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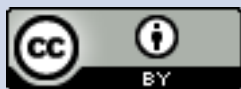
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Author:

Giuseppe Motta
*Sapienza University of
Rome, Italy*
[giuseppe.motta@uniroma1
.it](mailto:giuseppe.motta@uniroma1
.it)

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The Myth of a Jewish Invasion and the Refugee Question in Romania after the Great War

Giuseppe Motta

Sapienza University of Rome

Abstract

The idea of a Jewish invasion in Romania appeared during the debates on the first constitution (1866) and was revitalized after 1918, as the recently occupied territory of Bessarabia hosted many Jewish groups fleeing revolutionary Russia, the civil war, and pogroms. In this context, the immigrants were depicted by nationalist propaganda as invaders wishing to exploit Romania's wealth and hospitality, and this image was combined with the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism. Thanks to the archival sources of the High Commission for Refugees and of relief organizations such as the Joint Distribution Committee, this paper aims to present in detail the controversial encounter between national security policies and humanitarian concerns for the fate of the refugees. At the same time, it will discuss how the refugee question influenced the Romanian political context, fostering sentiments of antisemitism and xenophobic anxiety. As will be argued, the idea of an invasion was very influential before and after World War I, and conditioned not only the definition of the policies regarding citizenship and minorities, but also the whole political discourse and the shaping of Romanian identity. At the same time, the emergence of refugees and the juxtaposition of humanitarian versus national security was not a purely Romanian affair, and in many aspects anticipated the topics of today's debates.



Keywords: *Romania; antisemitism; Jewish refugees; invasion; immigration*

Introduction. The birth of a myth

The problem of antisemitism has represented a constant factor in Romanian history since the legal identification of Jews as foreigners and the denial of citizenship to them in the first constitution of 1866. Antisemitism became a leitmotif of Romanian intellectuals such as Mihai Eminescu, Vasile Conta, Bogdan P. Hașdeu, and even of liberals such as Cezar Bolliac and Mihail Kogălniceanu. The Jewish presence, which was greatly enlarged by the flows of the mid-eighteenth century, was viewed as a product of a constant invasion aimed at creating a new class of Jewish proprietors and enslaving the old Romanian ones (Butaru, 2012; Drace-Francis, 2013). Jews were targeted as parasites, a disease, an insult to the nation, invaders, or intruders to be expelled. They were regarded as aliens, as an instrument of Germanism, as a Trojan Horse that the elites in London, Berlin or Vienna were using to exploit the country, as proved by the reaction to the Strousberg affair in 1870.ⁱ The flow of Jewish immigrants escaping the discrimination of Tsarist Russia was viewed accordingly, and was compared to a stream entering the country and destroying it (Oldson, 1994; Volovici, 1995; Brustein-Ronnkvist, 2002). According to the celebrated historian Nicolae Iorga (1913, p. 210), the Jews had no historical rights in Romania; they had rapidly increased in number from just 12,000 to 500,000: “Whatever the Jew is, Jew he will remain”.

The reaction to this ongoing danger was to be found in the ‘law of the nation’, a combination of strong xenophobia against all foreigners and economic frustration against them. In 1866, Jews were constitutionally excluded from Romanian citizenship, and this issue was debated animatedly in the parliament, especially after the Congress of Berlin (1878) when international pressures reached their peak; the recognition of Romanian independence was somehow conditioned by the change of the laws on citizenship. But the internationalization of this question did not produce any substantial results: in the period 1878-1913, only 529 individual Jews were naturalized by the parliament under this regime of hierarchic and illiberal

citizenship (Iancu, 1978, pp. 142-143; Iordachi, 2001).

In the first years of the twentieth century, many books further propagated the narrative of the fraudulent entrance of Jews in the Romanian territories, their criminal attitudes (Verax, 1904, p. 45), or attacked the policy of the Austrian authorities, who were accused of supporting Jewish immigration as a means of economic exploitation (Petresco-Comnène, 1905, pp. 71-72). In 1910, the belief that the Romanian nation was statistically and economically destined to perish because of the Jewish advance (Cuza, 1910) was converted into the political program of Iorga's and Professor Alexandru C. Cuza's Nationalist-Democratic Party.

This problem was aggravated by the war, when the conditions of Romania, on a smaller scale, recalled those in Russia: Jews were naturally associated with the German enemy, and thus considered as disloyal and treacherous elements (Motta, 2017). The association of Romanian Jews with the invading Germans is present in many different sources, such as the writings by Iorga, who lamented that in Bucharest many Jews spoke only German and were insolent spies (Iorga, 1931, p. 95). During the German occupation, rumours of Jewish betrayal spread all over the country: the Romanian population and the radicals blamed Jews for military defeats, inflation, and speculation. Groups, associations, and clubs of different social and professional extractions formed a composite antisemitic movement which aimed to combat Jews and Jewish influence (Iancu, 1978, p. 220). In May 1918, the fact that the award of citizenship to the Romanian Jews was included in the peace treaty with the Central Powers was interpreted as evidence of their collaborationism: the 'oppressed' Romanian people were still fighting the historical battle against Jews and foreign invaders. People were ready to discover spies everywhere, and the fear of imminent pogroms was widespread among Jewish communities (Vopicka, 1921, pp. 271-272). In any case, the expected pogrom never happened (Pippidi, 2002), and serious episodes of violence were recorded only in the Jewish outskirts of Bucharest (after the withdrawal of German troops) and in Brăila.

The October Revolution, the outbreak of the Russian Civil War, the tragic pogroms of Ukraine, and the famine generated uncontrolled flows of refugees escaping through Poland and Romania, at a moment when the country was celebrating the Great Union of 1918, absorbing regions with a different historical background. The process of integrating these regions into the structures of Romanian administration was difficult from the economic and political point of view, in particular because of the presence of many substantial minorities, including Jews (Calcan, 2017). On the one hand, the size of Jewish population increased as *România Mare* (Greater Romania) annexed the Jewish communities living in Transylvania and Banat, Bukovina, and Bessarabia, absorbing "at least five distinct Jewries" (Mendelsohn, 1983, p.

174). On the other hand, the Jews of Banat and Transylvania were associated with Budapest, while those of Bessarabia with Soviet Russia. Both Hungary and Russia had clear revisionist dreams about those regions now under Romanian sovereignty; their leaders were rightly or wrongly identified as Jewish revolutionaries and Jews represented their natural allies. The problems in estimating the actual number of refugees entering Romania (and the proportion of Jews among them) facilitated the propaganda of nationalist and antisemitic groups and contributed to the spread of a real anti-Jewish and anti-Bolshevik psychosis.

The association of Jews with a foreign power was undoubtedly strengthened by the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism, which crystallized concerns about state security, especially in countries that shared a border with the Soviet Union. In Romania, this was nothing new as the founder of the first socialist party of Romania, Solomon Katz (a.k.a. Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea), was a Jewish immigrant from Russia: the personification of foreignness, cosmopolitanism, and rootlessness (Shafir, 1984).

As underlined in Paul Hanebrink's remarkable study (2018, pp. 8-9), ethnonationalists imagined Judeo-Bolshevism as a threat to their own nations, to Europe and Western civilization. This idea was extremely widespread, both in internal and external political scenarios: it perfectly corresponded to the image that Romanian negotiators were proposing at Versailles, where Romania was portrayed as the bulwark against Russian and Magyar Bolshevism. It represented a powerful subject for the propaganda of nationalist and conservative parties, and especially for the ultranationalism which was emerging on the mobilization structures of pre-war movements, which added an extremist agenda to the nation-building project of a state that had doubled its size and population (Clark, 2019, p. 13).

The aim of this article is to analyse the refugee crisis affecting Romania at the end of World War I, highlighting the distance between the humanitarian concerns of relief operators and the stereotypical interpretations of Romanian authorities and public opinion. On the one hand, sources from the archives of the Joint Distribution Committee show the transnational solidarity of American and European Jews and the focus on the human cost of a grave international crisis, which affected not only Romania but the entire Europe. On the other hand, Romanian documents emphasize concerns for military and political security, consolidating and re-interpreting historical prejudice despite the evident changes in the European scenario and the contingency of an unprecedented humanitarian event.

1. The flows of refugees in the documents of the Joint Distribution Committee

At the end of the conflict, the prolonged state of chaos in many newly annexed regions such as Transylvania and Bessarabia, as well as the strict policy of the government, represented a serious hurdle for the improvement of the conditions of Romanian Jews. In a 1919 report, Wilhelm Filderman, leader of the Union of Native Jews, analysed the political-economic situation, underlining that the “exclusion of Jews from all fields of human activity” seemed to be the axis of the entire domestic policy of Bucharest.”ⁱⁱ According to Filderman, 65% of the Jewish population was in a state of economic misery and spiritual suffering. Filderman’s analysis was confirmed by the report of Baruch Zuckerman, executive director of the People’s Relief Committee, who commented: “To render the conditions more difficult, the Roumanian Government is discharging all Jews, who have been in any Government service, or in the service of any important office whatsoever, and throws the intelligent proletariat also out of work”.ⁱⁱⁱ

Zuckerman visited Romania in the summer of 1919, cooperating with Jewish institutions and the American Relief Administration, and described in catastrophic tones the conditions of many small villages which had almost been reduced to ruins by the conflict: “thousands of people linger in a state of helplessness... without a place to put their heads on”.^{iv} The worst situation was at Sadhora (Sadagura, Sadiger): “Very few non-Jewish houses were destroyed. Very few Jewish houses were left”.^v One of the most striking aspects of this traumatic scenario was represented by the mass of refugees coming from the other side of the Dniester River, where Jews were experiencing the widescale massacres by troops targeting them with genocidal ambitions (Miliakova, 2010; Budnitskii, 2012). Consequently, refugees were mostly of Jewish origin: at Ungheni, Zuckerman recorded the passage of 1,266 refugees; only 184 of them were non-Jews.

Refugees crowded cities such as Chernivtsi (Cernăuți, Czernowitz, Černivci), where the Jewish population amounted to 53,000 out of a total of 100,000. Among the 15,000 refugees, many of them had no place to sleep.^{vi} The same concentration was to be found in Iași or in Kishinev (Chișinău, Kišinöv), where the Jewish population was 65,000 out of a total of 135,000: 20-25% of Jews depended on relief. Jewish refugees used to walk in the streets “having nothing for the present, and, what's worse, having no hope for the future... no funds, no prestige, no uniform, no passports, no rights, no nerve, no strength, no courage, no hope, and no assistance of the authorities”.^{vii} Except for isolated cases of reconstruction in some agricultural colonies (Vertiujeni, Dombroveni) or in Ungheni, where the very active local population developed a strong sense of responsibility, the material conditions were impacting.

The refugees escaping the horrors of Ukraine brought their suffering with them: of mothers who had witnessed the murder of their children or “the skeleton appearance of girls who crossed the border streams and saw behind them their parents and brothers drown in the small boats in which they were escaping from the Ukrainian persecutors”.^{viii} At the border, refugees experienced mistreatment, robberies, and gunfire even against women and children (Garusova, 2017, pp. 62-64). According to Zuckerman, the territories of Bukovina under Romanian sovereignty faced similar problems. The region of Khotyn (Hotin), for example, was still witnessing the conflict between its local population and the Romanian army. Fighting was going on and obliged a part of the population to look for shelter in Soroca (Soroki), where “the commander assembled the entire population of the town, selected all those who were between 18 and 50 years of age, ordered them all to lie down on the snow, and had the soldiers jump over their bodies, to have some fun. For seven hours in succession, they were kept in such condition”. At Jedenitz (Edineț), a Romanian officer put a group of Jews in a line, “took out one of every three in the line and shot them at once, while the rest were imprisoned, whipped and tortured until some of them died in prison”.^{ix}

After visiting many public institutions, synagogues and private houses, Zuckerman defined the situation as indescribable. People could not earn their own bread and did not have enough *mămăligă* to feed the children with: “how can one stand and not help at least those on whose faces hunger has left such deep impressions. I was short of money, otherwise I would have distributed more...” Among the consequences of war - such as the paralysis of economic life, the lack of housing, the spread of typhus, increased mortality, the inflation of prices. and juvenile delinquency – the concentration of refugees in cities such as Chișinău or Cernăuți was one of the gravest:^x

I saw people who, according to my mind, the best relief we could have given them, would have been to take their lives away and put an end to the inhuman suffering – which they have to undergo constantly day after day, hour after hour. There are hundreds of such, no hopes for their recovery at all, crippled physically and mentally. Many of them old mothers, who are compelled to keep their young children near them and by doing that waste away a young life, fill it with horrors which they can never forget and cripple up that young creature if not physically, spiritually and morally.

Refugees crowded cities and villages on both sides of the Dniester, and the border was crossed by thousands of Jews fleeing Ukraine, where they were “unmercifully pillaged, maltreated,

injured, assaulted, and slaughtered in large numbers”.^{xi} The crisis continued in the following years; in 1922, it was estimated that a mass of 25-30,000 refugees was expected on the other side of the Dniester. Though many lost all hope of transatlantic emigration and renounced going to Bessarabia, “in a very short time there will not be many Jews left in Ukraine for they are coming here in hordes, and there are others here from Odessa and other parts too”.^{xii}

2. The work of humanitarian organizations

The relation between Romania and private organizations had been problematic since the Congress of Berlin in 1878. The clauses concerning minority rights were perceived as an imposition by the European powers (Volovici, 1995, p. 27) and successive political debates introduced into Romanian political discourse the theme of Jews creating a state within the state, scheming that was supported from afar by personalities such as the German banker Gerson von Bleichröder and by Adolphe Crémieux (Iancu, 1987). The involvement of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, in particular, “was one of the most disapproved actions in the Romanian public sphere” (Onac, 2012, p. 62). This “example of coercive diplomacy at the highest level” (Green 2014, p. 477) was perceived as the result of the capacity of the Jewish lobby to influence the politics of states like Britain, France, Germany and the United States, and in the eyes of nationalists proved that a world conspiracy targeting the Romanian nation was taking root with the aim of establishing a second Palestine in Romania.

The association between international diplomacy, Jewish NGOs, and the imposition of minority rights was further consolidated by the peace treaties of Versailles and especially by the minority treaties of 1919-1920, which once again were supported by the pressures of Jewish organizations (Fink, 2006). The role of private organizations, in any case, did not merely consist in political lobbying, and despite Filderman’s ideas on charity as “a bad school which should be employed only as a last resort”, the help of humanitarian organizations during the war was fundamental in many countries of East Central Europe, and Romania was no exception.^{xiii}

One of the most active organizations was the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), which was created in 1914 following the initiative of the American Jewish Committee, merging different bodies that operated for the collection of funds and the material assistance of Jewish war-sufferers in Palestine and Europe. At the end of the conflict, the JDC continued its activities, establishing a solid and extended transnational network with the aim of supporting a more ambitious project of reconstruction (Szajkowski, 1970). As would be later recognized by

Queen Marie of Romania: “the work done by the Joint Distribution Committee has been extremely beneficial to the Jewish population. I also know that your committee has rendered much service to other than the Jews in my country”.^{xiv}

Before 1919, the JDC operated through an American minister in Romania, Charles Vopicka, who remitted money to the relief committees in Bucharest and Iași. In spring 1919, Miss Betty Goldman, its first representative in Romania, organized the Central Relief Committee in Bucharest including the members of various organizations (Chevra Kadisha, Union of Native Jews, B’nai B’rith, Women’s Association, Poale Zion). In July 1919, the JDC delegated Lieutenant James H. Becker of the American Relief Administration.^{xv}

The situation was particularly grave in the eastern regions, either as a consequence of military devastation occurred during the conflict (Bukovina), or because of the pogroms in Russia which generated a continuous flow of refugees. The crisis was neither temporary nor limited to a specific country and demanded an international response which was coordinated by the newly created High Commission for Refugees, relying on the robust network that many organizations had already established over the previous years. Among them was the Jewish Colonization Association, which was represented by Lucien Wolf, who acted within the High Commission’s advisory committee as the delegate of many other organizations such as the JDC. The JDC itself created a refugee department headed by Bernard Kahn, who visited Romania in June and July 1921, meeting the representatives of relief committees, and inspecting shelters and institutions in many localities of the country.

According to Kahn, the relief work was extremely badly organized, if not “entirely non-existent as far as method or system or any logical process of continuity may be concerned”, while the Bucharest committee practically had “no idea of constructive philanthropy”.^{xvi} There were no systematic records, files, or statistics, but a general state of chaos and widespread corruption.^{xvii} Controversies regarding the distribution of goods were common in many countries, for example in Poland, but in the Romanian case these misunderstandings seemed to be more frequent: it was said that the foodstuffs were not distributed but sold to merchants; some impostors declared that they were JDC agents in order to make contraband in the border towns; unauthorized committees were dumping their share of refugees. According to the *Jewish Daily Forward*, misuse “prevail[ed] all over Romania”.^{xviii} Clothing, for example, was distributed in this way: “first of all, our rich men dressed their servants, their relatives and the Christian girls that serve in their homes; then they gave some to widows also. But as to the poor workers... No attention whatever was given them”. At Câmpulung, the treasurer of the relief committee was indicted for his failures, while in many other cases people “acquired the

habit of appealing for assistance without really being in need thereof”.^{xix} The money seemed to go to the “first worthy causes”, and the reference to this lack of organization was mentioned in many documents: “There is no office, no proper records, not even a telephone”.^{xx} The Bessarabian agents omitted to report about the expense of 700,000 lei handed over to them by Becker, and were not able to administer the funds “without guidance from an American delegate”.^{xxi} It was quite pitiful, therefore, to see “highly respected and reputable men” who were anxious to work, “idling about waiting for tools and the needed capital to commence operating”.^{xxii}

In addition to maladministration, problems were caused by the precarious state of the railways and transport, and by the traditional diffidence that reciprocally affected the relationships between the authorities and the Romanian Jews. These combined challenges meant that it was hard for the JDC emissaries to encourage even prominent Jews to go to any governmental agency. The intentions were good, but people “were groping in the dark not knowing how to begin to organize the work”.^{xxiii}

At the same time, the administration of the country appeared very strange to the eyes of the Americans, who defined Romania as an oriental country, where organization, “as we conceive the term”, was unknown.^{xxiv} The negotiations with the functionaries were “truly both painful and discouraging as well as humorous”, while the Americans in general, and the American Jews in particular, were subjected to both the hate and disgust of the Romanians:

You cannot imagine the great difficulties encountered in trying alone, and at the same time, to supervise the discharge and distribution of a supply cargo at Galati, of making all the necessary arrangements... To negotiate with the Roumanian Government about any question, no matter how unimportant, often means the loss of weeks, to say nothing of the loss of days or hours.^{xxv}

Generally, the humanitarian agents were extremely critical towards the Romanian authorities and compared Romania to a country that was familiar to them: “If Mexico is the country where things are done *mañana* (tomorrow), here they are only promised for the day after and done, if at all, in the dim future”.^{xxvi}

In any case, thanks to Lieutenant Becker’s and Oscar Leonard’s “Herculean work”, activities improved and were better organized, until serious organization for the specific needs of refugees was prepared at the time of Kahn’s visit in 1921. Kahn described the internal flows of refugees moving to Chişinău and Soroca in order to obtain passports and documents, and focused attention on the difficulties in the emigration process, the only stable solution that

could be applied to alleviate the congestion of refugees: “only about one third of the refugees will be able to emigrate, and therefore the reminder should be held to obtain some kind of work”.^{xxvii} Both aspects were to be kept together, as an efficient program for the care of refugees could only be carried out properly when emigration was permitted by legal regulations and adequate funds, chiefly through the expertise of organizations such as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS).^{xxviii}

Kahn visited several committees in various localities which were dependent on the centres of Bucharest and Chişinău, where the Committee for Jewish Emigrants was officially inaugurated after his arrival.^{xxix} The relations between these bodies were complicated and even after the establishment of an unified society in 1921, chaired by Jacob Bernstein-Kogan, it remained difficult to guarantee a stable form of cooperation between the Old Kingdom and Bessarabia.^{xxx} The Jewish representatives in Bucharest, Filderman and Elly Berkowitz, wished to liquidate the Ukrainian committee and consider it as a branch of a new central committee, being thus accused of capitalizing the situation for the purposes of political power.^{xxxi} In turn, the committee in Chişinău, representing 65 local committees and 175 Jewish communities in different provinces, lamented the action of some “irresponsible persons”.^{xxxii}

3. A military emergence

The situation of refugees in Romania was undoubtedly conditioned by the precarious state of Bessarabia, which was annexed by Romanian authorities after the proclamation of the *Sfatul Ţării* (9 April 1918) in an atmosphere of political turmoil. Local conflicts among the different ethnic communities went side by side with bad economic conditions and social tensions, and the arrival of refugees, mostly of Jewish origin, represented a further problem for the new occupants, who put Bessarabia under military administration and martial law. After the war, the law of 1916 establishing the *Stare de Asediu* remained in vigour in Bessarabia (royal decree of 13 January 1920), was further extended to Bucharest, and once again confirmed in the regions between 30-50 km from the borders (Grecul, 1928, pp. 6-7). With this coherent legal framework, the refugee crisis was primarily seen by the Romanian authorities from a military point of view (Guzun 2012), as a threat to the security and integrity of the state. Jews arriving in Romania crossed the border illegally; they were “exposed to every sort of arbitrary treatment” and could not move to other parts of the kingdom.^{xxxiii} The military authorities, in particular, officially defined these flows as an invasion (*invazia elementelor străine*), and considered the majority of refugees as being sent by Soviet Russia with the intention of spying,

exporting Bolshevik propaganda in the country, freeing their comrades from prison, and keeping the population in a state of constant insecurity.^{xxxiv} Chişinău was the nest (*cuibul*) of Bolshevik agitations, and among many of its 60,000 refugees were Soviet agents aiming to spread anarchy in the region (*anarhia în Basarabia*).^{xxxv}

Two actions were envisaged to halt these flows. On the one hand, the military authorities suggested implementing administrative and police controls, to close the borders, and to pay particular attention when issuing travel or other kind of documents. On the other, the president of the Council, General Alexandru Averescu, proposed removing refugees towards the interior, westwards of the Galaţi-Nămoloasa-Focşani line. This solution was justified also by sanitary reasons and was officially decreed by the decision of the Minister of Internal Affairs of 17 September 1921. Refugees who arrived after 1 September 1918, had to obtain permission from the prefect following the recommendation of Jewish relief committees, and then settle in localities in the Old Kingdom (the territory of the first independent Romanian state) except for Bucharest. Conditions of evacuation and transport were to be decided by a special mixed commission in October 1921. This proposal met with the unconditional approval of the Union of Native Jews, which assumed the responsibility of settling and assisting the refugees and had practically “police powers to effect the registration of all refugees, to arrange the transport from Bessarabia and their allocation in various towns with the exception of Bucharest”.^{xxxvi}

The opinion of Jewish organizations in Bessarabia, however, was not enthusiastic. On 13 November 1921, the Chief Rabbi of Chişinău, Yehuda Leib Tsirelsohn, asked that evacuations were delayed until spring 1922. Many refugees had families in Bessarabia and their arrival brought positive effects on the economic life of the region. The Jewish committees of Bessarabia wished to take care of their moral, sanitary, and material needs, and opposed any further transfer before their final emigration. Rabbi Isaac Rubinstein, a Lithuanian leader of a humanitarian organization working with the JDC, considered this evacuation as quite absurd: first, there were insufficient trains; then, the Jews in the localities of the new settlements viewed the presence of refugees as a political danger. Finally, it was hard to house them in places where very small numbers of Jews resided.^{xxxvii} At the end, only one transport took place at Galaţi, then the cooperation of the International Red Cross and the High Commission for Refugees essentially resulted in obtaining the indefinite postponement of the measure.^{xxxviii}

The solution proposed by the Jewish organizations was emigration, as repeatedly stressed by Lucien Wolf, who pondered that for the most part refugees were emigrants and they should be considered as such.^{xxxix} Poland and Romania were simply a stopover on a longer trip,

“une halte sur la route qui devait les conduire vers leur refuge définitif”, and Wolf estimated that 97% of refugees wished to emigrate: 77% to the United States and 11% to Palestine. Half of them had retained some goods or properties at home, 13% had left their houses to their families, the remainder had lost everything. The majority was composed of women and children.^{xli}

Though both the Polish and Romanian governments initially supplied refugees with *ad hoc* certificates or passports, the emigration system was undoubtedly a serious impediment (Szajkowski, 1974). Bucharest, for example, was the only centre where consulates were authorized to issue visas and passports to emigrants, so many remained in the city. Here, the committee of HIAS built a shelter for 500 persons and a school for 250 children, but the special emigrant fund was rapidly exhausted, while new refugees still arrived day by day.^{xli} The consuls had a very rigorous approach: for example, in the period March-May 1922, the US consulate issued only 2,000 passports, while the Canadian one asked for a ‘good for return’ passport, verifying health and literacy through an examination in Bucharest.^{xlii} As a consequence, in Poland and Romania, the refugees had “no present prospect of being moved either West or East”.^{xliii}

Though arrivals continued throughout 1922, and a mass of potential refugees was at the other side of the Dniester, the establishment of the High Commission and the improvement in international cooperation helped to reduce the presence of refugees. The US consulate intensified its issuance of visas (previously it was only worked four days a week), but not all refugees succeeded in obtaining documents for emigration, while some came back from the port of Constanța after failing medical examinations.

To finally deal with the problem and expel those without permits, the Romanian government insisted on repatriation to Soviet Russia (*refoulement*) as the ideal solution, announcing that 1 October 1923 would be the deadline for refugees staying in Bessarabia, and 1 December for the whole of Romania.^{xliv} But Romanian plans, once again, crashed against reality. First, with relations between Romania and the Soviet Union pending establishment, no legal ways existed to proceed with repatriation. Refugees who were arrested, sent to Galați and Chișinău, then taken in cattle cars and put on boats to the left bank of the Dniester, were usually returned by the Bolsheviks.^{xlv} In summer 1923, when the JDC prepared to liquidate its refugee department, Romania and Constantinople still required assistance: “in both points we shall have a hard time, and many bitter experiences, and perhaps be publicly severely attacked”.^{xlvi} Out of a total of 8-9,000 refugees, Kahn initially calculated that 1,000 could proceed to the United States, 2-3,000 to Argentina, and some could maybe accept being returned to Russia. Some

children were enrolled in schools and could probably remain in Romania; the rest represented a serious problem. His plans, however, were “cruelly upset” as Argentina practically closed its doors to Jewish immigration: for many there was the actual possibility to be interned, and Kahn reminded that during the war almost 80% of the internees in Romania died.

At the end of 1923, though the Romanian press enthusiastically proclaimed the question was about to be settled, 5-6,000 refugees (3,500 in Bucharest) were still in the country, which was the second most important Jewish refugee centre in Europe.^{xlvi} In summer 1924, 3,500-4,000 remained, and Romania was considered by the JDC as the largest and most difficult problem in Europe: out of those 3,500, 2,064 were receiving no help from the government, while repatriation to Russia was not possible. Once again, their residential permit was finally extended until 1 January 1925.^{xlvi}

4. Opposite perspectives

Refugees were subjected to opposite visions, either as passive and ‘traumatized’ objects of humanitarian intervention; maltreated victims of violence and atrocities, calumnies, and false accusation; or as deserters, opportunists, spies and agents of Bolshevik Russia (Gatrell, 1999, pp. 34-35). On the one hand, information arriving from the Dniester region contained appalling descriptions: the majority of refugees consisted of “helpless beings, old people, women and children concentrated in small villages”. Many crossed over on the right bank despite the grave dangers which they had run during the journey. From 150 to 200 crossed the frozen Dniester weekly: “They explain that they prefer to be shot on the spot than have to return to the place where their children are threatened with dying from starvation”.^{xlvi} On the other hand, in the context of widespread fear of Bolshevism, Jews were seen as a “pest”.¹ The Jewish immigrant was imagined as “an ethno-ideological Bolshevik zealot, a destructive border-crosser intent on mobilizing local Jews and other discontented groups to overturn the social and moral order” (Hanebrink 2018, p. 8).

According to abundant documentation, the Romanian authorities viewed Jewish refugees as subversive agents, while the relief organizations represented an “actual danger for Bessarabia” and needed to be banned because of their fraudulent activity. This consisted in taking refugees from behind the Dniester, applying for Romanian citizenship in exchange for their money, and subsequently corrupting functionaries in Bessarabia (Guzun, 2010, p. 201). As illustrated in Dmitry Tartakovsky’s research (2019), Romanian authorities considered Jewish culture and religion as a political threat, and refugees as Soviet spies preparing for the

return of Bessarabia under Russian sovereignty through anti-state propaganda and the acquisition of military information. Siguranța (State security service), the military authorities, and the police paid great attention to the activity of individuals and organizations. Many were arrested for illegally crossing the frontier in both directions, or for supposed communist and anti-Romanian sympathies, as in the case of Gherș Gelișenschi, the leader of the Yiddish Cultural League, who was arrested, tortured, indicted, and then finally acquitted. Generally, the state security service lacked the necessary competencies to understand the real activity of Jewish organizations, for example it did not have sufficient Yiddish-speaking agents to infiltrate suspected movements.

Jewish organizations were indistinctively seen as an extension of communism and international Jewry. Their presence in Romania signified the triumph of American liberalism and the transformation of the country into an “America of the Danube” (Oldson, 1994, p. 27). The JDC, for example, was supposed to be financed by the Alliance Israélite Universelle of London (sic), to spread subversive ideas and to have no connection with the State Department, while it was through American embassies that money had been distributed during the war.^{li} Instead of supplying relief, the committees were accused of using remittances to enrich a class of useless functionaries and agents.^{lii}

The problem of refugees, in any case, was not destined to be solved in the short term. Repatriates to Soviet Russia could be enlisted in the Red Army and thus become a future threat against Romanian integrity.^{liii} Equally, many of the evacuees could fail in finding suitable residence abroad and come back to Romania, being thus regarded as a permanent danger to state security (*un permanent pericol pentru siguranța statului*), as proved by numerous acts by local or regional police denouncing the presence of suspected people or organizations working in the field of illegal immigration in 1924 and 1925.^{liv}

The nationalist press described these flows as the invasion of a foreign horde, and Romania as an inviting pole of attraction for Jewish greed, the Jewish country par excellence: *țara evreiască prin excelență*.^{lv} This regarded not only Moldavian villages, which were assaulted by a multitude of “parasites, poisonous vipers, mice leaving the Soviet ship”, but all of the country, as Jews also entered Romania from Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia.^{lvi} An article described the small village of Iclod, between Cluj and Gherla: in 1915, only one Jewish family lived there, then there were 155 Jews, a rabbi arrived, and the economic exploitation of the Romanian population began.^{lvii} In spite of official data, the general conviction was that the number of foreigners from the other side of the Dniester was higher,

no matter if they were predominantly women and children. The majority, in any case, was of Jewish nationality.^{lviii}

The vision of refugees as a threat, a problem of border security and public order, went side by side with the demonization of the relief committees, which were equally guilty of acting against Romanian interests and besmirching the Romanian image abroad. These bodies, both Christian and Jewish ones, worked in a direction at odds with the aim they were created for, and committed crimes and abuses against the security of the state (*crime și abuzuri contra siguranței și ordinii de stat*).^{lix} This attitude had evident repercussions in the cooperation between Romanian authorities and relief committees: the latter protested against the expulsion of their agents, while the former considered these organizations as political movements. In this context, the High Commission became the privileged official intermediary of the authorities. The intervention of the High Commissioner was necessary not only to mitigate Romanian measures, but also to permit the passage of official operatives at the borders, for example Luciano Bacilieri or Joseph Mirkin, who were both working for the High Commission.^{lx} Generally, the organizations put pressure on the High Commissioner, who acted on their behalf with the government, which postponed or annulled its decisions and softened the approach of military authorities.

The military commander in Bessarabia, Ion Popovici, was by far the most intransigent, as proved by his reluctance in negotiating the immigration of about 2,500 Jewish, German, and Orthodox children. Notwithstanding the assurances of the organizations about the cost and the help of the respective families, only 508 were finally admitted: those who could be hosted in official dormitories (*căminuri*) under the responsibility of the authorities.^{lxi}

As illustrated by Anca Cretu (2020, p. 542), the foreign committees and even the American Relief Administration were viewed with suspicion in Romania, but their help became fundamental to calm down social unrest at a moment when Bolshevism represented the meeting point of the agendas of the leaders of the Romanian state and American humanitarians. It would have been difficult to celebrate Romanian generosity in 1927, when Averescu claimed to be responsible for more than 200,000 Russian Jews taking up their residence in Romania, without the fundamental activity of humanitarian organizations.^{lxii} Romania surely contributed to the solution of such an important humanitarian crisis, but this happened mostly thanks to the work and funds of Jewish relief organizations, which operated amid continual controversies and misunderstandings. The relations between the government and the private organizations remained characterized by a profound divide. The former tolerated the latter because of their

operative capacities and international support; the latter showed a paternalist attitude and a certain contempt, considering Romanian civilization as corrupt and backward (Cretu 2019).

In Roumania, you will find Statesmen at Bucharest who reason and talk in the most advanced Western fashion. They promulgate laws that would be a credit to any civilised country. But the execution of all these laws and ideas is left to the local administrative functionary, known as the Prefect... His methods of government are the methods of a Turkish Satrap of the middle ages.^{lxiii}

Conclusion

The refugee crisis in postwar Romania meant an encounter between two different worlds: the modern humanitarian, multicultural and transnational vision of American Jews (Granick, 2021) clashing against a militaristic and nationalist rhetoric that confounded loyalty and ethnicity. In a context of new social, ethnic, and racial hierarchies, the arrival of a high number of Jewish refugees in Romania consolidated wartime security concerns about saboteurs and traitors and bred new anxieties, strengthening the besieged fortress complex which was so typical of the Romanian mentality (Boia, 2001, p. 155). After many centuries of foreign oppression, *România Mare* was still under the influence of external enemies, namely Jews and the Revolution (Livezeanu 1995, p. 23).

All events were consequently distorted. The peace treaty of Versailles, which granted Romania a substantial territorial expansion, was interpreted by the nationalists as a *Pax Judaica*, while the League of Nations represented the Kahal.^{lxiv} Though private organizations focused on emigration as the solution to the refugee problem, the extreme right accused them of corrupting functionaries to illegally turn Jews into Romanian citizens. Refugees were regarded as invaders or Bolshevik spies, and data were easily exaggerated: official estimates recorded c. 3,500 refugees remaining in Romania at the end of 1924, while propaganda denounced the arrival of two million foreigners.^{lxv} In the Romanian imagination, hospitality to the Jews was repaid with ingratitude and hostility, and thus converted into an attack against Romania's basic right of existence (Crainic, 1928). The goodwill of the relief organizations, in this sense, was viewed as another example of Jewish camouflage, an attempt to cover economic and political appetites with solidarity.

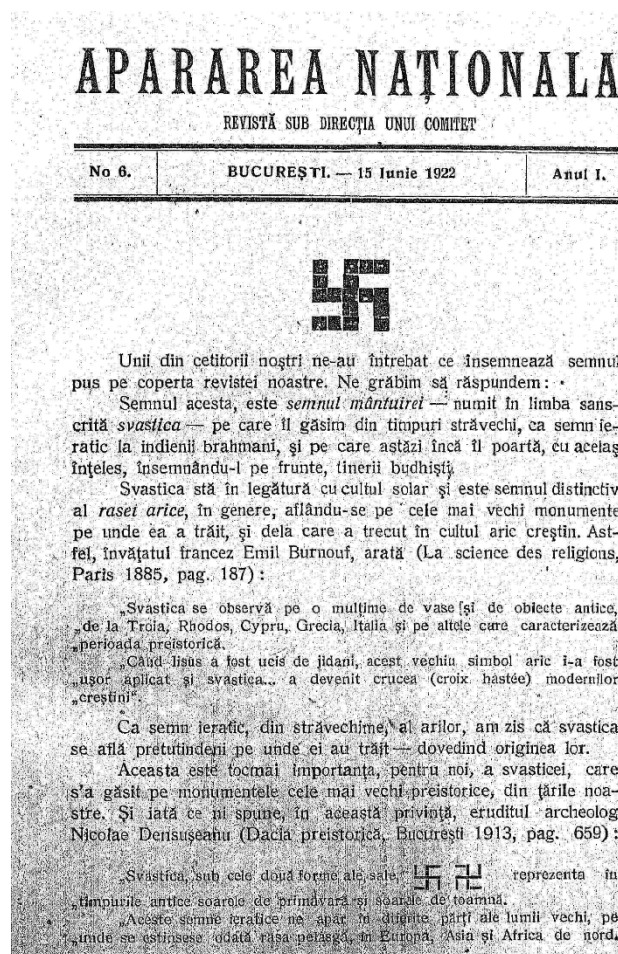
This duplicity was reflected in the paradoxical representation of Jews either as the prototype of cosmopolitan and urban people invading the rural pureness of the Romanian nation, or as parasitic primitives, as underlined at Versailles by Ion C. Brătianu, who defined

Jews as “devouring locusts”, and Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, who compared them to savage Turanic Mongols (Santoro, 2020). In a peripheral nationalising state such as Romania, the oriental aspects of eastern Jews served to portray them both as backward populations to be colonised and agents of colonisers aiming to subvert and undermine national aspirations: as subjects of external colonialism and objects of internal imperial ambitions that were inherited from the old empires (Cârstocea & Kovács, 2019, p. 34).

Though victims of Bolshevism, and with Soviet Russia being the worst foe of the Romanian state, Jewish refugees were rarely seen from a humanitarian perspective, but as a danger, a problem of military security, political stability, and territorial integrity. This imaginary, stereotypical, dehumanised representation of Jews was greatly facilitated by the presence of refugees, which represented an important factor in the rise of radical nationalism and antisemitism (Brustein, 2003, p. 47; Egry, 2014), and further consolidated the personification of Jews as an ‘essential Other’ or an enemy-supported group (Oișteanu 2009; Zukier 1996).

In Romania, the profound transformation of humanitarian practices and philosophy that the Great War converted into an assertion of humanitarian rights (Cabanès, 2014, p. 3) did not alter the historical interpretation of Jewish presence. The founding fathers’ thought was preserved intact by Corneliu Codreanu (1936), who shared with Iorga the sacrality of the village as the cradle of Romanian national identity to be preserved against the Jewish parasites (*jidanii paraziți*) in the name of territorial law. It was not by chance that one of the most radical journals devoted special attention to the celebrated poet Mihai Eminescu’s antisemitism.^{lxvi}

A. Cuza’s and Nicolae Paulescu’s National Christian Union (*Uniunea Națională Creștină*) was expressly founded with the mission of fighting against the Jewish invasion and colonization of Romanian soil, while the review *Pământul Strămoșesc* gave a visible representation of this penetration right in its cover, which included a map highlighting the Jewish centres in the country. Other works (Vasiliu, 1923, pp. 22-23) described this invasion in a more scientific style, for example mixing the study of Romanian demography with violent attacks against Jewish immigration as an attempt of international Jews to destroy Romania (*Distrugerea noastră*).



Front pages of the journals *Pământul Strămoșesc* and *Apărarea națională*.

Political discourse did not substantially change before and after the Great War, and remained focused on the idea of preserving the Romanian organic entity (*entitate organică*) from the assault of foreigners (*străini*). The response to a 1927 petition to the League of Nations, for example, was corroborated by two publications of twenty years earlier insisting on the idea of an invasion and strongly criticizing all humanitarian concerns, which were defined as useless, feminine, and sentimental (Verax, 1904, p. 74; Petresco-Comnène, 1905, p. 193).^{lxvii} The flows of Jewish refugees from eastwards were not considered in their historical contingency, but as a chapter in a long constant process: the interpretation of the events of Soroca in 1932, when six Jews trespassing across the frontier were killed by the police, was essentially the same of 1919, and corresponded to that of 1866.

But if the refugee crisis in the aftermath of World War I was interpreted through the lens of the pre-war context, it also anticipated themes that are typical of contemporary debates: the interpretation of immigration as an invasion; a social and civilizational menace; the

impossible assimilation of parasitic groups; the idea of borders as walls separating nations and cultures; and the demonization of relief organizations. In the context of the 1930s, these premises were further combined with racial and anthropological elements (Turda, 2003), and in a few years, the expulsion of Jews from society degenerated into the idea of expelling them from humanity.

Notes

- ⁱ This was a financial scandal caused by the bankruptcy of Bethel Henry Strousberg's business, which affected the concession to build a national railway network in Romania and caused economic costly disadvantages for the Romanian State.
- ⁱⁱ Report by Filderman, Political-Economic Situation of Roumania and the necessity for establishing great financial institutions (August 7, 1919). Archives of the Joint Distribution Committee, AJDC, 1919-1921, Romania, General, document 200094.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Report of Zuckerman on Bessarabia (October 8, 1919). AJDC, 1919-1921, Romania, Bessarabia, Bukovina... 231872.
- ^{iv} Romanian report no.28 sent by Landescu to Goldman (May 4, 1920). AJDC, Romania, General 1920, 230526.
- ^v Report of Zuckerman on Bessarabia. cit.
- ^{vi} Report of the JDC on the activities in Bukovina signed by Rosenfeld, president of the Bukovina committee (January 29, 1920). AJDC, Romania, General 1920.
- ^{vii} Report of Zuckerman on Bessarabia. cit.
- ^{viii} Report on "The Refugee Problem" (November 23, 1920), AJDC, Romania, General 1920, 230460.
- ^{ix} Report of Zuckerman on Bessarabia. cit.
- ^x Report of Jdc on the activities in Bukovina, cit. Resume of a survey from Wiznitz, Bukovina made by Hoch und Tiefbau Gessellschaft of Chernowitz (December 12, 1919). AJDC, 1919-21, Romania, Bessarabia, Bukovina, 231876.
- ^{xi} Letter from Landesco to Weitzman (July 22, 1919). AJDC, 1919-21, Romania, Bessarabia, Bukovina. The Refugee Problem (November 23, 1920), cit.
- ^{xii} Memorandum from Boris D. Bogen to Lewis Strauss (February 16, 1922). AJDC, 1921-1932, Romania, Refugees, 351771
- ^{xiii} Report by Filderman, Political-Economic Situation of Roumania, cit.
- ^{xiv} Letter of Leonard to Bogen (June 20, 1920).
- ^{xv} Brief survey of the work done until August 1920 (September 24, 1920). AJDC Romania, General 1920, 230596.
- ^{xvi} Alexander Landesco to Julius Goldman (January 28, 1920). AJDC, 1919-21, Overseas Administration, January-May 1920, 208247.
- ^{xvii} Landesco to Goldman (February 14, 1920). AJDC, 1919-21, Overseas administration, 208248.
- ^{xviii} Letter of B.C. Vladeck (*Jewish Daily Forward*) to Magnes (March 27, 1920). AJDC, 1919-21, Romania, Bessarabia, Bukovina... 231898.
- ^{xix} Report on the activities of JDC in Iași from September to December 1920; articles on the *Zeit* (June 14, 1920 and April 21, 1921) AJDC, 1919-21, Romania, 231905.
- ^{xx} Letter of Landesco to Goldman (January 28, 1920); Letter from Chișinău to Landescu (November 22, 1920). AJDC, Romania, General, 230484.
- ^{xxi} Landesco to Goldman (February 1, 1920; May 17, 1920; July 4, 1920). AJDC, Romania, General, 230492, 230547, 230589.
- ^{xxii} Report on Cooperatives Syndicate of Bessarabia (November 22, 1920). AJDC, Romania, General 1920, 230461.
- ^{xxiii} Letter of Leonard to Boris d. Bogen (February 25, 1921), AJDC, Romania, Refugees 1921, 231102.
- ^{xxiv} Letter from Lieutenant James Becker to Felix Warburg (April 14, 1920), AJDC, Administration 1919-21, 230511.
- ^{xxv} Ibidem.
- ^{xxvi} Landesco to Goldman (March 24, 1920). AJDC 1919-21, Romania: General, 230499.

- xxvii Letter from Bernhard Kahn to the Executive Committee of the JDC, Report on journey in Roumania and Bessarabia (July 15, 1921). AJDC, 1921-32, Romania, Refugees: General and Financial, 351735.
- xxviii Abstract of Preliminary Report on the Refugee Problem by Bernard Kahn (November 1, 1921), AJDC, 1919-21, Refugees, 351736.
- xxix Report on Journey in Roumania and Bessarabia, cit.
- xxx Report by Bacilieri to Major Johnson (October 19, 1922), Archives of the League of Nations, ALON, High Commission for refugees (Nansen Fonds), 1919-1927, Relations with organizations, R1727/45/24387/15127. Report of Brunnel, delegate of the High Commissioner (October 29, 1923). ALON, Nansen funds, R1735/45/31002/16843.
- xxxi Extracts from Rubinstein's Diary (September 28; November 16, 1921), AJDC, 1921-32, Romania, Refugees: General and Financial, 351752.
- xxxii Documents of the Central Relief Committee for Ukrainian Refugees in Roumania (February, 22; June 2, 1922), AJDC, 1921-1932, Romania, Refugees, 351777, 351778.
- xxxiii Preliminary Report on the Refugee Problem by Bernard Kahn (November 17, 1921). AJDC, 1921-32, Romania, Refugees, 351737.
- xxxiv Raportul Inspectoratului General de Siguranță al Basarabiei (June 22, 1921). Report of the Army's General Staff (February 18, 1922). AMAE, Fond. 33, vol. 4. All quotations of Romanian documents have been translated by the author.
- xxxv Minutes of the Council of Ministers (August 20, 1921). AMAE, Fond. 33, vol. 4.
- xxxvi Letter to the Prime Minister (September 13, 1921). AMAE, Fond. 33, vol. 4. Extracts from Rubinstein's Diary (November 16, 1921). AJDC, 1921-1932, Romania, Refugees, 351752.
- xxxvii Letter to the Minister of Interior (November 13, 1921). Translation of Letter from the Central Committee for the Protection of Ukrainian Jewish Refugees in Rumania (November 17, 1921). AJDC, 1921-1932, Romania, Refugees, 351754.
- xxxviii Referat asupra refugiaților evrei (undated). AMAE, Fond. 33, vol. 4. Memorandum by Rosenblatt on the Nansen Committee (January 3, 1922), AJDC, Romania 1921-32, General, 351767.
- xxxix Memorandum on the emergency which has arisen in Eastern Europe through the congestion of Russian fugitives in Poland and the adjacent countries. (July 28, 1921). ALON, 1919-1927, R1726/45/14817/14598.
- xl Note sur la situation des Réfugiés russo-juifs en Europe orientale et la reconstruction de la vie économique des Juifs en Russie (March 27, 1923). Letter by Lucien Wolf to Major Johnson (May 4, 1923). ALON, Nansen Fonds, 1919-1927, Relations with the JCA, R1726/45/27915/14598; C1409/305/R404/1/25/1.
- xli Letter from the Central Committee for the Relief of Ukrainian Refugees in Rumania (May 18, 1922), AJDC, 1921-1932, Romania, Refugees, 351796
- xlvi Report of the High Commission's delegate in Romania (October 29, 1923). ALON, Nansen Fonds, 1919-1927, R1735/45/31002/16843.
- xliii Memorandum on the emergency, cit.
- xliv Translation Letter from Lachco (vice-president of Senate), Mirca (vice-president of the Chamber) and 3 deputies from Kishinev, to the Ministers Bratiano, Voytoiano and Inculet (September 22 1923). AJDC, 1921-1932, Romania: Refugees 351819.
- xliv Translation Letter from Noel Aronovici to Bernhard Kahn (September 9, 1923). AJDC, 1921-1932, Romania, Refugees 351815
- xlvi Letter from B. Kahn to Mr. Bressler (August 30, 1923); abstract taken from the reports of our delegate in Bucharest (September 9, 1923). AJDC, 1921-1932, Romania, Refugees, 351810, 351817.
- xlvi Translation: "The question of Ukrainian refugees is about to be settled", from *Le Matin* of Bucharest (October 7, 1923); Refugee Activities in Roumania, (August 13, 1924). AJDC, 1921-1932, Romania, Refugees, 351823, 351829.
- xlvi Letter from B. Kahn to David M. Bressler (August 13, 1924). AJDC, 1921-1932, Romania, Refugees, 351828, 351829.
- xliv Some Information Regarding the Sanitary Condition on the Left Bank of the Dniester (February 22, 1922). AJDC, 1921-1932, Romania, Refugees, 351776.

- ⁱ Ibidem. Central Relief Committee of the Ukrainian Refugees in Roumania (February 22, 1922).
- ^{li} Note of the Army's General Staff (February 18, 1922). AMAE, Fond. 33, vol. 4.
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- ^{liii} Răspunsul ministrului Afacerilor Străine, I.G. Duca (September 6, 1923); Nota Ministerului de Război din 22 octombrie 1923. AMAE, Fond. 33, vol. 4.
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- ^{lvi} Din țara sovietelor. *Apărarea națională* I, 3, 1 mai 1922, p. 21. Valvarie, Pericolul invaziei jidovești la sate. *Apărarea națională*, II, 9, 4 august 1923. pp. 9-10. Discursul D-lui Dr. Lascu asupra invaziei străinilor indezirabili. *Apărare Românească*, IV, 2-4, 4 iulie 1925, p. 38.
- ^{lvii} Iclod, pământul făgăduinții. *Înfrățirea Românească*, II, no. 13, 1 mai 1926, pp. 8-9.
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- ^{lxv} Discursul D-lui Dr. Lascu, cit, p. 39.
- ^{lxvi} Antisemitismul lui Eminescu. *Apărarea națională*, 1, nos. 3, 1 mai 1922, p. 28; 5, 15 Iunie 1922, p. 17.
- ^{lxvii} Observations of the Romanian Government after the petition of January 17, 1927. ALON, R1699/41/45705/58342.

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