

***THE MAJOR DAILY NEWSPAPERS OF THE '40 BETWEEN OBJECTIVITY AND
MANIPULATION CASE STUDY: IAȘI POGROM (JUNE 29-30, 1941)***

Carmen Țăgșorean, PhD Student, Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: The anti-Semitism was not an unknown concept within the Romanian society of the twentieth century, reaching its peak in 1941, a year marked by an unprecedented series of oppressive measures. They were economic, social, political, religious, legal, and moral reprisals, which culminated with the physical extermination of some of the Jewish population, especially in the northern part of the country (Moldova, Bukovina and Bessarabia). The archival documents and the testimony of the Iassy-pogrom survivors (28 to 30 June 1941) draw the picture of the events marked by violence of unimaginable cruelty. Actors involved in these violent actions came equally from among the representatives of the authorities (military and various police forces), and civil society. This study would like to reveal the image of the events in Iasi, illustrated in the pages of the central newspapers in Bucharest. It is hard not to notice the manipulative character of the articles and the selection of the information for the public opinion, not to mention the censorship. In this particular case censorship and manipulation played a secondary role, while the leader's desire to maintain a flawless image of his political correctness came first.

Keywords: Jews, central newspapers, violence, Holocaust, manipulation.

It is everybody's duty to get to know our national history, and try to avoid the errors of the past. Based on this knowledge we will be able to build what Sandu Frunză used to call "the ethics of responsibility" (Frunză, 2010, 31). Besides the human tragedy that a military conflict usually implies, the Jews extermination during WW II represents "a troubling moment in the history of the XX century (Kuller, 1997, 37). Writing about the Holocaust and keeping the specific objectivity of the scientific discourse may be often difficult. Just as the Swiss ambassador in Romania, Jean Claude Joseph put it, any statement on the issue has to be carefully weighed because it is hard to analyze the past from a vantage point set in present time, and pretend that it's an infallible judgment "because each of us is different by personality, behavior, perception, culture, in short, by his entire being" (Șiperco, 1998, 7). That's why, based on these concept, history cannot be looked upon as a series of favorable events, "it cannot be revised based on interpretation from epoch to epoch, but true national light should be shed on it with the passing of time regardless whether is in our advantage or not (Preliceanu, 2009, 20). Denial of the Holocaust is a phenomenon typical to the cultures of the ex-Soviet space, by historians who do this very skillfully comparing the losses of one country during the same war to those of the Jewish community. It is what Michael Shafir called "triviality by comparison" (Shafir, 2002, 13). In contrast to other countries of Europe, Romania managed to maintain her sovereignty under Ion Antonescu regime, for which reasons the Holocaust here had its peculiarities (Deletant, 2004, 162). Romania was included by Raul Hilberg in the category of opportunistic states that hoped to regain lost territory by siding with the Axis. This kind of behavior was also employed in her attitude towards the Jews (Hilberg, 1997, 668). The attitude and reaction of the Romanian populous were definitely influenced by the manipulator and propagandistic messages of the popular figures

in the state, culture, church and army whose positions on the issue were carried by the press. For over a century, these public figures “embraced anti-Semitism and peddled it constantly and with perseverance into a rich mix of action and inspiration which resulted in the political and intellectual culture of modern Romania” (Friling, Ioanid, Ionescu, 2005, 53-54). Although anti-Semitism was not an unfamiliar issue to the Romanian society before, the decade 1930-1940 was decisive in its mass-dissemination because that was the time when purity of a nation was the big issue with the totalitarian regimes all over Europe (Neuman, 1996, 212-213). The penetration of anti-Semitic doctrine of state institutions, like the army, was an act of serious gravity. Ottmar Trașcă notices that the strong anti-Semitic attitude present in these units were actually fed to the army “from the highest positions of command” (Trașcă, 2010, 20-21).

One of the most efficient instruments in manipulating the public opinion was the press. The messages carried in it led to the “poisoning” of mentalities, instigating to hatred and violence (Carp, 1994, 57). The launching of an ample anti-Semitic campaign in the press made a big impact in changing mentalities and led to “an attitude of open battle, of “holy war” against the Jews (Volovici, 1995, 64). After 1940 the expression “no mercy” became a battle cry for the press, a stern supporter of the anti-Semitic measures taken by the government. A closer look at these articles leads to the idea that the “final solution” to “the Jewish question” was not only attempted, but wanted (Friling, Ioanid, Ionescu, 2005, 95-100). In this atmosphere, the acts of violence against Jews appear to be legitimate. In the same period, an increase in the number of defamatory articles against the Jews is striking newspapers of large circulation like *Curentul* and *Porunca vremii* (Ancel, Vol. I, 2003, 178-179). These campaigns meet exactly the criteria of propaganda and manipulation dedicated to a final goal (Hențea, 2004, 72). The techniques of manipulation had already been tested, the strategy operating “on an already laid ground work, either as national mythology or a mixture of hatred and national prejudice” (Domenach, 2004, 83). From this standpoint, the mission of those behind this propaganda machine was relatively easy due to the widespread prejudice and stereotypes against Jews present in the popular culture. Manipulation and control the emotions of the population was easy, playing the fear and guilt cards. Fear renders an individual unable to think, strengthening the cohesion of the group in when facing a threat – real or invented –, thus justifying violence (Ficeac, 1998, 144). Masses manipulated this way turn into “the perpetrator of the horrific acts mankind has witnessed all along recorded history” (Teodorescu, 2007, 353).

Tension looming in Iasi for decades burst into the open on June 29-30, 1941. A city close to the frontlines, with a population 50% Jew, nicknamed “the cradle of anti-Semitism”, Iassy was the birthplace of both the National-Christian Defense League and the Legion Movement (Dieaconu, 2009, 237). On the other hand, the public opinion had been subjected to intense media propaganda, instigating to violence: “Romanians, with every Jew killed, you killed a communist. The day of revenge has arrived!” (Ioanid, 1997, 95). The public announcement that for every German soldier killed by insurgents 50 communist-Jews were to be executed appeared into an information bulletin of the French ambassador in Bucharest (Iancu, 2001, 138). The charges against the Jews of Iassy fall into four categories: that they signaled the Russian army the positions and strategic objectives of the Romanian army; that

they sheltered Russian paratroopers; that they wreaked havoc by disseminating rumors about the war; and that they fired at Romanian and German military (Geller, 2004, 43-45).

The Pogrom had been carefully preplanned and orchestrated through ordinances of the Marshall Antonescu, like closing of the Jewish cafes, forced evacuation of all Jews ages 18-60 from the villages between the rivers Siret and Prut, and by the orders of the Chief of Police “to clean the field”, which actually meant the cleansing and deportation of Jews (Ioanid, 1997, 88-89). The same idea is carried by Jean Ancel who states that “the Pogrom was not a spontaneous outburst of criminal instincts, but a well-planned, premeditated act” (Ancel, 2005, 12), with five directives: the warning of the Christian population of the events to come, marking the homes of the Jews to be easily recognized, intensifying the cooperation between civilians and authorities for this purpose, spreading rumors about Jews’ activities against the army, and inciting population to violence (Friling, Ioanid, Ionescu, 2005, 122). The Jews were made “the fall guys” once again. There is no doubt that there were communists among the Jews of Iassy, but it’s preposterous to assume that all Jews were communist and they were openly pro-Russian since the leaders of the Jewish community had been summoned to the police headquarters to be warned specifically on the subversive activities perpetrated by some of their members (Benjamin, 2003, 25). Public opinion had been so well manipulated, the general perception was that all Jews were communist (Constantiniu, 1999, 375).

There were warning signs prior to the outburst of atrocities, but in most cases, the Jews didn’t know how to read them. The tension was heavy three days before the anti-Jewish riots, fueled by press articles and the attitude of local authorities. Other signs were furnished by intellectuals who fled the town amid “confusing warnings of a disaster about to happen” made by Romanian friends and acquaintances.” (Ancel, 2005, 52), and the strangest ordinance of all that all Jews to dig mass graves in the local cemetery (Ancel, vol II, 2003, 89). Marius Mircu provides the details on the two mass graves dug by young Jews on orders from the Mandatory Labor Office, “20 to 30 meters long”, in the Jewish cemetery. The entire job lasted from June 20 until June 26, 1941 (Mircu, 1944, 5-6).

During the Pogrom of Iassy, the Jews were murdered in their own homes, in the street, in the police headquarters, then finally left to die on the “death trains” (Arendt, 1997, 357); “They entered homes and yards and the Jewish men (but also women and children) were dragged into the streets and there killed on the spot with rifles, pistols, even machine-guns” (Solomovici, vol. I, 2001, 371).

The City of Iassy was bombed twice (24 and 26 of June, 1941) and the two raids fueled an increase of anti-Semitic feelings as the general rumor was that the Jews were helping the Russians by signals that made easy targets out of strategic military facilities (Ioanid, 1997, 91). In the outskirts of Iasi, the violence started on June 25, 1941, when soldiers on the march invaded Jewish private properties and beat the people they found there. In other parts of that neighborhood the violence erupted one or two days later, when, this time, the Jews were arrested on charges of collaboration with the enemy by signaling to the Russian air force. What followed was a fake attack of the Jews against the military “to justify the anger and the retaliatory measures that ensued, under the impression that control had been lost and these were absolutely necessary against the Jewish perpetrators”. The shots fired near the soldiers’ barracks made it clear to the Jews that it was all a setup, “a signal agreed upon

for the violence against them to begin” (Ancel, 2005, 58-64). In the evening of June 26, 1941, as a result of the police raids around the city, 207 Jews were taken into custody. According to Marius Mircu’s testimony, on June 27 the first acts of violence took place in the suburb of Nicolina, where the father of dr. Naum was killed by an army sergeant (Mircu, 1944, 9). The gun shots that rang out in the city in the evening of June 28, 1941, triggered a massive operation against the Jews, with the participation of police, public guards, army, German military, and “low class civilians”. Lt. Col. C. D. Chirilovici, in a report on July 2, 1941, declared that no guns were found during searches of the Jewish homes (Șerbănescu, 1997, 240-241). Although no guns were found, by 9:00 (June 29, 1941) 1800 Jews had been rounded up and brought to the police headquarter. The investigation conducted by the Brig. Gen. Leoveanu after the riots confirmed that there were no injuries or victims among the soldiers, Romanian or German, and no traces of bullets were found (Alexadru, Benjamin, *et. alli.*, 1991, 94-108).

The eyewitnesses’ testimonies draw a picture of a city fallen into anarchy: beatings, killings, looting, robberies – all scenes from a horror movie while the German soldiers were taking picture after picture to freeze in time a tragic event in history: “The soldiers stopped listening to orders; they were on the loose in the city, robbing, beating, shooting, at will and without any refrain (Stoenescu, 1998, 249-250). On June 29, 1941, known as “that Sunday” the streets were full of Jews of all ages under escort, hands up in the air, clothes in shambles, bleeding from their faces, driven towards police station (Benjamin, Florian, Ciuciu, 2007, 104). To get the Jews out of hiding a deceptive rumor was released: “permits of free” were available at police headquarter (Geller, 2004, 45-46). Some fell for the trick, came out of hiding just to be taken into custody, while some others, wiser or simply scared remained hidden (Mircu, 1944, 16-19). These people knew that the authorities wanted to hurt them; yet, they fell for the trick with free passes. It happened because the perpetrators of this atrocious scheme were really cunning: they actually issued some free passes and released some prisoners into the community to lure the others into the trap. “If we had known what was in store for us, we would have fought back. But some came back with free passes” said one survivor (Mircu, 1944, 28).

A “welcoming committee” made up of SS soldiers and Romanian policemen, with baseball bats and iron bars was set up right at the entrance of the police headquarter and the prisoners who had to pass through this 30 meter-long corridor were beaten over the head and humiliated with name-calling and slurs (Mircu, 1944, 37). Among the prisoners in the yard rumors were flying, “all frightening, and all maddening. The air smelled like blood, smelled like death” (Zăicescu, 2007, 86). After a few hours of inhumane abuse, without any probable cause, the authorities told the prisoners that red flags and flashlights had been found during the searches and gave them an ultimatum to admit guilt. As a good-will gesture, women, kids and elderly were released to go home (Mircu, 1944, 36-37). The “big massacre” in the yard of the local police started at 15:00. The signal was a false alarm of an aerial raid. Everybody who had a gun opened fire on the Jews. The streets around the police headquarters were packed with soldiers brought there with this mission: to shoot and kill the Jews who would try to escape. The desperate struggle for survival made the prisoners scatter in all directions to escape the deadly bursts of machine-gun fire.

Demonstrating that they are very observant and have a good grip on the mentality of the time, the editors of the main daily newspapers in Bucharest sensed the change of strategy produced by the removal of the legionnaires from the government, but also the continuation of the anti-Jewish propaganda. This study will analyze the articles in the main daily newspapers of Bucharest from June 20-July 30, 1941. In all of them it is noticeable the absence of news on the Jews' massacre in Iasi and a uniformity of the news content. This is proof without a doubt of censorship and manipulation. On the other hand, it is also proof that the journalists were trying a cover-up because they didn't even try in any way – like subliminal or vague messages – to pass the news about the grave events that had taken place in Iasi. Usually, titles that cover this kind of news or official communiqués were printed in large capital letters to draw attention of the readers. This time there was nothing of that nature in the press. Chronologically speaking, the first piece of information that suggested events to come was about the removal of the Jews from the rural area of Moldova. The official announcement came without any explanation of the objectives of such a measure. For example, the article *The Removal of the Jews Who Live in Rural Communities of Moldova* (*Timpul*, 1941, #1485,1). There were some publications that interpreted the event, all in anti-Semitic tones. An example is an article published in *Universul* that emphasizes the struggle of Ion Antonescu against the “dubious elements infiltrated into our rural life” (*Universul*, 1941, # 72,1). In addition, an article in *Acțiunea* sheds light on Romanians' qualities and prejudices against the Jews. In other words, a welcoming country, Romania had become “an importer of Jews from all over the world”, including the “Bolshevik paradise”. In some journalists' opinion, the war was a good chance to rectify the situation, not only externally, but also internally, so that Romanians in the countryside would have a great opportunity to regain their rights lost to “this population all alien for the Romanian nation” (Davidescu, *Acțiunea*, 1941, # 240, 1-2). For a journalist this measure was entirely justified for national security reasons, as the presence of the Judeo-Bolsheviks behind our front lines could jeopardize the success of military operations (R. V., *Unirea*, 1941, # 112, 1). On top of the military reason, there is a social one, anti-Semite, according to which the Jews, who had taken over the villages of Moldova had to be removed (*Curentul*, 1941, # 4801, 3). This action was regarded as an anti-Semitic battle that would put an end to the exploitation of Romanians by the Jews (Rădulescu, *Porunca vremii*, 1941, # 1960,1).

The first information about the gravity of the events in Iassy came as a backdrop of events like the uncertainty of a Romanian victory in war, the hardships of war, but also the manipulating messages that instigated the population against the Jews. The official communiqué of the Council of Ministers in its entirety was published in the *Monitorul oficial* on July 1, 1941. It announced the execution of 500 Judeo-communists found guilty of acts against Romanian and German armies (*Monitorul oficial*, 1941, # 153). It is noticeable that the German army is mentioned before the Romanian one. The communiqué, in this form or in a slightly modified version is carried in the following days by most newspapers of Bucharest. As a result, some newspapers announce the execution of the 500 Judeo-communists, while others reiterate the firmness of authorities in dealing with similar acts of treason and of the duty of honor that all Romanians have in helping and supporting authorities by denouncing any suspect activity. The daily *Acțiunea* announced on page 3 of

its July 2nd edition, the execution of those 500 Judeo-communists, without any other details (*Acțiunea*, 1941, # 242, 3). A day later, headlines in *Universul* carried the same information, showing that the “Soviets’ intent was to produce acts of sabotage, public mayhem and aggression behind enemy lines” (*Universul*, 1941, # 176, 1). Without any reference to the events in Iasi, the second communiqué is published, informing the public that there were attacks against Romanian and German armed forces and the perpetrators will be punished (*Universul*, 1941, # 177, 1). The same piece of information is carried in the article *Treason*. The author is not specific about who the traitors were, but he says the Judeo-communists will pay for their acts of treason. He goes on showing the benefits of “those elements”: “sheltered here, they lived a care-free life, enjoying the privileges of a tolerating environment”, but now “in times of war, they work in the dark for foreign pay”. Their actions were meant to sow doubt and “to entertain, skillfully and cunningly, an atmosphere of defeatism, until they’ll go directly to acts of sabotage and terrorism” (Șoldan, *Universul*, 1941, # 179, 1). On its turn, *Curentul* underlined that “Any attempt to repeat these despicable acts of aggression will be met with merciless vengeance” (*Curentul*, 1941, # 4806, 1). All other topics of the time are largely debated in the press, but the details of the execution of those 500 people in Iasi are simply overlooked. An event of such magnitude was expected to stir great interest among journalists and trigger on-site investigations, followed by an avalanche of commentaries, but none of that happened. There is only one conclusion to be drawn from this silence: that censorship was at its best that the State covered this up, to avoid public panic. The articles and communiqués that followed shed no light on the events. On the contrary, they mean to maintain tension and to manipulate the public opinion. Downplaying the tragedy in Iassy, *Timpul* carried the government decision to execute 50 Judeo-communists for each German or Romanian soldier killed by these only on last page (*Timpul*, 1941, # 1490, 8).

The most aggressive and offensive articles are written and published by Ilie Rădulescu in *Porunca vremii*. Talking about Jews, he calls them names like “dikes”, “Jewish treachery”, “dike corpses” or “criminal Judeo-communist aggression” (Rădulescu, *Porunca vremii*, 1941, # 1973, 1). Prof. A. C. Cuza relay the same anti-Semitic tirade in an interview, declaring that “Jews have to be eliminated for good and completely from our national life”, and, later on, to praise the new laws of reprisals against the Jews passed by Antonescu regime (*Timpul*, 1941, # 1509, 5).

In contrast to these blunt attacks, there are a lot of other articles suggesting that Jews are responsible for this ire against them. The public is reminded that there are spies among them who signal the Russian planes where the strategic military targets are located and reiterate that it is a patriotic duty of every citizen to report to the proper authorities such cases (*Universul*, 1941, # 192, 1). In *Timpul* (1941, #1505, 1) and *Acțiunea* (1941, #257, 3) the public is invited to point out to authorities the signals made by spies for the enemy airplanes. Journalists seem to come to the aid of the public by explaining how they can help the army and the state. As the spies’ job is to gather information, citizens should be careful and refrain from talking about delicate issues (*Universul*, 1941, #193, 1). In this atmosphere the measures taken against Jews appear logical, as they find full understanding and approval in the simplistic minds of public opinion heavily bombarded with manipulation and

deception for years. And this was just the foundation on which future subliminal messages and manipulation will be built during the month of July, 1941. By repeating the same message over and over, the population was to become aware that there was a real enemy within, one that was just as dangerous as an external one, and, as a result, everyone was responsible for the public safety and any suspicious act should be reported. This way, the government was building up the critical mass necessary to implementing the anti-Semitic policy and turning it into a national consensus. Journalists played the patriotic card to disseminate suspicion, doubt, and hatred in support of the draconic measures the government had in store for a minority chosen as a scapegoat for its foibles. Even if the author's intent was not to admit manipulation, the readers get the message that "propaganda has become a weapon of war- and the most important". Due to the ethnic diversity in the recaptured territories, the effort in those regions is similar to "social surgery" that has to be understood by each and every citizen, so that all can "participate with love and sacrifice to it" (Davidescu, *Acțiunea*, 1941, # 257, 1). The article does not mention the Jews by name, but given the national atmosphere and anti-Semitic just passed legislation, we can imply safely that it is about Jews.

Another means of manipulation with great impact was the movie publicized by the written press. It is important to bring it up because some reviews were related to the events in Iasi. One of them in particular, *Demonul din umbră* eulogizes the anti-Semitic production because it turns the qualities of the Jews into flaws: "an egocentric Jew, full of talents", the one who has "the bad habit of wanting everything". For the journalist, the fiction in the movie is good enough to categorize justify the anti-Semitic actions. "How bad this Jew is cannot be expressed in words. Indeed, only by looking at the cruelty of this Jew, like Rothschild, you can realize why the mankind is all against Jews" (*Vremea*, 1941, # 610, 6). The daily *Acțiunea*, also presents a review stating that "the Jews had the shamelessness to shoot at the Romanian and German soldiers; the Christians had one more chance to realize how real the Judaic danger is". The danger becomes more obvious when the author states that "in almost every third Bolshevik soldier there is a lurking Jew" (*Acțiunea*, 1941, # 259, 3).

Conclusions

One of the most dramatic events of the Romanian Holocaust, the Iasi massacre, was skillfully covered up by the central press. Moreover, it was used as an excuse for the anti-Semitic legislation and all the discriminatory measures that sprang from it, for the purpose of continuous manipulation and disinformation of the public opinion here and around the world. Judging by the columns dedicated to events from the provinces of Romania during this time, full of unimportant news, while the events in Iassy are totally overlooked, we can unmistakably conclude that the massacre of the Jews in Iassy was a wide cover-up, set up by those who had an interest in manipulating the public opinion for their political purposes. The well-greased propaganda machine worked so fine, that the national consensus to the "Jewish question" was achieved with the tragic results and consequences that we all know today.

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