

Remembering the Victims of the Second World War in Romania
during the Communisation of the country (1945-1950)

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The Second World War left behind human tragedies and a huge potential for a new national ideology; events, symbols, geographic places and national heroes all became part of public memory on a universal scale. In particular, each nation selected for itself those ‘products’ of the Second World War, which once fitted into the public memory had to shape the self-image of the nation and to re-define its role during the war. Approaching the topic relating to public memory of the Second World War in the post-war Romania, one must take under consideration that for Romanians this war represented particularly a very complex event after fighting three years on the side of the Axis Power but turning the weapons against their former allies, posing afterwards as winner of the war along the United Nations Coalition. Therefore also the victims and the remembrance to them in the post-war years was a sensitive issue instrumented by the political regime of propagandistic considerations. Both innocent civilians and military fighting on battlefields lost their life during 1941- 1945. One could distinguish two main categories of war victims. On the one hand there were the victims due to the pro-nazi policy of the period July 1941 – 23 August 1944, on the other side those who died fighting against Nazi – Germany after August 1944. The number of the civilian casualties and victims war much higher in the first period, connected to the “domestic” Holocaust costing the life of ten thousands of Jews, but also due to the bombardments by the Western Allies while during the second period most of the victims were soldiers fighting side by side with the Soviets against German and Hungarian troops in Transylvania, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Commemorating the victims of World War II meant also an ideological construct that had to serve clearly defined purposes. While the celebration of the victory served to consolidate the common identity or the national cohesion of the Romanian nation, the Holocaust was regarded as a strictly Jewish issue even if many of those affected were Romanian Jews. These Jewish communities in Romania developed their own public memory of the World War II, which reached certain elements within the Romanian society, but it has only recently been integrated into a general public memory of the Second World War in Romania. However, since the regime established after 23 August 1944 underwent step by step towards a new dictatorship, this time a communist one, changed almost from year to year the meaning of remembering the victims of the war.

Remembering civilian victims

Since most of the non-Jewish civilian victims of the war died as victims of the bombardments carried out by the Western Allies against the infrastructure of the Antonescu – Romania during the war, their memory was bound from public becoming a strict personal issue of every family or person who lost relatives, friends, children due to these bombardments. No monuments but only their graves in cemeteries indicate the way they lost their life. Some civilian non-Jewish victims have been caused also by German bombardments especially in Bucharest on 24 August 1944 but compared to a national scale, their number seemed insignificant. Much higher was the figure of the Jewish civilian victims even if they were not all victims of the Germans but also the pro-Nazi Romanian regime. Those under Hungarian rule in Northern Transylvania were deported to Auschwitz – Birkenau, those from Bessarabia and Bukovina, to Transnistria. The question was, how could fit these victims into the image of a country that itself had to play the role of a victim of Nazism and of an active fighter against Nazism. As long as the remembrance related to the victims in Northern Transylvania, including the victims of some hundreds of Romanians killed during the march of the Hungarian troops into the ceded territory in September 1940, there was no problem. Monuments have been erected, commemorative plaques unveiled, publicity was made on large scale in the media, thus the remembrance had the fully support of the authorities. In regard to the Jewish victims of the Antonescu – Regime things it was necessary to adopt a deflecting strategy of remembrance, that excluded the fact, that these Jews were in fact the victims of the Romanian state. Therefore the remembrance generalized the Jewish victims of this specifically Romanian issue as victims of “German barbarism”. Unlike other monuments dedicated to the Second World War¹ erected in central areas of towns and villages, monuments and memorial plaques remembering the Jewish victims were placed within Jewish cemeteries, courtyards or inside the synagogues. The first Holocaust monuments had the aspect of a grave located in Jewish cemeteries and were inaugurated in the period 1945-1947 during the ritual ceremonies of burning soap pieces considered at that time to be the human remains of the Jews who perished in German concentration camps. Later on, local Jewish communities, in association with the central Jewish organisation (the Union of Jewish Communities of Romanian People’s Republic), erected monuments to include the memory of Romanian Jews killed under specific circumstances on Romanian territory. For instance, in Dorohoi, a marble plaque was set on the funeral stones of the graves containing the said soap

¹ Monuments erected by the state authorities dedicated to the Romanian and Soviet Army or for local Romanian heroes who were engaged in the military operation against the German troops.

pieces some years later, probably during the 1950s, to remember the victims of the pogrom that occurred in Dorohoi on 1 July 1940.²

The military victims

After taking part in the military campaign against Nazi – Germany the Romanian army and the countries leadership could feel like whitewashing the sins the Romanian troops had for the years on Germany’s side in the war against the Soviet Union. Even if some officers were indicted and sentenced as war criminals, the image and honour of the army as an national institution have been saved. Romanians celebrated the end of the war as a victory even if this victory had its price: territorial amputations in Bukovina and Moldova. A myth of the victorious Romanian army became a common tool for regime and society. As a consequence of this glorification of the fight in West, the victims of the fight in East have been forgotten. In the first years of the post-war period, the monuments dedicated to the military heroes of the war made very little distinction whether the fighters died in the East or in the West. These monuments were stone crosses with little text on it. After the communists gained more and more influence in the country’s political life, the favourite pattern of the new monuments became the obelisk with references in the text to the fight against Nazi – Germany, thus excluding from remembrance those who died on the Eastern front. Once the power in state belonged exclusively to the communists and the artistic style of the socialist realism overwhelmed also the memorial representation, the monuments for the heroes of the World War Two became more vivid representing fighting soldiers, often in Romanian and Soviet uniform together while the texts gave the impression, the Romanian army would have been from the very beginning of the war on the right side, on the side of the Antifascist Coalition. In comparison with other countries “librated” by the Soviets, Romania had less Soviets monuments and the fact, that Romania managed to change the side to the Anti-Nazi Coalition and sent troops against the German Army gave a feeling of a national proud when commemorating the military victims of the World War Two. In particular there was also monuments dedicated to young heroes, teenagers who allegedly joined the Romanian army fighting against the “Hitlerit hordes” , like the monument for the 16 years old Virgil Iovănaş in the border village Curtici in western Romania.

² The text of the inscription: “Here are buried the unidentified Jews, victims of the fascist massacre carried out on 1st July 1940 during the royal dictatorship”. *Martiriul evreilor din România; documente și mărturii* (CSIER), Bucharest: Hasefer, 1991

As a conclusion one can say that the remembrance of the victims of the World War Two, regardless if civilians or military occurred on a selected basis, thus principle of inclusion and exclusion played an important role.