



REGULATION AND MANAGEMENT OF FORESTS IN BESSARABIA UNDER TSARIST ADMINISTRATION (1812-1917)

Cătălina FRANGOPOL *

Abstract: The regulation and management of forests in Bessarabia under Tsarist administration (1812-1917) were shaped by the broader economic, political, and social transformations following the region's integration into the Russian Empire. After the annexation of Bessarabia in 1812, the forests were nationalized and placed under direct state control, becoming a crucial resource for both economic and military purposes. The Forest Regulations of 1832 established a legal framework governing the exploitation, preservation, and administration of forest resources. These policies led to the creation of a structured bureaucratic system tasked with overseeing forestry operations, monitoring timber trade, and ensuring compliance with imperial directives. Throughout the 19th century, Bessarabia's forests were subjected to extensive logging to support construction, furniture production, and exports, contributing significantly to the imperial economy. This intensified exploitation resulted in severe ecological consequences, including large-scale deforestation and resource depletion. Additionally, the enforcement of strict forestry regulations led to tensions between the Tsarist authorities and the local population, particularly among peasants who relied on the forests for firewood, grazing, and subsistence activities. The study of these regulatory policies provides valuable insight into the imperial approach to resource management and its broader socio-environmental implications, illustrating the intersection of governance, economic interests, and ecological sustainability in Bessarabia during the Tsarist period.

Keywords: Forest regulation; Bessarabia; Tsarist administration; Nationalization of forests; Timber industry; Deforestation; Socio-environmental impact

* PhD in progress, Moldova State University, Republic of Moldova, Address: Alexei Mateevici str., nr. 60, Chisinau, Republic of Moldova, Tel.: +37378742347, E-mail: catalina.tudor@mail.ru.



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1. Introduction

Following the annexation of Bessarabia by the Russian Empire in 1812, the management of the forests in this region became a crucial component of imperial economic and administrative policies. Forests, considered a strategic resource both economically and militarily, were integrated into the centralized Russian management system, marking a turning point in the ecological and economic history of the province. The transformations were influenced by Tsarist forestry legislation, which reflected both the need for economic exploitation of natural resources and emerging concerns about conservation, within the context of agricultural expansion and rapid industrialization. One of the first measures adopted by the Tsarist administration was the nationalization of the forests, placing them directly under state control. This policy was justified by the need to protect resources from excessive exploitation by the local population and to integrate them into the imperial economic strategy. (Bejan 2010, p. 6) Through forestry laws enacted from the first half of the 19th century, including the Forest Regulations of 1832, strict regulations were established concerning the exploitation and use of timber. These measures contributed to the centralization of forest resource management, establishing a network of forest officials responsible for monitoring and managing the forests. Economically, the forests of Bessarabia became an important source of revenue for the Russian Empire. (Frangopol 2024, p. 165) Timber, particularly oak and beech, was exported to the more developed regions of the empire and to European markets through the ports on the Dniester and Danube rivers. (Filipescu, Giurgea 1919)

These economic policies led to the intensive exploitation of forest resources, contributing to the transformation of Bessarabia's natural landscape and the reduction of virgin forest areas.

The restrictive measures imposed by the Tsarist administration led to social conflicts, particularly between the local peasantry and the authorities. The rural population, traditionally dependent on access to forests for firewood, construction materials, and pasturing, faced drastic limitations, leading to numerous revolts and official complaints. (Enciu 2020, pp. 189-199) These tensions highlighted the contradictions between the interests of the centralized state and the needs of local communities.

2. Methodology

The study of the topic „Regulation and Management of Forests in Bessarabia under Tsarist Administration (1812-1917)“ was conducted through the examination of theoretical materials, historical documents, articles, synthesis works, and contemporary press materials. These sources provided a solid foundation for the application of research methods aimed at understanding the impact of Russian imperial policies on forest management in Bessarabia.

The main methods employed in this research included the historical analysis method, the historical-comparative method, the methods of induction and deduction, the analysis and synthesis method, the critical analysis method, the interdisciplinary approach method, and the retrospective method. These approaches ensured a coherent methodological framework for addressing the research topic and interpreting the historical context effectively.

Additionally, the study adhered to key principles of research, such as the scientific principle, the principle of objectivity, and the principle of a systemic approach. These principles guided the analysis and supported the integration of multiple perspectives into the study, offering a comprehensive understanding of the policies and their effects on forest management in Bessarabia under Tsarist administration.

3. Results

The study of forest management policies in Bessarabia under Tsarist rule offers valuable insights into the interaction between imperial power and the natural environment, highlighting how the exploitation of resources was used as a tool for economic and political integration. Analyzing these policies provides a deeper understanding of the economic and social dynamics in Bessarabia in the 19th century, contributing to a better contextualization of the relationship between humans and the environment in a province at the periphery of a multi-ethnic empire.

Under Tsarist policies, the forests of Bessarabia were treated as a strategic resource, reflecting the economic, military, and administrative priorities of the Russian Empire. The Russian administration implemented a strict system of regulations, inspired by the forestry legislation applied in other regions of the empire, such as the central guberniyas and Congress Poland. (Teodorescu 1919) The Forest Regulations of 1832 represent one of the most significant legislative documents of

the era, consolidating state control over natural resources and establishing detailed measures for their management. In Bessarabia, this regulation was applied through a specialized bureaucratic apparatus, which included local foresters and inspectors appointed by the Ministry of Finance, who monitored cutting activities and regulated exploitation practices. (Nistor 1991, pag. 98)

This policy of centralization was amplified by subsequent reforms, such as the 1843 reform, which provided for the division of forests into functional categories: state forests, communal forests, and private forests. (Enciu 2020, pp. 189-199) The purpose of this classification was to ensure more efficient resource use, with state forests prioritized for industrial exploitation and military needs, while communal forests were intended for local consumption. This division was perceived by local communities as a reduction of their traditional rights over forested lands, amplifying discontent and creating an atmosphere of social conflict.

The export of wood constituted a major component of the Tsarist economic strategy in Bessarabia. According to commercial documents from that period, the ports of the Dniester and Danube, such as Reni, Ismail, and Tighina, became essential nodes for transporting timber to markets in Central and Southeastern Europe. Statistics from the 1850s and 1860s indicate a significant increase in the volume of timber exported, with species such as oak and beech being preferred for shipbuilding, furniture, and other strategic industries. (Emilciuc 2017, pp. 14-34) This intensification of trade transformed the forests of Bessarabia into a key element of the regional economy but also increased the pressure on local ecosystems.

From an ecological perspective, the impact of these policies was profound. Official reports from the second half of the 19th century, including those from the Economic Council of Bessarabia, highlight the accelerated pace of deforestation and land degradation. According to a study conducted by the local administration in 1875, the area of forests in Bessarabia had been reduced by over 30% compared to the period preceding the annexation. (Emilciuc 2017, pp. 14-34) This phenomenon was caused not only by intensive exploitation but also by the expansion of agricultural land, a trend promoted by the Russian authorities.

In social terms, Tsarist forestry policies led to a rift between the administration and local communities. Peasants, accustomed to using forests for daily needs such as firewood, grazing, and hunting, found themselves restricted by the new regulations. In 1886, a report from the authorities in Bessarabia province recorded numerous complaints from peasants regarding the limited access to forests, many of which resulted in small-scale local uprisings. (Boboc 2008) These conflicts reflected the

tensions between the centralized administrative model and the traditions of local communities, who viewed the forests as part of their natural rights.

The forest management policies in Bessarabia under Tsarist administration not only reshaped the natural and economic landscape of the region but also illustrated how natural resources were used as instruments of imperial integration and control. This complex dynamic remains an area of interest for historians, emphasizing the interaction between politics, ecology, and society in a region situated at the crossroads of empires.

After 1870, with the administrative and economic reforms implemented across the Russian Empire, including those related to the emancipation of serfs, Bessarabia experienced further reorganization of its forest management system. The Imperial Forestry Department, established in 1869, played a central role in overseeing forestry activities. In Bessarabia, this department extended its influence by establishing *ohrani* (forest posts) designed to monitor activities in state forests and control private exploitation. (Emilciuc 2017, pp. 14-34)

Local forest officials, often from outside the province, were seen as representatives of imperial centralization policies, frequently clashing with local elites and rural populations. (Frangopol 2024, pp. 250-254) Diaries and administrative reports from this period, such as those preserved in the gubernial archives in Chişinău, provide testimonies of the difficulties encountered in implementing forestry regulations, including corruption and local resistance.

Another essential aspect of forestry policies was their integration into the empire's industrialization process. In the second half of the 19th century, the development of transportation infrastructure, such as the construction of railways in southern Bessarabia, facilitated the exploitation and export of forest resources. The Bender-Galaţi railway line, inaugurated in 1877, became a crucial artery for transporting timber to Danube ports and onwards to international markets. (Emilciuc 2017, pp. 14-34) This infrastructure development had a profound impact on the region's forests. Vast areas were deforested to provide materials for railway construction and maintenance, as well as to support the mining and shipbuilding industries in southern Russia.

Statistics from Russian official reports show a significant increase in the volume of timber exploited from Bessarabia between 1870 and 1900. (Emilciuc 2017, pp. 14-34) In 1894, the total volume of timber exported through the Ismail and Reni ports doubled compared to the previous decade, highlighting the intense demand for this

resource. Such intensive exploitation of forests was not accompanied by appropriate reforestation measures, leading to long-term ecological degradation. (Frangopol 2024, pp. 250-254)

The Tsarist administration was primarily focused on the economic exploitation of forests, the late 19th century saw the first signs of ecological awareness. Forestry conferences held in St. Petersburg in the 1880s and 1890s discussed the importance of protecting natural resources and adopting sustainable exploitation practices. (Enciu 2020, pp. 189-199) In Bessarabia, these ideas were partially reflected in attempts to create local forest reserves and in the prohibition of logging in certain critical areas to prevent soil erosion. The implementation of these policies was limited by the lack of qualified personnel and economic pressures. Regional archives mention the isolated efforts of some forestry inspectors to implement reforestation practices, but these were not supported by adequate funds or consistent political backing.

Forest management policies had a direct impact on the daily life of Bessarabia's inhabitants. For peasants, the forests were not only an economic resource but also an integral part of community life, providing firewood, building materials, and grazing land. In this context, the strict regulations imposed by the Tsarist administration were perceived as a threat to their traditional way of life.

4. Conclusion

The forestry policies implemented by the Tsarist administration in Bessarabia between 1812 and 1917 provide a compelling example of how an imperial state approached the management of natural resources in a borderland region. These policies were characterized by a dual intent: the economic integration of Bessarabia into the Russian Empire's economic structure and the strategic use of forest resources to support infrastructure and industrial development. Although this administrative model was effective in generating revenue and consolidating state control over a valuable resource, the long-term ecological and social consequences were considerable.

The intensive exploitation of forests, coupled with inadequate attention to regeneration, led to significant degradation of Bessarabia's natural landscape. The loss of extensive forested areas negatively impacted local ecosystems and contributed to the region's increasing ecological vulnerability. At the same time, the restrictive policies imposed on the local population sparked social conflicts and persistent grievances, reflecting the ongoing tension between the needs of rural

communities and the economic priorities of a centralized state. (Frangopol 2024, pp. 250-254)

The legacy of these policies remains relevant in the analysis of natural resource management within centralized governance structures. Bessarabia's experience under Tsarist rule offers valuable lessons about the importance of balancing economic exploitation of natural resources with the need for their protection for future generations.

Furthermore, these policies raise fundamental questions about the state's role in resource management and the social implications of economic policies that prioritize centralization and material extraction over sustainability. By studying these aspects, historians can contribute to understanding governance models that have profoundly shaped the relationship between humans and the environment, both in the past and the present. This analysis can serve as a starting point for addressing contemporary challenges related to the responsible and equitable management of natural resources.

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