

# The Cult of Antonescu and the Delayed Reappraisal of the Romanian Holocaust

by Mariana Hausleitner, Free University of Berlin

---

After General Antonescu came to power in September 1940, Romania became an important ally of the German Reich. Ion Antonescu ruled for five months jointly with the Iron Guard, a widespread fascist movement. In January 1941, the Iron Guard attempted to oust the general through an insurrection. Hitler sided, however, with the general, as order was the German Reich's priority in Romania. The country was intended as a staging ground for the scheduled attack on the Soviet Union and its oil wells were of central importance to the German war effort. During the insurrection a pogrom occurred in Bucharest, in which over one hundred Jews were murdered.

In the first weeks after the attack on the Soviet Union, the persecution of the Jews took on a new dimension. In the city of Iași in northeastern Romania on June 29, 1941, around 13,000 Jews were murdered by gendarmes, soldiers, armed legionnaires and civilians. There were many more victims in the summer of 1941 in Bessarabia and North Bukovina, districts which the Romanian army had been forced to evacuate in June 1940 due to a Soviet ultimatum. After the recapture of these areas, through the end of 1941, between 45,000 and 60,000 Jews were murdered by the Romanian army and small units of the German Einsatzgruppe D. In August 1941, the German Reich ceded the Ukrainian territory between the Dniester and Southern Bug rivers, called Transnistria, to its Romanian ally as an occupation zone. Afterwards, the Gendarmerie deported Jews from Bukovina and Bessarabia to that area. This region was utterly devastated throughout the war, and roughly 130,000 Jews fled or were killed. The largest massacres were carried out here: in Odessa the Romanian army murdered about 20,000 Jews in October 1941. In Transnistria

there was no earning potential, and the deportees could only secure food by selling their meager portable possessions to farmers. Jews from Bessarabia, in particular, came to Transnistria without any possessions following long marches. Hundreds of thousands starved or died of deficiency diseases like epidemic typhus. In Bucharest Ion Antonescu, who had risen to Marshal, had allowed a plan to ethnically cleanse Romania to be drawn up. In October 1941, Sabin Manuilă, director of the Central Statistical Institute, devised a plan for the systematic expulsion of 3.5 million non-Romanians. Communities of Romanian minorities from abroad were to be settled in place of the Hungarians and Ukrainians, while Manuilă spoke cynically of a "one-way transfer" of Jews and Gypsies/Roma. The first 20,000 Roma were deported in 1942. In 1943, the intended expulsion of over one million Slavs from Bessarabia and North Bukovina remained in its earliest stages, because the condition of the Romanian army had drastically worsened after the defeat at Stalingrad. Already by the spring of 1944 the Red Army had captured Bessarabia and North Bukovina. On August 23, 1944, Marshal Antonescu and Prime Minister Mihai Antonescu were arrested by the King. As a result, the Romanian army was able to make an about-face, fighting thereafter on the side of the Red Army to recapture North Transylvania, which Hungary had gained by the Second Vienna Award of 1940.

Ion and Mihai Antonescu were put to death on June 1, 1946, after a trial in which the mass murder of the Jews and Roma played only a marginal role. At its center stood the Romanian army's devastation of the territory of the Soviet Union. However, the magnitude of the mass crimes was known, because in 1946 Matatias Carp, the secretary of the Fede-

ration of Jewish Municipalities published many documents in Black Book. The Suffering of the Jews of Romania 1940-1944 (*Cartea neagră. Suferințele evreilor din România 1940-1944*). This book disappeared from Romanian libraries, however, after Stalin ordered the confiscation of the corresponding Black Book about the mass murder of Jews in the territory of the Soviet Union.

After 1949 only the murders in Iași were discussed in Romania and the Wehrmacht was blamed for them. Nothing was published about Bessarabia and North Bukovina. After 1986 occasional publications appeared on the deportation of the Jews from North Transylvania, which belonged to Hungary between 1940 and 1944.

Outside Romania, however, research was carried out from the 1980s about the mass killings in Romania and Transnistria: the Israeli historian Jean Ancel published a comprehensive document collection on the subject. Randolph R. Braham covered the deportations from North Transylvania in a benchmark work on the Hungarian Holocaust. In Germany, Armin Heinen wrote his dissertation on the fascist movement in Romania. Even after the fall of Ceaușescu in December 1989, only a few intellectuals in Romania took an interest in these works. It was above all the members of the Federation of Jewish Communities who, through the publication of documents, attempted to clarify the dimensions of the mass murder of Jews in the Romanian peripheral regions. In contrast, many Romanians contributed encomia on the struggle of Marshal Antonescu against Bolshevism. On the petition of members of the ruling "National Salvation Front," on June 1, 1991, Antonescu was honored with a minute of silence in the Senate on the occasion of the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his execution. Only the re-

presentatives of the Hungarian minority left the room in protest. Streets were named after Antonescu and busts of him installed in several large cities. Countless publications appeared celebrating him as a patriot who reclaimed Bessarabia and the Bukovina in 1941. Many Romanian politicians themselves hoped for annexation of both regions after the collapse of the Soviet Union. At that time Romanian historians in the Republic of Moldova also took up the Cult of Antonescu, while members of the Slavic minorities vehemently criticized it.

Some Romanians called for a judicial rehabilitation of Antonescu and when the first step to this end was taken in November 1997 by the chief public prosecutor, eight members of Antonescu's regime were rehabilitated. Two United States Senators vehemently protested against this, and as a result only a few state secretaries from the regime were rehabilitated in 1998. Besides family members, the initiators of the rehabilitation were notably politicians of the Greater Romania Party. This party, led by a former "court poet" of the Communist Party, has made a name for itself by its hate campaigns against Jews, Hungarians, and Roma. In the elections of November 2000, the party gained 20% of the vote, making it the second largest force in parliament. Governmental responsibility passed to the Party of Social Democracy, led by Ion Iliescu, which between 1993 and 1995 had ruled with the support of the Greater Romania Party.

Iliescu's party wished after November 2000 to distinguish itself from its former allies and positioned itself in opposition to the Greater Romania Party and in favor of a quick integration into NATO and the European Union. In the course of the war against Afghanistan, a close cooperation with the

United States began and this new alignment brought about a renunciation of the cult of Marshal Antonescu. Afterwards, General Chelaru, who until February 2000 had been a member of the General Staff of the Romanian Army, took active part in the ceremonial dedication of an Antonescu bust in Bucharest while in uniform, which was criticized in the United States. Soon afterwards Mihai Chelaru lost his post. In March 2002 Prime Minister Năstase, jointly with the ministers of the interior, justice, and culture, issued an edict banning racist agitation and holocaust denial, under penalty of a prison sentence. For a long time the edict could not be adopted in parliament, largely because the delegates of the Greater Romania Party opposed it.

In October 2003, to secure support for himself Ion Iliescu, as Romanian President, provided for the creation of a "Commission on the Holocaust and its Aftermath in Romania" (see the article by William Totok). It was chaired by writer and Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel, who had been deported from North Transylvania to Auschwitz as a child. Half of the commission's members were well-known historians from Romania, Israel, Germany, and the United States, while the other half were representatives of Jewish organizations. Exactly one year later the Commission presented a voluminous report, the central point of which was the mass murder committed against the Jews on Romanian and Ukrainian territory. The total number of fatalities was estimated to be between 280,000 and 380,000. It also referred to the 11,000 Roma who died in Transnistria. The report also noted the strength of the Greater Romania Party, which had denied the Romanian Holocaust.

In December 2004, Iliescu commended the commission's report and decorated the writer decoration for their direction of it. Yet

before the end of his term in office, Iliescu granted the same decoration to two anti-Semites who had been vehemently criticized in the report: it was given to Corneliu Vadim Tudor, the leader of the Greater Romania Party, as well as to the historian Gheorghe Buzatu, a long-time representative of the Party in the Senate. Buzatu also directed an endowment for the rehabilitation of Marshal Antonescu. As a result, Elie Wiesel and Randolph R. Braham indignantly returned their decorations to Iliescu.

The report of the Holocaust Commission first appeared in 2005 in Romanian and English. Shortly afterwards, the creation of a research institute in Bucharest named for Elie Wiesel was announced (Website: <http://www.inshr-ew.ro/>). It published analysis of the Holocaust and current anti-Semitic trends. 2005 also saw the introduction of an education ministry-approved textbook which informed high school students about the history of Jews and the Holocaust. A Holocaust commemoration day was designated. The streets that had been named after Antonescu were renamed.

Still, not all remnants of the 13 years of a persistent Antonescu cult have been erased, although in public only extremist fringe groups deny the Romanian Holocaust. But there is no debate about the comprehensive plans for ethnic cleansing during the war years. The report compiled by the commission compiled in one place research findings which had not been previously discussed in Romania. For American and Israeli researchers the crimes against the Jews have stood in the foreground, while much less work has been done on other peoples discriminated against during the war years like the Roma and the Slavs. Even less is known about the deportation to Transnistria of Romanians

who refused military service on religious grounds.

*Translation from the German by John Kenney*

*About the author:*

Mariana Hausleitner, Ph.D., is a lecturer on the Cultural and Historical Studies department at the Free University of Berlin. She is currently curator of the exhibit "Order and Crime: The Police in the Nazi State" at the German Historical Museum in Berlin.

southern Ukraine, the rehabilitation of communism. Selected publications: *Die Rumänisierung der Bukowina. Die Durchsetzung des nationalstaatlichen Anspruchs Großrumäniens 1918-1944*, München 2001 [The Romanization of Bukovina. The enforcement of the nation-state claim of Greater Romania 1918-1944], Munich 2001; *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien 1814-1941. Zur Minderheitspolitik Russlands und Großrumäniens*, München 2005. [The Germans and the Jews in Bessarabia 1814-1941. On the minority policy of Russia and Greater Romania], Munich 2005. e-mail: m.hausleitner@t-online.de

## **Reception of the Final Report of the International Commission for Investigation of the Romanian Holocaust ("Wiesel Commission")**

by William Totok, Berlin

---

The history of the scholarly and journalistic reception of the events of the years 1941 to 1944 is part of the history of the Romanian Holocaust. The creation of an international commission in the autumn of 2003, which investigated the Romanian Holocaust and one year later issued its final report, was preceded by scores of press campaigns, in which there was some demand for the rehabilitation of the military dictator Ion Antonescu and those members of his cabinet who had been convicted as war criminals after 1945. To the post-communist cult sparked by Antonescu was added an extremely questionable interview in which then Romanian president Ion Iliescu relativized the Holocaust. The interview, published in the Israeli newspaper "Ha'aretz" on 25 July 2003, took the international public by surprise. So as not to politically strain and potentially

jeopardize Romania's intended European integration, an international commission for the investigation of the Holocaust was created in the fall of 2003. One year later, acting under the chairmanship of Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel, the commission presented its final report, which was subsequently published on the internet in both English and Romanian. Later the final report was published in book form by the Romanian publisher Polirom. The publication of the report and in particular the conclusions and recommendations contained within it brought about a variety of reactions.

In the public reception four tendencies became apparent: 1.) positive-factual; 2.) distanced-ironic; 3.) historical-critical; and 4.) dismissive-revisionist. However, a key statement in the conclusion of the commission's fi-