**From Source Collections to Peer-Reviewed Journals: Romanians Write the Holocaust**

Roland Clark, University of Liverpool

On June 13, 2003, Romania’s president Ion Iliescu caused an international uproar when he stated publicly that it was “unjust to link Romania to the persecution of the Jews in Europe” because his country had had nothing to do with the Holocaust.[[1]](#footnote-1) Despite the fact that between 280,000 and 380,000 Jews and over 11,000 Roma perished as a direct result of genocidal measures carried out by the Romanian army in the occupied in the territory of Transnistria between 1941 and 1943, Iliescu was simply expressing what most Romanians believed.[[2]](#footnote-2) Between 1944 and 1989 historians and intellectuals in the Romanian Socialist Republic distorted and minimized the mass murder of Jews during World War II, encouraging people to speak of “fascist crimes” against the Romanian people with little or no discussion of the killers’ racist motives.[[3]](#footnote-3) Only the Center for the Study of Jewish History in Romania, established in 1977, promoted the study of the Holocaust, but its work was limited until more archival documents became available during the 1990s. In 1991 Sergiu Stanciu established Editura Hasefer as the center’s press, which subsequently published most Romanian research on the Holocaust in Romania over the next decade.[[4]](#footnote-4) Toward the end of the century, the National Archives also published an edited collection of the minutes of General Antonescu’s Council of Ministers meetings, which included detailed proof that the deportations and mass murders had taken place following direct orders from Antonescu and under his supervision.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Despite the growing body of evidence now publically accessible, silence characterized most of the Romanian historiography of the 1990s, and even today Holocaust deniers continue to have their voices heard in the mainstream press and even in the Romanian academy.[[6]](#footnote-6) Given that only a handful of monographs on the Romanian Holocaust had been written at the time of Iliescu’s statement, primarily by scholars based in Israel or the United States, and that the topic was mostly ignored within Romania’s educational system, Iliescu’s ignorance should have come as no surprise.[[7]](#footnote-7) Over ten years later, the Romanian public remains largely ignorant about its country’s role in the Holocaust.[[8]](#footnote-8)

International observers were nonetheless shocked that the leader of the largest state-level perpetrator alongside Nazi Germany would deny that it had ever happened. Despite making several similar blunders over the next couple of months, in October 2003 Iliescu established the Elie Wiesel International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania. Comprised of both leading historians and young researchers, foreigners and locals, minimizers and those campaigning for greater public recognition of Holocaust crimes, the commission required careful negotiations and overwhelming evidence if it was to get its work done.[[9]](#footnote-9) Its Final Report was a comprehensive treatment of the topic, however, emphasizing an intentionalist reading of Romanian culpability, while nonetheless acknowledging the importance of changing circumstances and local perpetrators.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Scholars such as Jean Ancel and Lya Benjamin had labored for years, publishing source collections from the Yad Vashem Archives that outlined the shape and nature of the Holocaust in Romania, but the commission also had access to documents in the National Archives and from the archives of the Securitate (the Communist-era secret police), which had only recently become available.[[11]](#footnote-11) On the commission’s recommendation, the government established the Elie Wiesel National Institute for Studying the Holocaust in Romania in 2005. The institute has focused primarily on research, publishing academic and educational literature, lobbying for greater public recognition of Romania’s role in the Holocaust, commemoration of the victims, and on organizing academic conferences. The institute publishes its own peer-reviewed journal, *Holocaust: Studii şi cercetări*, which at present is the primary forum for publishing research on the Holocaust in Romania.[[12]](#footnote-12) Prior to the establishment of this journal, most article–length studies on the Holocaust appeared in *Studia Hebraica*, a peer-reviewed journal launched in 2001 by Felicia Waldman, the director of the Goldstein–Goren Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Bucharest. Also as a result of the Wiesel Commission’s report, the Holocaust is now commemorated through academic conferences, monuments, and a Holocaust Remembrance Day, but these efforts usually receive little public attention.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Historical research on Romania’s involvement in the Holocaust began in earnest once the Wiesel Commission had demonstrated that this was a topic deserving serious study. Working with the commission helped focus the research trajectories of several of its members over the next decade. Paul Shapiro and Radu Ioanid assembled a significant archival collection on the Holocaust in Romania at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, and made the topic a regular focus of the research carried out by fellows at the museum’s Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies.[[14]](#footnote-14) The commission’s youngest member, Adrian Cioflâncă, has since done more than almost anyone else in Romania to ground the study of the Holocaust on a detailed archival base. In part because the “points” system Romanian universities use for promotion and tenure makes this a valuable use of resources, it is common for academics to publish collections of archival documents along with a short introduction and often with minimal editing. In recent years, such volumes have focused in particular on topics ignored by Ancel and Benjamin, such as the deportation and mass murder of Roma, survivor testimonies, documents from German archives, and the persecution of neo-Protestants.[[15]](#footnote-15) Almost all of the research published by historians based in Romania relies entirely on Romanian archives, and any interesting new work being done using Soviet or German archives is restricted to foreign academics, who have better access to the funding needed for international travel.

Research by scholars based in Romania has followed a similar trajectory to the international scholarship on these issues, much of which has been driven by emigrés working abroad, such as Irina Livezeanu, Radu Ioanid, Constantin Iordachi, Vladimir Solonari, Maria Bucur, and Marius Turda. Historians interested in the persecution of Jews first began researching the history of fascism, a topic that was palatable for the Communist Party, and then turned their attention to nineteenth and early twentieth-century antisemitism. A number of the edited source collections of the 1990s attempted to cast the fascist Legion of the Archangel Michael in a favorable light, but more recent research has been increasingly critical of the movement’s violence and antisemitism.[[16]](#footnote-16) A handful of young Romanian scholars studying abroad have also produced significant doctoral dissertations on interwar and wartime fascism, and promise to guide the field in more critical directions as they take up academic posts in Romania and abroad.[[17]](#footnote-17) In a related trend, Irina Nastasă-Matei’s research has focused on Romanian students in Germany and highlights transnational connections in the shadow of the Holocaust.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Histories of Ion Antonescu’s regime have become gradually less sympathetic over time, following the lead of Western historians such as Dennis Deletant, whose monograph on the general sparked a sea change in the Romanian scholarly consensus on the topic.[[19]](#footnote-19) The international literature has now moved toward more functionalist interpretations of the Holocaust in Romania, focusing on local perpetrators and contingent circumstances. This trend is reflected in recent approaches to decision-making and Romanian–German relations, while other Romanian scholars continue to focus on Antonescu’s official policies and orders.[[20]](#footnote-20) Turning to local perpetrators, historians have worked on reconstructing the history of the early pogroms of 1940 and 1941 as well as writing the histories of Transnistria’s ghettos and concentration camps, but these remain under-researched topics within Romanian academia.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The publication of Mihail Sebastian’s diary in 1995, in which the writer described his life as a Jewish intellectual in Bucharest between 1935 and 1944, including his alienation from long-time friends and contemporary cultural icons, caused a significant stir in Romania’s cultural scene at the time and focused historians’ attention on Jewish experiences during the Holocaust.[[22]](#footnote-22) Two important studies have detailed the forced-labor regimes Romania’s Jews were subject to, while others have focused on Jewish emigration.[[23]](#footnote-23) Efforts are being made to preserve Romanian Jewish heritage, in particular by collecting survivor testimonies and *Yizkor* books.[[24]](#footnote-24) Traces of prewar Jewish villages have almost completely disappeared in rural Bessarabia and Bukovina, but some elements of postwar Jewish culture do survive in major cities.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Although most historical research on the Holocaust has focused on Romanian perpetrators and Romanian Jews, non-historians have also written extensively on the Holocaust as a European and American phenomenon. Mihai Milca approaches it from a political science perspective, and Arleen Ionescu studies Holocaust commemoration and German museums.[[26]](#footnote-26) Armand Goşu and Caius Dobrescu have thought about the similarities between the Holocaust and Communist gulags.[[27]](#footnote-27) A number of literary scholars write and teach about Holocaust literature, with Dana Mihăilescu’s recent work focusing in particular on the testimonies of children.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Efforts to incorporate the history of the Holocaust into the secondary-school curriculum have met with resistance from parents and teachers, and even when it is taught in schools, teachers frequently do not know enough about the material to communicate it effectively to students.[[29]](#footnote-29) The situation in universities is much more encouraging. At the University of Bucharest, for example, Valentin Săndulescu teaches a regular course on Romanian antisemitism and the Holocaust in the history department, and courses dealing with the Holocaust can also be found in the Faculties of Literature, American Studies, Philosophy, and Foreign Languages and Literatures. The latter in particular has a robust Judaic studies program, which includes courses in the history of the Holocaust and events run by the Goldstein–Goren Center. The emergence of so many young scholars interested in the field, together with the increasing number of courses, publication venues, and public interest in the history of the Holocaust suggests that the future of the field in Romania is promising, even if access to research funds and institutional constraints limit the quality and quantity of what has been written to date.

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3. Adrian Cioflâncă, “A ‘Grammar of Exculpation’ in Communist Historiography: Distortion of the History of the Holocaust under Ceauşescu,” *The Romanian Journal of Political Sciences*, vol. 2 (2004), pp. 29–46; Petru Weber, “The Public Memory of the Holocaust in Postwar Romania,” *Studia Hebraica*, vol. 4 (2004): pp. 341–348; Ana Bărbulescu et al., “The Holocaust as Reflected in Communist and Post-Communist Romanian Textbooks,” *Intercultural Education*, vol. 24, no. 1 and 2 (2013): pp. 41–60. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Centrul pentru Studiul Istoriei Evreilor din România, accessed June 15, 2017, <http://www.csier.ro/>; Editura Hasefer, accessed June 15, 2017, <http://www.hasefer.ro/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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8. Felicia Waldman and Mihai Chioveanu, “Public Perceptions of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Romania,’” in John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic, (eds.), *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), pp. 451–486. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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18. Irina Natasă-Matei, *Educaţie, politică şi propagandă: Studenţi români în Germania nazistă* (Bucharest: Eikon, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
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