



THE IMPACT OF THE ROMANIAN ARMED FORCES ON DAILY LIFE IN BESSARABIA (1930S)

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The article presents the impact of the Romanian Armed Forces, as a state institution, not only on the daily life in Bessarabia during the 1930s, but also on Romanian society as a whole. Thus, the factors and means by which the military institution contributed, to a certain extent, to the change in the way of life in both rural and urban environments are discussed. In approaching the topic, certain elements have been taken into account as follows: the interwar national construction programme; the multi-ethnic identity configuration; the management and interaction in the cultural, economic, educational fields; the recruitment and the military service; the hygiene and health care. Interpreted unitarily, the mentioned elements had the role of modernizing the daily life of the province. The research objective is to provide an overview of the way the Armed Forces managed to meet the challenges specific to the region.

Keywords: Bessarabia; Romanian Armed Forces; national construction; modernization; interwar period;



PRELIMINARIES

The presentation of the military institution influence on each of the basic fields of daily life in Romania, as well as the interaction between the Romanian Armed Forces and the population of Bessarabia is aimed at highlighting how the Armed Forces, as a state institution, positioned and reacted to various challenges specific to each region. Although the subject is approached briefly and unevenly in specialized literature, without distinguishing between the reference period and the subject matter, the research task has been made possible based on the works of renowned researchers in the field, such as Dimitrie Gusti, Gheorghe Palade, Ion Valer Xenofontov, Oana-Maria Mitu, Octavian Țicu, and others. Additionally, the original sources identified by the author in the National Archives Agency in Chişinău, as well as the period press, are useful and relevant as factual material.

Due to its complex characteristics, the study of the impact of the military institution on daily life as well as of its contribution to the construction of identity in the communities of the Romanian province deserves special attention, as it fits into the strategies and tools used by the Romanian state to build the Romanian nation during the 22 years it governed Bessarabia.

Between 1920 and 1940, as part of the interwar national (re)construction programme, the primary roles were assigned to the security structures, whose purpose was to monitor the process of cohesion and consolidation of the state by ensuring the protection of the Romanian ethnic majority, in relation to those who did not accept the form of government of the unified state and did not comply with the directives of the government. That programme became applicable to Bessarabia once the Romanian armed forces entered it, on 12 January 1918. For these reasons, the everyday relevance of the Romanian Armed Forces provided authorities and communities with public presence and an additional advantage in interacting with society in both urban and rural areas.

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The role of the Armed Forces was to take over, continue, or complete segments of the process of unifying the mental, attitudinal and behavioural differences of national minorities, and to provide a common basis for interaction with those they directly addressed.

At the same time, the Armed Forces held the highest position in the symbolism of state institutions, being placed alongside the School and the Romanian Orthodox Church (a fact included in the Romanian Constitution of 1923), in shaping civic and moral attitudes that fostered national spirit. The role of the Armed Forces was to take over, continue, or complete segments of the process of unifying the mental, attitudinal and behavioural differences of national minorities, and to provide a common basis for interaction with those they directly addressed. Through that and the community extensions it sought to practice, the military institution aimed to relax communication barriers and soften the identity contours that existed before the war (Mitu, 2021, p. 244).

In that approach, the priority for the Romanian population of Bessarabia was to condition the fixed role of the Armed Forces activities into two main directions: *“socializing and cultivating the spirit of equality and fraternity, creating spiritual bonds at the individual level, and fostering a sense of belonging to a single community, as well as forming loyalty to the central public institutions in relation to the principles and interests of the Romanian national state.”* (Ib., p. 247).

MILITARY INSTITUTION: A REFERENCE FOR PATRIOTIC AND CULTURAL EDUCATION

Determined by the level of underdevelopment of the rural communities in Bessarabia, the areas of focus of the Romanization programme, as well as its operational needs, were aimed at normalizing the situation at the societal level. On the practical level of the role they were tasked to fulfil, taking care of young people who were illiterate and not socialized in any other official formative environment, the officers found their educational mission difficult. One of the most visible problems raised by the illiteracy of the troops was the military system’s inability to supplement the communication that occurred between officers and soldiers. The process of shaping national consciousness, within the military institution, consisted in strengthening the interethnic relations and the national construction of the Romanian state.

Among the three social, cultural, and educational entities mentioned, the School and the Church ensured the initiation and continuity of the formation and practice of national sentiment,

while the Armed Forces provided a school-like supplement, ensuring the fundamental fluidity of cult practices, and paving the way for cultural activities (Gusti, 1946, p. 212). The interaction between the Armed Forces and other components of the institutionalized cultural sphere demonstrated the contribution made to solidifying the connection between military authority and the population, which was largely determined through cultural, musical, and sports associations.

In a Bessarabia with an underdeveloped Romanian consciousness, characterized by the absence of a Romanian ethnic pressure, the rehabilitation of traditional identity elements, as well as the gradual development of the State’s moral authority, was to be undertaken through the filter of young people who had fulfilled the military service.

This reality was outlined in 1918, when the entry of Romanian troops into Bessarabia required explanatory support to legitimize their presence in the eyes of the population and thus ensure acceptable limits to a social order already destabilized by war and Bolshevik interference. Therefore, not only troops were sent to the province, but also priests and military teachers to explain to the population the role of the Romanian military action (Palade, 2010, p. 39). For those reasons, the necessity of organizing an integrated training process for the related structures and components was outlined by the General Staff of the Romanian Armed Forces. For example, in the *Order of the General Staff, Section 5, No. 2635 of 8 December 1938*, it is indicated that all active officers fulfilling the function of county prefect were required to participate in officer training at the garrison (ANA, F. P-339, inv. 1, f. 3468, p. 4).

At the same time, in the 1930s, various aspects of daily life became concerns for the authorities in the implementation of the programme to integrate Bessarabia’s minority population into the Romanian state system. The complexity of the integration programme interacted effectively with certain capabilities of the Armed Forces, such as vigilance, reconnaissance and information collection, control and reaction actions, as well as communication with locals while carrying out community-interest work, all of which being considered productive for the process of regional identity reconstruction.

Thus, the Armed Forces, along with other force structures, closely examined how mandatory linguistic, educational, and religious



ROMANIAN
MILITARY
THINKING

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integration requirements were being implemented among the Orthodox minorities (Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, and Gagauz) in Bessarabia, seeking to align them with the new national principles (Mitu, p. 289). Referring to other community entities that did not fit the Orthodox majority profile, the Germans and Jews from central and southern Bessarabia were particularly highlighted.

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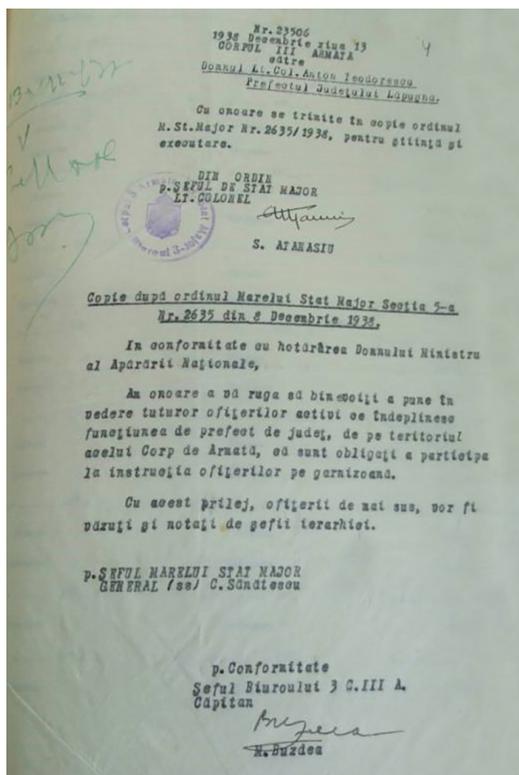


Photo 1: Copy of the Order of the General Staff, Section 5, No. 2635, dated 8 December 1938 (lb.)

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THE ARMED FORCES INVOLVEMENT IN THE INTERACTION PROCESS IN THE CULTURAL, EDUCATIONAL, AND ECONOMIC FIELDS

The complexity of the functional capacities of the Romanian Armed Forces fully facilitated the achievement of objectives outlined in the National Construction Plan during the reference period. Therefore, a significant aspect was the Armed Forces responsiveness in various emergency situations, the timely organization of a socio-cultural action plan regarding military support for national construction in Bessarabia, and the establishment of good working relationships to support the Romanian administration in the territory.

At the same time, with other regulatory duties and responsibilities concerning the execution of the National Construction Plan in Bessarabia counties, it was noted that some actions undertaken in an organized manner by the Armed Forces since the early interwar period involved the deployment of specialized personnel (officers, teachers, and regimental priests), who contributed directly to Romanian literacy activities. Those efforts were particularly aimed at the youngsters of enlistment age, but in the absence of a state apparatus to address the urgent needs of immediate Romanization interventions for the regional population, military personnel were also used for the training of civilians (Mitu, p. 316).

Armed Forces representatives carried out a number of well-structured and effective cultural activities. The contribution and dedication of the Romanian military personnel were well managed by the authorities through the creation of the first cultural centres. One of the first Romanian cultural centres in southern Bessarabia was established on 28 April 1920, in the village of Selemet in the Tighina County, under the direct encouragement of Second Lieutenant Marin Georgescu, adjutant of the 15th Howitzer Regiment (lb.). The officer took the initiative to bring together the local authorities, teachers, and priests of the village hosting the Regiment, launching a call to all prominent people in the community to explain the importance of the national goal, the need to rediscover the identity of "pure Romanian", and the contribution of the organized cultural activities quality (lb.). In this context, it was noted that Second Lieutenant Georgescu chose to supplement the purely administrative details in the founding



ROMANIAN
MILITARY
THINKING

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documents of the cultural centre with somewhat contrasting statements, which, for example, emphasized that the institution would specifically aim at the “revival of the hora dance because in it lives the language, humour, poetry, and our soul”. It illustrated the models of identity attachment that were created/amplified by national rhetoric in the military personalities acting as active agents of the collective consciousness reconstruction programme (Palade, 2010, pp. 58-59).

With such perseverance, the establishment of cultural centres continued in Bessarabia. In this regard, the moral and material contributions of the Armed Forces proved to be effective and were foundational in the establishment of one of the first cultural-spiritual divisions in the entire province. That initiative emerged in Cetatea Albă, where the first Cultural Circle in Bessarabia was established (Iliescu, 1928, pp. 44-45), which would later become the first Bessarabian branch of “Astra”. Subsequently, this spiritual source operated with numerous cultural initiatives organized in the province during the mid-1920s. With dedication and initiative, military elite representatives continuously led those actions.

During this process of promoting Romanian cultural and spiritual values, Captain Mihail Dumitrașcu, from the 30th Infantry Regiment “Matei Basarab” stationed in Cetatea Albă, became publicly recognized as a promoter of other emerging forms of Romanian culturalization in the province (Petrescu, 2008, p. 20). Specialized historiography links the founding contribution of this officer to the opening, in 1925, of four other cultural institutions: “Regimentul 28 Infanterie Ismail”, “Batalion Vânători Tighina”, “ASTRA Tighina” (“Tighina County”), and “Tighina City” (Iliev, 2013, p. 91). Motivated by Captain Dumitrașcu, the officers of the 28th Infantry Regiment in the city of Ismail established their Astrist organization on 1 January 1925, opening a cultural circle and a library for each of the 14 companies. With the support of the Central Committee from Sibiu, each of those libraries was frequented by about 100-150 soldiers (Petrescu, 2008, p. 21). Also, in Lăpușna County, the cultural centres were involved in assisting with military concentrations and equipping (Xenofontov, 2023-b, p. 30).

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Throughout the 1930s, the authority and specific capabilities of the Armed Forces in this domain continued the national construction effort, focusing on becoming a foundation for connecting the Armed Forces with the population in Bessarabia, as well as on fostering collaboration between military structures and other cultural-spiritual institutions of the State. The goal was to form in the popular consciousness reflexive mental associations between the Army, School, Church, and State, between the principles and teachings specific to each, and the universal canons of the national Romanian identity consciousness (Gusti, p. 212).

SOCIAL UTILITY ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF THE ARMED FORCES

In the early 1930s, the unified State radically increased actions to streamline the operation of the mentioned strategic programme by involving the armed forces in social activities of both spiritual and material nature (Mitu, p. 311). In this regard, the reality was confirmed by some staff officers, who even argued that the concrete help provided by the Romanian military to the rural population, for example, with labour forces and agricultural inventory to restore field production after the destruction caused by the world conflagration, had won them the “love and admiration of the population who at first, (viewed them) with distrust” (Ib.).

In this context, the military authorities in the province were also well aware of the strategic need for radical changes in infrastructure, road construction, and modernization to alter the existing situation. Their achievement was expected to contribute to increasing the economic potential and, implicitly, to improving the situation of the large social categories of the population in Bessarabia (Agrigoroaiei, 1993, p. 90).

In addition to the relationship with the local population, there was also direct involvement of the military institution in activities with social and utility purposes. For example, in 1919-1920, only one road was built connecting the city of Hâncești with the Prut localities, while



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General Constantin Lăzărescu, Chief of the General Staff, emphasized the need to begin the construction of approximately 900 km of roads in Bessarabia in 1933, with an estimated cost of 952 million lei. Ultimately, the decision was made by Prime Minister Iuliu Maniu, who stated: "It would be good to begin the construction of roads in Bessarabia", and allocated the necessary funds for the planned works in the first priority stage of the Road Network Development Plan.

the construction of others was constantly delayed. In 1920, at the insistence of the Military Command of Bessarabia, the construction of the Chişinău – Băcioi – Gara Zloţi road began (Ib., p. 90). As a result, 150 km of road embankments were executed by the military and the local population (Ib.).

A large volume of work was launched in the '30s, when the Romanian authorities in Bessarabia identified the strategic development of road networks and infrastructure as critical elements in modernizing the lives and well-being of the local population. The development of infrastructure, as part of a network, alongside railways and navigable routes, to support military operations, was for the first time addressed by the High Council of National Defence (Giurgiu, 2012, p. 91), in a meeting on 22 February 1932, held at the Royal Palace, under the presidency of King Carol II. General Constantin Ştefănescu-Amza, Minister of National Defence, requested approval for the construction of roads in Bessarabia, as "these represented both strategic and economic interests" (Ib.). After the meeting, on 13 December, the topic was revisited in a new session of the High Council of National Defence at the Royal Palace. General Constantin Lăzărescu, Chief of the General Staff, emphasized the need to begin the construction of approximately 900 km of roads in Bessarabia in 1933, with an estimated cost of 952 million lei (Ib.). Ultimately, the decision was made by Prime Minister Iuliu Maniu, who stated: "It would be good to begin the construction of roads in Bessarabia" (Ib.), and allocated the necessary funds for the planned works in the first priority stage of the Road Network Development Plan (Ib.).

In this regard, the Romanian military authorities in Bessarabia were simultaneously making continuous efforts to improve and build roads of various categories. As a result, in the work plan of Minister General Răşcanu, published in *Cuvânt Moldovenesc* on 26 July 1931, a chapter titled *Refacerea șoselelor cu sprijinul oștirii/Restoring Roads with the Support of the Armed Forces* announced that "given the nearly non-existent resources (...) I will immediately appeal to the military workforce, with whose help I hope and can start even in August the restoration of these roads, which are so necessary for the economic life across the river Prut" (Planul, 1931). With the active involvement of the Armed Forces, roads were constructed linking the cities of Hotin and Cernăuți through the Otaci – Grozinți – Colincăuți road, Soroaca

with Florești, Cahul with Traian Val station. The road network, or rather stretches of road and paved roads, connected the ports of Reni, Chilia, with surrounding localities (Giurgiu, ib., p. 90).

Concurrently, in the article *D-I ministru general Răşcanu în nordul Basarabiei/General Minister Răşcanu in Northern Bessarabia*, published in *Cuvânt Moldovenesc* on 25 September 1931, it was mentioned that he inspected the northern part of Bessarabia, spoke to the population, and inspected the authorities. In Soroaca, "he stated that, as a Minister, he would focus solely on administration and would be uncompromising with those who failed to do their duty or who engaged in politics". The publication of the time noted that 12,000 troops were working on the roads. The government allocated 40 million lei for that purpose (D-I ministru/HE Minister, 1931).

The process of road network development for the needs of the population was constant throughout the era. Compared to the old Kingdom and especially Transylvania, the infrastructure in Bessarabia was in worse condition. In 1920, at the request of the Military Command of Bessarabia, the construction of the Chişinău – Băcioi – Rezeni – Gara Zloţi road began, which was interrupted in some years (Xenofontov, 2024, pp. 114-115). By 1938, the modernization of 1,200 km of roads was planned, including the routes Focşani – Bacău – Roman, Botoşani – Dorohoi – Cernăuți – border; Suşița – Tecuci – Bârlad – Crasna – Huși – Chişinău; Fundata – Pitești – Râmnicu Vâlcea – Govora; Pitești – Curtea de Argeş; Sebeş – Deva – Arad – Timișoara; Cluj – Dej – Hamleu; and Bazargic – Balcic, with a budget of 800 million lei (Giurgiu, ib.).

At the same time, it is important to note that the economic development of the unified Romania was in a deep crisis, affected by the great economic crisis of 1929-1933, which was in turn triggered by the banking collapse in New York. As a result, poverty was widespread throughout the province, both in urban and rural areas. Despite the socio-economic difficulties faced by the Romanian authorities in the province, the social phenomenon was a priority in their activities. The military was also involved in combating poverty.

In another article titled *Starea lucrurilor din Basarabia/The State of Affairs in Bessarabia*, published in *Cuvânt Moldovenesc* on 28 August 1931, Minister Ioan Răşcanu emphasized that one of the military's tasks was combating poverty: "In the cities where poverty has spread



ROMANIAN
MILITARY
THINKING

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The involvement of troops during their mandatory military service in carrying out public interest work was not their primary duty, as it was that of defending the State. However, it was the disciplined, well-organized, and operationally prepared military contingent that could provide the response and support for a need that the authorities had no other way of addressing.

*its wings more widely, I will set up canteens with field kitchens, so that 50–60 poor people can be fed daily” (Starea lucrurilor, 1931). Thus, it is worth noting that, in addition to the military’s constitutional missions, the Romanian Armed Forces command took on another important social task. The results of the military’s involvement in supporting the population were reflected in the press of the time. Moreover, the Romanian troops efforts sparked a patriotic feeling of belonging and national pride. For example, in the *Cuvânt Moldovenesc* newspaper on 19 March 1933, in the article *Armata în ajutorul săracilor/The Armed Forces Help the Poor*, it was mentioned: “Our image speaks volumes and dispels all the slanders brought against us by the enemies of our country and nation, from within and outside the borders. Just as in wartime the armed forces defend our country, our property, and our lives, in peacetime, the armed forces always come to the aid of the needy. We see them here, distributing hot meals this winter to the poor of Chişinău.” (“Armata”, 1933).*



Photo 2: The Armed Forces Helping the Poor (lb.).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the involvement of troops during their mandatory military service in carrying out public interest work was not their primary duty, as it was that of defending the State. However, it was the disciplined, well-organized, and operationally prepared military contingent that could provide the response and support for a need that the authorities had no other way of addressing.

Given the severe circumstances of socio-economic reconstruction in light of the unsatisfactory reality of public services provided by the authorities to taxpaying citizens, the role and visibility of the Armed Forces in the National Construction Programme became obvious in the improvement of the living conditions of the population in Bessarabia.

In this context, the Armed Forces represented a compelling potential in the process of strengthening efforts to enhance the interwar national construction process. The consistent and successful engagement of the Romanian Armed Forces in overcoming the obstacles to the smooth development of everyday life had the capacity to demonstrate to both rural and urban populations that the State was consciously concerned and made considerable efforts to modernize and consolidate the socio-economic situation of Bessarabia.

THE ROLE OF THE ARMED FORCES IN HEALTHCARE ASSISTANCE IN THE PROVINCE

Another direct involvement of the military institution in socially beneficial activities was in the field of healthcare. At the end of the First World War Bessarabia faced significant challenges regarding the state of medical and sanitary assistance. The Armed Forces were tasked with addressing epidemiological issues, combating various infections being among the main problems. Thus, both civil and military authorities established a Civil-Military Inspectorate for Bessarabia, which was responsible for combating epidemics. The military structures were organized according to emerging needs, specifically to combat epidemic diseases (Dumitraş, 2009, p. 11).

Considering the created situation, the existing possibilities, and the obligations assumed by the Romanian Armed Forces in Bessarabia, General Doctor Nicolae Vicol, the chief sanitary inspector for Bessarabia, proposed a series of measures to rectify the situation. Among them were: adapting sanitary organization to the administrative framework, ensuring that operations were properly coordinated; continuing the activity of civilian hospitals under the supervision of local authorities, in coordination with the General Directorate of the Civil Sanitary Service (Dumitraş, 2018, p. 82).

In support of those sanitary security efforts, under the instructions of the superior military authorities of the Romanian Ministry of War, six military pharmacies were established in the cities of Bolgrad, Cetatea



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Albă, Tighina, Chişinău, Bălţi, and Hotin. Their mission was to collect all sanitary materials within their geographical area and provide medical supplies to Romanian troops, local Bessarabian militias, and hospitals and pharmacies organized in the province (Ib.). During that period, for more efficient cooperation with civil authorities and to aid the local population, a central sanitary depot was established in the village of Călăraşi, near Chişinău. Furthermore, to provide medical support to the troops stationed in Bessarabia and to eliminate epidemics of contagious diseases, several military hospitals were set up (Ib.).

As part of the Romanian military's sanitary services, another form of healthcare assistance was developed by the Armed Forces through the construction and operation of soldier baths. Evidence in this regard can be found in an interwar Bessarabian media source, the newspaper *Cuvânt Moldovenesc*, in an article titled *Baia Corpului 3 Armată/The Bath of the 3rd Army Corps*. The article highlights the attention the 3rd Army Corps Command gave to both its troops and the civilian population. It mentions that "After the Armed Forces worked planting tens of thousands of trees, after the barracks were built, after the construction of the Public Bath and the Cultural Centre in Nisporeni Lăpuşnei – just to name a few – came the fulfilment of a great need, the construction of the Chişinău garrison bath." (Baia, 1931). This bath was completed on 10 January 1931, and was consecrated in the presence of officers, enlisted men, and civil authority representatives. The bath was located at the 3rd Army Corps Military Hospital. At the same time, according to the publication of the time, General Dragu was quoted as saying that the bath was just the beginning of a programme of works he intended to carry out for both the military and the civilian population (Ib.).

The Programme and Operation of the 3rd Army Corps Bath (Ib.)

The bath operates the following schedule, from 08:00 to 13:00 and 15:00 to 19:00:

Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays – it will be available for officers, their wives, and soldiers.

Tuesdays, both morning and afternoon – the wives of civil servants may use the bath.

Thursdays – for civil servants.

Sundays – it is a day of Christian rest, so the bath will not operate.



Photo 3: General C. Dragu, Commander of the 3rd Army Corps, and debts of gratitude for the organization of the bath¹ (Ib.)

Public health issues became a priority for the Kingdom of Romania, which, by engaging both civil authorities and the military, organized and increased the number of medical institutions. It was manifested through the creation of a system of dispensaries, small maternity units, child care centres, deworming stations, and public baths (Opopol, 2019, pp. 203-208). Overall, the activity of the Romanian Military Sanitary Service in Bessarabia after the Great Unification, under the leadership of the general medical inspector for Bessarabia, Nicolae Vicol, in collaboration with local authorities, improved the unsatisfactory pre-existing sanitary and epidemiological situation. It also established a system of civil and military health protection that successfully operated during the interwar period.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the context of addressing the daily life and living conditions of the population of Bessarabia in the 1930s, the beneficial impact of the military authority was highlighted through the reconstruction

¹ We, on behalf of the newspaper, bring to General Dragu and the officers of the garrison, through this means, the thanks and feelings of gratitude from the civilian administrative population, who, from now on, will have the opportunity – at very little cost – to practice hygienic rules. Long live, General! (P.)



ROMANIAN
MILITARY
THINKING

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of the consciousness of the Bessarabian elite and population. Despite insufficient material support from the state authorities, the importance of the national construction programme encouraged the independent initiatives of officers and non-commissioned officers, in collaboration with those in the province, to promote the representation of Romanian culture in Bessarabia's social environment.

In those socio-historical conditions, the Army, together with the Church and the School, successfully contributed to the most important projects aimed at connecting Bessarabia with the rest of the Romanian social and cultural space, through the direct involvement of military personnel in the community. We must also mention the military's contribution to the modernization of the national cultural system and the execution of material and construction actions, such as regional infrastructure projects, construction of local roads, and the building and reconstruction of social interest structures like schools, churches, cultural centres, baths, and others. However, the achievements and influence of the Armed Forces on the entire modernization process of living standards and daily life in the region during the reference period were not sufficient to maintain a sustainable development trajectory. Unfortunately, the events of June 1940, with the beginning of the Soviet occupation, shattered the results and efforts made by the Romanian Armed Forces, along with other Romanian authorities, in carrying out the national construction process and the integration of the Romanian people.

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