



Diana Dumitru. *The State, Antisemitism, and Collaboration in the Holocaust: The Borderlands of Romania and the Soviet Union.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 268 S. \$99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-13196-5.

Reviewed by Markus Bauer

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The structure of this book derives directly from Diana Dumitru's thesis: Comparing civilians' implication in robbing, denouncing and killing local and deported Jews in Bessarabia and Transnistria following German and Romanian troops' attack on the Soviet Union in summer 1941, she aims to prove that in Ukrainian Transnistria, local people were more willing to help the Jews than they were in Romanian Bessarabia. Starting from this hypothesis, Dumitru unfolds arguments and observations that meticulously examine possible backgrounds and aspects of civilian attitudes towards Jews during the "silent holocaust" between Pruth and Bug in today's Republic of Moldova and southern Ukraine.

Dumitru's focus is not on police, militias, Einsatzgruppen or army units, but on civilians – simple citizens, neighbors and fellow villagers who voluntarily or under coercion took part in atrocities against local and deported Jews when German and Romanian soldiers "re-occupied" Bessarabia and conquered the territory between Dniester and Bug, which became part of Romania. The then Transnistria was territorially much bigger than today's Transnistria, a small strip of land on the river Dniester that claims independence from Moldova. During World War II, more than 200,000 Jews and Roma died of killings, disease or starvation in Transnistria and Bessarabia. Most of

these people had been deported from Bukovina and northern Moldova, but a significant number of local Jewish communities in Bessarabia and Odessa also fell victim to Romanian forces commanded by Marshal Ion Antonescu, the dictatorial head of the Romanian state.

To prove the basic hypothesis, Dumitru examines the history of these two territories in three steps. First, she looks at the history of Gentile-Jewish relations in Bessarabia and Transnistria in the Tsarist Empire. Bessarabia and South Russia (today part of Ukraine) were part of the Pale of Settlement where most Russian Jews were forced to live from the end of the 18th century. Dumitru discusses the general development of Russian Jewish communities, which faced pogroms, economic underdevelopment and social discrimination, in the light of various policy approaches to "the Jewish question," as it was called by the 19th century.

Bessarabia "came back" to Romania after World War I, when the Paris Peace negotiations doubled the size of the small Carpathian kingdom by incorporating Bukovina, Bessarabia, Transylvania and Dobrogea into what was now called "Greater Romania." Although integration of these multiethnic territories was an important issue in Romanian politics for the next twenty years, Romanian authorities often found little acceptance – especially in Bessarabia, where half of the population spoke Russian and a new neighbor state,

the Soviet Union, disputed its loss of this territory. Homogenization policies were mingled with anti-semitism, and some Jewish intellectuals looked to the Soviet state as a less threatening authority than Romania. Economic and social relations between peasants and Jews were tense, as Jews had been stereotyped as usurers, exploiters and rich people since Tsarist times. Dumitru emphasizes that Romanian authorities did little to curb these tensions and sometimes adopted the perspectives of antisemitic parties and movements like the Iron Guard.

After the Hitler-Stalin pact, when Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia had been part of the Soviet Union for only a year, the 1941 German and Romanian attack on the Soviet Union led to pogroms and killings of Jews in Bessarabia, in which civilians participated. Jews were regarded as promoters and supporters of Bolshevism and enemies of the Romanian state – a prevalent suspicion in the Romanian administration in Bessarabia before World War II.

Dumitru contrasts the Romanian administration policy in Bessarabia with the Soviet minority policies in the Odessa region and Transnistria. She stresses the Soviet interest in establishing equal social conditions for all minorities, including Jews. Antisemitism was regarded as an “anti-socialist” and a “wrong and old-fashioned ideology.” With policies of “affirmative action,” the authorities inculcated an integrationist view of Jews among workers and peasants, aiming at *korenizatsiia* (indigenization). Once the communists came to power, Jewish culture was supported for the first time in Russian history. Some schools offered instruction in Yiddish, the famous Jewish republic of Birobidzan was founded in the East, and Jewish departments were established in Party structures. Jews saw chances for advancement in the Soviet administration. Statistics show that educated Jews were soon able to enter the higher echelons of the Party and administration. Furthermore, the structure of professions in Ukraine

changed significantly: besides holding a high percentage of white-collar jobs, Jews became industrial workers in cities and even turned away from state supported Yiddish language to Russian. Although victims of collectivization, starvation, etc. may take a critical view of Jewish identification with the new socialist system and its aim to emancipate them, the overall result – Dumitru claims – was integration, less visible antisemitism, and slackening of nationalism. Meanwhile, the author does not neglect Stalinist anti-religion propaganda or the several antisemitic purges it inspired: Zionism had always been attacked, and religion was generally seen as an offense to Marxist ideology. After 1936, with the preferment of Russian nationality in the Soviet Union, anti-Jewish attitudes could prevail more. Soviet policy towards Jewish independence was double-sided, supporting some of its aspects while also trying to eliminate its religious and social basis.

Dumitru's main chapter analyzes the differing behavior of civilians in Bessarabia and those in Transnistria during the three years of Romanian occupation from 1941 to 1944. For this research her sources are mostly collections of interviews with surviving Jews in Yad Vashem and the Washington Museum of the Holocaust, as well as her own interviews. From these voices, she clearly differentiates the treatment in Bessarabia and Transnistria.

The author acknowledges some methodological problems regarding the thesis and corroboration of it, as the survivors cannot speak for those who had different experiences and died. She also recognizes the dictatorial character of the Soviet state and explicitly does not intend to eulogize the Soviet Union of the interwar period. Rather, Dumitru describes what the interviews reveal and explains her findings on a socio-behavioral level: Soviet “affirmative action” policies seem to have disposed people to humane behavior towards oppressed Jews. The range of such examples is narrow, compared to the whole extent of atrocities

against Jews in Eastern Europe during World War II, but it is big enough for Dumitru to investigate its differences from the Bessarabian samples. Another problem arises from the constructed context of historical developments in Russia and Romania and the research on the hypothesis: whereas the history of Jews in Russia and Romania is mostly presented as findings of historiography, the arguments for her hypothesis rely mostly on the interviews, thereby attaching heavy weight to oral history.

What can be concluded from the book? Certainly not a clear, firm affirmation or rejection of Dumitru's theory and its subsequent rationale. But Dumitru's multifaceted, detailed description of the still under-researched events in Bessarabia and Transnistria is based on many previously untapped sources. Her attempts to corroborate the hypothesis have unearthed a lot of facts about Jewish history in the region. The book is thus a pioneering comparative work that furthers research on a hitherto neglected part of the Shoah.

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