

ALEXANDRU FLORIAN

THE FATE OF THE JEWS FROM NORTHERN BUKOVINA UNDER THE ANTONESCU REGIME: EVIDENCE OF THE EVOLUTION OF ANTISEMITIC POLICIES IN THE STENOGRAPHS OF CABINET COUNCIL MEETINGS

Between January 1938 and August 1944 over eighty antisemitic laws, decrees, and ministerial decisions were issued in Romania. The wave of antisemitism surged, shifting from the symbolic violence in the public discourse of the 1930s towards an overtly aggressive antisemitic policy that culminated in pogroms, deportations, and extermination.

The first step towards genocide came after the Romanian parliamentary elections of December 1937, when King Carol II appointed Octavian Goga, leader of the National Christian Party (Partidul Național Creștin), as Prime Minister. Under Goga, Romanian political life became increasingly undemocratic, beginning with the January 1938 anti-democratic laws designed by Goga with the support of Minister of State Alexandru C. Cuza.¹ The regime's policy pursued two chief

¹ Partidului Național Creștin (The National Christian Party) was the result of the 1935 merger between Partidul Național Agrar (The National Agrarian Party), led by the antisemitic ultranationalist Octavian Goga, and Liga Apărării Național Creștine (The National Christian Defense League), led by Alexandru C. Cuza. The latter was a fascist party with a prominently antisemitic doctrine: “*Cuzism* comes before us with its own complete, unitary, and scientific system of Christian nationalist doctrine, proving by the totality of its own biological, theological, economical, sociological, histori-

aims: suppression of the democratic press and social and economic discrimination against Jews.

In a speech announcing his government program, Goga unequivocally voiced his support for anti-democratic and antisemitic policies:

From bottom to top, from the depths of the reservoir of our national strength, a wave of protests cries out against foreign domination from one end of the country to the other with the demand: We want a Romania for the Romanians!... The Government has undertaken urgent measures: we have suppressed the newspapers *Adevărul*, *Dimineața*, and *Lupta*, encouraged by faith that our country's public spirit demands that the native-born be raised with a threefold duty: national, moral and intellectual. The aforementioned newspapers were foreign intruders in the intellectual heritage of the people, which must not be hindered in its creative struggle by subversive or dubious interference... We have immediately revoked all alcohol licenses held by Jews in the rural communes in order to replace them with disabled soldiers. In order to effect a prompt solution, we implemented re-examinations of citizenship acquired after the war by the Semitic element, which had invaded Romania by the hundreds after the war and has stayed here out of greed for profit, corruption, and fraud.²

Moreover, suppression of the press and persecution of the Jews often went hand in hand: some left-wing newspapers were suspended due to the very presence of Jews on the editorial staff. Thus, from the very beginning were present the ideological themes later identified as the pillars of fascist totalitarianism: anti-democratic nationalism,

cal events, and from each one separately, that the only possible solution for the Jewish problem is the annihilation of the Jews, calling for immediate action on all plans and at any time, based on a clear program and aiming at this necessary and feasible elimination," A.C. Cuza, "Doctrina naționalistă creștină—cuzismul" (The National Christian Doctrine—Cuzism) in *Apărarea Națională [National Defense]*, 6, no. 15/8 (April 1928).

² Octavian Goga, extract from a speech as President of the Cabinet Council regarding the Government Program, December 31, 1937.

antisemitism, and the myth of the “Judeo-Bolshevik” enemy.

While the Romanian political system still maintained a façade of democratic institutions, the *Decree-Law No. 169/21 from January 1938, for revising citizenship* established the legal basis for removing the Jews from political life, and was in fact the first antisemitic law to come into force in the country.³ Under the pretext of revising Citizenship Registers entries for the inhabitants of Basarabia, Northern Bukovina, Transylvania, and other territories which had united with the Kingdom of Romania in 1918 to form Greater Romania, the law was aimed primarily at revoking the citizenship of Jews from those new territories. Two years from the law’s inception, 36.5% of individuals to whom it applied had lost their Romanian citizenship:

In consequence 225,222 Romanian Jews lost their citizenship and became persons without rights, in addition to the 44,848 Jews who were not registered in any record and had so far been tolerated. In other words, out of the 728,115 Jews registered during the 1930 census, by November 1939 270,170 (37%) had an uncertain juridical status that would subsequently cause them serious problems regarding their economic and social status.⁴

Although the measures passed in January 1938 constituted a crucial first step in the destruction of Romania’s Jews, the Goga government was merely a transition from the ruins of Romania’s fragile democracy. After only one month, Carol II dismissed the Goga government and instituted a regime of monarchical authority, under which the state continued to institutionalize an authoritarian power system. The new Constitution from February 1938 instituted a corporatist political regime and banned political parties, curtailed civil rights and other liberties. The king wielded the only real power, and antisemitic legislation served to legitimize racist

³ Lya Benjamin, ed., *Evreii din România între anii 1940–1944*, vol. 1: *Legislația antievreiască* [*The Romanian Jews between 1940–1944*, vol. 1: *Antisemitic Legislation*] (Bucharest: Hasefer, 1993), 25–31.

⁴ A. Florian, Lya Benjamin, and Anca Ciuciu, eds., *Cum a fost posibil? [How was It Possible?]* (Bucharest: INSHR-EW, 2007), 54.

ideology. In June 1940, when Bessarabia and Bukovina were ceded to Soviet control, the Romanian withdrawal from those territories was accompanied by pogroms (Dorohoi, Galați) perpetrated by soldiers and officers of the withdrawing Romanian Army. The Decree-Law no. 2650 from August 8, 1940 established for the first time a separate political status and legal category for Jews.⁵

In September 1940, internal political pressures created by Romania's territorial losses caused by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Vienna Dictate resulted in Carol II's abdication. Four years of totalitarian rule followed, under two successive political regimes: the National Legionary State (from September 14, 1940 to January 23, 1941), with General Ion Antonescu as "the leader of the Legionary State and the head of the Legionary Regime" and Horia Sima as "the Leader of the Iron-Guardist Movement," and Marshal Antonescu's discretionary government without a party (from January 24, 1941 to August 23, 1944).⁶

During the National Legionary State, antisemitism erupted in the streets. In defiance of the law, the Iron-Guardists physically assaulted the Jews, committed robberies, ransacked Jewish shops, etc.⁷ In January 1941 the struggle for power between the Iron-Guardists and Antonescu escalated. During the decisive confrontation between the army and Iron-Guardists, the Iron-Guardists carried out a pogrom in Bucharest, while the army did not intervene⁸.

⁵ Lya Benjamin, ed., *Evreii din România între anii 1940–1944*, 37–50. A Ministry of Justice report advocating the necessity of this law defined the blood law, which differentiated Romanians by blood versus Romanian citizens, as the basis of the totalitarian ethnocratic state. The law stipulated that juridically the Jews be divided into three categories, listing the restrictions specific to each category.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 61–62, Royal Decree, September 14, 1940.

⁷ For an inventory of Iron-Guardist robberies and violent assaults all around the country, see Matatias Carp, *Cartea neagră [The Black Book]*, vol. 1, second edition, (Bucharest: Diogene Publishing House, 1996).

⁸ Anca Ciuciu and Alexandru Florian, "Pogromul de la București. Oameni și locuri" [The Pogrom from Bucharest. People and Places] in INSHR-EW, *Violență și teroare în istoria recentă a României [Violence and Terror in Recent Romanian History]*, ed. Universitară Publishing House (Bucharest, 2006): 86–113. During the Bucharest Pogrom, 123 Jews were killed.

Romania's participation in the Second World War as Nazi Germany's ally opened a new chapter in the "Jewish problem." From this moment on, any organized actions followed a logic that could only lead to extermination. Identified as "Judeo-Communists," any Jews in the vicinity of the front line and in combat zones became targets of extermination. The signal was announced by the Iași Pogrom, in which over 13,000 Jews were killed between June 28 and July 6, 1941. After the Iași Pogrom, the war became a vehicle for "cleaning the land" of Jews.⁹ Paradoxically, in Bessarabia and Bukovina—territories where the Romanian Army had a liberation mandate—the Jewish communities were submitted to a quick process of deportation and extermination. The "great liberation" of Bessarabia and Bukovina from Soviet occupation signified ethnic cleansing through the mass destruction of the Jews. "In 1941, German and Romanian troops in Bessarabia and Bukovina killed between 45,000 and 60,000 Jews. Between 105,000 and 120,000 Romanian Jews were deported and died as a result of deportations to Transnistria. In the region of Transnistria, between 115,000 and 180,000 local Jews were eliminated (especially in Odessa and the districts of Golta and Berezovca)."¹⁰

The extermination actions were organized and carried out by the Antonescu Government. They were based on an ideological and emotional antisemitism raised to the rank of policy or state doctrine. Bessarabia and Bukovina were on the frontlines, where brutal and violent criminal policies against the Jewish population were favored; hence, the number of Jewish Holocaust victims from those territories was larger than that of those from the Old Kingdom. As documented in the stenographs of the Cabinet Council at the time, the themes of ideological antisemitism that mobilized the destructive policies against Jews could be found likewise in the State's political discourse regarding

⁹ For a socio-historical analysis of the extermination of the Jews from Basarabia and Bukovina during the Second World War, see J. Ancel, *Transnistria* (Bucharest: Atlas Publishing House, 1998); J. Ancel, *Contribuții la istoria României. Problema evreiască 1933–1944* [*Contributions to Romanian History. The Jewish Problem 1933–1944*], vol. 2 (Bucharest: Hasefer Publishing House, 2001, 2003); and R. Ioanid, *Evreii sub regimul Antonescu* [*The Jews under the Antonescu Regime*], second edition (Bucharest: Hasefer Publishing House, 2006).

¹⁰ CISHR, *Raport final* [*Final Report*] (Iași: Polirom Publishing House), 388.

the fate of the Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina. The only difference between policy in the Old Kingdom and that in Bessarabia and Bukovina was that in the latter territories these policies were given higher priority and applied at a faster rate so that the end of the war would coincide with “solving the Jewish problem” in the regained territories. In this way, they could become an example for “solving the Jewish problem” in the Old Kingdom.

Ethnic cleansing was the obsessively occurring theme in the meetings of the Cabinet Council during the Second World War. On June 17, 1941, a few days before the launching of Operation Barbarossa against the USSR, Cabinet Council Deputy Prime Minister Mihai Antonescu characterized the ethnic homogenization of the population of Bessarabia and Bukovina as “the biggest” issue of reconstruction in those territories, which he desired be reincorporated as soon as possible. To this end, he proposed the violent expulsion of the foreign populations, especially the Jews:

The Romanian nation is meeting this historical moment, the likes of which I don't know in how many centuries we shall meet again, and we have to use this moment to purify the population.... I assure you that not only in regard to the Jews, but to all the nationalities—we have the chance to carry out a policy of total and violent elimination of the foreign element.... In consequence, regarding Bessarabia and Bukovina as well as the Transnistrian territories to be incorporated under Romanian sovereignty, we will have to carry out a policy of purification and unification of the race through expulsion.¹¹

The first days of war would prove that the hostility was not only against the USSR and had as its aim not only the recovery of the Romanian territories lost in 1940. It was also a war against the Jews, against a civilian community of Romanian citizens. On June 25, M. Antonescu informed his government colleagues that “General [Ion] Antonescu made the decision—being in Moldova—to remove the Jews from all the rural

¹¹ Lya Benjamin, ed., *Problema evreiască în stenogramele Consiliului de Miniștri*, vol. 2 [*The Jewish Problem in the Stenographs of the Cabinet Council*], 1996: 234, 235.

communes—and from Moldova, Basarabia, and Bukovina. This measure has already been applied in Moldova.”¹²

Even though the status of Transnistria as a Romania-administered territory was not decided until August 30, 1941, after Germany and Romania signed the *Agreement for the security, administration and economical exploitation of the territories between Nistru and Bug and Bug and Nipru*, M. Antonescu had sealed the fate of the Transnistrian Jews two and a half months earlier. With the signing of the agreement with Germany at the end of August, their fate was confirmed and legalized. Paragraph 7 stipulated the confinement of the Jews in ghettos until their deportation over the river Bug. “The deportation of the Jews over the river Bug is for the moment not possible. Thus, they have to be gathered and exploited for labor until their deportation eastwards becomes possible, after the completion of operations.”¹³

In fact, ethnic cleansing and the elimination of Communist influence were the two targets of the Romanian policy for Basarabia and Bukovina. The proceedings from a July 2 meeting between M. Antonescu and the future governors of Basarabia, Bukovina, and Transnistria clearly show that the deportation of the Jews was a Romanian political strategy. The Deputy Prime Minister of the Cabinet Council informed his colleagues that phase one of this policy and the reorganization was to be the purification of those provinces:

Those have to be and stay Romanian provinces not only in the conventional sense with large and abstract proportions, but through a healthy biology, which we should not only feel, but verify daily through the social and ethnic reality of the population inhabiting those provinces. In consequence, the first phase marks a radical purification. The second phase marks the establishment of certain institutions. The third phase marks the beginning of reconstruction.¹⁴

¹² Ibid., 242.

¹³ CISHR, *Raport final*, 137.

¹⁴ Lya Benjamin, ed., *Problema evreiască în stenogramele Consiliului de Miniștri* vol. 2, 259.

In a short time, in a world of armed violence mixed with the symbolic violence of antisemitism, the governors would declare a principle of physical aggression and crime against Jews. In the stenographs of a July 8, 1941 Cabinet Council meeting, the political discourse displays a mixture of crude antisemitic prejudice and invectives to kill Jews. In under a month, the Romanian Government seemed on the verge of completing the elimination of the Jews through deportation and incitement to mass murder. During the above-mentioned meeting, the Minister of Agriculture and Land declared that, regarding the Jews from Bukovina, “there is only one remedy to get rid of those bed bugs: burn them until the land is bare”; the Minister of Internal Affairs announced that “this remedy [was] being put into practice.” During the same meeting, M. Antonescu brought the criminal discussion presented by his colleagues to its logical conclusion, begging the Government members to be merciless in order to purify the nation:

Please be implacable. Saccharine, vapid, philosophical amiability has no place here ... behind the disguise of humanitarian philosophy hides the most acute race interest, that of a race who wanted to master all, and of certain abstract principles behind which was hiding a religion taking advantage of a nation overwhelmed by needs, and many nations were like us.... If necessary fire the machine gun.

As indicated by the Cabinet Council’s vice president, the Jews were the first-priority target and the communists were second. The implication here is that the Jews were a more dangerous enemy than the communists; certain antisemites believed that Communism was synonymous with “Judeo-Bolshevism.” In their logic, M. Antonescu’s demand to kill the Jews first, with the same fate applying to the “lost Romanians” who had embraced Communism, made perfect sense. The stenographs of the Cabinet Council meeting prove that the policy of racial purification by deportation and extermination was supported by the members of the Government, while there is no mention of any opposition to the purification policy and the construction of an ethnocratic state.

Confident in victory, M. Antonescu recommended that the ministers use all means necessary to purify the nation. According to totalitarian

discursive logic, in the project of creating an ethnocratic state—the ideal political model for asserting the Romanian spirit in the world—the ends justified the means: “Therefore, I desire with all my heart that you stumble over as few formal issues as possible.”¹⁵ We have here an example of the manner in which political totalitarianism combines violence and the arbitrariness of the leader’s decisions as instruments of government.

The Leader of the State, Marshal Ion Antonescu, on every occasion returned to the issue of purification. Sometimes his speech was more aggressive and crude than vice president’s. During a September 5 meeting, the leader initiated a new message: Romania was fighting on the side of Hitler’s Germany in a war against the Jews: “If we do not lead this war to clean the race of those people draining our economical, national, and physical life, we will be in danger of losing Basarabia forever...” In other words, the Jewish danger to Romania had three dimensions: economic, ethnic, and physical—in short, the Jew destroys the existential basis of the Romanian as individual. Once the motivation for the destruction of the Jews of Basarabia and Bukovina had been established, the image of the fight against them became more important than the anti-Soviet war. Given the high stakes involved, the priority assigned to the “Romanian Renaissance” led I. Antonescu to assume responsibility from the very beginning for all necessary errors and costs. For the Leader, the destruction of a civilian population—the Holocaust—was conceived as a total, life and death struggle for Romania:

There are going to be also mistakes, of course. Don’t think that I am not aware. Don’t think that when I have decided to rid the life of the Romanian nation of all the Jews, I didn’t realize I would cause an economic crisis. But I have told myself that this is my war to lead ... if we miss this historical moment now, we have missed it forever. And if the Jews win the war, we don’t exist anymore. We are completely damned.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 267.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 298, 299.

Since all these antisemitic messages were put forth within a closed environment (the Government) and were not intended for the public, they expressed the regime's credo and political conscience, rather than propaganda used to mobilize the masses.

Also, in his fight against the Jews, the Marshal declared himself on the side of the Nazis. He supported the creation within Ukraine of the Galitian State as a political entity through which Germany intended to ethnically purify Eastern Europe: "Our purpose must be the formation of a Galitian State, which would solidify the union between us and the Germans, and this Galitia must be cleansed of Jews and Slavs, as I myself fight to cleanse Basarabia and Bukovina of Jews and Slavs."¹⁷ Thus, Antonescu admitted his own policy for the destruction of the Jews, enabled by the circumstances of the European War. Therefore, the fate of the Jews of the Romania-administered territories depended on Romanian state policy. While this policy relied on collaboration with Hitler, it was not subordinated to German policy, as some historians have tried to present it in order to mitigate Romania's responsibility for the Holocaust.

Under the circumstances caused by difficulties at the front, Antonescu's antisemitism exploded in even more violent forms and expressions. For example, the prolongation of the siege of Odessa compelled I. Antonescu to openly incite the extermination of the city's Jews. During a December 16, 1941 government session, he called for death to the Jews: "Please immediately remove the Jews from Odessa," he asked the Governor of Transnistria, in contrast to earlier antisemitic policies in which the border between spatial distance and physical extermination had been unclear. In the following exchange, informed by the Governor that the Jews had been prepared for deportation and requested a ship for their transportation, Antonescu demonstrates his reckless attitude toward Jewish lives: "*Alexianu, Governor of Transnistria*: I have issued a deadline, so please provide me with a ship. *Marshal Antonescu*: To sink them. *Alexianu*: To take them to Oceacov. *Antonescu*: You know that we have lost another ship, Cavarna. I don't care for the Jews, but for the ship."¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., 302.

¹⁸ Ibid., 364.

Besides the Marshal's crude, lifelong antisemitism, the Holocaust of the Jews of the Old Kingdom, Bukovina, Basarabia, and Transnistria was fuelled by ethnocratic state doctrine. In each of the government sessions, Jewish life was measured against the principle of "Romanianization" of the economy as the basis for developing the country, since racial purification was regarded as a condition necessary to allow the development of cultural values and institutions affirming the identity and power of Romanian society, internally and in relation to other nations. The third theme of antisemitism was the myth of "Judeo-Bolshevism" that equated Jews with Communism; a society without Jews would be safe from the danger of Communism. Thus, government sessions frequently discussed subjects such as the confiscation of Jewish rural property in Bukovina and Basarabia and its colonization by Romanians.

At the same time, the governors realized during the first days of the war that, while the deportations and exterminations would accelerate, the implementation of the Romanianization policy in the regained territories would be much delayed by bureaucracy. During a July 8, 1941 Cabinet Council meeting, M. Antonescu went so far as to recommend that, in order to reorganize Basarabia quickly and efficiently, Romanian administrators abandon the legal system as too dense and difficult to implement:

All the prefects, magistrates, engineers, agronomists going there [i.e., to Basarabia and Bukovina] should know that if they are going to behave according to the old spirit and work according to the old methods, we are not going to accomplish anything. I take full formal responsibility saying that there is no law. For centuries this nation didn't have a law, but there was a law against it; last year, in 1940, there was no law for the Romanian nation to surrender its lands to foreign domination, to have its property, religion, and life destroyed under Bolshevik rule. Therefore, today there is no law to hinder the Romanian nation in its holy right to incarnate and rebuild its national body. No law at all. For two or three weeks I will suspend the law in Basarabia and Bukovina.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid., 268.

The only law that functioned with maximum efficiency was the racist legislation against Jews, which had been developed since 1938 on the ideological basis of ethnic purification. Analysis of the stenographs suggests that in Basarabia and Bukovina, policy and action for the deportation and extermination of the Jews functioned independently of other strategies, taking precedence over the economic and institutional Romanianization policy. The Holocaust was fed by the state antisemitism and facilitated by the contingency of war, when anything seemed possible.