

Igor Cașu. *Dușmanul de clasă: Represiuni politice, violență și rezistență în R(A)SS Moldovenească, 1924-1956*. Chișinău: Editura Cartier, 2014. 394 pp. n.p. (cloth), ISBN 978-9975-79-828-0.

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## Of Human Bondage: Repression and Resistance in Soviet Moldova

Twenty-five years after the fall of communism in Europe, the region is still confronted with the question of how to understand those regimes' appalling human rights record. A remarkable number of studies written by established and amateur historians; compilations of original documents put together by individuals with privileged access to key archives; and memoirs and self-serving testimonials penned by former victims, torturers, journalists, or simply witnesses of those trying times have been published at dizzying speeds throughout Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. While these books rest on various premises, get inspiration from different ideological positions, have divergent theoretical and empirical concerns, and are of significantly unequal value, they all try to explain reality during communist times. Of course, survivors of communism hardly need to be told that the authorities of those times upheld human rights selectively, if at all. Rather, this exercise of "collected memory," to use Jeffrey K. Olick's words, is undertaken mainly for the benefit of the region's new generations, who have no direct experience with communism, or the foreigners interested in that part of the world.[1]

Of the numerous historical overviews of communist crimes published in the former Soviet Union, Igor Cașu's *Dușmanul de clasă: Represiuni politice, violență și rezistență în R(A)SSM, 1924-1956* (The class enemy: Political repressions, violence, and resistance in Soviet Moldova, 1924-1956) stands out for its painstaking attention to historical details. Cașu draws on multiple archival sources,

an impressive knowledge of the scholarly debates centered on that period, a sound reexamination of total victim counts of various repression campaigns, and a sustained effort to unveil little-known or under-documented instances of repression, such as the 1924 food shortage and the persecution of Moldovans living close to the republic's border with Romania.

Two additional reasons make this study worth reading. First is the wealth of information it reports from previously unavailable state and secret archives, which Cașu was able to access as an expert contributor to the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of Communist Dictatorship in Romania (2006) and as vice president of the Presidential Commission for the Study and Evaluation of the Totalitarian Communist Regime in the Republic of Moldova (2010). His narrative follows closely the hundreds of documents he consulted for this project in the Chișinău collections of the KGB, the Ministry of Interior, and the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Second is Cașu's attempt to give a human face to victimization, and thus to go beyond abstract statistics and impersonal historical evaluations. He offers thirteen vignettes of victims, among them teachers, priests, church singers, village mayors, peasants, members of parliament, and others. These victims represent a cross section of society, including Romanian speakers and Gagauz, the politically active and politically indifferent, the poor and the not so poor. Collectively, these stories show the wide range of individuals who suffered persecution, arrest, deportation, imprisonment, torture, or death in the Gulag for be-

ing labeled “class enemies” for real or perceived crimes.

The volume includes six chapters that analyze the intense, successive campaigns of Bolshevik and Soviet repression on both sides of the Nistru (Dniester) River, including the territories of present-day Moldova that constituted the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) in 1940–91 and the territories of present-day Transnistria and Ukraine that constituted the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) in 1924–40. The volume’s timeline begins in 1917, when the Moldovan Democratic Republic was declared in Bessarabia in the wake of the Russian Revolution, and ends in 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev denounced Joseph Stalin’s crimes in his famous “secret speech.” It excludes periods of relatively low repression, as well as the crimes committed on these territories by Romanian authorities during World War II. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on human rights violations committed on the left bank of Nistru by the Bolsheviks against Moldovans during 1917–33 and 1937–38, which foretold later repression campaigns by the Soviets in Moldova proper. These chapters also present popular resistance during the Russian Civil War (1919–21), the Red Terror of 1919–21, the food shortages of the 1920s and the 1930s, and the collectivization campaign of 1929–33. They furthermore describe how the Great Terror affected Moldovans during 1937–38.

The remaining chapters document human rights violations that occurred in Soviet Moldova after 1940. Chapter 3 includes eight vignettes detailing Soviet repression of 1940–41, which was launched after the Red Army occupied the then Romanian territories of Bessarabia, Northern Bucovina, and Hertza. Repression took the form of abusive political arrests, death sentences, deportations, the massacre at Fântâna Albă, and a forced labor campaign, which together affected close to 120,000 individuals (that is, some 4.5 percent of the republic’s population). Chapter 4 is a comprehensive examination of the starvation campaign of 1946–47, during which between 150,000 and 200,000 Moldovans lost their lives, some of them while travelling to the Ukraine in search of food. Chapter 5 turns the lens on the mass deportations of 1949–51, which affected close to 35,800 Moldovans, over

11,800 of whom were children. Finally, chapter 6 focuses on popular reactions to de-Stalinization and the break with Stalin’s “bad communism” that Khrushchev sought to achieve through his condemnation of Stalin’s crimes. These chapters present critical reactions to the regime; the regime’s interaction with the society; and its championing of Moscow’s interests, voiced by Communist Party members, peasants, workers, civil servants, members of religious groups, intellectuals, and only partially rehabilitated former deportees.

Cașu’s fine work opens important research avenues. A second volume continuing the narrative from where this one ends and explaining the mechanisms of repression from 1953 to 1991 might prove Cașu’s thesis that “political repression did not characterize only the Stalinist era, as many think. The Soviet regime treated as a political crime any more or less *open* anti-regime manifestation. The difference between [the Stalinist and post-Stalinist periods] is that before 1953 repression was very brutal, taking the form of *summary executions, deportations and murder through mass starvation*, whereas after Stalin [the regime] renounce[d] these methods” (p. 15). The discussion of popular reactions to de-Stalinization included in chapter 6 is a good, but insufficient, start in this direction. In addition, the wealth of individual cases that Cașu presents could help us come up with sharper definitions of repression and resistance so as to map instances when they are political or apolitical in nature, to show the links between organized and individual resistance, and to more clearly delineate active and passive forms of opposing the regime. Cașu’s overview should be supplemented by a more thorough discussion of the nature of state-led repression and society-driven resistance that identifies the conditions under which they trigger each other. Eloquently written and thoroughly researched, Cașu’s sweeping overview of early Soviet crimes in Moldovan territories is likely to remain a reference book for years to come.

Note

[1]. Jeffrey K. Olick, “Collective Memory: The Two Cultures,” *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 3 (1999): 333–348.

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