

## THE PENETRATION OF NARODNIKIST IDEAS IN BESSARABIA AND THE STRUGGLE OF THE GOVERNMENT DIRECTORATE OF THE GENDARMERIE CORPS AGAINST THEM

### PĂTRUNDEREA IDEILOR NARODNICISTE ÎN BASARABIA ȘI LUPTA DIRECȚIEI GUBERNIALE A CORPULUI DE JANDARMI ÎMPOTRIVA LOR

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**Rezumat:** *Imperiul Rus, un stat autocrat, cu puternice rămășițe ale dreptului feudal de castă, era bazat pe un sistem de drept care avea ca scop intimidarea cetățeanului în vederea apărării și conservării orânduirii sociale anacronice existente. Una din instituțiile de stat, responsabile de securitatea regimului și lupta împotriva mișcărilor revoluționare și antistatale, era Corpul Independent de Jandarmi. Înființat în 1867, avea structuri organizatorice în toate provinciile și guberniile ale Imperiului, inclusiv și în Basarabia, unde activa Direcția regională a corpului de jandarmi. Imediat după înființare, Direcția gubernială de jandarmi s-a confruntat cu răspândirea în Basarabia a ideilor narodniciste, curentul dominant în mișcarea social-politică și anti guvernamentală din Imperiul Rus în anii 60-90 secolului al XIX-lea. Această mișcare în Basarabia avea un caracter izolat și era strict supravegheată de poliție și jandarmi, care jucau un rol secundar față de organele poliției. Datorită curenților interni caracteristici acestei instituții de stat la început de activitate, cum ar fi lipsa profesionalismului și cadrelor de înaltă calificare, Direcția cu greu făcea față situației, ne având posibilitatea de a opri valul de contrabanda revoluționară și răspândirea ideilor revoluționare printre populație, în special în rândul tineretului studios. Această stare de lucru era tolerabilă pe timp de liniște și acalmie politică, dar putea genera mari probleme în perioade de crize politice sau război. Influența narodnicismului în Basarabia nu a luat proporții nu datorită activității eficiente a jandarmilor, ci din degenerarea internă a mișcării.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *Direcția de jandarmi, Basarabia, mișcarea social-politică, ideile narodniciste*

**Abstract:** *The Russian Empire, an autocratic state with strong remnants of feudal caste law, was based on a legal system that aimed to intimidate the citizenry in order to defend and preserve the existing anachronistic social order. Various specialized state institutions were responsible for the security of the regime and internal order, among which the Gendarmerie Corps played a central role. This Corps was established on*

September 9, 1867, and later the Bessarabia region's Government Gendarmerie Directorate was established. Immediately after its establishment, the Government Directorate of Gendarmes faced the spread in the region of Narodnikist ideas, the dominant current in the social-political and anti-government movement in the Russian Empire in the 60s-90s of the 19th century. The activity to combat the revolutionary trend in Bessarabia, especially the Narodnikist one, was based on two principles: the implementation of preventive measures against the revolutionary movement and the undertaking of follow-up actions aimed at annihilating concrete cases of anti-government activity. Of those duties, the simplest was the supervision of studious youth, whose number in Bessarabia was quite limited. According to the statistical data on the number of secondary school (high school) students, compiled by the Bessarabia Gendarmerie Directorate for the year 1881, their number was quite small, 2,788 people. The small number of intellectuals made it easier for the Bessarabian gendarmes, limited in quantity, to detect and supervise people who could possibly join the Narodnikist movement. The concerns of the gendarmes in combating the Narodnikist movement were complicated and difficult. Due to the lack of internal premises for development, it was focused on combating the activity of followers of revolutionary ideas among Bessarabian students in the main university centers of the empire, among which Zamfir Ralli-Arbore stood out. In Switzerland, Z. Ralli-Arbore organizes the clandestine transportation of anti-government literature to the Russian Empire, the activity that gave the Bessarabian gendarmes so much trouble. The burden of fighting the smuggling phenomenon fell to the Independent Border Guard Corps and police bodies, the gendarmes having the mission of coordinating the actions and taking over cases related to state security, the activity, which was quite inefficient. In addition to illegal literature, the smugglers successfully transported across the country's borders typographic characters, but also entire printing presses, passing them off as agricultural machines, which they officially sent from Romania to the Reni station. Despite these successes, the tsarist authorities and especially the gendarmerie were hardly able to cope with the phenomenon of smuggling, the rate of completion of investigations and convictions on this article being extremely low, reaching the figure of approximately 7% of the total number of apprehensions.

The Directorate's major concern was also combating the activity of revolutionary circles and the individual actions of the representatives of the anti-government movement existing in the region. The first socialistic circle in Bessarabia was founded in 1874 by Nicolae Zubcu-Codreanu, who stirred up the studious youth of Chisinau. Under the influence of Narodnikist ideas, some of the studious Romanian youth practiced "walking into the people". Thus, Petru Braga, a student of the Theological Seminary in Chisinau "went to the people, being inspired by the populist movement, establishing a blacksmith's shop in his native village, Ulmu", followed by another student of the Seminary, Filip Codreanu, a relative of N. Zubcu-Codreanu and the father of the future academician of the Romanian Academy, Radu Codreanu, who went to Nisporeni as a teacher, under the influence of the same movement, for propaganda purposes.

The Narodnikist movement in Bessarabia had an isolated character and was strictly supervised by the police and gendarmes, who played a secondary role to the

*police bodies. Due to the internal deficiencies characteristic of this state institution at the beginning of its activity, such as the lack of professionalism and highly qualified personnel, the Directorate was hardly able to face the situation, having the opportunity to stop the wave of revolutionary smuggling and the spread of revolutionary ideas among the population, especially among studious youth. This state of affairs was tolerable in times of peace and political calm, but could cause great problems in times of political crisis or war. The influence of Narodnikism in Bessarabia did not take on proportions not because of the effective activity of the gendarmes, but because of the internal degeneration of the movement.*

**Keywords:** *Gendarmerie Directorate, Bessarabia, social-political movement, Narodnicist ideas*

## **Introduction**

Immediately after its establishment, in 1867, the Government Directorate of Gendarmes faced the spread of Narodnikist ideas in the region, the dominant current in the social-political and anti-government movement in the Russian Empire in the 60s-90s of the 19th century. The movement, animated by the ideas of A. Herțen and N. Cernișevski, crystallized organizationally in 1861, when the secret society "Zemlia i Volia" ("Land and Freedom") was founded, which included several autonomous revolutionary circles<sup>1</sup>. This society existed until 1864, when it dissolved itself, giving rise to a large number of anti-government circles active both in the country and abroad, animated by the ideas of M. Bakunin, P. Lavrov, P. Tkaciov. After the failure of the march in the people, the Russian revolutionaries changed the tactics of the struggle, establishing, in 1876, the revolutionary organization "Zemlia i Volia", which aimed to prepare uprisings on the territory of the empire. In 1879 "Zemlia i Volia" split into two independent organizations - "Narodniaia volia" ("The will of the people" in Romanian), which campaigned for terrorist methods in the fight against tsarism, and "Ciornî peredel" ("Black Repartition" in Romanian), who were adherents of gradual changes in society, through propaganda in the broad masses, especially among the peasants, and the schooling of the population<sup>2</sup>. The Narodnik current, being a movement of intellectuals, recruited its followers from among studious youth, whose number was quite limited, a fact that made it easier for the tsarist authorities to supervise this movement.

## **Context**

The above relates in its entirety to the newly established Directorate of Gendarmes from Bessarabia. The activity to combat the revolutionary trend, especially the narodnikist one, was based on two principles: the implementation

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<sup>1</sup> Iliia Budak, *Obscestvenno-politiceskoie dvijenie v Bessarabii v poreformennîi period.* (Kishinev: Cartea Moldovenească, 1959), 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Istoria SSSR, Tom II. Rossia v XIX veke. Krizis feodalisma. Utverjdenie kapitalisma.* (Moskva: 1954), 591.

of preventive measures of the revolutionary movement and the undertaking of follow-up actions aimed at the annihilation of concrete cases of anti-government activity. Prophylactic measures, carried out by the gendarmes, provided for the secret or judicial surveillance, in collaboration with police bodies, of persons under criminal investigation on political files<sup>1</sup>; careful monitoring of the relations of studious youth, especially students of higher educational institutions, with the lower social classes<sup>2</sup>; careful monitoring of the relations of studious youth, especially students of higher educational institutions, with the lower social classes<sup>3</sup>; control over the entry into the region of literature prohibited for distribution in the empire, as well as control over compliance with the regime of residence visas and legal crossing of the state border. Of those duties, the simplest was the supervision of studious youth, whose number in Bessarabia was quite limited. According to the statistical data on the number of secondary school (high school) students, compiled by the Directorate of Gendarmes from Bessarabia for the year 1881, and which did not change radically during the 1960s-1990s, the situation was as follows:

**Tabelul 1.** List of the number of students in Bessarabia in 1881<sup>4</sup>

N d/o	Name of the institution	Number of students	Russian	Polish	Hebrew	Other nationalities	Noble	Priesthood	Bourgeoisie	Peasantry	Other categories
1.	Chisinau Boys Gymnasium	660	441	55	132	32	346	19	208	12	75
2.	Chisinau Girls Gymnasium	500	270	28	90	112	288	14	180	3	15
3.	Real school (Gymnasium) Chisinau	159	61	16	27	55	68	1	49	5	36
4.	Progymnasium from Chisinau	277	166	19	117	8	121	5	131	8	12
5.	Progymnasium from Ismail	118	64	1	20	33	29	9	65	5	10
6.	The secondary school for	91	44	2	16	29	28	4	20	2	29

<sup>1</sup> Arhiva Națională a Republicii Moldova (ANRM), F. 297, inv. 1, d. 2, f. 67.

<sup>2</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 2, f. 67.

<sup>3</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 2, f. 68.

<sup>4</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 6, f. 115.

	girls in Ismail										
7.	Progymnasium from Akkerman	180	60	3	55	24	46	5	76	11	12
8.	The secondary school for girls in Akkerman	156	77	2	43	34	44	6	79	7	20
9.	School (Gymnasium) in Bolgrad	190	14	3	9	164 <sup>1</sup>	9	14	105	37 <sup>2</sup>	25 <sup>3</sup>
10.	Girls' high school in Bolgrad	166	14	-	2	150 <sup>4</sup>	10	6	142	8 <sup>5</sup>	-
11.	Teachers' seminar from Bairamcea	81	55	-	-	26	8	20	11	33	9
12.	Reni Boys' School	131	2	2	1	118	-	-	131	-	-
13.	Girls' school in Reni	79	3	-	21	55	-	-	79	-	-
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>2788</b>	<b>1271</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>533</b>	<b>840</b>	<b>997</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>1276</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>243</b>

The first thing that can be highlighted from examining the presented table is the small number of students (2,788) in pre-university education compared to the entire population of the region, which was around one million people. Leaving aside the sociological analysis of the statistics presented by the gendarmes, where Moldovans are completely absent among different categories of the population, hidden in the columns of other nations, nobles, peasants, we can see a high level of naivety, bordering on incompetence, that they showed officials of the Directorate when they did not include the Theological Seminary in Chisinau in the table. In the view of the gendarmes, the Theological Seminary was a bastion of loyalty to the regime, whose students were a priori excluded from the category of youth willing to embrace revolutionary ideas. Reality proved the inaccuracy of this conclusion, the seminarians becoming the leaders of the opposition movement to the authoritarian regime in the Russian Empire. Therefore, the small number of intellectuals made it easier for the Bessarabian

<sup>1</sup> Bulgari.

<sup>2</sup> Coloniști.

<sup>3</sup> Cetățeni bulgari.

<sup>4</sup> Bulgari

<sup>5</sup> Coloniști.

gendarmes, limited in quantity, to detect and supervise people who could possibly join the Narodnikist movement. According to the calculations of the researcher P. Munteanu, in the whole of Bessarabia and Transnistria in 1859 there were 57 subscribers to the magazine "Sovremennik" ("Contemporary"), in 1860 – 90 subscribers and in 1861 – 87 subscribers<sup>1</sup>, a fact that confirms the ease with which these people could be supervised by the authorities.

Another direction to prevent the spread of rebellious ideas in society was the control over the circulation of books by accepting those permitted for circulation in public and private bookstores and libraries and removing from circulation those prohibited. Lists of banned publications and books were published in special catalogs, edited by the Main Publishing Directorate in St. Petersburg and distributed to all the Government Directorates of Gendarmes. The number of titles was varied, tending towards quantitative growth. So, at the beginning of the 70s of the 19th century, the number of banned books was 66 names<sup>2</sup>, reaching the figure of 79 titles in 1876<sup>3</sup> and 196 at the end of the '90s<sup>4</sup>. Among the most dangerous for the regime banned books were "Cunning Mechanics" by the famous Russian statistician, of Romanian origin, Vasile Varzar, which in simple words described the taxation system existing in the Russian Empire, "The Story of Four Brothers" and "The Story of the Wise Naumnov", written by S. Kravcinski, the killer of the head of the Gendarmerie Corps N. Mezentshev<sup>5</sup>, the literary work of L. Tolstoy<sup>6</sup>, the works of K. Marx and F. Engels<sup>7</sup>. In the end, the logic of compiling the catalog of banned books is not clear, because among those that represented a real danger to tsarism, such as those quoted above, there were also some harmless ones, such as "Armenian novelists, dramatists and poets" or "The Waters minerals from Marienbaden in Bohemia. The history of discovery"<sup>8</sup>.

Much more complicated was the Directorate's activity in combating the concrete concerns of the exponents of the Narodnikist movement in Bessarabia. As in the previous period, in the absence of experience and truly professional cadres, the newly established Territorial Directorate of Gendarmes were entrusted with simple missions, the heavy work falling to the police, which had

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<sup>1</sup> Mihail Munteanu, „K voprosu ob uceastii bessarabskikh narodnikov v revoliutsionnom Iviienii Rossii v 60-70 godah XIX v.,” *Ucennie zapiski Kishinevskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta*, Tom XXXIII (1958): 98.

<sup>2</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 6, f. 33.

<sup>3</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 6, f. 78 verso.

<sup>4</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 6, f. 211.

<sup>5</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 6, f. 79.

<sup>6</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 6, f. 209.

<sup>7</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 6, f. 204, 211.

<sup>8</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 6, f. 200.

an extensive network of spies and secret agents<sup>1</sup>. One of these missions was the supervision of a destined Russian revolutionary, the Narodnik and ethnographer Vasili Kelsiyev, founder of the colony of Russian emigrants in Tulcea, who, disappointed by the nihilistic ideas of the Narodniks, decides to voluntarily surrender to the Russian authorities<sup>2</sup>. On May 19, 1867, Vasili Kelsiyev, passing into the Russian Empire through the Sculeni customs house, handed the head of customs a note announcing that he was a state criminal who wished to be arrested and handed over to the Russian authorities<sup>3</sup>. He was immediately arrested and transferred to Chisinau Prison, where, at the insistence of the Governor General of Novorossiysk and Bessarabia, Infantry General Pavel von Kotzebue, he was provided with optimal detention conditions<sup>4</sup>. On May 24, the head of the Directorate of Gendarmes in Bessarabia, Colonel Ermolin, receives an order from St. Petersburg that the prisoner be transferred to the capital of the empire and handed over to the Third Section of the Emperor's Personal Chancellery. To carry out the order, two of the best and most experienced gendarmes were selected, sergeant-inferior (unter-officer) Dimitrie Marchin and private soldier Stepan Timcenco<sup>5</sup>. For escorting the prisoner, money was allocated from the Directorate's account for two gendarmes, one prisoner and three horses in the total amount of 159 rubles 1 kopeck<sup>6</sup>. Arriving safely in the capital of the empire and handing over, on June 4, 1867, Vasili Kelsiyev to the III Section of the Emperor's Personal Chancellery, it was found that the named gendarmes could not return to Chisinau, because, despite all the existing instructions, the allocated money they were only for one direction. To send them home, the Third Section of the Emperor's Personal Chancellery procured them two train tickets to Ostrov station, giving 89 rubles and 74 kopecks for the journey from Ostrov station to Chisinau, a total of 109 rubles and 76 kopecks, the money, which had to be returned by the Territorial Directorate of Bessarabia to the central body<sup>7</sup>. This case once again demonstrates the level of competence of the management staff of the Gendarmerie Directorate in Bessarabia, which did not know existing management documents in the Gendarmerie Corps.

Another episode, which confirms the Directorate's subordinate role to the legal authorities, took place in the spring of the same year. For the investigation of an anonymous complaint regarding the suspicious activity of the chief of

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<sup>1</sup> Anatol Leșcu, *Basarabia și asigurarea logistică a trupelor ruse în anii 1812-1874* (București: Editura Militară, 2018), 228.

<sup>2</sup> Iliia Budak, *Obscestvenno-politiceskoie dvijenie v Bessarabii v poreformennîi period*. (Kishinev: Cartea Moldovenească, 1959), 25.

<sup>3</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 918, f. 32.

<sup>4</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 918, f. 24.

<sup>5</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 918, f. 12.

<sup>6</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 918, f. 14 verso.

<sup>7</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 918, f. 29.



police in Chisinau, Sergeant Fortunat Prjeťlavschi, Polish by origin, with the Polish rebels, who are allowed to stay illegally, without documents, in the capital of the province<sup>1</sup>, by order of the Governor General of Novorossiysk and Bessarabia, on March 23 a special commission was set up with the mission of conducting a search in the police chief's apartment and office. The president of the commission was appointed the vice-governor of Bessarabia, state councilor L. Cuťchevici-Chișchin, the members: Provincial Prosecutor V. Batianov; President of the Crușinschi Criminal Court; colonel Hoteaev, in charge of special affairs of the governor-general of Novorossiysk and Bessarabia, and finally, the head of the Gendarmerie Directorate of Bessarabia, colonel Stepan Ermolin<sup>2</sup>. The activity of the gendarmes, led by their chief, was limited to carrying out the search<sup>3</sup>, which could not be undertaken by the police bodies for easy to understand reasons, although the case was related to the security of the state, completed with the total acquittal of the sergeant.

Much more complicated and difficult were the concerns of the gendarmes in combating the Narodnikist movement itself. Due to the lack of internal premises for development, it was focused on combating the activity of followers of revolutionary ideas among Bessarabian students in the main university centers of the empire, among which Zamfir Ralli-Arbore stood out. Active militant in student revolutionary circles in Moscow and St. Petersburg, on the night of March 15, 1869, he was arrested and released a few days later, being exiled to Bessarabia under the supervision of the local police. Shortly after, in April 1869, he was arrested again, transferred to St. Petersburg, imprisoned in the Petropavlovsk fortress, from where he was released on March 16, 1871, on the bail of Prince Constantin Muruzi, with his expulsion to Bessarabia<sup>4</sup>. We consider that the statement of the researcher M. Munteanu regarding the release, in March 1869, of Z. Ralli-Arbore on the bail of Prince C. Moruzi<sup>5</sup>, it is an erroneous one, arising from the confusion of the chronology of the multiple arrests and releases of the Bessarabian nihilist. It is known that precisely after this release he left the Russian Empire clandestinely, in August 1871, through the Novoselita customs house and emigrated to Switzerland, which could not happen in 1869, when after his release he was again arrested and imprisoned in the Petropavlovsk fortress .

Arriving in Switzerland, Z. Ralli-Arbore continued his revolutionary activity which included the clandestine transportation of anti-government

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<sup>1</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 7939, f. 15.

<sup>2</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 7939, f. 16 verso.

<sup>3</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 7939, f. 15 verso.

<sup>4</sup> Gheorghe Tulbure, *Zamfir Ralli-Arbore. Activitatea revoluționară și concepțiile social-politice*. (Chișinău: Cartea Moldovenească, 1983), 34.

<sup>5</sup> Mihail Munteanu, „K voprosu ob ucestii bessarabskih narodnikov v revoliutsionnom Iviienii Rossii v 60-70 godah XIX v.,” *Ucennie zapiski Kishinevskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta*, Tom XXXIII (1958): 107.



literature to the Russian Empire, the activity which gave so much trouble to the Bessarabian gendarmes. In this context, it is necessary to mention that in the past, Marxist historiography attributed the credit for organizing the clandestine smuggling of banned literature in the Russian Empire exclusively to revolutionary circles and especially to N. Zubcu-Codreanu. Thus, the Romanian Marxist researcher, Gheorghe Haupt, claims that the task of "crossing the Romanian border of literature from abroad [...] was entrusted to N. P. Zubcu-Codreanu [...] who immediately stepped into the realization of this task"<sup>1</sup>. The statement is repeated by the researcher I. Budac who claims, in his work, that "narodnikist circles in Moscow and Petersburg [...] entrust Zubcu-Codreanu with organizing the transport of literature to Russia from abroad through Bessarabia"<sup>2</sup>. The idea takes root, becoming a dogma through its introduction by the researchers I. Budac and Ia. The thick, in the official Soviet version of the history of Moldova, represented by the History of the Moldavian Socialist Soviet Republic, vol.1, where the authors claim that Zubcu-Codreanu "is in charge of organizing and directing the shipment of revolutionary publications from abroad to the largest cities in Russia"<sup>3</sup>. Leaving aside the fact that the pioneering in organizing the illegal transport of literature from abroad to Russia through Bessarabia belongs to Z. Ralli-Arbore, who played a leading role in the Narodnikist movement, and not to N. Zubcu-Codreanu, we would like to mention that the organization of "revolutionary" smuggling was not the merit of the Narodnik revolutionaries. The author's research in this chapter demonstrates that the phenomenon of smuggling in the Russian Empire had a constant character. Bessarabia being one of the main transit routes for contraband within the Empire. Bessarabian smugglers united in large associations and groups, carrying out their activity, sometimes even attacking the pickets of the border guards<sup>4</sup>. According to the author's data, quite incomplete due to the lack of official statistics, in the second half of the 19th century, 260 cases of smuggling were registered in Bessarabia, it ranked third in the Empire in terms of smuggling, after the Russian-Prussian border and Russian-Austrian<sup>5</sup>. All the mentioned confirms the fact that the credit for organizing the smuggling belongs not to the revolutionaries, but to

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<sup>1</sup> Gheorghe Haupt, *Din istoricul legăturilor revoluționare româno-ruse. 1849-1881*. (București: Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, 1955), 147.

<sup>2</sup> Iliia Budak, *Obscestvenno-politiceskoie dvijenie v Bessarabii v poreformennii period*. (Kishinev: Cartea Moldovenească, 1959), 100.

<sup>3</sup> *Istoria Republicii Sovietice Socialiste Moldovenești*, Vol.1. (Chișinău: Cartea Moldovenească, 1967), 547.

<sup>4</sup> Artur Leșcu, *Legislația punitivă și sistemul penitenciar din Basarabia, 1812-1864*. (Chișinău: Valinex, 2021), 87.

<sup>5</sup> Artur Leșcu, *Legislația punitivă și sistemul penitenciar din Basarabia, 1812-1864*. (Chișinău: Valinex, 2021), 94.

the local smugglers' gangs, whose network was used by the revolutionaries for their purposes.

The burden of fighting the smuggling phenomenon fell to the Independent Border Guard Corps and police bodies, the gendarmes having the mission of coordinating the actions and taking over cases related to state security, the activity, which was quite inefficient. In the absence of experience and special training, the gendarmes could hardly face the challenges, the detection and capture of the revolutionaries was based more on chance than on a systematic thing to combat the existing phenomenon. How easily the officers of the gendarmerie corps in Bessarabia were misled is demonstrated by the case described in luxurious detail in his memoirs by Z. Ralli-Arbore. Disguised as a traveling Jewish merchant, with false bangs glued to his temples, he crossed the bridge from Sculeni unhindered, being greeted by a gendarme officer with the words "Look, this guy goes here and there every day! And they are all like that! I am convinced that he has no other occupation than smuggling"<sup>1</sup>. This gendarme officer was none other than Captain Nicolae Sozonov, assistant to the head of the Directorate of the Gendarme Corps in Sculeni. A real success of the Directorate was learning, by chance, at the beginning of January 1876, about the activity of N. Culeabco-Corețchi as the coordinator and responsible for transporting illegal literature from abroad to the Empire on the Bessarabian segment, established for this purpose in Chisinau. N. Culeabco-Corețchi avoided arrest only due to the fact that he was in Odesa when the gendarmes descended on his apartment<sup>2</sup>. Fleeing from Russia, he lived in exile, from where he returned to the Empire and, on May 13, 1879, was arrested in Tiflis (Tbilisi)<sup>3</sup>. Appearing in the file initiated by the Bessarabian Gendarmerie Directorate regarding political smuggling, he was transferred to Chisinau and imprisoned in the citadel of the locality's central prison. Regional prosecutor Varzar's assistant and a "young lieutenant of gendarmes [...] with no experience" were tasked with carrying out the investigation<sup>4</sup>, who turned out to be the aide-de-camp of the Chief of Directorate, Lieutenant Otto Trentovius, a graduate of the Riga Infantry School, class of 1875, which did not train officers, but non-commissioned officers for the army. Lacking the practical experience, the investigation took a slow step. In order to break the deadlock of the investigation, she was joined by the Head of the Directorate, Colonel Vladimir Yanov, described by the author as "a wizened and faded old

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<sup>1</sup> Zamfir Arbure, *În exil. Din amintirile mele*. (Craiova: Institutul de Editură Ralian și Ignat Samitca, 1896), 120.

<sup>2</sup> Nikolai Culeabco-Corețchi, *Iz davnih let. Vospominania lavrista* (Moskva: Izdatelstvo politkatorjan, 1931), 170.

<sup>3</sup> Nikolai Culeabco-Corețchi, *Iz davnih let. Vospominania lavrista* (Moskva: Izdatelstvo politkatorjan, 1931), 251.

<sup>4</sup> Nikolai Culeabco-Corețchi, *Iz davnih let. Vospominania lavrista* (Moskva: Izdatelstvo politkatorjan, 1931), 259.

man of small stature"<sup>1</sup>, who, in turn, could not get anything, N. Culeabco-Corețchi, after 14 months of detention, was released due to lack of evidence.

In connection with the activity of N. Culeabco-Corețchi, also occasionally, on December 2, 1875, the peasant of the village of Costuleni, Ion Begma, was arrested with two bales of contraband containing prohibited literature, and in February 1876, in Zberoaia, a lot was intercepted of clandestine literature, kept in 4 bales, which contained over 2,000 book titles. Due to lack of experience and procedural mistakes, the investigation got bogged down, the case coming to the attention of Section III of the Emperor's Personal Chancellery. Following an official investigation, a series of omissions and errors were revealed on the part of the people in charge of investigating the file, especially the gendarme captain Mitrofan Iavorschi. First of all, after finding the bales of literature, they were not all unpacked, which made it difficult to indict the people involved in transporting them. Moreover, for a month, from February 21 to March 23, 1876, the file was left aside, the investigators losing the opportunity to take advantage of the factor of surprise and confusion on the part of the suspects. It was only on March 23 that 4 suspects were interrogated who only confirmed the fact of the goods being seized. From March 23 until April 11, the file was left open again, the day when the citizen Parhanschi was interrogated, who testified about the involvement in smuggling of the residents of Chisinau, Boldișor and Constantin Popovici<sup>2</sup>. Captain M. Iavorschi immediately searched the apartment rented by C. Popovici and his mother's house, where his suitcase with various documents with personal content was found. During the searches, M. Iavorschi committed several procedural mistakes. Thus, the found documents were simply attached to the file, the officer did not find time to analyze them, the owners of the apartment and C. Popovici's mother were not questioned, and no measures were taken to find and catch him<sup>3</sup>. In the same years, in the village of Bărboieni, on the banks of the Prut river, during the search raid for contraband carried out by the border guards, in the vicinity of the house of Tanas Daragan, a bundle with 9 banned books was found, among which were also the complete editions of the works of V. Alecsandri and textbooks of Romanian grammar. During the interrogation, T. Daragan confessed that Constantin Popovici gave him the respective books to be transported from the border to the interior of the country<sup>4</sup>.

In addition to illegal literature, the smugglers successfully transported across the country's borders typographic characters, but also entire printing

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<sup>1</sup> Nikolai Culeabco-Corețchi, *Iz davnih let. Vospominania lavrista* (Moskva: Izdatelstvo politkatorjan, 1931), 264.

<sup>2</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 2, f. 132 verso.

<sup>3</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 2, f. 133.

<sup>4</sup> Ilia Budak, *Obscestvenno-politiceskoie dvijenie v Bessarabii v poreformennii period.* (Kishinev: Cartea Moldovenească, 1959), 145.

presses, passing them off as agricultural machines, which they officially sent from Romania to the Reni station<sup>1</sup>. In the fall of 1879, hiding places with typographical characters were occasionally found in Reni and Chisinau. Despite these successes, the tsarist authorities and especially the gendarmerie were hardly able to cope with the phenomenon of smuggling, the rate of completion of investigations and convictions on this article being extremely low, reaching the figure of approximately 7% of the total number of apprehensions<sup>2</sup>. According to official Russian data, in the period 1874-1877, 1,611 people were prosecuted for revolutionary activity in the Russian Empire, of which 1,054 were convicted. Among those convicted, 1.5% were peasants, accused of smuggling and 18 were agitators from Bessarabia<sup>3</sup>.

The Directorate's major concern was also combating the activity of revolutionary circles and the individual actions of the representatives of the anti-government movement existing in the region. The first socialistic circle in Bessarabia was founded in 1874 by Nicolae Zubcu-Codreanu who was leading agitation among the studious youth of Chisinau<sup>4</sup> of Romanian origin (Moldovans). During the Soviet period, special attention was paid to this fact, being interpreted as an example of "remarkable Russian-Ukrainian-Moldovan revolutionary ties"<sup>5</sup>. Despite the attempts of representatives of Soviet historiography to find documents in the archives of the USSR that would prove the activity of this revolutionary circle, they were not found, a fact noted by the researcher I. Budac<sup>6</sup>. We do not know the nominal composition of this circle, the period of existence, the actual activity. Due to the lack of any mention in the funds of the Directorate of Gendarmes from Bessarabia regarding the activity of the circle, we can assume that it represented an amorphous union of socialist ideas, whose activity was not even noticed by the gendarmes. It is certain that, under the influence of these ideas, a part of the Romanian studious youth practiced "walking into the people". Thus, Petru Braga, a student of the Theological Seminary in Chisinau "went to the people, being inspired by the populist movement, establishing a blacksmith's shop in his native village, Ulmu", followed by another student of the Seminary, Filip Codreanu, a relative of N. Zubcu-Codreanu and the father of the future academician of the Romanian

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<sup>1</sup> Zamfir Arbure, *În exil. Din amintirile mele*. (Craiova: Institutul de Editură Ralian și Ignat Samitca, 1896), 422.

<sup>2</sup> Artur Leșcu, *Legislația punitivă și sistemul penitenciar din Basarabia, 1812-1864*. (Chișinău: Valinex, 2021), 91.

<sup>3</sup> Alexandr Malshinski, *Obzor sotsialno-revolutsionnogo dvijenja v Rossii* (St. Petersburg, 1880), 293.

<sup>4</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 10, f. 4 verso.

<sup>5</sup> *Istoria Moldavskoi SSR s drevneushih vremion do nashih dnei*. (Chișinău: Știința, 1984), 209.

<sup>6</sup> Iliia Budak, *Obscestvenno-politiceskoie dvijenie v Bessarabii v poreformennii period*. (Kishinev: Cartea Moldovenească, 1959), 101.

Academy, Radu Codreanu, who went to Nisporeni "as a teacher, under the influence of the same movement, for the purpose of propaganda"<sup>1</sup>. In 1877, at the Pedagogical Seminary in Bairamcea (Níkolaiivka-Novorosiiska), a small anti-government circle of about ten people led by P. Socolschi was established by the students. A year later, 1878, F. Codreanu, A. Frunză and C. Ursu set up a circle of seminarians with a Poporanist character at the theological seminary in Chisinau, which attracted 16 people to its ranks<sup>2</sup>. The existence of the circle was short-lived, it self-dissolved after the arrests made by the police in April 1879, when some of the circle's members, especially C. Popovici and Corotchevici, were arrested and imprisoned in the citadel prison in Chisinau, and the leader of the circle, Axinte Frunza, fled to Romania.

As we can see, the number of active participants in the Narodnikist movement in Bessarabia was limited, their influence on the population was practically non-existent, a fact also noted by Soviet historiography which emphasized that "the activity of the circles was very limited"<sup>3</sup>, they were kept under the control of authorized state bodies through visual surveillance and searching of correspondence<sup>4</sup>. In total, in 1880, the Directorate had four files of a political nature, in which seven people were involved, including Axentie Frunze, arrested on March 31, 1880, after his illegal return from Romania<sup>5</sup>. That is why we consider exaggerated the claims of the researcher I. Budac, such as "in Chisinau and other cities of Bessarabia, in pubs, squares, railway stations, parks, everywhere police agents were lurking, eavesdropping and looking furtively into every book, magazine read [...] by people"<sup>6</sup>. Such activity was impossible, because the main states of the Gendarmerie Directorate in the region numbered nine people, and as for the number of the police force, it was insufficient, one policeman returning to 5 125 citizens, which meant that the physical police did not could cover the entire territory of Bessarabia<sup>7</sup>.

At the beginning of the 1880s, the Narodniks switched from propaganda to terrorist actions, culminating in the assassination, on March 1, 1881, of Alexander II. In such circumstances, the revitalization of the activity of the revolutionaries in Bessarabia had a retarded character, they specialized, as in the

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandru Boldur, *Istoria Basarabiei*. (București: Editura Victor Frunze, 1992), 388.

<sup>2</sup> Ilia Budak, *Obscestvenno-politiceskoie dvijenie v Bessarabii v poreformennîi period*. (Kishinev: Cartea Moldovenească, 1959), 178, 182.

<sup>3</sup> Ilia Budak, *Obscestvenno-politiceskoie dvijenie v Bessarabii v poreformennîi period*. (Kishinev: Cartea Moldovenească, 1959), 179.

<sup>4</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 10, f. 24.

<sup>5</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 1, d. 10, f. 37-a.

<sup>6</sup> Ilia Budak, *Obscestvenno-politiceskoie dvijenie v Bessarabii v poreformennîi period*. (Kishinev: Cartea Moldovenească, 1959), 177.

<sup>7</sup> Artur Leșcu, *Legislația punitivă și sistemul penitenciar din Basarabia, 1812-1864*. (Chișinău: Valinex, 2021), 85.

past, in revolutionary smuggling, especially in the transportation from abroad of prohibited literature, printing equipment and propaganda among the population through the means of the few revolutionary circles founded in Chisinau. Thus, in 1880, seminarian Tudor Denis established a circle of revolutionary propaganda among railway workers, and in 1884, another circle of studious youth was established, also in Chisinau, among whose members were the brothers Constantin and Victor Steri. This activity was closely monitored and repressed in time by the police in collaboration with the gendarmes. The fluctuation of cases and files started by the Directorate in the eighth and ninth decades of the 19th century is reflected in the adjacent table:

**Tabelul 2.** Numărul dosarelor pornite în decadele opt și nouă al secolului al XIX-lea

The year	State crimes					Crimes according to art.246 <sup>1</sup>					Total crimes				
	Russian Empire		Bessara bia		%	Russian Empire		Bessara bia		%	Russian Empire		Bessara bia		%
	folders	people	people	people		folders	people	folders	people		folders	people	folders	people	
1881	932	12 87	12	3 1	-	-	-	17	-	-	932	12 87	29	31	3
1882	545	58 0	6	6	-	-	-	7	-		545	58 0	13	13	2,3
1883	1611	21 38	5	5		-	-	21	-	-	161 1	21 38	26	26	1,6
1884	723	13 89	7	3 8	-	-	-	5	5	-	723	13 89	12	43	1,6
1888	1149	13 16	1	2	-	-	-	16	16		114 9	13 16	17	18	1,4
1889	Cases in Bessarabia have not been started														
1892	Cases in Bessarabia have not been started														
1893	167	56 8	1	1		82 2	736	17	14		989	13 04	18	18	1,8
1895	Cases in Bessarabia have not been started														
1896	332	12 07	-	-	-	109 4	88 5	32	32	-	142 6	20 92	32	32	2,2

Analyzing the figures presented in the table, we can conclude that the number of crimes of a political nature in Bessarabia was a limited one and varied from 32 to 12 cases per year, except for the years when such crimes were generally not recorded, in which no more than 50 people. Obviously, the prevention and repression of the revolutionary movement was not a difficulty for the Directorate of Gendarmes, which, although overshadowed by the activity of the police and the insufficiency of competent staff, fulfilled, as far as possible,

<sup>1</sup> Art. 246 was a component of less serious state crimes and referred to the verbal insult brought to the person of the tsar and intentional damage to portraits, busts, monuments of the tsar.



its professional duties. Compared to other governorates and regions of the Empire, Bessarabia, with its 24 cases since 1881, was in the middle of the ranking of crimes against the state, being surpassed by the governorates of Yekaterinoslav (62 cases), St. Petersburg (52 cases), Poltava (46 cases), Tambov (44), Kursk (37), Podolsk (36), Viatka (31), Kuban region (30), Odesa city (27), a long distance by the Baltic lands, where such crimes were generally not detected<sup>1</sup>.

Taking into account the particularities of the province as a transshipment point for revolutionary contraband, the fight with which required more military than analytical skills, at the initial stage the Directorate's staff were filled with officers with military, combat experience, transferred to the gendarmerie service directly from the army, without any special training. This practice can best be observed in the activity of the Heads of Departments. The first head of the Bessarabian Gendarmerie Directorate was Stepan Ermolin. Born in 1810, from the age of 15 he embraced the military career, voluntarily enlisting in the army and assigned to the Yakutsk Infantry Regiment, stationed in Grimăncăuți from 1818<sup>2</sup>, and in the years 1829-1834, in Briceni<sup>3</sup>. Practically, his entire military career was related to Bessarabia and the Romanian Countries. In the years 1828-1829 he participated in the Russo-Turkish War, taking part in all the campaigns and participating in the battles of Silistria, Mesembria and Varna, and in 1849 in the campaign to suppress the revolution in Transylvania, being decorated for the courage shown with the order of St. Ana 3rd grade with bow<sup>4</sup>. In all these years, from 1825 to 1854, he went through all the stages of his military career, starting with the rank of podpraporogic and ending with lieutenant colonel<sup>5</sup>. His bravery in battle was rewarded with the highest military distinction, the order of St. George 4th class, with which he was decorated in 1854. Also in that year, as a connoisseur of Bessarabia and the Romanian Lands, he was transferred, without special prior training, from the troops in the Gendarmerie Corps of Bessarabia, and in 1867 he was appointed as head of the Directorate of the Gendarmerie Corps of Bessarabia. He worked in this position for the rest of his life, being promoted to the rank of colonel, and on April 20, 1869, to that of major general and decorated with the orders of St. Ana 2nd class, St. Vladimir 3rd class and St. 1st class Stanislaw<sup>6</sup>. He died on February 6, 1872 and was buried at the Central

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<sup>1</sup> *Obzor vajneisih doznanii, proizvodivshihsea v Jandarmskih Upravleniah Imperii, za vremia c 1-go iulea po 1-e okteabrea 1881 goda, po delam o gosudarstvennih prestupleniah. Vipusk I* (St. Petersburg: Departament Politsii, 1881), 72-77.

<sup>2</sup> Anatol Leșcu, *Basarabia și asigurarea logistică a trupelor ruse în anii 1812-1874*. (București: Editura Militară, 2018), 61.

<sup>3</sup> *Spisok generalam, stab-i ober-ofitseram vsei Rossiiskoi armii s pokazaniem cinov, familii i znakov otlicii*. (St. Petersburg: Tipografia Glavnogo Staba, 1831), 237.

<sup>4</sup> *Spisok generalam po starshinstvu*. (St. Petersburg: Voiennaia Tipografia, 1871), 771.

<sup>5</sup> Podpraporogic - the higher military rank of the sergeant corps, granted only to nobles.

<sup>6</sup> *Spisok generalam po starshinstvu*. (St. Petersburg: Voiennaia Tipografia, 1871), 771.

Cemetery in Chisinau on Armeneasca Street where his tomb has been preserved to this day.

We do not know the biographical data of the second head of the Directorate, lieutenant-colonel Victor Beletchi, but, taking into account his rather short tenure in this position (1873-1875), he did not rise to the occasion and was replaced by Colonel Vladimir Yanov. If the first head of the Directorate, St. Ermolin, at least he was an infantryman and he knew the specifics of gathering information, researching the enemy and organizing ambushes, then Vl. Yanov, according to his military specialty, was a sailor. Born on July 15, 1820 in Kaluga, he completed his military studies at the prestigious Naval Cadet School (Marine Cadet Corps) after which he served as a naval officer in the Black Sea Fleet under the command of Admiral Nahimov. After the disbandment of the Black Sea Fleet following Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, he moved to the land forces as adjutant of General A. Șnel, commander of the 5th Region of the Gendarmerie Corps, and then as adjutant of the Uhlani Regiment of Archduke Karl Ferdinand of Austria (Belgorod of Ulanis). In 1866, he joined the Gendarmerie Corps, being already a well-formed personality, whose entire activity was linked to other professional concerns. With the reformation of the Corps, he was appointed as head of the Gendarmerie Directorate of Volânia, and in 1875, as head of the Government Directorate of the Gendarmerie Corps of Bessarabia<sup>1</sup>. In this position, on April 8, 1884, he was promoted to the rank of major general<sup>2</sup>, position, where he worked until his death, which occurred on February 27, 1888<sup>3</sup>. As can be seen from these brief biographical sketches, none of the three heads of the Directorate had the necessary skills to manage a specific institution such as the Gendarmerie Corps. This fact could not leave its mark on the Directorate's activity in combating the revolutionary phenomenon in the region.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we can state that among the first movements with a social-political character that the newly established Directorate faced, was that of the Narodnikists. This movement in Bessarabia had an isolated character and was strictly supervised by the police and gendarmes, who played a secondary role to the police bodies. Due to the internal deficiencies characteristic of this state institution at the beginning of its activity, such as the lack of professionalism and highly qualified personnel, the Directorate was hardly able to face the situation, having the opportunity to stop the wave of revolutionary smuggling and the spread of revolutionary ideas among the population, especially among studious

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<sup>1</sup> Galina Roianova, „Materiali k rodoslovnoi dvorian Ianovih (po materialam Gosudarstvennogo arhiva Kalujskoj oblasti)”, *U istokov rossijskoi gjsudarstvennosti. Issledovania, materialy*. (Kaluga, 2015): 251.

<sup>2</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 2, d. 3, f. 10.

<sup>3</sup> A.N.R.M, F. 297, inv. 2, d. 7, f. 7.

youth. This state of affairs was tolerable in times of peace and political calm, but could cause great problems in times of political crisis or war. The influence of Narodnikism in Bessarabia did not take on proportions not because of the effective activity of the gendarmes, but because of the internal degeneration of the movement.

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