



CONCEPT 2(29)/2024

---

# THE PAINFUL MEMORY OF MOLDOVA — ***THE BOOK OF FAMINE*** BY **LARISA TUREA**

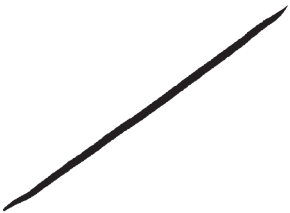
*Cartea foametei*

Cartier

2024 (paperback, 559 pp)  
ISBN: 9789975867634

by Larisa Turea (Author)

**CORNEL HUȚANU**



University of Bucharest, Romania  
*cornel.hutanu@u.unibuc.ro*

**Abstract:** The book authored by Larisa Turea talks about one of the most brutally dark pages of the history of Moldova, the 1946-1947 famine. The result of a decades-long thoughtful research, the book brings together shattering testimonies of this tragic event, alongside insightful translations of official documents and touching photographs that shape an irrefutable truth: hundreds of thousands of people perished not because of natural conditions, not even as accidental victims of an irresponsible policy, but because of a man-made famine engineered by the Soviet government.

**Keywords:** starvation as a weapon of war, 1946-1947 famine, 1932-1933 Holodomor, soviet dictatorship.

**How to cite:** Huțanu, C. (2024). "The Painful Memory of Moldova – *The Book of Famine* by Larisa Turea", *Concept* 2(29), pp. 243-251. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37130/jpdkdg18>

The book authored by Larisa Turea speaks about a painful and lesser-known but extremely important chapter in the history of the population east of the Prut River: the 1946–1947 famine in the former Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, a period of major food deprivation that caused hundreds of thousands of victims and had complex historical, social, and psychological consequences.

The volume published by Cartier Publishing House is in its 5th edition and is the result of a research work spanning several decades, a persistent investigation that had to overcome the imposed silence on the subject, with a first result in the book published in Chișinău in 1991:

Employed at *Moldova* after 9 years, during my field trips I also wrote down testimonies about the famine, because I realized that the survivors were disappearing, and the archival documents, those that would be preserved (if they were ever preserved) would become unusable. (...) I collected materials without hoping they would be printed: the situation changed with Gorbachev's Perestroika; in 1987, together with Valeriu Turea, I started publishing fragments from *The Book of Famine* which, typewritten in transliterated Russian letters, appeared, with a philosophical preface by Ion Druță, at the Universitas Publishing House in Chișinău, in 1991. The print run of 2000 copies sold out in a few days, the volume literally vanished from bookstores. However, the research was truncated, many archival documents were rejected, and those accepted were dispersed. (p. 11)<sup>1</sup>

1 "Angajată peste 9 ani la Moldova, în deplasările pe teren îmi notam, aparte, și mărturiile despre foamete, pentru că îmi dădeam seama că dispar supraviețuitorii, iar documentele de arhivă, câte se vor păstra (dacă se vor păstra) vor ajunge literă moartă. (...) Colectam materiale fără a spera că vor fi tipărite: situația s-a

The next edition, published in Bucharest in 2008 by Curtea Veche Publishing House, was the result of another 15 years of research, in which Larisa Turea sought out and interviewed other survivors of the famine. Their disturbing confessions were supplemented by new archival documents, carefully selected as they became available while the influence of the previous dictatorship diminished.

The volume is structured in two sections. The first part presents an oral history of the famine, where people are allowed to speak, without interventions or comments from the author. Ordinary people speak about the out of the ordinary events they experienced, shocked that such horrors were possible, carrying psychological wounds that will never heal. The author confesses: "I chose not to tell the stories myself, the monologue seemed more appropriate (...) to help the singular, distinct voice of each one be heard" (p. 14). It was an approach that gave confidence to the survivors to tell their stories, but which was not without scientific rigour: "I tried to respect some selective criteria, I formulated questionnaires with dozens of questions, I tried to obtain a representative sample, to present the testimonies of as many social environments as possible."<sup>2</sup>

(p. 13). Therefore, the testimonies that reconstruct the dramatic picture of Bessarabia in those years come from all representative categories of survivors: peasants, workers, intellectuals, people from all geographical areas, from rural, but also urban environments. Among the earth-shattering testimonies we can find a few period photographs, visual evidence with a profound impact.

The second part of the volume inventories various official archival documents, translated to provide a clear picture of the overwhelming mandatory taxes in kind, of the evolution of the crisis, but also of the way in which authorities related to information about victims, the health status of the population, and requests for help from those starving to death (information notes, requests, extracts, records, certificates, information on demographic developments and the evolution of living costs, medical diagnoses).

The famine in Bessarabia of 1946-1947 is a dark chapter in the history of Moldova that was kept silent for decades by the Soviet authorities and was less known until recently. A subject avoided by people out of fear or out of self-preservation. The imposed silence gradually became a voluntary, consented silence, while the survivors often refused to speak, preferring to forget the torments they went through, or out of shame for having lived through them:

---

schimbat cu Perestroika lui Gorbaciov; prin 1987, împreună cu Valeriu Turea, începusem a publica secvențe din *Cartea foamei* care, dactilografiată cu litere rusești, transliterate, a apărut, cu prefața filosofică a lui Ion Druță, la Editura Universitas din Chișinău, în 1991. Tirajul de 2000 de exemplare s-a epuizat în câteva zile, volumul literalmente a dispărut din librării. Cercetarea era însă trunchiată, multe documente de arhivă au fost respinse, cele acceptate au fost dispersate.

2 "am ales să nu depăn eu istoriile, mi s-a părut mai nimerit monologul (...) pentru a face auzită vocea singulară, distinctă a fiecăruia."

Many avoided the subject, as someone said, “as if we were suffering from a shameful disease.” Silence was a rule imposed by the Soviet communists. Neither in public nor in private was there any talk about certain facts, events, or certain people. There was no talk about labour camps, about the GULAG in general, about former mayors or members of interwar parties, about writers who had been blacklisted (at one time, even Dostoevsky was on the blacklist of illegals), etc. Memory was restricted, the prohibition to address taboo subjects deeply seeped in the mentality of the Bessarabians. (pp. 558-559)<sup>3</sup>

The organized nature of the famine was denied by the Soviet authorities and continues to be denied by the political structures of Soviet influence that followed. The official causes for the famine invoked natural conditions, namely the overlapping of drought and post-war shortages, the reduction of livestock, which did not allow the saturation of the land with fertilizers. The former regime did everything possible to ensure that the exact number of victims remained hidden and, even today, an estimate is hard to pinpoint. According to historians (Bulmaga, 2012; Ellman, 2000; Gribincea and Țăranu, 1989; Țăranov, 2002 cited in Cașu, 2014, pp. 189-190) between December 1946 and August 1947, around 150,000 to more than 200,000 people were killed by starvation in Soviet Moldova. Many, including new-borns, died without being declared. Hundreds of thousands more were seriously affected by malnutrition, and many of them lost their lives in the following years.

Economist Amartya Sen (1982) theorizes the accountability of authorities in times of famine, arguing that the lack of a democratic system and famine are interdependent. Authorities are responsible for the food security of a country, and they must find appropriate solutions to prevent and limit natural disasters when they occur. Sen gives the example of the Bengal famine of 1943, arguing that it was caused mainly by the British occupation in India, and was aggravated by the British government's suspension of trade in rice and grains between the various Indian provinces.

In the case of Moldova, the cooperation with the Romanian armed forces in 1941-1944, the resistance to the Soviet occupation, the refusal to accept collectivization and forced requisitioning, but also possible attempts at reunification with Romania were the problems that the Soviet authorities wanted

3 "Mulți evită subiectul, așa cum afirma cineva, 'de parcă am fi zăcut de o boală rușinoasă'. Tăcerea era regulă impusă de comuniștii sovietici. Nici în spațiul public, dar nici în cel privat nu se vorbea despre anumite fapte, evenimente, despre anumiți oameni. Nu se vorbea despre lagărele de muncă, despre GULAG în general, despre foștii primari sau membri ai partidelor interbelice, despre scriitorii trecuți la index (într-o vreme, până și Dostoievski era pe lista neagră, a proscrisilor) etc. Memoria era restricționată, interdicția de a aborda subiectele tabuizate a pătruns adânc în mentalitatea basarabenilor."

to suppress, and the strategy that was applied was starvation. Food is a primary necessity of citizens, and those who are subjected to starvation lose the will to resist and fight back.

A strategy that had been successfully implemented in the past, with well-documented examples (Edmondson, 1977; Conquest, 1987; Applebaum, 2017) like the Povolzhye famine of 1921-1922 in Russia and the Holodomor of 1932-1933 in Ukraine, other examples of genocide through famines organized by Stalin, where similar testimonies appear and where the famine had similar coordinates.

The horrifying testimonies collected by Larisa Turea contain common elements, and the singular testimonies become a collective voice that confirms the authenticity of each statement, so that none of them can be ignored or disregarded. Furthermore, the documents attest to the deliberate lack of response or solutions from the authorities. Against the backdrop of the 1945-1946 drought and a very low agricultural production, in a country that had not yet recovered from the ravages of war, the Soviet power imposed overwhelming taxes and mandatory quotas in kind ('postavka') that had to be handed over to the state, obligations that were constantly increasing, those who opposed them being severely punished. In a short time, "the attics were swept, the last grain was taken"<sup>4</sup> (p. 518), and people were left with nothing to eat and to feed their children.



*Mother heroine Chifariuc Z.P.,  
Târnova village, inv. 1944 (p. 217)*

Brutally deprived of food, people ended up eating anything they could find, from weeds from their garden or the surrounding forests, pets or other animals near their house—dogs, cats, rats, or even insects—, plant roots or reed. The recorded cases—many of them recurrent—of serious food poisoning from poisonous plants paint a picture of despair. Others put their lives at risk by crossing the border clandestinely, as Soviet border patrols were instructed to shoot on sight any trespassers. For others the only solution left was suicide: "Desperate people went wherever their legs carried them in search of food, on foot or on the roofs of train cars, each as he could. Those who remained at home often had no other solution than to end their lives"<sup>5</sup> (p. 546). The full picture of dehumanization is completed by the cases of necrophagy and cannibalism recorded in the archival documents.

<sup>4</sup> "s-au măturat podurile, s-a luat ultimul grăunte"

<sup>5</sup> "Oamenii disperați plecau unde îi duceau ochii în căutare de hrană, pe jos sau pe acoperișurile vagoanelor de tren, care și cum reușea. Cei rămași la vatră nu aveau, adesea, altă soluție decât să-și pună capăt zilelor."

The Soviet activists were illiterate and uneducated and were constantly trying to assert themselves, collecting more than was needed. Many of the requisitioned products were mismanaged or stolen. Although documents prove that Moscow authorities were constantly notified on the disastrous situation in Moldova, Soviet help arrived too late—mostly with state loan status—at the end of December 1946. Most of the aid was stolen by the local administration or went bad due to poor storage in train stations. Canteens were opened, but they were too few and inaccessible for the large numbers of starving people. The situation spiralled out of control and the first attempts for real aid from the Soviet officials came after the visit of Alexei Kosygin in Chişinău as head of the relief mission, but the increasing cases of dystrophy prove the crisis was again mismanaged. The situation finally improved in the second half of 1947, only with the new harvest, although a considerable amount of the survivors, severely physically affected, will perish in the following years.

The famine and its effects, followed by the mass deportations of July 1947 and March-April 1951, permanently altered the country's demography, and its political and cultural landscape, forever shaping the destinies of those who survived. Larisa Turea's book not only stands as an obstacle in the path of forgetting but continues to engage discussions about this dark period of Moldova's past. The book has also translated into a number of performative productions that speak of the atrocities committed by the Soviet regime.

*Plânsul pământului* (*The Cry of the Earth*) and *Pâinea cea de-a pururi* (*Our Everlasting Bread*) are 2 artistic documentaries produced in 2016 at the National Radio Theatre in Bucharest, based on scripts by Magda Duţu, under the artistic direction of Petru Hadârcă. A cast that brings together artists from both sides of the Prut River gives voice to some of the survivors, as participants and witnesses of those terrible times.

*Seceta Roşie* (*The Red Drought*, 2017)—directed by Petru Hadârcă at the Vasile Alecsandri Theatre in Iaşi—is a theatrical creation with documentary value that also brings to life the testimonies from the *Book of Famine*, working as an exercise of remembrance.

The Luceafărul Republican Theatre hosted in 2023 the performance *1946* directed by Slava Sambriş. The documentary performance brings to light the harrowing stories of the survivors of the organized famine of 1946-1947. Also drawing from *The Book of Famine*, the play follows the chronology of events and presents the atrocities to which people were subjected.

In 2022, the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova established the “Day of Commemoration of the Victims of the Organized Famine of 1946-1947”, on the third Saturday of April.

**References:**

1. Applebaum, Anne (2017) *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine*. Signal.
2. Cașu, I. (2014) *Dușmanul de clasă. Represiuni politice, violență și rezistență în R(A)SS Moldovenească, 1924-1956*. Chișinău: Cartier.
3. Conquest, R. (1987) *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*. Oxford University Press.
4. Edmondson, C. M. (1977) "The politics of hunger: The Soviet response to famine, 1921", *Soviet Studies* 29/4, October, pp. 506–518.
5. Sen, Amartya (1982) *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

**Online references:**

1. Parlamentul Moldovei (2022, 7 April) *Parlamentul a votat instituirea Zilei comemorării victimelor foametei organizate din anii 1946-1947* [Online] Available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/minut-de-reculegere-in-parlament-pentru-victimele-foametei-organizate-din-1946-1947/32920455.html> Accessed: 22 November 2024)

**Performance references:**

1. *1946* (2023) Directed by Slava Sambriș [Luceafărul Republican Theatre, Chișinău]
2. *Pâinea cea de-a pururi* (2016) Directed by Petru Hadârcă [Teatrul Național Radiofonic]
3. *Plânsul pământului* (2016) Directed by Petru Hadârcă [National Radio Theatre]
4. *Seceta Roșie* (2017) Directed by Petru Hadârcă [Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre, Iași]



**Larisa Turea** is a journalist, art critic, member of the Writers' Union of the Republic of Moldova, member of the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC/AICT), president of the Moldovan National Section of the IATC/AICT, literary secretary of the Mihai Eminescu National Theatre in Chișinău. She made her poetry debut in *Moldova*. She is a graduate of the State University of Chișinău, Journalism Department (1974); internships in France (1995, Paris, Courant d'Est programme of the Ministry of Culture; Grenoble, Observatory of Cultural Policies), USA (New York University, Remarque Institute).

She was Vice-Minister of Culture and Cults in the Government of the Republic of Moldova (1992-1994) and worked in diplomacy. She collaborated with publications such as *Contrafort*, *Sud-Est cultural*, *Jurnal de Chișinău*, *Flux*, *Timpu*, *Art-hoc*, *Democrația*, *Literatura și arta*, *Capitala*, *The Slovak Theatre* (Slovakia), *Caiete critice* (Romania), *Missives* (France); etc.; founder and editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Teatrului Național*; author of *Portrete în relief*, (Cartea Moldovenească, 1987), *Cartea foametei*, with Valeriu Turea (1<sup>st</sup> edition, Universitas, 1991), *În do major! Eugen Doga* (Tipografia Centrală, 2007), *Cartea foametei* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, revised, Curtea Veche, 2008), „Portret de grup cu Sfântul Nicolae” (in *Dramaturgi basarabeni de astăzi*, Teatrul Azi & Fundația Camil Petrescu, 2008), *ABC*

*Doga, un destin in do major* (Prut Internațional, 2018, Special Award of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research of the Republic of Moldova, International Book Fair for Children and Youth 2019). Productions: *Pâinica de la iepurele șchiop* (radio play for children, directed by Aurica Mirca, Radio Moldova, November 2013, Award for the best radio script, Radio Theatre Gala, 2013); *Plânsul pământului* and *Pâinea cea de-a pururi* (2 artistic documentaries at the National Radio Theatre Bucharest; scripts by Magda Duțu, directed by Petru Hadârcă, 2016); *Seceta Roșie* (after *Cartea foametei*, directed by Petru Hadârcă, Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre, Iași, May 2017); *1946* (after *Cartea foametei*, directed by Slava Sambrîș, Luceafărul Republican Theatre, Chișinău, 2023).