

Staring at the Past with Eyes Wide Shut: Holocaust Revisionism and Negationism in Romania

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In a television interview in early March 2012, thirty-eight-year-old Romanian senator, lawyer, and Social Democratic Party (PSD) spokesman Dan Sova proclaimed that “only twenty-four Romanian citizens of Jewish descent were killed” in Iași in late June 1941 and that this act was carried out “by German soldiers. Romanian soldiers were not involved in the action. This is a historical fact.” When the Jewish community and the Elie Wiesel Institute in Bucharest objected to these negationist statements, the politician countered that he had been misunderstood. He had only wished to state that “the Romanians had not wanted these events” and that they were the product of an “unfortunate historical context and Nazi policies.” That declaration amounted to yet another misrepresentation of historical events.¹

What is unusual about these negationist statements is that they were made not by a die-hard Holocaust denier but by a young and well-educated Social Democratic politician. Furthermore, hundreds of bloggers on internet forums expressed their “solidarity” with the politician and praised him for his supposed courage in telling the truth. He was, however, immediately removed from his position as spokesman by the party leader, and as “punishment” was compelled to visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, where he could learn more about the Holocaust in Romania.

In August 2012, less than six months later, the very same politician was appointed minister—a decision that was met with sharp criticism on the part of diverse organizations both in Romania and abroad. The president of the Jewish community in Bucharest, Erwin Simsensohn, noted that Jews in Romania were “infuriated” and added that the politician’s statements were in violation of Romanian laws prohibiting Holocaust denial. “Only in Romania,” he said, can you “deny the Holocaust and then be appointed as a government minister.”² To appease his critics, the designated minister again made a formal apology: “The

remarks I made during a televised program about the Holocaust in Romania are completely wrong.”³

Irrespective of one’s opinion on this case and whether someone who has negated the Holocaust in Romania deserves a second chance, this incident highlights the revisionist and negationist tendencies that exist in Romania. During World War II, Romania was a sovereign ally of Nazi Germany and, as such, enjoyed considerable freedom of action. Of all of the nations that sided with the Nazis, the Romanians provided the largest contingent of soldiers for the *Ostkrieg*—the war on the Eastern Front. It cannot be overlooked that Romania was actively and independently involved in the Holocaust of its own accord. If a young, leading politician—and a university educated one at that—remains unaware of these facts or is even prepared to consciously negate them, then it must be assumed that there are many more Romanians who either know nothing, or do not wish to know anything, about the Holocaust in Romania.

Indeed, Romanians are still generally defensive vis-à-vis problematic aspects of their nation’s history and, more specifically, about the “tabooing of the genocide.”⁴ Among members of the Romanian public, “a wider examination of the Holocaust has yet to take place.”⁵ Some segments of Romanian society do not want to know anything about the mass murder of Jews carried out by the Romanian army, gendarmerie, and by perpetrators drawn from the local population. One author has even described this stance as “collective amnesia.”⁶ Alongside this desire among the wider population to avoid any knowledge of the Holocaust, there are others who espouse relativistic, revisionist, and even more extreme positions. If only obscure splinter groups were harboring Romania’s revisionists and negationists, it would be difficult to justify producing an entire article on the issue. This, however, is simply not the case.

It is worth examining the most pronounced revisionist and negationist trends in Romania, for the manner in which a group or society deals with the past, as well as how it decides what constitutes memory and what is to be repressed and forgotten, are important indicators that reveal much “about the constitution and tendencies of a society.”⁷ Memory is always actively handed down from one generation to the next until “this past has been accepted as meaningful.” Conversely, a group or a society “forgets” “when the generation that now possesses the past does not convey it to the next, or when the latter rejects what it receives and does not pass it onward.”⁸

Romania’s involvement in the war of extermination in the East as well as in the Holocaust is an undeniable historical fact. In late June 1941, even before Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia had been invaded, over 10,000 Jewish men,

women, and children were murdered in the Romanian city of Iași in a horrifying massacre.⁹ Just a few weeks later, in early July 1941, the Romanian army and gendarmerie, as well as elements of the local population, committed a number of atrocities in Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia. All over the occupied territories, the Romanian army—with the gendarmerie following in its wake—massacred Jews, including women and children. At times, the army was assisted by local Romanian or Ukrainian perpetrators and collaborators, who in some places even initiated pogroms before the arrival of Romanian forces. In July 1941, there were neither quantitative nor qualitative differences between those murders of Jews carried out by the Germans and those by the Romanians.¹⁰

Following the massacres of July 1941, the Jews of Bukovina and Bessarabia were ghettoized and subsequently deported to Romanian-administered Transnistria, where nearly 200 ghettos as well as labor and concentration camps were established.¹¹ Even though Jews deported to Transnistria were much more likely to survive than those sent to German concentration and extermination camps, tens of thousands of Jews still died as a result of the deportation marches, illness, starvation in the ghettos and camps, forced labor, beatings, and executions. In total, between 250,000 and 410,000 Romanian and Soviet/Ukrainian Jews were killed in the areas under Romania's control.¹²

Although Romanian scholars Felicia Waldmann and Mihail E. Ionescu have identified certain signs of progress, significant shortcomings still exist when it comes to teaching the history of the Holocaust at Romanian schools and universities.¹³ Waldmann claims: "The history that is taught is of the Romanian people, not of Romania itself... Students are still taught about how hospitable the Romanian people have always been, and how they've been the victims of history, never acting as aggressors."¹⁴

According to a 2007 Romanian survey, 65 percent of those asked had heard about the Holocaust, but only a quarter of those knew that the Holocaust also took place in Romania and in areas occupied by Romania. The percentage of those polled who were aware that Romanians—rather than Germans—were responsible for the Holocaust in Romania or areas under its control is exceedingly small.¹⁵ It is a daunting challenge to combat this widespread ignorance of Romania's involvement in the Holocaust for committed teachers, journalists with a sense of responsibility, and the relatively few internationally connected Romanian historians who seek to do so. In light of this reluctance to discuss the Shoah in Romanian schools, universities, and media, it is no surprise that Romanian public opinion concerning the Holocaust is "rife with half-truths and deliberate denial." The majority of the population has only "vague and distorted ideas of what took place."¹⁶

Revisionism and negationism are nothing new in Romania. In fact, they are probably less virulent and influential today than in the early 1990s. Almost immediately after the World War II, the newly established Communist regimes in East Central Europe started to suppress all discussion about the Holocaust. Fascism was presented as an “imported” concept alien to Romanian tradition and Romania as a victim of Germany. Matatias Carp’s *Cartea Neagra* [Black Book]¹⁷ on the Holocaust in Romania, published shortly after the war, quickly disappeared from bookshelves. The Communist regime did not shy away from using antisemitic rhetoric when it served its purpose. When the Berlin Wall came down, knowledge of their country’s role in the Holocaust was close to zero among Romanians. The early 1990s were the heyday of antisemitism, and the Ion Antonescu cult blossomed.

Only when Romania initiated its accession process to NATO and to the European Union was there an increase in international pressure on the government to curb antisemitism and to take a closer look at Romania’s Fascist past and its involvement in the Holocaust. But as late as 2003, then-President Ion Iliescu stated in an interview with *Haaretz* that “the Holocaust was not unique to the Jewish population in Europe. Many others, including Poles, died in the same way.”¹⁸ At the same time, it was Iliescu who commissioned the groundbreaking report of an international commission on the Holocaust in Romania (published in English in 2005).

Even though revisionism and negationism may no longer be as influential as they were in the early 1990s, the persistence of the Romanian revisionist and relativist camp cannot be ignored. Among its proponents are politicians, university professors, artists, and writers.¹⁹ Revisionist authors are prolific in their attempts to dispute the existence of Romania’s violent policies; while not actually denying that the Holocaust took place, Romania’s participation in the events is “relativized, marginalized, or simply ignored.”²⁰ Statements made by Romanian revisionists generally fall into five basic categories.²¹

First, revisionists maintain that antisemitism was not a mass phenomenon in Romania during the interwar years. They believe that Romanians maintained a tradition of tolerance and that relations between Romanians and Jews were generally good. Antisemitic laws and practices were by no means radical, they claim, and a combination of the Romanian humanist tradition and Christian morality actually succeeded in preventing a “total Holocaust.” Romania protected “its” Jews from Nazi Germany and ensured that they did not share the same fate as Polish or Hungarian Jews. Revisionists often focus on the Holocaust as it unfolded in Hungary in order to highlight, by comparison, the supposedly humane and pro-Jewish actions on the part of the Romanian authorities as well as the population at large.

Second, revisionists maintain that although Jews were killed by Romanians, the number of victims was relatively small and has been grossly exaggerated by Jewish historians. Sporadic “repressive actions” against Romanian Jews may have taken place, but a “real” Holocaust never occurred. This is “illustrated” by the fact that the Romanian government did not agree to have the Jews from the *Regat* [Old Kingdom] deported to Auschwitz or other German extermination camps.

Third, Romanian revisionists do not deny the fact that the Holocaust took place—for this would, by definition, make them negationists—but they do maintain that the Holocaust did not take place in Romania itself. They stress that it was due to Hungarian collaboration with the Germans that the Jews of Northern Transylvania were deported to, and subsequently killed in, Auschwitz. They insist that Romania, on the other hand, never acquiesced to have the Jews of the Old Romanian Kingdom deported. Furthermore, Romania belonged to the German sphere of influence and, so they argue, the Germans should bear the ultimate responsibility for the murder of the Jews in the East. This strategy of externalizing or even sharing responsibility for the Holocaust is by no means unique to Romania. It is widespread throughout post-Communist East Central Europe.²²

A fourth argument maintains that the Jews were partly responsible for their own fate. According to this line of thinking, most Jews were Communists and took part in the persecution and killing of Romanians in 1940; now, it is alleged, “the Jews” are sparing no effort to maintain their “monopoly on suffering.” This notion is widespread both in revisionist circles and beyond. Radu Ioanid, a scholar affiliated with the USHMM, maintains that this relativization of Jewish suffering and of the unique nature of the Holocaust is a typical, mainstream antisemitic tendency shared by elements of the intelligentsia in Romania as well as in other countries.²³

Finally, the revisionists are keen to compare the crimes of the Communists with those of the Fascists—and come to the conclusion that atrocities committed by the former were considerably more heinous than those carried out by the latter. Here I am not referring to the methodical, rigorous, and scholarly—although still problematic—analysis of national socialism versus communism or Stalinism such as that which appears in Timothy Snyder’s controversial book *Bloodlands*. I am referring instead to the revisionists’ crude, at times almost maniacal, notion of a “victimhood contest,” according to which the Communists/Stalinists killed more people than the Nazis—or so believe the revisionists—and the true victims were not the Jews, but the Romanians themselves.

Negationist tendencies can mainly be found in internet forums that generally do not attract the attention of historians. At times, the discussions that take place

in these forums are beyond belief. Negationists also maintain blogs and succeed in disseminating their works without any evident difficulty. After two Romanian journalists published a series of articles consisting of interviews with Holocaust survivors, the website of the newspaper (*Evenimentul Zilei*) in which their articles appeared was inundated with hundreds of posts from its readers: “From the comments you can pick out huge amounts of disinformation, lots of prejudices, and one big certainty: the Romanian Holocaust is *an invention*, the Romanian people need not feel responsible, and the Jewish people are in general guilty of all the crimes of Communism.”²⁴ When the then-president of the Chamber of Deputies of Romania, Roberta Anastase, issued a historically accurate statement in February 2012 on Romania’s role in the Holocaust, she unleashed a wave of antisemitic and negationist rage in a number of internet forums where she was described, for example, as a “whore of the Jews.”

The Romanian negationists deny that the Holocaust in Romania ever actually took place, while maintaining that, as one of its well-known advocates states, “the antisemitic holocaust in Romania and the [sic] Transnistria is the invention of Jewish and Romanian Communists.” Ion Antonescu sent the Jews to Transnistria to save them from the starvation that ravaged all parts of Romania, according to one of the negationists’ “arguments.” Not one single Romanian Jew shared the fate of the Hungarian Jews, they contend.

According to the negationists, the Jews were largely responsible for a “Romanian Holocaust”—a particularly favored construction of the negationists—namely, a mass murder of Romanians. The victims (the Jews) are thus transformed into perpetrators and the perpetrators (the Romanians) into the victims. This absurd notion—a kind of “self-victimization”²⁵—is still supported by a handful of (Romanian) historians. As the brilliant young historian Adrian Cioflâncă has shown, a tradition has been handed down that depicts the Romanians as the primary victims of first the Nazis and then the Communists, with the Jews transformed into the role of the (Communist) perpetrators.²⁶

The notion that history provides us with simple lessons relating to the present is, of course, naïve. The fact that “memory is increasingly being used as a morally charged, rather diffuse emotional formula” is also a worrisome development.²⁷ Harald Welzer, a German researcher on memory, points out that a young person who is “constantly told that he may never forget, even though he never had the intention to forget” will “ultimately become disgruntled [and turn] to other things,” a notion that might well have some validity in Germany.²⁸ However, recent studies have shown that every fifth German under the age of thirty is “clueless when it comes to the Holocaust.”²⁹ Nevertheless, such statements and ideas ignore the reality of the situation in Romania and elsewhere in East Central Europe. Most

people in these countries have never been confronted with the “duty of memory.” They are either unaware of their own history or are exposed to a form of it that has been manipulated for decades. For many East Europeans, the Holocaust is seen as a taboo or a complete fabrication rather than a constantly present theme in the media that people reject when they become disgruntled. Many of the people in these countries have no intention of remembering what took place during World War II, for any knowledge of what actually happened would destroy the reigning myth of innocence.

For many people in Romania, “forgetting” the Holocaust is, to quote the late French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, “an obscure will not to inform oneself,” “a wanting-not-to-know,” and “a strategy of avoidance, of evasion, of flight.”³⁰ While an obtrusively, hierarchically, or externally imposed duty of memory may be of little value, “wanting-not-to-know” is no real option either. Brown University historian Omer Bartov aptly wrote that those “who stare at [the] past with eyes wide shut can only conjure fictions, legends, nightmares, and phobias, however much they seek a pure, good, cleansed identity.”³¹ Confronted with a choice between the “terror of forgetting” and the “terror of having too much to remember,” Romanians (as all people) should be encouraged to join the late Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, professor of Jewish history at Columbia University, in choosing the latter, for memory is also a question of justice.³²

Notes

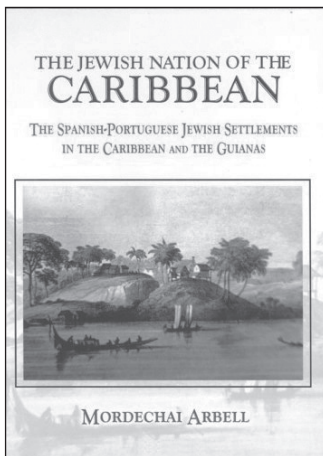
- ¹ www.archive.punkto.ro/articles/Nach_Holocaust-Leugnung:_Sozi-Sprecher_Sova_entschuldigt_sich_halfherzig-3774.html.
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