

NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE ANTISEMITIC CHALLENGE: OLD AND NEW ASPECTS IN ROMANIA*

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The situation of post-Ceausescu Romania in connection with the development of nationalism and the related issue of the possible re-emergence of the Jewish question and antisemitism is quite different from that of the Soviet Union and other East-European countries. From this point of view, the special situation in Romania has been caused by the very singular nature of the Ceausescu regime, the character and standing of the Jewish community and the forms of nationalist ideology traditional in Romania.

Ceausescu was successful in creating one of the most powerful and oppressive forms of Stalinist regime, which he was able to maintain and even strengthen in a period when the Soviet Union and other communist countries were undergoing a process of liberalization. One of the foundations of his success came in his early years when he won a certain national legitimacy (a thing no other Communist leader was able to do). He made the greatest use of a heavily nationalist demagoguery, which became in the years following 1970 a new form of communist ideology called by political analysts "Ceausism," "National Communism," or "Xenophobic Communism."¹ This ideology carries within it both insidious and obvious forms of antisemitism. It was a pragmatic antisemitism which avoided the major elements of Soviet propaganda—anti-Zionism and the myth of the world Zionist threat. Ceausescu's policy meant the gradual yet systematic elimination of the Jews from every important aspect of political, social and economic life. He also permitted (one might even say stimulated) antisemitic outbursts in the press and maintained an atmosphere of chauvinism and xenophobia in Romania, which, though rarely demonstrated publicly and consequently not often perceived in the West, was nonetheless thorough and effective.² The Jews were compensated by a relative freedom in the organization of their religious life and by the freedom both to emigrate to Israel (with which Romania maintained political and touristic relations) and to stay in contact with the American Jewish community and world Jewish organizations.

The Romanian Jewish community (now reduced to only 20,000 due to the

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1. See Vlad Georgescu, *Politică și istorie: Cazul comunistilor români, 1944-1977* (Munich, 1983); Michael Shafir, *Romania: Politics, Economics and Society* (London, 1985), chapter "The Intelligentsia: Dissimulation, Cooptation and Nationalism."
2. Bela Vago, "Communist Antisemitism: The Case of Romania and Hungary," in Leo Eitinger, ed., *The Antisemitism in our Time: A Threat against Us All* (Oslo, 1984), pp. 75-85.

massive emigration to Israel) managed to adapt itself to its special status—on the one hand seemingly privileged, while on the other increasingly marginalized in Romanian society. The personality and political ability of the Chief Rabbi, Dr. Moses Rosen enabled him to capitalize on Ceausescu's ambivalent and pragmatic approach for the good of the community.³ This ambiguous relation has become one of the sources for recent antisemitic outbursts in Romania, which have been directed against the person of the Chief Rabbi. He has been accused as serving as a tool for Ceausescu in helping to draw the attention of the West away from the economic disaster and the regime of terror established by the "presidential couple." Though these accusations have also been heard in the Western and Israeli press, they have received a strong antisemitic taint in Romania. This is due largely to an old xenophobic reflex which has been aggravated by the fact that Dr. Rosen is the only official and accepted spokesman of the Jewish community.

I should mention here another feature special to Romania—the fact that in the last two decades there has arisen a group of Jewish writers and intellectuals who while playing an important role in Romanian cultural life have also demonstrated an increasing determination to affirm their Jewish identity, to return to their roots and to Judaic spiritual values.⁴ Some members of this group have left Romania in the last few years, but wherever they may be, it seems reasonable to suppose that they will add their voice to the discussions on Romanian-Jewish relations.

The expression of antisemitic feelings so recently freed from the bonds of state-controlled xenophobia has been quick to appear in the very young, and still fragile Romanian democracy. An English journalist recently commented on the circulation of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in Romania and on the antisemitic remarks of leaders of the reestablished right wing, shocked by the Jewish (or supposedly Jewish) origins of some of the country's temporary leadership.⁵ Freedom in Romania has also meant that there has been nothing to stop the penetration of antisemitic pamphlets produced by the extreme right-wing elements among Romanians abroad, in particular by former members of the well-known fascist Iron Guard.

As things stand, I do not think it would be right to talk of a trend towards political antisemitism in Romania similar to that in the Soviet Union or even in certain clerical and political circles in Poland. At present the major focus of ethnic conflict in Romania is the problem of the relationship between the Romanians and the Hungarian minority in Transylvania.

The nexus of antisemitism and nationalist ideology in Romania has implications more profound than the phenomena I have mentioned so far, though

3. See Dr. Moses Rosen's memoirs, *Dangers, Tests and Miracles* (London: 1990), pp. 237–244.
4. Leon Volovici, "Norman Manea and the Rumanian Jewish Renaissance," *The Jewish Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 1987.
5. *The Observer*, 11 Feb. 1990, reprinted in *Minimum* (Tel Aviv), No. 37, April 1990.

these are not yet perhaps fully obvious. Ceausescu's nationalism was made up to a great extent of the xenophobic trend in old Romanian nationalism wrapped up in new Communist terminology though without, of course, any religious mysticism. In a recent article entitled "The Roots Of The Evil," a well-known Romanian literary critic, Valeriu Cristea, put his finger precisely on those elements which allowed the monstrous longevity of the Ceausescu epoch:

The Ceausist phenomenon had more than just a single root—Communism. There was at least one other cause, just as noxious as the first. . . . This second root is nationalism, or more accurately ultra-nationalism, chauvinism, xenophobia and antisemitism. Ceausescu exploited not our communist beliefs, for these were non-existent, but rather our nationalist feelings which unfortunately were not only existent but even very active in the hearts of many of us.⁶

In its cultural milieu, Ceausescu's xenophobia found support in a new and nationalistic "right wing" which became prominent in the early eighties due to a noisy antisemitic campaign that even came to the attention of the western press.⁷ The widespread hatred for Ceausescu and the violent overthrow of his regime also discredited this "new right" which had fawned upon him in his lifetime.*

6. Valeriu Cristea, "Rădăcinile răului," *România literară*, No. 4, Jan. 1990.

7. See Michael Shafir, "The Man of the Archangel Revisited: Anti-Semitic Formation among Communist Romania's Intellectuals," *Studies in Comparative Communism*, vol. XVI, no. 3, 1983; Idem, "From Eminescu to Goga via Corneliu Vadim Tudor: A New Round of Antisemitism in Romanian Cultural Life," *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, No. 3, 1984; Norman Manea, "Romania: Three Lines with Commentary," in William M. Brinton and Alan Rinzler, ed., *Without Force or Lies: Voices from the Revolution of Central Europe in 1989–90* (San Francisco, 1990); Rosen, *op. cit.*, pp. 272–279.

* Despite this, in the last month the most vociferous and aggressive voices in the nationalistic camp are now represented by the same former adulators of Ceausescu. The astonishing and rapid transition from national-Communist slogans to an ultra-nationalist and anti-Communist platform is facilitated and justified by their "eternal loyalty" to national ideals. They were and remain the main producers of antisemitic articles. Nevertheless, due to the priority of other xenophobic struggles (anti-Hungarian, anti-Russian), the antisemitic trend is less obvious and does not dominate nationalist activity.

The same nationalistic press is also dominated by another trend, which has found great resonance in public opinion—the consolidation of a national myth: the heroism and martyrdom of Ion Antonescu, the military dictator of Romania. He is praised as the great liberator of Bessarabia, who fought as an ally of Hitler during the war against the Soviets. He was executed in 1946, after a national-show trial prepared by Stalin. Antonescu held the lion's share of the responsibility for the mass-murder of the Jewish population of Transnistria. After 1942, however, under internal and international pressure, he refused to agree to the Nazi plan for the deportation of Romanian Jews to the death camps. In the apologetic writings published by Romanian emigrés—and in the Romanian nationalistic press today—Antonescu appears as a national hero, a legitimate leader in a "holy war" against the Bolsheviks and a "savior" of the Jews. Any mention of massacre of the Jews in 1941 provokes either a strong denial of the historical facts or antisemitic justifications of Antonescu's barbaric behavior.

The new Romanian leaders are neither using nor promoting antisemitic feelings. However, we are now witnessing a strange situation. For political reasons, an important part of the

The discrediting of this group stood in stark contrast to the rise of another group of intellectuals known for their opposition to the regime. Either singly or in small groups these men set a moral standard and succeeded in creating islands of intellectual pluralism which either stood in opposition to, or simply ignored official ideology. A number of these thinkers—including philosophers, logicians and essayists of exceptional standard—are now to be found in the Group for Social Dialogue. The intention of the group is to create an intellectual opposition to the abuse of, and deviation from classic European democratic values. The mentor and spiritual guide of the group was, until his death, the philosopher Constantin Noica.⁸ In the years following the First World War, Noica had been a member of the circle of young and brilliant intellectuals which formed round the figure of Nae Ionescu. Other members of this circle, such as Mircea Eliade and Emil Cioran, after the war won international renown. Their early Romanian works are now being scoured by Noica's students in an attempt to discover their own spiritual roots and to forge a new approach to Romanian history and culture. They are trying to formulate a national identity consistent with new conditions and to reestablish Orthodox Christianity within it. Here, I feel, is to be found a dilemma which will eventually have to be faced by the present generation of thinkers. Their avowed spiritual mentors belonged to an important group of well-known thinkers and scholars that in the late 1930s underwent a strong phase of intellectual adhesion to the fascist and blatantly antisemitic Iron Guard. After the war, they repudiated fascist ideology, either directly or by allusion, and in the same way rejected antisemitism. They nevertheless consistently avoided any critical reconsideration or even recognition of their own previous political stand.⁹

One of the first challenges before their modern disciples will be to face up to this heritage which is quite inconsistent with their own strong commitment to democracy. They must choose between adopting their mentors' ideology in toto as an act of veneration while at the same time playing down its darker aspects or taking the opposite path and adopting a critical approach to their masters and reopening the debate on the character of their nationalism. This choice will determine the way in which Romanian national consciousness will be reformed in the time to come.

Another factor which will be of crucial importance in the development of

intelligentsia and the student organizations have ceased to support the National Salvation Front. The latter continues to be supported, however, by the new nationalistic party from Transylvania and by the above-mentioned extreme nationalists and former enthusiastic supporters of Ceausescu's dictatorship.

8. See Katherine Verdery, *The "School" of Philosopher Constantin Noica* (Johns Hopkins University, 1989); Sorin Alexandrescu, "The Challenge of Power," *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4529, Jan. 19–25, 1990.
9. For a detailed analysis of this topic, see Leon Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology and Antisemitism: The Case of the Romanian Intellectuals in the 1930s* (The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem), in press.

nationalist ideology will surely be the Romanian Orthodox church. Its hierarchs are presently being subjected to scathing criticism by precisely those intellectuals who identify themselves with Christianity. The accusation is that the Hierarchs betrayed their mission when they acquiesced to the anti-religious policy of the regime. In the two decades before the Second World War, the Romanian Church was on the right of the nationalist movements and sometimes even offered important moral support to extremist and antisemitic groups.¹⁰ The self-examination which is now being demanded of the Church by the intellectual elite should be extended to cover this period, too.

The absence of any such critical re-evaluation, the continuation of a form of national amnesia in regard to various historical events and the flight into a world view based on nationalist stereotypes may also be seen in the Romanian approach to the Holocaust. With few exceptions, Romanian thought has avoided the question of Romania's responsibility for the deportation and murder of the Jewish population in those regions which came under Romanian rule during the war. In order to preserve a national self-image, the positive elements of Romania's record during the Holocaust have been emphasized instead—namely, the fact that half of the Jewish population of Romania survived until 1945.¹¹

The Romanian revolution of December 1989, like those in the other Eastern European countries, had a clearly democratic character. The question which is now beginning significantly to recur is how far the renewed vigor of nationalism in these countries represents a threat to their democracy. In the case of Romania (though not only there), the answer to this question depends on the character of this nationalism and the ways in which it re-evaluates its own traditions. Between the two World Wars, nationalism and democracy were seen to stand in the opposite relationship: democracy was considered a threat to the full expression of the "ethnic spirit" and was viewed as a foreign idea which first and foremost served the Jewish interest. Perhaps today, however, we are not "between two world wars. . . ."

Translated by Adam Teller

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10. On Romanian fascist and right-wing political movements, see especially Eugen Weber, *Varieties of Fascism* (New York, 1964); Idem, "Romania," in Hans Rogger and Eugen Weber, ed., *The European Right* (Berkeley–Los Angeles, 1966); Z. Barbu, "Rumania," in S. J. Woolf, ed., *Fascism in Europe* (London–New York, 1981); Armin Heinen, *Die Legion "Erzengel Michael" in Rumänien: Soziale Bewegung und politische Organization* (Munich, 1986).
 11. See Jean Ancel, "Introduction" to *Documents Concerning the Fate of Romanian Jewry during the Holocaust*, vol. XI (Jerusalem–New York, 1987); Bela Vago, "The Destruction of Romanian Jewry in Romanian Historiography," in Yisrael Gutman and Gideon Greif, ed., *The Historiography of the Holocaust Period* (Jerusalem, 1988).