

Simon Geissbühler

Bloody July
Romania and the Holocaust in Summer 1941

Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 29 October 2015

Dear Mr. Director,
Dear Professor Michman,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear friends,

When I was invited a few weeks ago to come to Yad Vashem and to speak about Romania and the Holocaust in summer 1941, I hesitated. I hesitated because speaking at Yad Vashem is an honor, but it is also a burden and a challenge. Not many historians – and certainly very few, if any historians turned diplomats – get an invitation to speak here. As you can see, I accepted. I did so because my good friend Laurence Weinbaum convinced me to do so and because this is a unique opportunity to talk about an under-researched and lesser-known part of the Holocaust and to hopefully give a new impulse to research on the Holocaust perpetrated by Romanians and in Romanian-controlled territories.

The German historian Armin Heinen claimed in 2007 that the Romanian historiography of the Holocaust had reached approximately the state of research in Germany of the mid-1960s. Methodologically, many Romanian studies on the Holocaust have indeed been descriptive and positivistic. They did not take into account the state of international research on the Holocaust in general and did not work with specific research questions and theses. International research on the Holocaust in Romanian-controlled territories remains relatively scarce to this day, too.

Indeed, the breakdown of the Soviet bloc and the end of the Ceausescu regime did not immediately lead to a comprehensive reassessment of Romanian history. The Fascist ghosts of the past, especially questions about the collaboration with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust perpetrated by Romania, were unsolicited. Fascism was presented as an alien, German concept and Romania as a victim, “innocent of any wrongdoing or crime.” The so-called revisionist school is still relatively influential in Romania. It minimizes Romanian crimes during the Second World War in general and Romania’s responsibility for the Holocaust in Northern Bukovina, Bessarabia and Transnistria in particular.

But there have been some progress and positive developments. Radu Ioanid’s “The Holocaust in Romania,” published in 2000 and the “Final Report” of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania published in 2004/2005 – we will learn more about it shortly by Professor Friling – are crucial synoptic works. They have been complemented in the last few years by new studies. I would like to mention here, for example, the outstanding works by Yad Vashem’s late Jean Ancel and by Vladimir Solonari.

Better researched than the massacres at the beginning of the war which interest me here are the Holocaust in Transnistria and the horrendous mass murder of Jews in and around Odessa perpetrated by the Romanian armed forces. I am looking forward to the lecture by Sarah Rosen later today on the ghettos in the Mogilev district in Transnistria.

What is also positive is the fact that young historians, also Romanians, are now working on these topics. I commend organizations, research groups and individuals, many represented here today, who work on specific aspects of Romania and the Holocaust. Finally, Romania will take over the presidency of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance for 2016-2017, which is also a positive step forward.

Before I outline some of the main findings of my own research, let me answer a question which I am always asked and which might be on your mind as well right now. How come that a Swiss diplomat became interested in Romania and the Holocaust?

First, I am trained as a historian, and I have been interested in Eastern European Jewish history since high school – for reasons I have never been able to reconstruct.

Second, I was transferred to Bucharest in 2007 to serve there as the Deputy Chief of Mission of the Swiss Embassy. Travelling through the country, I quickly rediscovered my passion for Jewish history. I published four books, so-called travelogues, about my search for the traces of Jewish life and death in the Bukovina, in the Satu Mare/Satmar region, in Moldavia, and, more recently, Southern Podolia.

Third, in these borderlands the traces of the Holocaust have been largely erased – to use a term coined by Omer Bartov. But I have found some traces of the mass murder of Jews, mainly mass graves. These are some of the neglected, run-down and hard to find places: Climăuți, Novoselitsa, Edineți, Costești, Drachyntsi. I wanted to know more about these places, and I wanted to know about the victims. That is also why survivors' testimonies are such an important source of my work. I consulted testimonies here at Yad Vashem, in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in the Visual History Archive, but also on the internet. Some survivors such as Ambassador Yosef Govrin or Avigdor Shachan have written their memoirs.

Fourth, when I was transferred from Bucharest to Warsaw in 2010, I first read Jan Tomasz Gross' book about Jedwabne. I was struck that very similar local massacres had happened in Northern Bukovina and in Bessarabia and that there was almost no scholarly literature on these massacres. I wanted to fill this research gap.

My presentation is structured as follows: First, I summarize what happened in summer 1941 in Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia and the context of these mass killings. Second, I explain what the Holocaust in Romanian-controlled territories means, and why and how it is relevant to our understanding of the Holocaust as a whole.

What happened in summer 1941?

In the "Final Report" of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, one finds a very telling and important sentence: The Holocaust "did not arrive in Romania like a meteorite from outer space." Now, we don't have the time to analyze in-

depth the context of the Holocaust perpetrated by Romania and in Romanian-controlled territories. Let me briefly mention the following points.

The Romanian anti-Semitism had traditional, often religious roots. But in the 1930s it was also economically and increasingly racially motivated. It radicalized throughout the interwar period. Violence against Jews was no exception, but the rule in interwar Romania. The perpetrators were frequently members of the Iron Guard and students, albeit these two groups often overlapped. They did not act in a political and social vacuum. They also did not represent marginal splinter groups. They could count on the more or less explicit support of the security forces, wide parts of society, also of the intellectual elite, and partly of the political leadership of the country. The Romanian state massively toughened anti-Semitic legislation throughout the 1930s.

The Jews were the “perfect” scapegoats for the failures of the Romanian state which gradually lost control over wide sectors of society. Especially after the so-called national disgrace of summer 1940 when Romania had to cede Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia to the Soviet Union in the context of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the of course untenable thesis of Judeo-Bolshevism according to which all Jews were Communists and had conspired against Romania served as so-called “proof” that the Jews had to be “eliminated.”

Undoubtedly, the increasingly aggressive and widespread anti-Semitism – one should point to the bloody pogroms in summer 1940 and at the end of January 1941 in Bucharest – was leading to the mass murder of Jews in the East. These massacres in the bloody July 1941 in Romanian-occupied territories were a continuation of the anti-Jewish policies of persecution – but now in the radicalized context of the war of destruction. There was clearly a process of what Ian Kershaw had called in the German case a dynamic cumulative radicalization.

The massacre in Iași at the end of June 1941 was a change in paradigm – qualitatively as well as quantitatively. Approximately 13,000 Jews, men, women, and children, were killed in Romania and mainly by Romanian perpetrators. The mass murder of Romanian Jews in the Romanian town of Iași was an important and – in the perception of the Romanian political and military leadership – “successful” test.

In the first few days of the Romanian-German invasion on the southern front on 2 July 1941, the Romanian troops and gendarmerie, mixed groups of perpetrators and local perpetrators left behind a bloody trail in Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia. Area-covering, they killed Jews, also women and children. In the first two months of the war – so in July/August 1941 – according to my calculation, at least 43,500 Jews were killed.

It was mostly regular Romanian troops which first came into contact with the Jewish population in Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia after 2 July 1941. The Romanian gendarmerie followed in its wake. The German army was involved in the offensive mainly in the middle and southern sections of Bessarabia, but only marginally in Northern Bukovina and northern Bessarabia. The Einsatzgruppe D was also active in the region. But it played a minor role in Northern Bukovina and the northern part of Bessarabia. Therefore, mainly Romanian troops killed Jews in early July 1941.

Organized and relatively “systematic” mass shootings of Jews by Romanian troops took place in Ciudei, Hertsă, Bălți, and Edineț. More pogrom-like, “unstructured” shootings were carried out in Novoselitsa and Storozhynets, to name two examples.

Pogroms initiated and implemented by local perpetrators immediately before, during and directly after the start of Operation Barbarossa were by no means limited to Poland, Lithuania or Galicia. In many villages, shtetlekh and small towns in Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia, parts of the local population used the “vacuum” between the retreat of the Soviets and the arrival of Romanian troops to initiate pogroms. Jeffrey Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg fittingly talk about a wave of “intimate violence” which slopped over Eastern Europe in July 1941. I counted about two dozens of pogroms in the first few days of the war. Such pogroms took place for example in Stăneștii de Jos, Banila on the Cheremosh River, Nepolokivtsi, Kyseliv, and Sadagura. In rural Northern Bukovina, the perpetrators were often ethnic Ukrainians, in Bessarabia often ethnic Romanians.

The objectives of the Romanian participation in the war in the East were by no means restricted to the “liberation” of Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia, but included the comprehensive “cleansing” of these territories and of Transnistria of the Jews. Why would the Romanians have had to shoot thousands of defenseless Jews, to plunder and to rape in order to recapture the two so-called lost provinces? The mass murder of Jews was not a “derivative” of the war or a “collateral damage,” but an integral part and pre-defined goal of the Eastern Campaign.

Why and how is the Romanian case relevant for our understanding of the Holocaust in general?

In an article recently published in the Ukrainian scholarly journal “Holocaust and Modernity,” I presented 13 theses on Romania and the Holocaust. I have narrowed these 13 lessons learned from my research down to the following six.

Lesson 1: The Holocaust is more than Auschwitz.

This point might sound somewhat strange to you. But the general public – surely in Romania, but I would guess in many western European countries as well – and even some historians, certainly in Romania, still today often equate the Holocaust with Auschwitz. Auschwitz is and should be an important “code” or symbol for the Holocaust. But the reduction of the systematic annihilation of the Jews to Auschwitz is problematic. As you know very well, approximately half of all Jewish victims were not gassed or killed in a *Konzentrationslager* or *Vernichtungslager*, but shot, tortured or beaten to death mostly in the east of Europe.

By somehow and probably often unintentionally “reducing” the Holocaust to Auschwitz – and here I agree with Timothy Snyder – “the actual scale of the evil done” is reduced, too. If the Holocaust is Auschwitz, then the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of Jews in the East, the Holocaust by bullets, “can be excluded from history and commemoration” – to cite Snyder once more.

And this is not a theoretical discussion, but a very real danger. An opinion poll published recently shows that 59% of the Romanian population associate the Holocaust

with the German concentration camps and 46% with the gas chambers. But only 20% associate the Holocaust with Transnistria and 14% with pogroms. Only 28% of the respondents say that the Holocaust happened also in Romania. Of these 28%, 69% believe that Germany was primarily responsible for the Holocaust in Romania – I underline “in Romania” – only 19% see the main responsibility with the Antonescu government.

Some Romanian revisionists argue to this day that there was no Holocaust in Romania because there were no extermination camps in Romania and no Jews from the Old Kingdom were sent to Auschwitz. In February 2013, a former university professor “argued” exactly along these lines in a presentation at the Romanian Academy. He was not challenged by the audience, by the way...

The symbolic centrality of Auschwitz to the Holocaust poses no problems whatsoever to me. But I think we have to enlarge the perception of the Holocaust in the public mind. It has to include the hundreds of thousands of Jews shot over pits in the East, killed in mass shootings, beaten or tortured to death, also by Romanian soldiers and gendarmes and by their Ukrainian and Romanian neighbors.

Lesson 2: Non-German perpetrators played a role in the Holocaust.

This brings me to the second lesson. The *Endlösung* was a German project, and most perpetrators were Germans. The naming of perpetrators of other nationalities is certainly not intended to relativize Germany’s responsibility.

However, we must point to the fact that Romania was responsible for the death of over 300,000 Jews on territories its armies conquered and it controlled. Romania conducted a war of destruction on Germany’s side and its own war against the Jews. It implemented – as the only other state – the Holocaust actively and autonomously.

The fact that Romania rejected German demands later in the war to send the Jews of the Old Kingdom to Auschwitz clearly proves that Romania had a choice. Its choice at the beginning of the war was to kill as many Jews as possible and to ethnically cleanse Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia as well as Transnistria.

The role of non-German perpetrators and the interaction between German and non-German perpetrators has received much more scholarly attention in the last few years. However, more research is needed, especially on the Romanian case.

Lesson 3: The motives of the perpetrators were complex, and, yes, anti-Semitism was a key factor.

The motives and scope of action of the perpetrators were complex and cannot be generalized. It is obvious, however, that ideological and political as well as economic motives are crucial to explain violence against defenseless Jews.

Anti-Semitism and a widespread and strong belief among ordinary Romanians, which was indoctrinated and propagated for years, that the Jews were Communists and responsible for the downfall of Greater Romania certainly played a role in “facilitating”

the mass killings of Jews. Saul Friedländer and others have underlined the importance of anti-Semitism as a key motive of the Romanian perpetrators.

I disagree on this with Timothy Snyder who writes in “Black Earth” that – I cite – “age-old antisemitism cannot explain why pogroms began precisely in summer 1941”. Yes, it does. And Snyder himself even gives the answer why: state structures did no longer exist on 2 July 1941 when Romanian troops invaded Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia, and anti-Semitic violence literally exploded. No one stopped or wanted to stop the perpetrators. Mass murder was possible only after the Soviet order had collapsed and the perpetrators in the field – the army, the gendarmerie and the locals – had gained access to the defenseless Jewish population. There was a close relationship between the war itself and the extermination of the Jews.

The largely risk-free opportunity to enrich themselves by plundering the Jews and deeply-rooted anti-Semitic and nationalistic attitudes seem to have been the most important driving factors behind many people’s will to initiate or participate in pogroms and behind the soldiers’ readiness to shoot Jews. Few seem to have hesitated. Almost nobody opposed them.

Many Ukrainian local perpetrators, furthermore, hoped that the German invasion would ultimately lead to Ukrainian independence. They believed that the Jews – as well as the Poles – were in their way to realize this dream. Many ethnic Ukrainians and Romanians in the region hated the Jews because they saw them as the main profiteers of the Soviet occupation – which was, of course, not true.

Doubtlessly, there was group pressure. But Romanian soldiers – like the German ones – were not forced to kill Jews. There were orders of the political and military leadership to “clean” the occupied territories. These orders simply registered what was already well-known to all the soldiers when they crossed the Romanian-Soviet border: the Jews were to be “liquidated.” I would argue that these orders would not even have been necessary for the implementation of the Holocaust in Romanian-controlled territories in the East.

Furthermore, local perpetrators always killed their Jewish neighbors because they wanted to do so. Many Romanian and local perpetrators acted extremely brutally – as testimonies from survivors show. The rape of Jewish women and girls by Romanian soldiers was widespread.

Lesson 4: Local pogroms in Romanian-controlled territories were widespread – and must be better researched.

The subject of local perpetrators during the first phase of the Holocaust in the East became a focus of research especially after Jan Tomasz Gross’ book on the Polish town of Jedwabne. Even earlier, other authors had pointed out that a wave of pogroms took place in the borderlands on the eve of or during Operation Barbarossa – that is to say, before the *Einsatzgruppen* deployed.

In many places the Jews’ neighbors themselves exploited the power vacuum between the departure of one government and the arrival of the next to initiate pogroms. Omer Bartov has spoken fittingly of communal genocide, and Aristotle Kallis of “localized eliminationist violence.” More recent studies by authors such as Yad Vashem’s Witold

Mędykowski, Sara Bender, Alexander Prusin, Omer Bartov, John-Paul Himka or Wendy Lower have shed light on actions of locals in summer 1941 in what is now western Ukraine. I would also like to point to Kai Struve's new monumental monograph on the summer 1941 in western Ukraine. This is, in my view, the most comprehensive study on the topic so far.

But there are very few systematic examinations of such local pogroms in Romanian-controlled areas based on the testimonies of survivors and seeking to determine how and under what conditions local perpetrators plundered or murdered their Jewish neighbors.

Lesson 5: The Holocaust in the East was often a public event.

After the war, a convenient myth developed in Germany. Many argued that they did not know and did not hear about the mass killings of Jews. This myth is non-sense, as newer studies for example by Frank Bajohr and Dieter Pohl as well as Peter Longerich have convincingly shown. The same myth has been constructed and handed down in Romania and in the territories in the East which Romania conquered in World War II and which now belong to Ukraine and to the Republic of Moldova.

But this myth is non-sense in the Romanian case, too. In most cases, the local non-Jewish population in Northern Bukovina and in Bessarabia literally saw what happened to their Jewish neighbors. The local population knew very well what was going on, who the perpetrators and the collaborators were.

It was not very difficult to get relatively precise information already in July/August 1941 in Bucharest about the Holocaust in the East. There is clear evidence that interested observers in Bucharest knew what was going on.

This is underlined, for example, by the reports of the Swiss ambassador in Bucharest or by the diary of Mihail Sebastian. Sebastian commented a photograph showing women and children in a newspaper on 16 July 1941. The under-title said that these were Judeo-Communists who would be punished for their misdeeds. On 18 July 1941 Sebastian wrote in his diary about a rumor that the army had the order to kill all Jews in the Bukovina and in Bessarabia. On 21 August 1941 he noted that a friend who was a cavalry lieutenant had told him that thousands of Jews had already been shot.

But there was no noteworthy opposition or resistance neither from the population in the capital nor from the local population in Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina and Transnistria against the mass murder of Jews.

Lesson 6: The Holocaust in Romanian-controlled territories is largely "forgotten" and marginalized in the public discourse. A call for action!

There are hardly any physical traces of the former Jewish presence and of the Holocaust in today's Northern Bukovina (Ukraine) and Bessarabia (Moldova). To find one of the very few remaining synagogues, an overgrown and neglected cemetery, or a mass grave, one has to search assiduously. The former Jewish presence has been largely "erased." But the mental traces of the former Jewish presence and of the Holocaust are also evaporating. For many in Romania and elsewhere in Eastern Europe the Holocaust remains to this day a taboo or an invention.

Looking at the self-images of the villages and towns of the region, one finds almost no or highly distorted allusions to their Jewish history. Many of the inhabitants of these places indeed know nothing about the Jewish past of their villages and towns and of the mass murder of Jews which happened where they live now. But many others also do not want to know.

The dissemination of information about the Holocaust in Romanian schools and universities is still fragmentary. The public opinion about Romania's role in the Second World War and in the Holocaust is still shaped by superficial knowledge and conscious suppression. The Holocaust is largely "forgotten" – or, to use an expression by Paul Ricoeur, there is a strong will of "wanting-not-to-know".

Therefore, it is not surprising that in 2012 a young senator of the Socialist party said in a TV show that only 24 Jews were killed by Germans in Iași at the end of June 1941. If a young politician with a law degree does not know better – or does not want to know better – what can you expect from the overall population?

This brings me back to my opening statement. I hope that this day symposium will motivate young researchers to look more closely at Romania and the Holocaust. Much still has to be done. We lack, for example, studies on local events in specific towns and villages as well as studies with a comparative approach. Kai Struve's new book on events in western Ukraine in summer 1941 is, in my view, the benchmark also for researchers studying events in Northern Bukovina and in Bessarabia.

We also lack coordination between different groups which are active in collecting information. I wished, for example, that Yahad-in-Unum would more speedily publish its findings on mass execution sites and integrate them in the scholarly mainstream. We have to better communicate our findings to a broader public, but also to the decision makers, and make our research available in Romania, in Ukraine, and in the Republic of Moldova.

In this context, I am happy that the Romanian version of my book "Bloody July" will be published shortly by the Elie Wiesel Institute in Bucharest. I commend Romania for taking over the presidency of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance next year. I hope that this opportunity is used actively and wisely.

I particularly thank Yad Vashem for the initiative to organize this day symposium which is very timely and important.

Thank you.

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