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The Dobrich Military Cemetery: An Inclusive Space of Wartime Remembrance from Its Establishment to Recent Times

ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical evolution and commemorative significance of the Dobrich Military Cemetery in Southern Dobruja from the aftermath of the First World War to the present day. The principal purpose of the study is to analyze how the cemetery functioned simultaneously as a site of Romanian national memory and as an inclusive space of transnational and interconfessional remembrance. Established in a politically contested borderland inhabited by diverse ethnic and religious communities, the cemetery contains the graves of Romanian, Bulgarian, German, Russian, Serbian, Ottoman, and Jewish soldiers who fought on opposing sides during the Great War. Using interwar press reports, archival testimonies, the cemetery's Golden Book, commemorative inscriptions, and documentation regarding post-1989 restoration projects, the article investigates how official ceremonies, diplomatic initiatives, and civic collaborations contributed to shaping the cemetery's symbolic meaning.

The study argues that despite nationalist frameworks and political tensions, the Dobrich Military Cemetery evolved into an important example of reconciliation, shared European heritage, and intercultural dialogue.

Keywords: Dobrich Military Cemetery, First World War remembrance, Transnational memory, Romanian-Bulgarian relations, Military cemeteries.

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Dobriç Askerî Mezarlığı: Kuruluşundan Günümüze Savaş Dönemi Anmasının Kapsayıcı Bir Mekânı

ÖZ

Bu makale, Güney Dobruca'daki Dobriç Askerî Mezarlığı'nın Birinci Dünya Savaşı sonrasından günümüze kadar uzanan tarihsel gelişimini ve anma kültürü içerisindeki yerini incelemektedir. Çalışmanın temel amacı, mezarlığın hem Romanya ulusal hafızasının bir unsuru hem de ulusötesi ve dinlerarası kapsayıcı bir anma mekânı olarak nasıl işlev gördüğünü analiz etmektir. Etnik ve dinî açıdan çeşitlilik gösteren, siyasi açıdan tartışmalı bir sınır bölgesinde kurulan mezarlıkta, savaşın karşıt taraflarında yer alan Romanyalı, Bulgar, Alman, Rus, Sırp, Osmanlı ve Yahudi askerlerin mezarları bulunmaktadır. Çalışma; iki savaş arası dönem basını, arşiv tanıklıkları, mezarlığın Altın Defteri, anıt yazıtları ve 1989 sonrası restorasyon projelerine ilişkin belgelerden yararlanarak, resmî törenlerin, diplomatik girişimlerin ve sivil iş birliklerinin mezarlığın sembolik anlamını nasıl şekillendirdiğini araştırmaktadır.

Makale, milliyetçi çerçevelere ve siyasi gerilimlere rağmen Dobriç Askerî Mezarlığı'nın uzlaşma, ortak Avrupa mirası ve kültürlerarası diyalog açısından önemli bir örnek hâline geldiğini savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dobriç Askerî Mezarlığı, Birinci Dünya Savaşı anma kültürü, Ulusötesi hafıza, Romanya-Bulgaristan ilişkileri, Askerî mezarlıklar.

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Introduction

The First World War left behind an unprecedented landscape of death and destruction across Europe, prompting states, local communities, and veterans' organizations to develop new forms of commemorating the fallen. Military cemeteries became among the most visible manifestations of this process, serving not only as burial grounds but also as sites of collective memory, political symbolism, and public ritual. While much of the historiography on war remembrance has focused on Western Europe, the borderlands of Southeastern Europe provide equally important examples of how memory was constructed in regions marked by contested sovereignties, ethnic diversity, and shifting national identities. The Dobrich Military Cemetery, established after the First World War in Southern Dobruja, represents one such example.

This article examines the history of the Dobrich Military Cemetery from its establishment in the aftermath of the Great War to its contemporary significance as a place of transnational remembrance. Located in a region that passed between Romanian and Bulgarian sovereignty during the twentieth century, the cemetery occupies a unique position within the memorial landscape of Southeastern Europe. Unlike many national military cemeteries, it contains the remains of soldiers belonging to several armies that fought on opposing sides during the war, including Romanians, Bulgarians, Russians, Germans, Serbians, and Ottomans. As a result, it offers an opportunity to explore the relationship between national commemoration and multicultural remembrance in a politically sensitive borderland.

The principal objective of this study is to analyze how the Dobrich Military Cemetery functioned as both a site of national memory and a space of international and interconfessional coexistence. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which Romanian authorities, local communities, foreign representatives, and later Bulgarian institutions contributed to shaping the cemetery's commemorative meaning. The article also seeks to investigate the extent to which the cemetery promoted reconciliation among former enemies and whether such inclusiveness was limited by broader political and national considerations.

Several research questions guide this analysis. How was the cemetery conceived and presented during the interwar period? In what ways did official commemorative ceremonies reflect the multicultural composition of the soldiers buried there? How did Romanian authorities reconcile the cemetery's multinational character with their own nation-building objectives in Southern Dobruja? To what extent did the cemetery serve as a space of cooperation among different ethnic and religious communities? Finally, how has the meaning of the site evolved after the territorial transfer of Southern Dobruja to Bulgaria and in the context of contemporary European commemorative practices?

The study is based on a diverse body of primary and secondary sources. Primary emphasis is placed on interwar Romanian press reports, owing to their detailed coverage of commemorative ceremonies, official visits, and prevailing public perceptions of the cemetery. Particular importance is given to interwar Romanian press reports, which provide detailed accounts of commemorative ceremonies, official visits, and public perceptions of the cemetery. These are complemented by the cemetery's Golden Book, archival testimonies, inscriptions, diplomatic statements, and documents relating to the restoration projects undertaken after 1989. Secondary literature on the First World War, memory studies, and Romanian-Bulgarian relations provides the broader interpretative framework. The theoretical approach is informed by the scholarship of Jay Winter and other historians of war remembrance, who have emphasized the role of military cemeteries as sites of mourning, pilgrimage, and collective memory.

Methodologically, the article combines historical analysis with approaches drawn from memory studies and heritage studies. Through a close reading of commemorative practices, ceremonial discourse, press representations, and material aspects of the cemetery, it investigates how different actors constructed and negotiated meanings attached to the site across time. By situating the Dobrich Military Cemetery within both regional and European frameworks, the article contends that it constitutes a significant example of how remembrance can simultaneously serve national objectives while promoting transnational dialogue. By situating the Dobrich Military Cemetery within both regional and European contexts, the article argues that it represents a significant example of how remembrance can simultaneously serve national purposes and foster transnational dialogue.

1. Historical Context

Romania's acquisition of Southern Dobruja (the Cadrilater), where Dobrich is located, was a direct consequence of the geopolitical realignments brought about by the Second Balkan War of 1913. After remaining neutral during the First Balkan War (1912–1913), Romania intervened against Bulgaria in the summer of 1913, arguing that the balance of power in the Balkans had been disrupted by Bulgaria's territorial expansion. The conflict ended with the signing of the Treaty of Bucharest on 10 August 1913, through which Bulgaria ceded Southern Dobruja to Romania. The newly acquired territory, which included the strategically important towns of Dobrich, Balchik, Silistra, and Tutrakan (Turtucaia), became an integral part of the Romanian state and was subsequently subjected to policies of administrative integration. However, the region's strategic location along the lower Danube and the Black Sea coast would soon make it a major theater of military operations during the First World War.

Following Romania's entry into the war on the side of the Entente in August 1916, Dobruja became the scene of intense fighting between Romanian and Russian forces on the one hand and the armies of the Central Powers, composed primarily of German, Bulgarian, and Ottoman troops under the command of August von Mackensen. One of the most significant engagements was the Battle of Tutrakan/Turtucaia (2-6 September 1916), which resulted in a devastating defeat for the Romanian army and the capture of the fortress of Turtucaia by Bulgarian and German forces. The battle had a profound psychological impact on Romanian society and exposed the vulnerability of the country's southern defenses. Subsequent military operations, including the battles of Cobadin and the advance of Mackensen's forces, led to the occupation of nearly the entire Dobruja region by German, Bulgarian, and Ottoman troops by the end of 1916. The occupation persisted for much of the war and transformed Dobruja into a contested borderland marked by military administration, population displacement, and extensive material destruction. Consequently, the region became one of the most important and symbolic fronts of the Romanian war experience, while the numerous military cemeteries established there, including the one at Dobrich, continue to bear witness.

After the end of the Great War and the confirmation of the status of Southern Dobruja as part of Romania, important steps were taken for the purpose of commemorating those that sacrificed themselves in the bloody military confrontation from the Balkan front. The memorialization of the Great War remains a preoccupation of every state no matter which side they fought for during the Great War, as a warning for future generations. The memorialization of the Great War has evolved into a transnational process of remembrance across both Western and Eastern Europe, encompassing countries such as France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Russia, where commemorative practices have served not only to honor the war dead but also to foster historical reconciliation and a shared European memory of the conflict.

According to Jay Winter, the unprecedented scale of death during the First World War generated profound grief, and war memorials held deeply personal significance for contemporaries, functioning as sites of pilgrimage, remembrance, consolation, and mourning rather than merely ideological monuments.[1] At the same time, Winter challenges the conventional interpretation of the war as the decisive catalyst of modernism. Instead, he contends that the boundaries between elite and popular culture were permeable and that many supposedly modern cultural expressions retained strong traditional elements. Consequently, rather than inaugurating a complete break with the past, the war revitalized a range of traditional cultural languages, which were subsequently expressed in both conventional and innovative forms.[2] Historian Jay Winter argues that the creation of mass military cemeteries after the First World War marked a profound transformation in how modern societies dealt with death on the battlefield. Instead of returning soldiers' bodies to families or allowing scattered, individual burial practices, the postwar period - especially under organizations like the Imperial (later Commonwealth) War Graves Commission in the UK - produced carefully planned, uniform cemeteries that treated the dead as part of a collective national and/or imperial sacrifice. Winter emphasizes that this system replaced private mourning with a public, state-managed form of remembrance, in which

[1] Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 94.
[2] Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 18.

identical headstones and regimented layouts expressed equality in death regardless of rank or class. These cemeteries, in his interpretation, became symbolic landscapes of mass bereavement, offering families a permanent place of pilgrimage while simultaneously acknowledging that the sheer scale of industrialized war had made individualized commemoration impossible.[3]

2. The Interwar Period

In Dobrich,[4] after the end of the Great War,[5] the Bulgarian, Turkish, German, Russian and Serbian fallen soldiers were buried by the local population in a basic war cemetery, as ordered by the local Bulgarian "Committee of freedom".[6] Following this initiative, the Romanian society for the "Monuments of the Fallen Heroes" (established by a government decree on 12 September 1919), continued the work under the guidance of the Romanian government and with the help of the local population.[7] The Military Cemetery was finalized in 1921 when the sanctification ceremony also took place. Over three thousand Romanian, Bulgarian, Russian, Serbian, German and Turks were buried there, only 314 of them being identified: 252 Bulgarians, 20 Russians, 8 Germans, 5 Serbians and 4 Jews. Part of the original Romanian style gate can still be seen today but most of the tombstones have been replaced in 1967 thanks to the Bulgarian authorities, when also a small but extremely representative museum was build, the *Voenno-Grobishte Muzei Gr. Dobrich* – Museum of the Military Cemetery in Dobrich.

The Golden Book of the Cemetery, where important guests were invited to sign, contains in its preface a text that reveals an *a priori* European collaborative project: "Yesterday's enemies lie together, their remains being brought from all parts of the Caliacra County, from the places where they clashed in an immaculate struggle. For their memory, also to serve as an example for the future generations and for eternal remembrance, it has been built by the tribulation of the God and nation-beloved Colonel Nicolae Uica, the commander of the 17th Infantry Brigade, and by the beneficent adherence of the people in Caliacra County, and also under the protection of our loving sovereigns, this cemetery, so called 'of the heroes' who sacrificed their lives for the unification of their nation".[8] As we can see "yesterday's enemies" are mentioned in a respectful manner, tributary to the greatness of their sacrifice, as they are considered heroes no matter which side they fought for during the war. Even more, the dark and merciless war becomes "immaculate struggle" when serving a national purpose.

Less happy incidents also occurred in the interwar period due to the activity of Bulgarian komitadji or rebel bands and even border guards. Romanian border gendarme Tereudeacă Dumitru was fatally shot near the Romanian–Bulgarian frontier on 30 May 1924 during an incident in which Bulgarian border personnel allegedly crossed into Romanian territory; his death provoked official investigations and public outrage, and he was subsequently buried with full military honors in the Heroes' (Military) Cemetery at Bazargic (Dobrich).[9]

During the interwar period, on official holidays, military ceremonies would take place with the participation of important personalities, which also signed in the Golden Book. The signature of Queen Marie of Romania can be identified (on the 9th of October 1924), as well as that of the War Minister, General Mărdărescu (on the 3rd of August 1923). The visit of General Mărdărescu was detailed in the regional perioadical *Dobrogea Junǎ* [Young Dobrogea] in an article which includes a description of the site:

[3] Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 78.
[4] When South Dobrogea was part of Romania, Dobrich was the seat of the Caliacra/Kaliakra county and was called Bazargic, a version of the name it had during the Ottoman period: Hacioglu Pazargic; during the communist regime it was called Tolbuhin, in the honor of Fiodor Ivanovich Tolbuhin, a Russian Marshal from the second World War.
[5] Petar Boychev et al., *Trutrakanskata epopeya i osvobojdenieto na Dobrudja* [The Tutrakan Epopee and the Liberation of Dobruja] (Silistra: Kovachev Press, 2006), 8.
[6] Radoslav Simeonov, *Dobrichkata epopeya 1916: Istoriko-bibliografski spravochnik* [The Epopee of Dobrich, 1916: A Historical-Bibliographical Record] (Dobrich: AVE FAKTA Press, 2006), 17.
[7] Remus Macovei, "Cimitirul eroilor din Dobrici" [The Heroes' Cemetery in Dobrich], *România Eroică*, no. 2 (33) (2007): 36–37.
[8] Quote taken from the first page of the Golden Book in Voenno Grobishte Muzei Dobrich (handwritten in Romanian and in single edition).
[9] "Grănicerii bulgari au încălcat teritoriu roman omorând un grănicer" [Bulgarian Border Guards Violated Romanian Territory, Killing a Border Guard], *România*, July 6, 1924, 192.

"Occupying an area of 200 meters by 200 meters, this cemetery was built in the year 1921, and within it rest the remains of 2,800 heroes of different nationalities who fell for their country.

Constructed entirely of reinforced concrete, endowed with admirable avenues, artistically laid out with beautiful and abundant plantings, the Heroes' Cemetery of Bazargic possesses a grand chapel, in whose crypt lie the bones of unknown soldiers of various nationalities and belonging to different armies that fought in these lands during the autumn of 1916.

In recent weeks this holy place was visited with particular attention by General Mărdărescu, Minister of War, who, after signing his name in the visitors' register, added that the Heroes' Cemetery of Bazargic is one of the most magnificent works of this kind possessed by the country.

All the expenses required for the construction of the cemetery were covered solely through public subscription; and the initiative and completion of this beautiful work, which is destined to serve as an example to future generations, are owed to Colonel Uică, commander of the infantry brigade in Bazargic".[10]

In 1924 an impressive celebration was held on Heroes' Memorial Day (the feast of the Ascension):

"The celebration of the nation's heroes was held this year in the town with special grandeur.
After the divine service officiated by priests of all rites in Peace Square, a procession was formed in front of the authorities, who then proceeded to the heroes' cemetery.
There, Colonel Stratilat read the list of heroes who died on the field of honor, in the presence of General Stan Poetaș, all the regimental officers, 40 infantrymen, and while the troops rendered honors, General Dragu's report was presented.
Speeches were then given by Colonel Stratilat, the garrison commander, Archpriest Gheorghiu, and the mayor of the city, Mr. Sarmaschiu, after which the troops marched past in parade formation.
A very poor impression was made by the Bulgarian choral society "Sedeanka" from Silistra, which sang during the ceremony only Bulgarian songs".[11]

An electoral press article in 1932 praising the local liberal candidate, Ahil Constantinescu, included the Dobrich Military Cemetery in a list of public buildings' repairs: "Repairs were performed recently at the municipality building, the slaughterhouse, at the fire trucks and firefighter's premises, at the Heroes' Cemetery and electrical lamps were installed in the public gardens and the outskirts".[12]

The Dobrich Military Cemetery or Bazargic Heroes' Cemetery, as it was known in Romania, was also visited by the Turkish ambassador to Bucharest, Hamdullah Suphi Bey, in 1933. The ambassador recalled this visit during a speech he delivered at the Ghencea Turkish Cemetery in Bucharest on Heroes' Memorial Day (20 May 1934, Ascension):

"This is the third time that I have joined in this ceremony honoring the Turkish heroes who fell on Romanian soil during the World War. Last year I had the opportunity to visit, at Comana, in the village so close to Bucharest, a crypt where Romanian soldiers and officers were buried together with the remains of Turkish soldiers who died in this region during the war. Also last year I visited the cemetery in Bazargic, where the Turkish heroes occupy a special place. The graves of the thousands of Turks are cared for and maintained just as well as those of the Romanians.

I feel a deep satisfaction in emphasizing that this care, devoted by the Romanian people to all soldiers who fell on the field of honor while carrying out their final duty, proves that they possess a noble spirit and an admirable character, which does them honor".[13]

[10] "Cimitirul Eroilor din Bazargic" [The Heroes' Cemetery in Bazargic], *Dobrogea Jună*, no. 210, September 13, 1923, 1. Author's translation.
[11] "La Bazargic" [At Bazargic], *Universul*, no. 127, June 9, 1924, 6.
[12] "Ajun de alegeri la Bazargic" [The Eve of the Elections in Bazargic], *Ziua*, no. 882, December 1, 1932, 1.
[13] "Între turci și români. O cuvântare emoționană a d-lui Ministru al Turciei" [Between Turks and Romanians: An Emotional Speech by the Turkish Minister], *Adevĕrul*, no. 15445, May 21, 1934, 4.

In 1934 the commemoration ceremonies in Dobrich were also marked by Romanian authorities:

> *"Throughout the ceremony, military music, trumpets, choirs, and singers performed patriotic and religious hymns.*
> *At the Heroes' Cemetery, one of the most beautiful in the country – the work of General Uică, Inspector of the Army – a cemetery where Romanian, Russian, Bulgarian, Turkish, and Jewish heroes who fell in the battles of August 1916 are buried, Orthodox priests, together with the mufti and the rabbi, officiated a memorial service for the repose of those who fell for their homeland. The graves were adorned with flowers.*
> *General Hermeziu and Deacon N. Georgescu, as well as Captain Onciu Shunda, president of the reserve officers, delivered moving speeches in memory of the heroes. This was followed by a parade of the troops of the 40th Infantry Regiment and the 12th Roșiori (cavalry regiment)".*[14]

In 1938 similar ceremonies were performed:

> *"At the Heroes' Cemetery, religious services were officiated for the repose of the souls of those who fell for their country. The military band intoned the "Royal Anthem," and the foreigners' "Heroes' Anthem." A roll call was made of the soldiers who died in the war, after which the entire audience knelt and observed a minute of silence.*
> *The foreign soldiers present covered the graves with wreaths and flowers.*
> *In the afternoon, representatives of the Muslim and Mosaic (Jewish) faiths held religious services, attended by the authorities, at the graves of soldiers of their respective faiths.*
> *The parade took place on the Bazargic–Constanța road, following the gathering of the foreigners, the townspeople, and the troops from the garrison commanded by Col. C. Bălăceanu.*
>
> *In the evening, at 8:30, there was a retreat with torches, and the Heroes' Monument was festively illuminated with tricolored electric bulbs".*[15]

These press articles reveal the Dobrich (Bazargic) Military Cemetery as both a site of Romanian state-building and an unusually inclusive space of wartime remembrance. They demonstrate how interwar commemorative culture in Southern Dobruja sought to reconcile national narratives with the region's ethnic and religious diversity, while also exposing the limits of that inclusiveness.

The earliest reports emphasize the cemetery's symbolic importance within the Romanian state. The 1923 article in *Dobrogea Jună* presents the cemetery as a monumental national achievement, stressing its scale, modern design, and patriotic purpose. The description highlights not only the burial of "2,800 heroes of different nationalities" but also the fact that the project was financed through public subscription and completed under the leadership of Colonel Uică. The article frames the cemetery as a model for future generations and as evidence of Romanian civic and military commitment to honoring the war dead. The repeated visits of prominent figures – including Queen Marie in 1924 and War Minister General Alexandru Mărdărescu in 1923 – further reinforced the site's official status. The maintenance of a Golden Book for distinguished visitors transformed the cemetery into a place of state pilgrimage, linking local memory to national authority.

At the same time, the articles consistently stress the multinational character of the cemetery. The 1923 description refers to the remains of soldiers of "different nationalities" and notes that the crypts contained unknown soldiers from several armies that fought in Dobruja in 1916. Later reports become more explicit.

The 1934 commemoration described the cemetery as a place where "Romanian, Russian, Bulgarian, Turkish, and Jewish heroes" were buried. Significantly, the memorial service was conducted jointly by Orthodox priests, the mufti, and the rabbi. Likewise, the 1938 ceremony included separate religious services for Muslim and Jewish soldiers, attended by local authorities. Such reports indicate an official recognition that military sacrifice transcended ethnic and confessional divisions.

[14] "La Bazargic" [At Bazargic], *Universul*, no. 136, May 22, 1934, 6.
[15] "La Bazargic" [At Bazargic], *Universul*, no. 154, June 7, 1938, 8.

The Turkish ambassador Hamdullah Suphi Bey's speech in 1934 offers particularly valuable external testimony. His praise for the care given to Turkish graves in Bazargic suggests that the Romanian authorities deliberately used the cemetery to project an image of civilized and impartial treatment of former enemies. By emphasizing that Turkish graves were maintained "just as well as those of the Romanians," the ambassador portrayed the cemetery as a space of reconciliation and mutual respect.

The ceremonies themselves were designed to create a sense of collective remembrance. The 1934 and 1938 reports describe military music, religious services, floral offerings, speeches, parades, and moments of silence. The reading of the names of the fallen, the participation of multiple religious communities, and the presence of foreign visitors all contributed to a ritual language that recognized the common experience of wartime loss. The 1938 account is particularly revealing. The performance of both the Romanian Royal Anthem and the "Heroes' Anthem" of the foreign delegations, together with the laying of wreaths by foreign participants, suggests a commemorative culture that incorporated international and transnational elements. Such practices were relatively unusual in a region marked by contested borders and competing national claims.

However, the same sources also reveal the limits of this inclusiveness. The cemetery's multinational character existed within a fundamentally Romanian commemorative framework. The ceremonies were organized by Romanian authorities, featured Romanian military units, and reinforced Romanian sovereignty over Southern Dobruja. The clearest indication of these limits appears in the report on Heroes' Day in 1924. Although a Bulgarian choir from Silistra participated in the ceremony, the newspaper criticized it for singing "only Bulgarian songs". This complaint demonstrates that multicultural participation was welcomed only insofar as it conformed to the expectations of Romanian state ceremonies. Expressions of distinct national identity could be interpreted as inappropriate or insufficiently respectful of the Romanian commemorative setting. The cemetery honored foreign and minority dead, but it did not challenge the dominant Romanian interpretation of the war and the region's history.

Starting on the 7th of September 1940, when Southern Dobruja was ceded to Bulgaria, the Dobrich Military Cemetery entered the patronage of the Bulgarian Defense Ministry. Until 1942, visitors noted their impressions in the old Golden Book, which has then been replaced with a new one containing testimonies mostly in the Bulgarian language. Surprisingly, even when the Iron Curtain was separating Romania, Bulgaria on the one side and on the other side, Europe, an account in Romanian can still be found in the Golden Book of the cemetery (on the 21st of September 1975, the only one between 1940 and 1990!), which evinces the same conciliatory spirit, as the Romanian visitor thanks the Bulgarians for their investment in restoring the cemetery.

3. The 2009 Restoration Works at the Dobrich Military Cemetery

The same European spirit of collaboration that was evident during the interwar period, in spite of certain excesses of propaganda or national pride,[16] reached its maturity after the fall of the communist regimes in 1989. In 1999 and 2000 the German Popular Union for the Restoration of Military Graves contributed to the upkeep and renovation of this military cemetery, while in 2003 the same organization sponsored the construction of the flag alleys, displaying the national flags of the countries which the militaries buried there belong to.

[16] Mariana Cojoc, "România şi restul lumii. Comerţul exterior al României cu Bulgaria derulat prin portul Constanţa în perioada interbelică" [Romania and the Rest of the World: Romania's Foreign Trade with Bulgaria through the Port of Constanţa during the Interwar Period], in *Români şi bulgari. Provocările unei vecinătăţi* [Romanians and Bulgarians: The Challenges of a Vicinity], ed. Florin Anghel, Mariana Cojoc, and Magdalena Tiţă (Bucharest: Cartea Universitară, 2007), 258; Ion Bulei, "Balcanii şi relaţiile româno-bulgare în preajma Primului Război Mondial. Consideraţii incomode" [The Balkans and Romanian-Bulgarian Relations on the Eve of the First World War: Uncomfortable Considerations], in *Români şi bulgari. Provocările unei vecinătăţi* [Romanians and Bulgarians: The Challenges of a Vicinity], ed. Florin Anghel, Mariana Cojoc, and Magdalena Tiţă (Bucharest: Cartea Universitară, 2007), 131; Mariana Cojoc, "Dinamica vieţii sociale în oraşul-port Constanţa între anii 1878–1916" [The Dynamics of Social Life in the Port City of Constanţa between 1878 and 1916], *Anuarul Muzeului Marinei Române* 4 (2001): 99–114; Mariana Cojoc, *Constanţa—port internaţional. Comerţ exterior al României prin portul Constanţa (1878–1939)* [Constanţa—International Harbor: Romania's Foreign Trade through the Port of Constanţa, 1878–1939] (Bucharest: Cartea Universitară, 2006); Stoica Lascu, "Presa dobrogeană şi idealul unităţii naţionale româneşti" [The Dobrujan Press and the Ideal of Romanian National Unity], *Revista Muzeelor şi Monumentelor—Muzee* 26, nos. 9–10 (1989): 61–68.

During the summer of 2009, in the same European spirit of cooperation and in commemoration of the great sacrifices of the First World War, the initiative was continued by the National Association for Heroes Memory of Constanta, Romania (hereafter NAHMC), even though only 27 graves of the 500 existing ones in the cemetery are for Romanian militaries. Thus, the campaign for restoring the historical elements of the Military Cemetery in Dobrich took form, in which the undersigned also participated as a translator and volunteer, together with a colleague, on behalf of the "Ovidius" University of Constanta.

The NAHMC is a non-governmental organization of retired officers, priests and history teachers and it has worked in collaboration with the National Office for Heroes Memory in Bucharest, which is a government-controlled institution,[17] and with the Regional History Museum of Dobrich. The first steps were taken back in 2006, when members of the association visited the War Cemetery and were profoundly impressed by what they saw. A bilateral Romanian-Bulgarian agreement was signed on the 7th of July 2009 between the representatives of the previously mentioned institution, and after this date the leader of the project, Colonel Remus Macovei (first vice-president of the National Association for Heroes Memory in Constanta at the time), coordinating over 20 volunteers from the NAHMC and two students, effectively began work.[18] In approximately two months the aesthetics of the War Cemetery were greatly improved with the restoration of the tombstones. The media, especially the Bulgarian one, expressed interest in the project. The final ceremony marking the conclusion of the restoration works, which took place on the 11th of September 2009, saw many personalities attend.

Figure 1. Dobrich Military Cemetery front gate and premises with chapel in 2009. Source: personal photograph.

[17] The National Office for Heroes Memory (NOHM) - established through the Law 379/2003 on the regime of war graves and memorials, and The Government Ordinance no. 635/2204 - is a specialized organization belonging to the central public administration, with juridical personality, reporting to the Romanian Government. The Office is the rightful continuator of Queen Marie National Seed for the Heroes Memory and its establishment represents an important step of the alignment of the Romanian legislation to the European one, from this point of view. The Office has functions of regulating, counseling, support and control, representation, civic education and administration of its own patrimony. Also, NOHM is tasked to research, discover and identify war graves and memorials, both Romanian and foreign, on the territory of Romania and also the Romanian ones abroad. It co-operates with non-governmental organizations and with the religious cults recognized by law, and, by request, delivers information on war burial places. Together with other institutions, NOHM draws the program of manifestation with the occasion of the Heroes Commemorative Day, which is, according to the law, a national holiday. In order to conclude international agreements concerning the regime of war graves and memorials, The National Office for the Heroes Memory co-operates with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and takes the required measures for founding and protecting those abroad, being tasked to represent the Romanian Government in foreign activities, within the allotted budget and according to the international treaties which Romania agreed to.
The Office supervises the change and movement of war graves and memorials, as well as the building of the latter and gives approval for the founding of cemeteries and honour lots with Romanian tombs. The Office is ruled by a director, appointed by the Minister of National Defence. accessed May 25, 2026, https://once.mapn.ro/.

[18] Remus Macovei, "Cimitirul din localitatea bulgară Dobrici, loc de veşnică odihnă pentru ostaşii căzuţi în Primul Război Mondial pe aceste meleaguri, fie că au fost amici, fie că au fost inamici..." [The Cemetery of the Bulgarian Town of Dobrich, a Place of Eternal Rest for Soldiers Fallen in the First World War in This Region, Whether They Were Friends or Enemies], *Timona* 14, no. 134 (October–November 2009): 8.

This initiative represented a particularly effective unifying endeavor, not only between Romanians and Bulgarians, but also among all six nations represented in the Dobrich Military Cemetery, as well as between older and younger generations. The project clearly demonstrated that historical grievances had largely been overcome, as the volunteers involved were primarily motivated by a shared commitment to the preservation and restoration of the cemetery's historical heritage. In accordance with the European principles of international cooperation - principles that have likewise found expression in this context in the past - the Romanian, Bulgarian, Turkish, Russian, Serbian, and German soldiers interred there are regarded, and will continue to be regarded, as heroes whose memory transcends national boundaries.

The partnership between the National Association for Heroes Memory in Constanta (NAHMC) and the Regional History Museum of Dobrich was started in 2006, when members of the association had visited this location for the first time, but the official collaboration agreement between the NAHMC and the Dobrich Military Cemetery was signed after different consultations the 7th of July 2009 following a Romanian initiative. This was the first international project of the NAHMC. The work was coordinated by the first vice-president of the association, the retired Colonel Remus Macovei, with the participation of over 20 volunteers, including 11 retired officers, as well as two young students from the History specialization of the University "Ovidius" of Constanta. The students' participation was possible thanks to the good collaboration with the Faculty of History and Political Sciences of the "Ovidius" University of Constanta.

Half of the necessary funds were provided by the National Office for Heroes Memory in Bucharest (from the state budget) and the other half by sponsors from the Constanta area. The main sponsors were: S.C. Valentino Auto Service, Trans Euro Import Export S.R.L., Green Seas Ltd. and Cdor. (r) Prof. Dr. Toma Dumitru. Restoration activities took place every weekend (sometimes also during the week) between the 20th of July and the 11th of September 2009. The students participated as volunteers, not only working for the cemetery's restoration but also functioning as the group's translators into English and partly in Bulgarian.

As previously mentioned, the Dobrich Military Cemetery is the biggest one on Bulgarian territory from the First World War, sheltering the remains of over 4500 militaries, belonging to Bulgaria, Romania, Germany, Russia, Serbia and Turkey.[19] The restoration work consisted in cleaning the tombstones, which was performed by a qualified team, hired from the Central Cemetery of Constanta, and the repainting of the funeral inscriptions. The front gate of the cemetery and the fence were also restored, so in less than three months, the volunteers managed to provide a refurbished look to the whole location.

Thanks to one of the volunteers the discovery of the inscription on the bell which hangs atop the front gate was possible. This has historical value, as it further proves Romania's involvement in the evolution of the site. The discovered inscription is: "Donat de Constanţa si de colonel Nicolae Uică în amintirea iubitei lor fetiţe Mărioara 29 septembrie 1921 Fabrica Oituz" meaning "Donated by Constanţa and Colonel Nicolae Uică in the memory of their beloved young daughter Mărioara, 29 September 1921 Oituz Factory".

[19] See the appendix for a list of the tombstone inscriptions.

Figure 2. The inscription on the bell atop the Dobrich Military Cemetery entrance gate. Source: personal photography.

At the end of the restoration campaign, on the 11th of September 2009, a ceremony was held at the Dobrich Military Cemetery where notable guests were invited to give talks. The students and all the volunteers were awarded honorary diplomas on behalf of the Municipality of Dobrich, bearing the following text: "Diploma awarded for the contribution in restoring and popularizing the Military Cemetery Museum in Dobrich".

In a solemn background the Bulgarian authorities, together with representatives from Romania, offered flower wreaths at the heroes' monument within the Military Cemetery and held a moment of silence for the fallen heroes. According to the Bulgarian authorities speaking at the press conference held at the Municipality of Dobrich on the same day as the ceremony, the actions taken in the summer months of 2009 for restoring and maintaining this historical location create an important precedent in Romanian-Bulgarian relations. The officialdom of the two countries expressed their interest in signing an agreement for the creation of a legal framework to ease the development of similar projects.

In order to pay homage to the fallen heroes of the First World War battles in Dobrogea, the ceremony was attended by the Romanian Social-Democrat senator Nicolae Moga, as a member of the Senate Committee for Defence and as a sponsor of the project. The press[20] and especially the Bulgarian television – including two national channels – showed special interest for this restoration campaign, but athe press in Constanta[21] also mentioned the project in several articles.

Conclusion

The history of the Dobrich Military Cemetery demonstrates how sites of wartime burial can transcend their original commemorative purpose and evolve into enduring spaces of dialogue, reconciliation, and shared historical memory. Established in the aftermath of the First World War in a region marked by shifting borders, competing national claims, and profound human losses, the cemetery emerged as one of the most significant memorial landscapes in Southern Dobruja.

[20] Many articles were written, refer to: "Komandvashtiat Voennomorskija flot na Turchia pocheti Voennoto Grobishte v Dobrich," *Dobrudjanska Tribuna*, April 2009; and "'Kult kam geroite' ot Rumania pochistva nadgrobishni znaci vav Voennoto grobishte v Dobrich" ["Heroes' Memory" from Romania Restores the Tombstones of the War Cemetery in Dobrich], *Dobrudjanska Tribuna*, no. 149 (9818), August 11, 2009, 1.

[21] For example, refer to the following: Simona Anghel, "Din respect pentru jertfa lor" [Tribute for Their Sacrifice], *Cuget Liber*, September 2, 2009, 6; Claudia Candet, "Membrii Cultului Eroilor refac cimitirul din Dobrich" [Members of the Heroes Memory Cult Are Restoring the Cemetery in Dobrich], *Ziua de Constanţa*, September 5, 2009; Tatian Iorga, "Eroii de la Dobrici, comemoraţi de autorităţile române şi bulgare" [The Heroes of Dobrich Commemorated by Romanian and Bulgarian Authorities], *Telegraf*, September 14, 2009; and Andreea Barbu, "Cooperare româno-bulgară pentru omagierea eroilor" [Romanian-Bulgarian Cooperation for Paying Homage to the Heroes], *Ziua de Constanţa*, no. 2672, September 14, 2009, 7.

While created under Romanian administration following the reintegration of the region into the Romanian state, the cemetery was exceptional in that it brought together the remains of soldiers from multiple armies and nations that

had fought against one another during the conflict. Romanians, Bulgarians, Russians, Germans, Serbians, Turks, and Jewish soldiers found a common resting place, transforming the cemetery into a unique expression of the universal human cost of war.

The interwar period reveals the dual nature of this commemorative project. On the one hand, the cemetery functioned as an instrument of Romanian state-building and national memory. Official ceremonies, visits by prominent political and military figures, and press coverage consistently emphasized the role of the Romanian authorities in constructing and maintaining the site. Through military rituals, patriotic speeches, and public commemorations, the cemetery reinforced Romania's sovereignty over Southern Dobruja and integrated the region into the broader narrative of Romanian sacrifice and nationhood.

On the other hand, the same sources reveal an unusually inclusive commemorative culture. Religious ceremonies involving Orthodox clergy, Muslim representatives, and rabbis, the presence of foreign delegations, and the respectful treatment of enemy soldiers' graves demonstrate a remarkable willingness to acknowledge the shared suffering produced by the Great War. The testimony of Turkish ambassador Hamdullah Suphi Bey in 1934 is particularly significant in this regard, illustrating how the cemetery could function as a diplomatic symbol of mutual respect between former adversaries. Such practices anticipated later European approaches to war remembrance, which increasingly emphasized reconciliation rather than exclusively national sacrifice.

Nevertheless, the inclusiveness of the cemetery had clear limits. The commemorative framework remained fundamentally Romanian, and multicultural participation was generally accepted only insofar as it supported the dominant state narrative. The criticism directed at the Bulgarian choir during the 1924 Heroes' Day ceremony reveals the tensions that persisted beneath the surface of official cooperation. Thus, the cemetery reflected both the possibilities and the constraints of interwar multiculturalism in a borderland society characterized by ethnic diversity and political contestation.

The later history of the cemetery further reinforces its significance as a place of transnational memory. Despite political changes, the transfer of Southern Dobruja to Bulgaria in 1940, and the ideological divisions of the Cold War, the site continued to preserve the memory of soldiers from different nations. The restoration campaigns undertaken after 1989, culminating in the Romanian-Bulgarian civic cooperation project of 2009, demonstrated that the principles of collaboration and mutual respect embodied by the cemetery could survive changing political contexts. Today, the Dobrich Military Cemetery stands not only as a monument to the fallen of the First World War but also as a testament to the capacity of historical memory to bridge national divides. In this sense, it represents a valuable example of how remembrance can contribute to international understanding and how former battlefields may become landscapes of peace, dialogue, and shared European heritage.

Declarations / Beyanlar

Author Contributions / Yazar Katkısı

The author is solely responsible for the conception and design of the study, the collection and analysis of the sources, the interpretation of the findings, and the preparation of the manuscript.

Çalışmanın tasarımı, kaynakların toplanması ve analizi, bulguların yorumlanması ve metnin hazırlanması tek yazar tarafından gerçekleştirilmiştir.

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Conflict of Interest / Çıkar Çatışması

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Ethics Committee Approval / Etik Kurul Onayı

This study is based on historical documents, published sources, and the author's personal photographs. It does not involve human participants, personal data, surveys, interviews, or experimental procedures; therefore, ethics committee approval was not required.

Bu çalışma tarihî belgeler, yayımlanmış kaynaklar ve yazara ait kişisel fotoğraflara dayanmaktadır. İnsan katılımcı, kişisel veri, anket, görüşme veya deneysel uygulama içermediğinden etik kurul onayı gerektirmemektedir.

Research and Publication Ethics / Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği

The author declares that the study was conducted in accordance with the principles of scientific research and publication ethics and that all sources used in the study have been appropriately cited.

Yazar, çalışmanın bilimsel araştırma ve yayın etiği ilkelerine uygun olarak hazırlandığını ve yararlanılan bütün kaynakların usulüne uygun biçimde gösterildiğini beyan eder.

Declaration on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence / Üretken Yapay Zekâ Kullanım Beyanı

The author declares that no generative artificial intelligence tools were used in the research, analysis, interpretation, or writing of this article.

Yazar, bu makalenin araştırılması, analizi, yorumlanması veya yazılması sürecinde üretken yapay zekâ araçlarının kullanılmadığını beyan eder.

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