

THE ODESSA MASSACRE AND ITS PERPETRATORS: MEMORY AND “VICTIMHOOD” TOWARDS THE HOLOCAUST IN ROMANIA

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The academic study of the Odessa Massacre and its impact on the memorial process of post-1989 Romania has not produced a research cluster of its own. As part of the Holocaust in Romania, the massacre is one of the pivotal moments in the study of the Romanian-orchestrated genocide, yet no comprehensive study currently exists on how the post-communist Romanian public perceived the Odessa crimes. In this paper, I examine the relation between the way in which historians have discussed the Odessa Massacre through the use of archival sources and the process of memory dissemination related to this event after 1989. Recent attempts at “recovering” the memories of convicted war criminals such as Nicolae Macici have shown that the idea of political justice has had a certain negative connotation in post-totalitarian Romanian public memory. Still, other figures such as Constantin Trestioreanu and Ovidiu Anca have been treated as having various “motivations” for their actions, ranging from just military responses to the impossibility of military refusal. Building upon my previous article published in “Holocaust-Studii și cercetări” on Romanian postwar memory, I argue that the post-1989 attempts at rehabilitating the names of convicted war criminals are linked to the lack of study of lesser-known figures of the Odessa Massacre. Thus, I examine the way in which focusing on the “big names” from this chapter of the Holocaust has undergirded a memorial process by which certain perpetrators can be classified as victims in the memory related to the Holocaust by appearing as symbols of oppressed “political prisoners”. Overall, this article looks at the relation between archives and memory within the post-1989 era.

Keywords: Holocaust in Romania, Odessa Massacre, political justice, memory processes, victimization.

INTRODUCTION

This article deals with the question of how the Odessa Massacre has been constructed within post-1989 memory. I argue that the event itself can be seen as a pivotal standard for how the Holocaust in Romania has been perceived as a whole by Romanian society. The Massacre of Jews in Odessa which took place in 1941 has taken on forms of memorial construction that range from a complete denial of the massacre of Jews to a deflection of guilt and victimization (by claiming that the Jewish residents of Odessa were Soviet agents or, more simply, that they deserved it). These antisemitic tropes are not endemic to the post-1989 era, but they have certainly flourished in it. In this article, I show that even the denial of a specifically Jewish Massacre in the case of Odessa portrays the event of 1941 as a relevant piece of ‘Romanian

history' because of the Romanian army's role in the country's memorial process. Furthermore, I examine the ways in which historians have dealt with the Massacre, how the public has been taught to see it, and in what terms the Odessa Massacre came to be described after the postwar trials of 1946. The study of postwar justice in Romania is an emerging subject of historical enquiry that, while still a somewhat marginal field, can nevertheless build upon the wider narratives within Holocaust studies. In this sense, the opening of the archives in Romania has had a critical impact on the possibility of historians expanding their research in this area. The dissemination of new archival information has allowed historians to challenge the primarily nationalist discourses about the Second World War that were fostered during the communist period and which so profoundly impacted the public memory of the '90s. As such, in the present article, I try to contextualize the Odessa Massacre in light of information obtained from the archives regarding the Holocaust in Romania, including information pertaining to trials in the immediate aftermath of the war. I am also interested in using primary and secondary sources for analyzing how the myth of victimhood in Romania's Second World War experience can be linked to the Odessa Massacre; an event which, paradoxically, is seen as important even among those who shamefully deny it.¹

METHODS OF INQUIRY

My approach in this paper is twofold: first, I take a look at the historiography, archives, and works related to the public memory of the Odessa Massacre in particular and the Holocaust in Romania in general. In this way, I can provide an analytical overview of the main ideas related to these phenomena, including (but not limited to) myths of victimhood in Eastern Europe after the Second World War, fascist anti-communism and its relation to memory formation both before and after 1989, as well as nationalists' usage of events of the Holocaust in the 21st century. Second, I use the comparative method to briefly examine the Odessa Massacre postwar trials and other important judicial proceedings from this period. Hence, I focus on archival documents from both the People's Tribunal in Bucharest dealing with the Massacre, as well as documents from the Cluj People Tribunal which focused on crimes in Northern Transylvania, in order to bring a regional perspective to how similar judicial institutions treated mass crimes in close proximity to one another in considerably different ways. Cases of postwar justice are essential to

¹ For further information on Holocaust denial tactics, see Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York City: Free Press, 2012).

both historical analysis and memory formation with respect to the Holocaust, mostly because trials bear information which can be deconstructed to shed light on the recent past. Yet, they are also subjective agents since memory, both collective and personal, is volatile and influenced by the experience of certain groups or individuals. In this sense, history is an analysis of the past, while memory is those ideas that a society chooses to commemorate in the present. With this in mind, in this article, I will focus my attention to the following main research questions: What are the main reasons for considering the Odessa Massacre a research standard for understanding the Holocaust in Romania? What are the main myths in Romania regarding the Second World War? What is the relation between fascism, anti-communism, and post-1989 memory? How can scholars use postwar materials from different areas related to the postwar Romanian state (Transnistria, Bukovina, Northern Transylvania) to create an entangled history of these areas? How can the term “victimhood” be understood in the context of examining the Odessa Massacre?

Because of the brief length of this article, I try to look at these questions succinctly and to formulate an analytical tool for better understanding the Odessa Massacre as both a symbol and an event. Also, I try to both separate and link the ideas of memory and history through the usage of primary and secondary documents.

BETWEEN MEMORY AND HISTORY: HOLOCAUST, THE ODESSA MASSACRE, AND NATIONAL VICTIMIZATION

In an interview stored in the USHMM database, retired colonel Ovidiu Anca describes the main scenes of the Odessa Massacre of 1941. The Romanian military man, wearing regular clothes and trying to at least mimic a sense of decency, acknowledges that the massacre took place, while also employing a narrative that became representative of a type of deflective negationist discourse that eventually dominated the Romania of the 1990s.² The perniciousness of deflective and selective Holocaust denial does not reside in denying that the event itself happened (or at least, key events belonging to it); rather, it resides in the omission of key aspects of the ideology, the sequence of events, or the motivations for murder in order to provide an alternative discourse to an otherwise much more incriminating reality. In other words, one can use the Odessa

² RG-50.642.0001, Oral history interview with Ovidiu Anca, The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of the Federation of Romanian Jewish Communities, Washington DC.

Massacre to portray sympathy for the Jews, while at the same time exculpating oneself (and, in Anca's case, the army) for a certain behavior that has been proven beyond any doubt by documentation. This form of information from an 'insider' is a trope of victimization discourse, and in this case, showcases a sense of victimhood in relation to the Holocaust. By claiming to know how events unfolded by simply being there, a bystander or perpetrator can offer an alternative understanding of the events in question. From an academic point of view, this can be a valid approach, of course, so long as one does not try to excuse mass murder or deny the facts.

As for Anca, towards the end of the interview, he defends the Romanian Army by claiming that its members were not in any way prejudiced towards Jews, as he personally knew Jewish members of the army who were not forced to wear the Jewish Star of David. He also claimed that the army actually helped Jews and was not antisemitic since they took measures against the Iron Guard. He ends up blaming all antisemitic actions on the Iron Guard, portraying a black and white version of the military and the fascist movement which had been founded by Codreanu.³ Anca more or less describes Constantin Trestioreanu, whom he knew personally, as having had the same role as him. This form of Holocaust distortion is typical for the post-1989 era; it involves telling a partial truth in order to create an even bigger lie. Specifically, Anca fails to mention that the Romanian army was in fact highly antisemitic and was one of the main institutions for the mass murder of Jews in the East.⁴ As Holocaust research has shown, no state entity acts solely at the behest of its supreme leader who, though bearing the primary responsibility for mass murder during the Shoah, does not have complete control over peoples' agency.⁵ Furthermore, the armies of countries allied with the Reich were antisemitic institutions who had deeply internalized a sense of anti-communism that was based on an intense hatred of 'Jews as Bolsheviks', and were prone to violence. The fact that the army went against the Iron Guard must be understood in the context of the state of civil war which was present in Romania in 1941: the liquidation of the fascists by the army was a struggle for power. In fact, the short-

³ For an introduction to the Romanian uses of antisemitism, see Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Ion Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944* (Chicago: Ivan R Dee, 2000), xvii-xxvi, 3-62.

⁴ File 2714, Volume 37, Reel 11, RG-25.004M, Selected Records from the Romanian Information Services, 1936-1984, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington DC.

⁵ For agency and the Holocaust in Romania, see Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, Introduction, as well as Vladimir Solonari, 'On the Persistence of Moral Judgement: Local Perpetrators in Transnistria as Seen by Survivors and their Christian Neighbors' in *Microhistories of the Holocaust*, ed. Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman (New York: Berghahn, 2017), 198-216, and Dennis Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and his regime, Romania 1940-1944* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

lived National Legionary State had a long-standing impact on the government of Ion Antonescu and all of the actions that followed: it allowed national institutions to internalize the fascist ideas of their Iron Guard peers and to combine them with a strong nationalism and pervasive anti-Bolshevism. The result was a murder-driven frenzy of Jews in Odessa who were seen as Soviet agents.⁶

Anca's employment of denial was neither a new strategy nor simply his own. As I have shown above regarding Holocaust denial, one does not need to wholly deny the Holocaust, but rather simply pick and choose which aspects of massacres and sequences of violence to accept or not. By doing this, one can take the Holocaust out of context, engage in victim-blaming, falsely compare the massacres of Jews in the Holocaust to the crimes of communism, and trivialize events such as the Odessa Massacre as accidents of war. These arguments are meant to reduce the importance of the Holocaust as an object of study and to treat its events simply as a part of war, while ignoring both the ideology of murder of Nazi Germany's allies, as well as the various economic, social, or political motivations that local perpetrators had for such acts.⁷

I insist on examining Anca's interview because it exhibits a view of the Odessa Massacre that held appeal and was eventually internalized by Romanian society in the 1990s: the myth of an army reclaiming lost territories by fighting the powers of Bolshevism, as symbolized by the Jews. Yet, the memory formation of mythology in post-1989 Romania cannot be separated from the experiences of violence from the Second World War. As Stefan Ionescu has shown, the violence of the Second World War was accompanied by a symbolic environment marked by the rise of strong antisemitic and anti-Bolshevik narratives.⁸ Thus, symbols of 'good' vs. 'evil', which were represented by, for example, national symbols such as the Romanian flag on one side and the Star of David on the other, were employed as gestures of anticipated violence. One can say that during the war, "acts of violence are socially negotiated in everyday life contexts".⁹

⁶ Reel 32, RG.25.004M, Selected Records from the Romanian Information Services, 1936-1984, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington DC. Also see Ottmar Trașcă, "Ocuparea orașului Odessa de către Armata Română și măsurile adoptate față de populația evreiască, Octombrie 1941-Martie 1942", *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie G. Barițiu din Cluj-Napoca*, XLVII (2008): 377-425.

⁷ Emanuel Grec, "Transition on Trial: The People's Tribunal Between Historiography and the Politics of Memory in Post-War Romania", *Holocaust-Studii și cercetări*, No.13 (XII/2020):293-326.

⁸ See Ștefan Ionescu, "Myths, Narratives, and Patterns of Rumors: The Construction of 'Jewish Subversion' and Retributive Violence in 1940-41 Romania", *Culture & Psychology*, Vol. 15(3): 327-336. Also, Ionescu, "În umbra morții: Memoria supraviețuitorilor Holocaustului din România", *Studia Hebraica* (4): 362-390.

⁹ Ionescu "Myths", 334.

After the fall of communism, a strong anti-communist narrative came along with a rise in nationalism, giving birth to radical forms of antisemitic anti-communism hidden behind apparently national ideals.¹⁰ Democratic anti-communism was thus hijacked by the memory formation of so-called “prison saints”, which were remnants of the memory of the fascist ideology of the Iron Guard. In the memorialization process, national anti-communist symbols such as Iuliu Maniu were lumped together with the likes of Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu, a fascist member of the Iron Guard.¹¹ Furthermore, Holocaust survivors’ memories of events were ignored, as the processes of memory did not develop in Romania in the same ways as they did in the West. The communist regime blocked any discussion of the genocide of Jews and Roma by the Antonescu regime, thus making for the emergence of a Romanian sense of “victimhood” all the easier to appear after the regime’s fall.¹²

It is important to study the Odessa Massacre because it is connected with the memory formation of the Holocaust, as the event was a brutal display of genocide disguised as military measures, while at the same time being used by those who deny the Holocaust to stress the myths of a brave Romanian army and to expand on antisemitic tropes regarding “Judeo-Bolshevism”. The study of the Odessa Massacre is paramount to understanding the Holocaust in Romania as an event of radicalized violence, not just one related to Romanian military history or history in general. It can also be understood as a symbol in history as well as a memorial to the victims of the genocide.¹³ Yet, the main myths of post-1989 Romania can be linked to the anti-communist mythology of counter-memory. In this sense, Maria Bucur explains that after-1989, the portrayal of Romanians (especially soldiers) as “only victims” had a profound role on the society’s perception of the past.¹⁴ They created an idealized version of victimhood where Romanians are seen as being in a permanent struggle to reclaim their historical land, wherein they were ‘trapped’ between the Soviet Union in the East and Nazi Germany in the West. In this version, Romania was a victim who had no choice but to act during the war in ‘nationalist’ ways. This

¹⁰ Michael Shafir, “Romania: ‘Neither “Fleishig” nor “Milchig”’: A Comparative Study” in *Holocaust Public Memory in Postcommunist Romania*, ed. Alexandru Florian (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018): 96-150.

¹¹ See William Totok and Elena-Irina Macovei, *Între mit și bagatelizare: Despre reconsiderarea critică a trecutului, Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu și rezistența armată anticomunistă din România* (Iași: Polirom, 2016).

¹² Ștefan Ionescu, “The Boom of Testimonies after Communism: The Voices of the Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Romania (1989-2005)”, *Studia Hebraica* (5):357-380

¹³ Vladimir Solonari, *Purificarea națiunii: Dislocări forțate de populație și epurări etnice în România lui Ion Antonescu, 1940-1944* (Iași: Polirom, 2015).

¹⁴ Maria Bucur, *Eroi și victime: România și memoria celor două războaie mondiale* (Iași: Polirom, 2019): 203-230.

myth applies to Ion Antonescu as well, and has been portrayed in popular movies such as ‘Oglinda’ (The Mirror), which had a strong impact on the Romanian public. In this sense, ‘national’ came to be mythologized as excluding non-Romanian elements, and those deemed ‘alogeni’ (foreigners) were considered as hurting the Romanian nation by virtue of simply existing. This is one of the main myths of post-communist Romania and was enhanced during communism by the exclusion of the Holocaust from general study and from the broader discourse.¹⁵

The archives of the People’s Tribunals are an essential part of memory formation pertaining to the Holocaust. The People’s Tribunal in Bucharest, which contains documentation of the trials of the perpetrators of the Odessa Massacre, was based on special law 312/1945 and bore the role of investigating war criminals and their role during Romania’s alliance with Nazi Germany.¹⁶ The Cluj People’s Tribunal examined crimes committed in Northern Transylvania, a territory which was not under direct Romanian control during the war.¹⁷ As I investigated many of these files, I tried to pinpoint the differences and similarities between them, but ultimately realized that they in fact could not be separated. This is not so much because of their resemblance, but because of the ways they were both constructed and later perceived. Thus, while the Bucharest trials developed into a form of political legitimization by investigating war criminals and political figures that were guilty of war crimes in fascist Romania, the Cluj trials sought to create a form of national belonging, using, in its format, anti-Magyar historical stereotypes to create forms of national bonding between ethnic Romanians. Jewish and Roma victims of the Holocaust were thus not the main subjects of discussion in these trials, even though they were presented as victims and mentioned as such. Yet, neither of these trials incorporated larger discussions of the role of an organized genocide.¹⁸ But with all of their shortcomings, the People’s Tribunals were legitimate forms of postwar justice and did not play the role of communist show-trials. They were also important for the fact that they punished war criminals who were guilty of unprecedented crimes, while also initiating the discussion of such acts within the Romanian judiciary. Yet, in terms of memory, the People’s Tribunals are seldom seen as such in post-1989

¹⁵Adrian Cioflăncă, “Gramatica disculpării în istoriografia comunistă. Distorsionarea istoriei Holocaustului în timpul regimului Ceaușescu”, *Yearbook of the A. D. Xenopol Institute of History* 42 (2005): 627-644.

¹⁶ See File 2986, Volume 4094, Reel 14, RG 25.004M, Selected Records from the Romanian Information Services, 1936-1984, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington DC

¹⁷ See, for example, file 1/1945-1950, National Archives of Romania, Cluj Branch.

¹⁸ I am studying these aspects in my current PhD at the University of Heidelberg.

Romania.¹⁹ The myths surrounding the trials take the form of both Holocaust denial and ignorance of history, as well as radical forms of anti-communism which associated everything linked to this ideology with the worst outcomes. While the People's Tribunals were not communist tribunals, they were nevertheless perceived as such by the Romanian public. Note that this mostly applies to the Bucharest Tribunal. Also, in terms of memory construction, the Romanian public often sees the Cluj Tribunal in a positive way, especially because it enhances the nationalist ego of Romanians vs. Hungarians. The Cluj trials mostly accused Hungarian perpetrators for killing Romanian Jews and Romanians. Memory-wise, this created a 'victimhood competition', giving rise to a myth of "our Jews vs their Jews".²⁰

CONCLUSION

The previous discussion shows that popular opinions after 1989 regarding the Odessa Massacre, the Holocaust, and postwar trials were influenced by a number of factors: historiography during communism, nationalist historiography in the 1990s that developed into a focus on 'big names' during the war, ignoring of the experiences of everyday life or that of radicalized violence within communities during the Holocaust, and an inclination of equating war criminals with political prisoners under communism. The lack of scholarly attention to certain historical aspects, such as the important difference between political prisoners and criminals of war guilty of Holocaust crimes, has made the post-1989 collective memory unidimensional: Romanians against others. This form of othering emerged as a tactic of victimization because events such as the Odessa Massacre were both taken out of their context and were studied under false pretenses. Of course, it does not serve well to collectively incriminate all those tied to various institutions such as the army or the local communities. Fierce generalization can have a negative toll on historical discourse and memory formation alike. Yet, it is important to acknowledge the crimes of the past and to create a platform where state agents can take responsibility for actions during the Holocaust, not only for a better understanding of the past but also for establishing a more positive platform for building the future.

¹⁹ See Grec, "Transition on Trial", 314-321.

²⁰ Shafir, "Romania", 110-123.

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