

**BESSARABIAN JEWRY UNDER ASSAULT:
FROM PRE-WAR ANTISEMITISM
TO POPULAR VIOLENCE DURING
THE HOLOCAUST**

It has been almost two decades since the Communist system collapsed in Eastern Europe. During the period that has followed, the history of these former socialist countries has undergone a radical re-writing. While some of these efforts by historians have been laudable, much of this re-writing has been accompanied by some regrettable approaches. One of the most obvious and disappointing approaches was the continuous politicization and instrumentalization of history. Many East European historians tore down "the heroic revolutionary masses" from the pedestal of history just to replace them with the figure of "the suffering nation." The theme of a nation's victimhood became one of the most popular and praiseworthy topics, while historical writings that exposed the same nation's victimization of other national or ethnic groups provoked public outcry, dismay, and even anger.¹

The history of the Holocaust is a relevant example. The scandal that exploded in Poland around the publication of Jan Gross's *Neighbors* is emblematic of East European's recent distaste for histories that damage national sentiments.² Nevertheless, scholarly debate, international attention, and local public engagement have all helped to convince some historians to grapple with these unpleasant subjects and to commit to helping societies

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1 Topics such as the famine in Ukraine (1932-1933), Stalinist deportations from newly acquired territories (1939-1940) and the abuse of the Soviets in the former socialist block are just a few of the relevant examples. The Russian President's creation of a Commission entrusted with the "counteraction to the attempts to falsify history in detriment of the interests of Russia" is clearly an attempt of the Russian government to instrumentalize history for its own political goals and to reverse the ongoing process of historical writings (both in the West and in former Soviet territories outside Russia), which expose the USSR/Russia mainly as a victimizer. See the presidential decree on the website:

<http://document.kremlin.ru/images/3/05.png/0524.png/052421001.png>.

2 Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). On this debate, see, *Thou Shalt Not Kill: Poles on Jedwabne* (Warsaw: WIEZ, 2001). For Holocaust denial in former socialist states look at Michael Shafir's, *Între negare și trivializare prin comparație: Negarea Holocaustului în țările postcomuniste din Europa Centrală și de Est* (Iași: Polirom, 2002).

confront these distressing accounts of their past.³ Despite these encouraging signs, many residents of Eastern Europe are still not familiar with this type of history because local historians have not demonstrated a penchant for this approach, leaving significant challenges ahead.

While the history of state-sponsored massacres and deportations in Romania during the Holocaust has now been well documented, the local population's approach to their Jewish compatriots during the Holocaust has only recently begun to be addressed. With the exception of some partial attempts to discuss the theme made by Dalia Ofer⁴ and Ronit Fisher,⁵ few research projects have systematically studied the attitudes and behavior of gentiles toward the Jews within Romania. As far as I am aware, only Vladimir Solonari's 2007 article as well as two of my own articles have achieved this goal.⁶

In this article I summarize the political context of state-sponsored antisemitism in Romania during the interwar period and challenge the popular conception that the Holocaust in Romania was a significant break from previous behavior. This research focuses specifically on the territory of Bessarabia.⁷ I use primary sources to detail both popular antisemitism during the interwar period as well as the onset of increasing levels of violence against Jews perpetrated by the civilian population during the Holocaust. Unfortunately, there is no statistical information on this level of violence, therefore, we must rely on eyewitness accounts available in archival material, oral history interviews, and secondary sources.

3 One should notice, however, that many of the works on the collaborations made during WWII still tend to be published primarily outside the countries to which they refer. See David Gaunt, Paula A. Levine and Laura Palosuo, eds., *Collaboration and Resistance during the Holocaust: Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania* (Bern, 2004); Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Karel C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2004). Among the recent books, which approach the subject of local participation in the Holocaust, is the work of Anton Weiss-Wendt, *Murder without Hatred: Estonians and the Holocaust* (Syracuse University Press, 2009).

4 Dalia Ofer, "Life in the Ghettos of Transnistria," *Yad Vashem Studies*, 1996 (25), 229-274.

5 Ronit Fisher, "Ethnic, Racial Purity and Gender: The Fate of Apostates and Spouses of Mixed Marriages in Transnistria," and Presentation at the International Workshop "Transnistria: Vanished Landscapes of History and Memory," Jerusalem, May 20-21, 2007.

6 Vladimir Solonari, "Patterns of Violence: The Local Population and the Mass Murder of Jews in Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, July-August, 1941," *Kritika: Exploration in Russian and Eurasian History* 8:4 Fall 2007: 749-87. Diana Dumitru and Carter Johnson, "Constructing Interethnic Conflict and Cooperation: Why Some People Harmed and Others Helped Jews during the Romanian Holocaust," *World Politics* 63:1 (forthcoming January 2011); Diana Dumitru, "The Attitude of the Non-Jewish Population of Bessarabia and Transnistria towards the Jews during the Holocaust: A Survivors' Perspective," *Yad Vashem Studies* 37:1, (Spring 2009): 53-83.

7 Bessarabia is the historical name of the region between the Dniester and Prut rivers. This term is conventionally used to refer to this area when it was a part of Tsarist Russia (1812-1918) or part of Romania (1918-1940, 1941-1944). Moldova is largely conterminous with Bessarabia and it is conventionally used to describe the same territory (with some changes on the northern, southern, and eastern borders) when it is pseudo-independent (inside of the Soviet Union) or to refer to the contemporary Republic of Moldova.

This article proceeds in three stages. First I examine the political context of Romania in the interwar period. Since Romania was a functioning (albeit illiberal) democracy during this period, we can use the party system as a bellwether for popular sentiment among the population. Second, I detail violence against the Jewish community in Bessarabia perpetrated by non-state actors, during the interwar period. Finally, I focus on non-state violence during the Holocaust itself, suggesting that there was continuous growth of such activity from the late inter-war period right up to the Holocaust. Society was much more actively involved in the Holocaust itself than previously assumed in much of the literature.

POLITICAL ANTISEMITISM IN INTERWAR ROMANIA

The two main political parties of interwar Romania, the National Liberal Party and the National Peasant Party, attempted to combine a commitment to democracy with their commitment to the national cause. Experts described these two parties as “indifferent, at best” to the situation of the Jews and emphasized that, “while neither party had openly anti-Semitic positions in their political platforms, neither party took positions that were designed to ensure equal rights, equal status and security to the Jews.”⁸ Members of both parties believed that the state’s main responsibility was to ensure better conditions for the Romanian ethnic group, while simultaneously respecting minority rights. They both, however, recognized the need for a state minority policy that would distinguish between individuals who had lived on Romanian territory for a long time, and those that had recently immigrated and were considered dangerous for the state.⁹ This principle is clearly visible in the citizenship law adopted by the Romanian Parliament in February 1924. The people from the newly acquired territories could apply for Romanian citizenship if they could prove that both their parents were born, or had residency, in the Old Kingdom. The law required “citizens of the former Russian Empire residing on Bessarabian territory” to prove that they themselves were residents there on, or before, March 27, 1918, while a special law for Jews specified that Jews in any of the annexed territories would have to prove residency as of August 2, 1914.¹⁰ For all contemporaries it was clear that the law intended to restrict access to citizenship for refugees from Russia, who were primarily Ukrainian Jews.¹¹

8 Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, and Mihai E. Ionescu, *Final Report*, 29.

9 Victoria Gabriela Gruber, *Partidul Național Liberal (Gheorghe Brătianu)*, (resume of PhD diss., University Lucian Blaga from Sibiu, 2006), 12.

10 Dmitry Tartakovsky, *Parallel Ruptures: Jews of Bessarabia and Transnistria between Romanian Nationalism and Soviet Communism, 1918-1940* (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009), 112.

11 Ibid.

Although the parties did not support any of the radical claims for antisemitic policies circulating in society, they also did not take any effective measure to protect the Jewish minority from vicious attacks. At a national meeting in Bessarabia of the National Liberal Party, Jewish deputies addressed the Minister of Interior with complaints about antisemitism, while the Chişinău communal leader voiced with despair: "Every day I am told of the plight of Jews in the small towns and villages, where anti-Semitic agitation moves toward hysteria. There is an entirely new understanding of the concept of citizen among the population—that it means someone of pure Romanian blood. This is a completely voluntary concept being brought forth against the very meaning of the constitution."¹²

Other political parties that briefly came to power, such as the People's Party (1920-1921, 1926-1927), the National Democratic Party led by Nicolae Iorga (1931-1932), and the National Peasant Party (NPP) led by Alexandru Vaida-Voievod (1932, 1933),¹³ did not refrain from antisemitic statements or suggesting anti-Jewish measures, such as *numerus clausus*, regarding Jews in higher education, the economy, and state administration.¹⁴ By the 1930s antisemitism had moved to the forefront of political and social affairs: virulent publications, student rallies, and political parties propagated antisemitism not only as a program, but as a philosophic and aesthetic creed. All these actions went unhindered by governmental restrictions. In 1935 representatives of the Jewish communities of Bessarabia gathered in Chişinău and put forward a charter, which essentially suggested a separate Jewish government for the communities of Bessarabia.¹⁵ As the Chişinău communal president explained, this meeting was provoked by the Jewish community's fear for the present. Its intention was to "to try to let out a cry of protest so loud that politicians in Bucureşti would hear it, for Bessarabian Jews had lost faith in the observance of Romanian laws."¹⁶

Two right wing political parties—the National Christian Defense League (in Romanian: Liga Apărării Naţional Creştine, or LANC) formed in 1922 by Alexandru C. Cuza, and the Iron Guard founded in 1927 by Corneliu Z. Codreanu—had a special role on the political stage throughout the interwar years. Crampton has called Romania's fascist movement, "the strongest in Eastern Europe."¹⁷ By the end of 1937, Octavian Goga and Alexandru C. Cuza

¹² *Bessarabskoe slovo*, November 5, 1935.

¹³ In 1933 Alexandru Vaida-Voievod split from the National Peasant Party over a rift with the party's leader, Iuliu Maniu, who disagreed with Vaida's support of Iron Guards and his expressed antisemitism.

¹⁴ Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, and Mihai E. Ionescu, *Final Report*, 30.

¹⁵ Dmitry Tartakovsky, *Parallel Ruptures: Jews of Bessarabia and Transnistria between Romanian Nationalism and Soviet Communism, 1918-1940* (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009), 211.

¹⁶ *Bessarabskoe slovo*, November 7, 1935.

¹⁷ R. J. Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century - and After*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 113.

were leading the Romanian government and shut down two democratic newspapers on the pretext that Jewish interests controlled them.¹⁸ Although the Cuzists had been in power for just several months before King Carol installed his personal dictatorship, they succeeded in restricting the constitutional rights of Jews in the name of nationalism. Their success is exemplified in the Citizenship Revision Law, while Cuzist paramilitaries attacked Jews and their property all over the country. One Zionist activist described the sentiment among Jews in his memoirs from that time: "People scurried around in fear. Members of the liberal professions and many businessmen simply lost their livelihoods...Panic and depression set in as persecutions against Jewish schools, journalists, and cultural institutions began."¹⁹

Bessarabia proved to be particularly sensitive to the messages of the right-wing parties, which became evident during the 1937 general elections. In the 1937 election a number of counties voted heavily with the antisemitic parties of the Cuzists and in much smaller numbers with the Iron Guard. This was a significant transformation from the early 1930s when the majority of peasantry voted with moderate forces, especially the National Peasants Party. The inability of the NPP to solve the staggering agricultural problems during their time in office (1928-1933) caused much disappointment among Moldovan peasants, allowing for the right wing parties to take advantage of this frustration.²⁰

All traditional topics associated with antisemitic movements were amassed in the public discourse of the Cuzists and the Iron Guard: refusal of citizenship rights; mass invasion of Jews from the East; Jewish over-population in Romania's cities; exploitation of the peasantry through alcohol, tobacco, and other vices; control of the press; de-nationalization of Romanian culture; outright service to Romania's enemies; and representation of foreign interests.²¹ However, for the Bessarabian peasants, the Cuzists' promise to expropriate the Jews and to give away their assets to Romanians proved to be their most attractive campaign promise. One of the Siguranța (secret police) reports indicates that the Cuzists promised the population "almost impossible things: the cancellation of all debts, confiscation of the properties from Jews, elimination of the Jews from all state positions."²² Another police note explains that the enormous popularity of the Cuzists in Bessarabia "is not driven from national sentiment, but by the desire to see a right-wing party at the leadership

18 Adevarul and Dimineata.

19 M. Kotlyar, *Krov' na Snegu (svidedetsl'skie pokazania)*, (1989), 4; cited in Kopanskii, "The Jews of Bessarabia," 352.

20 Stephen Fischer-Galati, "Jew and Peasant in Interwar Romania," *Nationality Papers* 16:2 (1988), 214.

21 Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, and Mihai E. Ionescu, *Final Report*, 45.

22 National Archive of the Republic of Moldova [Arhiva Națională a Republicii Moldova, further: ANRM], fond 680, opis 1, file 3817, part I, informative note of the police office from Orhei district (1937), 2-9.

of the state which will fulfill the promises made propagandistically by the Cuzist party."²³

Under the permissive eyes of the authorities, regular processions of the Cuzist party become popular festivities in Bessarabia in the 1930s. The sanctification of the party's flags in churches was accompanied by public speeches from teachers, lawyers, and other public figures, attracting huge crowds. For example, on the occasion of the sanctification of the Cuzists' flag in Scăieni village, sixteen Cuzist organizations from neighboring villages came with their flags and a senator from Bucharest even traveled to attend the event.²⁴ At the sanctification of the Cuzist flag in Dondușeni over twenty flags were brought from neighboring villages, and the event gathered about 1,200-1,500 predominantly young men and women.²⁵ The blessing of the Cuzist flag in Văsoca attracted 2,000-2,500 people, and typical speeches against Jews marked the celebration.²⁶ However, each time the Cuzist party threatened the existing order, police worked to avert this danger. For example, when Cuzist organizations in the Hotin district attempted to create assault battalions, police were careful not to allow them to have any guns or uniforms and did not tolerate field training of personnel.²⁷ During the interwar years police reported that there was a continuously increasing number of Cuzist party members, especially in the northern districts of Bessarabia. For example, in the Soroca district in 1936 the number of Cuzists reached 2,548 people,²⁸ while in the district of Bălți 14,000 members were reported in 1937, the majority of them being local Moldovan peasants.²⁹ In 1937 the Cuzists received the largest share of the vote in Bessarabia: 21.3 percent, as opposed to 9.15 percent in Romania as a whole.³⁰ The central and northern parts of Bessarabia, where Jews were concentrated in large numbers, became particularly strong Cuzist strongholds.³¹ Police confirmed that there was "antisemitic propaganda...with the occasion of the elections ...due to the difficult economical situation significantly captured the rural Christian population" and announced that "the enmity is reciprocal between the Christians and Jews."³²

23 ANRM, fond 680: Bessarabian Regional Police Inspectorate, opis 1, file 3817, part II, 387 (verso).

24 ANRM, fond 2071: Soroca district prefecture and its subordinated preturas and town halls, file 340, part I, informative note Nr. 40 from 08.02.1936 of the Gendarmerie of Soroca, 93.

25 ANRM, fond 2071, file 340, part II, 325.

26 ANRM, fond 2071, file 340, part II, 382-384.

27 ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3632, 90.

28 ANRM, fond 2071, opis 1, file 340, part II, 382.

29 ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3817, part II, 395.

30 See C. Enescu, "Semnificația alegerilor din decembrie 1937 în evoluția politică a neamului românesc," *Sociologie Românească* 11:12 (1937): esp. 522, 523, and fig. 5; cited in Solonari 17, note 42.

31 For example Bălți district from Bessarabia was leading on the country level with 38.10% of the votes cast for Cuzists. See Viorica Nicolenco, *Extrema dreaptă în Basarabia (1923-1940)* (Chișinău: Editura Civitas, 1999), 70.

32 ANRM, Fond 2071, Soroca district prefecture and its subordinated preturas and town halls, opis 1, file 162, vol. III, 370.

The antisemitism of the Iron Guard was of a different nature: it blended in with their more general religious issues, their condemnation of political corruption, and their mystical rhetoric about the revival of Romania. Moreover, it embraced violence as a tool to combat not only Jews alone, but also the “Judaized” Romanians who had enabled the “takeover” of Romania by the Jews.³³ During the interwar period, the Iron Guard organized the assassination of two incumbent prime ministers (Ion Duca in 1933 and Armand Călinescu in 1939), two former prime ministers (one of them Nicolae Iorga, murdered in 1940), and numerous ministers, politicians, and other leading personalities.³⁴ For obvious reasons, the movement was perceived as a threat to the incumbent regime and it was declared illegal three times during the early 1930s and kept under close surveillance during 1933-1937, with its members being occasionally imprisoned, exiled, or killed.³⁵ Under the dictatorship of Romanian King Carol, in November 1938, the leader of the Iron Guard, Corneliu Z. Codreanu, was assassinated by the Romanian secret police while in detention. He was killed under the false pretext of attempting to escape.³⁶

Apparently, the less numerous but more aggressive Iron Guard (sometimes referred to by its earlier name: Legion of Archangel Mikhail) also found followers among Bessarabians. In 1936 the Gendarmerie of Soroca counted 170 supporters of the Iron Guard in the village of Cotiujeii Mari and mentioned that they did not hide their desire “to hang the Jews and to introduce the death penalty after the party comes to power.”³⁷ Similar to the Cuzists, the members of the Iron Guard (also referred to as Legionaries) staged propaganda tours throughout Bessarabia in order to recruit supporters. They walked by foot in compact and organized groups, dressed in national costumes, and sang patriotic songs, producing a certain impression on the public.³⁸ In June 1933 a group of legionaries from Galați took such a tour to the villages of Reni, Anadol, Frecăței, Caragaci Vechi, Barta Gl. Averescu, Cairaclia, Erdecbarno, Cîmașir, Muraviovca, Aprodul Purice, and Chilia Nouă. Meanwhile, another group of legionaries from Brăila visited Reni, Cuza Vodă, Curchi, Tabac (Ismail district), Bulgărica, Cimișlia, Alexăndreni, Ivănești Noi, and Teplița.³⁹ An additional group of legionaries launched an eighty kilometer

33 Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, and Mihai E. Ionescu, *Final Report*, 45.

34 Ibid, 46.

35 It was outlawed by the government of Nicolae Iorga, prime minister in mid-1931 to mid-1932, and in December 1933 by the prime minister Ion Duca.

36 Vladimir Solonari, *Purifying the Nation: Population Exchange and Ethnic Cleansing in Nazi-Allied Romania* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Centre Press, 2009), 50.

37 ANRM, fond 2071, opis 1, file 340, part III, 505.

38 Some of the Bessarabians interviewed as late as 2010 still remember the songs sung by the Legionari during those marches. See for example: USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, interview with Vasile Cârhană (2010).

39 ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3640, part I, 35. The police reported these legionaries being arrested afterwards.

march from Chişinău to Tighina, afterwards claiming to have encountered "a unanimous nationalistic spirit" among people they met on the way.⁴⁰ The Legionaries were also known by their active involvement in summer working camps, volunteering to rebuild bridges, roads, and churches in various parts of the country. In Bessarabia such camps functioned in Roşcani (Cahul), Cotuienii Mari (Sorocea), Buga monastery (Lăpuşna), Valea Mare (Bălţi), and other places.

Legionary newspapers that circulated in the Bessarabian districts abounded with graphic images of demonized Jews contrasted with saint-like images of Moldovans. One newspaper distributed in the Tighina district bemoaned the fate of the Moldovan peasant, "who toils like a slave," while calling out for the impalement of the "hideous" "Yid master [that] lives like a maggot on good-natured Moldovans."⁴¹ The leaflets spread by the Guard asked all Romanians to join its ranks for the salvation of the country.⁴² Even imprisonment did not shake the fanatical views of the Legionaries. In 1933 inmates of the Chişinău prison were visited by the Inspector of the Ministry of Justice and they brought to the Inspector's attention that, "while living in the prisons is unobjectionable," they particularly "regret being unable to continue their national struggle between the [Rivers] Prut and Dniester [meaning Bessarabia], where only the ideology of the Iron Guard could paralyze the communist action of Judeo-Masonic elements. Only through their [Legionaries'] action was it possible to instill a patriotic sentiment, which is foreign until today to the Bessarabian soul."⁴³ Nevertheless, despite all its efforts, the Iron Guard did not manage to reach the level of support in Bessarabia that it gained in others parts of Romania: in 1937 it won only 5.3 percent compared to the 15.58 percent of the votes at the national level.⁴⁴ This lower result is mainly explained by the particular success of Cuzists in Bessarabia, which most probably took away votes that could possibly have gone to the Iron Guard.

The circulation of fascist ideas originating in Nazi Germany put an additional strain on the situation of the Jews in interwar Romania. There were a number of Jewish individuals and self-created antifascist organizations involved in the struggle against Nazi propaganda, but their efforts were constantly frustrated by Romanian state institutions. For instance, in January 1934 all printed issues of the newspaper "Ciuma brună," published by the antifascist committee of Bessarabia in Chişinău and describing the persecution of Jews in Germany, were confiscated by the police and burned. Meanwhile, the committee's request for a permit to publish a monthly journal of an antifascist character in

40 ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3639, 109, the newspaper *Calendarul* from June 9, 1933.

41 ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3639, 92, the Newspaper of the Legion Hatman "Luca Arbore" from Tighina, May 10 1933.

42 ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3639, 37. Manifest from Cahul district.

43 ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3638, part I, 111.

44 Viorica Nicolenco, *Extrema dreaptă în Basarabia (1923-1940)* (Chişinău: Editura Civitas, 1999).

Chişinău was refused on the grounds that the content of such a publication would be "dangerous to the interests and security of the [Romanian] state and is intended to carry propaganda in favor of a leftist movement and against militarism." The committee was in fact a "quasi-communist group."⁴⁵ In August of the same year the Ministry of Internal Affairs confiscated the antifascist committee from Bucharest's 5,000-copy postcard, which had already been published. The card bore the inscription: "17,000 antifascist sportsmen at the Olympics in Paris 11-15 August 1934, the antifascist youth from Romania fight against war."⁴⁶

Individual initiatives to engage in public debates about Nazism and antisemitism were equally hijacked by an over-watching police. This happened to a journalist from Chişinău, Mikhail Nedolin, who set about on a tour with a public lecture, entitled, "The Barbarians of the Twentieth Century. The Ideals and Dreams of Adolf Hitler." During his first lecture in the town of Tighina police dutifully noticed that the room was full "in majority by Jews from lower stratum and very many communists" and that the lecturer talked about the demagoguery of Hitler, who managed to attract the population on his side and set them against Jews. Nedolin compared the activity of Petlyura to Hitler and asked all the Jews to unite against Hitler.⁴⁷ Immediately after this first lecture the authorities prohibited the tour.

On June 26, 1940 the Romanian diplomats were presented with an ultimatum from the Soviet Union, asking for a "return" of Bessarabia as well as the "transfer" of northern Bukovina to the Soviet state. The annexation of these territories to the Soviet Union aggravated Romania's internal and external policies. The strengthening of the relationship with Nazi Germany and the coming to power of a new government in Romania, known for their public support of fascism, meant a new step in the deterioration of the status of the local Jews. Immediately a series of laws emulating Germany's Nuremberg Laws limited Jewish rights to property, profession, participation in political life, and marriage to ethnic Romanians.⁴⁸ Nazi paramilitaries, the Romanian army, Romanian police, and antisemitic masses massacred thousands of Jews during the pogroms of Bucharest and Iaşi in 1941.⁴⁹ Though the Jewish people of Bessarabia managed to escape this ruthless national discrimination, deadly attacks occurring in 1940-1941 inside the Romanian state. At this point they were confronted with Soviet class ideology and the wave of arrests and deportations of the "bourgeois" elements of the Bessarabian population took place.

45 ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3641, part I, 174, 205, 226, 251.

46 ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3641, part I, 371.

47 ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3647, part I, 41-52.

48 Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, and Mihai E. Ionescu, *Final Report*, 86-87.

49 Ibid, 112-115, 120-126.

POPULAR ANTISEMITIC VIOLENCE IN INTERWAR ROMANIA

The Jewish-gentile tensions that developed during the interwar period erupted into open violence on many occasions, and this violence became progressively more intense throughout the 1930s, culminating in the orgy of violence perpetrated by both state and non-state actors during the Holocaust. In 1926, the Bessarabian Jewish senator, Leib Zirelson, already spoke in parliament about "violence against Jews in trains, streets, trams, and synagogues."⁵⁰ Indeed, to bring one example, in the same year about two hundred nationalist Bessarabian students returning from a right wing meeting in Iași attacked Jewish households, shops, and synagogues in towns along their way, including Chișinău, Călărași, Edineț, and Ungheni.⁵¹ Another prominent Romanian Jew at the time stated that, "The Jewish population laments the criminal indifference of the authorities and the apathy of the legal instances...nothing has been done to guarantee our personal security and property."⁵² Kopanskii refers to several antisemitic riots that took place throughout Bessarabia between 1929 and 1932.⁵³

Several other instances can be found in archival material. In 1930, for example, there are credible reports of an attack against local Jews organized by "young men" of the village of Temiliuți.⁵⁴ In another instance from Bălți, a young man hit a Jew with a metal pipe in the central park; the victim, covered in blood, was left on the ground. Another Jew had to follow the aggressor and to show him to the police, who arrested the assailant.⁵⁵ In 1936 a fight broke out between Jews and Cuzists at the Otaci market after "a young Cuzist leaned over the counter of a Jewish merchant and broke a board." In this context police noted the existence of "big tensions in Jewish settlements and conflicts with the Cuzists."⁵⁶

The hostility between the locals of Baraboi (strong supporters of the Cuzist party) and Briceva (a predominantly Jewish settlement) gave serious cause for concern among authorities in May 1936. Here, in response to the Jewish merchants' boycott of the Baraboi market, the Cuzists chose to resort to violence. Several hundred Cuzists paramilitaries coming from the villages of Baraboi, Frasin, Mihăileni and other places, many in blue uniforms with swastikas and armed with big clubs, barricaded the roads to the Briceva

50 Reported in the newspaper *Bessarabia* 04/03/26, No. 1220; cited in Kopanskii, "The Jews of Bessarabia," 349.

51 Dmitry Tartakovsky, *Parallel Ruptures: Jews of Bessarabia and Transnistria between Romanian Nationalism and Soviet Communism, 1918-1940* (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009), 163.

52 Ibid, 350.

53 Prepeli a, Orhei County (1929), Lipcani (1930), Bălți (1930), Rădoia (1932).

54 ANRM, fond 2071, opis 1, file 217, 213, Report of the praetor on the inspection of Târnova, the year 1936.

55 ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3640, part I, 171.

56 ANRM, fond 2071, opis 1, file 340, part II, 238.

market and beat all people trying to go to Briceva. The Cuzists destroyed all goods carried by people and did not even let peasants pass who were going to the field, or even those going to see a doctor.⁵⁷ A similar episode was witnessed in 1939 by a Moldovan from Cobâlca. In a 2009 interview the Moldovan related the story of when he was visiting the local market and saw the arrival of a group of Cuzists mounted on horses. They had short thick truncheons and started to brutally hit Jewish traders. The Jews rushed away to hide and the Christian villagers rushed to steal the goods left unattended by the Jews.⁵⁸

The security forces did not look eager to protect the Jewish population from these attacks. Typically, the police took little action and sought to blame Jews for the violence perpetrated against them. In one police report, the Jews were described as being "very vindictive against the right [wing] elements, they themselves provoke incidents, which later could be blamed on peaceful elements."⁵⁹ By the late 1930s, this approach by the police clearly intensified and Jews were regularly reported as being the instigators of disturbances in society: "It is well established that the Jews undertake one of the fiercest campaigns against ultra-right wing elements, seeking through various means to compromise those whom they consider the butchers of the Jewish people. The Jews go so far that they provoke incidents on themselves in order to demonstrate afterwards that they witnessed Cuzists incidents."⁶⁰ The police were also keen to underline the Jewish connection with "centers from abroad," the strong Jewish campaign in favor of emigration, the Jewish "open propaganda against Romanian nationalism," and their preparedness "to react against any movements that would start against them."⁶¹

Boosted by this condescending attitude of officials, the assaults on Jews were to become more audacious and frequent. Beating of Jews, intimidation of both men and women, blatant theft of goods from Jewish shops, were all reported in a number of Bessarabian villages.⁶² These and other similar events coupled with the public discourse and policies of the time fomented hopes among the Bessarabian gentiles that after the Cuzist party will take power, "[we] will break the Jews [razobiem evreev] and all their shops and property will be ours, and then life will be very good".⁶³ As frequently happened

57 ANRM, fond 2071, opis 1, file 340, part II, 342-354.

58 USHMM, RG-50.572, Oral History, Moldova, audio interview with Ion Vlas (2009).

59 ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3651, part II, 737 (verso), Siguran a report from Tighina, June 30, 1930.

60 ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3817, part III, 131.

61 ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3817, part I, 37-40.

62 ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3828, 183. See the information of the attacks of a group of eleven legionaries on the Jews in the villages of I. G. Duca (Tighina) and Talmaz. We also have information on the Cuzists beating and insulting Jews in the village of Lunga—see the interview of Mihail Lazarenco, USHMM, RG-50.572.

63 A dialogue occurred in 1930. See USHMM, RG-54.003*48, War Crimes Investigation and Trial Records from the Republic of Moldova, 1944-1955; Record of the case of Tănăsescu Nicolai Ivanovici, minutes of the interrogation of Tănăsescu from May 8th, 1944.

previously in Tsarist Russia, the Jews sought to protect themselves from gentile aggression by organizing self-defense units, a fact which irritated local authorities and police who liked to believe that the state took sufficient measures to control the situation.⁶⁴

POPULAR VIOLENCE AGAINST THE JEWS IN THE FIRST YEARS OF THE HOLOCAUST IN ROMANIA

In June 1941, Germany and Romania declared war on the Soviet Union. In a matter of days the civilian population of Bessarabia witnessed the Nazi allied troops entering the territory, and the Romanian administration reestablishing control over the province that they had painfully lost less than one year earlier. Most Bessarabians, despite a somewhat demonstrative welcome to the returned authorities, reacted to this change with apathy, albeit with some slight concern as well.⁶⁵ The province's locals had learned to worry whenever any change of border and/or regime occurred.

Destruction of the Jewish community began from the very first days. Action was taken by both the Romanian and German militaries, and the steps that were taken have been documented in several other sources.⁶⁶ The Bessarabian Jews who managed to survive the first wave of atrocities were kept initially for weeks in local camps and ghettos. These weeks then extended into months. Later they were deported by foot to eastern Transnistria and were imprisoned in camps until the end of war, where a large portion died due to horrific conditions.

The executions, arrests, imprisonment in improvised places, deportation, robbing and maltreatment of Jews by the authorities were all carried out under the eyes of their non-Jewish neighbors. Survivors have provided us with detailed information about the violence committed by civilians in Bessarabia. Michael Zilbering witnessed two pogroms: one organized in

64 For example, a police report from May 1933 announced that such a self-defense unit was created by Jews in the town of Hotin, aiming to "survey and prevent eventual attack or arsons by the anti-Semite elements." ANRM, fond 680, opis 1, file 3651, part I, 508.

65 The author of this article does not use the term Bessarabian/s as ethnic identification, but as a term that describes the entire local population of the territory of Bessarabia. However, in previous periods (and less frequently nowadays), this term has been used interchangeably with the term "Romanian/s" and "Moldovan/s," when referring to the Romanian-speaking population native of Bessarabia. In 1930, the Romanian/Moldovan ethnic group included 56.2 percent of the entire population of Bessarabia.

66 International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, *Final Report*, Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, and Mihai E. Ionescu, eds. (Iași: Polirom, 2005); Jean Ancel, *Transnistria, 1941-1942. The Romanian Mass Murder Campaigns* (Tel Aviv: The Goldstein Goren Diaspora Research Center, 2003); Dennis Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally. Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-1944* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000).

Telenești, and the other in the village of Dumbrăveni. Zilbering remained haunted for years by the violence he had witnessed, still wondering how it was possible that the same Moldovans who lived in peace with their neighbors for centuries then “took axes, pitchforks, metal bars and went to kill and rob the Jews.”⁶⁷ A native of the Zgurița village mentions a similar story about his co-villagers, who were engaged very actively in a pogrom on July 9, 1941. The survivor was especially pained by the memory of two local Moldovans who raped a teenage Jewish girl, who used to be the survivor’s girlfriend, in front of him and his family.⁶⁸

Evghenia Sherman from Lipcani recalls: “When the war broke out the Moldovans immediately burned out our house. They were those that helped the Germans, they burned the houses and people....The Moldovans were worse than the SS...”⁶⁹ Similar ruthlessness was exhibited by some peasants from Onișcani village, in the region of Orhei, who brought four Jews to the gendarmerie and requested they be shot.⁷⁰

Jews often also encountered the aggressive attitude of the local population during their deportation marches to Transnistria. While passing through Bessarabian villages, the deportees were assaulted by the locals. Mucinik Avram recalled the details of these assaults: “You would pass through the village. From both sides are standing Romanians [Moldovans], local inhabitants, with long sticks and they hit everybody whom they could reach. My father was also beaten badly.”⁷¹

The same facts were confirmed by Messin Esther, who explained how on the road near the Coșău i forest some hooligans came from the neighboring villages and said: “Aha, they are Jews! And they began to rob! We didn’t have anything and then they hit us with a stick, how could they, since we didn’t have any protection. ...we were with Romanian gendarmes. My mother, she received a very strong blow.”⁷² The case attested to in nearby Sorocea, in the village of Bârnova, is especially shocking: peasants were waiting for the convoys of deportees and were “buying” from the gendarmes well-dressed Jews; then they would kill them and steal their clothing and shoes.⁷³

The war crimes’ trial files largely document the involvement of Bessarabian civilians in massacring Jews. Hundreds of Bessarabians volunteered to be part of the carnage and participated, without restraint, in the killings of those who used to be their neighbors. Frequently, everything started with crowds of local

67 Written memoirs of the servivo, Michael Zilbering, mailed personally to the author of this paper, 19.

68 Interview 69: Joshua Gershman, December 2005, Washington, D.C..

69 Yad Vashem Archives [further: YVA], VT/1757; video interview with Evghenia Sherman.

70 Jean Ancel, ed., *Documents Concerning the Fate of Romanian Jewry During the Holocaust*, Vol. VI (New York: Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1986) 112.

71 YVA, VT/2211, video interview with Abram Mucinik.

72 YVA, VT/1926, video interview with Messin Esther.

73 Jean Ancel, *Documents Concerning the Fate of Romanian Jewry During the Holocaust*, Vol. VIII, 579.

peasants greeting the entering Romanian troops, naming neighboring Jewish families, pointing to Jewish houses, and even helping arrest victims. This was the case in the village of Țigănești. When the Romanians gathered ten to twelve Jews and headed outside the village a bunch of curious villagers followed the convoy. Among those were Ivan David, Profir Petrov, Mihail Gorbatâi, Semion Bedeniuc, and others. When they arrived at the execution spot they asked Romanian soldiers to be allowed to execute the victims themselves. The favor was readily granted. Unfortunately, trial documents do not provide insight into the motivation of the local killers, except that one of the perpetrators, providing a frightening lack of reasons, asserted that he took the gun and shot the family of Riva Gutman "because the other villagers participated in the shooting as well..."⁷⁴

Another similar episode took place in the village of Kotovsk. A local bystander recalled the crimes committed by two villagers. When the Romanian armies entered Kotovsk the Jewish population was gathered and prepared for execution. One of the Romanian soldiers refused to shoot, explaining he was feeling sick. The locals, Nicolai Munteanu and Ștefan Troșin, immediately volunteered to murder the Jews and even after the execution approached the bodies with Romanian soldiers and made "control shots."⁷⁵

In Sculeni a group of residents diligently put together a list of around three hundred to four hundred "Soviet activists and Jews." They were even at hand for their execution, forcing the victims to dig their own graves.⁷⁶ For more than one year a resident of Sculeni, Petr Kotlearov, denied his participation in this massacre.⁷⁷ When he finally admitted his crime, he affirmed: "I shot twelve Jews on the order of the chief of the Romanian gendarmerie ... Regarding why I shot them, it is not clear to me."⁷⁸ Kotlearov was not the naïve and simple person he intended to present himself as; he tried to build his claim of innocence through an agreement to keep silent about [or with?] another murderer, Trofim Popa. They knew that the rest of the murderers had run away to Romania, or were drafted into the army in 1944, meaning nobody could divulge their participation in the shooting.⁷⁹

A number of massacres took place with group participation of the locals, without Romanian presence on site. The gratuitous involvement of gentiles in violence against Jews puzzled even the Soviet NKVD. In the case of the murder

74 USHMM, RG-54.003*22, War Crimes Investigation; Record of the case of Kitik [Chitic] Mikhail Kirilovici, minutes of the interrogation of Gorbatâi Mihail, 82.

75 USHMM, RG-54.003*30, War Crimes Investigation; Record of the case of Munteanu Nicolae, testimony of Kojuhari Nicolae [Cojocaru Nicolae], 23.

76 USHMM, RG-54.003*61, War Crimes Investigation; Record of the case of Jdanov Konstantin Vasilievici, p60-61.

77 First interrogations started on August 8th, 1944, but Kotlearov accepted his guilt only in the interrogation on May 15th, 1945.

78 USHMM, RG-54.003*58, War Crimes Investigation; Record of the case of Evtodii Alexandr Ivanovici, minutes of the interrogation of Kotlear [Kotlearov] Petr Fedorovici, 64, 202, 204.

79 Ibid, 204.

of the Jews from Liublin,⁸⁰ which was committed by villagers from the neighboring Nemirovka, the investigation documents had difficulty in explaining the overtly displayed cruelty by the civilians that were not formally affiliated with the Romanian authorities. Therefore, when recording this criminal activity, Soviet prosecutors chose to invent a new incriminating formula: "maintained a close bond with the Romanian gendarmerie."⁸¹

The village of Liublin was a small Jewish settlement of about fifty households. Yet at the beginning of the war, while some local Jews evacuated, other Jewish refugees arrived. As a result, a group of peasants from the neighboring Nemirovka village went to Liublin to slaughter and rob the Jews. Several Moldovan teenagers from Nemirovka, who happened to be with sheep in a field a few hundred feet away from Liublin, told the NKVD in 1944 that on the day of the murder they saw Petr Tofan, Semen Povaliuk, Ivan Panfil, Ivan Ţopa, Dumitru Brega, Afanasii Tomşa, Semen Panaiti, and others, approaching Liublin. Some of them carried guns, but mostly clubs and hoes. These villagers started to gather the Jews from Liublin, killing some on the spot while driving others to a place in the center and then shooting them.⁸²

One important factor to take into account when analyzing the perpetrator behavior in Bessarabia is the fact that the Romanian authorities deliberately orchestrated the civilian population's violent actions against the Jews. One secret order issued by the Romanian counterintelligence required acts of "spontaneous" violence by locals to be instigated against the Jews even before the army or gendarmerie began their operations. Accordingly, a carefully tailored plan proposed "to eliminate the Judaic element from the Bessarabian territory, still under the Soviet government, by organizing the teams, which would get ahead of the Romanian troops."⁸³ Concrete instructions were given: three Romanian counterintelligence subdivisions (Centrul B, Subcentrul 4 Huşi, and Subcentrul 6 Fălciu) were assigned territories to cover; "teams" from among the locals had to be created in established places; and itineraries were mapped out. These "teams" were supposed to gather in the villages of Nemţeni, Răzeni, Tochilu, Leova, and Cania. Correspondingly, their members had to be recruited from among Bessarabians with "tested feelings" on the

80 Solonari underlined the fact that, in contrast to Bucovina, the "pogroms in Bessarabia usually took place after the arrival of the Romanian Army and/or gendarmerie, and the killings of Jews were conducted under the gendarmes' command." He mentions, "the only possible exception might have been the Jewish shtetl of Liublin where a pogrom does seem to have taken place before the Romanians' arrival, but it was probably aimed more at plunder than at murder." However, according to the trial files, besides Liublin's case, local gentiles initiated pogroms without Romanians' presence in Săseni and Ghirovo.

81 USHMM, RG-54.003*50, War Crimes Investigation; Record of the case of Tofan Petr. The incriminations from the file of Ţopa Ivan Semenovici.

82 USHMM, RG-54.003*45, War Crimes Investigation; Record of the case of Povaliuk Semen Stepanovici, testimony of Melnic David (born in 1925), 258-302.

83 USHMM, Romanian Ministry of National Defense, Archive of the General Staff concerning the Holocaust in Romania, RG-25.003M, file 781, 143-146.

territories controlled by the Romanians. The knowledge those Bessarabians had about local society and the possession of all necessary Soviet identifications papers was considered useful for the successful completion of the proposed mission.

In addition, the plan required selecting only those who could not be mobilized [by the Soviet army], who could not be pointed out as hostile elements to the Communist regime, or who could not be suspect because of their past. At the same time, their families were to remain in the Romanian territories "as an extra guarantee" that their assigned mission would be successfully accomplishment. The "team," which was formed from two to four residents of each of the villages named above, would have the mission to spread—"through relatives, acquaintances, and anticommunist elements—*the idea of collective defense* against the Judaic danger" [emphasis in original].

In order to gain agents for this enterprise, the order appealed to the "Romanian feelings" of the population hostile to the Soviet regime, and sought out those who had suffered from it. The order also recommended making use of "patriotic feelings; the fulfillment of some wishes that could be satisfied immediately; proposals to compensate morally or materially an activity undertaken in the national domain." Finally, the assembled groups were supposed to be provided with resources to cover the expenses for their "maintenance and displacement."⁸⁴

In response to this secret order, received on July 8, 1941, the next day the lieutenant colonel of the 2nd Bureau from Section 2 (a counterintelligence unit), Al. Ionescu, reported that his unit had already started the mission to create an atmosphere unfavorable to Judaic elements in villages. The goal was that the population alone would seek to eliminate Jews through the means that they would find most adaptable to their circumstances. At the arrival of the Romanian troops the atmosphere had to already be created, and villagers had to have already taken action.⁸⁵

I did not find any other documents that shed light on the evolution of this "operation," but it is safe to assume that Romanian provocateurs found fertile soil on which to ground their antisemitism, especially among the political supporters of radical right-wing parties like the Iron Guard and Cuzists. The documents from the Soviet Union's war trials of the perpetrators that committed crimes against the Jews on Bessarabian territory contain a number of confessions and testimonies confirming the perpetrators' membership in the aforementioned political movements in pre-war Romania.⁸⁶ Certainly we cannot unconditionally accept any evidence from Soviet court materials, since the system is well known for its capacity for forgery and the ability to "produce" confessions and testimonies. However, by crosschecking these

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 143.

⁸⁶ See files from the USHMM, RG-54.003, War Crimes Investigation and Trial Records from the Republic of Moldova.

documents with non-Jewish and Jewish survivors' testimonies, we can assume that, at least partially, this supposition is true.

The Romanian counterintelligence's secret provocation was so readily accepted, not only because of the existing antisemitic feelings or extreme rightist political convictions that were so popular among the population. A series of other reasons prompted civilian Bessarabians to join the group of tormentors: the desire to curry favor in the eyes of a new incoming power; the envy of a more prosperous neighbor and the possibility for profit; the opportunity, in an environment of permissiveness, to find an outlet for one's own sadistic instincts or suppressed frustrations. What was not allowed by any previous regime suddenly became the rule under the newly established administration: murder, rape, beatings, and robbery. While these rules only applied to the Jews, many took advantage of this officially opened "hunting season."

The majority of the Bessarabian masses, however passively, watched what was happening to the local Jews. We are not able to deduce the wide range of emotions and sentiments they might have experienced while witnessing the Holocaust. For the most part, they adopted an air of apathy and coldness. Unable to penetrate this apathy, the author of a report prepared for the Romanian gendarmerie states that the opinion of the local Bessarabian population is quite difficult to assess and remained "unclear" to him. The best insight that the observer could offer was the impression that this population "is living in a state of permanent fear."⁸⁷ Presumably, this was because of the reluctance to show their real feelings about what was happening around them.

In most cases the reserved attitude of the Bessarabian population was interpreted as hostility toward the Jews. Another survivor from Orhei gave the following opinion: "With the exception of individual people, the population saluted tacitly the isolation and the deportation of the Jews outside Bessarabia, but many expressed these feelings in a visible mode."⁸⁸ Only a few Bessarabians did not hide their tears and, despite their exposure to omnipresent antisemitic rhetoric, felt deeply sorry for the victims who "despite their Jewishness were human too."⁸⁹ In some of their testimonies survivors also mentioned that, en route to final-destination camps, the population in Bessarabia came out to the streets and offered the Jews food and water.

CONCLUSION

Today it is rather difficult to estimate how many of the violent actions perpetrated by Romanian gentiles against the Jewish population were the

87 USHMM, RG-25.003 M, reel 121, f. 347. România, Arhivele Ministerului Apărării Naționale, fond: Guvernământul Basarabiei, Cabinet Militar, informative note on Ismail district from the beginning of the occupation until September 10, 1941.

88 Interview 19: Leonid Kupchik, December 2005, Washington, D.C.

89 Ibid.

result of instigations organized by the Romanian secret service and how many were strictly a result of local initiative. Even if we assume that the Romanian authorities instigated the violence in the majority of cases, pogroms and other violent attacks could not succeed without “fertile” social ground. This social ground was abundant in Bessarabia, because it was prepared consistently during the interwar years. Antisemitic ideology penetrated deep into Bessarabian society, and this became outwardly visible to the world in the 1937 general elections, in which a number of counties from Bessarabia voted heavily with the antisemitic parties of the Cuzists and the Iron Guard. Economic hardship during this period also created intense animosity between the peasants and the Jewish population. In many cases, Jews were in charge of trade between villages and towns. Therefore, when there was a catastrophic drop in prices for agricultural goods, many peasants—whose only direct contact with Jews was through a Jewish merchant that would visit their village—channeled their rage by blaming the entire Jewish population for “robbing” locals.

In most respects the situation of the Jews and their relationship with their non-Jewish neighbors in interwar Bessarabia was complex and difficult. The state displayed criminal complaisance towards the burgeoning antisemitism inside its own institutions, as well as among its elites and masses. Dysfunctional aspects of Romania’s newly modernizing society were frequently blamed on the Jewish community and their perceived malignant social role. Unwilling to curb the hostility against its Jewish population, the central government primarily sought to curtail the rights of its Jewish population, aiming to reduce their economic influence. Inflammatory public discourse, anti-Jewish legislation, an unofficial ban on top-state positions, and unpunished violence against Jews, all contributed to the further legitimization of popular anti-Semitism and strengthened the perception that Jews were a group of people outcast from the Romanian social body. The Roman state was so fixated on preserving the newly acquired lands from the former Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires and so obsessed with the fear of a socialist incursion from its Soviet neighbor, that it saw Jews—and Bessarabian Jews specifically—as the anti-model of the population it wanted under its wing. The Jews, as an ethnic group, were denigrated within Bessarabia long before the Holocaust began. It was this constant vilification and exclusion of the Jews from the mental map of humanity that prepared local gentiles for future physical attacks. As such, by the time the Romanian state allied with the Nazis and took part in the Holocaust, the population of Bessarabia was already indifferent to the regime’s destruction of the Jews.