

# Tradition, Nationalism and Holocaust Memory: Reassessing Antisemitism in Post-Communist Romania

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## *Abstract*

This article is a re-evaluation of the Holocaust memory in the contemporary Romanian society. It shows that from its inception, Romania's nation-building process went hand in hand with antisemitism. Furthermore, it points out that after 1989 the country's sense of frustration at its communist past managed to obscure the memory of the Holocaust. Despite Romania's government recognition of the country's involvement in the Holocaust (2004), a wholehearted acknowledgement of the issue remains improbable at the general level of Romania's society. A new law to counteract Holocaust denial was adopted in Romania in 2015. However, the country has proved ever since that it has barely come to terms with its historical legacy.\*

**Keywords:** Romanian Holocaust, post-communism, Transnistria, nationalism, antisemitism.

*“When I wrote “Babii Yar”<sup>1</sup> they attacked me for supposedly anti-patriotism, [for the fact] that I did not like the Russian people and concentrated on people of Jewish nationality. You know, despite the nationalities that divide us, we all are, after all, human beings! All religions are based on human brotherhood.”*

Yevgeny Yevtushenko<sup>2</sup>

The end of 2021 marked the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Odessa (22-25 October 1941) and Bogdanovka (21 December 1941) massacres in Transnistria, among many others. A territory occupied and ruled by Romania (1941-1944) during the Second World War, Transnistria was the scene of horrific and inhumane crimes perpetrated during Ion Antonescu's regime in the region. As an ally of Nazi Germany in the war, Romania's antisemitism<sup>3</sup> can be easily explained.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.culture.ru/poems/26226/babii-yar>

<sup>2</sup> Yevgeny Yevtushenko, “V sem'e u menia ne vodilos' oskorbleniia drugikh natsii,” <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-37483445>, accessed February 26, 2022 (author's translation).

<sup>3</sup> By “antisemitism” we understand the “hatred of Jews as a people or of ‘the Jew’ as a concept.”

However, Romanian antisemitism has more complex roots and old history. This irrefutable fact still constitutes a thorny issue within Romania's society and a heated debate even among its educated elites. The reality is both reflected in the public discourse and in the various forms of Romanian Holocaust denial.

The fall of Romania's communist regime took place more than three decades ago. Ever since, the country seems to have embarked on a process of modernization and Europeanization. However, in a hasty attempt to become more "European," Romania's society has drawn a veil over its traumatic past and this legacy makes the country lag behind. Regardless of the two extreme forms of government which the country experienced in the twentieth century, – the extreme-right (fascist<sup>4</sup>) and the communist regimes – the memory of communism prevails as Romania's greatest wound of the last century. Moreover, the memory of Romania's other dark chapter, the extreme-right wing

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According to yadvashem.org, "the term 'antisemitism' was first coined in the late 1870s, subsequently it is used with reference to all types of Jew-hatred – both historical and contemporary. The word himself comes from the idea that Hebrew belongs to the Semitic language family, and thus Jews must be 'Semites.' Many other languages also belong to the Semitic language family, such as Arabic and Amharic, and therefore other cultures could be called 'Semites.' However, there is no such thing as 'Semitism' and no other groups have ever been included in the hatred and prejudice denoted by antisemitism. The word itself is a good example of how, during the late nineteenth century, Jew-haters pretended that their hatred had its basis in scholarly and scientific ideas."

<sup>4</sup> When asserting that Romania had a far-right (fascist) regime, despite the existing debate among various scholars, I rely on R.J. Crampton's analysis of the issue. As Crampton noticed, the difficulty of defining fascism derives from the fact that it lacks a clear-cut ideology, unlike Marxism-Leninism. Accordingly, fascism is much more a phenomenon of action, rather than one of ideas. See: Crampton, *Europa Răsăriteană în secolul al XX-lea...și după* (București: Curtea Veche, 2002), 184; David Renton's theory on fascism concurs with that of Crampton: "fascism should not be understood primarily as an ideology, but as a specific form of a reactionary mass movement," see: Roger Griffin apud David Renton, "The Primacy of Culture," *The Journal of Contemporary History*, no. 1 (2002): 21-43, 6. The term "fascism" derives from Constantin Iordachi and Traian Sandu's approaches in regard to Romania's "legionarism." While Iordachi, who employs Max Weber's theory on charismatic authority, points out that "the Legion exhibited the archetypal genesis, message, structure and political trajectory of a charismatic movement" (Constantin Iordachi, "Charisma, Politics and Violence: The Legion of the 'Archangel Michael' in Inter-war Romania," *Trondheim Studies on East European Cultures and Societies*, no. 15 (2004), 159). Traian Sandu extends these characteristics to a "global phenomenon." Accordingly, Sandu stresses that the legionary movement used to spark euphoria and enthusiasm among Romania's youth in regard to "the accepted leader;" in the wake of the First World War's distress, this type of leader "seemed to have possessed the new truth on nation, which he had promised to profoundly reshape in the name of this national revelation," Traian Sandu, *Istoria Gărzii de Fier. Un fascism românesc* (Chișinău: Cartier, 2019).



regime (1938-1944)<sup>5</sup> is not only reluctantly tackled, – including the history of Romania’s Holocaust – but also obscured by the anti-communist discourse. This is due to the fact that post-communist Romania’s society has employed memory in the most suitable way to reconfigure its present. However, to extrapolate the Russian novelist Lyudmila Ulitskaya’s remark on the gospel, history “is not an icon to kiss, but to study.”<sup>6</sup>

This article is focused neither on Romania’s competing communism-Holocaust narrative, nor on the exhaustive history of country’s two totalitarian chapters.<sup>7</sup> References to Romania’s totalitarian past will be used only to demonstrate how the legacy of history resurfaces in post-communist Romania; such references prove that a country’s relationship with its past is a harbinger of society’s maturation or the opposite. It provides a striking confirmation of Tzvetan Todorov’s proposition that the representation of the past is not only individual identity’s constitutive element; it is a core element of collective identity.<sup>8</sup> To extend the argument even further, I will use one of Ulitskaya’s most heuristic reflections: “Our future depends on the extent to which the lessons of the past are learned, its mistakes are understood, the ways to achieve

<sup>5</sup> In December 1937 Romania held its last general elections before King Carol II dismissed the parliament and then installed dictatorship in February 1938. As Keith Hitchins noted, the elections in 1937 represented a strong competition between democracy and authoritarianism, Keith Hitchins, *România 1866-1947*, trans. George G. Potra and Delia Răzdolescu (București: Humanitas, 2017), 454. The results of the elections produced a terrible blow to Romania’s fragile democracy: it was for the first time in the history of Romania’s parliamentarism when a government lost the elections. Moreover, the extreme-rightists registered significant gains. While the Iron Guard (via its party “Totul pentru Țară”) got 15.58 percent of the votes and 66 seats in the parliament, Goga’s nationalistic and antisemite newly-founded party, obtained 9, 2 percent of the votes and 39 seats. It would not be an exaggeration to state that Romania’s political extremism, officially started with Goga-Cuza government (29 December 1937-10 February 1938), formed on King Carol’s request. While in office, Goga opened the path for Carol’s dictatorship and legalized anti-Semitism. By revising the laws on citizenship, Goga denaturalized a third of Romania’s Jewish minority. On 10 February 1938, King Carol dissolved Goga’s government and replaced it with a “consultative” one led by the patriarch Miron Cristea. Ion Antonescu was included as minister of National Defense.

<sup>6</sup> Ludmila Ulițkaia, *Daniel Stein, traducător*, trans. Gabriela Russo (București: Humanitas, 2011), 214.

<sup>7</sup> To avoid an irrelevant to this article debate in regard to “totalitarian” versus “authoritarian” regime, I need to point out that the term “totalitarian” employed in this context is a rather generic notion. The best approach in the case is Tzvetan Todorov’s perspective on totalitarianism as synonym for “monism.” Briefly, “a totalitarian state is the exact opposite of a democratic state,” Tzvetan Todorov, *Hope and Memory, Reflections on the Twentieth Century* (London: Atlantic Books LTD, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Abuzurile memoriei*, trans. Doina Lică (Timișoara: Amarcord, 1999), 52.

the common goal – the peaceful and meaningful existence of mankind are comprehended.”<sup>9</sup>

In this article I dwell on Romania’s antisemitism in light of country’s departure from communism while trying to embrace more European values. The article’s main undertaking is to point out that Romania has not yet come to terms with its past experiences since society has not undergone the process of acknowledging its history. In an attempt to demonstrate that approaches to antisemitism, – as to other official discourses with social high impact – are molded by the state’s official narratives, the history of Romania’s antisemitism will be scrutinized in light of the Romanian state’s policies towards its Jewish subjects. The nation’s “ideal” – to become a single Romanian people by gathering all historical provinces – developed along with systematic Jews’ discrimination; this issue will be analyzed in the article’s first part. The legalization of antisemitism after the First World War, when Romania united its historical provinces, will be further analyzed in the article’s second section. In the last two parts, I dwell on the Holocaust memory against the backdrop of Romania’s post-communist society and I show how anticommunism and antisemitism have jointly evolved in present-day Romania.

### **Nationalism and Antisemitism in Romania’s Pre-WWI Society**

Isaiah Berlin pointed out that nationalism is an inflamed condition of the national consciousness. However, it may take sometimes a tolerant and peaceful form.<sup>10</sup> In backward societies, exploited or dominated by more powerful nations, it is highly likely for nationalism to appear more “resentful.” Faced with an inferiority complex, these nations tend to invoke the glorious – real or imaginary – past or to hope for one if such past does not exist.<sup>11</sup> The Romanians’ national idea contained the force of a national myth which derived from country’s alert to its neighboring great powers – Turkey, Austria and Russia. That is why the national unity and sovereignty became Romania’s *claim* and *ideal*, as Leon Volovici noted.<sup>12</sup> In moments of their partial achievements – such as the union of Moldova and Wallachia in 1859, or Romania’s independence from the Porte in 1877 – country’s sovereignty and national unity were threatened

<sup>9</sup> Liudmila Ulitskaya, *Chelovek v istorii* (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo AST), 2018, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Lemnul strâmb al omenirii, capitole din istoria ideilor*, trans. Andrei Costea (București: Humanitas, 2021), 308.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 309.

<sup>12</sup> Leon Volovici, *Ideologia naționalistă și «problema evreiască» în România anilor’30*, (București: Humanitas, 1995), 23.



by external intervention. The Romanian people's xenophobia and distrust of external and domestic foreigners stemmed from this reality.<sup>13</sup> It was Romania's unfledged nation that explained the country's dramatic struggle with its ethnic minorities, had remarked Emil Cioran. He had assumed that local xenophobia was a consequence of historical inequality between ethnic Romanians and the minorities groups. Had Romania been a pre-eminent nation, it would have integrated its ethnic groups naturally.<sup>14</sup>

Needless to say, in the nineteenth-century nationalism was a dominant movement. Its occurrence on the present-day Romanian territories marked a new phase in the evolution of Romanian juridical antisemitism. While modern antisemitism,<sup>15</sup> along with nationalism, was a widespread phenomenon in other countries of central and eastern Europe, Romanian antisemitism evolved hand in hand with legal discrimination that precluded the Jews from participating in public life.<sup>16</sup> Although antisemitism is commonly seen as a reaction to Jewish emancipation, Raul Cârstocea points out that in Romania, antisemitism developed as a consequence of the failed emancipation in conjunction with the official discrimination of the Romanian Jews.<sup>17</sup>

The Treaty of Adrianople (1829), which concluded the Russo-Turkish war of 1828-9, allowed Russia to occupy the principalities of Moldova and Wallachia. A large number of Ashkenazi Jews fleeing Galicia and the Russian Empire settled in the two Romanian provinces when foreign trade in the region flourished due to a relative degree of independence from the Ottoman Empire.<sup>18</sup> In 1859 the Jews in both principalities accounted for 135,000 people compared to approximately 22,000 prior to the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> However,

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, 23-24.

<sup>14</sup> Z. Ornea, *Anii treizeci: extrema dreaptă românească*, (București: Cartea Românească, 2015), 108-109.

<sup>15</sup> References to "modern antisemitism" in this article are borrowed from Raul Cârstocea, who dissociates between religiously-inspired anti-Judaism of the Middle Ages and the modern antisemitism typical of the second part of the nineteenth century. As opposed to old antisemitism, its modern version manifested itself as a distinct secular, political and ideological phenomenon.

<sup>16</sup> Raul Cârstocea, "Path to the Holocaust. Fascism and Antisemitism in Interwar Romania," *S:I.M.O.N – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation*, no.1 (2014): 43-53, 44-5.

<sup>17</sup> Idem, "Anti-Semitism in Romania: Historical legacies, Contemporary Challenges," *ECMI Working Paper 81*, 2014, 5.

<sup>18</sup> One of the Treaty's most important clauses was the abolition of the Turkish monopoly on the Romanian principalities' trade. The liberalization of the trade in the region connected the two Romanian countries, via the Danube and the Black Sea, with the rest of the European countries.

<sup>19</sup> Raul Cârstocea, "Uneasy Twins? The Entangled Histories of Jewish Emancipation and Anti-Semitism in Romania and Hungary, 1866-1913," *Slovo*, no. 2 (2009): 64-85, 66.

discriminatory regulations against the Jews were introduced in the Organic Statutes (also the Organic Regulations), legislation imposed by the Russian governor, General Pavel Kisselyov. The most important aspect of the document was that it underlined the foreign definition of the Jews. Seen as vagabonds, economic profiteers and exploiters, the Jews were susceptible to distrust and expulsion. This “official” prototype of the “Jewish nation” as hindrance to Romanian national progress would become an integral part of Romania society’s discourse. As scholars have shown, the anti-Jewish measures of Russian origin would be of paramount importance in the following antisemitic discourse and legal developments.<sup>20</sup> Timothy Snyder demonstrated in a similar context a century later that minorities are the most vulnerable subjects of the state. They are the ones who need the most state protection and law supremacy, as they are the first to suffer in case of anarchy and war.<sup>21</sup> The disenfranchisement and the marginalization of the Jews in Romania tarred them in the eyes of their fellow Romanian citizens.

Requests for the Jews’ emancipation existed though in the Romanian principalities. Such was the case in 1848 during the revolutions in Moldova and Wallachia.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, attempts to gradual emancipation were suggested in December 1863 and January 1865 by prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the ruler of Moldova and Wallachia. However, the number of antisemitic laws and regulations increased until antisemitism reached a state character.<sup>23</sup> With the establishment of the Romanian dynastic house in 1866, new discriminatory laws against the Jews were systematized. Since King Carol refused to emancipate the Jews, the latter became vulnerable economically and politically. The protection of the “national labor force” was made to the detriment of the Jewish ethnic group. Moreover, Romania’s first Constitution adopted in 1866, specified that the Jews continued to be legally identified as “foreigners.” According to Article 7, Romanian citizens could become only the ethnic groups which practiced Christian Orthodoxy. An anti-Jewish campaign was put in practice in the spring of 1867 when Jews from the countryside, but not only, were subject to banishment and even to arbitrary expulsion from the

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Vintage Publishing, 2011), 127.

<sup>22</sup> The Revolutions of 1848 were inspired by the French Revolution which took place in February 1848. The process was liberal and democratic in nature and aimed at removing the old monarchical structures and creating new nation-states. In the Romanian principalities, these revolutions promoted the Romanian nation and the revival of the national consciousness.

<sup>23</sup> Ioanid, *Holocaustul în România* (București: Hasefer, 2006), 22.





country. Such an operation was launched by Ion Brătianu, Romania's Minister of Internal Affairs and a former revolutionary of 1848.<sup>24</sup>

It would not be an exaggeration to state that Romania's concessions to its Jewish population were made due to international pressure when certain political gains were at stake for Romania. In 1878, for instance, at the Congress of Berlin, the recognition of Romania's independence from the Ottoman Porte brought to the fore the status of the Jews. Despite Romania's consent to grant rights to its Jewry, the minor changes to its legislation allowed emancipation based on a cumbersome process which evaluated the requests individually. In 1878 and 1879 Mihail Kogălniceanu (as Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Ion Brătianu (the Minister of Internal Affairs) were depicting the Jews, both in the country and abroad, as Romania's enemies. The new law concerning article 7 of the Constitution gave way to a complicated process of naturalization that hindered the emancipation of the Jews until the end of the First World War. Only 888 Jews who participated in the War of Independence (1877) were granted Romanian citizenship en bloc. Between 1879 and 1911, the Romanian Parliament agreed to naturalize only 189 Jews based on the process of individual requests.<sup>25</sup>

The international pressure and the debate over the Jews' emancipation against the backdrop of Romania's antisemitic society only inflamed the growing nationalistic tendencies in the country. Having obtained independence from the Porte, Romania focused on its new ideal, the union of all Romanian speakers in a national state. In addition to having been seen as alien residents, Jews were perceived as reluctant to integrate and even as friends of Romania's foreign enemies. Entrenched stereotypes portrayed the Jews either as capitalist exploiters to the detriment of ethnic Romanians or as backward poor – Polish and Russian “barbarians.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ion Brătianu, along with other young politicians and intellectuals, took part in the 1848 Wallachian Revolution which aimed to overturn the administration imposed by the Russian Empire's authorities. The revolutionaries in both Moldova and Wallachia requested “the emancipation of the Jews and political rights for any compatriots of other faith.” See: Joseph Kaufmann, “Evrei luptători în Revoluțiunea românilor din anul 1848 sau o pagină din istoria evreilor români,” in *Evreii din România în texte istoriografice. Antologie* (București: Editura Hasefer, 2004), 316; Radu Ioanid pointed out that when Ion Brătianu had become prime-minister, he had introduced a systematic anti-Jewish campaign, see: Ioanid, *Holocaustul în România*, p.23.

<sup>25</sup> Ioanid, *Holocaustul în România*, 24.

<sup>26</sup> As scholars have argued, the great majority of non-Romanian ethnic groups, particularly the Jews, were enterprising and open to competition and risky investments. They were deservedly appreciated as representatives of the Romanian middle class, see: Lucian Năstasă-Kovács, “Premisele discursului antisemit interbelic în mediul universitar românesc.” In *Discurs și violență antisemită în România modernă*, *Revista de istorie a evreilor din România*, Nr. 4-5, edited

Due to Romania's discriminatory legislation, at the end of the nineteenth century the picture of Jews' life inside Romanian society was as follows. The Romanian Jews were forbidden permanent residence in rural areas and could be evicted as vagrants from villages and towns at any time. In rural areas, they were forbidden to own houses, land, vineyards, inns and pubs. In towns, their right to own houses and properties was disputed. The Jews were not allowed to become teachers, pharmacists, state doctors, or railway workers; although they had to perform military service, they could not advance as officers in the army. The sanitary Law of April 1886 and its subsequent amendments stipulated that in order to obtain any position in sanitary services, Romanian citizenship was compulsory. "Foreign" pharmacist assistants were hired provided they could be supervised by a Romanian assistant. While medical care was free of charge for poor Romanians, based on Articles 83 and 84 of the Sanitary Law, the "foreigners" could be cared for only for a fee and were allowed to occupy no more than 10 per cent of the hospital beds.<sup>27</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, poverty, lack of rights, and numerous episodes of antisemitic violence had led to tens of thousands of Jews emigrating. In 1912, Jews made up to 3.3 per cent of the total population. This translated into a number of 240,000 people, most of which were deprived of citizenship.<sup>28</sup> However, the lack of citizenship did not exempt the Jews from the obligation to fight in the First World War.<sup>29</sup> Among the Jewish fighters in the war, 882

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by Adrian Cioflâncă, 206-218 (București: Hasefer, 2020), 209; at the same time, it was typical of the Romanian society to point out the Jews' all pervasive presence to the detriment of ethnic Romanians, see: Lya Benjamin, "Sunt sau nu folositori ovreii Principatelor Române? Analiză istorică a unei broșuri antisemite." In *Discurs și violență antisemită în România modernă, Revista de istorie a evreilor din România*, Nr. 4-5, edited by Adrian Cioflâncă, 206-218 (București: Hasefer 2020), 37; It seems that the influx of the Ashkenazi Jews in Romania was reluctantly accepted by the Romanian elites. Octavian Goga, for instance, had publicly declared that compared to the already existing Jews in Moldova and Wallachia, – which were the Sefardi Jews, "of a fine race" (sic!) – the newcomers from Russia and Poland were "barbarian Jews" with "red face" and "oblique eyes," see: Radu Ioanid, *Holocaustul în România*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, 23-7.

<sup>28</sup> Wolfgang Benz, "România și Holocaustul." In *Holocaustul la periferie. Persecutarea și nimicirea evreilor în Transnistria în 1940-1944*, edited by Wolfgang Benz and Brigitte Mihok (Chișinău: Editura Cartier, 2010), 18.

<sup>29</sup> Lucian Năstasă-Kovács noted that "Jews' self-sacrifice and virtues during the First World War have not been sufficiently highlighted by the historiography of the event, although a century has already passed. They confirmed Jews' indisputable attachment to the homeland that had stubbornly denied them the right to citizenship, but not the one to satisfy the military service and to sacrifice oneself on the "altar of the fatherland." As during the War of Independence (1877-1878) or the Balkan War in 1913, through courage, devotion and the spirit of sacrifice on the front or behind it, the Israelis in Romania dismantled another





were killed, 735 wounded, and 825 decorated.<sup>30</sup> In 1918 Romania was the only country in Europe whose Jewish population did not possess civil rights.<sup>31</sup> All this historical evidence made Hannah Arendt to conclude that “Romania was the most antisemitic country in prewar Europe.”<sup>32</sup>

### **From Greater Romania’s “National Ideal” to the Pinnacle of Antisemitism**

In the context of the First World War, Romania’s “national ideal”<sup>33</sup> was accomplished. However, the newly acquired territories, which Romania saw as its historical lands, (Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transylvania), contained a large number of ethnic groups. The Jews numbered 4 per cent of Romania’s total population, and most of the country’s elites still opposed the Jews’ emancipation. Romania’s prime-minister, Ion I. C. Brătianu, joined the Paris Peace Conference<sup>34</sup> with a ready-made conception about Romania’s position at the conference.<sup>35</sup> Rather than accept the emancipation of Romania’s Jewish minorities, – a precondition imposed by main European leaders at the conference – Brătianu chose to leave the discussions. However, in addition to having made Romania endow its Jewry with civil rights, the League of Nations was to supervise the implementation of the law. Considering the Jews’ image in Romanian society and the country’s national aspirations, such stipulations were perceived as foreign interference in Romania’s domestic affairs and national humiliation.<sup>36</sup>

Prior to the First World War, Romania and the Russian Empire were the only states which had failed to emancipate their Jews.<sup>37</sup> The right to vote, to

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myth, that of their non-involvement in the key-moments of the nation building,” see: Lucian Năstasă-Kovács, “Premisele discursului antisemit interbelic,” 211.

<sup>30</sup> Ioanid, *Holocaustul*, 29.

<sup>31</sup> Benz, “România și Holocaustul,” 18.

<sup>32</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 190.

<sup>33</sup> As Vladimir Solonari pointed out, in the eve of the First World War, the expression the “national ideal” meant the union off all Romanian provinces – seen as ancestral – with the already united Moldavia and Wallachia, Vladimir Solonari, *Purificarea Națiunii: Dislocări forțate de populație și epurări etnice în România lui Ion Antonescu, 1940-1944*, trans. Catalin Dracsineanu (Iași: Polirom, 2015), 31.

<sup>34</sup> The Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920) was the formal meeting chaired by the victorious Allies, – which had defeated the Central Powers – in order to conclude the World War I.

<sup>35</sup> Hitchins, *România*, 323.

<sup>36</sup> For Ion I. C Brătianu’s discourse at the conference, see Ioan Scurtu and Liviu Boar, *Minoritățile naționale din România 1918-1925. Documente* (București: Arhivele Statului din România, 1995), 146-8.

<sup>37</sup> Diana Dumitru, *Vecini în vremuri de restriște. Stat, antisemitism și Holocaust în Basarabia și Transnistria*, trans. Miruna Andriescu (Iași: Polirom, 2019), 70-1.

which Romania finally agreed – and adopted in 1923 in its new Constitution – did not spare the Jews from further discrimination in the interwar period. In the newly-regained territories in particular, Jews were treated with a higher degree of suspicion. Romania's fear of Bolshevism and the fact that ethnic minorities in Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transylvania had been assimilated by the former regimes showed Jews in an inauspicious light. According to the Constitution adopted in 1923, Jews had to prove their "permanent residency" before the First World War I. Since many of them immigrated from the former Russian Empire in the context of the First World War I and the Russian Civil War, 80.000 of Romania's Jewry in 1928 – most of them in Bessarabia – had no citizenship.<sup>38</sup> As opposed to the prewar period, when Romania's aspirations were defined by irredentism, Greater Romania's national discourse promoted rapid national consolidation after the First World War. Like in other countries of central and eastern Europe, integral nationalism became the ideological framework of Romania's interwar politics. This nationalistic consensus which, however, excluded the communist and socialist sympathizers, was also typical of the great majority of the Romanian interwar intelligentsia. Whatever degree nationalism reached among Romania's intellectuals, in crucial moments, the antisemites tipped the scales in their favor.<sup>39</sup> Despite the fact that the Romanian intellectuals' antisemitism had had a long tradition, the new socio-political realities of Greater Romania gave impetus to radicalization. At the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s the country faced a difficult period. It had to put up with economic instability, poor living conditions and, most importantly, an overwhelming ethnic and religious diversity. The new atmosphere proved to be the breeding ground for extreme right political parties and intellectual movements.<sup>40</sup> After the First World War, Romania's population and territory doubled while its ethnic minorities increased fourfold. In 1899 ethnic Romanians accounted for 92.1 percent of the total population, whereas in the interwar period, their number dropped to 71.9 percent. Notwithstanding that Jews were no longer the largest minority group in the country, having been outnumbered by ethnic Hungarians, 70 percent of them lived in the newly-acquired provinces.<sup>41</sup> This meant that Jews were the bearers

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, 71-2.

<sup>39</sup> Irina Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism în România Mare, 1918-1930*, trans. Vlad Russo (București: Humanitas, 1998), 26-7.

<sup>40</sup> Ion Popa, "Miron Cristea, patriarhul Bisericii Ortodoxe Române: influența sa politică și religioasă cu privire la soarta evreilor din România (februarie 1938-martie 1939)." In *Discurs și violență antisemită în România modernă, Revista de istorie a evreilor din România*, Nr. 4-5, edited by Adrian Cioflâncă (București: Hasefer, 2020), 229-30.

<sup>41</sup> Cârstocea, "Anti-Semitism in Romania," 8-9.



of the former imperial legacies and an additional “burden” to Romania’s national project. In Transylvania the Jews were seen as Magyars, since language and not faith distinguished the Austro-Hungarian subjects. Likewise, a part of Jews in Bukovina had been long integrated and spoke German, while the rest of them – Yiddish. The Bessarabian Jews, as inhabitants of the Pale of Settlement, the compulsory area for Jews’ residency inside the Russian Empire, were defined by a high degree of urbanization. Roughly 48 percent of the total Jews in the Pale lived in urban settlements, as opposed to 10 percent of the Gentiles. In 1930, Chişinău was the second largest city in Romania with 117,016 inhabitants, of which 41,405 were Jews. The city had 38 Orthodox churches, compared to 65 synagogues and Jewish houses of prayer. Moreover, the Jews owned the great majority of the commercial, financial and industrial businesses, including three quarters of the factories. Nearly half of the city’s commercial properties had Jewish owners, while across Bessarabia the Jews constituted over 80 percent of the merchants, almost entirely dominating the grain trade.<sup>42</sup> During the same period, Bessarabia’s ethnic Moldovans (the Romanian speakers) had only modest representation in the liberal professions – 17 percent of the doctors, 18.3 percent of the teachers, and only 11 percent of the judges – and lived mainly on the urban outskirts, far from the progressive and cultural life.<sup>43</sup> The fact that ethnic Romanians were less educated and underrepresented as white-collar professionals became conspicuous after Romania incorporated all the new provinces. Urban settlements of the newly acquired territories were brimming with the former dominant ethnic groups, such as the Russians in Bessarabia, the Germans in Bukovina, and the Hungarians in Transylvania; not to mention the ample number of Jews who spoke Yiddish or the language of the previous regime. The Jews were almost equally present in towns and rural areas only in Transylvania and Crişana-Maramureş; in Bessarabia, according to Anton Golopenţia, their number in urban settlements was slightly exceeded by their presence in villages.<sup>44</sup> Greater Romania’s nationalistic discourse, which overtly promoted xenophobia by describing minorities in the new provinces as a threat to state’s unity, exacerbated Romania’s antisemitism. Paradoxically, the Jews were unanimously blamed for their isolation in the Romanian society. They were suspicious of “racial interests,” incompatible with those of the “true” Romanians.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Dumitru, *Vecini*, 50-1.

<sup>43</sup> Alberto Basciani, *Dificila unire, Basarabia și România Mare 1918-1940*, trans. George Doru Ivan and Maria Voicu (Chişinău: Editura Cartier, 2018), 59.

<sup>44</sup> Ornea, *Anii treizeci*, 306.

<sup>45</sup> Dumitru, *Vecini*, 70.

There is little surprise that universities became the breeding ground for antisemitism in Greater Romania, since it was fervently promoted by the country's political and intellectual elites. Despite antisemitism's widespread manifestation across almost all central and eastern Europe of the time, the case of Romania is distinct. As Raul Cârstocea has stressed, the intensity of violence and the official antisemitic discourse, in conjunction with the antisemitic consensus among young intellectuals in the 1930s, made Romania's case so unique and on a par with that of interwar Germany.<sup>46</sup>

Romania's most influential antisemitic ideologue at the end of the XIXth century, Alexandru Cuza, was a senior official at University in Iași. Geography and antisemitism were intrinsically linked in Romania, since the dimension of the Jewish community played a crucial role in Romania's modern antisemitism.<sup>47</sup> Moldova had the largest number of prewar Romania's Jews, and scapegoating them for the Romanians' misfortunes was commonplace among the Romanian elites and the antisemite leaders such as Nicolae Iorga, Alexandru Constantin Cuza and Corneliu Zelea Codreanu.<sup>48</sup> In the context of Greater Romania's cultural revolution, universities, along with overall educational facilities, flourished to unprecedented records. Since such efforts aimed to a certain degree to bridge the gap between Romanians and the rest of minorities in terms of education,<sup>49</sup> they emphasized the inferiority of the former. Owing to their cultural and historical legacies, the Jews had been always better prepared for the market's demands and values. They were also the best represented ethnic minority in Romanian universities. While making up to 16.4 percent of the total students between 1921 and 1933, Jews constituted around 30-40 percent of the students in faculties such as medicine and pharmacy.<sup>50</sup> Hostility towards the Israelites, remarks Lucian Năstasă-Kovács, was promoted and theorized as a core element of Romania's nationalism and dominated the country's spiritual life.<sup>51</sup> The lack of material privileges faced by poor Romanian students added to anti-Jewish animosities.

<sup>46</sup> Cârstocea, "Anti-Semitism in Romania," 9.

<sup>47</sup> Jean Ancel, *Contribuții la istoria României. Problema evreiască 1933-1944. Vol. I.* (București: Hasefer, 2001), 15.

<sup>48</sup> Idem, "Pogromul de la Iași din 20 iunie 1941." In *Holocaustul la periferie. Persecutarea și nimicirea evreilor în Transnistria în 1940-1944*, edited by Wolfgang Benz and Brigitte Mihok. Translated by Cristina Grossu-Chiriac (Chișinău: Editura Cartier, 2010), 49.

<sup>49</sup> Livezeanu apud Andrew Janos, *Cultură și nationalism*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> Cârstocea, "Anti-Semitism in Romania," 10.

<sup>51</sup> Lucian Năstasă-Kovács, "Premisele discursului antisemit interbelic în mediul universitar românesc." In *Discurs și violență antisemită în România modernă, Revista de istorie a evreilor din România*, Nr. 4-5, edited by Adrian Cioflâncă (București: Hasefer, 2020), 209.



Scholars pointed out that in 1935 the idea of a *numerus clausus* – limiting the Jews' access to education – was endorsed by nearly all Romanian parties.<sup>52</sup>

Romania's political life in the interwar period was defined by the confrontation between democracy and authoritarianism, as Keith Hitchins underlined.<sup>53</sup> Apart from the country's traditional parties, other political groups and individuals were against European values, such as urbanism, industry, rationalism and democratic political institutions. The followers of Nichifor Crainic or Nae Ionescu, for example, fostered the nationalistic climate that promoted an authoritarian political line.<sup>54</sup> In 1923, Alexandru Cuza founded the National Christian Union, which evolved into a far-right political party (LANC – the National-Christian Defense League) infused with Nichifor Crainic's theological arguments.<sup>55</sup> Contrary to Cuza's conservative and antisemitic party, a more radicalized faction led by Corneliu Codreanu founded in 1927 the Legion of the Archangel Michael. From 1931, it was renamed the Iron Guard and became a fascist party represented in the Romanian Parliament. According to R.J. Crampton, fascism in Romania bordered on the absurd; its leader had founded the movement as a result of Archangel Michael's alleged visit while Codreanu had been imprisoned. Born out of the Romanian Orthodox Christian tradition to serve God, legionary gatherings would be accompanied by religious hymns and prayers; "national revival!" as Codreanu had asserted, was the movement's supreme aim.<sup>56</sup> The importance of the religious factor dissociated east-European from west-European fascism, according to Crampton.<sup>57</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that Romania implemented three major reforms after the unification: universal male suffrage, the agrarian reform, and the emancipation of its Jewry. The electoral reform meant the insertion of all citizens into Romania's political life, whereas the radical agrarian reform was supposed to guarantee the prosperity of country's long-suffering population. As Traian Sandu noted, against the backdrop of the war, the country's human losses reminded the peasant-soldiers of the debts that the ruling elites had owed them; in the context of the newly-changed realities Romania's peasantry self-

<sup>52</sup> Dumitru, apud Irina Livezeanu, *Vecini*, 73.

<sup>53</sup> Hitchins, *Romania*, 414.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, 415.

<sup>55</sup> A poet, publicist, theologian, and political figure, Nichifor Crainic was, – according to Leon Volovici – the leading voice and main theoretician of the traditionalist movements (known in Romanian as *autohtonism*, *ortodoxism*, and *gândirism*). See: Volovici, *Ideologia naționalistă*, 91.

<sup>56</sup> Crampton, *Europa Răsăriteană*, 189.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, 188.

identified with the source of political legitimacy in their country.<sup>58</sup> A group of people who “felt the same” were building a new culture based on the primacy of nationalism,<sup>59</sup> has remarked Valentin Săndulescu.

Likewise, Romania’s conservative movement “Junimea,” strongly criticized the norms of western liberalism being imposed on country’s different realities: an agrarian country without a middle class and transparent political culture. Their xenophobic stance was very close to Romania’s peasantry and endorsed protectionist nationalism; this message deeply impressed the young Alexandru C. Cuza.<sup>60</sup>

According to Andrei Pippidi, the new radicalized rightists promoted a new type of archaic identity, opposed to the secular state and the social stratum representing old nationalism. It was a new social cleavage between the former period, in which Romania’s nationalism had been promoted by the country’s educated middle class, and the Iron Guard’s moment of power. Uprooted from their rural universe and endowed with political leverage, the legionaries translated their economic and cultural frustrations into a national message. The claim that throughout history the Romanians had been sacrificed despite their general excellence was a typical inferiority complex transferred from a class to a whole people.<sup>61</sup>

Another antisemitic movement – highly reputable since it promoted Romania’s national revival – was linked with the Transylvanian poet Octavian Goga. From 1932 Goga led the National-Christian Party.<sup>62</sup> During his short-term premiership (1937-1938) Romania renounced its parliamentary system and became politically close to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. In the context of increasing political instability, financial crisis, and the soaring threat of the legionary movement, in 1937 Goga was commissioned by King Carol II to form a new government, although the National Christian Party had obtained only 9.2 percent of the votes.<sup>63</sup> The 44 days period paved the way not only for Carol’s dictatorship but also for the legalized antisemitism. Goga’s antisemitic laws

<sup>58</sup> Sandu, *Istoria Gărzii de Fier*, 35.

<sup>59</sup> Valentin Săndulescu, “‘Taming the Spirit’: Notes on the Shaping of the Legionary ‘New Man.’” In *Vers un profile convergent des fascismes? «Nouveau Consensus» et Religion Politique en Europe Centrale, Cahiers de la Nouvelle Europe*, N°12, 2010, edited by Valentin Săndulescu, 208.

<sup>60</sup> Sandu, *Istoria Gărzii de Fier*, 36-7.

<sup>61</sup> Andrei Pippidi, *Despre statui și morminte* (Iași: Polirom, 2000), 220.

<sup>62</sup> On 10 April 1932, Octavian Goga founded the National Agrarian Party (by separating from Marshal Averescu’s Party of the People). In July 1935, Goga’s Party joined Cuza’s National-Christian Defense League and established the National-Christian Party.

<sup>63</sup> Hitchins, *România*, 455.





rendered *heimatlosen* half of Romania's Jewry.<sup>64</sup> His efforts to gain the support of the Iron Guard's electorate by intensifying the antisemitic measures, only strengthened the Iron Guard. Moreover, his cabinet ruined Romania's economy and the country's relationship with Europe and the League of Nations. In the wake of Romania's territorial losses and General Ion Antonescu's rise to power in 1940, the Jews' tragedy would unfold into what we currently know as the Holocaust.

The role of the political elites, but especially of the Romanian intellectuals in changing Romania's antisemitic character was paramount. As Jean Ancel pointed out, the latter constituted the chain between the boorish antisemites at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the modern learned Romanians that possessed a broad occidental education.<sup>65</sup> It was particularly that type of intellectuals that readapted Romania's traditional Judeophobia to the rising European fascist ideology, yet also to Greater Romania's new realities. Ancel remarked in addition that the antisemitic apologists were not necessarily the Iron Guard's sympathizers. They included prominent writers who became antisemites in their old age (Ion Alexandru Brătescu-Voinești); brilliant young intellectuals who despite having displayed rightist affinities, could not be labelled as antisemites (Mircea Eliade and Emil Cioran); literary critics and right-wing ideologues (Nicolae Roșu and Nicolae Davidescu); original thinkers (Nae Ionescu) and notable journalists (Pamfil Șeicaru), among many others.<sup>66</sup>

For the great majority of interwar Romania's elites the "national ideal" meant not only rapid modernization, but also the eradication of Romania's social and economic asymmetries concerning its minorities. The fact that ethnic Romanians were underrepresented in almost all spheres of life could have suggested Romanians' inability to catch up with their more advanced neighbors. Even Romania's most tolerant and humanist politicians, such as Iuliu Maniu, believed that the Romanian nation possessed "special rights" on the Romanian territory. Compared to Romanians, the ethnic minorities were seen as "islands" of different peoples on the "autochthonous national body"; their "fatherlands" were elsewhere and their presence on Romania's national territory was the result of "infiltration."<sup>67</sup>

When it was created, Greater Romania had to give in to international democracy's pressure. However, the general consensus was that the state belonged to ethnic Romanians. Romania's government mission was to voice

<sup>64</sup> Benz, *România and the Holocaust*, 19-20.

<sup>65</sup> Ancel, *Contribuții la istoria României*, 130.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, 131.

<sup>67</sup> Solonari, *Purificarea națiunii*, 40.

the nation's interests, and not those of the country's minorities. The great majority of Romania's elites had a shared vision on how the Romanian nation was linked to its "state" (*stat*) and "country" (*țară*). Vladimir Solonari's example is highly illustrative of this reality. In May 1944, George Călinescu, Romania's reputable literary critic, historian and a member of the Romanian Academy met Ioan Hudița, a remarkable member of the National Peasants' Party. Călinescu confessed that regardless of his contempt for Hitler, he admired the latter's national purification methods; likewise, he would have applied similar measures for Romania's foreigners who had become Romanian citizens. Namely, only after having formed roots in the national body – after three generations – could they achieve political rights. Hudița noted in his diary that Călinescu's ideas made a good impression on him.<sup>68</sup>

This representation of the Romanian nation in medical terms, stressed Marius Turda, eroded the nation's cultural and historical definition. Dominated by its new biological vision, the "Romanian race" became anxious about not being swallowed by internal or external "foreigners."<sup>69</sup> The fear of the neighboring countries and of its ethnic minorities sealed Romania's following political actions and its role in the Holocaust.

### **Holocaust Memory in the Post-Communist Romanian Society**

So far, the exact number of Romania's Holocaust victims remains disputed. However, the crux of the issue is that Antonescu's regime "killed the highest number of Jews in Europe after Nazi Germany; Romania was not merely a Nazi ally, it was the most important ally and was involved on a significant scale – compared to other Nazi allies – in the plan to exterminate the Jewish population in Europe."<sup>70</sup> Raul Hilberg argued that with the exception of Germany, no country had operated so massively the Jews' massacre; Romania's case stands out not only for the swift actions against its Jews, but also for the extent of brutality that defined these actions.<sup>71</sup> The cruelty of

<sup>68</sup> Ibidem, 306.

<sup>69</sup> Marius Turda, "Rasă, eugenie și naționalism în România anilor '40 ai secolului al XX-lea." In *Holocaustul la periferie. Persecutarea și nimicirea evreilor în Transnistria în 1940-1944*, edited by Wolfgang Benz, Brigitte Mihok, trans. Cristina Grossu-Chiriac (Chișinău: Cartier, 2010), 252.

<sup>70</sup> The statement belongs to Alexandru Muraru, the Romanian government's adviser on antisemitism, <https://www.rferl.org/a/romania-anti-semitism-role-holocaust/31259818.html>, accessed 28 February, 2022.

<sup>71</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Exterminarea evreilor din Europa*, Vol. I, trans. Dina Georgescu (București: Hasefer, 1997), 668.



Romanians against the Jews had impressed even Hitler, who recommended it to the Nazi officials.<sup>72</sup> The employment of the above-cited conclusions in this article is not accidental. They aim to point out the inconceivable tragedy of the Romanian Holocaust in contrast to post-communist Romania's meagre efforts to acknowledge it.

Despite historical evidence, the Romanian Holocaust still represents a thorny issue in present-day Romania, and this reality is highly related to country's failure to accommodate its past. The totalitarian experiences – the extreme-right wing regime (1938-1944) and the communist regime (1948-1989) – still overshadow the post-communist Romanian political and memorial landscape. While the Romanian state has tried to tackle the traumatic past through measures aimed at documenting and condemning the “criminal communist dictatorship,” – the Wiesel Report (2004) and the Tismăneanu Commission (2006) – Romanian society has been more reluctant to put in practice such condemnation.

The collapse of communism gave way to a massive reconsideration of the past and a need to glorify (and overestimate) it in order to refill the country's political void. For the country's new restorers, post-communist Romania's “national centrism” was a handy tool to manipulate.<sup>73</sup> Myths, rather than historical facts, were employed in “demonstrating” various qualities typical of the Romanian nation, – kindness and tolerance, in an attempt to intertwine the national history with Christian Orthodoxy, for example. These “national virtues” were usually personified by historical figures and political leaders of Romania's bygone times, such as Ștefan cel Mare, Mihai Viteazul, and Avram Iancu. Regarding Romania's post-1989 “national” approach, Lucian Boia remarked that “each political orientation cultivates their own heroes.”<sup>74</sup> While resurging post-communist nationalism was obscuring the historical evidence, at the same time, it continued the nationalistic discourse that existed prior to 1989. It is important to bear in mind that the image of the past was manipulated under communism so that it could best serve the regime. Dennis Deletant demonstrated how Romanian historiography was “molded” through certain strategies concerning Romania's participation in the Second World

<sup>72</sup> Solonari, *Purificarea națiunii*, 219; Armin Heinen, *România, Holocaustul și logica violenței*, trans. Ioana Rostoș (Iași: Editura Universității „Alexandru-Ioan Cuza”, 2011), 95.

<sup>73</sup> William Totok, “Cultul lui Antonescu și reabilitarea criminalilor de război.” In *Holocaustul la periferie. Persecutarea și nimicirea evreilor în Transnistria în 1940-1944*, 299-319, edited by Wolfgang Benz, Brigitte Mihok, trans. Cristina Grossu-Chiriac (Chișinău: Cartier, 2010), 299.

<sup>74</sup> Lucian Boia, *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească* (București: Humanitas, 2005), 369.

War. Transnistria's occupation (1941-1944)<sup>75</sup> was justified by comparing the Romanian regime with Nazi Germany's more terrifying rule in other Soviet territories. Likewise, the omission was employed to exaggerate the Communist Party's role in the Act of 23 August 1944<sup>76</sup> and Romania's contribution to the war against Germany. The third strategy relied on scapegoating Germany and singling out Romania as a victim.<sup>77</sup>

Given the Romanian post-communist relationship with its uncomfortable past, old historical stereotypes have been inherited and flourished, and still define the country's antisemitic discourse. Deletant's third remark on communist Romania's strategy to sweeten the pill of its history would best fit into what Michael Shafir terms as "deflective negationism." Shafir argues in one of his seminal works on post-communist antisemitism that deflective denial does not simply reject the Holocaust. Compared to other forms of denial, it either redirects the blame towards the members of other nations, or minimizes the participation of its nation by reducing it to trifling manifestations. Shafir also emphasized that deflective negationism means externalizing the blame and that Romania's antisemitism has always been defined by scapegoating.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Transnistria, known also as Transnistria Governorate (Governământul Transnistriei) was a Romanian-administered territory between the Rivers Dniester and Southern Bug. It was conquered by Axis Powers from the Soviet Union during the Second World War and occupied from 19 August 1941 to 29 January 1944. Not being part of the Romanian territory, Transnistria was used as killing field for Jews' extermination. Compared to Nazi Germany's concentration and extermination camps, life in Transnistria was horrendous due to the Romanians' arbitrariness, viciousness and rampant corruption. Some specialists estimate the number of Transnistria's victims between 105,000 and 120,000, see: Viorel Achim, "Deportarea evreilor în Transnistria în contextul politicii demografice a guvernului Antonescu," In *Holocaustul la periferie Persecutarea și nimicirea evreilor în Transnistria în 1940-1944*, edited by Wolfgang Benz and Brigitte Mihok, trans. Cristina Grossu-Chiriac (Chișinău: Cartier, 2010), 243. According to other scholars, the figures were much bigger. Raul Hilberg argued that the Romanians killed 150,000 Jews only in Odessa and Goltia regions (Hilberg, *Exterminarea evreilor din Europa*, Vol. I, 668); Jean Ancel showed that the number was no smaller than 310,000 (Jean Ancel, *Transnistria*, Volumul III (București: Editura Atlas, 1998, 301); based on Radu Ioanid's accounts, more than 300,000 Jews perished in Transnistria (Ioanid, *Holocaustul în România*, 285); whereas Marcu Rozen approximates the total number of the victims to 270,000 (Ioanid, *Holocaustul în România*, 285).

<sup>76</sup> Known also as Romanian coup d'état, the Act of 23 August 1944 was led by King Mihai of Romania, who removed the government of Ion Antonescu. With the support of the Romanian Communist Party, the Social Democratic Party, the National Liberal Party, and the National Peasants' Party, the King organized the coup and obtained ceasefire with the Soviet Red Army. The Act was seen as Romania's turning point in the war.

<sup>77</sup> Dennis Deletant, *Aliatul uitat al lui Hitler*, trans. Delia Răzdolescu (București: Humanitas, 2008), 278.

<sup>78</sup> Michael Shafir, *Între negare și trivializare prin comparație. Negarea Holocaustului în țările postcomuniste din Europa Centrală și de Est* (Iași: Polirom, 2002), 49.



According to Lucian Boia, the “foreigner” is endowed in the Romanian mentality with strong features of otherness;<sup>79</sup> under communism the Romanian-foreigner opposition deepened. Communist propaganda and Romanian population’s despondency jointly contributed to a general obsession about everything that was “foreign.” When communism collapsed and Romania broke its isolation, society became more vulnerable and frustrated. Poverty and seclusion widened the gap between “east” and “west” and intensified Romania’s inferiority complex. Not to mention that the outside foreigners were doubled by its “internal” ones. Lucian Boia has rightly noted that Romania did not know to assimilate, or at least, integrate its minorities. A non-Romanian ethnic was perceived as a foreigner before being seen as a member of the Romanian nation and a Romanian citizen.<sup>80</sup> This reality was particularly highlighted in the context of Greater Romania’s cultural nationalization, as earlier shown in this article. Greater Romania’s attitude towards its newly-acquired provinces and Romania’s policies concerning its eastern territories after 1940 are intrinsically linked. There is a widespread consensus among most historians showing Romania’s mismanagement of Transylvania, Bukovina, and Bessarabia after 1918,<sup>81</sup> not to mention Bucharest’s distrust and arrogance concerning Bessarabia’s population.<sup>82</sup> In the wake of Romania’s crisis and territorial losses in 1940, the existing Romanian outlooks on its eastern provinces played a great role in Antonescu’s attempt to transform Bukovina and Bessarabia into “model” provinces for the rest of Romania. Mihai Antonescu explained that the two provinces “had to be experiment cells on which to build a new economic and administrative order, to be later exported to the rest of the country.”<sup>83</sup> It is important to bear in mind that Bessarabia’s and Bukovina’s “purification”

<sup>79</sup> Lucian Boia, *România. Țara de frontieră a Europei* (București: Humanitas, 2005), 206.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*, 206-7.

<sup>81</sup> Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism*; Hitchens, *România*; Basciani, *Dificila Unire*, 158-60, 166-7.

<sup>82</sup> Ion Țurcanu, *Sfatul Țării. Istoria zbuclumată a unei importante instituții politice basarabene din anii 1917-1918* (Chișinău: Editura ARC, 2018), 193; Basciani, *Dificila Unire*, 108; Alexandru Marghiloman, “Note politice (extrase) de la Iași la Chișinău pentru izbânda Unirii Basarabiei cu România-mumă.” In *Unirea Basarabiei cu România-Mumă 27 martie 1918*, edited by Stelian Neagoe (București: Editura ISPRI, 2018), 17-8; Michael Shafir pointed out that Bessarabia had been treated by the Romanian authorities as a colony, rather than a historical province. Anti-Romanian feelings were widespread in Bessarabia; among the supposedly Jews humiliating the Romanian Army in 1940 were also ethnic Romanians, Ukrainians – most of them communists. The argument that Antonescu punished the Jews for their anti-Romanian crimes is groundless (Shafir, *Între negare și trivializare prin comparație*, 77-8).

<sup>83</sup> Solonari, *Purificarea națiunii*, 151.

through Jews' mass assassination and violent deportations at the beginning of the Second World War, was essential to and perfectly fit into the view of the two "models."<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, Romania's approach to its "foreigners" has an extended dimension, which still plays an important role in keeping antisemitism alive. While the regained Bessarabia and Bukovina in 1941 were seen as Romanian territories, the Jews on their soil were not seen as Romanian citizens. Legally speaking, the great majority of the Romanian Jews lost their citizenship in 1940 due to Romania's antisemitic legislation. At the same time, since the Holocaust did not happen in "Romania proper," it might lead to the conclusion that in Romania the Holocaust did not happen at all. Raul Cârstocea has noted that

"not only temporal distance but also spatial considerations came into play: as most of the crimes committed during the Holocaust by the Romanian administration [...] took place in areas that are currently outside the borders of contemporary Romania, most of the population living within Romania proper would not have been directly exposed to them."<sup>85</sup>

Likewise, deflective and selective forms of Romania's Holocaust denial are based on the widespread statement that Romania was the only country in the Nazi Germany's sphere of influence where the Final Solution was not implemented;<sup>86</sup> a similar and common "argument" is Antonescu's refusal to deport the Old Kingdom's Jews. Such limp reasoning challenges first of all the historical evidence. It has been demonstrated that Antonescu's hesitance to apply the Final Solution in Romania was opportunistic; it was the fear of war's evolution that made the Romanian government keep its hands "clean."<sup>87</sup> Additional Romanian-German disputes over economic and ethnic issues in Transnistria had also an important role; not to mention that already in August 1942 Romania's war enthusiasm was on the wane,<sup>88</sup> and the Jewish leaders

<sup>84</sup> Vladimir Solonari, *Imperiul-satelit. Guvernarea românească în Transnistria*, trans. Andrei Pogăciaș (București: Humanitas, 2021), 139.

<sup>85</sup> Raul Cârstocea, "Between Europeanisation and Local Legacies: Holocaust Memory and Contemporary Anti-Semitism in Romania," *East European Politics and Societies: and Cultures*, 2 (2021), 313-335, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325420906201>, 318.

<sup>86</sup> *Raport final / Comisia Internațională pentru Studiarea Holocaustului în România*, edited by Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, Mihail E. Ionescu (Iași: Polirom, 2004), 350.

<sup>87</sup> Benz, *România and the Holocaust*, 23; Vladimir Solonari stressed that while the Romanian officials had seen the Jews' deportations as a theoretical future plan, the Germans had perceived it as an immediate action. The extermination camp in Belzec, near Lublin, had been specially expanded by the Germans to amass the Romanian Jews (Solonari, *Purificarea națiunii*, 270).

<sup>88</sup> Ioanid, *Holocaustul în România*, 353-4.





could mobilize more easily Romania's public opinion against the deportation of Jews from the Old Kingdom.<sup>89</sup>

### **The Anti-Communist Discourse and the Revival of Romania's Antisemitism**

After 1989 Romania's open forms of antisemitism were resumed against the backdrop of trenchant anticommunism. Anticommunism became a common phenomenon in eastern and central Europe, along with a widespread hierarchy of memories of the Holocaust and communism.<sup>90</sup> According to Cârstocea, it is particularly this feature that dissociates the antisemitism in eastern Europe from the "new antisemitism" of western Europe, the latter having its roots in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>91</sup> Concerning antisemitism in post-communist countries, despite being driven by different motivations, it represents an attempt to reconfigure the post-communist community. Michael Shafir pointed out that political communities, and post-revolutionary communities in particular, resort to a "usable history" – a positive past – in order to build self-confident national identities.<sup>92</sup> In such light, the rehabilitation of Ion Antonescu as "a great Romanian" was not dismissed as outrageous by Romania's post-communist society. In the first decade after communism collapsed, the cult of Antonescu flourished with the Romanian dictator being presented as an anti-communist patriot. By 2004, there had been erected between 6 and 8 monuments in the marshal's memory; 25 streets and squares, and also the "Heroes' Cemetery" in Iași carried Antonescu's name.<sup>93</sup> The radicalization of anti-communist and antisemitic discourses materialized between 1992 and 1996 when the Greater Romania Party (Partidul România Mare [PMR]) and the Romanian National Unity Party (Partidul Unității Naționale a Românilor [PUNR]) entered the governing coalition along with former representatives of Romania's Communist Party. In 2000 their popularity was so high that the far-right candidate Corneliu Vadim Tudor got the second round of the presidential elections having received 33.17 per cent of the vote.

The denunciation of communism as a criminal regime imposed from outside became a mantra of numerous radicalized organizations. In most cases,

<sup>89</sup> Heinen, *România, Holocaustul și logica violenței*, 98.

<sup>90</sup> For an extended debate on the topic, see: Emmanuel Droit, "The Gulag and the Holocaust in Opposition: Official Memories and Memory Cultures in an Enlarged Europe," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, no. 2, (2007), 101-20.

<sup>91</sup> Cârstocea, "Between Europeanisation and Local Legacies," 318.

<sup>92</sup> Shafir, "Rotten Apples, Bitter Pears," 150-1.

<sup>93</sup> Shafir, *Între negare și trivializare prin comparație*, 98.

interwar far-right models, – such as the “Iron Guard” and its leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu – were employed in order to “legitimate” the country’s lost values. “Tribal impulses,”<sup>94</sup> many of which are typical of interwar Romania’s publications, used as “proof documents,” started being promoted with pride by the Romanian political elite.<sup>95</sup> It seems to be a fact that between 1989 and 1999 up to twenty-eight radical right organizations, along with twelve foundations and associations, were set up by the Iron Guard’s supporters.<sup>96</sup>

Faithful to its past traditions, Romania had to comply with international trends concerning the Holocaust in the context of its integration into NATO. Regardless of the Romanian elite’s readiness to discuss the country’s responsibility for the Holocaust, it was evident that such change of heart was a rather utilitarian approach – dictated once again by international impositions – than a true need for Romania to come to terms with its history. Romania’s politicians half-heartedly tackled the issue and applied double standards when addressed the topic at home and abroad. Although Emil Constantinescu was Romania’s first president to accept Romania’s participation in the Holocaust, he stressed his country’s refusal to apply the Final Solution.<sup>97</sup> Likewise, prime-minister Adrian Năstase declared that “the future cannot be built on falsifications and mystifications,” he later added that he opposed the attempts to “blame the Romanian people concerning the Holocaust” and that “there have been graver situations in history and nobody has tried to blame the German, Russian, American or any other people.”<sup>98</sup>

Against the backdrop of the Emergency Ordinance 31/2002, which banned antisemitism and xenophobia, the Holocaust’s denial was also legally prohibited. Despite the fact that public display of portraits of people guilty of “crimes against peace and humanity” were also banned, a new gallery in the government’s building included Ion Antonescu’s picture. When international protests occurred, Romania’s ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs, Răzvan Theodorescu, pointed out that the venue hosting the marshal’s portrait was not a public one.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, the need to reconsider the Ordinance’s stipulations soon manifested. According to the following amendments, the Holocaust was defined as the “en-masse and systematical

<sup>94</sup> George Voicu, *Zei cei răi, cultura conspirației în România postcomunistă* (Iași: Polirom, 2000), 65.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>96</sup> Cârstocea, “Between Europeanisation and Local Legacies,” 319-20.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*, 320.

<sup>98</sup> Shafir, *Între negare și trivializare prin comparație*, 99-100.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem*, 100.



extermination of the European Jewish population, organized by the Nazi authorities during World War II.” Theodorescu further added that “there was no Holocaust in Romania, but Romania participated in the Holocaust, due to Antonescu’s regime, in the areas under temporary Romanian occupation.”<sup>100</sup> Additionally, Antonescu’s charge of crimes against the peace (1946) was reconsidered in 2006 by Bucharest’s Court of Appeal. It was concluded that in World War II’s first phase Romania tried only to regain its lost territories (Bessarabia and North Bukovina); the country’s participation in the war against the Soviet Union was thus legitimate. This attempt to rehabilitate the former Romanian dictator along with twenty other collaborators, was rejected by Romania’s Court of Cassation only in May 2008.<sup>101</sup>

As a post-communist country, Romania’s integration into European structures caused reactions typical of most countries in central and eastern Europe. In their struggle to adopt and internalize various patterns of western Europe, post-communist countries “swallowed” the Europeanized memory of the Holocaust without having their own domestic public confrontation. Consequently, the proliferation of selective memory stressing victimhood rather than responsibility for collaboration or perpetration was facilitated.<sup>102</sup> Additionally, Romania’s steeped tradition of symbolically excluding its Jews from the Romanian “nation” prioritized the Romanian people’s collective memory of communism as the country’s greatest historical tragedy. By embracing the anti-communist discourse and glorifying Romania’s interwar period, the “Judeo-Bolshevist”<sup>103</sup> narrative resurfaced along with the widespread comparative trivialization. The revalorization of the interwar radical right message has brought into the limelight the old pattern of representation, according to which “foreign” and dreadful communism is highly associated with Jews’ role in having disseminated Bolshevism. While “Judeo-Bolshevism”

<sup>100</sup> Ibidem, 101-2.

<sup>101</sup> Totok, “Cultul lui Antonescu,” 318.

<sup>102</sup> Cârstocea, “Between Europeanisation and Local Legacies,” 321-2.

<sup>103</sup> Adrian Cioflâncă demonstrated how the Romanian authorities had exaggerated when dealing with “the communist issue” and “the Jewish issue” after the First World War. Various forms of abuse and cruel methods of investigation had been carried out in order to counteract the spread of communism in Romania. In many cases, the antisemitic and anticommunist discourse had been exploited for political gains. The “Judeo-Bolshevism” was forged based on the assumption that all the Jews were communists and that the communists were largely influenced by Jews, see Adrian Cioflâncă, “Antisemitismul și Holocaustul din perspectivă comunistă. Un caz de distorsiune ideologică.” (I) In *Discurs și violență antisemită în România modernă*, edited by Adrian Cioflâncă (București: Hasefer, 2020), 330-331.

can be traced at the Congress of Berlin,<sup>104</sup> when foreign intervention on Jews' behalf was seen as a threat to Romania's sovereignty, comparative trivialization stems from Romania's failure to accept its Holocaust. Basically, it "refers to the abusive use of comparisons with the aim of minimizing the Holocaust, of downplaying its atrocities, or conditioning the memory of this tragedy."<sup>105</sup> There are two main arguments at the core of comparative trivialization. In the first case, the Gulag and the Holocaust are seen as equal tragedies whose victims and perpetrators must shake hands and come to terms with their past. In the second case, the Gulag and the Holocaust are seen in a competitive light, with the stress on who was persecuted the most.<sup>106</sup>

The most alarming aspect concerning Romania's way of tackling the Holocaust resides in the elites' inability to envisage broader and practical strategies to confront the country's communist past. The Holocaust's denial and trivialization have become post-communist practices widely spread not only among Romania's political but also intellectual elites. The Romanian Academy, which claims to be the highest science and culture forum in the country, openly denies the Holocaust in Romania. Moreover, it denied the fascist character of the Legionary Movement and militated for keeping offensive terms such as "*jidăni*" (an offensive word for a Jewish person) and "*țigăni*" (an insulting word for a Roma) in the Romanian Explanatory Dictionary (DEX).<sup>107</sup> Romania's brightest minds keep seeing the Jews as collective disseminators of communism, and consequently, the main culprits in communizing the country. For instance, Romania's prolific philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu pointed out in 1997 that having spread communism, the Jews eliminated for good the singularity of the Holocaust.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, Andrei Pleșu reacted to the Law 217/2015 (it condemned the legionary movement as a fascist organization; its symbols and propaganda were prohibited in public space). One of Romania's most visible public intellectuals who is neither an antisemite, nor a Holocaust's denier, Pleșu's criticism stressed the Law's failure to equally denounce the communist catastrophe.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>104</sup> *Final Report*, 45.

<sup>105</sup> *Final Report*, 45.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*, 113-4.

<sup>107</sup> Radu Ioanid, "Aproximațiile păgubitoare ale domnului Andrei Pleșu," [https://adevarul.ro/news/eveniment/aproximatiile-pagubitoare-domnului-andrei-ple-su-1\\_56b47d765ab6550cb879d576/index.html](https://adevarul.ro/news/eveniment/aproximatiile-pagubitoare-domnului-andrei-ple-su-1_56b47d765ab6550cb879d576/index.html), accessed 16 March, 2022.

<sup>108</sup> Shafir, *Între negare și trivializare prin comparație*, 122.

<sup>109</sup> Andrei Pleșu, "Mărturii pentru cercetări viitoare," [https://adevarul.ro/news/societate/marturii-cercetari-viitoare-i-1\\_55c7c901f5eaafab2c65e82e/index.html](https://adevarul.ro/news/societate/marturii-cercetari-viitoare-i-1_55c7c901f5eaafab2c65e82e/index.html), accessed 16 March, 2022.



Law 217/2015 was largely perceived by Romania's elites as "antidemocratic and insulting to the Romanian culture."<sup>110</sup> Not to mention that in such context, the Law was seen as a strategy to gain the support of Romania's Jewish community. While associating the latter with the Ellie Wiesel Institute, the name of the Institute's head, Alexandru Florian, was mentioned in a boorish way.<sup>111</sup> A shameless statement made by the head of the Romanian Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism of the Romanian Academy, Radu Ciuceanu, concluded that the Legionary Movement cannot be classified as "fascist" since it lacked ideological character. Raul Cârstocea rightly noticed that such assessments are contradicted by all specialists in the interwar fascism,<sup>112</sup> needless to say that the judgements made by Romania's most esteemed historical establishment are highly suggestive of country's unreadiness for change. Similar statements were made by Radu Preda, the head of the Institute for the Investigation of the Communist Crimes in Romania (IICCMER). Preda's remarks on "anti-legionary law" being "pro-communist" by omission, since they did not ban the apology of communism, made five members of the institution's Scientific Council resign – Dennis Deletant, Adrian Cioroianu, Zoe Petre, Cristian Pârvulescu, and William Totok – after their demand for Preda's resignation had no repercussions.<sup>113</sup>

### Instead of Conclusions

The Romanian Jews' fate was a bitter one. In "Odessa Stories," one of Isaak Babel's most famous protagonists asked rhetorically whether it had not been a mistake on God's part to settle the Jews in Russia, where they would suffer like hell.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, Jean Ancel captured the hapless reality of the Romanian Jewry living in a country where "all trends associated with Jews' emancipation had been 50-100 years behind central Europe."<sup>115</sup> Ancel noted that hostility towards the Jews had not derived from their deeds; it had been a reaction to Jews' presence in Romania – a country steeped in prejudice and antisemitism.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>110</sup> Alex Ștefănescu, "Poate că sunt eu nebun," [https://adevarul.ro/news/societate/poate-nebun-1\\_55d58512f5eaafab2cbe441e/index.html](https://adevarul.ro/news/societate/poate-nebun-1_55d58512f5eaafab2cbe441e/index.html); Ion Spânu, "Legea 217/2015 a lui Crin Antonescu, o Lege împotriva culturii române," <https://www.cotidianul.ro/legea-2172015-a-lui-crin-antonescu-o-lege-impotriva-culturii-romane/>, accessed 16 March, 2022.

<sup>111</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>112</sup> Cârstocea, "Between Europeanisation and Local Legacies," 325.

<sup>113</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>114</sup> Isaak Babel, *Maloe sobranie sochinenii* (Sankt-Petersburg: Azbuka, 2020), 24.

<sup>115</sup> Wilhelm Filderman, *Memorii & Jurnale, Volumul 1: 1900-1940*, edited by Jean Ancel (București: Hasefer, 2016), 11-12.

<sup>116</sup> Ibidem, 12.

There is little wonder that until 1998, the history of the Holocaust (the Romanian and the Holocaust in general) had not been studied in Romania. That means that schoolbooks or compulsory books in universities did not contain any references to the Holocaust. Nothing is more illustrative than Felicia Waldman's remark on this evidence: "the schoolbooks reflect society's vision on the essential values that it wants to pass on to future generations."<sup>117</sup>

Regardless of the change in Romania's approach concerning its traumatic past, the country is still far away from healthy social strategies. It would not be an exaggeration to state that in Romania the memory of the Holocaust is more honored in the breach than in the observance. Radu Ioanid noted that in Romania, juridical practices like NUP<sup>118</sup> are commonly applied in cases when individuals use publicly terms such as "Yid" (*jid*) or deny the Holocaust. In 2014, in fifty-nine cases of incitement to hatred or discrimination, none of the accused people were sent to trial.<sup>119</sup> Despite Romania's legislation banning Legionary symbols, the Tăbăcănești crucifix – the place where Corneliu Codreanu was murdered in November 1938 – has become a place of pilgrimage under the authorities' permissive eyes.<sup>120</sup> According to county Ilfov's prosecutors, the place was "educational."<sup>121</sup> In 2017, Fundația Gavrilă Ogoranu, a so-called "Memorial of the Anti-Communist Resistance," along with other "NGOs" as such, celebrated the seventy-nine commemoration of Codreanu, "who has not yet been forgotten by many Romanians."<sup>122</sup>

As all these examples suggest, Romania's society still treats its past realities with immaturity. The elites' inability to acknowledge the country's need to confront history might stem from an overall unreadiness for following a different path. Although Romania pays lip service to western democratic values, its actions prove the country's unwillingness to reconsider its past. Like other countries in eastern and central Europe, Romania has copied the western approach – instead of acknowledging on its own the importance of Romania's society to face

<sup>117</sup> Felicia Waldman, "Holocaustul în manualele postcomuniste din România." In *Holocaustul la periferie. Persecutarea și nimicirea evreilor în Transnistria în 1940-1944*, edited by Wolfgang Benz, Brigitte Mihok. Trans. Cristina Grossu-Chiriac (Chișinău: Cartier, 2010), 320.

<sup>118</sup> NUP is an abbreviation for "*neînceperea urmăririi penale*" (failure to initiate criminal proceedings). In Romania's criminal code, it represents a solution that can be given by a prosecutor when investigating a criminal case.

<sup>119</sup> Ioanid, "Aproximațiile păgubitoare ale domnului Andrei Pleșu."

<sup>120</sup> <https://www.rfi.ro/reportaj-rfi-107654-zelea-codreanu-subiect-de-pelerinaj-la-80-de-ani-dupa-moartea-sa>, accessed 18 March, 2022.

<sup>121</sup> Ioanid, "Aproximațiile păgubitoare ale domnului Andrei Pleșu."

<sup>122</sup> <https://ogoranu.ro/2017/11/26/tancabesti-comemorarea-unei-crime-de-stat/> accessed 18 March, 2022.





the Holocaust. Likewise, the Romanian elites are stuck in their communist past tragedies, preventing them from tackling the Holocaust as one of the country's greatest wounds. Giving moral lessons, however, has never been proof of virtue, remarks Tzvetan Todorov. On the contrary, acknowledging the misfortune of others equates with not claiming for yourself the exclusive status of a former victim.<sup>123</sup> Only when the Romanian Holocaust and communist memories will not be amalgamated will Romania's society be able to overcome its traumatic history. Cultivating a responsible and mature society could be an important step for Romanian society in confronting with dignity its harsh history.

### Rezumat

Acest articol reprezintă o reevaluare a memoriei Holocaustului în societatea actuală din România. El arată că în România procesul de construire a națiunii a mers mână în mână cu antisemitismul. Articolul subliniază că frustrarea țării cu privire la trecutul ei comunist a reușit să plaseze memoria Holocaustului într-un con de umbră. În ciuda recunoașterii de către guvernul României (2004) a participării țării la Holocaust, conștientizarea deplină a acestei probleme rămâne improbabilă la nivelul întregii societăți românești. O nouă lege menită să contracareze negarea Holocaustului a fost adoptată în România în 2015. Cu toate acestea, țara a demonstrat că încă nu și-a acceptat moștenirea istorică.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Holocaust românesc, post-comunism, Transnistria, naționalism, antisemitism.

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<sup>123</sup> Todorov, *Abuzurile memoriei*, 42.