The Cultural Struggle:

Literacy and Propaganda in the Rural Areas of Post-war Soviet Moldavia (1945-53)

After the Soviets annexed Bessarabia in June 1940, and again after its recapture in August 1944, the authorities launched a campaign to increase adult literacy. The context was one of high tension, as a result of the war and the policy of enforcing the re-establishment and (re-) sovietisation of government apparatus. The ‘elimination of illiteracy’ was influenced by the ideological tradition of the ‘cultural revolution’ of the 1920s and by wartime rhetoric, but it had both positive and negative aspects. On one hand, it was positive campaign for the education of the masses, for ‘cultural construction’ and in favour of ‘civilising popular culture’. On the other hand, it had negative objectives, because it was directed against ‘ignorance’ and also against the ‘wrongs’ of Rumanian education and propaganda.

The double-edged nature of disseminating literacy can be found in any modern process of compulsory schooling and adult literacy education: as Furet and Ozouf wrote about the process in France, ‘We all can guess, but nobody can really measure the psychological, social and cultural cost involved when written culture is introduced into societies based on oral communication’. The case of post-war Moldavia is a revealing one because of the great political importance which the Soviet authorities attached to literacy. My paper takes this example to examine how these dual components, both positive and negative, alternated and competed with each other, and
were enmeshed both in the practice of literacy education and in the discourse which promoted it. To understand the whole process, I have brought together for analysis two important perspectives: that of the state (in a series of speeches and official documents) and that of the ‘people’ (in a body of interviews conducted with a sample of rural inhabitants born in the 1920s). The agents of the literacy campaign – who represented the state but were mainly of popular origin – acted as bridges and intermediaries between the two ‘camps’.

The ‘cultural revolution’, which I mentioned above, was a systematic element of the speeches of officials and Bolshevik militants in the years 1920-1930.² It partly signified the process of mass education and ‘civilisation’ in a Leninist sense, and partly the radical and urgent transformation of the life and consciousness of the Soviet people through the class struggle (an interpretation deriving from Stalin and his followers). In fact, both tendencies co-existed in the Soviet ‘cultural revolution’, at least during the first Soviet decade and under Stalin’s regime. We can nevertheless distinguish two phases in its evolution, one positive, another negative. A positive phase of the Soviet cultural policy took root in relatively calm periods (the New Economic Policy of 1922-1928, the ‘interlude’ of 1933-1936 and the post-Stalinist ‘thaw’). In contrast, a negative and highly militant phase came to the forefront in the radicalising periods of the Soviet regime (War Communism in 1920-22, the Great Turning-Point of 1928-31, the Great Terror of 1937-38 and finally Zhdanovism in 1946-50). Of course, historians have indicated that negative features existed in calm periods, while positive features persisted in periods of radicalisation.³
This brief periodisation of Soviet cultural policy helps to define the historical and semantic context of the action and rhetoric of the ‘great changes’ promoted in post-war Soviet Moldavia, in which the literacy campaign played a part.

According to this periodisation, the post-war years corresponded to a period of radicalisation of the Soviet regime, and so it was a ‘negative’ phase in terms of cultural policy. The struggle to ‘eliminate illiteracy’ (the Russian abbreviation was *libkez*), pursued after the war in the villages of Soviet Moldavia, must be seen in its context of high tension between the Soviet authorities and the rural population. In spring 1944, Moldavian peasants were regularly and progressively subjected to food requisitioning in order to supply the Red Army and the areas most ruined by the war. This policy was applied indiscriminately, and led to a general famine in which an estimated 150,000 to 250,000 died in Moldavia in 1946-47. After a few years’ ‘reprieve’ the Soviet authorities introduced the compulsory collectivisation of agriculture in 1949. In the same year, 11,212 *kulak* families were deported to Siberian camps to eliminate the stratum of society considered most resistant to sovietisation, and to force the Moldavian peasantry to comply with Soviet measures.

The campaign for literacy was thus contemporary with grain requisitions, agricultural collectivisation and the deportation of the *kulaks*. It was profoundly marked by this conjuncture, both in its urgent and coercive application, and also in terms of the interpretation assigned to it as a ‘revolutionary’ project, directed against ignorance, backwardness and the errors inherited from the old regime.
The Central Committee of the Moldavian (Bolshevik) Communist Party (henceforth CCMCP-B) issued a series of resolutions (*postanovleniia*) in 1941, 1945 and 1951 on ‘the elimination of illiteracy and semi-illiteracy amongst the workers of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic’.

Republican leaders, as well as administrative and local party organisations, made regular pronouncements on the subject, either for public consumption or internal use. The Bolshevik leaders and militants of the 1920s positioned themselves in opposition to the Tsarist regime, which they blamed entirely for the high illiteracy rate.

In the same way, the Moldavian Soviet authorities saw education and the literacy campaign not as a continuation of the Rumanian regime’s efforts, but in radical opposition to them. So every official speech on the ‘elimination of illiteracy’ began by presenting alarming statistics on the state of Bessarabian illiteracy inherited from the Rumanian regime in 1940 (they were usually taken more or less at face value from the Rumanian census of 1930). Having established this, the authorities then reviewed the necessary tasks to be accomplished by the massive mobilisation of all administrative and party echelons, educators, propagandists and the civilian population (*komsomols*, clubs, secondary students in higher grades) to remedy the situation urgently.

Official speeches in the post-war period announced the ‘elimination of illiteracy and of semi-illiteracy’ in a tone strongly influenced by the recent war, alongside other priorities like the reconstruction of the economy destroyed by the occupiers or the ‘work of mass education and explanation’. References to the ‘elimination of illiteracy’ were an integral part of a more generally negative rhetoric which always aimed to ‘liquidate’ or ‘struggle against’ something: the ‘elimination of mistakes and errors’,...
the ‘liquidation of the consequences of bourgeois propaganda’, ‘the struggle against Rumanian-Moldavian nationalists’, and so on.\textsuperscript{12}

In the spirit of a famous citation from Lenin in which ‘the illiterate is outside politics’\textsuperscript{13}, the ‘elimination of illiteracy’ was regarded as one of the most important political objectives.\textsuperscript{14} Literacy went hand in hand with political education. The task of ‘inculcating the broad Moldavian masses with communist consciousness’ could only be achieved through literacy.

The CCMCP-B’s decision of 17 July 1945 made it obligatory for adults to attend basic literacy lessons in their mother tongue.\textsuperscript{15} But the ‘mother tongue’ was not the same for all Moldavians. According to the Soviet authorities, Moldavians all spoke Moldavian and not Rumanian (in its official Rumanian version). A language reform was adopted in June 1945, establishing the ‘Moldavian’ language with a Cyrillic alphabet, a new spelling and specific rules of grammar, breaking completely with literary Rumanian.\textsuperscript{16} As a result, a substantial number of Moldavians educated in Rumanian schools now had to learn written ‘Moldavian’, as well as Russian (the official language of the USSR), or they would be considered semi-illiterate. Thus the 1945 language reform, which slightly modified the criteria for distinguishing illiterates or semi-illiterates, merely served to increase their number.\textsuperscript{17} (In contemporary Soviet language, the ‘illiterate’ person was defined as being completely unable to read or write; the ‘semi-illiterate’ had ‘a very poor knowledge of reading and writing, or was almost unable to read and write’. These definitions were obviously far from clear). For Moldavians who had received some education in Rumanian schools, literacy now amounted to a counter-literacy, in the sense they
were called on to ‘forget’ their old ways of writing and adopt new ones. Most Moldavian peasants, who attended Rumanian primary schools at the end of the 1930s and/or during the Second World War and then became literate after the war, experienced a double literacy, and often a double semi-literacy. They learned to write first in Rumanian using the Latin alphabet, and then in ‘Moldavian’ using the Cyrillic alphabet. Some interviewees admitted they still get the two alphabets mixed up in their writing even today. ¹⁸

The Soviet administration was strongly and generously committed to making the rural population of Moldavia literate. The CCMCP-B urged on the Education Ministry and regularly checked that decisions were applied quickly and effectively. Substantial resources were allocated to the cause. The ‘socio-cultural’ sphere, which included literacy, education and propaganda, received 49% of the Republic’s budget in 1945 and 62% in 1950.¹⁹

Tens of thousands of cultural militants (kul’tarmeitsy) recruited from the komsomols (Communist youth) and young teachers started work after a month’s training. The most devoted militants earned material and symbolic rewards: diplomas from the Education Ministry, sometimes a laudatory article in the journal Moldova socialista or even, for the most brilliant ones, a government citation ‘For eminent merit in the service of popular education’.²⁰ A ‘socialist’ spirit of competition urged on groups of kul’tarmeitsy, and even different villages, each aspiring to the honour of bearing the red flag of the Council of Ministers and of the Central Committee of the Moldavian CP.²¹ The authorities favoured a pedagogical method which was not limited to the mechanical understanding of the characters, but which also embodied some political
I interviewed one former ‘cultural militant’ who gave her students the biography of Stalin to read, as her superiors desired.

However, the reports of the Party and the Education Ministry deplored the low level of adult literacy, no doubt attributed to the poor preparation and training of ‘cultural militants’. According to Education Ministry figures from 1946-47, out of 19,242 ‘cultural militants’, there were only 788 teachers (in other words who had studied pedagogy), or 3% of the total. Their number rose to 4,095 in 1949-50 which then amounted to 26% overall. The others were, in the words of a high-ranking party official, ‘peasants from the kolkhoz (collective farms) and workers who only had some primary schooling and were barely literate themselves’.

Many interviewees regarded the literacy lessons as a pointless burden. For most of them, being literate meant only learning how to sign their name. In the difficult circumstances in which they had to teach, the cultural militants were not very demanding:

I used to finish school lessons early to go to peasants’ houses [i.e. to give literacy lessons in their homes]. But there was no lighting, no electricity. There were only gas lamps or even just candles. I bought exercise books out of my own wages. My own pathetic wages. I taught them the alphabet, then they took their exams. Some were old people. I taught them at least how to sign their names, and not to just give their fingerprint for voting at elections or whenever.
The ‘cultural militants’ and their students both came from the same rural background and they tried to make their lessons just a little bit more pleasant:

Then he [a student] went out and came back with a jug of wine. We had a glass, then we signed the [exam] document. When all is said and done, did the poor old man really need to go back to school?  

Often both parties accepted the conventional formalities of the lessons.

In 1948, *Moldova socialista* trumpeted the fact that the current year would see the permanent end of illiteracy, but its achievement was regularly postponed. It was victoriously proclaimed that a million people had become literate between 1945 and 1950. But this victory was not yet definitive – it would now be celebrated on 1 January of the following year. The triumphalist enthusiasm for literacy at any cost had allowed some mistakes to creep in. Some cultural militants and local leaders were more concerned with statistics than actual results, and they drew up balance-sheets which did not correspond to the situation on the ground. Thus some groups were recorded as having eliminated illiteracy although this was not really the case.

After checking the situation, the Education Ministry’s inspectors deplored the low peasant attendance at literacy lessons especially by women. In fact in 1946-47, over half the women enrolled in *libkez* courses dropped out. As one high-ranking party official explained in his report:
The institutions of public education have not taken into account the fact that women, especially among the peasantry, are in certain situations not always able to attend \textit{libkez} classes and individual tuition in their homes has not been organised.\textsuperscript{34}

Besides, according to two interviewees, women were not under the same pressure as men to attend literacy classes,\textsuperscript{35} because they simply could not be mobilised. This perception is confirmed by the CCMCP-B resolution of May 1945 which urged the party district committee to

\begin{quote}
pay special attention to working with women and [try to] raise their cultural-political level, eliminate [their] illiteracy and semi-illiteracy, and involve them – female activists, Moldavian and from other nationalities – in co-operative and economic party work.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

By the early 1950s, the struggle against illiteracy had achieved remarkable results. The CCMCP-B resolution of 6 August 1951 announced that the campaign had been successfully completed in many districts.\textsuperscript{37} However, the knowledge acquired was often too superficial and consequently it did not last. In 1954, when the problem of illiteracy was declared officially resolved, the Moldavian government suddenly decided to put it back on the agenda. It published a free supplement to the journal \textit{Taranul sovietic (The Soviet Peasant)}, with a circulation of 40,000, for readers with
limited reading competence.\textsuperscript{38} These second thoughts on the part of the authorities\textsuperscript{39} about the education (including political education) of the peasantry were evidence of the huge gaps left by the literacy campaign, which had been conducted in such haste in the aftermath of the war.

Moreover, the reading of adult Moldavians in the 1940s rarely touched on politics. According to the interviews I conducted with a group of people from rural backgrounds born between 1920-1930, most Moldavian peasants used their newly-acquired literacy skills to write letters (usually to close relatives who were away doing their military service) and to read religious literature (notably books or manuals saved from the Rumanian period or even from Tsarist times).\textsuperscript{40} Reading technical manuals was quite common among men working as drivers or mechanics.\textsuperscript{41} Journals had a wide circulation in peasant households; subscription to at least three papers was later considered obligatory. Some informants remembered seeing a family member (usually the father) reading the newspaper.\textsuperscript{42} And yet in those days newspaper-reading was far from being current practice. Several respondents admitted they had used the paper for domestic purposes or as cigarette paper.\textsuperscript{43}

The success of the campaign to ‘eliminate illiteracy’ in post-war Soviet Moldavia was ambiguous. Statistics from the late 1950s proved that illiteracy had been completely eradicated from the Moldavian countryside. Nevertheless, the reading and writing practices generated by the campaign remained part of a traditional culture instead of leading its beneficiaries towards a new way of life as intended by the Party. One historian of the Russian literacy campaigns of the 1920s concluded that society’s militant enthusiasm of this project declined noticeably around 1926.\textsuperscript{44} In Soviet
Moldavia this enthusiasm had never existed in the first place, neither in the literacy campaign nor the other campaigns directed by Soviet authorities after the war. The speeches of communist leaders and official newspaper articles still adopted militant vocabulary to drive forward Soviet coercive policies (for literacy but also for grain requisitioning and collectivisation), which were resumed once again after the recapture of Bessarabia and Transnistria in 1944. But this rhetoric could not conceal the fact that it had become ‘routinised’.

In their writings, the Bolshevik leaders of 1910-1920, and especially Lenin himself, had fetishised literacy. After the war, this ‘enlightenment’ tradition nourished official communist discourse, in which literacy was an indispensable and indeed infallible means of transforming the consciousness of the masses and integrating them into the Soviet system. From this point of view, we can say that the adult literacy campaign missed its target in the villages of Soviet Moldavia. Its aims would be achieved through the education of new generations of Moldavians brought up in an entirely Sovietised school system. The ‘cultural revolution’ then took the form of a generational conflict which would not end until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

[Translated by Martyn Lyons]

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Ibid., p. 429-30.


*Kul’tura Moldavii*, op.cit., vol.2, part 1, p.190 (22 December 1945) and p. 223 (24 Jan 1948).


*Kul’tura Moldavii*, op.cit., vol.2, part 1, pp. 149, 159 and 222-3.

Ibid.


*Kul’tura Moldavii*, op.cit., vol.2, part 1, pp. 149 & 159 (resolutions of 23 May and 17 July 1945).

Ibid., p. 159.


18 Interviews with Roman Cozmac (b.1927 in Bocani), Fedora Bâncilă (b. 1931 in Sărata Veche), Nicolae Turtureanu (b.1930 in Bocani, now Făleşti), Alexei Isaicu (b.1924 in Cocieri, Transnistria).


20 V. Barbalat on the ‘critical stage in the permanent elimination of illiteracy’, *Moldova socialista* (MS), 18 Dec 1948, p. 3.


22 M. Pupkov, article on ‘The komsomols make the best kul’tarmeitsy’, MS, 18 Dec 1948, p.3.

23 Lidia Tiuliakova (b.1930, from Nisporeni).

24 See report of M.M. Radul, art.cit.


26 See report of M.M. Radul, art.cit., p. 224.

27 Articles on ‘Let’s have a more conscientious approach to the elimination of illiteracy’ and ‘At Bravicea the elimination of illiteracy is being sabotaged’, MS, 1 Nov. 1945, p.3 and 20 Dec. 1950, p.3.

28 Lidi Tiuliakova (b.1930, from Nisporeni).

29 Ibid. and interview with Stefan Bologan (b.1922 at Doltu).


32 See articles cited above in note 27.


34 Ibid., p. 224.

35 Interviews with Maria Potlog (b.1923 at Milești) and Vera Frunză (b.1930 at Dânceni).


39 This measure had already been discussed in 1947 but it was then rejected – Russian State Archives for Social and Political Research, archive 573, inventory 1, dossier 19, p. 3.

40 Interviews with Natalia (b.1922 from Chişinău), Zinovia Arsenie (b.1931 at Bălănesti), Leonid Vieru (b.1929 at Petroasa), Ana Palamari (b.1922 from Naslavcea), Ileana Talpă (b.1929 at Bălănesti), Maria Potlog and Nicolae Turturau, already cited.

41 Interviews with Minadora Axentea (Oloinice) (b.1925 from Arioneşti), Sofia Nirca (b.1931 from Cocieri, Transnistria).

42 Interviews with Nicolae Turturau, Zinovia Arsenie, Ana Palamari already cited, and Dumitru Arsenie (b.1926 at Bălănesti), Ecaterina Crăciun (b.1922 at Bălănesti), Marina Ciorici (Crăciun) (b.1924 at Bălănesti), Avram Nirca (b.1926 from Cocieri, Transnistria).

43 Interviews with Zinovia Arsenie, Dumitru Arsenie, already cited, and Serghei Cerchez (b.1915 from Bălănesti).