

Jews in Romania Before, During, and After the Holocaust

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Abstract: An examination of Romania's past reveals a historical pattern of anti-Semitic behavior which tragically culminated in the killing of close to 300,000 Jews during World World II. Under the fascist rule of Ion Antonescu (1940-1944), Romania actively participated in the persecution and extermination of the Jewish population. Initially, discriminatory laws were enacted, but that soon escalated to mass deportations and killings of Romanian Jews. Following the ousting of the fascist regime, a communist government gained control of Romania and ushered the country into a post-war era. This period predominantly focused on distancing the country from their anti-Semitic past using censorship and distorted history. Even today, despite irrefutable evidence, the Romanian public continues to deny the nation's involvement, often blaming Hitler for the Romanian Holocaust. Although Hitler and the Nazis played a role, Romania's long-standing anti-Semitic tendencies facilitated collaboration efforts, and resulted in crimes which were independent atrocities perpetrated by leaders and citizens alike. In spite of efforts by later governments to attribute fault solely to the Nazis, Romania must take accountability for its participation in the Holocaust.

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Throughout much of history, Jewish communities have been victims of anti-Semitism at the hands of people who viewed themselves as superior. A number of countries have carried out atrocities against people of the Jewish faith, but Nazi Germany, under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, stands above all in its infamy. Contrary to much of the historical research focused on the Holocaust, Hitler's role is less prominent when examining Romania. Despite this, many present-day Romanians believe that he and the Nazis have more to do with the Jewish extermination in their country than history reveals. According to Alexandru Florian, a recently conducted poll found that nearly "72 percent of respondents said that Hitler and the German government at the time were responsible for the Holocaust in Romania."⁸⁹ Despite the influence of Hitler and the Nazis, patterns throughout history clearly indicate that Romania has a long legacy of anti-Semitism which informed its collaboration with the Nazis, contrary to messaging by later regimes that placed full blame on German influence. Thus, rather than being a result of external pressure, Romania's culpability in the Holocaust must be understood as a national responsibility.

The history of Jewish people in present-day Romania dates back to the second century, specifically in the province of Dacia, which had been under Roman rule. Evidence of Jewish existence in the territory within the early centuries is well-documented in the form of inscribed tombstones and artifacts, but very little is known with regards to their quality of life during that time period. Thus, there is a large gap within their history in Romania. Later, in the 14th and 15th centuries, Jews were migrating to Romania en masse from "Poland, Russia, Germany, and the Hanseatic cities following the bloody pogroms," and "settled in Moldavia [another Romanian territory]."⁹⁰ It is important to understand that the Jewish community had nowhere to call home, so they were constantly migrating to avoid persecution in lands where they were unwelcome. Despite many having escaped persecution in their native countries, the Jews in Romania were not exempt from anti-Semitic measures. The level of hostility toward the Jewish community was largely dependent on the ruler of each territory and their sentiments. Radu Ioanid, the author of *The Holocaust in Romania*, lists rulers and the anti-Jewish procedures they took during the 15th and 16th centuries. He says that, "ruling Wallachia from 1456 to 1462, Vlad the Impaler...

⁸⁹ Attila Szoó, "Majority of Romanians Still Blame Nazi Germany for the Holocaust in Romania - Transylvania Now," *Transylvania Now*, May 17, 2021, <https://transylvanianow.com/majority-of-romanians-still-blame-nazi-germany-for-the-holocaust-in-romania/>.

⁹⁰ I. C. Butnaru, *The Silent Holocaust: Romania and Its Jews* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 3.

persecuted Jewish merchants. In Moldavia, Stefanita (1522-1527), Alexander Lapusneanu (1552-1561 and 1564-1569), and Petru Schiopul (1579) promulgated discriminatory measures against Jewish merchants.”⁹¹ Whether these measures were enforced as a result of racial prejudices or feelings of jealousy over their perceived wealth, Jews were discriminated against by the governments and citizens alike. Regardless of who was ruling, the Jewish community faced endless discriminatory measures during the early centuries. When Romanian Jews began to gain political power three to four centuries later, the anti-Semitism they experienced would only get worse.

In the 19th century, conflicting opinions from numerous leaders and governments regarding the Jewish community made it difficult for Jews to find any sense of stability or belonging in Romania. Proclamations and published laws conflicted with one another, so many Jews were unsure of their citizenship status and the rights they were afforded. In the 1856 Treaty of Paris, it states that, “all inhabitants, regardless of religion, were to enjoy civil and religious rights as well as the right to own property and trade. Only foreign citizens did not have these rights.”⁹² Despite this declaration, Jews were considered aliens of a separate nation according to the Organic Statute, which was included in the 1829 Treaty of Adrianople; therefore, the Romanian government decided that the Treaty of Paris did not apply to Jews, and they were guaranteed no rights.⁹³ Fortunately, the Jewish community was not alone in their fight for civil rights in Romania. In numerous addresses to the legislature in the 1860s, “Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza opened doors for the gradual emancipation of Romanian Jews...but [Interior Minister] Kogalniceanu publicly contradicted the prince and in December of the same year, Jews were forbidden to practice law.”⁹⁴ In spite of leaders such as the prince advocating for equal rights, others, such as Kogalniceanu, used their influential positions to impose a number of anti-Semitic policies that would exclude Jews from occupations that might empower them, specifically in the fields of education, law, and

⁹¹ Radu Ioanid, *Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944*, (Chicago: Ivan R Dee, Inc., 2008), 5.

⁹² This treaty ended the Crimean War (1853-1856). The war saw the Russian Empire and an alliance of the Ottoman Empire, France, and Britain fight over the right to holy places like Palestine within the crumbling Ottoman Empire, which contained much of modern-day Romania. See Butnaru, *The Silent Holocaust*, 14.

⁹³ The Treaty of Adrianople ended the Russo-Turkish War (1828-1829) that was fought between the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire. The terms favored Russia, who gained control of present-day Romanian territories such as Wallachia and Moldavia.

⁹⁴ Ioanid, *Holocaust in Romania*, 6.

medicine. Jews were considered enemies of the state by the Romanian ruling class, hence why their civil rights were largely restricted. Eventually, in 1878, Jewish people were able to apply for citizenship, but there were many roadblocks to overcome. Consequently, only a select few were able to successfully become citizens (up until 1918 when restrictions became more lax). Throughout the majority of the 19th century, Jews were considered foreigners, but even when they did become citizens, they were not granted equality, as anti-Semitism continued well into the next century.

The first half of the 20th century was dominated by violence and bloodshed, most of which occurred during global conflicts. In 1914, the First World War broke out, and in 1916, Romania decided to join the Allied Forces. Jews were encouraged, and in some cases forced, to serve in the military, where anti-Semitism was rampant. In one horrifying event, “the Supreme General Staff unleashed an anti-Semitic campaign leading to the execution of a number of Jewish soldiers accused of spying...six Jews were shot by their erstwhile comrades on orders of their commanding officer.”⁹⁵ In spite of this and other similar instances of violent anti-Semitism, roughly 35,000 Jews risked their lives to serve in the Romanian forces. Even after their immense sacrifices during the war, Jews were ridiculed by the political forces in Romania for their alleged collaboration in nearby revolutions. Romanians were angered by the fact “that Jews played a leading role in the Russian and Hungarian communist revolutions,” which “further bolstered Romanian political anti-Semitism.”⁹⁶ Such feelings were exacerbated by “the inordinate attention” Jewish communists received from the international press, leading to Jews being deemed a threat to national security and viewed as anti-Romanian. Romanian nationalists even “exploited anti-Semitic stereotypes to portray the Jewish community as a whole as a pro-Communist fifth column.”⁹⁷ Consequently, the fight for Jewish civil rights was ignited once more, but certainly not without opposition. Many Romanian political parties ran on a platform of anti-Semitic policies, but two in particular, the LANC (Christian National Defense League) and the Iron Guard, were major perpetrators of violence against the Jewish community in the 1920s, with the former even adopting the swastika

⁹⁵ Ioanid, *Holocaust in Romania*, 11.

⁹⁶ William Brustein and Ryan King, “Anti-Semitism as a Response to Perceived Jewish Power: The Cases of Bulgaria and Romania before the Holocaust,” *Social Forces* 83, no. 2 (December 2004): 698, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3598344>.

⁹⁷ Ioanid, *Holocaust in Romania*, 37.

before Hitler. In one such incident, following the government's refusal to take measures against Jews, members of both the LANC and the Iron Guard "decided to purify national life by assassinating a number of important Jewish personalities, rabbis, and writers, as well as Christian politicians [who had been 'bought' by Jews, according to the LANC]."⁹⁸ Even more shocking than this is the fact that the perpetrators were acquitted due to anti-Semitism within the legal system. Unfortunately for Jews in Romania, anti-Semitic political parties such as the LANC and the Iron Guard would garner more and more support heading into the 1930s, so much so that they would end up leading the country just before the Second World War.

In 1935, the LANC merged with the National Agrarian Party, which was headed by Octavian Goga, a raging anti-Semite who served as the Interior Minister at that time. Soon after this merger, Goga and A. C. Cuza, leader of the LANC, met with Adolf Hitler. There were "close relations between these fascist leaders and Hitler and his government...and large sums of money [were] received to organize a solid propaganda campaign."⁹⁹ By the end of 1937, the campaign partly funded by the Third Reich proved to be successful as the Goga-Cuza government rose to power in Romania. Almost immediately after, over 200,000 Jews had their citizenship revoked and a series of anti-Semitic laws were enacted. The government proposed mass deportations of Jews, but none were ever carried out. This is because after only two months of ruling, King Carol II dissolved the Goga-Cuza government and installed his own dictatorship in February of 1938. For Jewish people, this was no relief, as things would get progressively worse under each new leader. Under Carol II, a law passed on August 8, 1940 defined what a Jew was according to the government. Some of the criteria included "c. persons converted to Christianity, though born to unconverted Jewish parents; d. Christians born to a Christian mother and a Jewish father who had not been baptized; e. persons born illegitimately to a Jewish mother."¹⁰⁰ The law and its parameters were even stricter than those of the Nuremberg Laws of Nazi Germany. Additional laws were passed that barred Jews from certain professions and punished them for up to two years if they were found in violation. Even more egregious, and similar to Nazi Germany, the new government passed a law forbidding marriages between Jews and gentiles on the basis of Jewish inferiority.

⁹⁸ Butnaru, *The Silent Holocaust*, 38.

⁹⁹ Butnaru, *The Silent Holocaust*, 53.

¹⁰⁰ Ioanid, *Holocaust in Romania*, 20.

With the developments of World War II beginning to take shape, laws defining Jews passed under King Carol II would encourage and set the stage for increased anti-Semitic violence in Romania throughout the war.

Following the invasion of Poland by the Nazis in 1939, Carol II and Romania maintained a position of neutrality. In June of 1940, while still neutral in the midst of the war, the USSR demanded that Romania forfeit their claims to Bessarabia and Bukovina. While Romanian soldiers were withdrawing from these provinces, anti-Semitic violence broke out as a result of propaganda that depicted Jews as communists; Jews were brutally massacred all over the country by Romanian forces, with “the largest massacres taking place in the towns of Galati and Dorohoi [on the Romanian-USSR border].” Attempting to escape Romania was a death sentence in itself, as evidenced by an incident in which, “a unit of the Romanian army cut down at least four hundred Jews attempting to flee to the USSR.”¹⁰¹ This is just one example out of the dozens of mass killings that took place during the time period. There was very little outrage at the loss of Jewish life; instead, the outrage came due to the fact that the territories of Bessarabia and Bukovina were lost. This inevitably led to General Ion Antonescu blaming King Carol II and forcing him to abdicate the throne. His son Mihai (Michael) succeeded him, but essentially became a figurehead. Antonescu assumed much of the power and effectively became a military dictator. Under his leadership, the Jewish community in Romania would suffer; Antonescu wasted no time joining Hitler and the Axis Powers, doing so in November of 1940.

In January of 1941, the opposition to Antonescu, led by his second-in-command Horia Sima, staged an attempted coup spanning three days known as the Legionnaire’s Rebellion. Rather than punish the authoritative figures that they resented, they attacked a minority population that had nothing to do with their suffering.¹⁰² In his book, Butnaru states that, “they did not use this fury to go against those who had oppressed them, those who had tortured them, those who had interned them in concentration camps, those who had broken their backs, but against Jews!”¹⁰³ When Antonescu brutally crushed the rebellion, he was able to capitalize on the perception that he

¹⁰¹ Ioanid, *Holocaust in Romania*, 41.

¹⁰² Antonescu viewed the Iron Guard as a threat to his authority, and when Horia Sima sensed that the dictator would attempt to crush his opposition, he launched a last-ditch coup attempt.

¹⁰³ Butnaru, *The Silent Holocaust*, 82.

appeared to have saved Jews. However, even though it was his own harmful rhetoric that caused Jews to be targeted in the first place, the Prime Minister strategically exploited the situation to his advantage, with the hope of exonerating himself from his previous wrongdoings. In reality, Hitler is the one who encouraged him to repress the rebellion, even though the victims were Jews, because he feared it might spiral out of control. Ultimately, following a violent rebellion that targeted Romanian Jews, tensions would escalate, not for the fascist governments, but instead for the Jewish community.

Just months after the Legionnaire's Rebellion, arguably the most devastating massacre to occur during World War II took place in Romania. During the summer months of 1941, "thousands of Jews were killed in one of the most savage pogroms of World War II, the Iasi pogrom, perhaps the most infamous event in the history of the Holocaust in Romania."¹⁰⁴ Local authorities and soldiers massacred the Jewish people of Iasi, who they believed were working closely with the Soviet enemies. Antonescu condemned the violence carried out by the participants but offered no solace to the Jewish victims. Those who were not massacred were crowded into train cars destined for concentration camps. The death train, as it is commonly referred to, promised a horrible fate for those that boarded it as they died slow, painful deaths caused by hunger, dehydration, and infections from the wounds they sustained at the hands of the soldiers. Butnaru vividly describes the death train as "a train that was carrying human beings who were still alive, but who were obliged to reach their destination only as corpses."¹⁰⁵ The inhumanity suffered by the Jews in Iasi and aboard the death train would be a sign of the horrors that awaited the remaining Jews in Romania during the war. Overall, it is estimated that "about eight thousand Jews died in the bloody pogrom at Iasi."¹⁰⁶ Unfortunately, the number of victims would only continue to grow under Antonescu, even after he crushed the Iron Guard revolution. The slaughtering of Jews in Iasi was not an isolated event, but instead part of a larger pattern of anti-Semitic violence undertaken by the Romanian government.

Throughout the war, the Romanian government continued to persecute the Jewish community that resided in Romania, as well as in territories that they expanded into. One such

¹⁰⁴ Ioanid, *Holocaust in Romania*, 63.

¹⁰⁵ Butnaru, *The Silent Holocaust*, 96.

¹⁰⁶ Butnaru, *The Silent Holocaust*, 97.

territory was Odessa, a major port city in what is now Ukraine, which was under Soviet control at the time. Before the massacre, historians believe that just under 200,000 Jews resided in Odessa. Very few would survive once the Romanians gained control from the Soviets, but those that did were sent to concentration camps, where their chances of survival were slim. Following an explosion in which a Romanian general was killed in Odessa, “Antonescu ordered a reprisal in the ratio of one to one hundred. The ensuing massacre of Jews was the largest in Europe.”¹⁰⁷ For every one person killed in the explosion, one hundred Jews would be slaughtered. The simple execution methods of hanging and shooting Jews proved to be especially time consuming, so the organizers implemented more efficient methods. In one case, “groups of about fifty to sixty people were shot and fell into the ditch,” and in another, Jews were crowded into warehouses where the soldiers “opened fire on the crowd shut up in those sinister warehouses.”¹⁰⁸ The massacre lasted just three days, but the damage was done; Odessa would never be the same again. Historians frequently engage in discussions regarding the total number of victims, but the final analysis shows that “it is quite likely that at least 25,000 Jews were killed in Odessa.”¹⁰⁹ After the merciless killings concluded, the Jews that were lucky enough to survive and not be sent to concentration camps fled the city. As a result, a small fraction of the 200,000 Jews that had once populated Odessa remain today. The figure is believed to fall between 30,000 and 40,000, signifying just how long-lasting the effects and influence of Romanian anti-Semitism are, even beyond its borders.

Up until 1944, the Romanian military continued to carry out atrocities similar to those that occurred in Iasi and Odessa, and the blood on the hands of Romanian soldiers continued to grow. With all of the deaths caused by the Nazis, it is easy to hold them accountable for all of the Jewish deaths, “but what must be borne in mind is that in the years of 1940-1944 more than four hundred thousand Jews were killed in Romania.”¹¹⁰ The death toll would have been much higher if Ion Antonescu had not decided to indefinitely suspend the deportation of Romanian Jews to concentration camps in Poland in 1942.¹¹¹ He went against the desires of Adolf Hitler and his

¹⁰⁷ Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-1945* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1995), 84.

¹⁰⁸ Butnaru, *The Silent Holocaust*, 126.

¹⁰⁹ Ioanid, *Holocaust in Romania*, 182.

¹¹⁰ Butnaru, *The Silent Holocaust*, 89.

¹¹¹ Ioanid, *Holocaust in Romania*, 271.

proposed Final Solution, not necessarily to save Jews, but rather because of mounting political pressure from both international and domestic sources. When news spread of the treatment of Jews under his regime, Antonescu attempted to temporarily mitigate the adverse effects of his policies. In an attempt to save face, he tried to shift blame for the Romanian Holocaust to Hitler and the Nazis. In spite of his attempts to conceal the behavior of his government from the public eye, Antonescu's legacy of anti-Semitic hate and violence is one that cannot be forgotten. Romania experienced one of its darkest times under Antonescu's leadership during World War II, but the period from 1944 onwards proved to be especially significant in the reshaping of the country's global image.

In August of 1944, a coup led by King Michael and a number of government officials was carried out, as they opposed Antonescu's rule and were in favor of leaving the Axis alliance. After ousting Antonescu, Romania abandoned Hitler and began fighting alongside the Soviets for the remainder of the war. Following the Allied victory in the war, war criminals such as Ion Antonescu began to be prosecuted. Comparable to the famous Nuremberg Trials of Allied-occupied Germany, Antonescu's trial was highly publicized due to his notoriety and due to the magnitude of the crimes he was charged with. He was charged with devising a plan "to eliminate the Jews from Romania [through] executions, deportations, forced labor, and starvation."¹¹² As expected, Ion Antonescu was found guilty of crimes against humanity that he and the Romanian military carried out while he was in power. Although the Romanian Communist Party was genuinely interested in trying Antonescu for his war crimes, they also likely had ulterior motives, primarily to characterize him as the root of Romanian anti-Semitism to avoid acknowledging a national participation. Despite Antonescu and the military-style dictatorship being overthrown, Romanian Jews had a new government to fear: the Communists.

While the violence toward Jews in Romania mostly subsided after the war, anti-Semitism remained. Petru Groza, appointed as Prime Minister by King Michael I after pressure from the Soviets, was a staunch communist that tended to diminish influential Jewish figures like Alexandre Safran, and the community as a whole. Safran was the chief rabbi of Romania at the time and is best known for saving thousands of Jewish lives by advocating for the stoppage of deportations in

¹¹² Ioanid, *Holocaust in Romania*, 294.

1942. Safran says, “that what Antonescu did not achieve—namely the destruction of Jewish institutions—the Communist regime did in the first phase of its power.”¹¹³ The rabbi was so displeased with the regime that he chose to remain in exile in Switzerland. In spite of Safran’s outrage, Groza was not considered an anti-Semite in comparison to those that preceded him. In fact, he did condemn anti-Semitic violence, but he did not condemn simple anti-Semitism. Instead of working to right the wrongdoings of his predecessors, he chose to ignore the blatant anti-Semitic ideologies that plagued Romanian society. He did nothing to dispel prejudices against Jews that were common after the war, such as that, “Jews were anti-Romanian, lazy, financially rapacious, and morally decadent.”¹¹⁴ The Communist Era in Romania lasted from the end of the war to 1989, and, during that time, these harmful rhetorics only continued to grow and further distort history.

The reason why 72 percent of the respondents in the aforementioned poll believe that Hitler and the Nazis are to blame for the Holocaust in Romania can be attributed to the Communists. The Communists implemented school curriculums that distorted the reality of the Holocaust or completely skipped over it altogether. Hence, many Romanians today do not have the education necessary to be able to determine what Romania’s role in the Holocaust truly was. Some even deny that the Holocaust occurred, despite the overwhelming amount of evidence that confirms it. In *The Silent Holocaust*, the famous Holocaust survivor-turned-author Elie Wiesel imparts his wisdom, saying, “remember: when memory is muted, truth is victim. When the past is silenced, the future is jeopardized. When history is falsified, humanity is impoverished.”¹¹⁵ While Groza did not engage in state-sanctioned violence like his predecessor, he and his government suppressed the problematic history of Romania and thus perpetrated an injustice upon the Jewish community. The Communist government, largely due to cultural and historical anti-Semitic attitudes within Romania, pursued policies which obfuscated the Holocaust, and particularly Romania’s responsibility for the deaths of thousands of innocent Jews.

Despite the historical oversight, the study of Romanian history offers an opportunity to reflect on and learn from past mistakes. Without context, it is possible that one could arrive at the

¹¹³ Ion Popa, “The Jewish Community of Romania and the Romanian Orthodox Church in the Aftermath of the Holocaust (1945–1948),” *The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 75.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Popa, “The Jewish Community of Romania,” 76.

¹¹⁵ Butnaru, *The Silent Holocaust*, Foreword.

conclusion that the Nazis forced the Romanians to participate in exterminating Jews. However, when looking at Romanian history dating back to the times of Vlad the Impaler and numerous other leaders in the 15th and 16th centuries, it becomes more and more apparent that a pattern of anti-Semitism does in fact exist. Even further proof is demonstrated in the way that Jews were treated during the 19th and early 20th centuries, when they were considered aliens and therefore had no rights in Romania. While it is true that, before the war, the Goga-Cuza government relied on the Nazis for financial support, it was succeeded by multiple governments which still perpetrated not just anti-Semitic attitudes, but outright violence and massacres. The Nazis did not force the Romanian government to do anything, and they were complicit in the proposed Final Solution. The tragedies that happened to the Jewish community in Romania were the fault of the Romanian government and military, and should be attributed to them as such. Unfortunately, the Communist regimes that followed Antonescu succeeded in rewriting the history of Romania. Consequently, much of the Romanian public today is familiar with a history that has been heavily embellished and distorted. A thorough examination of Romanian history, from the persecution of Jews in the Middle Ages, to the escalation of anti-Semitic violence before and during World War II, and the subsequent erasure of a disgraced past by the Communist governments, provides all of the necessary evidence to be able to recognize that Romania is largely at fault for the Romanian portion of the Holocaust.

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