

The Odessa Massacre and its Perpetrators: Trials and context

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In this article I look at the distinction between the theoretical concepts of memory and history related to the Odessa Massacre of 1941. I use primary sources (trials, investigations, perpetrator documentation) found in the Romanian National Archives and the USHMM to reconstruct the way the Massacre had been presented by those involved in war crimes legal proceedings, as well as to deconstruct the way history has been produced within postwar Romania. I argue that the Odessa Massacre cannot be separated from mass killings in the city and in the neighboring area, and thus treating the Odessa Massacre as a single event is not historically feasible. Rather, I see the crimes perpetrated by the Romanian army and auxiliary units in the Odessa region as multi-angled, directed against Jews within a complex area-wide killing spree, fueled by multiple motivations such as ideology, looting, nationalist propaganda, and anticommunist views. The main research questions I look at are: in which way has the Odessa Massacre been presented in postwar trials and historical accounts? In which way history and memory differ when one looks, specifically, at the Holocaust in Romania? Can the view of the Odessa Massacre be seen as paradigmatic for the overall Romanian view of the genocide? More specifically, what is the relation between the Odessa Massacre of 1941, as an event, and the region-wide killings that took place in the same period? When looking at perpetrators, can genocide be analyzed primarily as local or should be always place it in the context of the Holocaust in Romania/Ukraine?

In this article I look to give a contextual research overview of the trials that dealt with the Odessa Massacres. I use the plural not only because the prosecutors themselves used it, but also because it better conveys the situation during the days that followed October 22, 1941. As I show, the massacres during the days of the main Romanian extermination of Jews in Odessa cannot be separated from the events that followed into the year of 1942, meaning the construction of ghettos, the deportations and ultimately the complete evacuations of the Jews from the city of Odessa. Hand-written witness statements describe the atmosphere during and after the Odessa Massacres of 1941.¹ Some of the main questions I look at in light of archives and historiography are: How was the Odessa Massacre from October 1941 been presented in the 1945 main trials? What about the massacres and deportations that followed? How has Odessa been framed as a place by Romanian prosecutors within the larger discourse on the Antonescu regime? How were the Massacres viewed by different groups of witnesses for the

¹ USHMM, 25.004M, reel 20, f. 221-320

prosecution and defense? What were the main motifs in the memory construction of the Massacre?

Memory and History: Odessa in the Romanian imagination

In the post-1989 period, public discussion of the Massacre has been based much more on remembrance than on actual usage of sources by historians to bring to light what had happened. I believe, thus, that a few remarks on how these aspects of memory and history have been conceptualized in the past years are necessary.

In an interview stored in the USHMM database, retired colonel Ovidiu Anca describes the main scenes of the Odessa Massacre of 1941. The Romanian military man, wearing regular clothes and trying to at least mimic a sense of decency, acknowledges that the massacre took place, while also employing a narrative that became representative of a type of deflective negationist discourse that eventually dominated the Romania of the 1990s.² The perniciousness of deflective and selective Holocaust denial does not reside in denying that the event itself happened (or at least, key events belonging to it); rather, it resides in the omission of key aspects of the ideology, the sequence of events, or the motivations for murder in order to provide an alternative discourse to an otherwise much more incriminating reality. In other words, one can use the Odessa Massacre to portray sympathy for the Jews, while at the same time exculpating oneself (and, in Anca's case, the army) for a certain behavior that has been proven beyond any doubt by documentation. This form of information from an 'insider' is a trope of victimization discourse, and in this case, showcases a sense of victimhood in relation to the Holocaust. By claiming to know how events unfolded by simply being there, a bystander or perpetrator can offer an alternative understanding of the events in question. From an academic point of view, this can be a valid approach, of course, so long as one does not try to excuse mass murder or deny the facts.

As for Anca, towards the end of the interview, he defends the Romanian Army by claiming that its members were not in any way prejudiced towards Jews, as he personally knew Jewish members of the army who were not forced to wear the Jewish Star of David. He also claimed that the army actually helped Jews and was not antisemitic since they took measures against

² RG-50.642.0001, Oral history interview with Ovidiu Anca, The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of the Federation of Romanian Jewish Communities, Washington DC

the Iron Guard. He ends up blaming all antisemitic actions on the Iron Guard, portraying a black and white version of the military and the fascist movement which had been founded by Codreanu.³ Anca more or less describes Constantin Trestioreanu, whom he knew personally, as having had the same role as him. This form of Holocaust distortion is typical for the post-1989 era; it involves telling a partial truth in order to create an even bigger lie. Specifically, Anca fails to mention that the Romanian army was in fact highly antisemitic and was one of the main institutions for the mass murder of Jews in the East.⁴ As Holocaust research has shown, no state entity acts solely at the behest of its supreme leader who, though bearing the primary responsibility for mass murder during the Shoah, does not have complete control over peoples' agency.⁵ Furthermore, the armies of countries allied with the Reich were antisemitic institutions who had deeply internalized a sense of anti-communism that was based on an intense hatred of 'Jews as Bolsheviks', and were prone to violence. The fact that the army went against the Iron Guard must be understood in the context of the state of civil war which was present in Romania in 1941: the liquidation of the fascists by the army was a struggle for power. In fact, the short-lived National Legionary State had a long-standing impact on the government of Ion Antonescu and all of the actions that followed: it allowed national institutions to internalize the fascist ideas of their Iron Guard peers and to combine them with a strong nationalism and pervasive anti-Bolshevism. The result was a murder-driven frenzy of Jews in Odessa who were seen as Soviet agents.⁶

The study of the Odessa Massacre is paramount to understanding the Holocaust in Romania as an event of radicalized violence, not just one related to Romanian military history or history in general. It can also be understood as a symbol in history as well as a memorial to the victims of the genocide.⁷ The archives of the People's Tribunals are an essential part of memory formation pertaining to the Holocaust. The People's Tribunal in Bucharest, which contains documentation of the trials of the perpetrators of the Odessa Massacre, partly found in the

³ Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Ion Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944* (Chicago: Ivan R Dee, 2000), xvii-xxvi, 3-62.

⁴ USHMM, RG-25.004, Reel 11, Volume 37, File 2714.

⁵ Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, Introduction, as well as Vladimir Solonari, "On the Persistence of Moral Judgement: Local Perpetrators in Transnistria as Seen by Survivors and their Christian Neighbors" in *Microhistories of the Holocaust*, ed. Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 198-216, and Dennis Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and his regime, Romania 1940-1944* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁶ USHMM, RG.25.004M, Reel 32. Also see Ottmar Trașcă, "Ocuparea orașului Odessa de către Armata Română și măsurile adoptate față de populația evreiască, Octombrie 1941-Martie 1942", *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie G. Barițiu din Cluj-Napoca*, XLVII (2008): 377-425.

⁷ Vladimir Solonari, *Purificarea națiunii: Dislocări forțate de populație și epurări etnice în România lui Ion Antonescu, 1940-1944* (Iași: Polirom, 2015)

Romanian National Archives with files digitized by the USHMM, was based on special law 312/1945 and bore the role of investigating war criminals and their role during Romania's alliance with Nazi Germany.⁸ Yet, in terms of memory, the People's Tribunals are seldom seen as such in post-1989 Romania.⁹ The myths surrounding the trials take the form of both Holocaust denial and ignorance of history, as well as radical forms of anti-communism which associated everything linked to this ideology with the worst outcomes. While the People's Tribunals were not communist tribunals, they were nevertheless perceived as such by the Romanian public. Note that this mostly applies to the Bucharest Tribunal, where the Odessa Massacres were analyzed in the trials. The role of the Judeo-Bolshevik myth must be underscored because, as I show, it was paramount to the evolution of the Massacre, as well as to its reception by the Romanian public.¹⁰

Both early postwar trials and books written immediately after the War touch upon a core of names that can be taken into account when looking at crimes in the Odessa region. Some sources, such as handwritten witness statement from the Macici trial dealing specifically with Odessa, discuss the order from a top-down perspective, such as Ovidiu Anca's brief account on General Trestioreanu's application of order from the center.¹¹ Also, General Nicolae Tătăranu, Chief of Staff for the Romanian 4th Army in Odessa, states in his handwritten witness note that he told Trestioreanu, who was in charge at the time in the city, not to take any actions of reprisals until he hears news from the main station in Bucharest. Importantly, he mentions that this conversation took place before General Macici came to Odessa the following days.¹² It is thus implied that Trestioreanu did order reprisals, which other witnesses contradicted. Relating these conversations is important for several reasons. First, there is still a confusion as to what happened via orders and motivation for murder in Odessa in October 1941. Overall, in the trials dealing with the massacre, those involved tried to excuse themselves by placing the blame on those higher up on the military rank than them. The latter either discussed orders in terms of military procedure¹³ or claimed that their orders were given directly from the center in Bucharest, meaning Antonescu's office. Antonescu, in turn, denied that such direct orders

⁸ USHMM, RG 25.004M, Reel 14, Volume 4094, File 2986.

⁹ Emanuel Grec, "Transition on Trial: The People's Tribunal Between Historiography and the Politics of Memory in Post-War Romania", *Holocaust-Studii și cercetări*, No.13 (XII/2020):293-326.

¹⁰ Some of the ideas in this subchapter can also be found in Emanuel Grec, "The Odessa Massacre and its Perpetrators: Memory and "Victimhood" towards the Holocaust in Romania", published at Ratiu Forum, available at: <https://ratiuforum.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/RF-Award-Paper.pdf> accessed in October 2021.

¹¹ USHMM, RG 25.004M, Reel 20, file 40001, vol 6, f. 161-162.

¹² *Ibid.*, f. 163

¹³ *Ibid.*, f. 160-162, 165-170.

ever took place.¹⁴ Second, these aspects are further complicated by the fact that some of the participants on the ground became accusatory witness for the prosecution against one perpetrator while at the same time being a defense witness for another. Ovidiu Anca's case is relevant. In an interview he gave many years later, he discussed the scenes he witnessed in Odessa with much more detail than he had done in the initial trial after the war. The former major was a witness for the Trestioreanu defense, claiming that he did not order reprisals before Macici's arrival. He also insists that at the trial he did not say reprisals did not exist, only that they did not come directly until after Macici arrived.¹⁵

The dynamic of accusation between center and local command, represented by Nicolae Macici, who was dispatched to Odessa from Tiraspol, and Trestioreanu, respectively, is telling about the non-linear pattern of perceiving the Odessa Massacres by those involved, who also witnessed the events. Although Anca was not accused of any crimes directly in the 1945-46 trials, he was accused of fascist propaganda in 1948 and sentenced to 10 years in prison.¹⁶ Further, the reasons for murder are not clearly outlined in the trial, as there is a back and forth between perpetrators, all invoking the orders they received and the claim of military rank. This kind of defense transcends place and time during the 1941-1944 campaign, and can be found not only in Macici's testimonies, who claims that he did not have order for reprisals and thus did not order them himself¹⁷, but also in files dealing with other neighboring acts of reprisal, such as those in Tiraspol or Berezovska. One of the most interesting cases in the Odessa region, although not touching directly on the massacres of October 1941, is that of colonel Mihail Iliescu, the Inspector and Chief of the Gendarmerie in Transnistria. He was judged by the People's Tribunal in the 27th of July, 1945, the court considering that they cannot find clear evidence of a chain of orders that Iliescu might have given for the massacres in Mostovoi and Berezovska. In a declaration after his trial, Iliescu emphasizes the importance of orders in the military process, trying to show that full authority regarding reprisals were only given to the Transnistria Government and to the prefects of each county, while the Gendarmerie had only limited role of oversight and respecting the orders from each prefecture.¹⁸ Furthermore, in a section of his written declaration titled Responsibilities, he adds that given the large number of

¹⁴ See the Trial of Ion Antonescu in USHMM, RG 25.004M, reel 31, folder 40010, vol. 1.

¹⁵ See the 2003 interview done by Harry Kuller here: https://youtu.be/UO8sBTo_Vmo accessed in September 2021.

Also, see Muraru, *Transnistrian War Crimes Trials*, 96-97.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 96.

¹⁷ USHMM, RG 25.004M, reel 20, folder 40011, vol. 6, f. 82-3.

¹⁸ USHMM, RG 25.004M, reel 83, f. 217

gendarmerie personnel and the many rights that these people have in exercising their duties, there are serious responsibilities that they have and limitations imposed on them. He claims that they can only act when there is a written order from a superior and concludes that they were on a territory administered by the prefect. The gendarmerie, according to Iliescu, were only obeying the law.¹⁹

Of course, Iliescu was wrong on these aspects of participatory violence in mass murder, as gendarmerie personnel in all Romanian occupied territories acted on various motivations, the legal aspects of order being just one aspect of the process of murder. Branding actions from both military and auxiliary forces as ‘reprisals’, those involved in these trials tried to instill a sense of legality for any kind of murder, saying that they were only doing their job. Iliescu’s case is one of the more complicated ones, since he had his headquarters in the city of Odessa yet spent much of his work time in Tiraspol. The disjunction of his accusations is not so much based on the many witnesses that he had at the trials on his behalf, many of them saying that he helped them, but much more on contradictory information provided by accusation witnesses, who gave false information in order to cover up their own role in massacres in Berezovska.²⁰ The role of Colonel (later General) Mihail Iliescu is not part of this short research so I will not dwell on his role in the murder of Jews in Mostovoi and Berezovska. His perpetration acts seem to have stemmed from a disregard of human life that were based on ‘following orders’ and applying the law, since he was not a fascist ideologue, as he did not seem to use antisemitism as his main reason for killing.

Since we are discussing trials that concern Odessa, a list of names on responsible perpetrators might be warranted. However, selecting or creating a comprehensive list might prove challenging, since the prosecutors did not themselves make clear distinctions between those accused only of crimes in the Odessa Massacre or between those involved in areas such as Berezovska. This is explained also by the emphasis that the People’s Tribunals judged facts (or acts), not people.²¹ In any case, while the location of war crimes was specified in the trials, with an emphasis on the more well-known massacres such as Odessa, Dumanovka or Mostovoi, their perpetrators did not have separate trials regarding these places. Also, there were multiple lists of perpetrators that could be taken into account. Matatias Carp, for example, in his seminal work from 1946 on the destruction of Jews in Romania and its occupied territories, makes a

¹⁹ Ibid, f. 218-219

²⁰ Ibid, f. 228.

²¹ See see the Accusation Act from the Macici trial, USHMM, RG 25.004M, reel 19, folder 40011, vol. 1, f. 9-40.

list on “leaders and helpers which instigated, initiated, executed, or observed the development of the Transnistrian tragedy”.²² A look at this list shows us those that he names as responsible for the actions that occurred in Transnistria. By looking at the list, we can select those that were involved directly or indirectly with the situation in Odessa during and after October 1941: Marshall Ion Antonescu (the leader of the Romanian state and first-leader of the Romanian army), Professor Mihai Antonescu (Ad-interim President of the Council of Ministers), Professor Gheorghe Alexianu and General Gheorghe Potopescu (Governors of Transnistria), Emil Cerchavschi (Secretary General of Transnistria), Gheorghe Balcas and architect Sdrobici (Directors of Labour in Transnistria), General Nicolae Tătăranu (Chief deputy of the General Army Staff), General Ciupercă (commander of the Romanian 4th Army), General Nicolae Macici (commander of the Odessa Operations after October 1941), General Constantin Trestioreanu (Comander of the 13th division), as well as what he names as directly responsible for the execution of the Odessa (Dalnic) Massacre: Colonel Deleanu, Lt. Col. Mihail Niculescu, Captain Ionescu Radu, and Captain Eugen Balăceanu.²³

This list is, naturally, not comprehensive, in the sense that this is a subjective selection by Carp. Furthermore, as he himself says in a footnote to the complete list (these names here have been selected by me to be the most representative), Carp includes names of people in the general directorate of ruling Transnistria, of people from Bucharest, and of those responsible for other occupied territories (Bessarabia, Bukovina), since he stresses that all of them were involved in some way or another for the destructions in Transnistria. The above-named are the most directly responsible for the Odessa Massacre and its further deportation and killings. There are also multiple other people involved, who were either cited as witnesses (such as Ovidiu Anca or General Iosif Iacobici) or directly accused, such as Nicolae Ghineraru. Gherghe Alexianu, Transnistria Governor and one of the main ones to be convicted for war crimes, also had a list of people we considered directly responsible for committing the Odessa Massacre. His list, given to the USSR State Commission which dealt at the end of the war with the crimes in Odessa, includes Macici, Trestioreanu, Ghineraru, Coca Niculescu, General Dascalescu.²⁴ Each name is followed by the accusation Alexianu appoints to them. While the acts and names presented by Alexianu are most likely reliable to a large extent, the list must be taken with a critical eye since the language used by him is not specific for the former Romanian army man,

²² Matatias Carp, *Cartea Neagră: Fapte și documente. Suferințele evreilor din România 1940-1944*, vol. 3 (Bucharest: Socec, 1948), pp. 17-21.

²³ Ibid, p. 18.

²⁴ USHMM, RG 25.004M, reel 35, file 40010, vol. 101, f. 53-62.

such as constantly using “soviet citizens” instead of Jews.²⁵ It is, thus, likely that Alexianu was indicated a certain way in which he should discuss these matters by Soviet investigators. Hence, although his account somewhat fits later historiographic accounts of the actions in Odessa, the list must not be taken as a clear and definite statement regarding details.

The way in which accusations were formed by both prosecutors and witnesses regarding those involved in the Odessa Massacre shows that there was no clear way of defining motivations for murder. The accused constantly shifted blame on each other, emphasizing following orders as something normal although this ended in mass murder. In one rhetorical argument, Nicolae Macici claims that while he did not directly order military reprisals, such actions happened and they were warranted. He invokes international law, claiming that “when the enemy provokes, one must act with military actions, which is also done today”.²⁶ This argument by the former general indicated that he believed Jews to be responsible for the explosion at the Romanian headquarters in Odessa, and he actually never considered the actions on the Odessa population (i.e. Jews) as unwarranted. The conversations between the General Commandment of the Romanian Army in Bucharest and the army in Odessa led by Macici confirm it.²⁷ The motives for murder, then, could be interpreted as both ideological and military (since Macici invoked, indirectly or directly, both of them). The Massacre of Odessa was only the beginning of sufferings for the local Jewish population, as by the spring of 1942, almost all Jews in Odessa should have been deported beyond the Bug River. Thus, after the Massacre of 22-25 October, 1941, a ghetto was established and Jews were systematically deported to various places including Berezovska and Vapniarka.²⁸ The fact that subordinates of those accused of killings in Odessa, sometimes on the accused bench themselves, put the blame exclusively on the higher echelon of either the army or the Gendarmerie, is not surprising, especially since many of these people profited economically in the long-term from the administration of Transnistria.²⁹

In a handwritten testimony from May 17, 1945, General Iosif Iacobici, military commander of the 4th Romanian Army, gives supporting testimony for Nicolae Macici, claiming that he personally told Macici to go the Odessa and figure out what is going on, stressing that there were no orders for reprisals. He also claims that he heard about reprisals on October 23, given

²⁵ Ibid, f. 55-57

²⁶ USHMM, RG 25.004M, reel 20, file 40011, vol. 6, f. 203. See also, Muraru, p.100.

²⁷ USHMM, RG 25.003M, reel 12, file 870.

²⁸ Charles King, *Odessa: Geniu și moarte într-un oraș al visurilor*, translated by Radu Săndulescu (Kishinev: Cartier, 2019), pp. 166-187.

²⁹ See Vladimir Solonari’s book on the rule of Transnistria by the Romanian state, *A Satellite Empire: Romanian rule in Southwestern Ukraine, 1941-1944* (NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

at the direct order of Marshall Antonescu.³⁰ Interestingly, Iacobici also claims that immediately after the death of the local army commander in Odessa in the explosion, general Trestioreanu took it upon himself at commanding the troops at the site, and without waiting for any orders decided that it was a duty to execute the Jews.³¹ He also stresses that Trestioreanu is to blame for the Massacres, since, he insists, “in the final phrase of the report I received from Trestioreanu, it states that he took measures for the hanging of some Jews and suspected communists.”³² Iacobici’s defense of Macici is also a defense of himself, as he contradicts the reports of the Council of Ministers after the war, in which Macici is blamed for reprisals in Odessa. More likely, Trestioreanu acted on his initial gut to hand Jews and communists as a form of immediate reprisal, and Macici, when he arrived, acted on military reprisals as the proper method of showing force. In fact, Ovidiu Anca in his testimony states that he heard Macici tell Trestioreanu, when he arrived in Odessa, that “you people are cowards and fearful: by this hour, Odessa should have been torn upside-down”.³³ It is not surprising that so many contradictions are showed in the behavior of those involved as related by military witnesses: behavior was subjective in postwar Romania as Odessa was seen as the biggest and most outrageous Massacre to have been committed during the war on territories controlled by Romania. Being subjective, witnesses tried not only to defend themselves but offered to collaborate with various parts of the prosecution by defending some military men and accusing others. The question is not, thus, what is true or untrue in what the accused say regarding the sequence of orders and motivations in Odessa, but rather what were the perceptions of these perpetrators when the mass killings of Jews in Odessa took place.

Most of those perpetrators accused of war crimes in the Odessa Massacres, including the aftermath killings, ghettoization process, and deportations to Berezovska and Vapniarka were put on trial in the Bucharest People’s Tribunal, especially those that were considered military responsible. Yet, the idea of justice is more complicated when it comes to perpetrators in Odessa insofar as not all trials were final in terms of their sentencing. Appeals and re-trials took place, many of those accused in the period 1945-1947 were later retried under different accusations for which there was more evidence. Furthermore, smaller trials took place up until 1955, especially of perpetrators that had more limited roles in the dissemination of orders. Also, many local perpetrators were tried by USSR courts immediately after the war, so the trials

³⁰ USHMM, RG 25.004M, reel 20, folder 40011, vol. 6, f. 158

³¹ Ibid, f. 158b

³² Ibid, 158.

³³ USHMM, RG 25.004M, reel 20, folder 40011, vol. 6, f. 161b.

regarding Odessa perpetrators and collaborators with the Romanian occupying authorities cut across clear lines of geographically delimitations of the Holocaust. As such, these trials are as much about the Holocaust in Romania as they are about the phase of genocide in occupied Ukraine. Future comparative research on the evolution and conclusions of trials taking into account both Romanian and Soviet sources would be extremely valuable, especially if researchers can transcend language barriers and access restrictions in different countries.

Because there was no group that can be labelled as such as “Odessa perpetrators”, researchers will still have to look in multiple archives for documentation on crimes in the region. The files I examined here have been indexed by the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. and they are a collection of sources from the Romanian National Archives and the Romanian Information Service. My continued research looks at perpetrators’ names and tried to identity their place and role in the Odessa Massacres of 1941 and the actions that followed, up until the spring of 1942.