

SWEET HISTORY IN BITTER TIMES: REFINING SUGAR IN THE TRANSNISTRIAN BORDERLANDS (1898-2001)

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Geographical Background

This project will explore the ways in which a small East-European borderland community negotiated its place through the events of the twentieth century. Founded in 1628, Rybnitsa is a small town which today lies in the contested Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova.

When my project begins at the dawn of the nineteenth century, Rybnitsa was a village in the western borderlands of the Russian Empire. Today, it is a small city and home to JSC Moldova Steel Works (MMZ) -one of the top five steel producers in Europe.

Yet the real story of Rybnitsa is not the often told twentieth century story of a village becoming a city of heavy industry. Rybnitsa's is a story of a different kind for in 1898, a sugar factory opened there. This factory survived the travails of the twentieth century only to perish in 2001, during the so-called "transition" from communism to capitalism.

The fact that this industrial enterprise lasted for more than a century in a region of the world where borders change often and only German products are considered to last, is in itself a subject worthy of study.



This is the administrative building of the sugar factory. The eclecticism of the factory is already visible in this picture.



Depending on the geopolitical preferences, Moldova is placed either in the pro-European South-Eastern Europe or in the post-Soviet Eastern Europe. This map is an illustration of the strategic placement of Moldova between East and West.



This is a schematic map of contemporary Moldova. Rather than precision, the purpose of this map is to show the basic geographical locations, with which I am dealing in my project.

Changing Lives, Changing Borders

In order to reveal the patterns of Rybnitsa's urban development, I designed a series of maps. Because I am interested more in the sugar factory than in the town itself, I decided to schematize the urban landscape and to focus on the location of the sugar factory throughout the twentieth century.

The factory was founded in 1898 and existed until 2001. Obviously along with numerous territorial changes, both the factory and the town have not held to their places. Borders have moved and they have moved in tune with them.

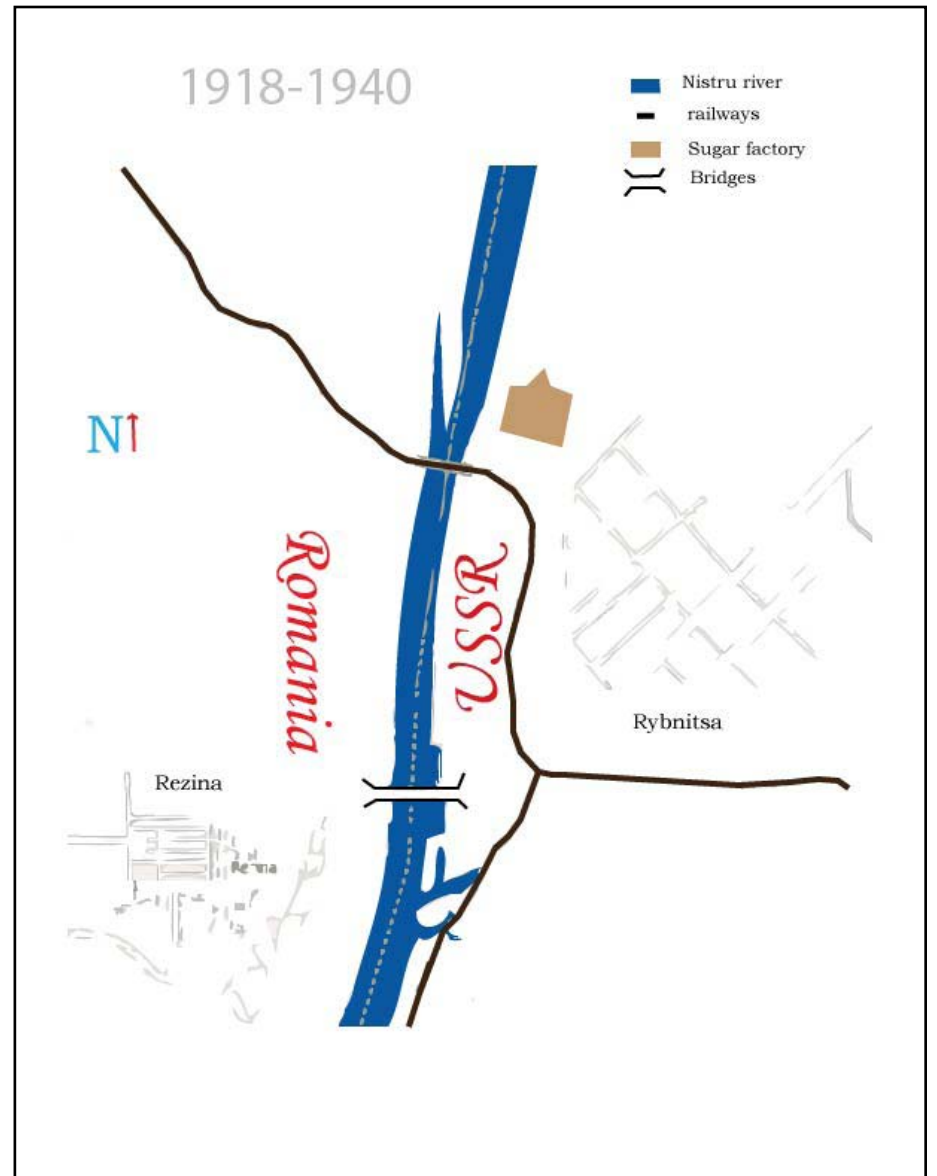
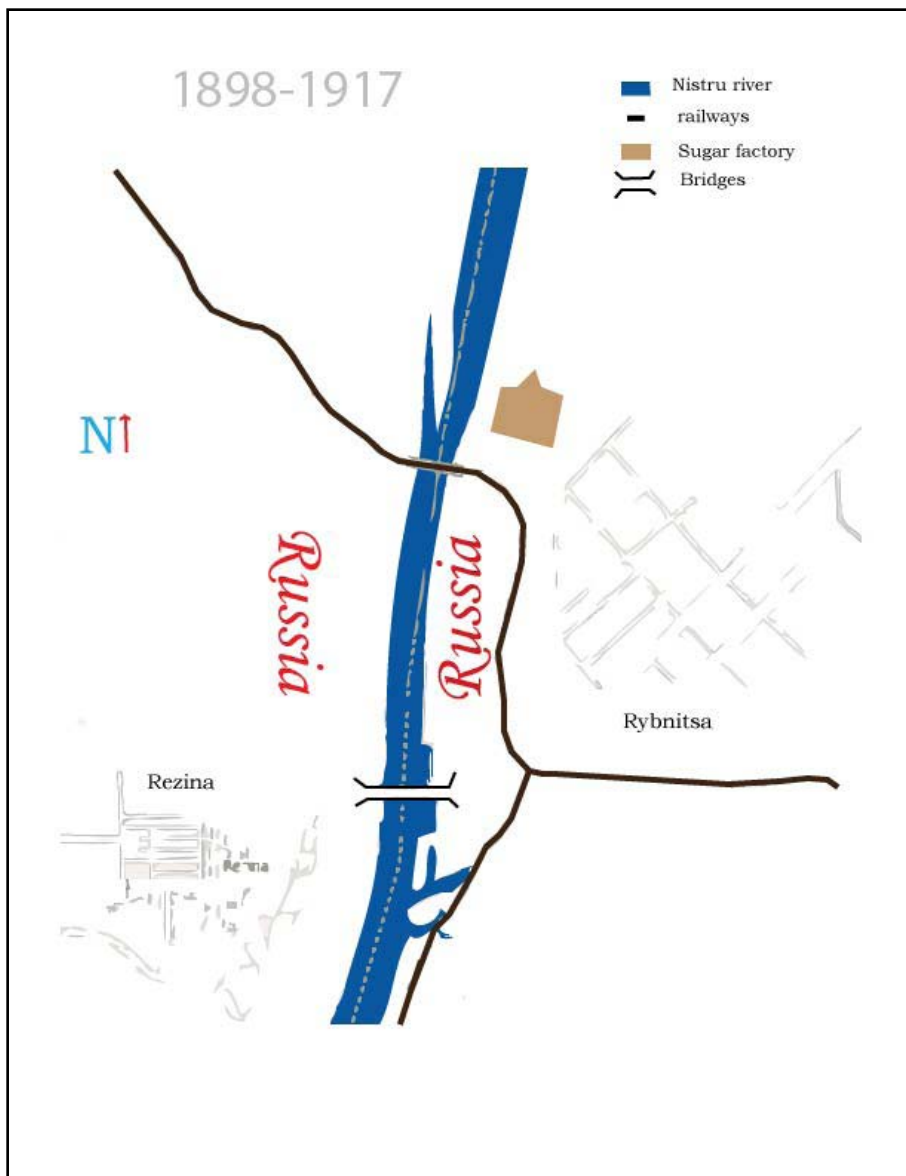
First of all, this town passed to Russia in 1793, after the second partition of Poland. Then, after the October Revolution of 1917, it was involved in the Civil War, which made it practically a no man's land for several years. In 1924 it became a part of The Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) inside the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, which was a part of USSR. During the interwar period, the Soviet-Romanian border was highly militarized, and the sugar factory had to work under a special border regime.

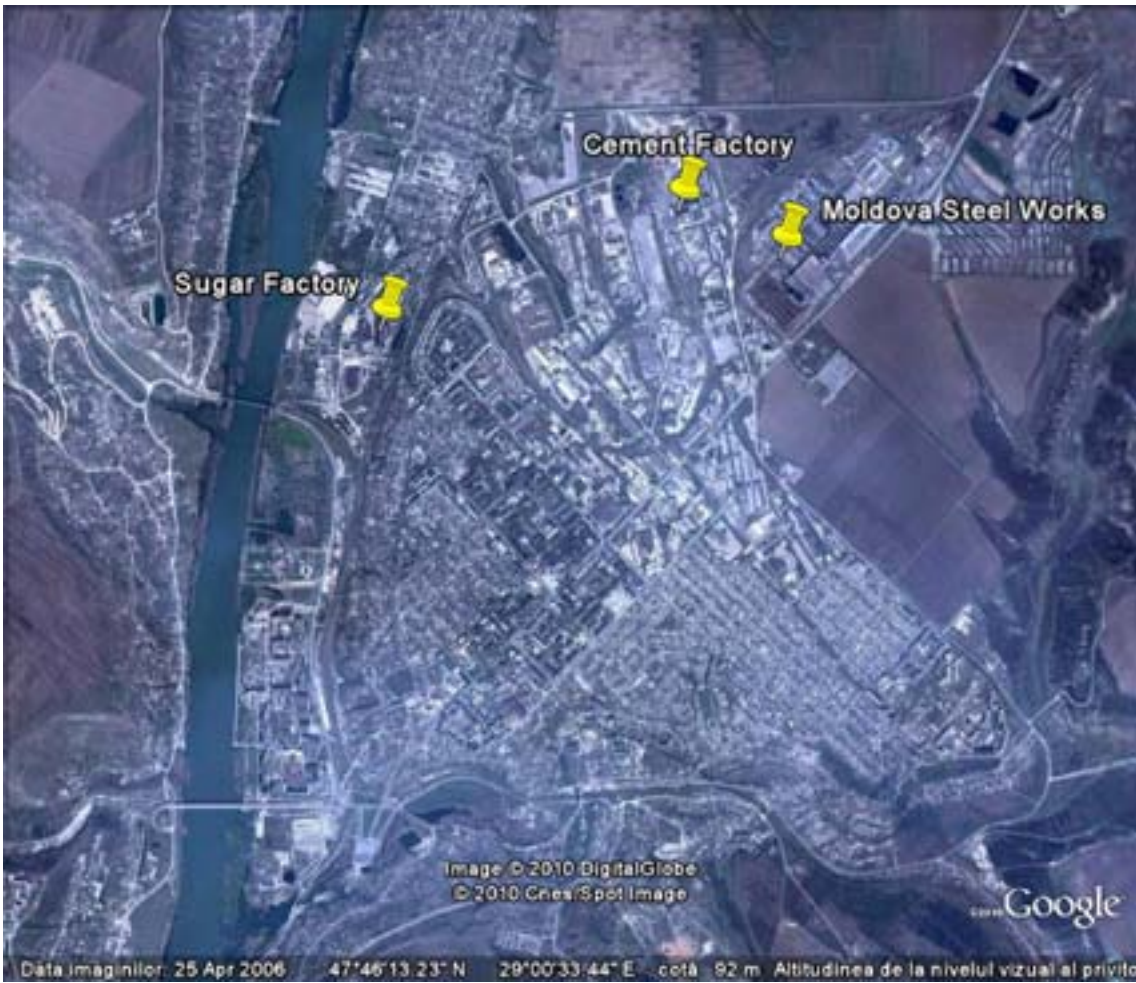


This aerial view from Google Earth provides an approximation of the local landscape at the beginning of the twentieth century. From this photo, it is possible to notice that Rybnitsa was developing toward the river. At that time, the sugar factory was the only industrial enterprise in the proximity of the city.

Until the October Revolution of 1917, Rybnitsa was situated in the province of Podol'sk, which belonged to the Russian Empire. On the other side of the river, Rezina was inside the province of Bessarabia, which also belonged to the Russian Empire. The main distinction between Bessarabia and Podol'sk was in terms of the population. The population of Bessarabia was mostly Romanian, while the population of Podol'sk was mostly Ukrainian.

From 1918 though 1940, Rybnitsa was on the Soviet border with Romania. During the interwar period, Bessarabia belonged to Romania, but Soviet Union had not officially acknowledged this fact. In this sense, the Soviet-Romanian border was highly militarized and it was very difficult to cross it. As a consequence, the sugar factory had to perform its activities under a special border regime.





In contrast to the image from the previous page, this photo represents the contemporary industrial landscape of Rybnitsa. Throughout the twentieth century, Rybnitsa has experienced the radical transformation from a village to an industrial town. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the sugar factory is rather marginal in comparison with the cement factory and with Moldova Steel Works.

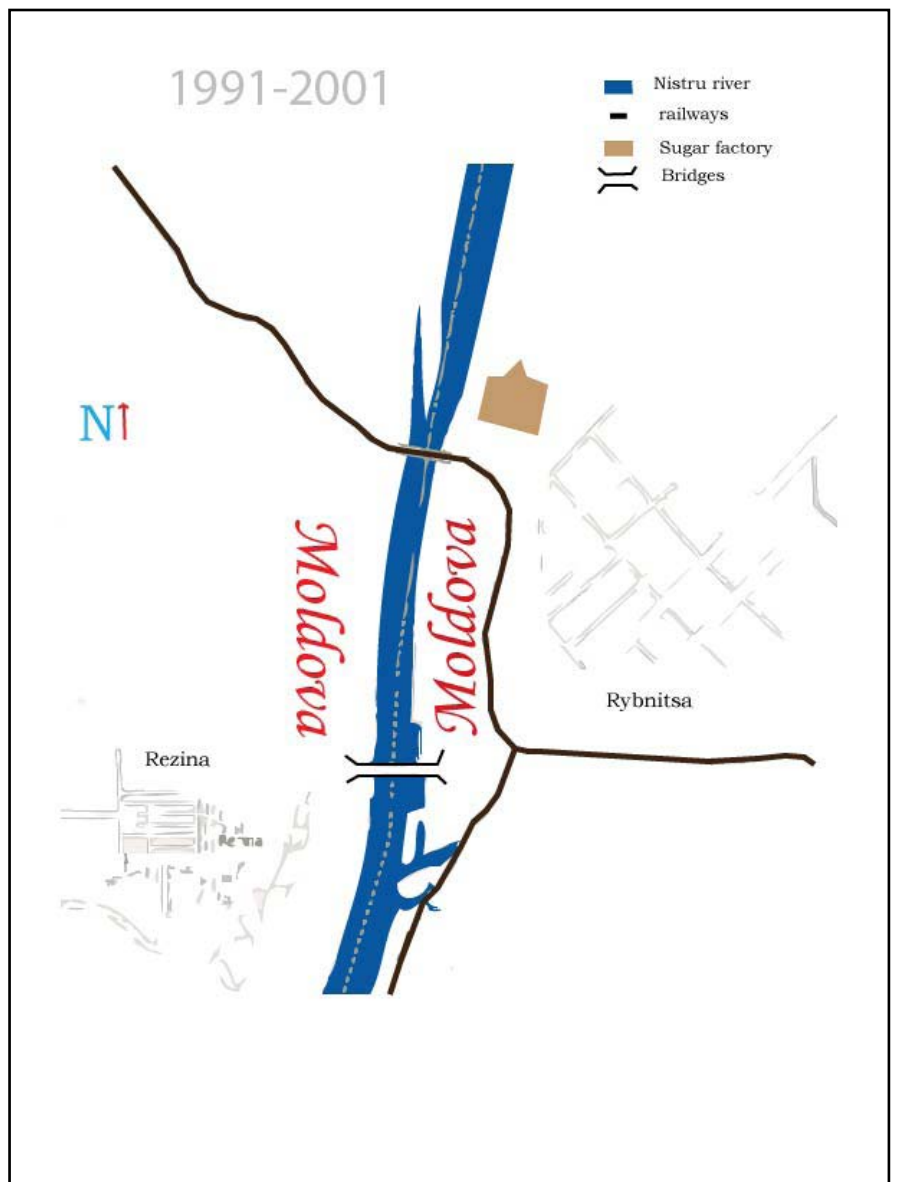
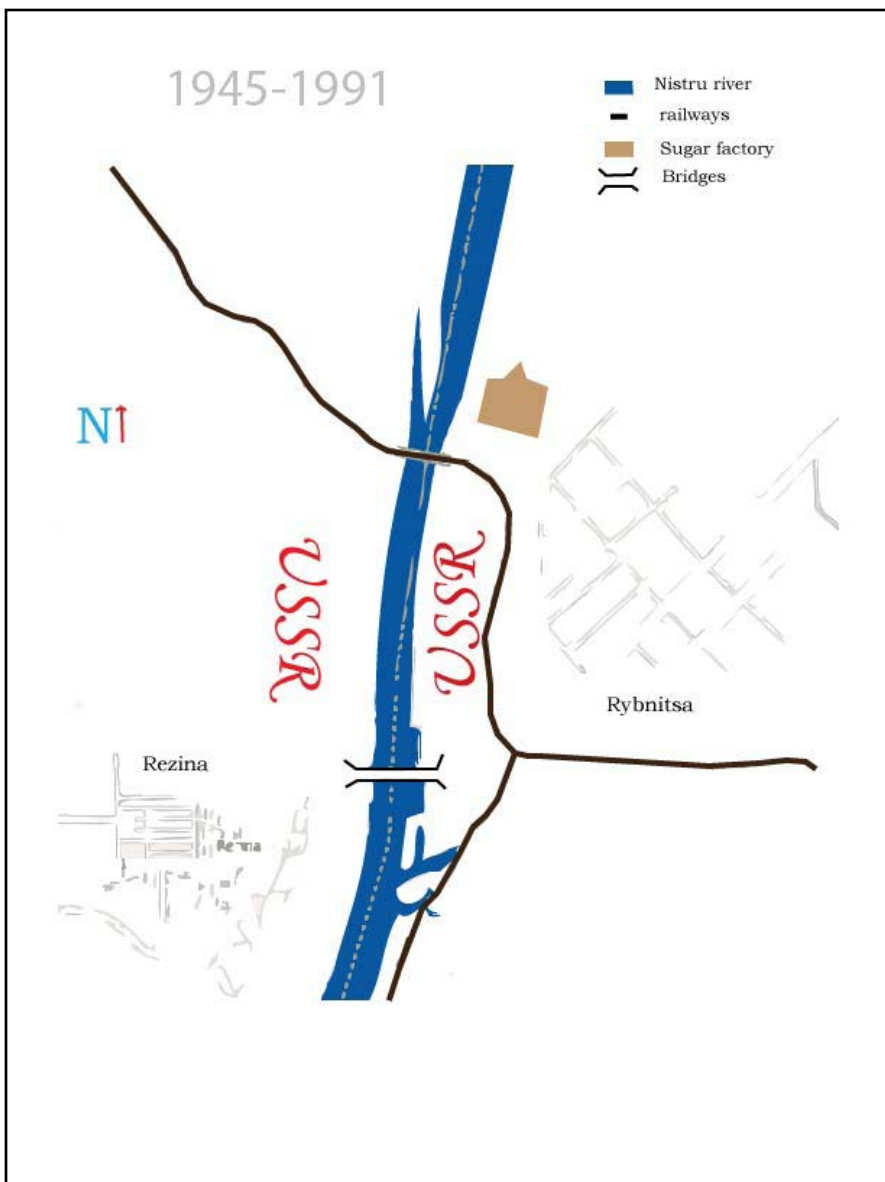
In 1940, MASSR was dissolved, and a part of it was ceded to Ukraine, while the other part united with a part of Bessarabia to become Moldovan Socialist Republic (MSSR).

During World War II, Transnistria became a venue of the Holocaust. From 1941-1944, Rybnitsa was occupied by Romania, which was an ally of Nazi Germany. From 1944 to 1990, it was again a part of MSSR inside USSR. Finally, from 1990 until now, it is situated in Transnistria, which in 1990 proclaimed its independence from Republic of Moldova, but this independence is not recognized by international community. Since this independence is not recognized by the international community, all economic activity in the region is again subject to special regulations.

So, as you see, it is quite a challenge to explain in few words how borders change in that part of the world. At the same time, since Rybnitsa has gradually become an industrial town, I decided that it will be helpful to place the sugar factory among other industrial enterprises, such as: the cement factory and the steel factory. This leaves some place for a broader comparison in terms of patterns of industrialization on the Soviet and post-Soviet periphery.

After World War II, Rybnitsa stayed inside the Soviet Union, but it was now part of the new Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). Since Rezina, which previously belonged to Romania, was now also inside the MSSR, the neighbors had to find common ground in order to live in a common Soviet republic. This fact determined the administration of sugar factory to buy sugar beets not from Ukrainian collective farms but from their Moldovan counterparts.

In 1991, the Soviet state ceased to exist and was replaced by fifteen independent republics. In the process of gaining its independence, Moldova has experienced a "national revival," which sought to rethink the national framework of the new state. In this sense, Rybnitsa, along with the eastern part of Moldova, declared its independence from Moldova. Since this independence is not recognized by the international community, all economic activity in the region is again subject to special regulations.



The Memory Remains

For the most part of the twentieth century, Rybnitsa was on the territory of the Soviet Union. In economic terms, this meant that the industrial administrators had to comply with the demands of central planning. Indeed, all the economic activity was directed toward the fulfillment of five year plans.

Nevertheless, from the pictures of the sugar factory it is possible to observe that during its twentieth century history, there has been numerous adjustments to the architecture of the sugar factory. These adjustments were not always subject to central planning.

Major architectural changes happened in tune with the major events of the twentieth century. The World War I, The October Revolution of 1917, The World War II represent moments when this small factory is bound to resend the importance of global history.



This agglomeration of buildings illustrates the lack of a single strategic development concept for the sugar factory.



Amidst a rural landscape, this photo presents a perfectly industrial and modern artifact: the pipe.

At the same time, there are moments, when local history asserts itself. Sometimes, it is exactly this sort of local history, which can leave more visible traces on the local landscape. For example, in the case of the sugar factory from Rybnitsa, it is the year 1913, which is inscribed on the pipe of the factory.

Someone would expect that 1913 is the year when the factory was founded, but it is not the case. This factory was founded in 1898. Nevertheless, the fact that this year was inscribed on the pipe, means that it is important for the local community.

At the same time, from 1913, Rybnitsa has experienced several political regimes, which often were conflicting with each other. Each political regime is very careful with celebrating certain dates and erasing others from the public memory.

In this sense, despite of the fact that Soviet regime sought to erase all the legacy of the previous political regimes, especially in terms of visuals, somehow the inscription "1913" managed to survive on the pipe of the sugar factory.

I am not sure what 1913 means but I have in mind two options: one is that in 1913 the owner of the factory had changed and he decided to imprint this date on the history of the place; the second might be that 1913 was the year when local workers organized a rebellion.

The fact that the inscription was not erased from this pipe may suggest that the event that happened in 1913 was internalized by all the political regimes. It is to be seen if the memory of the events that happened in 1913 was asserted by the central government or if it was preserved by the local community.

At the same time, I cannot exclude the fact that this date was added later than 1913. So, it is not yet clear to me what has happened then, but it is clear that this date is important for this place.



This inscription on the pipe of the sugar factory seems to defy the predominant interpretation of major historical events. It is often stated that such events as World War I or World War II had a huge impact on various local landscapes. It seems that in Rybnitsa these major events are too contentious and locals prefer to celebrate an event which happened in the relatively peaceful 1913.