

# **The Holocaust in Romania and the Vapniarka Concentration Camp**

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## **DECLARATION**

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree or for any other purpose. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis details the political and social circumstances leading to the implementation of the Final Solution in Romania. It provides a comprehensive backdrop for the understanding of how the Romanian Holocaust was conceived and executed and a case study analysis of the Vapniarka Concentration Camp that epitomises and sheds new light on this experience. In so doing, the work demonstrates points of continuity with other European locations in which the Holocaust was perpetrated, but also provides insight into unique aspects of the Romanian case. It explores the history and nature of Romanian antisemitism, the role and influence of Ion Antonescu, Romania's fascist leader during this period, and details the experience of Vapniarka's prisoners through a close examination of their testimony. In particular, the medical disaster perpetrated against the prisoners through what I posit was a cruel and uncontrolled programme of poisoning, is highlighted. I argue that this poisoning should be understood, at the very least, as a wanton, criminal and deliberate attempt on the part of succeeding camp commands, without concern as to the consequences. The carrying out of this programme of poisoning was implemented on the advice of Nazi officers and, as such, it is contended that this total programme should be seen as a part of a continuum of Nazi policies in which medical experimentation and abuse was utilised as a means of enacting genocidal policies.

## DEDICATION

**This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Geza Kornis,  
1917–2019**

Geza Kornis was a man who, as a Jew and a strong anti-fascist, was imprisoned in the Vapniarka concentration camp in Transnistria from September 1942 until May 1943.

He wrote of his experience as a prisoner of that camp in his personal memoir *Überlebt durch Solidarität*, Konstanz, Germany, Hartung-Gorre Verlag, 2004.

As one of the last, if not the very last living survivor of the Vapniarka concentration camp, Geza was the only person who reached out to me in answer to my general online enquiry in 2016 for information on the camp, offering to answer any questions in relation to the camp I may have.

He encouraged me to undertake this project, and his offer to be interviewed at his then age of 101, should I be able to make the trip to his home in Germany, strongly influenced my decision to embark on this project.

When I was ultimately able to travel to Europe in 2018, Geza's frailty and consequent inability to meet me was a cause of great sadness and disappointment. He passed away during the following year.

This thesis is my way of honouring both Geza's memory, as well as the memories of all who both succumbed to, and those who withstood the tyranny of Antonescu's reign of terror.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The decision to commit to this particular project came from two very strongly held personal beliefs on my part; firstly, a strong empathy, as a member of the Jewish faith, for the entire subject matter of the Holocaust and, secondly, a personal feeling of responsibility and desire to contribute, in my own way, to a wider understanding of a little-known chapter that occurred during the Second World War. By way of emphasis with regard to this last point, and through my reading on the subject, I became aware that the historical face of Romania's involvement that was presented to the world during and beyond the war years, and until 1989 with the end of the Communist regime was, to say the least, devoid of accuracy and truth. This is particularly so with regard to Romania's treatment of the country's Jewish community, as being the main component in furthering the murderous aims and aspirations of the fascist Axis powers during the Second World War, and specifically 1941–1944.

I wish to express my extreme gratitude to the following people, without whose help in the manner in which I will outline, enabled me to complete this project:

Dr. Avril Alba, in her role as my primary supervisor for the period during which most of the writing of the thesis took place. I am indebted to her for the careful review of each chapter of work that I submitted to her, and her comments were invaluable in assisting me to write more concisely and to the point.

Dr. Michael Abrahams-Sprod, in his role, initially as my primary and, following his retirement, as my secondary supervisor. It was he who saw me through the developmental stages of the project and assisted me with an approach to the University's Ethics Department in order to set up an interview with the last living survivor of the concentration camp under review. His assistance in referring me to the various repositories in Europe and the United States where information on the

thesis topic was available added greatly to the success of the trip I undertook in April/May 2018. I am also indebted to him for agreeing to read and comment on the finished thesis prior to its submission.

Emeritus Professor Konrad Kwiet, Resident Historian of the Sydney Jewish Museum, who was sufficiently wise in originally steering me away from other Holocaust-related topics that I had in mind, and who supported the current project on the basis of it needing communal exposure.

The suggestion to research and write a study in the form of a thesis on this particular concentration camp was given to me by Dr. George Weisz, a Sydney-based orthopaedic surgeon, and himself a child Holocaust survivor. To this day, and apart from his continuing connection with the Sydney Jewish Museum, Dr. Weisz has, and continues to have, an abiding and deep medical interest in the effects of the ingestion, by the Vapniarka prisoner population, of the poisonous grass pea, *Lathyrus sativus*, and has written authoritatively on its particular use as described in this thesis.<sup>1</sup>

Geza Kornis, was first made known to me through his daughter Kati, who answered my email approach to Cornell University's online Czernowitz 'chat room' in 2016 indicating his willingness to answer any questions I may have regarding the camp, and his time as a prisoner there. This contact was of particular importance in the decision to embark upon the project. At 101 years of age at that time, he was one, if not the last of the living survivors of the camp under review.<sup>2</sup> With great sadness, it

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<sup>1</sup> G. Weisz, 'Remembering More Jewish Physicians', *Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal*, vol. 7, no. 3, Published online July 28, 2016, doi: 10.504/RMMJ.10253.

<sup>2</sup> Geza Kornis, now deceased, lived in Germany and was born in Budapest in 1917. In 1940, 1941 and 1942

must be reported that Geza passed away in September 2019, and it is for the privilege of having known him and read his story, and out of regard for his place in my appreciation of the camp's significance, as well as the deep personal respect there was between us, that this thesis is dedicated to his memory. Although, due to his failing health, I was unable to interview him during my trip to Europe in 2018 for the purposes of this thesis, his family continued to be most helpful with information and references from his personal records bearing upon the subject matter of this thesis.

David Kessler, son of Vapniarka survivor, the Late Dr. Arthur Kessler, and who thought enough of my project to maintain contact and send me copies of some of his late father's precious papers, together with maps and photographs, all of which proved immensely useful.

Professor Felicia Waldman, Faculty Member, Centre for Hebrew Studies, University of Bucharest, for her email correspondence beforehand, and the time she spent advising and assisting me while I was in Bucharest in April, 2018.

Dr. Ana Barbulescu, chief researcher of the Eli Wiesel National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Bucharest, Romania for her enthusiastic and willing assistance during my visit with her in April 2018 while I was in Bucharest, and her invaluable assistance then, and since, with documents during the writing of the thesis.

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he was forced to perform hard labour in Jewish labour camps. In Autumn 1942, he was arrested and deported to Transnistria, where he spent almost two years in the Vapniarka Concentration Camp. He published his war-time experiences under the citation: Kornis G., *'Überlebt durch Solidarität'*, Konstanz, Germany, Hartung-Gorre Verlag, 2004.

Catalin Bujor Bontas, Head of Archives at The Centre for the study of Jewish History in Romania, for his painstaking effort and assistance in putting the resources of his organisation at my disposal at such short notice whilst I was in Bucharest.

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The staff of the Reading Room at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem Israel, who assisted me during my visit there in April 2018.

Dr. Gaye Wilson of Gryphonworks Editing and Coaching Services, for her assistance with reconstructing and formatting my damaged Word file and her general editing suggestions. Without her close attention to detail, this thesis would not have been brought to its presentable current form. All remaining errors are my own.

Finally, and with much gratitude, I thank my wife who has suffered the privation of living with someone who has had his mind elsewhere for most of the time for some years. Her patience and support have been both immeasurable and incapable of repayment.

Translators: I place on record my deep gratitude for the time and devotion of Ileana Iliutz for her translation into English of both Romanian and German texts, and Susan Roos for her Romanian translations.

# INTRODUCTION

## Scope and Chapter Outlines

The central subject of this project, the Vapniarka Concentration Camp,<sup>1</sup> was brought into existence, in the first of its two iterations, in October 1941, followed by a second from September 1942 to early 1944.<sup>2</sup> Situated approximately three kilometres outside the strategic rail-head village of the same name, it was one of several such camps and ghettos established in the newly created territory of Transnistria, which was actually still part of the Ukraine. This thesis, as its main aim, will explain and broaden an understanding of the camp, the detail of its establishment, its operation, and its ultimate closure in 1944. The camp has become infamous for the practice, by several successive camp commanders, of including a component in the prisoners' diet known to be poisonous to humans and which had the effect of causing incurable paralysis of the legs, namely, a type of 'field pea' or 'fodder pea', otherwise known by its botanical name of *Lathyrus sativus*.<sup>3</sup> I will argue and demonstrate that this effect was, in fact, known to the camp authorities, and yet they persisted in the practice. Further, I will

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief introductory description refer to Yad Vashem Shoah Resource Center, available at: [Yadvashem.org/odot-pdf-pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206337.pdf](http://Yadvashem.org/odot-pdf-pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206337.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Prisoners were brought to Vapniarka in the autumn and early winter of 1941. Most had died of typhus by spring with all but 71 of those remaining being taken from the camp and shot. The camp was re-activated in August 1942 when 2100 'Communist Jews' were taken there. See Barbulescu, A., 'Life, Death, and Survival in the Vapniarka Camp', *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. vii, no. 9, 2016, pp. 75–77.

<sup>3</sup> '*Lathyrus sativas* (grass pea) is a high yielding, drought-resistant legume consumed as a food in Northern India and neighbouring countries as well as in Ethiopia. Its development into an important food legume, however, has been hindered by the presence of a neurotoxin, commonly known as ODAP in seeds which, if consumed in large enough quantities for prolonged periods, can cause irreversible paralysis...' Spencer, P. S., et. al. '*Lathyrus sativus* (grass pea) and its neurotoxin ODAP', *Phytochemistry*, vol. 67, issue 2, January 2006, p. 107.

explore the possible link of these practices with Nazi medical experimentation generally. Details of the political, social and religious contexts necessary to understand the unfolding events in Romania and Transnistria between 1941 and 1944 will also be covered in order to gain an appreciation of events throughout those years, but with particular reference to the abovementioned unique circumstances of the Vapniarka Camp. While the territory of Transnistria, under the control of dictator, Ion Antonescu, through an appointed Governor, followed the Nazi example of establishing ghettos, labour and concentration camps, I have chosen not to dwell on any of the other, larger and equally infamous of these but, rather, allow the detailed example of the Vapniarka camp to stand as a representative microcosm of all.

The thesis commences with a literature review and an overview of sources and incorporating a methodology. The Literature Review chapter examines a number of well-known scholars who have been the main contributors to the record of the Holocaust years in Romania. Writers such as Matatias Carp, Raul Hilberg and Julius Fisher who belong to the pre-90s group, and Radu Ioanid, Jean Ancel, Ana Barbulescu, Diana Dumitru, Dennis Deletant, Simon Geissbuhler and Vladimir Solonari who, among others have written in the years since, have all made valuable contributions. When examining what has been written generally on the subject of Romania's role in the Holocaust, one concludes that the relatively small number of scholars who did so, hampered as they were until the demise of the Communist regime in 1989 by an absence of government documents, could not adequately explore the plight of the country's large Jewish population during the war years. It took some passage of time, actually until the mid-1990s for the country's huge document collections to become available for the general use of historians, and even so, there were large amounts of material still to see the light of day. One of the foremost historians of this period of Romanian history, Jean Ancel, makes this telling comment:

After the collapse of the Communist regimes, the East European archives suddenly became available...From 1994 on, I also visited the U.S. Holocaust memorial Museum in Washington DC, which began amassing important collections of documents that came from Romanian archives...The inaccessibility of the archives in Romania and the Soviet Union (until then) had led to substantial errors in my understanding of Antonescu's regime, its objectives, its modus operandi, the role antisemitism played in its consideration, the extent of its participation in the liquidation of the Jews, and especially the relationship it had with the Third Reich...<sup>4</sup>

The following statement by the historian Dennis Deletant further supports the point:

After the overthrow of Romania's Communist dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, in December 1989 the doors were opened of the archives and a deluge of books appeared in Romanian on Antonescu.<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted, at the outset of this thesis that, by definition, the coverage and depth of understanding of situations and events are constrained by the author's inability to read and understand the Romanian language. Added to this is the fact that the obtaining of Romanian translating services is also both difficult and very expensive. For these reasons, many excellent academic and insightful works have not been able to be consulted. To offset these deficits I have availed myself of alternative quality works which have been translated from the original Romanian and are available in English.

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<sup>4</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, 2011, p. 1 (Introduction).

<sup>5</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 5 (Introduction).

This literature is assembled and analysed in order to create as comprehensive a backdrop as possible upon which the primary sources are then brought to bear.

With regard to primary sources, a key focus will be personal testimony. Testimonies of camp prisoners have been repeatedly used in the war trials of criminal perpetrators as a realistic and non-rebuttable primary source on which to base an understanding, not only of particular offences, but as a means of understanding the day-to-day life of the camp. Similarly, the practice of interviewing survivors of camps and other wartime situations creates a much more faithful, detailed and rich picture of the period being examined than can be achieved by the most erudite academic written word. This should not be understood to mean that the use of, and reliance upon testimonies as a form of primary source material comes without its own inherent set of problems, and some of these will be explored; however, apart from documentary evidence, the testimony of prisoners in the context of life in any concentration camp still remains one of the most powerful sources of primary source material at our disposal.

None of the major authors mentioned above nor, for that matter, authors of the journal articles published on the history of the camp in question have utilised the available testimonies in their analyses, despite the fact that all interviews included in this thesis were conducted and published earlier than the better known and respected works in this area. Therefore, as a result of careful research and study of at least twenty-five such testimonies, I have decided to highlight nine of them to varying degrees from survivors of the camp under review. Four of the nine testimonies have come from The USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education,<sup>6</sup> and have been chosen because they are the only testimonies from this camp

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<sup>6</sup> USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, available at <http://www.usc.edu/vhi> (accessed 20 November, 2017.)

and in this archive that were recorded in the English language, whilst the remainder were either previously published by survivors in their own right or recorded in writing by one of the many communal organisations set up to gather such information. The information gleaned from these interviews is interwoven into the chapters concerning the functioning of the camps, in order to provide a more granular understanding of day-to-day life from the perspective of the individual prisoner. All testimonies I have used, other than those from the USC Shoah Foundation Institute, were sourced from the records of the Bad Arolsen Archives, International Center on Nazi Persecution in their original European language, and have been translated into English for inclusion in this thesis.<sup>7</sup> In order to gain the most meaning and significance in the expanded re-telling of the story of Vapniarka, the content of the testimonies will be appropriately woven through the chapter dedicated to the camp.

It is also important to stress that the testimonies used were carefully chosen because each one of these prisoners played an important role in the life of the camp with some of them being members of the so-called ‘illegal committee’ accepted by the prisoner community of the camp to determine the day-to-day decisions affecting people’s very existence. Further, a close reading of the translation of the written testimonies discloses an interrelationship between some of the prisoners who willingly gave their testimonies. It is almost axiomatic that, by one prisoner mentioning the name and behaviour of another, additional credence is given to both accounts and further humanises and heightens one’s understanding of daily life and interaction within the camp.

Having established this theoretical and methodological backdrop, Chapter One focuses on the history of anti-Semitism in Romania. The chapter illustrates how its relentless growth in

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<sup>7</sup> The names of my translators appear in the list of acknowledgements to this thesis, however, I owe a special debt of gratitude to Sydney translator, Ileana Epstein.

Romania from at least the fifteenth century, culminating in the rise of the Iron Guard and later, Ion Antonescu, created a backdrop against which the latter could demonstrate his own Nazi-like perversions against the Jewish community. There is no doubt that both the depth and breadth of anti-Semitism that had existed within Romanian society, coupled with the emergence of a man such as Antonescu, representing that anti-Semitism, were hugely instrumental in the murder of some 380,000 of its Jewish citizens. An appreciation of this is necessary in order to make some sense of what historians have described as ‘the Romanian Holocaust.’<sup>8</sup>

Chapter Two delves into the rise of Antonescu; his early history and career are examined, as is his admiration for, but not membership of the fascist Iron Guard movement. Antonescu’s own personal anti-Semitism mirrored that of Romanian attitudes of the day, and was sufficient to fuel his rise to power, allowing him to remove the reigning monarch and assume the sole mantle of power. Because of the personal and unique role played by Antonescu, and the resultant destructive effects his actions wrought upon the country’s Jewish population, it is imperative that detailed background context also be provided in this area. In order to create that context, the nature of pertinent social and political issues operating in Romania both well before and leading up to its entry into the Second World War, will be expanded upon, with particular attention to the history of Romanian anti-Semitism and Antonescu’s rise to power. Because of his pivotal role in the manner and detail with which his country prosecuted its unique involvement as an Axis member during the years of the Holocaust in Romania from 1940 to 1944, and particularly with regard to its treatment of Jews, a separate chapter is devoted to the man, his career, and his politics and actions.

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<sup>8</sup> Glayjar, V. and Teodorescu, J. (eds), *Local History, Transnational Memory in the Romanian Holocaust*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; Jagendorf, S., and Hirt-Manheimer, A. (eds), *Jagendorf’s Foundry: A Memoir of the Romanian Holocaust 1941–1944*, New York, Harper Collins, 1991.

Chapter Three then proceeds to examine the nature of the relationship between Germany and Romania, its racial context and how the political and economic aspects of Romania's ill-fated Axis partnership with Germany resulted in such disastrous effects on Romania as a whole.

Chapter Four introduces the territory of Transnistria and its creation as a region of the Ukraine over which Hitler, after initially conquering the area in partnership with Romania, allowed Romania territorial rights, these rights being granted without any agreement as to the term. It is here that the overwhelming majority of Jewish men, women and children who perished were murdered by shooting, poisoning, starvation and disease.

Having set the contextual background, the centrepiece of the thesis, Chapter Five, describes the beginnings of Camp Vapniarka and its prisoner community in detail and how they organised their lives in the face of the adversity into which they had been thrown. In approaching the central subject of the Vapniarka camp, wide parameters have been set for various reasons. Firstly, and although there is no scarcity of written material about the camp, the information that exists is not to be found in a single and comprehensive form or place. Rather, it is in the form of short articles or references in various disparate source materials related to different aspects of the camp's existence, and usually subservient to a larger overall Holocaust theme. It is also therefore among the aims of this thesis, not only to expand upon existing knowledge of the camp, but also to gather the information in a single body of work, thereby assisting in giving the camp its own rightful place in the history of the Holocaust. Secondly, in order to understand and absorb the totality of the Vapniarka narrative, it is necessary to give a contextual sense of the Romanian nation's role in the unfolding of the Holocaust in Europe in order to see the camp's place in a historical background with complete clarity. The choice of this particular concentration camp in Transnistria serves a dual purpose, namely, to provide a microcosm of the more general treatment of Jews in the overwhelming

number of camps established in Transnistria and, at the same time, expose the unique actions of the camp command in relation to the poisoning of prisoners' food.

A number of themes will be raised and expounded upon, namely, the political and geographical circumstances leading to the camp's establishment, the changing nature of the basis of incarceration, details of the uncompromisingly disciplined approach taken by the prisoners among themselves in order to survive, and the overall placing of the camp within the context and extent of Romania's role in the Holocaust. Other subjects to be covered will be the events leading to the disbanding of the camp, and the post-war criminal trials of the Romanian personnel in command of the camp together with their partners in crime.

What I posit to be the deliberate poisoning by the camp command of the prisoner population with *Lathyrus sativas* or 'grass pea', and the supreme efforts on the part of those detainees who were both medically knowledgeable and/or physically able to help salvage the best of the situation is examined in detail. Chapter Six continues this examination and, in the light of Nazi-style medical experimentation, asks whether it may be possible to equate it with the Vapniarka situation. While the poisoning may not have been part of an official medical experimentation programme, I demonstrate that it was deliberate, both as to intent and knowledge of the exact physical effects on the prisoners. Hence, I posit that the poisoning of prisoners in this regard can and should be understood as an example of local mobilization of Nazi policies of medical experimentation that furthered the implementation of the regime's genocidal goals.

Chapter Seven will open a window into a relatively new area of academic research, that of the post-war trials of those responsible for criminal conduct during war time. It will describe the intense political nature of those trials of particular interest to this project, namely, those whose men who served as officers in the command of the Vapniarka camp, as well as, in the case of

one 'Bubi' Finkelstein, a prisoner himself and who, as a 'lackey' of camp officers, aided and abetted various criminal acts against his fellow prisoners. The main thrust of the chapter will be to describe how, with the Romanian political system still in place, the recently victorious Soviet occupiers brought their influence to bear, slowly but relentlessly, to ensure that the trials were no more than a sign to the Romanian nation, and the world, that there was now a new order in place. The political preparations, mainly of a legislative nature, as preparatory steps to the holding of the trials in a manner advantageous to the new Soviet masters will be described, as well as the major changes made to the judiciary of the country, so that the trials would carry the indelible stamp of the Communist message.

The thesis will close with Chapter Eight as an overall conclusion to the project.

## **Conclusion**

In its simplest terms, and concentrating almost entirely on the unfolding of events affecting the Jews of Romania, the project views the period through four distinct lenses, namely: (a) the application of legislative strictures against Jews both before and during the war; (b) the barbarous acts of genocide perpetrated against the Jewish population, particularly in the areas of Bessarabia, Bukovina and Romanian-controlled Transnistria, leaving some 380,000 dead; (c) the change of attitude on the state's part once it could be seen that the war would be lost, and (d) the passive withholding, after the war, of the historical records which would demonstrate the truth, coupled with the acts of open political 'cleansing' of the period. This thesis will also, as an equally important task, and as far as available sources allow, examine all phases of the Vapniarka Concentration Camp itself, not only for its own unique characteristics, but as representing the range of labour, detention and concentration camps set up across Transnistria by Romania. In doing so, the work provides insight into

the role of the camp system as a vital component in the prosecution of the Final Solution in Romania.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview of Scholarship on the Holocaust in Romania

A unique situation exists with regard to Holocaust records in Romania, namely, that literally millions of pages of meticulously kept material relating to the Holocaust in Romania were hidden from public view between the downfall of Romania's wartime government and the establishment of the Communist regime in 1947, and until the end of that rule in 1989. It is clear from the literature available that, until 1989, very little primary source material was ever released.<sup>1</sup> Initially, and under the control of wartime dictator Ion Antonescu from 1941 until 1944, such incriminatory material as existed would have been well hidden from public view. Following the fall of the Antonescu government in 1944, and the commencement of communist rule, the broadly accepted Communist practice of subjugating the individual's rights to free speech and information in favour of the broader interest of society as a whole took hold, a concept which is explored in an article by E. Roberts, published online from the Stanford University.<sup>2</sup> Whilst the Communist regime's reasoning for secrecy was obviously differently based, the external effects were the same.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Following the Soviet model, a mania for secrecy enveloped the entire Romanian institutional system. The communist regime encouraged a "siege mentality", and this had extremely important consequences for public life, and the rest of society as well. We should clarify that, from the middle of the 1950s until 1991, the State Archives were led exclusively by officers, specifically generals, of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, a fact which, without doubt, shaped the institution's ethos, including, perhaps especially, its attitudes toward document access. Dobrinu, D., 'A Brief History of Romanian Archive Access since 1989', *Euxeinos. Culture and Governance in the Black Sea Region*, vol. 3, 2011, p. 18, <http://www.gcc.unisg.ch/euxeinos> (accessed 12 February 2018).

<sup>2</sup> 'Communism, as a primary economic system, is much quieter on the issue of individual human rights. Two conflicting positions on these freedoms arise with analysis of communist theory. The first is an argument against individual freedoms. In a communist society, the individual's best interests are indistinguishable

An examination of the literature of the Holocaust in Romania shows that, with the exception of the relatively earlier works of Carp published in 1946, 1947 and 1948,<sup>3</sup> Hilberg in 1961,<sup>4</sup> and Fisher in 1969,<sup>5</sup> almost no books appeared until an important (but not often quoted) work of Ioanid in 1990.<sup>6</sup>

Until the mid to late 1990s and the release of voluminous amounts of hitherto hidden government documents following the end of the Communist regime, respected academic writing on this period of Romanian history in general, and its involvement with the Holocaust in particular, had been the purview of only a few individuals. Additionally, following the ‘watershed’ publication, in 2004, of the government-sponsored report of the International Commission of the Holocaust in Romania,<sup>7</sup> many more students of the period came forward to take advantage of both this and other hitherto unavailable primary sources which had only recently become available. It was also necessary because there was a need to quickly expose the misleading and even factually incorrect accounts that had been abroad for so long, thereby ‘filling in the gaps’ also left empty. This thesis has placed reliance on more recent

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from the society’s best interest. Thus, the idea of an individual freedom is incompatible with a communist ideology.’ Roberts, E., ‘Censorship and Freedom of Speech’, <https://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs201/projects/communism-computing-china/censorship.html> (accessed 3 February 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Carp, M., *Holocaust in Romania: Facts and Documents on the Annihilation of Romania’s Jews 1940–1944*, Safety Harbor, FL, Simon Publications, 1946; Carp, M., *The Black Book: The Sufferings of the Jews in Romania 1940–1944 Vol III*, Bucharest, ‘Dacia Traiana’, The National Publishing and Graphic Arts Society, 1947; Carp, M., *The Black Book: The Sufferings of the Jews in Romania during the Dictatorship 1940–1944, Vol. II-A*, Bucharest, The National Publishing and Graphic Arts Society, 1948.

<sup>4</sup> Hilberg, R., *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Chicago, Quadrangle Books, 1961.

<sup>5</sup> Fisher, J., *Transnistria, The Forgotten Cemetery*, London, Thomas Yoseloff, 1969.

<sup>6</sup> Ioanid, R., *The Sword of the Archangel: Fascist Ideology in Romania*, Boulder, East European Monographs, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Friling, T., Ioanid, R. and Ionescu, M. (eds), *Final Report, International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004.

publications, but always with due regard to the basic and uncontested material of the earlier and much-respected writings. It was mainly the hitherto primary documents from government sources which became available in the immediate period leading up to the publication of the abovementioned International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania,<sup>8</sup> and going forward, which became the driving force of these later researchers.

An example of the effect, perhaps extreme, of the absence of available information for historians up to the early 1990s can be seen in the case of Hilberg's seminal work of 1964<sup>9</sup> in comparison with, for example, Ioanid's well-known and detailed work of 1999.<sup>10</sup> In an article in which historian Roland Clark, in his words, 'surveys the historiography on the Romanian Holocaust',<sup>11</sup> he says of Hilberg:

Early histories such as Raul Hilberg's 'The Destruction of the European Jews' (1961) approached the Romanian Holocaust as a sideshow to Hitler's Final Solution: Romanian violence was sometimes halting, sometimes excessive, but was always relative to and contingent upon the German story. More recent histories have emphasised the extent to which Romanians were important and independent actors in the Holocaust.<sup>12</sup>

Contrast the above statement with the following comment by Dennis Deletant in his review of Ioanid's work:

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<sup>8</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Hilberg, R., *The Destruction of European Jews*, Chicago, Quadrangle Books, 1961.

<sup>10</sup> Ioanid, R., *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of the Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime 1940–1944*, Chicago, Ivan R Dee, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> R. Clark, 'New Models, new questions: historiographical approaches to the Romanian Holocaust', *European Review of History*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2012, p. 304.

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit., p. 3.

Ioanid's study provides access to the horrors of Antonescu's treatment of Jews and Gypsies for the first time. His task has been facilitated by hundreds of thousands of pages of documentation on the subject that the United States Holocaust Museum (USHMM) has assembled since 1993 from Romania and Ukraine under the guidance of Ioanid (himself) and Paul Shapiro...he stimulates the reader into an analysis of Antonescu's *own* (my emphasis) version of the Final Solution – death by inhuman treatment and a callous disregard for human life rather than industrialized killing.<sup>13</sup>

The unfolding of the Holocaust in Romania during the Second World War demonstrates that, although the country's dictatorship borrowed many of its characteristics and policies from Nazi ideology, the Romanian leadership, presided over by Ion Antonescu, needed little tutelage when it came to its barbaric treatment within its borders. The following excerpt from an article by the Canadian historian Christopher J. Kshyk is quoted as representing the prevailing academic opinion of both Antonescu the man, and the character of the dictatorship he led:

Marshal Ion Antonescu, military dictator of Romania from 1941–1944, advocated a policy of ethnic cleansing to purify the Romanian nation no less radical than Hitler's own racial ideology. Unlike most of Hitler's erstwhile allies, who in practice were merely German satellites, Romania was able to maintain its independence and freedom of action not only through military cooperation with Hitler against the Soviet Union, but also by using its vast

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<sup>13</sup> Deletant, D., 'The Holocaust in Romania: Murderous or Providential Anti-Semitism?', *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2000, p. 190.

reserves of oil, which Germany's war effort was dependent upon, as economic leverage.

As such, Antonescu's policies of ethnic cleansing were carried out independently, though with the approval, of Hitler's Third Reich, making Romania's persecution of Jews a distinct chapter in the history of the Holocaust. These massacres were largely an outgrowth of an ingrained suspicion of ethnic minorities, a tradition of anti-Semitism among ethnic Romanians, as well as Antonescu's own anti-Semitic ideology of national purification and ethnic cleansing.<sup>14</sup>

As is to be expected, and while the Romanian nation was at war, very little information reached the outside world. However, once the war ended and a Communist regime was installed in Romania in 1947 by the victorious Soviet Union, a repeat of the strict and characteristic censorship, this time at the hands of the Communists, was imposed which ensured that there existed a total 'blocking out' of access to accurate and truthful records of the period under review. In other words, one 'cloak of mystery' was exchanged for another, and the lack of transparency continued.

Despite academic attempts by historians in the years leading up to 2000 to piece together an accurate picture of both Antonescu and Romania's roles in the Holocaust in that country,<sup>15</sup> it

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<sup>14</sup> Kshyk, C. J., 'The Holocaust in Romania: Murderous or Providential Anti-Semitism?', *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 13, no. 2., pp 190–194, p. 190.

<sup>15</sup> Carmelly, F. S., *Shattered! 50 Years of Silence: History and Voices of the Tragedy in Romania and Transnistria*, Scarborough, Ontario, Abbeyfield Publishers, 1997; Carp, M., *The Black Book of Sufferings of the Jews from Romania 1940–1944 Vol. I*, Bucharest, The SOCEC & Co. S.A.R., 1946; Carp, M., *The Black Book: The Sufferings of the Jews in Romania during the Fascist Dictatorship 1940–1944 Vol. II-A*, Bucharest, The National Publishing and Graphic Arts Society, 1948; Carp, M., *The Black Book: The Sufferings of the Jews in Romania 1940–1944 Vol III*, Bucharest, 'Dacia Traiana', The National Publishing

seems, as far as serious study of the Holocaust in Romania is concerned, that the first decade of this century was a watershed period for exposing, commenting on and uncovering the extent of what occurred during the 1941–1944 period, and the developing of explanations to support the facts learned. Those who wrote in this period were greatly assisted by the opening of previously closed government records, and their work, which I shall discuss, was of great value in bringing both expanded and newly discovered detail to the world.<sup>16</sup>

In mid-2002, following statements by the then Romanian President Iliescu which were tantamount to a minimisation, if not a negation of Antonescu's role and culpability for the loss of Jewish life between 1941 and 1944,<sup>17</sup> global pressure resulted in the appointment, by Iliescu, of an international commission to report in detail on Romania's role during the Holocaust. The commission was government sponsored and funded, and convened under the chairmanship of Eli Wiesel, a recipient of a 1986 Nobel Peace Prize and a Holocaust survivor. The commission's report was published in 2004 under the title 'The International

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and Graphic Arts Society, 1947; Dallin, A., *Odessa 1941–1944: A Case Study of Soviet Territory under Foreign Rule*, Iasi, Center for Romanian Studies, 1998; Fisher, J., *Transnistria: The Forgotten Cemetery*, London, Thomas Yoseloff, 1969; Shachan, A., *Burning Ice: The Ghettos of Transnistria*, Boulder Colorado, East European Monographs, 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Ioanid, R., *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime 1940–1944*, Chicago, Ivan R Dee, 1999; Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004; Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and his Regime, Romania 1940–1944*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006; Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011; Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> In an interview with the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz on 25 July, 2002, Romanian President Ion Iliescu repeated the previous line of the Romanian government and its representatives: 'The Holocaust was not unique to the Jewish population in Europe. Many others were killed in the same manner, including the Poles...Jews and Communists were treated equally...However, it is impossible to accuse the Romanian society of this [massacre of Jews]': Davidovitch, G. (title of article unknown), *Ha'aretz*, 25 July, 2002 (page unknown).

Commission on the Holocaust in Romania' and its truth, accuracy and extremely strong general acceptance was obviously due in no small part to the release of much of the voluminous information which had been kept from public gaze for so long.<sup>18</sup> A short, but particularly relevant article which discusses the circumstances leading to the convening of the commission was published online by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.<sup>19</sup> The article explains that 'after the fall of communism, a revisionist history movement with close ties to prominent political circles emerged that portrayed Antonescu as a national hero.'<sup>20</sup> It was a direct result of the previously mentioned revisionist statements by the President in 2002, minimising the Holocaust in Romania, and the resulting international pressure, that led to the hurried appointment of the Commission. There is no doubt that the international reputation of Eli Wiesel, as well as the colleagues who joined him gave the completed report of the Commission the gravitas required to underpin the unassailable facts that emerged. To quote from the same article:

The Commission concluded that Romanian authorities were the main perpetrators, and that some 380,000 Romanian and Ukrainian Jews were murdered or died during the Holocaust in Romania and the territories under its control. The Commission also traced the evolution of the destruction of Romanian Jewry during World War II...(and) the Commission found that

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<sup>18</sup> Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and M. Ionescu (eds), *Final Report, International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polistrom, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> 'Romania Facing its Past', United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, available at: [ushmm.org/research/scholarly-presentations/symposia/holocaust-in-romania/Romania-facing-its-past](http://ushmm.org/research/scholarly-presentations/symposia/holocaust-in-romania/Romania-facing-its-past) (accessed 10 May 2018).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1.

direct responsibility for the Holocaust in Romania fell squarely on the Antonescu-led Romanian state.<sup>21</sup>

The report of the commission will be referred to often in this thesis as many of the report's chapters contain much needed clarity on Romania's treatment of its Jewish community during the war years. It is certainly no exaggeration to say that this document, with its unequivocally accepted factual account of what transpired under the Antonescu regime, remains the corner stone of the world's understanding of that dark period.

Simon Geissbuhler, in a chapter of a book which he edited reminds us that 'With the ending (in Romania) of the Communist regime in 1989, one might have expected that the world in general, and the Romanian community in particular would have been informed of the true nature of Romania's actions during the war years.'<sup>22</sup> However, 'The Cold War may have ended in 1989, but Holocaust "amnesia" has persisted, fostered by key Romanian leaders who deliberately sought to obscure the nation's fascist past.'<sup>23</sup> Added to this, in the years leading up to the first decade of the twenty-first century, the predominantly anti-Semitic nature of the general community conspired to allow a return to the glorifying of Antonescu's actions, with the adoration of the former Romanian dictator reaching cult proportions.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Geissbuhler, S. (ed.), *Romania and the Holocaust: Events-Contexts-Aftermath*, Stuttgart, Idem Press, 2016, p. 243.

<sup>23</sup> Pilon, J. G., 'Romania and the Holocaust', *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2017, p. 147.

<sup>24</sup> 'The existence of Jews on Romanian territory was suppressed under Communism. Romania's complicity in the Holocaust was a taboo. In the post-Communist era, attitudes were slow in changing. President Ion Iliescu's remark that there had been no Holocaust on Romanian territory represented a particularly low point. Only with the integration of Romania into international organisations and the convening of the Elie Wiesel commission of enquiry did the climate change. Now Romania is increasingly willing to accept responsibility, to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust, and to integrate the country's Jewish heritage into its national remembrance culture.' Waldman, F., 'From Taboo to Acceptance: Romania, the Jews, and

The importance of the Commission's report lay in the fact that, because it was a government-sponsored project, and despite the fact that the chairman and several of its members were Jews, the Romanian nation slowly began to absorb and accept its findings. It will be an objective of this thesis to compare and contrast the state and quality of what was known in Romania both before and after the publication of this watershed report.

### **Scholarship on Anti-Semitism in Romania**

I will now proceed to examine the current state of academic discourse on other particular areas which form the scope of this thesis, the first being the history and development of anti-Semitism and the way in which it characterised Romania's murderous actions as members of the Axis powers. While space is also devoted to anti-Semitism as it existed prior to, say, the mid-thirties, it is the way in which this scourge was utilised as a tool in the hands of the intelligentsia and those in power leading into, and during the Holocaust, that warrants the greatest discussion.

As an over-arching comment, it is always difficult, when examining anti-Semitism in a twentieth-century context, to separate out the practice of anti-Semitism as a social phenomenon from its connection and undeniable role as a precursor of the Holocaust and all the physical suffering that this term conjures up, and this is most certainly true with reference to Romania. The relationship is neatly summed up in a lecture by Prof. Peter Kenez: 'for the Holocaust to happen, it was necessary to have modern anti-Semitism. And that modern anti-Semitism meant that the Jews had to be successful in order to be feared.'<sup>25</sup> While scholarship

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the Holocaust', *OstEuropa 2008, Impulses for Europe, Tradition and Modernity in East European Jewry*, vol. 58, no. 8/10, p. 316, available at: [osteurope\\_impulse\\_for\\_europe\\_eng.pdf](#), p. 311 (accessed 20 September 2019).

<sup>25</sup> *The Holocaust: The Destruction of European Jewry*, [online video], date unknown, available at: [es.coursera.org/lecture/the-holocaust/8-1-1-romania-part-1-6V6Ue](https://es.coursera.org/lecture/the-holocaust/8-1-1-romania-part-1-6V6Ue) (accessed 30 November 2022).

on the history and development of anti-Semitism in that country was, prior to the Holocaust years, found only in sporadic articles, or as a general topic in encyclopedias and similar, the specific character of Romanian anti-Semitism did not come under specific scrutiny and expression until the Second World War ended, with a resurgence at the end of the Romanian Communist years in 1989. Matatias Carp became the earliest post-war historian of note to describe the ‘Romanian Holocaust’ in all its detail very shortly after the end of Romania’s war in 1944, doing so in three volumes;<sup>26</sup> he was followed by Raul Hilberg, with his universally respected work ‘The Destruction of the European Jews’ in 1961 (revised in 1985).<sup>27</sup> Both of these earlier academics, with emphasis on Carp, seemed to accept the existence of anti-Semitism as a ‘given’, and proceeded to write on that basis. More specifically targeted articles on the subject followed later by academics such as Raul Cârstocea and William Brustein, who took advantage of the availability of hitherto inaccessible documents. Both these academics have published many articles specifically discussing the rise and playing out of anti-Semitism in Romania over the years leading up to and throughout the period of the Romanian Holocaust.<sup>28</sup> Jean Ancel, Radu Ioanid, and Dennis Deletant have also all written on the Romanian Holocaust, always drawing in the anti-Semitism factor, with Ioanid and Deletant referring to the subject as part of more general works on the Romanian Holocaust,

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<sup>26</sup> Carp, M., *The Black Book of Sufferings of the Jews from Romania 1940–1944, vol. 1, The Legionary Movement and the Rebellion*, Bucharest, The Socec & S.A.R Publishing House, 1946; Carp, M., *The Black Book: The Sufferings of the Jews in Romania During the Fascist Dictatorship 1940–1944, vol. II-A, The Pogrom in Iasi*, Bucharest, The National Publishing and Graphic Arts Society, 1948; Carp, M., *Holocaust in Romania, Facts and Documents on the Annihilation of Romania’s Jews 1940–1944*, Safety Harbor, Florida, Simon Publications, 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Hilberg, R., *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Chicago, Quadrangle Books, 1961.

<sup>28</sup> Refer to the bibliography of this thesis for details of their various articles.

and Ancel also devoting specific journal articles to Romanian anti-Semitism.<sup>29</sup> Ioanid neatly summarises the earlier situation with regard to Romanian anti-Semitism in this way:

Romanian anti-Semitism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was extremely virulent, but unlike Germany, Poland, Russia, or Spain, Romania did not have a medieval anti-Semitic tradition. Romanian anti-Semitism was born at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the penetration of capitalism, and quickly became a powerful movement, first among the political elites and intelligentsia and then among the lower middle class. Romanian anti-Semitism has many unique characteristics that partly explain the peculiar nature of the Holocaust in Romania.<sup>30</sup>

Expanding on the ideas expressed by Kenez, Ancel wrote: ‘the monstrous dimensions of the Holocaust in Romania sprang from the encounter of popular and traditional anti-Semitism rooted in ancient and deep-seated religious sentiments, on the one hand, with socioeconomic considerations, the power of the modern state, and the tools at its disposal, on the other.’<sup>31</sup>

The history of Romanian anti-Semitism throughout the centuries and particularly the middle to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provides an obvious basis for the events which befell the Jews of Romania from 1941 to 1944, but it is the breadth and accuracy of the relevant chapter of the Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania,<sup>32</sup> to which most academics turn in order to validate their own views. The literary

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<sup>29</sup> References to these authors’ works are to be found in the bibliography of this thesis.

<sup>30</sup> Ioanid, R., ‘Romania’, in D. S. Wyman (ed.) *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 225.

<sup>31</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln and Jerusalem, University of Nebraska Press & YadVashem, 2011, Forward to the Hebrew Edition, p. xi.

<sup>32</sup> Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi,

and reputational provenance of this document, particularly because both the circumstances leading to its preparation, and the academic reputation of its authors are fundamental to an understanding of all aspects of the Holocaust in Romania.

In the main, the academics who wrote before the beginning of this century, and into its first few years, did so without the facility of the documentation which had become available with the fall of the Communist regime, and references to the approaches taken by Cârstocea and Brustein in the following chapter of this thesis entitled: ‘Romania – The Development of Anti-Semitism’ will better demonstrate the position of modern scholarship on Romanian anti-Semitism. Cârstocea quotes the International Commission when he says: ‘the anti-Semitism that manifested itself in Romania between the two world wars grew directly from seeds sewn at the major turning points of the country’s development starting in the mid-nineteenth century.’<sup>33</sup>

The role played by the modern state of Romania as a member of the Axis powers during the Second World War, and the motivations for its decision to enter the war on the side of Germany, require an examination of its earlier and tumultuous history, leading particularly to its long-held and embedded anti-Semitism. Romania’s decision in 1941 to enter the war was overwhelmingly influenced by Hitler’s tantalising offer to Romanian leader Antonescu that, on the basis of faithful and ongoing deliveries of oil to the German war machine, as well as military support for Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union, the return to Romania of the provinces annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 as well as the return of northern Transylvania

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Polirom, 2004, pp. 19–56. The relevant chapter is titled: Background and Precursors to the Holocaust. Roots of Romanian Anti-Semitism. The League of National Christian Defense and Iron Guard Anti-Semitism. The Anti-Semitic Policies of the Goga Government and of the Royal Dictatorship.

<sup>33</sup> Cârstocea, R., ‘Anti-Semitism in Romania: Historical Legacies, Contemporary Challenges’, *European Centre for Minority Issues, Flensburg Working Paper #81*, October 2014, pp. 3–4.

were distinctly possible outcomes. The history of events leading to Romania's momentous decision and the reasons behind it are covered in great detail in Chapter 1 of Dennis Deletant's work on the Romanian Holocaust.<sup>34</sup> I give the last word to a relevant quote from the previously mentioned chapter of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania:

Understanding the deep roots of antisemitism in Romanian politics and culture will make it easier to confront the factual record that is emerging regarding Romania's role in the Holocaust from the hundreds of thousands of Romanian Holocaust-era documents that are now available for research.<sup>35</sup>

### **Scholarship on Ion Antonescu**

It would have been virtually impossible for the tragic story of the Holocaust in Romania to have unfolded without the central character, personality and actions of Ion Antonescu, appointed Prime Minister of Romania on 5 September 1940, elevated to 'Conducator' (Head of State) the following day, and who ruled as dictator until being overthrown on 23 August, 1944. Despite the existence and actions of the fascist entity known as the Legion of the Archangel Michael (as well as its militant, sadistic and anti-Semitic off-shoot known as 'the Iron Guard'),<sup>36</sup> historical hindsight would seem to suggest the bitterly ironic conclusion that, had Hitler not opted to support the rise of Antonescu to political supremacy over that

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<sup>34</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004, p. 56.

<sup>36</sup> Movements founded by C. Z. Codreanu in June, 1927 and April 1930 respectively. Although the Legion's 'aim was to engender a spiritual regeneration amongst Romanians and to create "a new type of man", the Iron Guard was very quickly reduced to specialising in anti-Semitic thuggery of the cruelest kind, including murder'. See Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 31.

of the Legion, the number of Jews murdered by the Romanians between 1941 and 1943 may well have been twice as many.

An understanding of the role of Antonescu, and the paradoxical personality of the man, together with his openly avowed and rabidly anti-Semitic views, and his relationship with Hitler concerning Romania's role in aiding and abetting Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union are absolutely pivotal in presenting a balanced understanding of what unfolded in Romania in general and the camps and ghettos of Transnistria from 1941 and 1944, in particular. Apart from briefly mentioning Antonescu's early years, including his rise through the ranks of the military, it is his elevation to the position of the nation's dictator, together with the way in which he stamped his character on the Romanian nation during wartime which will also be closely scrutinised in Chapter 2. Further, because of the centrality of Antonescu's role throughout Romania's involvement in the war, his influence on all aspects of Romania's actions in this area pervades these years and will unavoidably appear in some form in most chapters of the thesis.

Many historians have written about Antonescu, including Jean Ancel,<sup>37</sup> Dennis Deletant,<sup>38</sup> and Radu Ioanid,<sup>39</sup> to name just a few. An extensively detailed, broadly-based yet succinct article by Ancel entitled 'Antonescu and the Jews'<sup>40</sup> is also a most informative examination of the man, as well as of the approaches and decisions made by him with regard to Romania's Jewish population. Ancel is considered to have been one of the most well-informed

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<sup>37</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln and Jerusalem, University of Nebraska Press & Yad Vashem, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and his Regime, Romania 1940–1944*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Ioanid, R., *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime 1940–1944*, Chicago, Ivan R Dee, 1999.

<sup>40</sup> Ancel, J., 'Antonescu and the Jews', *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. 23, 1993, pp. 213–280.

commentators on the history of the Jews in Romania. His writings are said to have changed the perception of Romania's role in the Holocaust, and he was strongly of the view that Romania both initiated and perpetrated Nazi style crimes against the Jews of Romania.

To sum up his description of Antonescu's role vis-à-vis the Jews of Romania, he writes:

From February 1941 to August 23, 1944, the lives of Romanian Jews depended solely on the wishes, whims, and moods of Antonescu, as well as on his views and assessments of the ways in which the Jewish presence could serve Romanian interests...<sup>41</sup>

However, it is Deletant's work in his previously referenced work *Hitler's Forgotten Ally* which has specifically attempted to explain Antonescu the man, his personality, character traits, and what drove and underpinned his decisions. I intend to fully examine Deletant's exposure of Antonescu's excesses and their effects, particularly on Romania's Jews, and this specific publication has been a valuable contribution to understanding Romania's role as a member of the Axis states.

The word 'paradox' is often used to describe Antonescu, and Deletant's work dissects Antonescu's pivotal role in orchestrating his country's war-time role as a member of the second tier of Axis nations. It is a detailed study, not only of political military decisions taken, but of the man and his personal philosophy. Nowhere else in my reading of other historians' writing on the role of Antonescu have I received a clearer sense of what drove him to behave in certain ways. For example, it may have been true that he had no alternative, when having regained the territories of Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia following the invasion of the Soviet Union, but to remain loyal to Hitler's cause; however, it was equally his deep

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 269.

hatred of Bolshevism which fuelled his decision to go beyond his own national borders and cross the Dniester to be part of the invasion of the Soviet Union.<sup>42</sup>

As previously stated, an important factor which created difficulty for researchers of Romanian activities during the Second World War was that, for nearly fifty years, records of atrocities and general documentation held in government-controlled repositories within the country were inaccessible due to Communist control. A number of scholars, whose works from that period have become accepted as laying the foundation for the ever-increasing knowledge we have today regarding the Holocaust in Romania, wrote without any key documentary evidence; however other scholars, such as Radu Ioanid, were able to obtain privileged access to documents and reveal new information.

The following are three other works which are considered to be at the forefront of informed work on this period of Romanian history and are all the more deserving of respect when one realises that they were all published prior to 1950. Matatias Carp, as the earliest historiographer to chronicle the unfolding of the Holocaust in Romania, had virtually no entrée to government archives at his disposal. M. Hirsch and L. Spitzer refer specifically to Carp in the following terms:

For his pioneering work on the Romanian Holocaust, *Cartia Negra*, Matatias Carp managed to acquire documents and photographs (through purchase, friendship, and discreet collaboration) from the Filderman Archives of the Bucharest Jewish Community Federation, the Romanian

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<sup>42</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and his Regime, Romania 1940-44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 85.

Ministry of the Interior, and a Wehrmacht officer with access to materials.<sup>43</sup>

Carp's work was published in three volumes (a fourth volume will not be referred to as it deals with the deportation of Jews from Northern Transylvania, carried out under Nazi/Hungarian control, and not considered sufficiently relevant). Volume I<sup>44</sup> was published in 1946, and deals with The Legionary Movement and the Rebellion. The second volume, referred to as 'Vol. II-A' and published in 1948,<sup>45</sup> deals almost exclusively with the pogrom in Iasi, while the third volume, published in 1947,<sup>46</sup> and most relevant to the thesis at hand is subtitled 'Transnistria'. A separate volume entitled 'Holocaust in Romania: Facts and Documents on the Annihilation of Romania's Jews, 1940–1944' was published in 1946.<sup>47</sup>

Despite acclaim in earlier years, Carp's meticulously detailed work has fallen out of favour to some extent, mainly as a result of having been overtaken by the release, from 2000 onwards, of massive primary source documentary files held in government offices. In a preface to a re-published selection, in 2000, from the original first three volumes the editor, Professor A. L. Simon makes the following point:

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<sup>43</sup> Hirsch, M. and Spitzer, L., 'Small Acts of Repair: The Unclaimed Legacy of the Romanian Holocaust', in Bond, L., S. Craps, P. Vermeulen (eds), *Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2017, p. 106.

<sup>44</sup> Carp, M., *The Black Book of Sufferings of the Jews from Romania 1940–1944 Vol I*, Bucharest, The SOCEC & Co. S.A.R. 1946.

<sup>45</sup> Carp, M., *The Black Book of Sufferings of the Jews from Romania during the Fascist Dictatorship 1940–1944, Vol. II-A*, Bucharest, The National Publishing and Graphic Arts Society, 1948.

<sup>46</sup> Carp, M., *The Black Book of Sufferings of the Jews from Romania 1940–1944 Vol III*, Bucharest, 'Dacia Traiana', The National Publishing and Graphic Arts Society, 1947.

<sup>47</sup> Carp, M., *Holocaust in Romania: Facts and Documents on the Annihilation of Romania's Jews 1940–1944*, Safety Harbor, Fl., Simon Publications, 1946.

Since the first publication in 1946, Matatias Carp's 'Holocaust in Romania' has all but lost its relevance. Traditional Romanian chauvinism and xenophobia have since compelled hundreds of thousands of Germans, Jews, and Hungarians to leave their homeland, bringing about a sharp drop in the percentage of German, Jewish, and Hungarian minorities to the Romanian majority.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the fact that Carp was denied the availability of documentation which was released much later, he argues strenuously against the often-repeated theme contained in Romanian propaganda, namely, that Romania was the only member nation of the Axis that purposefully spared Jewish lives. Carp sets out to demonstrate that precisely the opposite is true, and shows that, in comparison with Nazi brutality, Romania's mindless cruelty was often no less extreme.

In 2015, Paul A. Shapiro published his work *Kishinev Ghetto, 1941–1942: A Documentary History of the Holocaust in Romania's Contested Borderlands*.<sup>49</sup> On page 3 he quotes from an article which appeared in the July 1991 issue of the *Europa* magazine, which contained the following disingenuous comment on the part of the unnamed person responsible for the State Archives of Romania: 'Whatever happened to the Jews out there in Bessarabia and Transnistria...was done by the Germans and a few wild men...' Further, Shapiro continues '(This unnamed official) challenged those who would write about the Holocaust in Romania to cease and desist until they obtained archival materials to underpin (their) conclusions.'<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Simon, A. L. (ed), *Fact and Documents on the Annihilation of Romania's Jews 1940–1944*, Safety Harbor, FL., Simon Publications, 2000, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Shapiro, P., *The Kishinev Ghetto, 1941-1942: A Documentary History of the Holocaust in Romania's Contested Borderlands*, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama Press, 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Shapiro, op. cit., p. 1.

The same article in *Europa* continued: ‘It is unimaginable that the authors of books, presentations, and studies would do their work without documents.’<sup>51</sup> He was, of course, denying the validity of early documentation provided in Carp’s ‘Cartia Negra’, drawn largely from the records of the Romanian Jewish community and the post-war trials of Romanian war criminals. If nothing else is to be gained from these observations, the detail of Carp’s work illustrates that the amount of information which resided within the Jewish community itself was sufficient to furnish him with the facts and information he needed for four meticulously prepared volumes.

In Volume 3,<sup>52</sup> Carp alludes to an ambiguous situation which accompanies history’s view of Ion Antonescu and which, some might claim, downplays his bestial attitude toward the Jews of Romania. According to Carp, in January and February 1942, and in answer to a German request, the Governor of Transnistria ordered 20,000 Jews into the ghetto at Slobodka. All of them were then evacuated to the province of Mostvoi where, over the succeeding two months each of them was executed by German SS troops.<sup>53</sup> However, in the autumn of the same year, when a similar plan was mooted under Hitler’s proposed agenda of liquidation of all Jews under Romanian control, it was aborted; not because it did not have the imprimatur of Antonescu, but because of ‘characteristic Romanian bureaucracy, indecisiveness, torpor, petty interests and a certain amount of humaneness’.<sup>54</sup> Carp also finds that the Romanians suffered

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<sup>51</sup> In order to provide some context for the remarks of the Director General of the Romanian State Archives, the comments were made in June 1991, fully fifty years after Romanian forces fought shoulder to shoulder with Hitler’s army. One can only assume that they were either the ramblings of an ill-informed government official or, more likely, as a product of a process throughout the decades of deliberately trivialising the ethnic cleansing activities of the Romanian war-time government of Ion Antonescu.

<sup>52</sup> Carp, M., *The Black Book: The Sufferings of the Jews in Romania 1940–1944, Vol. III*, Bucharest, ‘Dacia Traiana’, The National Publishing and Graphic Arts Society, 1947, pp. 8–9.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9.

from an ingrained inferiority complex. Again, pointing to the nature of Antonescu's leadership style, it is no exaggeration to say that, whereas the Nazi regime of murder indulged in by the German army and associated Nazi authorities acted as a machine with brutal precision wherever they struck, virtually no such activities were perpetrated by the Romanian army or the gendarmerie that cannot be traced back to the strategies, influence and decisions of the country's leader/dictator himself.

Dennis Deletant obviously considered Antonescu as occupying a sufficiently authoritative yet paradoxical position to warrant the writing of a detailed study of him and his government for the duration of the period during which he ruled.<sup>55</sup> Deletant traces the course of Antonescu's reign and policy formulation, including his own pre-leadership career development. He also examines Antonescu's role and behaviour as a self-professed anti-Semite, leading a nation which had developed, over centuries, an underlying and ingrained anti-Semitism. The book describes Antonescu reacting to a range of wartime situations, particularly in the chapter dealing with Transnistria. This chapter is directly relevant to the subject matter of this thesis as it analyses the circumstances leading to the creation of the territory of Transnistria. Although Hitler's offer to grant Antonescu this particular area of the Ukraine, he (Antonescu) bitterly coveted the return of Northern Transylvania to Romania which it had lost to Hungary by virtue of the Second Vienna Award in 1940, and would have much preferred it being returned rather than accepting the Ukrainian territory. These matters will be referred to in this project.

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<sup>55</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and his Regime, Romania 1940-44*, Basingstoke. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

## Scholarship on the Vapniarka Camp

The establishment by the Romanian Army of the Vapniarka Camp as a detention facility took place in October 1941, ‘functioning...as a camp where Jews brought from Odessa were imprisoned’,<sup>56</sup> and becoming a concentration camp for political prisoners under the direct control of the Romanian government at the end of 1942.<sup>57</sup> The geographical position of the town of Vapniarka placed it in the most northern area of the then newly created region of Transnistria, the establishment of which will occupy a separate chapter of this thesis.

Bearing in mind that, in relation to the current topic and in a general sense, the political and social history of Romania in the late nineteenth century until the Second World War has been well documented, even the lesser amount of material available on the war period does not prepare us for the paucity of information on the Vapniarka camp itself. There are, however, some notable exceptions which I will draw upon when discussing the formation of the camp, its daily existence and its final closure. For example, articles by Paul Shapiro,<sup>58</sup> Ana Barbulescu,<sup>59</sup> Leo Spitzer,<sup>60</sup> and Laura Degeratu,<sup>61</sup> all deal exclusively with the camp,

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<sup>56</sup> Degeratu, L., ‘The Camp in Vapniarka: Detention, Survival, Memory’, *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. vii, no.8, 2015, p. 30.

<sup>57</sup> Shoah Resource Center, Yad Vashem, [yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20-%w206337.pdf](http://yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20-%w206337.pdf) (accessed 2 May 2018).

<sup>58</sup> Shapiro, P., ‘Vapniarka, The Archive of the International Tracing Service and the Holocaust in the East’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2013, p. 125.

<sup>59</sup> Barbulescu, A., ‘Life, Death, and Survival in the Vapniarka Camp’, *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. viii, no. 9, 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Spitzer, L., ‘Solidarity and Suffering: Lager Vapniarka among the Camps of Transnistria’, in H.T. Lustiger Thaler and H. Knoch (eds), *Witnessing Unbound: Holocaust Representation and the Origins of Memory*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2017, pp. 105–130.

<sup>61</sup> Degeratu, L., ‘The Camp in Vapniarka: Detention, Survival, Memory’, *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. vii, no. 8, 2015, pp. 29–42.

albeit from different perspectives. Additionally, and selecting one among the testimonies given by surviving camp detainees, I will refer to a particularly detailed description of the Vapniarka camp and life within it by survivor, Ihiel Benditer.<sup>62</sup> Benditer's testimony contains very interesting information on the internal groupings and alliances between prisoners, as well as the formal and informal arrangements which were put in place by both the camp command and the prisoners themselves in order to allow life in the camp to continue on a day-to-day basis.

With regard to the availability of documents, Shapiro writes about his efforts on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in successfully gaining ongoing access to the enormous archives of the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen, Germany.<sup>63</sup> These efforts were only successful as recently as 2008, and it was not until 2012 that a comprehensive inventory of all the collections was drawn up. The number of categories under which documents are held is huge, ranging from transport and deportation lists to arrest and prison records, and everything in between. However, the greatest relevance of the collection is to the events that occurred in western Europe, with lesser emphasis on matters to the east. In order to illustrate this comparison, the example of the Vapniarka camp itself is offered as a case study. The relevant documentation regarding this camp is, by comparison with that pertaining to others, minimal. However, two names in these records, and about whom much more will be said in different contexts are of great significance for several reasons. Dr. Arthur

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<sup>62</sup> Benditer, I., 'Cattle Fodder for the Victims', *Nizkor Project: Shattered! 50 Years of Silence, History and Voices of the Tragedy in Romania and Transnistria*, available at: <http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/c/carmelly-felicia/benditer-ihiel.htm> (accessed 2 May 2018).

<sup>63</sup> Established at the end of the war by the Allied forces, the huge repository known as ITS was under the control of the International Refugee Organisation. Finally located in Bad Arolsen, Germany, administration was placed in the hands of the International Red Cross in 1946, a situation which obtains today. Stone, D., 'The Memory of the Archive: The International Tracing Service and the Construction of the Past as History', *Dapim: Studies on the Shoah*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2017, p. 71.

Kessler was a Vapniarka detainee from Czernowitz and, as one of some twenty medico-prisoners, soon gained sufficient respect from his medical colleagues to be considered as the leader of the team which worked feverishly on the previously mentioned issue of poison being fed to the prisoner population. The second name is that of Simion Bughici, who was also a prisoner, and whose name will re-appear in the later chapter in this thesis devoted to the camp itself. Although Shapiro devotes some space referring to the life-saving work performed by Kessler on behalf of so many of his fellow prisoners, he reserves more room for reference to the activities of Bughici.

Simion Bughici led a ‘political core group of Communists’<sup>64</sup> within the camp and, in a thirty-page written testimony about his incarceration in Vapniarka, outlined his decision to establish what became known as ‘The Jewish Community of Vapniarka’. A close reading of the testimonies I will present demonstrates that, contrary to the seemingly benign motives stated by Bughici in setting up the ‘Community’, both an elitist and bullying attitude towards the general prison population existed. This is also attested to by other detainees. Shapiro seems to have picked up on this aspect when he writes:

Bughici explains his decision to establish a “Jewish Community of Vapniarka”, headed by Radu Alexandru...to work alongside the camp prisoner committee, as a reflection of the urgent need to extend “solidarity” *and control.* (my emphasis)<sup>65</sup>

Whilst Shapiro’s article reveals other interesting material concerning the camp, it is written more broadly so as, he says:

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<sup>64</sup> Shapiro, P., ‘Vapniarka: The Archive of the International Tracing Service and the Holocaust in the East’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2013, p. 125.

<sup>65</sup> Shapiro, op. cit., p. 126.

not to provide a fully researched history, but rather to describe the materials relating to Vapniarka that can be found at the ITS, and to place them in the broader context of archival and other research resources that exist elsewhere.<sup>66</sup>

The article by Spitzer, entitled ‘“Solidarity and Suffering”: Lager Vapniarka among the Camps of Transnistria’,<sup>67</sup> lays out the political bases for the establishment of ghettos and camps in the territory of Transnistria between the years of 1941–1944, describing the displacement of Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina, and offering the Vapniarka camp as the central subject of his essay. Based on my reading of the relatively sparse literature on this camp, I cannot find myself in agreement with the author’s description of the camp as ‘...one of the most notorious and distinct.’<sup>68</sup> Certainly the camp was ‘distinct’ because of the unique practice there of introducing a poisonous component into the prisoners’ diet, and perhaps also because the camp was uniquely set up to house political prisoners, mainly Jewish communists; but it was hardly ‘notorious’ considering its size (approximately 2000 prisoners, and one of the smallest camps in Transnistria). However, he introduces a hypothesis concerning the Romanian military generally which I find equates with my own research when he says:

The very qualities that defined the Romanians as disorganised, unsystematic, improvisatory, haphazard, and venal in contrast to the Germans also provided Jewish deportees and camp inmates some small

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p. 119.

<sup>67</sup> See footnote 60.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 107.

spaces and possibilities to barter for food, to bribe for favours, to communicate, and even to organise in order to resist and continue to live.<sup>69</sup>

Spitzer devotes significant space in the article to details of the outbreak of paralysis among the prisoner population, detected by Dr. Arthur Kessler, himself a prisoner, and caused by the consuming, by the prisoners, of the ‘fodder pea’ deliberately and knowingly fed to them by the camp command. Spitzer points out:

It is significant to note that neither Vapniarka’s Romanian camp officers nor its military guards ate the toxic peas – only the inmates. Yet, when Dr. Kessler and other leaders among the prisoners appealed to the camp command to change their diet and to be given medical supplies to treat the sick, they were ignored.<sup>70</sup>

This last quote goes some way to linking with an argument which I shall pose in a later chapter regarding the possible nexus between the deliberate feeding of the ‘fodder peas’ to prisoners and the infamous practices by the Axis powers of medical experimentation.<sup>71</sup>

Studies of the Vapniarka camp have also been published by Romanian historians, Ana Barbulescu<sup>72</sup> and Laura Degeratu.<sup>73</sup> Both authors cover much the same areas of enquiry, with Barbulescu stating:

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<sup>69</sup> Thaler and Knoch, op. cit. p. 111.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p. 120.

<sup>71</sup> ‘The induced lathyrismus epidemic in Vapniarka is yet another manifestation of the exterminationist aspects of the Romanian Holocaust.’ Spitzer, L., ‘Solidarity and Suffering: Lager Vapniarka among the Camps of Transnistria’, in H. T. Lustiger Thaler and H. Knoch (eds), *Witnessing Unbound: Holocaust Representation and the Origins of Memory*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2017, p. 122.

<sup>72</sup> Barbulescu, A., ‘Life, Death, and Survival in the Vapniarka Camp’, *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. vii, no. 9, 2016, pp. 73–91.

The present study aims to identify the different stages of the camp; the categories of prisoners interned there, as well the internal organization of the camp with its official regulations and parallel unofficial developments.<sup>74</sup>

Degeratu, somewhat complementing this approach examines the camp using:

data regarding the setting of the camp; the detention regime of the prisoners; the depositions of the survivors as registered during the War Criminals' Trial from Cluj, and other depositions or testimonies written down afterwards plus, nevertheless, the sketches made by the inmates during their detention.<sup>75</sup>

My introduction of personal testimonies of prisoners as both part of the fabric of this project, as well as commentary on, and description of the day-to-day life within the camp, will also become an important component in being able to present a fuller and more faithful representation of the cruelty of which Romania showed itself capable of whilst in partnership with Germany during its membership of the Axis bloc.<sup>76</sup>

An array of written and recorded testimonies of survivors of the camp does exist and, with the rich depth of understanding that they provide, deserve to be better utilised than has been the case in the past. I have, from my research, collected some twenty-three of them and incorporated content from them where and when appropriate.<sup>77</sup> These include four recorded

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<sup>73</sup> Degeratu, L., 'The Camp in Vapniarka: Detention, Survival, Memory', *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. 1, no. 8, 2015, p. 30.

<sup>74</sup> Barbulescu, p. 74.

<sup>75</sup> Degeratu, p. 30.

<sup>76</sup> For full details of those whose testimonies have been used, see bibliography listings of this thesis.

<sup>77</sup> Kornis, G., *Überlebt durch Solidarität*, (translated as 'Survival through Solidarity'), Konstanz, Germany, Hartung-Gorre Verlag, 2004, Matei Gall, interviewed by Cosmina Gusu, April 7, 2015, Berlin, Germany,

video interviews in English held by the USC Shoah Foundation which form part of the huge volume of interviews sponsored and underwritten by movie producer and philanthropist Steven Spielberg.<sup>78</sup> These testimonies reveal a huge array of human situations involving the day-to-day lives of prisoners of such a personal and private nature that they, perhaps, may have escaped the attention of the academic historian. However, much of this detail is invaluable in teasing out the way in which ordinary people react under extreme duress and privation and, in some cases, extreme pain and physical suffering, while still managing somehow to remain alive. There is much in this humbling body of testimony which will inform the central chapter on the Vapniarka camp.

These testimonies afford the opportunity to highlight and discuss certain anomalous or contradictory facts contained within them which, while not uncommon among those testifying, do differ widely when describing events within the camp. This is to be contrasted with the hitherto historical view of what was thought to be a very socially cohesive social structure between prisoners in the camp. I will allege and demonstrate that there were undercurrents of serious division between certain prisoner groupings within the camp, particularly with reference to a ‘hierarchy’ of individuals who instigated strict disciplinary control over the general prisoner population. It should come as no surprise that the

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available at: <http://www.inshr-ew.ro/ro/maturii/170-interviu-matei-gall.html> (accessed 21 November 2019). Documented testimonies from Srul Haber (Dosar 371), Alexandru Rado (Dosar 367), Asia Moraru (Dosar 371), Simion Bughici (Dosar 374), Esther Gonda-Magyar (Dosar 371), Walter Isac (Dosar 370), Eugen Friedlander (Dosar 370), Prof. Dr. Mihai Leonescu (Dosar 371), Margareta Gall (Dosar 371), Iosif Blumenfeld (Dosar 371), all available at RG 25.021, Centre for the Study of the History of the Jews of Romania, fonz, 1940–1944, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC., Benno Baruch, *Biblioteca Politica*, vol. 40, 1966, pp. 5–16, Adelbert Rosinger, *CSIER (Centrul pentru Studii Istorice Evreilor din Romania)*, Series No. 1, (16–17), 2016, pp. 280–305.

<sup>78</sup> USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive interviews conducted in USA with: Armin Nagel (Interview Code: 24196), Leah Derera (Interview Code: 20192), Maya Wegrowitz (Interview Code: 54452), Leopold Szor Interview Code: 43045).

unfathomable depths of despair suffered by those people who became victims of life in concentration or other such detention camps, were subject to a basic urge to survive taking hold and, as a result, the best and the worst of motivations and behaviours rose to the surface. There are, therefore, some disquieting overtones contained and revealed in contrasting statements in certain testimonies which will be discussed. Finally, it is hoped that the laying down of a broad basis of the social and political circumstances leading to, and the unfolding of the Holocaust years in Romania, together with a more detailed account of the life in the Vapniarka camp than has hitherto been offered, will make more understandable all that was perpetrated against the Jewish communities of Romania during those times.

### **Scholarship on Post-War Trials**

The penultimate chapter of this thesis will be used to describe, investigate and illuminate the most complex and, as it eventuated, politically tainted series of processes which passed for the criminal trials of the Romanian war criminals.

At the end of the Second World War separate armistice agreements with separate annexures spelling out the responsibilities of the various countries that had been in conflict with each other were signed by both the victorious Allies and the Axis bloc of nations. Each of these agreements called for the establishment of an Allied commission which would have, amongst its many responsibilities, the task of controlling the rebuilding of the nations in question. Another prime responsibility was the setting up of suitable tribunals to conduct trials of suspected war criminals. In the case of Romania, this was spelled out in Article 14 of the Armistice Agreement of that country, which states: ‘The Rumanian Government and High Command undertake to collaborate with the Allied (Soviet) High Command in the

apprehension and trial of persons accused of war crimes'.<sup>79</sup> The parties authorised to supervise the functions described in the Armistice Agreement derived their powers to do so from the nature and operation of the Agreement itself.

An informative piece by historian Michael Shafir details the complex and manipulative way in which the trials of the Romanian war criminals were conducted.<sup>80</sup> His chapter, entitled 'Romania's Tortuous Road to Facing Collaboration', shows to what extent the trials became subservient to, and an instrument of the newly installed Communist regime. Initially, the model used for the setting up of what was known in Romania as the People's Tribunal, was based on the Nuremberg Charter.<sup>81</sup> The nature of the crimes committed were to fall under one or more of three categories or indictments. Those categories are: (a) crimes against peace, (b) war crimes, and (c) crimes against humanity.<sup>82</sup>

A question arises in that Shafir nominates an additional category, namely, 'conspiracy to take over the country's legal government'.<sup>83</sup> This does not appear in the Nuremberg model, and it would seem that it may have become an additional category applying to the trials held by the Romanian People's Tribunal. Further clarification is required in this area.

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<sup>79</sup> United States Treaties: 1776–1949, Para. 14, p. 904, Armistice with Romania – September 12, 1944, available at: <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ust000003-0901.pdf>.

<sup>80</sup> Stauber, R. (ed.), *Collaboration with the Nazis: Public Discourse after the Holocaust*, Oxford, Routledge, 2011, pp. 245–297.

<sup>81</sup> 1945 Charter of the International Military Tribunal, available at: <https://untreaty.un.org/unts/160000/2/35/00003709.pdf> (accessed 10 April 2019).

<sup>82</sup> The Charter and Judgement of the Nurnberg Tribunal – History and Analysis: Memorandum Submitted by the Secretary-General, see Article 6 of the Constitution of the International Military Tribunal, pp. 92–93, available at: [digitallibrary.un.org/record/160809?ln=en](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/160809?ln=en) (accessed 16 May 2023).

<sup>83</sup> See Stauber (footnote 80) at p. 246.

It has long been accepted that, with the establishment of the Communist regime in Romania in March 1945, the total process of pursuing justice for crimes committed by Antonescu and his war-time government would become inexorably linked with the political upheaval taking place in the country, and it is the politicization of what should have been purely a legal process, that led both to the obvious failures in achieving outcomes based solely on law and fact as well as many culprits escaping proper judgement. A further longer-term effect of politicization was that it served the Communist regime's interests to have such crimes as had been committed by Antonescu and his government construed as having been, in effect, forced on them by Germany. This particular area, as well as a consideration of all aspects of the trials of the war criminals is covered in a chapter entitled 'Trials of the War Criminals' in the widely accepted report 'International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania',<sup>84</sup> a document which is mentioned at various places throughout this thesis. Apart from dealing with details of the actual machinery of the trials and their content, the important point below is made by the authors which had far-reaching effects on Romanian society for many years after those trials.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, following their trial which commenced on 6 May 1946, Antonescu and three of his co-defendants were found guilty on all counts, and executed for their crimes at the Jilava prison on 1 June of that year.

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<sup>84</sup> Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004. pp. 313–333.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. pp. 324–325: 'In conclusion, the Soviet occupation and the communist regime imposed on Romania prevented a real debate on Romanian fascism and Antonescu's regime or the defects of Romanian society and its values. So, any national catharsis was thereby prevented. In retrospect it seems that, with Antonescu's downfall, the Romanians would have been ready and willing to re-adopt the Western democratic values that the Romanian fascists had so despised, in the understanding that they suited Romanian interests, preferences, and culture and because Romania was favourably prejudiced toward the West.'

The fact that the processes of the trials, as they were implemented, allowed many of those who were obviously guilty to escape punishment, and the manipulative methods used to achieve these ends, have been very well documented, as has Antonescu's subsequent rise to cult status following the departure of the Communist regime in 1989. Among the more informative and distinctive academics in this area, apart from Deletant and Shafir are Alexandru Climescu, Chiriac Bogdan and Andrei Muraru.<sup>86</sup> Climescu picks up on Shafir's point, and discusses the introduction of the 'cunning' (his word) way in which a fourth criminal category had been added to the Romanian People's Tribunal process;<sup>87</sup> Bogdan examines the changing nature with which Antonescu's image was managed and manipulated in the years following his execution; while Muraru closely examines the Romanian legislation which, in tandem with the Nuremberg model, underpinned the legal processes. These issues are further explored and expanded upon in the relevant chapter of this thesis.

## Conclusion

One cannot help observing that the publication of the report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania became a 'line in the sand'. It is as if, concurrent with the publishing of the Commission's report, permission was given to academia in the area of scholarship concerning the history of the Holocaust in eastern Europe to begin informing the

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<sup>86</sup> Climescu, A., 'The Holocaust on Trial. Memory and Amnesia in the Case of Romanian War Criminals', *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. vii, no. 8, 2015, 307–320; Bogdan, C., 'The "Retrial" of Marshal Ion Antonescu in Post-Communist Romanian Historiography', MA Thesis, Central European University, 2008; Muraru, A., 'Legislation and War Criminals' Trials in Romania', PhD Thesis, University of Iasi, 2009; Muraru, A., 'Romanian Political Justice. Holocaust and the Trials of War Criminals: The Case of Transnistria', *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. 10, no. 11, 2018, pp. 89–184. (The scope of coverage contained in the chapter on this subject in the report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania [see footnote 84] remains, in this writer's opinion, the most informative of all.)

<sup>87</sup> Climescu, A., 'The Holocaust on Trial: Memory and Amnesia in the Case of Romanian War Criminals', *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. vii, no. 8, p. 310.

world in detail of what Romania had perpetrated during its Holocaust years. In its own small way, this thesis is another piece of academia within this large tapestry of the story of the Holocaust in Romania. The events and restrictions which had denied the availability of government documents to historians both during the war years and then throughout Communist rule were no longer a controlling factor. But even though much of this documentation had been available from the fall of Ceausescu as premier in 1989, the report of the Commission seemed to act as an imprimatur for the many publications that have followed since its release.

## **Chapter One: Romania: The Development of Anti-Semitism**

### **Scope of this Chapter**

It is the main aim of this chapter to establish and describe the undeniable linkage between the long and unrelenting development of anti-Semitism in Romania and the culmination of that process with the massacre of between 280,000 and 380,000 Romanian and Ukrainian Jews during the period of the Holocaust in Romania. The steady development and insidious nature of the phenomenon of anti-Semitism in this country over a long period, with emphasis on the years between the first and second World Wars to a point where it became a societal norm will be demonstrated. Any presentation of a chronological history of anti-Semitism in Romania up to, and including, the Second World War must, of necessity, include mention of the way in which official records were managed.

### **Anti-Semitism in Romania**

By way of general comment, ‘Anti-Semitism is a trans-national phenomenon inasmuch as it shares a common pool of ideas and concepts that relate to one another across cultural norms’.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the veracity of such a general statement, the changing nature and development of custom applicable to particular countries and regions will also have as great an influence on the ways in which anti-Semitic practices are employed as any other factor

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<sup>1</sup> Grec, E.M., ‘The rise of Anti-Semitism in the Modern Era: Social and Political Implications of the “Jewish Question” in Romania after 1866’, *Studia Iudaica Aradensis*, no. 5, 2017, p. 143.

but, as Romanian anti-Semitism in particular is the subject under discussion, further in-depth exploration of these much broader matters would necessitate moving away from the thesis topic to an unwarranted degree.

To maintain an emphasis on the particularity of ‘Romanian anti-Semitism’ as distinct from the characteristics which define other ‘versions’, an interesting statement directly upon the unique nature of Romanian anti-Semitism from William O. Oldson throws some light on the subject. In a telling comment he states: ‘As eccentric as it seems, the Romanians carried out their pogroms in a selective fashion, killing primarily “enemy” or “foreign” Jews. This delicacy of discrimination was not to be expected in a state reputedly more anti-Semitic than Hitler’s Germany...The uniqueness of Romanian anti-Semitism lies in its link to romantic nationalism as well as in the stature it gained through the reputations of the cultural leaders proclaiming it.’<sup>2</sup> To go further, my own reading has pointed up how much and how comfortably Romanian anti-Semitism dwelt in the strata of the intelligentsia, while also inhabiting the lower classes with a physical brutality, surprising even the Nazis. The difference between Romanian and Nazi anti-Semitism may be summed up by concluding that, while the Nazis thought of the Jew as a commodity, or an object to be destroyed, the Romanians required the Jew to be viewed as human, but almost as hated possessions to be destroyed. The degree of anti-Semitism was tempered by where a Jew lived, and what advantage he may represent to the country. In his article on the subject, William Oldson quotes the words of a Romanian Holocaust survivor: ‘We were *their* [the Romanians’] *Jews*. If anyone was going to kill us, it would be them...’<sup>3</sup> This difference is what enabled the

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<sup>2</sup> Oldson, W. O., Rationalizing Anti-Semitism: The Romanian Gambit, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 138, no. 1, 1994, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 27.

400,000 Jews of the Old Kingdom, as distinct from those who had either taken refuge in Romania, or had lived in a previously non-Romanian area, to survive the Holocaust.

Volumes have been written by academics in an endeavour to explain the phenomenon of anti-Semitism, particularly its virulence in the hands of the Nazis and their Axis partners. Mark Roseman<sup>4</sup> posits that it was the linkage between Hitler's inherent anti-Semitism and his adoption of 'a ruthless form of biopolitics, in terms of focusing on the healthy and removing the weak'<sup>5</sup> that formed a platform on which the Nazi ideal of building 'population quality'<sup>6</sup> was based. Since the Jewish population did not, as a general rule, fit the desired national stereotype of physical athleticism, the depth of hatred for the Jewish communities was heightened. Although physical violence was always a common denominator, the organisational competence between the Nazis and the Romanians for engaging in brutality often, but not always suggests, on the Nazi side, a certain cold, calculated and planned approach combined with savagery, whereas the same level of cruelty on the part of the Romanians was often carried out in a haphazard climate of confusion, rage and the tendency to accept bribes, thus allowing some more fortunate individuals to avoid the barbaric consequences altogether.

By virtue of the continuing total secrecy with regard to official government information throughout the war period, the establishing in Romania of a Communist regime immediately following the downfall of the Antonescu fascist government following a coup in August 1944, served only to assist those revisionists and deniers who now wished to keep the true

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<sup>4</sup> Roseman, M., 'The Holocaust', academia.edu/10817154/The\_Holocaust (accessed 17 September 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit. p. 10.

facts of Romania's involvement as an Axis partner hidden. In essence, one totalitarian regime had been replaced by another.

The exiting of the Communist regime in Romania in 1989, however, and the gradual freeing up of official government documents, brought with it an academic storm of activity during the next fifteen years giving rise to honest and accurate appraisals of what had really taken place. As a pinnacle achievement, it enabled the watershed 'Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania' of 2004 to be published.<sup>7</sup> The following key statement from that Report creates a sobering context:

The number of Romanian Jews and of Jews in the territories under Romania's control who were murdered during the Holocaust has not been determined with final precision. However, The Commission concludes that between 280,000 and 380,000 Romanian and Ukrainian Jews were murdered or died during the Holocaust in Romania and the territories under its control. An additional 135,000 Romanian Jews living under Hungarian control in Northern Transylvania also perished in the Holocaust, as did some 5,000 Romanian Jews in other countries. Referring to Romania, Raul Hilberg concluded that 'no country, besides Germany, was involved in massacres of Jews on such a scale.'<sup>8</sup>

Before stating the particulars, it is argued in general terms that the withholding of public documents until the departure of the Communist regime, which would have clarified the truth and detail of Romania's government during the war years much earlier, served to stunt the

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<sup>7</sup> Friling, T., R. Ioanid, and Ionescu, M. (eds), *Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., pp. 381–382.

nation's ability to understand the facts. Additionally, it also provided carte blanche for revisionist elements to maintain a strong anti-Semitic base and influence throughout, even into the period following Communist rule. It is further contended that this situation was, in terms of European countries that fell under Communism following the Second World War, and when taking the history of anti-Semitism in Romania into account, more prevalent in that country. Anti-Semitism in Romania was, demonstrably, of such a long and continuing nature, that it was only by tremendous efforts on the part of many individual and devoted academics that the truth started to emerge.

In particular, the actions of the dictator Antonescu and his government towards the Jews throughout the years of the war which, in terms of Romania's involvement commencing in 1941 and ceasing in 1944 with Antonescu's overthrow, were meticulously recorded and secreted in state records. Similarly, but for totally different reasons which will be discussed later, the Communist regime which immediately filled the power vacuum vacated by Antonescu, also had its own reasons for keeping these records away from the public's gaze. It was not until 1989, when the Communist regime finally collapsed, and the state's archives were opened to the world, that the full reality of Romania's involvement slowly, but starkly became obvious.

Notwithstanding the foregoing more recent facts, the detailed historiography in this chapter will demonstrate that a strong element of anti-Semitism has been embedded within the Romanian psyche for many centuries and it was to this that Robert L. Wolff was referring when he wrote:

Romanians of all social classes and of any or no degree of education, of all Christian sects and all professions, hated Jews, and were prone to blame them for the troubles of the country. In the Hitler period, when antisemitism

became fashionable in Europe, the Romanians often claimed to have invented it.<sup>9</sup>

In a longer passage, the Romanian-born historian Radu Ioanid very pointedly states:

World War II transformed what might otherwise have remained a period of severe anti-Semitic outbreaks into a true Romanian Holocaust that, while part of the broader German-European Holocaust, remained at the same time a specifically Romanian story. As in Germany, the immediate background to Romania's Holocaust tapped archaic anti-Semitic traditions and was crafted by militant agitation of anti-Semitic parties, itself followed by State legislation and then compounded by wartime circumstances. Bloody mob violence was the result, but now drawing in government elements, the riots took on the character of a social enterprise and thus invited takeover by the State. This transition phase, when mass robbery and mass murder evolved from a societal to a government enterprise, took place in the months immediately preceding and immediately following Romania's entrance into the war.<sup>10</sup>

There were 728,115 Romanians who, in the census of 1930, identified themselves as being of the Jewish faith. This represented approximately four per cent of the country's total population of 18,057,000, and can be compared with Poland, where that country's 3,300,000 Jews formed almost ten per cent of a total population of 35,100,000.<sup>11</sup> It should be

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<sup>9</sup> Wolff, R. L. (ed.), *The Balkans in Our Time*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1978, p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> Ioanid, R., *The Holocaust in Romania*, Chicago, Ivan R Dee, 2000, pp. 108–109.

<sup>11</sup> *The Romanian Census of 1930*, Project Gutenberg Self-Publishing Press, available at: [www.gutenberg.us/articles/romanian\\_census\\_of\\_1930#29\\_December\\_1930\\_census](http://www.gutenberg.us/articles/romanian_census_of_1930#29_December_1930_census) (accessed 25 March 2019).

noted that the census of 1930 has been deliberately used as the borders of Romania changed so markedly prior to the next official census of 1940 that large numbers of Jewish populations were now living under other regimes. The men, women and children who perished were either murdered by, or died as a result of the inhuman conditions deliberately created by the Romanian dictatorship under Ion Antonescu and its armed forces, as well as a willing and participating citizenry. However, it is an unfortunate fact that the history of anti-Semitism, in the forms in which it has, and still persists as a social phenomenon in Romania, goes back to at least the fourteenth century, and it will be among the aims of this chapter to give some detail to those forms as well as dealing with the phenomenon of Romanian anti-Semitism in the historiographical sense.

Delving into Romanian history, one sees that, although there were communities made up of those Jews who had been exiled from Hungary in the late 1360s and who settled in the main Romanian territory of Wallachia, it was in 1579 that Jews were exiled from the region, with the reason given that their commercial activities were ruining the local merchants.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Jewish communities living in harbour communities on the Danube River were regularly subjected during those times to riots, usually coinciding with religious festivals such as Easter, and more often than not carried out by Greek and Bulgarian merchants. The Jews of Romania were also not impervious to the ‘spilling over’ effect of anti-Semitic activities being carried out in adjoining countries with the notable example of a pogrom in 1652, when marauding Cossacks invaded and murdered Jews in the Romanian city of Jassy (Iasi).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Herscovici, L.Z., ‘Wallachia’, in Gershon Hundert, (ed.), *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, available at: <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/wallachia> (accessed 30 October 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Herscovici, L.Z., ‘Iasi’, in Gershon Hundert, (ed.), *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, available at: <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/iasi#author> (accessed 3 March 2019).

Entering the nineteenth century, Romania consisted of the principalities of Moldavia and Wallacia and it was to be, basically, the ultimate unification of these territories in 1859 which initiated a drawn-out process towards the formation of the modern nation of Romania. In a review of F. Kellogg's work on Romanian independence entitled *The Road to Romanian Independence*,<sup>14</sup> which gives us a hint of the national feelings at play at the time that independence came about, Michelle Patterson writes:

Full independence occurred primarily through reducing political dependence on the Ottoman Empire by cultivating economic ties with foreign countries. Economic relationships created tensions and opportunities. Kellogg describes the tensions and complex relations between foreigners, Jews, and Romanians and the often-xenophobic side of nationalism. More specifically, the construction of railway lines was financed largely by foreign investors, and this created resentment...<sup>15</sup>

The phenomenon of anti-Semitism at most, if not all levels of Romanian society remained an ongoing scourge and as we shall see, when the European powers insisted on equality of rights for Jews as a pre-condition for Romanian nationhood, caused severe upheaval. The point is covered in an excerpt from the 2004 'Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kellogg, F., *The Road to Romanian Independence*, West Lafayette, Indiana, Purdue University Press, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Patterson, M., 'The Road to Romanian Independence', *Canadian Journal of History*, Saskatoon, vol. 31, no. 2, 1996, p. 330.

<sup>16</sup> 'One of the issues which evoked an enormous outpouring of anti-Semitic sentiment from the mid-nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth was the juridical status of Jews in the new Romanian state. The leadership of the 1848 uprisings in Wallachia and Moldavia had called for the emancipation of the Jews and political equality. However, after the uprisings were crushed and as the status of the principalities became the subject

Returning to the chronological account of the development of anti-Semitism in Romania, the Convention of Paris (August 19, 1858) established the terms under which the unification of Wallachia and Moldavia would be acceptable. Article 46 of that convention called for full juridical rights to eventually apply to all Moldavians and Wallachians but, whether by design or not, the wording of the article contained a number of ambiguities which were to further fuel feelings of animosity and, in some cases, downright hatred between majority and minority communities for the next twenty years. The wording of Article 46 was interpreted as follows:

All Moldavians and Wallachians are equal before the law and taxation and shall have equal access to public employment in each of the principalities...Moldavians and Wallachians of all Christian faiths shall equally enjoy political rights. The enjoyment of these rights can be extended to other religions by legislative enactments.<sup>17</sup>

The author continues:

Not unexpectedly, Romanians and Jews interpreted this text in opposite ways. Whereas the former denied that any special form of Jewish protection had been granted, the latter insisted that their existence and legal rights were now recognised. To be sure, the seven signatory powers had cloaked their disagreement over Jewish emancipation in ambiguity. After excluding

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of diplomatic negotiations among the European Powers, improvement of the juridical status of the Jews in the principalities became an issue of international interest.' Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania (Executive Summary and Report Abstract)*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Fink, C., *Defending the Rights of Others: The Great Powers, the Jews and International Minority Protection, 1878–1938*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 11.

Jewish inhabitants from the category of ‘Moldavians and Wallachians’ entitled to full civil and political rights, in the last sentence they proposed a specific, if unattainable, remedy. For the next two decades, this terribly vague Article locked Romanian Jews, and the Great Powers in a public debate over its meaning.<sup>18</sup>

The Final Report of the International Commission goes on to explain that whilst Article 46 of the Convention of Paris of August 1858 laid out the broad terms of and, actually achieved the unification of Moldavia and Wallachia, it was in the Treaty of Berlin (1878) that the European powers stated that ‘recognition of Romanian independence was to be conditional upon the grant of citizenship and political rights to the Jews...’<sup>19</sup> This seemingly undeniable extending of a ‘hand of friendship’ by the European powers created extreme anger within Romanian society and to quote further from the same Report:

the voices of the new country’s cultural elite were as outraged as any in the political realm. This external pressure caused extreme resentment among a Romanian elite seeking to establish Romanian self-determination and sovereignty, and reinforced questions that still persisted a century later about the loyalties and motivations of Romanian Jews seeking full citizenship and equal rights in the Romanian State. Antisemitic expression was not limited to Romania’s founding political elite. It was also widespread among the cultural and intellectual elite of the country.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania (Executive Summary and Report Abstract)*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 14.

In mid-1866, a new version of Article 6 for inclusion in the Romanian constitution was brought forward by executive government which stated: ‘The Romanian citizenship is given, kept and lost according to the Romanian civil laws. Religion cannot be an impediment in the process of obtaining citizenship’.<sup>21</sup> Following opposition by the anti-Semitic lobby to this highly favourable law for the Jews, it was quickly modified to state that ‘although religion cannot be a barrier for obtaining Romanian citizenship, the case of Jews is a special one and they will be given “special laws” in order to gradually obtain citizenship.’<sup>22</sup> Although this severely curtailed the chances of emancipation for the Jews, the modified article was completely replaced with a new Article 7, which read:

The status of Romanian citizenship is acquired, maintained, and forfeited in accordance with rules established through civil legislation. Only foreign individuals who are of the Christian rite may acquire Romanian citizenship.<sup>23</sup>

By removing what had already been a severely reduced opportunity for the emancipation of Romania’s Jews, a perfect climate for obfuscation was created and the emancipation of Romanian Jews was effectively put back for nearly half a century.

There is no doubt that these events echoed down through the years to where we see the development of various heavily anti-Semitic and fascist-based organisations, operating both inside and outside the actual parliamentary process, and which, in order to obtain a fuller understanding, are important to discuss.

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted by Grec, ‘The Rise of Anti-Semitism in the Modern Era: Social and Political Implication of the “Jewish Question” in Romania after 1866’, *Studia Iudaica Aradensis*, no. 5, 2017, p. 135.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Yad Vashem online: [https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/pdf-drupal/en/report/english/1.1\\_Roots\\_of\\_Antisemitism.pdf](https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/pdf-drupal/en/report/english/1.1_Roots_of_Antisemitism.pdf), p. 7 (accessed 6 June 2019).

The importance of 1878 was that, following the war with the Ottoman Empire, Romania became a fully independent state, and it is from this point in time that we see the emergence of a definitive trajectory of anti-Semitism developing as Romanian society formed its own national identity and forged a place among European nations. The particular harshness, including actual physical ‘brutality’ which characterised the anti-Semitism that developed in Romania later during the interwar period, fed directly into the beliefs and perceptions which drove and ultimately fuelled Romania’s role in the Second World War. It was, in fact, the philosophies and actions of the many virulently anti-Semitic political parties and organisations which developed after the First World War which culminated in a climate so suitable for an alliance with Nazi Germany. These organisations will be referred to later in this chapter.

Again, the period following the Treaty of Berlin in 1878 showed just how deeply anti-Semitism was embedded, as is evidenced by the fact that, although it was now perfectly legitimate for Jews to be naturalised, ‘this solution of gaining civil rights for the Jews proved entirely impracticable, and the total number of Jews naturalised between 1878 and 1913 did not exceed 529.’<sup>24</sup> Until the First World War, other legislation of a prohibitive nature was brought in which had the effect of substantially reducing the opportunities for Jews to be part of industry, trade, or the professions, as well as undertaking educational courses. With the banning of Jews from residing in rural areas also being legislated:

...the Union of the Native Jews was set up in Bucharest in 1910, assuming the responsibility of coordinating the struggle for emancipation. It was these efforts, the support of the European public opinion and of the international

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<sup>24</sup> L. Gyemant, ‘The Romanian Jewry: Historical Destiny, Tolerance, Integration, Marginisation’, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, No. 3, Winter, 2002, p. 94.

Jewish organizations that prepared the field for the favourable conditions at the end of World War I which made Jewish emancipation a reality in Romania.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Interwar Period and Beyond**

In an interesting article which explores the reasons for both the beginnings and continuing development of anti-Semitism in western Christian societies, and singling out Romania as a case in point, historians William Brustein and Amy Ronnkvist examine their subject through the lens of a model they create based on ‘the emergence and spread of four strains of Jewish hatred.’<sup>26</sup> They enumerate these four strains as ‘...a result of the impact of a deterioration in a society’s economic well-being, the impact of increased immigration of Eastern European Jews, the growth of popular support for the political Left, and the extent to which leadership of the political Left was identified with Jews.’<sup>27</sup> The authors’ examination is conducted under the further four sub-headings of economic, racial, political and religious anti-Semitism and covers the period up to, and including, the interwar period. A solid basis is established on which to claim that ‘Romanian anti-Semitism during the interwar period served as a principal recruiting theme...which resulted in the establishment of a series of rabidly anti-Semitic political parties ranging from C. Cuza’s League of National Christian Defense (which preached the physical liquidation of the Jews) and established in 1923, to an anti-Semitic government installed by King Carol in January 1938, opening the way for the ultimate rise to

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<sup>25</sup> Op. cit., p. 94.

<sup>26</sup> Brustein, W. and Ronnkvist, A., ‘The Roots of Anti-Semitism: Romania before the Holocaust’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2002, p. 211.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 211.

power of Ion Antonescu.’<sup>28</sup> The authors conclude that the overall effects of the rise under each of the headings of anti-Semitism chosen for examination ‘may have been ignited by the effects of declining economic well-being, increased Jewish immigration, growth of Leftist support, and identification of Jews with the leadership of the political Left.’<sup>29</sup>

Before proceeding further in detailing the growth in both scope and severity of anti-Semitism in Romania during the interwar years, it would be well to pause and realise that, by the arrival of the twentieth century, there can be no doubt as to the depth to which this phenomenon had invaded Romanian nationalism, and that a solid base had been erected on which the murder and mayhem which were to be perpetrated against the Jews of that nation during the Second World War would take place.

One cannot discuss the development of anti-Semitism in Romania with reference to the interwar years without noting that:

The interwar systemic political transformations decisively affected a whole range of societal factors in entire Europe. Beginning with the ascension of totalitarian political regimes that triggered a continuous deterioration of various intra-societal relations, the whole continent entered a new ideologically impregnated era.<sup>30</sup>

Romania, which, to this point, had been very much an agrarian and peasant-based society, had lagged behind the process of political and social development, which was unfolding

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 216.

<sup>29</sup> Op. cit. 233–234.

<sup>30</sup> Jadaneant, A., ‘The collapse of constitutional legalism: Racial laws and the ethno-cultural construction of national identity in Romania during World War II’, *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 183, 2015, p. 40.

across Eastern European states and, although it badly needed the benefits of modernisation, it should be seen, as Vago puts it, as a ‘late developer’.<sup>31</sup> He continues:

Romania’s version of nation-building was (therefore) more intense, acute and demanded a great leap forward, destroying elements of the traditional of society.<sup>32</sup>

The early stages of the interwar period saw an increase in Jewish involvement across the full spectrum of Romanian society, including social, economic, political and cultural spheres, together with the development, within Jewish communities, of communal, philanthropic, cultural, artistic and sports associations. This was in direct conflict with the concurrent development of extremely fascist organisations across Europe and within Romania.

As intimated earlier, no discussion on the development of anti-Semitism in Romania has credence without fully exploring the long-range effects of the formation of political parties and organisations having clear anti-Semitic platforms. Both the Nationalist Democratic Party of Nicolae Iorga and Alexandru C. Cuza, established in 1910, and the Christian Nationalist Democratic Party, being a continuation of a ‘splinter’ group set up by Cuza after breaking away in 1919, actively pursued anti-Semitic activity on a racial basis. This last-mentioned party ‘differentiated between regular anti-Semitic groups and organizations and movements that predicated their hatred of Jews on *Christian* (emphasis mine) racist grounds.’<sup>33</sup> Cuza’s new party published a pamphlet which claimed that its *raison d’être* was ‘to fight with all

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<sup>31</sup> Vago, R., ‘The Traditions of Antisemitism in Romania’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1993, p. 107.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press and Yad Vashem, 2011, pp. 10–11.

legal means in order to support economic, political, and social interests against the Jews.’<sup>34</sup>

As Motta says:

Over a long period, anti-Semitism has constituted one of the most enduring facets of Romanian nationalism and consequently assumed different aspects in different times and circumstances. Romanian anti-Semitism in itself represents a compendium of all the forms that anti-Semitism has historically assumed, an endemic amalgam of nationalism and anti-Semitism, of nationalised bias and visceral excesses.<sup>35</sup>

In 1923, and following the same methodology of accusing the Jews of trying to destroy the values of Christian peoples everywhere, but primarily Romanian Christians, Cuza established a further iteration of his Christian Nationalist Democratic Party, calling it the League of National Christian Defense. It was centred in the city of Iasi, but its activities soon spread to become the largest anti-Semitic organisation in the country.<sup>36</sup> Again, as previously, Cuza injected a strong combination of peculiarly Romanian and religious based hatred for Jews; Ancel summarises the League’s activities as having:

...created, fostered, and channelled hatred on a Christian Orthodox basis. The attempt to accuse the Jews of collective subversion against the Christian peoples and against the Romanians in particular – a subversion based on an imperative, a kind of genetic code, that arose from the very essence of

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Motta, G., ‘Nationalism and Anti-Semitism in an Independent Romania’, *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

Judaism, the Jewish nature, faith, and God – placed Cuza and his generation’s hatred of Jews on a religious Christian basis.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Rise of the Iron Guard**

Whereas both Iorga and Cuza had been products of the end of the nineteenth century and First World War periods, and with the country awash with anti-Semitism, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, a young militantly anti-Semitic university student in Iasi, burst upon the political scene. Whilst anti-Semitism as a party platform was absent from both of the political parties discussed above, there was no doubt as to their anti-Semitic leanings and attitudes. Codreanu proceeded to ‘cut his (political) teeth’ by becoming president of the Law Students’ Association and, inspired by articles in *Apararea Nationala*, which Cuza and Paulescu had founded in 1922, established the Association of Christian Students that same year with the purpose of ‘defending our fatherland against Jewish invasion’.<sup>38</sup>

In June, 1927, Codreanu established the Legion of the Archangel Michael, later in 1930 to become known as the Iron Guard. With true rebellious attitude, Codreanu chose not to operate within a political party framework; in fact, this newly formed movement favoured organised violence, ‘not only against Jews, but against the establishment, as an acceptable, even preferred, method of accomplishing the movement’s goals.’<sup>39</sup> In describing Codreanu, Ancel writes:

Codreanu, like Hitler, harbored pathological hatred of Jews. Like Hitler, his hatred was based on feelings, not facts. As far as he was concerned, modern

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<sup>37</sup> Op. cit. p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds) *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004, p. 44.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 45.

Romanian history was a constant war between Jews and Romanians. Jews were members of an accursed nation that, directly and through its lackeys, controlled the Romanian economy and sought to gain control of the state, too. The Jews sowed the seeds of hatred and dissension among the Romanians, and their revolutionary Marxist and Communist ideas were a destructive element. There was no compromise in the war between the Romanian people and the Jews. Anti-Semitism was an existential war for the Romanians, a war that justified all means, however barbaric.<sup>40</sup>

Leading up to the First World War, Romanian anti-Semitism had always contained a strong element of religious symbolism. Accusations such as the Jews being responsible for breaking the ‘spiritual link’<sup>41</sup> between the Romanian people and God so that they could successfully destroy the Romanian nation were ‘stock in trade’ for anti-Semitic leaders of the day. Both Goga and Cuza, in their own ways, were always in favour of using such national/religious language, but were constrained because they also insisted on working from within a traditional political regime. Codreanu, on the other hand, was a dangerous renegade who preached the overthrow of traditional government in favour of dictatorship, and whose philosophy also included convoluted Romanian Orthodox and mystical symbolism.<sup>42</sup>

Whilst Codreanu had already begun drawing up lists of those who he saw as ‘traitors’ who were to be eliminated as early as 1923, and although many murders were carried out

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<sup>40</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011, p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 45.

<sup>42</sup> Ioanid, R., ‘The Sacralised Politics of the Romanian Iron Guard’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2004, pp. 419–453. (In this article, the author details the strong links between the religious symbolism and national aspirations espoused by the Iron Guard.)

throughout the years, the most heinous chapter occurred in 1940.<sup>43</sup> The Iron Guard's predisposition to violence as a means of dealing with minorities, but mainly Jews, was evident in the many murders which took place throughout the interwar years.

The activities of the movement gathered momentum with its radical attitudes, primarily towards Romania's Jews, with its behaviour similar in manner to the Nazis of Germany. As early as December 1927, synagogues were burned down, and property destroyed in the town of Oradea, where one of the movement's first conferences was being held.<sup>44</sup> Generally speaking, during the period commencing with the establishment of the Iron Guard in 1927, and ending with the Goga–Cuza government in 1937, the brutal acts of murder, thuggery and dispossession which were the hallmark, not only of this organisation but a number of others, now became part of the published policy of openly anti-Semitic political parties, and 'threats against Jews became the centre-piece of national and public debates.'<sup>45</sup> It should also be noted that the Great Depression that engulfed the world from 1929, also 'strengthened those elements that were proposing a new way of solving Romania's ills by jettisoning democratic values.'<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> 'The first list of 'traitors' drawn up in 1923 included six cabinet ministers...Over the next 18 years, Codreanu's movement was responsible for vicious incidents of street violence, aimed mainly at Jews; the assassination of two incumbent prime ministers; and the murder of numerous cabinet ministers and other local and national personalities in both the political and cultural spheres...Iron Guard violence culminated on November 26–27, 1940, with the murder of sixty-four leading personalities and defenders of the interwar political order...': Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004, p. 46.

<sup>44</sup> Brustein, W. and Ronkvist, A., 'The roots of anti-Semitism: Romania before the Holocaust', *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 4, no. 2, p. 228.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

During the early 1930s the Jews of Romania enjoyed somewhat of a welcome remission from the grinding anti-Semitism of Iron Guard philosophy and practice owing to the popularity of the National Peasant Party. This party, until it was brought down by corruption scandals from within its own ranks, coupled with the increasing effects on Romania of the catastrophic economic results of unfolding global depression, legitimately tried to ‘involve representatives of the ethnic minorities in the political decision-making process.’<sup>47</sup> The unfolding 1930s saw the merging of the Iron Guard (which had commonly become known as ‘the legionary movement’) and a number of other anti-Semitic organisations with the National-Agrarian Party led by the popular anti-Semitic poet Octavian Goga to form the National Christian Party.

Goga joined forces with Cuza to form government in 1937 and immediately implemented a range of harsh anti-Semitic measures, including one which effectively, and in contravention of Article 7 of the 1923 Romanian constitution, removed the right of citizenship from 395,000 Romanian Jews. Accompanying legislation also removed many rights for Jews in connection with important commercial matters such as the removal of rail passes for journalists, suspension of newspapers owned by Jews, the removal of licenses to sell liquor in rural areas, and others. The Goga–Cuza government continued until 1938, when it was removed by King Carol II, who installed himself as head of a royal dictatorship, and this continued until September 1940, when the National–Legionary government came to power upon the abdication of the King. One month prior to the King’s abdication, a set of laws almost identical to the Nazi Nuremberg Laws were passed.

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<sup>47</sup> Cârstocea, R., ‘Anti-Semitism in Romania: Historical Legacies, Contemporary Challenges’, *European Centre for Minority Issues, Working Paper #81*, October, 2014, p. 11.

This government was, itself, short lived because it is at this juncture that Ion Antonescu enters the picture, and the full force of Nazi influence, as well as that of Antonescu himself starts to take hold of the affairs of the Romanian people. The next chapter is devoted to exploring Antonescu's unique, evil, yet strangely paradoxical role as dictator of Romania during the Holocaust years.

### **Conclusion**

I have demonstrated that, historically, Romanian anti-Semitism has existed for many centuries as an anti-social and culturally ingrained practice. In that sense, it shares its manifestations across many national borders. However, as I have also shown, Romania had developed a possessive nature along the way with regard to its 'brand' of anti-Semitism. It is almost as if it had announced to the world that 'these are our Jews, and we will decide whether we will mistreat and degrade them in our own unique way, or not'.

## **Chapter Two: Ion Antonescu**

### **Scope of this Chapter**

The aim of this chapter will be to examine sufficient information regarding Antonescu, as well as the circumstances leading to establishing his dictatorship, so as to give context, understanding and historical explanation to what effects the years of his totalitarian rule had on the Romanian nation and, in particular, Romania's Jews. An attempt will be made to explain the man who presided over the documented account of the murder of between 280,000 and 380,000 Jews and Roma during the years that he was in power. While there is no doubt that the use of such words as 'patriot' have been used with regard to Antonescu, more recent terms such as 'ultra-nationalist'<sup>1</sup> and 'war criminal'<sup>2</sup> have been more common. The description of him as a 'paradox' in the article quoted below is interesting in that the author uses this term to describe the fact that '...while often protecting Jews inside Romanian borders, [he] murdered them indiscriminately just outside those borders.'<sup>3</sup> In terms of the period under consideration being relevant, Antonescu is accepted as having represented Romania's bulwark against Communism, however his importance tends to be diluted by the degree to which the country, at least outwardly, accepts its responsibilities for what occurred during the Holocaust years.

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<sup>1</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 269-270.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Kaplan, R. D., 'The Antonescu Paradox', *Foreign Policy – The Magazine*, February 5, 2016, p. 1.

## Early History and Career Details

There is a dearth of detailed information with reference to the childhood and formative years of Ion Antonescu. Such scant information as does exist, is to be found expressed with brevity in many sources. Some is of such questionable nature as not to be worthy of quotation, but we may accept other versions as reliable. In this regard, and while relying heavily on historian Dennis Deletant's acclaimed account of Antonescu's role as Romania's dictator, even he has no more information to impart than the three sentences noted below.<sup>4</sup> No information as to Antonescu's childhood or formative years are able to be found, and one may be drawn to the conclusion that all references were obliterated from the record during the period he was in power.

It was not my intention to indulge in a detailed examination of the complexities and paradoxes of Antonescu's personal character and mindset throughout his career, whether in his earlier years in the military, or his later years as a diplomat, then politician and finally as leader of the nation. However, from all accounts, so central were his minutest foibles and mood swings to decisions made, especially those affecting the Romanian nation's interests and minority ethnic communities during the Second World War, that it is essential to devote space to their examination. The man's complex and at times, inexplicable, even irrational thinking, coupled with his overt, unbridled, and vicious anti-Semitism, led to consequences of suffering and death for primarily the Jewish and, secondly, Romani minorities on a mammoth scale. Ancel describes a more personal aspect in these terms:

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<sup>4</sup> 'He was born on 2 June 1882 into a middle-class family in the Southern Romanian town of Pitesti, and baptized into the Orthodox faith. His father, an army officer, wanted his son to follow in his footsteps and mapped out a military career for him, sending him to primary and secondary military schools in Craicova. On 1 July 1904, after two years at the Infantry and Cavalry School, he began service in the Romanian army with the rank of second lieutenant.' Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 37.

One personality trait in particular proved of considerable importance in his decisions regarding matters of state and Jewish affairs: he was susceptible to radical mood changes, outbursts of rage alternating with calm and self-restraint, often in the course of the same conversation. Alexander Safran, the chief rabbi of Romania, described him thus: ‘His face was flushed and pale in turn. His affect was that of a beast of prey, ready to pounce on me and tear me to pieces. At this point my strength left me, and I began to whisper *Shema Israel*...In the course of one meeting he was capable of turning into a completely different person without any warning.’<sup>5</sup>

Unlike the recorded personal histories of both the famous and infamous, usually replete with commentary on their many personal character traits, there is a strange silence where Antonescu is concerned, and any comments of this nature concerning him are usually connected with particular situations or decisions with which he was involved. We are therefore left to infer the man’s particular way of thinking from the unfolding of incidents themselves; Deletant gives us the following further example:

A second quality (the first being that of a ‘patriot’) attributed by Romanian historians to Antonescu was his sense of ‘honor.’ Few students of Romania would dispute this appreciation. And yet Antonescu’s sense of honor made him inflexible and rigid. Romania under Antonescu was led into a war on the basis of his word of honor to Hitler and was expected to stay in the war...as long as honor required it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ancel, J., ‘Antonescu and the Jews’, *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol xxiii, 1993, p. 220.

<sup>6</sup> Deletant, D., ‘Ion Antonescu: The Temptation of Fascism’ in V. Tismaneanu, and B. C. Iacob (eds), *Ideological Storms: Intellectual Dictators, and the Totalitarian Temptation*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2019, p. 275.

Deletant comments further:

Antonescu made a name for himself as a tactician during the First World War but his personal qualities left a different kind of impression with some of those he met. General Victor Petin, France's military attaché in Bucarest, in an assessment of Antonescu dated 21 July 1922, expressed reservations about him: 'A well-trying intelligence, brutal, duplicitous, very vain, a ferocious will to succeed – these are, together with an extreme xenophobia, the striking characteristics of this strange figure... [In an ambiguous yet also prophetic sentence Petin added], 'Antonescu deserves a special place in the Romanian army...'<sup>7</sup>

Historians of the period have also quoted or commented on Antonescu, often referring to his anti-Semitism; a selection of these will form a suitable basis for a clearer understanding of Antonescu's behaviour throughout his career, and the paradoxical nature of his decisions.

The following strong language appears at p. 243 of no less an important document than the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania:

...general Ion Antonescu was dominated by his loathing of Jews and Judaism. He revealed this loathing at a session of the Council of Ministers on April 15, 1941: 'I give the mob complete license to massacre [the Jews]. I will withdraw to my fortress, and after the slaughter, I will restore order.'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Deletant, D., 'Ion Antonescu and the Holocaust in Romania', *East Central Europe*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2012, p. 64.

<sup>8</sup> Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004.

Again, as a further example of Antonescu's deep anti-Semitism, he is quoted on July 4, 1941 as saying:

...the Jewish people had embezzled and impoverished, speculated on and impeded the development of the Romanian people for several centuries; the need to free us from this plague is self-evident.<sup>9</sup>

Yet again, on December 16, 1941 and in relation to his anti-Semitism:

Put them in the catacombs, put them in the Black Sea. I don't want to hear anything. It does not matter if 100 or 1,000 die, [for all I care] they can all die.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps one of the most callous of Antonescu's recorded statements, mainly for its off-hand nature, requires some short introductory comments prior to the quoting of his actual words:

Ion Antonescu was well aware of the mass murders committed by the SS in Transnistria. According to a report from the Supreme General Staff of the Romanian Army to Antonescu in March 1942, German policemen subjected the Jewish population of the county of Berezovka to mass executions:

- i. 1) In the county of Berezovka (Transnistria), German policemen executed 4,067 Jews who had been interned in that county's camps; specifically: 1,725 Jews on March 10; 1,742 Jews on April 20; 550 Jews on April 22; 30 Jews on April 24.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 244.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 246.

2) Following the executions, the German police burned the corpses, and donated the clothes to the German population without having disinfected them, which caused cases of typhoid in one particular town.

- ii. The Supreme General Staff wishes to find out if the German policemen can conduct such undertakings under Romanian administration.

Marshal Antonescu wrote in response, ‘...it is not the responsibility of the General Staff of the Army to worry about such things.’<sup>11</sup>

The following quote will demonstrate one instance of what can only be described as Antonescu’s bizarre, brittle and controlling personality:

In his own words to Hitler in June 1941, he was ‘neither a politician nor diplomat. He was a born soldier and wanted to die one’. In a country unfamiliar with discipline, Antonescu tried to impose it, though his strictures sometimes extended to the ridiculous – a ban on walking the streets in shirtsleeves during the summer on pain of internment!

While some transgressors were actually punished in this way, the moral and spiritual regeneration sought by Antonescu did not receive the public support he hoped for.<sup>12</sup>

Historians have noted the complex, irrational, and paradoxical nature of Antonescu’s thought processes; one could be forgiven for looking askance at any example, such as the following

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 248.

<sup>12</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 70.

one, which seems to indicate, in a rare but revealing example, Antonescu's ability to express sorrow. Upon being informed of the murder of Jews in Chisinau in December 1941, he stated: 'It was the greatest disappointment, I can say, in my career, that there could take place what took place under my regime, and that my regime could be stained by such bastards, like other regimes. The matter is all the more painful since many soldiers are involved.'<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the final word on this aspect of Antonescu's place in the history of the Holocaust should be given to historian Dennis Deletant who explains part of this man's evil legacy to the world in this way:

The record of bestiality shown by the Romanian authorities at Bogdanovka, Domanevka, and Akhmetchetka ranks with the most horrific acts of mass butchery carried out in the twentieth century. Based on trial records, a figure of about 70,000 Jews has been computed as the number murdered in the three localities between December 21, 1941, and the end of February 1942. This was solely a Romanian affair; the part played by the Germans was largely that of spectators. Through his initial decision to deport Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina, and the later one regarding those from Odessa, Ion Antonescu bears the ultimate responsibility for the deaths of Jews from typhus, starvation, and mass shooting.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Deletant, D., 'Ion Antonescu: The Temptation of Fascism' in V. Tismaneanu, and B. C. Iacob (eds), *Ideological Storms: Intellectual Dictators, and the Totalitarian Temptation*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2019, p. 287.

<sup>14</sup> Deletant, D., *Aspects of the Ghetto Experience in Eastern Transnistria: The Ghettos and Labor Camp in the Town of Golta, in Ghettos 1939–1945: New Research and Perspectives on Definition, Daily Life, and Survival*, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, 2005, p. 33.

By way of a relatively brief summary of his early career, it seems that Antonescu first comes to prominence when, having attended the Advanced Cavalry School at Targoviste, and then as a second lieutenant in the Romanian army, he is sent to head up a cavalry unit in Covurlui which is where the so-called Peasants Revolt of 1907 was taking place. It is reported that:

his tact and conciliatory behaviour won him the admiration of King Carol I himself, who sent Crown Prince Ferdinand to Galati to congratulate him in front of the entire garrison.<sup>15</sup>

Deletant reports that, from 25 July to 21 August 1917, Antonescu:

made a significant contribution to the tactics adopted during the battle of Marasesti, when the Romanian and Russian armies successfully resisted the German attempt to take Moldavia.<sup>16</sup>

We see the first indications of an erratic character and an inability to interact with the world outside of the military milieu when, following his promotion to the rank of lieutenant-colonel, and with the first opportunity of a political appointment, he was one of three officers short-listed for the role of military attaché in Paris in 1920. The fact that Antonescu was by-passed for the position was due, in no small part, to a very frank opinion of him which was given by France's military attaché in Bucharest, General Petin:

Extremely industrious, of great military worth and well-suited from the Romanian point of view, to hold such positions with success. But Lt.-Col. Antonescu is extremely vain as regards his own person and his country, is chauvinistic, xenophobic and I am sure that we cannot count on him in

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<sup>15</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. pp. 37-38.

any way to continue the policy of French–Romanian *rapprochement* or to receive from him any sign of gratitude for the services made by France [to Romania].<sup>17</sup>

In connection with the multiple number of occasions on which various historians and academics have remarked on Antonescu’s tendencies to fits of rage and mood swings, it may be helpful to take account of a possible explanation in a footnote of J. Ancel in his often-quoted work ‘The History of the Holocaust in Romania’.<sup>18</sup>

Antonescu’s character excesses continued to make themselves evident and it seems that his appointment to Paris was arranged to ‘paper over’ an incident which occurred in the Sibiu garrison, details of which were not reported, but which drew the comment: ‘...he had grown accustomed only to command, while up to the rank he had, he has yet to learn how to listen’.<sup>19</sup> Following this posting, he was assigned, in 1926, to the cavalry training school in Sibiu and then, after a short period as secretary-general in the Ministry of War during 1928, he married. He was promoted to the position of brigadier-general and, in 1933, was appointed Chief of the General Staff. His priorities for modernising the army’s weapons and equipment brought him into direct conflict with the Minister of Defence, General Angelescu and, as a

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<sup>17</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> ‘A study on Antonescu published in Romania in 1993 stated that he was not ill with malaria and that in the summer of 1942 he underwent “a late and terminal stage of syphilis” after having ‘caught the disease in his youth’: Mezincescu, *Maresalul Antonescu*, pp. 148–149. A late stage of syphilis cannot be discovered in serological examinations. The disease could be diagnosed only if Antonescu himself confessed to having caught it and “after a protracted follow-up of the patient and a rigorous psychiatric examination.” Who, however, would have dared to conduct a psychiatric examination of the Conducator? And who could have differentiated between his megalomania and a psychiatric illness?’ Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011, p. 489, footnote 9.

<sup>19</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 39.

result, resigned his position in December, 1934. From 1937 to 1938 he served as National Defence Minister in Octavian Goga's National Christian government.

### **Antonescu and the Iron Guard**

The foregoing short summary of Antonescu's militarily focused career, and rapid rise to high military position thereafter, paves the way for an examination of how his consuming nationalism, combined with a virulent anti-Semitism, shaped the rest of his career, especially his behaviour during the four years of his rule of Romania by dictatorship. It is, at this stage, via a connection forged with an organisation known as the Iron Guard, that Antonescu turns to, and introduces politics into his life as a means of promoting himself. From this point his actions become subject to mainstream scrutiny, and to sometimes conflicting commentary by modern history and academia. However, with little knowledge of, or patience for politics, Antonescu's grasp for power was achieved by an alliance with the Iron Guard. There is little, or any evidence to show that he shared much more than virulent anti-Semitism with that movement. But he was content, for the sake of his career, to set up a national legionary state with the Iron Guard as his partner. In an article which looks closely at how the conflictual relationship between Antonescu and the Iron Guard had been viewed in the 1950s and 1960s, historian Radu Ioanid writes:

both Antonescu and the Iron Guard were described as the Romanian 'fifth column' and their conflict as a simple struggle between fascists...in some of these writings Antonescu was recast as almost a progressive figure and the clash between him and the Iron Guard became the most violent expression of the old and frequent conflicts that aroused the masses as well as

important political and progressive circles against this fascist and terrorist organization...<sup>20</sup>

In terms of time, and as we shall see, Antonescu's relationship with the Iron Guard was relatively short lived, but it seemed to have shaped him in ways which were to result in terrible consequences for the Jews of Romania. Overall, however, and even though the violent anti-Semitism of the Iron Guard fitted in with Antonescu's baser instincts, we should note that the influential role that anti-Semitism played in his life and career, ruled many of the murderous decisions that were made by him and/or in his name well after his association with the Legionnaire movement was over. The following statement by Ioanid in the article just quoted points to the fact that Antonescu's disciplined and army-trained upbringing was shocked, not by the murder and physical and social pain inflicted, but by the untidiness and disruptive nature of the Iron Guard's activities whilst going about it:

These activities of the Iron Guard exacerbated the conflict between Marshal Antonescu and the Iron Guard. Although a fascist in his convictions and behaviour, Antonescu the old soldier was revolted by the administrative and economic disorder brought on by the legionnaires' greed and incompetence, which sowed confusion and difficulties everywhere in the country's economic, administrative and judicial system...<sup>21</sup>

It will be seen from the previous chapter of this thesis dealing with the development of anti-Semitism in Romania that it had become endemic. The following quotation from Ancel makes

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<sup>20</sup> Ioanid, R., 'The Pogrom of Bucharest 21–23 January 1941', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 373–374.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 375.

the point well, clarifying just how centrally placed Antonescu was in these times to have been imbued with an anti-Semitic mindset:

The extreme nationalist anti-Semitic movement in Romania, the cradle of the Romanian fascist movement, was not a product of existing political parties, marginal elements, the petty bourgeoisie, or those impoverished by the war – as was the case in Germany – but was first and foremost a student movement. In Romanian schools the sons of peasants and urban Romanians studied alongside the sons of the rural intelligentsia – teachers, clerks, clerics, and *army officers* (my emphasis). These youth from different social backgrounds created the most extreme antisemitic right-wing movement in that period in Europe. The students of the gymnasia served as a natural pool for the fascist organization that made a bid for power in the late thirties.<sup>22</sup>

In 1922, A. C. Cuza, a right-wing Romanian politician and university professor with an anti-Semitic bent, had founded a political party, calling it the National Christian Union. The party had been formed with its sole objective being ‘to fight the Jews with all legal means, and to bring about the abolition of their rights.’<sup>23</sup> Corneliu Codreanu, initially a close friend of Cuza, initiated a second fascist movement in 1927 and called it The Legion of the Archangel Michael. He later added a military arm, calling it the Iron Guard, and this became the name by which the whole organisation was commonly known. This fascist anti-Semitic movement was based on thuggery and physical violence, stemming from a hatred of Jews, as well as an underlying belief that Jews were a ‘disease on the body of the Romanian nation’, and had to

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<sup>22</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011; Jerusalem, YadVashem, 2011, pp. 11–12.

<sup>23</sup> Ancel, J., ‘Antonescu and the Jews’, *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. 23, 1993, p. 215.

be eliminated. As time passed, the Legion found it progressively more difficult to identify its movement as a 'local product' and not merely one which mimicked the Nazi model. Whilst this violence of thought was rife on university campuses, it was not long before it spread to the political system and throughout the strata of public and communal life. Fuelling the growth of this and other fascist groups in the country was the effects on the population of both the Great Depression, the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany, and the thinking that something other than a democratic approach was required to guide Romania into new times.

On the basis that Antonescu was openly and unashamedly anti-Semitic, it is little wonder that 'The Guard', as it was popularly known, aroused both his attention and interest. Deletant mentions that, on being introduced to Codreanu for the first time in 1936, 'Antonescu found the Iron Guard leader arrogant...but committed to a purge of the political system.'<sup>24</sup> It is fair to say that, at this stage, the political scene in Romania was already in turmoil. The responsibility for this state of flux can, in large part, be placed at the feet of the King, Carol II, who had returned from exile in 1930 following a liaison with one Magda Lupescu, and who was reinstated to the throne by re-swearing the royal oath on June 8, 1930. As a general statement, King Carol's persistent meddling in political matters over the years that followed, particularly in foreign affairs, together with his practice of continually playing off the three major political parties in the country against each other, the elections of 1937 became a turning point in Romanian political history. They were the last democratically held elections until 1990 with the end of the Communist regime.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Deletant, D., 'Ion Antonescu: The Temptation of Fascism', in V. Tismaneanu, and B. C. Iacob (eds), *Ideological Storms: Intellectual Dictators, and the Totalitarian Temptation*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2019, p. 290.

<sup>25</sup> Whilst the elections of December 1937 may have been democratically held, the resultant government and cabinet were chosen by King Carol II and not democratically elected.

## The Elections of 1937

I have chosen to highlight the 1937 elections in Romania for two reasons; firstly, because they mark Antonescu's entry into politics, and secondly because they also herald the start of relentlessly cruel anti-Semitic legislation. Such legislation was passed, firstly by the newly elected government, as well as by subsequent governments for the many years following, including the years in which Antonescu himself governed as dictator. Antonescu took up the role of Defence Minister in Octavian Goga's rabidly anti-Semitic government of 1937.<sup>26</sup> The passing of successive anti-Semitic laws and tolerance by the Goga/Cuza government of rampant and brutal anti-Semitic acts all took place with the approval of Ion Antonescu who, as Minister of Defence, stood waiting impatiently in the wings for the right moment to mount a challenge for the leadership.

It would be fair to say that the tumultuous forty-four days of the Goga/Cuza government have been seen as a watershed in the development of savage physical attacks on Jews which became the norm, and which occurred on Antonescu's watch.<sup>27</sup> Further, Kaltenbrunner makes the following statement in a recent article:

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<sup>26</sup> 'In December 1937 he had, in fact, made his participation in Goga's government conditional upon the avoidance of close links with Germany and had favoured Rumania's joining in any Western effort to prevent Hitler from destroying Czechoslovakia.' Hitchens, K., *Rumania 1866-1947*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994, p. 460. (It is the opinion of most historians that Antonescu's later decision to 'throw his lot in' with Germany was done, not because he had lost his feelings for the West, but purely and simply because he was convinced that it was in the national interest to do so.)

<sup>27</sup> 'But what was novel under the National Christian Party, during the Royal Dictatorship, and especially when control passed to the Iron Guard and Antonescu, was not the nature of the anti-Semitism they espoused, but the fact that anti-Semitism had passed from the realm of verbal expression and occasional outbursts of antisemitic violence by private groups or individuals to the realm of government policy and state action.' Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *Final Report, International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004, p. 19.

As the authorities often treated complaints by Jews reluctantly, ‘anti-Semites’ attacks grew ever more audacious and frequent.<sup>28</sup>

It is also important to note that the passing of much legislation aimed specifically at removing the rights of Jews was created by the Goga/Cuza government, which was the first elected forum to come to office with a public policy of anti-Semitism, and second only to Nazi Germany.

The Iron Guard, which had contested the elections, achieved sixteen per cent of the vote; Goga’s National Christian Party nine per cent, and Iuliu Maniu’s National Peasants’ Party twenty per cent. King Carol, with the constitutional power granted to him under the Romanian constitution was tasked with appointing a prime minister and, in an effort to both ‘divide and appease this rightist sentiment’,<sup>29</sup> appointed Goga to the position despite his party’s poor showing in the elections, and in spite of his well-known lack of ability as a politician. Because Carol lacked faith in Goga’s National Christian Party willingly carrying out his instructions, ‘he also appointed several members of the traditional political parties to the new government cabinet. However, this combination proved weak and totally unable to govern.’<sup>30</sup>

Goga was partnered in government and cabinet by Alexandru Cuza and his pro-Hitler League of National Christian Defence. The government proved to be dysfunctional, not convening once during its forty-four days in office. Antonescu used his communication skills during this time to placate Corneliu Codreanu and his Iron Guard, as Codreanu had not been offered a place in the government and cabinet. Antonescu also extracted an agreement from Codreanu

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<sup>28</sup> Kaltenbrunner, A., ‘Anti-Semitic Violence in Eastern Romania: The National Christian Party’s Congress, 8 November 1936’, *Contemporary European History*, 2022, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Temple, M., ‘The Politicization of History: Marshal Antonescu and Romania’, *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 10, no. 3, Fall 1996, p. 459.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

to a request for no ‘political violence’ to take place. Nonetheless, it was, in fact, Cuza’s thugs who continued to wreak havoc during this period, attacking both Jews as well as members of the Iron Guard. This necessitated Antonescu, as Minister for Defence, having to maintain a state of martial law as allowed under the 1923 constitution.<sup>31</sup> Shapiro sums up the life of this ill-fated government as follows:

The Goga–Cuzist PNC government installed on December 28, 1937, was to last only forty-four days. The regime was marked, wrote Ambassador Petrescu-Comméne, by a ‘sequence of ineffectual measures on the internal plane and a series of most unpleasant incidents in the external sphere.’<sup>32</sup>

The incessant stirring up of radical anti-Semitism espoused by Goga and Cuza while in government, together with a monarch whose ambivalence did nothing to control it, continued to pervade the nation. Because the Romanian parliament had not once convened, Prime Minister Goga was forced to pass laws by emergency decree, which then had to be countersigned by the king. By far, the most onerous and far-reaching decree can be described as follows:

On January 21, 1938, King Carol II and Goga signed a decree authorizing the ‘review’ of the citizenship of Romanian Jews based on racial criteria as well as geography, other conditions of birth and the possession of specific legal documents. The two claimed that between 250,000 and 500,000 Jews

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<sup>31</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 41.

<sup>32</sup> Shapiro, P., ‘Prelude to Dictatorship in Romania: The National Christian Party in Power, December 1937–February 1938’, *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, vol. VIII, no. 1 (Spring 1974), p. 74.

had illegal status. While Carol II claimed he did not intend to expel them, Goga proposed the deportation of the '500,000 vagrants to Madagascar'.<sup>33</sup>

This repressive legislation: 'brought into question the citizenship of all Jews, not just those considered refugees, vagabonds, or illegal immigrants...The law had repercussions not only for the legal status of Jews but also for all aspects of their lives, such as accommodation, business permits, work permits, permits to exercise certain professions, membership in trade unions, and the like.'<sup>34</sup>

### **End of the Goga/Cuza Government**

Despite Minister Antonescu maintaining martial law in place, street violence and attacks against Jews, perpetrated by both Codreanu's Iron Guard and the thugs belonging to Cuza's League of National Defence (known as the 'lanchieri') continued unabated. Carol reasoned that, as he had always intended that Goga's government would be temporary, and a stepping-stone on his way to a royal dictatorship, the forming of a new government to include Codreanu, may have the effect of reigning in the Iron Guard. Codreanu initially refused Carol's invitation but relented and agreed after being approached by Antonescu. However, his initial refusal severely angered Carol, and can be said to have later led to Codreanu's downfall and ultimate murder. Shortly after, with Carol's patience at an end with Goga because of his ineptitude and intransigence, he dismissed both him and his government on 12 February 1938, retaining Antonescu and seven ministers from the previous government, and creating an interim administration. It is important to reflect here on a comment from the

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<sup>33</sup> Poliec, M., *The Holocaust in Romanian Borderlands: The Arc of Civilian Complicity*, Oxford, Routledge, 2019, p. 219.

<sup>34</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011; Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2011, p. 32.

report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania in connection with the short term of the Goga PNC (National Christian Party) government:

while the PNC's time in power was short, the anti-Semitic policies that Goga and Cuza pursued survived their precipitate fall from power and exerted considerable influence on the policies of the governments that followed. A significant number of PNC adherents served in the governments of the Royal Dictatorship and *resurfaced again in the civilian bureaucracy of wartime dictator Ion Antonescu* (my emphasis).<sup>35</sup>

During the short but eventful period of Goga's government, Antonescu's performance impressed the German ambassador Wilhelm Fabricius, who reported the following to the German Foreign Ministry:

Antonescu served for a long time in London as Military Attaché and is a man of broad vision. On the other hand, he has no ties to Germany whatsoever. Since he is a man of determination who has his task of building up the striking power of the Romanian Army seriously at heart, we will have to try to develop further the contact which I have recently established with him.<sup>36</sup>

### **Carol's Royal Dictatorship**

Over the next week, as the country headed for complete collapse and civil war, Antonescu worked to consolidate his relationship with the army, as well as preparing for a possible

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<sup>35</sup> Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004, p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 42.

Soviet incursion on the country's western border. Carol, believing that Goga had been secretly meeting with Codreanu and concerned that this could mean an unfettered rise to power of the Iron Guard, together with an undermining of his position decided, on 20 February, to annul the 1923 constitution and proclaim a royal dictatorship, appointing Patriarch Miron Cristea, head of the Romanian Eastern Orthodox Church as replacement Prime Minister. He hoped that the respect held for Cristea by the country's Orthodox population would engender a sense of calm throughout the nation. However, the ever-present and pervasive anti-Semitism continued unabated. Cristea had no intention of speaking out against it and, in keeping with his own church's tendencies, vilified the Jews:

One has to be sorry for the poor Romanian people, whose very marrow is sucked out by the Jews...Live, help each other, defend yourselves and exploit one another, but not us and other peoples whose entire wealth you are taking away with your ethnic and talmudic sophistications.<sup>37</sup>

In 1938, the then Minister of the Interior Armand Calinescu realised his long-held desire to put an end to Codreanu and had him and thirteen of his Iron Guard followers assassinated. An intense hatred had developed between the two men when Calinescu had savagely clamped down on the Iron Guard and their leader for continually flouting the regulations of Carol's newly proclaimed constitution of 1938. The cold-blooded assassinations, for which Carol was seen as responsible, were received very badly at home and in Germany, where they were seen as Carol's moving against local fascist forces supportive of Hitler.

In June 1940 the Soviet Union, seeking to take advantage of Romania's weak international position, served a notice of demand that it sought the return of the territories of Bessarabia

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<sup>37</sup> Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004, p. 36.

and Northern Bukovina, giving Romania four days to withdraw its troops from those territories. This was a demographic catastrophe resulting in vastly altered concentrations of Jewish communities being now located within altered national borders, with countless numbers of them meeting with a grim death as retreating Romanian forces blamed them for the loss of territory. Ion Antonescu, who had been ‘conspicuous by his absence’ or, at least, out of the public spotlight for many months, argued strongly with Carol that the Soviet Union should be asked to delay the compliance date; Carol mistook this approach by Antonescu as being both belligerent and threatening, and had him arrested and confined. This huge cession of territory forced on Romania, and resulting in the approximate loss of one third each of the country’s territory and population, was followed in September by successful claims from Hungary to parts of Transylvania, which were also granted following a mediation process carried out by the Axis.

During these days, the lot of the Jews of Romania grew worse. On 8 August 1940, Law No. 2650 was signed by Carol, being a further repressive measure against the Jews of the country and which, modelled on the Nuremberg Laws of Germany, categorised them first into three groupings, as well as mandating nine headings for the definition of a Jew. It became known as the Jewish Statute and, later under Antonescu, was considered to be ‘the starting point for a solution to the Jewish problem’.<sup>38</sup> For the first time, the ‘blood’ of a person was to be considered as part of the definition, with the Minister of Justice of the day, Ion V. Gruia, explaining that he had:

based the law not only on the concepts of ‘a common soul’ (a term taken from the Iron Guard’s lexicon) and a common ‘race, language, land, royal

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<sup>38</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011; Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2011, p. 96.

dynasty, and past and shared ideals' but first and foremost on blood and on the Christian faith – the two forces that together defined the nation: 'I have arrived at an original Romanian formula that considers Romanian blood an ethnic and moral element, the definition of which relies on legal distinctions of religion and extraction. The definition of the Jew [on this basis] receives, in addition to its hitherto legal structure, a political connotation.'<sup>39</sup>

As stated above, the loss of territory also caused unrest, demonstrations, and hostility throughout Romania, as well as a general uprising by the Iron Guard. The relationship between Carol and Antonescu deteriorated even further, with Carol harbouring ill-will towards Antonescu because of the way in which the latter so publicly came to Codreanu's defence during his court trials and Antonescu's bitter resentment against the king for having so easily allowed the grabbing of territory by the Soviets and Hungary. With Carol's political standing at an all-time low, the political entourages of both the king and Antonescu became active with their advice. Carol, for his part, wanting to remain in power, was being advised that an approach should be made to the popularly accepted Antonescu to assume the prime ministership so that both men could rule jointly. Antonescu's reply to this proposition was that he would accept on the condition that Carol would abdicate. The new leader of the Iron Guard, Horia Sima, also saw a chance to seize power in the interests of further cementing Romania's ties with Nazi Germany, and 'on the first of September Sima made his first demand for Carol's abdication.'<sup>40</sup> After tense and private negotiations between the king and Antonescu, where abdication was not made an issue, it was agreed between the two men that Antonescu would 'accept the mandate to form a government, but on condition that he (Carol)

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Haynes, R., 'Germany and the Establishment of the Romanian National Legionary State, September 1940', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 77, no. 4., October 1999, p. 710.

confer on Antonescu “all necessary power”’.<sup>41</sup> Any doubts about Antonescu’s worthiness for the position that Wilhelm Fabricius, Hitler’s ambassador to Romania, may have had were dispelled in discussion with Antonescu. Deletant tells us: ‘Fabricius offered German support on the three conditions that Antonescu implement the Vienna Award (this refers to the so-called second Vienna Award under which Romania relinquished Northern Transylvania to Hungary), receive a German military mission, and strengthen economic ties with Germany, all of which Antonescu accepted.’<sup>42</sup>

### **The National Legionary State**

On the evening of 5 September, 1940, Antonescu advised the king that he was unable to find the political support he required to form government because of the clamouring by all for the king to abdicate. When Carol gave orders to shoot on demonstrators outside the palace, who were calling for him to abdicate, and Antonescu became aware that Carol, in league with one of his own, General Coroama, had been plotting Antonescu’s murder, Antonescu decided to act. These events, coupled with Antonescu being made aware that Carol had completely lost the confidence and support of Germany, were the deciding factor in Antonescu forcing an ultimatum upon Carol to hand over full dictatorial powers before abdicating in favour of his son Prince Michael. The new king then re-appointed Antonescu on the same terms as his father Carol had done. Later that day, Carol hastily departed Romania by train with his entourage, his mistress Elena Lupescu and, as was later found, a sizeable portion of Romania’s wealth and artworks. The last days and hours of Carol’s reign and fall from power, as well as Antonescu’s rise to Head of the Council of Ministers are covered in detail by both

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<sup>41</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 48.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 49.

Deletant<sup>43</sup> and Watts.<sup>44</sup> Watts is at pains to highlight just how Antonescu's suitable leadership qualities equipped him for the role in taking the nation forward at the end of the crisis period leading to, and resulting from, Carol's abdication. However, Deletant's own commentary on Watt's work quite pointedly suggests that it is basically an apologia for Antonescu's crimes against the minorities of Romania during his rule.<sup>45</sup>

By way of summary, the period of Carol's dictatorship lasted until 5 September, 1940; a period during which the country had drifted increasingly and unswervingly towards fascism, upheaval, and the German sphere of influence. The state of unrest within the country is to be judged by the number of changes of governments during the royal dictatorship period reflected by the following prime ministerial appointments: Patriarch Miron Cristea (February 1938–March 1939), Armand Calinescu (March 1939–September 1939), Gheorge Argesame (September 1939, 7 days), Constantin Argetoianu (September 1939–November 1939), Gheorge Tatarescu (November 1939–July 1940), Ion Gigurtu (July 1940–September 1940).

In his immediate efforts to form government following Carol's abdication, Antonescu's public persona exhibited preference for calling on the established parties as an acceptable and stabilising basis on which to build national confidence going forward, despite their own purely symbolic and cynical practices of parliamentary rule. His private and personal leanings were more toward the ultra-national and authoritarian thrust of Horia Sima and his Legionary Guard. However, the established parties refused to serve with the Guard, therefore leaving

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. pp. 46–51.

<sup>44</sup> Watts, L., *Romanian Cassandra: Ion Antonescu and the Struggle for Reform 1916–1941*, Boulder, East European Monographs, 1993, pp. 243–248.

<sup>45</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 273–274. (See also Deletant's review of Watts' book in: *The Slavonic and East European review*, vol. 74, no. 1, October 1996, pp. 174–175).

Antonescu, together with Sima, to establish on 14 September 1940, the National Legionary State. As Deletant states:

To maintain his grip at the helm of the country, while at the same time conceding the leading role of the Guard, Antonescu had the young king (Michael) proclaim the country a National Legionary State by royal decree on 14 September, with Antonescu defined as ‘the leader of the Legionary State and the head of the Legionary Regime’.<sup>46</sup>

### **Antonescu as Dictator**

From the very outset, there was disagreement between Antonescu and the Legionary Guard. The latter, in a continuation of its past performances, and using its own designated police force, both pillaged and inflicted physical violence, especially against Jews.<sup>47</sup> Antonescu’s attitude to physical violence was, at the beginning, rather muted, and the passing of oppressive legislation against the Jews of Romania also continued. During the five months of the life of the National Legionary State government, 14 September 1940, to 14 February 1941, legislation expropriating Jewish-owned rural property (4 October), forests (17 November), and river transport (4 December) was passed, further diminishing the lives of Jewish citizens. There were many events which occurred during the five months which had far-reaching effects on the outcome of Antonescu’s handling of Romania’s role as Axis partner. Not the least of these were, commencing on 8 October, the arrival of 500,000 German troops on to Romanian soil (this was obviously in preparation for the as yet undisclosed attack

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<sup>46</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 57.

<sup>47</sup> Temple, M., ‘The Politicization of History: Marshal Antonescu and Romania’, *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 10, no. 3, Fall 1996, p. 463.

on the Soviet Union, and particularly to keep a close and watchful eye on Romania's important oil fields), and Antonescu's trip to Berlin and his first meeting with Hitler on 21 November. Two days later, Antonescu committed his country to membership of the Axis powers, giving assurances that Romania was totally united behind Germany in its war effort.

The actions of thuggery on the streets on the part of the Iron Guard did not stop and, concerned with the Iron Guard's activities, Antonescu sought a further meeting with Hitler. This took place on 14 January, 1941. Knowing the support for the Iron Guard that existed among the higher German echelons, Antonescu explained that its actions had become unmanageable and that 'He had to reorganise it...in order to be able to govern with it.'<sup>48</sup> Antonescu accepted Hitler's statements of confidence in his ability to manage the situation as approval to proceed as he thought fit and when, on 19 January, the Iron Guard murdered a German officer and staged a pogrom in Bucharest on 22 January in which 120 Jews, some of whom included children, were slaughtered and dismembered in the abattoirs, Antonescu acted quickly. In what became an uprising of the Iron Guard, Antonescu ordered the army to subdue the revolt, effectively bringing to a savage end his joint government with the Iron Guard and opening the way for Antonescu to proceed to form a military dictatorship.

I have deliberately detailed much that occurred between the Goga/Cuza government and the end of the National Legionary State Government, a period of slightly more than three years, because it enables the following conclusions to be drawn. Antonescu was a minister in each of the eight governments during the period in question and seems to have been a willing observer of his country's slide to a point where his ego allowed him to believe that he was the only person who could salvage it. The fact that he participated in all governments and was a

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<sup>48</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 64.

party to all the repressive and anti-Semitic legislation that was passed during this period is ample testimony to his abiding and basic personal anti-Semitism. It speaks louder than words to his later role in the murders of between 280,000 and 380,000 Romanian Jews. His ability to stay in the background, biding his time, being accepting of the many anti-Semitic statutes and resulting ill-treatment of Jews, yet ‘fitting in’ when both appropriate and to his strategic advantage, speaks both to his baser instincts and his iron will. Perhaps a fitting way to conclude this chapter is to quote a damning extract from Carp:

Ion Antonescu was just as much of a lunatic as Mussolini and Hitler. However, he possessed neither the leadership qualities of the former nor the iron will of the latter. He was an evil man and an enemy of the people. He was especially against Jews, not because he held particular convictions, but because through anti-Semitism, he was able to vent his inherent hatred. He did not like the Germans, either. He allied himself to them, sacrificed the blood of his country, its values and its honor, served them with sinful loyalty, only because it was with their assistance that he was capable of fulfilling his arrogant ambitions of grandeur and power.<sup>49</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This chapter’s history of Antonescu’s early career, his absolute and nationalistic determinism, and his added ability to remain ‘in the wings’ and yet completely in touch with events, equipped him with the ability to take ultimate control. His military upbringing and bearing brought him in contact with those in power in both Romania and Germany at the time, allowing him to take full advantage of advancing his political career. Unfortunately, his

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<sup>49</sup> Carp, M., *The Black Book: The Sufferings of the Jews in Romania 1940–1944, Vol. III, Transnistria*, Bucharest, ‘Dacia Traiana’, The National Publishing and Graphic Arts Society, 1947, p. 11.

extreme anti-Semitism caused him to use the power so gained to wreak upon Romania's Jewish communities the murderous events that culminated in the setting up of ghettos, labour and concentration camps such as the Vapniarka camp, and the murders of between 280,000 and 380,000 Romanian Jews.

## **Chapter Three: The Relationship Between Germany and Romania in WWII and Its Effects on Romania's Jews**

### **Scope of this Chapter**

It is the aim of this chapter to detail the nature of, and reasons behind, the various and many-faceted relationships which existed between Romania and Germany during the period leading up to, and throughout the Romanian war years of 1941 to 1944. The range and motivations behind these relationships had, almost always as their purpose and at their core, a deleterious result for the Romanian Jewish communities, being the most disadvantaged and downtrodden of all minority groups in the country.<sup>1</sup> It is essential that the relationship between Romania and Germany should be explored in relation to the key theme of this study, namely the Vapniarka Concentration Camp. The point should be made that, aside from possessing a national brand of anti-Semitism of its own, the Romanian nation became hostage to a masterful strategy of pressure and persuasion over time by Germany to bring it into the Axis. This in turn also brought with it, at a later stage and as an evil by-product, the Nazi practice of establishing labour and concentration camps. By logical extension, therefore, the Vapniarka camp, as one of many camps and ghettos set up and run by the Romanians, may be seen as a replication of this German process. Apart from the Nazi-centric elements of concentration

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The two largest minorities in Romania at this time were the Jews and the Roma. The Jews numbered 757,000 – refer: [yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/final-solution-beginning/romanian.html](http://yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/final-solution-beginning/romanian.html). Approximately half of this total community was murdered during the Holocaust. Against this, there were approximately 300,000 Roma living in Romania at this time, of which 11,000 were to perish. Refer: Achim, V., 'Romanian Public Reaction to the Deportation of Gypsies to Transnistria, in R. Stauber and R. Vago (eds), *The Roma – a Minority in Europe: Historical, Political and Social Perspectives*, Budapest, CEU Press, 2007, pp. 89–90. By any calculation, the Romanian Jewish community would qualify as having suffered the most by comparison.

camps, labour camps, murder, and fear, I will show that Romania was also drawn into a state of economic dependence on Germany which was almost tantamount to it becoming a satellite state. In fact, we shall see that Romania's involvement with Germany in this context is an example, to paraphrase one historian, of 'a small state being absorbed into an alliance and eventually extracting itself from that alliance again'.<sup>2</sup>

The resumption of relations between Germany and Romania following the First World War was rather tentative in nature and, during the 1920s, functioned narrowly in the areas of firstly, the re-establishing of trade relations that had been destroyed by that war and, secondly, by the handling of reparation payments for war damages. Leading into, and during the 1930s, Germany showed increasing interest in establishing trade, economic and political connections as well as cultivating stronger ties with the resident German minority in Romania.<sup>3</sup> As further indication of the relative measure of importance placed on trade relations between the two countries, it is noted that, 'By 1937, Germany was already receiving 19% of Romania's exports and providing 29% of her imports'.<sup>4</sup>

It is not an exaggeration to say that in the years leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War, political relations between Romania and Germany were precarious, with the Germans already endeavouring, in a general sense, to re-align Romania's orientation which had been mainly towards the west. This was managed in a covert manner, by the financing of right-wing groups and parties and by becoming involved in a meddling manner in the affairs

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<sup>2</sup> Jonas, M., 'Hitler's Satellites? Finland and Romania in Nazi Foreign Policy and War Strategy, 1940/1941–1944', in J. Suchoples, S. James, B. Tornquist-Plewa (eds), *World War II Re-explored: Some New Millenium Studies in the History of the Global Conflict*, Berlin, Peter Lang, 2019, p. 483.

<sup>3</sup> For a short discussion on this aspect see: Friling, T., Ionid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004, pp. 57–59.

<sup>4</sup> Haynes, R., *Romanian Policy towards Germany, 1936–40*, London, Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000, p. 9.

of the country's large German ethnic minority. Good use was made of the fact that anti-Semitism, which was already the official state doctrine within Germany, found willing adherents in Romania, a country which already had its own strong leanings in this direction.<sup>5</sup>

A study of the literature will show that, in the continuous racial, diplomatic, political, economic and social upheaval within Romania in the years leading to the establishment in 1940 of Ion Antonescu's dictatorship, Romania's geographic placement between the two armed giants of Germany and the Soviet Union left it no alternative, with Germany's bureaucratically heavy-handed and sinister tactics, other than to join the Axis.

Further strengthening of the argument for considerations by Romania for allegiance and alignment with Germany at this time are explained and expanded upon by Deletant in a 2017 publication.<sup>6</sup> There, he argues that (a) Romania was driven into alliance with Germany by fear of the Soviet Union; and (b) the conviction to do so after the loss by Romania of its three territories of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina in June, and Transylvania in August of 1940, that these territories may one day be returned to Romania. The loss of these territories saw a corresponding loss of over six and a half million Romanian citizens to other jurisdictions.

One may also add two more cogent and persuasive arguments which led to Romania's agreement to join the Axis pact in November 1940, namely: (a) in the previous month Germany had already positioned five hundred thousand troops on Romanian territory, ostensibly in readiness to invade Greece, but to also ensure the availability of oil from Romania's Ploesti oil fields; (b) a promise by Hitler to Romanian leader Antonescu that the

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<sup>5</sup> Friling, T., Ioanid, R. and Ionescu, M. (eds) *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004, see also further comment pp. 58–59.

<sup>6</sup> Deletant, D., 'Romania', in Stahel, David (ed.), *Joining Hitler's Crusade: European Nations and the Invasion of the Soviet Union, 1941*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 46.

lost Romanian territories of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina would be returned following a successful invasion.

It will be an important aim in this chapter to expose and explain these various elements, including the insidious and continuing racial politics of anti-Semitism, and how they were managed. Linked to each of these aspects, but as a separate and dark shadow over the total picture, was the ever-escalating plight of the Jewish community, and what was happening to its members in the name of national Romanian policy. In fact, this chapter will examine these matters during the period 1937–1944 or, as one historian described the process: ‘the evolution of (these) issues within the context of the Romanian–German diplomatic relations and political interactions.’<sup>7</sup>

### **Racial Context within the German–Romanian Relationship**

While there may be sufficient literature to conduct a separate review of each of the other individual elements of upheaval mentioned under the previous section, namely the racial, diplomatic, political, economic and social aspects, the developments which occurred in each was, to a larger or lesser extent, tainted and dictated by the operation of an anti-Semitic agenda. For this reason, exposure of the relationship between the two countries is essentially an examination of the ways in which each country’s respective manifestations of anti-Semitism played out. It is interesting to note how Yoav Gelber, in his introduction to Ancel’s work,<sup>8</sup> describes and distinguishes between the traditional characteristics of anti-Semitism as practiced by Germany and Romania during the Holocaust:

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<sup>7</sup> Iordachi, C. and Trasca, O., ‘Ideological Transfers and Bureaucratic Entanglements: Nazi “Experts” on the “Jewish Question” and the Romanian–German Relations, 1940–1944’, *Fascism*, vol. 4, 2015, p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011.

In most Eastern European countries...historical Eastern European antisemitism operated alongside Nazi ideology and power. The Nazis exploited popular anti-Jewish sentiments and channeled them to serve the modern liquidation factory that was erected during the war. Romania was unusual in that it was the Romanian, not the German, regime that operated the death machine...at its own initiative and under its own free will. Germany's involvement was secondary only.<sup>9</sup>

Gelber goes on to explain that the Holocaust unfolded in Romania simultaneously and on two distinct levels: '(firstly) in the context of the religious, national, and socioeconomic anti-Semitism that had typified Romania since its establishment as a sovereign state, and (secondly) the context of the Second World War, which served as a convenient backdrop to the annihilation of European Jewry by the Nazis, their satellites, and their collaborators.'<sup>10</sup> Gelber completes his thoughts on this particular comparison in words which would be difficult to improve upon:

The fact that the Holocaust in Romania was initiated and implemented by Romanians explains both its savagery and its incompleteness. Their modus operandi...was often unusually cruel, primitive, contemptible, and depraved. On the other hand, they were far less efficient than the Germans.

This, no doubt, explains why there were people left to tell the tale.<sup>11</sup>

While the descriptors 'cruel' and 'depraved' may be seen as applying almost exclusively to behaviour in a physical sense, the words 'contemptible' and, perhaps 'primitive' may be more

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. xi.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. xii.

properly applied to the way in which the Jews were dealt with right across the spectrum of communal activity, no matter whether it was in the economic, political, social or religious domain. The comparison between the German and Romanian approaches as far as dealings with the Jews is again summed up by Gelber when he says that the Romanian Holocaust:

sprang from the encounter of popular and traditional antisemitism rooted in ancient and deep-seated religious sentiments, on the one hand, with socioeconomic considerations, the power of the modern state, and the tools at its disposal, on the other. The Germans' preoccupation with precision and fastidiousness engendered a need for a 'workforce' that would carry out their dirty work for them.<sup>12</sup>

The basic questions of 'To what extent did the Third Reich shape Romania's anti-Semitic policies during the Second World War?' and 'What was the role played by the Nazi advisors in this process?' were posed by historians Iordachi and Trasca.<sup>13</sup> The answers to these questions lie, without doubt, in the heartless and meddling practices that Germany employed with its considerable diplomatic bureaucracy. This particular group had begun to assemble in Bucharest as early as 1935, when convicted war criminal and Romanian Gestapo agent, Radu Lecca, was dispatched by Berlin to Bucharest with funds, and with the assignment of establishing a pro-Nazi movement in Romania. This work continued, with the arrival in April 1936 of Wilhelm Fabricius, who took up his post as German ambassador to Romania in that month. With the death of the former prime minister Octavian Goga, Fabricius took a personal

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Iordachi, C. and Trasca, O., 'Ideological transfers and Bureaucratic Entanglements: Nazi "Experts" on the "Jewish Question" and the Romanian-German Relations, 1940-1944', *Fascism*, vol. 4, 2015, p. 48.

hand in surreptitiously influencing the government and media with anti-Semitic propaganda of all description. Neither money nor manpower seemed to be a problem and, with a population that was, almost by default, already deeply anti-Semitic, together with a large minority community of ethnic Germans and functioning anti-Semitic parliamentary parties in existence, life for the Jews of Romania took a very grim turn. As Ancel aptly says:

The tenuous ideological link between Nazi antisemitism and Romanian antisemitism, especially on racial and religious issues, did not prevent them from closing ranks against the Jews.<sup>14</sup>

Reference is made here to the weight of bureaucratic influence, already mentioned above, that was brought to bear on Romania to join the Axis, and to ‘toe the Nazi line’. Following General Antonescu’s decision to do so on 27 September 1940, the degree to which the various ‘advisors’ and ‘consultants’ arriving from Nazi Germany both before and after this date buried themselves deep within the Romanian political and social spheres was undoubtedly responsible for dictating both public and private opinion within the country. It did not take too much more for this to be translated into action. In December 1940, Manfred von Killinger replaced Fabricius as German Ambassador and on the advice of General Moruzov, head of the Romanian Security Police, invited Germany to send a suitable advisor to work on ‘the Jewish question’ in Romania. The following April Gustav Richter, a legal expert from Himmler’s Reich Security Main Office and a member of the Nazi party and the SS, arrived from Berlin to fulfil this task. It should be noted at this point that Antonescu was already in office as the dictator of Romania and therefore must be assumed to have been not only aware, but supportive, of the insidious creep of German influence into Romanian affairs. But for one visit back to Berlin the following September, Richter remained in Bucharest until the coup

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<sup>14</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011, p. 66.

which ousted Antonescu in 1944. Richter was aide to Adolf Eichmann and, openly, a great deal harsher in his approach to the ‘Jewish Question’.

Essentially, from the time that Richter arrived in Bucharest, we see that Germany took firm control in shaping Romania’s anti-Semitic policies. The caveat, however, to German intrusion is the undeniable truth that Antonescu strove, and succeeded, in never having Romania physically occupied by Germany and, while Antonescu’s own dealings with Romania’s Jews was undeniably cruel and harsh, he did not permit the transport of Jews to the German death camps as the Nazis had expected. It was, in fact, Richter who, as part of Hitler’s overall plan for the extermination of European Jewry being handled by Eichmann, devised a ‘Plan for the Extermination of Romanian Jewry’,<sup>15</sup> which was a blueprint for the deportation by train of 300,000 Romanian Jews to the extermination camps of eastern Europe. The plan was signed on 15 September 1941 but, although it ‘lay on the table’ and was forcefully promoted by Richter to the Romanians, including both General Antonescu and his deputy, Mihai Antonescu, for more than twelve months, it was finally scuttled by the general in December 1942. The reasons for the cancelling of these plans in no way rested on humanitarian considerations on the part of Antonescu; rather, they had to do with his military intuition at that point that Germany was likely to lose the war and, although the western allies had in no way aided the smaller countries of south-eastern Europe, it would not be at all helpful at any future armistice discussion to have been seen to be responsible for the sending of 300,000 Jews to their deaths.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Shoah Resource Center, available at: [www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205402.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205402.pdf) (accessed 3 March 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 205–209.

Importantly, perspective must be retained with respect to the work of the Nazi advisors in Romania. The arrangements put in place and the ongoing activities between Germany and Romania were many and complex. At this juncture we are considering those activities touching on outcomes for the Jews of Romania which were comprehensively referred to as ‘The Jewish Question’, but the group of advisors also had, among its members, German experts on the military, agriculture, industry, propaganda and other areas of operation, which we shall consider separately. We should not think, however, that the presence of advisors in Romania was with the resounding approval of Antonescu. According to the literature, the advisors were never requested; and, in fact, one can sense a certain degree of frustration on Antonescu’s part from the following:

The political impact of the Nazi advisors in Romania is symptomatic of the evolution of Romanian–German wartime relations. According to Antonescu’s own recollection made on November 13, 1941, during a meeting of the Council of Ministers, the dispatch of the Nazi advisors was done at Hitler’s initiative, who reportedly urged Antonescu to avoid potential policy mistakes in building his regime by ‘taking advantage of our [Nazi] school and experience.’<sup>17</sup>

Further, and as an earlier indication that he was not happy with Germany’s intervention, we have the ousting, at Antonescu’s instigation, of the five-week-old Legionary government in which he had partnered with the Legionary movement. However, this had the effect of leaving him in power, but alone, and altering, as Iordachi states:

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<sup>17</sup> Iordachi, C. and Trasca, O., ‘Ideological transfers and Bureaucratic Entanglements: Nazi “Experts” on the “Jewish Question” and the Romanian–German Relations, 1940–1944’, *Fascism*, vol. 4, 2015, p. 99.

...the dynamics of the German–Romanian inter-state relations. Deprived of the former political basis of his regime, General Antonescu tried to gain internal and external legitimacy by intensifying the transfer of German legal and political ‘expertise’, with a focus on the ‘Jewish Question’.<sup>18</sup>

Whether Germany’s ‘meddling’ in the internal workings of Romania’s economic and political fabric was to Antonescu’s liking or not, decisions made in any of these areas resulted in terrible ongoing social and financial consequences for Jewish victims. Ancel tells us that the German Reich was in favour of Romania’s exclusion of its Jews from the economy over time, as well as the seizing of Jewish property; this also accorded with Antonescu’s own views from his early career. What is extraordinary is that, at this time, Germany’s special economic attaché, Neubacher, advises the U.S. military attaché in Bucharest, one Col. John P. Ratay: ‘The Jews must go, but they will be liquidated gradually and according to laws and regulations which will be promulgated...I shall have an expert come from Vienna who, as advisor, will take charge of the work.’ Ancel notes that this statement was relayed to the U.S. State Department in Washington by telegram but, unbelievably, that’s the last reference to it.<sup>19</sup>

In concluding this section of the chapter, it is undoubtedly true that Nazi Germany’s vision of Europe was racially based and used anti-Semitism to achieve the revolutionary results it was seeking. From Germany’s point of view, Romania’s own historically ingrained anti-Semitism allowed easier government backed implementation of the many harsh measures perpetrated

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 70.

<sup>19</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011, p. 148. See also Ancel, J., *Documents*, Tel Aviv, Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center, Tel Aviv University, vol. 2, doc. 81, footnote 42, p. 260, which reads: ‘U.S. ambassador Franklin Mott Gunther to the State Department in Washington, telegram, 10 February 1941.

against the Jewish community. It is equally true that, because of suggested national traits of lack of application and purpose on the part of the Romanians,<sup>20</sup> the rigour with which these measures was conceived and adopted would not have been as many or as devastating as they were if the Germans had not had a diplomatic and advisory presence in Romania.

## **Political and Economic Context within the German–Romanian Relationship**

### **Romanianization**

Before commencing this section, it is important to point out that, while we are discussing the relationship between Germany and Romania during the Second World War, and how this played out within the Romanian context, the Romanian side of this relationship should be seen through the prism of a concept that became known as Romanianization.

The centrality of the concept was verbalised by Antonescu on his assuming power in September 1940. The operative part of his statement to his Council of Ministers was: ‘The program I will submit to your collective judgement is rooted entirely in the tenets of integral nationalism.’<sup>21</sup> Further, it is imperative to understand Antonescu’s personal stance in this matter. To him, ‘integral nationalism’ meant a complete denial of the rights and property of all minorities meaning, almost exclusively, the Jews of Romania, so that ‘Romanianization was a crucial problem and the cornerstone of the new state he intended to create.’<sup>22</sup> It was a concept which had been a personal ideology since his younger days, shared with a people

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<sup>20</sup> ‘...a synonym for unreliability, lethargy, corruption, irresponsibility, mismanagement, blurring of the competencies and borders in the order of law and much else’: Harward, G., ‘First among Un-Equals: Challenging German Stereotypes of the Romanian Army during the Second World War, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3, p. 444, quoting Todorova, M., *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004, p. 181.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

which had always had deep views of nationalism on the extreme right of politics, and which had been developing since the mid-1800s.

It will be appreciated, following some explanation, that it was through the ill-gotten gains of this concept that Romania was to fulfil its obligations under the relationship which Germany had promoted and skillfully engineered. Ancel tells us that: ‘At Antonescu’s trial, the prosecutor summed up this chapter of Romanian history in a single sentence. “The Jews”, he said, “provided the raw material” for the enrichment of the Romanian fascist state and members of the regime.’<sup>23</sup> We will therefore examine the interplay and effects, within Romania, between two very powerful forces, namely, ‘Romanianization versus Germanization.’<sup>24</sup> Both of these processes proceeded side by side within the country, with the ‘iron fist in a velvet glove’ approach by the previously mentioned German advisors within Romania obviously receiving instructions from Berlin. What is meant by the term ‘Romanization’? One short article, directly on point, provides the following definition:

a policy of excluding ‘foreigners’, especially Jews, from the economic domain, through property and business seizure and exclusion from employment. Romanianization was a manifestation of greediness, corruption, opportunism, antisemitism and ethno-centered policy, the government’s central domestic project under Ion Antonescu.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press & Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2011, p. 279.

<sup>24</sup> The title of Chapter 5 of Ionescu, S.C., *Jewish Resistance to “Romanianization”, 1940–44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 110.

<sup>25</sup> Warter, L., and Warter, I., ‘The Romanianization Policies and their Socio-Economic Implications: A Dark Chapter of the Holocaust’, *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. xi, no. 10, p. 56.

It was especially the process of the seizure and re-allocation of property from minorities, especially Jews, that was supposed to create the will, rather than the financial basis for the changes required by the country's totalitarian, later dictatorship governments, as well as the initiatives demanded by Germany. From an ideological perspective, the shifting of wealth from one sector of the community (Jews and other minorities) to the general sector was heralded in 'various official publications',<sup>26</sup> and Deletant goes on to say that Romanianization represented:

not only the cleansing from the realms of property and from economic activity of the dominant and acquisitive Jewish and foreign elements, but even more than that, and consecutively, a creative measure designed to give a thorough guarantee of a pure, healthy, durable Romanian control of property and of economic activity.<sup>27</sup>

There is an interesting comparison to be made between the definitions contained in each of the above quotations. The first quotation paints the Romanians in a very poor light, whilst the second one from Deletant lends the process, as described, an air of respectability which it may not deserve. Ionescu attempts to come to terms with the very basics of the process of Romanianization in the following way:

In my study, I use the concept of Romanianization as reflected in the Antonescu regime's discourse and legislation: the project which envisioned the exclusion of 'foreigners', especially of Jews, from Romanian economic life, by seizing their real estate, jobs, and businesses and the creation of an

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<sup>26</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 106.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 106-107.

ethnic Romanian bourgeoisie. I am not examining the confiscations and extortions of mobile properties (such as money, jewelry, furniture), which have been investigated thoroughly by others...<sup>28</sup>

The historian, Julius Fisher, leaves no doubt as to his views on Antonescu's role in the unfolding and ultimate results of the process of Romanianization:

Antonescu, who sold down the river the entire economy and all his country's natural resources, sought to cover up these treasonable concessions with self-glorification. In a survey of his three years of government, he presented detailed statistics of the expropriated Jewish properties emphasizing his own merits in having saved them for the benefit of the 'national patrimony'. He had, in fact, transformed Rumania into an 'organized colony of Hitler'.<sup>29</sup>

The term 'Romanianization' was said to have been coined by the Romanian economist Mihail Manoilescu in 1942<sup>30</sup> and was, one may conclude, meant to echo the descriptor for the corresponding German process, 'Aryanization'. However, although it is entirely legitimate to bring the word 'Aryanization' into the discussion, this introduces an even more sinister note, and somewhat clouds the issue. The Nazi system of 'Aryanization' which commenced as soon as Hitler came to power in 1933, with the similar intention of expropriating the businesses and properties of Jews, was to be achieved and, in fact, was achieved in two distinct stages. The first was managed and supported at arm's length by, and through, a web

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<sup>28</sup> Ionescu, S., *Jewish Resistance to 'Romanianization', 1940–1944*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 191–192, footnote 7.

<sup>29</sup> Fisher, J. S., *Transnistria: The Forgotten Cemetery*, New York, Thomas Yoseloff, 1969, p. 29.

<sup>30</sup> Ionid, R., *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944*, Chicago, Ivan R Dee, 2000, p. 301, endnote 53.

of legislated mechanisms which loaned the whole exercise of theft a veneer of legal correctness. The second phase was implemented ‘following the violent nationwide pogroms on November 9–10, 1938 (Kristallnacht)...(being) the forced transfer of all Jewish-owned businesses to non-Jews’,<sup>31</sup> with much physical brutality associated with both stages.

Similarly, the whole process of ‘Romanianization’ which, in the hands of the Legionaires, and in most cases, was no more than state-licenced theft and thuggery, was also underpinned by a legal support system. This process, by its exclusionary nature, allowed the immoral and reprehensible behaviour to continue. The earliest statutory support related to rural land commenced under Law No. 3347 of October 1940 during the brief term of Ion Gigurtu as Prime Minister. Ioanid writes that the legislation:

nationalized Jewish rural property, with Article 2 specifying a very broad definition of a ‘Jew’, held to be a person either of whose parents were Jewish, regardless of whether they were practicing, whether they were citizens or not, or whether they were residents on Romanian soil. No exceptions in the enforcements of this law were to be permitted. A supplementary decree of November 17 ordered nationalization of forests, mills, distilleries, lumberyards, and granaries, as well as non-arable land. In combination with expulsions and deportations, these decrees completed the Romanianization of rural areas. On December 4, Jewish-owned boats were confiscated too.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> ‘Aryanization’, in *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, Publisher: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, available at: [encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/aryanization](https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/aryanization) (accessed 19 June 2020).

<sup>32</sup> Ioanid, R., *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944*, Chicago, Ivan R Dee, 2000, p. 24.

The process of 'Romanianization' already existed in Romania in the late nineteenth century. But Ancel tells us that, in its more recent iteration, as initiated by the National Legionary regime, the methods of using unprecedented levels of terror and cruelty lends it a certain uniqueness.

The reason I have dwelt on a description of the process of 'Romanianization' is because the outcome of having many fewer Jewish businesses in existence created a completely new landscape upon which the development of Romania's economy was to go forward. As we shall see, the extreme pressure which was to be exerted by Germany to have Romania virtually turn over its economy and become provider for the German people would be difficult enough without the removal, by anti-Semitic legislation, of Jewish intellect and ability from the commercial sector. Additionally, any study of the development of Romania's economy from, say, 1940 onwards, necessitates a discussion of the involvement of both Nazi Germany exerting influence and the injecting of capital from outside the country, as well as the aggressive stance of the large number of ethnic Germans within Romania. Although, strictly speaking, this large ethnic minority grouping did not qualify to profit from the 'Romanianization' process and its supporting legislation, it was known that they were to be considered favourably in the future, despite the rules of Romanianization also applying to them as a minority, and the following passage explains the reality of that situation:

subsequently changing geopolitical circumstances prevented the Antonescu regime from finding an opportune moment to extend most Romanianization laws to non-Jewish ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, certain administrative restrictions against ethnic-minority entrepreneurs were imposed, including MEN's (Ministry of National Economy) secret order to the Registry of Commerce to refuse registration and other legal operations (such as

increasing or decreasing capital) to all ethnic-minority businessmen, except Germans and Italians, until 1944.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Importance of Oil and Economic Relations**

‘During the two world wars, oil had a vital role for belligerent states,’<sup>34</sup> and although discussion on the earlier history of the oil industry in Romania is contextually unimportant for the purposes of this study, knowledge of the strategies employed in the industry during the period 1938–1944 are of benefit in appreciating how they fed into the wartime relationship between Germany and Romania. While books have been written on the Romanian oil industry and the part it has played over the years since first extracted on 22 November 1517,<sup>35</sup> it was the Second World War which demonstrated just how imperative it was that Germany be able to rely on supplies for its war effort. On this basis, and despite what has already been said about the Nazi stranglehold on the Romanian economy, it is almost bizarre to imagine a Nazi general of the malevolent reputation of Wilhelm Keitel being reduced, in October 1942, to writing to General Antonescu in the following pleading terms:

I *beg* (my emphasis) Your Excellency to increase to the maximum degree these deliveries of fuel to Italy which are exclusively reserved for supplying the fleet called upon to maintain important positions in the Mediterranean for the purposes of joint warfare.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ionescu, S. C., *Jewish Resistance to ‘Romanianization’, 1940–44*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 111.

<sup>34</sup> Preda, G., ‘German Foreign Policy towards the Romanian Oil during 1938–1940’, *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, vol. 3, no. 3, p. 326.

<sup>35</sup> Buzatu, Gh., *A History of Romanian Oil, vol. I*, Bucharest, Mica Valahie Publishing House, 2004, p. 34.

<sup>36</sup> ‘“Ulei Romana” During World War II and Beyond: Development of the Romanian Oil Industry’, *The Yale Review of International Studies*, posted in October 2014, available at: [yris.yira.org/essays/1474](http://yris.yira.org/essays/1474) (accessed 15 June 2020). (Author’s note: I find it hard to understand Keitel’s ‘cap in hand’ attitude when we know that

Although having little interest in the Romanian oil industry during the interwar years, Germany became much more absorbed in exerting its influence over it in the lead-up to a war footing. During the years 1938–1940, Germany became engrossed in developing a multi-level policy platform, working through diplomatic, political, military and economic channels to ensure control over Romanian oil. This was seen as especially vital, since Germany realised that it would have serious transportation problems in continuing to obtain supplies of oil from other continents. However, the whole area of bilateral relations, burdened by irreconcilable and fundamental differences in the areas of trade and political relations remained an ongoing problem.

It must be remembered that the different actors in this complex situation were intent on pursuing different roles in relation to Romanian oil supplies. A Yale University paper written by R. Ward on the subject suggests that Romania:

valued its independence from European powers more than it did revenues coming in from oil wells and refineries. Other countries, like Germany and the USSR, instead harbored interest in the petroleum itself. They in turn valued the Rumanian oil industry for the energy it could supply to their campaigns. For the Allies, the Romanian oil industry was seen as an easy asset waiting to be seized by Germany; their interest was not in seizing the oil, but rather destroying it and incapacitating Germany.’<sup>37</sup>

The same paper tells us that, in a declassified recording from June 1942, Hitler admitted: ‘“if Russia would occupy Romanian oil sources, well then Germany would be lost!” ...On this

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Germany had already, and menacingly, placed its own troops on Romanian soil with the express purpose of protecting the supply of oil from Romanian reserves.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

basis the Allies saw the Romanian oil industry as the Achilles heel of the Nazi empire: if they could destroy it, the Nazis would be stopped dead in their tracks.’<sup>38</sup>

There is little doubt that, for Germany, being able to access a large range of commodities from Romania to feed and clothe the German nation was not only cost effective, but politically and geographically expedient. And it was this all-encompassing need that was the main driver in establishing the German–Romanian Treaty for the Development of Economic Relations between the Two Countries (1939),<sup>39</sup> with the treaty being signed in Bucharest on 23 March. It was extremely wide, as this description from Buzatu makes clear:

The plan operated in several areas: The development and the orientation of Romanian agricultural production; the development of the existing agricultural industries and the creation of new ones; the forest field; the deliveries of machinery and equipment for the Romanian mining industry; the founding of mixed companies for the capitalization of certain ores; the collaboration in the industrial field; the creation [of] ‘free zones’; deliveries of weapons and equipment for the Romanian army and war industry; the construction of certain equipment of public utility; the collaboration of certain Romanian and German banks for the interest of both countries, especially in the direction of business financing. From our point of view, the most important clause is inserted in Article 1, No. 4: ‘The founding of a mixed Romania–German company that will deal with the exploitation of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> The text of the treaty in the German and Romanian languages is to be found in *League of Nations Treaty Series*, vol. 199, 17 January, 1940, pp. 77–81, [treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/LON/Volume%20199/v199.pdf](https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/LON/Volume%20199/v199.pdf) (accessed 18 July 2020).

petroleum and execution of a program of drilling and treating of crude oil.<sup>40</sup>

There is little to be gained in discussing the economic relationship between the two countries without, at the same time, also recognising the importance and ‘power-shift’ in favour of Germany brought about by the implementation of this treaty. However, although the treaty may be seen as removing the last vestiges of meaningful control by Romania over its own affairs, there is also no doubt that the main reason behind the relentless steps taken to achieve such access, was the need for Romania’s oil. The cynicism with which the signing of the treaty was urged upon Romania was not lost on one commentator who referred to its effect being tantamount to a ‘peaceful conquest of Romania’.<sup>41</sup>

It is interesting to observe how the language of the different historians and journalists on the issue of Germany’s political and economic subjugation of Romania ranges from the temperate to the intemperate. Firstly, I refer to Ancel’s coverage of the methods open to Germany to achieve its aims in Romania; the need to quote extensively here is necessary to show the strength of Germany’s efforts in this area:

Several options were open to Germany in seeking to realise its goals in Romania: it could try to persuade the press and the Romanian public of the truth of its ideology and the effectiveness of its regime; it could support sympathetic right-wing parties and movements in Romania; it could exploit large concentrations of *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans) in Transylvania and other areas (about 750,000 individuals in 1930); it could activate its secret

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<sup>40</sup> Buzatu, Gh., *A History of Romanian Oil, vol. II*, Bucharest, Mica Valahie Publishing House, 2004, p. 90.

<sup>41</sup> Jadaneant, A., ‘The collapse of constitutional legalism: Racial laws and the ethno-cultural construction of national identity in Romania during World War II’, *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 183, 2015, p. 44.

services; it could conduct an intensive campaign of economic penetration; it could use ordinary diplomacy and turn the full force of its leaders' charisma on the Romanian government; or finally—if all that failed—it could achieve its aims through threats, intimidation, extortion, and coercion. Nazi Germany used all the above in order to obtain oil, grain, food, and other natural resources as well as a military foothold in Romania.<sup>42</sup>

Ancel leaves us in no doubt about the breadth and strength of the German effort to virtually 'kidnap' the Romanian economy for its own wartime purposes. By comparison however, and in making reasonable allowances for a journalist's fervour in reporting the matter in real time, the following paragraph begins a short but colourful piece in *Time Magazine* of 3 April 1939, under the headline 'Killing':

Under the 'heavy pressure of circumstances' the Kingdom of Rumania last week signed a trade treaty with the Third Reich which, in effect, converted Rumania from an independent nation to a German dependency. In no instance of modern times has one State made such humiliating, far-reaching economic concessions to another as Rumania's King Carol II made in Bucharest last week to Dr. Helmuth Wohlthat, Führer Hitler's travelling salesman... For a day or two it seemed to the outside world that Britain and France might rescue her from German pressure. But in the end Rumania signed on the dotted line. With that signature Adolf Hitler made his biggest killing to date...<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011, p. 61.

<sup>43</sup> 'Killing', *Time Magazine*, (Foreign News) 3 March 1939, pp. 18–19.

The article also bristles elsewhere with words in connection with Germany's actions such as 'bludgeoned' and 'raped', leaving us in no doubt as to the effects of tactics exerted by Germany over Romanian society.

### **Conclusion**

It must be said that the two extraordinary and government mandated processes which took place between 1938 and 1941, namely, the expropriation of the assets of minority groups, with its concentration almost entirely on the Jewish community, and Romania's acceptance of Germany usurping its political and economic landscape for its own purposes, created societal changes which were to set Romania on a disastrous journey during the Second World War years, as well as spelling disaster for the Jews of the country. Although this chapter has concentrated more on the political and economic results of Romania's link with Germany for the country's Jews both before and during the war years, there was also a huge cost of human life exacted as well. By way of summary, and additional to the examples of human loss already mentioned, the political and economic losses should also be recognised as equally central themes resulting from the relations between the two countries. It is certainly correct to say that the negative impact on Romanian Jews of this linkage had already begun to be felt in the middle to late thirties, years before Romania's decision to join the Axis powers. Pressure had been applied via diplomatic channels and ranged over economic matters such as persuading 'German companies in Romania not to employ Jews or let them sell German goods.'<sup>44</sup> In what eventuated as dire consequences for the Jews of Romania, 'the German Foreign Office required each of its Romanian consulates to supply comprehensive

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<sup>44</sup> Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004, p. 59.

information on the number of Jews in its area and their role in the community's business life.'<sup>45</sup>

Ancel reports that at neither of 'Antonescu's first two meetings with Hitler, on 22–23 November 1940 and 14 January 1941, was the Jewish problem even raised.'<sup>46</sup> It now seems that many of the plans of an economic, political and even social character were perhaps already well advanced but being handled quietly through diplomatic channels. However, while in the light of what had already befallen the Jews at the hands of the Romanians to that point did not seem to register *yet* with either Hitler or Antonescu, once Antonescu was firmly ensconced in office, replete with his own personal brand of 'ultra-nationalism'<sup>47</sup> and anti-Semitism and the reins of power in his hands, prospects for the Jews became infinitely worse. With Hitler, at this stage already plotting his invasion of the Soviet Union, the next chapter will detail the two ultimately disastrous by-products of that invasion, namely the setting up of the Governorate of Transnistria, and the wholesale slaughter of the Jews of Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press & Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2011, p. 145.

<sup>47</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 269. (Deletant chooses to call Antonescu an ultra-nationalist rather than a patriot, a term used by other Romanian historians because, as Deletant explains, ultranationalism incorporates, by necessity, elements of racism, and exclusion of minorities.)

## Chapter Four: The Catastrophe that was Transnistria



Figure 1: Map of Transnistria showing the main camps, including Vapniarka.  
Source: Shapiro, *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2021, p. 63.

### Scope of this Chapter

This chapter will cover mainly the circumstances, reasons and events which led to the establishment of the territory known as Transnistria, as well as a brief description of the genocide which took place leading up to it being brought into existence. Whilst the complexity of the situation that unfolded there deserves a more detailed account than the space available here, what occurred on Romanian-controlled soil to the Jewish component of the population, both to the local communities and, as we shall see, those forcibly moved there,

needs to be told. In reducing the rationale in Antonescu's mind as to why these tragic events took place, it should be realised that Antonescu had originally intended to literally herd the Jewish populations of Bessarabia and Bukovina east across Transnistria and beyond, thus ridding Romania of this element. He did not foresee that his German Axis partner was not willing to allow this to happen while it was engaged in offensives against the Soviet forces. The terrible outcome was that the hordes of Jews who had been thrown out of their lands became trapped on Romanian-controlled Transnistrian soil, unable to go forward or return to whence they came. I will examine, in brief, not only why the region was selected, its originally intended purpose and how it was administered, but also some of the systematic and random campaigns of wholesale murder, rape and pillage perpetrated by both the Romanian citizenry and its army. It will also serve as an introduction to the following chapter, which is the centrepiece of this thesis, namely, a comprehensive coverage of the establishment and running of the Vapniarka Concentration Camp, together with a detailed examination of its unique characteristics.

Before moving on to consideration of the establishment of Transnistria as a territory, the circumstances leading to it, and the consequences that followed, I refer to a most enlightening article by Mihai Chioveanu.<sup>1</sup> The author, in effect, sees Transnistria as a small piece of a puzzle within a gigantic 'end-game'. He suggests that concurrent with the invasion of Russia, the *International Solution* (my emphasis), which was to be either forced emigration to far-flung shores such as Madagascar, or the physical transfer of all Europe's Jews as far east into Soviet territory as possible, now 'implied the death of tens of millions by disproportionate

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<sup>1</sup> Chioveanu, M., 'Transnistria, the "General Plan East", and the Shoah by bullets', *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 427–446.

shooting, starvation, and brutal evacuation.’<sup>2</sup> In other words, the ‘International Solution’ became what we now understand as the ‘Final Solution’. In the author’s words:

Departing from the *International Solution*, but without abandoning the term, which continued to be part of the sterile language of the perpetrators, the Nazis were making room for a new solution, to dwarf previous plans and deeds. The new, total war, which unlike previous plans and campaigns magnified everything, including the Jewish question and the solution to it...<sup>3</sup>

Chioveanu goes on to offer us the fascinating concept that, in simplified terms and in a very factual sense, the ‘structured cruelty’ of the Romanians in their attempt at total genocide of the Jews in Transnistria may have been at least a contributing factor and, at worst, an influential element in Hitler’s decision to annihilate the Jews of Europe instead of a wholesale ‘evacuation to the east’. As for Romania, Transnistria was to be its ‘killing field’, and its whole purpose, as far as the Jews were concerned, was seen as fulfilling this ultimate goal.

### **Genocide Prior to the Establishment of Transnistria**

The triggers for much, if not almost all the brutal murder of Romanian Jews during the Second World War lie in the unfolding of a number of events. In chronological terms the events were, firstly, the military occupation of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina by the Soviet Red Army between 28 June and 4 July 1940, following the cession of those territories to the Soviet Union. This was followed closely by the loss of further territory in the form of northern Transylvania to Hungary on 30 August 1940 and, in September, southern Dobruja to

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 429.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Bulgaria. The decision to cede the two last-mentioned territories was made under a German and Italian arbitration process which became known as the Second Vienna Award and the Treaty of Craiova respectively.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the regaining of Bessarabia and Bukovina by the Romanian armies following the invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany and its allies, and the nationalistic fervour which ensued, allowed and underpinned the implementation of the physical deportation of those territories' Jewish populations. Thirdly, and with much further and far-reaching effect on the future loss of Romania's Jewish lives, was the actual decision to forcibly deport the Jewish communities of both Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina across the Dniester River to the newly established territory of Transnistria. The mass uprooting and expulsion of total communities which occurred forms the core of this chapter.

At the end of June 1940, less than a year after the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, and using the ultimatum of an invasion, the Soviet Union made demands upon Romania for the cession to it of the territories of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina with the further humiliating demand that the Romanian army withdraw within four days. Further demands for Northern Transylvania by Hungary and the southern Dobruza by Bulgaria were also acceded to. Within a short space of time, Romania's footprint had been reduced by half and a new and dangerous mix of nationalities and minorities had been created in contrast to the large Romanian majority which had existed previously, especially in the form of an increase in the Jewish population. The rage which was felt by the Romanian nation for the loss of both territory and Romanian citizens to other masters, especially the Communists, percolated to the top and resulted in the abdication of King Michael and a burning desire on the part of the new Romanian leader, Ion Antonescu, that these territories, with emphasis on Northern

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<sup>4</sup> 'Romania', in *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, Publisher: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, available at: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/romania> (accessed 15 September 2021).

Transylvania, would be regained. In the territories just lost, the finger of blame was pointed at the Jews.

Matatias Carp writes:

Approximately 800,000 Jews were living in Greater Romania before the war. According to the last official census on December 19, 1930, there were 756,930 people. More than one third of these (314,933) lived in the counties of Bessarabia, Bukovina and Dorohoi.<sup>5</sup>

In an atmosphere of mistrust and hatred of a community which had no means of physically defending itself, the seeds were sown for massacres such as that which took place in Iasi at the end of June 1941. At this stage, the Jews had no way of knowing how predictive this cruel loss of life was in relation to the treatment that would be meted out to them when the lost territories were re-occupied by Romania a little more than a year later.

The twelve-month period between the second half of 1940 to the second half of 1941, which culminated in August 1941 with the establishment, under Romanian control, of the territory of Transnistria, was dire for the whole Romanian Jewish community, but especially so for those who lived within the territories just lost as detailed above. The amount of open hatred and humiliation that was engendered in the minds of Romanians in general and the military in particular at the spectre of the armed forces having to vacate approximately one third of their country called for a scapegoat and, in both stereotypical and historical context, the Jews were chosen yet again. Ioanid points out:

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<sup>5</sup> Carp, M., *Holocaust in Romania: Facts and Documents on the Annihilation of Romania's Jews 1940-1944*, Safety Harbor Florida, Simon Publications, 1948, p. 159. (It should be noted that a survey conducted by the Central Statistical Office on 1 September 1, 1941, after the first two months of the war, showed that only 151,121 of the 314, 933 mentioned had survived).

Many Jews regarded the Soviets as potentially better suzerains than the Romanians, while others remained indifferent to them or even hostile. But Romanian nationalists exploited anti-Semitic stereotypes to portray the Jewish community as a whole as a pro-Communist fifth column.<sup>6</sup>

While this may be the direct causal link for the depths of cruelty with which Romania dealt with its Jews during the twelve-month period under discussion, one must also take into account the long history of public and deep anti-Semitism in Romania to understand how easily this would have occurred. With specific referral to the three territories under discussion, Ancel gives us earlier historical authority which is still relevant regarding the unbroken chain of blame levelled at the Jews up to 1944 and the downfall of Antonescu:

Indeed, since 1919 successive Romanian governments had adopted a national policy that had been widely supported by the political establishment—a policy that preferred Romanians to members of minority groups...In the three new territories—Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transylvania—Jews were branded as foreign implants who did not speak the language of the majority. They were accused of helping disseminate the culture of the internal, ethnic enemy and of supporting the struggle of former rulers to change borders and peace treaties...The Romanian establishment, for its part, made no real attempt to integrate the Jews of the three new territories, who numbered over half a million, into Romanian society and culture.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ioanid, R., *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944*, Chicago, Ivan Dee, 2000, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2011, pp. 15–16.

No sooner had the areas of Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, Northern Transylvania and Dobruja been lost to Romania, when armed reprisals against Jews commenced. In the town of Galati on 30 June 1940, four hundred Jews were gunned down by a unit of the Romanian army,<sup>8</sup> while one day later, in Dorohoi, some three hundred kilometres distant, fifty-three Jews were also shot.<sup>9</sup> At this time, with the Iron Guard loose on the streets, there were almost daily beatings and murder of Jews in Bucharest, including the attack and torture of a group of sixty Jews at prayer on November 10, eleven of whom were later murdered and their bodies found on the outskirts of town some two weeks later.<sup>10</sup> There was the infamous Bucharest pogrom of 21–23 January 1941, in which over 120 Jews were tortured and killed which took place in the midst of the Iron Guard's rebellion against Antonescu. Most accounts of the period detail the murders of over one hundred in the Jilava Forest and outside the city abattoirs, with the murder and desecration of twenty additional bodies inside the slaughterhouse.<sup>11</sup> Against this 'official' number of slain, Hilberg quotes the German military

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<sup>8</sup> Ionid, R., *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944*, Chicago, Ivan Dee, 2000, p. 41, quoting *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum/Romanian Intelligence Service Archives*, RG 25.004M, reel 7, vol. 4087.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp. 41–42. (For wider coverage of the events in Dorohoi, see 'Dorohoi', in Gershon Hundert, (ed.), *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, Publisher: Yale University Press, 2008, available at: <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Dorohoi> (accessed 22 August 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> See: Ioanid, R., *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944*, Chicago, Ivan R Dee, 2000, pp. 57–58; Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2011, pp. 157–164; M. Carp, *Holocaust in Romania: Facts and Documents on the Annihilation of Romania's Jews 1940–1944*, Safety Harbor Florida, Simon Publications, pp. 76–78; Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 66; Hilberg, R., *The Destruction of the European Jews (vols. 1–3)*, New York, Holmes & Meier Publishers Inc., 1985, vol. 2, p. 764. This last reference to Hilberg interestingly also refers to '630 dead; another 400 were missing' with sources from United States Foreign Relations quoted in support, namely: *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1941*, vol. II Europe, p. 860, and the Institute of Jewish Affairs, *The Jews in Nazi Europe*, New York, 1941, p. 11.

attaché as reporting: ‘In the Bucharest morgue...one can see hundreds of corpses, but they are mostly Jews.’<sup>12</sup> By way of confirmation, Hilberg also refers to a report by the then recently formed Institute of Jewish Affairs in New York at that time that two hundred corpses were found in the municipal slaughterhouse of Bucharest.<sup>13</sup> A closer look at that particular report reveals a quote from a letter received by the ‘New York Post’ on 19 February, 1941 written by the mother of a slain Iron Guardist, who described the horror that she faced when she visited the slaughterhouse following the event.<sup>14</sup>

The second and, if possible, even more cruel and costly in terms of loss of life event took place from 29 June to 6 July, 1941 when the bloodiest of pogroms was perpetrated upon the Jews of the city of Iasi. This Jewish community consisted of 45,000 people, or approximately half the city’s total population. The slaughter that transpired over those days was ‘carried out on the express order of Ion Antonescu to cleanse the city of Jews and to ruthlessly liquidate any Jew who might open fire on Romanian or German soldiers.’<sup>15</sup> Much has been written about this pogrom, with most of it being attempts to pierce the thick veil of secrecy surrounding both its circumstances and the perpetrators. The time required to do justice to a summary of these events would, itself, take more space than this particular chapter can afford and the pogrom, which lasted for eight days, has been extensively written about by every

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<sup>12</sup> Hilberg, R., *The Destruction of the European Jews*, New York, Holmes & Meier Publishers Inc., 1985, p. 764.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Name Withheld, Letters to the Editor, *New York Post*, 19 February 1941, ‘I went to the slaughterhouse. What I saw there I shall not forget the rest of my life. I saw human beings hung up like animals. I saw a little girl, five years old who was suspended by her feet from the hooks where the calves are hung. Her entire body was smeared with blood.’

<sup>15</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2011, p. 445. (Ancel mentions in footnote no.1 that the direct and ‘secret’ order from Antonescu was only discovered in July 1996.)

academic who has concentrated on this period of Romanian history. However, it is Ancel who is credited with having discovered who was responsible many years after the event in a book which he wrote in 2005,<sup>16</sup> as well as in two earlier and revealing articles in 1987,<sup>17</sup> explaining with great depth and clarity how, and by whom, the destruction of almost 15,000 Jews occurred, and how it was possible that the true story was able to remain hidden for so long. It is common knowledge that approximately 8,000–9,000 Jews were murdered within the city, while the balance of approximately 7,000 was cruelly, and without food or water, locked and sealed into carriages in the so-called ‘death trains’. These trains were deliberately allowed to aimlessly and slowly meander their way between different stations around the countryside, having murder of the occupants as their sole purpose, and stopping after long intervals only to unload the bodies of those who had suffocated in the interim. Reviewing Ancel’s previously mentioned work, which was dedicated solely to the circumstances and unfolding of this particular pogrom, historian of this period Leon Volovici writes:

Antonescu, like his subordinates, disclaimed any responsibility for the massacre. Contrary evidence was discovered by Ancel only in 1996, when the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. acquired microfilm records of the judicial proceedings, most of them after the war, but also during the war, in which the Romanian leadership hastened to limit damage to the prestige of the Romanian army. Antonescu’s explicit order, on the eve of the pogrom, referred to a planned total evacuation of the

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<sup>16</sup> Ancel, J., ‘*Preludiu la asasinat: Pogromul de la Iasi, 29 iunie 1941*’ [The Pogrom in Iasi, June 29, 1941], Bucharest, Editura Polirom, 2005, p. 491.

<sup>17</sup> Ancel, J., ‘The Jassy Syndrome (I)’, *Romanian Jewish Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1987, pp. 33–49 and ‘The Jassy Syndrome (II)’, *Romanian Jewish Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1987, pp. 35–52.

Jewish population of the city [45,000 at that time], and the immediate execution of any Jew ‘who will attack the army’ ...<sup>18</sup>

Volovici goes on to explain that because all Jews were held out to the general community as those ‘who will attack the army’, it follows that ‘dangerous agents...the army, the police, and even the civilian population had a free hand in killing them.’<sup>19</sup> In his review of the same book, Dennis Deletant writes:

He [Ancel] harbors no doubts about Ion Antonescu’s responsibility for the Iasi pogrom: ‘The Iasi pogrom took place following a decision of the Antonescu regime to liquidate the majority of Jews in a city that, in the eyes of the Romanian nationalists and anti-Semites, symbolized [for more than a hundred years] the Jewish existence in Romania’.<sup>20</sup>

By way of conclusion, and quoting Volovici in his previously mentioned review of Ancel’s work on the subject:

the Iasi ‘event’ was a general rehearsal for the huge massacres that followed in the summer and fall of the same year, leading to the near-total destruction of Bessarabian and Bukovinian Jewry and to the mass killings in Odessa, Kishinev, Bogdanovka, and other Transnistrian camps.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Volovici, L., (2006) Review of *Preludiu la asasinat: Pogromul de la Iasi, 29 iunie 1941* by Jean Ancel, *American Historical Review*, vol. 111, no. 4, 2006, p. 1278.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Deletant, D., Review of *Preludiu la asasinat: Pogromul de la Iasi, 29 iunie 1941*, by Jean Ancel, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2007, p. 206.

<sup>21</sup> Volovici, L., (2006) Review of *Preludiu la asasinat: Pogromul de la Iasi, 29 iunie 1941* by Jean Ancel, *American Historical Review*, vol. 111, no. 4, 2006, p. 1279.

## **Operation Barbarossa, Deportation, and the Establishment of Transnistria**

By way of a precursor, Ioanid tells us that ‘From late June 1940 to the end of May 1941, more than 600 Jews were slaughtered in Romania’,<sup>22</sup> and it was in this atmosphere that the Jews of Romania were about to be faced with a much greater and protracted period of loss of life. Concurrent with the attacks on Jews across the country, but predominantly in the territories which had just been lost, Germany and its allies’ invasion of the Soviet Union took place on 22 June 1941. As one specialist journalist put it:

Romania [as] Nazi Germany’s largest ally on the Eastern Front, provided over 300,000 troops in the conflict against the Soviet Union...At this point, the liberation of Romanian territory was the first and only war aim of the Romanians. As the Third and Fourth Armies stood ready on the Prut river, now the new boundary between Romania and the Soviet Union, Marshal Antonescu issued a proclamation to his men: ‘I am ordering you: Cross the River Prut’...With these words the Romanians joined the German Eleventh Army in the invasion of Bessarabia and Bukovina.<sup>23</sup>

Within a month, Romanian troops had retaken both of these territories, and by the end of June Ion Antonescu had personally ordered martial law to be set up across both provinces. On July 3, Mihai Antonescu, vice-president of the Council of Ministers, declared that ‘the time had come for “complete ethnic” liberation...[and that] the act of ethnic cleansing will involve

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<sup>22</sup> Ionid, R., *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944*, Chicago, Ivan Dee, 2000, p. 61.

<sup>23</sup> Murrey, T. W., Romania’s Disaster at Stalingrad, *Warfare History Network*, available at: [warfarehistorynetwork.com/2016/10/17/romania-disaster-at-stalingrad/#:~:text=The%20destruction%20of%20two%20Romanian,the%20eastern%20borders%20of%20Romania](http://warfarehistorynetwork.com/2016/10/17/romania-disaster-at-stalingrad/#:~:text=The%20destruction%20of%20two%20Romanian,the%20eastern%20borders%20of%20Romania) (accessed 18 September 2020), pp. 1 and 4.

removal or isolation of all Jews in labor camps, from which they will no longer exert their nefarious influence...’<sup>24</sup>

Ioanid quotes Hilberg when he says that prior to the commencement of deportations, ‘more than ten thousand Jews were murdered in Bukovina and Bessarabia during July 1941’.<sup>25</sup> This litany of murder introduces the even darker chapter of the wholesale and forceable deportation of thousands of Jews from their homes towards the east with the single purpose of driving them across the Dniester River (Trans-Dniester) to join the hapless Jewish communities who already lived there. The staggering story of wave after wave of humanity arriving at the eastern banks of the Dniester River in temperatures of minus forty degrees and either with no clothes or food and little or no shelter beggars belief. Some made it on to barges and rafts, only to fall into the water during the crossing and drown. The thousands that reached the other banks were pushed eastward and into the depths of Transnistria. Many large ghettos, work camps and concentration camps were established, where the conditions were sub-human. The camp of Vapniarka, which we shall examine in depth in the next chapter, was one of these.

From a geographical perspective, the ‘Transnistria’ of 1941–1943, is not to be confused with the modern-day territory of the same name. As part of the Ukraine, it ‘stretched over forty thousand square kilometres and was bordered by the Dniester River in the west, the Bug River in the northeast, the Black Sea in the south, and the Liadova River in the west, (from the Dniester north to Zhmerinca and then east to the Bug).’<sup>26</sup> Transnistria was, as historian

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<sup>24</sup> Ioanid, R., *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944*, Chicago, Ivan Dee, 2000, p. 92.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 108.

<sup>26</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2011, p. 315.

Julius Fisher put it, ‘a geographic freak’<sup>27</sup> that was in existence for only two years and seven months. Although, strictly speaking, the genocide of Romanian Jews did begin before the creation of Transnistria, it is, however, on that ill-fated territory, once established, that the wholesale murder and loss of life by the bullet, neglect, disease, and starvation of so many of Romania’s Jews, Roma, and other minority groups continued. In fact, the precise origins of the area’s name we know as the first iteration of Transnistria are difficult to establish absolutely. Matatias Carp, first among those to document the Romanian war years, particularly as the situation affected Romanian Jews, wrote of Transnistria in 1946:

There is no such dominion, province, country or district indicated on one single map or Geography textbook of Ukraine, Czarist Russia or the Soviet Union. Transnistria, as a geographical entry, had not existed prior to July 1941, and, of course, will never exist in the future.<sup>28</sup>

By way of minor rebuttal to Carp’s claim, and purely in connection with the use of the word ‘Transnistria’, historian Alexander Dallin, whose work on Odessa contains invaluable information regarding Transnistria,<sup>29</sup> suggests:

In the 1930s there had existed in Romania a small ‘Asociatia romanilor refugiati transnistreni’—i.e., a society of refugees ‘from beyond the Dneestr’, refugees from the USSR.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Fisher, J. S., *Transnistria: The Forgotten Cemetery*, London, Thomas Yoseloff Ltd, 1969, p. 9.

<sup>28</sup> Carp, M., *Holocaust in Romania: Facts and Documents on the Annihilation of Romania’s Jews 1940–1944*, Safety Harbor Florida, Simon Publications, p. 146. (Carp was, of course, not to know that the modern entity of the same name, although not internationally recognised and with different borders, would be established at a later date.)

<sup>29</sup> Dallin, A., *Odessa, 1941–1944: A Case Study of Soviet Territory Under Foreign Rule*, Iasi-Oxford-Portland, Center for Romanian Studies, 1998 (specifically Chapter 2).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Dallin speaks of the area designated at that time as ‘Transnistria’ as:

being east of Bessarabia...between the Dneestr and Bug Rivers—large, fertile, and reasonably well populated area, with Odessa as its capital...a large part of the Dneestr-Bug area had actually been set up as the Moldavian Republic under Soviet rule (in 1924). This then, was the land beyond the Dneestr, or Transnistria (Trans-Dneestr) as politically minded Romanian scholars were prompted to call it.<sup>31</sup>

Considering the 1941 iteration of the territory, and in support of Dallin’s reference to the previous Soviet Republic of Moldavia, we should consider two important letters which passed between Hitler and Antonescu dated 14 August 1941, and Antonescu’s reply of 17 August respectively.<sup>32</sup> In his letter, Hitler repeated an offer that he had made previously in writing to the Romanian leader on 27 July 1941, for the occupation and use of the total area between the Dnieper and the Dniester rivers that Antonescu would administer and economically exploit for Romania’s ongoing benefit. Antonescu accepted Hitler’s offer in principle, but suggested that, as he lacked the manpower to administer the total area, it should be divided into two parts; the territory between the Dniester River in the west and moving eastward to the Bug River should be designated one area, which Antonescu would administer and exploit; and a second area expanding further to the east and the Dnieper River, for which Antonescu would accept responsibility for security only. Interestingly, there is one additional and earlier offer that Hitler is alleged to have made to Antonescu, which appears in Antonescu’s evidence at his trial for war crimes on 12 February, 1946. He said then:

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Hathi Trust Digital Library, available at: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/007054745>.

My third meeting with Hitler took place in Munich in May 1941...Hitler stressed that Romania must not remain outside this war [the war against Russia], for, if she wished to have Bessarabia and North Bukovina returned to her, she had no other alternative but to fight on Germany's side. At the same time, he pointed out that in return for our assistance in the war, Romania would be allowed to occupy and administer other Soviet territories right up to the River Dnieper.<sup>33</sup>

There is still speculation about the source of the name 'Transnistria' and who coined it, especially since neither of the letters between the two men contained the actual name. However, bearing in mind the historical link mentioned previously, and explanation of the word 'Transnistria' with its Romanian past, I posit now that the name was, in fact, coined in Romania, and is a reflection of why Antonescu easily slipped into using the name for the territory for which he was accepting responsibility. Perhaps, as Ancel suggests, 'the name was reminiscent of northern Transylvania (meaning "beyond the forests"), which had been annexed to Hungary.'<sup>34</sup>

There are different dates ascribed to the exact time of establishment of Transnistria, commencing with Carp's previously mentioned generally worded submission. However, documentary evidence shows that it was by Decree No. 1, issued by Antonescu on 19 August 1941 and signed by a ratifying convention, signed at Tighina, Bessarabia on 30 August, naming Tiraspol as the capital. On the same day, 19 August, 'when heavy battles were still

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<sup>33</sup> Evidence of Ion Antonescu at Nuremberg Trials for War Crimes, available at: [avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/02-12-46.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/02-12-46.asp) (volume 7, p. 305–306) (accessed 10 September 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania.*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011; Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2011, p. 315.

going on in and around Odessa’,<sup>35</sup> Antonescu named Prof. Gheorghe Alexianu as Governor of Transnistria. Odessa was later renamed as the capital, under Ordinance No. 4 for the Administration of Odessa, issued by Supreme Army Headquarters on 17 October 1941.’<sup>36</sup> A close reading of the ‘Tighina Agreement’ demonstrates that the Germans, perhaps understanding their Romanian allies better than most, ensured for themselves a strategic supervision under the agreement, ‘claiming this was necessary to guard the rear of the eastern front and such important locations as rail and road junctions...units [also] set up included mobile ones which travelled along the roads for security and surveillance purposes, a communications command, and intelligence units.’<sup>37</sup> The administrative underpinning of the Romanian occupation is outlined in the following summary:

The administration of a province with a population of 2.3 to 2.5 million required substantial bureaucracy, which during Alexianu’s tenure as a governor grew to thirty departments (*directii*) in his administration or *guvernament*...There were thirteen counties (*judete*) overseen by prefects, assisted by their offices or *prefecture*, each *judet* consisting of three to eight *raioane* (districts), headed by *pretori* (prefects) assisted by their offices, *preture* (prefectures). Gendamerie companies or legions were placed in every *judet* and subordinated to the prefects.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Solonari, V., *A Satellite Empire: Romanian Rule in Southwestern Ukraine, 1941–1944*, Ithica and London, Cornell University Press, 2019, p. 59. (As a general observation, this most recent work of Solonari, focusing, as it does, on all aspects of the history and operation of Transnistria, appears to be the most complete source on the subject to date and was of inestimable value in the preparation of this chapter of the thesis.)

<sup>36</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011; Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2011, p. 317.

<sup>37</sup> Shachan, A., *Burning Ice*, New York, East European Monographs, Boulder, 1996, p. 153.

<sup>38</sup> Solonari, V., ‘Record Weak: Romanian Judiciary in Occupied Transnistria’, *Journal of Romanian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2020, p. 65.

There were several factors which converged to result in both the establishment of Transnistria and the unbridled ferocity with which Jews of Romania, as a significant minority, came to be persecuted there. Having acquired the territories of Transylvania, Bukovina, Bessarabia, and parts of the Banat, Crisana and Maramures following the First World War by the operation of the Treaty of Versailles, Romania then covered the greatest land surface in its history which was referred to, throughout the interwar years, as the Greater Romania. Importantly, even though the different component constituents of Greater Romania contained a number of nationalities, Romanians formed, by far, the majority. However, being sandwiched between the might of the Soviet Union on one side, and Germany on the other, and having to contend with the German–Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of August 1939, and the defeat of France, Romania no longer attracted the protection of the Great Powers which it had previously enjoyed and was therefore in a particularly vulnerable situation. It was Antonescu’s assumption that he was, in fact, serving his country well, both as a soldier and a national leader, in partnering with Germany as an Axis member. This he felt, would guarantee him protection from the Soviet Union, and also enable him to engage with his anti-Semitic and nationalistic policies of ridding his country of this particular minority group permanently. It is evident that Hitler, by earlier ‘dangling’<sup>39</sup> the possibility of Romania being awarded ‘Ukrainian territory south-west of the Bug’<sup>40</sup> had done so, not only as a reward for signing on with the Axis forces, but as ‘bait’ to assist with ‘the Jewish problem’. Hitler had no need to concern himself that Antonescu was not up to the task of sanctioning the murder of tens of thousands during the shocking ‘forced migration’<sup>41</sup> of Jews from Bessarabia and Northern

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<sup>39</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 166.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Bukovina once the territory of Transnistria had been set up. The murder and mayhem that took place both before and during the deportations and what later occurred in Transnistria was, from then on, a blight on the Romanian nation, and a human tragedy of monumental proportions.

Ploscariu tells us that it had always been Antonescu's intention to use Transnistria as a 'dumping ground' for the Jews until such time as he could settle Romanians there, moving the Jews on to, and over, the Bug River.<sup>42</sup> Antonescu's plans were quite clear as the quotation from Solonari below will show.<sup>43</sup> However, as matters evolved, Transnistria turned out to be the prison, later the burial ground of approximately 270,000 murdered Jews.<sup>44</sup> The area of the Ukraine which had been designated as Transnistria was already home to old and culturally rich Jewish communities numbering in total approximately 300,000 people. These communities, which had been established for over a thousand years, had founded religious and family dynasties and their heritage and traditional importance had resounded around the entire Jewish world.<sup>45</sup> And it was while the Jews of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina were

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<sup>42</sup> Ploscariu, I., 'Institutions for Survival: The Shargorod Ghetto during the Holocaust in Romanian Transnistria', *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2019, p. 122.

<sup>43</sup> Solonari quoted Antonescu as saying: 'It is no secret that I am not disposed to let go anything I have already grasped in my hand. Transnistria will become a Romanian province, we will make it Romanian and will get all foreigners [non-ethnic Romanians] out of there...We have to open space for Romanian because Romanians cannot support themselves...I will take these people, will bring them into Transnistria, and there they will get land to till.' Solonari, V., 'Nationalist Utopianism, Orientalist Imagination, and Economic Exploitation: Romanian Aims and Policies in Transnistria, 1941–1944', *Slavic Review*, vol. 75, no. 3, 2016, p. 588.

<sup>44</sup> Harward, G., 'First among Un-Equals: Challenging German Stereotypes of the Romanian Army during the Second World War', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2011, p. 462. The figure of 'approximately 270,000' is to be contrasted with the most often and reliably accepted 280,000–380,000 as appears in the report on the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania: Friling, T., Ioanid, R., Ionescu, M. (eds), *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004.

<sup>45</sup> For further pre-war and historical background information on the Jewish communities of the Ukraine, see:

being herded like animals away from their homes on Romanian soil and towards internment and almost certain death in Transnistria, that the German Einsatzgruppe D, an SS mobile death squad, was already engaged in the process of murdering over 100,000 Ukrainian Jews on Transnistrian soil.

### **Massacre in Odessa**

The largest city in Transnistria, Odessa, with approximately 200,000 Jews, was the cultural focal point of the territory. There was also a large and very active Jewish community in the towns and villages around Odessa, and it is to that city, which had been made the capital of Transnistria, that many hundreds of people from Romania had fled ahead of the Romanian Army as it forcibly ejected the Jewish communities of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. But on 16 October 1941, the day that the Romanian army entered the city, there were many men attempting to escape by ship or other means. Soviet sources, Ancel tells us, report that the army massacred approximately 8,000 men on that and the following two days and nights, and although this was a figure put out by Molotov,<sup>46</sup> it has never been confirmed.<sup>47</sup> An infamous murderous spree, on which much has been written, took place in Odessa between 23 and 25 October 1941. The episode, known as the ‘Odessa Massacre’ is most clearly described by Ancel.<sup>48</sup> The event refers to the blowing up of the Romanian command centre in

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Anonymous, online Encyclopedia of Ukraine, Danylo Husar Struk (ed.) Published under the auspices of the Shevenko Scientific Society in Europe, 1949: [encyclopediaofukraine.com/pages/J/E/Jews.htm](http://encyclopediaofukraine.com/pages/J/E/Jews.htm) and M. Weiner, *Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova: Pages from the Past and Archival Inventories*, New York, Miriam Weiner Routes to Roots Foundation, 1999.

<sup>46</sup> Ionid, R., *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944*, Chicago, Ivan Dee, 2000, pp. 177–178.

<sup>47</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011; Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2011, p. 354.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. pp. 355–356.

the late afternoon of 22 October 1941, which had previously functioned as the Russian NKVD headquarters. It was later shown that the Soviets, fleeing for their lives under the German/Romanian onslaught, had deliberately set a time-bomb to destroy the premises and everyone in it. There were 61 victims, including the military commander of the city, General Ioan Glogojeanu. Without trial, Antonescu assumed that Jews and Communists were responsible and, in a secret direction sent the next afternoon to Odessa command, Gen. Trestorieanu carried out the 'harsh' reprisals that had been ordered. These reprisals were achieved in three murderous exercises: firstly, the hanging of many hundreds of Jews in public places; secondly, the 'liquidation of 18,000 Jews in the ghettos',<sup>49</sup> and thirdly, the rounding up of some 50,000 more who were then marched as a convoy to the nearby village of Dalnic. Ancel takes up the story:

The twenty-five thousand Jews who were the first to reach Dalnic were lined up near the antitank trenches that had been dug during the siege and shot in the head. About forty to fifty Jews were shot in one go. The operation was carried out in total chaos and disorder...Antonescu ordered General Tataranu 'to execute all Bessarabian Jews who had fled to Odessa' and herd all Jews 'who had not yet been executed [by the previous order]' into a mined building and explode it...<sup>50</sup>

It seems that this process of murder proved too slow; the shocking account goes on to relate that approximately 22,000 Jews were then packed into nine large warehouses and literally slaughtered by machine gun fire and then doused with gasoline and torched. The ninth

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 355.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 356.

warehouse was blown up instead of being set alight, with no less brutal results. The descriptions of these scenes of horror are encapsulated by Ancel's following final sentence:

Of about twenty-two thousand Jews, there remained only charred or blown-up body parts that were collected and buried in late November by Soviet prisoners of war.<sup>51</sup>

As we have already seen, Odessa had been a city of some 200,000 Jews. We are told by several sources, that approximately half of these people managed to escape the city before the Romanian army entered. Of this total number, with the 8,000 who were murdered almost immediately upon the entry of the Romanian troops into Odessa, the 18,000 who were shot near the docks area, and the estimated 25,000 who were murdered in Dalnic, we can say that a total of at least 50,000 Jews were murdered by Romanian troops as a result of the 'Odessa massacre'. The Odessa massacre, although grotesque in its dimension and ferocity, was but another episode in the story of Transnistria. Antonescu, not realising that Hitler had decided to exploit any captured territory west of the Bug River for the settlement of an expanding German nation, but 'having Transnistria, a poisonous gift from Hitler for Romania's participation in the war',<sup>52</sup> was forced to accept the reality that, instead of being able to push Romania's Jews into the same areas, Transnistria would now become a huge concentration camp for their destruction. His twisted dream that Transnistria would one day become an additional home for the Romanian people was no longer possible, instead being doomed to witness the destruction of between 280,000–380,000 Jews. I have given a full description of the Odessa massacre as a means of illustrating how representative it is of

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Chioveanu, M., 'Transnistria, the "General Plan East", and the Shoah by bullets', *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review* vol. 10, no. 3, p. 442.

numerous examples of the same horror played out over the length and breadth of Transnistria, and to act as a precursor to the next chapter concerning the Vapniarka Concentration Camp.

### **Transnistria: Final Phase**

By the summer of 1942, the nightmare of genocide by many means that had unfolded for both the resident Jews of Transnistria, and their brethren from Romania, firstly on their own soil, and then as they were deported across the Dniester to Transnistria had peaked, but not ceased. The turning point in the tragic saga, is to be found in Antonescu's attitude to his country's involvement regarding the treatment of Jews, and which began to change in the middle of that year. Deletant devotes a whole chapter to illustrate this 'about face'.<sup>53</sup> He uses, as a detailed illustration of Antonescu's mindset, the example of the cancelled plans to deport the Jews of Romania to the death camps of Poland. These plans had originally been agreed to in July 1942 by Antonescu's second-in-command, Mihai Antonescu, in discussion with Gustav Richter. The details of the cancellation, on examination, become shrouded in a host of seemingly intentionally vague exchanges between upper echelon personnel; more likely is the fact that extreme pressure was brought to bear by a cross-section of the Romanian community for the cancellation of the plan based on potential damage to that country's international reputation.<sup>54</sup> Deletant posits the view that, should there have been a chance for Romania to regain northern Transylvania following the war, as well as comments by both Churchill and Roosevelt with regard to those that had 'persecuted the Jews',<sup>55</sup> Romania's chances at any future peace negotiations would certainly fail. Perhaps, the cancellation of the plans to deport

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<sup>53</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, Chapter 9.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 206-207.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* p. 208.

the Jews of Romania to the Polish death camps was a ‘last ditch effort’ at salvaging any possible chance of the regaining of lost territory. Additional moves illustrating the change of policy were the cessation of deportations of all Jews from Romania to Transnistria,<sup>56</sup> and the initiation of discussions to allow Jews to emigrate to Palestine.<sup>57</sup> There is no doubt that, although he already carried the responsibility of up to 380,000 murders of Jews on his conscience, he thought that this new approach would be to his and his country’s benefit at any ‘peace-table’ that may ultimately be convened. Chioveanu suggests that ‘vested interests made the Romanians reconsider their policy...and the other decision makers no longer endorsed his visions...rejecting extermination when they had to take the substantial risk of alienating western allies and inciting further intervention, both domestic and international’.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

In order to bring some perspective to a total overview of Romania’s occupation of Transnistria it should be noted that, while this thesis concentrates exclusively on the treatment of Romanian Jewish communities throughout the period of Transnistrian occupation, there exists a much wider picture. This ‘wider picture’ is the subject of Solonari’s 2009 work, in which he states that ‘Antonescu suffered with an acute inferiority complex, namely from a perception that his beloved Romania was looked down upon by (all) other European states’.<sup>59</sup> Hence his absolute resolve to, as he said: ‘demonstrate in the face of history and of Europe

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 211.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 213.

<sup>58</sup> Chioveanu, M., ‘Transnistria, the “General Plan East”, and the Shoah by bullets’, *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. 10, no. 3, p. 446.

<sup>59</sup> Solonari, V., *Purifying the Nation: Population Exchange and Ethnic Cleansing in Nazi-Allied Romania*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009, p. 31.

that we are able to administer a larger country'.<sup>60</sup> A second, and equally important, but practical goal, was the intention to the 'pulling out [of] as much resources as possible from Transnistria'.<sup>61</sup> From the strictly Jewish perspective, the completely serendipitous circumstance of the region of Transnistria being so conveniently made available to him allowed Antonescu, not only to exercise his mania for ridding the country of non-ethnic minorities, but to use his abiding anti-Semitism to do so with the utmost physical cruelty. With this chapter we have seen the way in which Romania under Antonescu undertook the first step in its use of the territory of Transnistria as a place to bring its unwanted Jews. The next move it envisaged was to have been the further expulsion of those Jews across the Bug River and further into the vastness of the Soviet Union. When this was thwarted by the Germans, who wanted these lands for their own expansion, Antonescu was forced to establish ghettos, and work and concentration camps in which to hold the Jews. Vapniarka was one such camp, and the focus of the next chapter.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 32.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 34.

## **Chapter Five: The Vapniarka Concentration Camp**

### **Scope of this Chapter**

This central chapter, as its title suggests, will address the core subject of this thesis, with the dual intentions of presenting it on the broadest possible canvas, but always with attention to the minutest detail. The establishment and dissolution of this camp on two separate occasions, as well as the array of experiences of prisoners during both, but mainly the second iteration will be the main focus of this chapter. The central tragedy connected with the second iteration of the camp and referred to in the Abstract of this thesis as ‘the unique and deliberately engineered medical disaster, [which] was perpetrated upon the prisoners’ will also be examined in detail. The ongoing life of the camp and that of its prisoners on a daily basis, are important and pivotal parts of the Vapniarka camp story, and they will also be detailed in this chapter. To provide some context around the dates of the camp’s operations, it was established in October 1941 by the occupying Romanian army, and made responsible, as were all other camps, to the Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie of Transnistria. This first phase was completed in July 1942, following the deaths of all 1,000 Jewish prisoners from typhus and executions, with only 71 non-Jews left alive. The next weeks until September may be considered as an intermediate stage of the camp’s existence, during which time the ‘requisitioning of barbed wire and metal staples to enclose the site’ in readiness for reuse took place.<sup>1</sup> Coinciding with, and because of this, Antonescu had ordered its re-opening with

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<sup>1</sup> Shapiro, P., ‘Vapniarka: The Archive of the International Tracing Service and the Holocaust in the East’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2013, p. 130.

military responsibility directly to the Minister of the Interior, and with its purpose being exclusively one of detaining 'Jewish political prisoners'. In reality, this description actually referred to 'Jews with communist affiliations'. A major influx of approximately 1,200 prisoners entered the camp on 16 September 1942 which I refer to as its 'second iteration'. In October 1943, and with the Soviet Army's unwavering approach, the decision was made to close the camp. However, it was not until mid-March 1944 that the gates finally closed. This chapter covers all these periods.

### **The Use of Testimony as a Record of Truth**

An additional dimension which has been utilised by many historians as an indispensable 'ingredient' in presenting a meaningful and explanatory examination of the Holocaust, is that of survivor testimony, and it will become apparent to the reader to be especially effective in the case of the Vapniarka Concentration Camp. If it were not for the availability of testimony from some of those who were imprisoned in Vapniarka, we would have little or no knowledge of what occurred through the eyes of those imprisoned there. The use of such testimony will allow an examination of this particular camp to a degree, depth and accuracy that represents a greater than hitherto and meaningful contribution to an understanding of the Holocaust in Transnistria. It is the intention, with its completion, to have also succeeded in providing a breadth of clarity of understanding regarding the existence of this camp and its prisoners, and to thereby contribute to the memory of those who endured such suffering and hardship. But first, a few remarks about the judicious use of testimony.

Holocaust survivor testimony is discussed at this point because it will inform so much of the historical narrative of the Vapniarka camp. The use of testimony as a means of documenting and confirming events that have taken place, particularly with reference to the Holocaust, began to develop as a separate branch of academic enquiry almost as soon as those events had

occurred.<sup>2</sup> While it is true to say that the use of survivor testimony in all its forms carries with it a number of potential obstacles which, because of potential or inevitable errors in memory and therefore factual accuracy, may mitigate against an accurate, unbiased and reliable record of the past, it is also the case that in many instances it is the *only* evidence available of what took place. I am specifically assisted at certain points by being able to point to one prisoner's recall of events accurately corroborating another prisoner's testimony.

A positive view of the place of testimony, particularly in relation to the Holocaust has been provided by Christopher Browning.<sup>3</sup> His work in this area stemmed from the actions of a judge in a 1972 case in Hamburg where a retired policeman was on trial for his allegedly murderous role in the liquidation of a ghetto in a Polish town in 1942. Most of the damning evidence against him came from survivors of the group for which the man charged was responsible for on the relevant day. In his reasoning for the 'not guilty' verdict, the presiding judge stated that 'as a matter of principle, the eyewitness testimony was "the most unreliable form of evidence" with which the judicial process had to deal'.<sup>4</sup> He went on to say that, in his judgement, the most ideal witness is an 'indifferent, attentive, intelligent observer, [who observed things] in a disinterested and distanced way'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 'For example, the audio recordings in 1946 of Holocaust survivors' testimonies made by David Boder are, effectively, the first oral history project involving such testimonies': Muller, B., 'Translating Trauma: David Boder's 1946 Interviews with Holocaust Survivors,' *Holocaust Testimony and Translation*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2014, p. 258. (Although Boder may have been primarily interested in the historical record, he was also intent on exploring both language and trauma. See a review of Boder's book of 1949: 'I did not Interview the Dead' by Fearing, F., *The Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 34, 1951, p. 145).

<sup>3</sup> Browning, C. R., *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Based on this, Browning makes many nuanced observations in alternatively putting forward his claim for Holocaust testimony as an accurate and valuable source of historical information. He is aided in his argument by psychologist Henry Greenspan who points to studies where the detailed memories of survivors, who have been questioned on events at certain times, sometimes many years apart, showed a consistency of recall which was ‘most noteworthy and remarkable’.<sup>6</sup> Browning’s general viewpoint with regard to the veracity of personal testimony stems from his belief that, when both authenticity and factual accuracy are present, there is nothing more powerful than testimony given ‘in the personal voice’.<sup>7</sup> He is at one with scholar Elyana Adler<sup>8</sup> when she observes that survivor memories proved to be ‘more stable and less malleable than [she] had anticipated’.<sup>9</sup>

The value of both audio and/or visual testimony for research purposes is also very much governed by the ability of the interviewer to elicit information that is both relevant and factual to the purpose of the interview. So much can be lost, for example, when a subject is interviewed on camera for three hours, and three quarters of it is spent in asking for details about the person’s pre-Holocaust life, with experiences during the Holocaust period given virtually no time at all. Again, this is another reason to choose audio/visual testimonies wisely and cautiously. It is with the above in mind that I will judiciously introduce, use, and weave survivors’ testimony throughout this chapter. I am aided, at some points, in having corroborating testimony from several survivors concerning the same matter or episode, thereby contributing to the veracity of the account.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Adler, E., ‘Crossing Over: Exploring the Borders of Holocaust Testimony’, *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2015, p. 90.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

With these supportive, but cautionary comments in mind, it is intended that the blending of historiographical fact together with the use of survivor testimony, will enable this chapter to not only give a factual account of life in the camp over its duration, but to also tease out some of the inner dealings between prisoner and prisoner and prisoner and perpetrator by way of testimony not used before.

### **The Role and Place of Testimony in this Thesis**

The opportunity to use the testimony of survivors of this camp created the rich experience of sharing the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of the twenty-three survivors of the Vapniarka Concentration Camp whose names appear at the end of this thesis and of injecting their experiences into this project. Further, their voices are the channel through which readers may, for the first time, immerse themselves in the egregious circumstances of life in the camp. Seventeen of these testimonies were the result of interviews by academically respected organisations, while the remaining five were self-published. While only some of the testimonies are cited, the reading of all of them was important for the helpful context they created.

Although each survivor expresses himself or herself differently, with some in more depth than others, there are four general areas of the experience of life in the Vapniarka camp on which each person comments. They are, more or less in the order of importance in which they are raised: (a) the shock of seeing the dilapidated state of the camp on arrival, (b) the comparison of succeeding camp commanders' humanity, or lack thereof, in their approach to prisoners, (c) some reference to the outbreak of Lathyrism (paralysis) among the prisoner community (to be discussed later), and (d) the manner in which prisoner-based internal management and control of the community was organised. Examining the testimonies, and with few exceptions, there is a commonality of attitude among the survivors as to both subject matter and opinion, which creates a strong impression of community, as well as indicating a high degree of the

material's veracity. I believe that the so-called 'illegal' collective, i.e. illegal in terms of the rules of the camp's command hierarchy, an organised group which existed at the core of the Jewish prisoner community's will to survive, was responsible for instilling both the required courage against adverse conditions as well as the team effort that was needed for the saving of lives.

### **Vapniarka Camp: First Iteration**

Initially, and for the sake of completeness, the Vapniarka Camp should be defined in terms of its geographic location, as well as its origins. As was common with most of the death, concentration, labour and detention camps established by Axis Powers across Europe during the years of the Second World War, a camp took its name from the town or vicinity in which it was located and the Vapniarka camp was no exception. The small town of Vapniarka in the Ukraine is located, in GPS co-ordinate terms, at 48° 31' 59 N, 28° 45' 0 E, approximately 47 kilometres from the next and larger town of Yampol. Vapniarka, was established as a railway settlement in the 1870s as the focal point from which the Southwestern Railway would be laid<sup>10</sup> and located in what was later, in Romanian-controlled Transnistria,<sup>11</sup> the Tomaspol 'raion' or administrative unit, within the Jugastru county or district. There seems to have been a significant industry of lime or gypsum mining carried on around the town, and the word 'Vapniarka', in the Ukrainian language, translates as 'lime' or 'lime pit'. The relatively small Jewish community goes back to the end of the eighteenth century which records eight Jews living in the town as it was in 1784, increasing over the years to 711 in

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<sup>10</sup> International Jewish Cemetery Project, International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies, available at: [iajgscemetery.org/eastern-europe/Ukraine/vapnyarka](http://iajgscemetery.org/eastern-europe/Ukraine/vapnyarka) (accessed 20 November 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Creanga, O., 'Vapniaca', *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos 1933–1945*, Geoffrey P. Megargee, (ed.), vol. III, Indiana University Press, 2018, p. 811.

1939, and forming 20 per cent of the total community.<sup>12</sup> The retail and commercial activities in the town centred around the railway station, having been part of an important rail hub in the general region.

Following the invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany and Romania in June 1941 and situated approximately three kilometres outside the town of Vapniarka, there was a hastily abandoned ‘Soviet cavalry school’.<sup>13</sup> Spitzer has clarified the character and nature of this site in the following passage:

Vapniarka [camp] was first established as a detention camp in Transnistria’s Juguastu district in the early fall of 1941. It had been located on the grounds of an ex-Soviet cavalry training base—a place whose structures, furnishings, and equipment had largely been dismantled and taken, or sabotaged and destroyed, when the Red Army withdrew in the aftermath of the July 1941 German–Romanian invasion of the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup>

He goes on to say that, regardless of the state of the buildings and very soon after the invasion and withdrawal of the Soviets, ‘around one thousand deportees were brought there... [comprising] some minor bureaucrats who had been Soviet employees in Odessa and Tiraspol, and Jews from Bessarabia and the Bukovina who had failed in their efforts to flee to Russia in advance of the German–Romanian onslaught’.<sup>15</sup> From my reading, Spitzer is the

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<sup>12</sup> International Jewish Cemetery Project, International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies), available at: [iajgscemetery.org/eastern-europe/Ukraine/vapniarka](http://iajgscemetery.org/eastern-europe/Ukraine/vapniarka) (accessed 11 September 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Creanga, O., ‘Vapniaca’, *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos 1933–1945*, Geoffrey P. Megargee, (ed.), vol. III, Indiana University Press, 2018, p. 811.

<sup>14</sup> Spitzer, L., ‘“Solidarity and Suffering”: Lager Vapniarka among the Camps of Transnistria’, in H. Lustiger and H. Knoch (eds), *Witnessing Unbound: Holocaust Representation and the Origins of Memory*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2017, p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

only historian who has nominated a specific number of those who were the first to be interned in the camp, and he does so by quoting the prisoner Matei Gall who was interned in the camp from September 1942.<sup>16</sup> Barbulescu refrains from specifying a number, preferring only to say: '[T]he first categories of internees imprisoned in Vapniarka'. As Ihiel Benditer, like Gall himself an actual detainee of the camp's second iteration also says: 'there were also, among the first detainees, an unknown number of other survivors of the pogroms and massacres committed by the Romanian army during October 23 to 25, 1941...as punishment for an explosion which took place at the Romanian Military Headquarters'.<sup>17</sup> Although Barbulescu agrees to an unspecified number of Jews and Christians arriving in the camp in the early days following the Soviet withdrawal, she states that it was in March 1942 when the precise number of 1,197 Jewish prisoners from the Central Prison in Odessa, as well as various others, were incarcerated at Vapniarka. The group was comprised of 'Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina, Soviet citizens who had not withdrawn with the Soviet Army, or employees of the Soviet administration from Odessa and Tiraspol'.<sup>18</sup> They had been imprisoned there because of their membership of the Communist Party and 'were mostly men, aged between 18 and 50'.<sup>19</sup>

In general terms therefore, we may accept that a small group of detainees arrived soon after the camp's establishment, with this last-mentioned larger contingent arriving in March 1942.

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<sup>16</sup> Gall, M., *Finsternis: Durch Gefangnisse, KZ Wapniarka, Massaker, und Kommunismus. Ein Lebenslauf in Rumänien, 1920–1990*, Constance, Hartung-Gorre Verlag, 1999, pp. 119–20.

<sup>17</sup> Benditer, I., 'Cattle Fodder for Victims', The Nizkor Project, available at: <http://nizkor.com/hweb/people/c/carmelly-felicia/benditer-ihiel.html> (accessed 19 February 2018). There is no information given as to how Benditer came by this.

<sup>18</sup> Barbulescu, A., 'Life, Death, and Survival in the Vapniarka Camp', *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. viii, no. 9, 2016, p. 74.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

From the beginning, there was little chance of survival for this group. We read that ‘many of the Vapniarka internees in these first contingents died during the typhus epidemic that struck deportees throughout Transnistria during the winter and spring of 1941/1942’.<sup>20</sup> Although the numbers are not accurately known, most historians agree that approximately half of the prisoners, amounting to 600 people, succumbed to typhus, leaving approximately another 600 whose fate hung on decisions to be made as to their future. Degaratu reports, without giving a source, that there is documented evidence showing that this remaining group would have to be ‘removed from the camp before the other transports of detainees were due to come’.<sup>21</sup> With regard to their removal, she further reports:

The transportation was made in two lots, at 4–5 days’ distance, and the Jews evacuated from Vapniarka were to be settled in places designated by the local administration. This was made following a decision taken through Government Ordinance No. 35, of January 1942: ‘All Jews to be found in the Odessa county and its surroundings will be evacuated from that city and will be placed in the North region of the Oceacov county and in the south of the Berezovca county, in localities settled by the local administration’ (art.1).<sup>22</sup>

Barbulescu gives us some clearer and more extensive detail of the suffering and ultimate fate of this first lot of Vapniarka prisoners who managed to survive the outbreak of typhus.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Shapiro, P., ‘Vapniarka: The Archive of the International Tracing Service and the Holocaust in the East’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2013, p. 120.

<sup>21</sup> Degaratu, L., ‘The Camp in Vapniarka: Detention, Survival, Memory’, *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. vii, no. 8, 2015, p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Barbulescu, A., ‘Life, Death, and Survival in the Vapniarka Camp’ *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. viii,

According to an army report issued mid-May 1942 on the condition of the prisoners,<sup>24</sup> it seems that the detainees ‘were full of lice, being so infested, that they were dangerous to approach and thus completely isolated from the outside world’.<sup>25</sup> However, the tragic outcome for these prisoners was that they were removed from the camp according to the above ordinance, taken to Kolosovka in Berezovka County and executed there. It seems that the number of approximately 500 survivors must be presumed correct as Order no. 60 was issued on 15 July detailing that 400 prisoners were to be transported to Berezovka and specifying which officers were to accompany them<sup>26</sup> in the first contingent, and with the remaining group to leave a few days after to the same place and fate. We are told that, following the removal and execution of the last of the Jewish prisoners there were 71 non-Jews left in the camp. Quoting local records, Shapiro tells us that these remaining prisoners ‘had been convicted of “crimes” or were simply “suspects”’.<sup>27</sup> Ihiel Benditer, however, reports that there were, in fact, 101 non-Jews left in the camp who were all adherents of the Bogomoli religious order,<sup>28</sup> and who had been detained under an order of Antonescu relating

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no. 9, 2016, pp. 74–75.

<sup>24</sup> Report no. 689 from 17 May 1942 sent by the 72nd Infantry Battalion to the Second Guard Division, Archive INSHR-EW, RG-25.003, reel 393, file 36, p. 297, see Barbulescu, A., ‘Life, Death, and Survival in the Vapniarka Camp’ *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. viii, no. 9, 2016, p. 75.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 76.

<sup>27</sup> Shapiro, P., ‘Vapniarka: The Archive of the International Tracing Service and the Holocaust in the East’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2013, p. 130. I understand that the words ‘convicted of crimes’ equate to what we understand as ‘common law criminals’.

<sup>28</sup> A dualist and docetist sect that arose and flourished in mediaeval Bulgaria and Macedonia. They took their name from their founder, the priest Bogomil (Theophilus). They believed that God created man’s soul, but matter was the invention of Satan, God’s older son: The Saint Pachomius Library, available at [vokrese.info/spl/Xbogomil.html](http://vokrese.info/spl/Xbogomil.html) (accessed 1 February 2021).

to the detention of religious sects.<sup>29</sup> No testimony has come down to us from the first contingent of prisoners sent to Berezovka and who were murdered there; nor has any testimony come to light from the remaining non-Jewish detainees. However, Shapir reveals that much information regarding the last stages of the camp's first iteration resides in the government 'Vinnitsa' files which contain, amongst other material, the orders of Transnistrian Governor Alexianu to send the remaining prisoners to Berezovka for 'labour' purposes.

One final, and tragic occurrence which marks the end of the camp's first iteration is an escape as reported by Barbulescu.<sup>30</sup> Three Jewish prisoners, Iser Reuter, Aron Slonim, and Iasa Kowski, managed to escape from the camp, only to be apprehended a few days later. According to Governor Alexianu's Ordinance 23 of November 1941,<sup>31</sup> they were automatically considered 'spies' and therefore subject to the death penalty. Under interrogation, all three men said that they were driven to escape by hunger. Although all three were to be tried by court martial, Kowski died beforehand, presumably from typhus, and we also must assume, without information to the contrary, that Slonim and Reuter were executed.

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<sup>29</sup> Carmelly, F. (Steigman), *Shattered! 50 Years of Silence: History and Voices of the Tragedy in Romania and Transnistria*, Ontario, Abbyfield Publishers, 1997, p. 184.

<sup>30</sup> Barbulescu, A., 'Life, Death, and Survival in the Vapniarka Camp' *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. viii, no. 9, 2016, pp. 74–75.

<sup>31</sup> Anonymous, downloaded from the JewishGen website, available at: [kjewishgen.org/databases/holocaust/0124\\_balta\\_battalion.html](http://kjewishgen.org/databases/holocaust/0124_balta_battalion.html) (accessed 25 April 2021). This Ordinance established Transnistria as a penal colony, divided into 13 districts. It laid down how the forced labour laws would be applied and enforced throughout the colony and the penalties for a range of misdemeanors. Article 8 stated that whoever was found in another locality 'shall be considered a spy and punished immediately under military laws in time of war'.

## Vapniarka Camp: Second Iteration

During the month of August 1942, an important alteration was made to both the military and day-to-day control of the camp. Militarily, the camp was, from then on, to receive its orders and instructions from General Army Headquarters in Bucharest and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, respectively. This meant that such orders that were issued from Bucharest could remain secret from the office of the Governor of Transnistria, with the governance of the camp coming directly under the control of Antonescu himself through Dumitru Popescu, his Minister of the Interior and therefore removing responsibility for it from Governor Alexianu. The change resulted in the local authorities having the responsibility solely for the supply of food to the military detachments guarding the prisoners.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Vapniarka Camp was again commissioned for use in September of 1942 and was designated as a 'special camp for political prisoners'.<sup>32</sup> In reality, it was to become a concentration camp for Jewish Communists and it may be posited that it was Antonescu's intense hatred and suspicion of both of these groupings that informed his decision to bring the overall control of the camp under the central Romanian government, rather than his Transnistrian Governor. It is with this iteration of the camp that we shall be engaged in much more detail throughout this chapter. The camp was reopened subject to Order no. 3333, issued by Antonescu personally as early as May 1942,<sup>33</sup> and confirmed by Order no. 9283 of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. Ostensibly, these orders targeted those Jews in the Old Kingdom either condemned or suspected of having Communist leanings, as well as Jews found in Bucharest without legal documents. The

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<sup>32</sup> Shapiro, P., 'Vapniarka: The Archive of the International Tracing Service and the Holocaust in the East', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2013, p. 120.

<sup>33</sup> Barbulescu, A., 'Life, Death, and Survival in the Vapniarka Camp' *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. viii, no. 9, 2016, p. 76.

issuing of these orders by Antonescu personally took precedence over Transnistrian Governor Alexianu's Decree Nr. 0607, issued 13 February 1942.

That decree had set out Alexianu's edict which was meant to have the Vapniarka camp serve as a prison for 'suspected communist sympathizers...and other political dissidents...[and] to serve as a "*lager for communists of Christian descent*"' [my emphasis]. It was set up to receive and house approximately five thousand inmates.<sup>34</sup> Spitzer quotes from camp inmate Dr. Arthur Kessler's memoir: 'Despite this religious stipulation...the vast majority of persons deported to the camp were Jews'.<sup>35</sup> As an added detail, the number of prisoners in the camp never exceeded 2,500 at any time.

We read that, after being rounded up, the group to be deported numbered 2,110. It had been formed under four categories: '(a) Communists found [at] liberty across the country; (b) Communist Jews interned at the Targu-Jui camp; (c) Communist Jews detained in prisons; (d) Communist Jews who [had] requested to be repatriated to the Soviet Union after June 1940. This last category was evacuated together with family members'.<sup>36</sup> There was no warning given to these people as to their fate when they were picked up by the police during the first two weeks of September 1942 and placed on trains for the journey to Vapniarka. Details of their rounding up by police as well as the train journey are contained in the testimony of many camp prisoners, including Radu Alexandru and Eugen Friedlander, whose individual testimonies in other connections I shall mention at a later stage, as well as other better known

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<sup>34</sup> Hirsch, M., and Spitzer, L., *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*, Berkley, University of California Press, 2010, p. 209.

<sup>35</sup> Spitzer, L., '“Solidarity and Suffering”: Lager Vapniarka among the Camps of Transnistria', in Lustiger-Thaler, H. and H. Knoch (eds), *Witnessing Unbound: Holocaust Representation and the Origins of Memory*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2017, p. 49.

<sup>36</sup> Barbulescu, A., 'Life, Death, and Survival in the Vapniarka Camp', *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. viii, no. 9, 2016, p. 76.

prisoner names such as Dr Arthur Kessler, Matei Gall, and Ihiel Benditer. The testimonies of Alexandru and Friedlander are summarised by Barbulescu; in essence, we are told that there were between 50 and 55 individuals,<sup>37</sup> as well as armed guards in each wagon,<sup>38</sup> and that among the stops along the way, a main one was the large town of Tiraspol. Here, all prisoners were removed from the trains, and ordered to hand over their valuables. Importantly, and ominously, 598 of the deportees, being those whose ‘crime’ had been that they had sought government approval for repatriation to the Soviet Union, were separated from the main group and sent in another direction to Mostvoi, where they were murdered on arrival by SS troops.<sup>39</sup> The removal of this group from the train at Tiraspol is specifically referred to in most testimonies, including camp survivor Geza Kornis in his testimony of this episode, where he notes the removal of the group and, by way of confirmation, specifically and ominously refers to them as ‘people who, in 1940, had demanded emigration to the Soviet Union’.<sup>40</sup> Dr. Arthur Kessler, who is to figure prominently in the lives of the prisoners during their detention, gives a particularly vivid description of the journey itself,<sup>41</sup> in which he speaks of hearing gunfire throughout the night, and of the paralysing fear of what awaited them in Transnistria. Matei Gall, another prisoner, relates that the train journey lasted eight

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 77.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Kornis, G., *Überlebt durch Solidarität* [“Survival through Solidarity”], Konstanz, Hartung-Gorre, 2004. Sixteen-page abridged English translation available at: [www.memoria.ro/marturii/periode\\_istorice\\_perioada\\_celui\\_de-al\\_doilea\\_razboi\\_mondial/din\\_viata\\_mea\\_si\\_vremurile\\_mele\\_\(2\)/1601/](http://www.memoria.ro/marturii/periode_istorice_perioada_celui_de-al_doilea_razboi_mondial/din_viata_mea_si_vremurile_mele_(2)/1601/), p. 6 (accessed 22 September 2019).

<sup>41</sup> Hirsch, M., and Spitzer, L., *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*, Berkley, University of California Press, 2010, pp. 201–202, 203–204. (The authors quote here from a translation of Kessler’s, as yet unpublished, memoir of incarceration in Vapniarka).

days.<sup>42</sup> Nathan Simon, another prisoner in the same camp intake in September of 1942, gives details of the march to the camp from the railway station after their arrival, and of the ‘gigantic human snake, whose tail end I could not see, creeping along the few kilometers separating the train station from the lager...’<sup>43</sup> He goes on to relate that there were beatings handed out with clubs and rifle butts during the two hour march to the camp at the end of which, ‘totally worn out by hunger and thirst’,<sup>44</sup> the group arrived at the gates of the camp and was ‘given over to military authorities’.<sup>45</sup> There are several versions of what ensued following the prisoners’ arrival at the camp. The most comprehensive is that of survivor Benditer, who describes the camp complex and entry into it as follows:

surrounded by three barbed wire fences, with watchtowers every fifty metres...After registering at the gate, the new detainees were lined up for rollcall. They were met by Colonel Murgescu, the camp commander, who prophetically uttered the following greeting: ‘You entered the camp on two legs but, should you ever get out, you will crawl on all fours’.<sup>46</sup>

A further observation made by most of the arriving prisoners that stands out in their accounts is one of being overwhelmed as they stood at the gates of the camp, by the partially destroyed

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<sup>42</sup> Text of an interview of Matei Gall by Cosmina Gusu on behalf of the Elie Wiesel Institute for the study of the Holocaust in Romania, Date of interview: 20 May, 2009, p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> Hirsch, M., and Spitzer, L., *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*, Berkley, University of California Press, 2010, p. 204 (The authors quote here from Nathan Simon’s memoir “...auf allen Vieren werdet ihr hinauskröchen!” [“On all fours you will crawl out!”], Berlin, Institut Kirche und Judentum, 1994).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Benditer, I., ‘Cattle Fodder for Victims’, The Nizkor Project, available at: [www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/c/carmelly-felicia/bendliter\\_ihiel.htm](http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/c/carmelly-felicia/bendliter_ihiel.htm) (accessed 19 February 2018).

and parlous state of the buildings in which they were to spend their confinement being devoid of windows, doors and furniture of any description. There is testimony of detainee Geza Kornis that, within the area surrounded by barbed wire, ‘there were three buildings, each with one storey, and other small buildings that served as kitchens and other purposes’.<sup>47</sup> Depending on our understanding of the language used in this description, it would seem to equate with Matei Gall’s description of the buildings having a ‘ground floor and upstairs’.<sup>48</sup> There are details given by various other testimonies which complete our understanding that the layout of the camp comprised both large rooms, seemingly for groups of soldiers, as well as a series of smaller rooms, presumably used previously by officers.

These initial impressions gave way to a night spent on the concrete floor in freezing conditions and waking to a day which only served to highlight the extent of dereliction of their accommodation. The first roll call on that first day is recalled by prisoner Dr Arthur Kessler, who writes:

The gate is thrown wide open, and the commandant of the internment area, Colonel Murgescu, appears with a following of officers and noncoms...his speech is short: ‘On the slope behind the camp you can see the graves of 550 people who were in the camp before you. They died of typhus. Try to do better if you can’.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Kornis, G., *Überlebt durch Solidarität* [“Survival through Solidarity”], Konstanz, Hartung-Gorre, 2004. Sixteen-page abridged English translation available at: [www.memoria.ro/maturii/periode\\_istorice\\_perioada\\_celui\\_de-al\\_dolea\\_razboi\\_mondial/din\\_viata\\_mea\\_si\\_vremurile\\_mele\\_\(2\)/1601/](http://www.memoria.ro/maturii/periode_istorice_perioada_celui_de-al_dolea_razboi_mondial/din_viata_mea_si_vremurile_mele_(2)/1601/), p. 2 (accessed 22 September 2019).

<sup>48</sup> Matei Gall, interviewed by Cosmina Gusu, 2009, on behalf of the Elie Wiesel Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania.

<sup>49</sup> Hirsch, M., and Spitzer, L., *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*, Berkley, University of California Press, 2010, p. 210. (The authors quote here from a translation of Kessler’s, as yet

With a haunting reference to Murgescu's 'welcoming' statement that those who would manage to leave would be 'crawling on all fours', as well as to Shapiro's statement that 71 non-Jewish prisoners had remained in the camp after it had been emptied, prisoner Matei Gall testifies:

On the first day, everything seemed strange to us because we found survivors from among the first inmates. I saw a group of people, who were no longer people, and about whom I knew nothing. Why must they sit on the ground and help with their hands to move, their hands being a kind of see-saw with which they threw themselves forward...so this is our fate, we are going to become neo-humans; instead of bipeds we will somehow become quadrupeds...<sup>50</sup> It should be noted that survivor Rado Alexandru had also testified that, as the group arrived at the camp the previous day, he saw: 'some wretched looking people, poorly dressed and in an advanced state of physical degradation just milling about'.<sup>51</sup>

### **The 'Guiding Hand'**

It is crucial at this point to detail an important element, perhaps inadequately mentioned in any material on the camp until now, but undoubtedly one of the essential characteristics which enabled the Vapniarka prisoner community to overcome the adversity it faced. I do so at this juncture because, in the midst of so much hardship and suffering, this important initiative permeated almost every constructive development throughout the period of the

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unpublished memoir of incarceration in Vapniarka.)

<sup>50</sup> Matei Gall, interviewed by Cosmina Gusu, 2009, Holocaust. Studii și Cercetări Institutului, Bucharest, available at: <http://www.inshr-ew.ro/matei-gall-interviu/> (accessed 20 January 2019).

<sup>51</sup> File III-367, Reel 15, RG-25.021, The Camps Tg. Jiu, Vapniarka, Grosolovo, 1940–1945, Archive Records, United States Holocaust Museum Archives, Washington.

camp's existence. It is also raised at this point because it became relevant from the first day of the prisoners' incarceration. By way of introduction, it must be accepted that, apart from the initial and emotionally destructive effect of their incarceration, the overall impression and first thoughts of a large group of individuals arriving at such a prison, and for most of whom imprisonment was a new and frightening experience, would have most probably been to have resigned themselves to their ultimate destruction. Added to, and further complicating any ability to plan for and ultimately manage the welfare of such a group from within, was the fact that, while all were Jews, it was comprised of a multiplicity of backgrounds and cultural practices. It is easy to see how, without effective control, the terror of the situation could quickly and completely overwhelm the majority. However, there was a sizeable group among them which had had previous experience of incarceration, and who had not only been hardened by their ordeal but had also learned various ways of bonding with each other in order to build coping mechanisms and resilience to adversity. The fact that this last-mentioned sub-group was made up mainly of Communists and other anti-fascists meant, additionally, that they were also well experienced in using the strength afforded them by a 'group discipline' mentality that helped them in being able to marshal each of their own strengths.

Some who have written about this camp, especially the survivors themselves, have described the above process as effectively establishing within the camp a highly disciplined and secretive 'inner sanctum', or 'central committee' and made up of a number of, it would appear, self-chosen men from within the ranks of the prisoners. The committee has been referred to as the 'Black Hand' and, on occasions, as the 'unseen hand' or 'guiding hand'.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> M. Hirsch and L. Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*, Los Angeles University of California Press, 2011, p. 219. (Note: It is generally accepted that the group under discussion was set up by Simion Bughici, a senior member of the Romanian Communist Party, and who had served many prison sentences for his political beliefs.)

There was a certain amount of mystery and dark intrigue surrounding the group, with veiled suggestions from certain survivors that both physical and psychological force were used to enable the smooth running of the community. It was obvious that this group had concluded between themselves that a rigidly enforced form of benign discipline was absolutely necessary if they were not all to perish. Overall, the camp accepted this committee as a ‘force for good’ imposing, as it did, a regime of civil behaviour upon and between the prisoner population. The committee, with its strong Communist ethos, soon became known as ‘the collective’ and, among its responsibilities, maintained tight control over the maintenance of optimum hygiene levels in order to stave off infection and disease. All this, in turn, minimised the potential and damaging effects of internal unrest and contributed to creating an optimistic mindset.

Ihiel Benditer informs us that it was purely a politically based committee, led by Andrei Bernat and Lazar Grunberg, with Simion Bughici, Paul Dascal, Nicolae Goldschmidt, Rabbi Benjamin Vilner and Aurel Rotenberg,<sup>53</sup> all well-known members of the Romanian Communist Party. Bughici, who was to survive his experience at Vapniarka and go on after the war to serve as Romania’s foreign minister, explains the *raison d’être* of the collective in his testimony in the following terms:

As the population of Vapniarka was so diverse, we realised that it was essential for us to get organised in order to withstand camp conditions better. This was achieved relatively quickly and easily. A party leadership was chosen which was made up of Andrei Bernat, Lazar Grunberg, and

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<sup>53</sup> Benditer, I., ‘Cattle Fodder for Victims’, The Nizkor Project, available at: [www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/c/carmelly-felicia/bendliter\\_ihiel.htm](http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/c/carmelly-felicia/bendliter_ihiel.htm), p. 6 (date accessed 28 January 2019).

Simion Bughici. We organised a collective of anti-fascists whose main objective was solidarity and support for all detainees.<sup>54</sup>

The existence of the ‘collective’ was soon to prove a necessity, as the privations suffered by the prisoners due to the total lack of living quarters and sanitary arrangements and exacerbated by the deliberate restriction of a water supply, grew to be intolerable. It became literally a matter of ‘life and death’ to initiate a level of prisoner-based discipline and control over the community from within in order to improve living conditions, with the prisoners’ mental and physical resources stretched to the limit.

The decision to form, and to organise the functioning of the ‘collective’, as explained by Spitzer,<sup>55</sup> was easier because of the absence, in the Transnistrian camp system, of the Nazi inspired ‘kapo’ control mechanism, where any initiative was destroyed by physical abuse or death. As Spitzer explains the ‘collective’ or ‘guiding hand’, it had been superimposed upon the established camp system as a self-appointed ‘underground political committee, composed of former activists and Communist leaders, [who] in effect “ran” all significant aspects of the camp in a sub-rosa manner’.<sup>56</sup> This clandestine committee was known to and tolerated by the camp’s command, but never publicly acknowledged. Obviously, any success on the part of the group only served to make the camp commander’s task easier, and both parties therefore benefited from this symbiotic process. There seems to have been some knowledge within the general prisoner community that this group had brought itself into existence; however, for the

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<sup>54</sup> File III-374, Reel 15, RG-25.021, The camps Tg. Jiu, Vapniarka, Grosolovo, 1940–1945, Archive Records, United States Holocaust Museum Archives, Washington.

<sup>55</sup> Spitzer, L., ‘Solidarity and Suffering: Lager Vapniarka among the Camps of Transnistria’, in Lustiger-Thaler, H. and H. Knoch (eds), *Witnessing Unbound: Holocaust Representation and the Origins of Memory*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2017, p. 52.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

sake of clarity, there existed a mandated camp model of an administrative prisoner committee which was formally acceptable as Romanian camp command practice, whereas the collective was not.

One area of Holocaust research that is closely allied with the type of activity just described is that of prisoner ‘resistance’, which has been the subject of much academic debate. Following the Holocaust it was the overwhelming attitude on the part of remaining Jewish communities that those who perished did not do enough to ‘stand up to’ their aggressors and went, almost willingly, to their slaughter. As a way to show that this line of thinking was both factually and demonstrably wrong, much has now been written by eminent scholars using testimony and other evidence to demonstrate that much was done by way of physical resistance, given the restraints and privations visited upon the Jews of Europe.

One such scholar, Professor Yehuda Bauer, used the Hebrew word ‘amidah’, loosely translated as ‘resistance’, which has the sense of ‘standing up’ to circumstances. Having coined the term in 1968, he defined it to mean: ‘any *group* action consciously taken in opposition to known or surmised laws, actions, or intentions directed against the Jews by the Germans and their supporters.’<sup>57</sup>

Twenty years later, Bauer broadened his definition of Jewish resistance to ‘any group action consciously taken in opposition to known or surmised laws, actions or intentions directed against the Jews by the Germans and their supporters’.<sup>58</sup> Using Bauer’s widened terms, there is no doubt that the actions of setting up the type of ‘underground’ control group and network qualify absolutely as actions of resistance.

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<sup>57</sup> Bauer, Y., *The Jewish Emergence from Powerlessness*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1979, p. 27.

<sup>58</sup> Bauer, Y., *Rethinking the Holocaust*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 119.

An explanation of the way in which the administration of the camp, both formal (legal) and informal (illegal) was arranged is to be read in the testimony of survivor Eugen Friedlander,<sup>59</sup> and clarified further by Ana Barbulescu in her article about the camp.<sup>60</sup> Firstly, we are told that the camp commander, pursuant to military practice, divided the prisoners into groups of one hundred, known as '*despartituri*', or sections, each with an appointed leader; detainee Alexandru Radu was named as overall commander of them. This effectively made him leader of the total Jewish prisoner community in the eyes of the camp's command. Pavel Donat was appointed as his deputy. In his position, Radu was to represent the prisoners in front of the camp authorities and maintain contact with the camp commander on their behalf. Barbulescu reminds us that, apart from the formal and accepted structure, the individual camp commander selected his own informant from within the prisoner community. In Murgescu's case, it was Jewish prisoner 'Bubi' Finkelstein, who spent his time as an undercover informant as well as in the extortion of his fellow detainees. Finkelstein stood trial in 1946 for his criminal activities.

Secondly, Radu's position and the divisions of one hundred<sup>61</sup> had standing only as far as the relationship between the camp authorities and prisoners was concerned. Fellow prisoner Andrei Bernat, to be mentioned shortly, suggested to Radu that, just as it was common throughout the many prisons and camps of Romania housing Jewish anti-fascists to establish a united communal front, it should also be done in Vapniarka. Between the prisoners

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<sup>59</sup> File III-370, Reel 15, RG-25.021, The Camps Tg. Jiu, Vapniarka, Grosolovo, 1940–1945, Archive Records, United States Holocaust Museum Archives, Washington.

<sup>60</sup> Barbulescu, A., 'Life, Death, and Survival in the Vapniarka Camp', *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. viii, no. 9, 2016, pp. 79–80.

<sup>61</sup> The term applied to separate groups of one hundred prisoners chosen by the camp commandant, over each of which a chosen fellow prisoner was placed in a position of responsibility for that group's continuing obedience.

themselves, a body known as the 'Jewish Community' was therefore formed by people gravitating towards each other based on their common geographic backgrounds and cultural norms. Radu also agreed to be the leader of this large group, on the condition that it was to be totally inclusive and open to all Jewish prisoners regardless of shades of political and religious beliefs. The energy of this 'community' was spent on organising cultural, educational and religious activities and programmes, the provision of which were most important in maintaining the overall morale of the camp. It was with the 'community' that detainees could reminisce about their former lives and try for a short time to forget their common tragedy so that current burdens were easier to bear. It is interesting to note that this particular internal structure, although tolerated by the first camp commander, Murgescu, was strongly opposed by his replacement Buradescu, who deliberately encouraged criminal elements from within the Jewish prisoner community to provoke and foment unrest and violence within it.

Detainee Friedlander's testimony is most clear and precise on several matters, not only in his separate description of the three buildings within the camp perimeter and their layout, but also the fact that certain criminal elements, both Jewish and non-Jewish, were later deliberately and strategically placed by the camp command within the prisoner population in order to act as provocative elements to trigger the use of weapons against any 'Jewish troublemakers'. These sources were also used to report back any suspicious conversations between prisoners. Additionally, Friedlander, like all other prisoners from whom we have testimonies, gives no actual names of any other members of the 'collective', although we know by reference in several of the testimonies that additional prisoners, according to their skills, were co-opted.

The one intriguing exception to this is the example of survivor Adalbert Rosinger, whose story could well be the subject of a separate study. His singular situation deserves special

mention at this point, and he stands out as one who, while he had been incarcerated as an anti-fascist, also saw Communism as another form of totalitarianism and was bitterly opposed to it. Although we see no mention of Rosinger in the testimonies of fellow prisoners, his views come to light much later after the war when, having survived eight years in a Romanian gaol from 1961 to 1969 on trumped up charges by the Ceausescu regime of ‘undermining the national economy’, he managed to gain permission to emigrate to Israel. He was assisted in this by the intervention of US Senator A. Ribicoff who appealed to the Romanian authorities at the request of Rosinger’s daughter.<sup>62</sup> Once in Israel, Rosinger published a piece in an Israeli magazine named ‘Minimum’ in which he gave testimony on his years in two Romanian camps, including Vapniarka and another, as well as details of his arrest, charge and imprisonment between 1961 and 1969. Although the magazine has long ago disappeared into obscurity, the article has been reproduced in a publication of the Central and European Online Library.<sup>63</sup> His comments on Vapniarka and its ‘collective’ are scathing; particularly with regard to Lazar Grunberg and Andrei Bernard who were the two men who, as he maintains, ‘elected themselves’ as leaders. He is also the only person apart from Ihiel Benditer who, in that part of his testimony dealing with his time at Vapniarka, mentions specifically the names of Emanuel Vinea, Paul Dascalu, Simion Bughici, Aurel Rottenberg, a certain ‘Burger’, Alex Radu and Paul Donat as making up the entire ‘inner sanctum’ of leadership. He refers to it as a Miniature Totalitarian Republic and accuses it of being guilty

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<sup>62</sup> Following Senator Ribicoff’s unsuccessful appeals to the Romanian Government, he raised the matter on the floor of the United States Senate. As a result, Romanian Decree No. 131, June 8, 1978 granted Rosinger an amnesty from the trumped up charges for which he had spent so many years in a Romanian gaol. With this amnesty, he and his wife were able to emigrate to Israel. Source: Record of the Hearing before the Subcommittee on International Trade of the Committee on Finance, United States Senate, Ninety-Sixth Congress, First Session, US Govt. Printing Office, Washington, 1979, p. 47.

<sup>63</sup> Rosinger, A., ‘Wapniarka – A Miniature Totalitarian Republic (1941–1944)’, *Revista de Isorie a Evreilor din Romania*, vol. 1, 2016, pp. 280–305.

of, what he claims are, a number of crimes and moral misdemeanours. These include the stealing of parcels, money and mail sent to prisoners by their families in Romania, and occasions of physical beating, all the while claiming that these actions were being taken because of the necessity to conform strictly to a code of Communist based discipline in order to get through the ordeal of their imprisonment. 'Stealing' of in-coming food or money was, in the minds of those in charge of the collective, seen as necessary under the extreme circumstances, so that the food, clothes or money sent from families outside could be added to a stock-pile and shared with the prisoner community. Summing up, Rosinger saw the collective, under the severe conditions of the camp, as an oligarchy in the making, profiting by its authority and superiority at the expense of detainees, imposing privation and depriving them of any advantages and pleasures, and all in the name of sacrifice for the elite.

Adalbert Rosinger was, in relation to the attitudes of others expressed in the testimonies to hand, unique in his vitriolic criticism of the so-called 'collective' and, perhaps because of that, and because other survivors have, in direct contrast, openly testified that they owe their very lives to the actions of the collective, a somewhat guarded approach should be adopted to his comments. Rosinger went on to make a career for himself as a top official of Romania's post-war trade department known as Romanexport but, in 1959, became tragically caught up in the circumstances referred to earlier.

Returning to the role and disciplinary effect of the collective, its influence on detainees could be felt in almost every sphere of daily life in the camp. One may say its role began with gaining permission from the camp commander to scavenge materials from other deserted and derelict buildings nearby with which to replace and repair doors and windows, as well as construct as many bunks as possible for sleeping. The same decisive approach by the collective was to be absolutely critical later in the handling of the 'medical disaster' referred to in the Abstract to this thesis, as well as the equally important undertaking of maintaining

camp and personal hygiene with its own inherent life-saving benefits. The ‘collective’ knew well that the maintenance of high standards of hygiene among the prisoner population was a key factor if they were to survive. Prisoner Srul Haber testifies that: ‘One of the most pressing issues for us was the maintenance of health among the detainees. The collective had a special role, with the support of the camp doctors – that of enforcing personal hygiene, to the point of forcibly undressing some people and forcing them to wash.’<sup>64</sup> One of the most immediate tasks was to rid the camp of lice, which were not only the source of the raging typhus epidemic which had gripped and decimated prison camp populations throughout Transnistria, but would also certainly destroy all those in the Vapniarka camp if not eradicated. Referring to this problem, prisoner Geza Kornis writes:

Every morning before getting up, the internees’ shirts and undergarments were checked for lice...This was my task and I very quickly became experienced at it and soon I knew the seams where these vermin were hiding. In the beginning, the lice had to be squashed between the fingernails...after a certain period of time, we were able to announce that the dormitory was free of parasites.<sup>65</sup>

The circumstances I have described thus far provide a solid basis for understanding the miserable rhythm of life endured by the camp community for the first months of their incarceration. But, towards the end of 1942, matters take a turn for the worse with the onset of what I have chosen to call the ‘medical disaster’.

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<sup>64</sup> File III-371, Reel 15, RG-25.021, The camps Tg. Jiu, Vapniarka, Grosolovo, 1940–1945, Archive Records, United States Holocaust Museum Archives, Washington.

<sup>65</sup> Kornis, G., *Survival through Solidarity: Vapniarka Concentration Camp, Olgopol Ghetto in Transnistria, Labour Camp in Romania, A Contemporary Eyewitness Report*, Konstanz, Erhard Roy Wiehn, Hartung-Gorre Verlag, 2004, p. 8.

### **The Medical Disaster: Neurolathyrisism (*Lathyrus sativas*)**

The harshness and monotony of the prisoners' life in Vapniarka continued and, in the face of the facility that human beings possess of becoming acclimatised to the harshest of conditions, including, it seems, a concentration camp, survivor Geza Kornis tells us, ironically, that 'Life in the camp seemed to calm down and become normal'.<sup>66</sup> It is superimposed upon this difficult existence that the next gruelling chapter for the Vapniarka detainees unfolds. I refer to the outbreak of the medical condition known as neurolathyrisism, which brought with it not only untold suffering, but also encouraged outstanding examples of sacrifice and dedicated service on the part of the approximately twenty medical doctors who were also prisoners within the camp. As a general overview and summary of this part of the Vapniarka story, I refer to the neurological condition, its nature, how and why it arose, and how it was dealt with. It is because of the more than tenuous connection between this medical episode and the general topic of Nazi medical experimentation, which is itself an area I shall investigate in a later chapter, that this event assumes even greater importance and significance. With the completion of this particular section, there may be a better appreciation of why this medical episode gives such singularity to any account of the camp's history. In leaving aside the historical significance of the actual botanical plant in question for the following chapter of this thesis, I turn now to the details of the actual manifestations of the disease as it affected the prisoners in Vapniarka. The source of most of the reliable information regarding the unfolding of the medical condition under discussion is Dr. Arthur Kessler, the often-mentioned medical practitioner and camp prisoner himself in his, as yet unpublished, testimony entitled 'Ein Arzt im Lager' — (A Camp Physician).<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Kessler, A., 'Ein Arzt im Lager' A Camp Physician', *Cassava Cyanide Diseases and Neurolathyrisism Network*, issue no. 25, June 2015.

So that the debilitating effects of the condition may be appreciated, a brief description gained from a cross-section of the testimonies of some of the camp victims suggests that the first signs of the illness were very painful stomach cramps with extreme flatulence. As time progressed, extreme dual incontinence ensued which, with all their other deprivations, made life a 'hell on earth' for the sufferers. But worse was to follow; very soon, the person became subject to involuntary and jerky movements of the legs, extremely painful cramps in arms, legs and stomach and, finally, paralysis of the legs to varying degrees according to individual patients.

How the cause of this sickness, a poisonous grass pea, came to be available to the camp authorities, why it was fed to the prisoners, and how the connection between the outbreak of the condition and the ingestion of the peas was discovered are all highly relevant questions, the answers to which will assist in an understanding of their plight. The answers to these questions lie, respectively, in the significance of the location of the camp, the circumstances that led to the decision to use the peas as part of the prisoners' diet, and the resolve and energy of the doctor/prisoners in the camp. Firstly, as to how and why this particular pea was available is directly related to the location of the camp. It will be recalled that 'it had been located on the grounds of an ex-Soviet cavalry training base',<sup>68</sup> with the reasonable implication that when the sudden and totally unexpected invasion of Soviet territory took place and the cavalry took flight, they left behind a large quantity of fodder, with the offending grass pea as a separate additive in hessian bags, as well as many sick and lame horses. In connection with the decision to make the grass or fodder pea part of the prisoners' diet, we find a reference in the testimony of survivor Ihiel Benditer to

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<sup>68</sup> Spitzer, L., '“Solidarity and Suffering”': Lager Vapniarka among the Camps of Transnistria', in Lustiger-Thaler, H. and H. Knoch (eds), *Witnessing Unbound: Holocaust Representation and the Origins of Memory*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2017, p. 48.

‘memorandum number 2087, dated November 13, 1942, [in which] G. Alexianu, the Governor of Transnistria, complained to the Assembly of Ministers that he had experienced enough problems in supplying the army with food, without having to also satisfy “the needs of the Jewish Communist deportees interned in the camp”.’<sup>69</sup> Benditer goes on to say that ‘the German Gestapo representative who liaised with the Einsatzkommand suggested that in order to solve this problem the Romanians should use [the] pea cattle fodder to feed the deportees...[and that] the German Gestapo representative was fully aware that the pea fodder had toxic effects on humans’.<sup>70</sup> The fact that such a suggestion should be made specifically by a German Gestapo officer is just another of many allegations that the onset of lathyrism was the result of an intentionally criminal act.

With regard to domestic animals, particularly the horse, and to emphasise the toxicity of the grass pea in the animal world as well as the human, an article written in 1933 stated that, following ingestion by ‘horses which are the most susceptible of our domestic animals... [there is] paralysis of the “nervus recurrens” and acceleration of the pulse [and]...death usually follows after months of illness with symptoms of asphyxia’.<sup>71</sup> Because of this the field pea stock only ever formed a minor additive of the horse fodder, rather than being mixed through it, and was stored separately so as to be dispensed more accurately. This would account for Kessler’s testimony:

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<sup>69</sup> Benditer, I., ‘Cattle Fodder for the Victims’, *Nizkor Project: Shattered! 50 Years of Silence. History and Voices of the Tragedy in Romania and Transnistria*, available at: <http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/c/carmelly-felicia/benditer-ihiel.htm>, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. pp. 4–5.

<sup>71</sup> Steyn, D. G., ‘*Lathyrus sativus* L. (Chickling Vetch; Khesari; Indian pea) as a Stock Food’, *Onderstepoort Journal of Veterinary Science and Animal Industry*, vol. 1, No. 1, 1933, p. 165.

Daily rations of peas [of] 400g per head, contained in 8 heavy bags, are collected each day from the military storehouse.<sup>72</sup>

In the interest of accuracy with this project, once we read of the decision to include the pea fodder as part of the prison diet, two observations arise. Firstly, the amount of pea fodder allocated to each prisoner on a daily basis is important, as different reports contained in prisoners' testimonies and historians' documentation quote varying amounts; this is relevant because there is a level of ingestion below which the risk to health is minimal. Depending on which report one reads, the daily intake of the field pea per prisoner varies from 100 grams to 400 grams, the amount being crucially important because of the toxicity contained. It seems from what has been written on the violent and cruel nature and behaviour of the various camp commanders, that the amount of field peas dispensed to prisoners, which satiated hunger was raised or lowered according to the degree of hunger and, perhaps, level of illness they wished to create. Strangely, also, there is a question as to the form in which the pea fodder was given to the prisoners. Dr. Kessler, whose testimony I suggest, should be treated as absolutely reliable, states categorically in more than one place that the peas are prepared separately as a soup, and eaten with a separate 200 gram slice of bread made from barley which also contained wet straw.<sup>73</sup> Further, I believe that when Kessler makes the statement as to quantity, it equates to that which was being dispensed on the day, according to the changing whim of the commander. Additionally, erroneous statements from academics such as 'this fodder became a food source for the prisoners to grind into flour and bake into bread',<sup>74</sup> and

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<sup>72</sup> Kessler, A., 'Ein Arzt im Lager – A camp physician', *Cassava Cyanide Diseases & Neurolathyrism Network News*, vol. no. 25, June 2015, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> Hamilton, R., *The Silent Fire: ODAP and the Death of Christopher McAndless*, available at: <http://www.christophermccandless.info/Ronald-Hamilton/ronald-hamilton-intothewild1.html> p. 1.

‘the prisoners were fed daily 200 grams of bread...made from hops and milled hay, and fodder peas’<sup>75</sup> do not assist in maintaining an accurate account when, in fact the ‘fodder peas’ were eaten separately as a soup.

The second question as to how the disease was discovered and diagnosed is answered mainly by what survivor Dr Arthur Kessler has testified in a medical sense, as well as the testimony of several survivors who have documented their own personal experiences with regard to the onset of the disease. In the unfolding of the process, and before Kessler and his fellow medical prisoner/colleagues finally diagnose the outbreak as neurolathyrism, they list a number of complaints of prisoners such as ‘feverish intestinal infections (enteritis)...chill on the bladder, muscle cramps in calf muscles, and stiffened necks’.<sup>76</sup> At this stage Kessler had assumed that ‘our dirt, malnutrition, lack of warm clothing combined with the cold Russian winter not surprisingly leads to stiff and cramped muscles’.<sup>77</sup> Separately, but simultaneously, there were many cases of gangrene caused by the intense cold coupled with a lack of clothing and heating. This was the source of much suffering, pain, and ultimately, in a few cases, death.

It was around 20 December 1942 when prisoners started to exhibit strange and debilitating but common changes to their gait and, when it was realised that the field pea diet was the only common factor linking all prisoners but not the camp guards or command, it seemed that the diagnosis was reasonable. Kessler writes that within a couple of weeks, there were 120 totally lame prisoners with approximately 1,000 more showing initial symptoms. A deputation of

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<sup>75</sup> Megargee, G. P. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos 1933–1945*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2018, vol. 3, p. 811.

<sup>76</sup> Kessler, A., ‘Ein Arzt im Lager – A camp physician’, *Cassava Cyanide Diseases & Neurolathyrism Network News*, vol. no. 25, June 2015, p. 5.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

three doctors, including Arthur Kessler, approached Murgescu's replacement Captain Buradescu, and firmly put their case that the deliberate poisoning being perpetrated against the camp's prisoners was against international law, and that an alternate to the field pea must be found before they all perish. Further, they insisted on the tremendous need for beds, bedding, warm clothing and medication. The answer was as sinister as it was direct: 'How do you know we are interested in keeping you alive?'<sup>78</sup> His total refusal of any assistance or amelioration of the hardships was followed by an effort, on the part of the 'collective' to disseminate their plight to the outside world. This was accomplished by using those men who were being accompanied under guard to the Vapniarka train yard on work detail to unload coal, and who were able to bribe their guards to mail their letters. At the same time, the 'collective' met and, with the approval of the prisoner community, advised the camp command that the prisoners of the camp had unanimously decided to refuse to eat the pea fodder any longer because of its effects, and demanded that it be replaced. This was followed by a period of approximately one week when there was no replacement and severe hunger throughout the camp. Shapiro points out that by this time, Dr Kessler and his colleagues had addressed a number of appeals to Transnistria's governor, Gheorghe Alexianu who even agreed to see a delegation of the doctors. Benditer also testifies that the news of the suffering in the camp had reached Czernowitz and that doctors and lawyers there had also sent memoranda to the governor.<sup>79</sup> Following this, the diet was finally changed on 23 January,

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>79</sup> (Steigman) Carmelly, *Shattered! 50 Years of Silence: History and Voices of the Tragedy in Romania and Transnistria*, Ontario, Abbyfield Publishers, 1966, p. 195. Unlike all other camps in Transnistria, Ion Antonescu determined that the Vapniarka camp would come directly under the control of the Ministry of Defence in Bucharest and not under the Transnistrian Governor, Gheorghe Alexianu. For this reason, little is written about any connection with Vapniarka that Alexianu may have had.

Research indicates there is only one detailed account, in the Romanian language which, when translated, quotes Alexianu as admitting to the location and existence of a concentration camp at Vapniarka. He does

1942 when Lieutenant-Colonel Gheorghe Tataranu visited the camp and ‘ordered the cessation of the fodder pea diet’.<sup>80</sup> At this time, permission was given for medicine, food and clothing to be sent by families outside who were able to do so.<sup>81</sup> In fact, Benditer contributes valuable and additional facts surrounding the camp command’s reaction to these events. Firstly, Captain Popescu was brought in to uncover and rout out any organisers within the camp of the latest resistance. He immediately reduced bread rations to 100 grams, prohibited parcels, mail and food for prisoners entering the camp, as well as confiscating all heating ovens. All infractions resulted in physical beatings, as was brutal incarceration in two-metre-deep vertical holes in the ground where the prisoner was forced to remain standing for sometimes forty-eight hours. None of these measures managed to break prisoners’ spirits or interfere with any ‘illegal’ activities.<sup>82</sup> It should be pointed out that the actions of the prisoner population in defiantly refusing to eat the offending grass-pea diet should be seen as being an action of resistance in Bauer’s terms as previously mentioned on p. 158 of this thesis.

I note that, apart from survivor, Ihiel Benditer, who contracted the disease and provided a testimony,<sup>83</sup> most surviving prisoners do not provide detailed accounts of the effects of the

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not speak about any aspect of the camp, nor does he admit to receiving a deputation seeking him to intervene in the poisoning of prisoners by the particular diet being fed to them. The account is to be found in an online article in connection with his pre-trial interrogation: Obidin, Y., ‘The Interrogations of the Governor of “Transnistria” Gheorge Alexianu Conducted by Smerț in Moscow’, <https://razboiulpentrutrecut.wordpress.com/2015/11/03/interogatoriile-guvernatorului-transnistriei-gheorghe-alexianu-efectuate-de-catre-smers-la-moscova/> (accessed 17 September 2022).

<sup>80</sup> Barbulescu, A., ‘Life, Death, and Survival in the Vapniarka Camp’, *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. viii, no. 9, 2016, p. 86.

<sup>81</sup> Shapiro, P., ‘Vapniarka: The Archive of the International Tracing Service and the Holocaust in the East’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2013, p. 121.

<sup>82</sup> (Steigman) Carmelly, *Shattered! 50 Years of Silence: History and Voices of the Tragedy in Romania and Transnistria*, Ontario, Abbyfield Publishers, 1966, pp. 195–196.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 181ff.

pea. Although there is evidence in their testimonies that they were aware of fellow prisoners exhibiting a strange gait, much of the other visual evidence, such as the many cases of unrelated problems of gangrene and skin conditions, would have been hidden from the general prisoner community, as Kessler, together with his colleagues, attempted to house those so afflicted in separate rooms. Almost every testimony mentions, to some extent, that there was a problem of paralysis caused by the pea fodder diet and, apart from Dr Kessler's detailed and comprehensive report, their comments are usually brief and with varying degrees of emotion. For example, survivor Strul Haber's only reference to it is: '...we suffered the horrendous effects of the pea fodder, meant to exterminate us'.<sup>84</sup> Beno Baruch testifies strongly about 'the human guinea pigs [at] the hands of the Nazis. Who could forget...[the] young men barely in their twenties who became life-long invalids unable to stand on their own two feet?'<sup>85</sup> Survivor Esther Gonda-Magyar mentions, only in passing, 'The pea fodder caused paralysis in many victims. The more fragile young people were particularly susceptible.'<sup>86</sup> Eugen Friedlander, in an otherwise detailed testimony, has only the following two sentences: 'There were about 100 sick people in the camp. Most of them suffered from paralysis brought on by eating pea fodder.'<sup>87</sup> However, Nathan Simon, who testified to his experiences in a book he wrote following his ordeal in the camp, tells vividly and poignantly how he suffered through all the initial stages until he could no longer walk without the aid of

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<sup>84</sup> File III-367, Reel 15, RG-25.021, The Camps Tg. Jiu, Vapniarka, Grosolovo, 1940–1945, Archive Records, United States Holocaust Museum Archives, Washington.

<sup>85</sup> Baruch, B., Vapniarka, *Biblioteca Politica*, vol. 40, September, 1966, published in Tel Aviv. (The comments have been translated from the original Romanian.)

<sup>86</sup> File III-371, Reel 15, RG-25.021, The Camps Tg. Jiu, Vapniarka, Grosolovo, 1940–1945, Archive Records, United States Holocaust Museum Archives, Washington.

<sup>87</sup> File III-370, Reel 15, RG-25.021, The Camps Tg. Jiu, Vapniarka, Grosolovo, 1940–1945, Archive Records, United States Holocaust Museum Archives, Washington.

crutches. The following necessarily extensive and translated quote will give a powerful idea of his traumatic situation:

Dr. Arthur Kessler was the head of the group of imprisoned doctors. He helped me out of my clothes, which I was very embarrassed about, since I hadn't been able to bathe for weeks. We could only wash ourselves, if necessary, with snow. He examined me carefully and asked about the exact nature of my illness. I told him everything, from difficulty with urinating to collapsing under the weight of carrying a sack of potatoes. When I asked him what I am suffering from and what would happen to me, he looked at me with a sad expression. But he tried to act as if everything would be fine, so as not to demoralise me. That was not true! I had the feeling that he was hiding something very serious from me, something that was threatening my life. Despite my just twenty years of age, I felt weak and years older. Dr. Kessler showed me to the sick room.<sup>88</sup>

Simon continues:

About twenty inmates with various diseases such as cancer, tuberculosis, ulcers, etc. were lying there on bare boards. Only Avram Solomovici and Eli Stein had lost the use of their legs. I was now the third person with this mysterious disease. Many, I suspect, had been showing initial symptoms for a long time, but it was only the three of us that got that bad. The result of extensive urinary incontinence with painful urination, cramps in calves, difficulty walking, and finally the legs. It was only with great effort that we

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<sup>88</sup> Simon, N., *"...auf allen Vieren werdet ihr hinauskrechen!" Ein Zeugenbericht aus dem KZ Wapniarka*, Berlin, Institut Kirche und Judentum, 1994, p. 76.

could walk with the support of sticks. None of us suspected that we would suffer this disease all our lives.<sup>89</sup>

The ‘collective’ which, as has already been explained, had assumed the role of a central, yet ‘underground’ management authority of the prison community, understood that it was its responsibility to devise ways of helping the prison community to cope socially, emotionally and culturally with its incarceration and disease. As a result, we find various activities being undertaken, such as religious services, musical and poetry evenings and a heavy emphasis on craft work. In fact, a lot has been written on the production of miniature items such as metal jewellery, and the ‘pièce de résistance’, a bound book of drawings measuring one inch by half an inch, containing forty pages of written comments and drawings, and which was presented to Dr Kessler as a tribute for the tireless work he performed for his fellow prisoners. Discussion on this and the many other items of jewellery and art produced by the prisoners are described by Hirsch and Spitzer.<sup>90</sup>

Although it is difficult, by way of a summary, to know how many camp prisoners were affected by ingesting the pea fodder, researchers Hirsch and Spitzer have suggested that, at the height of the disease in the camp in late January, 1943, at least 1,000 prisoners were exhibiting early- and intermediate-stage symptoms, with 120 already totally disabled. Ten deaths were directly attributable to the sickness, whilst an unknown number of additional deaths were indirectly linked by way of gangrene and various abdominal conditions connected with the poisonous material’s ingestion.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Hirsch, M., and Spitzer, L., ‘Testimonial Objects’, in Baronian M.A., and Besser, S., and Jansen, Y. (eds), *Diaspora and Memory: Figures of Displacement in Contemporary Literature, Arts and Politics*, Amsterdam, Rodopi BV, 2007, pp. 137–162.

<sup>91</sup> Hirsch, M., and Spitzer, L., ‘There Was Never a Camp Here’ in Kuhn, A., and McAllister, K.E. (eds),

Some relief was provided for the community from December of 1942 when permission was granted by Antonescu for prisoners to work outside the camp,<sup>92</sup> mainly loading coal at the rail yards. Survivor Eugen Friedlander relates that those men were not short of ingenious ways of smuggling food that they had begged, bought or stolen in the town back to camp, which was then shared or given to sick prisoners, using those opportunities also to set up relationships with co-operative townspeople who would send and receive messages from families of prisoners.<sup>93</sup> Many of these messages resulted in money and food parcels arriving and addressed to prisoners. Often, parcels would be pilfered or confiscated by the camp commander of the day and, even more often, money would never be handed over. More than one camp commander was involved in ‘trafficking [in] money, letters, and other goods between detainees and their families in Bucharest’, but Murgescu and Popovici are the two named by Barbulescu in her record of the camp.<sup>94</sup> One survivor heavily involved in smuggling food, letters and parcels and medications back into the camp was prisoner Armin Nagel, a dentist by profession who, because he was able to relieve the painful dental condition of some of the officers, was given a daily job at the local military hospital. In his compelling video testimony, but sometimes difficult to understand English, Nagel tells of the instructions given to him by the prisoners’ camp committee that he was to agree to go daily to the hospital, he was to perform his dental duties to the best of his ability, but he was also to try and smuggle both pharmaceuticals and food back to the camp. He agreed to do this,

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*Locating Memor: Photographic Events*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2006, p. 149.

<sup>92</sup> Hirsch, M., and Spitzer, L., ‘Testimonial Objects’, in Baronian M.A., and Besser, S., and Jansen, Y. (eds), *Diaspora and Memory: Figures of Displacement in Contemporary Literature, Arts and Politics*, Amsterdam, Rodopi BV, 2007, pp. 137–162.

<sup>93</sup> File III-370, Reel 15, RG-25.021, The Camps Tg. Jiu, Vapniarka, Grosolovo, 1940–1945, Archive Records, United States Holocaust Museum Archives, Washington.

<sup>94</sup> Barbulescu, A., ‘Life, Death, and Survival in the Vapniarka Camp’, *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. viii, no. 9, 2016, pp. 84–86.

realising that there were orders from the Interior Minister that anybody found smuggling such things would be shot, as well as the other nine people who were members of the group of ten in the camp to which the person belonged. Nagel also makes the harrowing comment that, when the poison in the grass pea started affecting people, there was not one day when several teenagers would fall to the ground, with their legs paralysed.<sup>95</sup>

The account of the camp, once the offending field or grass pea had been removed from the prisoners' diet, changes in character and assumes a much more optimistic outlook. Coupled with this, while not directly impacting on the camp community, 'the change in policy toward the Jews began in October 1942, before the Axis defeat at Stalingrad, and deportations [to Transnistria] were definitely terminated in March–April 1943'.<sup>96</sup> The circumstances which brought this about were strongly connected with Antonescu's perception that, the war may possibly be lost and that, therefore, a public demonstration of policy change may stand him in good stead. This was also seen as his reasoning in connection with his reversal of plans to allow the deportation of Romanian Jews to the Nazi death camp of Belzec.<sup>97</sup> Already, on 19 January 1943, in response to requests from prisoners at Vapniarka, Directive No. 55347 was issued by the Ministry of the Interior, setting up a committee to select 'Jews who had been "unjustly" deported to Transnistria and interned in the camp in Vapniarka...'<sup>98</sup> As a result, on 17 March, 427 prisoners were permitted to leave the camp and were placed in

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<sup>95</sup> Armin Nagel, interviewed by Yvonne De Fries for the USHMM Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive, location of interview: Hilo, Hawaii, 15 December, 1996, Reel 3 of 7, commencing at 23 minutes for approx. 10 minutes.

<sup>96</sup> Friling T., Ioanid, R. and Ionescu, M. (eds), *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, Final Report, Findings & Recommendations*, Bucharest, Polirom, 2004, p. 464.

<sup>97</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln and Jerusalem, University of Nebraska Press and Yad Vashem, p. 487.

<sup>98</sup> Carp, M., *Holocaust in Romania: Facts and Documents on the Annihilation of Romania's Jews, 1940–1944*, Safety Harbor, Florida, Simon Publications, 1946, p. 224.

various Transnistrian towns.<sup>99</sup> Life in the camp continued until a decision was made in Bucharest in October 1943 to close the camp. Barbulescu suggests that ‘the main reason for that was the Red Army’s steady approach’.<sup>100</sup> As well, others have commented that Antonescu considered that such action would also elevate his standing in the eyes of the Allies, should peace talks commence. Barbulescu also writes that 54 prisoners were sent to Rabnita prison where they were murdered, with the remaining 550 sent to Grosolovo ghetto ‘and safely repatriated by Sabin Matora, the last commander of Vapniarka’.<sup>101</sup> With these events, the saga of the Vapniarka Camp comes to a close. Further consideration of both the deliberate poisoning of Vapniarka prisoners, and the results of trials for war crimes of those connected with the camps existence will be covered in the next chapters.

The prime objective of this project is not only to highlight the unique events which transpired there, but to also attempt to describe, in basic terms, the type of every day life to which those prisoners who were not ill were subjected. In previous works on the camp, the emphasis has been on those prisoners who were suffering the poisonous results of the ingestion of the damaging field peas. The number of victims, at its highest, was approximately seven hundred, and these were affected on a symptom spectrum of mild to total lower limb paralysis. The numbers began to subside as soon as the field peas were removed from the diet. It has been suggested, but not substantiated, that 120 prisoners were paralysed for life.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Degeratu, L., ‘The Camp in Vapniarka: Detention, Survival, Memory’, *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. vii, no. 8, 2015, p. 32.

<sup>100</sup> Barbulescu, A., ‘Life, Death, and Survival in the Vapniarka Camp’, *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. viii, no. 9, 2016, p. 88.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> ‘It is necessary to discuss the 120 permanently disabled prisoners because their lives, like all prisoners of Vapniarka, were drastically changed by the effects of neurolethyrism’ available at: [courses.bowdoin.edu/history-2202-fall-2020-bmalakoff/primary-source-analysis/](https://courses.bowdoin.edu/history-2202-fall-2020-bmalakoff/primary-source-analysis/) (accessed 22 October, 2023).

Although conditions were harsh, and the lack of a nutritional diet affected even those prisoners who had not succumbed directly to the poisonous field peas, they had few ways to occupy themselves during the day. Simion Bughici, in the translated version of his 30-page testimony, gives us a snapshot of life in the camp:

Gradually, life took its course; the party organisation became very active, and the anti-fascist collective gained great influence and prestige with most detainees. Detainees rallied around the collective and benefitted from their work; cleaning the grounds, maintaining bedrooms, the kitchen, cultural activities, and the communication with the camp authorities re their varying problems...We repaired the water pipes, the kitchen, the doors and windows, and set up a laundry in our building. We managed to find materials from some other dilapidated buildings. We dismantled some old stables, and made some beds from planks of wood. We set up an infirmary as well.<sup>103</sup>

Another excerpt from prisoner testimony, this time that of Radu Alexandru, explains that one of the prisoners:

...came up with the idea of organising activities after lights out. The purpose behind this was to maintain the morale of detainees. A program of songs, recitals, and humorous entertainment was suggested. The proposal was met with great enthusiasm by many detainees. A large number contributed to the creation of a program of varied entertainment, such as Romanian and Yiddish songs, opera arias, etc. These were seen as measures

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<sup>103</sup> File No. 374, Reel 15, RG-25.21, Simion Bughici, Testimonies retrieved from International Tracing Service, Bad Arolson, Germany.

deemed to improve resistance to the harsh measures adopted by the camp commander.<sup>104</sup>

And later in his testimony:

Our cultural activities continued in the camp. We also had discussions about science, psychoanalysis, Einstein etc. Life was bearable from the point of view of morale. The community became stronger, people came to us for advice.<sup>105</sup>

And this excerpt from the translated testimony of Ester Gonda-Magyar:

We set up cultural activities in the camp. These were meant to sustain morale, and the cultural level of detainees. For example, we would gather in our barracks at night and talk about books we had read, and films we had seen. I organized ballet numbers with some detainees...In 1943, for Purim Ofelia Manole recited the Meghila, and Asia Moraru played Esther. We had poetry readings, symbolic dances and I put together 'tableaux vivants'.<sup>106</sup>

### **The Camp Commanders**

Having given an extensive overview of events in Vapniarka, it is fitting to examine the identity and nature of those Romanian army officers who were tasked with overseeing the camp during the period of its second iteration. Although there seems to be some confusion in survivors' testimony as to the chronological order in which these men served in their roles, it

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<sup>104</sup> File No. 367, Reel 15, RG-25.21, Radu Alexandru, Testimonies retrieved from International Tracing Service, Bad Arolson, Germany.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> File No. 371, Reel 15, RG-25.21, Esther Gonda-Magyar, Testimonies retrieved from International Tracing Service, Bad Arolson, Germany.

is certain that the group was made up of five officers over the period, namely: Lieutenant Colonel Ion Murgescu, Captain Sever Buradescu, Captain Cristodor Popescu, Colonel Cristache Popovici and Colonel Sabin Motora. The first three named, according to the testimonies of a number of the survivors, were sadists. I have already made reference to Murgescu's welcoming comments as the prisoners first entered the camp on that day in September 1942; apart from this, he was particularly hated because of his control of the single water supply pipe into the camp. He had a tap installed in his office, which enabled him to turn the supply on and off at will. Many times, after turning it on, he would wait until the many thirsty people were ready to collect the water and turn it off once more.

His replacement was Captain Sever Buradescu, a man who made it his business to brutalise prisoners at any opportunity, and who also interfered with the water supply. It was Buradescu who devised the torture of digging a two-metre-deep hole in the icy ground, just round enough for a man to stand up in, into which someone would be lowered for up to two days with a lid placed over the top. Both Murgescu and Buradescu were brought before the People's Court after the war, and sentenced to death, with both sentences being carried out. Buradescu was replaced by Captain Cristodor Popescu who immediately embarked on an even more severe regime. He banned mail and parcels from arriving into the camp, reduced the portions of bread, and removed the small tin heating stoves from rooms. Like Murgescu, he also forced prisoners to spy on their peers and report to him. On 6 February 1943, Popescu was replaced by Colonel Christache Popovici who immediately doubled the daily amount of bread per prisoner and, while on a trip to the capital, demonstrated a degree of kindness by agreeing to bring back money and letters which had been sent to prisoners by families outside. For this considerate behaviour, Popovici was arrested removed and dealt with by his superiors. When brought before the People's Court after 1945 for war crimes, he was acquitted as a result of statements by former camp prisoners as to his character.

In September 1943 Colonel Sabin Motora was appointed camp commander and, with the announcement in October that the camp would be closed, became the final commander of its operation. He was a man of good intentions, and we are told that: ‘the food improved and the treatment of the prisoners...changed for the better. [They] were permitted to obtain food from the local market and to get in touch with their families.’<sup>107</sup> It is well known that Motora risked both his military career and his life as the Red Army came closer to the Transnistrian border, by evacuating the camp and transferring the 611 remaining prisoners back across the Romanian border to the Grosulovo ghetto. For his outstanding efforts he was recognised by Yad Vashem as ‘Righteous Among the Nations’.

### **Conclusion**

This key chapter has told the unique story of what transpired in the Vapniarka concentration camp. My main purpose has been to broaden the account of the camp beyond that which has generally been understood, and to emphasise the human suffering that was endured. From all my reading of the history of this camp I believe, demonstrably, that those who survived owed their lives to the intervention of that experienced and determined group referred to as ‘the collective’. The following paragraph, written about them by an academic who was, himself, a survivor of a Transnistrian camp, summarises their place in the story of this camp:

The internal organization of the Vapnyarka camp was an extraordinary example of how people under tremendous mental and physical pressure were able to so arrange matters that they simply made it impossible for the camp authorities to crush their spirit. Even the paralysis in the camp could

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<sup>107</sup> Yad Vashem, World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Righteous Among the Nations Database, available at: [righteous.yadvashem.org/?searchType=righteous\\_only&language=en&itemId=4016513&ind=0](https://righteous.yadvashem.org/?searchType=righteous_only&language=en&itemId=4016513&ind=0) (accessed 12 July 2021).

not vanquish them, because they fought it valiantly. This they accomplished primarily by imposing order on their lives as well as total discipline, and by selecting leaders who were able to break through the wall of despair and depression with which their captors had surrounded them.<sup>108</sup>

I can think of no more fitting final comment than to quote from the testimony of a further Vapniarka survivor Benno Baruch:

22 years after the ‘rescue’, I have not seen such dignified, talented people with a yearning for life in such dire condition and facing a horrendous end as a result of what they went through at Vapniarka.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Shachan, A., *Burning Ice: The Ghettos of Transnistria*, Boulder, East European Monographs, 1996, p. 244.

<sup>109</sup> Baruch, B, ‘Vapniarka’, *Biblioteca Politica*, vol. 40, September, 1966, published in Tel Aviv. (The comments have been translated from the original Romanian.)

## **Chapter Six: Vapniarka Concentration Camp: A Comparison with Nazi Style Medical Experimentation, or Just Plain Murder?**

### **Scope of This Chapter**

The scope of this chapter is to provide a detailed investigation and discussion into and surrounding the nature and results of any intention on the part of the camp authorities to include ‘field pea’, otherwise known as *Lathyrus sativas*, in the diet of the Vapniarka prisoners with the prior knowledge of the damaging outcome. Whether we should consider this action as being akin to Nazi medical experimentation, and therefore as a crime against humanity, or as a wanton criminal act of malicious intent, or merely as a result of generally inhumane conditions within the camp, are important questions that need to be examined.

It was considered appropriate to have this chapter follow the main chapter of the thesis, in which the daily life of the camp was discussed, and in which the claims concerning the poisonous peas were made and supported by both academics and the many testimonies quoted. The questions as to whether the decision to include the peas in the prisoners’ diet was done with the foreknowledge and malicious intent that it would affect them as it did, or whether it was based on expediency both as to its availability and cost, need to be examined. Or was it perhaps, a combination of both? The strong amount of historical support for the measure to be seen as one of criminal malevolence certainly warrants a valid investigation by examining all the facts at our disposal, and this shall be the main thrust of this chapter. One may ask what is to be gained by arriving at one conclusion or another and my answer is that,

should it be shown to have been more likely than not that there was a clear criminal intent to cause bodily harm and possibly death, then I will have at least had a part in confirming the policy of which the survivors who testified themselves to these matters were already sure. The chapter commences with a brief overview of the offending plant which, when included in the diet, caused the outbreak of the condition.

### ***Lathyrus sativus* (Grass Pea): Its Characteristics and Historical Significance**

It is not intended to delve too far into the botanical nature and properties of the particular ‘field pea’ on a technical basis, the ingestion of which was responsible for causing the large numbers of cases of neurolathyrism amongst the prisoner population within the Vapniarka camp; however, the provenance of the plant needs to be documented in order to demonstrate how long it has been a part of European and Asian farming and agriculture and, therefore, how entrenched in people on the land the knowledge of its characteristics and effects would most certainly have been at the time of the Second World War. One may certainly say that many men in Romanian uniform would have come from the land and would have been familiar with the plant under discussion. These two points also assist in clarifying and strengthening the claims made regarding the intentional inclusion of the plant in the prisoners’ diet, by knowing and understanding the harm it would cause.

I find it impressive, and telling, that the ‘pedigree’ of this plant genus goes back many thousands of years. We are told:

*Lathyrus sativus* originated from the Balkan Peninsula in the early Neolithic age. [Up to 10,000 years ago] It may have been the first domesticated crop in Europe around 6000 BCE. Grass pea is now widely cultivated and naturalized in many areas of southern, central and eastern

Europe...Grass pea is [also] an economically important crop in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup>

The effects of a diet which contains a high content of the field pea and causes the symptoms and, ultimately, the incurable paralysis of the legs are evident in Vapniarka prisoners. We read:

The first ever recorded lathyrism epidemic may have occurred in the Indian subcontinent around 1500 BC. According to Chopra, ‘In the old Hindu literature, the Bhavaprakasa, it is written that the *triputa* pulse causes a man to become lame and crippled and it irritates the nerves’.<sup>2</sup>

Hippocrates, in the first written record of a similar epidemic in the western world around 300 BC, writes of a famine in the town of Ainos: ‘those who eat constantly of beans, both male and female, were affected with weakness in their legs, from which they escaped with difficulty’.<sup>3</sup> Further, in an article in 2011, which brings the issue further to the fore of European knowledge and experience:

The propensity of the grass pea to paralyse the lower extremities was appreciated throughout Europe during the Middle Ages, when the disease apparently reached alarming proportions. In 1671, Duke Georg of

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<sup>1</sup> Heuze, V. et al., ‘Grass Pea (*Lathyrus sativus*)’, *Feedipedia*, a programme by INRAE, CIRAD, AFZ and FAO, available at: <https://www.feedipedia.org/node/285> (accessed 15 June, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Chopra, R., ‘Lathyrism’, *The British Encyclopaedia of Medical Practice*, London, Butterworths, 1935, pp. 651–657.

<sup>3</sup> Hippocrates, *The History of Epidemics, in Seven Books*, Book 2, Section IV, Translated into English from the Greek by S. Farr, London, T. Cadell, In the Strand, 2003, pp. 59–60.

Wurttemberg issued the first ever edict banning the consumption of *Lathyrus* peas due to its ‘paralyzing effects on the legs’.<sup>4</sup>

The above comments by academics must be added to the various unsupported and personal remarks from various other prisoners’ testimonies to the effect that both the Germans and the Romanians knew that that the eating of the plant was potentially poisonous and therefore harmful. This must also be understood in light of the quantity of between 200 and 400 grams consumed by each Vapniarka prisoner as a major component of the daily diet so that, without it, the prisoners would have surely starved.

### **An Examination of the Intent to Cause Harm**

The issue of whether an intent to cause harm through the feeding of the grass pea existed in the minds of those responsible for the incarceration of the prisoners at Vapniarka is not a simple one. It may be easy to conclude that it was a deliberate act because the source of the paralysis was not removed once it was noticed, reported, and demonstrated to camp command and, therefore, any further feeding of the offensive plant to the prisoners is absolute evidence of intent. However, this would seem to deny or overlook one possible argument which, at best, may have been a contributing factor behind the reason that the poisonous food was fed to the prisoners. It is necessary here to refer to three sources which, though varying slightly one from the other, may assist in supplying an answer. Firstly, to the testimony of detainee Ihiel Benditer, writing after the war, who reported on the circumstances surrounding a certain complaint of Governor Alexianu to the Assembly of Ministers. Alexianu stated in his Memorandum 2087 of November 13, 1942, that he had no food to feed the prisoners and

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<sup>4</sup> Garfinkle, J. Andermann, F. and Shevell, M. I., ‘Neurolathyrism in Vapniarka: Medical Heroism in a Concentration Camp’, *The Canadian Journal of Neurological Sciences*, vol. 38, 2011, p. 840.

sought an answer to this problem.<sup>5</sup> Benditer goes on to recount that ‘the German Gestapo representative who liaised with the Einsatzkommando suggested [that the grass pea being stored there] be used’.<sup>6</sup> With a slight difference, academics Westmore and Weisz write:

the central authorities in Bucharest accepted the suggestion of the *SS Einsatzgruppen* (killing squads) to add grass-pea (*Lathyrus Sativus*), left behind in abundance by the retreating Soviet troops who had used it as fodder for horses, to the daily bread [rations] of prisoners.<sup>7</sup>

To bring the discussion back within the confines of the camp itself, and in an essay named ‘Theory on Chris McCandless’ Death’, R. Hamilton writes:

At Vapniarca, the Camp Commander, Ion Murgescu, along with the encouragement of a German officer known only as Hauptsturmführer Kirdoff, recognized the ‘pea fodder’ as *Lathyrus sativus*. In what was little more than a crude experiment to study the effects of the toxic legume upon a captive population on a mass scale, they issued the decree that the fodder be turned into flour for the prisoners’ bread.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Benditer, I., ‘Cattle Fodder for the Victims’, *Nizkor Project: Shattered! 50 Years of Silence. History and Voices of the Tragedy in Romania and Transnistria*, available at: <http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/c/carmelly-felicia/benditer-ihiel.htm>, p. 4 (accessed 6 July 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp. 4–5.

<sup>7</sup> Westmore, A. and Weisz, G., ‘Medical Research Undertaken in Captivity: A Form of Resistance to Imprisonment and Attempted Extermination’, *War & Society*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2009, p. 99.

<sup>8</sup> Hamilton, R., Online essay, available at [www.christophermccandless.info/Ronald-Hamilton/ronald-hamilton-intothewild2.html](http://www.christophermccandless.info/Ronald-Hamilton/ronald-hamilton-intothewild2.html), p. 2 (accessed 22 December 2020). (Author’s note: A librarian, Ronald Hamilton, was fascinated by the story of poisoning at Vapniarka, as he was engaged in researching the death of one Christopher McCandless, who died suffering very similar symptoms to the Vapniarka prisoners while living alone in the forests of Canada and foraging for his own food. Hamilton claims that he gained his information concerning Vapniarka from correspondence with the son of the last camp commandant of

There are, however, several aspects of this last quotation that bear examination; firstly, the possibility is raised here that the decision to feed the poisonous material to the prisoners was made locally, at the camp site, whereas the previous quote from Westmore and Weisz seem to indicate that the decision was taken in Bucharest. We are told, however, by Hamilton that it was decided at the camp by Murgescu together with a German officer and I attach importance to the fact that there is therefore a degree of ‘on-site’ Nazi input in the ‘decree that the fodder be turned into flour...’ But secondly, and unfortunately, the reference to ‘fodder [being] turned into flour’ sours one’s confidence in accepting the statement’s overall accuracy in any event, as it is beyond doubt, based on prisoner Arthur Kessler’s indisputable testimony, that the grass pea was prepared separately as a soup and not included as an ingredient of the bread which was given out (see below). Although this source is not the only one to have made the similar claim that the bread was made using flour milled from the grass peas, Dr. Arthur Kessler, who headed up the group of doctors among the detainees, is quite clear in describing the use of the grass pea as a separate diet item.<sup>9</sup> He says that ‘the daily ration of peas of 400g per head, 8 heavy bags, are collected each day from the military storehouse’.<sup>10</sup> Again, he describes the bread separately, when he says: ‘nearly 200g bread per head, barley bread with wet straw, real chaff. It is deeply split, it crumbles when cut, has a wide soapy strip at the bottom, but it is nevertheless bread’.<sup>11</sup> It must also be remembered that the prisoners were responsible to prepare their own food, so that the peas ‘from the

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Vapniarka, Sabin Motora.)

<sup>9</sup> Kessler, A., ‘Ein Arzt im Lager – A camp physician’, *Cassava Cyanide Diseases & Neurolathyrism Network News*, Issue Number 25, June 2015, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3.

military storehouse' would have been prepared and eaten in that form, as the prisoners almost certainly did not have flour milling equipment.

I put forward the proposition that, despite camp commander Murgescu most probably being personally aware that the field peas were toxic, it was also because of the fear of severe embarrassment, and maybe worse, should the instructions of the German officers be disregarded, that the poisonous food continued to be used. I also note the following accusatory comments contained in an article in a Canadian medical journal:

In retrospect, the decision to feed the toxic pea to the Vapniarka inmates was made for both practical and more heinous reasons. The pea represented a cheap and available source of food. However, since it was withheld from the camp command, it would be fair to say that it was known to be toxic for humans and thus did conform to the Romanian version of the exterminationist Final Solution.<sup>12</sup>

Compared with this accusatory tone, as well as that of many other academic and prisoner testimony sources, we have the much more reasoned, but still somewhat similar comments of both Dr. Kessler and Spitzer. Arthur Kessler's statements, in typically measured medical fashion, speak of 'ignorance on behalf of the camp authorities about the toxicity of grass pea, a need to save expenditure and availability of more pleasant food for the guards [being] also plausible reasons for leaving the horse feed for the prisoners...' and further, '...While there is little evidence [of] malicious intent regarding the use of grass pea, the camp command showed little interest in improving the conditions, even when it became clear that a lot of

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<sup>12</sup> Garfinkle, J., Andermann, F. and Shevell, M., 'Neurolethyrism in Vapniarka: Medical Heroism in a Concentration Camp', *The Canadian Journal of Neurological Sciences*, vol. 38, 2011, p. 842.

inmates showed muscle cramps and walking problems'.<sup>13</sup> Spitzer's chapter introduces the general subject of the camps in Transnistria, but devotes the major part of his contribution to the camp at Vapniarka. After traversing most of the same ground as others in relation to the use of the offending grass pea, it is my view that there is a strong degree of decisiveness in his conclusions. They are worth quoting in some detail:

It now seems clear that the decision to feed Vapniarka's inmates the toxic pea fodder was undertaken for both practical and ideological reasons... the ready availability of the chickling-pea fodder for use in the inmates' food would have seemed like a windfall and a logical allocation of resources. But since it also seems to have been known by some Romanian officials that the pea fodder was toxic for human consumption... feeding it to the imprisoned Ukrainian partisans, religious sect members, Jews, Communists, and to other 'politicals' did in fact conform to official and unofficial directives from the highest authorities in Bucharest itself...The induced lathyrismus epidemic in Vapniarka is yet another manifestation of the exterminationist aspects of the Romanian Holocaust.<sup>14</sup>

As a postscript to the total 'intent' perspective, one cannot help asking why the poisonous diet was abrogated without too much fuss following the hunger strike of the prisoners. My strong understanding of the situation is, following a number of indicative references, and taking into account the period we are discussing would have been around the first quarter of 1943, that

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<sup>13</sup> Kessler, A., 'Ein Arzt im Lager – A camp physician', *Cassava Cyanide Diseases & Neurolathyrism Network News*, Issue Number 25, June 2015, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Spitzer, L., 'Solidarity and Suffering: Lager Vapniarka among the Camps of Transnistria', in Lustiger, H. and H. Knoch (eds) *Witnessing Unbound: Holocaust Representation and the Origins of Memory*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2017, p. 52.

the possibility, or even likelihood of losing the war was gaining traction, and that the curtailment of murderous behaviour may have been more on the minds of the camp command and their superiors than was evident. Obviously, it would take some time for opinions and rumours emanating from the top echelons of the military to filter down to the officer ranks such as those commanding camps. However, an interesting passage in an article by Kshyk states the following:

As early as November 1941, Antonescu began to express doubts as to the feasibility of victory against the Soviet Union. By the end of the year, Antonescu had begun to shift his attention to beginning preparations for a possible peace conference...[He] was determined that Romania's bargaining position [was not to be] undermined by its mistreatment of Jews and other minorities.<sup>15</sup>

I consider Kshyk's operative date of November 1941 in terms of Antonescu's attitude to be earlier than the circumstances warrant (for which Kshyk offers no authority) and may probably only have been a private attitude on the part of Antonescu; that is not to say that potential defeat at the hands of the Allies became a real possibility not long afterwards.

The defeat, officially on 2 February, 1943 of German armies at the hands of the Russians following the Battle of Stalingrad created shockwaves throughout the German military forces, resulting in the deploying of German troops from various European theatres to replace the losses suffered on Russian soil. I posit that this important defeat must have given Antonescu great pause for reflection regarding his own attitude to the almost certain defeat of Germany at the hands of the Allies. A final and important postscript to my argument is the known fact

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<sup>15</sup> Kshyk, C. J., 'The Holocaust in Romania: The Extermination and Protection of the Jews Under Antonescu's Regime', *Inquiries Journal/Student Pulse*, vol. 6, no. 12, 2014, p. 1.

which I have quoted elsewhere that, for reasons not made known, Antonescu had decreed soon after the establishment of the second iteration of the camp that all matters concerning the supervision of the Vapniarka Concentration Camp were to come directly under his personal control and were not to be included within the purview of the newly appointed Governor of Transnistria, Gheorghe Alexianu.<sup>16</sup> With these facts in mind, I suggest that the conditions at the Vapniarka camp must have weighed heavily on Antonescu's mind. It must certainly be much more than mere coincidence that the poisonous grass peas were removed from the camp diet in the last week of January 1943, even though Dr. Kessler's approach fell on deaf ears with regard to medical and other supplies for the already sick. But he did manage to have a written complaint delivered to the government offices in Bucharest. It is surely not a coincidence either that, on 22 February 1943, an official government medical investigation committee arrived at the Vapniarka camp. I think the foregoing delay establishes incontrovertible proof that, once being aware of the results of the grass pea poisoning, there was reckless intent on the part of the camp command to allow as many people as possible to either die or become paralysed. It is interesting to note that, as he had assumed full control of the Vapniarka camp and was, therefore, responsible for the decision that the grass pea should be fed to the prisoners, it was most likely Antonescu, and his close connection with the camp that forced its commanding officers to remove the offending poison.

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<sup>16</sup> 'On 22 May 1942, the Ministry of Internal Affairs sent out a circular to the police and gendarmerie relaying an order from Marshall Antonescu which it had received from his office. All active Communists were to be deported to Transnistria...The Ministry proposed to the Army General Staff that the activists be interned in Vapniarka camp, situated in Jugastru county': Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 196.

## Judicial Outcomes for the Crimes Committed

The details of the war crimes of the previously mentioned camp commander Murgescu, for which he, along with his fellow camp commander Sever Buradescu were charged and tried in Bucharest in 1945, were summarised in a document entitled 'Poporul acuza!' or 'The People Accuse' and published in that year; these will be examined in more detail in the next chapter of this thesis. Interestingly, and co-incidentally with the arrival, on 16 September 1942 of over 1,000 detainees, we read that Murgescu's command commenced on 1 August of that year, when he took over from one Alex Stoleru.<sup>17</sup> Because we have survivor testimony to the effect that victims of neuroleptism were already seen to be present in the camp on the Jewish prisoners' arrival, this would indicate that Stoleru had also been in charge of the camp when the poisonous field peas were already being used, and also why Murgescu was able after only six weeks into his command, to quite easily make his comment at the gate as though he were a 'seasoned veteran' on the subject. I make the point also that, with his statement 'but you will leave on all fours', made to the prisoners as they arrived at the gates of the camp, there is the implication that Murgescu was both condoning and openly signifying that the practice responsible for causing the paralysis would continue. It also shows that camp command was already quite aware that the grass pea was the culprit, and that the later results of the concern and hard work by Dr. Kessler and his colleagues only discovered what was already known. The document above, i.e. 'Poporul acuza', details Murgescu's behaviour in relation to the initial cases of paralysis when we are told that, although the cases were reported to him, with the plea that the grass pea be removed from the diet, he deliberately

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<sup>17</sup> Anon, *Poporul acuza!*, Bucharest, Editura Apararii Patriotice, 1945, p.6. (This government-published document of 117 pages, produced at the time of the trials, was a listing of all those military personnel and public officials who had been charged with war crimes of various types, showing the actual charge as well as supporting details against each one. During the period that the trials lasted, large sections of this document were published daily in the official nationwide communist newspaper 'Scinteia'.)

ignored the request and went further by preventing medication and warm clothing reaching those already sick. Although there is no record that has come down to us of more than a couple of sentences spoken to prisoners by Murgescu, the two statements quoted here are as indicative as they are chilling. Geza Kornis records that when it was pointed out to Murgescu by Dr. Arthur Kessler that the continued feeding of grass pea to the prisoners was going to ultimately kill all of them, Murgescu replied: ‘What makes you think the survival of you people means anything to us?’<sup>18</sup> On a further occasion, when the prisoners, at great physical risk to themselves, launched a camp-wide strike against the eating of the grass pea, Murgescu screamed at them: ‘You have been brought here to die, not to live.’<sup>19</sup>

The law that was used to prosecute personnel such as Murgescu and Buradescu will be looked at in more depth in the next chapter; however, both these men were tried in the so-called ‘Macici Group’ trial of 46 persons, held in Bucharest in May 1945, in the first of many cases to be heard following the ceasing of hostilities, firstly in Bucharest and later in Cluj. The almost farcical and political nature of those ‘show’ trials will also be discussed later; however, the charges levelled by the state against the individual members of this group were based on the so-called ‘Law no. 312 of 21 April 1945, for the tracking down and sanctioning of those guilty in the disaster of the country, and war crimes.’<sup>20</sup> To expand on this a little further, this particular law laid down two punishable areas of criminal activity which can be summarised briefly as (1) Those that ‘promoted the advance of Fascism or Nazism and...allowed the advance of the German forces in the country’s territory, and after

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<sup>18</sup> Kornis, G., *Geza Kornis Memoir*, available at: [portal.ehri-project.eu/units/us-005578-irn514336](http://portal.ehri-project.eu/units/us-005578-irn514336).

<sup>19</sup> Butnaru, I. C., *The Silent Holocaust: Romania and its Jews*, New York, Greenwood Press, p. 144.

<sup>20</sup> Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004. p. 316.

6 September, 1940, acted [to carry this out]<sup>21</sup> and (2) laid out fifteen sub-categories of war crimes, the most applicable of them being the actions of: ‘commanders, directors, supervisors, and guards of camps of either POWs, deportees or political inmates, or forced labor detachments, who treated the persons under their control in an inhumane way’.<sup>22</sup> The letter of the law demanded the death penalty or a life sentence with hard labour for any infraction of any of the fifteen sub-categories; however, many of the group indicted had already escaped, or could not be traced, and the whole process, particularly with regard to mishandling of court processes, bungling of documentation, and the sheer politicization of all aspects, resulted in only four of the twenty-seven death sentences being carried out, while:

the others got from two years of imprisonment and hard labour to several decades in prison, [or] return to civilian status and seiz[ure] of wealth... However, the death penalty [of the 23 remaining so charged] was changed to life in prison, for political and humanitarian reasons.<sup>23</sup>

## **Conclusion**

I believe that I have presented sufficient evidence, including the primary evidence of camp survivors, to demonstrate the distinct possibility, even likelihood that the criminal behaviour of the camp commanders in feeding the grass pea to prisoners with the result of causing serious illness, paralysis and death was, in the cases of at least both Murgescu and Buradescu, a strong part of the charges which resulted in their death penalties. While it may be somewhat of a stretch to equate their behaviour with Nazi-style medical experimentation, and therefore

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Muraru, A., ‘Romanian Political Justice. Holocaust and the Trials of War Criminals: The Case of Transnistria’, *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. 10, no. 11, 2018, p. 135.

as ‘crimes against humanity’, the poisoning of Vapniarka’s total population knowingly and without regard to the consequences remains as just one more stain on Romania’s involvement in the Second World War.

It will be the aim of the next and penultimate chapter of the thesis to examine the attempts to bring to justice the Romanian public office holders and military personnel in connection with the Vapniarka camp who committed various war crimes, and the vexed and bungled exercise this became. It is not too much of a stretch of the imagination to see the Soviet Union’s involvement in the total process as no more than a huge political exercise, designed to show the defeated Romanian nation the power now wielded by the Soviets as its new political masters.

## Chapter Seven: Post-War Criminal Trials

### Scope of this Chapter

We are informed by the Holocaust Encyclopedia that many of the European nations such as Czechoslovakia, France, the Netherlands, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the Soviet Union, which had been occupied by Nazi Germany during the Second World War all held criminal trials for German perpetrators, and their own citizens, including Jews, who had collaborated with the Germans in a huge series of trials following the end of the war.<sup>1</sup>

I note, in commencing this chapter, that the study of what generally has become known as ‘post-war trials’, has emerged in recent years as an important ‘stand-alone’ area of research.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, in Romania’s case, the whole subject of the creation of appropriate law with

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<sup>1</sup> ‘War Crimes’ in *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, Publisher: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, available at: [encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/war-crimes-trials](https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/war-crimes-trials) (accessed 19 August 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Jockusch, L., Kraft, A., and Wünschmann, K. (eds), *Revenge, Reconciliation, Justice and Emotions between Conflict and Mediation*, Jerusalem, The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2017; Porat, D., *Bitter Reckoning, Israel Tries Holocaust Survivors as Nazi Collaborators*, Cambridge, MA Harvard University Press, 2019; Frei, N. (ed.), *Transnationale Vergangenheitspolitik. Der Umgang mit den Kriegsverbrechern in Europa nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2006; Deak, I., Gross, J., and Just, T., *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and its Aftermath*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2000; Kornbluth, A., *The August Trials: The Holocaust and Postwar Justice in Poland*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2021; Weinke, A., *Die Verfolgung von NS-Tätern im geteilten Deutschland*, Paderborn, Schöningh 2002. (These are representative only of the works which have, since the start of this century, contributed to a relatively new area of enquiry).

which to process and punish war criminals ‘had never had a coherent and comprehensive approach’.<sup>3</sup> It is not my desire to delve too deeply into this area, nor is one able to, firstly because of the inability to access documents kept secret during over fifty years of Communist rule and, secondly that until recently, with the research done in this area, particularly by Bogdan Chiriac<sup>4</sup> and Andrei Muraru,<sup>5</sup> the area had only been covered in a cursory manner. My purpose in this chapter, however, is to look at the competing interests which existed in Romania following Antonescu’s removal from power. I will detail the bases on which the trials of those accused were carried out, with special emphasis on the charges and sentences concerning four individuals whose names and deeds figured so egregiously in the lives of the prisoners in the Vapniarka camp. The background of the People’s Tribunals will also be explained.

Basically, this chapter is an examination of how the system under which those guilty of so-called ‘war crimes’ during the Antonescu years was structured to deal with them and whether it was successful in serving as some degree of closure for the death by murder of between 280,000 and 380,000 Romanian Jewish citizens. A second and most interesting area of enquiry was prompted by a statement in an article by the academic E. Grec, from whom I was privileged to have some personal assistance during the preparation of this chapter. In one of his articles in which he undertook an examination of how the Soviet influence affected the trials, he wrote that he saw them: ‘not as a creative force of “communist justice” (e.g. show trials), but rather as an unstable form of “political justice”...They were neither show trials,

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<sup>3</sup> Muraru, A., ‘Legislation and War Criminals’ Trials in Romania’ in (ed.), Irina Vainovski-Mihai, *New Europe College Stefan Odobleja Program Yearbook 2009–2010*, Bucharest, New Europe College, p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> Chiriac, B., ‘The Trial of the Antonescu Group (May 6–17, 1946) and the Communist Takeover in Romania. A Historical Interpretation’, PhD Thesis, Central European University, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Muraru, A., ‘Procesele criminalilor de razboi din Transnistria’, PhD Thesis, Iasi: ”Al.I. Cuza” University, 2011.

nor popular trials'.<sup>6</sup> Having carefully researched what is accepted by the term 'show trial', I agree with that statement, and believe that they were precisely engineered as political trials.<sup>7</sup> Grec's statement prompted me to look somewhat deeper into the competing forces that were at play in Romania, both political and social, right from the time of the coup which saw Antonescu ousted, to the holding of the political trials now being discussed, and a degree of emphasis will be placed on this area throughout the chapter.

Chiriac gives us the following succinct definition of a political trial in the following terms:

Political trials are defined as highly publicized examinations before the courts of law during which the normally neutral legal process [is] manipulated by the ruling elite or dissenters in order to achieve political or ideological goals...<sup>8</sup>

The political climate, during the period to which I am referring, necessarily pitted the competing political interests and objectives of the government from which Antonescu had recently been removed against the might of the Soviet regime via the Romanian Communist

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<sup>6</sup> Grec, E., 'Transition on Trial: The People's Tribunals between Historiography and the Politics of Memory in Post-War Romania', *Holocaust. Study & Research/Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. xii, no. 13, 2020, p. 297.

<sup>7</sup> Oxford Dictionary definition of 'show-trial': 'A judicial trial held in public with the intention of influencing or satisfying public opinion, rather than ensuring justice.' Further reading included: Allo, A.K., 'The Show' in the 'Show Trial': Contextualizing the Politicization of the Courtroom', *Barry Law Review*, vol. 15, Issue 1, 2010, pp. 41–72, Ellman, M., 'The Soviet 1937 Provincial Show Trials: Carnival or Terror?', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 53, no.8, 2001, pp. 1221–1233. (One other feature which has become synonymous with 'show trials' is the fact that the outcome of the 'sham' is usually known before it takes place. This does not appear to be the situation with the Romanian war trials).

<sup>8</sup> Chiriac, B., 'The "Retrial" of Marshal Ion Antonescu in Post-Communist Romanian Historiography', M.A. Thesis, Central European University, 2008, p. 28.

Party. I intend to look at some of the thoughts of academics on this ‘battle’ as a second and separate area of discussion in the chapter.

### **Introduction to and Preparation for the Process and Trials**

Although the records are not as definitive as one would like, the detail available demonstrates the way in which the retributive policies of the Romanian authorities played out, at least during the round of trials with which we are concerned, namely those held in Bucharest over May to June, 1946. Following the coup of 23 August 1944, as a result of which Ion Antonescu was ousted from power by King Michael, Constantin Sanatescu was immediately installed as Prime Minister. An armistice agreement between Romania, on the one hand and the United Kingdom, the United States and the Soviet Union on the other, was signed on 12 September. Stalin, as the victor, took it upon himself to construe the terms of that agreement as giving him the upper hand in taking overall economic and political control of the country. Following the coup, and the swearing in of Sanatescu as Prime Minister, a further change of office quickly followed after some fourteen weeks, and on 6 December 1944, Nicolae Radescu was installed. However, by the end of February 1945, agitation by the Communist forces within the country against Radescu’s failure to deal more quickly and harshly with Antonescu and his ministers resulted in a visit to Romania by Stalin’s envoy Andrei Vyshinsky. In an audience with the King, and in a climate of consolidation of Communist power in Romania, Vyshinsky openly threatened the monarch with serious repercussions if the Communist-supporting Petru Groza was not installed in Radescu’s place. The King succumbed to the pressure and Groza was sworn in as Prime Minister on 6 March 1945. While investigations into the likely war criminals to be charged were being conducted, preparation of the legal bases on which to support those charges, and especially the tribunals to act as the mechanism of trial, had been in train in the background, and it was from the

taking of office of Prime Minister by Petru Groza that these matters quickened in pace. It is this period that Grec observes: ‘Organized by the Romanian government[s] under Soviet supervision, the Tribunals were impacted by the latter[’s] presence and generated a paradox that has not been sufficiently explored so far’.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, however, it is important to realise that the task of building a legal and political framework within which to put to trial those who had wrought such misery in the carrying out by Romania of its own and the Axis’s ambitions during the war on both its own and in Transnistria, was a most complex and problem-ridden exercise. We must bear in mind that:

The new governments that came to power after Romania’s August 1944 switch of allegiance had to deal with the issue of maintaining fully functioning executive and judicial systems while also prosecuting those considered responsible for Romania’s role in genocide policies across Eastern Europe in Romanian-occupied territories.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of the internal situation in Romania at this time, the fact that on 23 August, 1944, concurrent with the overthrow of Antonescu, Romania ‘changed sides’ by leaving the Axis and joining the Allied forces impressed neither the Soviets, nor the other Allies. Concurrently, it was the Soviet government which was now engaged upon an intense socialization plan across eastern Europe. Grec makes the further important point that: ‘The environment of

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<sup>9</sup> Grec, E., ‘Transition on Trial: The People’s Tribunals between Historiography and the Politics of Memory in Post-War Romania’, *Holocaust. Study & Research/Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. xii, no. 13, 2020, p. 308.

<sup>10</sup> E. Grec, ‘Henchmen to Killers: War Criminals and Perpetrators in Romania’s Postwar Trials (1945–1948)’, PhD Thesis, University of Heidelberg, 2020, Abstract, available at: [uni-heidelberg.de/facultaeten/philosophie/zegt/sog/Grec/html](http://uni-heidelberg.de/facultaeten/philosophie/zegt/sog/Grec/html) (accessed 30 August, 2021).

Soviet influence which led to the communist takeover of Romania...after 1944 can help scholars better separate war crime trials from the show trials of the 1950s and 60s'.<sup>11</sup>

Under the terms of 'The Armistice Agreement with Rumania; September 12, 1944',<sup>12</sup> (and particularly Articles 13 and 14), 'Romania was required to collaborate with the Allied High Command in the apprehension and prosecution of those persons accused of war crimes'.<sup>13</sup>

The preparations for specially designing and formulating a legal system for the metering out of justice to those who would be referred to as 'war criminals' were hampered by the many, many years of chauvinistic and nationalistic attitudes which had manifested themselves in the formation of anti-minority and ultra-national groups. Nevertheless, once the agreement was signed, the attitudes of both the United Kingdom and the United States could best be described as 'disinterested', and almost a recognition that 'to the victor belong the spoils'. The Soviets quickly set about developing the necessary changes to both legal and political attitudes as the means of obtaining legitimacy, being anxious for the trials to take place as soon as possible.

However, unlike right-wing radical parties such as the German National Socialists in Hungary, and the Ustasha organisation in Croatia which, as constituted entities that could be disbanded, Romanian Fascism and anti-Semitism were embedded within 'the corps of army officers and unter-officers, the police and special services personnel, as well as the state

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Allied Control Commission, *The Armistice Agreement with Rumania; September 12, 1944*, The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, available at: <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/rumania.asp#art1> (accessed 25 August, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Bogdan, C., 'The 'Retrial' of Marshal Ion Antonescu in Post-Communist Romanian Historiography', M. ArtsThesis, Central European University, 2008, p. 27.

apparatus'.<sup>14</sup> These attitudes were also so generally and nationally embedded that, according to Andrei Muraru, a leading scholar in this area in recent times, it was not until 20 January, 1945, following deliberate obfuscation, that the first pieces of legislation for the prosecution of war criminals was promulgated. These were 'Laws Nos. 50 and 51 as published in the Official Gazette, No. 17 of January 21, 1945' which, in tandem, related to 'the identification and punishing of war criminals and war profiteers'.<sup>15</sup>

The combination of both the above statutes prohibited a range of activities which, at first reading, would seem to cast a wide net including, as they did, war crimes such as acting contrary to the provisions of international law, ordering or committing acts of cruelty or execution in areas of military action, giving orders for or initiating the creation of ghettos and labour camps, etc. However, the way in which they had been formulated and applied, allowed a whole class of 'second-tier' criminals to avoid prosecution. Taken together, Laws 50 and 51 were referred to as the 'State Law on the Punishment of War Criminals and the Law on the Liability of Persons Guilty of the Holocaust'.<sup>16</sup> And the same article continues: 'many provocateurs and instigators of war crimes, who [had] indoctrinated the conscience of society, spreading fascist ideology through the media did not fall under the scope of these

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<sup>14</sup> Obidin, Y., 'Were Romanian Criminals Punished? Part II', *The War for the Past*, available at: <https://razboiulpentrutrecut.wordpress.com/2013/07/06/au-fost-oare-pedepsiti-criminalii-de-razboi-romani-partea-ii/> (accessed 26 August, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Muraru, A., 'Legislation and War Criminals "Trials in Romania"', *New Europe College Stefan Odobleja Program Yearbook (2009–2010)*, note 68, p. 162: Law no. 50 / 21 January 1945 for the identification and punishing of war criminals and profiteers; Law no. 51 / 21 January 1945 for the identification and punishing of war criminals and war profiteers.

<sup>16</sup> Obidin, Y., 'Were Romanian Criminals Punished? Part II', *The War for the Past*, available at: <https://razboiulpentrutrecut.wordpress.com/2013/07/06/au-fost-oare-pedepsiti-criminalii-de-razboi-romani-partea-ii/> (accessed 26 August, 2021).

laws'.<sup>17</sup> Within a matter of weeks, and in readiness for the trials of the major criminals of the Antonescu regime, two important events occurred; firstly:

at the orders of A. Vyshinsky, Patrascanu [Minister of Justice] dismissed over 1,000 magistrates to make room for individuals loyal to the communist regime. This change of personnel was implemented by Law no. 640 '...which overturned the "irremovability and stability of judges"'.<sup>18</sup>

In a move, undoubtedly designed to increase Communist pressure and control, the replacements appointed were both under-qualified and under-trained but faithful to the Communist cause, effectively lowering the tone of Romania's judges as compared to the interwar period. Deletant is more scathing, referring to the replacements as 'pliant zealots'.<sup>19</sup> This process was specifically intended to ensure that the People's Tribunals, when the time came, would be adjudicated by a group of obedient hand-picked amateurs with virtually no legal training or experience. Also, in a move that was to have far-reaching consequences, King Michael issued a decree on 21 April, 1945 which had the effect of (a) replacing Laws 50 and 51 with other laws, and (b) setting up People's Tribunals which would be used to charge, try and sentence Romania's war criminals. This decree became known as Law 312. Shafir's statement that the so-called People's Tribunals set up under this law would be 'based on the Nuremberg model [Charter]'<sup>20</sup> which to my reading, creates a wrong impression, as Law 312

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Cojocariu, M., 'Subordinating Justice in Communist Romania: The Sovietization of the Romanian Justice System (1945–1953)' M.A. Thesis, Central European University, 2011, p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> Deletant, D., *Romania under Communism: Paradox and Degeneration*, Milton Park, Routledge, 2019, p. 60.

<sup>20</sup> Shafir, M., 'Romania's Tortuous Road to Facing Collaboration' in R. Stauber (ed.), *Collaboration with the Nazis: Public Discourse after the Holocaust*, London, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011, p. 246.

pre-dates the Charter setting up those trials, and was signed on 8 August, 1945.<sup>21</sup> In brief, Law 312 contains seventeen distinct areas of criminal liability, enumerated under Articles 1 and 2, with the available sentences for those crimes listed under Article 3.

Article 10 sets up the People's Tribunals, and the balance of the statute deals with the selection of judges, and the administration of the court.

Climescu explains that:

The crimes stipulated by this law [Law 312] can be summarized under three categories: (a) participation in the war against the Allied Forces and the USSR; (b) inhumane treatment enforced against war prisoners, civilians in the confrontation zones, and other persons, based on racial and political reasons; (c) support for fascism through propaganda.<sup>22</sup>

### **Trials of the Vapniarka Defendants**

I return now to further examination of the political nature of the trials and the ways in which the Soviets endeavoured to use them to their own ends. The performance of the Tribunals, both at Bucharest and Cluj fell far short of achieving justice without fear or favour at almost any level. The deep Soviet involvement with the whole tribunal process is captured in the following quote of one academic who claims that: 'the trial[s] of May 1946 became a stepping-stone in the Romanian Communist Party's rise to power. In fact, the trial was used to

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<sup>21</sup> 'Agreement for the prosecution and punishment of the major war criminals of the European Axis. Signed at London, 8 August 1945', available at: [http://untreaty.un.org/unts/1\\_60000/2/35/00003709.pdf](http://untreaty.un.org/unts/1_60000/2/35/00003709.pdf) (accessed 26 September, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Climescu, A., 'The Holocaust on Trial. Memory and Amnesia in the Case of Romanian War Criminals, *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. vii, no. 8, 2015, p. 307. (I also note that Climescu continues: 'We may observe that [the later] Law 291/1947 was more consistent with the Nuremberg law, as it established, besides war crimes a new category: crimes against humanity.')

symbolically sanction the overturn of the deposed Antonescu regime and to give weight to the tenuous legitimacy claims of the successor Communist regime'.<sup>23</sup>

Deletant's very forthright view of the general climate in the country at this turbulent time is also in contrast to other more conciliatory comments of the atmosphere of the time:

The establishment of the Groza government brought with it the total subordination of the forces of order to the Communists. Citizens' committees were [formed] to assist the police, which had been reduced by Soviet order on 28 February and purged, and these arrogated to themselves the right to check people's documents in the street...<sup>24</sup>

Having purged the country's judiciary with the implementation of Law No. 640, Articles 4–8 of Law 312 were invoked concerning public prosecutors, a new group with extremely wide investigatory powers. Their powers also extended to seconding the assistance of any and all arms of the judiciary to aid them in their investigations, and no appeal against any of their actions was possible. Article 9 of Law 312 also reached into the assets of any person brought before the tribunal and operated to 'freeze' all property, as well as that of all heirs, if it should be required to satisfy a judgement of the Tribunal. Although it is not within the limits of this chapter, it must be noted that, as plans of how to appropriately deal with war criminals under Law 312 were being developed, it did become clear that these issues could not be contained above 'party politics'. However, there was unanimity between opposing party leaders that prosecution of war criminals and collaborators should proceed, and so the stage was set for the first trials. It had been decided to put forty-six defendants on trial

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<sup>23</sup> Chiriac, B., "'The 'Retrial' of Marshal Ion Antonescu in Post-Communist Romanian Historiography', M.A.Thesis, Central European University, 2008, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> Deletant, D., *Romania under Communism: Paradox and Degeneration*, Milton Park, Routledge, 2019, p. 59.

including three generals, with the rest being high ranking officers, all former employees of the Romanian administration. There were also several non-army deportees to Transnistria among the defendants. The group became known as the ‘Macici group’, taking its name from the general who was the former military head of Odessa, where over 70,000 Jews were murdered by the Romanian Army.<sup>25</sup>

The trials were scheduled to take place between 14 and 22 May, 1945 and to act, one would suppose, as a prelude to the main trials of Ion Antonescu, Mihai Antonescu and other ex-cabinet ministers almost one year later. The importance of the trials of May 1945 to this thesis will become obvious when it is noted that Ion Murgescu, Sever Buradescu, Cristodor Popescu, as well as ‘Bubi’ Finkelstein, all of whom have been previously mentioned and figured prominently in criminal activities against prisoners in the Vapniarka Camp were in this first group. All these men were tried under Article 2 of Law 312, namely, war crimes and its selected sub-clauses. The trials were extensively publicised in the official media, in particular the Communist newspaper *Scinteia*,<sup>26</sup> which, once the trials were underway, carried large front-page photographs of the accused as well as official transcripts of interrogations. The trials were also widely reported on the radio and kept before the public on a daily basis. That the Communists were now making their presence felt is echoed here by Cercel:

The fact that the Communist movement was in charge of the prosecution and conviction of the crimes is of course not surprising inasmuch as Soviet

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<sup>25</sup> Chiriac, B., ‘The Trial of the Antonescu Group (May 6–17, 1946) and the Communist Takeover in Romania. A Historical Interpretation’, PhD Thesis, Central European University, 2017, p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> *Scinteia*, the official gazette of, and edited by the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, launched in 1944.

troops were present in Romania and the movement was slowly trying to rebuild its presence in public life...<sup>27</sup>

I turn now to a document to which I have referred previously in this thesis called, in Romanian, ‘Popurul acuza’ (‘The People Accuse’),<sup>28</sup> which enables me to comment further on particular Vapniarka camp personnel. This official document covers the statements of the appointed public prosecutors to the Tribunal.<sup>29</sup> Although there is no record here of witness statements, the accusers, using an inordinate amount of hyperbole, described in detail the criminal behaviour of each of the accused. Firstly, Major Ion Murgescu’s criminal exploits are enumerated, such as denying water to the prisoners, or any basic facilities such as doors, windows, beds, cooking essentials or toilets. He was accused of administering beatings, of knowingly continuing to feed the poisonous grass-pea diet and even increasing it. He was also accused of stealing prisoners’ money, drunkenly cavorting with female prisoners and of actual rape. Next, Captain Sever Buradescu came before the Tribunal; he was described as an artist and as ‘one [who would be expected to have] the soul of an artist, one who creates beauty on canvas’.<sup>30</sup> However, together with his lackey, one lieutenant Ceachir, he surrounded himself with a ring of informants from among the non-Jewish prisoners, including one Vera Isacenca who, the Tribunal was told, was later proven to be working for the Gestapo. As a ferocious anti-Semite, Buradescu brought 44 criminals into the camp from other jails, specifically for

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<sup>27</sup> Cercel, C., ‘Judging the Conducator: Fascism, Communism, and Legal Discontinuity in Post-War Romania’ in W. Delavusau and A. Gliszczynska (eds), *Law and Memory: Towards Legal Governance of History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 240–241.

<sup>28</sup> *Indictment and Reply of the Prosecution in the Trial of the First Group of War Criminals*, Bucharest, Defence of the Patriots Publishing House, 1945.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 100–108. Note: these pages cover the remarks of public prosecutors to the Tribunal concerning only the four men associated with the Vapniarka camp.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 106.

the purpose of fomenting violence with which he hoped to exterminate Jewish prisoners. He continued to organise and support ongoing physical attacks and abuse against Jewish prisoners by this mob, his aim being to taunt the Jewish prisoners to the point of rebellion when he would be justified in ordering soldiers to open fire on them. The plan did not work, because the soldiers, pointedly described by the Communist accuser as ‘soldiers from the people, peasants and workers’<sup>31</sup> refused to shoot. Buradescu is infamously remembered for the torture he devised of digging a vertical, two-metre-deep round hole in the ground into which a man was lowered and forced to stand for between 24 to 48 hours. A metal lid was placed over the hole to complete the ‘entombment’.

The next person named in absentia before the Tribunal was Captain Cristodor Popescu. He fitted the mould of the preceding camp commanders, being a hardened nationalist and anti-Semite, and made it known that he intended to achieve the deaths of all prisoners. He continued the diet of grass pea, preventing the prisoners from buying food at the local market to guarantee the eating of the poisonous food. He stole parcels sent to camp inmates by their families in Romania; however, his main claim to infamy was his confiscation and destruction of the small tin stoves in the prisoners’ barracks which supplied some warmth during the harsh winter. He was replaced on 1 March 1943 by Lieutenant Colonel Constantin Popovici who instituted an investigation into camp activities and reversed many of the murderous regulations. The last person relevant to the Vapniarka camp in this group before the Tribunal was ‘Bubi’ Finkelstein, both a prisoner and a Jew. Described to the Tribunal as a ‘rotten person’ and a ‘wretch’, Finkelstein ingratiated himself with the camp command, especially Murgescu as his driver and mechanic, thereby gaining for himself the ability to travel outside the camp. In this favoured position, he was also able to hear about and report on

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 107.

various activities within the camp, especially concerning a group of prisoners, again pointedly described to the Tribunal as the ‘collective’ who saved portions of their own food for those who were already sick. This resulted in harsh penalties being meted out to members of the group.

Although a formal sentencing document has not been located, the front page of the *Scanteia* newspaper, dated 24 May 1945, detailed the sentences of 26 of the 38 men charged and whose cases had already been heard. The five cases detailed above are among those listed, and all but Popovici received the death sentence. Popovici was, in fact, found not guilty, and excused following supportive statements enlisted from former camp prisoners. On 29 May, an appeal to the High Court of Justice by those who received death sentences was rejected; ‘However, on June 1, 1945, King Michael managed to intervene and with the express consent of the Groza cabinet and, [with] tacit approval of the Soviet authorities, commuted the death sentences to life imprisonment’.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Contest Between Two Totalitarian Regimes**

Many academics who have written on the period during which the coup that removed Antonescu from power took place, followed by the unstoppable introduction by the Soviet Union of a satellite Communist state in Romania, were at pains to comment on the climate, both political and social, which accompanied this process as it unfolded. Although I have covered some of the political and legal issues which accompanied the setting up of the trials that were held, it is not sufficient to discuss just the charges and the verdicts. It is also necessary to look behind this, what I would term as a ‘façade’, at the strategies that were implemented by the Soviets as they sought to establish their new regime. It should be noted

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<sup>32</sup> Chiriac, B, ‘The Trial of the Antonescu Group (May 6–17, 1946) and the Communist Takeover in Romania: A Historical Interpretation’, PhD Thesis, Central European University, 2017, p.141.

that the very telling difference between Romania and other eastern European nations which had Communist rule imposed upon them was the fact that Romania, as an exception, had not been invaded and occupied by Germany. As a result, Romania's political structure was, as the Soviets arrived, intact. The approach and strategy of the Romanian Communist Party therefore, in working with the major parties to formulate laws and support systems for the running of the trials became a complex social 'marketing exercise' in trying to bring the 'hearts and minds' of the people with them, rather than a declaration and enforcement procedure. Thus, even though the trials were, ostensibly, the task of the Romanian government which had remained in power after the removal of Antonescu, the influence of the new Russian masters was most evident in the setting up and carrying out of the 'trials' process. Grec puts it very succinctly when he analyses these matters in an article on the subject:

the way in which the Soviet influence in these post-war trials has been perceived, while also looking at the multiple ways in which it can be interpreted...[and] the study of the Holocaust in Romania is contingent upon understanding these crucial post-war attempts to deal with the horrors of Romania's past.<sup>33</sup>

Grec is at pains to point out that, from a Holocaust perspective, the trial process created the entirely false assumption that, because there had been no organised war crimes against Jews within Romania proper, (not strictly a true statement), there had also been no war crimes against Jews in Romanian-controlled territories either, and that the Germans should be held

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<sup>33</sup> Grec, E., 'Transition on Trial: The People's Tribunals between Historiography and the Politics of Memory in Post-War Romania, *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. xii, no. 13, 2020, p. 293.

accountable for all such crimes.<sup>34</sup> There is little doubt that the Soviet Union had a serious influence on the fairness of the trials; and here it is relevant to point to the difficulty on the part of many academics, in their examination of the intentions and effects of the Soviet interference with the trials and their preparation, to differentiate between the apparent usurping by the Soviets of, what should have been Romanian responsibility for this work, against the undeniable accuracy of the evidence presented, and the wealth of data that was accumulated. Grec sums up the trials by claiming that, while it may be correct that the Soviet-directed trials might have resulted in the rightful conviction of war criminals which were based on proper documentation, they placed a burden on the procedures, resulting in bringing a lesser sense of justice to those who had been persecuted and more of a focus on legitimising the Soviet image.<sup>35</sup>

Whilst I have described the development of the law as it ultimately applied to the People's tribunal trials in both Bucharest and Cluj during 1945 to 1947, it is the nature and underlying Soviet influence over those trials which I have been keen to stress. Having read a translation of the prosecution's case to the Tribunal, one can't help but pick out markers that indicate the unmistakable signs of a political trial; characteristics such as highly exaggerated language and references to 'class struggle'; an over representation of the trials in the newspapers to ensure the public were aware of the power of the Communist Party was also evident, with many full pages in daily newspapers given over to full and verbatim reports of daily proceedings. I believe that, although the justice meted out to four war criminals from the Vapniarka camp does little to compensate for the suffering of so many in that terrible place of incarceration, these trials also concurrently heralded the virtual ending of Romanian Jewry's long and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 294.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 308.

vibrant presence in Romania with the loss of nearly half of its total community to the Holocaust.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter's subject matter has covered issues which herald the commencement of the Communist regime in Romania. It comes, fittingly, after details of the life in the camp in Chapter Five, which was followed by an examination of whether the cruelty of the Romanian command of the camp should be viewed as something approaching 'Nazi style medical experimentation', or whether it should be seen simply as the result of the acts of murderous brutes who had been raised to be anti-Semites, and completes a somewhat broader look at the place in Romanian history occupied by the Vapniarka Concentration Camp.

I conclude with the following helpful quote from Muraru:

The trials of war criminals in Romania left a rather vague inheritance. Controversies regarding the legality of procedures, indecent propaganda, political disputes concerning the actions of the special courts only created a distorted image of political justice provided by the People's Tribunals. The moral, political and legal context when Communism came to power—through a slow coup in 1945–1948, on the ruins of the former Antonescu regime, concomitantly with the trials of the war criminals—was bound to create confusion and political debates after 1989.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Although I am aware that, at the conclusion of the Second World War, Romania still possessed one of the largest Jewish communities in Europe in terms of numbers, my intention here is to point out that the destruction of half of the nation's Jews also had the effect of destroying the will and ability of the remainder to rebuild the religious, moral and social fabric that had once existed.

<sup>37</sup> Muraru, A., 'Romanian Political Justice. Holocaust and the Trials of War Criminals: The Case of Transnistria', *Holocaust Studii și Cercetări*, vol. 10, no. 11, 2018, p. 163.

## **Chapter Eight: Overall Conclusion**

To summarise this project is, in a way, tantamount to a complete assessment of Romania's role in the Holocaust, beginning and ending with the country's entry into and exit from hostilities. As Ioanid says of the human losses: 'We may never have a full statistical picture of the human carnage [within the Jewish community] caused by the Holocaust in Romania',<sup>1</sup> but we do know from the many who have written on this subject, that between 280,000 and 380,000 souls were lost; and although this project did not set out to propose or raise new lines of enquiry, rather the opposite approach has been taken. Ostensibly, it has been one of collating and consolidating what has already been known from both primary and secondary sources about Romania's role in the Holocaust, Antonescu, and the Vapniarka concentration camp, and presenting them as a single study in the one document.

Within these dimensions, the core of the thesis set out to highlight life and events in the Vapniarka concentration camp, on Romanian-controlled soil in the territory of Transnistria, a region of the Soviet Ukraine between 1941 and 1945. In using this particular camp as a representation of all places of detention and control enforced by the Romanian totalitarian government of the day under Ion Antonescu, the aim was to situate the story of the Vapniarka camp in as broad and detailed yet relevant context as possible. Successive chapters were placed in deliberate order to reflect both the natural and/or chronological development of the wartime situation; from the existence of longstanding anti-Semitism through the joining of

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<sup>1</sup> Ioanid, R., *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime 1940–1944*, Chicago, Ivan R Dee, 1999, p. 289.

Romania with the Axis group of nations, and the establishment, across Transnistria of the types of camps and ghettos for minorities which was a common practice of member states of the Axis group.

My reading on the subject, particularly that of Deletant's work on Antonescu's role as the dictator at the helm of the Romanian nation from 1941 to 1944,<sup>2</sup> allowed me to give character and image to a cruel and oppressive tyrant who, similar to his evil Axis accomplices in both Germany and Italy, caused so much suffering to their general populations, as well as orchestrating the murder of their minorities. Antonescu's name was inextricably linked to the Vapniarka concentration camp in that it was the only one set up and run by the Romanians that was ordered by Antonescu to answer directly to him. This direct line to the dictator was achieved by virtue of the fact that the camp's command answered directly to the central Ministry of Interior and, therefore by line-authority to Antonescu himself. I was not successful in finding an explanation as to why this singular link with Bucharest had been set up, apart from my own supposition expressed in an earlier chapter, that Vapniarka was the only camp, in its final iteration, to have been set up solely for 'political' prisoners.

This thesis initially discussed and examined the historical rise, growth and effect of anti-Semitism in Romania as a deeply rooted, deeply religiously based source of hatred towards the Jews of the nation, as well as the rise of Ion Antonescu, a product of this milieu who by virtue of his political stance, found himself at bitter odds with King Carol II. As Deletant writes: 'Antonescu inherited the Axis alignment',<sup>3</sup> and although he carried no liability to

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<sup>2</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase is lifted from the Abstract to a lecture given by Professor Dennis Deletant entitled 'Ion Antonescu: The Paradoxes of his Regime. Romania, 1940-1944', held on October 1 2009, at the Central European University, Vienna.

manage the internal political upheaval it caused, he judged Germany's stance as offering Romania the best way forward; consequently, when Romania's foreign policy fell out of step with that of Germany, Antonescu forced Carol's abdication, and took control of the country.

Academics are fond of using the word 'paradox' in connection with Antonescu's dictatorship, and have given various examples of his paradoxical behaviour.<sup>4</sup> One basic and stark example that is representative of both the character of Antonescu, and of the extremely paradoxical behaviour of the man, is that connected with the request made of him by Germany to send the Jews incarcerated east of the Dnieper River to the gas chambers of the Polish extermination camps. Although at first, Antonescu had signaled his approval when his deputy Mihai Antonescu was approached by Hitler's Adolf Eichmann in this regard, he later changed his mind and refused, thus saving hundreds of thousands of lives. In case one was to grant any likelihood of his change of heart being due to a single atom of goodwill on his part, I am entirely convinced that it was due to him coldly calculating that his decision may bode well for him at any future armistice negotiating table. Antonescu's image during the Communist period after his death in 1946 rose to being one of hero status in Romania. The fact that he had been responsible, both directly and indirectly, for the murder of between 280,000 and 380,000 Jews in Bessarabia, Bukovina, and the territory of Transnistria, was either overlooked or openly refuted, and he was remembered as having been the head of the Axis member which saved more of its Jewish citizens than any other. Similarly, and as a result of the sheer weight of the Soviet influence on Romanian society, the average Romanian citizen accepted the explanation that the loss of Jewish lives had been due to the Nazis and that, but

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<sup>4</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 2, where the author gives two examples; additionally, in the online opinion publication ForeignPolicy.com, Robert Kaplan has penned an 'on point' article entitled 'The Antonescu Paradox', available at: [foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/15/the-antonescu-paradox-romania-world-war-ii-hitler/](https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/15/the-antonescu-paradox-romania-world-war-ii-hitler/), (accessed 21 December, 2021).

for Antonescu, the other half of the country's Jews would also have been murdered. For the Soviets, it was both a plausible and convenient argument, and well worthy of their support.

The central sections of the thesis covered the Vapniarka concentration camp, in both its iterations, but with a heavy bias toward the later of the two. The intention was not only to expose the unique medical disaster of the poisonous grass-pea 'diet', but to purposely bring a 'human face' to the cruel treatment, as well as the continuously harsh conditions and the constant threat of murder which the detainees of the camp had to face over their nearly two years of incarceration. The next chapter looked at the nature, history and effects of ingesting the poisonous *Lathyrus sativas* or 'grass pea' that was part of the camp diet and raising the question as to whether it was a deliberate undertaking on the part of the Romanian camp command, and the possibility that the action could be likened to Nazi medical experimentation. Chapter 7, which followed, dealt with the creation of laws with which to try the perpetrators, together with the complex political climate that accompanied that exercise. It should be remembered that the trials, especially the earlier ones in 1945 in Bucharest, were the first attempt assign the responsibility for war crimes committed by Romanians, against Romanians. Not only were these perpetrators of a mainly Jewish minority rounded up and charged, but members of Antonescu's government and of the Iron Guard were also included in those indicted. However, as is now recognised as fact, the project of the trials was wholly unsuccessful in creating an atmosphere of contrition within the nation; rather, they were seen more as what they really were: a product of the new Soviet occupation wanting to quickly establish political control.

The necessity for creating a strong backdrop to the central subject of the project was in order to appreciate the motivations which drove the 'Holocaust in Romania'. In relatively simple terms, it arose from the interplay of three separate, but interconnected aspects; firstly, the longstanding anti-Semitism which had existed in Romania, and which was inherent

particularly within the upper echelons of society and the intelligentsia; secondly, the particular character and behaviour of Marshal Ion Antonescu, a product of this society and thirdly, and flowing from this, the implementation by Antonescu of actions based on that element which he held in common with his ‘honour among thieves’ relationship with Hitler, namely, hatred of Jews, Slavs and other minorities, as well as ‘Bolshevism’. It should be noted that the respect and admiration that Antonescu and Hitler held for each other<sup>5</sup> allowed the former to indulge and carry out his own personal murderous plans for the ethnic cleansing of minorities. As an example, his cruel, detached but nonetheless pragmatic reasoning that the Jews and Roma of Old Romania or the Regat, as it was known, were more commercially useful than those of the countryside or newer territories condemned between 280,000 and 380,000 to death, and labelled Romania as having been responsible for murdering more Jews than any other Axis nation, apart from Germany itself.

Throughout my reading on the subject of Romania’s role in the Holocaust, I have struggled to understand one of the ‘paradoxes’ which Deletant applies to Antonescu. This is the one which shows us Antonescu as:

a war criminal who sent tens of thousands of Jews to their death in Transnistria, and yet he refused to send other Romanian Jews to the death camps in Poland. He was an anti-Semite and yet, despite the deportations to Transnistria, more Jews survived under his rule than in any other country within Axis Europe.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For an interesting description see: Deletant, D., *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

Knowing Antonescu and his reputation as a manipulative and calculating anti-Semite, I am able to understand that the commercial value of the Jews of the Regat to the Romanian economy took precedence over having them liquidated. I am equally able to understand his reasoning regarding the deportation of Jews to Transnistria, and his choice of the territories from which they should be driven. I see no paradox here, but rather the actions of a ruthless man who uses the maxim 'the ends justify the means' to the fullest. There is no doubt that had he seen the Jews of the Regat as expendable, they would also have been lost. I take issue with those academics who say that 'more Jews survived under his rule than in any other country within Axis Europe', and Deletant is not the only academic to point it out.<sup>7</sup> It seems to me that, most cynically, the statement is tantamount to 'thanking' Antonescu for not sending those Jews who were spared to Poland when requested. In fact, Ioanid raises the question as to whether 'Romania's wartime dictator, Marshal Ion Antonescu, was a murderer or a saviour of Jews during the Holocaust'.<sup>8</sup> While this view may be popular amongst some scholars, in order to qualify for the description of 'saviour', I would have hoped that one would have to have shown some degree of concern for the people that one is supposed to have saved. The same academics making these comments redeem themselves by suggesting that those whose lives were saved in the Regat were saved with the ulterior motive that they were deemed more useful alive and contributing to the Romanian economy.

While it is extremely difficult to avoid seeing the spectre of Antonescu in almost every area of misfortune which befell Romanian Jews between 1941 and 1944, his path of destruction was made easier by the way in which the government, administration and the nation generally fell 'into line' behind him. On this point, Ancel was moved to comment:

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<sup>7</sup> See also Ioanid, R., *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime 1940–1944*, Chicago, Ivan R Dee, 1999, p. xxii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

at no point in the decision-making processes affecting the Jews did the Romanian administration ever entertain humanitarian considerations or consider the genocide of Jews a crime against humanity.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of working and developing this thesis, I have found one small anomaly which, while previously known, certainly requires highlighting and clarifying in order to add credence to the narrative of the camp, and I repeat it here. For example, in some versions of the historical record, doubt had been expressed regarding the form in which the poisonous grass pea had been fed to the prisoners, some claiming that it had been milled into a flour and then bread being baked using the flour.<sup>10</sup> I posit that with the definitive statement from the unpublished memoir of camp prisoner, Dr. Arthur Kessler, the grass peas were stored in their original form in hessian bags and boiled in water to be eaten as a soup, the alternative claim should now be seen as having no credibility.<sup>11</sup> Further, I have uncovered and written more in this thesis about the mysterious but life-saving effectiveness of the so-called ‘Black Hand’ as

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<sup>9</sup> Ancel, J., *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2011, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Weisz, G.M. and Grzybowski, A., ‘Remembering More Jewish Physicians’, *Rambam Maimonides Med. J.*, vol. 6, no. 3, available at: [rmmj.org.il/userimages/581/0/PublishFiles/581Article.pdf](http://rmmj.org.il/userimages/581/0/PublishFiles/581Article.pdf), p. 2, and Hamilton, R., ‘Into the Wild Essay: The Silent Fire ODAP and the Death of Chris McCandless’, available at: [christophermccandless.info/Ronald-Hamilton/ronald-hamilton-intothewild1.html](http://christophermccandless.info/Ronald-Hamilton/ronald-hamilton-intothewild1.html) (The first of these articles is an academic examination of the work of Dr. Arthur Kessler, the Vapniarka prisoner who identified that the cause of the paralysis affecting so many prisoners was due to the grass peas that were being fed to them; the second article was written by a retired librarian who undertook research on a related plant which took the life of Canadian, one Christopher McCandless, but relied heavily on what he had read about Vapniarka. The authors of both articles have erred in recording that the grass peas fed to Vapniarka prisoners were first ground into flour and then baked into bread. As I have written, the meticulous journal of Dr. Kessler himself is absolutely clear that the peas were separately boiled in water and eaten in that state.

<sup>11</sup> Kessler, A., *Ein Arzt im Lager*, online, unpublished memoir, available at: [yumpu.com/de/document/read/6330330/ein-arzt-im-lager](http://yumpu.com/de/document/read/6330330/ein-arzt-im-lager), p. 29 (accessed 20 July 2020) of translated text from German.

Arthur Kessler termed it, [sometimes referred to as the 'collective'], than has been described in any other work on this camp.

A further area of interest raised in the thesis was the actual motivation on the part of the Vapniarka camp command to feed the poisonous grass pea to the prisoners. On balance, and whilst I believe that the poisoning of the prisoners was, on the part of those in command in Bucharest, including Antonescu himself, a deliberate act, I also must accept that the senseless feeding of the poisonous material to the prisoners by ill-informed and ill-intentioned camp officers displays a degree of recklessness for the consequences of following those orders which came from Bucharest.

To add a further layer of culpability to the camp's command, we know that the camp command reported directly to Antonescu and, as previously suggested, we also know that one Nazi officer in Bucharest, and another in Transnistria had each suggested including the grass pea in the diet.<sup>12</sup> It is my proposition the camp command considered that, because of the weight of the German suggestion from two quarters that the grass pea should form the main part of the prisoners' diet, to discontinue feeding it would cause a serious rift in relations. I further posit that for the command to arrive at such a conclusion, knowing that the expendable lives of Jewish prisoners were the only consideration, the conclusion to continue the poisonous diet is all the more understandable.

While it may be too strong a claim to say that the poisonous results of eating the field peas was both intentional and planned, a further line of argument is feasible and may be explained in

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<sup>12</sup> The German Gestapo representative who liaised with the Einsatzkommando suggested that in order to solve this problem [that of there being no food to feed the prisoners] the Romanians should use pea cattle fodder to feed the deportees. Alexianu had at his disposal a large quantity of this fodder since it had been left behind by the withdrawing Soviet troops, Dr. F (Steigman) Carmelly, *Shattered! 50 Years of Silence: History and Voices of the Tragedy in Romania and Transnistria*, Scarborough, Abbeyfield Publishers, 1997, pp. 188–189.

the following way. The camp doctors, themselves prisoners and led by Dr. Arthur Kessler, had diagnosed and reported the existence of the disease to the camp's command, advising that by continuing to eat the peas as the main item of their diet, all prisoners could die. The camp commander replied with the words: 'You have been brought here to die, not to live', and continued to supply the same field peas as the only main food given out.<sup>13</sup> The commander's statement could be interpreted to (a) acknowledge that the peas were poisonous or, in the alternative, he was not concerned if they were or were not, and (b) equally as importantly, such further supplying of the peas as the main food could be considered as attempted murder.

On beginning work on this project, I read the much-respected work on this period in Romania by Raul Hilberg.<sup>14</sup> He wrote that, in the hierarchy of the 'machinery' which handles the business of war on behalf of its society, it is the country's bureaucracy which programs and controls the process. With regard to the Nazi situation in Germany after 1933, Hilberg writes:

The German bureaucracy was not slowed by Jewish pleading; it was not stopped by Jewish indispensability. Without regard to cost, the bureaucratic machine, operating at accelerating speed and ever widening destructive effect, proceeded to annihilate the European Jews.<sup>15</sup>

By way of contrast, historians have written scathingly of the relationship between the average Romanian and the state. Deletant claimed, for example, that '...this culture [the dexterity and cunning of the elite] has been assimilated by the small, bureaucratic middle class, who expected to rely on unofficial remuneration in the form of bribes to supplement their meagre

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<sup>13</sup> Butnaru, I. C., *The Silent Holocaust: Romania and its Jews*, New York, Greenwood Press, p. 144.

<sup>14</sup> Hilberg, R., *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Chicago, Quadrangle Books, 1961.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

salaries'.<sup>16</sup> While there were those Jews who had the ability to pay bribes to officials to secure their freedom and that of their families, this was not the case for the overwhelming numbers who were being persecuted. And this should be seen in the context of Ioanid's line: 'Three factors, then, weighed heaviest in the death and *the survival* (my emphasis) of Romanian Jews: malice, greed and opportunism'.<sup>17</sup> The following often used quote from Hilberg accurately describes the everchanging face of the Romanian bureaucracy, with the dire consequences for the Romanian Jewish communities of which we are now aware:

In examining the Romanian bureaucratic apparatus, one is therefore left with the impression of an unreliable machine that did not properly respond to command and that acted in unpredictable ways, sometimes balking, sometimes running away with itself. That spurting action, unplanned and uneven, sporadic and erratic, was the outcome of opportunism that was mixed with destructiveness, a lethargy periodically interrupted by outbursts of violence. The product of this mixture was a record of anti-Jewish actions that is decidedly unique.<sup>18</sup>

This thesis has mainly reviewed the period of Romanian history leading up to and encapsulating Antonescu's dictatorial regime. The infamous Vapniarka concentration camp was used as an example and measure of the suffering that the Jews of Bessarabia and Bukovina endured. Antonescu's 'Romanianization' policies and the total forces of a coercive military, police and judicial apparatus were used against the Jews during the initial half of the

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<sup>16</sup> Deletant, D., *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-44*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> Ioanid, R., *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime 1940-1944*, Chicago, Ivan R Dee, 1999, p. 295.

<sup>18</sup> Hilberg, R., *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Chicago, Quadrangle Books, 1961, p. 486.

war, and this period saw the establishment of Romania's camps and ghettos, with the heaviest loss of life due to murder, disease or starvation. Even though, as time passed, Antonescu calculated that it would be useful to have some Jews still alive at the end of the war, he remained a violent anti-Semite till the end, paradoxically stating as late as February, 1944 that he regretted not deporting every last Jew from Bessarabia and Bukovina, [presumably, to their death].<sup>19</sup>

The most important message to emerge from this project is the fact that, when Romania made the decision to join Nazi Germany in a war against European Jewry, it did so with pre-conceived anti-Semitic and fascist convictions and plans of its own regarding the initiation and persecution of such a war, and as Eli Wiesel's Commission Report stated: 'The orders were issued in Bucharest, not in Berlin.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Hayes P. (ed.). *How was it Possible? A Holocaust Reader*, London, University of Nebraska Press, 2015, p. 563. (In an essay entitled 'Annihilation Aborted', Jean Ancel refers to a letter dated 4 February, 1944 from Antonescu to his Jewish architect, Nicolae Clejan, expressing his regret at not having deported all 14,201 Jews still remaining in Bessarabia and Bukovina.)

<sup>20</sup> Friling, T., Ioanid, R., and Ionescu, M. (eds), *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iasi, Polirom, 2004, p. 6.

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