

Jews or Judeo-Bolsheviks?

Accounts for the Romanian Holocaust Paradox

Dălălău Andrei

PhD student, Faculty of History and Philosophy

Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca

Introduction

The Holocaust in Romania has long been a controversial episode of the Eastern European genocidal practices during the Second World War due to its inherent paradox: between 280.000 and 380.000 Jews and Roma were deported and murdered within Bessarabia, northern Bukovina, and Transnistria from 1941 to 1944, while hundred thousand Jews and Roma from non-Eastern parts of Romania were relatively left “protected”. The International Commission for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania stated that the Romanian authorities, led by Marshall Ion Antonescu, bear the main responsibility for both the planning and the implementation of the Holocaust¹. This controversy raises a number of political, military, institutional questions, such as: how can one explain the authorities’ decision to deport Jews from the Eastern parts of Romania while “neglecting” the Jewish population from the Old Kingdom? Was it a strategical move, an incoherent policy or both?

Firstly, in order to explain this paradox, one should take into consideration the agents involved in the decision-making process of the Holocaust, including the discrimination, deportation and progressive degradation of an “undesirable” ethnic group from the Romanian national body. Secondly, even if Romania was under a pro-German military dictatorship, the persecutions were not always supervised, nor imposed by the Nazis, as Romanian authorities bear direct responsibility for their actions. Lastly, the victims of the Holocaust were the result not only of systematic killing, but also of spontaneous pogroms, mass killings, economic and civic degradation, forced labour, abusive evacuation from rural areas and other episodes of daily violence from the authorities, members of far-right parties or even civilians.

Who is to be blamed for the Holocaust in Romania? Scholars, such as Dennis Deletant and Ottmar Traşcă², argued for Ion Antonescu’s main role in purging the Jewish population, while also claiming that the Romanian Holocaust was unlike that in other parts of

¹ Comisia Internațională pentru Studiarea Holocaustului în România, *Raport final*, Iași: Polirom, 2004.

² Ottmar Traşcă (ed.), *Chestiunea evreiască în documentele militare române 1941-1944*, Ed. Institutul European, București, 2010, p. 14.

Europe and the Soviet Union³. In short, the Romanian and German authorities shot 12.000-20.000 Jews in Bessarabia and Bukovina in 1941; Romanian forces killed an estimated 15.000-20.000 Jews in Odessa in October 1941; at least 90.000 of the 147.000 Jews deported in Transnistria died from typhus and starvation between 1941-1943; during the same period, 130.000-170.000 local Ukrainian Jews are estimated to have perished in the same province⁴. In this regard, the Antonescu's regime is held responsible for the largest number of deaths of Jews after Hitler's Germany⁵. Moreover, Antonescu acted of his own volition in the context established by Nazi domination of continental Europe. Ion Antonescu and Foreign Affairs Minister, Mihai Antonescu, frequently used the word "purification" when referring to the Jewish question in Romania, indicating that their policy had a direct racial target. However, a distinct Jewish category was created when Antonescu referred to the *ost-Juden*, mainly the eastern Jews, which were perceived as a greater threat to the establishment than their southern and central peers due to external and internal political evolutions, as this present essay aims to prove.

Premises of a genocidal paradox: the eastern Jews

Ion Antonescu addressed the situation of eastern Jews at his meeting with Hitler in Munich on June 12, 1941, when the marshal complained that German army sent back from the Ukraine the Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina whom the Romanian army intentionally deported further east as part of the plan to "cleanse" two provinces of Jews⁶. For Hitler and Antonescu, the term *eastern* connoted Jews who had come under the influence of Soviet Communism and, according to Deletant, this reading offers a possible explanation in understanding the different policy adopted by Antonescu towards the Jews in the provinces of Romania which had not been under soviet rule⁷. In short, Antonescu made distinction between Jews and *eastern* Jews, the latter being supposedly "contaminated" by communism and thus becoming Judeo-Bolsheviks. In this regard, the infamous racial element – the Jewishness - was doubled by a hostile and threatening political identity – communism, resulting in the imperative of solving the "Jewish problem" using violent methods.

This hypothesis is supported by various documents issued by the Antonescu administration before the Eastern offensive of the Romanian army from June 1941.

³ Dennis Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally. Ion Antonescu and his Regime*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2006, p. 127.

⁴ Dennis Deletant, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

⁵ Even if 500.000 Jews from Hungary – including northern Transylvania - were deported to the death camps in Poland, the extermination policy in Hungary has been greatly increased after the German occupation of that country on 19 March 1944, which placed the local command under the direct rule of Nazis.

⁶ Deletant, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 128.

Antonescu ordered “the closing of all communist Jewish cafes in Moldova, the identification - by region - of all Jews, communist agents or sympathizers”⁸. Mihai Antonescu began using the term “purification” with an unprecedented sense of urgency, claiming that Bessarabia and Bukovina will go through a “policy of total and violent removal of foreign elements” to ensure the “ethnic, racial security of the Romanian people”⁹. Shortly after, he ordered the evacuation of all Jews between 18 and 60 years old from the villages between Siret and Prut to the Targu Jiu camp¹⁰. Mihai Antonescu noted that “General Antonescu has taken the decision – whilst he is in Moldavia – to remove the Jews from this very moment from all the villages in Moldavia, Bessarabia and Bukovina. This measure is already being applied in Moldavia”¹¹. The targeted ethnic and geographic group was that of the eastern Jews which supposedly impeded the military and logistic operations on the front.

One of the most brutal episodes of the Holocaust in Romania was the Iași pogrom. The preparation and the implementation of the Jewish massacres from Iași (known as the *Iași pogrom*) from June 27-30, 1941, was taken by Romanian military authorities, local authorities, German forces, legionary agitators and the Romanian Secret Service (SSI), whose director Eugen Cristescu dispatched the first operational echelon (160 agents) in Iași with the official mission of protecting the back front from sabotage, espionage and terror actions. The SSI took part in the massacre according to multiple sources, including the testimony of SSI lieutenant colonel Traian Borcescu¹². During his trial in 1946, Antonescu argued that “it is a military principle: along the front and in proximity to it the civilian population must be moved” and that the Iasi pogrom was a “measure taken for the political security of the state, a question of military security and of military operations and even a matter of saving their lives”¹³. This statement is supported by one of Mihai Antonescu’s declarations from July 2, 1941, when he justified the Jewish massacre at the police headquarters in Iași: “To this end they (the Soviets) have been parachuting in spies and terrorist agents, who are making contact with agents resident in the country and with the Judeo-Communist population in order to organize acts of aggression. In Iași, 500 Judeo-Communists, who fired on German and

⁸ Matatias Carp, *Cartea neagră. Fapte și documente. Suferința evreilor din România, 1940-1944*, vol. 3, Atelierele Grafice Socec & Co., SAR, București, p. 39.

⁹ Vladimir Solonari, *Purifying the Nation. Population Exchange and Ethnic Cleansing in Nazi-Allied Romania*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2010, pp. 151-152.

¹⁰ Jean Ancel (ed.), *Documents Concerning the Fate of Romanian Jewry during the Holocaust*, vol. II, Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, New York, 1986, pp. 414-415, apud Radu Ioanid, *Pogromul de la Iasi*, Ed. Institutului National pentru Studiarea Holocaustului din Romania „Elie Wiesel”, Polirom, Iași, 2021, p. 20.

¹¹ Deletant, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹² Radu Ioanid, *Pogromul de la Iasi*, p. 108.

¹³ Deletant, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

Romanian troops from their houses have been executed”¹⁴. The term “Judeo-Communists” indicates a clear ideological separation between the Jews from the east and the Jews from other parts of Romania, the latter representing a second-degree social danger in the broader political and military context of 1941-1944 Romania.

Spontaneous violence and administrative incoherence

Another aspect which should be taking into consideration when analysing the Holocaust in Romania is the administrative and institutional incoherence of the decision-making agents. When Ion Antonescu ordered an investigation into the violence perpetrated by General Emanoil Leoveanu, the Chief of Police, two different reports written and signed by the same person – Leoveanu – were found: “the first report portrays the pogrom as a response to provocation by Jews who fired on Romanian and German troops; the second report makes no mention of Jewish provocation and lays the blame for the attacks on Iron Guardists and shows that the German commandant falsely claimed to have had suffered casualties among his men”¹⁵. The exact same situation emerged when colonel Captaru Dimitru, the prefect of Iași, executed the order to evacuate Jews using the infamous “death trains”. After that, he wrote two reports to justify his actions: the first one mentions that certain individuals were trying to smear Jews in order to induce their mass murder by the military, while the second one declared Jews were guilty for the pogrom, accusing them of being communist sympathizers and saboteurs¹⁶.

Moreover, the chaotic nature of high command orders and their application at the local level increased the confusion of what truly happened in Iași and how many Jews were actually killed during the pogrom. Historians estimate that between 3,200 and 12,000 people died during the events, but the large margin of these numbers indicate the difficulties faced when documenting the victims of the Romanian Holocaust. While the deaths claimed by the “death trains” have been recorder with accuracy – approximately 2,800 victims – historians debate the number of murders elsewhere in the city. A SSI report from 23 July 1943 mentioned around 13.000 victims, while historian Jean Ancel cited two documents where the number of victims reaches 14,850 dead¹⁷. The discrepancy between the minimum and maximum number of victims, the debate over who is to be blamed for this atrocity and the chaotic military decisions regarding the itinerary of the “death trains” indicates that the

¹⁴ Deletant, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 138.

¹⁶ Radu Ioanid, *Holocaustul din România. Distrugerea evreilor și romilor sub regimul Antonescu 1940-1944*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2019, p. 142.

¹⁷ Jean Ancel, *Preludiu la asasinat. Pogromul de la Iasi, 29 iunie 1941*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2005, p. 383.

genocidal policy from Romania was not only the mere result of a systematic anti-Semitic plan carried out by the Council of Ministers, headed by Ion Antonescu, but also of anti-communist paranoia, the local population's silent complicity, the German military supervision and the provocation from the Iron Guardists and the Romanian secret services.

Transnistria and “Judeo-Bolsheviks”

The Iași pogrom was only one facet of the Holocaust from Romania. The main genocidal actions were taken in Transnistria from 1941 to 1943, where Jews were deported by the Romanian army and gendarmerie. The Transnistrian Governorate was the province between Dniester and Southern Bug rivers, including the city of Odesa as local capital¹⁸. This enlarged province had roughly 2,3 million inhabitants, including nearly 200,000 Romanian-speaking residents¹⁹. The Transnistrian deportation of eastern Jews was part of Antonescu's political and ideological view of the Judeo-Bolshevik, this perspective being reflected in his response to two petitions sent to him in October 1941 by Wilhelm Filderman protesting the deportations: “...your Jews, who have today become Soviet commissars, are driving the Soviet troops in the region of Odesa using unprecedented terror – corroborated by Russian prisoners – to a useless massacre, in order solely to cause us losses”²⁰. Antonescu proceeds to call the eastern Jews “Russian Jews”, justifying deportations using touching testimonials and metaphors, abstracting the reality of the genocide by arguing for the Jewish “hatred, bordering on madness” towards the “tolerant and hospitable” Romanian people²¹.

Transnistria was governed by Gheorghe Alexianu, who was in charge from August 1941 through January 1944. His name was directly linked with the elliptical “Alexianu method”, which meant that all Jews who could not hold with the column due to their weakness or illness had to be shot²². This “code word” reflects the methods used by Romanian authorities from Transnistria towards the deported Jewish population. Needless to say, the Romanian lower ranks officials committed criminal acts while the higher command was hiding behind anonymity. This pattern, Solonari argues, was established by Antonescu himself when he explicitly stated that he doesn't “want to know” about the methods used to pursue the ethnic cleansing program: “One hundred of them may die, one thousand may die,

¹⁸ Vladimir Solonari, *Imperiul-satelit. Guvernarea românească în Transnistria 1941-1944*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2021.

¹⁹ This number is a matter of debate considering that, during the census team led by Henri H. Stahl, ethnic Romanians who resided in predominantly Ukrainian villages were encouraged to identify themselves as Romanians. Stahl and his team found 197.685 Romanians or 8,4% of the Transnistrian total population (Solonari, *Imperiul-satelit*, p. 142).

²⁰ Deletant, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

²² Vladimir Solonari, *Purifying the Nation*, p. 205.

all may die...”²³. The Transnistrian territory was guided based on two main political philosophies: Romanian *nationalism* and *orientalism*. Orientalism maintained the gulf between the supposedly superior rulers - the Romanians - and their inferior subjects - the Slavs, the Jews, the Eastern Romanians. Both governing strategies gave rise to an arrogance of power and reinforced the belief of the occupying authorities that violence was justified to achieve a higher goal, such as ethnic cleansing and racial “purification”²⁴. Jean Ancel indicates that 180,000 Jews died in Transnistria, while Juliul Fischer estimates around 87,000 Romanian Jews and 130,000 local Jews were killed. Marcu Rozen considers that these numbers go as high as 270,000 victims²⁵.

The exceptions

Besides its antisemitic character and racial hatred towards specific demographic segments of its population, the Nazi-allied Romania led by Ion Antonescu had some notable exceptions. One of these is the Cernăuți exception, where mayor Traian Popovici, to whom the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem granted the title of “Righteous among the Nation” in 1989, resisted the policy of ghettoization and deportation by pleading for compassion, tolerance and kindness towards the Jews. However, documents show that Ion Antonescu’s decision to spare fifteen to twenty thousand “economically useful” Jews from the city from deportation was directly influenced by the German consul in Cernăuți, Fritz Gebhard Schelhorn, who invented the argument of economic indispensability to save as many lives as possible, according to his own words²⁶. The local authorities and provincial governors made efforts to minimize the number of Jews who were to be deported in Transnistria and slowed down the selection process, which led to the postponement of these decisions until the deportations were eventually suspended. On September 7, 1942, there were still 19,080 Jews in the province, while on 1 October 1, 1943, there were still 17,963 Jews compared to the 183 Jews left in the city of Chișinău, Bessarabia²⁷. The exception of the Cernăuți case was possible on the base of local authorities’ decision to interpret the higher commands from Bucharest in a manner that was portrayed as beneficial for the economic support in favour of the German war effort on the eastern front.

The great question

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 206.

²⁴ Vladimir Solonari, *Imperiul-satelit*, p. 138.

²⁵ Radu Ioanid, *Holocaustul în România*, p. 319.

²⁶ Vladimir Solonari, *Purifying the Nation*, pp. 214-216.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 211.

The present article tried to offer a glimpse on the rationale of decision-making agents in Romania by arguing that eastern Jews were considered a greater “threat” for the military operations of the German-Romanian troops on the Eastern front than the rest of the Jews which were not in the direct range of the anti-Soviet war. Instead of conclusion, putting aside the geographical and demographic criteria of the deportations, one question still remains the subject of debate among scholars: did Antonescu and his staff aimed to kill all the Jews if Nazi Germany was to be victorious during the Second World War?

Vladimir Solonari indicated that the regime’s policy underwent a radicalization after the first year of war that it looked as if the whole concept of gradual expulsion of Jews would be thrown out the window and “all Romanian Jews, not only those residing in the eastern provinces, would be shortly expelled to the east”²⁸. The proofs of this hypothesis reside on various pronouncements when he suggested extending the “purification” measures beyond the eastern provinces to the rest of Romania. Antonescu considered all Jews to be dangerous for the Romanian ethnic body, translating his racial hostility into violent statements such as: “Either we will win, and then the world will be purified, or they will win, and then we will become their slaves. The Satan is Jew”²⁹ or “their (i.e. Bessarabian Jews’) hatred was the hatred of all Jews”³⁰. The leader’s hatred for all the Jewish population was a fact, but his radical approach on deportations and ethnic cleansing was cooled down after growing difficulties on the front and strong protests from various quarters over the negative economic consequences of the abrupt removal of Jews from Moldavia³¹. But this change was only temporary, Antonescu claimed, as the removal of all Jews was postponed until external and internal preconditions for a final successful stroke were available. The “purification” process was part of the Romanianization policy, which consisted in expelling all foreigners from the national economy and their replacement with ethnic Romanians. Antonescu’s instructions from May 7, 1943 reiterated that by the end of the war Romanianization had to be completed “in its totality”³², meaning that foreign ethnicities were to be displaced, deported or even eradicated.

Bibliography:

²⁸ Vladimir Solonari, *Purifying the Nation*, p. 237.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 238.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 238.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 239.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 241.

- Comisia Internațională pentru Studierea Holocaustului în România, *Raport final*, Iași: Polirom, 2004
- Ancel, Jean (ed.), *Documents Concerning the Fate of Romanian Jewry during the Holocaust*, vol. II, Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, New York, 1986.
- Ancel, Jean, *Preludiu la asasinat. Pogromul de la Iasi, 29 iunie 1941*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2005.
- Carp, Matatias, *Cartea neagră. Fapte și documente. Suferința evreilor din România, 1940-1944*, vol. 3, Atelierele Grafice Socec & Co., SAR, București.
- Deletant, Dennis, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally. Ion Antonescu and his Regime*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2006.
- Ioanid, Radu, *Holocaustul din România. Distrugerea evreilor și romilor sub regimul Antonescu 1940-1944*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2019.
- Ioanid, Radu, *Pogromul de la Iasi*, Ed. Institutului National pentru Studierea Holocaustului din Romania „Elie Wiesel”, Polirom, Iași, 2021.
- Solonari, Vladimir, *Imperiul-satelit. Guvernarea românească în Transnistria 1941-1944*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2021.
- Solonari, Vladimir, *Purifying the Nation. Population Exchange and Ethnic Cleansing in Nazi-Allied Romania*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2010.
- Trașcă, Ottmar (ed.), *Chestiunea evreiască în documentele militare române 1941-1944*, Ed. Institutul European, București, 2010.