

Glinski, Basia. Review. "Monk Moise. *Do Not Avenge Us: Testimonies about the Suffering of the Romanians Deported from Bessarabia to Siberia*. Gabor, Octavian, translator. Citrus Heights, CA: Reflection Publishing Co., 2016. 324 p."

Traditionally, the idiosyncratic and subjective nature of witness testimonies has precluded their incorporation within academic histories developed using positivist methodologies. Eschewed by historians who preferred to research official archival documents, personal narratives were often neglected due to the phenomenological nature of their content. Further, the singular qualities intrinsic to individual testimonies vitiated their acceptance as valid representations of historical events. Letters, memoirs, diaries, poems, and formal interviews do not conform easily to empirical research objectives, particularly when separate individuals may experience and recall identical events dissimilarly. For historians seeking to construct balanced and objective accounts, witness testimonies ostensibly defied analytical corroboration. The tension between the realms of memory and history qualified their association as being one defined varyingly by separation, competition, and even opposition.

In recent decades, however, the transformation of the relationship between memory and history has led to increased acceptance of the use of witness testimonies by historians as well as to the rise of memory studies as a research field. While there are several reasons for this evolution, one influential factor has been the increased documentation by historians of Holocaust survivors' testimonies. These accounts have established an educational resource that provides a human context to the statistical accounting of the Holocaust, which has contributed to increased interaction between the domains of memory and history. While a new historiographical role for the use of witness testimonies emerged, it is one in which the accounts have generally served to support the official documentation gathered by historians to reconstruct the past. This subservient role ensures that testimonies that do not confirm existing credible archival materials often escape critical consideration. Yet, these are the statements that potentially expose new areas of investigation, particularly when governments that have perpetrated crimes suppress access to the evidential documentation which reveals their culpability. In this case, personal testimonies may illuminate events that might otherwise remain unknown; in doing so, collective memory itself may act as a legitimate point of departure for the reclamation of historical veracity.

The emergence of an additional category of witness testimonies related to World War II reveals a chapter of war events that generally has been omitted from the historiography of the war in the United States. These witness accounts pertain to the Soviet occupations and mass deportations conducted during and after World War II, following the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on August 23, 1939. This 10-year non-aggression treaty between the Soviet Union and Germany included a secret protocol that assigned the territories of Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, and Finland to either German or Soviet spheres of influence "in the event of a territorial and political rearrangement". The USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or the Soviet Union) also declared an interest in Bessarabia — a territory in eastern Romania — while Germany did not assert political interest in the province.

Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, without opposition from the Soviet Union, while the latter occupied eastern Poland on September 17, 1939. The USSR immediately began a political cleansing process that included confiscating private property, rigging elections, and executing or arresting intellectuals, priests, as well as military and government officials. In February 1940, the Soviet Union began a series of four mass deportations of Polish civilians to regions including Siberia, Northern European Russia, and Kazakhstan; deportees were imprisoned, sentenced to slave labor, or forced to work on collective farms. This general process was repeated in the additional territories annexed by the USSR during World War II as it purged those regions of populations considered to be “anti-Soviet elements” that might organize resistance to the communist regime.

“Do Not Avenge Us: Testimonies about the Suffering of the Romanians Deported from Bessarabia to Siberia” is a collection of 6 witness testimonies from Romanians who were deported from Bessarabia by the Soviet Union during and after World War II. Translated into English by Octavian Gabor, the book is one component of a testimonial collection initiated by Monk Moise Iorgovan’s research regarding the spiritual life of political prisoners detained by the communist regime. His introductory investigation evolved into a series of interviews with survivors of communist persecution, and a video archive was established in order to document their testimonies. The production of a documentary film followed; the book is the most recent addition to this grouping and is scheduled to be followed by another volume.

For several reasons, this book is a decidedly noteworthy addition to the existing testimonial literature regarding the Soviet occupations and deportations during World War II. The deportations from Bessarabia are perhaps the least known of those conducted by the USSR following the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. A virtual absence of witness accounts published in English has further impeded awareness of this specific war chapter, particularly in the West. In contrast to the singularity of experience related in an individual testimony, this collection of 6 testimonies aggregates numerous examples of Soviet repression and allows readers to note experiential consistencies extant across multiple accounts. Several recent publications address the religious lives of those deported to the Soviet Union; however, the testimonies in this volume seamlessly integrate the evolution of each exile’s spirituality following entrance to the gulag, where all became unmoored from the institutional and communal anchors of their faith in Bessarabia. Vividly illustrating the communist persecution of Romanians from Bessarabia, these survivors’ voices resurrect atrocities committed by Stalin’s totalitarian regime that warrant further investigation and restore the legitimate historical reality and complexity of World War II.

The Soviet Union’s interest in Bessarabia during World War II was not a new development. Bessarabia — once the eastern portion of the Principality of Moldavia — had been ceded previously to the Russian Empire in 1812, following the conclusion of the Russo-Turkish War. After refusing to recognize Bessarabia’s union with Romania in 1918, the USSR established the Moldavian ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) in 1924 across the Dniester River in Ukraine, anticipating a potential future claim on Bessarabia. During World War II, the Soviet Union issued an ultimatum to Romania on June 26, 1940, demanding that its government withdraw from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. While the latter was not included in the Soviet sphere of influence defined in the Nazi-Soviet Pact, it was claimed as compensation by

the Soviet Union for the earlier loss of Bessarabia to Romania. In order to avoid war, Romania acquiesced to the Soviet demand on June 28, 1940. The Soviet Union then occupied Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, and the Hertza region, which was included without explanation. On August 2, 1940, the USSR established the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic which was composed of the majority of Bessarabian territory as well as a portion of the Moldavian ASSR. Northern Bukovina, the Hertza region, and the northern and southern sections of Bessarabia were incorporated into the Ukrainian SSR.

Not long after the first Soviet mass deportation of over 26,000 people on June 12-13, 1941, Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina were captured in July 1941 by Germany and Romania following the launch of Operation Barbarossa. The Soviet Union occupied the region once again in August 1944 and quickly began a second campaign of repression including arrests, executions, religious persecution, and political cleansing. Two additional mass deportations from the regions were organized by the USSR in 1949 and 1951; these followed a deadly famine that had occurred in 1946-47. The famine alone led to the deaths of approximately 150,000 – 200,000 Soviet Moldavians and remains one of the least known chapters of Soviet repression, even as greater awareness of the Holodomor in Soviet Ukraine has grown in recent years.

Collected specifically from Romanian Orthodox Christians who lived in Bessarabia prior to Soviet occupation, each testimony in “Do Not Avenge Us” is structured in a tripartite form that includes descriptions of life in Bessarabia prior to deportation, experiences in the USSR, and ultimate return to the Moldavian SSR. The recollections of pre-war Bessarabia provide meaningful details regarding the values and mores of Romanian culture; translator Octavian Gabor also provides additional explanation and maintains the use of Romanian vocabulary in select instances. The language and culture depicted — both later subject to eradication by the policies of Russification — reveal a world defined by strong faith and family structures, traditional values, and reverence for the land. The depiction of this pre-war realm reminds readers that the Eastern European borderlands and the various cultures situated there possessed autonomous identities that transcend traditional interpretations of the region as being defined solely by its geographical position between Western Europe and Russia.

Four women and two men constitute the group of survivors whose testimonies are included in the book, and they experienced various means of exile from Bessarabia to the Soviet Union. Both men were arrested by the USSR in years following the second Soviet occupation of Bessarabia and were subsequently sentenced to the gulag as prisoners in the Soviet Union. One woman was part of the first Soviet mass deportation that occurred on June 12-13, 1941, while two more were included in the second mass deportation of July 6, 1949. The remaining survivor was not part of a mass deportation but was deported in 1952 solely because a family member, her father, had been arrested previously by the Soviets in 1951. The book does not include any testimonies from victims of the third mass deportation which took place on April 1, 1951. This was a smaller deportation of roughly 2,600 people that specifically targeted religious elements, particularly Jehovah’s Witnesses, that were considered a threat to the Soviet regime.

While the book focuses exclusively on Romanians deported from Bessarabia, it is important to note that the Soviet deportations affected all ethnic groups in the region. The 6 testimonies are presented without maps of the region or details of the deportations, which would have provided

an informative context for readers unfamiliar with the history of Soviet repression during and after World War II. While not a means to provide a complete reconstruction of the period, these testimonies clearly document the horrific effects of Soviet occupation along with the nature of exile and the gulag. Perhaps most significantly, consistent details provided in these accounts establish a foundational framework with which to confirm and further investigate Soviet crimes that have long been suppressed. In this case, memory indeed serves as a resource capable of documenting and restoring historical accuracy.

For example, embedded within these testimonies of deportation are startling recollections of the 1946-47 famine which occurred in the Moldavian SSR following the second Soviet annexation of the territory. Four out of the 6 individuals included in this volume describe the famine in their accounts; the remaining two survivors were exiled to the USSR prior to 1946. A drought in 1946 severely impacted agricultural production in the region, and mass starvation developed by August. The famine became more widespread, and death rates peaked during the early spring and summer of 1947. While the Soviets claimed that the drought and post-war conditions were responsible for the famine, in fact, communist policies and actions generated the catastrophe. Local authorities continued to collect grain from peasants in order to fulfill requisition quotas and avoid accusations of sabotage by the Soviet Union, while grain distribution and response to the catastrophe were both insufficient. Three witness accounts in the book document the government's relentless confiscation of grain and other provisions, describing aggressive searches and seizures from the attics and storage places of peasants. A fourth witness indicates that her survival was contingent upon her parents' ability to hide food; milk from the family's cow also contributed to their nourishment. Had the government halted the requisitioning of grain, Moldavians would have been able to rely on their supplies of stored food to endure the famine.

While the Soviet goal of agricultural collectivization progressed slowly in the Moldavian SSR for a variety of reasons, the witness testimonies in "Do Not Avenge Us" indicate that the famine was organized intentionally to frighten Moldavians and spur them to join collective farms voluntarily. Survivor Ion Moraru observed that authorities confiscated grain from peasants only to let it rot outdoors, confirming his belief that the communists aimed to subjugate peasants. Mass starvation of the population led to the consumption of weeds, mud, and toxic substances; even cases of cannibalism were documented. While the deadly effects of the famine lingered into 1948, it was the ample harvest of August 1947 that alleviated mass starvation. Teodosia Cosmin's testimony indicates that by that stage, her grandmother, sister, and one-year old brother had all succumbed to the effects of starvation. Her father had been arrested previously and sent to the gulag in 1945. The famine severely accelerated the disintegration of family structures instigated by Soviet repression during both occupations of the region.

Cosmin's narrative and that of survivor Margareta Cemârtan-Spânu demonstrate the link between the famine and the Soviet Union's subsequent decision to accelerate the rate of agricultural collectivization. While the famine waned, Soviet authorities prepared to exile those deemed to be obstacles to the goal of collectivization. By the autumn of 1948, authorities prepared lists that identified kulaks who had not yet joined collective farms, in order to organize the second mass deportation from the region. Roughly 35,000 people were exiled to the USSR during "Operation South," the mass deportation that began on July 6, 1949. According to

historian Igor Casu, just over 23,000 of these deportees were kulaks, and the number of collectivized homesteads rose from 32 percent to 80 percent five months after the deportation.<sup>i</sup> Those who remained in Soviet Moldavia were no doubt motivated by fear to join the farms following the deportation.

After the famine, Cosmin, Cemârtan-Spânu, and their remaining family members were included in the second mass deportation. Their accounts describe the horrific 3-4 week unsanitary train journey to the USSR, which included overcrowded cars, excessive heat, lack of food and water, illness, and death. Exiled at just 6 years old, Cemârtan-Spânu's testimony also relates the grim discovery that a fellow deportee chose to drown her 4-month-old baby during the train journey after no longer being able to feed him. Deported to a settlement in the Urals, Cemârtan-Spânu eventually joined an orphanage following her father's arrest. Upon her ultimate return to Soviet Moldavia, she discovered a physical and cultural landscape that was transformed by communist rule almost as profoundly as she had been altered by her ordeal in the USSR.

Most importantly, the testimonies in "Do Not Avenge Us" document the consistently barbaric nature of Soviet repression in Bessarabia and the USSR. Each narrative relates numerous examples of terror that were responsible for causing profound suffering and loss among victims. Russification, false arrest, torture, famine, deportation, slave labor, starvation, destruction of family units, and death are only some of the atrocities that delineate the nature of Stalin's despotism during and after World War II. Perhaps the most tragic testimony in the collection was given by Tamara Oală Pleșca, who was deported at almost six years old with her family to Novosibirsk during the first mass deportation on June 12–13, 1941. A younger brother died during the journey, and her father was separated from the family upon arrival to Novosibirsk and sent to a gulag. One by one, the remaining five members of Tamara's family died due to starvation; as an orphan, Tamara eventually wandered through the USSR alone. For all the survivors, managing captivity and the duress of trauma required great mental strength. Ion Moraru recognized one technique to blunt the subjugation inflicted by Stalin's totalitarian regime. After becoming trapped in a collapsed mine in Siberia, he "...realized at that moment that my thoughts were the only things that I still had; since thoughts are in spirit, any prison in the world could not handcuff them. I became somewhat peaceful, and I did not fear death (188)."

While many of the experiences described in this collection were overwhelming and intolerable, the survivors are also able to recall the humane actions of others that co-existed alongside the cruelties experienced by them in exile. A memorable example includes Nicolae Istrate's description of his imprisonment in a gulag in Chelyabinsk, where he acted as a guard in a barrack that served as a morgue. Corpses from the camp were delivered there daily, and starving prisoners sometimes entered the morgue at night to cannibalize the bodies. One night, Istrate encountered an individual who inquired if the day's corpses had arrived; unexpectedly, the man then began praying and administering last rites for the dead. Istrate discovered that the man was a priest who had been his French teacher in Bessarabia and later volunteered to be a missionary during the war. The priest's actions were a reminder that even in the midst of appalling circumstances it was possible to encounter choices that generated moments of courage, compassion, and generosity.

For this group of Orthodox survivors, spirituality often provided an additional method of coping. Faith prolonged psychological endurance, provided solace, and preserved cultural identity. The collection begins with an account from Margareta Cemârtan-Spânu who lost her faith during her ordeal in the USSR but later reclaimed it in Soviet Moldavia through the bond with her son; it concludes with the volume's most robust and explicit expression of faith's worth by Nicolae Istrate. As a result of his suffering in the gulag, Istrate's faith intensified, his capacity to forgive was amplified, and his rejection of binary judgments developed his ability for empathy. While those exiled as adults relied on a mature level of internalized faith, children in turn depended more on their external environment for spiritual reassurance. Adult family members and religious rituals provided a spiritual framework that sustained the youngest, but as a result, it became feasible for children to relinquish faith if they lost family members during exile.

Faith served as a scaffold that allowed survivors to cultivate and nourish a conceptual vision of their native land during exile and upon their return to a transformed Soviet Moldavia. Performing religious rituals when possible in Siberia was one way of maintaining a connection to Bessarabia that provided emotional sustenance. Further, symbols of home acquired virtually divine qualities that elicited powerful sensory memories of Romania. After receiving an apple from a Bessarabian visitor to Siberia, Margareta Cemârtan-Spânu recounts how her family members treated it as a precious icon that evoked reverence for their homeland. Despite having abandoned prayer following deportation to Siberia, Margareta's father even dedicated a prayer session to the treasured apple. Later sliced and consumed as if it were a form of communion, the apple allowed the exiles to once again experience a sense of unity with Bessarabia through a ceremonial custom derived from religious practice. Faith fostered the survivors' devotion to memorializing pre-war Bessarabia, and for Margareta, recovering the faith she lost during exile allowed her to reclaim her Romanian identity after returning to Soviet Moldavia.

The witness accounts included in "Do Not Avenge Us" belong to a broader category of testimonies documenting the Soviet occupations and deportations during World War II, events which have long been omitted from war historiographies in the West. The memories from Romanians in Bessarabia included in this volume detail the experiences of communist oppression, exile, and the gulag, while also describing lesser known Soviet atrocities — such as the famine — that merit further research. Most importantly, this collection rectifies the inaccurate mythological narrative of World War II promulgated in the United States, which asserts that the war was a linear, binary conflict between good and evil. In fact, the Allies partnered with Stalin's totalitarian regime in order to defeat Hitler and subsequently consigned millions of people to decades of Soviet domination. Demonstrating the war's moral complexity, these witness accounts are also a potent reminder that the epicenter of suffering and destruction during the war was in Eastern Europe. The voices of these individuals reflect their endurance as well as the palpable absence of those who did not survive, and their legacy must be one of remembrance as Russia today continues to celebrate Stalin, seal archives, and deny culpability for the Soviet Union's actions during World War II.

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<sup>1</sup> Casu, Igor. (2010) "Soviet Terror in Soviet Moldavia, 1940 – 1953", in McDermott, K. and Stibbe, M. (eds.) *Stalinist Terror in Eastern Europe: Elite Purges and Mass Repression*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 49-50.