

„Babeş-Bolyai” University
Faculty of History and Philosophy
Doctoral School of *International Relations and Security Studies*

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION:

**PERCEPTION OF THE HOLOCAUST IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA.
POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND CIVIC ATTITUDE.**

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¹ Invest in people!

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ARGUMENT

When you start investigating a new theme, which not long ago was considered a taboo not only for the layman, but also for history researchers, the difficulty of such an approach becomes immediately obvious. However, in recent years, many different approaches on the Holocaust in Romania theme appeared. In the West, such approaches have already been a tradition for several decades. Almost every area and aspect of individual and collective life has been researched and presented to the public as present-day form of interdisciplinary historical writing. The thousands of articles and books are evidence of a process still in progress nowadays.

The theme proposed for research, "Perception of the Holocaust in post-communist Romania. Political discourse and civic attitude" is an area that *was* and *was not* researched enough, especially by the research literature in Romania. On the one hand, so many books, novels, memoirs, fiction have been written about the Holocaust that would take one more than a lifetime to read. On the other hand, many aspects regarding the acceptance of historical past and perception of the Holocaust in post-communist Romania are just a few issues that have been neglected intentionally or actually avoided for fear of entering into a sensitive area.

The necessity of such an approach is clear from the need to know what we may call the confrontation with the past and its acceptance. The Holocaust is a reality, it took place and remains to this day, a singular event because the destruction of the Jews had the features of the industrialized organization of the destruction policy. Holocaust made numerous victims, which raises a number of questions: *Why, though not all victims were Jews, all Jews were victims? Why did Romania wait so long to come to terms with its past? If researchers have shown that the Holocaust took place in Romania, why are there voices that still contest this fact and what do those individuals pursue to obtain by a policy of distortion, denial and trivialization by comparison?*

That being so, I think that the historian, the political analyst should seek to investigate, research and uncover the factors that generate such gestures.

"In an attempt to clarify the past, Eastern Europeans compete for control over the present. Myths about the past are systematically rewritten to fit the present-day political debate"². Here is how, Tina Rosenberg, in her book entitled *The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts After Communism* characterized the central and eastern European space, haunted by the ghosts of the past. In some cases, these ghosts are older than communism, and in other cases the communist regimes bear the responsibility. Undoubtedly, Romania belongs to the second category. Like other societies, it also had to give some answers to history at a certain time: it either rejected any memory or faced the problem of lawlessness. The answer to such a confrontation with its own history depends, in most cases, on the balance of forces that form the politic elite. Usually, the answers that a society gives to these questions are mixed, a fact which can be translated through the adoption of political strategies designed to solve at least some of the issues raised by a difficult past.

In this case, from the wish to have a history that would promote life welfare, the open confrontation with the ghosts of the past becomes a moral obligation. The elusion of a problematic past results in its return, being more burdening and more difficult to face. Sooner or later, every society will have to face the spectra of its own past.

The establishment of a Commission on the Holocaust in Romania was a first step in a long and difficult process of recovery of memory and assumption of responsibilities, in accordance with the moral and political values underpinning the new democratic country status. According to President Ion Iliescu, during whose mandate this Commission was established, "a critical assessment of the past is also necessary in order not to forget it, and to clearly establish the landmarks necessary for our effort to build ourselves, as part of the construction of the future of our nation."³ Iliescu even pointed

² Tina Rosenberg, *The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts After Communism*, Vintage Books Edition, New York, 1995, p. XIV.

³ Ion Iliescu *apud* International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, *Final Report*, Polirom, Iași, 2005, p. 12.

out in his speech that the need of remembering the past was even more appropriate as we were dealing with tragic events on which a long silence for no reason had settled, and that this past obliged us to create those mechanisms and institutions to serve as society's antibodies against racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia.

The establishment of the Commission on the Holocaust in Romania in the fall of 2003 was caused by: a few political events, press campaigns for the rehabilitation of dictator Ion Antonescu, national and international counter-reactions at the resurgence of Antonescu's cult, the controversial interview given by President Iliescu to the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*. The establishment of the Commission has not gone unnoticed by the international press, the Swiss newspaper *Wochenzeitung* and the Berlin newspaper *Die Tagenszeitung* classifying the event as one of exceptional historical dimension through which Romania seemed willing to assume its fascist past. Although the international community has perceived in a positive note the Romanian Presidential Administration's approaches to assume that past, the mass-media of the country, from the "mainstream" one to the extreme-nationalist one disputed the necessity and importance of the event. Thus, everything was interpreted as an attempt to blame the Romanian people and moreover, the credibility of the Commission was questioned.

The public presentation of the report on November 11, 2004 sparked different reactions. On the one hand, the Report received a positive-objective receiving, through which Romania was recognized as the most active ally of Germany in the action of extermination of the Jews. On the other hand, the distant-ironic receiving was reflected in the distrust shown towards President Iliescu's sincerity regarding his desire to elucidate the past and by ignoring the results of historical and politological research contained in the Final Report, given that we have not witnessed a critical-historical challenge. But the most radical form is that of ideological challenge, which appears in numerous articles in the Romanian press, both in the democratic one and in the nationalist-extremist one and whose common ground is Holocaust denial.

This fact asks for the past related to the Holocaust to be addressed with a new vision. It seems that there is a real willingness to look at the history of Jewish people in Romania as part of Romanian history, and this separation is a major impediment to critical assessment of the national past. But the effect of a problematic past elusion is none other but its return, becoming more oppressive and more difficult to face. It is pretty simple to enact an institutional framework based on civic attitude, but it is difficult to put it into practice in the life of a society. Tragic episodes in recent history demonstrate that ordinary people remain passive when the authorities take action against a group of fellow citizens - this, according to Hannah Arendt is part of the "banality of evil". Evil seems trivial from the point of view of the observer or the non-involved researcher, but it is not trivial to those who endure it. The passive consent to these abuses, the dignity of ordinary citizens is compromised by their civic passivity. We need an active public involvement to reach a restatement of the values of a society and the reconstruction of a moral community, able to protect democracy, social and political freedoms. Such a process will have a therapeutic role and will be at the same time, favorable to democracy. Thanks to its authority, the law has to play an important role in dealing with the past.

In this context, the aim of this paper is to evaluate the incidence of such attitudes in the Romanian public space and to raise civic awareness on the risk of promoting incentive messages. The analysis of anti-Semitic messages and denial of the Holocaust in Romanian mass-media is the subject of the last part of the paper. National newspapers, cultural magazines and periodicals of home and international policy will be analyzed. The objective of such an approach is to assess the extent and potential impact of non-liberal messages, whose effect is to keep prejudices and stereotypes about the "Other" in the collective mind. The nomination of authors and channels that promote anti-Semitism, Holocaust denial or discriminatory messages does not constitute a limitation of the freedom of expression, but the expression of a civic-democratic attitude, reacting against non-democratic opinions or behaviors, which directly or indirectly, calls to discrimination and social exclusion, to arbitrary hierarchy among citizens.

PROJECT MOTIVATION

The main motivation for the project is the fact that the theme proposed for research has not received due attention in Romania, except some timid approaches, which have not resulted in publications of at least national circulation that would enable awareness of issues related to Holocaust and Jewish people.

The approach of research represents an essential attempt to rediscover the historical truth with its implications regarding the social and political time.

Another important motivation is the attempt to apply a methodology that is based on interdisciplinarity - history, demography, sociology, hermeneutics, politics, the media, and so on, which could be the key to success of such an approach.

The fact that, in addition to numerous writings, memoirs and documents which have already been investigated, we have an original archival fund, we are offered the possibility of having access to a vast field of research.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

A first goal is the detection and investigation of an extensive documentary material and of a bibliography that would cover the needs of such an approach: from a methodological point of view, all categories of writings about the Holocaust, and, not least, the special bibliography of each separate theme.

Among the other aims we can name the use of a methodology that would ensure an optimal framework for research and the detection of key issues related to the Holocaust, and of the subtleties related to the individual and to the emotions and feelings generated by this historic event.

One of the main objectives is the framing of all less outlined aspects of the Holocaust over time, especially in recent years.

The central issue of the project is the perception of the Holocaust, as historical past, and, not least, as generator of new feelings and policies in relation to the Jewish people.

A special objective in the present research is the description of discursive dynamics that contributes to the establishment of an official collective memory, the research focusing on individual reconciliation with recent past in public testimony.

Alternatively, we will also discuss other issues on the Holocaust to present different aspects as they truly happened, but without losing the coherence of the subject.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Given the proposed theme and its many purposes a *multidisciplinary approach* to provide a comprehensive perspective on events, psychological implications, feelings, attitudes, etc. is strictly necessary.

From this point of view, *history* is the instrument that allows orientation in time and space in order to capture the spatial-temporal circumstances of events and people involved.

The history of mentalities and of the collective imaginary is also a very good perspective of analysis of Holocaust under all its aspects, and at the same time it provides a huge set of instruments to enter the psychology of individuals and crowds.

The interaction between history and memory, and the need of rewriting recent history are other methodological analysis elements whose approach is indispensable in the context of the perception of recent history analysis in a country which is still changing after the 1989 Revolution. In the analysis of the recent past, research focuses on what they say, do, on the social actions performed by the members of the society, focusing on the way in which individual and collective memory should be treated to achieve an adequate description of reconciliation with the past. The processes of remembering and forgetting should not be understood only as private psychological processes, but as social, public phenomena, as social experiences and actions culturally mediated.

Historical demography provides the best methodology to present key data on Romania's participation in the Holocaust, the number of Jews sent to the camps, the number of the dead, etc..

The quantitative dimension of the death is for this research an essential chapter in order to *quantify death* and illustrate the impact caused by the enormity of human loss.

Sociological research is the key element for the success of this research project. Finally, the comparative analysis of information makes the way towards the historical truth easier, as far as we can discover it.

And as a basic method we will use *political discourse analysis* from the wish to render as accurately as possible the Romanian political reality, and the *perception of civil society analysis*, which may or may not be consistent with political action and thinking. Methods are represented by political psychology, critical psychology of racism, political discourse analysis, the collective memory of political events, social representations of history, the way in which history is constructed in speech and writing, the political discourse of the elites, official texts, public testimony.

CONTENT OF PAPER

This doctoral thesis, entitled "Perception of the Holocaust in post-communist Romania. Political discourse and civic attitude" consists of three main chapters which are actually the three levels on which the analysis of the research subject is organized.

The paper begins, of course, with the approach of the theoretical aspects related to Holocaust and its denial. The chapter is made of several sub-chapters which gives it substance. Starting from the definition of what the Holocaust represents and up to the definition of its denial, the first sub-chapter seeks to address terminological clarifications essential for the success of such a scientific approach. Beside the simple defining process, we could not overlook the forms of manifestation of denial, with a special reference to the theoretical classifications of this phenomenon.

Not only the theoretical approach of the topic chosen is part of the first chapter, but also the analytical perspective of the problem. Therefore, the following sub-chapters refer to responses to Holocaust denial, bringing in the center of research the idea of the need for legislation in this field, covering such situations. The last part of the first chapter consists of the analysis of present-day legislation in force, internationally.

The second chapter starts with the rewriting of the recent history issue, especially in those societies in which they tried, over time, to intentionally forget some tragic events that do not honor that society. The perspective of history approach, closely connected to memory, acquires a slightly philosophical aura due to the references addressed. The philosophical level of the investigated issue is in the second sub-chapter, linked to the practical, concrete perspective, strictly applied to the Romanian post-revolutionary society. Thus, the last part of the chapter deals with the way in which Romania, through its political representatives, decided to answer to the ghosts of the past in terms of the tragic event of the Holocaust. The socio-political context in which the confrontation with the past took place is very important, and plays an essential key role in this approach. Thus, the chapter reviews the main events, starting from the decision to confront the past, its acceptance and institutional measures aimed at public opinion's awareness about the tragedy of the Holocaust and the acknowledgment of Romania's contribution to this event.

In the last part of the doctoral thesis we tried to achieve a socio-political diagnosis of the perception of the Holocaust and of the Jewish people in Romania. The sub-chapters of this part deal with various aspects. First of all, we describe the way in which the political actions aimed at the acknowledgment of Romania's involvement in the Holocaust were perceived and the way in which they were implemented. Had the measures taken by the Romanian authorities the expected results? In the context of public recognition, it has been seen an interest or rather a disinterest of the civil society in the issue of Holocaust and the Jews? These are just some of the questions to which the last part of this research is trying to find answers.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

With regard to the sources and references used, an important part of the documents can be found in PhD Professor Michael Shafir's archive, and thanks to his aid, access to them is not a problem.

The theoretical part of the paper pertaining to the clarification of basic concepts in the analysis of Holocaust is covered mostly by Michael Shafir's book *Între negare și*

trivializare prin comparație. Negarea Holocaustului în țările postcomuniste din Europa Centrală și de Est (Between Denial and Trivialization by Comparison. Holocaust Denial in Post-communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe) where key concepts of my paper are extensively explained: *Holocaust, denial, trivialization, oblivion*. Another indispensable book for my research is the work of Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*, where *truth* and *memory* are confronted with *denial*.

In *truth* discovery and *memory* assessment, the work of François Bédarida, *Histoire, critique et responsabilité*, that of Alain Besançon, *Le malheur du siècle. Sur le communisme, le nazisme et l'unicité de la Shoah*, or of Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Adevăr și metodă* (Truth and Method), of Paul Ricoeur, *Istorie și adevăr* (History and Truth), as well as several works of Pierre Nora, *Le retour de l'événement* and *L'ère de la commémoration* are the bibliographic basis of the chapter entitled *Confruntarea cu trecutul* (Confronting the past) which attempts to establish a diagnosis of Romanian collective consciousness and memory.

But the denial of the Holocaust is best reflected in the works of various authors, such as: Gheorghe Buzatu, Ion Coja. The analysis of these documents is essential to demonstrate the existence of Holocaust denial in Romania and the mechanisms by which it is made known. In terms of political discourse, on the one hand, the analysis of official statements of authorities in Romania and the documents aimed at solving the Holocaust issue are studied and analyzed in order to accurately describe the Romanian political environment. On the other hand, civic attitude will be analyzed in a sociological inquiry, whose structure would reflect more clearly the feelings and opinions of the Romanian public regarding the events that took place in Romania and the Jewish people.