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Ethno-Demographic Processes in Bessarabia in the XIX – Beginning of the XX Ages*

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Этнодемографические процессы в Бессарабии в XIX – начале XX в.

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The territory between the Prut and the Dniester rivers later called Bessarabia became part of the Russian Empire under the Treaty of Bucharest, as a result of the Russo-Turkish war of 1806 – 1812.

At that time, the Principality of Moldavia, the nominee owner of the Prut-Dniester interfluvium, was the Ottoman Empire vassal state. The Principality finally fell under the Turkish rule at the end of the 1530s. Some of Moldavian lands became rayas – the annexed territories governed by the Turkish military authorities. They were Belgorod (renamed as Akkerman by the Turks and governed by the Turkish authorities from 1484), Kilia (from 1484), Tighina (Bender from 1538), Ismail (from 1595) and Khotyn (from 1715). In 1569 steppe plains (called Budjak) located between the river mouths of the Dniester and the Danube were given to Nogais (later called Budjak Tatars; Mirza's Government House was in Kaushany). That is, 25,500 square km out of 45,800 square km of the territory later called Bessarabia were part of Turkish rayas and Tatar lands (55.7% of the interfluvium territory or

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27.2% of the whole of the Moldavian Principality territory). The north of the principality being the area of Rusins' compact settlement Bukovina (now Chernovtsy Oblast of Ukraine and Suceava County in Romania) including Siret and Suceava, the first capitals of Moldavia, was occupied by the Austrian troops in July 1774 and annexed to the Austrian Empire on May 7, 1775, under agreement with Turkey. The territory of 10,438.8 square km with the population of 70,000 people was ceded to Austria (the said territory was about 15% of the Moldavian territory).

The rest of the Moldavian Principality ceased to exist after the unification with Walachia in 1859 in order to create the United Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia (called Romania in 1861) that became independent in 1877 in the course of the Russo-Turkish war.

The Prut-Dniester interfluvium annexed to Russia was a sparsely-populated region devastated by Turks and Tatars. According to the imperial period ethnographers' data, the population size here varied between 200,000 and 334,000 inhabitants.

On February 29, 1828, Bessarabia lost its status of an independent region and became part of the Novorossiisk Governorate General. Tsinuty were renamed as districts. In 1873 Bessarabia became a Governorate.

A number of research papers published after the transfer of the region to Russia under the treaty with the Turks pointed out that the Bessarabian population was polyethnic. Legislative measures could not but impact social and economic welfare of the region resulting in the increase of its population. The first household census was held in Bessarabia in 1817. According to it, 98,526 families or 491,685 people domiciled in Bessarabia.

The northern and central regions in Bessarabia were mainly inhabited by Moldavians; Rusnaks (Rusins) lived in the northwestern part of the Khotyn District and in the territories along the Dniester banks. The population of the southern part consisted of new settlers, such as Great Russians, cossacks, Nekrasov or Ignat Cossacks, Bulgarians, Moldavians, Vlachs, Serbs, Armenians, the Swiss, Germans et al. Towns and "shtetls" (small settlements) in both parts of Bessarabia were mainly inhabited by Jews.

1,935,412 people lived in Bessarabia in 1897, according to the census data.

Among them, the number of Moldavian native speakers amounted to 920,919 people (47.58%). Ethnicity was determined in the census by the person's native language. The total number of Russians was 537,943 people; they were spatially dispersed according to their native

languages as follows: Great Russian spoken by 155,774 people (8.05%), Little Russian spoken by 379,698 (19.62%), Byelorussian spoken by 2,471 (0.13%). In Bessarabia there also lived 11,696 (0.6%) Poles, 103,225 (5.33%) Bulgarians, 60,206 (3.11%) Germans, 8,636 (0.45%) Gypsies, 228,168 (11.79%) Jews, 55,790 (2.88%) Turkish speakers, 2,737 Greeks and 2,080 Armenians. Some Gagauzes named Bulgarian as their native language, the rest of the Gagauz population claimed Tatar Turkish (as well as Ottoman Turkish) as their native languages. 55,615 people (97.7% of men and 99.6% of women) among those who considered Ottoman Turkish as their mother tongue were Orthodox Christians. This again suggests that ethnicity is not always determined by the language one speaks.

Rusins were assigned to the Little Russian native speakers. At that time, their population in Bessarabia was not less than 250,000 people. However, only 64 people determined Rusin as their native language being different from the other Russian languages.

According to their religion, the population of Bessarabia consisted of 1,600,999 Orthodox Christians, 28,532 Old Believers, 2,265 Gregorian Armenians, 246 Armenian Catholics, 19,825 Roman Catholics, 54,258 Protestants, 228,528 Jews and 617 Muslims (or Mussulmans as they were called in the 19th century). Orthodox Christians made up 82.72% of the entire Bessarabian population.

The coexistence of various ethnic groups in Bessarabia, which was part of the Russian Empire, contributed not only to cross-fertilization of cultures but also led to the formation of a specific (supra-ethnic) multiethnos called the Bessarabians notable for their high passionarity, "imperial consciousness" and mentality which was different from that of Romanians, though Romanians share ethno-cultural affinity with Moldavians.

Keywords

Russia, Turkey, Moldavia, Bessarabia, Moldavians, Russians, Rusins, Ukrainians, Gagauz, Bulgarians, Romanians, Russian.