

**Vlad Mitric-Ciupe**  
Associate Researcher, PhD  
ORCID: 0000-0003-4011-9041  
Center of European History and Civilization,  
Romanian Academy(Iași), Romania  
vlad.mitric@adproiect.ro

## **ROMANIAN ARCHITECTS IN ODESSA (1941-1944) AND THEIR SUBSEQUENT FATE**

### **Abstract**

*The topic of Holocaust is mostly mentioned in reference to Transnistria in the years of 1941-1944. Our research studies concerning the rapport between the officials and the architects/architecture during the totalitarian regimes in Romania unveiled the opportunity for us to discover new information and elements helping to give a more definite shape and enliven a plethora of issues, left neglected and even forgotten until today.*

*A good example of the above is the activity of the Romanian architects in Odessa and their later destiny, marred almost to its end by the horrors lived through during the Second World War. Hence the main thesis of our article. Documents in the Romanian Securitate archives are assisting us to build their professional and human portrait, along with other enthralling elements, trying to find out how their lifes – both social and professional – were affected by what happened in 1941-1944.*

*We already knew that the vast majority of Transnistria government's officials were convicted for war crimes or crimes against the peace by the people's court (1945-1946), but the fate of these architects remained unknown – or, at last, forgotten – until our research. Following the idea that they were simple technicians, our initial intuition was confirmed. Although they were arrested and investigated, in the end they were exonerated of any accusation related to their activity in Transnistria.*

*However, from a double perspective – both the criminal record from 1945 and their belonging to a social class destined to disappear – they were under the Securitate's lens for many years, having a series of both social problems and, above all, professional. Their ascension was completely blocked, they were constantly under surveillance, their involvement in other political processes was attempted, their transformation into Securitate's collaborators was desired.*

*The irony of fate is precisely that, relying exclusively on the documents of the former Securitate, we can recreate today the portraits of two architects who otherwise would have remained completely unknown.*

**Key words:** *architecture, Communism, Transnistria, Securitate, architects.*

For the 1941–1944, the recent Romanian historiography mainly recollects the painful Holocaust case when referring to the Transnistria territory under the jurisdiction of the Romanian state at that time. More other social and political elements have been assigned a secondary position during the communist years. Our research studies concerning the rapport between the officials and the architects/architecture during the totalitarian regimes in Romania unveiled the opportunity for us to discover new information and elements helping to give a more definite shape and enliven a plethora of issues, left neglected and even forgotten until today. A good example of the above is the activity of the Romanian architects in Odessa and their later destiny, marred almost to its end by the horrors lived through during the Second World War. Their stay in Odessa lasted less than three years, considering that General Antonescu issued the Decree number 1 for the Civil Administration of Transnistria on August 19, 1941 (A.M.A.E., USSR fund, file no 71, vol. 129, p. 37; Verenca, 57), later replaced by a military administration, on February 2, 1944 (Verenca, 2000: 199).

Pursuant to the article 14 in the Truce Convention – signed on September 12, 1944, between the Romanian government and its counterparts in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, United States of America and the United Kingdom, on the other hand – our country committed to cooperate with the Soviet High Command to arrest and sentence the people accused of war crimes. On October 10, 1944, along with other high dignitaries in Antonescu government (1940-1944), there were also detained three architects who had been working in the Department of Construction with the Transnistria government - Constantin Minescu (Head of Department), Nicolae Ioniță and Ilie Teodorescu. While investigating the documents in the Securitate archives, we had the opportunity to build the biographies of the first two, including their achievements, and noticed that the war years, their work in Transnistria and the interrogations they went through at a later date had a lifelong impact.

Born on August 22, 1906 in Bucharest, Constantin Minescu graduated from high school in 1926 and took the baccalaureate exam at Matei Basarab High School. In 1933, he finished his studies at the Architecture Academy of Bucharest. As he himself stated (A.C.N.S.A.S., Criminal Fund, file no. 76689, vol. 1, ff. 40–47), since he had to support his mother and two sisters after his father's death the same year, he took a job with other architects who had works commissioned or took part in various competitions (A.C.N.S.A.S., Criminal Fund, file no. 76689, vol. 1, ff. 40–47). After a few years of such 'painful struggles for survival' (A.C.N.S.A.S., Criminal Fund, file no. 76689, vol. 1, ff. 40–47), Constantin Minescu manages to secure a job at the Department of Architecture of the Royal Palace and later at the Technical Department of Bucegi Tinut (one of the ten lands established in 1938, following the administrative reform of King Carol II – *auth*). He was a close associate to Gheorghe Alexianu (1897-1946; jurist, Ph.D in Law, Professor. Royal Chief Commissioner of Suceava land (1938) and of Bucegi land (1938–1940), Governor of Transnistria (1941-1944). Arrested in August 1944 and investigated in Moscow, he was tried for war crimes and the country disaster during Ion Antonescu's trial – he was sentenced to death and executed on June 1, 1946 – *auth.*), Royal Chief Commissioner – a few months later, he was appointed the Head of the Department of Architecture when decision had been made to develop and diversify its activity. In this position, held between 1939 and the fall of 1940, he had the opportunity of a direct access to and supervision of an expansive and varied program of constructions, which included primary schools, kindergartens, medical centers, law courts, communal baths and many other public buildings in the main cities of the Land and in villages alike (Alexianu, 2007).

Even though he had to be conscripted to join the war, he benefited from an exemption in 1941, thanks to an Order issued by the General Staff, as he was warned that this alternative meant he was supposed to work for the Civil Department of Transnistria. The Government administration tasked him with setting in motion an architecture unit 'to immediately start the repair, development and restoration of various buildings damaged in the war fury and to initiate projects for new con-

structions, in full compliance with the plans provided by the Governor” (A.C.N.S.A.S., Criminal Fund, file no. 76689, vol. 1, ff. 81–86.), where he acted as Director until the beginning of 1944. At some point, the unit will convert into the Division of Governmental Constructions (Verenca, 2000; Solovei, 2009), employing 14 clerks.

While taking into account the trail of devastation left behind by the war, the Division went into immediate effect, thus contributing to the improvement and relief of the conditions in the city and its vicinity, operating on two areas – repair and restoration of the damaged buildings, along with designing and erecting anew. In spite of the major hardships – lack of construction materials, shortage of workers, means of transport, delay in receiving the materials delivered from the country, not speaking Russian, etc, it took a relatively short time to accomplish a large number of interesting works, *‘of a great artistic value and cultural significance, which will last for a long time’* (A.C.N.S.A.S., Criminal Fund, file no. 76689, vol. 1, ff. 81–86.), among which there are Palaces of Vorontsov, Duma, Tolstoi and the International Club, restoration of the Theatre of Opera and Ballet (all having been bombed), Londra Hotel, the buildings in Nicolae Boulevard and Gogol Street, as well as the ones in Ecaterina Plaza. Additionally, works of restoration were performed on a number of cheap hostel-like housing for clerks, workshops and hangars; terminal buildings in Tiraspol, Rabnita, Balta, Golta and Moghilau were designed and erected, along with city planning and systematization projects for protocol villages in Oceacov county (A.C.N.S.A.S., Criminal Fund, file no. 76689, vol. 1, ff. 81–86.). As for the restoration of the Opera in Odessa, there is a testimony of a direct witness – *‘I do not know how they did it, but they restored the Opera so beautifully that the moment the director and the team associated with its operation laid their eyes on it...when they saw what materials and furnishings had been sent over, of nowhere – suddenly costumes and everything the Russian workers had taken home popped out of the ground....’* (Mitric-Ciupe, 2014).

On October 11, 1944, architect Minescu was arrested, along with other clerks in the Transnistria Government (A.C.N.S.A.S., Documentary Fund, file no. 8175, f.140). During his arrest, he was interrogated

only once, on which occasion he briefly described his stay in Transnistria, pointing out at the end ‘*I find no blemish in my entire activity, never did a side job or evacuated anyone.*’ (A.C.N.S.A.S., Criminal Fund, file no 76689, vol. 1, ff. 18–18v.). In an additional interrogation on April 23, he will complete his statements with some thought-provoking information. He reminded them that the Division of Constructions had never employed Jews from the labor camps or the political detainees – they only worked with 5-6 Jewish architects sent to concentration camps by the General Staff, among whom there was Leon Garcea (1908-1989; architect, graduate of the Academy of Architecture in Bucharest in 1934. He had more interesting works, in a modernist style at the end of the 30’s; after war, he worked in different design institutes and he was a teacher at Școala Medie de Arhitectură (Intermediate Architecture School) after 1949. Co-author of the Radio and Broadcasting building in Bucharest, along with architects Mihai and Tiberiu Ricci) and author of the I.P.C.T. building project in Tudor Arghezi Street in Bucharest (1960) – *auth.*) he had suggested him to be a witness in that respect (A.C.N.S.A.S., Criminal Fund, file no.76689, vol. 1, f. 19). Various other people were heard during the investigation and all presented favorable facts on Constantin Minescu.

Released at one point (We were unable to identify the exact date in the documents in C.N.S.A.S. archive; our guess would be summer-fall of the year 1945. – *auth.*) and placed under house arrest on condition he attended regular meetings with the public prosecutor, he was permanently removed from the proceedings in 1946, being exonerated of all counts (A.C.N.S.A.S., Criminal Fund, file no. 76689, vol. 1, ff. 27–28v.). The case was resumed at a later date and the final decision was made in 1950, when the War Crimes Division attached to the Prosecutor Office of Bucharest ordered: „[...] *In possession of no administration, sending money back home from Transnistria, in no way destroying but building what the war damaged and always having a benevolent behavior towards everyone, we recommend to maintain the removal from proceedings decided on 14<sup>th</sup> of July 1946 for comrade counselor Ralescu*” (A.C.N.S.A.S., Criminal Fund, file no. 76689, vol. 1, ff. 98–98v). Being successful to overcome this sensitive situation, he got his life back

together – married the sister of Ionita, an architect who had been his co-worker in Transnistria and shared the same fate, resumed his activity at Sovrom Constructii after 2–3 years of private practice, between 1946 and 1948. Nevertheless, Minescu's political inconvenience was not yet over. He is arrested again on September 5, 1948, under the charge of hosting spiritism séances and subversive meetings (A.C.N.S.A.S., Criminal Fund, file no. 76689, vol. 1, ff. 56–59), but he was released in January 1949.

Back to his career, he will devote himself to designing at SovromConstructii Institute in the mid 50's – later known as I.P.S.R. and I.P.C.M. – being recognized as the author of the projects for the School Complexes in Lupeni, Barlad and Campulung Moldovenesc (for the Ministry of Armed Forces). Even if he had been admitted into the Union of Architects of R.P.R in 1954, Constantin Minescu sees himself back into the threading machine of politics some years later. According to some latest research studies (Celac, Panaitescu, 2016), U.A.R. went through a purging process in 1959; the order was to (initially) exclude a number of circa 10% of the member, with the most cited reasons being the fail of paying the contribution fee or the lack of activity. Minescu found surprisingly in the position of being expelled and his appeal petition remained unanswered. Other information on the architect's life until his demise in 1966 is entirely missing. He had no offsprings and his memory is only preserved in a few pages of the dusty files in the archives.

Born in Constanta in 1913, Nicolae Ionita attended the school in his native town and passed the baccalaureate exam at 'Dr. I. Mesota' High School in Brasov in 1931. Next year, he will be admitted into the Faculty of Architecture in Bucharest, which he graduated from in 1937 and defended his thesis in 1940. He started working as a student, first at Eng. E. Prager plant (1934–1938), then at the Architecture Unit of Busteni Land (1939 – 1940), followed by the Division of Constructions with the Transnistria Government (1941–44), after he had been drafted on the Ukraine front within the First Mixed Mountain Bridge for three months (Celac, Panaitescu, 2016). At the end of year 1941, he was appointed sub-director of the Division of Constructions in Tiraspol, where

he was in charge with ,the reconstruction of some valuable palaces and buildings, bombarded, as well as with erecting new buildings needed by the authorities” (Celac, Panaitescu, 2016), with duties of supervision and technical control, building terminals, railway stations, warehouses and residential houses (Celac, Panaitescu, 2016).

Placed on the list of war criminals, also charged with appropriation of assets from the USSR property, architect Nicolae Ioniță was arrested on October 10, 1944. Following an extensive investigation, taking place at the Prefecture of Police, then at Malmaison prison, the cabinet number 13 of the People’s Court decides his release and the case closing, considering that there was not enough evidence for the charge of war crime, and also that he had not caused any prejudice to the USSR while working in Transnistria (A.C.N.S.A.S., Informative network fund, file no. 44265, ff. 42–45). According to his own statements, Ionita claimed to be innocent, did not understand his detention solely based on his service with the administrative apparatus, thus requesting his social and moral rehabilitation (A.C.N.S.A.S., Informative network fund, file no. 76451, ff. 32–36). Released in June 1945, Nicolae Ioniță had a difficult time rejoining his professional field. He worked for the Artistic Ensemble of C.G.M. (1946–1948), the Architecture Unit of Civic Hospitals Eforia (1948), Division of Constructions within the Health Ministry (1948), Labor in Constructions Cooperative (1949–1950), the Institute of Construction Design starting with 1950. He considered all forgotten the chapter of the charges brought against him, the investigation and the political detention he went through after a new action permanently cleared him (A.C.N.S.A.S., Informative network fund, file no. 76451, ff. 107–108). Here is how, a few years later, while working for I.P.C.M.C. as the Head of Architecture Unit, Securitate tried to recruit him.

During that process, the architect was intimidated and threatened with being left unemployed, among other things, due to the fact that he had not confessed to the staff department about his «business» in 1945 (A.C.N.S.A.S., Informative network fund, file no. 44265, ff. 13–15). He gave in to the blackmail, received the clandestine name of «Cernatescu Paul», signed the agreement and went through the first briefing session. Following several statements, in the form of more than neutral

profile descriptions done for some of his co-workers (Ioniță provides notes with no relevance, meant for Securitate, about architects Dan Io-vănescu, Vasile Cantuniari and Constantin Minescu), his activity as a collaborator at the end of 1960 was assessed and it was noticed that *‘he did not deliver enough material’* and *‘promised to try harder to better perform his tasks assigned to him.’* (A.C.N.S.A.S., Informative Network Fund, file no. 44265, f. 24). After a few years when the relation between Nicolae Ioniță and Securitate is stagnant, as the architect had overcome his initial moment of weakness and probably refusing to provide the informative notes being requested, it was approved to discontinue the contact with agent *‘Cernatescu’* in 1967, *‘due to the fact that he was not in the position to obtain more information’* (A.C.N.S.A.S., Informative Network Fund, file no. 44265, f. 38–39). We are not aware of the year when architect Nicolae Ionita passed away but in 1971, when Securitate tried to also recruit his wife, he was no longer alive (A.C.N.S.A.S., Informative Network Fund, file no. 437663, ff. 1-1v).

In spite of the fact that they were not sentenced and served long years in the political prison like other contemporary architects, the cases of the two men in Transnistria of the years 1941–1944 follow the totalitarian logics of repression and total control in Romania at that time. If the effects of the war ending and the stipulations in the Armistice Convention finished quickly for them from a legal perspective, that exact moment and the label they had to carry haunted their lives to the end. Their professional path was obstructed, even if not completely, but in the context of development and promotion. In the new structures of their field – Union of Architects of R.P.R. – no position was available to them. On top of that, they had massive problems in the family and personal realm. The most memorable elements occurred during their interaction with Securitate, as both of them were classified as informers for several years, intimidated, blackmailed, with many attempts to convert them to being collaborators. Both of them ended in anonymity.

The irony lies in the fact that the Securitate documents themselves are helping to complete their professional and human profile, along with other interesting aspects about their activity in Transnistria of 1941-1944, during the Romanian administration.



## References:

A.C.N.S.A.S., Criminal Fund.

A.C.N.S.A.S., Documentary Fund.

A.C.N.S.A.S., Informative Network Fund.

A.M.A.E., USSR fund.

Alexianu, 2007 – Șerban Alexianu. Gheorghe Alexianu. Monografie. Transnistria, un capitol din istoria omeniei românești. Bucharest: Vreamea Publishing House, 2007.

Celac, Panaitescu, 2016 – Celac Mariana, Panaitescu Alexandru, Scurt istoric al profesiei de arhitect în România de la „Regulamentul” lui A.I. Cuza și M. Kogălniceanu până în prezent // Arhitectura nr. 3–4. 2016. URL: <http://arhitectura-1906.ro/2016/12/scurt-istoric-al-organizarii-profesiei-de-arhitect-in-romania-de-la-regulamentul-lui-a-i-cuza-si-m-kogalniceanu-pana-in-prezent/>.

Mitric-Ciupe, 2014 – Interview with Șerban Alexianu, son of former Transnistria Governor, taken by the author in Bucharest on 30.05.2014.

Solovei, 2009 – Rodica Solovei. Activitatea Guvernământului Transnistriei în domeniul social-economic și cultural (19 august 1941–29 ianuarie 1944). Iași: Demiurg Editorial House, 2009.

Verenca, 2000 – Verenca Olivian, Administrația Civilă Română în Transnistria 1941–1944. Bucharest: Vreamea Publishing House, 2000.