

**The Holocaust in Romania:**  
*Uncovering a Dark Chapter*

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## Introduction

In 1934 the Jewish population of Romania was 700,000. Today, fewer than 9000 remain. Outside of Nazi Germany the Romanian Holocaust was the most brutal and most deadly. Yet this chapter remains one of the darkest and most unexplored in Romanian history. What happened?

The Holocaust in Romania remains to this day one of the most controversial aspects of the country's history. Negationist theories run rampant throughout the country. Some 'scholars' claim the Shoah did not happen at all, others that it is all a Jewish conspiracy, many other scholars lay the blame solely on Germany, and others still profess that Romania actually saved its Jews. Whatever the theories may be, the last few years have fortunately shown tremendous accomplishments in unveiling the truth behind this dark chapter of Romania's past. Spearheading the movement towards acceptance was Elie Wiesel, a Romanian of Jewish background who was forced to emigrate from Romania with his family during the Shoah. Along with a team from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, they produced the Final Report International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania. It was the first document of its kind, and brought out to light, for the first time, the real atrocities of the Romanian Holocaust.

The brutal program of terror was a political maneuver on the part of the fascist government, and especially of Romania's leader during WWII - the military dictator Marshal Ion Antonescu. However, the Romanian people also need to accept blame for the atrocities of the Shoah, for anti-Judaic feel ran rampant in the country, and much of it still exists in the country today. Religious, economic, and cultural factors aided in the development of anti-Semitism in the region over several centuries, and especially during the decades leading up to the Second World War. Little humanity can be salvaged from the stories of the Holocaust, but in order to progress as a developed nation and a member of the European Union, Romania must understand and face up to its past.

## Part I: The Evolution of anti-Semitism

### *A Brief History of Romania in the 18<sup>th</sup> century*

Modern day Romania is made up of three historic provinces: Transylvania (to the west), Moldova (to the north), and Wallachia (to the South). Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century Moldova and Wallachia were under Ottoman rule but enjoyed some external independence. Transylvania has also once been a part of the Ottoman Empire, but eventually fell to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Only briefly in



Figure 1: Romanian Principalities in the 18th Century

the sixteenth century, under the great Romanian ruler Mihai Viteazul (Michael the Brave) were the provinces united. This however, was short lived. The first real attempt at uniting the three provinces came in 1848, when Romanian nationalists called for a united state. However, the Great Powers did not accept Romania's call for independence and the revolution was short lived. Just over ten years later the provinces of Moldova and Wallachia elected the same *domnitor* (ruler), Alexandru Ioan Cuza, and the Ottoman Empire allowed for the creation of a semi-sovereign union; without the third province of Moldova. However, Cuza was soon deposed by a coup d'état in 1866 and replaced by the Austro-Hungarian Prince, Karl of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, who soon became Prince Carol I of the Romanian provinces.

In the Russo-Turkish War of 1877, Romania finally saw an opportunity to unite its provinces and create an independent state. It was recognized as a sovereign, independent state. Wallachia, and Moldova, by virtue of the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, created the state of Romania, and two years later Prince Carol I became King Carol I of Romania. The Treaty of Berlin also gave Romania the south-

eastern region of Dobruja, forced the union to cede part of its northern territory to Russia, and also explicitly called for equal and civic rights for the Jewish population of Romania.<sup>1</sup> However, despite the expansion of Jewish emancipation throughout Europe, the Romanian Government actively fought to keep this provision, Article 44, out of the Treaty. Despite its well-meaning intentions, the Article propelled a growth in anti-Semitism and aided in the development of a deep-seated hatred for Jews, which manifested itself brutally during WWII. To understand exactly why anti-Semitism was such an important force in Romania's leadership, it is imperative to understand the history of Judaism in the region, and the roots of anti-Judaic feelings.

### *The Jews of Transylvania*

The Jewish community in Romania is one of the oldest in Europe. For hundreds Jews had lived and prospered in the area that is now the state of Romania. Jewish settlements as old as 87-107 AD were found in the area of Transylvania in the town of Thalmus (or *Tălmaci*) in the northern part of present day Romania. Some of the Jewish settlers came to Romania as part of the Roman army, as it swept through the region. These individuals integrated in the Romanian society and eventually gained leadership positions. However, with the coming of Jewish settlers also appeared anti-Semitism. At the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century the rise in anti-Judaic feeling started bubbling at the surface of Romanian society, but was quickly quelled by the Roman Emperor Theodosius, who sought tolerance for minorities in the Empire.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, both the Jewish settlers and anti-Semitic feeling continued to grow in the Romanian region well into the Middle Ages. The earliest records of anti-Semitic feeling come from eleventh century Transylvania, where the first decree forbidding inter-religious marriage between Jews and Christians was implemented by Ladislau I – the King and ruler of the region between

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Iancu. *Jews in Romania: 1866 - 1919: from exclusion to emancipation*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1996, 94.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Asandului, *Istoria evreilor din Romania: 1866-1938*. Iasi: Ed. Institutul European, 2003, 6-7.

1077-1095. To further limit the cultural Jewish influence on the region, during the same time, physical labor was not allowed on Sundays and during Christian holidays, regulating the visible differences between the Jewish and Christian communities. During the thirteenth century Pope Gregory IX encouraged the regional king Andrei II, and later his son, to continue pursuing anti-Semitic measures during their rule. However, not all regional rulers at the time took severe anti-Semitic measures. In some instances Jews served at the courts of Kings and held very high positions. Bella IV, the son of Andrei II and King from 1235-70, hired Jews for administrative purposes at his court. In fact, King Bella continued to fight for Jewish rights throughout his reign. One of his biggest accomplishments was the abolition of the *More Judaico* oath.<sup>3</sup> This special oath, specifically aimed at the Jewish communities, was required in all European courts, and remained in effect until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It was often a part of humiliating and dangerous ceremonies and stemmed from Christian distrust of Jews. The oath was eventually reintroduced in Romanian courts and remained in use until the early twentieth century. In the late thirteenth century, however, the temporary abolition of the oath and benefits instilled upon the Jewish community as a result of King Bella's efforts led to drastic increase in immigration and assimilation of Jews in the Romanian region.<sup>4</sup>

The records of the following few centuries are quite meager, as a result of constant invasions by the tartars, and it is not very clear how anti-Semitism progressed. What is clear is that during the fifteenth and sixteenth century anti-Semitism was present in the region. Many of the Jewish settlers that came to the region during that time settled into the realm of commerce and trade, thereby occupying a middle-man status between the farmers and peasants and the wealth boyars. Coupled with the constant foreign invasions, anti-Semitism soon took on a xenophobic aspect for Romanians. Soon the Jewish population was not allowed in any but one of Transylvania's major towns. Keeping in line with the oscillating history of Judaism in Romania, during the rule of Gabriel

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<sup>3</sup> Asandului, *Istoria evreilor din Romania*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, 8.

Bethlen, Prince of Transylvania from 1613 until 1629, many rights were restored back to the Jewish population, only to be taken right back after the fall of Bethlen. Yet, despite the turbulent and uncertain times in Transylvanian the Jewish community in Romania did not abandon the region, and many remained in the area until the dreadful events of WWII.<sup>5</sup>

*The Jews of Greater Romania (Romania Mare)*

As turbulence set over the northern region of Transylvania, many of the exiled Jews from the region travelled south and settled in the province of *Romania Mare*. In this province, Romanian rulers who encouraged commerce and trade welcomed exiled Jews. While Vlad Țepeș (Vlad the Impaler), ruler of Romania Mare from 1431 until 1476, treated the Jewish population somewhat harshly, Ștefan cel Mare (Stephen the Great), one of Romanian's most famous and beloved rulers, who at the time ruled over another southern region called Moldova, was much more welcoming to the Jewish population. The modern capital of Romania, Bucharest, saw the first Jewish settlers around 1550. The first half of the seventeenth century saw both legislative acts in favor of Jewish community, but also the first waves of anti-Judaic sentiments of the Christian-Orthodox church. The anti-Semitic feeling was an extension of a conservative wave that was taking over much of the Orthodox Church, and was by no means limited just to the Romanian region.<sup>6</sup>

Anti-Semitic measures continued and escalated during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the Romanian Jews were already vitally involved in the economy of the region through their roles in the production of alcohol and leather as well as their role in commerce and trade. During the second half of the eighteenth century the northern region of Romania was dominated by the Empress Maria Theresa, of the Hapsburg Empire. Her measures proved harshest to the Jewish community, which she deemed to be dangerous to the state. Through her *Juden Ordnung*, Empress Maria took charge of

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid*,10-11.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, 12-13.

every aspect of the Jewish life in the Banat and Transylvanian regions.<sup>7</sup> However, despite the constant struggle facing the Jewish community, Jewish immigration into the region continued. In his work Jews in the Romanian Provinces Anastasie Hiciu identified several of reasons why immigration continued: the divisions in Poland and in their Jewish community, the various pogroms against Jews in Russia (during the tsarist rule), the inability of the Romanian powers to stop the movement, as well as the benefits of trade that the Romanian nobles took from their exchanges with Jewish merchants.<sup>8</sup>

The continuing immigration flow into the region brought about a resurgence in anti-Semitism, which brought about an increase in accusations of ritual murder.<sup>9</sup> Ritual murder, or blood libel, is a false accusation that Jewish (and other religious minorities) murder small children and use their blood for ritualistic purposes. More specifically ritual murder accusations claim that Jews use the blood of young children to make the *maztos*, a traditional unleavened bread made for Passover. These accusations have been a major driving force behind the anti-Semitism feeling in Europe. During the same time, blatantly anti-Semitic literature emerged, encouraged and sometimes funded by the Orthodox Church. In 1803 Neofit, a former rabbi turned Orthodox monk, wrote on the subject in a work titled *Infruntarea jidovilor asupra legii și a obiceiurilor lor* (Confronting the Jews Concerning Their Laws and Customs).<sup>10</sup>

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Romanian provinces were invaded by their Russian neighbors. With them, the Russians brought about more anti-Semitic legislature through their Organic Regulations, which changed the status of Jews from human beings to a sort of alien race, a nation completely set apart. These regulations, enforced in the provinces of Wallachia and Moldova (east and north-east respectively), limited the role of the Jewish community in the

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 13.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, 18.

Romanian society. The years between the implementation of the Organic Regulations and the attempted revolution of 1848, was marked by restrictive legislature that identified all Jews as strangers to the land and affected their roles in all public matters.<sup>11</sup>

Ideas of Jewish emancipation began to take shape around the time of the Romanian revolution in 1848, which brought about a real improvement in the status of Jews, who enjoyed civil rights until about 1856, albeit no political ones. The Jewish community in Moldova benefited the most, as the Revolution brought about a drastic increase in civil rights.<sup>12</sup> During this time, as Alexandru Ioan Cuza ruled over the region, and even foreign Jews benefited from civil rights and were welcomed in the country. The Jewish community had become a middle class, a liaison between the peasants and the boyars. In 1866 with the arrival of Prince Carol also came a new constitution, which specifically stated that only Christians could be citizens of Romania. This provision, Article 7 of the Constitution, ultimately led to more virulent and powerful anti-Semitism in the region. It also gave rise to the 'Jewish Problem.' What was there to do with the Jewish population already inhabiting the area? The new constitution was followed by even more restrictive measures that further narrowed down the rights and possibilities of Jews in the state.<sup>13</sup> Professor Carol Iancu, a renowned scholar who writes extensively on the status of Jews in Romania before 1919, points to a few factors that ultimately led to the anti-Semitic policies of the years following the revolution. He rightly argues that anti-Semitism rose out of religious, economic, political and xenophobic factors, which together contributed to the prevalent anti-Judaic attitude.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, many other reasons existed for the shift in attitudes away from tolerance and emancipation, and towards a violent, hateful distrust of the Jewish people, Professor Iancu's theory serves to make sense of a convoluted

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Iancu, *Jews in Romania*, 68.



period and a complex issue. To fully grasp the complexities of this devolution the main factors that contributed need to be examined.

### *1. The Religious Factor*

It cannot be denied that the Orthodox Church had an important role to play in the development of anti-Semitism in Romania. Christianity, and Orthodoxy especially, is at the core of Romanian identity. During, but even before the politics of the twentieth century began focusing on development of national identity, the Orthodox Church in Romania encouraged violence against the Jewish community. Evidence of religious anti-Semitism can be found as early as the Middle Ages. In the seventeenth century, although anti-Semitism was not yet enforced by the state, religious texts encouraged blatant exclusion of Jews. The Church's Code of Law from Govora states: "He, the parson or person who might talk with the Jews and call them 'bothers,' let him be anathema."<sup>15</sup>

During the eighteenth century anti-Semitism took on other facets, economic, xenophobic, but religion was always at the center of anti-Judaic feeling. In the decades leading up to WWII there were various kinds of religious anti-Semitism. One of the most prevalent was classical religious hatred of Jews, which "stemmed from their purported role in the crucifixion of Christ and beliefs in Jewish non-acceptance of Christianity."<sup>16</sup> A general distrust of "the Jews 'who had killed God' and practiced 'ritual murder' was reinforced by clever denunciation of the Jewish religion itself."<sup>17</sup> Despite various other factors that influenced the growth of anti-Semitism, several powerful figures of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century emphasized the religious root of anti-Judaism. Cezar Bolliac, a former revolutionary of the 1848 coup, was well known for his anti-Semitic platform. In his speech to the Chamber of Deputies in 1869 he emphasized the religious nature of Jewish hatred:

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<sup>15</sup> Georgetta Pana. "Religious Anti-Semitism in Romanian Propaganda." *Religion in Eastern Europe* XXVI, no. 2 (2006): 1-9.

<sup>16</sup> William Brustein and Amy Ronnkvist. "The roots of anti-Semitism: Romania before the Holocaust." *Journal of Genocide Research*, 4:2, 2002, 212.

<sup>17</sup> Iancu, *Jews in Romania*, 69.

When one speaks of Catholics, Protestants or Orthodox, we are speaking of Christian people who have received their teaching from the same source: the Gospel. When one speaks of the Jews it is of people who do not believe in Christ and who, consequently do not have the same religion we have. So it is impossible to talk about the Jews without implying their religion, because when you ask them why they do this or that they always answer that their religion requires it. Thus in this sense one cannot say that the Jewish question is not a religious one.<sup>18</sup>

Evidently it was impossible for staunch Romanian nationalists, unable to separate Orthodoxy from Romanian identity, to ignore religious difference.

## *2. The Economic Factor*

The Jewish community in Romania found a niche in business sector, slowly becoming the middleman between peasants and wealthy boyars. As they developed this role they acquired a middle class status, and enjoyed good standing in the Romanian society. It was only natural that the 'Romanian' (i.e. Orthodox or non-Jewish) middleclass resented the Jewish population, which they considered as competition for jobs and influence. Politicians saw this as an opportunity to further their own careers and appeal to a new section of the population. Mihail Kogalniceanu, who became Prime Minister of Romania in 1863, chose to use anti-Semitism to appeal to the Romanian middle class and garner support from the masses.<sup>19</sup> Dionisie Pop Martian, an economist and the founder of Romanian protectionist model, also fiercely denounced the position of the Jewish community and their role in the economy. Martian called for complete nationalism and protectionism policy, which essentially meant discriminatory policy that would exclude all Jewish and foreign economic players.<sup>20</sup>

The nineteenth century saw a great increase in the industrialization of Europe. As the Industrial Revolution gripped almost all other countries on the continent, Romania lagged behind. As a prime agricultural state, Romania chose to close its doors to the technological advances of the era and focus in on itself. By choosing the protectionist model developed by Martian, it's economy

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, 70.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, 70.

fell even further behind other developing and modernizing countries.<sup>21</sup> Romanians soon sought a scapegoat to blame for their struggling economy, and found the perfect target in the Jewish community. In 1866 writer Bogdan Hasdeu, a professor of statistics at Jassy, denounced the Jews and their negative tendencies, by arguing that they exhibited a “tendency to earn without work,” they “lack[ed] of sense of dignity,” and furthermore they also exhibited a “hatred against all nations.”<sup>22</sup> Professor Carl Iancu argues that, ultimately, it was “economic competition and a spirit of narrow-minded exclusiveness which transformed the young Christian bourgeoisie into the most persistent enemy of the Jews and of their emancipation.”<sup>23</sup> Many other politicians and academics at the time were of the opinion that it was not religion, ethnic tensions, or nationalistic desires that fueled anti-Semitism. Parliamentary Deputy I.C. Codrescu of Bârlad asked the Jewish community to “realize that our struggle is not against your religion, but against your desire to monopolize the middle class of our society.”<sup>24</sup>

### *3. The Political Factor*

Naturally, politics played a huge role in the development of anti-Semitism in Romania in the years leading up to World War II. Politically, anti-Semitism was both a top-down and a bottom-up approach. It was a strong sentiment among the masses and part of the political rhetoric at the time, which created a vicious cycle of hatred and acceptable violence. In 1869 Prime Minister Mihail Kogalniceanu, who had formerly advocated for the emancipation of Jews in 1848, suddenly shifted sides and became a staunch advocate of expulsions of Jews from Romania. The same Jews for whom he had demanded emancipation twenty years earlier, had become the “scourge of the countryside.”<sup>25</sup> This anti-Semitic rhetoric became “a useful means of attracting the middle class.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, 70.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 71.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, 55.

This illustrates strong anti-Semitism prevalent in the middle class Romanian citizens in the mid to late 19th century. Politicians who desired the votes of this middle class advocated for exclusion and expulsion of the Jews. In a perfect, vicious cycle, the lower classes then became even more anti-Semitic which gave rise to more anti-Judaic feeling. Ultimately, the persecution of the Romanian Jews was a tool of the government, using it “as means to gain popularity with the masses, or rather with the voters in the city colleges who are all people frantically against they Jews.”<sup>27</sup>

#### *4. The Xenophobic Factor*

In the years after the unification of Romania a force behind all politics, economic policy, and social development was the desire to become a sovereign, independent nation, free of foreign influences. In their quest to define Romania, Romanian leaders at the time strived cultivated a strong nationalistic feeling among the people, and worked to develop a clear, distinct Romanian nationality. Eastern states like Romania had a different pattern of developing nationalist identity than most Western states. Romania was not able unite the nation into one state before the rise of nationalism, and did not succeed in brining the ethnic groups together before the rise of nationalism, thereby excluding certain minorities such as the Jewish community. The drive towards a clear Romanian nationality has its roots in the 1848 revolutionary war against the Austro-Hungarian rule struggle for an independent foreign state of Romania, free also of the Ottoman rulers in the south. The concept of a national state slowly emerged among the Romanians, who drew inspiration from the French and other Western peoples that had gained their independence. Professor Iancu argues that “the awakening of Romanian nationalism which took place in a striking way during the revolution of 1848 was based on the ideas of union and independence.”<sup>28</sup> At this time, the Romanian were struggling against ‘foreign’ powers, Russia and the Ottoman empire, and the independence fighters

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, 55.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, 74.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, 75.

saw the Jews as ‘their brothers,’ united in a similar struggle against another ‘them.’ However, once Romania did gain her independence, the xenophobic feels were turned inwards at its own people, namely the Jewish population.

In the years after the revolution and the arrival of King Carol I, Romanians began to see Western influences as threatening. Fearful of future cleavages in the country, Romanian leaders at the time tended to reject most advice and political influence from other European countries. “With the feverish investments of western capitalists, certain clear-thinking individuals understood at the time that the country was in danger of losing its economic independence,” which would ultimately lead to loss of political independence and return to the status it held before 1848.<sup>29</sup> Rejecting foreign influence soon became synonymous with the fight for Romanian national independence, as more and more Romanian leaders were unable and unwilling to distinguish between foreign influences and foreign threats. Furthermore, the foreign aspects of the post-revolutionary Romania tended to be Western modernizers, called into Romania by its leaders to aid in its development from an agrarian society to a modernized state. These Westerners soon became the managers and leaders in new associations that sought to improve Romanian industry, but did so at the expense of the peasants. Romanian nationalists became alarmed when it became evident that former peasants, considered to be the very essence of Romanian nationality, “had left one miserable life for another” and began serving as the labor force for foreign managers in foreign companies.<sup>30</sup> Their hopes of utilizing foreign influence to raise the status of Romanians backfired, and nationalists developed an even greater degree of xenophobia, fearful of the dominating presence of outside forces.

The Jewish community became an easy target for xenophobic feelings, since it had always occupied a unique role in society and had always set itself apart. The issue of non-assimilation further escalated the anti-Judaic feeling during the second half of the nineteenth century and the

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, 75.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, 75

early years of the twentieth century. Although most of the Jews living in Romania at the time were fully integrated in the Romanian society and had been living in the region for generations, many leaders and nationalists developed an acute distaste and distrust of this community. Due in part to the differences in language, dress, and customs, the Jews became the easiest and most visible targets for xenophobic expression. For I.C. Codrescu, a parliamentary deputy in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, argued that there was no such thing as a 'Romania Jews.' That term in and of itself was a contradiction, for one had to be either a Romanian, or a Jew. Following in the footsteps of other prominent national leaders, in 1866, Codrescu published one of his explicitly xenophobic parliamentary speeches in a pamphlet titled *Cotropirea judovească în România* (The Jewish invasion in Romania), in which he attacked the *Alliance Israelite Universelle* organization and argued that Jews were undermining the Romanian character.

The term Romanian Jew is an insult hurled at our nation... Whatever the Jew is, Jew he will remain... Gentlemen, the growth of this element has always proven so dangerous for all countries that no people has hesitated to take the most energetic steps, and often the most crude, to get rid of them.<sup>31</sup>

These various factors fed into each other, creating a malevolent cycle that perpetuated into a deep seethed hatred of the Jewish community. The historical, religious factor slowly pushed lower, peasant classes towards a distrust of the Jews population, which encouraged politicians to utilize this xenophobia to further their own careers, calling for even harsher anti-Semitic laws, which caused ever strong distaste for the Jews. This vicious progression will eventually lead to complacency and support of the fascist anti-Semitic policies of WWII, and acceptance of the violence and destruction of the Jewish people during the Shoah.

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<sup>31</sup> Elie Wiesel. *Final report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*. (Romanian ed. Bucharest: [s.l.], 2004), 25.

## Part II: *The Realities of the Romanian Holocaust*

The Holocaust in Romania is very much so a reality. The Romanian Government during WWII systematically conducted violent, crude, and genocidal actions against the Jewish population of Romania. One cannot understand the realities of this atrocious period without grasping the nuances of Romania's political leaders at the time. While anti-Semitism rose from the bottom up, and was promulgated back to the people by politicians and the elite class, the Holocaust was an organized series of laws and acts that the Romanian government enforced. It cannot be denied that the hundreds of thousands of Jews that died at the hands of Romanian soldiers, officers, and ordinary citizens did so because of the legality of systematic murder of the Jewish community.

### *The Road to the Holocaust: A brief history of Romania from the turn of the century to WWII*

The period between the establishment of the Romanian Kingdom in 1878 and the start of the first World War was a relatively stable, prosperous, and calm period for Romania.

Although in 1914 Romania entered the First World War on the Entente side. In May 1918 it entered into a treaty with Germany, known as the Treaty of Bucharest, where it in gained a significant amount of territory. In the interwar period Romania referred to itself as *România Mare* (Greater Romania, or



Figure 2: Romania Mare in the interwar period (1914-1918)

Great Romania), illustrated the large territory it acquired as a result of the agreement with Germany. At the end of WWI the provinces of Transylvania (which used to be under Austro-Hungarian rule), Bukovina (which had also been a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and Bessarabia (which had

declared its independence from Russia just months previously) united with the Romanian Old Kingdom and became part of *România Mare*. During this time King Carol II ruled over the area, in what was to be the first of two dictatorships of the early twentieth century.

King Carol II saw the rise of anti-Semitic, right wing, nationalistic parties, most extremist of which was the Iron Guard, a branch of a political party known as *Liga Apărării Național Creștine* [LANC] (or Christian National Defense League). LANC was created in 1923 by the vehemently anti-Semitic Professor Alexandru C. Cuza, which advocated for a strictly enforced ban on Jewish participation in Romanian politics and called for the revocation of citizenship of Jews.<sup>32</sup> In 1939 Germany and the Soviet Union signed the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact that, aside from declaring neutrality between the two powers, also stipulated that the Soviet Union had legitimate claim over several Romanian territories, including Bukovina. Following these losses King Carol II was forced to abdicate his throne and was succeeded by his son Mihai, who had little legitimate power. At the head of the Romanian government starting in September of 1940 was a joint coalition between the Iron Guard and the infamous Romanian military dictator Marshal Ion Antonescu, known as the National Legionary State.<sup>33</sup> The alliance between the two only lasted until January of 1941, after which the newly proclaimed *Conducător* (translated as Leader, and used to parallel titles such as *Führer* or *il Duce*) took full control over the country. This change in government propelled the first real anti-Semitic violence emerges in Romania of the Second World War, and began what would be one of the most brutal programs of genocide.

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<sup>32</sup> Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: the destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu regime, 1940-1944*. (Chicago, Ill.: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 16.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, 43.



*The beginning of the end:  
The first stages of the Holocaust*

Just a month before he was forced off the throne, King Carol II signed one of the most restrictive and anti-Semitic pieces of legislature in Romanian history. In order to garner support from the Legionary Movement, in hopes of maintaining his position of power and prevent a takeover from the Iron Guard, on August 8, 1940 Carol approved Law No. 2650. This piece of legislature clearly and narrowly enumerated what it meant to be a Jew. Its definition, which included the first mentions of ‘blood’ and ‘race’, was even stricter than Germany’s. Law No. 2650 considered the following as Jews:

- a. persons professing the “Mosaic faith;
- b. persons born to parents practicing Mosaic faith;
- c. persons converted to Christianity, though born to unconverted Jewish parents;
- d. Christians born to a Christians mother and a Jewish father who had not been baptized;
- e. persons born illegitimately to a Jewish mother;
- f. women included in the above subsection, even though married to Christians, if they embraced Christianity less than one year from the establishment of the “Party of the Nation” (June 22, 1939); and
- g. Jews “by blood” even if atheists.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike the anti-Semitism present in Romania in the previous century, anti-Judaic laws and took on a racial meaning. Under the new laws, conversion was no longer enough to spare a Jewish Romanian from exclusion, and eventually murder. Anti-Semitism escalated even further during the summer of 1940, extending to the professional realm, as more and more businesses began excluding their Jewish workers. From August 6<sup>th</sup> to September 3<sup>rd</sup> “nine ministries in Bucharest dismissed a total of 609 Jewish employees,” and two months later, on November 16, Law No. 825 ordered all enterprises of all nature to fire all their Jewish employees.<sup>35</sup> What propelled anti-Semitism most during the summer months of 1940 were the repercussions of the secret Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Ioanid, 25.

As a result of this accord, Eastern Europe stood on precarious ground. The terms of the agreement gave Russia control of several territories that belonged to Romania. On June 26, 1940 the Russian diplomatic envoy to Romania, Gheorghe Davidescu, effectively requested that the



Figure 3: Romania's borders: 1941-1944

Romanian army cleared Bessarabia, Bukovina, Northern Bukovina, and Hertza. King Carol II made the decision to abide by Russian desires and effectively handed large portions of the Romanian territory to various states under Russian control at the time. This decision effectively cost King Carol II his crown, brought about the rule of Antonescu

and the Iron Guard, and started a wave of violent anti-Semitic expression throughout Romania.

As the military began their withdrawal from the territories, many Romanians inside the truncated Romania felt the need to blame someone for the loss of Romanian territory. Having already been accustomed to excluding the Jewish communities, the Jews in the regions of Bessarabia and Bukovina were the natural scapegoats.<sup>36</sup> Nationalists had already branded Jews as traitors and spies, and now they added communists to the insults. The notion of the “Jewish communist, saboteur, and enemy of the Romanian people began to appear more frequently in popular propaganda and official reports.”<sup>37</sup> Known as the “red week,” the following few days saw tragic, brutal, and inhumane pillage of the Jewish people of the region. In certain parts of these areas the local people saw the Romanian army as the invaders of their territories, and many of them identified much more with the Russian or Hungarian regimes. Along the long road home the military did

<sup>36</sup> Tesu Solomovici. *Istoria Holocaustului din Romania: Transnistria si Transilvania de Nord*. (Bucuresti: Editura Tesu, 2006), 107.

<sup>37</sup> Ioanid, 39.

encounter various attacks from the local population, some of which was Jewish.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, some Jews were happy to be freed of the ant-Semitic Romanian government and welcomed the redistribution of the territories. However, the brutality the military showed these ordinary Romanians of Jewish faith was unimaginable. Anger soon spread to other parts of Romanian territories and in the summer of the 1940 several massacres throughout Romania took place. Of those, the most brutal were in the district of Dorohoi. These massacres emerged from “uncoordinated military initiatives and from anti-Semitic agitation, in the atmosphere of wartime catastrophe,” and left behind hundreds of dead.<sup>39</sup>

The repercussions of Carol’s decision also brought about his own demise. Although the King had allied himself with the Iron Guard, and had encouraged anti-Semitism, on September 6, 1940 the Iron Guard and Marshal Ion Antonescu “forced King Carol II to abdicate, blaming him for the loss of Bessarabia, Bukovina, and northern Transylvania.”<sup>40</sup> Although totalitarian in his rule, King Carol II had been quite westernized in his rule, and milder in his anti-Semitism than the government that deposed him. The new government declared Romania a “National Legionnaire State,” and allotted the new king, Michael I (Carol II’s son) merely a symbolic role.<sup>41</sup> Antonescu took over the Council of Ministers and assigned himself the role of *Conducător* (translated as Leader, and used to parallel titles such as *Führer* or *il Duce*). In one of his first interviews after ascending to the role of *Conducător*, Antonescu spoke of his strong anti-Semitic plans. On September 28, 1940 in an interview granted the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*, Marshal Antonescu introduced the ‘problem’ that the Jewish community posed to Romania and its economic expansion. In this early interview, Antonescu methodically laid the foundations for the genocidal actions during the war. He explained

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<sup>38</sup> Tesu Solomovici. *Istoria Holocaustului din Romania: Transnistria si Transilvania de Nord*. (Bucuresti: Editura Tesu, 2006), 109.

<sup>39</sup> Ioanid, 41

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*, 43.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, 43.

that “Jews formed the greatest obstacle to expansion of the Romanian economy” and promised to solve the ‘problem’ by effectively “replacing” Jews with Romanians.<sup>42</sup> The change in government, and Antonescu’s outward expression of anti-Semitism, led to a new wave of anti-Judaic expression. At grassroots level, all over Romania, mobbing, looting, and pillaging became the norm. Mobs plundered Jewish stores, police arrested and tortured Jews, and members of the Legionnaire government ordered the boycotts of Jewish stores and attacks on Jewish manufacturing.<sup>43</sup>

Disagreements between Antonescu and the Iron Guard, however, slowly emerged. While both encouraged and approved of anti-Semitic measures, Antonescu represented a different attitude towards anti-Semitism, “one slightly less virulent and slightly more considerate than that of the Iron Guard.”<sup>44</sup> A tremendous and astute political figure, Antonescu was very unhappy with the brutish way the Iron Guard was acting. Its members often “assaulted, and sometimes killed, Jewish citizens in the streets,” which Antonescu never fully approved of.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the Iron Guard generally confiscated Jewish property and good, and the rampant corruption “threatened to disrupt the Romanian economy.”<sup>46</sup> For all the anti-Semitic statements, and grave distaste for the Jewish communities, Antonescu was much milder in his anti-Judaic expression than the Iron Guard. Unlike his counterpart in Germany, Antonescu was in fact even willing to meet and discuss the Jewish plight with the leader of the Jewish community.

Just a few months before Antonescu took power, the previous regime had passed Order No. 5295, which states that “the army had the right to use women between the ages of eighteen and forty

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*, 44-5.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, 51.

<sup>45</sup> "Romania." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005472> (accessed December 14, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> "Romania." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005472> (accessed December 14, 2011).

as laundresses, seamstresses, and even office workers.”<sup>47</sup> Yet another dehumanizing piece of legislature passed in August of 1941 forced Jews to wear the six-pointed yellow Star of David. Unlike the German policy, for the first few years of the War it seemed like the Jews of Romania would not be exposed to the degrading fate of identifying themselves with the yellow star. This however changed in the summer of 1941. Outraged at this measure, the president of the UER (Jewish Union of Romania) Wilhem Filderman appealed to Marshal Antonescu. A former classmate of the dictator, Filderman hoped that a private meeting with Antonescu would sway him to rescind the order. And it did. On September 8, 1941 (two days after Antonescu and the Iron Guard officially took power), Filderman secured a meeting with Antonescu. From this, a paradoxical and complex image of the Romanian dictator emerges. Although determined to rid Romania of the Jewish plight, Antonescu was willing to meet with the leader of the Jewish Community, and even agreed to fulfill Filderman’s wish. Soon after the meeting with Antonescu ordered the vice president of the Council of Ministers, Mihai Antonescu (no relation to the Marshal) “to cancel the wearing of the badge throughout the country.”<sup>48</sup> Sadly, this appeasement was followed by utter terror in the next few months.

On December 16 1941 (through Order No. 3415) Marshal Antonescu ordered the devolvement of the Jewish Union of Romania, where Filderman still served as president. At the same time a new, Antonescu signed into effect the establishment of the dreaded *Centrala Evreilor*.<sup>49</sup> Created under the pretenses of protecting the interests of Romanian Jews, Centrala ultimately became another tool in Antonescu’s plot to destroy the Romanian Jewry. Among other things, the organization was primarily responsible for the following things:

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<sup>47</sup> Ioanid, 26.

<sup>48</sup> Ioanid, 33.

<sup>49</sup> Solomovici, 253.

- exclusive representation of the interests of Romanian Jewry;
- “reeducation” and organization of Jews for “work and trades”;
- preparations for Jewish “emigration”;
- general oversight of the legal system governing the Jews.<sup>50</sup>

Along with Government sanctioned actions against the Romanian Jews, Centrala “was one of the two main venues through which the course of the Holocaust in Romania played out.”<sup>51</sup>

The following month saw another major turning point in Romania’s history. The Iron Guard, dissatisfied with their role in government and aggravated by the constant disagreements with Marshal Antonescu over the treatment of Jews, rose up against the *Conducător*. During the three-day civil war that ensued, Antonescu managed to gain control of the government with support from the German army, as the defeated Iron Guard members proceeded to wreak havoc on the Jewish Communities in Romania. Between January 21 and 23 the Iron Guard instigated a deadly pogrom against the Jews of Bucharest. The Bucharest pogrom was part of a Legion-drafted plan, well planned and executed, “and not the manifestation of a spontaneous outburst or the strategic exploitation of a moment of anarchy.”<sup>52</sup> Many of the perpetrators of the pogrom were members of various organizations controlled by the Iron Guard, including “members of terrorist organizations, police from the Ministry of Interior and the *Siguranța* (the security police), and Bucharest *Prefectura* personnel.”<sup>53</sup> Aside from the political leaders and security personnel, many ordinary civilians also participated in the violence against the Jews. The Bucharest pogrom saw some of the most terrible atrocities of the war; most disturbing of which was the Bucharest slaughterhouse. On January 23, the last day of the rebellion, “fifteen Jews were driven from the *Prefectura* to the slaughterhouse, where all

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<sup>50</sup> Ioanid, 34.

<sup>51</sup> Ioanid, 35.

<sup>52</sup> Wiesel, *Final Report*, 113.

<sup>53</sup> Wiesel, *Final Report*, 113.

of them were tortured and/or shot to death.”<sup>54</sup> The Iron Guard members then proceeded to hang the bodies on meat hooks and “mutilated them in a vicious parody of kosher slaughtering practices.”<sup>55</sup> Even the self-proclaimed anti-Semite, Ion Antonescu, saw this as unnecessary brutality, especially after recognizing several of the bodies murdered in the slaughterhouse. In addition to the slaughterhouse, “there was also severe Legionary attacks on synagogues during the Bucharest pogrom.”<sup>56</sup> Much of the Jewish history and most of the Jewish communities of Bucharest were completely destroyed during the pogrom.

During the Iron Guard rebellion Antonescu appealed to his ally and friend, Adolph Hitler, and received extensive military aid from the Führer. Much confusion clouded the German troops already stationed in Romania, as they tried to make sense of whose allegiance they should uphold. Hitler’s personal message “to put German troops at Antonescu’s disposal” soon reestablished order and clarified Germany’s alliance with the *Conducător*.<sup>57</sup> To reassure Antonescu of his support, Hitler even telephoned his ally in Romania. With the help of German troops, by February the new German ambassador, Manfred von Killinger, “would report that Antonescu had emerged in definitive control.”<sup>58</sup>

In many ways, Antonescu’s rule still remains an enigma. The regime, which can be classified as fascist, aligned its ideology with the Nazi party, participated in the Holocaust, and even enacted a different version of the German Final Solution. However, Antonescu did push the Legionnaire Movement and the Iron Guard out of government, and at times even showed signs of collaboration, if not sympathy, for certain Jews. In fact, despite his various proclamations that a strong and powerful Romania must rid itself of its Jews, Antonescu did elude to the so-called ‘Jews *de treabă*’

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<sup>54</sup> Wiesel, *Final Report*, 114.

<sup>55</sup> "Romania." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005472> (accessed December 14, 2011).

<sup>56</sup> Wiesel, *Final Report*, 114.

<sup>57</sup> Ioanid, 54.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid*, 54.

(decent Jews). Although Antonescu attributed all of Romania's misfortunes to the *Jidani* (the gypsies of Romania), he claimed "not all Jews are alike," as was especially lenient towards those that had gained their citizenship after the war of independence of 1877, and those wounded or decorated in WWI.<sup>59</sup> And yet, on April 15, 1941, at a session of the Council of Ministers, Antonescu stated: "I give the mob complete license to slaughter them [the Jews]. I withdraw to my fortress, and after the slaughter I restore order."<sup>60</sup> Antonescu's statements were made almost immediately before disorder and violence descended upon Iasi, the stage of the second major pogrom of the Romanian Holocaust. The Iași pogrom took place over three days, between June 29 and July 2 1941, and left more than 10,000 Jews dead - many days before Antonescu and the army decided to intervene.<sup>61</sup> Much controversy surrounds the exact details of the event, especially with regards to Antonescu's prior knowledge and support of the mob violence. Regardless of the exact details, the massacre remains one of the most brutal expressions of anti-Semitic violence in Romania at the time.

In June of that same year Romania entered World War II on the Axis side. Although influence from Nazi Germany should not be underestimated, it must be noted that most of the anti-Semitic legislation, and various instances of brutality and violence against the Jewish community took place before Romania fully succumbed to Germany's influence. Marshal Antonescu, known as Hitler's greatest ally, certainly looked towards the German leader for inspiration, but was careful about the amount of interference from foreign forces, including Germany. Initially designed with the help of the Legionnaire Movement, but carried forward by the Marshal, Antonescu developed and implemented a process of 'Romanization' on his own accord. Similar to the German process of Aryanization, the program was designed to transfer all 'foreign' (which also included Jewish) capital back in the hands of Romanians," and restore Romania once and for all to its rightful people –

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid*, 272.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*, 272.

<sup>61</sup> Tesu, 153.



‘Romanians.’<sup>62</sup> Antonescu was obsessed with protecting Romanian nationalism and vehemently denied any foreign influence, especially on behalf of minorities in Romania. He emphasized that Romania was no longer privy to the treaty established in Berlin in 1878, and would not subject Romania to the embarrassment of having to embrace the Jewish minority. He further argued that Romania had been Judaized and therefore Romania’s economy had been compromised, “just like our purity.”<sup>63</sup>

The purity of the Romanian race was in danger after the German-Romanian armies invaded Russia and Romania was restored the lost provinces of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. Later that year, as the Axis troops took over Ukraine, Romania was awarded territory between the Dniester and Bug Rivers. It was in this province that the Romanian government created the province of Transnistria, an area that would become the hell on earth for the Jews of Romania.

Marshal Antonescu was clear in his orders to the Chief of Police in the city of Cernauti (today part of modern day Ukraine) when he stated that he wanted to rid the country of Jews.<sup>64</sup> And so began a program of methodical Jewish displacement from the southern



Figure 5: The artificial province of Transnistria, 1942

and mainland part of Romania to the northern province of Transnistria. Both on their own accord, and in support of German troops assigned to the area, Romania police and army units began

<sup>62</sup> Ioanid, 23.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, 274.

<sup>64</sup> Tesu, 165

systematically massacring thousands of Jews in Bessarabia, northern Bukovina, and Transnistria.<sup>65</sup>

Of the sanctioned murder programs, the most brutal and deadly was the Kishinev pogrom, which left thousands of Jewish people dead and spurred days of anti-Judaic violence. Those that survived saw a fate equally horrific. The 11,000 survivors of the initial attacks “were herded into a ghetto and conscripted to perform forced labor under harsh conditions.”<sup>66</sup>

Inside Transnistria the Romanian authorities created ‘colonies’, not much different than the German ghettos.<sup>67</sup> These ‘colonies’ were designed to hold the Jews that were being forced out of their homes in other parts of the Romanian territory. Once in the concentration camps in Transnistria, Bukovina, and Antonescu had developed a plan to expunge all of the Jews from Romanian territory once and for all. In October 1941, at a meeting of the Council of Ministers, he proclaimed: “I have decided to evacuate all [of the Jews] forever from these regions [specifically referring to Bessarabia and Bukovina].”<sup>68</sup> The conditions in the ghettos were abysmal, and thousands of Jews perished throughout the next few months.

The most notorious of the Romanian ghettos was Bogdanovka, located on the west bank of the Bug River. Most of the Jews of Odessa, the site of yet another appalling pogrom, were expelled to the ghastly Bogdanovka. In December of 1941, this ghetto was the site of another brutal massacre. After several cases of typhus broke out in the camp, fear of an epidemic broke out, and so the Romanian gendarmerie officer in control of the region, “decided to kill the entire camp population and issued an order to this effect to Vasile Manescu, the military government official in charge of the district.”<sup>69</sup> Shortly after “Romanian troops, together with Ukrainian auxiliaries,

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<sup>65</sup> "Romania." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005472> (accessed December 14, 2011).

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Ioanid, 142.

<sup>69</sup> "Shoah Resource Center, The International School for Holocaust Studies: Bogdanovka." Yad Vashem.

[http://www1.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/microsoft%20word%20-%20103.pdf](http://www1.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/microsoft%20word%20-%20103.pdf) (accessed December 16, 2011).

massacred almost all the Jews in Bogdanovka; shootings continued for more than a week.”<sup>70</sup> Of the thousands of victims in Bogdanovka and other camps in Transnistria, few survived the war.

The fate of the Jewish population of Romania was to take a new path with the Germany’s defeat at Stalingrad. As the course of the war began to favor the allied armies, and as Russia began to push Germany further and further outside of its border, Antonescu’s loyalties soon began to change. Obsessed with his prestige and desire to win the war and propel Romania into a new glorious era, Antonescu “increasingly came to see voluntary emigration of the Jews as a solution preferable to forced deportation.”<sup>71</sup> Although Germany continued to put pressure on Antonescu and the Romanian regime to continue with the deportations of the Jews to camps in Poland, and tried to ensure the implementation of the Final Solution in Romania, Antonescu hesitated. The Marshal, driven by a nationalistic pride, was determined to hold his own against Hitler. He argued that it was not “up to the Germans to decide what to do with ‘his’ Jews,” and once concerns about Romania’s image abroad emerged, Antonescu rejected Hitler’s interference.<sup>72</sup> Thus, one could argue, that by withstanding the pressure from Germany and Hitler, “Antonescu and his regime spared Jews in the Regat and southern Transylvania from the Nazis and the Final Solution.”<sup>73</sup>

Regardless of government’s milder actions towards the end of the war, and Antonescu’s decision to cease deportations, the Romanian regime is responsible for systematically murdering at least 250,000 of the Romanian Jewish population during WWII. In 1930 Romania had been home to 756,000 Jews. At the end of the war only about 375,000 remained.<sup>74</sup> The exact figures of the carnage of the Shoah in Romania may never be known, but it is undeniable that the Romanian government, under the rule of Marshal Ion Antonescu participated in the extermination of its Jewish

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<sup>70</sup> "Romania." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.  
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005472> (accessed December 14, 2011).

<sup>71</sup> Ioanid, 35.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid*, 282.

<sup>73</sup> Wiesel, *Final Report*, 252.

<sup>74</sup> Ioanid, 289.

communities. Guided by the historical anti-Semitism present in Romanian decades before the Second World War, and encouraged by a virulently anti-Semitic leadership, Romanian accepted the fate of their Jewish neighbors and supported the anti-Judaic measures. An enigmatic figure, Antonescu balanced a desire to purify the Romanian nation of the Jewish pest, while still maintaining a positive image in the international arena. In 1944 Antonescu was overthrown by King Michael, who had signed an armistice with the Soviet Government, and subsequently put on trial. During his trial Antonescu boldly stated: “If the Jews of Romania are still alive, it is on account of Ion Antonescu.”<sup>75</sup> Although this does indeed bare some truth, as many Jews from the southern parts of Romania never got their one-way ticket to Transnistria and were therefore spared of the twisted road to Poland, Antonescu is responsible for murders of Romania’s northern Jews. Marshal Antonescu was, without a doubt, “a war criminal in the purest definition of the term,” and his leadership “involved the country’s government in crimes against humanity unrivaled in Romania’s sometimes glorious, sometimes cruel, history.”<sup>76</sup> And yet, extreme nationalists in Romania today, hold Antonescu in a place of honor, venerating him as a hero who managed to hold the country together during a brutal war. The disturbing denial of the war crimes, and in some case of the Holocaust, is an aspect of modern day Romanian society.

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<sup>75</sup> Ioanid, 271.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid*, 287.

### Part III: Facing the Facts

In the decades following WWII Romania was gripped by powerful, autocratic, and oppressive communist regime. During those grim decades the memory of the Holocaust was lost; in part due to Communist denial of the atrocities, and in part due to people's lack of desire to uncover the dark past. As the communist regime buried the history farther and father into the past, denying any involvement in the Holocaust on the part of Romanians, people internalized the perverted historical accounts. The 1960s saw a "particular emergence of an overtly nationalistic and xenophobic tendency in Romanian historiography," which led to an abundance of open revisionist books in the 1970s.<sup>77</sup> Ironically, after the fall of Ceausescu (Romania's brutal communist dictator) in 1989, revisionist writing multiplied. A new campaign of heavily anti-Semitic, exceptionally nationalist extremist propaganda developed. Its proponents aimed to isolate Romania and establish control over the country. They developed anti-Semitic traditions in Romanian society and continue to claim that Antonescu was a liberator who gained Romania the provinces of Bessarabia and Bukovina during WWII. Due to the large number of Jewish Communists in the first post-war Romanian government, many extreme-right nationalists also blamed the entire Jewish population for bringing about communism to the whole of Romania, which became a deeply hated notion by the post-1989 leaders.

Extreme anti-Semitic feeling is not only present in the hearts and minds of very extreme nationalists, but a reality in the lives of many ordinary Romanians. Influenced by mainstream academics, politicians, and influential Romanians, ordinary people have adopted a negationist attitude toward the Holocaust in Romania. Several negationist theories persist in Romania today. Three are most prevalent:

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<sup>77</sup> Ioanid, xxiii

1. *Integral Negationism*

Advanced by the infamous Corneliu Vadim Tudor, leader of the *Partidul România Mare* (Greater Romania Party) and a Member of the European Parliament, the integral negationist theory proposes the idea that the Holocaust could never have happened and it is in fact just a Jewish scheme to further manipulate the European countries. Tudor clearly expressed this idea when he stated that the Holocaust was nothing but “a Zionist scheme aimed at squeezing out from Germany about 100 billion Deutschmarks and to terrorize for more than 40 years all those who do not acquiesce to the Jewish yoke.”<sup>78</sup> Another Romanian author that has whole-heartedly embraced this theory is Radu Theodoru, a strong supporter of western revisionist theory, who claims that the “Holocaust has been turned into ‘the most lucrative Jewish business ever,’ becoming a business that has ‘enriched the so-called witnesses, who fabricated series of aberrant exaggerations and pathological descriptions of life in Nazi camps’.”<sup>79</sup>

2. *Deflective Negationism*

This theory does not all-together renounce the Holocaust; rather it lays blame entirely on Germany. It is much more prevalent and widespread in Romania today, “both in statements made by politicians after the demise of communism and in history books.”<sup>80</sup> Proponents of this theory blame of the massacres and the deaths should be placed either on the causes of the war, or on the armies and actions of the Germans. Others go as far as to lay blame of the Jews themselves. In 1996 Vadim Tudor spoke about the Messianic plan God had entrusted upon him, “namely, to remind them [the Jews] that they cannot infinitely crucify Jesus.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Wiesel, *Final Report*, 351.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid*, 352.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid*, 352.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid*, 353.

### 3. *Selective Negationism*

Yet another negationist theory prevalent in Romania, more prevalent among Romanians than any other Eastern Europeans, selective negationism does not deny the existence or the gravity of the Holocaust. It simply denies certain aspects of it, particularly those that involve Romanian and the Romanian government. Proponents of this type of negationism venerate Antonescu and the Iron Guard, portraying them as heroes of the war. Much like deflective negationism “this discourse stems from a self-exonerating nationalist strategy.”<sup>82</sup> This theory is disturbingly found among many Romanian state officials, such as Gheorghe Buzatu (the Iași senator and member of the *Partidului România Mare* party) who has continuously denied Romania’s involvement in the massacre of Jews.

In 2006 the European Union welcomed Romania as a new addition to union. The prevalent denial of the Holocaust is truly an embarrassment for the Romanian people. Provided with countless accounts of sanctioned murder, it is quite unbelievable that a persistent negationism continue to. The tension in the today is between the need to follow European standards, and allowing the voices of the extremists who continue to deny Romanian’s role in the Holocaust. The only way ordinary Romanians will be able to turn their attention away from powerful figures such as Vadim Tudor, who have somehow manage to captivate the hearts and minds of Romanians, and become educated on the realities of their country’s history.

With the arrival of more liberal, westernized politicians and influence of academics from various European nations and the US, as well as Romanian-born foreign nationals, the truth is slowly emerging. In 2003, the former Romanian president Ion Iliescu, allowed for the uncovering of the Holocaust by a team of researchers led by the Romanian-born, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel. The report they produced, Final report: of the International Commission on the Holocaust

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<sup>82</sup> Wiesel, *Final Report*, 357.

in Romania, uncovered a wealth of knowledge about the Shoah in Romania and has become the basis for the study of the issue. On October 8, 2009, under the new Romanian president Traian Basescu, Bucharest inaugurated its first ever memorial for the Holocaust. Two years later President Basescu spoke again about the importance of Holocaust remembrance. In his October 2011 speech, commemorating 70 years from the beginning of Jewish deportations from Romanian territories, Basescu stated:

“The Day of remembrance of the Holocaust was founded for the remembrance of the suffering of the Jews who, along with another ethnic minority, were exposed to a systematic persecution during the period of 1933-1945. Today, for that reason, is one of remembrance, of acknowledging a tragic period of history, which unfolded on Romanian territory just 70 years ago – the beginning of the Jewish deportations to Transnistria.”<sup>83</sup>

Basescu’s message is one of hope, not only for remembrance of the Holocaust, but that perhaps, with strong leadership Romania will finally accept its role in the tragic events of the Holocaust.

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<sup>83</sup> Traian Bănescu, “70 De Ani De La începerea Deportării Evreilor Din România în Transnistria.” 2011 Presidential Message. Bucharest. 11 Oct. 2011.



#### **Part IV: Interviews in Romania**

I traveled to Romania in the winter of 2012 to gather testimonies and first hand accounts from various Romanians and Jews about their experiences with the Holocaust, as well as Romania's involvement in it. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to record much of it. Although I met with some very well known figures my time with them was short and my subject was much too delicate. No matter how much has been written about the Holocaust, and a lot has been written by Romanian and Jewish authors, the subject has not become any easier to discuss. More than once I was advised to step away from the subject and continue with my other passions. I also enjoy politics and international affairs, I would admit when asked what I was studying, and everyone argued that this would be a much better field for me to continue with. Maybe so. But having been educated in the spirit of the US the more I heard these claims the more I wanted to know why they were being made.

The problem of the Holocaust is a very delicate one in Romania. The truth is, and it is unmistakable, that the Romanian government under Marshal Ion Antonescu participated in the Holocaust. Anti-Semitic legislatures existed before the war and during the war. Hundreds, thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of Jews perished in the northern part of the country at the hands of this government. And while numbers are always important, numbers being the one factor that is most troubling for both Jews and negationists alike, I propose we move away from numbers. Ultimately, it does not matter if 25,000 or 250,000 Jews were killed, not more so than the fact that even the lowest number clearly show that the anti-Semitic laws and orders of the Romanian government actively sought to murder tens of thousands of Jews. I disagree that only 25,000 perished, and it might be difficult to prove with absolute certainty that all 280,000 Jews and Roma perished at the hands of Romanian military or due to Romanian legislature, the real number lies perhaps somewhere in the middle of the two extremes. Nevertheless, undeniable is that the

Romanian government, under Marshal Antonescu, participated in the sanctioned murder of its Jewish people. It therefore carried out a form of genocide, and subsequently should be held responsible for having participated in the Holocaust.

One of the most well known, albeit also most controversial, historians in Romania today is Alex Mihai Stoenescu. He has written extensively about Romania and its politics. A former military officer and employee of the Ministry of Defense, Stoenescu has previously been accused of collaborating with Secret Police during the communist era, which he claims was done with patriotic intent. Stoenescu moved away from his military duties and over the last twenty years has written extensively. His most recent work is a yet unpublished history of the world, in several volumes, in which he claims to rewrite the history of the Catholic Church. In his most famous book *Armata, Maresalul si Evreii* (The Army, the Marshall and the Jews) he discusses Antonescu's role in the events of WWII. This book, as many of his public statements about the Holocaust, has been met with much criticism. It was the reason why the Wiesel report has now categorized Stoenescu as a 'deflective negationist.' While he categorically agrees the Holocaust did happen in Romania, he also claims the numbers were grossly overestimated. Stoenescu also differentiates between the Romanian Jews of the southern part of the country (the former Wallachia) and the 'communist' Jews allied with the Soviets in the North (Bucovina and Moldova), and furthermore lays blame on the German armies for the massacre at Iasi. The massacre at Iasi has been a controversial aspect of the Holocaust. While some claim as many as 15,000 Jews were massacred, Stoenescu spoke of a conversation he had with the USHMM director Radu Ioanid, a historian who has written extensively on the subject, who claimed that he could also only prove that less than 1000 Jews were murdered. Yet again, the deeply embedded cynicism of the argument emerges. While an exact number of these atrocities is difficult to uncover (many of the bodies were disposed of and not properly buried),

Stoenescu chooses to focus less on the atrocities of the pogrom and the intention behind it, and instead proceeds to play a numbers game with Ioanid about the exact number of deaths.

Stoenescu further discusses in details the differences between the Jews pushed out of the Soviet Union who found a temporary home in Romania, most of whom remained in the northern region, and the Jews that had been assimilated in the southern region. He argues many instances of anti-Semitism, such as the instances where Jews were thrown off the trains (both moving and in the stops) where against these temporary, Russian Jews. He points to the many Jews that left during the communist era as proof that they had never intended to stay. Stoenescu argues that as soon as these Jews were allowed to leave the country by the new regime they packed up and left. Naturally Romanians would feel hurt by this. However, what Stoenescu does not take into account, is that during the 1960s and 1970s, when a lot of these Jews left, had the doors been open for Romanians to leave as well, the same amount, if not more, Romanian families would also have tried to escape the Ceausescu's regime. While undoubtedly there were Jewish families who had never intended to remain in Romania for good, this theory cannot be generalized to the entire community. While Stoenescu is not a true negationist, like other Romanian politicians who deny the very concept of the Holocaust or entirely lay blame with Germany, Stoenescu cannot be ignored nor dismissed. His work seeks to undermine previous history of the Holocaust and seeks to absolve the government and Romanians, at least in part, of some of the blame.

Furthermore, Stoenescu, and many other, ordinary Romanians, claim that Jews were the reason Communism emerged in Romania. Subsequently, Communists embarked on atrocious program to rid the Romanian population of any unstable (which meant elite) elements. The number of Romanians that died during the communist era was not insignificant. To rid the population of these 'dangerous' elements, the government began the Black Sea Canal Project. This became the site of the notorious labor camps during the 1950s that imprisoned over one million Romanians. Many

Romanians today, adverse to the Jewish population, see the Canal as a direct result of the Jewish actions during and after the Second World War. It is true that many of the leaders of the first government of Romania in the years following WWII were Jewish. The theories in Romania argue that that Jews brought Communism to Romania, Communism that later imprisoned and killed thousands of Romanian intelligentsia, and therefore Jews are directly responsible for the deaths of many Romanians. This is prevalent in the hearts and minds of many Romanians that suffered a great deal during Communism. While it is understandable that they would detest Communism, and by association would be inclined to form negative opinion of the Jewish community associated with this political movement, it is vital that generalizations are not made to extend to the entire Jewish population. No direct link between the Jews who perished during WWII and the communist leaders has ever been drawn. Yet, most Romanians refuse to see this.

During my stay in Romania I also had the opportunity to speak to the former President of Senate Oliviu Gherman, who served in the Romanian Government after 1989 for the better part of fifteen years. Now retired, he took the time to speak to me about his experience with the Jewish community. Although our time together was short, he did illustrate that, aside from anti-Semitic legislature that was passed during and before the communist regime, latent anti-Semitism is a part of Romanian life. He explained how, growing up, his classmates would torment young Jewish boys in his neighborhood. Some would get pork fat and, in the lunch break, rub it all over the food of their Jewish classmate. He also mentioned that on his way to school he would always pass a synagogue. Older boys would walk to school with scissors and would look for younger boys walking alone and to catch them and cut their sideburns. This was not a matter of childish play, he explained. It was all done with a nasty intent of disrespecting the traditions of their fellow Jewish classmates and neighbors. While anti-Semitism is no longer entrenched in Romanian society and politics, this latent anti-Semitism persists until today. When asked about his role in the government, Mr. Gherman

chosen not to speak much about his experience. It is important to note that, the early years of the 1990s were chaotic, difficult, and the political situation was very unstable. In the aftermath of a brutal communist regime, many politicians worried less about the 1940s and the Second World War, and more about the precarious situation Romania found itself in during the first few years after the fall of Communism.

To get a better understanding of the Jewish experience in Romania today I also met with Aurel Veiner, the Jewish deputy of the Romanian Parliament. Although so few Jews remain in the country today, their voice is represented in the government, much like all other minorities. He briefly discussed the work being done to educate Romanians on the Holocaust. A team of Jewish historians, politicians, and academics has been working on an extensive project concerning the Holocaust. Over the past few years they have collected testimonials of both Romanians and Jews and added it to an expanding body of work in the area of the Romanian Shoah. Through Mr. Veiner I also had the opportunity to meet Dr. Liviu Rotman, a historian, professor, and the director of the Hebrew Studies Center in Bucharest. Interestingly, Rotman was not readily willing to speak about the Jewish experience in Romania, during the Holocaust or today. The interview centered on his suggestions of books and literature, suggesting that the topic is still very much sensitive and in many cases, unspoken.

So what is the solution? Romania has come a long way in its journey to recognize its participation in the Holocaust. But many people still find it hard to discuss the sensitive topic and fear that opening the topic will bring about criticism and, as Stoenescu pointed out, “professional suicide.” The only way this subject will be discussed in an open, tolerant, and academic manner is through a thorough understanding of the various factors. This can only be done through education. The new generation of Romanians needs to be educated in a manner that allows students to explore all options of the atrocities of WWII. Nothing is black and white, so they should be

encouraged to ask questions, and further explore the subject. While the newly founded memorial is a great step forward, it is not enough. The guilt of the Holocaust and the blame for the genocide lies within the Romania people. Genocide cannot be perpetrated without popular support, at least in part. And so, healing and acceptance must also emerge within the population. Educating students in a tolerant and open manner will ensure that the Holocaust will emerge as a truly atrocious event, but its memory will might also allow for real reconciliation between the Jewish minority and the Christian majority of Romania.

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**Figure 5:** *Romania 1942, Transnistria Indicated*. Photograph. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.