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The Holocaust in the post-communist memory discourse in Romania: the case of the monuments and memorial sites to the victims of the Iasi pogrom of June 1941¹

Abstract

The current paper focuses on the monuments which commemorate the victims of the pogrom in Iași between the 29th of June and the 1st of July 1941. More specifically, monuments and museums mark several parts of the city as memory places of the killings of thousands of Jews by the Romanian and the German authorities in Iași. In the last few years the commemoration of this inconvenient traumatic past has been one of the aims of both academic research and public debate. The major differences between the communist memory discourse which blamed mainly the German authorities for the massacre and the post-communist discourse which points out the responsibilities of the Antonescu's regime and its collaboration with the German officials, reflect, of course, different politics of memory and history.

Taking into serious consideration both the transnational character of the Holocaust and the specificities of the Romanian Holocaust and the city of Iași, we shall deal with the way in which the memory places 'interact' with the academic narratives and the public discourse (cinema, media, literature etc) and become a part of a broader post-communist memory discourse in Romania. This post-communist memory discourse in Romania condemns the atrocities of Ion Antonescu's regime, rejects the communist politics of memory concerning tragic and traumatic events and promotes the image of Romania as a European and multicultural society ready to come to terms with its recent traumatic past.

Key words: Iasi pogrom, Jews, memory discourse, monuments

Introduction

The paper focuses on the monuments which commemorate the victims of the pogrom in Iași which took place between the 28th and the 30th of June 1941 and was launched by the Romanian and German authorities against the Jewish population. More specifically, out of the 45.000 Jews who lived in Iași at that time and constituted approximately half of the city's population, about 14.000 lost their lives (the exact figure is still uncertain). Most of them were murdered in the streets, in their houses and the courtyard of police headquarters. Thousands more were arrested and deported by trains ('Death Trains') to Călărași and Podu Iloaiei. Many of them died during the deportation due to heat, thirst and suffocation. This massacre was followed by

¹ This paper draws upon bibliographical and field research which I conducted in Iasi in 2015 and 2016. It is an elaborated version of the presentation I held at the International Academic Conference *Regions of Memory II: Memory Regions as Discourse and Imagination*, Warsaw, 17-19 March 2016. The conference was a part of the Genealogies of Memory project run by the European Network of Remembrance and Solidarity since 2011.

other massacres committed by both German SS and police and Romanian army and gendarmerie against thousands of Jews in Bessarabia, northern Bukovina, and Transnistria (Dobrincu, 2015: 288-290; Iancu & Platon, 2015: 7). As Ioannid (1993, 120) clearly states, the Iasi pogrom is the *best-known event in the history of Romanian Holocaust, a major outbreak of violent anti-semitism and a part of a long series of mass murders committed by Romanian fascists...* It was the outcome of numerous anti-semitic laws which had been adopted by Romanian governments from the 1860's onwards and the systematic anti-semitic propaganda which presented Jews as a constant danger to the economic, social and political stability in Romania (Ioannid, 1993: 119-122). The fact that until 1919 Jews in Romania had no civil rights and that they were granted citizenship only in the aftermath of the World War I after the intervention and pressure of the Great Powers indicates that anti-semitism was deeply rooted in the Romanian society and especially in the city of Iasi which had a long tradition of discrimination against its Jewish population (Ioannid, 1993: 121; Arendt, 1997: 208). The situation escalated in the 1930's when extreme anti-semitic political parties and organizations which advocated for the elimination of the Jewish population, such as the fascist movement Iron Guard (also called Legion of the Archangel Michael), dominated the political scene (Ioannid, 1993: 119-122). The rapid developments during the period 1940-1941, such as Romania's accession to the Tripartite Pact, the territorial losses, the seizure of power by the General Ion Antonescu who imposed a dictatorial regime and the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22 1941, paved the way for pogroms against the Jewish population, since Jews and especially those who lived near the front line were portrayed as '*Bolshevik agents*' and '*traitors*' (Ioannid, 1993: 119-122; Heinen, 2011: 22-24).

Theoretical framework and methodology

The methodological approach of the present analysis is multidisciplinary and is based mainly upon: i) general theoretical works which focus on the complex phenomenon of the relation between memory and history, individual and collective memory, trauma and politics of memory, official and unofficial memory and the interrelation between space and memory, ii) works on the specific characteristics of the Romanian Holocaust and the politics of memory in Romania and iii) field research in the city of Iasi.

The theoretical framework of our research and analysis is based on Maurice Halbwach's theory of collective memory and on Pierre Nora's conception of *Lieux de mémoire*. More specifically, the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs argues that individual memory is closely related to collective memory and he highlights the social frames of collective experience and memory (Halbwachs, 1992). The historian Pierre Nora draws from Halbwachs' conceptualization of memory and stresses the strong tie between memory and place. The concept *lieux de mémoire* (*loci memoriae*, *memory places*) refers to "*embodiments of a memorial consciousness*" and can be material, symbolic and functional (Nora, 1989: 12,19). The 'memory places' are determined by the mix of individuals that constitute the social group to which they relate (Nora & Kritzman, 1996: xi).

In our analysis we deal with *lieux de mémoire*, such as monuments and memorial sites, which embody traumatic events of Romania's past. In the last few years the commemoration of this 'inconvenient' traumatic past has been one of the aims of both academic research and public debate. The major differences between the

communist memory discourse regarding the Holocaust and the Iasi Pogrom which blamed mainly the German authorities for the massacre and the post-communist discourse which points out the responsibilities of the Antonescu's regime and its collaboration with the German officials, reflect, of course, different politics of memory and history. Taking into serious consideration both the transnational character of the Holocaust and the specificities of the Romanian Holocaust and the city of Iași, we deal with the way in which the memory places "interact" with the academic narratives and the public discourse and become a part of a broader post-communist memory discourse in Romania. In fact, the shift from the "collective amnesia" and the selective memory, which prevailed during the communist period to the contemporary "eruption of memory", is more than evident both in the historiographical discourse and the memorial sites (Platon, 2015: 195-204).

***Loci memoriae* of the Iasi Pogrom and the shifts in the Romanian memory discourse**

There are several memorial sites, monuments and museums in many Romanian cities, such as Bucharest, Arad, Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, Târgu Mureș, Satu Mare, Baia Mare, Șimleu Silvaniei, Dej, Bistrița, Sighetu Marmăției, Rădăuți, Dorohoi, Botoșani, Iași, Târgu Frumos, Podu Iloaiei, Roman, etc. which commemorate the victims of the Holocaust in Romania (Waldman, 2015: 221-223).

The *Lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989: 7) of the Iasi Pogrom are the Iasi Synagogue, the Jewish cemetery, the railway station and a building at the centre of the city. The monuments can be divided into two categories: 1) Those which reshape an already existing memory region and, therefore, transform an existing memory discourse into a new one and 2) those which construct a completely new memory region in the city. The monuments are the following: The impressive blackmarble obelisk in front of the Great Synagogue which was unveiled on the 28th of June 2011 and replaced the obelisk which had been built in the communist period, the Popricani Mass Grave Memorial at the Jewish Cemetery and the memorial plaques which were put on the building which used to host the Police Headquarters in the inter-war period, where many Jews were murdered or tortured and on the railway station building, the place from where those who had survived the massacre in the city and the torture, were deported by trains to places outside Iasi ("Erinnerung an die Opfer des Pogroms vom Juni 1941").

A very characteristic and illuminating example of the major shifts and changes in the official memory discourse concerning the Romanian Holocaust and more specifically the pogrom in Iasi is the obelisk in front of the Iasi Synagogue, a place of religious and cultural importance for the Jews: In the first obelisk which was erected in 1976 by the communist authorities one could read the following: "*In Memory of the Victims of the Fascist Pogrom of Iași June 28–29, 1941*" (See Figure 1).



Figure 1. The former obelisk “In Memory of the Victims of the Fascist Pogrom of Iași”, June 28–29, 1941

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

In the obelisk that replaced the former communist monument we read the following text: “In memory of over 13.000 Jews, innocent victims of Jassy Pogrom of June 28-30 1941 during the Ion Antonescu regime. We will not forget” (See Figures 2 and 3)



Figure 2. The new obelisk (2011) that replaced the former communist monument

Source: Author's personal archive



Figure 3. The text written on the base of the new obelisk

Source: Author's personal archive

The differences in the discursive elements of these two monuments are more than clear. In the first obelisk the terms *victims* and *Jassy Pogrom* are vague and are being put in the general context of *fascism*. Neither the origin of the victims nor the number of the victims is being mentioned. Of course, the text does not make any reference to the responsibilities of the Romanian authorities. The inscription in the new obelisk, however, specifies the origin and the number of the victims, blames the Romanian authorities and more specifically Ion Antonescu's regime for the massacre and makes a clear statement and appeal to the citizens not to forget: "*We will not forget*". ("Erinnerung an die Opfer des Pogroms vom Juni 1941"). In the first case we are dealing with a quasi-invisible character of the memory region, whereas in the second case the monument and the memory region are claiming to be part of the collective memory of the Jewish community and the city of Iasi.

The first monument reflected clearly the official position and discourse of the Communist Party concerning the pogrom in Iasi: The pogrom is being put in the context of the struggle between fascists and antifascists, whereas the number of the victims with Jewish citizenship is being significantly minimized. The German troops were mainly to blame for the massacre which were supported by *some fascist elements of the Romanian Army* (Karečki & Kovaci, 1978; Iancu & Platon, 2015: 11-12). Although there have been some attempts by some journalists of Jewish origin in the period between 1944-1947 for the investigation of the crimes committed against the Jews and the commemoration of the massacre in Romania (Guşu, 2010: 270-296), negation and selective memory prevailed throughout the communist period. Both in the period between 1948-1965, when the Stalinist model formed the ideological basis of the regime, and in the period 1965-1989, when Ceausescu imposed the model of national communism and promoted Romanian national ideology, the war crimes were seen as crimes committed by fascists (mostly foreigners and some locals) against communists. Especially in the Ceausescu period, fascism was regarded as a foreign political phenomenon which did not have a significant appeal to the Romanian people, whereas Ion Antonescu was regarded as a leader who tried to secure

Romania's independence against Germany and to regain the lost Romanian territories (Heinen, 2011: 28-30; Stan, 2012: 17-18).

On the other hand, the second monument embodies all the discursive elements of today's official historical writing and politics of memory regarding the Pogrom in Iasi and the Romanian Holocaust. Of course, the today's memory and historical discourse has not been shaped through a linear process but through the debates, controversies and discontinuities which characterized the shift from the communist to the post-communist discourse. The main topics of these controversies and debates were the phenomenon of the Romanian inter-war extreme right, anti-Semitism in Romania and the relationship between the intellectuals of the interwar period and fascist ideology. After 1989, in the context of a Romanian nationalist discourse many scholars and politicians tried to portray Ion Antonescu as a national hero and leader and the Legion of the Archangel Michael (Iron Guard) as a positive proponent of the Romanian national ideology (Heinen, 2011: 30). However, there were also other scholars who took a critical stand and wrote comprehensive studies on antisemitism and fascism in Romania (Volovici, 1991).

2003 was a landmark year for the shift in the memory discourse in Romania: After the reactions and protests that had been caused by a statement made by the President of Romania, Ion Iliescu, on the occasion of an cooperative agreement between the National Archives of Romania and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, that Romania's government "*encourages research concerning the Holocaust in Europe but strongly emphasizes that between 1940–1945 no Holocaust took place within Romania's boundaries*", an International Commission on the Holocaust was set up in Romania on October 22, 2003, on the initiative of Ion Iliescu (Culic, 2005: 1-21). The Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania which was presented to Romanian President Ion Iliescu in November 2004 defined the term *Holocaust* as a systematic persecution of Jews in Europe which was organized by Nazi Germany and its allies and collaborators in the period between 1933 and 1945. As for the Jews in Romania, the Report states that a significant part of the Jewish Community in Romania was exterminated during the Second World War. The Commission concludes that the Romanian authorities bear the main responsibility for the planning and implementation of the Holocaust in Romania (Friling, Ioannid & Ionescu, 2005; Stan, 2012: 26). The content and the conclusions of the Report gave impetus to numerous publications in the fields of Oral History, Historiography, Memory Studies concerning the Holocaust in Romania (Institutul Român de Istorie Recentă, 2004).

2011 was also a landmark year for the memory discourse concerning the Iasi Pogrom. On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the massacre, the memory regions became now an integral and dynamic part of the academic and public discourse. It is not coincidental that apart from the International Conference which was organized at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in June 2011, another conference took place at the same time in Podu Iloaiei, a place outside Iasi, with the main goal the exchange of experiences between professors who organize activities with students for the commemoration of the Holocaust. According to the organizers of the conference, Podul Iloaiei, was selected as the place of the conference, because there exists the Jewish cemetery and because it was the place where the "*death trains*" passed (Acioabăniței, 2011: 1-2). At the ceremony in front of the Great Synagogue, where the new obelisk was also inaugurated, many descendants of Jews joined the survivors of the massacre in order to commemorate the tragic events. The commemorative event

along with the inauguration of the obelisk had a very large media coverage. The Romanian President Traian Basescu himself sent a message with the following words: *...Nobody, nowhere can find an excuse nor a justification for what happened in Iasi. The Iasi pogrom as well as the tragedy of the Holocaust as a whole is a shocking chapter of Romania's history and should force us to assume our responsibilities for the serious errors committed in the past...* ("Romania commemorates Iasi pogrom", 2011).

The Jewish cemetery which is outside the city, constitutes also a memory place of great importance which has been reshaped and transformed as a discourse during the last few years. It is a memory place where in fact two memory discourses "coexist" (See figure 4).



Figure 4. The jewish cemetery outside the city of Iasi

Source: Author's personal archive

The first memory discourse is reflected on the memorial plaque which had been put on a mass grave during the socialist period by the Federation of Jewish Communities of the Socialist Republic of Romania and the second one on the Popricani Mass Grave Memorial. The first memorial plaque informs on the killings and sufferings of the Jewish people in Romania which were caused by racists, fascists and Anti-Semites. It gives emphasis on the transnational character of the Holocaust and does not mention anything about the responsibilities of the local authorities (See figure 5).



Figure 5. The memorial plaque which had been put by the Federation of Jewish Communities of the Socialist Republic of Romania

Source: Author's personal archive

The Popricani Mass Grave Memorial reflects the post-communist discourse, since it mentions that Ion Antonescu was to blame for the massacre and points out the local dimension of the tragedy (See figures 6 & 7)



Figure 6. The Popricani Mass Grave Memorial
Source: Author's personal archive



Figure 7. The Popricani Mass Grave Memorial
Source: Author's personal archive

As we have already mentioned, apart from the transformation and reshaping of already existing regions of memory, we deal also with the creation of completely new ones. This is the case of the *locus memoriae* which was created in 2011 by the memorial plaque which was set up on the building which used to host the Police Headquarters. This new memory place differs in many ways from the other ones. The basic difference is that it is not linked to any impressive monument of religious or cultural significance for the Jewish Community. On the contrary, it is situated in the centre of the city in Iasi, on a crowded street. The text we read, as we pass by the building, is the following: “In this place, where the police headquarters used to be, were brought on the 29th of June 1941 after they had been arrested thousands of Jews, victims of the pogrom organized by the authorities of the Antonescu’s regime. Romanian soldiers, policemen but also citizens along with German soldiers

participated in the massacre of their Jew co-citizens in the courtyard of the headquarters and in the streets of the city. 4432 of those who survived the massacre were sent in the train station and were deported. The pogrom in Iasi was the greatest massacre committed against the Jews in the territory of Romania. May the memory of this tragedy remain alive as a prevention for the future generations". National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania "Elie Wiesel", June 2011 (See figure 8).



Figure 8. The memorial plaque on the building which used to host the Police Headquarters.

Source: Author's personal archive

The goal of the above text is the transmission of a clear message to the citizens concerning the character and the dimensions of the massacre in Iasi. It gives all the useful information and details and puts deliberately emphasis on the fact that in the tragic events participated Romanian citizens.

Conclusions

The post-communist memory discourse in Romania concerning the Romanian Holocaust serves multiple goals: The condemnation of the atrocities of Antonescu's regime, the rejection of the communist politics of memory concerning tragic and traumatic events and the promotion of the image of Romania as a European and multicultural society ready to come to terms with its recent traumatic past. In the case of the monuments in Iasi, the city which used to have the largest Jewish community in Romania, emphasis is given, among others, on the local and specific character of the pogrom and on Iasi's citizens' duty to commemorate the massacre in order to prevent intolerance, anti-Semitism and negative stereotypical images of the 'other' from undermining the multicultural character of the local society in the future.

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