Cultural Intertexts
Year X Volume 13 (2023)

The 'Black' Danube: Life and Poetry in the Forced Labour Camps of the Danube-Black Sea Canal

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Abstract
Although the Danube-Black Sea Canal had been one of Ceauşescu's pet projects, used by the communist leader to enhance his image as a visionary prophet of the Golden Era of socialism, the idea of a canal that would connect the Danube and the Black Sea may have been as old as ancient Roman history. It is certainly along one of the lines of Trajan's Wall (Valul lui Traian), running along the Kara Su Valley, that the canal had been imagined, in the 19th century, by various adventurers and travellers. In the 20th century, with the development of technology, the idea turned into a project: in 1922 and 1923, two Romanian engineers (Jean Stoenescu Dunăre and Aurel Bărglăzan) came up with very definite plans of how to create a fourth arm of the Danube, which would help navigation by shortening the distance travelled by commercial ships with about 400 kilometres.

The actual building of the Canal, initiated by Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej at Stalin's orders, was less intended as a technological advancement and more as a pretext to exterminate the interwar elite in the forced labour camps established along the Danube. Work at the Canal began in 1949 and ended in 1953, after Stalin's death. Though only 20 km had been completed out of the intended 70 km, the legacy of the forced labour camps includes a large number of poems written by the detainees, detailing the inhuman treatment they received and making up a shattering testimonial of life in the Communist labour camps.

My paper intends to present and analyse a selection of such poems, showing how they take up the myth of the exiled Ovid and mix it with symbols of Christian suffering. In most of the poems, the colour that is associated with life in the labour camps is black: the blackness of the Black Sea (the inhospitable Pontus, in Ovid's poetry) is thus transferred onto the traditional 'blue' Danube.

Keywords: *Communism, labour camps, prison poetry, Danube-Black Sea Canal*

The project of building a canal that would considerably shorten the distance travelled by commercial ships along the Danube was not the outcome of the strategic planning of Communist leaders. Recent studies show that it had gained momentum after the War of Independence (1877) and that the first

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Romanian plans for a fourth arm of the Danube had been sketched by engineers Jean Stoenescu Dunăre in 1922 [1] and Aurel Bărglăzan in 1929 [2].

The implementation of the project, which started in 1949, was the consequence of a suggestion from Moscow, or, at least, that was the most favoured interpretation of Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej's decision to inaugurate the construction site of the Canal. As no official statement had been released, and information about the construction of the Canal was safely guarded, this interpretation was itself a rumour based on a fictional dialogue between Stalin and Dej, occurring in the first volume of Marin Preda's novel *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* [*The earth's most beloved son*] [3] (1980: 196-197). What is certain, as many researchers of the history of Communism agree, is that during that period, economic projects were bound to the programme of building socialism (Stănescu 2012: 125).

Since the idea of the Canal came from Stalin – he had also initiated the construction of the Belomorkanal [4] as the first part of his GULAG project –, it is certainly interesting to note that the first projects [5] connected with such an enterprise had been imagined in the 19th century, as a reaction to the Tsarist Empire's conquest of Sulina, which had given the Russians access to and control over the trade along the Danube. During most of the 19th century, Dobrudja had been a theatre of war between the Tsarist and the Ottoman Empires. Many cities and towns had been affected by the campaigns of the Russian army and the clashes between the two belligerent forces. Following the Peace of Bucharest in 1812, Russia occupied the Chilia branch of the Danube, as well as the territory between the Prut and the Dniester rivers, together with the small uninhabited islands situated between Ismail and Chilia. Five years later, the Russian Empire also took control over the Sulina branch and then occupied the Danube Delta entirely, thus controlling the mouths of the Danube until the Crimean War (1853-1856). Under these circumstances, building a canal between Cernavodă and Constanţa along the Kara Su Valley would have allowed any ship journeying from Vienna to Constantinople (a major international route at that time) to circumnavigate 400 kilometres of the area under Russian rule (Ardeleanu 2021: 135).

The first stage of the project, coinciding with the establishment of the forced labour camps, proved to be a total failure: in 1953, when the construction was interrupted, only 20 km out of the intended 70 had been built. It was to be expected; after the economy had been drained during the Second World War, the recently installed Communist regime could not find the necessary resources to finance such an important project. Abandoned by Dej in 1953, after Stalin's death, the project was taken up in 1975 by Nicolae Ceauşescu [6], who managed to complete it and inaugurated the Canal in 1984.

In a transcript of the meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers' Party (May 5, 1949), one of the

Communist leaders defined the purpose of the Canal as a 'laboratory' for the formation of the future Communist propaganda personnel (qtd. in Stănescu 2012: 125). Gheorghiu Dej, in his address to the party brigades sent to oversee the work at the Canal, mentioned, among others, that the Canal would be an experiment in organisation, a laboratory for building the 'new man' of socialism. In another transcript of the meeting of the PB of the CC of RWP, later that year, another purpose of the building of the Canal was clearly stated: the annihilation of the old social and political elites (qtd. in Stănescu 2012: 126). Mircea Stănescu claims that the purpose of using political detainees for this type of work was a triple one: forced labour (to compensate for the lack of existing resources), the extermination of the old and the weak, and the "re-education" of the young (2012: 126). The director of the Canal, Gheorghe Hossu, wrote in an article in *Contemporanul* that "[t]he people build the Canal and the Canal transforms the people" (qtd. in Bîtfoi 2012: 87).

Work at the Canal began in the summer of 1949 and was stopped on 18th July 1953, as part of the aftermath of liberalisation undertaken by Nikita Khrushchev and Lavrenti Beria after Stalin's death. Labour camps were officially established in January 1950 and abolished in August 1952, being replaced with "work colonies" (Bîtfoi 2012: 85). Whereas in 1949 and 1950 the number of detainees fluctuated from around 5,000 to around 7,000, in 1951 the official figures indicated around 15,000, and between 1952-1953, the number increased to around 20,000. These official figures only refer to the number of inmates present in the work colonies. There are no exact data regarding the number of political detainees, but there is consensus among specialists that they were the majority (Stănescu 2012: 128-129). Bîtfoi notes that the number of "enemies of the people" who were to be arrested and sent to work at the Canal was often based on the workforce needed there (2012: 85). Moreover, there are no official data regarding the number of deaths, either for the individual colonies or for the Canal as a whole. From the testimonies of the survivors, it became apparent that the number of deaths varied with the season (more people died in winter, because of the lack of heating and the harsh working conditions) and also with the regime of the colony and its administration, which could go from lenient to brutal or even downright murderous.

Petre Baicu, a detainee at Capul Midia, relates how the officer in charge of the camp forced an old man who was suffering from hernia to fill up and carry a wheelbarrow of sand. The old man fell to the ground after two steps. He died later at a hospital in Constanţa (1995: 98). There are thousands of similar testimonies and stories. It should also be mentioned that, even if the work at the Canal ceased with Stalin's death, labour colonies from the Danube Delta (Noua Culme and Periprava) still continued to function until 1963. Even if work there was not excessively hard – it consisted mainly of gathering reed –, the living conditions were still primitive and the administration brutally

coercive. Cornel Drăgoi, an inmate at Periprava, tells of an incident when, as the detainees were parching under the blaring Dobrudja sun, he asked a corporal for water and addressed him with "brother": the corporal admonished him for not calling him properly "comrade corporal" and beat him until he could no longer walk (Rizea and Drăgoi 1993: 176-177).

Bîtfoi quotes a number of testimonies of survivors who spoke about detainees being buried alive, or about bodies being left to rot in the sun, mutilated by rats (who ate their ears, noses and genitals), or eaten by wild animals. Even dead people were tortured: their mouth was cracked open and their teeth crushed (2012: 85-86). Black humour, notes Bîtfoi, became a strategy of resilience: thus, the new-comers in the camp who had little hope of survival were told by the others: "Penguin, we can see Agaua through your ears!" (Agaua was the village where one of the cemeteries for the detainees was located.) One way of announcing someone's death was to say that he was "released in an envelope" (2012: 86).

Though many detainees left poems about their experience at the Canal, Andrei Ciurunga (pseudonym of Robert Eisenbraun, 1920-2004), a journalist and refugee from Chişinău, published an entire collection "Poemele cumplitului Canal" [The poems of the terrible Canal] (1992), as well as an autobiography ironically entitled *Memorii optimiste* [Optimistic memoirs], which voice his experience and coagulate it into one of the most gruesome testimonials about forced labour as a form of modern slavery. In "Blestem pentru casa duşmanului" [Curse for the house of the enemy], Ciurunga, using the old form of the curse from folk poetry, makes a sociological inquiry into the custom, developed by state security officers, of treating the detainees as slaves, forcing them to perform menial work in their households (2010b: *Poeţi* 207-208). The same idea, of forced labour as a modern form of slavery, is also articulated by Ion Florescu (2010) in the poem "Valea Lacrimilor" [The Valley of Tears] (394-398).

In most of the poems composed (and later written down) by the detainees in the forced labour colonies, the word 'black' is repeated obsessively: "Everything here is black and impoverished", "It's black and dirty, poured in the bowl / the ladle of a tasteless broth", "The water from the mud is black" (Ciurunga 2010f: 164), "The bread is black inside the famished prison / As if the sky had baked it in its tears." (Ciurunga 2010e: 183) "The sky never seemed blacker / than when the alarm was sounded in the camp" (Oniga 2010: 451).

Grey is also mentioned, as part of the spectrum of black:

> Inside the black walls, gathered
> like fir trees in the greyish wood
> is our country, all and everywhere
> in chains, with prison guards around. (Ciurunga 2010a: 169)

Apart from referring to the miserable conditions the detainees had to put up with in the camp and the never-ending torture of the work and the beatings, blackness also worked as a real designation of place, the geographical location of torture symbolically pointing to suffering and death: the Black Water (Kara Su) Valley leading to the Black Sea. The building of the Danube-Black Sea Canal began along the trajectory of the Kara Su Valley, which crosses Dobrudja from East to West. The Kara Su Valley was one of the oldest commercial roads in Dobrudja, connecting the Kara Su Lake to the Danube. After the rains, the valley was flooded by muddy waters (often alluded to in the prison poems), which then flowed into the Danube at Cernavodă (a town whose name contains another 'black' reference). Even the dry and hot wind which sometimes blows over the Dobrudjan plateau is called the Black wind (Kara-yel), or "Empty bag", as it often destroys local crops.

The report of a former detainee at Midia and Poarta Albă, discovered in the archives of Radio Free Europe, details the inhuman working and living regime of the political prisoners. They lived in barracks covered only with tar board, without light or running water. They worked with primitive tools, requisitioned from various parts of the country, or with equipment brought secondhand from the Soviet Union. Work was done only manually, there were no mechanized tools or machines. While the workload required 5,000-6,000 calories per day, they were only given around 2,000 per day – no meat, no fat, only cereals like rye and barley. The toilets were simple holes dug in the ground, inside a roofless barrack, so that, when it was raining, the detainees were simultaneously taking a shower. A former detainee in Peninsula, a camp situated on a strip of land near present-day Mamaia, remembers that, in July 1950, they had no water for washing for more than a month: "Dripping with perspiration, covered by dust, weak and emaciated, we looked like Egyptian mummies. We were in the desperate situation of having to wash ourselves with urine" (Manea 2013: para. 8 of 18). Stoves were only for decoration in some barracks, for the detainees received no heating during the harsh winter months [7] – the famously harsh winters by the Black Sea, of which Ovid wrote so disparagingly. Bîtfoi quotes the testimony of a Jew who had been imprisoned at Auschwitz and who declared that the suffering of the "Canal slaves" was even more atrocious (2012: 89).

The poetry written by the detainees has been described as a poetry of hunger, fear, beating and cold (Cistelecan 2000: 21). Indeed, most poems concentrate on the animalic feelings of cold, hunger and fear – feelings that evoke the bleak conditions under which the prisoners were forced to work. If the project of the 'new man', postulated by the ideologists of the Communist Party of the USSR never came to be fulfilled, still, as Varlam Šalamov notes in his essay "O proze" [About prose], there was a new man born under Communism: the new man of the Gulag, political prisons and forced labour

camps, "a man with a new behaviour, a man reduced to the condition of the animal" (2009 [1965]: para. 48 of 128). For Šalamov the experience of the Gulag was unique in the history of mankind, for he considered it to have been a wholly negative experience for all those involved:

> The author of the *Kolyma Tales* considers the camp a negative experience for man – from the first to the last hour. [...] Not one single man becomes better, or stronger after the camp. The camp is a negative experience, a negative school, a corruption for everybody – for the administrators and the prisoners, guards and spectators, passers-by and readers of literature (2009 [1965] para. 40 of 128).

The complete negativity of this experience called for a new literary aesthetic, able to render the moral changes effected by the camp regime on the people inside it (people who were martyrs, but never heroes, Šalamov remarks), while also having a powerful impact on the larger reading public. The aesthetic of the new prose envisaged by Šalamov would regard literature as a document and the writer as Pluto returning to Hades, not as Orpheus rising from Hades (2009 [1965]: para. 72 of 128). To be more specific, the writer had to have lived the subject of his stories not with his mind, or heart, but, as Šalamov writes, "on his own skin, with his every nerve" (2009 [1965]: para. 46 of 128).

What are the implications of such an aesthetic for the poetic work produced by the detainees? Romantics like William Wordsworth, modernists like T.S. Eliot, and the Russian Formalists theorised, in different ways, poetry as something produced at a certain remove from life, from the immediate and the contingent. On the contrary, the authors of the poetry of detention were both the object and the subject of their poetry, immersed in the negative experience of the camp, and writing, so to say, with their own blood (some poems were literally written with their authors' blood). As the world of the camp was characterised by a penury of things and experiences, the few extant poetic images and ideas are always present like in a cinematic close-up, and an indefinite tension looms behind every word. Hunger, cold and fear become permanent companions, ghosts 'walking' beside the prisoners. In "Marş forţat" [Forced march], Ciurunga notes that:

> It is only the hunger we feel
> that walks with us every day,
> from the dawn when we go out
> till we get back under our blankets. (2010d: 163)

The bowls of tasteless broth that were served as lunch occasion another meditation on hunger, in which the bowl becomes the measure of "blind time", and a symbol for the spoliation of the land by the Soviet regime: "How could my land produce / such poverty? ..." (Ciurunga 2010f: 164).

Allusions to Ovid and his dark poems about the Black Sea are numerous. In what is perhaps the most famous poem about the Canal, Ciurunga writes:

> History, which now flows back,
> Will remember and write in its book,
> This terrible Danubius which spills
> Water through three mouths and blood from the fourth.
>
> And the songs which came out of slavery
> Will make up, in the years to come,
> In the books that will be written,
> A new *Tristia* by the Pontus Euxinus. (2010c: 162)

A poem by Dumitru Oniga, "Într-un lagăr din Deltă" [In a camp in the Delta], has a motto from Ovid's *Tristia*, Book III, Section 2, "Better Death than Exile": "So it was my destiny to travel as far as Scythia, that land that lies beneath the Lycaonian Pole" (2012: 1479). In this poem, Ovid sees himself as imprisoned by "the Pontus, seared by perpetual frost" and confesses that once he "reached the land of [his] punishment", the only thing he cared for was "weeping" (2012: 1479). Using inversion for emphasis, Oniga links the reference to Ovid with the Christian reference to Christ's crucifixion, turning the water into blood:

> Never have I seen a bloodier sun, [...]
> Than when the slaves, in ragged stripes,
> Carried at dusk big bundles of reeds towards the infinite,
> like in a perpetual Golgotha […]
> And a river of blood flew towards us,
> Reflected in ice, water holes and tears (2010: 450).

The same blend of Ovid and Christian martyr symbolism can be traced in Ion Florescu's poem "Valea lacrimilor" [The Valley of Tears]. Florescu's is one of the most detailed poetic testimonials of what life looked like for the detainees working in the labour camps at the Canal. The barracks housing the inmates, located "under hills guarded by evil spirits", where only "vultures, crows and rooks fly", are compared to "collective coffins, thatched with reed", built by the "pharaohs" for their slaves (2010: 394). The barracks have "no hall, no windows, no entrance door", the floor is made up of "earth and stone" and "bugs hidden in the boards". Instead of socks, the detainees had "paper, stuck with thread", and most of them had makeshift shoes: "On the left foot a peasant's flat, on the right one a galosh" (2010: 395).

Arşavir Acterian, a Romanian writer and Armenian ethnic born in Constanța, who was imprisoned in one of the labour camps at the Canal, made an interesting observation about the nature of that experience in his diary, comparing it with the ordeal of Sisyphus:

> I remember physical pains which I was seemingly doomed to endure forever. The terrible work at the Canal was like that, our way back – tired, exhausted – on a 7-8-kilometre-long road after having worked for ten hours digging, loading wagons, pushing at the wheelbarrows: it seemed as if it would never end. Like in a nightmare, I had the tantalizing, hopeless feeling of the infinity of this condition, this suffering, this experience. Work at the galleys, the ordeals of Tantal, Sisyphus (1992: 142).

The infinite mentioned by Acterian is the bad infinite, the endless cycle of suffering from which, at the time, there were only two escapes: death and literature.

While in the poetry of the detainees at the Canal, the Danube turns black, in the mainstream culture of Ceauşescu's regime in the 1980s (after the infamous July Theses, when the dictator had declared the 'nationalization' of culture) the Danube reappears as blue: in 1984, when Nicolae Ceauşescu inaugurated the Danube-Black Sea Canal, the song which won the Mamaia festival (one of the most important pop music festivals in communist Romania) was "Magistrala albastră" [The blue thoroughfare]. It was performed by Mirabela Dauer and Dan Spătaru, two Romanian pop music stars at the time. Interestingly, in the video, where the Canal is first shown from the perspective of the ship working its way along the still blue waters, Dan Spătaru is wearing the black leather jacket that had become the hallmark of the undercover state security agents, while Mihaela Dauer dons a brown jacket with epaulettes, a reference, perhaps, to the army forces used by Ceauşescu to complete the construction of the Canal. In the song, what had been the death canal is addressed as a "road of waters and dreams", carrying the Romanian soul, "a song without words" ("Magistrala", 1984), towards the sea. The construction of the canal is rendered as a work of love, "lifting the skies above the earth" ("Magistrala", 1984), for one's country. The chorus is a typical propaganda text from the late years of Ceauşescu's rule, designed to symbolically manipulate popular consciousness:

> The blue thoroughfare, a road built by the people
> Which speaks, you know, of present and future
> And great construction works [8]
> As a sign that they will be on this land forever
> That they were and they will be ("Magistrala", 1984).

The completion of the Canal – definitely a great achievement for socialist Romania – nevertheless contributed its share to the supreme leader's megalomania. In a documentary about the construction of the Canal produced by Sahia Films (the official propaganda movie studio), the first episode is entitled "Genesis" [9]. The canal is referred to as "a work of demiurgic

proportions", while the phrases "the epic of the construction of the Canal"/ "the epic of the blue thoroughfare" are repeated every few minutes. The Turkish name of the Kara Su valley is pronounced as one word, thus sounding like the Romanian word for the crucian carp (Carasu): at one point the narrator emphatically announces that: "It was the high mission of the Socialist Revolution […] to make a new geography fit our country's new history". In contrast to the Biblical genesis, the construction of the Canal is revealed to be a modern work of progress: "Every detail of this genesis is a combination of technical and human greatness." Ceauşescu's pet theory of the ethnogenesis of the Romanian people is this time applied to the space of the Black Sea, which, according to the narrator, "centuries before and after A.D. was one of the hottest hearths of the ethnogenesis of the Romanian people". There is no reference to the early work at the Canal, undertaken during Gheorghiu Dej's presidency of the Party and its many victims. Everything happens for the first time under Ceauşescu's enlightened rule: first tests, first explosions, first nails, etc. As forerunners of the project, only the names of two Romanians are mentioned: Ion Ionescu de la Brad and Stoenescu Dunăre (without the French-sounding Jean). The latter's vision is echoed in a sentence celebrating the technical genius of the Romanians: "Here we are, opening up for Europe the prospect of fluvial connections between the North and the Black Sea, between Western and Central Europe and the Near East and Asia." Furthermore, in the episode "Steps", the narrator introduces the topic of the Communist Metamorphosis: "Before obtaining the pure blue of the thoroughfare, first the assault of the mud waves had to be defeated." This Metamorphosis is part of the larger narrative of change on which the socialist revolution is based: "The face of the earth can and sometimes needs to be changed." (*Cum s-a construit Canalul*) The epic is clearly one of hard-won victory against the forces of nature and against history itself: the canal will endure throughout millennia, hard proof of the wondrous "Ceauşescu era".

Thus, it seems, by being united to the Danube through the man-made Canal, (and while the Danube slowly acquires its characteristic of blackness), the opposite will happen to the Black Sea, to whom, from now on, the former "Blue Danube" lends both its colour and its music. In Communist Romania, the song was actually entitled "Valurile Dunării" [The waves of the Danube], with no reference to colour: it was composed by Iosif Ivanovici, an army professional who had added Slavic (Serbian, to be more precise) nostalgia to Strauss's cheerful waltz. In the Sahia Film documentary, "Valurile Dunării" is part of the musical background of the movie, as Danube's blueness is transfered onto Ceauşescu's greatest achievement. It was, no doubt, a great achievement to have materialized one of the oldest technical dreams of the Black Sea space, and the transformation of nature did not stop at the physical level. While the Danube and Danube Delta had been re-imagined as black in

the poetry of the detainees working in the labour camps situated along the imagined trajectory of the Canal, the Black Sea gradually became blue through symbolic contamination with "The Blue Thoroughfare" after its completion in 1984, in an attempt to erase the memory of the victims of the labour camps and project a utopian view of Ceaușescu's own brand of national communism.

Notes

The translation of the primary sources in Romanian used in this article (poems, testimonials and songs) is mine. The translation of the quotations from Varlaam Šalamov's original essay in Russian is also mine.

[1] Stoenescu Dunăre initially published his project in *Analele Dobrogei* [The Annals of Dobrudja]. According to him, a navigable canal between Cernavodă and Constanța, besides shortening the way to the Black Sea, would have enabled, in the long term, a direct connection, via the Danube, between the North Sea (the Rotterdam harbour) and the Black Sea (Constanța), which in its turn could have opened towards the Levant, Egypt, India and the Far East (2005).
[2] In 1929, Aurel Bărglăzan published his bachelor thesis, written in collaboration with Octavian Smigelschi, "Studiul unui canal navigabil Cernavodă-Constanța" [The study of a navigable canal Cernavodă-Constanța] (Bărglăzan and Smigelschi 1929).
[3] After the 1989 Revolution, studies confirmed that Marin Preda's fictional dialogue was not just a figment of his imagination: Lavinia Betea and Paul Sfetcu confirm that Stalin had asked Gheorghiu Dej to start building the Canal during the former's visit to Moscow (1997: 13-14).
[4] The Belomorkanal connected the Baltic to the White Sea – as rumour had it, it had been built without any previous topographical studies and also without proper technical equipment. The construction of this canal was not justified by any economic reasons, as traffic to the White Sea was scarce. The harsh living conditions, together with the lack of technical means led to the death of over 25,000 detainees (Olteanu 2019: 97).
[5] The idea of building a canal along the Kara Su Valley may have been based on the ancient lore about Trajan's Wall. In *Călători la Pontul Euxin* [Travellers to Pontus Euxinus], Constantin Cioroiu mentions an Italian traveller, Giorgio Smancini, who, journeying in the Austrian stagecoaches along the course of the Kara Su Valley, wrote that the valley was allegedly the place where Trajan's canal, meant to connect the Danube with the Black Sea, began (1984: 46). The idea, however, was not considered feasible for many reasons. In 1840, Karl von Vinke, a German officer and politician who had been sent on a mission to Constantinople, criticised the theory, held true by many geographers, that the valley had been an older riverbed of the Danube, and showed that the construction of a canal alongside it would be impracticable and very costly (qtd. in Cioroiu 1984:44). However, in 1841, the British physician and geographer Francis W. Ainsworth, after travelling from Constantinople to Vienna, published an article envisaging that the construction of such a Canal would have brought immense benefits to the traffic along the Danube (Ardeleanu 2021: 136). On the same ship with Ainsworth was the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen, who mentioned the ancient lore about Trajan's canal, but concluded that building a railroad would have been cheaper and more practical (Ardeleanu 2021: 138).
[6] The Canal was part of Ceaușescu's grandiose plans for the economic development of the Black Sea region, which included the construction of an atomic plant in Cernavodă and an oil rig in Midia-Năvodari.

[7] The detainees often referred to the labour colonies along the Danube-Black Sea Canal as the "Romanian Siberia".
[8] In Romanian, the word used to denote 'construction works' is 'ctitorii', an old word extensively used for the founders of the Orthodox churches and cathedrals. Its usage put the construction of the Canal on the same level as the sacred spaces celebrating the rule of local princes and boyars in mediaeval and early modern Wallachia and Moldavia. Tismăneanu speaks of "the Byzantine rites" used to conceal Ceaușescu's neo-Stalinist personal dictatorship (1991: 85).
[9] The episodes are "Genesis", "Steps", "The Last Threshold", "26 May 1984" (the day of the Canal's official inauguration) and "Epilogue", thus building up a narrative of successful civilisation: gradual conquest, appropriation and victory over natural forces.

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