



Ion Popa. *The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Holocaust.* Studies in Antisemitism Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. Illustrations. 256 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-02956-0.

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According to the latest statistics, over 80 percent of Romania's population identifies as Christian Orthodox. In the first decade after 1989, a similarly high percentage of Romanians named the Romanian Orthodox Church as the country's most trusted institution; nowadays, well over half of the population expresses faith in the Church as an organization.[1] At the same time, to this day, popular knowledge about the Holocaust in Romania remains notoriously rudimentary and fragmented.[2] Many people still do not know that Romanians participated in the Holocaust and that an estimated 350,000 Jews were murdered or died in territory under Romanian control during the war. [3]

Is there a connection between these two states of affairs? This is the premise and main argument of Ion Popa's recent study, *The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Holocaust*. As he explains, "This book analyzes the way in which the Romanian Orthodox Church responded to its own involvement in the Holocaust and its role in shaping Holocaust memory in Romania" (p. 8). But in fact, the book reads like a veritable indictment. By tracing not only the actual involvement of the Church in the Holocaust but also its efforts to whitewash its history and even portray itself as a victim, and by emphasizing not only the Church's ongoing antisemitism but also its ongoing political

role and prestige in Romania, this study accuses the Romanian Orthodox Church of both participation in the Holocaust and the later cover-up of its actions, and thereby the wider distortion of the country's history as a whole.

While uncovering and denouncing the antisemitism of the Romanian Orthodox Church is not new, this study is the first to do so systematically and to link this attitude explicitly to the crimes committed or condoned by the Church during the Holocaust. Spanning a period of around seventy years, Popa's book offers a long-term perspective on the relationship of the Romanian Orthodox Church as an institution to the Jews and to antisemitism in Romania, first through the prism of the actions taken against Jewish citizens in Romania during the Holocaust—and what the Church did to endorse them or did (not) do to prevent them—and later with respect to the duty of memory, reckoning, and reparation and the Church's many missed opportunities and even lies in this respect. Popa thus reveals a complex story in which the first guilt became the source of a "second guilt" insofar as the initial crime was not acknowledged and earlier incriminating attitudes, actions, and discourses were never subject to proper scrutiny or repentance.[4]

The book is composed of nine chapters in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. Al-

though Popa emphasizes in the introduction that very little is known about the “attitude of the Church toward the Jewish community during the war,” only the first two chapters are dedicated to this topic (p. 3). In the opening chapter, Popa shows how the Romanian Orthodox Church’s fear of losing power and influence resulted, by the late 1930s, in its growing involvement in state politics and a gradual “vanishing of the line between church and state” in the country (p. 29). This was most notably embodied by the appointment of the notoriously antisemitic patriarch Miron Cristea as prime minister in 1938 but also by a wider “politicization of religious act(s)” and the ever-greater centrality of Orthodoxy to what Popa calls “Romanianism” (p. 33).

In the second—and arguably the book’s most compelling—chapter, Popa then goes on to show how the Romanian Orthodox Church’s antisemitic wartime narratives portrayed Jews as the “real enemy,” the war as “holy,” and Communism as “Jewish,” “anti-Romanian,” and “anti-Christian.” Thus, blatantly distorting the Christian message and drawing on the “Judeo-Bolshevik” myth, the Romanian Orthodox Church promoted economic and racial antisemitism and fanned the politics of hatred. Popa emphasizes the prevalence of religious anti-Jewish and antisemitic discourse at a time when terrible crimes were being committed against Jews in Romania and territories occupied by Romania, thereby legitimizing these acts. In newly acquired Transnistria, Romanian Orthodox priests were involved in a so-called re-Christianization missionary campaign. But as he argues, “the involvement of these priests in the Holocaust went beyond anti-Jewish propaganda promoted in the Church’s journals” (p. 51). Most members of the Romanian Orthodox clergy (contrary to members of other Christian denominations) expressed indifference toward the plight of Jews, rejected requests for conversions, and refused to help on many occasions; some priests even committed violent crimes. Evidence of members of the Romanian Orthodox Church assisting Jews, in turn, is of-

ten ambivalent and scarce; tellingly, only one Romanian Orthodox priest was declared Righteous among the Nations by Yad Vashem. Generally, Popa concludes that during the Holocaust, the Church remained more concerned with internal power battles than with the fate of the Jews.

Turning to the early postwar period (1945–48), Popa shows that the Romanian Orthodox Church immediately set out to cover up and re-write its recent past. While the relationship with the new regime was not easy from the start, the leadership of the Church and the new Communist authorities soon agreed on the process of whitewashing the Church’s history. The new regime needed the Church’s support for the sake of legitimacy, and, after the patriarch was replaced in 1948, the Church returned to its traditional mode of collaboration and close alignment with political power, which was beneficial to both parties. Popa then analyzes how the past was cleansed, distorted, and misused: how the Germans came to be blamed for everything, how myths of the Church’s historic tolerance and even rescue activities developed and were disseminated, and how Romanians developed a narrative of harmony among different religious communities. Hypocritically, past crimes were nevertheless used within the Church to blackmail clergy and bring down internal enemies. But when some priests were arrested and tried for their involvement in the Iron Guard, the persecution of the Jews was never the main charge. At first, Jewish protests against these narratives were silenced, but eventually, the new Jewish leadership (Moses Rosen replaced Alexandre Safran and became chief rabbi in 1948) accepted the situation. With this, Popa not only shows, as others have too, how widespread antisemitism remained in Romania after the war but also how much easier it was for the Romanian Orthodox Church to give up on anti-bolshevism than antisemitism and how Holocaust denial became essential to protecting the Church’s reputation.

The period 1948 to 1989 was marked by the rise of political antisemitism and what Popa, drawing on Michael Shafir's typology, describes as "state-organized forgetting" (p. 118). Nicolae Ceaușescu in particular embraced the narrative of Romanian tolerance, harmony, hospitality, and the policy of silence, obfuscation, trivialization, and minimization; the Holocaust was only discussed when it could provide political gain. Ceaușescu relied heavily on the Romanian Orthodox Church for legitimacy and for his form of "national Communism." Occasional expressions of antisemitism within the Church and scandals, such as the rehabilitation of interwar Far-Right Orthodox nationalists were therefore ignored, and the early postwar narratives based on myths, lies, and deceptions were left unchallenged. This enabled, in Popa's words, the Church to return, over the course of the Cold War, "to its interwar right-wing nationalism" and to later "emerge from the Communist era with its prestige untouched" (pp. 147, 153).

The book's last two chapters deal with the period after 1989 and paint an ambivalent picture, consisting of a mixture of change and continuity—a few steps forward and many setbacks. On the one hand, in the last three decades, the Romanian Orthodox Church, held in higher regard than ever, has sought to portray itself as a victim of Communism, but its leaders have continued to interfere in politics, to deny the clergy's involvement in the Holocaust, to overstate relief and rescue activities in this period, and even rehabilitated notorious antisemites and war criminals. On the other hand, there have been stronger challenges and pushbacks on behalf of a freer Jewish community, scholars abroad, and, after 2005, the Elie Wiesel National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania. In recent years, this has led to what Popa describes as "the duplicity" of the Church hierarchy insofar as it has let xenophobic, ethno-nationalist, and antisemitic narratives flourish, but they have become the preserve of lower-level Orthodox groups. Ultimately, for

Popa, if this testifies to the conciliatory attitude of the Jewish community, it especially stands for the Church's unwillingness to reform.

Analytically, the study is not always as sharp as it could be. The uses of the terms "perpetrator," "bystander," and "savior," for example, to describe the role of the Romanian Orthodox Church during the war or the use of the concept of memory are quite uncritical. Moreover, as other reviewers have noted, there is a lack of clarity concerning what Popa means by "the Church."^[5] A definition only appears on page 65 and is rather vague. This would have been useful in the introduction together with a comment on his approach and sources and their limitations.^[6] In general, aside from in the conclusion, Popa hardly ever refers to existing studies or literature in the body of the text and therefore only rarely engages in depth with the arguments other scholars have made elsewhere. Especially with respect to the well-known involvement of the Church rank and file with the Iron Guard and the convergences of Orthodox beliefs with Legionary ideology, this could have proved fruitful.^[7]

My two main reservations about this book, however, have less to do with the arguments than with their presentation. Firstly, the short chapters and many subsections lead to many repetitions and perhaps even prevent drawing more interesting personal, institutional, and discursive lines of continuity and providing a better sense of wider trends and enduring narratives and ideas. Secondly—and responsibility for this lies to a great extent with the editor and publisher rather than the author—the book requires much more rigorous editing. Aside from the many repetitions, there are numerous unclear or unfortunate wordings and even a number of copyediting errors.

Nonetheless, this study presents a wealth of interesting material and the verve and consistency with which the argument is presented makes for a convincing and readable account. As the first exploration of its kind on this politically, socially,

and culturally relevant and historically significant subject for an English-speaking readership, it is unquestionably an important contribution to scholarly literature. For this reason, it will most certainly become a standard reference for people working on the Holocaust in Romania and the postwar and post-Communist politics of memory in the country, and hopefully encourage others to explore further some of its themes.

Notes

[1]. Irina Marica, “What Public Institutions Do Romanians Trust the Most,” *Romania-Insider.com*, May 20, 2015, <https://www.romania-insider.com/what-public-institutions-do-romanians-trust-the-most>.

[2]. Alexandru Florian, ed., *Holocaust Public Memory in Postcommunist Romania* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018).

[3]. See Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, and Mihail Ionescu, eds., *Final Report: International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania* (Iași: Polirom, 2005).

[4]. The concept of second guilt has been used with respect to Germany by Ralph Giordano in *Die zweite Schuld oder Von der Last Deutscher zu sein* (Hamburg: Rasch u. Röhring, 1987).

[5]. Nicolae Drăgușin, “O istorie așteptată: BOR în timpul holocaustului,” *Observator Cultural*, September 20, 2018, <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/o-istorie-astep-tata-bor-in-timpul-holocaustului/>.

[6]. It is worth noting that the Holy Synod did not give Popa, or any other historian, access to its archives.

[7]. Most recently: Ionuț Florin Biliuță, “The Archangel’s Consecrated Servants: An Inquiry in the Relationship between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Iron Guard (1930–1941)” (PhD diss., Central European University, 2013).

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