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Diana Dumitru

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THE BORDERLANDS OF ROMANIA
AND THE SOVIET UNION

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Diana Dumitru : The State, Antisemitism, and Collaboration in the Holocaust: The Borderlands of Romania and the Soviet Union before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised

The State, Antisemitism, and Collaboration in the Holocaust: The Borderlands of Romania and the Soviet Union:

1 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A mysteryBy George HaritonThe story told by Dumitru is very simple in its outline. Bessarabia (today called Moldova, but that's another issue) and Transnistria are two neighboring regions in far eastern Europe. Until 1919 they were both part of Tsarist Russia. From 1918 to 1940, Bessarabia was governed by Romania and Transnistria was governed by the Soviets. From 1940 to 1941, both were governed by the Soviets, from 1941 to 1944 both were governed by Romania, and after 1944 both were governed by the Soviets again. During the second world war, some 90% of the Jews living in each region died. However, Dumitru argues that, while the local non-Jewish population in Bessarabia was very hostile to the Jews, their counterparts in Transnistria were not hostile, and indeed, did what they could to help the Jews survive. She ascribes this difference to the fact that Transnistria had a Soviet government in the 1920s and 1930s and that this government worked successfully to eradicate, or at least diminish, anti-Semitism among the population. I don't believe it. I have some knowledge of the people of those regions, and anti-Semitism is alive and well in both. If Soviet rule from 1945 to 1989 was not able to eradicate it, how did Soviet rule from 1918 (or later, as the region was subject to civil war) to 1940 manage it? And remember, this was a time of great famine in Ukraine. Transnistria, as a part of Ukraine, was affected, albeit indirectly. This sort of thing does not work to make people more humane. Well, Dumitru has evidence. She sent out several hundred questionnaires in the mid 2000s (sixty years after the fact), she consulted Yad Vashem archives, she looked at the transcripts of immediate post-war trials. She says: "One of the most remarkable findings of the research presented here is actually a non-event: no evidence of anti-Jewish episodes of mass violence by civilians anywhere in Transnistria's villages, towns or cities was found. Neither survivors' testimonies nor government records -- not even secondary sources -- report such activity." (page 182) I found that incredible, so I hunted down some secondary sources myself (I am not a historian and do not have access to primary sources). It did not take me very long to find a 500-page book by Avigdor Shachan, called *Burning Ice: The Ghettos of Transnistria*, published in 1996 by Columbia University Press as part of its *East European Monographs* series. From the book it does not look as if Shachan is/was a professional historian either, but he has obviously spent an awful lot of time talking to survivors and consulting the Yad Vashem archives (in the preface, he says he spent 25 years on the book). The end notes alone run to 64 pages. Here is how he opens his chapter on "The Attitude of the Local Population": "Most of the local non-Jewish residents of Transnistria treated the deportees with hostility, and there were frequent cases of locals who were directly involved in murdering deportees. Here and there one found an old non-jewish woman or an individual or family which helped the Jews either directly or indirectly. The younger generation, on the other hand, which had grown up and been educated under the Soviet regime, was utterly callous and harassed the Jews whenever afforded the opportunity to do so." (page 341) There follows a list of thirty-nine examples, all referenced to their Yad Vashem sources. Interestingly, Shachan's finding that the younger people were more hostile to the Jews conflicts directly with Dumitru. She finds that the younger people, who had spent a greater part of their lives under Communism, were kinder to the Jews than the older people. (page 217) Shachan's book may be flawed and misleading. But we will never know from Dumitru: It is mentioned nowhere in her book, and so nowhere rebutted. And yet, as I mentioned above, it is hardly invisible to a layman, much less to a scholar such as Dumitru. Did she deliberately blank it out because its evidence was inconvenient? There remains the wider context. Whatever the attitudes of the local populations, some 90% of the Jews in both Bessarabia and Transnistria died. This is inconceivable without at least some help in their deaths from the local population. There is also the curious fact that in the other provinces governed by Romania between 1941 and 1944 -- the Regat and southern Transylvania -- fewer than 8% of the Jews died. (Jean Ancel, *The Holocaust in Romania*) Clearly Soviet indoctrination was not a factor here. We must search elsewhere for explanations.

Based on original sources, this important new book on the Holocaust explores regional variations in civilians' attitudes and behavior toward the Jewish population in Romania and the occupied Soviet Union. Gentiles' willingness to assist Jews was greater in lands that had been under Soviet administration during the inter-war period, while gentiles' willingness to harm Jews occurred more in lands that had been under Romanian administration during the same period. While acknowledging the disasters of Communist rule in the 1920s and 1930s, this work shows the effectiveness of Soviet nationalities policy in the official suppression of antisemitism. This book offers a corrective to the widespread consensus that homogenizes gentile responses throughout Eastern Europe, instead demonstrating that what states did in the interwar period mattered; relations between social groups were not fixed and destined to repeat themselves, but rather fluid and susceptible to change over time.

"Can states school their citizens for genocide? Does valuing cultural diversity, by contrast, create a lasting buffer against state-organized violence? Diana Dumitru's thesis is provocative: that the Soviet ideology of "friendship of peoples" attenuated popular antisemitism. Using the Romanian-Soviet borderland as a kind of natural experiment, Dumitru finds substantial differences between how neighboring populations in Romania and the USSR viewed their Jewish neighbors. Dumitru's work will open new debates about the power of political choice in determining the course

of the Holocaust in different lands." Charles King, author of *Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams*"Diana Dumitriu's history shows the incredible power of the state's rhetoric and regulations to shape the attitudes and beliefs of its citizenry. This is a shocking and essential story for scholars of Central and Eastern Europe." Kate Brown, author of *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland*"The Holocaust in Bessarabia and Transnistria is much less familiar than that in Poland and the Baltic states, while by many accounts it was just as bestial. Diana Dumitru's research explores an even less familiar reality: that Stalin's totalitarianism fostered a climate that was relatively benevolent toward the Jews by comparison with the hostility fostered by the more traditional authoritarianism of Romania. In bringing to the surface this apparent irony, she demonstrates how the Holocaust remains an inexhaustible field of study, which continues to shed a revealing and troubling light on our present." Robert D. Kaplan, author of *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History*"Diana Dumitru's important contribution to the burgeoning study of the Holocaust in the East demonstrates convincingly that Transnistrian Moldova, under Soviet rule from 1918 to 1940, witnessed far less collaboration than did Bessarabian Moldova, under Romanian rule. Her argument that Soviet internationalism explains this difference is an important challenge to both Holocaust studies and Soviet history." Terry Martin, author of *Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*About the AuthorDiana Dumitru is Associate Professor of History in the World History Department at Ion Creangă State Pedagogical University, Moldova. She has been awarded prestigious fellowships, including the Gerda Henkel Stiftung fellowship, the International Institute for Holocaust Research Postdoctoral Fellowship for Study and Research at Yad Vashem, and the Rosenzweig Family Fellowship for research at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. She has authored over twenty articles and two books and, in 2012, she received the Mary Parker Follett Award for the best article or chapter published in the field of politics and history awarded by the American Political Science Association.