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Reviews and Annotation
Рецензии и анотации

AN IMPORTANT BOOK ON THE BESSARABIAN BULGARIANS

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Thede Kahl & Martin Henzelmann & Gergana Börger (2026).
Die Bulgaren in Bessarabien und Taurien. Geschichte, Sprache und Kultur im nördlichen Schwarzmeerraum. Forum: Bulgarien, vol. 8. Berlin: Frank & Timme.
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At this year's prestigious Leipzig International Book Fair, a highly informative volume on the Bulgarians in Bessarabia was presented. The book includes numerous illustrations and maps. It offers a detailed account of the Bulgarian minority in Moldova, Transnistria, and Ukraine. To the best of our knowledge, it is the first publication of its kind to appear in German. The book is available free of charge both in print and as an open-access e-book, and can be downloaded from the publisher's website.

The *"Forum: Bulgaria"* book series publishes scholarly works at irregular intervals, focusing on humanities-related topics concerning Bulgaria. Most recently, it released, for instance, a *Handbook of Bulgaria*, providing readers with a powerful encyclopedic overview of Bulgarian culture and society (Börger, Comati, & Kahl, 2019). Earlier, the series also issued a volume that offers an academic examination of the country's orally transmitted literature and folktales, thereby introducing Bulgaria's intangible heritage to a German-speaking audience (Börger, 2015).

The monograph is organized into three main sections, the first of which is devoted to the history of the Bulgarians in Bessarabia and Tauria (pp. 15 – 50). In this section, the authors elucidate the historical circumstances that led to the settlement of extensive areas north of the Black Sea by various ethnic groups, explicitly including the Bulgarians, who immigrated to these regions primarily in the early 19th century. The section is particularly valuable for readers because it incorporates clear definitions, images from archives, and maps, which provide essential context for a region that is little known, including its geographical, topographical, and onomastic features. It is further demonstrated that the Bulgarian community in the Republic of Moldova maintains a well-organized civil society and cultural infrastructure, especially in the southern Taraclia district (p. 38), a fact that is presented with clarity and thorough explanation.

The second part of the book addresses the linguistic situation (pp. 54 – 111). Of particular note is the resilience of the Bulgarian language in certain regions and the dedication of scholars to its systematic study. For example, the first comprehensive analyses of the folklore and language of the Bulgarians in Crimea were conducted by the Ukrainian scholar Oleksandr Muzychenko, whose interest in the vibrant Bulgarian culture of Tauria laid a crucial foundation for subsequent research. The contributions of St. Petersburg academician Nikolay Derzhavin and Russian professor Samuil Bernshteyn remain highly influential in the field of linguistics, providing detailed accounts of settlement patterns and dialectal variation that continue to be relevant (pp. 92 – 95). In addition, the monograph offers a vivid account of the sociolinguistic context in which Bulgarian and other minority languages have developed over the past two centuries.

It is essential to point out that Bessarabia has historically been a strategically significant territory for both Romanian and Russian geopolitics, rendering it a contested region over the centuries. Consequently, the regulation of the Bulgarian language varied considerably across different political contexts. Under the Soviet regime, conditions for maintaining the language beyond the domestic sphere were largely insufficient. It was only following the revolution that the integration of Bulgarian into the formal education system became feasible. Today, for a combination of linguistic, financial, legal, historical, societal, political, and ideological reasons, this integration appears to function more effectively in the Republic of Moldova than in Ukraine (pp. 66ff.). The authors of this book have previously published

multiple studies in various international journals addressing linguistic issues that encompass both sociolinguistic and structural-linguistic dimensions (Kahl, 2014; Henzelmann, 2025a; Henzelmann, 2025b). It is therefore unsurprising that the volume provides profound insights, rigorous research, and incisive analyses of accessible data. The complex linguistic situation merits closer examination within the broader context of post-Soviet state consolidation.

The literary output of the Bessarabian Bulgarians remains comparatively underexplored. It is addressed comprehensively in the third chapter of the book (pp. 115 – 209). Various literary genres emerge across different historical phases, reflecting and processing the realities of Bessarabia within the framework of literary production. These include, for instance, long-standing oral traditions and customs, which continue to inform the texts of contemporary authors (for literature, see also the seminal study by Börger, 2015). Identity often occupies a central role in this context. What precisely constitutes "homeland" – the Soviet Union, Moldova, Transnistria, Ukraine, or perhaps even Bulgaria? The book demonstrates the considerable complexity inherent in attempting to answer this question. Individuals belonging to a specific ethnic or linguistic group but living in the diaspora often face significant challenges in negotiating these factors. This aspect is particularly salient in literary production, such as prose or novels, which recount the experiences of people navigating daily life under difficult circumstances, sometimes speaking Russian more fluently than any other language, yet still envisioning Bulgaria as the land of their ancestors. Some undertake journeys to the country, or even settle there, only to confront the harsh realities of everyday life, rendering them strangers once again in what they consider their homeland. Engagement with this chapter thus offers a dual benefit: it provides both a strong overview of the development of the relevant literary tradition and a compelling illustration of the neglect this community has historically faced, as well as how literature has served as a vital vehicle for expressing personal and cultural integrity.

This book represents a significant contribution to research on Bulgarians in the diaspora, providing detailed insights into the historical, linguistic, and cultural factors that have shaped the Bulgarian communities in Moldova and Ukraine. The authors convincingly demonstrate how language and literature have survived and evolved despite challenging circumstances. The volume is extensively illustrated, conveying the impression of a meticulously compiled and authoritative resource by experts in the field. Consequently, the monograph is particularly valuable for scholars seeking a deeper understanding of Bessarabia and its Bulgarian population. It constitutes a rigorously researched and highly instructive work, accessible to both specialists and a broader academic readership.

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