

ROMANIA'S HOLY WAR: A THOUGHTFUL STUDY

by Grant T. Harward



World War II is a difficult subject in the Romania's past, which needs to be approached with clarity and intellectual honesty. The state and society engaged in one of the biggest massacres of their history, the Holocaust against the Jewish and Romapopulations. Romania started the war as a defeated and humiliated country and ended it in a similar condition after horrific losses, under foreign occupation. Grant T. Harward's study, *Romania's Holy War; Soldiers, Motivation and the Holocaust*, is an important contribution to the effort of understanding and grasping with the event of that period, and I will review the Romanian translation¹.

The author is an American military historian who did research in this country. Grant T. Harward combines two directions

of investigation, often kept apart. One is the study of Holocaust; the other is the history and analysis of military operations during World War II. *Romania's Holy War* main thesis is that these approaches should be treated together, that they are linked because the genocides were influenced by the state of the morale of the armed forces, which interacted with the fighting. Morale refers here to the psychology and the ideology of military units, and of Antonescu's dictatorial regime, who governed during that period. There are two components to its study, according to *Romania's Holy War*: the constitution and the intensity². Romania's Army morale during

¹ Photo source: www.libris.ro.

² See: Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



World War II combined religion, nationalism, antisemitism, and anticommunism, which are detailed in the book (pages 46-51). Ideology interacted with small group cohesion in fights and massacres, argues Grant T. Harward. These four factors were not restricted to the military realm. They contributed decisively to Romania's foreign policy orientation towards Nazi Germany, alongside the external conjuncture and the events. The fall of France in the summer of 1940 was the most important of the latter, according to Grant T. Harward. In *Romania's Holy War*, the author insists that between 1940 and 1944 the ideology was the most significant source of foreign policy, in comparison with other causes such as the European and regional distribution of power.

The strength of morale was significant and it was the result of ideology, propaganda, discipline, and the state of military operations. *Romania's Holy War* main thesis is that when optimism, belief in the success of the war and small group cohesion prevailed, the killings and deportations of Jewish and Roma people were at their maximum intensity. This offers a key to explain the Iasi Pogrom, the murders which accompanied the recovery of Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia, the massacre of Odessa, the deportations, and executions in Transdnistria, and others. They were more frequent during the period between 1941 up to the summer of 1943, when Romanian's forces and regime morale was high, and declined after, according to Grant T. Harward.

In *Romania's Holy War*, one example is the Odesa massacre. Once Romania entered World War II, alongside Nazi Germany, in 1941, during a campaign when things did not end up as well as the decision-makers expected, Antonescu's regime overplayed its hand and wanted a prestige victory. Grant T. Harward points out that, plagued by lack of equipment and leadership mistakes, the Romanian forces managed to take the city with huge losses, once the German pressure compelled the Soviet units to withdraw. The building chosen to host the military headquarters blew up and the Romanian forces killed tens thousands of Jewish residents, and deported tens of thousands more.

Military effectiveness is another part of Grant T. Harward study, a topic often ignored in Romanian historiography. The author considers that its political component was good, taken account of the context, but he states that the Romanian operational control of its troops was infrequent, which is a consequence of the relationship with Germany and of diplomacy (pages 51-54). Even when national control was restored, according to *Romania's Holy War*, the operations were sometimes faulty and subjected to political interference. There were also several long-term weaknesses such as a tendency to conceive the strategic goals in an overly optimistic manner, to overestimate one's strength, excessive centralism in planning and execution and lack of equipment.



The author also undertook a detailed analysis of Romania's army structure of that time. For example, the officer corps was privileged, trained according to elitist values, with the cavalry and mountaineers being highly regarded, but its performance was mixed. Grant T. Harward states in *Romania's Holy War. Soldiers, Motivation and the Holocaust* that a professional NCO corps did not exist and thus, a significant cleavage divided the officers from the recruits, which reflected social and cultural features. The access of minorities was restricted, especially for the higher echelons.

A strong point of this book is the diversity of sources employed. Grant T. Harward relies on convention bibliographies of Holocaust studies and military history, to which he adds several war diaries, his personal documentation from the archives, or a few propaganda products especially a comic series, *Peripețiile soldatului Neață* (The Adventures of Private Morning). This makes *Romania's Holy War* an interesting text, with a variety of topics. The reader needs to be aware of this diversity and that sometimes, there is a need to go back to previous sections of the book.

Military history is often practiced in an apologetic manner, and it may become less useful from both intellectual and practical points of views. It does not satisfy one's curiosity and wish to understand the past, nor does it identify lessons, issues which should be avoided. Newer trends have started to change that, a development which *Romania's Holy War* encourages, with its innovative approaches. The Romanian edition was translated by historian Alina Pavelescu and prefaced by another historian, Mioara Anton.

*Mihai ZODIAN, PhD**

* *Mihai ZODIAN, PhD, is a Researcher at the Centre for Defence and Security Strategic Studies within the "Carol I" National Defence University, Bucharest, Romania. E-mail: zodian.vladimir@unap.ro*