

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jean Ancel. *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011. xiii + 699 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-2064-5.

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Jean Ancel

## The Holocaust in Romania

The deaths of millions of Jews at the hands of the Nazis have prompted much research and the publication of thousands of books. Despite it all, the Romanian Holocaust remains a somewhat obscure subject. In fact, little has been published concerning the tragic events that took place there during World War II. Few are aware that a country other than Nazi Germany devised and executed a different kind of Final Solution. This is where this manuscript comes in. It tries to shed as much light as possible on this dark subject matter.

The book is separated into thirty-eight chapters. However, some of these could have been grouped together rather than subdivided. For example, the first six or seven chapters lay down the framework for all future discussions to follow in that they collectively discuss the necessary background information and compare the church, Romanian intelligentsia, and Jewish presence in Romania.

The first several chapters deal with the rise of anti-Semitism in Romania before 1941, emphasizing that Marshal Antonescu, who served as the prime minister during World War II, was not the first anti-Semitic government official in Romania. Although from 1941 to 1944 there were no fascist parties in Romania, every other party that existed in Romania advocated the physical extermination of the Jews. The highest decision-making circles of the Romanian government, including Antonescu himself, embarked on a policy of deportation and extermination.

In January 1938, King Carol II and Prime Minister Octavian Goga restricted Jewish rights in Romania. Goga at this point proposed the deportation of all Romanian Jews to Madagascar (there is an obvious connection between this Romanian proposition and the Nazi plan.) On January 21, 1938, he signed Decree Number 169, which stripped the majority of the Jewish population of their Romanian citizenship.

Ion Gigurtu, Antonescu's predecessor, passed various anti-Jewish laws, which were directly inspired by the Nuremberg Laws. Under the Laws of Blood, mixed marriages were forbidden and the definition of a Jew was made known. By the time Antonescu came to power, the atmosphere in the higher echelon of the Romanian government was virulently anti-Semitic.

The next five or six chapters concentrate on Antonescu's regime. A new project of Romanization (chapter 15), as opposed to the original Romanization (in chapter 8), is stressed and differences laid out. Whereas the original one was "the state-ordained robbery" (p. 112), the new one also included intellectual and cultural components. Antonescu's attitude toward the Jews and "Final Solution" is thoroughly considered and quotes from original documents are used throughout the chapters.

At this point in the book, the reader has a working knowledge of the background and inner workings of the Romanian government before and during World War II. The chapters that follow deal with individual regions or cities in Romania proper as well as Romanian-occupied

territories.

In territory under Romanian administration from 1941 to 1945, that is, prewar Romania plus Transnistria, there were about 800,000 Jews in 1941. Of these, 50 percent survived. This is a significant fact. Even more remarkable is the geographic arrangement. Of the 200,000 Jews native to Transnistria/Ukraine, 90 percent died. Of the 300,000 in Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia, 65 percent died. Why did the same extremely anti-Semitic Romanian government act so differently toward the two groups of Jews, those of Romania proper and those of the newly conquered territories? Unfortunately, Ancel does not shed light on this.

When Ancel gets to the city of Odessa in chapter 27, the tone of the book changes slightly to portray the harsher reality of the events in this major city in Transnistria. "The Kingdom of Terror" is how the book describes the events in the city (p. 355). On October 16, 1941, after prolonged fighting, Romania succeeded in occupying Odessa. This is when the horrors started. Within weeks, thousands of Jews were killed, burned alive, and herded into a ghetto. After a while deportations began. The next few chapters deal with the deportations to Berezhovka district and the problems encountered along the way.

A very important, albeit unpopular, topic is addressed by Ancel in a rather short chapter (31) that deals with the Christianization campaign in Transnistria region. Antonescu argued that Transnistria was a "territory that had been defiled by the godless Bolsheviks" and

his government "launched a campaign to bring the people back to Christianity" (p. 430). In the name of religion, horrible atrocities were committed in this region.

The last chapters of the book treat the question of "Final Solution" in Romania. Ancel stresses that Romania ardently admired the Nazi plan for the Final Solution of the Jewish Question. The best flattery being imitation, Romania developed and carried out its own Final Solution. Unlike Germany, however, when a Nazi victory was no longer as certain as it had seemed at the beginning of the war, political considerations took precedence over racial hatred and the mass killings. Romania therefore hesitated to deport its remaining Jews to the death centers in Poland as had been previously planned.

The last chapter (38) has all the statistical data on the Holocaust in Romania previously mentioned in the book. It is exhaustive and includes tables, explanations, and summary. Notes, a bibliography, and an index wrap up the book. In conclusion, Jean Ancel's book advances our knowledge of this tragic period. But there is still much to understand. We need to reflect on the reasons and motives of men who actually did the killings. Also, how is it that the legionary movement in Romania, which was wiped out in January 1941, was also able to participate in the deportations that started in July of the same year?

The book has a wealth of details and is very informative. Professional historians as well as casual readers should take note of this book and make it a starting point in their quest to delve further into the mystery of the Holocaust in Romania.

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