

New data on the practice of desertions from the Red (Soviet) Army as an expression of the anti-Soviet resistance of the Moldavian SSR population in the years 1944-1954

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Abstract

The history of the eastern part of what used to be Moldova, or the eastern area of Romanian territory located in the Pruto-Nistean interfluvium, which later became known as Bessarabia, is a tragic and turbulent one. In the last 200 years alone, this territory has undergone three occupations and annexations, all carried out by the Russian state in different forms: 1812, 1940, and 1944. The Sovietization of Moldova after the subsequent occupation of Bessarabia in the summer of 1944 proceeded with great difficulties, as the artificially created population of the Moldavian SSR resisted Soviet authorities in various ways. One of the forms of resistance was desertion from the Soviet Army. Desertion, a phenomenon characteristic of all armies worldwide, is a criminal offence that involves evading military service through various methods, such as fleeing from a unit or avoiding enlistment altogether. Under the conditions of forced Sovietization in the SSR between 1944 and 1953, this practice took on distinctly anti-Soviet characteristics, becoming a part of the population's struggle against the occupiers.

Keywords:

USSR; Moldavian SSR; Red Army (Soviet); mobilization; population; desertion; security services; soldier; officer; murder; escape; arrest.

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With the advance of the Red Army (later the Soviet Army, since 1946) into the territory of Bessarabia, as a result of the Uman-Botoșani operation and later the Iași-Chișinău operation, the Soviet authorities intensified the process of Sovietization and collectivization of the SSR. This process, which had begun as early as June 1940, was marked by forced collectivization, starvation, and mass deportations of the native population. The local Romanian population, as well as the non-Romanian one, showed reluctance towards the new authorities from the very first days of the occupation, expressing their disobedience through various forms of resistance. Among the multiple forms of anti-Soviet resistance during this period was the practice of desertion by young men conscripted into the Soviet Army, either by fleeing from military units or by evading military enlistment. The files of the party and Soviet bodies, as well as the military commissariats of the Moldavian SSR from 1944 to 1955, kept in the National Archives of the Republic of Moldova and the Archives of Social-Political Organizations of the Republic of Moldova, shed new light on this aspect of the history of resistance to the establishment the communist regime of that period. To the general notion of desertion, the Soviet military authorities attributed several meanings, among which the following were found: actual desertion from a military unit, evading enlistment in the ranks of the army and not appearing at the summons of the military commissariat, escaping from transport during the journey to the place of military service until upon taking the oath, not returning to the military unit from leave or medical treatment and others. Under the incidence of desertion also came pre-military young men compulsorily recruited for studies at vocational-technical schools (FZU) inside the USSR.

The massive mobilization of the population of the SSR began with the advance of Soviet troops on the territory of the country. The USSR was viewed by the Soviet military command as an important demographic source of replenishing the Red Army's losses suffered during the 1944 campaign on all fronts of operations. Between March and December 25, 1944, alone, hundreds of thousands of men were mobilized into the army, as follows:

- in the units of the Odesa Military Region – 115,504 people;
- in the units of the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts – 123,776 people;
- pre-military mobilized – 2,658 people;
- mobilized as a reserve of the Odesa Military Region – 21,343 people;
- in TOTAL – 263,281 people.

At the same time, 23,334 people were mobilized in the economy (AOSPRM, Fund 51, inventory 3, file 438, f. 4). But starting the mass mobilization of the population, the Soviet and military authorities collided with a new phenomenon for them, that of mass desertions of the mobilized population from military units or evasion from mobilization. From the beginning, this phenomenon received a pronounced anti-Soviet character. Thus, in June 1944, more than 300 newly mobilized soldiers from Soroca County, all Moldovans, led by Gumenâi Venedict (AOSPRM, Fund 51, inventory 3, file 431, f. 21). In June 1944, a group of deserters from the Red Army,

numbering 7 people, led by Ruga Ion, originally from the Rudi commune, armed with 2 rifles and an automatic pistol, operated in the forest from Otaci, and in the forest from Țeplenești, Bălți county, another group, headed by Chicu Grigorie, originally from that village ([AOSPRM, Fund 51](#), inventory 3, file 431, f. 22). The most dangerous for the authorities was, however, an armed group of deserters, composed of 7 people, who were active in the commune of Șeptelici and whose goal was the armed struggle against the Soviet power ([AOSPRM, Fund 51](#), inventory 3, file 431, f. 24).

The magnitude of the phenomenon was so great that it alarmed the military authorities who, in the informative note addressed on July 25, 1944, in the name of Nikita Salogor, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Moldavian SSR, communicated that “among the Moldovans mobilized in the Army Red shows the tendency to desert from the army units aggravated by the anti-Soviet spirit” ([AOSPRM, Fund 51](#), inventory 3, file 45, f. 48). Thus, only from the 35th Rifle Training Division, in July 1944, 32 trainees, all Moldovans, deserted from the districts recently “liberated” by the Red Army. It is symptomatic that the organizers of the fugitives, among whom N. Spinei stood out, as he was later sentenced to death by the Soviet judiciary, were in the past part of the Romanian army ([AOSPRM, Fund 51](#), inventory 3, file 45, f. 48 verso). Alarmed by the growth of the phenomenon and to put an end to the growing tendency of Moldovans to flee from the ranks of the Red Army, a special commission was created within the central party and Soviet bodies, tasked with developing concrete measures to combat desertions, composed of 9 persons, as follows:

1. Comrade Proletarschi, head of the military section of the Bender (Tighina) county party committee;
2. Captain Mulita, deputy head of section 1, RSSM Military Commissariat;
3. Lieutenant-Major Ivliev, deputy head of section 1, fight against banditry, People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) of the RSSM;
4. Captain Cuceruc, deputy head of section 1, fight against banditry, People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) RSSM;
5. Comrade Haidalov, head of the military section of the Chisinau district party committee;
6. Lieutenant-major Corniuhin, deputy head of section 2, Străseni district police station;
7. Comrade Minin, instructor of the Military Department CC PC(b) Moldova;
8. Captain Gologalov, secretary of the party organization of the Military Commissariat of the USSR;
9. Captain Kocetkov, head of section 2, fight against banditry, People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) RSSM ([AOSPRM, Fund 51](#), inventory 3, file 431, f. 16).

Despite Bolshevik enthusiasm and efforts, the commission’s work proved ineffective, ending in total failure. From month to month, the number of fugitives increased, also supported by the relatives who remained at home who urged them to flee in letters

sent to the army. Aware of the censorship of letters sent, even written in Romanian, many used code words or phrases and words written in the Gypsy (Roma) language, incomprehensible to Russians (AOSPRM, Fund 51, inventory 3, file 45, f. 1). Much more serious was the fact that deserters and those who evaded mobilization gathered in groups and began to wage an armed struggle against the Soviet power. Thus, in the Comratul Nou commune, on January 5, 1945, the father and son Slavovici killed the official F. Gherasimov, in charge of agricultural supplies, who intimidated the population with mass mobilizations in the army. His successor, who had just taken office, met the same fate, killed on January 11, 1945. On the same day, the secretary of the Chirsova village Soviet, V. Tafratov, was killed. Also active in Bugeac was a group of people who evaded military service, plotting the assassination of the presidents of the village soviets in Taraclia and Căinari (AOSPRM, Fund 51, inventory 3, file 89, f. 12). In the forest near the town of Olănești, a group composed of 85 people was hiding from the mobilization. In the first two months of 1945 alone, 3,226 deserters and people evading service in the Red Army and 980 deserters mobilized to work in the USSR industrial complex were detained in Bender (Tighina) county, a fact that could not jeopardize the announced plans regarding the mobilization of the population of the republic for war (AOSPRM, Fund 51, inventory 3, file 89, f. 13).

The analyzed documents demonstrate a surprising fact, for the current situation in the Republic of Moldova, but explainable, from a historical point of view, namely, the hostility of the population of Bugeac, mostly Gagauz and Bulgarian, towards the Soviet power and the Red Army and the sincere sympathies towards Romania. So, in March 1945, Baradja Maria, a Bulgarian citizen from the Taraclia commune, urged the locals to be a little more patient, because "in the spring of 1945 our liberators - Romanians will come to Bessarabia", and the resident of the Cazaclia town, Stefoglo Mihail, a Gagauz by nationality, urged the population not to cede their lands to collective farms, because "soon the Romanians will come to Bessarabia and ours must be helped [...] we must hide from the mobilization and meet the Romanian army". The resident of the Tătar Copceac commune, Anghelcev Tudor, a Gagauz by nationality, agreed and declared loudly that "it is at all costs necessary not to end up in the Red Army [...] **because Bessarabia was and will be Romanian**". The president of the village Soviet from Cazaclia, Dobrova Xenia, deserves all the respect of the current generation, as, despite the position she held, not only openly claimed in front of the citizens that "life in the USSR is harmful to the peasants, and the communists are impostors, while the Romanians in the interwar period hung with respect for the Gagauz and there were no political reprisals", but she also warned the men from the date of mobilization so that they would have time to hide in the forests (AOSPRM, Fund 51, inventory 3, file 89, f. 20).

Despite the measures taken, the situation worsened every day. The extent of the phenomenon can be demonstrated by the number of deserters and evaders apprehended between April 1944 and April 1945, without taking into account those who were not caught, data presented in the following table:

TABLE 1
Number of deserters and evaders apprehended in April 1944 – April 1945
 (AOSPRM, Fund 51, inventory 3, file 89, f. 19)

| Județ | Number of evaders caught | Number of deserters caught |
|------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| Chișinău | 1 113 | 1 480 |
| Soroca | 1 894 | 4 091 |
| Bălți | 2 082 | 3 478 |
| Orhei | 1 614 | 1 312 |
| Bender (Tighina) | 3 114 | 2 013 |
| Cahul | 2 315 | 1 905 |
| Stânga Nistrului | 810 | 901 |
| TOTAL | 12 942 | 15 180 |

The process continued with no less scope in the following years. In the years 1947-1948, 162 people who deserted from the army were registered (AOSPRM, Fund 51, inventory 7, file 60, f. 113). During the entire year of 1948 and four months of 1949, 240 cases of evasion from the Soviet Army, 208 cases of desertion and 30 people did not show up at the mobilization points were registered in the SRSM (AOSPRM, Fund 51, inventory 8, file 76, page 71). The processing of all existing documents allows us to find that, from 1946 to 1954, 228 cases of desertion from the ranks of the Soviet Army were reported. In fact, only 3 Russians, a Jew and a Buryat were certified among the deserters, the rest being Moldovans, including four people - Moldovans from the town. Chilia (Ukrainian SSR) denotes once again that the phenomenon of desertion had a pronounced national character of anti-Soviet resistance. The created situation can be presented in the following table:

TABLE 2
Number of deserters from the Soviet Army (by years)

| Rayon | Year | | | | | |
|-------------------|------------|----------|------|----------|----------|----------|
| | 1948-1949 | 1950 | 1951 | 1952 | 1953 | 1954 |
| Bravicea | | | | | | |
| Călărași | | | | 6 | 2 | |
| Lipcani | | | | | | 1 |
| Edineț | | | | | 3 | |
| Drochia | | 1 | | 3 | | |
| Strășeni | | | | | | |
| Otaci | | | | | | |
| Ocnîța | | | | | 4 | |
| Soroca | | | | | | |
| Zgurița | | | | | | |
| Olănești | | | | | | |
| Vulcănești | | | | | | |
| Chipirceni | | | | | | |
| Total - 84 | 228 | 1 | | 9 | 9 | 1 |

The analysis of the table demonstrates that the maximum number of cases of desertion fell on the years 1948-1949, the most difficult years in the contemporary history of Moldova, when the process of forced collectivization took place, resulting in starvation and mass deportations of the population of the republic, which is still an additional argument that desertions from the Soviet Army, in the concrete conditions of the SSR in those years, became a form of anti-Soviet manifestation. The districts most affected by this phenomenon were Soroca, including Zgurița district, which was part of Soroca county and Bravicea district.

The absolute majority of deserters were caught by the militia bodies or by the military authorities and returned to their units, such as the case of soldiers Jardan Diomid, Moroșan Ștefan and Brașovean Nicolae, who, on June 11, 1950, fled from military unit no. 53609, but were caught on 15 June 1950 instead. Kamișovka, Vladimir region ([ANRM, Fund 2862](#), inventory 3, file 5, f. 2). A similar case took place on January 30, 1952, when Calin Ștefan, originally from the village of Buda, Călărăși district, soldier of military unit no. 02151, ordered within Pereiaslavovka, Kaliningrad region, at 10 p.m., taking advantage of the lack of electricity, fled from the unit's disposal under the pretext of going to the old house. After a month of unsuccessful searches, he returned voluntarily, in February 1952, to the unit, not finding the possibility to leave the region ([ANRM, Fund 2859](#), inventory 3, file 4, f. 8). The flight of the Greek soldier Dumitru, who left military unit no. 86716 on 06.01.1954 and was caught and returned to the unit on 07.01.1954 ([ANRM, Fund 2859](#), inventory 3, file 10, f. 1) can also be mentioned.

There were also cases when the search lasted longer, the fugitives managed to hide from the Soviet authorities and, having travelled thousands of kilometres, arrived safely home. Thus, on the night of December 11 to 12, 1947, from the 492nd Independent Construction Battalion, located in the city of Novo-Fominsk, the soldiers Popescu Vasile and Coptari Timofei deserted. The following night, also from the same unit, the soldiers Negruță Ion, Gorman P. and Gulea I, all originally from the Zgurița district, did the same, going towards their homeland ([ANRM, Fund 2875](#), inventory 3c, file 1, f. 7-8). Catching them was made difficult because the fugitives, arriving in their homeland, knew perfectly well all the places where they could hide, information that the local militia and military authorities, mostly coming from inside the USSR, did not have. The search, in the summer of 1948, for the deserters Guțu Vasile and Ceban Gheorghe, who avoided all the raids and ambushes organized by the military bodies in collaboration with the local militia, was also unsuccessful, as they managed to hide in the forest and the fields of corn ([ANRM, Fund 2875](#), inventory 3c, file 3, f. 25). Lucky also turned out to be the soldier of the 7th guard company, South Operative Group (Romania), Șandra Vasile, a native of Ciuciuleni commune, Strășeni district, who deserted from the unit in December 1946, searched until October 1949, without being found ([ANRM, Fund 2873](#), inventory 4, file 8, f. 5). We can only assume that he remained in Romania, being hidden by the population.

Among the cases of desertion, there were also absolutely exceptional examples. If the success of V. Şandra's escape from the military unit can be explained by the possible help given to this Moldovan by the population of Romania, among which he could easily hide his Soviet citizenship, then the escape carried out by the soldier Cozubenco Ion, seems as if taken from a novel of fiction. On March 27, 1950, Ion Cozubenco, a soldier in the 459th Independent Airfield Technical Security Battalion within the Soviet military occupation group in Germany, and a native of Palanca, Călăraşi district, took advantage of the fact that, at that time, the Soviet occupation zone in Germany was still completely separated from the Western occupation zones. He left his unit and fled to the American occupation zone ([ANRM, Fund 2859](#), inventory 3, file 4, f. 14), thus becoming inaccessible to Soviet justice.

The anti-Soviet nature of the desertion phenomenon can be easily demonstrated by the existence of armed groups formed by deserters who were active in the territory of the SSR. A representative example is the case of Ştefan Ion Bătrîncea, who, after being conscripted into the Soviet Army by the Călăraşi Military Commissariat, fled from the recruitment assembly point on December 11, 1950. He went on to form an armed group that, over two years, terrorized the local Soviet authorities. Only after special security forces were involved in his capture, on July 14, 1952, was he arrested and brought to justice ([ANRM, Fund 2859](#), inventory 3, file 4, f. 4). A group of deserters, composed of six people, was also active in the summer of 1948 in the town of Sudarca, Otaci district ([ANRM, Fund 2891](#), inventory 2, file 2, f. 70). An illegal anti-Soviet group was also formed in the summer of 1949 in the village of Recea, Străseni district, which was active within that district. This group, in 1949, killed the president of the village Soviet from Pânăşeni commune, and in 1950 seriously injured the secretary of the UTCL (Komsomol) organization from Zubreşti. In the summer of 1950, the members of the group were arrested by the security authorities ([ANRM, Fund 2879](#), inventory 3, file 4, f. 4).

In conclusion, we can state that, during the period 1944-1954, the desertions of the autochthonous population from the Moldavian SSR had a massive and clear anti-Soviet character, becoming a form of the struggle of the Moldavians against the Soviet occupation. Over time, thanks to the retaliatory measures, but also the "taming" of the Soviet regime during the Khrushchev "thaw", this phenomenon disappeared as a manifestation of the anti-Soviet trend.

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