

The emergence of Holocaust denial and the resurgence of Anti-Semitism in post-war Romania

(Apariția negării Holocaustului și reapariția antisemitismului în România postbelică)

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Rezumat

Între august 1944 și decembrie 1947, România a trecut de la dictatura lui Antonescu la un stat controlat de comuniști. Acest articol explorează situația comunității evreiești în perioada de consolidare a puterii de către forțele comuniste. Mai exact, folosind o varietate de surse, de la documente de arhivă la broșuri publicate în acea perioadă, textul subliniază persistența antisemitismului în țară, atât la bază, cât și la nivel politic. În același timp, articolul analizează atitudinea comuniștilor față de evrei în timpul proceselor criminalilor de război, argumentând că crimele împotriva populației evreiești au fost parțial excluse din narațiunea generală. Mai mult, în timpul proceselor, discursul s-a concentrat pe lupta antifascistă a comuniștilor, victimele evreiești fiind uneori reprezentate ca fiind comuniști sau antifasciști.

Keywords: *anti-Semitism, communism, historical memory, the Holocaust, ideology*

On August 23, 1944, after King Michael overthrew the Antonescu dictatorship, the communists, the socialists, and the traditional parties – the National Peasant Party and the National Liberal Party – took over the government. They broke the alliance with Nazi Germany and started collaborating with the Allied powers and the Soviet Union.

Mihail Sebastian wrote in his journal on August 30, 1944, that he saw Soviet soldiers marching down the main boulevards in Bucharest, “dusty, tired, rather poorly dressed, but ready to conquer the world.”¹ The Romanian population was in the streets, enthusiastic at the sight of the Russians but “looking crossly at the cheering Jews (*jidani*).”² “The demystification of Romania would come when the question of responsibilities would be seriously raised,”³ emphasizes the Jewish writer.

The atmosphere in the country’s capital, after the event that changed not only the fate of Romanian Jewry but of the war as a whole, was of upheaval and hope. Nevertheless, the population was not yet prepared to look in the mirror and acknowledge its own actions during the war, not yet prepared to accept the Jewish community into society.

Anti-Semitism and authorities’ lack of interest in returning the community to its rights hindered the rehabilitation of Jews. As for the issue of accountability for the anti-Jewish actions of the former administration, it was initially brought up during the war criminals’ trials. Romania had the chance to create a shared historical memory concerning the Holocaust, particularly as official discourses, as well as survivors’ stories, dominated the public space during that time. Nevertheless, the Romanian government held the trials between May 1945 and June 1946, a time of political unrest, when Romania was moving from the dictatorship of Ion Antonescu to a Communist government supported by the Soviet Union. (After forming different mixed governments, based on a quasi-pluralist political system, with a clear communist majority especially after 1945, the Romanian Communist Party took total control of the country in December 1947, with the forced abdication of King Michael.)

¹ Mihail Sebastian, *Jurnal, 1935-1944*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2016, p. 560

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

Consequently, the emerging Communist regime used the war criminals' trials to solidify its political legitimacy. They employed a selective narrative about the Holocaust in Transnistria, emphasizing mainly the country's martyrdom during the Second World War. The crimes against the Jewish population were partially excluded from the general narrative. The discourse focused on Communists' anti-fascist struggle, with Jewish victims being sometimes represented as Communists or anti-fascists. Furthermore, a portion of the guilt and responsibility of the former Romanian government during the Holocaust was left out. The politicized framework created throughout the time range made it possible for later revisionist narratives.

In this article, I examine the relationship between the development of the Communist narrative about the Holocaust in Romania between August 23, 1944, and December 30, 1947, and the persistence of anti-Semitism in the country using a variety of primary sources, including booklets and archival records.

The historical memory of the Holocaust during the transition period in Romania

Recent studies portray the historical memory of the Holocaust in Transnistria, which emerged shortly after the war, primarily as state-controlled, politically and ideologically embedded, based on the Soviet metanarrative of downplaying and obliterating the catastrophe and its Jewish victims. In various articles or books' chapters, researchers analyze how the history of the event was presented in historiography and textbooks during the Communist regime, identifying different phases in the development of the official discourse, and emphasizing the intentional and systematic distortion of historical research about Transnistria for 45 years.⁴ Basing their research on publications from the abovementioned period, they argue that there was *a transitional period* up to 1948, when writing about the Holocaust and about Transnistria was possible.

The transition period, common for Eastern European countries before the communist regimes' advent to power, was characterized by a "relative openness" in writing and talking about the Holocaust and the Jewish victims.⁵ In the first years after the Second World War, Romanian authorities permitted the publication of different volumes, including Matatias Carp's *Black Book* or Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu's *Fundamental Problems of Romania*, among others.⁶ At the same time, they impelled and forced a whitewashing of the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the obliteration of Jews' sufferings in *Romanian History for eighth-grade* textbook, for example.⁷ The textbook, published in 1947, became canonical for all history textbooks afterward.

The transition era was a challenging time in terms of politics, economy, and society. The Soviet Army was stationed on Romanian soil. The nation's economy was ruined. Furthermore, the severe drought that dominated 1946 and 1947 contributed to increased prices and hardship.

⁴ Adrian Cioflâncă, "Gramatica disculpării în Istoriografia comunistă. Distorsionarea istoriei Holocaustului în timpul regimului Ceaușescu," in *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie «A. D. Xenopol»*, Nr. XLII, 2005, pp. 627-644; Victor Eskenasy, "The Holocaust in Romanian Historiography: Communist and Neo-Communist Revisionism," in *The Tragedy of Romanian Jewry, Anti-Semitism and the Treatment of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Eastern Europe*, Randolph L. Braham (editor), Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, pp. 173-236; Liviu Rotman, "Memory of the Holocaust in Communist Romania: From Minimization to Oblivion", in *The Holocaust and Romania: History and Contemporary Significance*, Mihail E. Ionescu, Liviu Rotman (editori), Institute for Political Studies of Defense and Military History, "Goldstein Goren" Diaspora Research Center, Tel Aviv University and "Goldstein Goren" Center for Hebrew Studies Universitatea București, București, 2003, pp. 205-217.

⁵ Adrian Cioflâncă, *op. cit.*, p. 632.

⁶ Matatias Carp, *Cartea Neagră. Suferințele evreilor din România 1940 - 1944*, Socec, București, 1946. Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, *Sub trei dictaturi. Problemele de bază ale României*, Editura de Stat, București, 1946.

⁷ Adrian Cioflâncă, *op. cit.*, p. 633.

The Moldova region's cities and villages suffered the most.⁸ The sensitive subject of the Holocaust was methodically ignored, both politically and intellectually, because post-war reconstruction piqued the attention of the whole society.⁹ The historical memory of the Holocaust became "secondary in the general interest".¹⁰

Additionally, the politicians started the exploitation of the Holocaust topic for ideological purposes. For example, the Romanian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference of 1947 employed a selective history of the Holocaust by minimizing Romanian authorities' responsibility for the catastrophe.¹¹ The "historical revision process"¹² that commenced immediately post-war meant the minimalization of Jewish sufferings followed by oblivion, employed mainly by the political spectrum.¹³

Following the Communist regime's consolidation of power, "Romanian historiography entered a glacial period of accentuated ideological de-professionalization,"¹⁴ with the historiography of the Holocaust deliberately "forgotten"¹⁵, "buried in the Orwellian black hole of history."¹⁶

During the transition period, however, overwhelming documentation about the Holocaust, Jewish sufferings in Transnistria, Romanian anti-Semitic tradition, and the country's own involvement in the event were available to historians as well as to the general public. Moreover, not only publications and different archival collections could have shed light on the crimes committed by the Romanian authorities during the Holocaust, but also the war criminals' trials, which were broadly broadcasted, constituted an important source of information for the general public.¹⁷

Building on the abovementioned arguments, I argue that the development of the historical memory of the Holocaust in Transnistria in post-war Romania can be understood only through acknowledging its peculiarities at the local level. A historical event and its subsequent historical memory are created by a complex network of agents and agencies. Thus, local and international actors pushed different narratives into the public space, following their own personal or group interests. Consequently, the Communists used the war criminals' trials to shift the Holocaust narrative to the "noxiousness of Fascism."¹⁸ The Jewish question received little to no coverage compared to topics that incriminated fascism and the far-right former political regimes.¹⁹ Jews found themselves at the center of the Communist Party's

⁸ Constantin Sănătescu, *Jurnalul Generalului Sănătescu*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2006, p. 172.

⁹ Adrian Cioflâncă, *op. cit.*, p. 634

¹⁰ Liviu Rotman, *op. cit.*, p. 205

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 206

¹² The term revisionism used by Liviu Rotman may be understood here as rewriting the history of the war and the responsibility for the crimes committed. A new term, used more often in contemporary research is selective denial, which is a hybrid of outright and deflective denial. Its proponents deny the Holocaust, but only in their own country's specific case. In other words, selective denial acknowledges that the Holocaust occurred elsewhere, but denies any participation of one's compatriots in its perpetration. The term was coined by Michael Shafir in his book *Între negare și trivializare prin comparație: negarea Holocaustului în țările postcomuniste din Europa Centrală și de Est*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2002, pp. 33-47

¹³ Liviu Rotman, *op. cit.*, p. 205

¹⁴ Victor Eskenasy, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 176.

¹⁶ Randolph L. Braham, *Romanian Nationalist and the Holocaust: The Political Exploitation of Unfounded Rescue Accounts*, Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 39

¹⁷ Randolph L. Braham, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

¹⁸ Alexandru Florian, "The Perception of the Holocaust in Historiography and in the Romanian Media", în *Local History, Transnational Memory in the Romanian Holocaust*, Valentina Glăjar, Jeanine Teodorescu (editori), Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011, p. 24.

¹⁹ Alexandru Florian, *op. cit.*, p. 25

power struggle.²⁰ Moreover, the removal of Jewish suffering from the historical memory of the Holocaust was fostered by anti-Semitic occurrences and political ideologies. The Communists' internationalist ideology was merely a slogan, used by the party representatives to cover their anti-Semitic ideas.²¹

Jewish community before August 23, 1944

Understanding how the historical memory of the Holocaust in Transnistria was shaped by the Communist forces during the transition period requires some information about the Romanian Jewish community before August 23, 1944.

According to the 1912 census, 231,038 Jews were living in Romania. The Jewish population grew to 756,930 members, or 4.2 percent of the total Romanian population two decades later, after Romania reconquered Bukovina, Bessarabia, and Transylvania.²² Of them, around half were residents of the recently joined provinces.

As a result of the ethnic shifts that followed World War I, the nationalistic movement intensified in the country, and along with it anti-Semitism emerged. To be more precise, Romania did not have an official, formalized anti-Semitic movement before the First World War. After the regions of Transylvania, Bukovina, and Bessarabia were united with the Old Kingdom, and Greater Romania was established, anti-Semitic organizations became stronger and more violent. From the register of spoken words and sporadic acts of violence, anti-Semitism became a matter of governmental policy and action.

Following the rise to power of the National Christian Party in 1937 under the leadership of A.C. Cuza and Octavian Goga, concepts that had played a crucial role in the political, intellectual, and spiritual discourse of the nineteenth-century campaign for the establishment of an independent Romanian state found their way back into contemporary discourse. The Jewish problem became the main issue on the public agenda.²³ More than that, during the Goga-Cuza government, which ruled from 28 December 1937 to 10 February 1938, anti-Semitism became state policy.

Almost 200,000 Jews lost their civil rights as a result of Decree-law No. 169 of January 22, 1938, for the reassessment of Jewish citizenship.²⁴ All Jews were required to submit their documents "for verification" within 40 days of the citizenship lists being published.²⁵ In addition to losing their political rights, many Jews also lost their property and jobs.

While one-third of the Jewish population was impacted by the revision of citizenship law, King Carol II's royal dictatorship decree regarding the legal status of Jews, from August 8, 1940, rendered all Jews living beyond Romania's borders second-class citizens.

On September 4, 1940, King Carol appointed General Ion Antonescu as prime minister. Antonescu formed a government together with the Iron Guard (that lasted until January 1941). On September 14, 1940, Romania became a National-Legionary State, the leader of the state being General Ion Antonescu, and the Legionary movement being the only recognized party. The first measures taken were the Romanianization, dispossession of the Jews of their rights and property.

²⁰ Valentin Săndulescu (2019) "Like coals under ashes, ready to scorch the earth once more: notes regarding anti-Jewish attitudes in Romania (1944–1947)", *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 26:6, 2019, p. 981

²¹ Liviu Rotman, "Evreii în România comunistă", în *Panorama Comunismului în România*, Liliana Corobca (editor), Editura Polirom, Iași, 2020, p. 442.

²² International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania (ICHR), Final Report, Tuvia Friling, et al. (editors), Editura Polirom, Iași, 2005, p. 20.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁴ Radu Ioanid, *Holocaustul în România*, Editura Institutului Național pentru Studiul Holocaustului în România "Elie Wiesel", Polirom, Iași, 2019, p. 13.

²⁵ Tuvia Friling, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

The anti-Semitic policies of the Christian National Party government, the royal dictatorship, and the National-Legionary state policies prepared the ground for much more serious events that would occur during the war under the Antonescu regime. The latter wanted to eliminate the Jews from Romania through Romanianization, deportation, and, finally, murder.

On June 22, 1941, Romania joined Nazi Germany in the war against the Soviet Union. In June and July 1941, the Romanian Army in cooperation with Einsatzgruppe D, Romanian Gendarmerie, local police and local population killed massive numbers of Bessarabian, Bukovinian and Ukrainian Jews. In the autumn of 1941 and spring of 1942, the Romanian authorities, the allies of Nazi Germany, deported Jews from Bessarabia, Bukovina, Dorohoi, and a small number from Regat (the Old Kingdom) to Transnistria. More than 100 camps were established in Transnistria, a territory between the Bug and Dniester rivers, under the Romanian administration during the war. Jews lived there in terrible conditions, without food, medication, or other necessities. Between 1941 and 1944, between 280,000 and 380,000 Jews died in Transnistria, mostly of starvation, illnesses, or freezing to death in the cold winters.²⁶

Ion Antonescu's regime's anti-Jewish policy was unique in the landscape of the Axis countries.²⁷ On the one hand, the Jews from Bessarabia, Bukovina and the local Ukrainian Jews were deported and exterminated, and on the other hand, those who remained alive were repatriated, starting from December 1943. Some returned to their homes, others settled in different towns or villages, and many immigrated to Palestine. Moreover, Jews from the Old Kingdom, who were supposed to be sent to Belzec, Poland, according to the agreement with Nazi Germany, were not deported. Instead, their emigration to Palestine had been supported.

By the end of the Second World War about 375,000 Jews were still living in Romania. They were mainly Jews from the Old Kingdom that, even if discriminated, expropriated, impoverished, and harassed based on anti-Semitic legislation were not deported to Transnistria or extermination camps in the General Government in German-occupied Poland.

At the institutional level, community organizations were reestablished, respectively the Union of Jewish Communities (FUCE) and the Union of Romanian Jews. The Zionist Party's activities also restarted. In 1945, the Jewish Democratic Committee (CDE) was established by the communists. Under the guise of Jewish unity, CDE was an additional means of controlling and gathering information about the community and its activities.²⁸

The emergence of anti-Semitism in post-war Romania

After August 23, 1944, a new policy of restoring Romanian Jewry rights and freedoms was implemented.²⁹ The high royal decree of August 31, 1944, restored the Constitution of 1923, giving Jews back their citizenship rights and freedom.³⁰ Moreover, the Decree-Law No. 641, which repealed anti-Jewish laws, was passed on December 19, 1944. All limitations, whether legislative, judicial, or administrative, placed by Romania's political regimes between 1938 and 1944 were eliminated as a result of this decree-law.³¹

²⁶ Tuvia Friling, op. cit., p. 388.

²⁷ Andrei Șiperco, *Acțiunea internațională de ajutorare a evreilor din România: documente 1943-1945*, Editura Hasefer, București, 2003, p. 15.

²⁸ Liviu Rotman, *Evreii din România în perioada comunistă, 1944-1965*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2004, p. 73.

²⁹ For more detailed research about Jews' property restitution post-World War II see Stefan Ionescu's forthcoming book *Justice and Restitution in Post-Nazi Romania. Rebuilding Jewish Lives and Communities, 1944-1950*, July 2024 with Cambridge University Press.

³⁰ "Legislația rasială a fostului regim. Pentru lămurirea opiniei publice", *Universul*, Nr. 245, Miercuri, 6 septembrie 1944, p. 4, accesat la 11 decembrie 2023 la adresa <https://adt.arcanum.com/ro/>

³¹ <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/72504>, accesat la 11 decembrie 2023.

When the anti-Semitic laws were overturned, Jews were asked to join the military. This became a huge problem; Jews were afraid to fight alongside anti-Semitic soldiers. Aside from that, Jews asserted that during the four years of the Antonescu dictatorship, they had already sacrificed enough human lives.³² Jewish community leadership managed to avoid the situation; in addition to some volunteers, only Jewish physicians were enlisted.³³ The decision to exempt the Jews from the army only fueled the anti-Semitism already existing in society.

Moreover, the abrogation of the entire anti-Jewish legislation, restoring Jews' jobs and property revived the old Romanian anti-Semitism.³⁴

The most common cause that intensified anti-Jewish feelings among the populace was the accusations of profiteering.³⁵ In a note from the Huși police, for example, the authorities drew attention to the fact that: "the hatred against the Jewish element is increasing day by day, and this is mainly because, while the population suffers from hunger, the Jews do not lack anything, but live much better, as in normal times."³⁶ Jews were blamed for the nation's food scarcity, being accused that the international help sent to Romania was diverted to Palestine.³⁷ Moreover, Jews were accused of having better living conditions, and better jobs. In Oradea, for example, the anti-Semitic current began to stand out day by day, because Jews were accused of penetrating all branches of commerce and industries.³⁸

Old anti-Semitic stereotypes – of the unmotivated Jew who does not want to work, of the ubiquitous Jewish population that rules the nation – were not to be found at the grassroots level only but appropriated by the Communist politicians as well.³⁹ In a meeting from October 5, 1945, the Communist representatives portray the Jews using a plethora of interwar anti-Semitic clichés: the profiteer, the reactionary, the lazy Jew: "Ghizela Vass: (...) I go to the country, I take cattle, I take everything and if they arrest them, I say: "You're just arresting me, whom I was in Transnistria?" and the gendarme lets them go. A comrade told me that it is a purely legionary manifestation and attitude that the Jews use. (...) Elena Stoia: And we know that they always run away from hard work."⁴⁰

Not only the Communists accused Jews of being profiteers. When they reached Iuliu Maniu, the leader of the National Peasant Party, to get help with their post-war rehabilitation, the politician dismissed them by saying that the country had "more important problems than the Jewish one (...)". More than that, Maniu uses anti-Semitic stereotypes while sending them away: "And then, what do you care about? You have always handled money and intelligence."⁴¹ Jews were associated with the communist movement and accused by the non-communist politicians of leading the country to disaster. Prime Minister General Nicolae Rădescu, for example, said, in February 1945, that the "traitors" and Hungarians led Romania to destruction.⁴² The same idea was underlined previously by Constantin Sănătescu in his diary.

³² *Minorități etnoculturale. Mărturii documentare. Evreii din România (1945-1965)*, Andreea Andreescu, Lucian Nastasă și Andreea Varga (editori), Editura CRDE, Cluj, 2003, Document al Prefecturii Poliției Capitalei din 11 ianuarie 1945 legat de evreii și încorporarea Comunicatul Marelui Stat Major, pp. 89-90.

³³ Jean Ancel, "She'erit Hapletah in Romania during the Transition Period to a Communist Regime. August 1944-December 1947" în *She'erit Hapletah, 1944-1948. Rehabilitation and Political Struggle, Proceedings of the Sixth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference, Jerusalem, October 1985*, Yisrael Gutman, Avital Saf (editori), Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1990, pp. 148-149.

³⁴ Jean Ancel, *op. cit.* p. 153.

³⁵ Valentin Săndulescu, *op. cit.*, p. 984.

³⁶ Andreea Andreescu, Lucian Nastasă și Andreea Varga, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

³⁷ Emanuel Copilas, *Integrarea României în sfera de influență sovietică (1944-1947). Perspective internaționale și locale*, Editura Corint, București, 2023, p. 159.

³⁸ Andreea Andreescu, Lucian Nastasă și Andreea Varga, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

³⁹ Liviu Rotman, *Evreii din România...*, p. 165.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 155.

⁴¹ Emil Dorian, *Jurnal 1937-1944*, Editura Hasefer, București, 1996, p. 365.

⁴² Emanuel Copilaș, *op.cit.*, p. 152.

Sănătescu, another former prime minister, emphasized that “Ana Pauker, a Jewish woman”, and “Vasile Luca, a Hungarian man”, who lay at the heart of the Romanian Communist Party, incited the Communist demonstrations causing disorder in the country.⁴³ Represented as pro-Soviet forces that backed the newly established Communist Party, Jews were caught in the political struggle of the transitional period.

The narrative about the Holocaust in Transnistria during the anti-fascist trials

Immediately after changing sides, the Romanian Government started the de-fascization process, according to the Armistice signed on September 12/13, 1944, in Moscow. The Romanian Government and High Command undertook to cooperate with the Allied (Soviet) High Command in arresting and prosecuting persons accused of war crimes and to immediately dissolve all pro-Hitler fascist-type organizations on Romanian territory, whether political, military or paramilitary, as well as any other organizations carrying out hostile propaganda to the United Nations and especially the Soviet Union.⁴⁴

This meant the abrogation of racist and anti-Semitic legislation and the punishment of war criminals. The war criminals' pursuit and arrest were to be realized in *cooperation* with the Soviet Union.⁴⁵ The Romanian authorities took slow steps in the de-fascization process. During the last months of 1944, lists of persons to be arrested were approved,⁴⁶ and only in January 1945, the first law for the pursuit and punishment of war criminals was enacted. According to it, a war criminal was a person who: “subjected prisoners of war to inhumane treatment; ordered or committed acts of cruelty on the population of the territories in which the war was waged; ordered or initiated the establishment of ghettos and internment camps, and deportations, for reasons of political adversity or racial motives; ordered or executed collective or individual repression, as well as those who ordered the displacement and transport of persons, for the obvious purpose of extermination of those transported (...)”⁴⁷

A more complex law for sanctioning those guilty of the country's disaster and war crimes was proposed a few months later, in April 1945.⁴⁸ Broad categories of crimes, including political, military, legal, and propaganda were included. Consequently, culprits of the country's disaster were considered politicians with positions of responsibility from the Antonescu administration, officers or soldiers from the Army and Gendarmerie, commanders and other persons responsible for the Transnistrian camps, civil servants who collaborated with the

⁴³ Constantin Sănătescu, *op.cit.*, p. 181

⁴⁴ Articles 14 and 15 of the Armistice Convention between the Romanian Government and the Governments of the United Nations, August 23, 1944. The document was signed by (ss) LUCRETIU PATRASCANU (ss) G-RAL ADJ. DĂMĂCEANU (ss) BARBU ȘTIRBEY (ss) G. POPP from the Romanian Government and the High Command of Romania. Commissioned by the Governments of the United States of America, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United Kingdom was (Ss) MALINOWSKI. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive, Paris Peace Conference, 1946.

⁴⁵ Virgiliu Țărău, „Instaurarea comunismului în România,” în *Panorama Comunismului în România*, Liliana Corobca (editor), Editura Polirom, Iași, 2020, p. 52

⁴⁶ According to Virgiliu Țărău a first list with suspects to be arrested for war crimes was enacted in October 1944. Later on, more lists appeared, ordered by the Romanian authorities and by the Soviet control members. For more details, see: Virgiliu Țărău, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ Article 1 of the Decree-Law 50 from January 20, 1945, for the punishment of war criminals, published in Monitorul Oficial nr. 17 from January 21, 1945. The law was signed by Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu who was the minister of Justice at that time.

⁴⁸ The law was adjusted and redefined depending on different factors, among others procedural innovations and definitions adopted at the international level, as explained by Andrei Muraru. For a complete list of law's adjustments see his article: Andrei Muraru, “Romanian Political Justice. The Holocaust and the War Criminals' Trials: the Case of Transnistria,” în *Holocaust. Studii și Cercetări*, vol X, nr. 1, București, 2018: 89-187.

regime, as well as those who committed crimes of opinion by spreading ideas of fascist or legionary origin – such as journalists.⁴⁹

Regarding the persons guilty of war crimes, 15 possible classifications were established, of which I mention: “a) they decided to declare or continue the war against the USSR and the United Nations; ... c) subjected prisoners or hostages of war to inhuman treatment; d) ordered or committed acts of terror, cruelty or suppression of the population in the territories where the war was waged; ... e) have ordered or committed collective or individual repression for political persecution or racial reasons against the civilian population.”⁵⁰

As clearly stated in the law, the war criminals were firstly those who promoted fascism, secondly, those who were culpable of aggression against the Soviet Union, and only thirdly those guilty of mass atrocities against individuals based on their political views or race. Historian Mariana Hausleitner stresses that this direction was pushed by the USSR to get war reparation payments from Romania.⁵¹ Nevertheless, war crimes committed for racial purposes were punished together with war crimes for political offenses.⁵²

Following the enactment of the law for the punishment of war criminals, two People’s Tribunals, one in Bucharest and another one in Cluj, were established, opening the way for the ideologization of the de-fascization process.⁵³ The Bucharest Court was intended for individuals who committed crimes in Romania and outside the Romanian border and the Cluj Court was created for people residing in the area. Subsequently, a commission of public prosecutors examined approximately 2,700 cases of war suspects, half of them being later brought to justice by People’s Tribunals.⁵⁴

Ion Antonescu and his close collaborators—ministers and army commanders—were charged in a trial organized by the Bucharest People’s Tribunal, between the 6 and 15 of May 1946.⁵⁵ The trial was called “The Great National Betrayal Trial”. The accused were prosecuted for the country’s disaster (political and economic “crimes”) and war crimes. They were indicted for handing Romania, its economic goods and people into German hands; starting a war of aggression against the peaceful neighboring Soviet Union; transforming the country into a fascist entity after the Nazi model, against its people’s will; losing Northern Transylvania; of robbing the Jewish population during the fascist-militarist government; terrorizing the peasants

⁴⁹ Law 312 from April 12 1945 for the punishment of war criminals. Accessed on May 4th, 2020. <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/36>

⁵⁰ Law 312 from April 12, 1945 for the punishment of war criminals. Accessed on May 4th, 2020. <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/36>

⁵¹ Mariana Hausleitner and Georgi Verbeeck, „Cultural Memory and Legal Responses: Holocaust Denial in Belgium and Romania,” in *Facing the Catastrophe. Jews and Non-Jews in Europe during World War II*, Beate Kosmala and Giorgi Verbeek (editori), Berg Publishing House, Oxford, New York, 2011, p. 238.

⁵² Muraru, “Romanian Political Justice,” p. 130. See Muraru’s articles for a comprehensive analysis of the war criminals’ trials from a judiciary and historical perspective. My approach is of a memory studies scholar with a focus on the way the trials were dispatched for the general public.

⁵³ Virgiliu Țărău, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁵⁴ Two tribunals of this kind were formed immediately post-war, one in Bucharest and one in Cluj. Both were disbanded in 1946. The public prosecutors were appointed by the Minister of Justice Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, many of them being loyal Communist Party members. More about the People Tribunals, public prosecutors, and the trials against war criminals can be found in Marcel-Dumitru Ciucă, *Procesul Mareșalului Antonescu, Documente, vol I-III*, Editura Saeculum, Editura Europa Nova, București, 1995.

⁵⁵ Alongside Ion Antonescu, 23 other members of the former regime were prosecuted. Among them were Mihai Antonescu, Horia Sima, Constantin Pantazi - former Defence minister, Gheorghe Alexianu - former Transnistria’s Governor. The trial was the 16th of its type, but one of the most important for the general audience.

and the workers; and of a barbaric attitude against the civilian population in Romania and Transnistria.⁵⁶

The process was more than a trial against war criminals. As part of the international community's efforts to eradicate fascism, the punishment of the Romanian leaders became a matter of universal justice. For the Romanian public, it was depicted as "the process of Romanian fascism" in order "to break with a shameful past"⁵⁷

Ion Antonescu and his government were represented as the incarnation of fascism. The perpetrators were not depicted as part of a nation or ethnicity but as fascists, dictatorial, a peripheral regime, a handful of Antonescu's slaves, Hitlerites, national traitors, a reactionary fascist clique, people's enemies, and war criminals. Moreover, they were presented as lacking their own ideology or decisions, only subordinating themselves and the country to Hitler's will and directions.⁵⁸

The victims' image was more complex. The Romanian nation turned into the victim per se – "the Romanian people became cannon fodder for Hitler's criminal cause"; "Romania became a German colony"; "the population was robbed"; "the Romanian people suffered the consequences of the criminal adventure of Antonescu's gang."⁵⁹ Paradoxically, Romanian soldiers who fought on the Eastern front and actively participated in the Holocaust, torturing and killing Jews, were included in the victims' category as "Germans' slaves".⁶⁰

Jews were also part of this category, not separately identified, but embedded in the Romanian population victims' group. Additionally, their racial or ethnic origin was sometimes obscured, being classified mainly as communists/anti-fascists individuals.

During the war criminals' trials, several publications on the topic were published by communist-controlled publishing houses. For example, the Patriotic Defense Publishing House published in 1945: *Fascism; The People accuse!* and *Look what the Hitlerites Did (or Look what the War Criminals did)*.⁶¹ The leaflets supported and forced an ideologically embedded historical memory of the events.

In another booklet, published in 1944 by the Central Committee of the Patriotic Defense, the Jews liberated from the camps were depicted as anti-fascist fighters, alongside other communists freed from prisons. The book presents an event that took place on September 10, 1944, in Bucharest, a celebration reunion for "the liberation of the anti-fascist fighters from camps and prisons" and for the fall of the Antonescu regime.⁶² Crowds from the Romanian capital participated, as can be seen in the brochure. Future Communist leaders, such as Chivu Stoica, Vasile Vaida, and Nicolae Ceaușescu, took the floor. Former detainees from Văcărești, Doftana, Caransebeș, and Aiud prisons spoke during the event, alongside freed representatives from camps. Târgu-Jiu and Vapniarka were presented as camps for the anti-fascist fighters. Jack Mendelovici⁶³ spoke on behalf of all former detainees from Transnistria, Vapniarka and

⁵⁶ *Procesul Marii Trădări Naționale. Stenograma Desbaterii de la Tribunalul Poporului asupra Guvernului Antonescu*, Editura Eminescu, București, 1946, pp. 3-4. The book is part of the USHMM collection, Library Call Number: KKR44.A57 P76 1946.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 3, 17.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem* 3, 17, 21.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

⁶⁰ *Idem*.

⁶¹ The Patriotic Defense, publisher of the trials' brochures, was originally a Communist Party-sponsored structure.

⁶² *10 Septembrie la Apărarea Patriotică. Mitingul pentru Primirea Sărbătorească a Luptătorilor Antifasciști Eliberați din Închisori*, Comitetul Central al Apărării Patriotice, București, 1944. The book is part of the USHMM rare books collection, Library Call Number: DR267.Z43 1944

⁶³ Born Itic Mendelovici, Jack Mendelovici, later on known as Jack Podoleanu, was interned between 1941 and 1944 in the Târgu Jiu, Vapniarka, and Grosulovo camps. After the war he became the director of the Romanian Workers Party Publishing House (future Political Publishing House), and later General Director of the General Directorate of Publishing, Book and Press, and Secretary of State for Food in the Dej Government.

Grosulovo. In his speech, however, no mention of the Jews exists.⁶⁴ Only the short caption accompanying his photo says: “Mendelovici Jack, repatriated from Transnistria, Vapniarka camp, where he fought tirelessly for the cause of the *deported Jews* and against the extermination regime to which they were subjected by the Antonescu regime.”⁶⁵

Târgu-Jiu camp was established in 1939 for refugees from Poland. The prison became a place where communist detainees, including future Romanian Communist Party leaders such as Gheorghe-Gheorghiu Dej, were imprisoned. In September 1942, detainees from the Târgu-Jiu camp were deported to Transnistria, more precisely to the Vapniarka camp. Before being transformed into a political camp, Vapniarka was intended for Jewish detainees, survivors of the Odessa massacre, and deportees from Bessarabia and Bukovina. The majority of them died of typhus before September 1942. Vapniarka was, thus, designated a political prisoner camp. How many communists and how many Jews were deported to Vapniarka is an essential point to explain. According to Dennis Deletant, the majority of inmates deported from Târgu-Jiu to Vapniarka were of Jewish origin.⁶⁶ Moreover, in May 1943, from a total of 1.312 detainees, 1.092 were Jews, 198 Christians, and 22 Christians criminals. The ones not convicted of criminal charges were considered communists, Jews or Christians.⁶⁷

In the booklets, whatsoever, the Jewish sufferings and the atrocities against them are presented without a clear Jewish/ethnic identification. For example, in *The Great National Betrayal Trial* book, in a separate subchapter called Deportations, the prosecutors mention the “criminal policy against cohabiting nationalities.”⁶⁸ Moreover, information about Jews deported from Bukovina, Bessarabia and Dorohoi is presented alongside data about deported Poles and Ukrainians.⁶⁹ Additionally, only the Odessa massacre has a separate subchapter in the indictment. The Jews killed in Odessa, though, are presented as communists, people, women, children, and men, but not even once as Jews.⁷⁰

The same approach of integrating the Jewish victims of the Holocaust into the larger victims’ category of peaceful citizens can be depicted in the *The People accuse!* booklet.⁷¹ The brochure offers a short glimpse of the indictment documentation against the first group of war criminals prosecuted in Romania by People’s Tribunals.⁷² In the indictment, five pages are dedicated to the Odessa massacres. The word Jew does not appear even once in the charges regarding Odessa. It is replaced with “peaceful population of the Soviet Union”, people, individuals, women, men, and children.⁷³

The first trial at the People’s Tribunals in Bucharest ended on May 22, 1945. General Nicolae Macici was found guilty of the massacres committed in Odessa in October 1941. It should be noted that on October 22, 1941, an explosion destroyed the Romanian Military Command in Odessa, killing soldiers and civilians. Marshal Antonescu ordered that for every Romanian and German officer killed, 200 communists to be hanged, and for every soldier, 100 communists. What is not explained in the indictment and to the larger public is that the

⁶⁴ *10 Septembrie, ed. cit.*, 31.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁶ Dennis Deletant, *România sub Regimul Comunist*, Fundația Academia Civică, București, 1997, p. 32.

⁶⁷ Romanian Interior Ministry Archive pachet 91, fila 569, p. 445 in Dennis Deletant, *România sub regimul comunist*, p. 32.

⁶⁸ *Procesul Marii Trădări Naționale, op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem.*, p. 42.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem.*, pp. 37-40.

⁷¹ *Poporul acuză*, Editura Apărării Patriotice, București, 1945. The book is part of the former Romanian Jewry Center at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel.

⁷² *Poporul acuză* presents the transcripts of the first trial held at the Bucharest People’s Tribunal. The trial ended on May 22, 1945. Among those tried were General Nicolae Macici, responsible for the Odessa massacre, Constantin Trestioreanu, and Cornel Calotescu, former Bukovina governor.

⁷³ *Poporul acuză, ed. cit.*, pp. 6-11.

“communists” killed by the Romanian army in a series of massacres, by hanging, shooting, burning, etc. were Jews.

Moreover, in the charges against former Bukovina and Transnistria authorities, even if the Jews are mentioned several times with detailed descriptions of the crimes committed against them, the concluding remarks minimize again their ethnic identity: “over 40.000 souls” from Bukovina and North Moldova found their death during the war.⁷⁴

The same pattern is used in the brochure *Look what the Hitlerite did* – a small album containing photographs of atrocities committed during the Bucharest and Iași pogroms, the Odessa massacre and the Transnistrian camps.⁷⁵ The word “Jews” appears only on the page about the Bucharest pogrom, near one of the photos. It is written: “In the Jilava forest, the bodies of several hundred peaceful people, Jews, savagely tortured and then killed.” All other photos represent: “people”, “cadavers”, and “victims” killed by the fascists, by Antonescu, by the Hitlerites”.

Conclusions

Consequently, during the war criminals’ trials, the Romanian authorities in charge pushed a narrative aligned with their ideological, political, and economic interests. Thus, the country’s involvement in the deportations and extermination of Jews in Transnistria was obliterated. The Holocaust was mentioned only in 23% of the indictment and the whole amount of evidence.⁷⁶

Central to the debate was the country’s “national disaster”, emphasized in the laws that proceeded the trials, during the trials themselves, or in the booklets presenting the events for the general public.

The narrative about anti-fascist resistance and Romania’s victimhood was adopted by the authorities. The Communists appropriated Jews’ sufferings, by employing a portrayal of Jews as anti-fascist fighters, by omitting their ethnic identity, to further their ideological and political goals. Thus, Jews’ sufferings were universalized, and their ethnic identity was minimized if not simply forgotten.

This fact is not surprising, taking into account that in the political imagination of the time, Jews were not considered victims, as expressed by Vasile Luca: “It cannot be said that Jews are the exclusive victims of this war.”⁷⁷ “No, it was the whole people; the whole people were the victims of this fascist criminal war.”⁷⁸

The generalized anti-Semitism existent in society as well as at the political level influenced greatly the unfolding of the war criminals’ trials, as well as the entire period of their rehabilitation. On a political level, the communists accused the Jews of Zionism and capitalist goals, while the traditional parties charged the Jews of being communists or communist sympathizers. Jews had almost no power to demand recognition for the crimes committed against them by the Antonescu regime; they were caught in the middle between the two developing political ideologies – the communists and the traditional parties – vying for control of the nation’s government.

Moreover, the Jewish community was impoverished and worn down by the consequences of the anti-Semitic laws during the Holocaust, thus immediately post-war their

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

⁷⁵ *Iată ce au făcut criminalii de războiu*, Editura Apărării Patriotice, București, 1945. The book is part of the former Romanian Jewry Center at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel.

⁷⁶ Tuvia Friling, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

⁷⁷ Andreea Andreescu, Lucian Nastașă și Andreea Varga, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 219 (Ședința resortului central al organizației de masă din 21 februarie 1946 (Comitetul Democratic Evreiesc))

battle remained one of survival. Furthermore, any deviation from the norm would have further exacerbated the anti-Semitic sentiments that reappeared in Romanian society following the war.

These attitudes, at societal and state levels, would further exacerbate during the communist regime. After seizing the power, the communists would start hunting the Zionists. At the same time, the Holocaust topic would become taboo.

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