

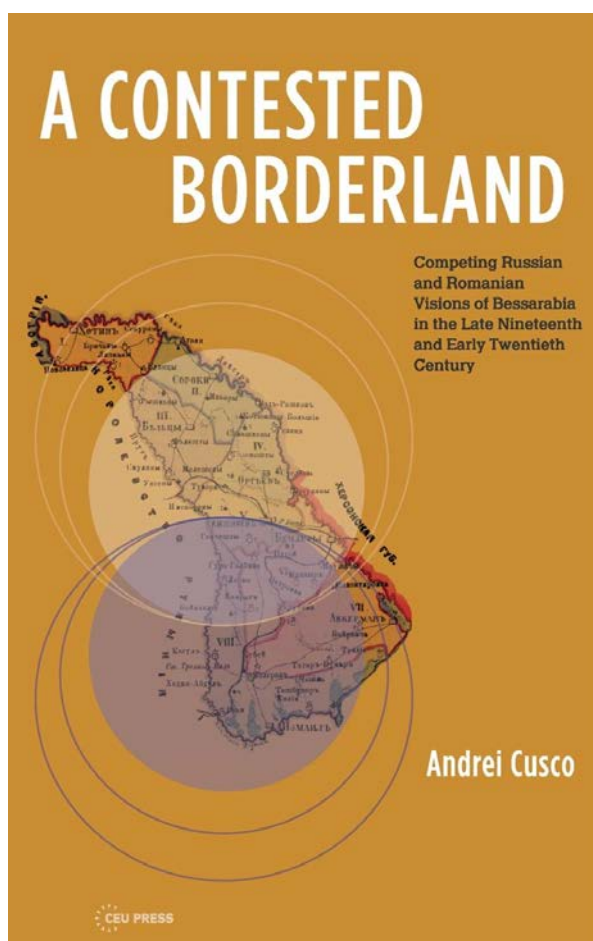
## BESSARABIA: A CONTESTED BORDERLAND – A REVIEW

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*A Contested Borderland: Competing Russian and Romanian Visions of Bessarabia in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century/ Andrei CUSCO; Central European University Press, Budapest, 2017, 295 p. ISBN 9789633861592*

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One of the most important works of Andrei Cusco, this book reflects his interest, passion and hard work on issues related to the Bessarabia's symbolic geography, the modern history of the Russian Empire and the competing Russian and Romanian visions of this contested region in the above-mentioned period. The book appeared in 2017, in the series *Historical Studies in Europe and Eurasia*, in Budapest, at Central European University Press. Andrei Cusco also authored numerous articles in international volumes and peer-reviewed journals from Germany, the United States, the UK, Russia, and Romania.

Cusco's book opens to the reader new horizons on the problem of Bessarabia and offers a very well-made comparison between the two states and the way in which they act between the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It also presents a critical reassessment of the historical events unfolding in Bessarabia geographical and historical region. The author pictures this land as a neglected territory and puts it onto the historiographical map.

For the construction of this book, the sources used by the author are unique and solid, such as archive documents (e.g. telegrams, official documents from the diplomatic correspondence). In addition, the author used extensive studies and biography of some important historians (Nicolae Iorga, Gheorghe I. Brătianu, A.D. Xenopol, Constantin Stere, Bogdan Petriceicu Haşdeu), and essential books and articles about the Bessarabian question.

The 2017 book is an interesting and innovative attempt to explore how Bessarabia became the main object of rival territorial claims by the Romanian nation-state and the Russian Empire, between the 1860s and 1916 (The Romanian Kingdom enters World War I) – 1917 (the outbreak of the February Revolution in the Russian Empire).

In 1812, according to the Bucharest Treaty, the Russian Empire annexes Bessarabia and, after that, tensions and rival claims between Romanians and Russians emerged. After Moldavia and Wallachia formally united to create The Romanian United Principalities, this territory became an object of what Andrei Cusco describes in this book as “symbolic competition” between the emerging Romanian nation-state and the Russian Empire. The Soviet Union had never acknowledged Romania’s acquisition of Bessarabia (in 1918) and took back the province by force in 1940.

The starting point of this study (1860s) and the selection of this period is conditioned by three main factors: first, the emerge of the Romanian national state; secondly, the inauguration of Russia’s Great Reforms and their implementation in Bessarabia; finally, the Polish Revolt of 1863-1864. The book’s upper chronological limit was arbitrary, and the present study does not examine the final of political mobilization in Bessarabia, which exacerbated various tensions between the nationalizing and socializing agendas in the region.

The volume is divided into an introduction, five chapters of unequal length, and a conclusion. Also, the book follows the current trends in recent historiography. This tendency is represented by the special interest given to peripheral areas, for a better understanding of the functioning of nation-states or empires of the modern period. The introduction situates the study within recent scholarship on empires and borderlands and on the new approaches to Eurasian spatial histories and symbolic geographies. Cusco’s work opens new vistas and offers fruitful comparison for other contested regions on the edge of larger states such Macedonia or Vojvodina.

In the first chapter, after an engaging introduction about the Russian Empire and the new formed state – the Kingdom of Romania –, Andrei Cusco underlines the discourses and practices in each state. The goal, in the author’s vision, was to provide the reader with the necessary information and background in order to follow the two competing discourses concerning Bessarabia. Also, the historiography of the dilemmas of building the Russian Empire from the periphery and the construction of national narratives in modern Romania was approached. Cusco shows that Russia’s spatial and cultural borders were not always neat, and, in the final part of chapter I, he examines the methods by which Russia sought to integrate the region into the imperial system. The author avoids the essential role of the Russian administrators in devising a government in Bessarabia, based on local patterns.

Chapter II, titled *Southern Bessarabia as an Imperial Borderland: Diplomatic and Political Dilemmas*, examines the emergence of the Bessarabian question during the Russian Ottoman War of 1877-1878 and presents the changes that took place in the region. Andrei Cusco explained this controversy by referring to national dignity and Realpolitik, bringing to the reader’s attention these two concepts that have defined this civility over time. The appearance of the Romanian national state in 1859 (*The United Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia*) – 1862 (Moldavia and Wallachia formally united in one state, one government, one capital, named *The Romanian United Principalities*), did not produce initially changes in the Russian imperial policy or towards this region located on the border of the empire. At that time, the Russians’ attention was mainly directed towards the Poles (and the Polish Revolt of 1863), and the Romanian Project did not present a special interest for them. The first time in history when the issue of Bessarabia was disputed was during the Russian-Ottoman War, when the Romanian Government elaborated a project which included Southern Bessarabia in the borders of

Romania. This event provoked the reaction of Russian officials, who developed a series of counter arguments in response to the Romanian Project.

Chapter III, *Rituals of Nation and Empire in Early Twentieth-Century Bessarabia: The Anniversary of 1912 and its Significance*, gives us information about the Russian Empire and the international context, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this chapter, we find descriptions of the way the Russian Empire functioned, the way in which they exercised their policy and by what means. Also, how these customs were perpetuated in Bessarabia, and what was their influence on the region. The relation of Russia and Bessarabia during that period was a good one and Cusco refers to it as a close and intimate one. To conclude, this chapter analysed the most important aspects of the Russian-Romanian symbolic competition on the anniversary celebration of Bessarabia annexation in 1912.

In the next chapter, the focus is on the works of Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu, Constantin Stere, and Dimitrie C. Moruzi, three important Romanian intellectual and publicists. These intellectuals with Bessarabian origins articulated different visions on this question. Andrei Cusco provides a case study of the three great Bessarabian-Romanian intellectuals and this section examines their work and biographies. In their writings, they researched the issue of Bessarabia and its disputed territory. Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu and Constantin Stere obtained prominent positions in Romanian academic and political circles, but Dimitrie C. Moruzi wrote one of the strongest reports on the situation in Bessarabia. Like in the rest of the book, A. Cusco, through a unique and clear approach, presents the work of such important historians and this denotes his ability to centralize and structure historical information. It is not just a series of events, but a complex presentation of a dispute over a territory on the border of the Russian Empire.

*Revolution, War, and the “Bessarabian Question”: Russian and Romanian Perspectives (1905–16)* represents the final chapter and, as the name suggests, it is one of the most complex and captivating of the book because it comes with a case study. The focus of this chapter is on the importance of the competition between the two narratives about Bessarabia, between the Russian Revolution (1905) and World War I. The main purpose of this chapter is to compare and analyse contemporary public debates in Romania, as well as Russia’s official image of Bessarabia.

From the beginning of this dispute, the dilemma of Bessarabia was a very tangled one, but Andrei Cusco manages to present clear historical events, in a chronological order, offering even to a non-specialized reader an understanding of the conflict about this border region. The opinions from inside Bessarabia that referred to the Romanian and Russian regimes shared two distinctive, contradictory trends: they were either pro or against the Romanian regime. A similar observation can be made about the accounts belonging to the foreign professionals who visited Bessarabia immediately after 1918.

The topic of the book is highly captivating although it is not an easy read, in part, due to its analytical sophistication. Despite this, the author manages to transpose historical events in a special, clear, and very well synthesized manner. In other words, the book of Andrei Cusco is a relevant, analytical, and necessary study for all those interested in the history of Bessarabia.

To conclude, this book is about how political elites pictured various state-building scenarios and their important roles in these projects. Another important thing about this work is that it focuses on the textual manifestation of the competing national and imperial discourses. The particularity of this conflict was the product of its contested character, and now, after more than one hundred years, these dilemmas continue to affect world politics and borderlands remain contested spaces for many states.