

RELIGIOUS ANTI-SEMITISM IN ROMANIAN FASCIST PROPAGANDA¹

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During WWII, Romania fought on the German side, and took an active part in exterminating Jews. Romanian forces killed more than 300,000 Jews during the war. They also gained some notoriety for the zest they displayed in carrying out their task in Northern Bukovina, Bessarabia and Transnistria.

The official state institutions masterminded and put into practice the killing of half of the country's Jewish population, while the other half was denied the most elementary civil rights. The Orthodox Church was an important part of the establishment. That's why the issue of Christian responsibility during the Holocaust cannot be left aside when it comes to Romania.

In the Middle Ages, anti-Semitism was not enforced as state policy, and this made possible the development of relationships between Christians and Jews. However, in some religious documents the contrary can be found, for instance in the 17th century's Church Code of Law from Govora, which goes as follows: "He. the parson or person who might talk with the Jews and call them 'brothers', let him be anathema," which would mean his exclusion from the Church and community.²

The situation changed by the beginning of the 19th century when anti-Semitism grew due to economic reasons and the Church also became less tolerant of Jews. The new situation was reflected in the media, academia, cultural and political circles, long before anti-Semitism became a state policy.

Given the religious structure of Romanian society, it is not surprising that the Romanian fascist movements tried to assimilate Orthodox Christianity into their programs.

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² Pravila Bisericească de la Govora, adusă la zi de Pr. Gheorghe I. Petre-Govora, Academia Română, 2004, p.71.

The most relevant Romanian fascist groups were the League of National Christian Defense, and the Iron Guard. Their founders always emphasized the importance of Christian education.

The League of National Christian Defense was founded in 1923 by Professor A. C. Cuza. His theories proclaimed a typically fascist violent anticommunism and anti-Semitism. This party's program called for, among other things, the introduction of anti-Semitism as state policy and the pre-eminence of the Church in the life of the state³. In fact, Cuza's entire political philosophy was built around a single issue, resting on a set of anti-Semitic convictions that he pursued throughout his career.⁴

He used religious anti-Semitism as a reliable tool, which would provide him a wide audience, mainly in the rural areas of the country. Here is a quotation from the *Christian Brotherhood* newspaper denying the anti-Jewish attitude of this organization: "The word anti-Semite is a Talmudic made-up notion, a product of the kike's mentality. But to us, the followers of our Savior's teaching, there is not and there will never be any anti-Semitism, there will only be nationalism".⁵

But the League of National Christian Defense carried on a fierce anti-Semitic campaign with a religious background, even among the young people. At the beginning of the school year of 1926, the League distributed in schools the following manifesto: "Every Christian student should know that those who have crucified Jesus, the guilty ones, are not only those who actually did it, but their descendants as well. You have these accomplices as your schoolmates. Beware of Satan; don't talk to them, for you have enough Christian mates."⁶ Such language could be found in hundreds of manifestos, booklets, speeches, etc., and was not amended by any of the priests who got involved with the League's activity. In fact, those priests probably found themselves in a very odd situation when the League distributed a booklet titled "Jesus' Teachings". The booklet accused Romanian priests and theologians of altering the Christian religion under the influence of Judaism.⁷ The Church was also accused of not having repudiated the Old Testament, thus allowing "Satan's power embodied by the Kikes."⁸ The religious sects, such as Adventists – were also incriminated as having been invented by the Jews and financed with "American Kikes' money, to the ruin of

³ Radu Ioanid, *The Sword of the Archangel: Fascist Ideology in Romania*, Boulder, CO 1990, pp.77-78.

⁴ Paul Shapiro, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

⁵ *Fratia Crestina*, 1924, no.6, year II, USHMM, RG 25.023M, reel 134, file 2.

⁶ USHMM, RG 25.023M, reel 135, file 1, p.151.

⁷ USHMM, RG 25.0123M, reel 133, file 1, p. 57.

⁸ Leon Volovici, *Ideologia nationalistă și "Problema evreiască" în România anilor '30*, Humanitas, 1995, p. 48.

Christianity.” This sentence appeared in the *Christian Solidarity* newspaper. That journal had as its motto the following phrase by a Romanian philosopher: “If we won’t fight against the kike element, we are going to perish as a nation.”⁹

Evidence that the Church disagreed with the statements Cuza wrote against Judaism are hard to find. One of the rare one’s is an article signed by a priest who named Cuza a “fake apostle of Christianity.” The priest accused him of using the Jews as pretext to actually attack the Christian religion, with statements such as “the people believed in me [Cuza] more than they believed in God.”¹⁰ The Patriarch intended to send a circular to ask the priests not to join Cuza’s “heretical League.”¹¹ But this did not prevent him from congratulating Cuza, years later, for his “energy, uncompromised character and his nationalism which must be a model, especially for the Romanian young population.”¹²

As for the League’s parliamentary platform, it called for the complete elimination of the Jews. In 1937, Cuza was part of the National Christian Party that took over for a two-month period and succeeded in implementing part of its anti-Semitic program. Governing through decree-laws, the NCP directed its first administrative measures against the Jewish minority; the most significant was the law for the revision of Romanian citizenship. More than 250,000 Jews lost their citizenship as a result of this initiative.¹³

But the most important fascist movement was the Iron Guard, founded by C.Z. Codreanu in 1927. It also used the names the Legion of Archangel Michael and Everything for the Fatherland Party. It had similar purposes as those of the League, which were to be accomplished in a more revolutionary way. They defined themselves as: “An organization based on order and discipline, guided by a pure nationalism, protecting the altars of the church, which its enemies wish to dismantle.”¹⁴ Indeed, the assimilation of Orthodox Christianity into the political doctrine was a permanent goal of this movement, since Orthodoxy was seen as the most important element that defined Romanian nationalism. Therefore, the Iron Guard used a series of rites in the form of collective prayers, songs, processions, etc., to emotionally manipulate the members and attract them to the desired path.

⁹ USHMM, RG 25.023M, reel 136, file 1, p. 63.

¹⁰ USHMM, RG, 25.023M, reel 140, p. 33.

¹¹ USHMM, RG 25.023, reel 133, file 4, p 57.

¹² USHMM, RG 20.023M, reel 34, p.158.

¹³ Shapiro *op.cit.*, pp.33-35.

¹⁴ Ioanid, *op.cit.*, p. 85.

In their “Pledge”, the Legionnaires swore “before God and the Holy sacrifice for Christ and Legion” and urged all Romanians to get baptized into the Legionary creed”¹⁵.

The Legionnaires also recruited high-school students as apprentices. When they admitted the pupils, they used elements borrowed from the ritual used to admit monks into monasteries. Discipline and obedience were the common coordinates. The guide of the “Fellows of the Cross” stated that: “In order to receive the baptism of the Legion, you need training similar to the penance before Holy Communion.” In the same document it is highly recommended to the students to read the New Testament, chiefly the Gospels, as part of the “nationalist bibliography.”¹⁶ The founder, Codreanu, wrote a creed similar to the Orthodox one, which stated: “I believe in the resurrection of Romania through the Legion [...], I believe in the Legionary victory and salvation of the Romanian nation.”¹⁷

In fact, the glorification of this so-called spiritual struggle grounded in the mystical imagery of the Orthodox Church, actually helped the Legionnaires to harden their anti-Semitism. In 1937, Codreanu wrote in a Circular: “The historical mission of our generation is the resolution of the kike problem. All of our battles of the past 15 years have had this purpose, and all of our life’s effort from now on will have this purpose.”¹⁸

The Legionary movement used a part of the Orthodox clergy for supporting its propaganda. That explains why during the elections of 1937, out of 103 candidates from the “Everything for the Fatherland Party,” 33 were priests,¹⁹ while 55 priests got decision-making and leading positions within the Legion.²⁰ But the accurate number of priests who joined or displayed sympathy for the Iron Guard was in the hundreds. The fact that some priests lent their support to this organization also emerges from a book by the priest Ilie Imbrescu entitled: “The Church and the Legionary movement,” where he states that: “A true priest will therefore be a legionnaire by the nature of things, and again, by the nature of things, the best son of the Church.”

Codreanu himself congratulated the Holy Synod on its release of the statement concerning Freemasonry (the Iron Guard was a declared enemy of Freemasonry, which supposedly was represented by the “Jews and those bought by them”). The Holy Synod’s

¹⁵ USHMM, RG 25.023M, reel 20, file 1, p.56.

¹⁶ USHMM, RG 25.023M, reel 19, file 1, pp. 412 and 441.

¹⁷ USHMM, RG 25.023M, reel 24, file 3, p.146.

¹⁸ see Shapiro, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

¹⁹ Ioanid, *op.cit.*, p. 142.

²⁰ Jean Ancel, *Contribuții la istoria României. Problema evreiască, 1933-1944*, vol.I, p. 357.

formulation is identical with the Iron Guard's. I quote from the Patriarch's statement: "The Freemasonry lodges gather Jews and Christians all together [...] The Church cannot sit and watch impassively how the most mortal enemies of the Christ are considered superior to Christians from the point of view of the knowledge of the highest truth and of the absolution."²¹ The Iron Guard always maintained that satanic Judaism caused the moral, economical, and political decline of Romania.²² Therefore, it considered itself definitely mobilized against Judaism. The formation of the national-legionary state was seen as a victory of the Guard over the Judaism and its symbol – the synagogue.

The members of the Iron Guard came to power in September 1940 along with general Ion Antonescu, who was not a member of the Legion. Their first measure was to abrogate the official recognition of Judaism. The rule of the Legion lasted for four months. During this period the Legion's leaders ordered their followers to commit murder, making sure to absolve them of their responsibility by infusing them with religious language and symbols. Likewise, clergymen who joined the Legion granted these proselytes moral absolution. Iron Guard confiscations and corruption threatened to disrupt the Romanian economy and led to tension with Antonescu and the Romanian army. The Iron Guard rose against the regime on January 21, 1941. During that three-day civil war, its members also instigated a deadly pogrom in Bucharest. In addition to the slaughter, during this pogrom there were also severe Legionary attacks on 25 synagogues. In some instances, the Legionnaires began their attacks during the religious service at the Coral Temple (those who were present at the time were taken to Jilava forest and killed). In the end, the perpetrators set several synagogues on fire, out of which two burnt entirely to the ground.²³

The first communiqué issued by the Council of Ministers on February 1941, after the Legionnaires were removed from power stated that "the priests who participated in the disorders of the past days will be severely punished."²⁴ General Ion Antonescu also emphasized the leading role of some priests: "Particularly serious is that many priests, preachers of the Christian faith [...] headed the gangs of rebels with gun in hand instead of a

²¹ USHMM, RG 25.023M, reel. 21, file 15, p. 40.

²² Ancel, *op.cit.*, p. 353;

²³ Matatias Carp, *Cartea Neagra*, Atelierele Socec&Co., 1946, pp.238-242;

²⁴ Ancel, *Remembering for the Future*, Oxford, 1988, "The 'Christian' Regimes of Romania and the Jews, 1940-1942."

cross, inciting them to barbaric and cruel acts.”²⁵ Worth mentioning is that 218 clergymen were arrested for having fought against the army in the rebellion.²⁶

But some priests continued to help the Iron Guard members after Antonescu’s action. A police note reported, for instance, that a car of a monastery near Bucharest transported Legionnaires disguised as monks.²⁷

The clergymen’s loyalty to the Iron Guard and the cult of Codreanu lasted long after his death. In 1950 while exiled to South America, the Romanian priest Palaghita described Codreanu by using theological language, often making comparisons between the Legionary Movement and the Church, and between Codreanu and Jesus: “Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, who blew the trumpet of the Romanian nation’s resurrection, has the same fate as our Savior’s [...]. I am certain that His sacrifice is unparalleled in the Christian’s lineage, except for the Savior and His Apostles’.” The same priest made the following assessment about the Iron Guard: “The Legionary movement, as much as the Church, is the instrument that welcomes humans the way they are and which persuades them to rise into the spirit high up to God.”²⁸ This kind of “religious claim” overlooked the fact that the Iron Guard was a terrorist organization that used political assassination. In fact, there are indications that during the rebellion this priest headed a gang of Legionnaires and ordered them to kill two soldiers.²⁹

Both the League and the Iron Guard used powerful religious symbols over the years. They blessed their movements’ flags, performed mass baptism of children and assiduously attended religious services, always under the priests’ guidance. It is interesting that each of the two movements conceived their own version of the Orthodox Christian calendar: The Leagues’ calendar of 1924 displays, for instance, a picture of the founder A.C. Cuza in the area where it usually shows a picture of an icon or other religious symbol. Instead of a quotation from the Gospels or other Church writings, this calendar presents the statistic of the “Kikes from Europe,” with the fanciful conclusion that in Romania there is “one kike for every other 7 inhabitants.”³⁰ The Iron Guard’s calendar of 1933 displays a picture of Codreanu, dressed up in the traditional national costume. It also underlines that the Iron

²⁵ Ion Antonescu, *Pe marginea prapastiei*, 21-23 ianuarie 1941, vol.I, p. 235.

²⁶ Antonescu, *Pe marginea prapastiei*, I, 1941, p.163.

²⁷ USHMM, RG 25.023M, reel 24, file 5, p. 14.

²⁸ Preot Stefan Palaghita, *Garda de Fer – spre reinvierea Romaniei*, Buenos Aires, editura autorului, 1951, pp. 3-27.

²⁹ SSI note, February 1941, USHMM, 25.023M, reel 25, file 1, p. 98.

³⁰ USHMM, RG 25.023M, reel 135, file 1.

Guard's struggle is first of all a Christian battle, as champions of the Cross and of Jesus'.³¹ In 1936 Codreanu published in the "Everything for the Fatherland" party's version of the Orthodox calendar his own 10 Commandments,³² that the Legionnaires were supposed to read and respect, especially during hard times. They even changed Orthodox iconography, representing the Archangel Michael as having a Jew in chains under his feet.³³

The role of the Church within the legionary state was planned to be great. According to their statute, "Religion [...] has to be revived. During the decisive battle the priests will lead our ways and those priests who have made a covenant with the enemies of Orthodoxy would be removed," since the Iron Guard is "militating for the creation of a legionary state based on Orthodoxy."³⁴ This short quotation was speaking about the Iron Guard's intention to reform the Church in order to use it for its own agenda.³⁵

The use of Orthodox propaganda was obvious also when general Antonescu removed the Legionnaires and assumed power himself. Some of his appeals were broadcast through the churches, being publicly read by the priests.³⁶ He invoked the universal Christian principles, yet he also implemented barbaric measures against the Jews.

Vice prime-minister Mihai Antonescu, the ideologist of anti-Semitism under Ion Antonescu's regime, described the nationalization of Jewish homes as a reconstruction of the "national-Christian foundations of the Romanian society." According to him, Fascism and Nazism had enabled the Romanians "to have the courage to expropriate Jewish property and return it to the nationalist and Christian ownership".

He also depicted the secret decision of murdering the Jews from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina as a "Christian revenge against those who had crucified Jesus."³⁷ The head of the state himself, Ion Antonescu, used the same old anti-Semitic clichés, saying that "the war in general and the battles of Odessa in particular have proven beyond any doubt that Satan was the Jew."³⁸

With few exceptions, the higher clergy viewed the Jews as enemies of Christianity, who had threatened the souls of Christians and who were responsible for the misfortunes of

³¹ USHMM, RG 25023M, reel 2, file 3, p. 11.

³² USHMM, RG 25.023M, reel 24, file 1, p. 3.

³³ USHMM, RG 25.023M, reel 33, file 7, p. 92.

³⁴ USHMM, RG 25.023M, reel 14..

³⁵ USHMM, RG 25.023M, reel 3, file 4, p. 14.

³⁶ Ioanid, *op.cit.*, p. 141.

³⁷ Ancel, *op.cit.*, pp. 17-18.

³⁸ Lya Benjamin, "The Jew's Image in Antonescu's Political Texts" in *The Holocaust and Romania. History and Contemporary Significance*, Bucharest, 2003, pp.122: 125.

the country. In their eyes, Jews were potential traitors, disseminators of leftist ideas, Communists or allies of the Bolsheviks and, of course, the assassins of God. Some of the most important priests praised Ion Antonescu in very original ways. Ghenadie, Bishop of Buzau, described the Romanian dictator as a new Jesus, sent by God to save Romania, “Yet then we found ourselves in darkness and God sent to our country the long awaited Redeemer.”³⁹ According to Irineu, Metropolitan of Moldavia and Suceava, “God had mercy on the Orthodox believers and sent His archangels on Earth: Hitler and Antonescu, and they headed their armies, the sign of the cross on their chests [...] and the synagogue of Satan was ruined and scattered into the four directions of the earth [...].”⁴⁰ The Romanian Patriarch at that time, Nicodim, adopted the same view, as shown in his statements during the war, “God had shown to the leader of our country the path toward a sacred and redeeming alliance with the German nation and sent the united armies to the Divine Crusade against the destructive Bolshevism [...] which has found here villainous souls ready to serve him. These companions of Satan have been found mostly among the nation that had brought damnation upon itself and its sons, since it had crucified the Son of God.”⁴¹

Meanwhile, the Romanian government in Transnistria launched an evangelical crusade in the villages. According to the Romanian Army orders, the chaplains in Transnistria were to reopen the churches (closed under the Soviet rule) and assist the priests in restoring Christianity to the population.⁴² This outburst of Christian activity coincided with the height of the mass murder operations against the Jewish population within the very same territory.⁴³ Jews never caused disagreement between the administration and the Romanian Orthodox Church. It’s hard to understand how those people believed that they were leading a “Christian life” at the height of the exterminations in Transnistria, or to separate “Christian” acts – founding and renovating churches, performing mass baptism and marriage ceremonies, etc., from the atrocities committed against the Jewish people, sometimes only a few meters away. One example of this was when the governor of Transnistria chose November 7, 1941, as the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution, and sought Antonescu’s permission to build an

³⁹ Niculescu Ghenadie, *Pastorala la nasterea Domnului* (Pastoral on the Birth of Lord), Bucuresti, 1941, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Irineu Mihalcescu, *Preotimea si Razboiul sfant contra hidrei Bolsevice. Pastorala* (The Clergy and the Holy War Against the Bolshevik Hydra), Iasi, 1941, p. 10.

⁴¹ Nicodim, Patriarch of Romania, *Cuvantul Patriarhului pentru post, pentru ostire, pentru ogor* (The Patriarch’s Word on the Fast, to the Army, to the Fields), Bucuresti, 1942, pp. 5 and.11-13.

⁴² Jean Ancel, *Transnistria*, vol.1, Tel Aviv University, 2003, pp.469-470.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp.478-481.

Orthodox cathedral in Odessa. Antonescu gave his blessing, and the same day the cornerstone was laid, thousands of Jews were shot and hanged in the streets of that town, and some 30,000 were forced to make their way on foot to the Bogdanovka camp.⁴⁴

One of the current problems the Romanian people face is to become aware of the huge responsibility of Antonescu's two regimes (with and without Legionnaires) in the process of discrimination and destruction of Romanian Jewry. The responsibility belongs to perpetrators and bystanders alike, and it's a duty of conscience to realize the importance of religious anti-Semitism in shaping the attitudes towards the Jews. Statements like "The one fact that the Jews are blamed for the crucifixion of Jesus would be enough for demonstrating their criminal nature,"⁴⁵ or the Jews are "a deicide people, an unforgettable fault which always will justify the anti-Semitism"⁴⁶ could still be read in some nationalistic magazines after 1990.

But the most acute problem is that the Orthodox Church has avoided and continues to avoid any reference to the consequences of religious anti-Semitism. The priests' involvement with the Legionary Movement and the mystical component of the Iron Guard's anti-Semitism are still being ignored by the Church. And the fact that theological anti-Semitism is never explained is very alarming. For instance, the depiction of the Jew that church-goers get the week before Easter, as described in the *Triod*, a very important liturgical book of the Eastern Church in use ever since the twelfth century, is as follows: the Jews are "destroyers of souls," "haters of God and people," "full of devilishness," and "vipers." The text calls finally for revenge: "And give them, Lord, what they deserve because they killed you."⁴⁷

Consequently, religious anti-Semitism is still a subject rarely approached in Romania. Some religion teachers continue to induce the idea that the Jews are to be blamed for their decision to kill Jesus, which can lead some people to connect this event with the Holocaust. A sixteen year old student in Romania told me that the Holocaust happened because Jews killed Jesus. And he seemed pretty sure about that. This probably still happens because the accusation of deicide, the most powerful label the European collective mentality applied to the Jews, was never re-evaluated by the Romanian Orthodox Church, neither from the theological and moral point of view nor from that of the historical perspectives.

⁴⁴ Idem, pp.482-483.

⁴⁵ **** "Avertisment", Miscarea nr.6/27, 1994.

⁴⁶ Mireille Astrid Popa, "Cine produce antisemitism?", Romania Mare, 27 Aug. 1993.

⁴⁷ *Triod*, Editura IBMBOR Bucuresti, 2002, p 616.