

# Peasants' Perceptions of Jewish Life in Interwar Bessarabia and how this became Interwoven into the Holocaust

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## *Abstract*

This article analyzes the imagery shared by interwar Bessarabian peasants about their Jewish neighbors and traces the role that this imagery played in determining gentiles' attitudes or behavior during the summer of 1941. It is built on a vast array of sources, including, over three hundred testimonies of Jewish survivors, and archival materials studied at the National Archives of the Republic of Moldova and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. During the start of the war, civilians had brief interregnum allowing them to act on their own, unrestrained by local authorities. At this time, robberies in Jewish towns and villages occurred on an unprecedented scale across the region, with open involvement of numerous groups of civilians; sometimes these robberies were accompanied by assaults and murders. This paper argues that the plunder of Bessarabian Jewry was something more complex than war banditry. For these peasants, the robbery of Jewish goods represented a 'natural' way to balance what they perceived to be an unjust economic and social situation that had lasted too long and which could finally be resolved. During the summer of 1941 the peasants of Bessarabia undertook, on their own initiative and for their own benefit, a mass plunder which had the effect of expropriating property from their Jewish neighbors. Men, women, and even children took part in this "mass operation." The plunder recast the economic topography of Bessarabian society, anticipating the actions of the Romanian state, which joined this process by legally nationalizing all property and assets owned by Jews in Bessarabia on September 4, 1941.

**Keywords:** Interwar Bessarabia, antisemitism, mass violence, the Holocaust

Romania emerged from WWI substantially enlarged both geographically and demographically, gaining the territories of Bessarabia from Russia, Bucovina from Austria, and Transylvania from Hungary. The elites of Greater Romania had a modernization project on their agenda, which aimed specifically to construct a state that would guarantee the flourishing of an ethnically Romanian nation. The role of minorities in this context proved ambiguous. By nationalist design, such people were viewed as disloyal, deemed threatening to the stability of the Romanian state. In Bessarabia, the Russian legacy was felt at every step in the modernization process, especially when dealing with the province's Russified urban elite and bureaucracy. Fixated on preserving its newly acquired lands and



deeply concerned with the danger of a socialist incursion, the Romanian state saw its Jews, and Bessarabian Jews specifically, as its most significant internal threat and treated them accordingly.

In interwar Romania, schools, universities, political parties, state institutions and authorities jointly nurtured antisemitism. Inflammatory public discourse, anti-Jewish legislation, the unofficial ban on Jews holding prominent official positions, and unpunished violence against Jews, all contributed to the further legitimization of society's antisemitism and hardened people's perception of Jews as outsiders. Within Bessarabia, Jews were denigrated as an ethnic group long before the Holocaust began. It was this constant vilification and the exclusion of the Jews from the mental map of the community that prepared gentiles for future physical attacks against Jews, once the Romanian state allied with the Nazis.

Romanian government paid special attention to the creation of a network of strong elementary schools, as a way to culturally integrate Bessarabia into the Old Kingdom, while secondary school education, which had to be paid by pupils' parents, was shaped in part by popular demand.<sup>1</sup> The state opened numerous new schools in rural areas and recruited much of the needed personnel from the Old Kingdom. As early as 1918, teachers who had been conscripted into the Romanian army were demobilized and assigned new teaching posts in Bessarabia. At the same time, many others who were recruited by the Ministry of Education and the military as propagandists, also ended up in Bessarabia in a variety of educational roles, including as primary and secondary school teachers, as school administrators, and substitute teachers.<sup>2</sup>

The spirit of 'Romanianism' that the former "propaganda staff" aimed to cultivate in its pupils frequently meant inculcating xenophobia and antisemitism in parallel. This situation was especially visible in rural areas. Romanian secret police reports admitted that in Bessarabia "especially teachers" promoted the highly antisemitic Cuzist party and its ideology during the interwar years.<sup>3</sup> A striking example can be found in a letter penned by a teacher from a village in southern Bessarabia, who wrote to one of his friends: "You know what is the ultimate goal of the stinky Yids, who polluted our air and poison us with the viper juice that is coming out from their skin... Most dangerous Yids are those from Bessarabia, Bucovina, and Maramureş [all territories acquired by Romania after 1918]... all teachers from the district and anyone who is named Christian hope to

<sup>1</sup> International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, *Final Report*, edited by Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, Mihai E. Ionescu (Iaşi: Polirom, 2005) [Further: ICHR, Final Report], 284.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> ANRM, f. 680, Bessarabian Regional Police Inspectorate, inv. 1, d. 3298, f. 32. The report is dated with April 1927.

approach [the people] to the life-giving balsam which is L.A.N.C. [Cuzist party]"<sup>4</sup> Another teacher, of the village Nadusita, made public his intention to open, for the Cuzist Party, "a cooperative with cheap merchandise, not speculated by the Yids."<sup>5</sup> A Moldovan who grew up in the village of Pepeni remembers that some of the teachers from his elementary school encouraged Moldovan children "to beat up the Yids during school recess."<sup>6</sup> Even if the children did not necessarily follow those teachers' appeals—as the respondent claimed—it nevertheless indicates that militant antisemites held teaching positions in rural Bessarabia, and they did not limit their activities to the realm of politics, but were prepared to share and cultivate similar views among the younger generation of new Romanians.

During the interwar period, like many students from Greater Romania, those from Bessarabia engaged in antisemitic activity, publicly supporting right-wing movements. As early as 1923, Chişinău police reported that "numerous young men from town wear as tie-pins distinctive badges of this antisemite organization," supplied by the leader of the Iron Guard.<sup>7</sup> At times, antisemitic youth stormed the countryside, looking for occasions to vent their hostility. A Moldovan villager from Hogineşti remembered that in the 1930s groups of right-wing students used to arrive in their village moving from one household to another searching for Jews. Fearful for their lives and property, Jewish inhabitants rushed to lock their houses and gates, sometimes even nailing their yards' entryways. Undeterred, the young assailants, armed with truncheons, jumped over gates and entered Jewish houses where they would beat the owners and destroy their property.<sup>8</sup>

Two right-wing parties, the National Christian Defense League (L.A.N.C.), formed in 1923 by Alexandru C. Cuza (hence its party members were frequently called Cuzists), and the Iron Guard, founded in 1927 by Corneliu Codreanu, played a special role throughout the interwar years. Bessarabia proved to be particularly sensitive to the messages carried by right-wing parties. This became evident during the 1937 general elections, when a number of counties voted heavily for the antisemitic parties of the Cuzists and, in much smaller numbers, for the Iron Guard. This was a significant change from the early 1930s, when the majority of the peasantry voted with moderate forces, especially the National Peasant Party. The inability of the NPP to solve the staggering agricultural problems

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, 33

<sup>5</sup> ANRM, f. 2071, inv. 1, d. 340, part II, f. 238

<sup>6</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Record Group 50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Andrei Vulpe (2008).

<sup>7</sup> Viorica Nicolenco, *Extrema dreaptă în Basarabia (1923-1940)* (Chişinău: Editura Civitas, 1999), 45. In March 1923 Codreanu and A. C. Cuza created the anti-Semitic Christian nationalist organization National-Christian Defense League.

<sup>8</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Nicolae Crăciun (2010).



during their time in office (1928-1933) generated much disappointment among Bessarabian peasants, giving right-wing parties an opportunity to take advantage of this frustration.<sup>9</sup>

Every topic traditionally associated with antisemitic movements found representation in the public discourse of the Cuzists and the Iron Guard: Jewish over-population in Romania's cities; Jewish exploitation of the peasantry through alcohol, tobacco, and other vices; Jewish control of the press; the denationalization of Romanian culture; outright service to Romania's enemies, and representation of foreign interests.<sup>10</sup> However, for the Bessarabian peasants, the Cuzists' promise to expropriate Jewish assets for the benefit of Romanians proved to be the most attractive. One secret police report indicates that the Cuzists promised the population "almost impossible things: the cancellation of all debts, confiscation of the properties from Jews, elimination of the Jews from all state jobs."<sup>11</sup> Another police document explains that the enormous popularity of the Cuzists in Bessarabia "is not driven from national sentiment, but by the desire to see a right-wing party at the leadership of the state which will fulfill the promises made propagandistically by the Cuzist party."<sup>12</sup>

Under the permissive eyes of the authorities, regular processions of the Cuzist party become popular festivities in 1930s Bessarabia. Churches hosted rituals sanctifying the party's flag, while the accompanying public speeches of teachers, lawyers, and other public figures attracted huge crowds. For example, in Scăieni, sixteen Cuzist organizations from neighboring villages arrived with their flags and one senator from Bucharest traveled to attend the event.<sup>13</sup> At the sanctification of the Cuzist flag in Dondușeni over 20 flags were brought from nearby villages, as around 1,200-1,500 people, predominantly young men and women, gathered for the event.<sup>14</sup> The blessing of the Cuzist flag in Văsoca attracted 2,000-2,500 people and typical speeches against Jews marked the celebration.<sup>15</sup>

In 1937 the Cuzists received their largest share of the vote in Bessarabia, 21.3 percent, as opposed to 9.15 percent in Romania as a whole.<sup>16</sup> Especially

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Fischer-Galati, "Jew and Peasant in Interwar Romania", *Nationality Papers* 16, no. 2 (1988): 214.

<sup>10</sup> ICHR, *Final Report*, 45

<sup>11</sup> ANRM, f. 680, inv. 1, d. 3817, part I, Informative note of the police office from Orhei district (1937), ff. 2-9.

<sup>12</sup> ANRM, f. 680, inv. 1, d. 3817, part II, f. 387 (verso).

<sup>13</sup> ANRM, f. 2071, inv.1, d. 340, part I, f. 93, Informative note no. 40 (08/02/1936) of the Gendarmerie of Soroca.

<sup>14</sup> ANRM, f. 2071, inv.1, d. 340, part II, f. 325.

<sup>15</sup> ANRM, f. 2071, inv.1, d. 340, part II, ff. 382-84.

<sup>16</sup> See C. Enescu, "Semnificația alegerilor din decembrie 1937 în evoluția politică a neamului ro-

the central and northern parts of Bessarabia, where the Jewish population was concentrated, became Cuzist strongholds.<sup>17</sup> Police confirmed, “antisemitic propaganda ... with the occasion of the elections ... due to the difficult economic situation, significantly captured the rural Christian population,” also announcing that “the enmity is reciprocal between the Christians and Jews.”<sup>18</sup>

The antisemitism of the Iron Guard was of a different type. It blended religiosity with condemnation of politicians' corruption and a mystical rhetoric about the revival of Romania, while also embracing violence as a tool to combat both Jews and “Judaized” Romanians, who allowed the Jewish “takeover” of Romania.<sup>19</sup> The apparently less numerous but more aggressive Iron Guard also found followers among Bessarabians. Like the Cuzists, the Iron Guards staged propaganda tours throughout the region in order to recruit supporters. Traveling on foot in compact and organized groups, dressed in national costumes, and singing patriotic songs, these left an enduring impression on the public.<sup>20</sup> More than seventy years later, two villagers from Hirova still clearly remembered the verses of a song that Iron Guard members used to sing while assembling in their village: “Legionaries, let's have this dance throughout the entire meadow, since we are at home, we are in our country!”<sup>21</sup> In June 1933 a group of Iron Guard members from Galați took a tour of thirteen villages in Bessarabia's south, while another group from Brăila followed an itinerary through other nine Bessarabian villages.<sup>22</sup> Other group members banded together for an eighty-kilometer march from Chișinău to Tighina, afterwards claiming to have encountered “a unanimous nationalistic spirit” among people they met on the way.<sup>23</sup> The Legionaries were

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manesc”, *Sociologie românească*, no. 11–12 (1937): esp. 522, 523, and fig. 5; cited in Solonari, *Purifying the Nation*, 17 note 42.

<sup>17</sup> For example, the Bălți district of Bessarabia led on the country level with 38.10 percent of the votes going to the Cuzists. See Viorica Nicolenco, *Extrema dreaptă în Basarabia (1923-1940)* (Chișinău: Editura Civitas, 1999), 70.

<sup>18</sup> ANRM, f. 2071, Sorokskaya uezdnyaya prefectura i podchinennyye ei pretury i primarii [Soroca district prefecture and its subordinated district administration offices and town halls], inv. 1, d. 162, vol. III, f. 370.

<sup>19</sup> ICHR, *Final Report*, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Some of the Bessarabians interviewed as late as 2010 still remember the songs sung by the Legionaries during those marches. See for example: USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Vasile Cârhană (2010).

<sup>21</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Mihail Roșca (2010); USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Ion Cârhană (2010).

<sup>22</sup> ANRM, f. 680, inv. 1, d. 3640, part I, f. 35. The police reported that these Legionaries were arrested afterwards.

<sup>23</sup> ANRM, f. 680, inv. 1, d. 3639, f. 109. This statement was published in the newspaper *Calendarul* on June 9, 1933.



known for their active involvement in summer work camps, volunteering to rebuild bridges, roads, and churches in various parts of the country.

Documents produced by the security organs reveal their entrenched perception of the Jews as a threat to the Romanian state. Police reports abound with sweeping accusations, such as the one from Cetatea Albă, which states, “they [the Jews] are the enemies of the church and of all Christians, endowed with a boldness that ends in insolence, united in their actions of theft, impertinence, slyness, and corrupting society, they represent a danger for our nation, especially in those regions which border on Soviet Russia and where the Jews prevail as leaders of the state.”<sup>24</sup> Romanian police reports frequently decried “subversive movements in Jewish towns” and accused exclusively “the Jewish population, especially the youth, [of being] infected by communism, [and] being far from harboring good sentiments as citizens towards the Romanian state.”<sup>25</sup> An informational report from Tighina similarly declares that “it was established with certainty that in the majority of discovered cases in our sector the Jews were the ones involved in Communist organizations as propagandists, initiators, and leaders.”<sup>26</sup>

### Peasants’ perceptions of Jews in interwar Bessarabia

In Bessarabia the subject of ‘Jews and communism,’ although a widespread and constant obsession of the interwar Romanian authorities, did not become part of the Bessarabian peasants’ contemporary collective memory. Despite the state’s fixation on this issue, none of Bessarabian gentiles’ recollections made any reference to a possible connection between local Jews and leftist ideology, or between Jews and the Soviet regime. A Moldovan from Codreanca came closest to hinting at such an allegation, stating that the cause of Jewish persecution was that “they [the Jews] were not on this side, nor the other side [meaning Soviet or Romanian authorities, respectively].”<sup>27</sup> Another Moldovan stressed that one “could not ever see a Jew in the war or in the army,” concluding that this meant that “they were a separate nation.”<sup>28</sup>

Economic hardship, especially painful during the global depression of 1929-1932, added to a pre-existing animosity between Jews and gentiles. During this

<sup>24</sup> ANRM, f. 680, Bessarabskii oblastnoi inspektorat politzii [Bessarabia regional police inspectorate], inv. 1, d. 3651, f. 971. The report is dated August 31, 1933.

<sup>25</sup> ANRM, f. 680, Bessarabskii oblastnoi inspektorat politzii, inv. 1, part I, d. 64, ff. 98-101, 150-58. The reports were produced in 1932 and originated in various towns in Bessarabia.

<sup>26</sup> ANRM, f. 680, inv. 1, d. 3817, part II, f. 388. The report is dated March 23, 1937.

<sup>27</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Fiodor Colun (2009).

<sup>28</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Vasile Coțaga (2010).

period, the national income of Romania dropped by 45 percent, while debt per hectare for arable land grew to 6,585 Romanian lei.<sup>29</sup> Peasants' distress was aggravated by the fact that prices for agricultural products fell faster than those for the industrial goods procured by villagers.<sup>30</sup> Many peasants only interacted with the economic market through Jewish buyers, thus the catastrophic drop in prices for agricultural goods provoked anger toward these Jewish traders, who were believed to be robbing peasants.<sup>31</sup>

Most of the gentiles' memories about the interwar years in Bessarabia bring into play their perception of significant economic inequality between Moldovans and Jews.<sup>32</sup> They evoke images of a Jewish population living in comfort, possessing objects of relative luxury or high value, which were completely inaccessible to the Christian population. Moreover, the Jews were perceived as having avoided difficult physical labor, leaving it exclusively to the peasantry, who worked themselves to their bones. These recollections regularly include a comparative dimension, which tends to highlight the qualitative difference between Jewish and Moldovan lifestyles. For example, the Jews were supposed to have eaten chicken, while Moldovans ate cornbread; Jews slumbered on soft pillows, while Moldovans slept on coarse rugs. The Moldovans' statements emphasized that "they [the Jews] were rich, they traded"<sup>33</sup> and that "the Jews had good houses... but we had little houses."<sup>34</sup> They also claimed that "we would not have furniture, or a sofa, but they did...";<sup>35</sup> "they were better dressed, better fed; we were poorer... The Jewish children would bring to school pastries and other goods we had never seen before."<sup>36</sup> Others remembered a romanticized,

<sup>29</sup> Brustein and Ronnkvist, "The Roots of Anti-Semitism," 217; Nicolas Nagy-Talavera, *The Green Shirts and the Others: A History of Fascism in Hungary and Rumania* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1970), 278; Paul A. Shapiro, "Prelude to Dictatorship in Romania: The National Christian Party in Power, December 1937–February 1938", *Canadian–American Slavic Studies* VIII, no 1 (1974): 45–88.

<sup>30</sup> Derek Aldcroft and Steven Morewood, *The European Economy, 1914-2000*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 86.

<sup>31</sup> Brustein and Ronnkvist, "The Roots of Anti-Semitism," 217.

<sup>32</sup> For this analysis we used the collection of more than two hundred audio and video interviews that have been gathered in Moldova since 2006 by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. While the interviewees were primarily questioned as eyewitnesses to murders of local Jews committed by Romanian and German forces, their reflections also provide a glimpse into the interwar period. The respondents were about 80-90 years old at the time of the interviews and lived their entire lives in Bessarabian villages.

<sup>33</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with David Popa (2008).

<sup>34</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Ecaterina Rusu (2008).

<sup>35</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Fevronia Cantemir (2009).

<sup>36</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Andrei Vulpe (2008).



unapproachable Jewish world, such as the Jewish shtetl of Zgurița, which was “beautiful, had electric light,” and where “couples used to stroll along alleys.”<sup>37</sup> Even when mentioning the striking physical beauty of a Jewish person, a peasant Moldovan woman felt compelled to juxtapose the two different lifestyles, in order to explain why Jews have particularly good looks: “The Moldovan works, toils with the hoe... is getting old. While they [the Jews], since their nation does not work [therefore they look good]...”<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, when asked directly about the quality of Jewish-gentile relations, the majority of non-Jews stated that these groups had a “good” relationship.<sup>39</sup> As ubiquitous proof of this good relationship, the interviewees invariably mentioned the fact that Jews were selling their merchandise to the peasants on credit. Almost every single gentile from Bessarabia—of a group of over one hundred respondents—mentioned local peasants buying goods on credit, or borrowing money from Jewish people. For example, one villager recalled, “The Jews and the locals were getting along well, helping each other... Some [peasants] if they were poorer and did not have money, would go to Jews... ‘If you [the peasant] don’t return money to me, I’ll take your produce.’”<sup>40</sup> The borrowing also involved an estimation of a peasant’s paying capacity, and if the lender anticipated that in the fall the peasant will not have a good harvest, then the credit was refused.<sup>41</sup>

Yet one Moldovan interviewee gave a more cynical—and perhaps less censored—answer to the question about the relationship between Jews and gentiles before the war, asserting, “They got along well, since the Yids were cheating and the Moldovans were working... The Moldovan was sewing wheat... the poor Moldovan didn’t have money... he was borrowing money from the Jews... working hard and growing [crops], and later was taking [the harvest] to the Yid and that [Jew] set whatever price he wanted. The Jew cheated him well...”<sup>42</sup> In a similar manner, another peasant contrasted the Jews, who—in his understanding—“were shrewd,” to the Moldovans, who “worked until [they] finished themselves.”<sup>43</sup> These evaluations of Jewish life and gentile-Jewish relationships reveal that many of the Bessarabian gentiles saw their relationship with local Jews as an unequal and unfair one, perceiving a power dynamic such that the gentiles were economically subjugated and disadvantaged.

<sup>37</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Agafia Guțu (2008).

<sup>38</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Parascovia Dodi (2010).

<sup>39</sup> See for example USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interviews with Ecaterina Rusu (2008), Silvestru Băț (2008), David Popa (2008).

<sup>40</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with David Popa (2008).

<sup>41</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Gheorghe Cernițan (2010).

<sup>42</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Vasile Cibotari (2008).

<sup>43</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Petru Roșca (2010).

### Prewar Attacks on Bessarabia's Jewry

Tensions between Jews and gentiles during the interwar period sometimes led to open violence. The Bessarabian Jewish Senator, Leib Zirelson already in 1926 spoke in parliament of "violence against Jews in trains, streets, trams, and synagogues."<sup>44</sup> Rubbed raw by this antisemitic environment, some Jews responded with violence. In 1936 a fight broke out between Jews and Cuzists at the Otaci market after "a young Cuzist leaned over the counter of a Jewish merchant and broke a board." In reference to this event, the police noted the existence of "major tensions in Jewish settlements and conflicts with the Cuzists."<sup>45</sup> Hostility between the locals of Baraboi (strong supporters of the Cuzist party) and Briceva (a Jewish settlement) became a serious cause for concern among authorities in May 1936. Here, in response to the boycott of the Baraboi market by Jewish merchants, the Cuzists turned violent. Several hundred Cuzist paramilitaries, coming from the villages of Baraboi, Frasin, Mihăileni and other places, many in blue uniforms with swastikas and armed with massive clubs, barricaded the roads to the Briceva market and beat those who tried to pass. The Cuzists destroyed the peoples' goods, even stopping peasants who were heading to the fields, and individuals going to see a doctor.<sup>46</sup> In 1939, a Moldovan from Cobălca witnessed a similar incident at a local market. A group of Cuzists arrived on horseback, bearing short, thick truncheons, which they used to brutally attack Jewish traders. The Jews fled, while Christian villagers rushed to steal the goods that the Jews left behind.<sup>47</sup> Cuzists' attacks against Jewish residents were witnessed as well in the villages of Onișcani and Rublenița.<sup>48</sup>

The security forces do not appear to have been eager to protect the Jewish population from such attacks. Typically, the police took little action and sought to blame Jews for the violence perpetrated against them. One police report described the Jews as being "very vindictive against the right [wing] elements, they themselves provoke incidents, which later could be blamed on peaceful elements."<sup>49</sup> Boosted by the officials' condescending attitude toward Jews, antisemites' attacks became ever more audacious and frequent. Physical violence against Jews, intimidation of both Jewish men and women, and the blatant theft of

<sup>44</sup> This incident was reported in: Bessarabia, no. 1220, March 4, 1926; cited in Kopanskii, "The Jews of Bessarabia," 349.

<sup>45</sup> ANRM, f. 2071, inv. 1, d. 340, part II, f. 238.

<sup>46</sup> ANRM, f. 2071, inv. 1, d. 340, part. II, ff. 342-54.

<sup>47</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, audio interview with Ion Vlas (2009).

<sup>48</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, audio interview with Nicolae Batâr (2010); USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, audio interview with Vasile Luța (2010).

<sup>49</sup> ANRM, f. 680, inv. 1, d. 3651, part II, f. 737 (verso). Siguranța report from Tighina, dated June 30, 1930.



goods from Jewish shops, were all reported in a number of Bessarabian villages.<sup>50</sup> These and other such events, coupled with the public discourse and policies of the time, fostered hope among the Bessarabian gentiles that, after the Cuzist party took power, “[we] will break the Jews and all their shops and property will be ours, and then life will be very good.”<sup>51</sup>

### **The Violence: “The Hoe and His Hands were Covered in Blood”**

In June 1941, Romania joined Germany and the other Axis forces in attacking the Soviet Union. In a matter of days the Nazi allies’ troops entered Bessarabia and the Romanian administration reestablished control over this province, which had been lost in the summer of 1940 as a consequence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. The Romanian and German militaries began killing Jews almost immediately in villages and small towns of Bessarabia. The Jews who managed to survive the first wave of atrocities were kept for weeks or months in improvised camps and ghettos. Later approximately 154,000-170,000 Jews from Bessarabia, Bucovina, and Old Romania were transported on foot to Transnistria and imprisoned in camps there until the war’s end.<sup>52</sup>

Available documents demonstrate that in the summer of 1941, in dozens of places within Bessarabia, groups of local peasants participated voluntarily in the carnage directed at Jewish civilians, including the killings of those who were once their neighbors. As it appears from the accounts referring to these incidents of murder, a thin and fragile line separated the mass involvement in pillaging Jewish belongings from acts of violence. Many individuals crossed this line, moving from theft and robbery to deadly outcomes for the Jews in question. Such acts frequently started with crowds of peasants greeting Romanian troops that entered a given village, which was followed by peasants willingly naming Jewish families, pointing out Jewish houses, at times helping with arrests, and then engaging in violent abuse and sometimes murder.

A number of episodes of mass murder point to the fact that some gentiles nurtured a deep and conscious hatred of Jews. The wanton cruelty and barbaric

<sup>50</sup> ANRM, f. 680, inv. 1, d. 3828, f. 183. See the reports of an attack by a group of eleven Legionaries on Jews in the villages of I. G. Duca (Tighina) and Talmaz. We also have an information on Cuzists beating and insulting Jews in the village of Lunga. See: USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Mihail Lazarenco (2009).

<sup>51</sup> This dialogue occurred in 1930. See USHMM, RG-54.003\*48, War Crimes Investigation and Trial Records from the Republic of Moldova, 1944-1955, record of the case of Tanasescu Nicolai Ivanovici, minutes of the interrogation of Tanasescu, May 8, 1944.

<sup>52</sup> International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania (ICHR), *Final Report*, eds. Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, and Mihail E. Ionescu (Iași: Polirom, 2005), 176.

slaughter associated with these murders were the main characteristics of such episodes. Both witnesses and victims described most of these attacks as “pogroms” and thereby likened them to the Jewish experience in nineteenth-century tsarist Russia.<sup>53</sup> Locals’ participation and frenzied behavior, in addition to the arrests and cold-blooded executions committed by the Romanian soldiers, drove witnesses and victims to use this specific term. One such bloodbath took place in Dumbrăveni, a major Jewish settlement in northern Bessarabia. During the Soviet postwar investigations, Tolcinschi, a Jewish survivor of this massacre, stated that, after the arrival of the Romanian army, the local non-Jewish population, assisted by groups of peasants from the neighboring villages of Dubno, Vodeni, and Parcani, “started mass violence against the Jews from Dumbrăveni” and “robbed all the houses, took things, furniture, and cattle, and throughout this pogrom, which went on for several days, beat Jews in a beastly way and also shot [them].”<sup>54</sup> When trying to escape from groups of people hunting down Jews, Tolcinschi bumped into a local Moldovan who was accompanying the Romanian soldiers. “Here he is!” shouted the gentile, and the soldiers’ shots felled Tolcinschi, who managed to survive despite suffering thirty-two wounds during the pogrom.<sup>55</sup>

Additional testimonies confirm the mass participation of neighboring villagers in the Dumbrăveni pogrom and the particular cruelty displayed towards the Jewish population. One victim, an older Jewish woman named Khoka Katz asserted, “the occupants [Romanian military] with the support of the villagers from the neighboring villages massacred the Jewish population from Dumbrăveni.” While some victims were shot during the pogrom, Katz managed to escape and witnessed how “people in civilian clothes, presumably from the villages Dubno [and] Vodeany, started to rob the houses, and the Jews discovered by them in the process were beaten mercilessly and chased into the courtyard of the Russian school [which became a place for temporary confinement].”<sup>56</sup> Further evidence of the crimes committed by local gentiles can be found in the memoirs of Michael Zilbering, who witnessed pogroms in Dumbrăveni and the town of Telenești. He recalls how the villagers “took axes, pitchforks, metal bars and went to kill and rob the Jews.”<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Over time other languages borrowed the word “pogrom” to describe gentiles’ attacks on Jews. In the second half of the twentieth century scholars used the same term to refer to intra-societal violence committed by non-state actors. See Paul Brass, ed., *Riots and Pogroms* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

<sup>54</sup> USHMM, RG-54.003\*14, Record of the case of Gheorghilaș Timofei, pp. 146, 152-53.

<sup>55</sup> USHMM, RG-54.003\*14, Record of the case of Gheorghilaș Timofei, p. 146.

<sup>56</sup> USHMM, RG-54.003\*14, Record of the case of Gheorghilaș Timofei, the testimony of Katz Khoka Rahmilevna (born in 1885), p. 152-153.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Zilbering, *Memoirs* (unpublished manuscript, mailed to Diana Dumitru, 2006), p. 19.



While the brutality and murderous intent clearly lay on the surface of Dumbăveni massacre, it remains difficult to untangle the complex number of motives that drove its local perpetrators. There are indicators suggesting that a mixture of possible economic benefit through Jewish property as well as a previous economic conflict were at play. After the extermination of all of the Jews in Dumbăveni, locals from nearby villages occupied the empty houses. One deposition included in the records of postwar investigations points again towards the scale of the locals' involvement in plundering Jewish property. A peasant who moved into one of these houses confirmed, "When I arrived to reside in Dumbăveni village, the houses did not have any stuff. All stuff was taken by the residents of neighboring villages."<sup>58</sup>

The town of Zgurița became the site of another pogrom where local civilians were intimately involved in mass violence. A victim of this pogrom and a native of Zgurița, recalled how "the Moldovans started to take everything, started to rape, the Moldovans started to beat, the Moldovans chopped off the head of a Jew with a scythe."<sup>59</sup> Another survivor of the Zgurița pogrom was especially troubled with his memory of two local Moldovans who had raped a Jewish teenage girl—who used to be the victim's girlfriend—in front of him and his family.<sup>60</sup> There are also testimonies about groups of peasants equipped with bats and axes, heading to kill Jews in the neighboring village of Valea lui Vlad.<sup>61</sup>

Archival materials reveal that local gentiles initiated attacks on Jewry without the presence of Romanian troops in the villages of Liublin, Săseni, and Ghirovo. The trial files of a participant in the pogrom from Ghirovo, connect the motivation of the 1941 assault with the political environment and xenophobic ideology of the interwar period. In his case, the perpetrator rationalized his participation in the massacre of the local Jewish population on the grounds that "during the whole time [interwar period] the Romanian government educated the population, including myself in the spirit of national hostility and hatred towards the Jewish population."<sup>62</sup> Certainly, we will never know if these were indeed the words of the defendant or if they were added by his NKVD interrogator, but they display sound logic and could lay at the foundation of at least some of the assaults committed by civilians against Jews in 1941.

<sup>58</sup> USHMM, RG-54.003\*14, Record of the case of Gheorghilaș Timofei.

<sup>59</sup> Testimony of Efim Frenkeli, Yad Vashem Archive (YVA), O.3/5638, pp. 2-3, 14.

<sup>60</sup> Joshua Gershman, interviewed by Diana Dumitru, December 2005, Washington D.C.

<sup>61</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, interview with Nicolae Batâr (2010).

<sup>62</sup> USHMM, RG-54.003\*48, Record of the case of Tanasescu (Tănăsescu) Nicolai Ivanovici, minutes of the interrogation of Mateescu Vasilii Stepanovici, May 26, 1944.

A similar factor emerges in analyzing the causes for the violence unleashed in the village of Pepeni. One perpetrator cited hatred and resentment toward Jews as central to his voluntary participation in the mass killings.<sup>63</sup> Another murderer, just twenty-three years old, explained his personal involvement, stating that other villagers “led by example”: “When I approached the building of the town hall, where the Jews were locked up I saw that many of the local residents were killing Jews eagerly. Seeing this I immediately started to kill those Jews who, while trying to escape death, were running, some towards the windows, some towards the doors. I did not care whom I killed, adult or child, man or woman, I was hitting everybody... However, I remember well that then I did not kill any children, but instead I killed more than ten adults.”<sup>64</sup> In other trial documents, the perpetrators did not reflect much on the roots of their hostility toward the Jews.

Given the repulsiveness of the crimes that were committed, one could easily suggest that the perpetrators came from the “margins” of society, being, e.g., criminals.<sup>65</sup> Yet, a careful study of the available personal files from the postwar trial materials depicts Bessarabian perpetrators as quite “ordinary,” when compared to other community members. With some exceptions, these were ethnic Moldovan males predominantly in their thirties, married, and with children. A majority of 54 percent of the defendants were listed as “average” peasants, 17 percent were recorded as poor peasants, 16 percent as comparatively wealthy peasants, and 11 percent were marked as “other.”<sup>66</sup> The recorded level of literacy of defendants was the following: 41 percent literate, 35 % with low literacy levels, 18 percent as illiterate, and in 5 percent of the cases this information is not indicated. As is visible from this data, 70 percent of Bessarabian perpetrators were middle or relatively wealthy peasants, and 41 percent of them were literate. If one takes into account that interwar Bessarabia was known for its deplorable economic situation, agrarian overpopulation, and that only 38.1 percent of Bessarabians were literate in 1930, the group of individuals who took part in the persecution of Jews looks no less poor and no less “cultured” than the rest of the population.<sup>67</sup> In fact, the

<sup>63</sup> USHMM, RG-54.003\*40, Record of the case of Sadovei Ivan, p. 15.

<sup>64</sup> USHMM, RG-54.003\*45, Record of the case of Sokolenko Gheorghii, p. 55.

<sup>65</sup> For example, Vladimir Solonari concludes in his study on civilian violence in 1941 that, in cases of violence against Jews in Bessarabia, “the main villains were peasants who were even poorer and less cultured than other villagers (bedniak, negramotnyi, and malogramotnyi, in Soviet parlance) and, it seems, sometimes widely despised by their fellow villagers.” Solonari, *Patterns of Violence*, 35.

<sup>66</sup> The latter category: “peasant” (without specifying the level of prosperity), “worker,” “working on his farm,” etc.

<sup>67</sup> Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism,*



profile indicated in these NKVD documents suggests that the typical Holocaust perpetrator was quite close to the archetypal Bessarabian from the year 1941.

### **The Plunder: “In Town, Everywhere Feathers Flew...”**

Various sources tend to indicate that peasants were central in the unprecedented wave of robberies of Jewish property in 1941. Both Jewish survivors and non-Jewish witnesses mentioned large numbers of peasants from outlying areas pouring into areas of Jewish residence, by foot or on horse carts, hurrying to participate in the pillaging from the very first days of the war. Peasants mercilessly ransacked Edineț, Florești, Călărași, Mărculești, Zgurița, and many other *shtetls*, carrying away furniture, carpets, clothes, pillows, and any other items they believed to be of value. A Moldovan from Edineț recalled that, after the looting, “in town, everywhere feathers flew.”<sup>68</sup> Many non-Jews, old enough at the time to remember these events but too young to be held accountable, do not make a secret of the mass involvement of local gentiles in the pillage of Jewish property.

One resident of Petrești confirmed that immediately after the arrests of the first Jews began, “the villagers rushed for houses and property.”<sup>69</sup> Vasile Morei revealed that, in the village of Cepeleuți, the houses and possessions of the Jewish population were raided by local peasants, who seemed to be insatiable: “The peasants grabbed! They were going even to Secureni or Briceni [other Bessarabian towns know to be Jewish settlements] to bring Jewish things!”<sup>70</sup> A Ukrainian from Zgurița talked about people from neighboring villages coming to her village with horse carts and emptying Jewish houses, while the Jews were rounded up by Romanian and German soldiers.<sup>71</sup> A twelve-year-old girl from the village of Pârlița, confessed to having rushed together with many other locals to Pârlița-Târg to loot Jewish houses. The locals were taking “everything they could find,” while the girl’s aim was “to take toys.” During one of her two “expeditions,” she stumbled upon a dead body on the doorstep of a house at which her family used to sell milk. She also saw Romanian soldiers taking groups of Jews away to be executed.<sup>72</sup>

Materials from Soviet postwar trials attest to the fact that peasants were widely implicated in the robbery of Jewish homes during the Second World

Nation Building and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930 (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 36.

<sup>68</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Nina Ghilaș (2006).

<sup>69</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, interview with Procopii Tîbîrnac (2008).

<sup>70</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, interview with Vasile Morei (2008).

<sup>71</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, interview with Olena Cucereava (2008).

<sup>72</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, interview with Ecaterina Rusu (2008).

War. For example, these trial documents indicate that a great number of villagers from Făleşti and its surrounding areas, actively sought Jewish possessions at the start of the war. One local perpetrator, arrested after World War II, stated in his deposition: "Almost all Moldovan people who had horses and carts were involved in the robbery and theft, about 5,000 Jews lived in the town and we threw them outside their houses without any bread and clothes, and their property remained at the free-will of fate, and it was stolen."<sup>73</sup>

Documents produced by Romanian authorities corroborate the information about a significant and large-scale involvement of peasants in the plundering of Jews in Bessarabia. A Romanian report reviewing deportations from the Chişinău ghetto, mentioned the inability of military guards to prevent the robbery of columns of Jewish deportees being marched towards Transnistria. The document admitted that "many attempts and many actual robberies against the Jews" took place during the process of deportation and along the deportation routes, and it identified "the peasants and tramps" as perpetrators who, by deploying either threat or force towards the deportees, robbed the Jews' possessions.<sup>74</sup> The same report noted that the looters "smuggled themselves among the convoys and sometimes even by means of direct attacks, stole everything that was in their way."<sup>75</sup> A Romanian lieutenant, in charge of the evacuation of Jews to Transnistria, clearly disgusted by the episodes he witnessed, made a remark about numerous peasants who waited "like vultures" on roads, hoping to steal goods from the deportees.<sup>76</sup>

Physical assaults continued during the entire time Jews were present in Bessarabia, either in camps or during their marches to Transnistria. For some frustrated Bessarabian peasants, it was not enough to take Jewish belongings or to see Jews marched off to Transnistria; they wanted to personally inflict pain on Jews. One villager from Stoicani used a large stick to beat Jewish deportees as they passed through his village. As one non-Jewish witness explained, the offender "did not want anything from them, it was out of spite."<sup>77</sup> Others, overwhelmed by anger, felt that only Jewish lives would be adequate payment for their personal

<sup>73</sup> USHMM, Record Group 54.003\*13, War Crimes Investigation and Trial Records from the Republic of Moldova, 1944-1955, Record of the case of Frăţescu Gheorghii, page numbers not visible, interrogation materials from September 14, 1944.

<sup>74</sup> "Report of the Inquiry," 31, 38.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>76</sup> Radu Ioanid, *Holocaustul în România* [The Holocaust in Romania] (Bucuresti: Hasefer, 2006), 217.

<sup>77</sup> In 1941 the Romanian authorities assigned Efim Sochirca the task of helping Romanian soldiers move a group of Jews to the Vertiujeni camp. He recalled witnessing this episode when on the road near Stoicani (he knew the offender personally). USHMM, RG-50.572, audio interview with Efim Sochircă (2009).



hardship. One conspicuous episode, reported to have taken place in the village of Petreni, reveals such sentiments: as Romanian soldiers arrested local Jews, one village resident approached the group of Jews and grabbed a woman's hand, comparing her palm to his. He called a Romanian soldier over, saying, "Look what kind of palm I have and what palm she has. So, who is the one who works?" The villager tried to convince the soldier to shoot the woman, since her palm did not show signs of hard work.<sup>78</sup> One must assume that local anti-Jewish feelings ran exceptionally high, if a peasant was prepared to demand a Jewish woman's death just because her hands were not as calloused as his.

Vasile Morei reported in an interview that, during the summer of 1941, the Romanian gendarmes requested his help in transporting Jewish deportees to the Edineț camp. At the village Ochiul Alb, the convoy encountered locals carrying massive clubs, waiting for the Jews to pass through. The villagers dragged some Jews out from the convoy, killed them, and stole their belongings. The convoy's Romanian guards did not seem to care, pretending not to notice and displaying an attitude that Morei described as, "You took him—have him!"<sup>79</sup>

Some of the local gentiles invented another means of robbing the deportees. Timofei Cocieru, a Moldovan from Gura Căinari, offered a description, recalling how peasants from his village went to a nearby transit camp to offer transportation services to the Jewish deportees. The Moldovans' real intention was to steal Jewish belongings packed onto their horse carts. One evening a villager named Ivan Istrati proposed that Timofei come with him, saying: "Come with me tonight, and I will dress you." Apparently, the interviewee's father, however, did not let the young man go. The next morning Timofei saw Istrati coming back with his horse cart full with sacks of clothes. That same night, villagers also watched Ivan Istrati's father-in-law bringing home not only belongings, but also a Jewish child. They later saw him throw the child into a nearby lake.<sup>80</sup>

In general, mass thievery started at the Romanians' appearance, but some peasants started plundering Jewish households right after the Soviets' departure and before the Romanians' arrival. This thievery was done in daylight and in a public manner, with no signs of fear of legal liability or public shaming by the community. Margareta Chiorescu, a Moldovan from Cobâlca village, provided a vivid snapshot of this situation. She recalls passing by the house of her Jewish neighbor Șlioma Șor one day and hearing Roza, Șlioma's wife, crying loudly. Margareta and her mother entered the courtyard and saw Roza on the terrace weeping, as a group of villagers plundered her home. Some carried off the wardrobe, others took the

<sup>78</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, interview with Haralambi Fuior (2008).

<sup>79</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, interview with Vasile Morei (2008).

<sup>80</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, video interview with Timofei Cocieru (2009).

remaining furniture, and a woman from the neighborhood stole kitchen utensils. Romanian authority had not yet been established in that village and the army was just passing by on a road adjacent to the village.<sup>81</sup>

This particular type of robbery indicates that rumors traveled fast in Bessarabia and that before eye-witnessing the arrest or execution of local Jews, many Bessarabians understood clearly that this ethnic group was being placed outside the incoming regime's legal protection. For many of these peasants, the robbery of Jewish goods represented a 'natural' way to balance what they perceived to be an unjust economic and social situation that had lasted for too long and which was finally possible to solve. For example, Chilina Carpova, a peasant woman in her forties, expressed this sentiment, as she, with the permission of Romanian soldiers, robbed Jews in the town of Rezina. Snatching a shawl from an old Jewish woman, who was being taken away for execution, Carpova allegedly declared, "Enough of good life for you, now we will live [well], our brothers, the Romanians, are coming!"<sup>82</sup> In another case, a villager from Băcioi, recalled how during the plunder of Jewish property, those villagers who were too overburdened with Jewish goods and could not carry more away, were sharing them with other villagers, saying: "Take and eat, because the Yids ate enough!" The witness herself, then only ten years old, was bringing home sugar in her apron, while her brother and cousin together with a Romanian gendarme on a hill nearby were torturing, and then killed, a Jewish mother and two daughters.<sup>83</sup>

During the summer of 1941 the peasants of Bessarabia undertook, on their own initiative and for their own benefits, a mass plunder with the effect of the expropriation of their Jewish neighbors. Men, women, and even children took part in this mass operation. This plunder recast the economical topography of Bessarabian society, anticipating the actions of the Romanian state, which joined this process by legally nationalizing all property and assets owned by Jews in Bessarabia on September 4, 1941.<sup>84</sup>

### **Ethnic Divide and Resentment as the Ultimate Explanation**

A close analysis of various groups of sources suggests that the Jews and gentiles of Bessarabia, with few exceptions, did not have a shared sense of solidarity when the war broke out. Almost immediately, large numbers of rural peasants

<sup>81</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, audio interview with Margareta Chiorescu (2009).

<sup>82</sup> USHMM, RG-54.003\*42, Record of the case of Serghienko Pavel, testimony of Vieru Evghenia.

<sup>83</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, interview with Parascovia Ionel (2010).

<sup>84</sup> Dennis Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-44* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 107.



hurled themselves at Jewish property, without any visible restraints, or pangs of conscience. Simultaneously, a smaller, but more aggressive group of Bessarabian civilians attacked their Jewish neighbors with brutality.

The ruthlessness displayed by these gentiles can broadly be understood to stem from a widely shared animosity towards Jews, which was especially prominent among the rural population of Bessarabia. This sentiment was cultivated by a long standing anti-Jewish public discourse, which was used to explain many of the social plights and the tense socio-economic environment in interwar Romania. Jews faced the peasantry's hatred on account of the latter's perception of Jewish economic prosperity, which stood as a reminder of their own need. Such popular sentiments, when combined with the militantly antisemitic propaganda of right wing parties and the Romanian intelligentsia of the interwar period, hardened negative and suspicious attitudes toward Jews, making violence more likely when the opportunities arose. Therefore we cannot interpret Bessarabian attitudes simply as a product of economic inequality or as opportunism, as such views developed from a combination of real problems, widespread negative stereotypes of Jews, and the vigorous antisemitic propaganda of the 1930s. For many Bessarabian gentiles, the Jew became the embodiment of the exploiter, a creature who lived in a secluded, cozy world and prospered at the expense of struggling peasants. In these circumstances, the idea of Jewish destruction that later came into view did not appear painful, regrettable, or shameful. And from the summer of 1941 it was also no longer illegal. One could murder Jews on account of personal grudges, covetousness, or, as we have seen, simply because other locals were doing it. Many gentiles committed murder just to get a Jew's coat.

Today we can still identify remnants of the 'interwar mindset' among gentiles born in Bessarabia during that period. This involved the perception of Jews as outsider members of society and becomes particularly visible when non-Jewish witnesses of the Holocaust express semiconscious or subconscious justifications of Jewish deaths. An observation by a resident of the village of Ghirova is evocative of this when he refers to killings he witnessed: "One [Jew] was a [WWI] war veteran and had land. I believe this [Jew] should not be shot."<sup>85</sup> Whether this was a slip of the tongue or a badly phrased expression, it indicates that, in this man's understanding, the Jews who were killed could have been considered guilty of something and deserved their fate. The only Jew who did not deserve such a fate, in his understanding, was the one Jew who had a life experience more similar to the peasant's—working the land and fighting for the state. In a society where the ethnic divide became the norm of the day, cross-human empathy unreasonably succumbed to the national line of empathy.

<sup>85</sup> USHMM, RG-50.572, interview with Gheorghe Cernișan (2010).