

Romania Gets to Grips With Holocaust Denial

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Parliament legislates against those who deny Romania's role in the slaughter of European Jewry.

Sixty years after the end of Second World War, many Romanians remain unwilling to admit their country's participation in the Holocaust under their wartime dictator, Ion Antonescu.

But if many people remain in a state of total denial, parliament is not and on May 4 it voted to make public denial of the Holocaust a criminal offence, punishable by a jail term of between six months and five years.

The new law bans the erection of symbols or monuments to people seen as guilty of crimes against humanity; and the founding of any organisation with fascist, racist or xenophobic ideology. The latter carrying a 15-year jail term.

Moreover, the spreading, selling and manufacture of fascist, racist or xenophobic symbols, as well as their possession with a view to spreading such symbols, is liable to prison sentences of between three months and three years.

The lawmakers' decision has highlighted the continuing controversy over Antonescu's responsibility for the mass murder of Romanian Jewry during the Second World War.

Many Romanians grew up viewing Antonescu as an anti-communist hero on account of the campaign he led against the Soviet Union in 1941, which reclaimed the north-eastern territories of Bessarabia and Bucovina. The country had to surrender them again at the end of the war.

Furthermore, the failure of democracy to deliver prosperity since the fall of the communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989 has increased nostalgia for authoritarian rulers such as Antonescu.

Many people resent parliament's latest action as an assault on their cherished version of history.

"You can't try to rewrite history by legislating against a legend," one elderly man protested.

"Antonescu tried to defend his country. What do the people now ruling Romania do for us? Our pensions are low, while they live in villas."

Romanians' feelings of victimhood have further muddied their perceptions of the country's troubled past.

The result is a society in which many impoverished people view their democratically elected leaders as crooks, whilst men like Antonescu and Ceausescu are idolised.

Mihai Chioveanu, a researcher from the Romanian Centre for Recent History, IRIR, in Bucharest, believes too many Romanians, including members of the political elite, retain skewed perceptions of events in the Second World War.

"Most of the population here is not anti-Semitic but they are still not well-informed about the war and cherish illusions about Romania's behaviour in the conflict," Chioveanu told IWPR.

Broadly speaking, there are two versions of Romania's wartime history.

The nationalist version maintains that despite an unfortunate alliance with Hitler, Romania saved many of its Jews from deportation through the intervention of Antonescu.

This diverges sharply with the accounts of serious historians, which say Romania was home to 760,000 Jews before the war, more than half of whom were killed during the conflict.

Many of them were murdered in concentration camps that Antonescu's regime set up in those parts of the country that had been reclaimed from the Soviet Union.

About 130,000 Jews also perished in Romania after Hungary deported them from Transylvania and other areas, which it had regained from Romania under Hitler's arbitration.

A particularly ferocious pogrom took place in Iasi, in north-east Romania, where Romanian and German soldiers killed more than 10,000 Jews.

Around 20,000 Romanian gypsies also perished in wartime camps and pogroms.

As a result of the slaughter and a post-war exodus to Israel, Romania's Jewish community is only a shadow of its former self, down to around 6,000, most of whom are elderly.

In recent years, official attitudes have changed, thanks partly to the pressure imposed by the need to meet standards required for membership of NATO and the European Union.

Romania has taken a series of measures to come to terms with its controversial past. It has introduced an annual Holocaust Day and has set up an international commission to shed light on the events of the time.

From last autumn, teaching about the Holocaust has become compulsory in Romanian senior schools. The authorities have also ordered the removal of statues and other monuments honouring Antonescu.

But critics say much remains to be done. "The new legislation and the efforts to help young people understand the country's role in the Holocaust are very important," said Mihai Chioveanu.

"But this doesn't mean people are suddenly more aware of this sensitive subject, or that they adopt the ideas contained in the new history textbooks. We still need a more critical public debate about the recent past."

Romania's remaining Jews agree. "We must forgive but we must not forget," said Otto Adler, president of the Romanian Jews organisation of survivors from Birkenau and Auschwitz. "The truth has to be said

openly. That is the only way to oppose such evil."

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