

Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–1944

Review Number:

606

Publish date:

Friday, 1 June, 2007

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ISBN:

9781403993410

Date of Publication:

2006

Price:

£58.00

Pages:

392pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave Macmillan

Publisher url:

<http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?PID=271347>

Place of Publication:

Basingstoke

Reviewer:

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Dennis Deletant is one of the leading authorities on the history of Romania since the 1930s. His well-deserved scholarly reputation for thoroughness, fairness, and honesty is amply demonstrated in this exhaustively-researched and well-written study which aims to describe in detail, and to render historical judgment on, the wartime Romanian government of Ion Antonescu (p. 277). His book fills a significant historiographical gap while providing a balance sheet for this hotly-controverted era in the Romanian past (p. 1).

The author introduces his subject by pointing out that the career of Ion Antonescu is riddled with paradoxes. He was an honest politician in a society not noted for integrity in politics. He was reportedly one of the few Axis leaders that Hitler respected or even allowed to contradict him. On the other hand, he was never a Germanophile. Further, as Deletant notes, he

was a war criminal who sent tens of thousands of Jews to their death in Transnistria, and yet he refused to send other Romanian Jews to the death camps in Poland. He was a definite anti-Semite and yet ... more Jews survived under his rule than in any other country within Axis Europe For five months he led a Fascist-style government, yet in January 1941, he removed that government ... and installed a military dictatorship (p. 2).

Antonescu was a pragmatist, but he also was an ardent Romanian nationalist and anti-communist. His pragmatism was, in typically Romanian fashion, subordinated to his nationalism.

Chapter One covers the evolution of Romanian policy from its reliance on the League of Nations system through to the German drive through Western Europe in 1940. In this interval, Romanian political calculations and the machinations of King Carol II were completely overturned. As soon as the defeat of France was certain, the Soviet Union ruthlessly seized Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina by ultimatum. This was followed by the loss of forty per cent of Transylvania to Hungary and the Southern Dobrogea to Bulgaria. All in all, by September 1940 Romania had lost one third of its 1939 territory and population. One consequence, Deletant stresses, was the proliferation of claims in Romania of Jewish collaboration with Soviet occupying forces. This contributed to the scapegoating of the Jews for territorial losses to the Soviets (a kind of Romanian version of the infamous Weimar 'Stab in the Back' theory), and thereby provided a convenient cover for the supine and humiliating retreat of the Romanians from the region. On the domestic front (again because of the manoeuvres of Carol II), democracy came to a complete collapse in the late 1930s. The notorious Iron Guard (the Legionary Movement) had thrived as anti-Semitism grew into official policy in 1937.

The stage was set for Antonescu's accession to power, which Deletant covers in Chapter Two. He reviews Antonescu's career, which was varied and distinguished (the general did not suddenly materialize out of nowhere), culminating with a stint as Minister of Defence in 1937. In the 1930s, Antonescu had been an opponent of Romania's flirtations with Germany, and regarded the Hungarians as Romania's primary military threat, not the Soviets. As popular reaction to Romania's territorial losses mounted in 1940, he emerged as King Carol II's successor. This was not due, as is often assumed, to German pressure. Deletant concludes that prior to September 1940, Antonescu 'had no close ties to the Reich ... He came to power in a vacuum, inheriting a situation which was not of his own making. "I went with Germany because I found the country committed to this policy, and no one then, whoever he might have been, could have given it a different direction without the risk of bringing ruin to the entire country"' (p. 51). And in 1941, following Pearl Harbor, Antonescu opined: 'I am an ally of the Reich against Russia. I am neutral in the conflict between Great Britain and Germany. I am for America against the Japanese' (p. 92). This led in September 1940 to the abdication of Carol II and the establishment of the National Legionary State, with Antonescu as Conducator (Leader), the subject of Chapter Three. Deletant points out that 'Antonescu brought to office the mental hardware of a general, one which placed discipline at the head of his priorities ... As he himself put it, "in today's circumstances a small country which is under threat, such as ours, does not do what it wishes, but what it can" ... In essence, after 1940, any Romanian policy was going to be a military policy' (p. 52). This quickly led to differences between the austere general and increasingly unhinged Legionary extremists. By January 1941, Antonescu was able to obtain German neutrality in a looming conflict with the Guard. When the Guard tried to oust Antonescu by force, he was able to crush it and establish a military dictatorship with a cabinet dominated by officers. In the end—because they needed stability in Romanian society, especially in the economy—the Germans were not unhappy to see the Guardist rabble replaced by reliable military men who would presumably ensure order.

Chapter Four is devoted to the subject of 'Military Dictatorship and War'. 'Antonescu was a soldier who saw the solution to problems in terms of *raison d'état*.' As he stated in late 1941, "I now want to declare before the world that this state is a militaristic one"... But unlike the dictatorships of Hitler and Mussolini, Antonescu's dictatorship was not based on a mass political party or ideology. Antonescu's programme was a

simple one: order within Romania and security for her frontiers' (pp. 69–70). This raises the question: 'To what degree was Antonescu's Romania a totalitarian state'? Deletant's answer is that 'Antonescu is perhaps best described as authoritarian rather than totalitarian' (pp. 70–1). Antonescu was a dictator, ruled by decree, and ran a generally repressive regime for which he claimed sole responsibility. On the other hand, 'Antonescu did tolerate what might be termed dissent rather than opposition' (p. 74). Indeed, in a 1943 Antonescu meeting with Hitler and von Ribbentrop, the German foreign minister described the conduct of Maniu, the leader of Romanian internal opposition, as treasonous: 'In Germany, a man such as Maniu would have been hanged long ago' (p. 75).

Was Antonescu a fascist? Deletant's response is that while the Legionary Movement was fascist, Antonescu was not, although 'his rule was overtly anti-Semitic' (p. 71). He was also strongly anti-Communist: 'I consider Communism to be the greatest enemy of the nation, it is a betrayal of the fatherland and I shall punish it with death ...' (p. 72). Of course, Jews were often considered likely to be both Communists and Russian sympathisers; for Romanian nationalists it is hard to determine which was the worst offense.

In the course of the war, Hitler profited from Antonescu's reflexive anti-Russianism, which led to significant Romanian contributions to the Axis war effort. The June 1941 attack on the Soviet Union was genuinely popular in Romania, where the majority agreed with Antonescu's description of the campaign to regain Bessarabia and northern Bukovina as a 'holy war' (p. 83). However, once these provinces had been reunited with Romania, Romanian opinion opposed continuing the battle across the Dniester, that is beyond Romania's traditional frontiers. Antonescu rejected this line of thought: 'I confirm that I will pursue operations in the east to the end against that great enemy of civilization, of Europe, and of my country: Russian bolshevism ... I will not be swayed by anyone not to extend this military cooperation into new territory' (p. 85).

Antonescu agreed to participate in the military occupation of Transnistria as well as in the eventually disastrous German campaigns up to Stalingrad. At the same time he was careful to reject suggestions by Hitler and others that Romania might annex trans-Dniestrian lands in exchange for its losses in Transylvania. He repeatedly raised the Transylvanian issue in his meetings with Hitler, and though the Romanians took military control of Transnistria, they pointedly refused to annex it.

Once the war turned against the Axis, Antonescu moderated his unequivocal support of the Germans. He 'began to temper his anti-Semitic zeal and sought to present a more favorable image of himself to the Western Allies, seeking to distance himself from the genocidal measures for which he was partly responsible in the summer of 1941. Aware that a reckoning with the Allies was ever more likely, he was anxious to show himself as a saviour of the Jews' (p. 100). This leads into the second major section of the book, five chapters dealing with Antonescu, the Jews, and the Holocaust.

When Antonescu took power in 1940, anti-Semitic measures increased, usually under the guise of 'Romanianization' of the economy and the professions. Later efforts to blame the Legionaries for anti-Semitic legislation, Deletant notes, are false: after January 1941—when Antonescu took sole charge of the regime—Romanianization actually accelerated. Particularly egregious was the conscripting of all Jews between the ages of twenty and fifty into forced labour in 1941. Antonescu also taxed the Jewish community for those who could not work because of illness or other causes, and decreed reprisal shootings and deportations for violation of forced-labour regulations. In the final analysis, although it has been claimed that Antonescu was not an anti-Semite as such, Deletant argues that Antonescu's correspondence and recorded comments in cabinet meetings clearly are the language of the anti-Semite (including disparaging references to 'yids', to proofs 'that Satan is the Jew', to advocacy of 'purification' of the Romanian lands) (pp. 116–20, 128–30).

This is borne out in the author's examination of 'Antonescu and the Holocaust', which could not be blunter:

The Jews were the principal victims of Ion Antonescu's regime ... their deportation constituted the principal means for Antonescu to satisfy his desire to "purify" and "homogenize" Romania's population. But deportation was not the only fate of the Jews. Romania is part of the geography of the Holocaust because on its territory, and in lands under Romanian control, Antonescu was responsible for the systematic murder of Jews (p. 127).

The statistical story is grim: 'mass murder' was 'carried out by the Romanian authorities under Antonescu's military dictatorship'. The death toll was 'the result not only of systematic killing, but also of deportation and its consequences ... These figures—almost 300,000 Jews in all—give the Antonescu regime the sinister distinction of being responsible for the largest number of deaths of Jews after Hitler's Germany' (p. 127).

The Romanian Holocaust began with the attempt to establish security zones behind the German-Romanian lines in the looming attack on the Soviet Union by attempting to deport all Jews in these areas. This led to the well-known Pogrom of Iasi, 28–30 June 1941, as a result of which some 4,000 or more Jews were shot or perished through deportation. This and subsequent tragedies were justified by Antonescu by reference to alleged Jewish collaboration with the Soviet Union. Once the invasion of the USSR occurred, the level of violence against Jews skyrocketed. Although the German Einsatzgruppe D was deeply involved in the systematic extermination of Jews in the war zone, even their leaders were reportedly unhappy 'with the arbitrary fashion in which Romanian troops carried out their murders' in their sector (p. 146).

Much more deadly was the Romanian deportation program designed to ethnically cleanse the re-claimed provinces of Bessarabia and Bukovina. This gained momentum in 1941, after the Romanians were given control of the area between the Dniester and the Bug usually referred to as Transnistria. Thousands of Jews were herded across the Dniester; those who could not make it because of illness or age were executed on the spot. In the end, by Deletant's calculations, 220,000–260,000 Jews died there under Romanian auspices. Antonescu's responsibility for all of this is clear. In his own words, he urged a 'policy of purification of the Romanian race, and I will not give way before any obstacle in achieving this historical goal of our nation. If we do not take advantage of the situation which presents itself today ... we shall miss the last chance that history offers to us. And I do not wish to miss it, because if I do so further generations will blame me' (p. 155). The irony is that future generations of Romanians have tried so hard to excuse or exculpate him.

The tragedy of Transnistria between 1941–44 is carefully described in Chapter Eight. The fall of Odessa in October 1941 was followed by the blowing up of the Romanian military headquarters there. Antonescu ordered reprisals, leading to the massacre of 20,000 Jews. This was followed by the deportation of thousands more to Transnistria in winter conditions, partly because of fears that a Soviet attack on Odessa was imminent. Antonescu told the governor of Transnistria, Gh. Alexianu, to 'get them out of Odessa. I don't want to know. A hundred can die, a thousand can die, all of them can die ...' (p. 176). And die they did, herded into pigsties or left in the open in subfreezing temperatures, often unfed, suffering from illnesses (the worst of which was typhus), and in some cases simply butchered. This was all solely under Romanian auspices. 'Through his initial decision to deport the Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina, and the later one regarding those from Odessa, Ion Antonescu bears the responsibility for the deaths from typhus, and starvation, and for the mass shooting of the Jews' (p. 182).

Jews were not the only ones to die in Transnistria. Deletant includes a discussion of the deportation of some 25,000 Romas to Transnistria in 1942–43. This was primarily for eugenic reasons, although those targeted out of the 200,000 Romas in Romania were just the nomadic, unassimilated Romas and those with criminal records. The death toll is unknown; Deletant thinks that more than half died as a result. At the same time, around a thousand Communists were deported to Transnistria, where an unknown number perished. All of these were Jews, as non-Jewish Communists continued to be interned at Targu-Jiu. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the response of the Roman Catholic Church to the Transnistrian situation, whose nuncio was very active in trying to protect Jews who had converted to Catholicism and supported Jewish appeals to the government, interventions on behalf of Jewish orphans, and financial assistance for Jews in Romania.

In 1942, Antonescu began to alter his Jewish policy. This is the subject of Chapter Nine. Not only were deportations to Transnistria suspended, those already there were repatriated; the Romanians refused to participate in the Final Solution by withholding its own Jews from deportation to the death camps in Poland; and the Romanians cooperated with efforts to allow emigration of Jews to Palestine. Why? Deletant says that no definitive explanation can be given. Initially, the Romanians supported the policies formulated at the January 1942 Wansee conference on the 'Jewish Problem' and made preparations for deportations to Poland. One possibility is that Antonescu saw German pressure as an infringement on Romanian sovereignty. Another is that Antonescu was aware of the further blot on Romania's image that this would make abroad. Thirdly, there was considerable internal opposition to the idea, including formal protests by the influential Metropolitan of Transylvania, Nicolae Balan, and Maniu, and pressure from King Mihai and the Queen Mother, Helen, who told Mihai that the royal family 'would be permanently associated in Romanian history with the crimes committed against the Jews, while she would be known as the mother of "Michael the Wicked"'. She is said to have warned the king that if the deportations were not immediately halted, she would leave the country' (p. 212). Fourthly, it may be that the stream of appeals from the leader of the Romanian Jewish community, Wilhelm Filderman (with whom Antonescu was in continual dialogue), had had some effect. Finally, German reversals at Stalingrad had Antonescu thinking about Romania's fate at an eventual peace settlement, something that became more and more of a factor as the war went on and Soviet forces moved closer to Romanian borders. It seems clear that Antonescu's change in Jewish policy was motivated more by opportunism than any changed convictions.

The last two chapters, which cover the Coup of 23 August 1944 and the Trial of Ion Antonescu, bring Deletant's analysis of the Antonescu era to a close. These add details to what is already known about these matters, while providing brief, but useful, summary accounts. Though Antonescu had allowed informal overtures to be made to the Allies in the waning years of the war, his stubborn sense of honour prevented him from breaking with the Germans. This had two effects. On the one hand, it kept the Germans from simply occupying Romania as it had Hungary. On the other, it led King Mihai and the civilian opposition to plan Antonescu's overthrow and Romania's exit from the Axis. The coup, in turn, had the ironical effect of placing Romania under the domination of the Russians for over four decades. Deletant's conclusion is that it was only with the fall of the Romanian Communist regime in 1989 that 'the Second World War ... finally came to an end for Romania' (p. 277). The book concludes with an interesting and helpful review of the treatment of Antonescu and his legacy since 1946.

Criticisms of this reliable and reasoned account of Ion Antonescu's responsibility for the Holocaust in Romania are few. The scope of this book is somewhat narrower than the title indicates as the author explicitly omits treatment of Romania's actual military activities under Antonescu (dealt with by others). He also does not present an analysis of the day-to-day organization and functioning of Antonescu's regime, partly because the Antonescu regime was run in a military fashion in 'which senior officers took their orders only from him and usually disregarded any decisions taken by other ministers in the government' (p. 69). There are still gaps in this story, but most of them (including exact numbers killed) by the nature of things are not likely to be filled. A better map of Transnistria would have made the story of the central section clearer. In short, this is a fine piece of work, meticulously researched, and reasonably argued.

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