**Terror and Antisemitic Student Violence in East-Central Europe, 1919–1923**

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Drawing on Ehud Sprinzak’s approach to delegitimization as a multi-stage process in the emergence of terrorism as well as Eckhard Hammel’s distinction between the instrumentalization of violence (*Anwendung der Gewalt*) and the exercise of power (*Ausübung von Macht*), this chapter argues that much like the postwar paramilitary movements, the wave of antisemitic student violence that swept through at least eleven different countries in East-Central Europe during the early 1920s was a key transitional phase in the radicalization of young nationalists, many of whom later joined fascist movements in their respective countries. Students violently attacked Jews while demanding increased student control over universities and ethnically based admissions criteria. They did not understand themselves as “terrorists,” nor did they begin with the repertoires and frames usually associated with terrorism in 1920s Europe. Their use of violence to terrorize Jews and university leaders, however, shows the violence of the early 1920s to have been formative for the development of fascist movements that would later use terrorism as a weapon against democratically elected regimes.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 There is an extensive literature on student organizing in East-Central Europe, including a number of studies on the violence of the 1920s, but historians consistently analyze movements within the context of single universities or nation-states.[[2]](#footnote-2) No previous study has approached the violence as part of a transnational phenomenon, but the riots intensified at the same time in each country, the students used the same rhetoric and frames regardless of their national contexts, and the repertoires of violence were remarkably consistent across the region. In August 1920, students horse-whipped communists and Jews during riots at Hungarian universities and technical schools. University administrators responded by refusing to allow Jews to sit their exams that year. Those who tried were assaulted by their antisemitic colleagues. In early 1921, students at five large German universities held demonstrations demanding that Jewish students be expelled. Later that year, students in Czechoslovakia asked for Jews to be expelled from their universities. In Poland, various universities established a *numerus clausus* rule limiting the number of Jewish students allowed to enroll. Riots broke out in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, and Romania during 1922, and the authorities temporarily closed several universities as a result. High school students in Lida, Poland, tried to hang one of their Jewish colleagues at the end of a history lesson in October. Antisemitic students beat Jews with iron rods, occupied university buildings, vandalized the offices of liberal newspapers, and attacked professors and administrators. In most places the initial wave of riots and strikes calmed down once students went home for their summer holidays in 1923, but occasional riots and student violence continued until the Second World War.[[3]](#footnote-3) While mentioning a number of different countries, this chapter focuses primarily on Austria and Romania.[[4]](#footnote-4) These two countries make interesting case studies, as Austrian students inherited a tradition of antisemitic violence and a decades-old fraternity system integrated into a single umbrella organization that spanned the German-speaking world, while Romanian students, by contrast, built their movement in the wake of the First World War around a handful of charismatic individual leaders.

**Terror, Differentiation, and the Exercise of Power**

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, diverse groups such as the Fenians and the Irish Republican Army in Ireland, Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s followers in India, the Black Hand in Serbia, and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization in Bulgaria all made use of methods developed by Russian terrorists in support of nationalist causes.[[5]](#footnote-5) These groups used violence in symbolic and theatrical ways “to threaten the ability of a state to ensure the security of its members” (a common definition of “terrorism”).[[6]](#footnote-6) Antisemitic students thus had the repertoires and discourses of nationalist terrorism available to them in the early 1920s should they have wanted them, but they did not call themselves terrorists. Nor did anyone else call them terrorists, even though they used symbolic acts of violence to undermine the authority of university administrators and elected politicians. Students probably avoided the word because although it had a variety of meanings during the early twentieth century, by and large Europeans associated it with violence perpetrated by the far left,[[7]](#footnote-7) or with people in “backward,” far-away places.[[8]](#footnote-8) As Moritz Florin argues, while the boundaries between terrorism and other forms of political violence were still blurry at this time, revolutionaries such as Leon Trotsky were encouraging the use of terrorism, and the perception it was illegitimate had already begun to take hold outside of radical circles.[[9]](#footnote-9)

 Terrorism emerged as a field of scholarly study during the 1970s, when both scholars and politicians began to apply the word exclusively to oppositional groups who, as Lisa Stampnitzky argues, became seen as “evil, pathological, irrational actors, fundamentally different from ‘us’.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The term has evolved as a category of analysis used specifically to describe more recent phenomena, but some insights from the literature on terrorism are nonetheless helpful for understanding student violence from the 1920s. Albert Bergesen has argued that terrorism diverges from other types of violence is that the perpetrator attacks a victim in order to hurt a target who is usually not the immediate victim of the violence.[[11]](#footnote-11) Indeed, in the 1920s, the primary targets of student violence were Jews, yet students attacked individual Jews as proxies for Jewry as a whole. Students also made claims on university authorities and governments, but what they were demanding was that elites join them in persecuting Jews more effectively. It was not until antisemites concluded their governments were not going to act decisively against Jews that some of them turned against the government, embracing what Ehud Sprinzak called “revolutionary terrorism.” Sprinzak argued that:

the most significant political difference between “universalistic” terror organizations and “particularistic” ones lies in their relationship to the prevailing authority. While left wing and nationalist radical movements are usually involved in a direct conflict with the ruling government and their terror campaign is directed against its emissaries, the conflict of many right wing, religious or vigilante groups with the regime is secondary. [...] Conflict with the authorities or occasional anti-regimist violence, while likely to develop in such cases, emerges, and often greatly intensifies, only after these radicals do not obtain official help, political understanding or favorable silence. What terrorists do – and other radicals do not – is to bring their rejection of the regime’s legitimacy to the utmost and express it by extranormal violence. The importance of the understanding of terrorism in terms of a process of delegitimization is that terrorism is identified as a behavioral stage in the life history of an extremist movement, a phase in which the organization is ready and willing to use unconventional violence against government’s agents.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Sprinzak’s distinction between anti-regime violence and “vigilante” violence against specific minorities allows us to see the student violence of the 1920s as a transitional stage between the vigilante violence of organized antisemitism and the anti-regime violence of revolutionary fascism.

Terrorist repertoires of the 1920s consisted primarily of assassinations with pistols or bombs.[[13]](#footnote-13) Students, on the other hand, preferred crowd violence, vandalizing Jewish businesses and assaulting Jews whenever the numbers were overwhelmingly in the antisemites’ favour. Béla Bodó writes that in Hungary during 1919, “militant antisemites barred the entrances of university buildings and lecture halls to their Jewish classmates; they interrupted lectures and seminars held by liberal and Jewish professors; and attacked Jewish students in the student canteen and on the streets.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Jews were not the only targets of student violence, and a crowd of students clashed with workers in Budapest on May Day 1920, with the students singing the Hungarian national anthem and the workers the Marseillaise before fists began to fly.[[15]](#footnote-15) Later that year “a mob of unruly students” surrounded their Jewish colleagues, beat them, and stole their identification documents.[[16]](#footnote-16) In Germany, “hundreds of university and upper school students armed with clubs and stones raided the Jewish section” in Berlin in February 1921.[[17]](#footnote-17) As the *Manchester Guardian* reported:

towards noon a number of young men collected in small groups along the Kurfuerstendamm [in Berlin]. Most of them were obviously students and wore the Anti-Semitic Swastica and German Nationalist colours. [...] Suddenly the students attacked individuals whose features were unmistakably Jewish. Hustling them and striking them with their sticks.[[18]](#footnote-18)

That summer students in Berlin vandalized synagogues and wrote slogans such as “if coals are scarce burn Jews and proletarians” on the walls of the university.[[19]](#footnote-19) Whereas most student violence involved crowds and vandalism, some right-wing students in Breslau formed a paramilitary group affiliated with the terrorist movement Organisation Consul, and began training with rifles and machine guns.[[20]](#footnote-20) In Dusseldorf another student wounded three French soldiers and five civilians after detonating a bomb in August 1923.[[21]](#footnote-21) Terrorism and paramilitary violence was thus not out of the question for students, but the vast majority restricted themselves to more socially acceptable crowd violence.

In Poland, the National Union of Student Youth (*Narodwe Zjednoczenie Młodzieży Akademickiej*) demanded limits on Jewish enrollment in universities in May 1920, and students began disrupting lectures and attacking dissection rooms in 1921 as part of a campaign to prevent Jewish medical students from dissecting Christian cadavers.[[22]](#footnote-22) Similar complaints about the politics of dissection characterized student protests in both Austria and Romania.[[23]](#footnote-23) Antisemitic protests increased in October 1922 through a series of rallies that took place first in Lwów then in Kraków, Warsaw, and elsewhere. In November 1923 antisemitic students broke down the door of a meeting hall in order to disrupt a gathering of Jewish students.[[24]](#footnote-24) The introduction of local quotas at individual universities calmed Polish students somewhat, but violence against Jews on university campuses returned here with a vengeance at the beginning of the 1930s.[[25]](#footnote-25) Antisemitic violence broke out at the new University of Latvia on 1 December 1922 when, as Per Bolin writes, “a crowd of Latvian students roamed the building shouting ‘Get the Jews out!’ forcing Jewish students out of the lecture halls and into the street.”[[26]](#footnote-26) The December riot was followed by a strike in March 1923 when Latvian students demanding that only ethnic Latvians be allowed to study at the university – something that the university authorities also wanted but were unable to strictly enforce.[[27]](#footnote-27) In most of these cases terror was imposed by crowds or gangs disrupting lectures or assaulting passers-by; only in Germany and Romania did students turn to pistols, bombs, and political targets.

Much of the scholarly literature argues that terrorists usually come from marginalized groups that instrumentalize violence as a way of forcing people with power and influence to engage with their agendas.[[28]](#footnote-28) Eckhard Hammel, however, distinguishes between the instrumentalization of violence (*Anwendung der Gewalt*) and the exercise of power (*Ausübung von Macht*).[[29]](#footnote-29) In the early twentieth century, groups such as the Fenians, the IRA, the Black Hand, and the IMRO were unable to command public attention except through terrorist violence. They were “outsiders” to the political establishment, without access to privileges enjoyed by the dominant group, such as the privilege to have their voices represented effectively by the media and in parliament, their languages used in schools and public spaces, and to influence the state’s decision-making process. Right-wing terrorists, on the other hand, used violence to demonstrate their dominance over Jews, left-wing students and professors, university administrations and governments. This violence – inflicted with minimal risk of personal repercussions and designed to send a message to all implicated parties – was a clear expression of their hegemonic and insider status, communicated at the expense of social and cultural outsiders. Acting as vigilantes, students appropriated the right to exercise power through violence that legally belonged only to the state, implicitly claiming that they, not the state, were the legitimate representatives of the nation.[[30]](#footnote-30) Students were highly educated, they were seen as guarantors of their nations’ futures and they belonged to ethnic majority populations.[[31]](#footnote-31) In attacking Jews, students were not instrumentalizing violence because they had no other options, but exercising power that they believed was their birthright.

**A Transnational Cycle of Protest**

Students talked about the student movement as a Europe-wide phenomenon, but outside of German-speaking Central Europe, it seems to have been poorly coordinated across borders. The antisemitic student groups largely ignored the extensive international student exchange programs already running during the 1920s. Their members did take part in them, but did not do so as representatives of their movements until the following decade.[[32]](#footnote-32) Most student groups were simply too grounded in local networks, traditions, and grievances to make organizing on an international scale feasible or desirable.

One of the Romanian student leaders, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, travelled to Berlin in October 1922 “to study the organization of antisemitic student actions.” Romanian nationalist students raised the money to pay for his trip, and he wrote frequent letters home about the street violence he saw there.[[33]](#footnote-33) At that time students in Berlin were attacking communists in street brawls and assaulting Jews in the universities.[[34]](#footnote-34) The violence in Berlin was part of a wider wave of antisemitic violence sweeping German universities in Jena, Prague, and elsewhere as students demanded a *numerus clausus* on the Hungarian model and the resignation of Prague’s Jewish rector.[[35]](#footnote-35) Codreanu bought antisemitic insignias and lapel pins with swastikas from the Germans, which he sold back in Romania. According to the Romanian secret police, he promised to organize “a great student gathering” in Iaşi in March 1923, “including delegates from Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Germany,” but no such meeting took place.[[36]](#footnote-36) Codreanu was not the only antisemite studying student protest. In Berlin, the youth wing of the Selbstschutzverbände (SSV) recorded efforts being made across Europe to mobilize young people around antisemitism. The minutes from their meetings talked about a united antisemitic student movement, which they would have liked to have believed they could coordinate. The SSV had only scattered information about what was happening in the rest of Europe, but their reports made clear that student groups at each university were taking decisions autonomously in imitation of each other but not in response to orders from other universities.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Not a single pan-European movement, antisemtitic student organizations were local expressions of a transnational cycle of protest. Sociologists describe cycles of protest as moments of increased activism when a variety of social movements, each with its own constituencies, grievances, and opponents, adopt similar repertoires and frames. According to this theory, movements that occur early in a cycle establish the core repertoires and frames of the cycle, which subsequent movements adapt to their own contexts and grievances.[[38]](#footnote-38) Local contexts determined how movements evolved in each place, but the repertoires and frames remained relatively constant across the continent. In Hungary, for example, student violence against Jews first emerged in the context of the White Terror, with students joining adult paramilitaries as well as forming their own student battalions.[[39]](#footnote-39) The 1920 *numerus clausus* law in Hungary provided the impetus for student movements across the region.[[40]](#footnote-40) Students from Germany, Austria, and Poland were also involved in paramilitary violence in 1919, but in Germany and Austria the student movements were organised through the Deutsche Studentenschaft.[[41]](#footnote-41) The politics of the organization differed from one university to another, and during the early 1920s the leadership had to compromise repeatedly in order to resolve schisms within the movement. Nonetheless, the Deutsche Studentenschaft provided an organizational structure through which right-wing students coordinated their activities in German-speaking universities across the region. It was not able to work with like-minded groups in Eastern Europe, and nor did it try. Students in Poland, Romania, and the Baltics did not share the German dissatisfaction with the Treaty of Versailles or have the fraternity tradition that the Deutsche Studentenschaft was based on. Moreover, German students were already ostracized by international student bodies such as the International Students Confederation.[[42]](#footnote-42) In Romania and Poland, students had neither paramilitary experience nor a tradition of fraternities. They had to build their own forms and institutions over time.[[43]](#footnote-43) In some cases antisemitic students also associated with political parties on the far right: the Polish students with Roman Dmowski’s National Democrats (*Narodowa Demokracja*), the Lithuanian students with the Christian Democrats (*Lietuvos krikščionių demokratų partija*), the Romanian students with the National Christian Defense League (*Liga Apărării Național Creștine*), and later the Estonian students with the Vaps Movement (*Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Keskliit*) and the German students with the Nazi Party and the German National People’s Party (*Deutschnationale Volkspartei*).[[44]](#footnote-44)

Antisemitic students framed their movements using precisely the same discourses as their elders, emphasizing once again their status as insiders rather than outsiders. In Latvia, nation-builders had established the University of Latvia as a “castle of light” for ethnic Latvians, and professors were already complaining that there were too many Jews enrolling for their courses in September 1919 – long before students began rioting on these grounds in December 1922.[[45]](#footnote-45) In Austria students opposed the “socialist” reform of universities and agitated for a Greater Germany that would include both Austria and Germany, which was the same thing many professors and right-wing politicians were arguing for at the time.[[46]](#footnote-46) In Hungary, students distributed antisemitic pamphlets printed by the Ministry of Propaganda itself. Members of the student militias received stipends from the state, and their leather bludgeons were named “Horthy sticks” after the right-wing regent Miklós Horthy.[[47]](#footnote-47) The *numerus clausus* law, so deeply cherished by antisemitic students across East-Central Europe, was the product of Pál Teleki’s Hungarian government and was written by leading intellectuals even if it was also a response to student demands.[[48]](#footnote-48) Teleki was himself a famous geographer, and other prominent academics such as Nándor Bernolák, Ottokár Prohászka, and Alajos Kovács all had a hand in crafting it.[[49]](#footnote-49)

**Austria**

The one organization that did manage to organize students across national borders was the Deutsche Studentenschaft, and it did so because in the fluid postwar context, many of its members considered the separation of ethnic Germans into different states to be illegitimate, as they all belonged to the same *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community). The real differences, these students argued, were not between Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, but between Germans and other national groups.[[50]](#footnote-50) “German-Austrian universities,” the Viennese branch insisted in November 1918, “should be open to German-Austrian students who have fought on the Front [of the First World War] and should remain open to those of German nationality.”[[51]](#footnote-51) The Deutsche Studentenschaft identified itself with the tradition of German Burschenschaften (student fraternities), which dated back to 1815.[[52]](#footnote-52) The Burschenschaften emerged out of the German national movement, but by the late nineteenth century camaraderie and fellowship were consistently more important than politics for most members. Each had its own colors and caps. Unity and loyalty to the fraternity was held in high importance, and joining gave one lifelong connections that could make or break a career.[[53]](#footnote-53) Although the Deutsche Studentenschaft situated itself within a long tradition of *völkisch* student organizing, the students acknowledged that the First World War and the revolutionary violence that followed in Germany were crucial catalysts, convincing them to overcome the divisions between conservative, Catholic, and liberal fraternities.[[54]](#footnote-54) The new federation built its own library, archive, printing press, scholarship system, and insurance policies. It formed working groups based around disciplines, such as Catholic Theology, Medicine, Veterinary Science, Law, and Social Science, and ran annual Student Days to promote student associational life.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Austrian Burschenschaften embraced antisemitism during the 1870s, and Robert Hein blames Catholic anti-Judaism, the “alten Herren” alumni networks, Georg von Schönerer, and Karl Lueger as the major sources of student antisemitism in Austria.[[56]](#footnote-56) They began officially excluding Jews in 1878, adding what were known as “Aryan paragraphs” to their statutes, which specified that only students of Aryan descent could become members.[[57]](#footnote-57) Violence erupted after an event commemorating Richard Wagner in 1883 and then again in 1884 following attempts to restrict means-based studentships only to students who were ethnic Germans; by which they meant not Jewish.[[58]](#footnote-58) For some students, attacking Jews was a regular event that happened every Saturday afternoon, when they assaulted Jewish students on the front ramp of the university using fists and clubs.[[59]](#footnote-59) Antisemitic students could get away with this because the police were not allowed on university grounds. As soon as someone fell or was pushed off the ramp, police would arrest them for disturbing the peace and either take them to hospital or to prison.[[60]](#footnote-60) Flare-ups of antisemitic violence followed no apparent pattern, and might have happened on one campus with no similar violence elsewhere.[[61]](#footnote-61)

Not all fraternities that identified with *völkisch* nationalism were antisemitic, and the liberal student newspaper *Deutsche Hochschule* wrote that “every German is welcome in our ranks regardless of origin, party, or belief; including the Jewish student who is a German by homeland and language, by upbringing and attitudes, and wants to practice his Germanness.”[[62]](#footnote-62) It was the antisemites who led the way in forging the early alliances that led to the establishment of the Deutsche Studentenschaft, however.[[63]](#footnote-63) Even though antisemites did not completely control the Deutsche Studentenschaft until 1924, when it effectively took over the antisemitic mantle from the Kyffhäuser Verbandand the Hochschulring movement, the organization provided communication networks and an institutional framework through which antisemitic students could coordinate their activities across German-speaking Central Europe.[[64]](#footnote-64) When introducing new members to what they might expect from the Deutsche Studentenschaft in 1924, student leaders argued that:

Life means struggle, and struggle is war. Our liberal bourgeoisie must finally realize that we are in a struggle, that we Germans are fighting and that we are fighting for life and death, and that there is therefore no quiet, comfortable, leisurely life! Just as we curse the neglect of the race which drove us into the Jewish rule during its night watch, which sold everything to the Jews: citizenship, honor, profession, nobility, daughters, etc., which plunged the German people to the abyss of destruction, just as the coming generation will curse us, that we drive ourselves even deeper into Jewish slavery in shallow disdain and un-German aversion to struggle.[[65]](#footnote-65)

During the early 1920s Austrian student violence reflected the same repertoires that had characterized it in the late nineteenth century. According to the newspaper *Jüdische Korrespondenz*,antisemitic students attacked Jews with canes and knives on a daily basis.[[66]](#footnote-66) The newspaper also reported that on 26 April 1920, students at the University of Vienna held a “pogrom meeting,” after which roughly a thousand of them proceeded to the Jewish Mensa Academica, which they “demolished,” smashing window panes, armchairs, and tables while singing the nationalist anthem *Die Wacht am Rhein*. The gathering had begun as a protest against a corrupt university official of Jewish origin, but quickly escalated as the crowd of students spread across the city.[[67]](#footnote-67) Forming a united front together with students from the University of Technology and the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU), antisemitic students lobbied for all Jews to be expelled from Viennese universities, with the result that the university was closed for two days to prevent further violence.[[68]](#footnote-68) As the *Wiener Morgenzeitung* pointed out, the vast majority of students were more interested in completing their studies than in violent political demonstrations, but neither did they do anything to stop their more vocal colleagues.[[69]](#footnote-69) Antisemitic violence disturbed Vienna’s universities in November 1922, then again in November 1923, with demands that the universities limit the number of Jewish students allowed to enroll and lift bans on antisemitic students wearing insignia. Student protesters drove Jews out of the lecture halls and attacked them with swords and clubs, causing the universities to close once more.[[70]](#footnote-70) The *Neue Freie Presse* reported that “the usual procedure was that about ten German students would grab an opponent, slap his face, tear his clothes and then kick him down the ramp.”[[71]](#footnote-71)

While arguing that antisemites should have ethnic privileges that were denied to minorities, students also suggested that they should be able to dictate policy in the universities. In one petty example from December 1921 the SSV Landesleitung reported that

a large number of student groups […] have taken resolutions which demand physical exercises for students like those introduced by the students in Göttingen. Unfortunately only a small proportion of these decisions have been acted on and only a small number of students have done the exercises. At very few universities have the university authorities, the Senate, put in place the requirement that students do physical exercise before they can sit exams. This demand for official recognition of the importance of physical exercise is the will of the majority of the German students, and its speedy implementation absolutely necessary.[[72]](#footnote-72)

This particular demand was about imposing the cultural values of the antisemitic students on the university as a whole. It neither focused on Jews nor was supported through violence, but it shows how right-wing students felt they were able to exercise power within the context of higher education. In other cases their demands extended to other academic issues, such as the insistence that war veterans should not have to sit exams of the same intellectual rigor as their colleagues.[[73]](#footnote-73)

Students also complained about Jewish or Socialist professors, demanding that they be forced out of their jobs to make room for right-wing colleagues.[[74]](#footnote-74) Professors feared that the students were throwing their weight around to prove that they were in control of their institutions, and indeed the students were explicit that greater student participation in decision-making was one of their main goals. At the University of Innsbruck students demanded a *numerus clausus* in 1918 that would limit the number of non-German teaching assistants and professors. The Professorial College argued that this was a non-issue because there simply were not many Jews there and that the real question was whether it was the students or the rectorate who was running the university.[[75]](#footnote-75) A history of the University of Technology in Vienna written in 1942 argued that in fact it *was* the Deutsche Studentenschaft that was leading policy developments here during the early 1920s.[[76]](#footnote-76) Indeed, in his speech at the beginning of 1922 the rector Karl Mayreder thanked the Deutsche Studentenschaft before anyone else as the driving force behind change at the university.[[77]](#footnote-77) Antisemites tried to overrule other students as well as their professors. Whereas the Senate of Vienna’s University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences initially insisted on the authority of the traditional student committees, administrators at other universities welcomed the Deutsche Studentenschaft as a representative organization, and in 1924 the Technical University passed a Student Law (*Studentenrecht*) giving the Deutsche Studentenschaft the exclusive right to represent students in Austria, despite loud protests from Jewish and socialist student groups.[[78]](#footnote-78)

**Romania**

Large-scale student protests began in Romania in December 1922, but these were the result of several years of ultranationalist organizing among students. Romania lacked the history of regular antisemitic violence that plagued Austrian universities, but Romanian students had been involved in occasional riots in the decades before the First World War. In particular, in 1906 students overturned trams and threw bricks and tiles at mounted police following an emotional speech by the nationalist historian Nicolae Iorga claiming that staging French-language plays in Bucharest was an attack on Romanian culture.[[79]](#footnote-79) The future fascist leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu began his legal education at the University of Iaşi in 1919, where he studied under A.C. Cuza, a family friend and antisemitic politician.[[80]](#footnote-80) Codreanu wrote in his memoirs that “the great majority of students were communists and communist sympathisers,” and that the student congress of September 1920 almost admitted Jews as members of student societies, but was prevented at the last minute by a small but determined group of antisemites from Iaşi and Cernăuţi.[[81]](#footnote-81) Codreanu and his friends engaged in regular fights with left-wing students, and violence increased during the summer of 1922 after Codreanu founded the Christian Student Association (Asociaţiei Studenţilor Creştine) in May.[[82]](#footnote-82) In a typical incident that July, Codreanu and fifty students demolished a newspaper kiosk in the center of town as the proprietor refused to allow the burning of newspapers that had reported on their hooliganism.[[83]](#footnote-83) Even though Codreanu had now graduated, antisemitic student demonstrations became a regular occurrence at the University of Iaşi once the academic year started, gaining momentum during the last two weeks of November.[[84]](#footnote-84) Violent protests spread through the university cities of Bucharest, Iaşi, and Cluj in December, with students vandalising Jewish property, breaking the windows of newspaper offices, and assaulting Jews on the streets and on university campuses.[[85]](#footnote-85) One police report from 10 December 1922 stated that:

The student protest ended in front of [the offices of the newspaper] *Monitorul Oficial* because the army had them surrounded. One of the students was wounded in the head by a gendarme during the tumult. Seeing their colleague injured, the other students began shouting that the army and the government were in the pay of the Yids. After extensive discussions they decided that no student should attend courses tomorrow and that Jewish students not to be allowed to attend either.[[86]](#footnote-86)

The same style of protest continued for several weeks, with crowds numbering hundreds of students confronting police, gendarmes, and soldiers. Attacks on Jews in lecture theatres began in early 1923, following the same pattern seen in other countries. Antisemites would enter a lecture hall, demand that all Jews leave, then beat both those who remained and those who left with iron bars or clubs.[[87]](#footnote-87) In addition to demanding that Jews be excluded from universities, student leaders complained about the poor food in the canteens and lack of space in dormitories and classrooms. Their demands that ethnic Romanians receive preferential treatment when it came to university places simply echoed a message that was being taught in schools at the time. By attacking Jews they were exercising their “rights” as members of the dominant ethnic group to marginalize and exclude minorities.[[88]](#footnote-88) Despite significant hostility towards Jews that permeated Romanian culture at the time, key individuals within university senates and in the government itself also cherished liberal values of tolerance and were unwilling to be seen giving into student demands.[[89]](#footnote-89)

Codreanu and several other student leaders turned to terrorism after deciding that the movement was beginning to wane. First he and several colleagues were arrested for attacking a Jewish neighbourhood in Iaşi with revolvers, then again in October 1923 for conspiring to murder prominent Jewish leaders in Bucharest.[[90]](#footnote-90) They admitted to conspiracy to murder, but were charged with treason for attempting to spark a national uprising against a government they believed was controlled by Jews. In his confession to the police one of the conspirators, Ion Moţa wrote that:

Recognizing a painful fact: that the students were tired, exhausted, even ready to return to the way things were (that is, to abandon their holy movement) without conditions and before achieving either victory or a great defeat. We (at least, I personally) arrived at the conclusion that we must do what the students no longer could. We, their leaders, must protect the honour that they would neglect.[[91]](#footnote-91)

Although the terrorist plot was the work of only six individuals, the antisemitic student movement as a whole rallied around them. The student newspaper maintained that “to fight to ensure that the Romanian people have an ethnically Romanian ruling class by excluding the Yids is not an attack on the Romanian state! […] Nor is defending a people threatened with destruction a crime punishable by law.”[[92]](#footnote-92) With ultranationalist support for the students increasingly visible, the defense lawyers maintained that it was not treason unless the intended victims were heads of state. The students were freed on the grounds that patriotism was not a crime.[[93]](#footnote-93) Given the plot’s success, student leaders repeatedly turned to terrorist repertoires over the next fifteen years, even while the majority of antisemitic students continued the more typical student repertoires of riots and vandalism.[[94]](#footnote-94) Codreanu was harassed by police on his return home to Iaşi and he shot the police prefect on the steps of a courthouse. Once again the subsequent trial focused on Codreanu’s motives rather than his actions, and he was acquitted on the grounds that he was defending the rights of ethnic Romanians.[[95]](#footnote-95) In 1926 another student, Nicolae Totu, shot a Jewish high school boy from Cernăuţi. The baccelaureate committees were notoriously biased against Jewish candidates, and this boy had heckled one of the ethnically Romanian examiners who was administering the exams that year. The examiner attacked the boy in a pamphlet, accusing him of insulting “the prestige of the Romanian state’s authority,” and when Totu was tried for murder he was acquitted after only ten minutes because his motives were “clearly” patriotic.[[96]](#footnote-96) In 1933 three of Codreanu’s student followers shot and killed the prime minister, Ion Gheorghe Duca, after he won an election that they believed had been unfairly rigged against them.[[97]](#footnote-97)

**Conclusion**

While early twentieth century terrorists used pistols, bombs, and assassinations, in most cases students used sabers, clubs, and vandalism to advance their political agenda. Why did students turn to terrorism in Romania and not elsewhere? In Germany those students who embraced terrorism were a minority, and only the assassins of Walter Rathenau enjoyed any level of support within the student body.[[98]](#footnote-98) In each case individual personalities and the reactions of the authorities undoubtedly played a role, but there were also structural differences in each country. In particular, Austrian students mobilized through pre-existing Burschenschaften and were able to communicate with each other and with university authorities through the Deutsche Studentenschaft. Attacks on Jews were ingrained in the rhythms of fraternity life, and having a strong, transnational organization allowed them to influence the universities more successfully than their Romanian counterparts. In Romania, on the other hand, antisemites only managed to gain control of student organisations in 1920, and the organizations though which they mobilized in November 1922 had only been founded in May that year. The role of charismatic individuals such as Codreanu was much greater in Romania than elsewhere, and the political careers of these individuals rested on their ability to maintain the momentum of the movement. Codreanu and his colleagues thus broke with the repertoires of strikes, rallies, and assaults that characterized student antisemitism elsewhere, turning to terrorist plots and assassinations.

Throughout East-Central Europe antisemitic student violence consistently involved the exercise of power in order to consolidate ethnic privileges of dominant populations in the new or reconstructed nation-states. Striking terror into the hearts of their victims, antisemites made it clear that their voices were the ones that mattered on campuses across East-Central Europe. Living through a liminal moment of postwar reconstruction and state-building, students took the idea that they were representatives of the nation seriously, and mobilized to secure the dominance of their nation within the postwar states, and of themselves within their universities. Although they were using violence as a means of pressuring the authorities to act against Jews, outside of Romania students did not take the step, which fascists would do explicitly during the 1930s, of attacking the state itself on the grounds that the elected authorities were not the legitimate representatives of the nation. The right-wing student violence thus represents a preliminary phase within Sprinzak’s typology, before antisemites embraced what Sprinzak called “revolutionary terrorism.” Once they graduated, many continued their association with antisemitic causes. Accordingly, histories concerned with the origins of fascism would do well to pay attention to the student movement as a breeding ground for radicals in the interwar period.

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