

## Romania and the Holocaust: Delicate Reappraisal of a Fateful Past

### Editorial

During the Second World War, Romania was directly responsible for the deaths of between 280,000 and 380,000 Jews and approximately 11,000 Roma. This is one of the most important insights of the final report of the Historical Commission led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel, which was appointed in 2003/04 by Romanian President Iliescu to investigate the role of Romania under the regime of the military dictator Ion Antonescu. The Romanian authorities only acknowledged the responsibility of the Antonescu Regime reluctantly. The trigger for the establishment of the Wiesel Commission was not the desire to deal with the past, but rather the increasingly apparent outrage in Western countries over the denial or trivialization of the Romanian role in the Holocaust, including by official representatives of the state like Iliescu himself. The official acknowledgement of the responsibility of the Romanian state for the mass murders must also be seen in the context of the country's then forthcoming admission to NATO and the EU. Nearly seven years after the state officially recognized its responsibility for the crimes of the Antonescu regime, there is no sign of a critical public discourse on this dark chapter of Romanian history and no general awareness of this tragedy in wide circles of the public. Some of the recommendations of the commission have indeed been implemented – like the establishment of a Holocaust Memorial in Bucharest. As the items in this issue of *Euxeinos* show, however, indifference and apathy continue to prevail, while the popular treatments of the topic in the media get bogged down in vague statements in the best case, while in the worst case they deny responsibility. Although by now not only foreign historians, but increasingly also Romanian historians have dealt with the topic and brought to light many specific aspects

of it through valuable new archival discoveries and findings, outside this circle of specialists there has not been a broad societal debate about Romania's responsibility for the persecution and murder of Jews and Roma.

The following articles illuminate the theme from diverse perspectives. Mariane Hausleitner traces an overview of the nature of engagement with the Antonescu regime in the postwar period, especially focusing on the flourishing Antonescu cult after 1990, and briefly discusses the current state of research. In William Totok's article the reaction to the Wiesel Commission's report is described. The author notes that in purely quantitative terms a hostile-revisionist reception prevailed, while a historical-critical reception only appeared to a limited extent. Victor Eskenasy notes a similar phenomenon in terms of popular depictions of the Holocaust in film and television. Despite an impressive number of serious scholarly works and document collections, in this area a very ambiguous handling of the issue still prevails. There are three main reasons for this: the prevalence of denialism as a result of traditional anti-Semitism, the reluctance of prominent intellectuals to address the general public, and finally the inaccessibility of the specialist literature due to high prices and limited editions. Finally, Viorel Achim's contribution focuses on a too often forgotten aspect of the Holocaust: the deportation of about 25,000 Roma in Romanian-occupied Transnistria (the area between the rivers Dniester and Bug), nearly half of whom did not survive. Compared to the nineties, the reappraisal of Romanian History in relation to the Holocaust and the Second World War has indeed made some progress. Nonetheless, as these articles demonstrate, a critical examination of its own history on a broad basis may still be a while in coming.

*Daniel Ursprung, Zürich*  
e-mail: daur@access.uzh.ch