the great local need for new members after a local party cleansing operation) despite a history of drunkenness.⁴⁶ Members such as these do not speak highly of the artels in general, something that local people were very well aware of as an indication of the broader problems of the Soviet economic system.

⁴⁴ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 4, l. 1.

⁴⁵ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 4, l. 40.

⁴⁶ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 4, l. 41-42.

Political re-education for workers, as *Evseksiia* activists called it, was of course also very important. A new school for Jewish political education in Yiddish was being opened in Balta, where enrollment was up to 60 and rising by 1924, due to the high regard for party ideology among Balta Jews (official), or rather the complete lack of educational opportunities in the otherwise decimated local economy (actual). Weekly meetings of the *Evseksiia* took place on Saturday afternoon, for obvious reasons of anti-religious zealotry.⁴⁷ Significant attention was paid the poor and destitute (particularly the Committee of Dispossessed Settlers, or KNS), and especially women and demilitarized Red Army soldiers. Yet, throughout hundreds of hours of meetings, there remained a blaring silence, at least on the record, about the unemployed artisans and traders—the *lishentsy*, a fact that by all indications greatly angered the local Jews.⁴⁸ Nor were the concerns of those on the agenda list always satisfied, either, as letters from disgruntled unemployed army officers from autumn 1924 attest, for example.⁴⁹ Jews in the MASSR were rapidly and convincingly alienated by a bureaucracy that, while claiming to represent their co-religionists best interests, seemed increasingly to favor state interests against their own.

All these revolutionary changes led many on the Jewish street to view much more skeptically the aims of the Jewish communists, and many tried as much as possible to resist the changes. In fact, despite the willingness of Soviet planners to rely on local cadres much more effectively than in Romania, numerous elements of Soviet modernization were ill-fitted for the local reality and created great resentment among MASSR Jews (and non-Jews). Among Jewish communists, there was early on criticism of party platforms that did not address the Jewish reality. Jewish communists participated in carrying out the directive to “Face the Village,” for example (make carrying the message of socialist culture to rural areas a priority)—but the Jewish

⁴⁷ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 12, l. 1.

⁴⁸ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 26, l. 12.

⁴⁹ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 33, ll. 1-2.

peasants were for the most part not in the village in the MASSR, but in the small market town. Some local committee members called the *smychka* (union) between workers and peasants that they were supposed to be creating a *razmychka* (discord, or disunity) in the Jewish case: Zionism remained in the towns unaddressed while enthusiastic Jewish Komsomol activists and pioneers were rejected by traditionally anti-Semitic local peasants. One angry letter from a Jewish activist asserted that Soviet policy was lost in unrealistic idealism inapplicable to the local reality:

And so the Jewish Komsomol members stand with their faces only to the village, and in the town there is such hatred, that a long time will be required to smoke out the air poisoned with it, and the result will be to stand in the same pose—toward the village with the face, toward the town with the ass!⁵⁰

In some cases efforts to streamline state support for Jewish re-settlement only hurt already ongoing efforts through the creation of another level of bureaucratic control.⁵¹ Jewish communists functioned not only as the force of secular modernization and the destruction of tradition, they were also supposed to bring class justice to their co-religionists. Some members of party committees and state bureaucracies expressed concern, however, that Soviet policies aimed at helping the formerly exploited were only deepening the exploitation and alienation among the Jewish poor. Strong expressions of this concern became increasingly problematic over the course of the 1920s but soon thereafter stopped altogether. In addition, Jewish communists not only in the MASSR underestimated the resistance to Soviet policies that would come from popular antisemitism, and, for that matter, that some Soviet policies would create more anti-Jewish sentiment rather than less. There were many examples. When possible, Jews were excluded from membership in the KNS, which made it more difficult for many that fled

⁵⁰ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 46, l. 2.

⁵¹ Such was the case for Jews from the town of Pescani, who had since 1917 been petitioning the Odessa gubernia authorities to grant them land to create a collective farm. After paying hundreds of rubles in fees and losing two of their members to bandits on the roads, they were told to start over in Balta, where such decisions “are now handled,” AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 46, l. 3.

their homes and resettled internally to qualify for state aid.⁵² In Dubassari, where there was a successful tradition of Jewish tobacco farming, many Jews that signed up to receive land were turned down under the premise that they were engaged in industry or were “large scale tobacco traders”.⁵³ In the northern Kamenka raion, Jews were being blocked from joining collective farms for the same reason.⁵⁴

Thus, despite the focus on including Jews in the Soviet project, things did not always go smoothly on the ground, especially in peripheral, borderland areas like the MASSR where there were other concerns and problems with cadres and institutional reach. The establishment of Soviet control, tantamount to a radical overturning of autonomous cultural and political life in favor of a narrow class-oriented, modernist world vision, was not achieved without tremendous resistance from the displaced, especially in the borderlands. The MASSR was no exception; the party was always concerned with several autonomous formations. As late as March 1925, several groups of youth continued to meet in Menshevik reading circles and circulate an underground newspaper, despite consistent arrests and exile of circle members. Although much better than a few years earlier, banditism remained a serious issue: the Mosocw-Balta train was twice crashed and robbed in 1924, once in May and again in August. Banditry and fear of inadequately secure control in Tiraspol were important reasons for locating the republic’s capital in Balta until 1929, farther inland with better infrastructural connections with the rest of Ukraine.⁵⁵ Religion also remained a concern for the new atheist state’s agents, especially the Tikhonovite movement.⁵⁶

⁵² AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 46, l. 5.

⁵³ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 46, l. 6; this was false, most of these farmers, if they had been successful before, were mostly subsisting by the 1920s.

⁵⁴ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 46, l. 7.

⁵⁵ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 10, l. 6. Balta remained the capital until 1929, when it was moved to Tiraspol, which sense in terms of Soviet policies because there were hardly any Moldovans in Balta (it was a Ukrainian population).

⁵⁶ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 50, l. 14

Without question the greatest local problem for the party by its members' own admission, however, was Zionism. Combating Zionism was not seriously undertaken until 1924 in the region, by when Zionist organizations had achieved considerable entrenchment despite official illegality. As in many other parts of the Soviet Union, but perhaps nowhere as intensely as in the Odessa gubernia, party cells and police agents organized intense raids on Zionist centers throughout 1924, particularly in Odessa itself. Zionism was effectively crushed by violent police action in one of its heartlands, including in the MASSR, although it never really died as an underground movement.⁵⁷ Party members understood that Zionist sentiment was fueled in part by the extremely difficult economic situation of the Jewish craftsmen (even if this problem was silenced in other reporting), but also by proximity to Romanian Bessarabia where Zionism was legal and interested in helping co-religionists across the Dniester. In October 1924, state and party officials in the newly created MASSR received circulars describing in detail the Soviet government's position on Zionism. Not surprisingly, in order to bolster the legitimacy of communism among Jews, considerable attention was given to circumstances in Eastern Europe and especially Romania, where many local Jewish communists had friends and family. In the desperate struggle for cadres, the appeal of Zionism had to be destroyed and no accusation was too outlandish:

⁵⁷ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 50, l. 14: from a March 4, 1925 report of the Odessa Gubkom. In Odessa there was a unified, underground Zionist party core of some 120 people and a youth organization of 180 people. In addition a committee of some 25 people led a children's organization of 200 members that published their own materials for children. In September 1924, "a massive" operation was launched and 107 Zionists were arrested in Odessa and 116 in rest of the gubernia, including Transnistria. Of these, more than 50 left for Palestine, 20 were exiled elsewhere, and some more signed promissory notes that they would stop their activism. Another smaller group was released after they were judged to be not significantly active. At the start of 1925, the gubernia-wide Zionist movement numbered 50 adult and 130 youth members by party estimates, half of these are in Odessa and the other half in the surrounding areas, especially in the Nikolaevsk and Kherson okrugs, but also in the MASSR. There was also a separate group of Zionist-socialists, although their numbers appear less clear. Certainly, even before the crackdown, this was already a huge step back from the massive popularity and myriad of various fractions within Zionism that flourished in Tsarist Russia (and Romanian Bessarabia, for that matter). State concern for illegal Zionist gatherings remained a constant—it was on the minds of Jewish communists during every meeting of artisans and teachers organized in the province for example, 'openness' was seen as battling Zionism, AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 47, l. 110.

Everywhere where Zionism acts as the guardian of the Jewish masses, it betrays their interests in the most shameful way. The “Hebrew” politics of the Zionists leads to the persecution of Yiddish in all the capitalist countries of Europe. In Poland, the Zionists cooperate with the reactionary szlachta in their persecution of the Jewish language (Yiddish). Despite Jewish suffering in Poland, Romania and all of Eastern Europe, the Zionists don’t go further than complaining to the League of Nations. When Ukrainians, Belorussians and other minorities under Polish domination have turned to the Soviet Union, seeing therein their only salvation, the Zionists continue their pathetic attempts to undermine Soviet power, spying for and supporting the efforts of the Polish secret police. Jabotinsky signs a peace treaty with Petliura. The Zionists in their press in Romania rehabilitate the Romanian government despite the fact that it organized Jewish pogroms, and acted against the self-determination of Bessarabia.⁵⁸

Self-determination for Bessarabia as far as Soviet policy makers were concerned meant allowing Bessarabians to decide by plebiscite to join the Soviet Union, which Romanian military administrators flatly refused despite Soviet demands particularly at the League of Nations all throughout the 1920s.⁵⁹ Official demands at the international level (Bucharest and Moscow did not have formal diplomatic relations until 1934) were of course not the only avenue pursued: Soviet efforts to export pro-Soviet propaganda in effort to foment a communist revolution in Bessarabia were well known to residents on both sides of the Dniester. If some Jewish communists remained ambivalent about the impact of Soviet policies upon the Jewish street, they kept quiet because of their general desire for modernization together with their fear of being accused of incompetence or disloyalty and losing power. By way of comparison, there was no ambiguity about Bessarabia: their real desire to wrest Bessarabia from Romanian control coincided with Soviet policies. Jewish communists proved to be effective propagandists, many leading in the Soviet-propelled campaign at great personal risk to export communism into Bessarabia and overturn Romanian control of the province.

Jews, many of whom had fled Bessarabia in the wake of Romanian annexation, were very active not only in MOPR but also in the “Society of Bessarabians,” formed to export revolutionary ideals across the Dniester. Within *raipartkoms* in the MASSR, special party

⁵⁸ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 7, l. 12.

⁵⁹ Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 89.

sections of the society were formed in every location where at least 10 “Bessarabians” were residents. The fulcrum of their propaganda plan was to spread the anti-Romanian newspaper *Krasnaia Bessarabia* into the Romanian-held province, thereby igniting a wave of resentment and resistance through other publications and acts of sabotage, thereby sparking an uprising against Romanian military rule.⁶⁰ After Mussolini came to power in Italy in 1922, the society’s propaganda purported to link Romania with fascism, adding an additional element of outrage and urgency to their call to get back Bessarabia.⁶¹ While not necessarily true for membership at the society’s headquarters in Moscow, on the field in the MASSR, an increasingly large proportion of the society’s members were Jews—many of whom had personal reasons for exporting communism and undermining Romanian rule in Bessarabia.⁶²

Changes at the Center

By the second half of 1927, signs of significant change in Bolshevik policies were in the air. Economic mismanagement during the second half of NEP resulted in significant shortages of grain for the urban centers by the winter of 1927/28, the so-called “grain crisis.”⁶³ The resulting revolution of Stalin that ended NEP, implemented forced collectivization and the liquidation of the kulaks, and branded as “right deviations” the arguments of those who espoused gradual economic transformation and the continuance of the *smychka* between peasants and workers (instead of break-neck collectivization and industrialization), had a tremendous impact on Soviet nationalities policies as well. While Soviet leaders did genuinely attempt to institute

⁶⁰ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 78, l. 1.

⁶¹ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 78, l. 3. By the time the MASSR was formed, local communist officials were routinely referring to it as fascist.

⁶² AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 78, l. 14 for the Rybnitsa okrug kom; f. 49, op. 1, d. 10, l. 35 for composition of the first MASSR Obkom under the leadership of Comrade Badeev.

⁶³ Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia* (New York, 1984), 91-93.

nativization campaigns across the Russian periphery, this policy was never a core Bolshevik value the way modernization and industrialization were. As a result, successful *korenizatsiia* was dependent on local factors, which came to mean that outside of Georgia and Armenia, nativization failed.⁶⁴ This was the case in the MASSR. By 1927 the policy of the center was clearly changing as the enthusiasm for the nativization campaign during previous years was dwindling and the Party questioned the nationalities policies it had formulated in 1923:

In articles published in *Bolshevik* in 1928 emphasis was placed on the necessity of subordinating national rights to socialist demands. Local nationalism was described as a growing danger which had become more troublesome than Russian chauvinism and could no longer be explained away as simple reaction to Tsarist oppression. Even within the All-Union Central Committee it was urged that, in view of the new socialist centralization in the USSR, the national question was no longer of importance and that, consequently, the Party should place emphasis on the building of a single socialist culture rather than numerous local national cultures. The slogan, “the right of nations to self-determination” was attacked on the grounds that it had lost its pre-revolutionary importance and had become a counter-revolutionary motto threatening the unity of the Soviet Union.⁶⁵

In such an atmosphere, the Yiddishization campaign of the *Evseksiia* was immediately affected as well. Reflecting the general mood in the Party as a whole, the *Evseksiia* leadership began an intense campaign of *samokritika* (self-criticism) in order to defend itself from charges of deviation, feared or real. Nationalism, national nihilism, chauvinism, latent Bundism, disorganization, passivity, right and left deviations of all sorts, “pessimism” in literature, falsification of history, autonomism, territorialism, “organizational fetishism”—this was the *Evseksiia* catalogue of errors.”⁶⁶ The policy that would most affect the Jewish communists, however, was the charge of right deviation, as previously supported campaigns for agricultural re-settlement and Jewish national-cultural and territorial autonomy led to the *Evseksiia* being blamed for not understanding the class nature of antisemitism and contributing to it with Jewish chauvinism. In order to regain favor from Party leaders, the *Evseksiia* struggled feverishly

⁶⁴ Terry Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 75-77.

⁶⁵ Robert S. Sullivan, *Soviet Politics and the Ukraine, 1917-1957*, (New York, 1962), 165.

⁶⁶ Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*, 444.

against these charges, which meant that constructive activity was largely paralyzed and land settlement in some cases reversed. While both antisemitism and Jewish chauvinism were considered deviations, the *Evseksiia* was much more active against Jewish chauvinism in order to show its super-orthodoxy in a time of great uncertainty than against antisemitism.⁶⁷

Communication from center to periphery began to display this sense of insecurity within the *Evseksiia*. In addition to the importance placed on creating a Yiddish-language press that would underscore Soviet values, the *Evseksiia* always gave considerable attention to the training of “Jewish cultural workers” (propagandists) who spread the ethos of revolutionary culture among the Jewish people. Not enough was being done to support Jewish cultural workers in the MASSR and they possessed insufficient literature in “the language of their origins,” according to the view from Kiev. In 1929, the MASSR Jewish Section was notified of an important session at the Main Bureau in Kiev concerning the work of activists from “*Rabotpros*” (work enlightenment) among Jewish cultural workers. The importance of Jewish cultural workers was underscored, because only through educating the masses in Yiddish could all Jews be reached. The spread of ideals of proletarianism and communism was weak among Jews, the MASSR Narkompros was informed, and they are “occasionally resistant to communist ideology, especially due to the continued influence of clerical-nepmen elements on the Jewish population and the spread of petty bourgeois chauvinism.”⁶⁸ Foreshadowing the policies of the 1930s, the resolution argued that the ranks of Jewish cultural workers had to be more closely reviewed and occasionally “cleansed” to make room for new, better-qualified teachers.⁶⁹ Such concerns in the *Evseksiia* with cleansing its own staff was understandable in 1929, given that several Ukrainian

⁶⁷ Ibid, 455-456.

⁶⁸ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1563, l. 37-38. It is noteworthy that Jewish communists continued to consider their co-religionists to be backward in terms of Sovietization when as a group

⁶⁹ Ibid.

party members had not long before been accused of Ukrainian national chauvinism and arrested. The Jewish communists were desperate to show that they could regulate their own business, yet the *Evseksiia* activists did not have a clear sense of the new direction Stalin was taking the party. *Evseksiia* members from the Central and Main Bureaus were summoned to Moscow in January 1930, and by all accounts were surprised when the Central Committee declared the dissolution of the *Evseksiia* several days later.

After the dissolution of the *Evseksiia*, most Jewish communist cells dedicated to creating Soviet-Jewish culture and solving once and for all the Jewish Question were put to work toward other directives, since Sovietizing the Jews was now deemed complete: Jews would be able to produce purely Soviet culture in Yiddish.⁷⁰ In the MASSR, Jews would now work exclusively on the Moldovan Question. From the founding of the autonomous republic, Jews had been involved in constructing the Moldovan nation, something that during the 1920s was not only a policy directive from Moscow but reflected a real desire among local intellectuals to “liberate the Moldovans from the oppression of Bucharest landlord-capitalism.”⁷¹

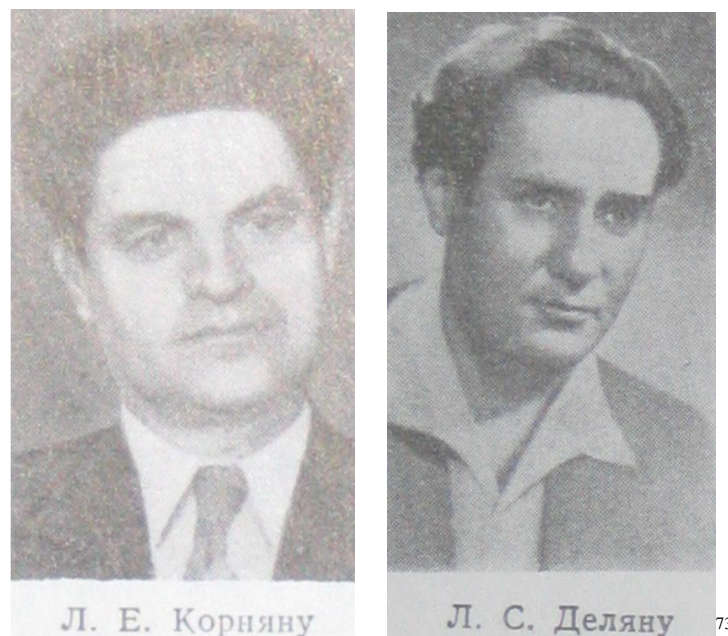
In the 1930s, even as Yiddish language publications continued, Jewish intellectuals were encouraged to change focus and play a part in determining the future for Moldovans. The Jewish Question, after all, was solved: the Jewish homeland had been created within the Soviet Union, in Birobidzhan. Focusing on Jewish issues in “Moldovan space” could no longer be justified. Jews participated in debates on cultural issues on the pages of *Plugarul roș* (The Red Ploughman) and *Moldova Literară* (Literary Moldova). Jewish service to the socialist cause was valuable in enforcing the party line as well: quite often, Jews (and also Russians) were trusted over Moldovans to remain loyal to Moldovan national construction. For example, a trial took

⁷⁰ Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher*, xvi.

⁷¹ Charles King, *The Moldovans*, 63.

place in Tiraspol on November 18, 1933 in which an ethnic Moldovan communist was charged for writing an article criticizing the policy of constructing a separate Moldovan nation. The trial was decided by three presiding party members—comrades Garmel', Drukman and Abramovich—all Jews.⁷² While this can be interpreted as the party's blindness to national differences in pursuit of the socialist cause, more likely Jews were more trusted. Many Jewish communists certainly understood that maintaining the party line was in their interest. Their service to the party was not well received, however, by a local population that typically remained anti-Semitic and in the wake of forced collectivization grew to hate and fear the Soviet state. News of such events trickled across the border into Bessarabia as well, where it served to increase the anti-Jewish sentiment of Romanian authorities as well as popular antisemitism through exaggerated rumors of Moldovan suffering in the Jewish-controlled MASSR.

Figure 10: Leonid Korneanu and Liviu Deleanu, both Jews and both leading writers specializing in Moldovan cultural construction and the fundamental, immutable difference between Moldovans and Romanians. Korneanu was a journalist who wrote mainly for *Moldova Literară*; Deleanu was a poet who wrote in Moldovan and Russian.



⁷² AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 11, l. 5.

⁷³

Yet, the preponderance of Jews in the state and party bureaucracy in the MASSR was by the mid-1930s decreasing. State efforts to make the autonomous republic truly representative of Moldovans was becoming a reality, and after a decade of intensive (if often corrupt and incompetent) efforts to train a new generation of cadres, there was a visible impact after 1934. The bureaucracy in place was still allowing a higher percentage of Jews into positions of authority than their proportion of the population, but this was changing: in 1934, of 48 students that attended the Communist Party Evening School of Tiraspol, 11 were Jews.⁷⁴ Only three years later, of a list of 78 candidates from the MASSR for Supreme Soviet elections, there were only 3 Jews on the list.⁷⁵ The *vydvizhentsy* in the MASSR tended to be more heavily chosen from Moldovans in particular, but clearly from among non-Jews in general.⁷⁶ The preponderance of Jews remained in education, however, and in MOPR as well. Right up to the Red Army's entrance into Bessarabia in 1939, Jews remained committed to regaining their imagined homeland. In December 1937, for example, the Tiraspol branch of the MOPR organization remained heavily Jewish, many of whom demanded the Tiraspol *raikom* give greater attention and support to MOPR's efforts to help struggling revolutionaries in Bessarabia as well as aid to victims of Romanian fascism and workers for revolution. MOPR remained very popular among Jewish pioneers and members of the Komsomol as well.⁷⁷

Taken together, radical changes swept across the borderland region of Transnistria in the years after the violence of war and revolution. Soviet policy ambitions created room for Jews to participate in building socialism, thus providing many with the opportunity to join an exciting revolutionary movement against tradition. This window of openness to Jewish input on a mass

⁷⁴ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 106, l. 45-46.

⁷⁵ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 626, l. 55-136.

⁷⁶ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 614. The NKVD remained a place that many Jews sought to join, but there were notably fewer Jews among its new members after 1935 than in the 1920s.

⁷⁷ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 638, l. 16-18.

level was short, however, effectively closing by the end of the decade. Jews remained in many places of power, but they would no longer be trusted to effect changes specifically for their own co-religionists, rather they would implement broad policies for everyone as members of the communist party and state. Yet during this short window, Jewish traditional society had been undermined to a far greater degree than across the border in Bessarabia. Together with Soviet economic policies that deprived many traditional Jews of their livelihood, sufficient pressure was produced on communities in Balta, Tiraspol, Birzuli, and Rybnitsa to convince many Jews that fleeing across the Dniester into Romanian Bessarabia was a valid alternative, chosen by at least a few hundred Jews every year even after the violence of the revolutionary and civil war years was over. Furthermore, the location of the MASSR and the aggressive policy of Moscow toward Bessarabia throughout the 1920s especially provided an opportunity for many Jews to participate in the effort to recapture Bessarabia, which not only proved unsuccessful until 1939 but did much to undermine an already precarious position of Jews in the eyes of Romanian leaders and especially local security police. The activism of Jews in the Bessarabian movement remained throughout the 1930s even though many of the participants were concerned about the direction of traditional Jewish life in Transnistria. Despite the political divide, the fate of Jews on both sides of the Dniester remained linked.

In order to understand more closely the specific points of this link, but especially to appreciate how the problems and issues of Jewish life on the Soviet side of the border differed from Romanian Bessarabia, the next sections will turn to two specific political and cultural directions in Soviet-Jewish life in the 1920s and 1930s: agricultural resettlement and state-sponsored education in Yiddish. A fundamentally important issue for these examples is the position of the state toward Jewish life and society on either side of the Dniester. Whatever the

outcome, Soviet policy makers took a constructive, interventionist approach toward Jewish agricultural re-settlement and education as a means of modernization, social engineering to speed backward Jews social evolution toward revolutionary consciousness. Such ideas were by no means limited to theorists in Moscow and Kiev, they found interest among Jews in Bessarabia and much of Eastern Europe, although such ideas to “normalize” the Jew by making him muscular and modern—fluent in ideas and languages of his neighbors, were not among the interests of the newly independent, nationalist states of interwar Eastern Europe. Rather modernization would be conducted, unlike in the Soviet Union, by Jews themselves: agricultural resettlement was a central component of most Zionist ideologies, especially on the left. Educational reform was also a central issue of Jewish life during these years that divided Jewish thinking deeply. In the MASSR the state took the lead even as it allowed Jews to join in the policy implementation.

Policy Options for “Normalizing” Jews: Agricultural Re-settlement

The chief manifestation of the path toward indigenization for the *Evseksiia* was the revival of Jewish national ideas. Because so many Jews joined the Communist party after 1921 when the last autonomous Jewish parties closed, *Evseksiia* conferences, particularly at the Main Bureau level in Minsk and Kharkov, became home to heated debates over the issue of Jewish national identity. What became clear to many *Evseksiia* activists, particularly the new members who may have joined out of opportunism and were not eager to see the end of Jewish tradition, was that industrialization, although nothing like the rate it would reach in the 1930s, was already highly successful in fostering Jewish assimilation into a broader concept of a Soviet people, which for all practical purposes for Jews meant Russification. Agricultural re-settlement became

the means by which “economic rehabilitation and productivization” of the Jewish masses could be accomplished without completely forgoing their national and cultural identity.⁷⁸ Nativization policies of the mid-1920s would permit the combating of Jewish backwardness without the loss of Jewish identity, which appealed to many Jewish communists.⁷⁹

The Jewish desire to resettle their co-religionists on agricultural land was not new and the Jewish Communists were not the first to propose it, but with a proletarian ethos behind them in a Bolshevik-controlled government, many among them believed that the Jewish Question could finally be solved in a positive way. As Jonathan Dekel-Chen has showed, the communists proved willing to work with American Jewish groups, which provided many with hope of Soviet openness and support.⁸⁰ In distant Transnistria like in other parts of the former Pale, this backwardness was stupefying from the Soviet as well as the American perspective, as the language of social engineering, though with differences, was very popular in both states at the time.⁸¹ Enlightenment workers’ reports about the state of Jewish life attested to their level of shock at what they interpreted as complete religious backwardness.⁸² State and party representatives viewed the “close and separate groups” in which Jews lived in the MASSR, together with their efforts to “preserve their tradition, culture and language, including not only the jargon but ancient Hebrew as well,” as something to be overcome.⁸³

⁷⁸ Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*, 384.

⁷⁹ Since the reign of Alexander I Russia had permitted and sometimes encouraged the agricultural re-settlement of Jews, especially to the lands of New Russia in the Ukrainian south, particularly Odessa and Kherson. The Jewish Colonization Agency (ICA) became involved in subsidizing some Jewish re-settlement after 1890. By 1900, there were tens of thousands of Jews in the Pale living by agricultural labor, despite state policies remaining on the books that made Jewish agriculture difficult, especially after 1881. See Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land*, 5-6.

⁸⁰ The Joint, for example, arrived in the Soviet Union in 1921 as part of Herbert Hoover’s American Relief Administration (ARA), Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land*, 29.

⁸¹ Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land*, 27-28.

⁸² The Jews of Savrani, for example, who comprised nearly 68% of the town’s population and were employed in petty trade and artisanry, and were described as being “steeped in religious fanaticism” according to the 1926 census, AOSPRM, f. 49, op.1, d. 24, l. 5.

⁸³ AOSPRM, f. 49, op.1, d. 24, l. 4.

In attempting to remedy such backwardness, particularly a Jewish concentration in “economically backward fields,” Bolshevik leaders were axiomatically against antisemitism, since they purported to themselves replace an anti-Semitic tsarist regime. Yet Bolshevik economic policies such as closing down the shops of tens of thousands of independent Jewish artisans and merchants in Transnistria in favor of state-run cooperatives, and attacking petite-bourgeois elements as *lishentsy* (thereby depriving thousands of electoral and economic rights), were tremendously damaging to the Jewish laboring masses who were overwhelmingly over-represented in such fields.⁸⁴ Some of these Jews, particularly the literate who were highly in demand in this borderland, joined the ranks of the Communist Party and state as administrators. Many other Jewish families were re-settled as agricultural colonizers mostly inside Ukraine but also later in the Jewish Autonomous Republic of Birobidzhan in the Soviet Far East. Many starved to death, however, particularly in the early 1930s, as state policies took away their traditional livelihoods and failed to offer a credible alternative.

Such policies bred resentment among the same Jews that were supposed to form the basis for Soviet-Jewish culture. A worker state needed to impose strict and legible class classification on the populace, but the reality on the ground could never be molded easily into the ideological blueprint. Many Jews in the MASSR who were dedicated to the revolution were made destitute by it, and their cases embittered many of their co-religionists to the policies of the modernizing Jewish communists. One potent example is Kilman Rafulevich, a miller of substantial means in his town of Rashkovo before the revolution who lost his property and was classified as *lishenets*. He protested vehemently to the MASSR natsmen bureau:

The heavy wounds that we Jews suffered from Tsarism cannot be made better or forgotten. We still remember the ‘Jewish Question,’ the ‘temporary regulations,’ the Belisovskii process in the Pale of Settlement, the bloody pogroms, etc. The question remains, could I, a Jew having suffered

⁸⁴ Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land*, 7.

the well-known Trotianetskoi rezni, where in a single day they cut up 500 innocent Jewish people among whom my brothers and my loving, innocent, honest and decent-hearted father whose bandit-decapitated head I buried in a mass grave with my own two hands...could I after all this be an enemy of the revolution, or the idea of Bolshevism, which attempts to and has managed, even if incompletely, tear out the deep roots of antisemitism and destroy the bloody Jewish pogroms? I was willing to give up my two-storied house so the building could be used by the party committee; I did not complain when all my mills, my livelihood was taken. But when the last coat and pillow was taken from my hysterical, epileptic daughter, this was too much. Now my family starves, yet every time I leave the house people point their fingers at me call me 'lishenets' and 'chastnik,' even though I have nothing and believe in the revolution. Could this be fair?⁸⁵

Bolsheviks desired to remedy this situation, in part because they feared pushing masses of Jews toward Zionism, and agricultural re-settlement was an appealing answer.⁸⁶ Furthermore, even if many in the *Evseksiia* held out hope in a distinct national Jewish space and in preserving a unique Jewish national culture, for architects of the nativization campaign the future goal was integration—using local languages and cultures to implant the message of Bolshevism among the minorities; that is “national in form, socialist in content.”⁸⁷ Popular reactions to re-settlement initiatives were mixed: the Jewish poor and uneducated, while at first exhibiting great interest in the “evseks” as they called them, rarely trusted them and often could not understand ideas that they must have found impractical and long-winded, but they rarely had better alternatives.⁸⁸

Re-settlement would provide a Soviet alternative to Palestine, providing a counterweight to the appeal of Zionism, as well as settling Soviet people on border regions in order to secure those regions for the state. The primary argument for re-settlement among *Evseksiia* activists themselves was Sovietizing the Jew, but these desires complimented well the already existent and much broader Jewish interest in creating a new, modern and muscular Jew, a goal that Soviet-Jewish policy makers shared with Zionists (chapter 5). What would be done was nothing

⁸⁵ AOSPRM, f. 49, op.1, d. 47, ll. 95-97.

⁸⁶ Terry Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 43. *Lishentsy* were discriminated against sharply in securing jobs, housing, and food rations in a time when many people depended on assistances after the destruction of the war years. Their children also suffered in their attempts to be admitted to school. See Salo Baron, *The Russian Jew under Tsars and Soviets* (New York, 1964), 211.

⁸⁷ Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land*, 12; see also the debate between Terry Martin's affirmative action perspective versus Francine Hirsch's argument that nativization was fundamentally about erasing national difference in the future, thus about cementing socialist culture and not helping minorities, *Empire of Nations*.

⁸⁸ *Der Emes*, August 15, 1925, p. 4.

short of remaking the “superfluous” Jewish man, the “luftmentch”⁸⁹ that had always been prevented by discrimination from plying normative and normalizing trades and instead being limited to those jobs which could most easily be gotten rid of in dire times. As Salo Baron put it:

The Jewish Communists were probably influenced by an idealized peasant mystique, the idea that agricultural work is one of the most basic, necessary, and ennobling ways of life, that a life close to the soil is somehow pure and healthy, and that a communal life is best suited to ridding the Jew of his individualistic, petit-bourgeois mentality. What could be better for a pale Jew of the ghetto, emaciated in body and twisted in spirit, than to breathe the invigorating air of the steppes and to sink his hands into the rich black soil?”⁹⁰

The re-settlement campaign was felt in the MASSR as well, although results were far from immediate. In order to get government control over spontaneous Jewish resettlement already ongoing under the permitted assistance of American Agro-Joint, the party created KOMZET, the Committee for Rural Settlement of Jewish Laborers.⁹¹ The MASSR branch of KOMZET was founded between October 1925 and March 1926, although absolutely nothing was accomplished during this time.⁹² The head of the group was removed in March, but his replacement was not any more active; only in November 1926 was someone appointed who moved the organization forward. By this time a local OZET, the Society for Rural Settlement of Jewish Laborers, had also been organized and was envisioned as a public, non-governmental organization that would work together with the state-run KOMZET to create interest for resettlement among shtetl Jews.⁹³ OZET managed to sign up 628 MASSR Jewish families for re-settlement within the autonomous region during its first year. Three categories were created

⁸⁹ This term was actively used at party and state conferences dealing with Jews. For example, a Transnistrian Jew, a comrade Khorsh, resettled and retrained from peddling to working in a sewing factory, spoke at a MoldOZET conference on February 25, 1929 thanking the Soviet government for “transforming a people of the air into workers,” AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1565, l. 1.

⁹⁰ Baron, *Russian Jews under Tsars and Soviets*, 241-42.

⁹¹ Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land*, 51.

⁹² According to a 1927 report of the Temporary Bureau of *Narkomnats* (People’s Commissariat for Nationalities) for work among the national minorities in MASSR; AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1162, l. 5.

⁹³ Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land*, 53. The reason for the two groups was largely one of show for the American Agro-Joint in order to give the impression that not all is state controlled and that considerable public support exists for state initiatives. It was intended to be like MOPR, which was also a public organization but really state controlled.

to divide the resettling population based on need, giving more priority to the more needy: 65% had assets of between 10 and 100 rubles, 30% around 150 rubles, and 5% about 300 rubles or more.⁹⁴ The campaign also worked to resettle families outside the MASSR, especially in the Krivorozhskii okrug, where 155 Jewish families, most of whose breadwinners were employed as artisans, bread makers or tobacco workers, were resettled. Plans for OZET included the resettling of another 100 in 1927, with greater numbers in the future.⁹⁵ The OZET campaign devised an agitation-information campaign about agricultural resettlement, including meetings, conferences, and presentations for Jewish colonists throughout the MASSR. Albeit with fits and starts (425 Jewish families were resettled in 1926 alone, then only 536 in the next 3 years), agricultural resettlement of MASSR Jews to available land in Ukraine was proceeding, as far as the *Evseksiia*, OZET, and other responsible state and party institutions were concerned. By the first all-MASSR conference of Jewish agricultural workers held in Balta on February 25, 1929, 1500 Jewish families (out of a population of 50,000) had been resettled to individual and collective farms within the MASSR, but plenty of serious problems remained (Tables 3 & 4).

Table 3: Individual Jewish Farms in MASSR, 1929.

	<i>Total Farms</i>	<i>People</i>	<i>Worker Able</i>	<i>No buildings</i>	<i>Home only</i>	<i>Home garden</i>	<i>Less than 1 des.</i>	<i>1-3 des.</i>	<i>3-6 des.</i>	<i>6-9 des.</i>	<i>9 or more des.</i>
Anan'ev	57	246	136	12	5	40	1	16	27	6	5
Birzuli	25	111	71	6	3	15	--	4	17	3	--
Balta	7	46	24	--	3	4	--	2	4	1	--
Krutiansk	1	5	2	1	--	--	--	--	1	--	--
Slobodzia	33	138	77	6	--	20	3	15	13	1	--
Kamenka	164	813	561	54	38	72	53	84	17	4	--
Grigoriopl	111	637	332	13	10	86	3	18	58	18	4
Rybnitsa	173	824	445	42	33	97	17	29	97	24	2
Tiraspol	37	174	92	20	3	14	2	4	17	11	--
Dubassari	192	929	655	27	39	122	41	68	44	7	--
Kranyi Oknitsy	150	719	124	42	7	100	--	15	72	38	17
TOTALS	950	4546	2819	223	141	570	120	250	367	113	28
Percentages				23.7%	14.9%	60.6%	13.7%	28.5%	41.8%	12.9%	3.1%

⁹⁴ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1102, l. 7, 8. It is unclear why Jews in the highest category would be interested in relocating and taking up farming.

⁹⁵ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1102, l. 7, 8.

Table 4: Jewish Collective Farms in the MASSR, 1929

<i>Region</i>	<i>Farms</i>	<i>Families</i>	<i>People</i>	<i>Land (Dest)</i>	<i>Tractors</i>	<i>KNS</i>	<i>Debt (Rubles)</i>	<i>horse</i>	<i>Cow</i>	<i>sheep</i>	<i>pig</i>	<i>Chickens</i>	<i>lamb</i>
Krasnoe Oknitsa	Il'ich	16	78	160	--	4	4000	11	--	120	32	50	--
	Krasnyi Oknianski	21	109	343	1	14	5100	18	--	174	--	100	--
	Filkedi 1	26	85	335	--	22	"wild organ"	12	13	--	--	120	--
	Filkedi 2	10	30	60	--	n	O		d	A	t	A	
	Novaia Zhizn	10	39	86	--	6	--	9	--	--	10	200	--
	Drug Ne-Zamozhnykh	8	41	102	--	--	--	14	6	--	5	200	4
	Chervonin Khlebodar	4	21	27	--	1	--	4	1	--	1	60	--
Rybnitsa	Der Shtern	26	126	443	1	3	13,160	17	--	50	--	--	1
Kamenka	Lenin	25	148	232	1	13	6100	16	9	72	--	300	3
Tiraspol	Evreilend	15	68	148	--	--	"wild organ" ⁹⁶	7	--	--	--	--	4
Ananiv	Evrei Khleborob	12	44	92	--	11	1789	18	12	--	3	180	--
Krutiansk	AMSSR	13	52	77	--	9	3502	13	--	--	--	--	--
Birzuli	Zemiadelets	14	55	139	--	7	--	13	19	--	15	200	4
Grigoriopl	Naie Lebn	10	50	70	--	--	3600	n	o	D	a	T	a
	Novoi Mir	11	55	75	--	n	O		d	A	t	A	
TOTALS		219	1457	2294	3	90		144	51	416	66	1410	13

Statistics compiled from AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1564, l. 4.

The agricultural workers conference was attended by members of MoldOZET, UkrOZET, the MASSR Central Committee, the obkom natsemen bureau and obkom agitprop committee, and boasted over 500 guests, many of them allegedly successful Jewish farmers.⁹⁷ Yet, despite repeated speeches by Jewish farmers at the conference in praise of state resettlement programs, there were clearly serious problems with the campaign that point to the broader issues of imposing rapid change on a traditional ethno-religious community. These Jewish farms, both collective and individual, were far from what OZET activists were telling people they were. Nearly one quarter of Jewish families resettled to individual farms inside the MASSR had no

⁹⁶ "Wild organ" was given by narkomzem for farms that formed quickly under OZET initiative without proper support from narkomzem.

⁹⁷ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1565, l. 1.

home or buildings whatsoever on the land that had been granted them. In the overwhelming majority of cases this meant, not surprisingly, that the family had not actually moved there. In a few cases, it meant they had been forced to move there and were relying on the kindness of strangers. Successful individual farms were comprised to a large extent of Jews that had been farmers before the revolution, fully 36.4%, meaning that resettlement was not sufficiently helping those that most needed aid—the unemployed and bureaucratically ostracized *lishentsy*.⁹⁸

OZET workers preferred that Jews resettle into collective farms rather than individual ones, because they believed collectivization to be a better way to move large numbers of unemployed *déclassé* Jews from the shtetls into productive labor, and that collective farms gave 2-3 times the crop yield of individual farms because of greater mechanization.⁹⁹ All but three of MASSR collective farms, however, had no mechanization whatsoever, and those three had one tractor per farm, or on average one tractor per 25 families. There was not an effective credit system in place to allow Jewish farmers to acquire farming assets, unlike the natively-grown Jewish credit system that was functioning fairly well in Bessarabia.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, in the final year before Stalin's forced collectivization, Jewish agriculture in the MASSR was already 13% collectivized by *narkomzem* statistics, and OZET resettlement activists, in accordance with party instructions, were strongly pushing for collectivization along with agricultural resettlement.¹⁰¹ Another serious problem that would surface during the famine was not reflected at all as a concern of OZET statistics, namely that fulfilling resettlement quotas was more easily achieved if diversity of crops was avoided: with the exception of Dubassari okrug, where a tradition of

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1565, l. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. OZET workers worried that Jews were being discriminated against in local financial organs because low-level functionaries believed "Jews were people that don't work." In reality of course many were anti-Semitic, which Jewish party members increasingly had to deal with by the late 1920s. In an ironic reversal of circumstances, Jews, had been driven out of finance by Bolshevik policies, now could not receive sufficient credit from the state to implement its retraining initiatives.

¹⁰¹ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1565, l. 2.

successful Jewish tobacco farming was still surviving, throughout the rest of the MASSR 85% of resettled Jews grew nothing but wheat and rye for bread.¹⁰²

Furthermore, these collective farms were, by all accounts, as inhospitable as individual tracts of land. Directives from the obkom to the raikom level reveal grave concerns that most people in the Jewish kolkhozes desperately lacked food. Settlers at the *Der Shtern* kolkhoz in Rybnitsa raion were reported scavenging for food in their neighbors' yards, with starvation common.¹⁰³ Many farms lacked tools for farming and many resettled Jews were not properly trained, remaining idle in terms of labor. In addition, simply moving people to a collective farm hardly created a collective spirit—OZET criticisms consistently reflected concern that farmers were not willing to depend on their co-members for their general welfare and continued to display, according to a report from 1930, “kulak tendencies.” In *Der Shtern*, for example, some more enterprising family heads were arrested in 1930 for selling grain illegally for profit, even as starvation was spreading through the kolkhoz.¹⁰⁴ In another case, OZET activists condemned members of *Der Shtern* for not consuming the pigs granted to their kolkhoz but instead trying to sell them to neighboring Ukrainian peasants.¹⁰⁵ There were many health problems resulting from a generally unhygienic environment, with no medical attention available. In addition, issues arising from the lack of day care for young children persisted, often compromising the availability of women in particular for work in the fields.¹⁰⁶ By the late 1920s, members of the *Evseksiia* were criticizing KOMZET and OZET for their careless zeal in moving Jews to farms, sometimes even destroying viable farming communities in the process, although the *Evseksiia* activists were under normal circumstances apt to jealousy toward KOMZET as challenging their

¹⁰² AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1565, l. 4.

¹⁰³ AOSPRM, f. 3. Op. 1, d. 258, l. 14-15.

¹⁰⁴ AOSPRM, f. 3. Op. 1, d. 258, l. 17.

¹⁰⁵ AOSPRM, f. 3. Op. 1, d. 272, l. 9.

¹⁰⁶ AOSPRM, f. 3. Op. 1, d. 272, l. 1.

role as institutional leaders of the Jewish population, which arguably happened even before the *Evseksiia* were dissolved in 1930.¹⁰⁷ By the end of 1930, however, these criticisms were drowned out by the much greater problems caused by general forced collectivization under Stalin. The massive bureaucratic strain together with the change of focus away from nationality issues could hardly have meant more attention to Jewish collectives founded under nativization, especially after the closure of the *Evseksiia*. It seems that the fate of many such collectives, such as *Der Shtern* in Rybnitsa raion, was to slowly atrophy as functional agricultural units until enough people left that they were closed down. In 1934, for example, four families were kicked out of the collective for refusing to work while another five managed to leave on their own.¹⁰⁸

In any case, no more OZET resettling was taking place within the autonomous republic by 1929. Most Jews were being moved to the Primorsky okrug in the Kherson oblast of Ukraine. Officially this was because no more land was available, but in reality the reasons were more complicated and indicative of the problems in implementing policies based on ideology that was not necessarily reflective of realities, both demographic and economic. Problems had much to do with the dedication of resettled Jews to farming. Too many Jews, OZET workers often complained, rented their land to local farmers either for money, or once this was attacked by OZET and party officials in 1929, for produce or other goods.¹⁰⁹ Again, only Dubassari had significant cases of successful Jewish farmers renting additional land from local peasants in order to boost their agricultural output of tobacco. In most cases, “renting” involved Jews that received land from OZET renting it to neighboring peasants because they had no idea how to farm it, or had no intention of leaving their community in order to relocate to open farmland

¹⁰⁷ Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land*, 51.

¹⁰⁸ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 472, l. 3-5.

¹⁰⁹ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1565, l. 4. After considerable effort, MoldOZET proudly reported that 67% of Jewish individual and collective farmers no longer rent out their land to others or rent from others.

surrounded by Ukrainian peasants, for obvious reasons. OZET activists referred with much anger to such Jews that had as they saw it “one foot in the shtetl and one on the land.” In numerous cases OZET workers found to their disbelief that Jews granted land by the state “did not know where their land was,” “treated it like an accidental gift” or displayed the wrong mindset in desiring to remain in the shtetls rather than moving to collective farms. Such attitudes were causing many peasants, OZET activists worried, to believe that “Jews are lazy and don’t know how to toil.” Rather than delving more deeply into the limitations of a process that turned land over to Jews who sometimes neither wanted it nor knew how to farm it, activists insisted on the need to “disabuse them of their outdated perspectives.”¹¹⁰

Jewish activists in KOMZET and the *Evseksiia* were no doubt harsh partly because they were under great pressure themselves. Party leaders very early on determined to use the controlled press as a powerful tool of legitimacy by turning potential criticism away from its often failing policies toward the cadres implementing them. For example, in July 1925, an article in *Der Emes* blamed local Jewish cadres for a resettlement mix up:

It is not easy to get land in the former Podol’ gubernia, now part of Moldova, but a collective of 28 families, 22 of them Jewish, managed to do just that. They received land, were extended sufficient credits by Gosbank to begin [farming], and then invested several months of labor since March. Now they are told by the Kamenka raipartkom that they will have to leave the land because it belongs to the Rybnitsa sugar plant...How can this be? Where was the raipartkom three months ago when the families started their labors? We ask the comrades at the Moldovan Jewish section to investigate this matter.¹¹¹

Many Jewish collective farms that were formed without proper capital and had no means to attain it without adequate credit were forced to rent out parts of their collective land to peasants in exchange for livestock or other necessities. In many cases, this strained relations

¹¹⁰ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1565, l. 3. In the case of the Dubassari tobacco and wine growers, their agricultural success was largely undermined by *narkomzem* policies requiring half their land be portioned off for growing potatoes and other vegetables that grew poorly in the region. Local farmers tried to circumvent these policies, but when they were enforced harshly in 1929, many went bankrupt. Numerous petitions to *narkomzem* on the issue received no positive resolution.

¹¹¹ *Der Emes*, July 2, 1925.

with local peasants, particularly when the collective farm failed to turn around due to inexperience, despite the borrowed assets. Peasants often maintained that Jews had no business farming, and sometimes violently opposed their establishing collective farms, such as those from the town of Marderovka who attacked the farm *Nae Lebn* in 1929.¹¹² In truth, many of these farms never became viable (despite the continuous efforts of Tiraspol-based Moldova Narkomzen to train Jews intensely to become successful Kolkhoz directors) until the mid to late 1930s, when they were either dissolved altogether or became open to non-Jews.¹¹³

OZET, like many other state agencies, had quotas to fulfill, in this case for resettled Jews; they were not very responsive to Jewish complaints after resettlement. In fact, there is plenty of evidence that the OZET drive to fulfill its resettlement quota contributed to the resettlement of inept farmers. Families were normally required to contribute at least 10 rubles toward their own resettlement, but many unemployed artisans could not collect this sum. OZET offered them subsidies, permitting resettlement without any family contribution. Thus, quite often only the completely destitute found OZET incentives appealing: total state support was requested for all interested families in a given district often.¹¹⁴

This was the intention, of course. Agricultural resettlement was envisioned as an important means of helping the huge numbers of Jewish *lishentsy* created by Soviet economic policies. In Transnistria, there is evidence that a significant number of economically undermined Jews received assistance through land resettlement: some 1500 families out of a total MASSR Jewish population of about 50,000 were moved. Yet this was far from sufficient, and in certain devastated portions of the region, it helped so few Jews as to fail to overcome a perception of the

¹¹² AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1565, l. 3.

¹¹³ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 225, l. 3.

¹¹⁴ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 120, l. 8. July 10, 1926: Rybnitsa natsmen bureau member Kaplan informed the local OZET committee that every one of 13 Jewish families interested in resettlement were able to be moved.

Jewish street of being the proverbial drop in the bucket. In Rybnitsa raion, for example, the number of Jews resettled was in the dozens, while the number of families made destitute after 1918 ran in the hundreds.¹¹⁵ Agricultural resettlement was of course not the only option available: in some cases *natsmen* workers sought to find factory work for displaced Jewish artisans. But here also, the results were minimal—most Jews either moved away and integrated into the workforce on their own or they starved.

In the years after collectivization, in fact, they were much more likely to starve. In May 1933 MoldOZET received a desperate and angry letter from KOMZET inspector Shoihet concerning the state of Jewish resettlement and the general condition of Jews in Ananeev raion during the famine.¹¹⁶ He wrote that he arrived from Tiraspol and found hardly anyone at OZET in Ananeev, only one dedicated woman, a comrade Tulchiner, who had outfitted and sent five families to Crimea for resettlement. He arrived at night and went out to look around at first light in the Jewish village of Valagotsulo, where he found

people lying around in the streets, swollen and dying of hunger. Every day somebody dies of hunger. Only about 60 Jewish families are left, about 25 of them survive because they are government servants, and another 10 families scrape by, while the remaining 25 families are starving. There can hardly be realistic talk of resettlement, as these people have no energy. Those recently earmarked for resettlement have died either of hunger or tuberculosis. One man's family, a Iankl Tsisis, died this morning. The Jews have been overwhelmed by the bureaucracy involved with registering for resettlement and many have given up because far too few have been effectively resettled. The Jews I talked to said that they have no hope, even if the process of resettlement gets under way, they'll die before they get there. Today, through my own efforts, six more families have been signed up for resettlement, but by the looks of them, only three will be able to survive the trip. No other families will resettle from here, and this mission is over. I want to leave today but the three families that can make the trip will not let me leave until the issue of outfitting them for the trip is settled: I hope this can be done by the evening so that I can go to Balta and leave this horror (*kashmar*)...I was at the Jewish school today, where the children were not fed. When they learned there was no food, many simply left school, while some others sat in their chairs and slept as the lecture went on. This is likely the picture in other schools as well. In the center of town there is a children's home for the poorest families, where the kids are fed 50 grams of bread and a cup of sweetened tea for breakfast, 50 grams of bread for lunch, and 50 grams of bread and the same tea for dinner. That is it. I was at the

¹¹⁵ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 205, l. 45. Agricultural re-settlement was of course not the only option available: in some cases Natsmen workers sought to find factory work for displaced Jewish artisans. But here also, the results were minimal—most Jews either moved away and integrated into the workforce on their own or they starved.

¹¹⁶ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 2425, l. 8.

playground and “found there not children playing, but tiny old people lying around in semi-consciousness.”¹¹⁷

Shoihet went on to blame the authorities for failing to help this village: there is no representative from the raion authorities, he apparently left, and the Ananeev raion OZET has not given any assistance to the local OZET representatives, which has completely disintegrated except for comrade Tulchiner. She has not been given sufficient funds for re-settlement, nor received proper information about how the settlers are to be outfitted, including payment for the journey and 3 rubles per person in cash. Last week, a family was sent off entirely on their own financial support. This is entirely the fault of the MoldOZET committee, Shoihet underlined, and it must be discussed upon his return to Tiraspol.¹¹⁸ The mission of resettlement survived the famine in the MASSR, but the numbers resettled were insignificant, never approaching the numbers discussed in meetings or continuously stated to poor Jews during the height of the campaign.

But what also bothered Jews of the devastated shtetls was what many of them considered an overly idealistic and thus unrealistic perspective on the part of the OZET bureaucrats regarding popular antisemitism, something that after the violence of the civil war years the Jewish street was very sensitive to. Indeed, throughout the resettlement cases, the ability of bureaucrats from the relevant agencies, both Jews and non-Jews, to close their eyes to the realities of popular antisemitism was remarkable. Only slowly and with resistance, bureaucrats and activists were forced to realize that not only were state and party initiatives being slowed by popular antisemitism, but that the policies were further straining already difficult inter-ethnic relations. Yet, Soviet policies professed to battle anti-Semitism, so how could this be? For many Jewish state and party activists faith in the revolution served as a veil that clouded their perception of reality—something of a continuation of traditional liberal hopes of Jewish

¹¹⁷ Ibid, l. 9.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, l. 10.

acceptance that, just like among pre-revolutionary Haskalah proponents, were marred by significant sentiment of Jewish self-hatred. Nevertheless, there was increased attention given to combating antisemitism: in the minds of state and party policy implementers, popular frustration with the perceived wealth of *nepmen* became mixed with antisemitism because of Jews' continued preponderance in trade.¹¹⁹ But in places of agricultural resettlement like Transnistria and southern Ukraine, the conflict with local peasants was also an important part of the issue. The perception of this problem grew consistently and was by 1928 a constant topic of conversation at agitprop meetings at local and regional levels.¹²⁰ By the end of the 1920s, new problems that contributed to rising popular antisemitism had surfaced that were directly connected to Soviet policies, especially resettlement.

On March 28, 1928, antisemitism in the MASSR was discussed at an *obkom* level OZET meeting. The participants concluded that Jews were still not properly settled on their lands, which angered the local peasants who thought that Jews should not have been given land at all, particularly if they didn't know how to use it. Members of OZET admitted that there is resentment because Jews are perceived to work for Soviet institutions, and anti-Soviet elements blame the Jews for policies they do not like, believing that the Jews were working through Soviet power to oppress the peasants. Some reported that conversations heard in villages focused on Jewish conspiracy theories—Ukrainians and Moldovans getting exploited while Jews were profiting again.¹²¹ To solve the problem, participants called for more urgent concern for the

¹¹⁹ Lewis Siegelbaum, *Soviet State and Society between the Revolutions, 1918-1929*, (Cambridge, 1992), 99.

¹²⁰ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 205, l. 26.

¹²¹ AOSPRM, f. 49, op.1, d. 1357, l. 9-11. The implication was of course that Ukrainians and Moldovans are the most backward, but the reality had more to do with the fact that these groups comprised the bulk of the village farming communities who were put off by state-sponsored Jewish settlement. The participants noted also that antisemitism was prevalent among various groups—kulaks, middle-men, wage workers, parts of the intelligentsia, including teachers and civil servants; it was not limited to peasants. It was admitted that in some cases sending Jews to villages to conduct education campaigns among non-Jews has provoked reaction from the peasants, like in

Jewish lack of desire to farm, including sponsoring assistance programs, including loans, to encourage Jews to move from small towns to farms and work the land, and to commit party organs to involve déclassé Jewish elements to take up agriculture. As far as these activists were concerned, Jews still had improper class understanding, with far too many still involved in trade. Somewhat unusual for the time, some called on the party to purge itself of antisemites in its ranks. Antisemitism was clearly a growing concern for the *Evseksiia*, but the fact that its own policies were a contributing factor remained a suicidal public admission to some, while many others refused to believe that socialist cultural policies could have such negative effects.

In fact, there were many local examples of *Evseksiia* actions exacerbating antisemitism. In Birzuli, for example, the state railroad worker union was refusing membership to Jews in 1929, despite the fact that the town was very heavily Jewish. In their discussions at the *obkom natsmen* bureau, Jewish communists complained that not enough people have been turned on to the work of OZET—that not enough people know about the “new Jew.” By implication, if people knew about new Jews, they would hire them, i.e, Jews would be accepted once they relinquished their particularity. Many in OZET believed, or at least pursued policies that reflected a belief, that once Jews became established as successful farmers, they would be accepted by neighboring peasants as brothers.¹²²

The reality could not have been further from the truth, although it was not until 1928 that Jewish communists in the Transnistrian borderland began taking serious note of the problem. At a Rybnitsa raion *agitprop* meeting, members expressed deep concern with rising antisemitism in the countryside, which they viewed as “*isskrivlenie kursa partii I Sovvlasti*” (twisting the direction of the party and the Soviet government), and determined to appoint the finest people to

Pereima and Kryzhavlin. Heavy percentages of Jewish children noted as attending village schools (as opposed to Jewish schools), usually children of state agitators, such as in Kamenka.

¹²² AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1565, l. 4.

tackle the problem.¹²³ There was little time to address the issue, however, and it soon outlasted the “evseks:” in the 1930s in rural Transnistria, most collectivized Jews left their non-viable farms went to join the industrial labor force. In part, this was because they never developed a real interest in farming, but also very important was the fierce resistance to them joining kolkhozes (and sovkhozes—the state collective farms) or taking up farming at all among Ukraininan and Moldovan peasants in general.¹²⁴ One of the impetuses for maintaining Jewish collective farms even when they were terribly unproductive (in 1934, only 12% of the grain quota for Jewish collective farms in the MASSR was fulfilled, lower than the overall average)¹²⁵ was antisemitism—it was very problematic to place Jews in collective farms with Ukrainians and/or Moldovans.

Things were getting bad enough to attract oblast level policy attention: the obkom review on March 2, 1929 of the raion-level election results noted, among other issues, the interference with voting because of “class warfare with minorities” in the villages, a veiled reference to anti-Jewish violence. It was primarily Soviet policies toward Jews that disturbed the traditional status quo and bred additional resentment by attempting to move large numbers of a largely urban minority into rural settings; other minorities in the area, most notably Germans and Bulgarians, were already overwhelmingly rural. Some groups in rural areas were accused of using nationality and religion as a means of constructing “a united front under the control of the wealthy and the priests,” and of using antisemitism to turn Jews away for nationalistic reasons. With this came the accusation that such wealthy and religious elements were causing fissures between groups in nationally-mixed villages.¹²⁶

¹²³ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 205, l. 26.

¹²⁴ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 462, l. 12-15.

¹²⁵ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 82, l. 17.

¹²⁶ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1555, l. 10.

Nevertheless, a continued dearth of competent party bureaucrats caused problematic and deteriorating circumstances because decisions often continued to be made without credible consideration being given to local circumstances or popular sentiment. By way of example, the kolkhoz “Red Gardener,” formed of mostly ethnic Moldovan villagers from the village of Suklei outside Tiraspol, was assigned a new party cell in December 1933 in order to speed-up collectivization because only 40% of the villagers by that point had been collectivized. Despite the ethnic composition of the kolkhoz, the party cell members included two Moldovans, four Ukrainians and a Jew, all of whom were not well received, especially the latter.¹²⁷ The decision was a particularly bad one in the case of Suklei because during the harvest months of 1933, when famine swept through much of Transnistria in the wake of forced collectivization, a Jew named Neiman, considered an exemplary *udarnik* by the local party cell, had been appointed to guard the kolkhoz grain storage to prevent hungry peasants from carrying off grain designated for shipment to Tiraspol. Neiman was attacked by Moldovan villagers desperate for grain and beaten almost to death—they were not at all pleased to see another Jew appointed to the kolkhoz party cell a few months later.¹²⁸ The absurdity of such cases, of which there were many, seemed to escape bureaucrats making such decisions on the basis of other concerns.

After the dissolution of the *Evseksiia* in 1930 and the end of indigenization, the focus of Jewish resettlement policies changed together with other aspects of cultural enlightenment. The OZET organization was maintained but its focus changed significantly, as seen from instructions for its policy directions received from Kiev during MoldOZET elections in 1934. Moldovan OZET cells were informed that they were now to gear themselves toward promoting socialist internationalism (in their case meaning Bessarabia specifically) while combating Jewish

¹²⁷ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 11, l. 1.

¹²⁸ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 11, l. 3.

nationalism, a clear turn away from policies of the 20s. The work of resettlement would now push the idea of the Birobidzhan Autonomous Jewish Oblast as a symbol of the correctness of Soviet nationalities policies: Jews should be re-settled there and no longer among Moldovan or Ukrainian villagers (or Bulgarian or German ones). At the same time, the members of OZET would be expected to become active participants in all levels of socialist construction (read: the specific project of Jewish agricultural resettlement would be watered down and workers committed to it would turn towards other social and cultural projects). The specific instructions for the raion-level electoral campaign for OZET underscored this point—cells were to work closely with rural communities to attract new members, i.e. OZET would slowly cease to be an exclusively Jewish organization and be used for agricultural modernization more broadly.¹²⁹ With the specific aims of Jewish national interests ended, Jewish institutions were being folded into the broader state bureaucracy geared toward non-Jewish interests, most clearly expressed through the instruction that OZET cells open up to allow non-Jews to be entered into the organization. Furthermore, the main goals of OZET no longer mentioned agricultural resettlement in Ukraine at all; it was now to spread the nationalities policy of the party. The sub-goals under this were to spread Soviet nationalities policy toward the Jews specifically and to push re-settlement to Birobidzhan.¹³⁰

Agricultural resettlement for Jews from the MASSR thus had ambiguous results. Clearly, the fundamental notion of moving Jews to rural areas to take up farming proved untenable as it was not a feasible solution to the Jewish problem in the post-WWI Soviet-controlled former Pale. It was demographically anti-modern and was for the country as a whole largely abandoned by the 1930s in favor of breakneck industrialization. This remained true even if the state goals

¹²⁹ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 126, l. 55.

¹³⁰ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 126, l. 56.

expressed were built on visions of self-improvement, muscularity and productivity. More than any other sphere of Jewish life and politics, the agricultural resettlement experiment pointed clearly to the ephemeral nature of Jewish national interests as purported by Jewish communists, as well as the marriage between supporters of radical Jewish change and Marxism-Leninism: by the 1930s, Jews in Transnistria were no longer as necessary for the stability of state and party control and dominance, therefore Jewish national goals and interests were no longer compatible with those of the Communist Party. Those Jews willing to go along with the new platform would be folded into the broader state project; those that were not had a more difficult and sometimes dangerous path, but many were able to quietly assimilate part or all of their Jewish identity to norms of Soviet citizenry.

Normalization through Re-education: the State Yiddish Schooling Campaign

Unlike agricultural settlement on the land, a focus on compulsory state education in Yiddish was more in line with Soviet values and thus survived intact Stalin's revolution from above. Prior to this, in the 1920s, as part of the general party directives which stipulated that soviets, courts, and party cells in Ukraine and Belarus should conduct their business in Ukrainian and Belorussian respectively, Jews were to conduct their business in Yiddish. This arrangement was meant to further the Stalinist conception of socialist in content and national in form, because local soviets in Yiddish were not meant to foster national diversity but to Bolshevize the national minorities. Yiddish was not an immediate or obvious choice but was eventually made the language of Soviet Jewish culture: Soviet Jewish scholars, writers, and other cultural activists went about transforming Jewish culture by creating a usable Jewish past that fit the socialist present, reforming the "wild" vernacular of Yiddish into a modern language worthy of high

culture, and transforming traditional, religious Jews into secular Soviet citizens.¹³¹ This change in policy was very important for the *Evseksiia* in taking greater responsibility for the Jewish masses.¹³²

Indeed, the Yiddishization drive, besides being part of the overall Soviet campaign against illiteracy, took on dimensions of its own. As already mentioned, Jews were an atypical minority because of their relatively high levels of literacy and urbanization. Together with their unusual geographic distribution, Jews were more apt to assimilate directly into Russian or Ukrainian language schools and/or institutions, which in fact many chose to do. The *Evseksiia*'s insistence of Yiddish was first of all tied to its own political and bureaucratic survival (after all, if Yiddish was not necessary for Bolshevizing the Jews, then what was the point of the *Evseksiia*?), and secondly to maintain Jewish identity around the only aspect of Judaism permissible to express in an atheist, proletariat state: the Yiddish language. In addition, Ukrainian communists favored the Yiddishization campaign, because they knew that Jews were assimilating into Russian language and culture and did not want to increase the numbers of cultural Russians in Ukrainian urban areas.¹³³ The *Evseksiia*'s program for Jewish education was thus focused on secularizing and modernizing the Jewish population of the former Pale of

¹³¹ David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture*, especially chaps. 1 & 2, 14-59.

¹³² Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*, 351; Gitelman argues that "the Yiddishization drive was the hallmark of the period of the *Evseksiia*'s transition from the role of making the "revolution on the Jewish street" and serving as the Party's propaganda organ to its self-assumed role as the planner and executor of a thoroughgoing modernization of the Soviet Jewish population.

¹³³ Terry Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, p. 49. This was apparently a sentiment of considerable strength among Ukrainian communists, who did their "catching" of Jewish children in order to send them to Jewish national schools. Martin quotes Volodymyr Zatonskyi's account how Yiddish-speaking children were dealt with: "We receive information from Nikolaev, from Kiev, and from a series of other places that during the pre-enrollment examinations children "suspected of belonging to the Jewish nation", if it becomes clear that "these malefactors know Yiddish", they are automatically sent to a Yiddish school "for, you see, we give every nationality full possibilities in this respect,—so off you go to a Yiddish school." The children don't want this and their parents instruct them not to admit that they know Yiddish. And so, comrades, an exam is conducted in order to trick these children—they speak with the child in Russian or Ukrainian, and then, when the child has calmed down (they speak nicely with them), suddenly the examiner tells him in Yiddish to go home. The Jewish child turns around and leaves "in a Jewish manner" (po evreiskii povorachivaetsia i uhodit) [laughter]. "That means you know Yiddish. We'll send you to a Yiddish school."

Settlement through Yiddishization. The *Evseksiia* activists, in line with the general goals of the Soviet literacy campaign of the mid-1920s, were also concerned with literacy as it was intricately linked to Soviet conceptions of modernization.¹³⁴

At the creation of the MASSR in 1924, local party officials were very concerned about the level of enlightenment among the local population, especially the Moldovans—on whose account the autonomous region was after all created. In Badeev's description of local circumstances before those assembled for the first All-Moldovan Party Conference, the Ukrainians, Russians and Jews were described as being ahead while the Moldovans and *women* were behind. This would not be the last time the feminization of backwardness was given a Moldovan face by communist officials.¹³⁵ The feminization of Moldovans (and in some cases and for other reasons, Jews) would be repeated often by Soviet policy makers in their effort to make the local population legible by markers of socialist progress. For most Jewish communists, such as the *Evseksiia* activists and youth in the komsomol, such sex-oriented paradigms went hand in hand with their own modernization narrative: they were trying, as they saw it, to create a new physical and muscular Jewish male and leave behind the stunted, bookish and weak (i.e. feminine) traditional shtetl Jew.

In terms of the implementation of Soviet educational directives—the MASSR was doing abysmally poorly, Badeev noted, with most teachers significantly lacking competence, let alone pupils.¹³⁶ In Rybnitsa raion, of 108 teachers reviewed by the executive committee (*raieksekom*)

¹³⁴ Charles E. Clark, *Doloi Negramotnost': The Literacy Campaign in the RSFSR, 1923-1927* (PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1993). Clark argues that in contrast to Western understanding of literacy as not necessarily having to be intricately linked to modernization and industrialization, for the Soviets, this was not a question at all. Soviet leaders in *Narkompros* believed literacy for most Soviet citizens was essential if the Soviet Union was to catch up to and surpass the West. Therefore, from 1923-1927, The Extraordinary Commission for the Liquidation of Illiteracy waged war on *bezgramotnost'*.

¹³⁵ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 6, l. 7.

¹³⁶ Out of some 800 teachers in the MASSR, about 40 were considered only semi-literate, while no more than 25 were literate in terms of party work, AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 6, l. 7.

as late as 1929, over 90 received very poor marks—not only for their low pedagogical effectiveness, but also for their social and party activism and their “lack of faith in socialism.” Many among the Moldovans and Ukrainians in particular had questionable pasts (son of a White Army officer, daughter of a priest, father killed for serving with Denikin, etc.)¹³⁷ Jews—particularly young teachers that had served as Komsomolists—received among the highest marks and were actively promoted into the ranks of local teachers.¹³⁸ Thus the contradiction: even as the *Evseksiia* promoted a secular Yiddish-language education system for Jews, there was growing opportunity for Jews to work in Russian and Ukrainian schools because of the dearth of qualified pedagogues from the party’s perspective. The demographic reality in the Transnistrian borderland served to undermine the implementation of Soviet affirmative action policies in the Jewish case.

In addition, implementing Soviet-Jewish education in the MASSR proved incredibly difficult because conducting propaganda work among minorities that lived in close proximity to each other and were often intermixed was impractical. In a region that may have been predominantly Ukrainian, for example, some 10 separate minority groups lived in adjoining villages, which made much more difficult the prospect of obtaining some positive impact from cultural work in the groups’ native languages. Because of an extreme lack of qualified personnel, a tremendous shortage of funds and considerable resistance from Jewish parents, the *Evshkoly* (Soviet Jewish schools) encountered considerable problems from the moment of the formation of MASSR’s Jewish education bureau.¹³⁹ Inspector of National Minorities of the People’s Commissariat for Enlightenment in the MASSR, Comrade Trakhtenbroit, complained

¹³⁷ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 257, l. 8-10.

¹³⁸ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 257, l. 12-14.

¹³⁹ After the dissolution of *Evkom* in 1924, Jewish education was handled by Central Jewish Bureaus within the regional centers of *Narkompros* in Moscow, Minsk, Kiev and several other cities. Unlike the *Evkom*, the Jewish bureaus had organizations in the provinces, including the MASSR.

that cultural work among the national groups was completely unregulated and hardly monitored: it was “disastrous.”¹⁴⁰

Budgetary problems significantly limited the ability of *Narkompros* to implement changes in the schools.¹⁴¹ While progress seems to have been made, with 81% of the schools that were ordered by *Narkompros* for MASSR national minorities only three years earlier apparently functioning by the end of 1927, these were generally not new schools but existing schools converted to a Soviet curriculum. For a bureaucracy strapped for funds, buildings seized from closed Hebrew schools and re-opened as *Evshkoly* were preferable to building new schools. Like elsewhere, in the MASSR *Evshkoly* were mostly refurbished former Talmud-Torah schools.¹⁴² Such school buildings were often entirely inadequate for schooling. Four *Evshkoly* in the MASSR did not have their own school buildings and their students shared buildings with Ukrainian and former Jewish religious schools (!), where Jewish students were often forced to attend during the evening shift. During the 1926/27 academic year, *Narkompros* issued 6000 rubles for the construction of a *Evshkola* in Krytiansko, for example, where the school previously had met in the Ukrainian school building.¹⁴³ Because of the problems caused by this type of mixing of traditions at the schools caused by a lack of funds, Jewish parents were more than willing to send their children to Russian-language state schools. The Jewish impetus for this education was community driven largely by parents who increasingly saw no future for their

¹⁴⁰ Report titled “About National Minorities Work of the MASSR Peoples’ Commissariat of Enlightenment from the organization of the republic until July 1927,” AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1102, l. 39-59. The report provides insights into the battle over Jewish education in MASSR in the 1920s, the goals of Soviet educational policy for the minorities, as well as the challenges facing Soviet bureaucracy.

¹⁴¹ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1102, l. 46.

¹⁴² AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1102, l. 47.

¹⁴³ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1102, l. 52.

children with a Yiddish education, as opposed to some other minorities for whom it was driven by pressure from state culture workers.¹⁴⁴

Among other challenges, the *Evshkoly* were plagued by shortages of all kinds, including books, furniture, and as already mentioned, buildings. This was not unlike the general situation facing the *Evseksiia* activists, and indeed, all of Soviet society, particularly in the early years of Soviet power. But the worst shortfall in the MASSR was of trusted, Soviet-educated cadres who specialized in the fields in question.¹⁴⁵ Books, apparently almost completely unavailable in the early years of the *Evshkoly*, continued to remain a problem. In 1926/27, political enlightenment workers delivered 12,923 books in the MASSR, of which 13% were for the national minorities, including 5.7% of the overall total for Jews.¹⁴⁶ Furnishings in the national schools were seriously inadequate: in some Jewish schools no benches were available, instead long tables were used which were reminiscent of those used in *heders*.¹⁴⁷ Things never really improved in this respect: teachers in Rybnitsa complained about the incredibly poor conditions of *Evshkoly* in late summer 1928, not long before *Evshkoly* began to lose state backing.¹⁴⁸ Thus, in physical terms, education must have seemed to have changed little for a great many Jewish children despite the radically new ideological vision of the Soviet policy makers. In many cases, the continuance of an atmosphere that failed to break in any notable way for local families from pre-revolutionary circumstances allowed families to proceed with tradition: the revolution did not reach far-flung areas for years.

¹⁴⁴ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1102, l. 47-48.

¹⁴⁵ At least one school around Balta hired ethnic Moldovan teacher that knew Yiddish for a *Evshkola*—a testament to the ethnic openness of the regime on one level and its desperation on another, AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 47, l. 100. Inspectors routinely wrote about the profound lack of qualified teachers in the area, AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 47, l. 105-07.

¹⁴⁶ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1102, l. 50.

¹⁴⁷ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1102, l. 51.

¹⁴⁸ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 200, l. 2.

The Yiddishization drive was also plagued by bureaucratic incompetence, particularly in the alienation of Jewish parents due to the excessive zeal of the Jewish communists. The politics of *Evseksiia* activists were geared to grab (okvhatit') children, as they forced *Tarbut* schools closed one by one and physically prevented children from attending them at other times. This zealotry cannot be understood without the context of the modern state into which activists were attempting to mold their co-religionists: the new modern Jew could not be created without attacking Jewish backwardness.¹⁴⁹ Activists in the countryside, often poorly trained, sometimes performed the anti-religious activist part of their job with excessive vigor and cruelty as well. Such zealotry from *Evseksiia* activists earned criticism from within. M. Kiper, a member of the Ukrainian *Evseksiia* Central Bureau, wrote in the June 28, 1927 edition of *Der Shtern*:

It was not clear to all cultured activists that Yiddish is not an end in itself but a means to ease the cultural development of the Yiddish speaking masses. This led to the tendency to drag all Jewish children into Yiddish schools by force...Gross distortions occurred in some cities where people who do not need Yiddish schools were forced—by the use of terror—to attend them.¹⁵⁰

Moishe Altschuler of the Minsk Main Bureau wrote scathingly in *Kommunistishe fon*: “We are not a party of Sabbath desecrators—we are a revolutionary Marxist party...”¹⁵¹ In the Russian language press also, reports were carried of Jewish parents wanting to send their children to Russian schools only to be barred from doing so by over-zealous cultural activists who insisted that children attend Jewish schools opened for them.¹⁵² Nora Levin has argued that obnoxious and desperate measures against traditional Judaism by the *Evseksiia* backfired, sparking vehement and often violent resistance that not only was partly responsible for the scaling back of

¹⁴⁹ Trakhtenbroit in the MASSR, for example, shows serious concern for not being able to reach Jewish children who live in far off rural places—and the inability of Soviet education to reach them is inability to instill Soviet values. In discussing the spread of the new Jewish schools, Trakhtenbroit consistently used the term “okhvat,” meaning in Russian to catch or grab, as in “the number of children grabbed by the national schools,” as if children not grabbed are being left to drown.

¹⁵⁰ M. Kiper, “Oifgabh in der kultur-oifkler arbet,” *Der Shtern*, June 28, 1927, op cite Gitelman, *Assimilation, Acculturation and National Consciousness among Soviet Jews*, 13.

¹⁵¹ *Kommunistishe fon*, May 19, 1923, op cite Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*, 312.

¹⁵² Harold Weinstein, “Language and Education in Soviet Ukraine,” in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. XX, 1941, 138.

attacks by the late twenties but also caused the deepening of rifts dating from pre-revolutionary times within the Jewish community, typically along generational lines.¹⁵³ In March 1924, the Moscow Central Bureau issued instructions that Jewish communists were to stop alienating the petit-bourgeois elements of the Jewish population and focus instead on neutralizing them.¹⁵⁴

Thus, many parents chose to send their children to Russian-language schools rather than the *Evshkoly*, or attempted to educate their children in the traditional Hebrew manner clandestinely either in their own homes or collectively with other parents in some agreed-upon location. Jewish parents generally found the *Evshkoly* unattractive. Most ended at the 4th or 5th grade, while many Jewish parents wanted to send their children to 7-year-schools. In addition, there was limited education available in Yiddish after this.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, parents who sought greater socio-economic opportunities for their children realized that Jewish schools in Yiddish were impractical because they did not properly prepare their children for a workplace that was almost exclusively conducted in Russian or Ukrainian. On the other hand, Jews for whom religious tradition was centrally important the Yiddish state schools were obnoxiously anti-religious, attacking Hebraic culture and Jewish religion more intensely than Russian or Ukrainian schools did precisely because the curriculum was designed specifically to reform “backward Jews.” Such a policy “made the Yiddish school unattractive to precisely those

¹⁵³ Nora Levin *The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917: Paradox of Survival*, v. 1 (New York, 1988), 75-82. For example, during a staged trial of a Kiev rabbi on the eve of Rosh Hashanah in 1921, angered members of the audience were arrested after the rabbi reportedly replied to the question of why he had poisoned Jewish youth with religious fairy tales and chauvinistic ideas with the answer “I’m doing this deliberately to keep the masses of people in ignorance and bondage to the bourgeoisie.” The audience member reportedly called the rabbi an ignoramus. Among other absurdities was trying to convince Jewish bakers to make *halah* in the shape of a hammer and sickle and shutting down synagogues supposedly because of numerous letters received from the Jewish laity asking for help against religious exploiters of the people.

¹⁵⁴ Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Union*, 79-80.

¹⁵⁵ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 47, l. 109.

elements who were most interested in the preservation of Jewish national identity.”¹⁵⁶ Soviet policies in fact helped keep *Tarbut* schools popular, even though they were difficult to support financially for mostly poor communities.¹⁵⁷ Hebrew also survived for some years as an elective in secondary schools, although it was deemed a “dead language” in the Soviet Union and unacceptable for primary education.¹⁵⁸ *Evsketsiia* activists complained that in some places where the Soviet school system was unable to reach, Jewish children still attended *heders*. Perhaps the lack of qualified teachers for the *Evshkoly* was the greatest deficiency of all: MASSR *Evshkoly* routinely failed to meet *Narkompros* standards mostly due to a complete lack of qualified teachers on the market. In order to try to improve the teaching effectiveness of national minority teachers, *Narkompros* sent teachers during the summers on training programs. Many of the minorities’ teachers sent from the MASSR, for example, were teachers in the *Evshkoly*¹⁵⁹

Despite such overwhelming problems, *Evshkoly* were nonetheless in some cases chosen by Jewish families because of the entrenched popular antisemitism that Jewish pupils and parents faced in the Russian and Ukrainian language schools. Given the legacy of Tsarist anti-Jewish discrimination and especially the unprecedented violence of the civil war years¹⁶⁰, Jewish officials were incredibly sensitive to manifestations of antisemitism that threatened to undermine

¹⁵⁶ Zvi Gitelman, *Assimilation, Acculturation and National Consciousness among Soviet Jews* (New York, 1973), 14.

¹⁵⁷ Zvi Halevy, *Jewish Schools Under Czarism and Communism*, p. 160, see also Elias Schulman, *A History Of Jewish Education in the Soviet Union*, p. 57. Hebrew was forbidden in the first grade for all schools, and it could be taught no more than 6 hours a week in the second grade in schools already open, but all new schools were not permitted to teach any Hebrew until the fourth grade.

¹⁵⁸ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 48, l. 7, from decisions reached at the *Evsketsiia* Central Bureau in Moscow, January 12-24, 1924..

¹⁵⁹ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1102, l. 52. In all cases during these years at least a few teachers were forced to pay for their own training. The destination was typically Kiev or Kharkov. In summer 1926, 10 teachers were sent, of which 7 were Jews; in 1927, 15 teachers were sent, 9 of whom were Jews. In both cases, 3 Jewish teachers went without any support from *Narkompros*.

¹⁶⁰ For insight into how policies toward Jews differed from those of other minorities see Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History* (Harlow, UK, 2001), 247-279.

Soviet policies, but under the circumstances of bureaucratic scarcity during the interwar years they were unable to adequately address this issue and popular antisemitism remained the rule rather than the exception—very much as had been the case in the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire. In defending the equality and rights of Jews, the state purported to uphold values that were alien for mostly illiterate peasants. In the *Evshkoly*, Yiddish for Jews was part of state-wide nativization policy during these years, but in reality *Evshkoly* attracted many because they often were at least less painful than integration: in the Tiraspol seven-year-school 180 of 400 pupils were Jews in 1925, but none of the 8 teachers were Jewish. One teacher routinely taught his class how Jews perform ritual murder, complete with demonstrations, until he was eventually replaced.¹⁶¹

Nevertheless, in the MASSR as elsewhere, many Jewish parents, particularly from urban “sophisticated” groups, sent their children to Ukrainian and Russian schools because of the lack of long-term opportunities offered by Jewish schools. The level of linguistic assimilation was already considerable in the province: “evseks” noted that some Jewish children were completely unable to speak “their native language,” having been brought up in either Russian or Ukrainian.¹⁶² Leaders in the *Evseksiia* strove to overturn this reality in order to implement Soviet *korenizatsiia* policies; linguistic assimilation directly into Russian or Ukrainian served to undermine their usefulness and was deemed (counter-intuitively) not good for inculcating socialist values. In an effort to maintain and enforce Soviet national order, the Jews would have to be taught Yiddish and learn to be Jews in the acceptable manner. Influenced by arguments from *Evseksiia* members, in 1925 the MASSR *narkompros* made mandatory the opening of at least one seven-year school for every thirty four-year schools in operation in the autonomous

¹⁶¹ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 46, l. 8.

¹⁶² AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1102, l. 46.

republic.¹⁶³ This meant opening many new seven-year schools, since standard pre-revolutionary rural education, when it was available, tended to be limited to the elementary level.¹⁶⁴ By 1927, seven-year Jewish schools had been opened at 133% of the quota set by *narkompros* for such schools (based on the number of elementary schools), compared to 100% for Germans and Russians and only 54% for Ukrainians and only 23% for Moldovans. While often not successful in inspiring socialist ethos within their traditional co-religionists, the *Evseksiia* activists did apparently contribute to Jews becoming immersed in a school curriculum that promised to inculcate Bolshevik values into their children, often because parents had no alternative available to the *Evshkoly*.

The *Evshkoly* thus did indeed show increased enrollment through the middle-to late 1920s despite the reservations noted above. In the MASSR in 1924/25 42% of Jewish children were attending *Evshkoly*; in 1925/26 the number had risen to 50%, and in 1926/27 to 55%. These figures in the MASSR closely paralleled those available for Belarus, which in the same years was 41.6%, 44.5%, and 47.9%, respectively.¹⁶⁵ The percent of all Jewish children going to *Evshkoly* went up from 42% to 55% in three years, although this figure was still too low for the activists who lamented that 45% of Jewish children were being educated in a non-native language in Russian or Ukrainian language schools.¹⁶⁶ Unfortunately, it was the children of poor, *déclassé* families—the *lishentsy*, mostly in urban areas—who found themselves at *Evshkoly* because better off parents, such as public servants, found ways to send their children to

¹⁶³ Ibid, 1. 44. A four year school was the equivalent of U.S. elementary schools, meaning grades 1-4, or usually ages 8-12. A seven year school was similar to junior high school, meaning grades 5-7, or typically ages 12-14. These seven year schools were considered by *Narkompros* to be “incomplete,” or a step towards what they planned to, and eventually did make, into ten year “complete” schools, for ages 7-17, which served until the end of the Soviet system. See Weinstein, “Language and Education,” 129.

¹⁶⁴ Weinstein, “Language and Education,” 128. Based on figured from the Tsentralnyi Statisticheski Komitet published in *Ezhegodnik Rossii*, 1912(?), Weinstein writes that in the Kiev Educational District in 1913, only twenty-two out of every one thousand people attend school.

¹⁶⁵ See Zvi Halevy, *Jewish Schools Under Czarism and Communism*, 161; AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1102, l. 47.

¹⁶⁶ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1102, l. 47.

Russian or Ukrainian language schools. The *Evshkoly* across much of the former Pale were thus attended by up to 85% pupils classified as belonging to various déclassé poor elements.¹⁶⁷ At the community level, such circumstances did much to further divide Jews in the MASSR.

In addition to four and seven year *Evshkoly*, the MASSR was home to various professional, technical and literacy schools meant to increase the skills of the national minorities and increase their rate of literacy. Two artisan training schools were opened in the early 1920s and one *Evproftekhskola* (Jewish Professional Technical School). These schools took 14 to 15 year olds and trained them for two to three years for a specific trade. In Balta in 1927 60% of all students in the general *Proftekhskol* were Jews, and Jews represented 39% of such students across the entire MASSR—clear evidence of the preponderance of Jews in artisan and technical fields, as well as in urban centers. The *likbez* or adult literacy school was another important Soviet re-education institution.¹⁶⁸ By the mid-1920s there were 216 such schools across the MASSR, 15 of which were Jewish, 6 German, 2 Bulgarian (although these courses were taught in Russian for lack of books in Bulgarian) and 2 Polish. The total of Jewish students in such schools was 650 in 1927, proportional to their numbers in the professional technical schools.¹⁶⁹ While these numbers reflect quite directly the minority population in the autonomous republic, they also again underscore the desire of the Soviet government to encourage education in minority languages, at least during the nativization campaign.

But just like with questions of agricultural re-settlement, the state focus on education as a means for promoting minority national culture ended by the early 1930s, replaced on the one hand by greater interest in the dominant language and culture, especially Russian, and on the

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, l. 49. There were some Jewish communists who disapproved of letting children of ‘chastniks’ to enter *Evshkoly*, whose resources were limited and were to be used on working-class children, AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 47, l. 106.

¹⁶⁸ *Likbez* stands for *likvidastiia bezgramotnosti*, “liquidation of illiteracy.”

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, l. 55.

other in the folding in of previously promoted national interests into the broader socialist direction. The MASSR was a special case because Moscow remained focused on Moldovans as different from Romanians for propaganda purposes. Even in choosing a dialect upon which to “build” the Moldovan language, linguists chose the dialect of central Bessarabia in order to make it intelligible to peasants on both sides of the Dniester, in expectation of the Soviet takeover of Bessarabia, or in Soviet parlance: the national liberation of all Moldovans.¹⁷⁰ Thus, the state focus would clearly be on creating Moldovan national culture—something that had to be done from scratch—and local minorities, such as the Jews, would need to focus on the real historical victims, the Moldovans. The previous stress placed on Jewish problems specifically could no longer be justified, and Jews in the local state and party administrations were instructed to direct their energies elsewhere.

The focus on socialist education primarily in Yiddish for Jews was thus over by the early 1930s, and given the ambivalent attitude toward the project on the Jewish street, it was not surprising that the *Evshkola* as an institution went into rapid decline. Without state backing that ensured enrollment of Jewish pupils throughout the 1930s, Jewish parents that were able to send their children to other schools did so. By 1937/38 in Tiraspol, for example, only one Yiddish-language school remained where there had earlier been many more. Its 407 pupils (for a Jewish population of some 20,000) reflected a below average level of interest in their studies: according to the school inspector fully 23% of the student body received unsatisfactory grades.¹⁷¹ The inspector blamed the problem on the lack of effective administration because the old school director was arrested last year by the NKVD. The new director admitted that Jewish parents desired more teaching in Russian, in fact he noted that this was the reason many sought to send

¹⁷⁰ Charles King, *The Moldovans*, 65.

¹⁷¹ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 2, d. 626, l. 56-58.

their children to other schools. Furthermore, much of the education was in fact being done in other languages: in terms of annual hours in the classroom, 1480 were spent in Yiddish, 1100 in Ukrainian and 1020 in Russian (no teaching took place in Moldovan at the Tiraspol *Evshkola*). Many subjects were never taught in Yiddish, such as astronomy, geography and physics that lacked instructional texts in Yiddish and required teachers to use texts in other languages. The Tiraspol *Evshkola* certainly was also an example of the policy changes underway in other ways: many teachers at the school were serving in other capacities as well. Mrs. Shitsman, for example, the math and physics teacher, doubled as a leading local *bezbozhnik* (League of the Militant Godless), while the biology teacher, Mr. Koifman, led OZET propaganda circles.¹⁷²

Part of the issue in Transnistria was that Jews were more broadly using education to migrate out of the MASSR, not merely in order to avoid the *Evshkola*. The two principal institutions of higher education in the autonomous republic, the Tiraspol State Institute and the Worker Faculty (Rabfak), which both were in some years during the early and mid-1920s close to majority Jewish, graduated only 19 Jews out of a combined total of 349 students in 1937/38.¹⁷³ This was paralleled at the Tiraspol Pedagogical Institute, whose graduates in 1978/38 included 14 Jews out of a total of 301, again a huge drop from the numerical over-representation of Jews in the previous decade.¹⁷⁴ What these enrollment numbers indicate can be corroborated by other institutions and spheres of Jewish life: in this Soviet periphery, state-sponsored Jewish identity had largely failed.

The Romanian Army's re-occupation of Bessarabia and Transnistria in 1941 meant the final nail in the coffin of the *Evshkoly*. Rybnitsa raion, for example, was governed a Colonel Korbu Popescu, who served as raion prefect. Popescu quickly changed the curriculum of all

¹⁷² AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 2, d. 626, l. 56-58.

¹⁷³ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 626, l. 40-42.

¹⁷⁴ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 626, l. 37.

Rybnitsa schools to champion the spread of Romanian culture. His administration gave their greatest precedence toward former Soviet Moldovan schools, but most Ukrainian schools were reformed in this way also, while remaining *Evshkoly* were closed. A committee composed of Romanian nationals was created to oversee education, and they replaced most local teachers and administrators with those sent from Romania, just as had been done more than 20 years before in Bessarabia. Children learned to sing patriotic Romanian songs and perform national dances, together with strong doses of anti-Soviet messages in stories and placards that adorned the inside of classrooms as well as the streets of Transnistrian towns. Jewish children did not witness the educational changes first hand, however, since they were sent to concentration camps along with their parents where the overwhelming majority were killed.¹⁷⁵ By the time the Red Army occupied the territory in 1944 (the second time—this time for 45 years), Soviet statisticians noted the local educational system carefully, together with the complete absence of *Evshkoly*. In Rybnitsa raion, again as example, 42 functioning schools (of 51) included 21 Moldovan schools, 19 Ukrainian schools and 2 Russian ones.¹⁷⁶

In the final analysis, the efforts of the *Evsektiia* to reform Jewish education met with limited success. While traditional Jewish education was primarily elementary and religious for most children, with a few talented youngsters going on to study at yeshivas, new secular state schools for Jews were aimed at institutionalizing professional training and inculcating socialist modernity. Whereas traditionally Jewish apprentices would study with their artisan teachers, the technical schools sought to standardize artisan education, to control its quality and material, as

¹⁷⁵ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 699, l. 24-26; on the Holocaust in Transnistria see Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944* (Chicago, 2000). For insight into motivations of Antonescu and his government, see Vladimir Solonari, “‘Model province’: Explaining the Holocaust of Bessarabian and Bukovinian Jewry” *Nationalities Papers* 34, no. 4 (2006): 471-5000.

¹⁷⁶ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 699, l. 23.

well as to have more say over who studied what. Thus, the state sought to limit professional and cultural choices of residents to those deemed favorable to state construction and Soviet cultural creation. While by the twentieth century modern secular ideals could increasingly be found in traditional *heders*, the Soviet national schools constituted a radical break with the past. Religious education was all at once and completely disavowed. The source of Jewish identity in Eastern Europe for centuries, Jewish traditional education was militantly attacked by the *Evseksiia*, offering instead to rally Jewish identity around the Yiddish language and a proletarian ethos. As seen from their efforts to reform education, and parental resistance to these efforts, results were mixed. While the institutional framework of Jewish life was irrevocably altered along *Evseksiia* plans, their notion of secular-Yiddish-Soviet identity for Jews was not accepted as they desired.

When compared to the educational policies of the Romanian crown across the Dniester, the *Evshkola* in the MASSR was quite a different beast. Unlike Bessarabian Jews, who had to constantly fight what proved a losing battle to maintain a separate educational system for Jewish pupils, in the Soviet Union it was the state, through mediation by Jewish communists, that imposed a specific education program in Yiddish for Jews that remained separate from the state curriculum, at least in terms of language. Much like the general governing philosophy, Soviet planners were content to allow Jews to bring reform to the Jewish street, and the *evseks* were committed to Soviet modernization. Traditional and backward from generations of Russian imperial neglect and discrimination, Jews would be ‘uplifted’ by the Soviet state and brought into the socialist fold. Romanian policy makers, on the other hand, wished to uplift the ethnic Romanian peasants at the expense of the Jews (and others). The Romanian state was intolerant to Jewish difference, but as long as they lived in Romania their children should study in Romanian—Jewish schools of any kind were an anathema and only grudgingly supported under

Western pressure. Jews encountered anti-Semitic legislation and popular attitudes that made attending state schools painful and difficult; and were prevented from higher education whenever possible. Jewish schools were not attacked, however, as they were by *Evseksiia* activists in Transnistria. By largely refusing state funding and accreditation to Jewish communal schools, many Jewish families had no choice but state-funded Romanian schools. Romanian policies thus forced many Bessarabian Jewish pupils into the very Romanian state schools that did not really want them in the first place.

In the Soviet Union, schools in Yiddish were very much a state initiative. Yet the often overzealous efforts of modernizing *Evseksiia* activists pushed many Jewish families to send their kids to general state schools in Russian or Ukrainian. Thus, even though their efforts were to recruit rather than to exclude, the results were quite similar in important respects to circumstances across the Dniester. The efforts of Jewish individuals, families, and communities on both banks of the Dniester to maintain Jewish communal and religious cohesion, largely in an effort to educate their children with some sense of Jewish identity, was a prominent similarity. Not surprisingly, the level of assimilation into non-Jewish culture was more common in the Soviet case, at least in terms of bureaucratic, communist culture. Lower-class, popular culture remained hostile to the surrounding modern state, just as was the case in Bessarabia. However, in both cases the state policies served to either stifle or sever outright Jewish educational autonomy. Traditional, religious Jewish education suffered much more in the Soviet Union than in Greater Romania where it was at least tolerated for most of the interwar era. Romanian administrators could not completely ignore the gaze of the international community, lax though it often was, and the Soviet policy proved much more adept at drawing in members of national communities and offering alternatives that enable the silencing of traditional institutions. As

Mark Mazower has aptly observed, the Soviet state proved much better in the interwar years at managing its multitude of national minorities than the East European national governments created by Wilsonian principles of national self-determination explicitly for the safe-guarding of minority rights.¹⁷⁷

Conclusion

Jewish identity was a contestable category during the 1920s in the MASSR, as it was throughout the whole of the Soviet Union. *Evseksiia* activists, as agents of the Communist Party and representatives of Bolshevik modernity to the Jews, sought to manage several demands. On the one hand, many were recovering from hopes dashed by the liquidation of the Jewish parties and struggling with internal questions about allying themselves to the Bolsheviks, while on the other, they were excited about the opportunity to reorganize traditional Jewish society that they deemed backward and oppressive. Over-zealotry was common, particularly since many found themselves in positions of power for the first time in their lives. Their actions, which destroyed much of traditional Jewish life and forced many Jews toward assimilation into Soviet (really Soviet Russian) culture, began to worry them because complete assimilation was not what most activists wanted. Attempts were made to manage Soviet policy such that modernization could be conducted while Jewish identity preserved.

Jewish identity had to change, however, for this to be possible. Clearly it could no longer be religious. It belonged out of the shtetl and would preferably be relocated to a city, or a Jewish collective farm in an autonomous Jewish territory. It would be Yiddish-speaking, never Hebrew, and through Yiddish teaching by trusted Soviet cadres, Jews would also be re-educated into

¹⁷⁷ Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York, 1998), 50.

modern, Soviet Jews. Such Jews were imagined as proletarians, as farmers and workers, not as the stooped, pale shtetl peddlers or kustars that represented to these activists everything wrong with Judaism, as seen through their own eyes and (as they imagined) the eyes of those non-Jewish officials whose acceptance they sought. At times the Communist Party gave their plans support, at others it undermined them. At times it gave them considerable free reign to Bolshevize the Jews on their behalf, at others it reined them in. In the end it determined that they were not to be trusted to implement what the Party wanted anymore. The activists were surprised by this because they misunderstood that the Party saw them as a temporary necessity to destroy traditional Jewish life and modernize the Jewish people, not as an agency that could justify its permanence through the successful accomplishment of its mission.

But the biggest failure of the *Evseksiia* activists was clearly their failure to sell their vision of Jewish identity to their own people, the people on whose Bolshevization the *Evseksiia*'s own bureaucratic existence depended. Most Jews of the former Pale rejected the *Evseksiia*'s notion of an atheist, Yiddish-speaking, proletarian identity, preferring to pick and choose between these and other values. For some, Yiddish was unappealing, because it was still considered only a jargon and impractical since the path toward career opportunities, as well as to the wonders of Russian culture, both largely closed before, were now open but would require Russian anyway. Many wanted to leave the Jewish villages and the rabbis behind and move to the cities, but to take something of Jewish tradition with them. This was typically religious and Hebraist rather than atheist and Yiddishist, however. Some wanted to leave Judaism behind altogether, and *Evseksiia* ideas didn't appeal to them. Many were horrified by the destruction of Jewish traditional life and terribly affronted by the zealotry of the Jewish

communists. Many were without rights as *lishentsy*, and could not but stay in traditional settings.

Whatever the reasons, the Jewish community went in many directions, but not sufficiently in the direction that the *Evseksiia* activists desired to call their work successful. Ultimately, their tenure proved too short. The interwar period overall saw the tremendous influx of Jews into all aspects of Soviet life, a fact that seemed to promise the creation of a new identity, the Soviet Jewish citizen, even if this meant the end of a traditional Jewish identity. While this promise would prove to be short-lived, the interwar period held the promise of a bright future of Jewish inclusion into Soviet society. In the final analysis, lower-class Jews made their own choices as much as possible. In Bessarabia Jews resisted Romanian chauvinism, fought to preserve cultural autonomy through Jewish nationalist visions while accommodating modern expressions of collective political identity and desire. In Transnistria, most Jews resisted Soviet-Jewish identity as presented by the *Evseksiia* and instead accommodated notions of Soviet modernity with varying degrees of Jewish tradition.

Chapter 5

Jewish Politics and Identity across the Divide: Dreams in Common

Jewish life and culture transpired in the Dniester borderland region to a significant extent framed by events and forces that could not be limited to national realities alone. It was not only that thousands of refugees traversed the Dniester River border and forced each regime (particularly the Romanian one) to deal with the reality of their plight. It was also the Soviet desire to get back Bessarabia that created opportunity for Jews to work toward this end, and for the Romanian state created additional incentive to label all Jews as pro-Soviet communists and implement discriminatory policies accordingly. But beyond national politics, Jews, Russians, Ukrainians, and others ethnic groups continued to manifest languages, customs, interests, political activism, and belief systems that transcended national borders and remained connected to values and memories that spanned beyond the immediate national project they found themselves in. Cataclysmic historical events like the Great War and the Russian Revolution which created a new Europe divided between communism and liberal nationalism could not destroy, at least not immediately, memory of multi-ethnicity and autonomy in multi-confessional empires even while living in East European nation states striving for racial order and national legibility, nor could it erase memories of religion and traditional community in a Soviet state striving for unified, socialist futurism.

As Michael Stanislawski has noted, perhaps too much attention has been given to the history of nations because many young historians, their eyes opened wide by the ideas of national construction set forth most famously by Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm, now look upon nations as something created by nationalism: not ancient and

primordial but rather very modern, indeed perhaps the single most defining characteristic of modernity.¹ In truth, this was never a one way road because nationalism itself was created by nations—meaning that national intellectual elites worked hard to establish the founding national myths of their nations by indoctrinating wider elements of the populace in their national “truth.”² The interwar years marked the high point of this historical process in Eastern Europe, very much part of the broader trends of social engineering that pervaded society during these years. Modern citizens would not only be made more educated, urban and wage-earning, devoted to self-improvement, cleanliness and health, and their civic obligations—in essence “gardenized” subjects—they would also become bold believers in the national cause of their society. This fundamental principle was the same in Romania and the Soviet Union despite the vast difference in collective causes, and those who failed to accept and perform the unifying national culture or where defined as standing outside it were left to suffer the consequences.

For Jews nationalism was more complex for obvious reasons: they had no unified territory to call their own other than the historical homeland of Eretz Israel, which at the time was not only ruled by others (which was true in all cases of imagined homelands in Eastern Europe) but it was almost entirely populated by others as well. Zionism was a logical outcome of European Jewry’s internalization of the European discourse of nationalism (but not the only one)—Theodor Herzl wanted an end to discrimination through “normalizing” the Jews, and what better way to accomplish this than to give them a land of their own just like all other European peoples possessed?³ The response slowly gained popularity from the first decade of the twentieth century; in the interwar years Zionism made much quicker strides because it made

¹ Michael Stanislawski, *Zionism and the Fin de Siècle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky* (Berkeley, 2001), introduction, xviii.

² See for example Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe” A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations* (Cambridge, 1985).

³ Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State* (New York, 1988).

more sense after the Balfour Declaration in 1917 seemed to open Palestine for Jewish settlement and the estrangement of Jews in the newly-constituted national homelands across Eastern and Central Europe made the multi-ethnic empires of the past a nostalgic Jewish memory.⁴

Socialism was another path out of discrimination and antisemitism for Jewish thinkers, workers and reformers, and like in the case of nationalism, Jews had a special relationship with socialism. Yuri Slezkine argues that among many reasons why Jews were so attracted to communism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was simply because Judaism is inherently close to Marxist idealism. Building on the philosophy of Russian émigré thinker Nikolai Berdiaev, who argued that socialism “is a form of Jewish religious chiliasm,” Slezkine writes: “Add to this fact that Jewish liberty and immortality are collective, not individual, and that this collective redemption is to occur in this world, as a result of both daily struggle and predestination, and you have Marxism.”⁵ The argument that communism replaced Judaism as the religion of 20th century ethnic Jews has earned Slezkine perhaps more criticism than any other. Yet for Slezkine, the entire discussion highlighted a bigger question—why are Western historians of modern Jewry still loath to write about the undeniably special connection between Jews and communism in 20th century Europe? The interwar Bessarabian case shows that the Jewish romance with communism was not particularly special from other alternatives available to Jews: communism was a tool to address local concerns and a reflection of local discriminatory circumstances. Jews were over-represented in the Bessarabian communist movement compared to other people, but overall only a tiny minority of the Jewish population in the province were communist activists. Jews were not nearly as predisposed to communism as communism was used as a broad label of Jewish disloyalty and anti-national agitation to silence Jewish aspirations

⁴ As a popular example, see the treatment of the place of Jews in Imperial versus post-Trianon Hungary in István Szabo’s film *Sunshine*.

⁵ Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, 2004), 91-92.

for autonomy and resistance to a specific, ethno-national identity being exported from Bucharest that was indigestible to minorities generally, especially Jews. For many Jews on the left, communism was a path of resistance against discriminatory treatment in Greater Romania.

In Soviet Transnistria, Jews were attracted to communism for different reasons, but what was similar to the Bessarabian case was similar more broadly to Jewish politics across Europe, including with the aspirations of Zionists. In that sense, the attraction was very much a reflection of modernist values across the West at the time. What was really appealing about both movements was the dynamism of progress through rational, self-improvement, not only of the individual but of the imagined collective. The possibility of improvement and most importantly, empowerment, promised finally the possibility for Jewish normalcy free from discrimination, hatred, suffering, isolation, and religious backwardness. Jews would finally be able to belong to a modern, progressive, rational order constructed either on a political order of nations or of equals in a socialist utopia without states or classes. These common dreams clearly saw beyond international borders: in the Zionist case Jews would come together from across all borders to form a state of their own (with borders, of course) while in the socialist case there would be no borders at all. Furthermore, the dynamism envisioned for both movements was one of action and power, of overcoming obstacles, and thus it was focused on the masculine. In both Zionism and communism is visible the need to become masculine, through physical work, in order to shed the “female” stunted helplessness of the Jewish past. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, European science had, including in Russia, put together considerable “evidence” that coded Jews as exhibiting “female” traits, such as hysteria, small chest sizes that made them unfit

for military service, and other degenerative states.⁶ The radically opposed state political values of Romanian nationalism and Soviet communism could not completely erase these commonalities; they transcended the new political border between the two states.

Yet there were other important differences on opposite sides of the Dniester that would weigh heavily on Dniester Jewry. The ideals of Bolshevik leaders were not theirs alone, but rather represented broadly-held ideals of much wider revolutionary sentiment not only in Russia but throughout Europe in the immediate post-WWI years. This was a deeply contradictory time for European society, as many scholars have made clear. As prominent politicians gathered in Versailles to make peace and “return to normalcy,” younger generations seethed under a political system that seemed to them old, anti-idealistic, and worst of all, unjust. Revolutionary violence erupted practically all over Europe. In Germany and Hungary in particular, communist coups either succeeded or came very close to succeeding. Yet it was only in Russia where revolution triumphed and ushered in a period of what Richard Stites has called revolutionary iconoclasm, “when various kinds of people, exhibiting various levels of consciousness, began ‘living the revolution’ by renouncing the old and trying out the new.”⁷ In terms of the Jewish Question, Bolsheviks shared numerous important ideas with Zionists particularly on the matter of turning violently away from the old and bolting headlong into the new, even as they fiercely fought to crush Zionism as a matter of power and control. This chapter will examine more closely these revolutionary dreams on both sides of the Dniester and compare them.

It must of course be mentioned that not all Jews partook in such dreams; many in fact wanted no part in modern ideologies or political and cultural activism. For these, who of course

⁶ Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York, 1991); Eugene M. Avrutin, “Racial Categories and the Politics of (Jewish) Difference in Late Imperial Russia,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* vol. 8, no. 1 (Winter 2007), 27.

⁷ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Visions and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York and Oxford, 1989), 61.

tended to be older and more devout, the desire for the preservation of their religious and cultural traditions and ways of organization, which some scholars have called autonomism or territorialism, took place on both sides of the Dniester River. Their circumstances were greatly influenced by the political regime overhead. In Bessarabia, autonomism was primarily focused on Yiddish language and cultural preservation, focused on rearing the next generation of Jews with the culture of their parents through language courses, libraries and reading rooms, and their own youth groups. The movement was associated with a particular cultural organization called the Yiddish Cultural League. In Soviet Transnistria, no such freedoms were possible, as any definition of Judaism that contradicted the state definition was not permitted. Autonomism is thus much harder to find; one has to search between the lines for underground meetings of parents and friends, of illegal economic formations, of attempts to maintain communal allegiances even if in secret in order to help each other and preserve cultural traditions. In short, Jewish autonomism in Soviet Transnistria is resistance to socialist culture, and as such to Soviet power. The similarities of autonomism in both cases are similar in many of the same ways that the dreams of socialism and Zionism were similar, and thus deserve inclusion in the chapter.

The New Masculine Jew

Herzl's Zionism initially took shape in a culture of rising racial antisemitism that made the possibility of winning acceptance by becoming 'civilized,' the central idea of the Haskalah, no longer tenable for Jews. Proponents of the Haskalah, beginning with Mendelssohn in the late eighteenth century, responded to the views of liberal European Christians such as Wilhelm Dohm, who argued that the Jews' primitive and Oriental way of life was the result of their backward Talmudism and oppression at the hands of Christian society. If they could be "re-

educated” and “civilized,” they would be ready, able and willing to drop their backward life and join European civilization. The Romanticism of the early nineteenth century co-existed with a revival in interest in the classic era, with its typically positive view of the ancient Israelites as heroic warriors. Civilization, even if non-Jewish, would return the Jews to the heroism of their ancestors. Such was the view, for example, in Nicholas I’s Minister of Enlightenment Sergei Uvarov, who enlisted the efforts of the young *maskil* (Haskalah proponent) Max Lilienthal to spread modernity among the Russian Jews through the “new schools.”⁸ Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, racist theories had eclipsed the liberal definition of Judaism, reworking it into something biological and immutable, which largely undermined the efforts of liberals.⁹ While long seen as the exception to the West European preoccupation with racial categories, Russian scientists and politicians did in fact assign immutable characteristics to race in the fin-de-Siècle Empire.¹⁰ Romanian rulers even earlier considered Jews as outside the national polity, the total number of Jews that were naturalized between 1878 and 1913 was 529, out of thousands of applications. Jews were clearly seen as foreigners in not only cultural or religious terms, and all legislation reflected this status for them even if they were born and lived all their lives in Romania.¹¹ Scientifically-grounded, racial definitions of difference in Romania spread only after WWI.

Self-criticism had existed among Jews since the medieval period, according to Sander L. Gilman, but it turned into self-hatred in the modern period, largely due to the transformation of antisemitism in the late nineteenth century from religious and economic to racial.¹² With the

⁸ For a discussion of Uvarov, see Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: The Transformation of the Jewish Question in Russia, 1825-1855* (Philadelphia, 1983), 59-68.

⁹ Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley, 1997), 279.

¹⁰ Avrutin, “Racial Categories and the Politics of (Jewish) Difference,” 13-40.

¹¹ Iancu, *Jews in Romania*, 112.

¹² Gilman, p. 286.

spread of enlightenment rationalism and modernist positivism during the nineteenth century, most notably the belief in linear progress as something that is monopolized by Europeans, and increasingly, at least in German historiography, by Aryans, outsiders came to be seen as outside history: having no worthwhile civilization of their own. This was not the first time in history that such divisions were deliberately drawn, for example the Romans saw themselves as bringers of history and progress to the peoples they conquered also. But the modernist project brought with it new and historically unique meanings. With the intensely modern emphasis on scientific differentiation of races, emplotment on less than the top rung of the socio-cultural evolutionary ladder gained a sinisterly irrefutable and irreversible character.

Some German cultural and intellectual elites, such as Richard Wagner and Heinrich von Treitschke, clearly, deliberately, and usually vehemently placed Jews outside the German nation as unable to understand, share in, or contribute to the special Aryan project of civilization. German Jews, many of whom were culturally, linguistically, economically, intellectually, and increasingly even religiously assimilated within the German whole by the turn of the twentieth century,¹³ and had earlier internalized German animosity toward Jewish difference, also ardently strove to denounce the imaginary construction of Jewish Otherness, the *Ostjud* or East European Jew. In the minds of modernized, secularized liberal Jews of the West, the *Ostjud* was the embodiment of the Jewish difference that they desired to shed. In doing so, they used the language of their detractors and internalized the categories of modernist discourse, which was characterized by the division of the world into definite, value-laden binary oppositions: good/bad, white/black, rational/hysteric, scientific/mystical, male/female, public/private, and Aryan/Jew. Thinking in unambiguous binary opposites in order to make clear and definite sense

¹³ Daniel Boyarin has noted in his discussion of Freud's fin-de-siècle Vienna how prevalent conversion from Judaism, into both Catholicism and Protestantism, Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*.

of an opaque world in fact linked revolutionary Russia to Europe. Sheila Fitzpatrick has argued that in the 1920s, the Bolsheviks tended to think within the frames of binary opposites: thesis/antithesis, proletarian/bourgeois, revolutionary/counterrevolutionary, ally/enemy.¹⁴ The language of the *Evseksiia* activists used such polarities as well in condemning Hebrew culture as Zionist and bourgeois, for example. The classifiers, white, Christian (at least outside the Soviet experiment), European males, desired to see the world in these terms, and they were increasingly threatened when the objects of their classification spilled out from their constructed definitions or especially when they resisted internalizing their given labels.

Perhaps no better single work brings out these binaries better than the influential, misogynist, Jew-hating book *Sex and Character* written by Otto Weininger, a young Viennese Jew who converted to Protestantism on the day he was awarded a PhD in 1903, only to commit suicide later the same year.¹⁵ Weininger set out to emplot men and women on a linear plane between the ideal male (M) and ideal female (F). While allowing that individual men and women fit between the two poles, with varying levels of femininity and masculinity, he stridently argued that psychologically and biologically, men are far superior to women by virtue of the very definition of masculinity, which he saw as virile and life-giving. Women, in fact, have no intrinsic value of their own for Weininger, other than as objects of male sexual desire:

When man became sexual he formed woman. That woman is at all has happened simply because man has accepted his sexuality. Woman is merely the result of this affirmation; she is sexuality itself. Woman's existence is dependent on man; when man, as man, in contradistinction to woman, is sexual, he is giving woman form, calling her into existence. Therefore woman's one object must be to keep man sexual. She desires man as Phallus, and for this she is the advocate of pairing. She is incapable of making use of any creature except as a means to an end, the end being pairing; and she has but one purpose, that of continuing the guilt of man, for she would disappear the moment he had overcome his sexuality.¹⁶

¹⁴ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca and London, 1992), 2.

¹⁵ Barbara Hyams and Nancy A Harrowitz, "A Critical Introduction to the History of Weininger Reception," in *Jews and Gender: Responses to Otto Weininger* (Philadelphia, 1995), 3.

¹⁶ Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, trans. from 6th German edition (London, 1906), 299.

Given this view, it is not surprising that Weininger argued that “the woman of the highest standard is immeasurably worse than a man of the lowest standard [302].”

In a manner similar to this binary construction of gender, Weininger set up a similar scale for race, placing the Aryan in the role of the male and a Jew in the role of a female. Similarly then, we see that “the most manly Jew is more feminine than the least manly Aryan [306].” Deeply threatened by modern urban life, sexuality, and mysticism, Weininger believed that Judaism has gained its greatest strength in the modern world, since “asceticism seems lost, sexuality and paring are accepted. Our age is not only the most Jewish but the most feminine [329].” This view of the degradation of society as a result of modern moral decay was a common one among Weininger’s contemporaries, a view perhaps most clearly put forth by the publication in 1895 of Max Nordau’s *Degeneration*, in which the author described in great detail how the degeneration of European elites had made them unfit for normal life or especially leadership. While Nordau himself moved toward believing that modern European life demanded as a solution for Jews what he called a “muscular Judaism,” or as Stanislawski put it “his Zionism went from Heine to Bar Kochba,”¹⁷ the broader belief was that because society, despite the marvels of scientific, technological and medical progress, was morally and spiritually degenerating it needed urgently to “weed out” its corrupting elements, such as Judaism. The search for purity as a means toward achieving the envisioned goal, whatever that goal may be, is a distinct quality of the modern condition. Weininger certainly identified with this perspective. For him, Christ was the greatest man (Wagner was second) because he overcame his original sin, his Judaism. Thus, mankind’s only salvation is to be as strong as Christ in choosing between Christianity and Judaism (again with the binary opposites); in having the strength to not choose Judaism [329-330].

¹⁷ Stanislawski, *Zionism and the Fin de Siècle*, 74-97.

Equating Judaism with femininity was not by any means unique to Weininger. In his review of the changing notions of gender from traditional-rabbinical Ashkenazi culture to modern attempts at assimilation, Daniel Boyarin argues that modern efforts at acceptance on the part of Westernized secular Jews marked the end of an independent Jewish world view and, at least in part, its subjugation to western values. As Boyarin traces Western Christian views of the Jew as feminine, weak, and/or queer through the centuries, he argues that the rabbis' construction of Jewish identity was not simply the unavoidable result of being on the receiving end of the dominating Christian discourse about the Jew, but rather a conscious and deliberate construction of an alternate system of Jewish values designed to resist assimilation, or anti-heroic rather than unheroic:

For traditional Jewry there were both alternate civilities, *Edelkayt*, an alternative paradigm of "manliness" that could be summed up in the relatively modern term *mentsh*. *Edelkayt*, which means "nobility," was a counter-ideal to many of the markers of the noble in romantic culture, in that its primary determinants within the culture were delicacy and gentleness, not bravery and courtliness.¹⁸

Boyarin argues that the modern era marks the effective colonization of Ashkenazi Jewry by Western cultural norms and values after centuries of effective resistance. Jews internalized the invention of heterosexuality, the modernist insistence that men must only have sexual relations with the opposite sex, in character with modern strict understanding of sex as a reproductive phenomenon and homosexuality as threateningly deviant behavior. In internalizing Western notions of heterosexuality and masculinity, Jews began to construct the modern Jewish male, infused with manly ideals developed by European Christian culture and in direct opposition to rabbinic masculine ideals. This was not without a sense of urgency, for as Boyarin notes in his discussion of Freud, being labeled a Jew in fin-de-siècle Vienna was tantamount to

¹⁸ Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, 36.

being labeled queer, which, in a bourgeois era of strict heterosexuality, meant symbolic castration:

Since within this culture, male hysteria and homosexuality are both symptoms and products of gender inversion, there is a slippage between them: the Jew was queer and hysterical—and therefore, not a man. In response, the normatively straight Jewish man was invented to replace the bent *Ostjud*—and his hysteria—his alternative gendering, was the first victim... The Oedipus complex is Freud's family romance of escape from Jewish queerness into gentile, phallic heterosexuality.¹⁹

For Boyarin, Zionism represents the highest state of internalization of the Christian worldview, rather than resisting and/or triumphing over it. Zionism, other than being Herzl's internalization of modernist discourse which held that nations must have territory to be "normal," was also an attempt to make Jews into whites (Europeans rather than Orientals) by imbuing them with land to colonize. Boyarin argues that "Zionism is thus the ultimate version of that practice dubbed colonial mimicry by Homi Bhabha."²⁰ While it is very problematic to argue in support or against Zionism as a whole by confronting only Herzelian Zionism as Boyarin does,²¹ there is little doubt that Zionism was in many ways a product of the modernist project within fin-de-siècle European Judaism, or that it had its greatest impact on the *Ostjuden* rather than on the Westernized Jews amidst whom Herzl lived and developed his theories. The impact can most readily be seen in the efforts, for example, of young Bessarabian Jews to infuse physicality and masculinity into their erstwhile "feminized" culture, at least as they imagined it. Gymnastics,

¹⁹ Boyarin, 215.

²⁰ Boyarin, 305.

²¹ For example, Asher Ginzberg, better known as Ahad Ha-'Am, wrote in response to Herzl about the spiritual and cultural need for Zion as the center of world Jewish life, and indeed, for the survival of traditional Jewish life, rather than as a means to turn away from it. Also, Simon Dubnow explicitly denied the need for a people to have their own land to be considered a "normal" nation. Dubnow argued that the Jews represented a nation on a higher plane than the European nations, precisely because they had survived as a distinct people spiritually, without land. Dubnow maintained that Zionism, while a useful idea, could not be taken as the only or indeed as even a realistic solution to the Jewish problem in its entirety, since the more than five million Jews in the Pale during his day could not simply all emigrate to Palestine. Dubnow continued to favor a notion of Jewish cultural autonomy within Russia. For the views of these two thinkers, see: *Selected Essays of Ahad Ha-'Am*, Leon Simon, translator and editor, (New York, 1970) and Simon Dubnow, *Nationalism and History: Essays on Old and New Judaism*, Koppel S. Pinson, ed. (New York, 1970).

agriculture and physical labor, as well as proud Jewish nationalism, were very much expressions of the ideals of hyper-masculinity in fin de siècle Europe.

But if these traits were to hold the keys to a new, modern, masculine, “non-degenerate” Jew, again Zionism was clearly not the only method available for his construction. Socialism, which is normally seen as an opposite of Zionism, had the potential, in the minds of many Jewish writers in the early years of the Soviet Union, to address many of the same issues that pre-revolutionary Jewish thinkers had sought to solve. Jewish self-hatred, especially for the traditional rabbinic upbringing that many from the first generation of Soviet Jewish writers and bureaucrats had undergone, was readily prevalent in Jewish young people that wanted socialist revolution as it was in those that demanded the creation of a Zionist state. Faith in revolutionary ideology as a means of creating the masculine Jew was just as important as it was for creating a Zionist settler capable of successfully undertaking *aliyah*, particularly as scholars have shown that Soviet ideology in general was very masculine in its ethos, not just for Jews.²² In this way, Jewish participation in the Komsomol (Young Communists’ League) in Transnistria, and Zionism and the communist underground in Bessarabia, all shared important traits, at least when it came to the construction of a masculine, Jewish male able to tackle the demanding and difficult challenges of the day. Resistance to such new ideals, usually by older and more devout Jews, was also an expression of their dreams—a rejection of a newly imagined Jewry.

Zionism and Jewish Masculinity in Bessarabia

No aspect of Jewish life better demonstrates the desire for a particular kind of modern Jewry that broke with the past than Zionism. Comparing Soviet and Romanian attitudes toward

²² For example, Elliot Borenstein, argues that “male comradeship is one of the primary myths of early Soviet culture, a myth that, though connected to the changing status of women, does not depend on women for its status,” *Men Without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917-1929* (Durham, 2000), 72.

Zionism has typically focused on the chasm of difference, noting Romanian support for the movement in order to get rid of the country's Jews while focusing on the Soviet intolerance for it as bourgeois nationalism.²³ In fact, Zionism was tolerated but carefully watched in Greater Romania, never really trusted. The Romanian Siguranța consistently attended various Zionist organizational meetings, rallies, and fundraisers over the course of the interwar years. Their reporting generally indicated the same perspective—they did not consider Jewish nationalist aspiration a threat to state security, but they suspected Zionists very often of communism as well, especially the socialist-Zionist Poalei Tsiyon, which was certainly seen as a threat because of its ideological connections with Soviet communism and therefore, its members were assumed to harbor intentions to help the Bolsheviks re-annex Bessarabia.²⁴

On the other side of the Dniester, however, Zionism was indeed viciously attacked by Soviet policy makers who successfully utilized the secular, pro-Yiddish intelligentsia to root out Zionist supporters on the state's behalf. This process depended on the extent of Soviet power, however; on the Soviet side of the Dniester borderland, far from Soviet centers of power, Zionism was not significantly controlled until the mid-1920s, albeit even then not completely. For Romania in particular, policies pursued toward Jewish national movements were not without problems, especially because Zionist sentiments varied greatly from left to right and could not be so easily placed in neat boxes for easy categorization. Given the tremendous economic, cultural and existential pressures of interwar Dniester Jewry, it is not surprising that Jewish communal institutions around a central religious leadership began to not only fray around the edges but come apart completely. In Transnistria the state dismantled the *kehilot*; in Bessarabia the state

²³ This is especially true for the period after WWII; see Jonathen Frankel, "The Soviet Regime and Anti-Zionism: An Analysis," in *Essential Papers on Jews and the Left*, Ezra Mendelsohn, ed. (New York, 1997), 440-482.

²⁴ On the ideology of Poalei Tsiyon, see Samuel D. Kassow, "The Left Poalei Tsiyon in Interwar Poland," in *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe*, Zvi Gitelman, ed. (Pittsburgh, 2003), 71-84.

tolerated and even sometimes gave minimal support to them. There was a price to pay, however: young Zionists in interwar Romanian Bessarabia, increasingly surrounded by state discrimination and rising anti-Jewish violence from Romanian-speaking youth, perceived traditional institutions and their leaders as part of the problem because of their ineffective response to the threat.

Already the most wide-spread and influential force in Jewish communal life prior to Romanian annexation of Bessarabia, Zionism continued to grow in interwar years to become by far the greatest mover of collective Jewish political will by the 1930s. As relations between Bessarabian Jews and Romanian administrators grew more problematic after the mid-1920s but especially by the early 1930s, radicalism within the Zionist movements, especially but by no means only among the youth, grew. This fact was also a reflection of the parting of ways between regional Jewish elites in the newly acquired territories and the national Jewish leadership in Bucharest: Zionism reflected in part a proud and resurgent insistence on defense of Jewish values against anti-Semitic Romanianization policies.

Circumstances were made worse by the assimilationist tendencies of the Bucharest Jewish elite, or at least this is what it looked like from the peripheries. In fact there was a strong Zionist movement in the Old Kingdom as well that existed even before WWI.²⁵ The earliest such organization was founded in 1909 in Focșani and Galați, which by 1914 had spread to other parts of Moldova and called itself “Hasmonean.” The Hasmonean manifesto, published in 1914, reveals their connection with ideas emanating from Central Europe before the Great War but would not become widely accepted in Bessarabia, beyond the student population, for another 15 years: “Judaism pays today with mountains of cadavers—the price of its acceptance by other nations. We were treated with hate, and we had to make great sacrifices. The Jewish students

²⁵ On this issue see Carol Iancu, *Evreii din România*; also *Jews in Romania, 1866-1919*.

protest against those who tried to spread this terrible lie that the Jews are only a religion and not a nation.”²⁶ This was similar language voiced in *Evreiskaia Tribuna* in 1929. Bessarabian Zionism was born in Tsarist Russia, but it was raised in a borderland setting between the movements of Jewish nationalism and self-defense of the former Pale of Settlement (centered until 1924 in Odessa) on the one hand, and the Zionist movements in Romania (including Transylvania, Bukovina and the Old Kingdom) on the other.

The structure of formal Zionism in Bessarabia reveals much about its development and connection to broader Jewish life, as well as the particular context of Zionism in Romanian Bessarabia because of its proximity to a contested and sensitive border. A central Zionist organization for the entire country, called the Zionist Federation, was legally registered and recognized under the new government on August 30, 1918. Several autonomous branches were established throughout the country, including one in Chişinău for Bessarabian Jewry. Under its umbrella all variations of Zionist thinking were represented, from the Paolei-Tsiyon and Zeiri-Zion on the left, the Allgemeine Zionists at the center, to the Revisionists on the right.²⁷ Moreover, from under its umbrella grew Zionist youth organizations of all political persuasions as well, from Gordonia, Hashomer Hatzair, Hehalutz, and Mercaz on the left to Betar, Hacoah and Brit-Trumpeldor on the right. The Bessarabian federation was led initially by Jacob Bernstein-Kogan, but then for most of the interwar years by Solomon Berliand, a wealthy tobacco merchant born in central Ukraine in 1868.²⁸ Zionist Federation leaders managed the Jewish National Fund, *Keren-Kaemet*, and maintained branches in nearly all Bessarabian towns with a significant Jewish population. The central Chişinău branch also maintained a Palestinian Office, which was founded in 1918 to assist Jews with all matters concerning legal emigration to

²⁶ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 228.

²⁷ Kopansky, *Blagatvoritelnye Organizatsii Evreiev*, 11.

²⁸ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 45, 50.

Palestine.²⁹ The American JDC was generous in supporting these Jewish agencies, particularly after 1930.³⁰ Also under the purview and financial support of the Zionist organization was the Popular Jewish University, founded by lawyer and newspaper editor Michael Landau in 1925. It was not recognized by the Romanian Ministry of Education nor supported financially; rather it was funded entirely through Jewish communal fundraising and the JDC. It aimed at instructing Jews in knowledge needed to make *aliyah*, or emigrate to Palestine. Over the course of the interwar years, as new and younger members became active in Zionism, the central organization also undertook to support, at least in part, many Zionist youth groups described below. Finally, the religious Zionist organization Mizrahi, which sought to ensure that settlements in Palestine would remain Orthodox, was also affiliated with the central Zionist organization and maintained close links with Rabbi Tsirelson and Aguda.³¹

Importantly, Tarbut was registered as part of the Zionist Federation and drew financial support from it. Initially the largest part of the federation, Tarbut had focused on Jewish education in Hebrew as a means of preserving Jewish culture for decades in the Pale of Settlement, even though it was registered with the Romanian government only in 1923.³² Tarbut organizers ran Jewish kindergartens and schools for children as well as higher and specialized training schools for young adults in Romanian Bessarabia; it also maintained a cultural section that ran some Jewish theaters, organized art expositions, Jewish sporting clubs, excursions and conferences, libraries and free places for children to play.³³ Its focus on Hebrew language and culture increasingly linked its leaders and their goals with those of the Zionist movement, which

²⁹ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 32. The Romanian government usually issued passports without conferring citizenship to Jews able to acquire a visa from the British government to immigrate to Palestine.

³⁰ For details see Kopansky, *Dzhoint v Bessarabii*.

³¹ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 33.

³² ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 34.

³³ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3146, l. 65.

in Bessarabia as elsewhere was not only dedicated to helping Jews make *aliyah* but at least until the mid-1930s also to strengthen Jewish national culture across Eastern Europe. Tarbut affiliates went up all over Bessarabia; in Chişinău alone, Tarbut ran 12 Jewish grade schools, 2 high schools, and a professional training school in 1924; outside the capital its schools enrolled about 2500 pupils that year.³⁴

Much of the financial support for Tarbut's sporting clubs came from the youth sports organization Maccabee, which was a Romania-wide organization initially registered separately from the Zionist Federation. Taken from the Hasmonean revolutionary hero Judah Maccabee, whose name not accidentally means "the Power," Maccabee never succeeded in gaining legality in Tsarist Bessarabia as it was considered subversive.³⁵ It was recognized soon after Romanian occupation, however, on April 30, 1918, adding to the general sense of hope among Bessarabian Jews for better circumstances after the end of Tsarism. With its central office in Bucharest, Maccabee opened affiliates all over the country, including sixteen in Bessarabia alone.³⁶ As the best-established Zionist youth group in much of interwar Eastern Europe, not just Bessarabia, Maccabee had by 1918 a considerable international fund-raising machine in place which allowed its leaders to influence youth politics beyond its own organization. According to its own guidelines, Maccabee was dedicated to "the physical revival of the popular masses through the spread of physical exercises to develop the body and fortify the health."³⁷

This goal of physical revival was of central importance to the cause of constructing a new Jew, and was shared by all Zionist youth groups, the range of which during the 1920s was truly impressive and by all indications bewildered the Siguranța. The goal of physical labor in

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 4837, l. 45.

³⁶ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 35, l. 256.

³⁷ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 4837, l. 11, from page 1 of the Maccabee statute submitted to the Chişinău Siguranța for registering the organization.

connection with a romanticized, utopian socialist organization of settlement in Palestine, in direct contrast to the physically weakening, misshapen petty capitalism of Jewish merchants and artisans, was a central goal of the Zionist left, especially the Marxist-leaning Poalei-Tsiyon. One of the older Zionist formations with roots in the Jewish Pale to Ber Borochov during fin-de-siècle revolutionary movements, Poalei was centered in interwar Romania in Bukovina where they published their newsletter *Arbeiter Tsaytung*, and to a lesser extent in Bessarabia, where its focus on Yiddish as the future language of Jewish Palestine rather than Hebrew appealed to many.³⁸ Much of the Bessarabian Siguranța understood the group as a communist formation outright and shut it down as early as autumn 1919.³⁹ While Poalei continued to function to a limited extent underground, especially in Hotin and Edineț, most of its members migrated to other Zionist groups, especially Zeiri-Zion, Mercaz and Gordonia.⁴⁰ As members of those groups, they took their focus on creating strong Jewish workers by organizing exercise and sporting events. The proliferation of Poalei-Tsiyon members, who were suspected of communism, throughout many Zionist youth groups in Bessarabia was an important reason why Siguranța suspicions remained.⁴¹

One of the youth groups most suspected of becoming a home for Poalei refugees was Hehalutz, which focused in its program on specialized training for Jewish young people in direct preparation for *aliyah*. Particular attention was paid to agricultural pursuits, to which end Hehalutz operated two farms and a voluntary labor camp in Bessarabia for education, practice and demonstration of farming techniques. Here, as part of their training, Jewish youth

³⁸ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3436, l. 11.

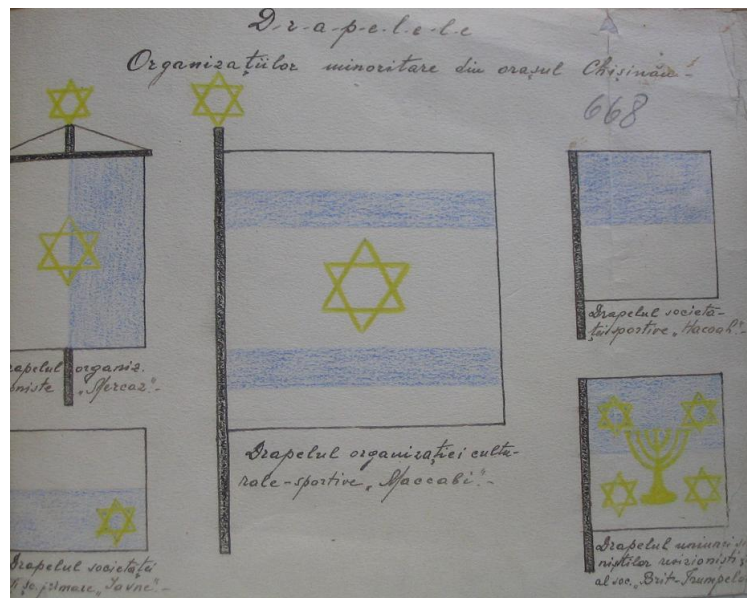
³⁹ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3436, l. 3-10.

⁴⁰ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3436, l. 20, 26, 27. These illegal sections periodically produced the underground Yiddish newsletter *Unzer Vort* (Our Word), which was dedicated to Marxism, worker rights and social progress.

⁴¹ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3436, l. 31-32.

volunteered their labor to bring in revenue for the organization. Located four miles outside the city of Bălți, this camp housed about 40 youths in training and was called, again not by accident, Masada. It was administered together with *Mercaz*, another Zionist group with branches in Bălți and Chișinău.⁴²

Figure 11: Flags of Zionist youth groups in Chisinaul; top left: Mercaz; bottom left: Iavne; center: Maccabee; top right: Hacoah; bottom right: Brit-Trumeldor. Taken from ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 668.



The training provided by Hehalutz was not limited only to agriculture, although it was the focus. It also placed Jewish young people (over the age of 18) in industrial settings, which in Bessarabia typically meant artisanal training since there were very few factories. By way of contrast, the group Gordonia was focused exclusively on agricultural training. Gordonia was created in 1928 in Cernauți (Czernowitz) through the fusion of two existing Zionist youth groups, Hahaver and Hatekhia, and was geared particularly toward teaching its agricultural settlers the discipline of the Kibbutz system in Palestine, meaning that it was deeply communal and socialist utopian in its political orientation. Gordonia spread to Bessarabia and quickly

⁴² ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 161.

achieved phenomenal success: within two years, over 75% of the group's members in the entire country were in Bessarabia.⁴³

For younger children who would later join Gordonia and Mercaz but especially Hehalutz, Hashomer Hatzair was founded in Bessarabia in 1923 aiming to strengthen Jewish young people up to age 14 through physical exercises and outdoor activities. In important ways it was not unlike the boy scouts or the Young Pioneers in the Soviet Union that prepared children for the Komsomol, something that reporting Siguranța agents consistently noted.⁴⁴ The platform of Hatzair was in fact based on the boy scouts; the boys were indoctrinated in the values of truth, nature, strength and physicality, loyalty to nation and people, and very importantly self-improvement, both physical and spiritual.⁴⁵ While the aim of the organization was to direct their physical strength and training toward preparation for *aliyah*, it also was desired to serve as the regeneration of the Jewish people in general, and to that end its leaders taught Jewish kids to fight back if accosted. The Marxist origins of the Hatzair also of course influenced the direction of its training activities, which earned it consistent suspicion from the authorities, particularly because of its popularity and rapid growth to thousands of members by 1930.⁴⁶ Hatzair was seen as against Romanian state interests because the national loyalty it sought to indoctrinate was of course toward the Jewish people rather than the Romanian state. For example, on June 17, 1934 Chișinău Hatzair members organized an end-of-school year outing for 600-700 Jewish children that included movies and programs about Palestine at the Express Theater downtown, including the picture "Halutsim." Siguranța agents reported this with concern.⁴⁷ Hatzair was furthermore

⁴³ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 232.

⁴⁴ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 43.

⁴⁵ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 231.

⁴⁶ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 269; for more on Hatzair ideology see Elkana Margalit, "Social and Intellectual Origins of the Hashomer Hatzair Youth Movement, 1913-1920, in *Essential Papers on Zionism*, Jehuda Reinharz and Anita Shapira, eds (New York, 1996), 454-472.

⁴⁷ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 674.

suspected of communist ties because of its similarity and thus alleged connection to the Young Pioneers. Siguranța agents reported of alleged connections with communists across the Dniester until Hatzair in Benderi was forced to shut down by general order on November 19, 1926.⁴⁸

Other chapters of the group, most notably in Bălți, kept functioning.⁴⁹

Figure 12: A page from the Zionist newsletter of *Karnei* published in Jerusalem, July 1934. This copy was circulated by Hashomer Hatzair in Bessarabia (one of 400 Siguranța confiscated copies), and shows Jewish children, some of them newly-arrived refugees from Germany (top picture caption) working hard to build the Jewish state.



Focus on Jewish pride and strength encouraged a new generation of Jews to refuse to tolerate abuse the way their parents had, as they saw it, and sometimes this new attitude led to conflict. Particularly well known for refusing to shy away from conflict as an expression of masculine pride in Bessarabia were the members of Hehalutz, who saw it as their duty to protect Jewish workers, particularly those planning to emigrate to Eretz Israel. In addition, the leader of

⁴⁸ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 99.

⁴⁹ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 161.

⁵⁰

the group was not a local Jew, but an educated young Zionist from Galicia named Samson Schechter, who held a PhD in philosophy from Czernowitz University of the pre-1918 Austro-Hungarian Empire. Schechter's contacts with and travel to Bukovina added to Siguranța suspicions about him and Hehalutz.⁵¹ Jewish parents were shocked and frightened, although perhaps some were also proud, when they read on January 13, 1927 that Jewish youth from Hehalutz beat up some right-wing anti-Semitic activists in the primarily Jewish town of Călărăși.⁵² On another occasion, Hehalutz youth boarded a train in Bucharest and got into a large brawl, sending one Romanian young man to the hospital.⁵³ Reports of these incidents quickly led to increased supervision over all Jewish youth groups by the Siguranța on April 19, 1927, particularly in Călărăși, in response to what police called "provocative Jewish movements."⁵⁴ In fact, beginning in the second half of the 1920s, there was a much higher rate of conflict being consistently reported between Jewish and non-Jewish youths.

Such expressions of Jewish identity of course concerned the Siguranța, and not only Hehalutz continued to experience raids and arrests for the rest of the interwar years, with many agents reporting without doubt that these kids are really communists for whom Zionism only served as a "mask." In fact such suspicions began immediately, in 1918, but grew notably after 1927.⁵⁵ Like for Hatzair, circumstances were particularly difficult in Benderi because its location on the Dniester assured assumptions about its ties to the Komsomol across the river in Tiraspol.⁵⁶ Hehalutz also ran into problems because its leader, Dr. Schechter, sometimes

⁵¹ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 36.

⁵² ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 57, 258.

⁵³ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 97.

⁵⁴ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 114.

⁵⁵ In his comments to an approval for a petition to meet by the Chișinău Zionist organization dated December 22, 1918, a Siguranța Major wrote "This is a society that has doubtful aims, which is why they [the police] have to send secret and clever agents to their meetings, who have to know the Jewish languages and then to collect information;" ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 4798, l. 32.

⁵⁶ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 159.

appealed for Jewish aid to the UK, citing as the need the abusive and anti-Semitic tendencies of the Romanian administration. The Interior Ministry and Siguranța agents not only took odds with this because they sought to preserve an image of Romania as a modern, democratic state but because they feared excessive attention to Jewish problems in Bessarabia would serve as fodder for the Soviet propaganda machine.⁵⁷ In fact, this was a persistent problem and not only as far as Zionist youth groups were concerned: Jewish international complaints were a source of ire for Romanian officials. By the late 1920s, considerable international Jewish attention was focused on Bessarabia in response to the growing awareness of the economic and political plight of the province's Jewish population, despite efforts by authorities to keep things quiet. The arrival in Bessarabian towns of Zionist dignitaries such as Naum Sokolov in 1931 were huge events, with their arrival at train stations typically attracting a massive turnout of local Jews that mobbed the visitor, as well as massive police presence.⁵⁸ There was little sympathy for the Jewish youth perspective: Romanian police reports explained to superiors that Jews want to emigrate because they wished to avoid military service for the Romanian state, and because many wished to live on international Jewish money from wealthy American Jews.⁵⁹

Although it would initially seem that Siguranța agents and young Zionists could agree on their shared desire for the Jews to leave Romania, there was still a serious problem: much of interwar Zionism, particularly among the youth, was utopian and deeply socialist in its understanding of a Jewish future, while the Romanian secret police had, broadly speaking, zero

⁵⁷ Schechter was of course not the only one; other Zionist youth made such appeals consistently, such as Mercaz which appealed to its central office in London on March 13, 1935; as did Jewish politicians, such as Michael Landau who appealed for help against Romanian antisemitism on behalf of the Jewish National Party on a trip to Palestine in 1935; ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 749, 751..

⁵⁸ World Zionist Congress representative Naum Sokolov's arrival in Călărăși, a mostly Jewish town close to Chișinău, where he was greeted at the train station by all local members of the youth Zionist organization Maccabee and about 600 Jews from town, ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 674, l. 183. The Siguranța agents on duty, whose report provides record of this event, were clearly distraught by this display of what they termed "foreign nationalism."

⁵⁹ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 5049, l. 1.

tolerance for political ideologies on the left, especially from ethnic minorities and particularly Jews. The assumed Jewish connection to communism, especially to Soviet-inspired, anti-Romanian activism, was at the end of the day not something the security agents could overcome: “they [Jews] are infected by the sickness of socialism and communism” according to one report, and “this territory is influenced by their part in the Russian Revolution,” purported another.⁶⁰ Additional damage was done by intermittent false reporting by Siguranța agents that were particularly ill-disposed toward Jews. In 1920, an agent in Bessarabia submitted a report to superiors in which he claimed that Maccabee, together with the Bund, the illegal Paolei-Tsiyon, Tarbut, the Yiddish Cultural League and Aguda, together with “other Jewish formations,” had formed an underground, international revolutionary organization called “Comverbund”⁶¹ centered in Odessa that desire to defend the rights and national interests of Jews by seeking a separate, Jewish nation-state across Bessarabia and Podolia. Worst of all, the future government of this new nation-state would be, of course, communist! More than ten years later, this report was part of the highest level regional briefing that the Bessarabian Siguranța put together for superiors at the Ministry of Interior. It summarized the central Zionist organization in 1931 thus:

All the clubs, reading groups, libraries and other organizations of the Zionist organization are frequented in the majority by Jewish youth. There they find supervision from mature adults enjoying good standing and all liberties, with whom they discuss questions of politics and clandestine organizations and are indoctrinated in a social life leaning toward the left with the final result that they aid communist formations. There have been many arrested Jewish young people in Bessarabia for instructing pupils in large conferences in acts that spread intrigue across Bessarabia.⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid. This sentiment is apparently only strengthened by Jewish contact with refugees fleeing from Ukraine through Bessarabia, who convince Bessarabian Jews of the need to emigrate also. The report noted with emphasis that some of the Zionist leaders were “in the service of the Bolsheviks.” One in particular, an engineer named Berenshtein, was driven to Chișinău from Odessa when it was occupied by Deniken’s troops—the Siguranța suggests strongly that such people harbor anti-Romanian, communist and revolutionary feelings; they need to be encouraged to emigrate by giving them every possibility to leave the country.

⁶¹ From *Komfarbund*, the Yiddish name for Jewish communism party in revolutionary Russia.

⁶² ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 257. It is quite likely that this agent overheard conversations in which Jews may have expressed their desire for such a state, but it was hardly ever more than a dream.

Thus, all Jewish youth groups in Bessarabia were closely scrutinized and never trusted despite legal recognition. Maccabee, for example, was initially granted freedom to assemble, but after a March 1920 parade through downtown Chişinău that included singing Jewish songs and the carrying of a Zionist flag, Maccabee was permitted to meet and conduct operations only if they announced their activities to the police in advance, including submitting a full proposal and having it subjected to police censorship.⁶³ Some of Maccabee's founding members were considered anti-Romanian by the authorities, especially Kogan-Bernstein, who was considered to be "in the service of the Bolsheviks." In reporting on this Zionist leader, Siguranţa intentions were laid perhaps most bare on the question of Zionism: "In the interests of state security, because there are many anti-Romanian, revolutionary and communist feelings [among Jews], we have to allow them to emigrate and give them all possibility to leave the country—this is in the general interest."⁶⁴ Many Siguranţa reports warned superiors in the Interior Ministry that Maccabee was supported by funds from "across the Nistru," which was generally interpreted synonymously with "enemies of the nation." They consistently stressed the need for "clever agents" able to understand "Jewish."⁶⁵

Nevertheless, during the early 1920s the security police generally did not interfere with Maccabee events if they were preceded by proper notification. Maccabee was not (at least initially) intended as a political organization but rather as a youth sporting club—in many Romanian schools where Jewish kids were isolated and often ostracized, Maccabee was a means for them to unite and allow them to compete athletically as Jews, and to exhibit Jewish pride. This naturally nurtured a sense of Jewish national difference and pride into adulthood, as

⁶³ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 4837, l. 45.

⁶⁴ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 5049, l. 1.

⁶⁵ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 4798, l. 31; for example in April 1920, Maccabee youth organized their own parade on the streets of Chişinău, even proudly waving the red and blue flag of the organization.

was intended, instead of a sense of Jewish religious separation as previously. Leaders of Maccabee would come to schools where the group did not yet exist and attempt to raise a chapter there. They were willing and usually did work hand in hand with other Jewish youth organizations if they were already established. Maccabee leaders attempted to direct youth activities toward teaching Jewish kids various exercises designed to “strengthen the body and fortify the health.”⁶⁶ Gymnastics competitions were very popular, including both among Zionist groups themselves and against other schools or athletic clubs.

Zionist youth activity both increased and grew more radical over the course of the 1920s. First, new organizations, such as the Society for Zionist Students, came into existence. This group was organized in the Old Kingdom 1931 and opened a chapter in Chişinău, even though there was no institution of higher education in Bessarabia other than a theological department of Iaşi University. Nevertheless, the group worked to include Bessarabian Jewish young people to organize lectures and conferences about Eretz Israel. Many of the leaders of the organization, like Mordco Bergman and Isaac Coring, were students in Iaşi and travelled consistently to Chişinău for meetings and events. Others, like Iosef Gurving and Isaac Livov, were Bessarabian Jews that managed to get into universities abroad, in this case in France, but still tried to influence and advise the organization.⁶⁷ Better educated in modern society than many other Zionist youth groups, the Zionist students often ran into censorship problems with agents in attendance when discussions about politics and contemporary affairs naturally elicited anger about antisemitism in Romania.

Secondly, and more notably, the Union of Zionist Revisionists, or the Zionist right-wing, made significant advances especially after 1930. The Revisionists were initially affiliated with

⁶⁶ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 4837, l. 45.

⁶⁷ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 253.

the Zionist Federation in Bessarabia. However, in the early 30s it split into two branches, the new and more radical one, called the New Revisionists, was internationally inspired by Vladimir Jabotinsky. This group was not part of the Federation but rather directly and aggressively recruited Jewish young men from all walks of life as long as they agreed with its ideology and were willing to undergo its regiment of military discipline. New Revisionists differed from the Zionist mainstream in their vision for Eretz Israel: they also directly challenged British authority in Palestine through calls for an autonomous Jewish Palestine free from British control and “cleansed” of all non-Jews. They also called for a unified plan of proportioning land for Jewish settlers together with a Jewish government (Supreme Council) capable of defending settlers from Arab attacks.⁶⁸

In 1931 the Revisionists were still relatively a small group, numbering about 150 in Chişinău and perhaps as many in Bălţi, but they grew quickly afterwards due to the radicalization of Romanian antisemitism.⁶⁹ Part of the reason for the growth in popularity was directly linked to British policies: tens of thousands of Jews wanted to go, but the number allowed in was tiny by comparison. Romanian Jews as a whole, numbering almost 800,000, were granted 377 entrance visas in 1932; 1374 in 1933; 1705 in 1934; 3596 in 1935; and 1348 in 1936, after which legal emigration ground to a halt.⁷⁰ Under such constraints the message of the Revisionists—just go, to hell with British quotas—was very favorable among the more militant Zionists, in fact it fed the radicalization of many. The Revisionists opened their own youth sporting association, called Hacoah, whose members expressed dissatisfaction with the centrist political leanings of Maccabee and desired instead stronger, military style discipline and complete allegiance to the

⁶⁸ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 255.

⁶⁹ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 942; Siguranţa report from November 1934 expresses concern over the rapid growth of the Zionist Revisionists.

⁷⁰ Iancu, *Evreii din România*, 233.

Zionist cause.⁷¹ Its youth dressed in military garb (until forbidden to do so) and marched in unison in military fashion whenever together, which was not only under suspicion from the Siguranța but also rubbed most Jews the wrong way.⁷²

Given the extreme level of politicization in this environment, differences of opinion were fierce, especially between the Zionist youth and the religious Jews, as well as among Zionists themselves, and violence sometimes erupted. Extreme division was characteristic even during the moments of unity, such as the German economic boycott throughout 1933. Zionists were very active in the anti-German economic blockades that went up all over urban centers in Bessarabia in reaction to Nazi discrimination against German Jews. Zionist youth were instrumental in organizing some of the largest demonstrations of protest, such as the one around the Express Theater in Chișinău on May 7, 1933 when a crowd of 1500 Jews shut down downtown traffic.⁷³ Once German Jews began fleeing Germany, some found their way to Bessarabia: a Committee for Aiding German-Jewish Refugees was set up in September 1933 as part of the Zionist Federation.⁷⁴ But from the Zionist perspective, Orthodox Jews were unforgivably lukewarm in their support for the boycott—because of their lack of national sentiment, according to the Zionist youth. One example that greatly upset Zionists was the Orthodox Jews’ much greater expenditure of energy on ensuring Jews kept their stores closed on Saturdays than on the boycott.⁷⁵

⁷¹ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 257.

⁷² In fact, just wearing such uniforms caused problems particularly for Brit-Trumpeldor: following a complaint from Chișinău Siguranța that the Zionist emblems on their uniforms were in violation of Article 27 of the Romanian Constitution, which allowed only the state military or police to wear uniforms with military emblems. The regional military governor ruled that such uniforms were no longer to be tolerated, and would result in up to a three-month prison term and confiscation of the uniform; ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 666.

⁷³ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 420.

⁷⁴ ANRM, 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 547.

⁷⁵ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 718.

On the other hand, the actions of some Zionists, such as Maccabee activists that pressured Jewish merchants to not buy German products, also offended.⁷⁶ At the general anti-German rally organized at the New Market November 13, 1933 by the Zionist Federation, Chişinău Hacoah leader Iahinsohn mounted a makeshift podium to speak to the Jewish crowd assembled, one of many speakers that evening. Members of the crowd interrupted his speech, however, and began chanting “down with the Jewish Hitler!” When he proceeded speaking, the crowd began throwing chairs at him until he was forced off.⁷⁷ Hacoah was particularly unpopular with older, devout Jews, who feared their overt acts of national pride would bring down repercussions on all Jews. A similar circumstance took place three days later, when Iahinsohn publically thanked local communists for supporting the Jewish boycott. The audience (one assumes the non-communists at least) began booing and throwing things, many calling out that the boycott need not lower itself by associating with communists. Fear of being associated with communists, given the Siguranţa record of arrest and torture, was real, but apparently the stance of the Hacoah (and the Revisionists in general) was deliberate confrontation.⁷⁸

There were other reasons why right-wing Zionist groups served to sow discord. For example, Iahinsohn angered the Jewish boycott committee in January 1934 when he wrote to the general committee in Warsaw to complain about the ineffectiveness of the Bessarabian boycott and asked them to send more committed Zionists.⁷⁹ More seriously, the Jewish National Fund consistently ran fundraising events, not only for emigration but also for Jewish institutions in Eretz Israel, including for self-defense forces. During fundraising in the autumn of 1933, several fights erupted between Chişinău Jews and the right-wing Zionist youth group Brit-Trumpeldor,

⁷⁶ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 729.

⁷⁷ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 629.

⁷⁸ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 640.

⁷⁹ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 661.

which by all accounts attempted to force some Jews storekeepers to give money for the formation of a Jewish gendarme battalion in Palestine.⁸⁰ This occurred also in Cetatea Alba (Akkerman) in the Bessarabian south, where older Jews felt particularly vulnerable before local anti-Semites and were extremely angered by the arrival of the uniformed Jewish group.⁸¹

The complex kaleidoscope of Zionist political perspectives was reflected in myriad Zionist papers, almost entirely in Yiddish at first but increasingly also in Hebrew, which began publication in the early interwar years as a reflection of the new youthful point of view. These usually closed down after a few months or a year or two at best, with the notable exception of Michael Landau's *Unzer Tsayt*.⁸² Zionist dailies not only informed their readers about local Jewish events, they in fact focused on international affairs: negotiations in London concerning Eretz Israel, circumstances in Palestine, Zionist conferences across Europe and their interpretation, thereby indoctrinating its readers with a powerfully Zionist outlook. The staff of *Der Yid*, for example, not only criticized the British government for not permitting enough Jews into Palestine, but also for forcing Jews there to learn English ("after all the Arabs don't have to learn English"). They criticized Talmud Torahs for expecting Jewish refugee children from Ukraine to learn in Yiddish ("some jargon").⁸³ Many of the Zionist youth groups put out their own papers, such as *Unzer Veg* (Our Path) published by the Zionist Student Society and *Erd und Arbet* (Land and Labor) published by Zeiri-Zion.

Despite the penchant of the Revisionists to make the news, the Zionist left was far more popular with Jewish young people in interwar Bessarabia as a whole. In most towns of the

⁸⁰ Named after Joseph Trumpeldor, a Jewish soldier from Britain who died in 1920 in combat against Arabs in Palestine.

⁸¹ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 656, 657.

⁸² Most have been lost. The holdings of the regional archives in Chişinău were largely destroyed; not all of those published (many were published in secret) made it to central holdings in Bucharest.

⁸³ *Der Yid*, #94, March 24, 1920.

Bessarabian north especially, left-leaning groups comprised of Zeiri-Zion, Gordonia, and Hehalutz very often between 50% and 70% of total Zionist youth movement strength.⁸⁴ The appeal of the left was strong for numerous reasons, but in all respects closely tied to local circumstances of Romanian Bessarabia and the Dniester borderland. As part of their imagined role as saviors and regenerators of the Jewish community, young Zionists on the left understood their role as not only fighting for Jewish emigration and standing up against the anti-Semites, but also in helping the Jewish poor and suffering, who were not in short supply in 1930s Bessarabia. Zeiri-Zion members were constantly working with Jewish communal organizations like Ezras-Hoelim, Malbish-Aranim and OZE to help the poor, especially children.⁸⁵ This was an important part of the imagined socialist utopia for members of Gordonia, for example. It is the duty of the men in the family to take care of the women and children; the leftist Zionist youth were performing their imagined masculinity.

In fact, the membership numbers indicate that the strength of the Zionist left and right was increasing at the expense of the middle, which in the face of tremendous challenges must have lost some of Zionism's romantic appeal to the more radical interpretations. It was also a reflection of the youth rebellion against the older generation, as the centrist *Algemeine Zionists* was composed much more of older people focused on following world affairs and diplomatic efforts to create a Jewish homeland, but much less liable to partake in radical action or violence.⁸⁶ They championed the Jewish National Party and remained committed to pushing forth a pro-Jewish agenda through democratic politics, even though most understood the serious anti-democratic problems plaguing Romanian local and national politics. By way of comparison,

⁸⁴ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 822-24, 825-30. Because there are few if any records left of the Zionist groups' membership, police surveillance proved useful in this respect.

⁸⁵ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 846, 856, 863.

⁸⁶ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 942.

withdrawal from the political arena was an important indication of the growing radicalization of the Zionist youth. By 1933, both the left and the right had given up hope in democracy in Romania. The position of Zeiri-Zion on the 1933 Parliamentary elections were well known by Bessarabian Jewish youth: there is no need to take part because none of the parties represent the interests of Jewish workers.⁸⁷ Underground sections of Paolei-Tsiyon became much more active after the elections despite the constant threat of arrest and torture in order to push for increased collections across Bessarabia for the Jewish National Fund. Together with Zeiri-Zion and two other socialist-Zionist groups, *Anaga Gilith* and *Freiheit*, they worked to organize a “workers’ Zion.”⁸⁸ Just as was visible in other segments of Jewish life, the rapid intensification of antisemitism and marginalization of Jews politically and socially after 1933 led to some unification among Zionist youth groups, most notably on the left. As circumstances grew worse, Zionist youth on the left and right became more committed to establishing Palestine and getting there by any means necessary.

Nevertheless, radicalization was not only happening with Zionist youth groups. By the late 1920s, the growth of Zionist sympathies in the Bessarabian Jewish public had grown sufficiently to permit a rapid growth of Zionist political and social organizations beyond the youth movement that in many cases ran parallel with and sometimes even competed with the older, traditional Jewish communal institutions. Particularly in Bălți in the north, which was something of a Zionist heartland in interwar Bessarabia, many Jewish organizations and interests began leaning in an increasingly Zionist direction. A Zionist women’s organization was begun in 1928 led by wives of the most wealthy and influential Jewish men in Chișinău. By 1931 the group had grown to over 200 members and was very active in fundraising for Palestine and in

⁸⁷ *Erd und Arbet*, December 17, 1933.

⁸⁸ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3436, l. 73-75.

the local ORT, which ran a school for professional training for Jewish adults.⁸⁹ This group was soon followed by the opening of several chapters of WIZO, the international Zionist Women's movement, and Veref, the women's Zionist-Revisionist organization.⁹⁰

ORT had existed in Tsarist Russia and focused on developing agricultural knowledge and training in industry and crafts as a means of economic amelioration, as well as modernization and social engineering. This was of course directed toward improving Jewish life in Russia, one of the principle ideals of the society's Jewish elite who founded it in St. Petersburg after 1881.⁹¹ In the 1930s when circumstances in Bessarabia grew dire, many chapters of ORT across the region began focusing more on training for settlement.⁹² This took place from above in terms of the political direction of the ORT leaders in Bessarabia, and from below, in terms of the greatly increased strength of Zionism among young people that turned to ORT for vocational training. By 1931, for example, most ORT chapters were already working closely with Hehalutz groups to combine spiritual positivism geared toward settlement with physical exertion and professional training.⁹³

In years before, the modern Jewish health organization OZE, which cared for the needs of the poor and especially children, came into competition with the traditional philanthropic societies like *Ezras-Ainim* (Society for Poor Jews) and *Bicur-Hoelim* (Society for Sick Jews). In 1927, an additional benevolent society was founded with Zionist federation money that sought

⁸⁹ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 267.

⁹⁰ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 942.

⁹¹ For the classic study of the role of the St. Petersburg intelligentsia in efforts at Jewish modernization, see Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917* (Cambridge, 1981); for a more recent and less Zionist perspective, see Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 2002).

⁹² ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 263. ORT continued until 1933 to be funded from ORT headquarters in Berlin as well as from Agro-Joint in New York. Siguranța agents knew that Agro-Joint was also very important for funding Jewish resettlement efforts in Soviet Ukraine, and many assumed that all these organizations were thus communist. Some even called the settlements in the Crimea, because of their concentration, the "Jewish republic." For more on Agro-Joint see Jonathan Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land*.

⁹³ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 265.

not only to provide food and medicine to poor Jews and their children, but also to instruct them in the development of Jewish national culture and in the virtues of sports and physical activity.⁹⁴ Increasingly, Zionist principles of social engineering, which were heavily laden with European gender coding of modern values, penetrated into wider Jewish culture in this extremely difficult, tense and frightening environment. These principles would allow for the production of better Jews—stronger, more physical, athletic and proud—which would make them more capable of confronting and triumphing against the anti-Semites.

Autonomism/Territorialism/Yiddishism

Even as Zionism gained strength throughout the interwar years, it was not the only alternative dynamic enough to interest young Jews. The project of the Yiddish Cultural League, the institution in interwar Bessarabia most clearly championing the political ideal of Diaspora cultural autonomy and Jewish cultural revival in Yiddish, was brought to life locally mostly by Jewish teachers, many of them having been active members of the Bund before the take over of Bessarabia by Romania.⁹⁵ This organization, formally established by Gherș Gelișenschi, spread rapidly across all of Jewish Bessarabia, becoming an important organization for the collection, proliferation and preservation of Yiddish culture. Police records indicate that by 1930, the Yiddish Cultural League (YCL) had 22 local chapters outside Chișinău focused on strengthening Jewish culture in Bessarabia rather than looking toward Palestine as homeland and solution to Jewish problems. The YCL serves as strong evidence that many Jews believed that their identity was rooted to their place of residence; enough to make them want to fight to preserve a Jewish

⁹⁴ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 98.

⁹⁵ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 31-45.

future there.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the YCL was subject to the same fate as its founder; suspicion of communist and anti-Romanian sympathies leading to the eventual closing of almost all its chapters by 1937. As in the case of Zionism, the Romanian government was not directly opposed to Jewish culture or religion, but its representatives in the Siguranța increasingly viewed Jewish culture and religion as political, which carried with it always the suspicion of communism.

Most YCL members had a strong connection to Yiddish culture as a regenerative force for the Jewish people as well as a tradition of left-wing political leanings. YCL leaders were by no means anti-Zionist, and in fact Zionism increasingly played a greater role in the organization as circumstances in Bessarabia grew worse in the 1930s. These leaders were, however, committed to the idea that Jews must not seek salvation through emigration to Eretz Israel only; rather, they should maintain cultural autonomy and work to preserve Jewish tradition in the lands where their ancestors had lived for centuries. Their ideology was informed by many Jewish thinkers whose ideas, as well as the socio-economic conditions of the Jews in the Russian Pale, had formed the basis of the Bundist movement.⁹⁷ Perhaps the best known Jewish historians of the time, Simon Dubnow, explicitly denied the need for a people to have their own land to be considered a “normal” nation. Dubnow argued that the Jews represented a nation on a higher plane than the European nations, precisely because they had survived as a distinct people spiritually, without land. Dubnow maintained that Zionism, while a useful idea, could not be taken as the only or indeed, even as a realistic solution to the Jewish problem in its entirety, since the more than five million Jews in the Pale during his day could not simply all emigrate to

⁹⁶ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 291.

⁹⁷ On this question see Ezra Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale*.

Palestine. Dubnow continued to favor a notion of Jewish cultural autonomy within Russia, and YCL leaders looked to implement the same principles in Bessarabia.⁹⁸

Yet the autonomists understood the Jewish condition to be in a state of crisis as well and sought to infuse restorative strength into Jewish identity also. Jewish national identity could survive in the Diaspora if it was sufficiently infused, indeed regenerated, with Yiddish secular culture. In fact, the programs of the various YCL chapters across Bessarabia, especially its cultural activities for Jewish youth, show a consistent and close relationship with Zionists. As socio-economic conditions worsened in the 1930s, however, the level of emotion in debates escalated and YCL meetings were often marred by arguments between autonomists, socialists and Zionists that sometimes led to fist fights. The YCL remained divided between the pro-Hebrew proponents of Zionism and the pro-Yiddish proponents of cultural autonomy and communism, with the pro-Yiddish Zionists in the middle.⁹⁹

The YCL was registered with the new Romanian authorities on September 19, 1919. According to its statute from 1920, the Yiddish Cultural League sought to develop and spread Jewish culture through art, theater, and Jewish schools both for children and adults throughout Bessarabia from its center in Chişinău. It had four separate sections; literature, music, theater, and pedagogy, each with its own sectional office that worked under the general direction of the local branch's central commission.¹⁰⁰ In interwar Bessarabia, the YCL became particularly known for its libraries, which rapidly spread to most significant Jewish communities in the region. The YCL funded these libraries in part through monthly membership dues and annual

⁹⁸ For a summary of Dubnow's ideas see Simon Dubnow, *Nationalism and History: Essays on Old and New Judaism*, Koppel S. Pinson, editor (New York, 1970); for a history of autonomism as an alternative to Zionism for Jews in revolutionary Russia, see Simon Rabinovitch, *Alternative to Zion: The Jewish Autonomist Movement in Late Imperial and Revolutionary Russia*, PhD dissertation (Brandeis University, 2007).

⁹⁹ Arkadii Mazur, *Stranitsy Istorii Sorokskih Evreev* (Chişinău, 1999), 21-22. Mazur details one such incident that took place at the Soroca YCL chapter that he attended.

¹⁰⁰ From the official charter of the Jewish Cultural League submitted to the Lapusna Tribunal on September 29, 1919: ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 67.

charges paid by library visitors, but mostly through communal support and fundraisers and donations, although the central branch in Chişinău also received some support from the municipal government between 1928 and 1936 when the Jewish community was legally recognized and became entitled to state subsidies as a recognized faith under the Law of Cults.¹⁰¹ Most of the visitors to the library were poor Jews, and the price for entrance, at 5 lei per month, was cheap, although it was more for the right to check out books.¹⁰² Its collections of Yiddish-language volumes was an important source for pedagogy at Yiddish language schools as well, and many Jewish primary schools relied on the YCL libraries as book repositories for use in the classroom.¹⁰³ Many of the books at YCL libraries were acquired from Yiddish cultural centers like Cernauţi, Warsaw, and New York, and often came through cooperation with other Jewish associations with broader organizational reach, such as the pro-Hebrew Tarbut.¹⁰⁴

YCL libraries functioned as important and multi-purpose centers of Jewish culture in the interwar period, providing not only a source of books, but literary clubs for discussion of Jewish authors, theatrical performances and debates on Jewish issues and political questions, all in Yiddish. They also doubled as the post-system in many small towns, especially in the north of Bessarabia where certain shtetls were almost entirely Jewish.¹⁰⁵ With the presence of a strong network of Tarbut private schools in Hebrew, the YCL became the proponent of Jewish education and culture in Yiddish. In 1922, the YCL was involved in fully or partly supporting a Yiddish language school network that had 52 primary schools, from which 38 at that time

¹⁰¹ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3406, l. 248-285, the Siguranţa list of Bessarabian Jewish organizations from November 25, 1932. In 1932, the state subsidy to the YCL was an annual amount of 15,000 lei (about \$80), although this amount would go down substantially and disappear completely by 1936.

¹⁰² ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 83.

¹⁰³ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 74.

¹⁰⁴ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 78, indicates some books in Hebrew received from Tarbut in Warsaw that were sold to the YCL at a significant discount.

¹⁰⁵ Kopansky, *Blagatvoritelnye Organizatsii Evreiev*, 13.

received state subsidies, altogether serving 6000 children.¹⁰⁶ Over the interwar years, hundreds of plays in Yiddish were presented on premises and/or under organizational auspices of YCL chapters.

While a central branch of the organization was founded in Chişinău in 1919, across Bessarabian Jewish communities the YCL represented the organic incorporation of already existing local Yiddish cultural institutions. For example, A Jewish library existed in Soroca since the middle of the 19th century, around which toward the end of the 1800s was organized a Yiddish literary organization called “Yiddishe Kunst.” In the early 1920s its functions were expanded and it was renamed the Yiddish Cultural League when it joined the organization founded by Gelişenschi. This branch of the YCL was built around this strong Jewish library, with religious books in Hebrew, various collections in Yiddish, as well as many books and journals in Russian, including Marxist literature. In the 1930s, the library acquired a growing collection of Zionist literature, and served not only as a place for reading, but also as a site for debates over materials read, especially over questions concerning Jewish nationalism and problems of Jewish life in Romania and Eastern Europe more broadly. Discussions about Jewish life in the Soviet Union also took place and were closely observed whenever possible. Elsewhere in the Soroca judeţ Jewish libraries and cultural centers existed in Vertizheni, Zguritsa, and some other shtetls.¹⁰⁷

The YCL received funds from the Jewish communal administration. Most of its members were artisans, low ranked civil servants, store workers and petty merchants. There was also a tiny minority of wage workers (from oil grinders, millers, and small factories for soap), since manufacturing in Bessarabia was in its infancy and employed very few people. Often

¹⁰⁶ Iancu, *Evreii Din România*, 126.

¹⁰⁷ Mazur, *Stranitsy Istorii*, 18.

reading circles would be organized on Saturday after the Sabbath, usually over some new written work. At the Soroca YCL, Yiddish literary classics were very popular topics for discussion, including the works of Sholem Aleichem, Mendeleyev Sforim, Yehuda Leib Peretz, and political leftist-radical works. Works by local writers, although of no great fame, were also performed. Most have not survived. Zionist youth groups such as Maccabee also worked with the YCL cultural centers. The YCL organized performances of Yiddish theater and solo artists, artistic exhibitions, youth athletic competitions, balls, fundraising evenings, parties and lotteries.

One of the central aims of the YCL was to ensure the education of the youth in a secular-national Diaspora direction, and in interwar Bessarabia the YCL was instrumental in maintaining a high level of education among the Jewish population compared to that of other ethnic groups, particularly in rural areas where state schools were only beginning to make inroads during these years and where a significant Jewish population remained.¹⁰⁸ Among the more famous Jewish personalities that performed in Sorocca as well as other towns, especially Chişinău, were Sidi Thal, Djini Zlatoi, and Simona Liebovich. One of Sidi Thal's best known works was called *Der Geiler Sutn* (The Yellow Shade), which was very successful in Bessarabia. There were also lectures from local and visiting Jewish communal leaders and personalities on various topics, mostly but not exclusively on Jewish life.¹⁰⁹ After 1936, the YCL was forced into inactivity, but some of its library continued to function until 1940, when the Soviet regime dismantled them and either destroyed or handed out the collections to other libraries.

Leaders of the Bessarabian autonomist movement were cultural leaders: writers, poets, publishers, and teachers. An illustrative example of a highly active interwar Yiddishist from

¹⁰⁸ Mazur, *Stranitsy Istorii*, 20-21. Mazur argues that the YCL was not a political organization, and as a result the Romanian government did not really interfere in its operation. While this may have been more true in Soroca than in Chişinău or Bălţi, the operation of the YCL in Bessarabia was in principle problematic due to interference of the Siguranţa, as this work will show.

¹⁰⁹ Mazur, *Stranitsy Istorii*, 19.

Bessarabia is Leizer Fishman, the president of the Soroca YCL. Fishman was a Yiddish teacher in the Soroca Talmud-Torah and also wrote for local Yiddish journals; in 1932-33, he edited a monthly journal called *Vintn* (Winds). He managed to publish several issues of the journal when he was then arrested by the Siguranța and jailed for a few months; after his release he was forbidden to publish anything else. Fishman also directed the Soroca Jewish theater group, which was known and respected not only in Bessarabia. Yiddish troupes under his direction, mostly Zionist youth, performed plays based on the stories of Sholem Aleichem, I.L. Peretz, Avram Goldfadn and others. Fishman was also involved in the local Jewish music scene, but died at the age of 30 from the flu.¹¹⁰ Another and better known example is Zelik Berdichever (Figure 13 below), who was born and lived in Bălți, where he was active in organizing cultural events and performances. Many of his songs and stories were used at gatherings of parents and children at the YCL library in Bălți throughout the 1930s. Although he died at the age of 34 in 1937, Bessarabian Jews still remember many of the children's songs that he wrote in Yiddish.¹¹¹

Figure 13: Zelik Berdichever, circa 1930, photo from *Letiashchie Teni*.



¹¹⁰ Mazur, *Stranitsy Istorii*, 22.

¹¹¹ *Letiashchie Teni: stikhi evreiskikh poetov Bessarabii v perevode s idish*, Rudolph Olshansky, trans. (Chisinau, 2000).

Despite the standard assumptions of the Bessarabian Siguranța that the YCL was part of the Bund or even an agent of Bolshevism, the organization was in fact a site for debate about Jewish culture of all types. The ongoing argument over Hebrew versus Yiddish among the YCL members attests not only to the strength of Jewish culture in Bessarabia in Hebrew, but also to the mixing of national and socialist ideologies¹¹² and the persistence of religious concerns among members that saw the organization as transcending Bundism to become a champion of Yiddishism and Jewish culture in general, as was the primary aim of the organization's founders.¹¹³ For example, at a January 27, 1920 meeting of the YCL in Chișinău, local members decided to conduct the meeting in Hebrew, and chose to discuss parables from the Talmud focused on the lack of necessity for Jews to unite into a nation, focusing rather on communal functioning along Talmudist principles in the Diaspora.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, members of the YCL were never completely removed from Zionist ideology, and over the course of the interwar years many plays, meetings, and lectures organized by the group were increasingly inspired by Zionist ideology. For example, in October 1926, Jewish teacher and locally well-known Zionist Iosif Dubovis gave a series of lectures at the Chișinău YCL center; on October 24, 1934, the YCL chapter in Cetatea Alba invited Jewish writer L. Malakh, who had recently been to Palestine, to speak of his impressions; and in October 1935 the YCL chapter in Bălți organized a youth conference with assistance from the local left-wing Zionist organization "Dror."¹¹⁵

¹¹² Iancu, *Evreii Din România*, 78.

¹¹³ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 55; upon his first arrest by the Siguranța in Cernauți on January 25, 1921, Gelișenschi insisted to the police that he was never linked with political parties and that he had always been attracted to cultural things; he had always been a lover of the Jewish "jargon" and saw it as the mother tongue of the Jewish people. He wanted all Jewish schools to teach in Yiddish. As he was an active Bundist, which he would admit to the police only a month later in Chișinău, part of his statement was false, but he was being honest about his love for Yiddish.

¹¹⁴ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 8.

¹¹⁵ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3354, l. 24-27, 343, 401.

Still, leftist ideology remained a strong interest of the YCL leaders, as was true for Bessarabian Jewry in general, and throughout the interwar period, YCL members participated in and organized demonstrations and conferences in support of the Jewish worker's movement. For example, on February 14, 1920, about 500 working class Jews from Chişinău attended a protest meeting held in the Mayoralty Hall to speak against the exploitation of the working class by the bourgeoisie, and in 1924, several members of this organization in Chişinău participated in the May Day demonstrations organized that day and were arrested for "pro-Bolshevism."¹¹⁶ The YCL became an important voice not only for the underground Bundists with links to parent institutions in Bukovina, but also for communists of various persuasions that had been active in the Russian revolutionary movement.¹¹⁷ It was not, however, absent from calls for Jewish national autonomy within Romania of the sort granted to Hungarians and Germans but never extended to the Jews.¹¹⁸

The YCL became involved with Jewish political struggles for the Jewish national cause when leaders felt necessary. During the course of 1925, all Jewish groups including the YCL protested and demonstrated against the private education law of Education Minister Angelescu, which initially deprived the Jews of a right to use their mother tongue for instruction in their own private schools by proposing that unlike the other minorities, the mother tongue of the Jews was Romanian.¹¹⁹ Gelişenschi, having returned from the United States in November 1925 after a fund-raising trip for Yiddish schools, immediately began working on an official protest to the Romanian government against Angelescu's private education law, and sent copies of the protest

¹¹⁶ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 14; d. 3406, l. 248-285.

¹¹⁷ Romanian police documents often mention the presence of well-known communists at the functions of the organization, such as for example the presence of recognized underground activists at JCL meetings in Chisinau in February 1920 and January 1921, ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3138, l. 20, 40.

¹¹⁸ Schaary, David, "The Jewish Policy in Great Romania between the Two World Wars," 145.

¹¹⁹ Iancu, *Evreii Din România*, p. 127-134.

to American and other foreign colleagues.¹²⁰ The Bund in Cernauți, led by Dr. Pistiner, sent circulars to underground Bundists in Bessarabia and to YCL chapters across the region protesting the Angelescu law and calling for all Jews to fight for their national autonomy.¹²¹

At the outset of the interwar period, the YCL in Bessarabia was focused on Yiddish culture and leftist political aspirations. Yet, as challenges to the Jewish community, and particularly to Jewish education, arose in Greater Romania, the organization moved closer the ideology of Jewish national autonomy that remained so strong in the interwar Bund in Poland and Lithuania. As fascism arose in Germany and its support in Romania began to be felt, the movement toward Zionism within the YCL was clear, as seen by the increasing number of Zionist speakers, discussions and literary evenings. Indeed, this movement toward calls for national autonomy can be seen in Bessarabian Jewry as a whole, of which YCL leaders and participants' aspirations for Yiddish cultural autonomy was a part.

Underground Communism in Bessarabia

Another very important expression of Jewish collective desire for the future, and the only one that really mattered as far as Siguranța agents were concerned, was communism. Despite the extremely small size of the illegal Bessarabian communist movement as a whole and of Jewish participation in it, especially when compared to cultural, religious or nationalist movements, communism, or more exactly Romanian leaders' perception of communism as a Jewish disease, was very important to understanding the eventual fate of the province's Jews. Jews had dominated the illegal communist movement in Bessarabia during the late Russian Empire. Like elsewhere in the Pale of Settlement, the legacy of Jewish revolutionary involvement against

¹²⁰ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, l. 94.

¹²¹ ANRM f. 680, op. 1, d. 3168, ll. 101-102.

Russian autocracy is well documented there. The province was fertile soil for revolutionary activity: it was far from the imperial center and a destination for many political exiles, factors that persuaded Lenin to begin publication of the underground newsletter *Iskra* (The Spark) in Kishinev in 1903. Most of the printers who worked on this newsletter were Jews.¹²² Jews were more literate and urban than their Orthodox neighbors and leaned toward leftist ideologies as a means of achieving freedom from Tsarist oppression. The de facto persistence of inequality in Romanian Bessarabia convinced many such activists that their cause must continue, with only the ruling regime having changed. Many Jewish youth, deprived of economic and social opportunity in the Pale, turned to revolutionary agitation.¹²³

Because communism was forced underground in Romania as a whole in 1924, but in Bessarabia specifically as early as November 1918, Bucharest inadvertently directed the local communist movement into the arms of the Soviet-controlled Comintern even as it made communist activity extremely dangerous and throughout the interwar years attractive only to the desperately destitute or the ideologically militant.¹²⁴ Jews had a monopoly on neither of these categories, and there were plenty of non-Jews in the communist movement across the whole of Romania. Classified party statistics compiled by Michael Shafir show that across Romania in 1933, 26.5% of communists were Hungarian and 22.6% were ethnic Romanians; Jews were third

¹²² Michael Bruchis, "The Jews in the Revolutionary Underground of Bessarabia and their Fate after Its Annexation by the Soviet Union," in *Nations—Nationalities—People: A Study of the Nationalities Policy of the Communist Party in Soviet Moldavia* (Boulder, 1984), 143.

¹²³ The subject of pre-revolutionary political movements among the Jews in the Pale of Settlement, understood as the rise of modern Jewish politics in Russia, has until recently received more attention from scholars than any other issue in Russian Jewish history. The works addressing the ideas and histories of Jewish parties and ideologies are numerous, some of the best include: Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*; Ezra Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale*; Hans Rogger, *Jewish Policies and Right-Wing Politics in Imperial Russia*; and the edited work by Zvi Gitelman cited above, *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics*.

¹²⁴ Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien*, 104.

with 18% of party membership.¹²⁵ In a country that was 4.2% Jewish this was still a high number, and it was even higher in Bessarabia, but communism could not be rightly called an entirely Jewish movement.¹²⁶ Yet, with relatively few literate, educated ethnic Moldovans in Bessarabian urban centers by 1918, Moldovans were tremendously under-represented in the communist movement. Romanian politicians constructed a national explanation for this: because they were in fact Romanian, Romanian-speaking Bessarabians would not partake in a movement that by Bucharest's definition undermined the sovereignty of their motherland.

Romanian nation-building propaganda capitalized on this fact: the idea that communism was imported into Romania by foreigners was accepted dogma among government and intellectual circles in the interwar period. There were many examples of this thinking; one such appeared as an interview with nationally-renown poet and short-term Prime Minister Octavian Goga in an article in the democratic Bucharest newspaper *Dimineața*.¹²⁷ In discussing the threat of Bolshevism from Soviet Russia, Goga argued that communism was completely incompatible with the Romanian nation culturally, economically, politically, and socially, not least of all because the Romanians already fought against Bolsheviks in 1918, and because they have an agrarian economy. The Romanian people had no attraction whatsoever to communism, he argued; they have other concerns. Thus, "when we talk about the spread of communism in Romania, we have to look to those that are foreign in this country and have no sympathy for the Romanian situation, a situation of working farmers and petty traders."¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Michael Shafir, *Romania Politics, Economics and Society: Political Stagnation and Stimulated Change* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1985), 25, as cited by Umut Korkut, "Nationalism versus Internationalism: The Roles of Political and Cultural Elites in Interwar and Communist Romania," *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 34, No. 2, 140; and Robert Levy, *Ana Pauker*, 5.

¹²⁶ See Michael Bruchis for an example of someone who does this, "The Jews in the Revolutionary Underground." Bruchis treats Jewish communist participation as a consciously pro-Soviet enterprise, arguing that it was a serious mistake that undermined Jews in Romanian society.

¹²⁷ *Dimineața*, January 15, 1927.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

Soviet policies did nothing to assuage the Romanian perception that communism was foreign to the Romanian character and in fact anti-Romanian. Unlike in Bessarabia, where ethnic minorities dominated the communist movement because the Moldovan population was overwhelmingly rural and uneducated, in the Old Kingdom there were many ethnic Romanians that strongly supported socialism and communism. After the Russian Revolution, however, they had to deal with a direct challenge to their national sentiment as Romanians from world communism led by Moscow—the Soviet Union demanded the return of Bessarabia and Romanian communists were expected to hold the party line. This took its toll: at the Third Congress of the Comintern that took place in Moscow in June-July 1921, many of the representatives from Romania that remained loyal to Moscow were Bessarabian Communists, and many of these were Jews.¹²⁹ Two years later, at the Sixth Conference of the Balkan Communist Federation held in Moscow in September 1923, the Romanian Communist Party further isolated itself from Romanian sentiment by accepting the Comintern position on the national question in Romania: the Romanian nation was not, as was proclaimed by the political and most of the intellectual establishment, the natural consolidation of the Romanian people into their own unitary, national state, but was rather the product of imperialist-capitalist policies in the aftermath of WWI. Bessarabian communists became increasingly crucial to the Romanian interwar communist movement in general, transferring their pre-1917 anti-Tsarist revolutionary activity toward the interwar Romanian government.¹³⁰ By 1924, Romanian communists had split over Bessarabia and the Communist Party was legally banned in Romania. Moscow's demand for ideological orthodoxy was made more pronounced with Stalin's eventual triumph of "socialism in one country:" by carefully constructing the perception of the USSR as besieged by

¹²⁹ Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons: A History of Romanian Communism* (Berkeley, 2003), 48.

¹³⁰ ANRM, f. 680, op. 1, d. 3138, l. 20, 40.

capitalism, it became even more necessary for communists abroad to strictly support the interests of the communist “homeland” even if they went against their own national interests.¹³¹ As such, Romanian communists went against Romanian national sentiment and undermined their own political base: those educated enough to make useful cadres. They opened themselves to criticism of being anti-Romanian. The movement then more readily attracted those that had less connection to the Romanian national idea, such as Jews, Russians, Hungarians and Ukrainians.¹³²

Political developments in interwar Romania served to strengthen the real and alleged connection between Jews and communism. Civic and political rights, while guaranteed in the minorities’ protection treaties that the Romanian government signed, remained a problem as many Jews in the annexed territories lost their citizenship in 1924 when their status became contingent upon individual petition with the Mârzescu Law.¹³³ This petition process was made complicated, difficult, and riddled with bureaucratic pitfalls that required bribery to settle issues, which meant that the poor were unlikely to receive citizenship.¹³⁴ With additional limiting provisions, this law and other codes prevented a significant percentage of Jews from the annexed territories of having a political voice. Lack of political rights, coupled with corruption and police bias, added to the general popular perception of alienation and hopelessness among Jews, which fueled Jewish national movements primarily, but also Jewish participation in the communist movement. For Bucharest, there were also geopolitical concerns that provoked state and police bias: there was a need to show that communism was an imported rather than a homegrown movement. If it became known that ‘Bessarabian Romanians’ were engaged in anti-national

¹³¹ Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons*, 52.

¹³² Ironically, however, the anti-Soviet dissent among the Romanians communists was led by Constantine Dobrugeanu-Gherea, the “father of Romanian socialism,” born Solomon Katz in Tsarist Ukraine near Dnipropetrovsk.

¹³³ Iancu, *Evreii Din România*, p. 19.

¹³⁴ See the Romanian legal statute governing interwar Jewish citizenship: *Statul Evreilor din Romania: Legislația Dela 1918-1941; Expuneri de Motive; Deciziuni Ministeriale*. V. Pantelimonescu, compiler (Bucharest, 1941).

activities, Bucharest leaders feared there might be greater international questioning of Romanian legitimacy in Bessarabia, particularly sensitive given the virulent Soviet opposition.¹³⁵

Communism as a Soviet-sponsored and directed import silenced the validity of communism as resistance to the abuses of the Romanian government; and a tradition of effectively scapegoating foreigners for internal problems there was already in place in the Old Kingdom.¹³⁶ The interwar Romanian national narrative that Bessarabians were ethnic Romanians was consistently reflected in state statistics, especially the 1930 census, and in police actions. Soviet propaganda, on the other hand, strove to play down Jewish involvement in communism, desiring instead to show that Moldovan common people desired Soviet power over Romanian bourgeois exploitation.¹³⁷

Police bias was built on and compounded by such ethnically constructed categories of Romanians and foreigners: while arrests were typical occurrences for all communist members, treatment was not equal across ethnic lines. Generally, the arrested were released fairly soon, after questioning and some beatings; the issue was usually decided without court proceedings but with bribes. The attitude toward the Jewish communists was harsher than toward the others, however, especially the Moldovans, who were typically released with a slap on the wrist. A police report from October 9, 1929 noted that a group of Moldovans arrested on September 22 in the town of Vesterniceni were immediately freed, only to be caught spreading communist manifestos on the streets again on September 23. The report betrays considerable frustration on the part of Siguranța officials with these people since they are “ethnic Romanians.” They had no set policy in such cases, apparently, since repression is meant for the foreign communists.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ On political insecurity in Greater Romania see Livezeanu’s introduction to *Cultural Politics*, pp. 1-25.

¹³⁶ For example, the leaders of the Liberal Party reacted to the peasant revolt of 1907 by blaming foreign revolutionaries, especially from Russia; see Henry L. Roberts, *Rumania: Political Problems of an Agrarian State*, 4. There was also significant initial reaction against the Jews in this respect.

¹³⁷ Bruchis, “Jews in the Revolutionary Underground,” 172.

¹³⁸ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 674, l. 65.

Jews tended to get longer prison sentences when convicted, and often had to fight to prove their innocence against heavy institutional and police bias. Such was the fate of Slioma Wexler and Berl Dragabetsky, who on July 8, 1932 were sentenced to Doftana prison for an indefinite sentence for “subverting the public interest by spreading communist propaganda and supporting the activities of the organization MOPR, which was known to have international communist interests and to work against the security of the Romanian nation.” Wexler and Dragabetsky were captured during a Siguranța anti-communist campaign in Cetatea Alba (Akkerman) during the first half of 1932. Police repression often functioned in waves, since consistent pressure could not be maintained at high intensity.¹³⁹

Figure 14: Protesting workers of obviously strong leftist leanings in Bălți, December 12, 1934: the sign on the left reads “We demand equality for railroad workers;” the one the right “Down with Fascism.” Photo from ANRM photograph collection, #42722.



¹³⁹ AMRN f. 171, op. 8, d. 74, l. 4.

Figure 15: Jewish communists arrested for underground communist activity; a dubiously democratic trial would be followed by typically lengthy sentences in the Doftana penitentiary near Benderi, which specialized in “communists.” The photo on the left is Sarah Suhaia, a leading figure in the underground communist movement, accused of conspiratorial work and sentenced November 16, 1933 to 10 years at the central prison and 100,000 lei fine. ANRM photograph collection, #42026; #42022.



In his semi-biographical novel about the young Jews in the communist underground in interwar Bessarabia, Yechiel Schreibman recalls his arrest and captivity by the Siguranța for 18 days.¹⁴⁰ Schreibman was seriously tortured to force him to give away some of his comrades in the underground movement. Most common were beatings, but also some electric shock torture was used. For the Siguranța, foreigners had corrupted the ethnic Moldovans toward communism—they needed to be punished while “ours” were just misguided and needed direction.¹⁴¹ Bravery for their cause in the face of the potential horrors they faced served as a powerful source of comradeship and zealotry, especially when martyrdom for fallen comrades was incorporated. The imagery of being at war, which many Bessarabian Jewish communists

¹⁴⁰ Yechiel Schreibman, *Semnadtsat'iletnie* (Kishinev, 1977). “Seventeen Year-Olds,” translation into Russian from Yiddish.

¹⁴¹ Kopansky interview, April 22, 2005.

maintained, and was understood as masculine like warfare itself is held as the business of men, even though women were also important revolutionaries.

Despite Romanian state bias about Jewish involvement with communism, Jews were not the only ones inclined toward the communist underground. As early as August 3, 1918, the Siguranța reported a disturbance at an Orthodox Church organized by opponents of Romanian rule in Bessarabia.¹⁴² Russians and Ukrainians were active in leftist movements, as was illustrated in the 1919 Hotin and 1924 Tatar Bunar uprisings, both of which were spearheaded by non-Jews. The latter, which was more serious and was brutally suppressed, was largely a reaction among ethnic Ukrainians, Russians and Bulgarians to the policy of the Romanian government to settle ethnic Moldovans in southeast Bessarabia to dilute the large non-Moldovan presence there, as well as anger over failed harvests and famine.¹⁴³

Nevertheless, Jews were an important presence in the communist movement in Bessarabia. For many young Jews that moved from Bessarabian shtetls into towns or cities for the first time, there was a pull toward underground communist organizations in part for economic reasons. Boris Gitsenshtein, who grew up in interwar Chișinău, remembers that Jewish kids from shtetls were very interested in getting a higher education and streamed into the main cities, especially Bucharest, but local centers as well, such as Chișinău. Here, things were difficult because a slowly growing economy and limits for university placement (*numerus clauses*) after 1922 made opportunities minimal. Many became attracted to the communist underground because at the very least there was the possibility of comrades and sustenance, because they found some support from the communist underground, although usually in contacts and knowledge rather

¹⁴² ANRM, f. 679, o. 1, d. 6, l. 38.

¹⁴³ Bruchis, "Jews in the Revolutionary Underground," 148, 162. Over 500 people were arrested at Tatar Bunar, some kept in prison through December of 1925.

than direct economic help.¹⁴⁴ There was not sufficient funding to support lower-rung party members, who had to work to support themselves and their conspiratorial activities, although for the higher ups in the organization, there was support.¹⁴⁵ Schreibman's roommate Yankl from Vad-Rashkov, with whom he arrived in Cernauți in 1930, worked 10 hours a day six days a week fixing watches, for which he was paid some 20 lei per day; the two of them paid a monthly rent of 200 lei for two cots in the corner of an apartment.¹⁴⁶ Sometimes the entire working-class party cell in Bessarabia or Romania would be composed of poor people.¹⁴⁷ In this way, Romanian limitations on Jewish university education and increasing antisemitism only strengthened the Jewish interest in communism.

Beyond any limited economic incentive, the underground movement was primarily attractive ideologically and culturally. Schreibman remembers putting together a play with teenage friends at the seminary he attended in Cernauți, where they performed a play from I.L. Peretz, "The Ancient Boy," and gave the proceeds they collected from local support and donations to the MOPR organization.¹⁴⁸ Jewish culture in Bessarabia and Bukovina was intricately intermixed with socialist dreams—Schreibman described the attraction for young Jewish men and women to the communist underground through the lens of romance. Communist conspiracy was a very attractive: it was a secretive thing to do and was combined, importantly, with a tight comradeship needed to overcome the harshness of life in the big city, especially for those who were outsiders to it. Schreibman's own romanticism increased when he began to see the sympathy for socialism among older, established people, such as his landlady, and even to some extent his seminary rabbi, who returned to him the leftist propaganda journal

¹⁴⁴ Interview, Boris Mihailovich Gitsenshtein, March 20, 2005.

¹⁴⁵ Interview, Yechiel Schreibman, February 27, 2005

¹⁴⁶ Schreibman, *Semnadtsat'iletnie*.

¹⁴⁷ Interview, Kopansky, April 28, 2005.

¹⁴⁸ This was the International Aid Organization for Revolutionary Fighters; Schreibman interview, 2/27/05.

Der Roite Schiller, (The Red Schoolboy—which circulated in Bessarabia and Bukovina) that Schreibman had been passing out to the other youth, only to tell him that this was not how propaganda was done.¹⁴⁹ Schreibman’s novels on his years as a communist youth, written in the Soviet Union after WWII, must be read with caution. Yet, strong sympathy for communism among Bessarabian Jewish intellectuals—such as Yiddish writers from the “Bessarabian Olympus” of Lipcani, expressed in their literary-political journal *Shoibn* (Windows), as well as the numerous cases of a pro-communist message extolled by Jewish teachers in mostly Yiddish but also Hebrew language schools—was clear and widespread.

As the early interwar years unfolded, Jewish involvement in the communist movement was thus an important narrative of resistance toward an ethnic Romanian state being imposed from Bucharest on the newly acquired territories. Nevertheless, communism also attracted Jews that were attracted to the Soviet promise of national equality and worked to create a Soviet Bessarabia. Many Jewish communists retreated from Bessarabia with Red Army detachments in 1918 and joined the civilian administration in Soviet Ukraine. Some went on to achieve high status as bureaucrats in the Odessa Gubernia and later in MASSR. Just as they were active in the MASSR party committees, Jews, many of them Bessarabian exiles, like Badeev, were active in the Soviet propaganda campaign in Bessarabia.¹⁵⁰ Michael Bruchis, who has closely tracked Jewish involvement in Bessarabian communism, maintains that Jewish communists not only led the movement; they essentially were the movement, as working class Jewish families from Bessarabian ghettos supplied not only the top layer leadership positions but also the street soldiers whose arrests were a daily news bulletin on Russian and Yiddish newspapers in interwar Chişinău.

¹⁴⁹ Schreibman, *Semnadtsat’iletnie*.

¹⁵⁰ Bruchis, “Jews in the Revolutionary Underground,” 149.

There are many examples of Jewish over-representation in the Bessarabian communist movement. The Soviet policy in Bessarabia was to directly foment a government overthrow through propaganda and agitation, a plan that failed through effective crushing of communist cells. There was something of a cat and mouse game throughout the interwar years between the underground press and the Siguranța. Underground papers *Bessarabskii Kommunist* (Bessarabian Communist) and later *Krasnyi Flag* (Red Flag) were published with small presses that were located in Jewish homes. Sometimes entire families were involved in the communist cause. Locations were discovered, for example, in May 1920, in February 1921, and again in June 1924—on all three occasions, the press had been secretly hidden in Jewish homes. Jews were instrumental not only in publishing in Chișinău and other Bessarabian towns, but as communications and instruction liaisons between Tiraspol and Chișinău, usually using the Orhei crossing of the Dniester River. Riva Grinshpun, who was one of the river crossers that carried literature across the Dniester, went to Moscow in 1920 for a six-month “party training course” and was returned to Bessarabia and promoted. In 1920 there was an intense crackdown on communist activity in Chișinău, so much so that the central base for Bessarabian underground activities was moved to Iași across the Prut and Bălți in northern Bessarabia. Many of the leading members arrested that year were Jews.¹⁵¹ This state of affairs continued throughout the interwar years: in 1935, a military court sentenced 10 communists for publishing illegal literature, of whom 9 were Jews.¹⁵²

The actual size of the underground movement is difficult to determine, although it was clearly a fraction of the size of Jewish national movements. Michael Bruchis estimates that there were some 800 communists in Bessarabia in 1919 prior to military crackdown; likely no more

¹⁵¹ Bruchis, “Jews in the Revolutionary Underground,” 175.

¹⁵² Bruchis, “Jews in the Revolutionary Underground,” 178.

than 320 in 1931 and still as few as 375 as late as 1940. Such estimates are likely too low, and in fact it is impossible to make an exact estimate because Bessarabian communists worked hard to maintain secrecy while attempting to publicly inflate their numbers.¹⁵³ Bruchis is not specific with his definition of a communist—likely these numbers represent the number of full-time revolutionaries, although this presupposes a much more numerous support structure of sympathizers. Both the Romanian and Soviet governments also attempted to show that this number was much greater than in reality; the latter to stake a claim about the strength of the movement and the harsh dictatorial rule of the “Romanian bourgeoisie” against local aspirations for worker equality, while the former to emphasize the danger of the communist threat to national security in order to justify policies that might be criticized as repressive.

Yet, despite the clear importance of Jews to the communist movement, it was not only tiny in actual political influence but clearly more of a menacing presence in the Romanian imagination than on the ground in Bessarabia. Sober reporting from the *Siguranța*, when it took place, point to this as well. On November 5, 1929 the Lapușna county police chief noted that the overwhelming majority of Jewish activism is in a cultural direction—especially among the Zionist youth. Jewish political activism takes place within general political groupings in the country and not outside them (like communism).¹⁵⁴ Despite such information circulating through the state’s own bureaucracy, Jews made too convenient and useful a scapegoat to seriously undertake amending public attitudes. A central aspect of Bucharest’s view was the national question—communism in Bessarabia was not accepted as a genuine workers’ movement aimed at alleviating genuinely abhorrent conditions and minority discrimination, but rather a

¹⁵³ Bruchis, “Jews in the Revolutionary Underground,” 145.

¹⁵⁴ ANRM, f. 679, op. 1, d. 674, l. 119. The chief also reported that the greatest problem with the Jews is their economic significance, since no commercial transaction can occur without their having a hand in it. Almost comically, he added that anti-Semitism does occur but is not a serious problem.

deliberate policy from Moscow to sever Bessarabia from the “motherland” and undermine Romanian “unity.”¹⁵⁵ In fact geopolitics was certainly an important aspect of the Soviet policy. Self-legitimizing ideology on both sides undermined the granting of any agency to local communists; Jews were caught in the middle of the struggle between Moscow and Bucharest.

Yet, the key to understanding Jewish motivations in participation in the underground communist movement was precisely lacking in historiographic and contemporary treatment. Bruchis, who deals specifically with the question of Jewish communism, sympathizes with the Romanian national argument, agreeing that Jewish involvement in communism undermined the Romanian nation-state and that Jews were misguided in placing their loyalty with Soviet interests. Yet Bruchis’s criticism, because it is built on the understanding that Bessarabian Jewish communists were actively and deliberately anti-Romanian, is problematic. Certainly for professional revolutionaries that led the cause, this is a questionable identity imposed by hindsight—Vladimir Tismaneanu notes that such Jews were in fact “supra-national,” true internationalists that did not subscribe to any nationality but sought to undermine nationality as a matter of principle. Their goals were loftier, aimed at not only solving the Jewish Question but indeed the problems of humanity; there could be no bother with undermining just the Romanian state or serving the interests of only the Jews. Their dream was also, like for the Zionists, focused on restoring human dignity to the downtrodden, and like the Zionist radicals they too believed the system was broken and beyond repair. Jews of this type were willing and ready to sever all ties with their Judaism in the name of their political and ideological ideals and desires, as Issac Deutscher put it, they were “non-Jewish Jews.” Tismaneanu succinctly explains why communism was appealing to Romanian Jews:

¹⁵⁵ Bruchis, “Jews in the Revolutionary Underground,” 146.

Dissatisfied with the status quo, disgusted with bourgeois values, victimized by discriminatory measures, and appalled by the rise of Nazism, they indulged in fantasies about a worldwide communist revolution that would create a climate conducive to what Marx had called the 'realization of the human essence' and thus excise the cancer of antisemitism. Their dream was to overcome their Jewishness, to be part of a universal movement whose aspirations and promises transcended national, religious, and racial boundaries. Their romanticized image of the Soviet Union functioned as compensation for their frustrations and humiliations.¹⁵⁶

Forced underground, Bessarabian communists would struggle to maintain their programs and recruit new members in the face of considerable danger from the Romanian Siguranța. In many of the very public trials that the Romanian government carried out against the communist underground, many and often most of those given severe sentences, especially death, were Jews: "the trial of the 108" in August 1919, 6 of the 19 convicted to death were Jews; "the case of the 48" in January-February 1921, most of those given death were Jews.¹⁵⁷ The Romanian Siguranța held an unparalleled reputation for brutality; its special prison for communist conspirators where many executions were conducted, called Doftana, was a place deeply feared by communists and recognized as one of the worst prisons in Europe.¹⁵⁸

Nevertheless, repression did not stop the communist movement. Cracking down on the Bund drove some proponents of national-cultural autonomy in Bessarabia away from the political and more into the cultural realm, such as the Yiddish Cultural League, and but forced many that would not leave politics into the communist underground movement—some Jews on the left in Bessarabia were in fact pushed toward communism by Romanian policies. Furthermore, by forcing communism in the region underground, the Romanian government directly contributed to the strengthening of Soviet influence over Bessarabian communism, if only because of the unavailability of funds from any other source. This was the very situation Romanian leaders desired to avoid.

¹⁵⁶ Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons*, 77.

¹⁵⁷ Bruchis, "Jews in the Revolutionary Underground," 152.

¹⁵⁸ Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons*, 59.

The Komsomol in the MASSR

On the Soviet side of the Dniester, Zionism was equally as strong during the years of civil war and chaos following the Great War and the Russian Revolution, but by the end of 1924 it was effectively but by no means completely silenced by continued Soviet attacks on Zionism as backward bourgeois nationalism. By 1924 but especially after, many Jewish young people in the MASSR found their way into the ranks of the Communist League of Youth, or Komsomol. While many such youth were wholeheartedly behind the project of building communism, many among them embraced the Komsomol organization for reasons that were not unlike those that drove hordes of Jewish youth into Zionist sporting, farming, and communal-aid organizations across the political divide.

While the pull of communist internationalism was in many ways diametrically opposed to building a Jewish nation, there were numerous points of connection. Both Zionism and the Komsomol attracted young Jews who wished to engage in building a better world, something that appeals to young people of every generation. Both groups desired change for Jews, seeing no future in what they imagined as the stunted, religious, shtetl existence of the past. Even if by embracing communism they professed allegiance with a philosophy that denounced religion, including their own, their interpretation of Soviet aspirations in the 1920s, when many young Jews flocked to the Komsomol just as many Jews in general flocked to the Communist Party, was in tune with their already existing anti-religious sensibilities. Bolshevism promised an end to Judaism, not Jewry. For many secular youths of the revolutionary era, religion was already a much less central part of life than it had been for their fathers and grandfathers—giving it up was

not only not much of a sacrifice, but liberating.¹⁵⁹ For many Jews that jumped on board, Soviet policies allowed them to make religious Jews into an Other, thereby removing themselves from persecution and joining the persecutors.¹⁶⁰ As far as they were concerned, the strong, proud and modern Jew of the future would be removed from the religious ways of the past. Yuri Slezkine, making use of Isaac Babel, puts it best: “In Soviet Russia, young Jews had, in fact, grabbed the ‘rings attached to heaven and earth, and pulled heaven down to earth.’”¹⁶¹

Evseksiia activists and party leaders above them were quite aware of the uses of the Komsomol among young Jews growing up in the ruins of East European shtetls. What was sought, after all, was a “fundamental change in the virtues of men, in their habits, in their feelings and desires, in the way they lived their daily life, in their *byt*.”¹⁶² Their successful “selling” of Soviet-Jewish identity was largely accomplished through the promise of empowerment that could be attained by participating in constructing communism. Not only Jews but many others, inspired by Bolshevik culture, desired to change their *byt*. Their embracing of a modern, universally dynamic ideology of equality, historical progress, purpose and self-improvement made many ready to embrace Bolshevik ideology and serve as its willing disseminators and administrators. There was much within revolutionary culture that drew roots from pre-revolutionary traditions of the Russian intelligentsia, especially the desire to see oneself and the world around as in flux and subject to the will, to be made better according to rational human ideals—in short, modern.¹⁶³ Secularizing Jews in the Russian Empire deeply internalized

¹⁵⁹ This has been a topic of considerable research in recent years, effectively changing our understanding of Jews in the early years of the Soviet Union as simply victims: see David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet-Jewish Culture*, Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher*.

¹⁶⁰ Robert Weinberg separates the difference between attacking Jews and attacking Judaism, which was something non-religious Jews were able to join Soviet society in doing, “Demonizing Judaism in the Soviet Union during the 1920s,” *Slavic Review*, vol. 67, no 1, spring 2008, 120-153.

¹⁶¹ Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, 215.

¹⁶² Nikolai Bukharin, “Ob uperiadochenii byta molodezhi,” *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, May 24, 1925, 2.

¹⁶³ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, 2006), 7-9.

this dream of the intelligentsia and applied it first as a means of transforming Jews toward acceptance from Russian society, later in the service of constructing a Jewish national soul through a new, historically-usable folk culture.¹⁶⁴ Many were thus quite ready by the 1920s to embrace revolutionary culture as a more radical expression of the very things they had already accepted, even if resentment at the closing down of Jewish parties after 1918 lingered among some.

For such lofty dreams, sacrifices were understandably necessary. The establishment of the Komsomol meant suppression of other youth groups, even pro-Bolshevik ones, since otherwise control could not be ensured.¹⁶⁵ As Lenin himself proclaimed, the New Man that was being constructed, as Komsomol activists were repeatedly told at congresses, was characterized, in part, by the creation “out of the will of the millions and hundreds of millions... a single will.”¹⁶⁶ The hallmark of a good Komsomolist was to obey, and thereby join the single, unified will of the workers and peasants. Jewish young people proved eager to join and become equals. In May 1926 in Rybnitsa, for example, efforts to recruit young Jews into the komsomol were accompanied with directives to shut down the illegal heders while simultaneously bringing together Jewish workers in the town centers to celebrate a new Jewish holiday: Sholem-Aleichem day.¹⁶⁷ The authors and architects of Soviet-Jewish culture, in celebrating the Yiddish language and the proletariat identity of Jews throughout history at the expense of religious tradition, sought to include Jewish young people who desired a new identity as Jews themselves.

¹⁶⁴ The study of the Haskalah in Imperial Russia is very rich; for example see David H. Weinberg, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Zhitlowski, Dudnow, Ahad Ha-am and the Shaping of Modern Jewish Identity* (New York, 1996); Michael Stanislawski, *For Whom Do I Toil?: Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry* (Oxford, 1988); Olga Litvak, *Conscription and the Search for Modern Russian Jewry* (Bloomington, 2006). On constructing a new Jewish folk culture, see David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge, 1995)

¹⁶⁵ Ralph T. Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth: A Study of the Congresses of the Komsomol, 1918-1954* (New York, 1959), 27.

¹⁶⁶ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 40.

¹⁶⁷ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 120, ll. 5-7.

To a large extent they were successful, and were able to utilize Jewish young people to implement a wide range of anti-religious, anti-Zionist and anti-traditional policies on the Jewish street—and not only on the Jewish street in the shtetls, but also in the collective farm and the new urban areas to which many Jews brought their traditions during these years of violence and mass motion.

A statistical view of the komsomol in Transnistria tells a similar story to Jews in the communist party as a whole. The organization grew rapidly in Transnistria throughout the 1920s, increasing in membership much more than the national fourfold increase during these years.¹⁶⁸ Jews were significantly over-represented relative to their population, and apparently more heavily in Transnistria than in most other locales. In 1934, the Komsomol organization in Transnistria numbered 1073 persons in the system—761 members and 312 candidates for membership, including 145 women among both groups. In terms of nationalities, there were 237 Moldovans in the Komsomol, 297 Ukrainians, 206 Russians, 283 Jews, and 50 belonging to other ethnic and national groups. Thus, Jews represented more than 37% of Komsomol membership despite being less than 9% of the MASSR population.¹⁶⁹ In Jewish collective farms, it appears that support for Komsomol activities was greater than among most other nationalities, especially Germans, although resentment was still quite strong.¹⁷⁰

For the generation that came up during the 1920s, joining the communist party was not only about dreams of a more equal and empowering modernity, however, but also about opportunism. Joining the communist movement, via the Komsomol as was the norm for young people, meant becoming empowered, gaining status, and paving the way toward a better life for

¹⁶⁸ Across the Soviet Union, Komsomol membership went from about 480,000 members in 1920 to almost 2 million by 1928, although the increase was not always steady as there was a plunge in membership in 1922. See Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 409.

¹⁶⁹ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 72, l. 2.

¹⁷⁰ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1555, l. 11.

themselves and their families. Many continued to believe that they were also doing good for their co-religionists, and when confronted by suffering on the Jewish street resulting from the implementation of communist cultural and economic rules and norms, they tended to blame their own people for failing to grasp the revolutionary benefits being offered them by the Soviet state. Their thirst for modernity was powerful, and so was the desire to get out of the ruins of their pre-war lives, in Transnistria more true than in many other places, where as late as 1929 many Jewish towns were plagued by more than half of their working population classified as *lishentsy*. The bright socialist future represented in every possible way, it seemed, that which was desirable as much as the dark ruins of the shtetl represented everything unwanted. The coding of this binary was very much in masculine/feminine: the public over the private, the “masses” over the family, the proletariat collective over bourgeois domesticity.¹⁷¹

Komsomol activists were very often placed in charge of kolkhozes, socialist cultural societies and economic enterprises precisely because they were on their way to becoming party members in a region where insufficient party representation existed. In many locations around the communist state, including Transnistria, the Komsomol activist was the only representative of state power well into the 1920s, serving as an organizer of campaigns and enforcer of policies—the very personification of “a progressive force for cultural change” that policy makers wanted people to see the state as.¹⁷² Given that Komsomol activists were typically young people (those placed in charge of enterprises were usually in their early twenties), this typically created tremendous resentment from the older, more specialized and competent Jews who were, nonetheless, less fluent in party ideology and less trusted than Komsomolists. Nowhere did this cause more problems in the MASSR than on Jewish collective farms. The Komsomol members

¹⁷¹ See Eliot Borenstein’s introduction to *Men Without Women*, 1-14.

¹⁷² Matthias Neumann, “Revolutionizing mind and soul? Soviet youth and cultural campaigns during the New Economic Policy, 1921-28,” *Social History*, vol. 33, no. 3, August 2008, 245-46.

assigned to the collective *Der Shtern*, for example, complained that workers were not being properly supervised; that women workers especially were failing to show up for work, and that the collective property—especially the cafeteria—were in an “unsanitary state.” One referred to it as a “svinarnik” (a pig sty). This could hardly have been an ideal place to live, but many of the Jews here knew each other, having been resettled together—the Komsomolist was an outsider and a young person without respect: such criticism was vehemently unappreciated. Despite continued efforts at “re-education” from several Komsomol activists assigned to the commune over the late 1920s and 1930s, they were never welcomed by older, more traditional Jews and *Der Shtern* experienced serious problems throughout its existence, finally failing completely before the war began.¹⁷³

Not only did party faith in and use of Komsomol activists breed resentment and division among Jews, however. In a borderland area like Transnistria, often lacking in competent literate cadre potential, Jews were even more concentrated as heads of institutions than other nationalities. Such concentration of Jews in quite visible places of authority had an impact on Jewish relations with the wider local population, which commonly continued to harbor anti-Jewish sentiment.¹⁷⁴ Such sentiment often exploded, particularly in rural settings where the reach of the party was stretched and the Komsomolist was the only representative of socialist culture and ideology, particularly in collective farms or small villages. Dreams of socialist modernity proved much more unambiguous than its reality in the Transnistrian countryside.

Even in settings where everyone involved was Jewish, violence against Komsomolists sometimes erupted because of their excessive socialist zeal. For example, on December 14, 1933 the Tiraspol City Control Commission received a hand-written letter from an Aaron Leibovich

¹⁷³ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 472, l. 3-5.

¹⁷⁴ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 72, l. 5-8.

Krasnolobov admitting that he did strike a Komsomolets at the rural enterprise that he ran, but arguing that he was justified in doing so because the Komsomolets, also a Jew, was drunk and abusing his power. He pointed out that he had been a party member since 1927 and had never before violated party ethics or discipline—while having been very active in the state collectivization campaign. His letter (in very ungrammatical Russian with mistakes typical for a native Yiddish speaker) did not help him: he was fired from his post the next month.¹⁷⁵

The zeal of young Jewish komsomol activists was a common, indeed, a stereotypical occurrence. In zealously carrying out party ideology, they were accused of sowing division among the Jewish people; of betraying Jewish interests for foreign ones. Komsomol activists were indeed key in keeping Jewish enterprises of all variety in line within communist ideology. In the case of Jewish collective farms, for example, Jewish Komsomolists were imperative for maintaining state control of the enterprise since non-Jews could not achieve the same level of access into Jewish society. In December 1930, a scathing assessment of the Jewish collective farm *Der Shtern* was submitted to the Rybnitsa raikom by the 15 Komsomol members stationed there. The brunt of the letter was concerned with two temporary appointees to the farm administration: the report called these farm leaders abusive of collective rules and the goodwill of the other members. Having completely undermined morale, they convinced many members to leave. What was worse, they were corrupt: they demand leather for themselves to sell for profit and use farm resources to provide for themselves a life in Kiev, where they spend much of their time.¹⁷⁶ In some cases, such as this one, the intervention of a Komsomolist proved beneficial in correcting an abuse and was well received. But often the actions of the Komsomol were called

¹⁷⁵ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 257, l. 49-51.

¹⁷⁶ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 2, d. 272, l. 10.

into question, as when they reported that many of the farmers at *Der Shtern* were lazy and ideologically “weak.”¹⁷⁷

In other cases the effect of Komsomol members activity was seen as nothing short of treasonous to Jewish interests. In May 1934, Komsomol activists assigned to the large Tiraspol-based artisan artel “Kust’prom” informed the raikom of problems at the artel. These included minor infringements, such as the irregularity with which the artel newspaper was published and the unsanitary conditions at some of the artel’s shops, such as the bakery run by Gomelfarb. But more seriously, Gomelfarb was accused of profiteering from his bread sales and paying off the artel enforcement official, Kapilevich, to keep his mouth shut. Most serious of all, the Komsomolists exposed the artel administrators for keeping hundreds of local *lishtentsy* illegally on its payroll. The accusations were investigated and led to a “cleansing” of the artel membership in July.¹⁷⁸ The artel was supporting, and no doubt profiting from, hundreds of Jewish artisans whose livelihood was undermined by the Soviet system. Here was an unusually large example of the maintenance of Jewish communal contacts and support networks adjusting to a new system as best they could, being exposed by, as they saw it, Jewish traitors. Cases such as this certainly contributed toward making the zeal of komsomol activists something to fear for many Jews and something to use by the state; they alienated traditional Jews even further and helplessly divided Jewish communities.

Their presence was very important in an undergoverned region like Transnistria: Komsomol activists were instrumental in encouraging people to vote during elections and contribute teaching Marxism-Leninism at political literacy circles for adults.¹⁷⁹ Convinced in the ability of Jews to help the party and the party as the means to change Jews into something better,

¹⁷⁷ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, 472, d. 3.

¹⁷⁸ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 467, l. 1-7.

¹⁷⁹ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 646, l. 54.

Jewish Komsomol activists were eager to foment knowledge of and loyalty for the Communist Party. They helped keep close tabs on the enrollment, attendance and participation of *Evshkoly* pupils and teachers (and often pupils' parents) and of various communist groups and organizations.¹⁸⁰ In 1925/26, 790 Jewish pupils, or 25.5% of all schoolchildren in MASSR *Evshkoly*, were members of the Young Pioneers organization, 305 were Octobrists, and 8 were members of the Komsomol; one Jewish teacher was a Communist Party member, 2 were candidates and four were members of the Komsomol.¹⁸¹

Reactions and Resistance

In Soviet Transnistria reform came to the Jewish street largely through Jewish communists who owed their allegiance to the Communist Party; thus they desired to crush any Jewish debate and impose upon them state and party policy instead. In Romanian Bessarabia the impact of a state representing an alien national culture was to spark frantic and vibrant debate that triggered reform from within. As such, it was deeply ironic that the changes wrought by the alien state were arguably not nearly as devastating to traditional Jewish life, at least before the foreign state turned to mass murder after 1940, as were those imposed by Jewish activists representing Soviet power, whose result was to create a Jewish culture, if it can be called that, which was more alien than that in Bessarabia. Certainly, the arrival of policy directives with Jewish representatives in many cases prevented a quick rise in opposition to Bolshevik ideologies, nevertheless, once traditional Jews understood the meaning of normalization as purported by the Jewish commissars, many attempted as much as possible to prevent what they

¹⁸⁰ An example is a document concerning the names of subscribers to the Soviet Yiddish newspaper *Der Shtern* among the Balta division of OZET from July, 15-21, 1927. The list includes the names of 45 subscribers listed in no particular order, their address and occupation, as well as the person who turned them on to the newspaper. AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 1102, l. 36.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, l. 54.

perceived as the destruction of their traditional life and faith. Becoming Jewish without Judaism remained, as might be expected, unacceptable to many Jews living within interwar Soviet borders. There was considerable effort to maintain traditional communal institutions and their functions. In comparing Jewish dreams across the political divide, this desire to preserve as much as possible of traditional Jewish culture is what I call Soviet autonomism.

As described previously, re-education was a primary pillar of Soviet activists' efforts to transform Jews into Soviet citizens. This campaign depended not only on new schooling and occupational retraining, but also on re-educating traditional Jews through the printed word that was intended, together with other means, to foster a socialist consciousness. Socialist ideology in Yiddish appeared in several formats, geared toward various readerships: *Der Emes* (Pravda) particularly but also *Der Shtern* (The Star) were the primary newspapers of Soviet ideas for Jewish readers. For younger readers, particularly the active Komsomol and Pioneer organizations members, *Iunge Gvardie* (Young Guard) and *Zai Greit* (Be Ready) were influential. These newspapers began circulating in Transnistria before the formation of the autonomous government in 1924, but their circulation, despite consistent efforts of *Evseksiia* activists, was rather modest. For example in the Rybnitsa raion, with a Jewish population of nearly 4000, the total number of subscriptions to state-sponsored Yiddish-language newspapers had reached only 108 by 1928.¹⁸² Not only was the level of interest among Jews for pro-Soviet Yiddish papers questionable, but there were additional obstacles. Some older Jews in shtetls surrounding the town of Rybnitsa actually organized an effort to sabotage the circulation of Yiddish newspapers in 1928, believing them blasphemous.¹⁸³ Outside the Jewish community, many among the local postmen, it was discovered by the raion agitprop committee, were not

¹⁸² AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 205, l. 45. This broke down: 48 subscriptions to *Der Emes*; 20 to *Der Shtern*; 20 to *Iunge Gvardie*; and 20 to *Zai Greit*.

¹⁸³ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 205, l. 26.

delivering Yiddish-language papers because they believed that Jews, like everybody else, should be reading Pravda in Russian and not receiving “special treatment.”¹⁸⁴ Local conditions also proved difficult for indoctrinating a socialist ethos into the Jewish population, sometimes exposing a surreal level of bureaucratic detachment and obstinacy: in the shtetl of Gershanovka, an anti-religious rally intended to focus on describing the false basis of Jewish religious holidays throughout history, planned for September 28, 1928, was cancelled on account of starvation among the targeted audience.¹⁸⁵

Sovietization was slowed, *Evseksiia* activists often discovered with anger, not only by difficult circumstances or problematic neighbors, however, but especially by the Jews themselves. Of the more than dozen collective farms begun in the MASSR by 1929, only a few survived as Jewish collectives after Stalin’s forced collectivization campaign of 1929/30. The farm *Der Shtern* was a notable example—it was also a place where its members fought hard to preserve their traditional Jewish culture. There was surprisingly little infiltration of official Soviet culture into the community, other than Komsomol activists. Members were mostly all déclassé poor artisans from Tiraspol (more than 80%) and maintained traditional culture as much as they could: Soviet cultural-enlightenment activity had to be carried out by “imports” from outside the farm membership, and they were actively rejected by farm community members.¹⁸⁶ The reach of the youth organizations such as the Komsomol was limited during the early 1930s, and the youth remained to a large degree under the sway of their parents. Even within the collective, private initiative did not end but was eventually stamped out by state agenda: more

¹⁸⁴ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 205, l. 45.

¹⁸⁵ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 205, l. 46.

¹⁸⁶ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 234, l. 5.

enterprising and able people established themselves, but were by June 1930 removed from the community as kulaks.¹⁸⁷

Perhaps most telling, and undoubtedly most troubling to socialist cultural activists who reported on such issues, was the persistence of traditional Jewish communes in one form or another that continued to serve as a source of authority and cultural cohesion for many Jews despite the efforts of proponents of Soviet authority to eliminate any and all competitors. In Rybnitsa, for example, members of the raion *natsmen* committee complained in 1929 that many struggling local artisans refused to abandon their trade and join the agricultural resettlement program, instead choosing to remain in their craft and turn to the remnants of the communal council for support in order to do so. Aided by leaders from the former communal government, the *kehilla* (it had been formally dissolved in 1924), they successfully used their influence and respect in the community to organize the local artisans into an unofficial self-aid organization in Rybnitsa (very much like the kasses that functioned in Bessarabia) whereby they pooled their resources to help each other through troubling times.¹⁸⁸ In other places, such as rural Kamenka, Jews were observed by natsmen workers to “have a tendency to form their own sel’soviets” (village communes) to the exclusion of other peoples, a clear attempt to refashion the *kehilla*.¹⁸⁹ Natsmen activists were rightly concerned that such solidarity permitted struggling Jewish artisans to function underground despite state sanctions on their operation. Such “anti-Soviet” cooperatives as they called them slowed the effective growth of state-sponsored trade cooperatives in the region, which were in any case challenged by the distance of this borderland from administrative centers and by the significant lawlessness there. Together with the continued functioning of Jewish organizations such as OZE (which remained open in Rybnitsa

¹⁸⁷ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 234, l. 1-2.

¹⁸⁸ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 234, l. 9.

¹⁸⁹ AOSPRM, f. 49, op. 1, d. 439, l. 120.

until 1930 thanks in part to support from Jewish contacts from Soroca across the Dniester), pro-Soviet Jewish cultural activists called such homegrown institutions “tendencies of the past” that were “dangerous national trends that upset communal harmony.”¹⁹⁰ Activists consistently called for greater support from the oblast committee to stamp out such communal associations; it was not until the early 1930s, particularly when famine swept the region, that they were in almost all cases finally liquidated.

In the economic sphere, Jewish artisans, petty merchants and businessmen in Transnistria strove to maintain regional businesses functioning under the new regime. Despite the massive problems created for small, individual artisans and craftsmen by state-sponsored cooperatives and artels, many traditional business contacts survived throughout the NEP years. The crackdown on private trade during Stalin’s revolution ushered in new forms of underground trade made possible through well-established regional contacts among Jewish businesses. Again, the distance from centers of Soviet power, the lack of competent cadres and the survival of traditional networks despite state and party efforts to enforce its firm control over industry and trade made arrests and trials of especially Jews for black marketeering a common occurrence during the first half of the 1930s.

A particularly prominent trial over a large illegal trade network took place in Tiraspol in 1934 that highlighted the extent of the striving for economic autonomy among a wide range of Jewish businessmen. The president and accountant of trade artel “Melkyi roznichnik,” comrades Groisman and Greenberg, were arrested for failure to pay taxes, accused of keeping the revenue for themselves. As their books became public and the investigation deepened in 1934, state finance officials deduced that the artel owed altogether, including penalties, just over 46,000 rubles. At a time when a weekly wage was several rubles, people across Ukraine were truly

¹⁹⁰ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 234, l. 9.

shocked by the size of this figure that they read about in the press, especially for a “backwater” town like Tiraspol, even as they understood that it was almost certainly inflated. Soon after it was determined that this Tiraspol artel was being used as cover for a thriving black market business that included similar enterprises in Odessa, Kiev, and Birzuli. The illegal trade included cigarette paper, chalk, hats, scarves, and locks; but especially candy and sausages. By the beginning of 1934, black market trade between several artels had done more than 250,000 rubles worth of business in 19 months. These included the Odessa “Gasporon” sweets factory run by comrade Friedman, the paper factory “Soglasie” run by Rosenberg and Muchnik, chemical artel and factory “Tekhno-khemic” run by Schwartz, and in Kiev the “Kust’ product” candy factory, along with small trade artels in Tiraspol and Birzuli, the latter headed by a comrade Nuhgaer. On January 16, 1934, Melkyi roznichnik purchased from their Odessa contacts, according to *Gorfinotdel* statistics, 3653 rubles worth of products for 1746 rubles (47% markdown) which they then sold to Tiraspol consumers for 5400 rubles. Groisman and Greenberg were charged with speculation, tax avoidance, including concealing their books from *Gorfinotdel*—all criminal charges.¹⁹¹ Beyond the importance of the case as an indicator of the growing state crackdown on free trade, the case is a clear indicator of a surviving network of Jewish regional contacts, a continuation, despite the turmoil of the past two decades, of traditional contacts among Jews. Such contacts and efforts to maintain economic autonomy existed in many places in Soviet society and among many groups—in the southwestern former Pale, with its history of wheeling and dealing, such contacts among Jews clearly persisted and did not end without harsh state intervention.

The pro-Soviet activists were by no means dependable either. The cases of Jewish communists accused of various charges such as *vreditel'stvo* (wrecking) or *razbazarivanie*

¹⁹¹ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 32, l. 32-33.

(market selling) increased dramatically after 1933. Largely, this was the result of increased party cleansing, but also clearly connected to the desperate circumstances that arose from the famine that began in 1932 but hit Transnistria particularly hard in 1933. Jews were on both sides—as receivers and givers of charges. A Jewish Comrade Gurevich, head of the Ukrainian meat artel, lambasted his Moldovan subordinates in a secret letter for the shameful state of the MASSR meat industry, demanding that it be cleansed of “former merchants, speculators, former white army officers, and priests.”¹⁹² The result was a dramatic cleansing of the MASSR meat industry: by January 1, 1934, a list of 46 communists to be cleansed from various food industries in Tiraspol alone was compiled, including many Jews. Simon Schreibman from Odessa was accused of concealing 200 poods of meat; Lev Tarnopolsky from Tiraspol 250 poods; Avrahm Schierer from Akkerman (Bessarabia) 170 poods. Such was the scapegoating method used to blame enemies of the people for the party’s failings.¹⁹³

Recriminations would of course only escalate, and in fact it was during the years of terror at the end of the 1930s that lines between personal interests became more brightly visible. As scholarship of recent years on the terror has shown, much suffering was caused not by the direct repression of the state but by the appropriation by ordinary citizens of state ideology as a weapon against others and in service of their own interests. Jewish Transnistria was no exception, but what is of particular interest is the efforts at maintaining a sense of loyalty to Jewish identity among those of the older generation that is arguably lost, at least to some extent, by the youth. At the Tiraspol *Evshkola*, a pupil named Trakhtenbroit found a book owned by a recently arrested teacher in October 1937 and turned it over to the NKVD as further evidence against him. One of the boy’s teachers, a Rashkovsky, scolded him for “getting involved in

¹⁹² AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 12, l. 6.

¹⁹³ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 12, l. 7.

things you shouldn't." Trakhtenbroit reported Rashkovsky, who was arrested. In his report the school principal called Rashkovsky's behavior anti-communist and anti-social, but after further investigating the case he learned that Trakhtenbroit did not like Rashkovsky and always caused problems in his class.¹⁹⁴ Similarly, Trakhtenbroit's math teacher, a Mrs. Shitsman, also yelled at him over the book incident, telling him that he "should be studying and not taking trips to the secret police." He informed on her as well and she too was arrested; later the principal learned that Trakhtenbroit wanted to transfer out of the *Evshkola* to a Russian school and Shitsman would not let him, so he took the opportunity to have her removed.¹⁹⁵ An older history teacher named Reznik heard a younger colleague's complaints that too few books on Soviet history were available in Yiddish, to which he replied "may they burn in Moscow." He was arrested.¹⁹⁶ A younger student confronted his teacher for missing their class, to which the teacher replied philosophically "to this knot of sorrow we have to add yet new sorrows." The teacher was arrested; the pupil was promoted to the Young Pioneers in Tiraspol.¹⁹⁷ Taken together, it is apparent that what was transpiring during these years was the death knell of a unified Jewish community, undermined from within as well as without. Despite the pressure, already felt by these years, to change professions, political parties, places of residence, expressions of religion, etc. it had been possible for people to entertain adversarial perspectives quietly, or secretly. This became increasingly dangerous as sentiment founded on preserving Jewish cultural identity came in conflict, at numerous points, with a pro-socialist ideology that the youth came in ever greater numbers to espouse. The Soviet state and bureaucracy proved much better at dividing traditional

¹⁹⁴ AOSPRM, f. 32, op. 1, d. 626, l. 62.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, l. 64.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, l. 67.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, l. 68.

and religious communities than the exclusionary policies being pursued by Romanian governors across the Dniester in Bessarabia.

Conclusion

After 1918, significantly different political regimes instituted powerfully different ruling methods upon subject peoples that had until that time lived in similar ways. One illustrative and enlightening means of ascertaining the persistence of similar perspectives, desires, and dreams among subject populations is to examine the similarities in indigenous political movements that either resisted the leveling programs of the states or used them to serve achieve their own agendas. In this way, the similarities in innate concerns for a Jewish future as evidenced in youth Zionism and activism in the Komsomol, as well as autonomist sentiment evidenced in both the Yiddish Cultural League in Bessarabia and resistance to communist policies by everyday Jews in Soviet Transnistria, serve to transcend the new and sudden political barrier that went up in 1918 between Greater Romania and the Soviet Union. Jewish political activists, writers, and thinkers on both the left and right on both sides of the Dniester had matured in a pre-WWI world of Jewish correspondence across the vast territory of the former Pale of Settlement, traveling between far-flung communities in Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Bessarabia to share ideas about the future of the Jewish people and the means to achieve it. After the collapse of empires, they found themselves separated by new boundaries jealously guarded by the young national regimes of Eastern Europe.

But the ideas remained that saw Jews as one people across political boundaries, in fact, they intensified. Most clearly this was expressed in Zionism, which, despite being divided into myriad perspectives on the political left, right, and center, shared basic features. Most

importantly, these included the creation of a Jewish nation-state in Palestine, and also the physical, social, and economic regeneration of the Jewish people to create new, modern and masculine Jews. These ideas were a product of their era across Europe, informed by broader medical, national and racial ideologies concerned with the degeneration of society. Russia, and later the Soviet Union, was part of these concerns, which was reflected in Bolshevik desires to inculcate traits necessary to build a new society—the New Man. These desires were in evidence among Jewish communists as well, including the youth activists in the Komsomol, who wanted to refashion “backward” shtetl Jews into strong, physical new Jews. Such ideas spanned newly constructed political borders.

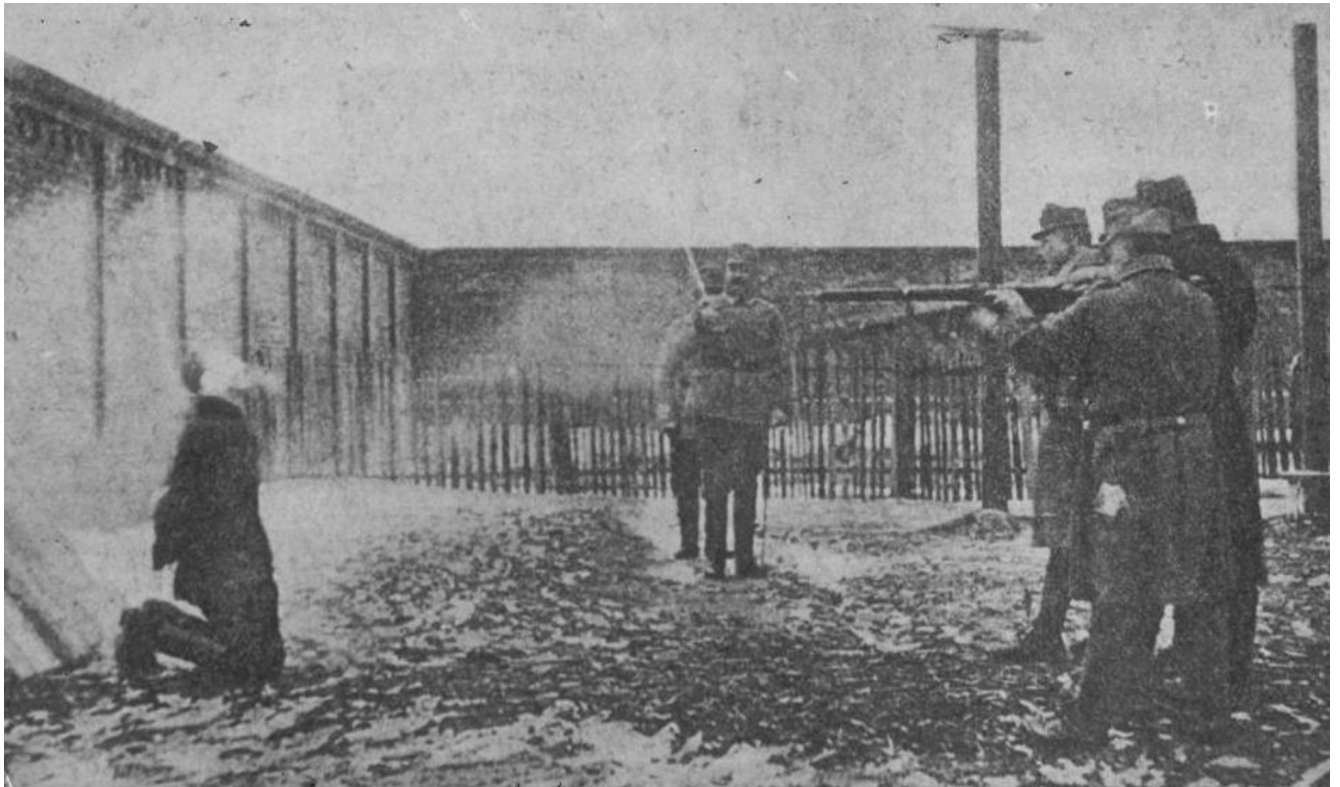
Finally, the transnational connection between voices that called for alternatives must not be overlooked. These included the desire for an autonomist future, meaning progressive in terms of its receptivity to modern, secular ideologies but turned to serve a non-Zionist agenda. Also important were voices of tradition that were first and foremost concerned with preserving the Jewish religion, avoiding mass assimilation of the Jewish people into the surrounding populace, and maintaining the Jewish communal government, the *kehilla*, in some form as the best institution to achieve these goals.

Nevertheless, the political regimes in which these dreams of the future played out could not be ignored, and in many ways shaped the direction of political activism. In Bessarabia, Zionists challenged the traditional ruling authority of religious leaders in communal affairs, just as Zionist ideology in the broadest sense spread from the youth among the populace and became intricately intertwined with Jewish life, politics and philanthropy. While comparatively few Jews were actually able to make aliyah, thousands benefited from new pride, comradeship and activism in social causes that helped weather the rising antisemitism and Jewish isolation in the

country. Across the Dniester, Komsomol activists were important in bringing the message of the party to rural areas where there was no other presence of the ruling culture or ideology. As the only representatives of Soviet power they often caused anger and division among battered Jewish communities, thus helping to establish Soviet power by weakening alternatives to it at the local level. They also helped in many cases in providing care for a suffering population, however, enticing some Jews, especially the young, to their cause because of their own zealous faith in communism.

The autonomists also had to work within the framework of the new states in which they found themselves. In Romanian Bessarabia, the Yiddishists turned primarily to culture and the inculcation of love and respect of the Yiddish language, the Jewish vernacular, as the means of maintaining Jewish difference. Their aspirations were closely tied with socialist idealism, which was sufficient to bring the wrath of the Siguranța upon them. In Soviet Transnistria, autonomism, much more difficult to locate in the sources, was primarily found in resistance to Soviet cultural, educational and anti-religious campaigns, such as the desires to maintain communal connections or means to help independent Jewish artisans that the party wished to shut down. Resistance in Bessarabia also sometimes moved passed a state-accepted Jewish cultural agenda and moved toward the revolutionary underground, fed ideologically from across the border and supported, as much as possible, financially. Jews were important participants in this movement but my no means its only supporters, despite the generally successful efforts of the state and the secret and military police to portray Jews as the only supporters of communism. Despite the coercive power of the ruling regimes, Jewish dreams of control over their own future persisted throughout the interwar years, and could not be strictly limited to the national space even if the Jews themselves physically could be.

Figure 16: Execution by firing squad of a communist revolutionary in a Romanian prison, most likely Doftana near Benderi (Tighina) in Bessarabia, kneeling with his hands tied behind his back, not later than 1925; photo taken from ANRM photograph collection, #24922.



Epilogue

When Soviet troops invaded Romanian Bessarabia (again) in 1944,¹ army officers kept detailed records of the state in which they found local conditions after three years of war-time fascist administration. Romanian forces had not stopped at the Dniester River when they first attacked the Red Army after the Nazi assault on the Soviet Union in summer 1941. They captured the entire region between the Dniester and Bug Rivers, including Odessa, which they called Transnistria. More than twenty years of dedicated, underground communist agitation seemed to have come to naught, as the Romanian Army proceeded to cleanse the entire region, including Bukovina, Bessarabia, and extended Transnistria, of foreigners and undesirables, especially Jews and communists. Romanian-run work and death camps for the Jews of the entire region, including Bessarabia, Bukovina, Herța and Odessa, were constructed in Transnistria.²

Bessarabian Jews had been systematically rounded up in the Chișinău ghetto and several camps in northern Bessarabian towns prior to their movement into concentration camps across the Dniester in Transnistria. Many were driven by foot in the late autumn, falling dead from abuse along the way to the camps. Soviet soldiers interviewed many locals about what they saw in 1944. Mrs. Solovieva from the town of Rybnitsa noted, in emotional language, the plight of Jews on their way to camps not far from her town:

Romanian soldiers came on, speaking an indecipherable Romanian language. At night there were screams of chickens, and in the morning only the remainder of chicken bones and feathers. All along the main roads, connecting the villages with Rybnitsa, laid the bodies of Jewish women, children, and old men. Later, when the Romanian administrators arrived to revive a stopped life, scattered, several people at a time, parties of Bessarabian Jews began coming. Tortured, tired and hungry, some of them could not make it and fell and died on the way, under the sticks of animalistic Romanian soldiers. I remember the soldiers were building a church, for which they destroyed the homes of living people—and used as labor Jews imprisoned in a nearby camp, work

¹ Soviet troops had initially entered the province in June-July 1940, in accordance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact by which the Nazis granted Bessarabia, along with eastern Poland, to the Soviet Union to buy their silence in the face of planned Nazi aggression across Europe.

² See Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944* (Chicago, 2000) for broader treatment of the Holocaust in Bessarabia and Transnistria.

for which they were unpaid and unfed. They worked under the gaze of those with sticks, and it was enough to make the slightest mistake and the blows would rain down on the head and back of the guilty...Before the Rybnitsa jail, in the building of the former border control brigade, they stopped all the parties of Jews passing through Rybnitsa. Here dozens of people died every day from hunger, wounds, exhaustion and disease. The path of this movement from Rybnitsa to the camp at Slobodka through the villages of Shmalena, Andreevka, Kolbasnaia, and Timkovo was throughout marked by the buried bodies of Jews...The Romanian soldiers were likewise unbelievably animalistic toward Soviet prisoners, especially during their retreat from Soviet territory, just like they had been when they force marched the Jews.³

Another eyewitness account from an unnamed source interviewed by the Soviet commission for determining the circumstances of the Romanian wartime occupation of the autonomous region noted that the Jews were stripped to the nude by the Romanian troops; they stood freezing in November before the Romanian troops. The Jews were driven, like animals, including men, women, children and the elderly, many of whom were killed on the way. The dead lay in piles up to the windows of the military barracks, and the living Jews were forced to dig holes for them—there were 15 such holes that this person witnessed dug, with hundreds of bodies thrown into them. Residents of the village of Colbasna reported how the road through the village from Rybnitsa was littered with bodies, none of whom were identified prior to mass burial, partly because the peasants did not know any of them. The report of the Soviet authorities explains that the Romanian forces drove a large number of Jews into the camps in November 1941, where they were driven into buildings without any heating or other facilities, and packed in so tight that they were forced to stand the entire time for days. Many died standing in this manner.⁴

Dniester Jews, divided for a generation by competing, ideologically antagonistic regimes when Romanian troops seized Bessarabia, were re-united in extermination when the Romanian Army extended its control past the Dniester all the way to the Bug. From 1941 to 1944, the

³ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 718, ll. 13-15.

⁴ AOSPRM, f. 3, op. 1, d. 718, ll. 18.

regime of the *Conducator*, Marshal Ion Antonescu, was responsible for the murder of at least 250,000 Bessarabian, Bukovinian, Transnistrian and Ukrainian Jews.⁵ As part of the ultra-modern pursuit of racial perfection, Ion Antonescu decided to remake multi-ethnic Bessarabia into a model, racially-pure Romanian province. Bessarabia was a good choice in that it was problematic both in terms of ethnic unity and state security, and the plan to cleanse the province of “foreign elements” promised to solve both issues. The efforts of the Antonescu regime to cleanse Bessarabia of Jews were a logical conclusion to the local manifestation of a broader European intellectual faith in racial purity as the foundation of successful modern society, as well as a generation of political interaction that was headed for collision since at least 1918 as a result. In that sense, the story of the Romanian Holocaust is not dramatically different from the Nazi one—except that Jews in much of the country, particularly the Old Kingdom, survived.

Yet focusing on the Holocaust has not been the primary objective of this project. Holocaust studies have arguably overwhelmed 20th century Jewish historiography and to a considerable extent contemporary Jewish identity.⁶ Writing about Jewish history in Europe from the tragic perspective alone anachronizes the tragedy and colors the interpretation of Jewish culture before the Holocaust with our own sense of the impending doom that those we write about could not of course feel. In fact, as this study has tried to show, this was a time of tremendous hope in the future. The interwar years were a time of unbounded cultural and political creativity and activity for Jews in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, precisely because so many people across a much broader social spectrum, no longer just the intellectual,

⁵ This is a lower estimate presented by Solonari. Iztaslav Levit estimates that about 350,000 were killed; see *Ashes of the Past*, 8. According to statistics compiled by an independent commission of the U.S. Holocaust Museum’s Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, the number of Jewish victims in Transnistria was between 280,000 and 380,000. Dennis Deletant, basing his statistics on the Holocaust museum’s research led by Radu Ioanid, reports that 90,000 of the Jewish dead in Transnistrian camps were from Bessarabia and Bukovina, while 170,000 were local Ukrainian Jews. Deletant, “The Holocaust in Transnistria: An Overview in the Light of Recent Research,” in *Occasional Papers of Romanian Studies*, No. 3: *Moldova, Bessarabia, and Transnistria*, 143-161.

⁶ For example in American Jewish life: Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston, 1999).

religious, or economic elite, believed that creating a better Jewish future was within their reach. The tremendously varied and conflicting debates over the direction and shape of this future paint a fascinating picture and needs not be lost because it was cut short. No place in the Jewish world was untouched by this debate, including the otherwise provincial regions of Bessarabia and Transnistria.

This has thus been a project focused on radical change and the individual and collective reactions to it. In particular, the focus on modern universalism, as engendered in a Western European notion of the modern, proved a powerful, arguably inevitable and unstoppable force for change that triggered an entire system of reactions within communities of religious, ethnic, and/or linguistic difference.⁷ Jews, arguably as Europe's best known "mobilized diaspora," provides an excellent perspective for examining the spread, accommodation and resistance of modern, particularly nationalist and socialist, ideas. Jews of the Dniester River borderland between Romanian and Slavic civilizations were confronted with such circumstances long before the interwar years, but it was during this time that these changes came to a crisis state that led either toward assimilation of communist identity in the multi-ethnic MASSR within Soviet Ukraine or displacement, marginalization, and finally extermination in a mono-ethnic, increasingly racialized homeland for blood Romanians in Bessarabia.

Not only were these changes traumatic in terms of their violent displacement on numerous levels of Jewish particularity, but also because, as is the story of the Jewish experience

⁷ The study of social change of particularistic cultures under pressure of Universalist modernity is not a new field and was not pioneered by historians. Perhaps best known is the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), particularly *Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example*, 142-169. A great example of traumatic cultural change such as this is Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (New York, 1994) about the pressures on traditional Ibo communities in Nigeria after the arrival of Christianity as a precursor to European imperialism.

with modernity, deeply divisive.⁸ In Romanian Bessarabia, the Jewish community, already divided in late Imperial Russia, was further splintered between Orthodox traditionalists, democratic secularists, autonomists, Zionists of numerous stripes, socialists and underground communists. In Soviet Transnistria, the devastated provincial Jewish towns were divided primarily between the pro-Bolshevik party and state bureaucrats and activists and, everybody else that desired a different future, including underground Zionists, the religiously devout, etc.

The Jews of this region, whom I have called Dniester Jews for purposes of ascertaining their common versus separate fate, were clearly invested in the multi-ethnicity of this borderland; it was during Russian Imperial rule a region shared by many ethnic and national groups, however turbulently, and not claimed exclusively by any one of them (Russians were of course most privileged in government and the military, but Jews controlled the economy and the Moldovans were indispensable in agriculture). This changed most clearly in the larger former Russian gubernia of Bessarabia, where a policy of Romanianization, or pro-Romanian ethnic affirmative action together with discrimination against others, was enforced with growing conviction much to the detriment of competing national and religious groups, particularly the Jews, who were seen by security police as foreigners, invaders, capitalist usurpers and communist traitors. On the opposite bank, the Bolshevik revolutionaries began construction of a multi-national, utopian communist system that was short on qualified personnel, particularly in places like Transnistria, provincial and distant from their power centers. Jews were welcomed into the party and helped extend Soviet control and Bolshevik culture in the region, just as they led in efforts to extend revolutionary agitation across the border into Bessarabia, which was considered rightfully Soviet land. However, by the 1930s Soviet power was firmly established and Jews (like other

⁸ See Eli Lederhendler, *Jewish Responses to Modernity: New Voices in America and Eastern Europe* (New York, 1994).

minorities) were no longer as needed; indigenization policies designed to bring native peoples into the party in their own languages were discontinued.

The claim that the division between Western and Eastern Jews ran along the Dniester River (among other places), along with the ideological divide between democracy and nationalism on the one hand and communist internationalism on the other, although true to a significant extent, cannot fully explain the complex reality on the ground. Romanian Jewry itself was divided between the two classifications (Union of Romanian Jews versus Jewish National Party), a fact that had important political ramifications for Jewish political activism and broader relations with their host state. Divisions were not limited to individual communities: differences of opinion broadened between Bucharest Jews that were familiar with Romanian culture and Jews in the new territories that were not. Under Soviet administrative centralization also, some Jews appropriated aspects of official ideology that resonated with Jewish collective goals while others maintained communal traditions and/or secret/underground organizations when they did not. The regime in power determined what was forced underground, communism in Romanian Bessarabia, Zionism in Soviet Transnistria; what was consistent was the pursuit of Jewish interests that refused definition by state interests alone.

As documents from police files, local communist party correspondence, the press and interviews show, Jews were not simply silenced victims, all-powerful capitalists, or “enemies of the Romanian nation,” nor were they necessarily all dedicated communists—all common stereotypes at the time. Rather, Jews helped shape state policies just as they were shaped by them; they were eager subjects and ardent revolutionaries, devout believers and dedicated atheists. This was true in Romanian Bessarabia even though Jews were blocked from exercising political power—political power was undeniably shaped in part by their presence. The

kaleidoscope of perspectives reflects the complexity and confusion of finding meaning in a modernity that opened the possibility for Jews to determine their own future, both as individuals and members of a collective, just as national political agendas sought to suppress that choice. We can see this not only in the Jewish responses to state policies, but also efforts to create an alternate Jewish future that refused to succumb to state attempts to create model subject, such as efforts by young Zionists to take up agriculture to prepare young Jews for Palestine; or spread Jewish participation in gymnastics in effort to make Jewish youths to become masculine and tough. This same sentiment was expressed enthusiastically by Soviet Jewish youth across the border through means available to them—agricultural campaigns and zealous involvement in the Komsomol. The choices made available to Jews in the Soviet system directed their activism in support of the state agenda, or at least not in direct opposition to it, while in Romanian Bessarabia Jews were outsiders; their agendas were tolerated if deemed harmless to the Romanian nation and persecuted with extreme prejudice when determined to be against the state. In many aspects of everyday life and political mobilization, there was a common Jewish response to state policies.

But were common desires across the Dniester border, common in fact much more broadly among East European Jews during these years, sufficient to claim an identity that resisted national classification? Clearly, transnational ideological interests and concerns for suffering co-religionists in particular could not be neatly contained within national borders as national leaders would have liked. Nonetheless, such cross-border sentiments quickly began succumbing to the political realities of competing projects of national identity construction, social engineering and population control. Jewish underground revolutionaries in Bessarabia, despite continued activism, were waging a losing war; contrary to post-1945 Soviet accounts of the victorious

revolutionary struggle for communism in Romanian Bessarabia, it was the Red Army that brought communism, not the interwar underground movement.⁹ Despite the flight of Jewish refugees across the Dniester and their constant presence in refugee camps in Chişinău, the everyday reality of attending the Soviet *Evshkoly* or Romanian state schools; of maintaining a job despite limitations on Jewish employment in Bessarabia or the affliction of a *lishenets* status in Transnistria; or encountering virulent popular antisemitism or having to conceal one's devotion to God; these everyday realities proved most central to any discussion of transnational regional identity.

So was there such a thing as Dniester Jews? Was there a Jewish identity in this borderland region between Romania and the Soviet Union that refused to be constrained within the constructed and ascribed national identities of these two modern states? The answer is an ambivalent maybe. This ambivalence is logical and important: it points to the profound level of transformation of society and culture that was underway during these years of rapid change and the difficulty in grabbing onto any particular ideology to anchor one's place in a world where constant change became the norm. Scholars of Jewish history in Eastern Europe have pointed to this for a few years. Jewish actors and playwrights did not perform and write works that neatly conformed to "national in form, socialist in content," rather they strove to conform to expectations while expressing internal sentiment toward Jewish nationalism at the same time.¹⁰ In terms of the production of Soviet-Jewish culture in Yiddish, the writers, poets and journalists

⁹ For example, Artem Lazarev, *Moldavskaia sovetskaia gosudarstvennost' I bessarabskii vopros* (Kishinev, 1974) and Jakob Mikhailovich Kopansky, *Mezhdunarodnaia podderzhka bor'by trudiashchikhsia Bessarabii za vossoedinenie s sovetskoi rodinoi* (Kishinev, 1975).

¹⁰ Jeffrey Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater*.

who engaged in such construction also became increasingly ambivalent about their project of destroying the Jewish “thick” culture that they had grown up with.¹¹

Jews in Bessarabia were ambivalent about becoming part of the Romanian state; they were only more wary twenty years later, not only because of antisemitism but also corruption, economic mismanagement and anti-communist labeling and persecution. Clearly there was little chance, as their political activity bears witness, that sentiment as Romanian Jews developed in Bessarabia to any significant extent. Similarly, state policies to construct a new Soviet Jewish culture through planned and controlled resettlement and re-education and Jewish reception of such policies proved ambivalent: a failure through poor implementation and a lack of commitment over time. By 1939, a quarter of Jews had left the MASSR, mostly for large cities inside the Soviet Union, thereby bypassing Yiddish schools for a more practical education in Russia for themselves or their children. Most of the rest struggled on in poverty in shtetls of the former Pale of Settlement and were mostly wiped out, both individually and as a culture, during the Romanian invasion of Soviet Ukraine during World War II up to the Bug River, including Odessa. What survived after the war for Jews was an integrated, unmistakably Soviet urban culture.¹² Jews in the Dniester borderland may have had considerable family, business, confessional and even political (in terms of international Jewish projects) connections at the beginning of the interwar years, but these were successfully broken down over the course of the 1920s and 1930s. What remained were national connections—for most, even Jewish communist activists in the Soviet Union, being Jewish was difficult to erase (and would become consistently more difficult after nationality became an item on one’s passport) despite the efforts of many to do so. In Romania, erasing one’s Jewish identity was always difficult; in interwar Romanian

¹¹ David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture*.

¹² Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher*, 182.

Bessarabia it was near impossible. “Dniester Jews” may have become more than a regional notion, like Galician Jews or Macedonian Jews, but they were shaped by competing state policies into Soviet Jews on the one hand and Jewish Bessarabians on the other, and shaped as much by the state policies as by their failure; as much by their acquiescence to them as their resistance.

Bibliography

Archives

Arhiva Națională Republicii Moldova (ANRM: National Archives of the Republic of Moldova), Chișinău, Republic of Moldova.

Fond 171	Lapușna Județ (County) Tribunal
Fond 679	Chișinău City Chestura and Siguranța Files
Fond 680	Bessarabian Regional Police Inspectorate
Fond 693	Siguranța Refugee Files
Fond 694	Bălți City Police Inspectorate

Arhiva Organizațiilor Socio-Politice a Republicii Moldova (AOSPRM: Archive of Socio-Political Organizations of the Republic of Moldova), former Moldovan Communist Party archive, Chișinău, Republic of Moldova

Fond 3	Rybnița Raion Party Committee
Fond 32	Tiraspol City Party Committee
Fond 49	Moldovan Oblast' Party Committee
Fond 2670	All-Ukrainian Jewish Social Commission for Program Assistance
Fond 52	Oblast and Raion Control Commission
Fond 60	Tiraspol Raion Party Committee

Newspapers & Contemporary Journals

Adevarul
Bessarabia
Bessarabskaia pochta
Bessarabskoe slovo
Calendarul Basarabiei
Dimineața
Der Emes
Erd und Arbet
Evreiskaia Tribuna
Golos Bessarabiei
Kishinovskii Listok
Komsomol'skaia Pravda
Das Kooperative Vort
Krasnaia Bessarabia
Moldova Literară
Der Morgn
Nash Golos (Unzer Kol)
Porunca Vremei
Raboche-Khristianskaia Pravda
Răsăritul
Der Shtern

Universul
Unzer Tsayt
Der Yid
Die Yiddishe Tseitung

Censuses

Recensământul general al populației României din Decembrie 1930. Vol II: Neam, limbamaterna, religie (General Population Census of Romania from December 1930, vol. 2, Nationality, Mother Tongue, Religion), Manuila Sabin, ed. (Bucharest, 1938), XXVI-LVI.

Pervaia vseobshchaia perepis' naselen'ia Rossiiskoi Imperii, 1897 g. N.A. Troinitsky, ed. St. Petersburg: Tsentral'nyi statisticheskii komitet Ministerstva vnutrennikh del, 1897-1905. 7. Nalichnoe naselenie oboego pola po uiezdam, s ukazaniem chisla lits preobladaiushchikh rodnykh iazykov.

Bibliographic Works

Grossu, Silvia. *Presa din Basarabia În Contextual Sociocultural al anilor 1906-1944*. Chișinău: Tehnica-Info, 2003.

Kulikovski, Lidia, et. al. *Presa Basarabească: de la începuturi până în anul 1957, Catalog*. Chișinău: Epigraph, 2002.

Monographs

Abramson, Henry. *A Prayer for Government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917-1920*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Agurskii, S. *Evreiskii Rabochii v Kommunisticheskom Dvizhenii, 1917-1921*. Minsk: Gos. izd-vo Belorussii, 1926.

Ansky, S. *The Enemy at His Pleasure: A Journey through the Jewish Pale of Settlement during World War I*. Joachim Neugroschel, ed. & trans. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002.

Balzer, Harley. *Russia's Missing Middle Class: The Professions in Russian History*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996).

Baron, Salo Wittmayer. *The Russian Jew under Tsars and Soviets*. New York: Macmillan, 1964.

Bartov, Omer. *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Bauer, Yehuda. *My Brother's Keeper: A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1929-1939*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1974

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Oxford: Polity, 1991.

Beizer, Mikhail. *Evreii Leningrada 1917-1939: Natsional'naia zhyzn' I sovietizatsia*. Moscow: Mosty kultury, 1999.

Benjamin, Lya, editor. *Evreii din România între anii 1940-1944, vol. I: Legislația Antievreiască*. Bucharest: Hasefer, 1993.

Berg, Lev Semenovich. *Bessarabiia: Strana-Liudi-Khoziaistvo*. Petrograd, 1918.

- Borenstein, Elliot. *Men Without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917-1929*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Boyarin, Daniel. *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Braham, Randolph. *The Tragedy of Romanian*. Boulder: Social Science Monographs, 1994.
- Brezianu, Andrei. *Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Moldova: European Historical Dictionaries, No. 37*. Editor, Jon Woronoff. Lanham: Scarecrow, 2000.
- Brown, Kate. *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Brubaker, Rogers. *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Bruchis, Michael. *Nations—Nationalities—People: A Study of the Nationalities Policy of the Communist Party in Soviet Moldavia*. Boulder: East European Monographs, 1984.
- Bucur, Maria. *Eugenics and modernization in Interwar Romania*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002.
- Budnitskii, Oleg, editor. *Arkhiv Evreiskoi Istorii*. Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2006.
- Cazacu, P. *The Truth about the Question of Bessarabia*. Bucharest: Cultura Națională, 1926.
- Chandler, Andrea. *Institutions of Isolation: Border Controls in the Soviet Union and Its Successor States, 1917-1993*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998.
- Cherikover, I.M. *Antisemitizm I pogromy na Ukraine: k istorii ukrainsko-evreiskikh otnoshenii*. Berlin: Ostjudisches Historisches Archiv, 1923.
- Ciobanu, Ștefan. *Cultura românească în Basarabia sub stăpânirea rusă*. Chișinău: Asociației uniunea culturală bisericească din Chișinău, 1923.
- Clark, Charles Upson. *Bessarabia: Russia and Roumania on the Black Sea*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1927.
- Codreanu, Corneliu Zelea. *For My Legionaries: the Iron Guard*. Madrid: Editura "Libertatea", 1976.
- Connor, Walker. *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Dekel-Chen, Jonathan L. *Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet Power, 1924-1941*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Doron, David. *Kishinevskoe getto—poslednii pogrom*. Jerusalem: Biblioteka Alia, 1991.
- Dubnow, Simon. *Nationalism and History: Essays on Old and New Judaism*, Koppel S. Pinson, ed. New York: Anthem, 1970.
- Enciu, Nicolae. *Populația Rurală a Basarabiei în anii 1918-1940*. Chișinău: Epigraf, 2002.
- Fisher, Ralph T. *Pattern for Soviet Youth: A Study of the Congresses of the Komsomol, 1918-1954*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1959.
- Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*. Ithaca: Cornell university Press, 1992.
- Frankel, Jonathan. *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Franklin, Bruce, editor. *The Essential Stalin: Major Theoretical Writings, 1905-1952*. Garden City: Anchor Books, 1972.
- Freeze, Gregory, editor. *Russia: A History*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Gassensmidt, Christoph. *Jewish Liberal Politics in Tsarist Russia, 1900-1914: the Modernization of Russian Jewry*. New York: New York University Press, 1995.

- Gatrell, Peter. *The Tsarist Economy, 1850-1917*. London: Batsford, 1986.
- Gilman, Sander L. *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.
- . *The Jew's Body*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Gitleman, Zvi. *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics, 1917-1930: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1917-1930*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.
- , editor. *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe*. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2003.
- . *Assimilation, Acculturation and National Consciousness among Soviet Jews*. New York: Institute for Jewish Policy Planning & Research of the Synagogue Council of America, 1973.
- . *Jewish Life after the USSR*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003.
- Golushchenko, Oleg. *Nasel'eniie Moldavskoi ASSR (1924-1940 gg)*. Chişinău, 2001.
- Gross, Jan. *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz, An Essay in Historical Interpretation*. New York: Random House, 2007.
- Heifetz, Elias. *The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine in 1919*. New York: Seltzer, 1921.
- Halevy, Zvi. *Jewish Schools in under Czarism and Communism: A Struggle for Cultural Identity*. New York: Springer Publishing Co, 1976.
- Hausleitner, Mariana. *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien 1814-1941: Zur Minderheitenpolitik Russlands und Großrumäniens*. Munich: IKGS Verlag, 2005.
- Haynes, Rebecca. "Historical Introduction," in *Occasional Papers in Romanian Studies No. 3: Moldova, Bessarabia, Transnistria*. London: School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, 2003.
- Hellbeck, Jochen. *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Herzl, Theodor. *The Jewish State*. New York: Dover, 1988.
- Hirsch, Francine. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.
- Hitchins, Keith. *Rumania, 1866-1947*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.
- . *The Romanians, 1774-1866*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- . *A Nation Discovered: Romanian Intellectuals in Transylvania and the Idea of Nation, 1700/1848*. Bucharest, The Encyclopaedic Publishing House; The Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House, 1999.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Hroch, Miroslav. *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe" A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*. Ben Fowkes, trans. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Hyams, Barbara and Nancy A Harrowitz, eds. *Jews and Gender: Responses to Otto Weininger*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.
- Hyman, Paula. *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995.
- Iancu, Carol. *Evreii din România: de la emancipare la marginalizare, 1919-1938*. Bucharest: Editura Hasefer, 2000.
- . *Jews in Romania 1866-1919: From Exclusion to Emancipation*. Carvel de Bussey,

- translator. (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1996).
- Ioanid, Radu. *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000.
- . *The Sword of the Archangel: Fascist Ideology in Romania*. Peter Heinegg, translator. (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1990).
- Judge, Edward, *Easter in Kishinev: Anatomy of a Pogrom*. New York: New York University Press, 1992.
- Kappeler, Andreas. *The Russian Empire: A Multi-Ethnic History*. Harlow: Longman, 2001.
- King, Charles. *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- Klier, John and Shlomo Lambroza, editors. *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Kochan, Lionel. *The Jews in Soviet Russia since 1917*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Kopansky, Jacob Mikhailovich. *Blagotvoritelnye organizatsii evreev Bessarabii v mezhoennyi period, 1918-1940* (Kishinev: Pontos. 2002).
- . *Internatsional'naia solidarnost' s borboi trudiashchikhsia Bessarabii za vossoedinenie s sovetskoi rodinoy, 1918-1940*. Kishinev: Shtiintsa, 1975.
- . *Dzhoint v Bessarabii: Stranitsy Istorii*. Chişinău: Liga, 1994.
- Kucherenko, Victor. *Bendery: zhyzn' tamu nazad...* Benderi: Poligrafist, 1998.
- Lazarev, Artem Markovich. *Moldavskaia sovetskaia gosudarstvennost' I bessarabskii vopros*. Kishinev: Kartiia moldoveniiaske, 1974.
- Lederhendler, Eli. *Jewish Responses to Modernity: New Voices in America and Eastern Europe*. New York: New York University Press, 1994.
- Lempster, Moshe. *Evreiskii Dozhd'*. Rudolph Olshansky, translator. Chişinău: Liga, 1997.
- Levin, Nora. *The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917: Paradox of Survival*. New York: New York University Press, 1988.
- Lewin, Moshe. *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia*. New York: The New Press, 1984.
- Litvak, Olga. *Conscription and the Search for Modern Russian Jewry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.
- Livezeanu, Irina. *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.
- Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Mazower, Mark. *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.
- Mazur, Arkadii. *Stranitsy Istorii Sorokskih Evreev*. Chişinău: Ruxanda, 1999.
- Mendelsohn, Ezra. *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.
- . *Class Struggle in the Pale: The Formative Years of the Jewish Worker's Movement in Tsarist Russia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- , ed. *Essential Papers on Jews and the Left*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.
- Mendes-Flohr, Paul and Jehuda Reinharz, eds. *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Michels, Tony. *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York*. Cambridge: Harvard

- University Press, 2005.
- Miliakova, L. B, editor. *Kniga pogromov: pogromy na Ukraine, v Belorussii i evropeiskoi chasti Rossii v period grazhdanskoi voyny 1918-1922gg: sbornik dokumentov*. Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2007.
- Mosse, George L. *Confronting the Nation: Jewish and Western Nationalism*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993.
- Nathans, Benjamin. *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia*. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002.
- Negru, Constantin. *Școala Pedagogică din Cahul: pagini de istorie*. Chișinău: Labrint, 2003.
- Negru, Elena. *Politica etnoculturală în R.A.S.S. Moldovenească, 1924-1940*. Chișinău: Prut Internațional, 2003.
- Nicolenco, Viorica. *Extrema Dreaptă în Basarabia, 1923-1940*. Chișinău: Civitas, 1999.
- Novick, Peter. *The Holocaust in American Life*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.
- Olshansky, Rudolph, ed. & trans. *Letiashchie Teni: stikhi evreiskikh poetov Bessarabii v perevode s idish*. Chisinau: Pontos, 2000.
- Polishchuk, Mikhail L. *Evrei Odessy I Novorossii: sotsial'no-politicheskaia istoriia evreev Odessy i drugikh gorodov v Novorossii, 1881-1904*. Jerusalem: Gesharism, and Moscow: Mosty Kultury, 2002.
- Popovici, Andrei. *The Political Status of Bessarabia*. Washington, D.C.: Ransdell, 1931.
- Reinharz, Jeduda and Anita Shapira, eds. *Essential Papers on Zionism*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.
- and Anita Shapira, eds. *Essential Papers on Zionism*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.
- Riasanovsky, Nicholas V., and Mark D. Steinberg. *A History of Russia, 7th edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Roberts, Henry L. *Rumania: Political Problems of an Agrarian State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951.
- Rogger, Hans. *Jewish Policies and Right-Wing Politics in Imperial Russia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
- Roskies, David G. *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Rothschild, Joseph. *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars: A History of East Central Europe, Vol. 9*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974.
- Shachan, Avigdor. *Burning Ice: The Ghettos of Transnistria*. Shmuel Himmelstein, translator. Boulder: East European Monographs, 1996.
- Sharand, Moshe. *A dritl yahruhendert yidishe kooperatsie in Bessarabie, 1901-1933*. Chișinău: Aroysgegebn durkhn Farband fun di Idische kooperativn in Besarabye, 1934.
- Sachar, Howard. *A History of the Jews in the Modern World*. New York: Knopf, 2005.
- Shekhtman, Iosif. *Pogromy dobrovol'cheskoi armii na Ukraine: k istorii antisemizma na Ukraine, 1919-1920*. Berlin: Ostjudisches Historiches Archiv, 1932.
- Schreibman, Yechiel. *Semnadsat'iletnie*. Kishinev: Literatura Artistică, 1977.
- Schulman, Elias. *A History of Jewish Education in the Soviet Union*. New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1971.
- Schwarz, Solomon. *The Jews in the Soviet Union*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1951.
- Scott, James C. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

- Scurtu, Ion, editor. Nicolae Encu, translator. *Istoriia Bessarabii ot istokov do 1998 goda*. Chişinău: O. i O. Gibu 2001.
- Sebastian, Mihail. *Journal 1935-1944: The Fascist Years*. Patrick Camiller, translator. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000).
- Shafir, Michael. *Romania Politics, Economics and Society: Political Stagnation and Stimulated Change*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1985.
- Shneer, David. *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918-1930*. New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Siegelbaum, Lewis. *Soviet State and Society between the Revolutions, 1918-1929*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Simon, Leon. *Selected essays of Ahad ha- 'Am*. New York: Anthem, 1970.
- Slezkine, Yuri. *The Jewish Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- . *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994.
- Snyder, Timothy. *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Statutul Evreilor din Romania*. V. Pantelimonescu, compiler. Bucharest: Ziarului Universul, 1941.
- Shternshis, Anna. *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.
- Spirin, L. M. *Rossia 1917 god: Iz istorii bor'by politicheskikh partii*. (Moscow: Mysl', 1987).
- Stanciu, Ion, coordinator. *The Jews in the Romanian History: Papers from the International Symposium*. Ioan Petru Vascan et. al, translation. Bucharest: Silex, 1996.
- Stanislawski, Michael. *Zionism and the Fin de Siècle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- . *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: The Transformation of the Jewish Question in Russia, 1825-1855*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983.
- . *For whom do I toil?: Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Stites, Richard. *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Sullivan, Robert S. *Soviet Politics and the Ukraine, 1917-1957*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962.
- Țăcu, Octavian. *Problema Basarabiei și relațiile sovieto-române în perioada interbelică, 1919-1939*. Chişinău, Prut Internațional, 2004.
- Times Atlas of European History*. London: Times Books, 1994.
- Turda, Marius and Paul J. Weindling, eds. *Blood and Homeland: Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900-1940*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007.
- Urussov, Sergei D. *Zapiski Gubernatora: Kishinev, 1903-04*. Moscow: V. M. Sablin, 1907.
- Ussoskin, Moshe. *Struggle for Survival: a history of Jewish credit co-operatives in Bessarabia, Old-Rumania, Bukovina, and Transylvania*. Jerusalem: Jerusalem Academic Press, 1975.
- Vago, Bela and George Mosse, *Jews and Non-Jews in Eastern Europe, 1918-1945*. New York: Wiley, 1974.
- Vartichan, I.K., et. al. *Sovetskaia Moldavia: Kratkaia Entsiklopediia*. Kishinev: Moldavskoi Sov. entsiklopedii, 1982.

- Veidlinger, Jeffrey. *The Moscow State Jewish Theater: Jewish culture on the Soviet stage*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- Volovici, Leon. *Nationalist Ideology and Antisemitism: The Case of the Romanian Intellectuals in the 1930s*. Charles Kormos, translator. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1991.
- Vital, David. *A People Apart: the Jews in Europe, 1789-1939*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Weber, Eugen. *Peasants into Frenchmen: the modernization of rural France, 1870-1914*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976.
- Weinberg, David H. *Between Tradition and Modernity: Zhitlowski, Dudnow, Ahad Ha-am and the Shaping of Modern Jewish Identity*. New York: Holes & Meier, 1996.
- Weinberg, Robert. *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Weininger, Otto. *Sex and Character*. Translation from the sixth German edition. London: William Heinemann; New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1906.
- White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination of Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.
- Wolff, Larry. *Venice and the Slavs: the discovery of Dalmatia in the Age of Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Wortman, Richard S. *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy, vol. 1*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.
- Zipperstein, Steven. *The Jews of Odessa, A Cultural History, 1794-1881*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985.

Journal Articles

- Avrutin, Eugene. "The Politics of Jewish Legibility: Documentation Practices and Reform During the Reign of Nicholas I" *Jewish Social Studies* 11(2) Winter 2005: 136–169.
- . "Racial Categories and the Politics of (Jewish) Difference in Late Imperial Russia" *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 8(1) Winter 2007: 13-40.
- Gelber, N.M. "The Problem of the Rumanian Jews at the Bucharest Peace Conference, 1918," *Jewish Social Studies* XII (3), July 1950, 223-246.
- Golushchenko, Oleg. "Crearea Republicii Autonome Sovietice Socialiste Moldoveneshti," *Revista de Istorie a Moldovei* 1997 no. 3-4, 67-82.
- Hamm, Michael F. "Kishinev: The Character and Development of a Tsarist Frontier Town," *Nationalities Papers* 26(1), Winter 1998: 19-37.
- King, Charles. "Ethnicity and Institutional Reform: The Dynamics of 'Indigenization' in the Moldovan ASSR," *Nationalities Papers*, 26 (1) 1998: 57-72.
- Korkut, Umut. "Nationalism versus Internationalism: The Roles of Political and Cultural Elites in Interwar and Communist Romania" *Nationalities Papers* 34(2) May 2006: 131-156.
- Neumann, Matthias. "Revolutionizing mind and soul? Soviet youth and cultural campaigns during the New Economic Policy, 1921-28" *Social History* 33 (3) August 2008: 243-267.
- Rose, Aharon. "The Haredim: A Defense" *Azure: Ideas for the Jewish Nation*, No. 25, Summer 2006, 29-60.
- Solonari, Vladimir. "Creating a 'People': A Case Study in Post Soviet History-Writing" *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4 (2) Spring 2003: 411-438.

- . “‘Model Province’: Explaining the Holocaust of Bessarabian and Bukovinian Jewry” *Nationalities Papers* 34 (4) September 2006: 471-500.
- Stratievski, Kyril Vasilievich. “Parteinaia elita Moldavskoi SSR, 1924-1940,” in *Moldova Academic Review*. No.1, 2002 (electronic version).
- Tartakovsky, Dmitry. “Conflicting Holocaust narratives in Moldovan nationalist historical Discourse” *East European Jewish Affairs* 38 (2) August 2008: 211-229.
- Turda, Marius. “The Nation as Object: Race, Blood, and Biopolitics in Interwar Romania” *Slavic Review* 66(3) Fall 2007: 413-441.
- Weinberg, Robert. “Demonizing Judaism in the Soviet Union during the 1920s” *Slavic Review* 67 (1) Spring 2008: 120-153.
- Weinstein, Harold R. “Language and Education in Soviet Ukraine” *The Slavonic Yearbook; The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. XX, 1941.
- Weitz, Eric D. “Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges” *Slavic Review* 61(1) Spring 2002: 1-29.
- Wolff, Larry. “Kennst du das Land? The Uncertainty of Galicia in the Age of Metternich and Fredro” *Slavic Review* 67 (2) Summer 2008: 277-300.

PhD Dissertations

- Clark, Charles E. *Doloi Negramotnost’: The Literacy Campaign in the RSFSR, 1923-1927*. PhD Diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1993.
- Rabinovitch, Simon. *Alternative to Zion: The Jewish Autonomist Movement in Late Imperial and Revolutionary Russia*. PhD diss., Brandeis University, 2007.
- Tanny, Jarrod. *City of Rogues and Schnorrers: The Myth of Old Odessa in Russian and Jewish Culture*. PhD diss., University of California at Berkeley, 2008.

Interviews in Chișinău, Moldova

Gitenshtein, Boris Mihailovich
 Kleiman, Rita
 Kopansky, Jacob Mikhailovich
 Schreibman, Yechiel
 Shlein, Dorina