

Roma Resistance during the Holocaust and in its Aftermath

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Between survival and noncompliance: Roma 'acts of resistance' in Transnistria during World War II

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1. Introduction

In the summer and autumn of 1942, while Romanian troops were fighting on the Eastern Front alongside the Wehrmacht against the Soviet Union, the Antonescu regime decided to put an end to the 'Gypsy question' in Romania and ordered the deportation of around 25,000 Roma² to the eastern province of Transnistria³. The deportation orders targeted those Roma classified by the Romanian authorities as 'dangerous and undesirable' on account of their nomadic lifestyle, extreme poverty and level of criminality, purportedly motivated by a pragmatic concern for maintaining public order and restoring 'social health'. In reality, the deportation of the Roma can be seen as part of a larger ethnic-cleansing programme implemented by the Antonescu regime, which affected in an uneven, but nonetheless destructive

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² Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004), 175 and Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: the destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu regime, 1940-1944* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2000), 226.

³ Transnistria was a province created in the temporarily occupied Soviet territory following the initial military victories of the Axis troops during Operation Barbarossa in 1941. Romania annexed the land between the Dniester, Bug, Liadova rivers and the Black Sea in August 1941 but was forced to abandon it in early 1944 due to the advance of the Red Army in the region. During this time, the Antonescu regime established a governorate in the new territory (its headquarters was eventually established in Odessa), and adopted a series of occupation policies that radically affected the lives of the local population, as well as the Jewish and Roma groups deported here from the Old Kingdom. For more details, see Dennis Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally. Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania, 1940 -1944* (Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 166-171 and Walter Laqueur and Judith Tydor Baumel, ed., *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 635-640.

manner, the lives of Jewish and Roma minorities, as well as several smaller non-Orthodox denominations, such as the Innochentists⁴. For the hundreds of thousands of people deported to Transnistria, this eastern province did not turn out to be a 'model colony', as Romanian wartime propaganda boasted, but a 'vale of tears', where they were exploited, abused and ultimately destroyed⁵.

Despite the heavy death toll (almost 11,000 Roma deportees perished in Transnistria)⁶ and the unspeakable trauma suffered by the survivors who managed to return to Romania in 1944, the wartime plight of the Roma has not received, until recently, significant attention, scholarly or otherwise, in Romania. The prevalent opinion being, that their wartime deportation was a social measure rather than one of a racial nature⁷. The publication of several pioneering studies in the last two decades has made several important corrections to this opinion by analysing deportations of the Roma within the framework of genocide and situating anti-Roma persecutions within the larger interwar eugenics research and wartime ethnic-cleansing policies⁸.

Recent debates on the systematic nature and racial motivation behind the wartime persecution of the Roma in Romania have opened new avenues of research that promise to produce new insights, not only into their wartime victimization, but also into their resistance to persecution. The new archival material concerning the fate of deportees in Transnistria suggests that not all Roma remained passive in the face of persecution: some of them engaged in individual or collective actions of protest, escape or other patterns of disobedient and disruptive behaviour, as some members of the occupation administration noted with disapproval. This was neither unnoticed, nor unsanctioned by the central authorities in Bucharest. While their largely spontaneous nature makes the task of generalization difficult, these actions can be interpreted within the framework of 'resistance' by redefining this concept in a manner that pays more attention to non-armed, civilian struggle to resist state persecution and violence.

The present study pursues this path of investigation by exploring the various patterns of 'disobedient behaviour' displayed by the Roma deported to Transnistria between 1942 and

⁴ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea țiganilor în Transnistria* (București; Editura Enciclopedică, 2004), 1: vii.

⁵ The number of Jews, Roma and Innochentists who perished during World War II in Romanian-controlled territories (including Transnistria) has yet to be determined with absolute precision and remains a controversial topic to this day. Some specialists estimate that between 280,000 and 380,000 Romanian and Ukrainian Jews, around 11,000 Romanian Roma and around 2000 Innochentists perished during the Holocaust in Romanian-controlled territories. For further details, see Tuvia Friling, Mihail E. Ionescu and Radu Ioanid, ed., *Final Report/International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania; president of the commission: Elie Wiesel* (Iași: Polirom, 2004), 381-382.

⁶ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, 1: xx and Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, 235-236.

⁷ Dorel Bancoș, *Social și național în politica guvernului Ion Antonescu* (București: Editura Eminescu, 2000), 216.

⁸ See, for instance, Vladimir Solonari, *Purificarea națiunii. Dislocări forțate de populație și epurări etnice în România lui Ion Antonescu, 1940-1944*, trans. Cătălin Drăcșineanu (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2005), 245-268.

1944⁹. Drawing on Romanian archival materials and testimonies of Roma survivors, this investigation provides a historical interpretation of those activities initiated by the Roma deportees, ranging from writing letters of protests to the Romanian authorities to organizing escapes from work camps, which involved challenging the deportation measures or openly opposing the Romanian administration in Transnistria. In doing so, this article aims to determine the extent to which the said activities can be interpreted, not only as the outcome of the 'survival strategies' adopted by ordinary people confronted with extraordinary adversity, but also as 'acts of resistance' in the face of state persecution and violence. Such an interpretation starts from the premise that, in the case of the Roma deportees, 'survival' and 'resistance' represented two sides of the same coin because their continuous struggle to survive in Transnistria overlapped, in many cases, with their desperate efforts to ensure, despite all adversity and persecution, their safe return to Romania.

The main research questions that this study will address are related to the nature and specific forms assumed by the Roma 'acts of resistance'. What motivated certain Roma deportees to adopt non-compliant and disobedient behaviour towards the discriminatory and oppressive policies adopted by the Antonescu regime? What were the factors that favoured or inhibited the emergence of clandestine activities among the Roma deportees? In attempting to answer these questions, this study articulates its main arguments around four sections: First, the analytical framework and research methods, which discusses previous research on the topic and the key concepts and primary sources in the present study; second, the historical background which explains the circumstances that favoured or inhibited the Roma 'acts of resistance' in Transnistria; third, the analysis of the main types of clandestine activities undertaken by the Roma deportees; and, fourth, a concluding section that summarizes and discusses the key findings of the research.

2. Analytical framework and research methods: previous research, main concepts and primary sources

The resistance of the Roma deportees in Transnistria represents a relatively new area of research in Romanian historiography that has been studied neither independently nor

⁹ The fact that the present article does not discuss Roma involvement in armed and organized forms of resistance does not derive from a narrow or reductionist perspective on the topic, but from the very limitations imposed by the scope and nature of the primary sources available at this time. The vast majority of the Romanian archival records and Roma survivors' testimonies provide details about non-violent ('civilian') forms of resistance, while the very few recorded cases of Roma violent ('armed') forms of resistance against oppression in Romanian-controlled territories render the efforts to generalize quite problematic. Conversely, the participation of Roma individuals in anti-fascist and/or Communist partisan movements in Romanian-controlled territories, apart from not being well documented in Romanian historiography, raises a different set of questions pertaining to the actual motivations (political persecution, ideological convictions and/or racial oppression) behind the decision to engage in such forms of organized resistance.

extensively, and is only occasionally discussed as part of the larger topic of the deportation of the Roma. Tracing the evolution of the historiographical discourse on this topic, as thin and disparate as it might be, from its earliest stages during the Communist period to the present day, would fall outside the scope of this article. Yet, it should be noted that the deportation of the Roma continues to represent a contentious and understudied topic, both inside and outside Romanian academia, due in part to the scarcity of primary sources, as well as to the difficulty of coming to terms with the country's 'problematic past' (Romania's participation in World War II and in the Holocaust) and the marginal role usually attributed to the Roma in mainstream historiography¹⁰.

The controversy surrounding the Roma genocide is far from over, as the proponents of conflicting interpretations of the nature and motivations behind the deportations continue to argue over the responsibility of the Antonescu regime for the death of almost 11,000 Roma in Transnistria¹¹. The opinion, according to which the deportation of the Roma simply represented 'a tragic chapter' in the wartime policies of population exchange implemented by the Antonescu regime in order to deal with a 'troublesome' social group and to maintain public order, still enjoys credibility in Romanian historiography¹². It has taken the sustained efforts of Roma and non-Roma researchers alike to challenge this interpretation and advocate for the analysis of the wartime deportation within the framework of state-sponsored persecution and genocide, as it was epitomized in the *Final Report on the Holocaust in Romania*, published in 2004¹³.

Although the recent publication in Romania of several collections of archival documents¹⁴ and testimonies of Roma survivors¹⁵ has made important contributions to our understanding of the deportation of the Roma, research on this topic is still in the developing stage. Several aspects of wartime deportation policies, such as the various censuses undertaken by the Romanian authorities between 1941 and 1942 in order to prepare lists of Roma deportees or the repatriation of the surviving deportees in 1944, remain largely understudied. The Roma 'acts of resistance' in the face of state persecution represent a case in point. One

¹⁰ Radu Ioanid, Michelle Kelso and Luminița Mihai Cioabă, ed., *Tragedia romilor deportați în Transnistria: 1942-1945. Mărturii și documente* (Iași: Polirom, 2009), 16-17 and Brigitte Mihok, "«Transferul unilateral»: deportarea romilor români în 1942-1944. Starea actuală a cercetării," in *Holocaustul la periferie. Persecutarea și nimicirea evreilor în România și Transnistria în 1940-1944*, ed. Wolfgang Benz and Brigitte Mihok, trans. Cristina Grossu-Chiriac (Chișinău: Editura Cartier, 2010), 271-284.

¹¹ This estimated number of Roma victims provided by Viorel Achim (*Documente privind deportarea*, 1: xx) is based on the surviving Romanian wartime records and can hardly be considered as precise or final. Other historians, such as Dennis Deletant, argued that the figure of 11, 000 Roma represents the minimum number of victims and provided a higher estimate (between 10,000 and 20,000 Roma). For further details, see Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally*, 4.

¹² Bancoș, *Social și național*, 215-237; Dumitru Șandru, *Mișcări de populație în România (1940-1948)* (București: Editura Enciclopedică, 2003), 165-175.

¹³ Friling, Ionescu and Ioanid, ed., *Final Report*, 223-243.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, vol. 1-2.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Ioanid, Kelso and Mihai Cioabă, eds., *Tragedia romilor*.

possible explanation for why the above-mentioned topic has received less attention than Roma victimization could be that the conventional understanding of 'wartime resistance' in Romania is still shaped by a biased interpretation. Official historiography from the communist era usually defined this concept primarily from an ideological and political standpoint, restricted it to active resistance (armed or otherwise), as opposed to passive opposition, against the forces of 'fascism and imperialism' and openly favoured class-consciousness over ethnicity¹⁶. As a result, the acts of resistance mounted in wartime Romania by members of ethnic minorities, including Jews and Roma, was either subsumed into the larger category of anti-fascist resistance or simply marginalized¹⁷.

Working with such a restrictive definition of 'resistance' offers limited possibility for recognizing the Roma acts of noncompliance in Transnistria as anything more than minor, isolated incidents. A few scholars working outside Romania, such as Michelle Kelso¹⁸ and Shannon Woodcock¹⁹, on the other hand, have adopted a broader definition of the concept in their research on the Roma deportees' experiences in Transnistria. The innovative studies that they have published on this topic, although detailed, do not actually offer a comprehensive historical interpretation of Roma 'acts of resistance' because they either confine their analysis to a limited number of cases of Roma protests and clandestine escapes from Transnistria, or filter the information gleaned from archival sources through the concept of 'Țigan identity'.

The concept of 'wartime resistance' lies at the core of this investigation and thus, requires a number of preliminary clarifications in order to justify its usage as a historical concept in the analysis of the Roma 'acts of disobedience' in Transnistria. As is the case with most complex concepts, there is no shortage of definitions of 'resistance' in the specialized literature pertaining to World War II, each adopting a more or less normative approach in their attempts to identify the distinctive traits of this phenomenon and to determine which of the various forms of underground and clandestine actions against 'the enemy' and/or 'the oppressor' fall within its scope²⁰. One type of definition, that may be conventionally labelled as

¹⁶ See, for instance, Gheorghe Unc et al., *Rezistența în Europa în anii celui de-al doilea război mondial, 1938-1945* (București: Editura Militară, 1976), 2: 7-8.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Ionel Hagi, *Rezistența antifascistă în Moldova (Pagini eroice din lupta Partidului Comunist Român)* (Iași: Institutul de Studii Istorice de pe lângă C.C. al P.C.R. and Comitetul Județean Iași al Partidului Comunist Român), 135-136.

¹⁸ "Gypsy deportations from Romania to Transnistria 1942-1944," in *In the Shadow of the Swastika. The Gypsies during the Second World War*, ed. Donald Kenrick and Karola Fings (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1999), 2: 95-130.

¹⁹ "Romanian Romani Resistance to Genocide in the Matrix of Țigani Other," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 25, no. 2 (2007): 28-43 and "What's in a name? How Romanian Romani were persecuted by Romanians as Țigani in the Holocaust, and how they resisted," *Interstitio* 2, no. 4 (December 2010): 29-50.

²⁰ Alfred J. Rieber, 'Anti-Fascist Resistance Movements in Europe and Asia During World War II' in *The Socialist Camp and World Power 1941-1960s*, vol. 2 of *The Cambridge History of Communism*, ed. Norman Naimark, Silvio Pons and Sophie Quinn-Judge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 15-37.

‘focused’, tends to emphasize the similarities in nature, but not necessary in ideological convictions, among the local resistance movements that emerged in Axis-dominated Europe²¹. They revolve around a number of ‘binary variables’, i.e. violent or non-violent, organized or diffused, individual or collective forms, and focus primarily on politically-oriented and violent actions, which may prove too restrictive when examining passive or diffuse forms or non-compliance²².

One possible solution to overcoming this limitation would be to provide a more ‘flexible’ definition, that recognizes the specificity of each form of resistance arising in various social and political contexts. At the same time, it could attempt to identify a series of common criteria for delimiting the wartime resistance activities, or movements, from other forms of non-compliance with the occupying or oppressing forces. Some scholars, such as O. Wieviorka²³, proposed three intention-related criteria, i.e. the intention to fight back, to take action and to challenge the order imposed by the oppressors, whereas others, such as D. Zbucnea²⁴ proposed, as a common denominator, not only intention, but also the level of visibility acquired by active resistance and the recognition they received from oppressing forces. One of the main advantages of this ‘flexible’ definition, apart from its inclusiveness, lies in its more balanced treatment of ‘passive’ resistance, which has traditionally attracted less scholarly interest than active forms of resistance.

These debates, surrounding the definition of the concept of ‘resistance’, have brought to the fore, amongst other things, the particular situation of racially persecuted minorities during World War II. In contrast to ‘national’/‘patriotic’ resistance movements in occupied Europe that actively opposed the Axis occupation, primarily on political or ideological grounds, members of minority groups usually engaged in acts of resistance against their oppressors in order to preserve lives rather than bring about the fall of the oppressing regime or the defeat of the occupation forces²⁵. Less politicized and less articulated in its organization, the struggles of the Jewish population in Axis-occupied Europe against its oppressors assumed a diversity of forms, from the refusal to cooperate with the occupying authorities to organizing daring escapes from camps and armed uprisings in the Jewish ghettos²⁶. While some were armed and violent in nature, many more were clandestine and non-violent, focusing on

²¹ See, for instance, Henri Michel, *The Shadow War: European Resistance, 1939-1945*, trans. Richard Barry (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 7-16 and Michel, *World War II. A Short History*, trans. Gilles Cremonesi (Hampshire: Saxon House, 1973), 25-29.

²² Nechama Tec, *Jewish Resistance: Facts, Omissions and Distortions* (Washington D.C.: Miles Lerman Center for the Study of Jewish Resistance, 1997), 2.

²³ Olivier Wieviorka, *The French Resistance*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, Ma. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 2-3.

²⁴ Dan Zbucnea, *Proiecte de unificare europeană ale mișcărilor de rezistență din cel de-al doilea război mondial* (Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2013), 15-18.

²⁵ Michael R. Marrus, “Jewish Resistance to the Holocaust,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no. 1 (Jan. 1995): 89.

²⁶ Patrick Henry, ed., *Jewish Resistance against the Nazi* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of American Press, 2014), xv-xvi.

survival and escape and contingent upon factors such as geography, access to resources and the shifting Nazi policies²⁷. Examples of non-violent forms of resistance intended to sustain life and promote solidarity in the Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe include, but are not limited to, the following activities: smuggling in and sharing food, medicine and clothing, publishing underground newspapers, founding schools, caring for orphaned children or documenting one's tragic experiences in writing.²⁸ It is important to stress, as Michael R. Marrus did, the centrality of the intention to resist in the study of Jewish resistance because what actually counted the most, was not 'the level of violence, but the motivation and objectives of the resisters.'²⁹

One of the most original concepts developed in the studies of wartime Jewish resistance was 'the struggle for survival' in ghettos and camps as a *sui generis* form of resistance. Criticizing the idea of 'innate Jewish passivity' in the face of persecution, historians such as Yisrael Gutman argue that Jewish life in the ghettos during World War II was, in fact, characterized by a 'defiant struggle for survival' that took a variety of forms (usually non-violent), including 'setting up mutual aid, assisting the weak, maintaining a semblance of humanity, and upholding values to which their spirit and ideology committed them.'³⁰ Even though Jewish underground resistance movements and armed groups did mobilize their forces to fight against persecution, European Jewry, as a whole, was too deprived of military means and logistical support from the Allies to engage in large-scale armed resistance. Confronted with systematic persecution and (imminent) mass destruction, the majority of the Jews living in the ghettos struggled to ensure their physical and spiritual survival by any means necessary and this, in itself, was their own way of resisting³¹.

The scope of this concept can be enlarged by applying it *mutando mutandis* to the analysis of clandestine non-violent activities organized by other persecuted minorities that were structurally different from the armed actions of the 'national' resistance movements in Axis-occupied Europe. The Roma deportees arguably represented one such minority, subjected to state persecution in Romania, whose bitter struggle to survive in the camps of Transnistria or escape from them by resorting to various clandestine and illegal means can be seen as an expression of their efforts to challenge the order imposed by the oppressors. Interpreting the deportees' struggle to survive, as a *sui generis* act of resistance is not without challenges, given the scarcity of primary sources (there is not enough data at this stage to speak of a structured 'Roma movement of resistance' in the camps in Transnistria, but rather of 'Roma acts of resistance'). Even so, such an approach will hopefully contribute to a better

²⁷ Ibid., xx-xxiii.

²⁸ Ibid., xx.

²⁹ Marrus, "Jewish Resistance": 92.

³⁰ Yisrael Gutman, "Reflections on Jewish Resistance," in *Jews and Violence. Images, Ideologies, Realities* (*Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. XVIII), ed. Peter Y. Medding (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 112-113.

³¹ Ibid., 123.

understanding of the relation between the form assumed by Roma ‘acts of resistance’ in Transnistria and the constraints posed by this oppressive environment.

In conclusion to the notions briefly discussed above, my interpretation of the concept of ‘resistance’ is directly influenced by more ‘flexible’ types of definition, because their broader focus can better accommodate the non-violent and diffuse forms of resistance organized by persecuted minorities such as the Roma. For the purpose of this study, I will operate with an expanded definition of ‘wartime resistance’ that includes any type of action, practice or form of behaviour that deliberately challenges, or does not comply with, the order imposed by an oppressing regime. The line between ‘non-conformist’ actions and ‘resistance’ can be difficult to distinguish when it comes to the everyday struggle to survive in ghettos and work camps. Without losing sight of this issue, I propose three criteria for identifying those brave, but rather mundane actions that can be arguably described as forms of resistance: intention (deliberate choice), discernable impact and level of recognition either from other oppressed members or the oppressing regime itself.

My investigation into the Roma ‘acts of resistance’ in Transnistria relies on two categories of primary sources that complement each other: Romanian official archival records dating from the war period and Roma oral histories collected in the last few decades. To a large extent, this article is based on official wartime records gathered from local³² and national Romanian archives³³ that provide invaluable insights into Roma ‘acts of disobedience’ recorded by the Romanian police, the gendarmerie, the secret services, the occupation administration in Transnistria, and even the central authorities in Bucharest³⁴. Various primary sources quoted in this article were published in Romania in several collections of documents pertaining either to the tragic plight of the Roma during World War II³⁵ or to the post-war trials of major war criminals in Romania³⁶.

³² Direcția Județeană a Arhivelor Naționale Iași (henceforth DJAN Iași), Fond no. 349 ‘*Circa a V-a Poliție Iași, ani 1935-1949*’, Folder no. 5 ‘Dosar relativ la țișanii nomazi/ 1942’, Files 1-57.

³³ Many of the Romanian documents concerning the fate of the Roma deportees to Transnistria are available in digital format at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C (henceforth USHMM). In this paper, I have made use of this collection, catalogued as RG-25.050M ‘Selected Records from Various Archives of Romania Concerning Roma’, which contains thousands of wartime Romanian documents, stored on 64 microfilm reels.

³⁴ The present article does not claim to be exhaustive and implicitly acknowledges the fact that there may be additional sources in the Romanian archives or the USHMM repository pertaining to other cases of Roma ‘acts of resistance’ in wartime Transnistria that have remained unexplored. Moreover, the corroboration of the information collected from the available Romanian primary sources with archival materials from Ukrainian and Russian archives would probably lead to a more nuanced understanding of this particular topic, particularly the involvement of Roma individuals or groups in the resistance activities organized by the local partisan groups in the temporarily Soviet-occupied territories.

³⁵ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, 2 vols. and Lucian Nastașă and Andreea Varga, ed., *Minorități etnoculturale. Mărturii documentare. Țigani din România (1919-1944)* (Cluj: Editura CRDE, 2001).

³⁶ Marcel-Dumitru Ciucă, Aurelian Teodorescu and Bogdan Florin Popovici, ed., *Procesul mareșalului Antonescu. Documente*, 3 vols. (București: Editura Saeculum I.O. and Editura Europa Nova, 1997-1998). I have

The interviews recorded with surviving Roma deportees represent a second category of primary sources that casts a deeper and more personal light on the suffering of the Roma in Transnistria and the strategies they employed in order to ensure their survival or escape to Romania. Similar to most oral history sources pertaining to underground resistance activities, they document aspects not usually covered in official sources and allow us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the Roma deportees' attitudes and reactions to persecution, which were more than often distorted or obscured by the bureaucratic jargon of the Romanian official documents.

Interpreting these two categories of documents is not without challenges. To start with, most Romanian official documents routinely denied the importance of Roma 'acts of resistance' based on the fact that these largely uncoordinated, non-violent actions posed no significant, long-term threat to the Antonescu regime. This tendency to downplay Roma subversive activities, coupled with official censorship, only serves to reinforce the image of so-called 'Roma passivity'. In addition, many Roma survivors who testified about the horrors endured in Transnistria displayed a tendency towards elusiveness when it came to explaining their own survival, in the sense that they were reluctant to speak openly about their sufferings in Transnistria, preferring to shift the focus from tragedy and injustice to their capacity to endure and survive³⁷. Many of their stories tend to focus on sufferings and sacrifices, rather than 'acts of heroism' and routinely invoke 'luck', 'fate' or 'divine intervention' to account for the narrators' own survival and/ or escape, although their resilience and resourcefulness must have played a significant role as well³⁸.

3. Historical background: the anti-Roma measures adopted by the Antonescu regime

Before getting to the heart of the matter, one needs to take a closer look at the historical context in which Roma 'acts of resistance' appeared in Transnistria in order to identify the underlying premises and factors that arguably hindered or facilitated their emergence. Like other forms of wartime resistance, Roma clandestine activities did not suddenly appear out of thin air, nor were they an entirely spontaneous reaction. They can, however, be interpreted

also consulted USHMM, RG-25.004M 'Dosarul penal Ion Antonescu proces', Reel no. 24, Folder no. 36, Files 1-250, which contains various documents related to the investigation of General Constantin Vasiliu, the former Undersecretary of State at the Department of the Interior and General Inspector of the Gendarmerie, who supervised the Roma deportations in 1942.

³⁷ Delia Mădălina Grigore, "Deportarea rromilor în Transnistria în mentalul colectiv al rromilor supraviețuitori: ocultarea durerii ca lecție de supraviețuire sau viziunea unui Holocaust etern," in *De ce nu plâng?.. Holocaustul rromilor și povestea lui adevărată. Deportarea rromilor în Transnistria: mărturii, studii, documente*, ed. Adrian-Nicolae Furtună, Delia Mădălina Grigore and Mihai Neacșu (București, 2010), 72.

³⁸ Ioanid, Kelso and Mihai Cioabă, ed., *Tragedia rromilor*, 19.

as a deliberate response to the increasingly restrictive and oppressive anti-Roma measures, adopted by the Antonescu regime between 1941 and 1944 to find a new, radical solution to the so-called 'Gypsy issue'.

During most of the interwar period, 'the Gypsy issue' was not a matter of paramount concern for the Romanian political elite because the Roma were not recognized as an ethnic minority with specific political demands that posed a threat (real or imagined) to the post-war *status quo*. Commonly referred to as 'țigani' (Gypsies) in official documents and colloquial Romanian, the Roma were usually perceived by the majority population, through the lens of traditional negative stereotypes and prejudices, as a marginal and impoverished group, loosely defined in social and cultural terms, rather than explicitly ethnic ones³⁹. According to the national census of 1930, they represented the sixth (or the fourth) largest minority in Romania, amounting officially to 1.5 % of the total population (262,501 people were registered as Roma) and unofficially to 3 % (around 520,000 people)⁴⁰. Although the climate established in Greater Romania during the 1920s favoured the rise of a Roma elite, and non-governmental organizations militated for social and cultural emancipation rather than political rights, there were no heated public debates over the situation of the Roma comparable to those concerning the fate of the Jewish minority⁴¹.

The situation began to show signs of deterioration in the late 1930s due to the erosion of the constitutional order and the rise of fascist political forces, such as the Legionary Movement, that propagated an ultra-nationalist, xenophobic and racial discourse, while militating for the creation of 'an ethnocratic state' that would establish ethnic Romanians, defined via kinship and Orthodox religion, as the dominant group, to the detriment of any other ethnic or religious minorities⁴². Simultaneously, certain bio-political theories, popularized by local specialists in eugenics such as Iuliu Moldovan⁴³, began to reach a larger audience. Concerned with the nation's well-being, which was defined in stronger racial terms, Romanian eugenicists played a key role in reframing the discussion around 'the Gypsy issue' in racial terms and advancing new solutions to what had traditionally been seen as a social problem⁴⁴. Claiming

³⁹ Achim, *The Roma*, 163.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

⁴¹ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, 1: ix and Solonari, *Purificarea națiunii*, 245.

⁴² See, for instance, Nichifor Crainic, *Ortodoxie și etnocrație*. 2nd ed. (București: Editura Albatros, 1997), 245-247.

⁴³ Iuliu Moldovan (1882-1966) was a trained medical doctor and an influential promoter of eugenic research in Romania after 1918. He was a professor at the Faculty of Medicine (the University of Cluj/Kolozsvár) between 1919 and 1947, founded the Institute for Social Hygiene in Cluj in 1919 and initiated the publication of *Buletin eugenic și biopolitic* in 1927, an influential eugenic review in which many of his collaborators and disciples, such as Iordache Făcăoaru, published their radical articles. He also held a Cabinet position as Undersecretary of State at the Department of Labour, Health and Social Protection in 1930. It was this ministerial appointment and allegiance to the National Peasants' Party that prompted the Communist authorities to marginalize and imprison him after 1947. For more details, see Maria Bucur, *Eugenie și modernizare în România interbelică*, trans. Raluca Popa (Iași: Polirom, 2005), 55-63.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 220.

that the Roma represented a 'dysgenic factor' that threatened the purity of the Romanian race, some of Moldovan's more radical followers, such as Iordache Făcăoaru⁴⁵, rejected all 'assimilationist' solutions and proposed instead that the Roma should be isolated in special camps and forcibly sterilized⁴⁶. These proposals, inspired by Nazi eugenic research, resonated with certain nationalist intellectuals and social scientists affiliated with the Legionary Movement, such as Traian Herseni, who wrote an article in January 1941 claiming that the racial purging of the nation was 'a life and death matter' that could no longer be delayed, and identified the Jews and the Roma as threats to 'Romanian racial purity'⁴⁷.

It was in this atmosphere, saturated with hostility towards minorities and anxiety about the course of the war, that the Antonescu regime began to explore 'new solutions' to the so-called 'Gypsy issue' in 1941. The influence exerted by the above-mentioned eugenic proposals over political decisions targeting the Roma population remains a controversial topic. Some of the terms employed by the Antonescu regime to describe the Roma population, i.e. 'social dead-weight', 'social plague' and 'elements of promiscuity', as well as some of the measures targeting this minority, such as internment in work colonies, do bear a striking resemblance to the racial categories used by local eugenicists and, respectively, their radical proposals for dealing with this 'problematic' ethnic group⁴⁸. The most likely candidate to have influenced the Antonescu regime in this respect was Sabin Manuilă⁴⁹, a leading specialist in

⁴⁵ Iordache Făcăoaru (born in 1897) was a Romanian anthropologist and eugenicist who took his PhD in anthropology and racial hygiene at the University of Munich in 1931. Upon his return to Romania, he became a member of the Institute for Social Hygiene in Cluj and one of Doctor Iuliu Moldovan's most radical disciples in the field of eugenics. His research focused particularly on mapping the racial composition of the Romanian nation and the 'threat' posed to its 'racial purity' by non-Romanian ethnic minorities, particularly the Roma, whom he described as an 'inferior race'. He became the director of the bio-anthropological section of the Central Institute of Statistics in Bucharest and conducted anthropological field research in Transnistria in 1942. In parallel, he joined the Legionary Movement and was co-opted into the government (the Department of National Education) during the National-Legionary State (September 1940 -January 1941). For further details, see Bucur, *Eugenie și modernizare*, 70-72 and Solonari, "In the Shadow of Ethnic Nationalism. Racial Science in Romania," in *Racial Science in Hitler's New Europe, 1938-1945*, ed. Anton Weiss-Wendt and Rory Yeomans (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 268-273.

⁴⁶ Solonari, *Purificarea națiunii*, 249.

⁴⁷ Marius Turda, *Modernism and eugenics* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 114 – 115.

⁴⁸ Solonari., *Purificarea națiunii*, 249.

⁴⁹ Sabin Manuilă (1894-1946) was a leading specialist in statistics and demography and one of Iuliu Moldovan's disciples, who served as the director of the Central Institute of Statistics in Bucharest (1937-1947). He played a leading role in the conduct of several national population censuses and helped popularize the concept of 'population exchanges' with Romanian's neighbouring countries as a means of removing ethnic minorities from within national borders. During World War II, he became a close adviser to the Antonescu regime and, in his capacity as expert on population politics, was involved in the new regime's policy of 'ethnic homogenization' (a euphemism for either aggressive assimilation or ethnic purging). Influenced by the works of German and Romanian eugenicists, S. Manuilă made written recommendations to Marshal Antonescu in October 1941 for the 'unilateral transfer' (deportation) of the Jewish and Roma minorities. After the coup of August 23, 1944, he kept his position at the Central Institute of Statistics and continued to work with the new Sănătescu and Rădescu governments until early 1945. He was forced to resign from all public positions

demography who showed interest in the recent research in eugenics⁵⁰. In his capacity as advisor to the Antonescu regime on issues related to population policies, Manuilă wrote a report in October 1941, claiming that the Roma were ‘a dysgenic factor’ and, therefore, represented Romania’s ‘greatest racial problem’⁵¹.

However, the surviving archival documents related to the internal decision-making process of the Antonescu regime are fraught with deliberate omissions and ‘euphemistic language’, making it difficult to determine the extent to which these eugenic arguments legitimized the anti-Roma policies. The Romanian high-ranking government officials involved in the planning of the deportations of 1942 avoided using explicit racialised terminology in relation to the Roma, invoking the need to ‘uphold public safety’ and to ‘restore social health’ as the official reasons behind their ill-fated decisions⁵². Marshal Ion Antonescu⁵³, the country’s *de facto* ruler, followed a similar line in his interventions in the Council of Ministers, denouncing the Roma as ‘work-shy’ and ‘anti-social elements’ whose regular involvement in street begging and criminal activities fell short of his ideals of social order, discipline and hard

in 1947 and fled to the United States in the same year. For further details, see Achim, “Romanian-German Collaboration in Ethnopolitics. The case of Sabin Manuilă,” in *German Scholars and Ethnic Cleansing, 1919-1945*, ed. Ingo Haar and Michael Fahlbusch (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005), 139-154.

⁵⁰ Achim, “The Romanian Population Exchange Project Elaborated by Sabin Manuilă in October 1941,” *Annali dell’Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento / Jahrbuch des italienisch-deutschen Instituts in Trient*, XXVII (2001): 594-596.

⁵¹ Solonari, “Ethnic Cleansing or Crime Prevention? Deportation of Romanian Roma,” in *The Nazi genocide of the Roma: reassessment and commemoration*, ed. Anton Weiss-Wendt (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2013), 102.

⁵² Achim, *The Roma*, 168-169; Achim, *Documente privind deportarea*, 1: xi.

⁵³ Ion Victor Antonescu (1882-1946) was a Romanian career officer who seized power by means of a coup in September 1940. Although Romania formally remained a monarchy ruled by King Mihai I, General Antonescu (promoted to the rank of marshal in August 1941) assumed full powers as Prime Minister, Supreme Commander of the Army and ‘Conducător’ (Leader) and was the *de facto* leader of the country from September 6, 1940 until August 23, 1944. He established an authoritarian regime (with fascist trappings) and veered Romanian politics in a new direction. In foreign affairs, he aligned Romania with the Axis by adhering to the Tripartite Pact (November 1940) and plunged the country into the war against the Soviet Union in June 1941. In domestic affairs, after the short-lived alliance with the local fascist movement (the Legionary Movement) ended in January 1941, he implemented an ambitious programme of ‘national regeneration’ that paved the way for the persecution, deportation and ultimately mass destruction of large segments of the Jewish and Roma minorities. Following his hesitation to extricate Romania from the disastrous war against the Soviet Union and to conclude an armistice with the Allies, King Mihai I and a coalition of local political leaders (the National Democratic Bloc) removed Marshal Antonescu from power and placed him under arrest on August 23, 1944. Afterwards, he was transferred into the custody of the Red Army and spent almost 18 months in Soviet captivity. He was returned to Romania in April 1946 in order to stand trial, together with some of his most prominent collaborators, for ‘contribution to the country’s disasters and war crimes’. He was brought before the Bucharest People’s Court and, after an expedient, and highly popularized, political trial (May 6-17, 1946), was found guilty, sentenced to death and executed on June 1, 1946. For further details, see Deletant, *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally* and Stelian Neagoe, *Oameni politici români. Enciclopedie* (București: Editura Machiavelli, 2007), 24-27.

work. He raised, for the first time, the issue of deporting the impoverished Roma who made a living from theft and begging in the streets of Bucharest during a meeting of the Council of Ministers held on February 7, 1941:

All Gypsies residing in Bucharest have to be moved out. But before they are moved out we need to think where to take them and what to do with them. One solution would be to wait until the Danube marshes are reclaimed so we can make Gypsy villages there and have them occupied in fishing etc. Another solution is to negotiate with the large landowners. There has always been a scarcity of manpower in Bărăgan. Let us build villages -not very durable, just build some houses and huts with health facilities, accommodation, trade, pubs and so forth⁵⁴.

In a subsequent intervention in May 1941, Marshal Antonescu resorted to stronger 'medical metaphors', reminiscent of the terminology employed by eugenicists, to describe the Roma population as a 'plague' and 'an invading force' composed of 'syphilis-infected members' who threatened to corrupt the Romanian nation⁵⁵. Thus, it can be inferred that his attitude towards the 'Gypsy issue', as much as it can be discerned from the existing records, was probably shaped by both explicit traditional stereotypes and implicit racial prejudices towards the Roma. Although he did not use explicit racial justifications in the official deportation orders, and would never admit it in public, not even in May 1946 when he was put on trial for war crimes and his contribution to the country's disaster, his decision to solve 'the Gypsy issue' in 1942 was shaped not only by social and public safety concerns, but also by 'bio-political aspirations', which were ultimately aimed at creating a homogeneous Romanian nation by expelling all other ethno-cultural groups from the country⁵⁶.

The first decisive steps towards solving the so-called 'Gypsy issue' were taken by the Antonescu regime in May 1941, in the context of the preparations for the Barbarossa Operation, when itinerant Roma, deemed as 'unreliable', were expelled from Bucharest and other Romanian cities and relocated in the neighbouring villages⁵⁷. This forceful transfer from the urban regions to the countryside represented only a temporary solution until a more remote region would be secured. The annexation of the province of Transnistria in the summer of 1941, following the successful advance of the German and Romanian troops deep into Soviet territory, offered the much-needed solution for implementing the 'unilateral transfer', i.e. forceful deportation, of large segments of Jewish and Roma populations across Romania's border with the Soviet Union.

⁵⁴ Marcel-Dumitru Ciucă, Aurelian Teodorescu and Bogdan Florin Popovici, eds. *Stenogramele ședințelor Consiliului de Miniștri. Guvernarea Ion Antonescu*, vol. 2 (January-March 1941) (București: Arhivele Naționale ale României, 1998), Doc. no. 8 (1941 February 7), 180 (unless otherwise noted, all the translations from Romanian to English are my work. The words enclosed in brackets are my own additions and were inserted to provide background information).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Doc. no. 3 (1941 April 4), 94-95.

⁵⁶ Solonari, *Purificarea națiunii*, 296-297.

⁵⁷ Nastasă and Varga, ed., *Minorități etnoculturale*, Doc. no. 146 (1942 May 27), 172; Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 14 (1942 May 21), 1: 21.

The pretext invoked by the Antonescu regime for initiating the deportation of the Roma in 1942 was the need for additional labour in Transnistria to rebuild the war-torn province⁵⁸. Acting under Marshal Antonescu's direct orders, governmental machinery initiated the necessary preparations for this massive population displacement. The logistical aspect of this task was entrusted to General Constantin Vasiliu⁵⁹, the head of the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, and was divided into three stages. First, the local law enforcement agencies (the police and gendarmerie) conducted a national census of the Roma population on May 25, 1942 in order to identify those 'nomadic, parasitic and disorderly elements' within the areas that they policed. Second, approximately 11,500 nomadic Roma were rounded up at the beginning of June 1942 and transferred to Transnistria using their own means of transportation (horse-drawn wagons). And third, around 12,500 sedentary Roma, 'with a criminal record, without a source of income or a stable occupation', were put together in special trains bound for Transnistria in early September 1942. Smaller groups of Roma continued to be deported after this date, and, even though the total number of deportees remains controversial due to factual inconsistencies in official documents, it appears that at least 25,000 Roma were 'unilaterally transferred' to Transnistria⁶⁰. The Antonescu regime was planning to deport a third wave of 'dangerous and undesirable' sedentary Roma (19,000 people)⁶¹, but cancelled this initiative when it suddenly decided to halt any further Jewish and Roma deportations to Transnistria in early October 1942⁶².

This large-scale operation, executed by the gendarmerie and the police forces in each and every Romanian county, sent shock waves through the entire Roma population. The secrecy and deception employed by the central authorities, coupled with the swift and brutal manner in which the local law enforcement agents executed the orders, were intended to prevent the Roma from mounting any large-scale opposition or attempting to flee *en masse*. Predictably, this deliberate mixture of surprise, deception and violence managed to achieve this objective to a large degree.

The element of surprise by the Antonescu regime was achieved by carefully censoring all information about forthcoming deportations and not revealing its true intentions until

⁵⁸ Ciucă, ed., *Procesul mareșalului Antonescu*, Doc. no. 7 (1946 May 7), 1: 246.

⁵⁹ Constantin ('Piki') Vasiliu (1882-1946) was a Romanian general who was appointed as Chief Inspector of the Gendarmerie (September 1940) and Under-secretary of State at the Department of the Interior (January 1942) by Marshal Antonescu. In these new capacities, he was tasked, among other things, with supervising the deportation of approximately 25 000 Roma to Transnistria in the summer and fall of 1942. He was arrested shortly after the coup of August 23, 1944 and shared the same inglorious end as Marshal Antonescu (he was executed on June 1, 1946). For further details, see Alesandru Duțu, Florica Dobre and Leonida Loghin ed., *Armata română în al doilea război mondial (1941-1945). Dicționar enciclopedic* (București: Editura Enciclopedică, 1999), 389.

⁶⁰ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, 1: xii-xiv and Solonari, *Purificarea națiunii*, 254-262.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Doc. no. 86 (1942 early September), 136-137.

⁶² Marcel-Dumitru Ciucă and Maria Ignat, ed., *Stenogramele ședințelor Consiliului de Miniștri. Guvernarea Ion Antonescu*, vol. 8 (August – December 1942) (București: Arhivele Naționale ale României, 2004), Doc. no. 10 (1942 October 13), 386.

the last moment, when things had already been set into motion. Only high-ranking state officials were privy to the logistical details of the deportation plans, while the secret order sent by Marshal Antonescu to the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie in late May 1942 to initiate the deportation of nomadic Roma demanded that “neither the deportees, nor the local Police and Gendarmes agents should know the ultimate goal of the current operations”⁶³. General Vasiliu complied with the letter and told law enforcement agents under his command only what he deemed necessary for them to know in order to carry out the deportation order efficiently. This is how he described the measures he took in May 1942 to ensure the initial secrecy of the operation:

In order to maintain the secrecy of the operation, the evacuation orders were issued separately to each regional Gendarmerie Inspectorate and the tasks were limited to their areas of operation, each Inspectorate knowing only that it was supposed to discharge to the neighbouring Inspectorate the Roma from their own circumscription. [...] In doing so, only the Chişinău and Transnistria Inspectorates were informed of the ultimate purpose of the population transfer, while the rest of the Gendarmerie structures knew only that they were organizing local eviction operations [...] ⁶⁴

Along with government secrecy, deception was another factor that prevented many Roma from opposing or escaping the gendarmes supervising the deportation convoys to Transnistria. The deliberate usage of ‘euphemistic language’ in the official orders and the dissemination of misinformation among the Roma population attest to the deceitful intention of the authorities to conceal the ultimate purpose of the deportation measures. At the central level, this can be discerned in the ‘euphemistic language’ used in the deportation orders, which made reference to ‘colonization’, ‘eviction’ or other similar terms in the initial stages of the operations, but began to speak of ‘deportation’ openly only after the population transfer to Transnistria had been completed. At the local level, some law enforcement agents, acting either under superior orders or on their own initiative in hope of achieving personal gains, began to spread false rumours about the allegedly favourable conditions in Transnistria, or the material advantages that ‘the colonists’ would enjoy there⁶⁵. The rumour travelled fast and gained credibility especially among impoverished Roma who desperately clung to the belief that they would receive a house and a plot of land in Transnistria and offered little resistance when the gendarmes arrived to carry out the deportation orders⁶⁶.

The use of ‘organized coercion and violence’ probably represented the most efficient means for preventing any form of large-scale Roma resistance. The local police agents and gendarmes were given a free hand by their superiors in Bucharest in enforcing the deportation orders, they were presented with some general guidelines and asked for immediate

⁶³ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 6 (1942 May 22), 1: 9-10.

⁶⁴ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 14 (1942 May 21), 1: 21.

⁶⁵ Solonari, *Purificarea naţiunii*, 257.

⁶⁶ Ioanid, Kelso and Mihai Cioabă, eds., *Tragedia romilor*, Doc. no. I (oral interview with Ştefan Moise), 82.

results, regardless of the obstacles encountered in the field. The roundup of the Roma did not always go smoothly, due to various unforeseen or unaccounted-for factors, so compelling some local police agents and gendarmes to improvise or use excessive force in the discharge of their onerous duty⁶⁷. Although the level of violence varied in intensity from region to region, one recurrent problem that plagued almost every local deportation operation was the mobility of the Roma population. Tracking down and rounding up all the Roma registered on deportation lists was complicated by the fact that many were currently travelling around the region, to ply their traditional trades or in search of seasonal summer work. Realizing that some of the people they were assigned to deport were nowhere to be found, some Gendarmes rounded up Roma randomly in order to make up for the missing ones and ‘meet their quota’ of Roma deportees. Such abusive practices were sometimes accompanied by the use of violence, as those Roma arbitrarily included in the convoys headed for Transnistria protested as strongly as they could. Here is the testimony of a group of Roma bricklayers from Craiova who were forced to join a convoy of deportees in June 1941:

[...] In June, we, the above-mentioned [11 persons], were travelling with our families from Craiova to Mărășești, in Putna County, in order to work on an estate, having been given formal approval to do so by the Prefect of the Dolj County, which is annexed to this petition.

While we were resting by the road, some Gendarmes, escorting a convoy of nomadic Gypsies passed us by and, on seeing us, told us to join the convoy and this is how we ended up in County [in Transnistria]. All nomadic Gypsies sent to Transnistria had been previously registered on lists, compiled and approved by the local Gendarme Legion. In our case, we were not subjected to any such formalities, but were forced into joining this convoy and taken away [...]⁶⁸

This was not an isolated case and other Roma suffered similar abuse at the hands of the local Gendarmes, who showed an excess of zeal in their efforts to ‘meet their quota’ of deportees. On more than one occasion, the authorities in Bucharest noticed a discrepancy between the number of Roma included on the deportation lists and the actual number deported to Transnistria. When asked to explain why so many additional Roma were rounded up out of his “circumscription” (jurisdiction), the Inspector of the Timisoara Gendarme Legion provided the following candid justification:

[...] The [Bihor] Legion reported that the list of deportees included 27 Gypsies. Out of this total, 5 could not be evicted because some were either too ill to be moved, their current whereabouts were unknown or, in the case of one women, did not fulfil the specified criteria for deportation.

Instead of the 5 missing Gypsies, the Legion, after conducting a new investigation, found another 5, bound by family ties, friendship or other interests with those originally listed for deportation, put their names on the deportation lists and evacuated them with the other [deportees]. In addition, the Legion evicted a Gypsy woman who lived together, without being

⁶⁷ Solonari, *Purificarea națiunii*, 259-260.

⁶⁸ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 58 (1942 ante August 3), 1: 88.

formally married with one of the evicted Gypsies, at her express request to join her concubine. This way, the Legion was able to meet its quota of 27 Gypsies established by the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie and evicted an additional Gypsy woman on the basis of the reason stated above [...]⁶⁹

The side-by-side analysis of these type of testimonies can bring to light additional details about the abusive and arbitrary nature of the deportations. For some law enforcement agents, the evictions were a complicated logistical task that could likely turn into an 'administrative burden' because their superiors in Bucharest allowed very little room for error, threatening those who did not faithfully execute orders with severe disciplinary sanctions⁷⁰. Still, the threats to sanction misconduct or negligence did little to prevent the violence and abuses perpetrated against the Roma by those local police agents, who harboured deep hostility towards this ethnic group and abusively equated 'Gypsy identity' with 'socially deviant or criminal type of behaviour'. The list of crimes routinely attributed to the Roma also included 'dabbling in the occult arts' and there was one case when a certain Roma fortune-teller was deported to Transnistria along with her 4 children due to the fact that she 'had no well-defined occupation, earning a living from scamming people, deceiving the local peasants with her fortune-telling and love potions'⁷¹.

Despite the presence of all of these inhibiting factors, not all Roma remained passive in the face of the injustice and persecution they faced in the summer and autumn of 1942. After recovering from the initial shock, some Roma found the strength to protest the violence and arbitrariness of the law enforcement agents who carried out the deportation orders. Their initial reactions of deep discontent were largely spontaneous and, for a variety of reasons, were not typically manifested in a violent manner. On the one hand, the Antonescu regime mobilized significant forces and resources to ensure that the Roma targeted for deportation had no real opportunity to respond in an organized manner. This aim was largely fulfilled and many Roma were taken aback by the swiftness and brutality of these deportation operations (although their overall efficiency was far from exemplary) and had no clear understanding of their ultimate goal. The case of Roma Private Costică Sofronie, serving in the army, who agreed in writing that his wife, Elena and his three children should be evicted, alongside her brother, from Iași to Transnistria, serves to illustrate this point:

I, the undersigned Sofronea Costică, aged 33 and residing in Iași, Vasile Lupu street no. 18, currently serving under arms in the 6th Mountain Huntsmen Regiment, I hereby declare my full consent that my wife Elena Sofronea, together with my children Gheorghe Sofronea, aged 13, Aurel, aged 3 and Verona, aged 10, should leave, with my authorization, together with her

⁶⁹ Ibid., Doc. no. 139 (1942 September 21), 1: 218.

⁷⁰ Ibid., Doc. no. 147 (1942 September 25), 1: 228-229.

⁷¹ USHMM, RG-25.050 M 'Selected Records from Various Archives of Romania Concerning Roma', Reel no. 4, Folder no. 196/ 1942, File 1224.

brother, Sofronea Va[sile] for Transnistria and after my discharge from the 6th Mountain Huntsmen Regiment, I wish to be sent as well there to join my family.[...]⁷²

On the other hand, the Roma represented a heterogeneous minority, composed of various subgroups dispersed across the entire country and subject to specific patterns of integration into mainstream society⁷³. They also lacked any form of legally recognized central leadership to defend their rights after the official dissolution of the General Union of the Roma in Romania in 1941⁷⁴ and had no strong assurance that they would receive any type of political support or humanitarian aid from outside Romania. Like most civilians in Romania, the Roma lacked direct access to means to protect themselves because the Antonescu regime introduced strict regulations after the Legionary rebellion of January 1941 that severely restricted the general population's access to firearms. In addition, offenses such as armed rebellion and treason were punishable by the death penalty in times of war⁷⁵.

Even in those dark, desperate times, in which armed resistance seemed impractical, if not unrealistic for most Roma given the wartime conditions, there was some glimmer of hope. The appearance of legality that the Antonescu regime tried to maintain, in spite of its dictatorial nature, ultra-nationalist discourse and repressive apparatus, induced many Roma who felt they had been wrongfully included on the deportation lists in 1942 to believe that this great injustice done to them could be remedied via official channels. Indeed, the deportation orders issued by the Antonescu regime were limited in scope (they officially targeted only certain groups of Roma, i.e. the nomadic Roma and the sedentary Roma with a criminal record and without a source of income, and listed among their explicit goals 'colonization', not 'physical destruction') and based the selection of the Roma deportees on 'non-explicit racial criteria' that were equivocal and prone to misinterpretation.⁷⁶ Since their legal situation remained somewhat ambiguous throughout the war because they had not been formally stripped of their citizenship rights in 1942, many Roma deportees realized that they could petition for assistance, as paradoxical as this might sound, from the same Romanian authorities that ordered their deportation in the first place.

The fragility of the Romanian administration in Transnistria, routinely understaffed and overwhelmed by the war effort, represented a second factor that encouraged non-cooperation and even unrest among the Roma deportees. The occupation administration intended to use them as a cheap labour force, but lacked the appropriate resources and manpower to efficiently exploit or police them, and could hardly even provide appropriate housing and sufficient food supplies to the almost 25,000 Roma sent to Transnistria in 1942⁷⁷. Its efforts to

⁷² DJAN Iași, Fond. No. 349 'Circa a V-a Poliție Iași, ani 1935-1949', Folder no. 5 'Dosar relativ la țigani nomazi/ 1942', File 62.

⁷³ Achim, *The Roma*, 146-148.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 156.

⁷⁵ Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally*, 71.

⁷⁶ Solonari, *Purificarea națiunii*, 258.

⁷⁷ See, for instance, Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 296 (1943 January 25), 1: 96.

restrict the mobility of the Roma by confining them to improvised work camps or evacuated villages quickly backfired due to the rapid spread of contagious diseases such as typhus, and to the deportees' constant need to forage for resources in the neighbouring villages. The inefficiency, brutality and corruption of the occupation administration forced the deportees to resort to a variety of non-violent tactics to ensure not only their survival in the face of adversity, but also their clandestine escape from this 'vale of tears'.

Since the resistance of Roma in Transnistria assumed a variety of forms, contingent upon the deportees' intentions and the circumstances in which they were thrown, in the next section I analyse the most representative of these separately, beginning with petition writing, moving on to non-cooperation, and closing with the escapes from Transnistria.

4. Protesting against injustice: petitioning the Romanian authorities for assistance

One of the most common non-violent forms of resisting the deportation to Transnistria was to write letters of protest or petitions to the Romanian authorities or public figures believed to wield enough political influence to help in this matter. These documents, written by Roma who found themselves in a very vulnerable position, either because they and their families had personally been subjected to deportation or feared that they would be forced to join the next convoy to Transnistria, reflected the desperate efforts of many Roma to draw attention to the great injustice done unto them, the dire threats looming over their families or the hardships they endured in Transnistria⁷⁸. With some exceptions, their content usually revolved around a set of similar arguments attempting to invalidate the senders' abusive inclusion on the deportation list and justify his or her rights to reside in Romania. Given the nature of the deportation orders (based on secret high-level executive decisions rather than legal decrees that could be appealed in a court of law), these petitions were sent to various members of the Romanian administration in Transnistria or in Bucharest, political figures and even to Marshal Antonescu and King Mihai⁷⁹. The analysis of these petitions and the bureaucratic 'paper trail' that they occasioned allow us to gain a better grasp of the Roma's individual reactions to the implementation of deportation orders and the 'array of arguments they used to challenge the criteria behind these measures.

Perhaps, the most passionate petitions were written by those Roma who had been deported to Transnistria in 1942 and who sought to have this expulsion measure rescinded by the Romanian authorities. Written individually or as a group, these petitions usually challenged the decision of the local enforcement agents to include him or her on the list of deportees, by claiming that it was the result of confusion, abuse or ill-will. In so doing,

⁷⁸ Solonari, *Purificarea națiunii*, 258-259.

⁷⁹ Woodcock, "Romanian Romani Resistance": 37.

the petitioners directly challenged the inconsistent implementation of deportation orders by the local police agents and gendarmes and indirectly contested the overgeneralized criteria behind the ‘hierarchies of exclusion’ embedded in the deportation orders, that disregarded regional specificities and local ‘variables’. In addition, they were trying to define their ethnic identity in relation to their own social status, legal ownership of property, good behaviour and distinguished military service— the four criteria that refuted their criminalization as work-shy nomads, impoverished, delinquent and unpatriotic ‘Gypsies’⁸⁰. Here is a telling example of a petition written by Maria Dumitrache, originally from Galați in 1943:

[...] I, the undersigned Maria Dumitrache, with the greatest of respect and tears in my eyes come before you with this petition, I was evicted to Transnistria with my husband and my two children from the city of Galați and I have a son enlisted in the Army, named Dumitrache Const[antin], serving in the 3rd Platoon Border Guards [Grăniceri] in Negru-Vodă, the Constanța County.

I beseech you to investigate in all seriousness what type of people we are, how we behaved in the past and the reasons why we were evicted from our old household and separated from our children, being traditional musicians.

I beseech you with a heavy heart [to approve] our return to our beloved country, for which we have fought for generations and for our son to be returned to us. [...] ⁸¹

The second category included petitions written by Roma men and women whose family members were deported while they were away from home, either plying their trades, visiting relatives or, in case of the men, serving in the army. Their letters, written in simple and direct words, capture the feelings of helplessness experienced by married women with children in their care, left to fend for themselves after they were suddenly separated from their husbands in 1942, or the emptiness felt by Roma husbands when they returned from abroad and saw their homes pillaged and deserted. The discursive strategies adopted by these Roma women or men tend to follow different ‘patterns of protest’. For instance, the letters penned by Roma women were, in more than one case, addressed to Queen Elena, King Mihai’s mother, and tended to stress the material difficulties they were experiencing as a result of the abrupt and painful separation from their children or their husbands, the main breadwinners in the family. Although Queen Elena had little influence over government decisions, the petitioners assumed that she would show more compassion for their problems. Elena Răducanu from Iași wrote such a petition to Queen Elena in May 1943, asking her to intercede in favour of her son, who had been deported by mistake:

[...] I, the undersigned Elena Răducanu, currently residing in Iași, Flueraș Street no. 6, beseech you with tears in my eyes and with a broken heart, I bow down before your Highness and ask

⁸⁰ Ibid.: 38.

⁸¹ USHMM, RG-25.050M ‘Selected Records from Various Archives of Romania Concerning Roma’, Reel no. 4, Folder no. 89/1942, File 1121.

you to intercede on my behalf that, as a mother, I am heartbroken because my mute and deaf son, Teodor Răducănu, aged 18, was taken by mistake in August 1942, at 1 AM, when the order came that all Gypsies be rounded up and sent to Transnistria and my son was taken without having any identification papers on him.

I have also sent a petition to Marshal Ion Antonescu concerning this issue and it was approved, in that I received a notice from the Council of Ministers confirming the repatriation of my son. Five months have passed since then and I have received no news from my son, nor was he returned back to the country, as ordered. [...]⁸²

Other Roma women chose to approach Romanian political decision-makers directly, writing compassionate letters to Marshal Antonescu himself, desperately pleading for the return of their children or husbands from Transnistria. Despite being similar in tone, these letters employ a larger array of arguments to plead their case, stressing not only the hardships the female petitioners had to endure in the absence of their husbands and children, but also the distinguished military record and patriotism of their deported male relatives. The letter written in October 1942 by Anastasia Burcea, a war widow from Pitești, pleaded for the repatriation of her mute son:

[...] During the implementation of the order issued by the esteemed Government concerning the colonization of Transnistria, Gheorghe Burcea, one of my sons and a carpenter by trade, and his wife were rounded up. Taking into account that our family was born and lives in Pitești, that my husband fell bravely fighting in the previous war, that one of my sons also shed blood for the Country, King, and Conducător and my other son is currently fighting in the first ranks side by side with our soldiers fighting in the Caucasus, I appeal to Your sense of righteousness and beseech you to order the return from the Oceakov commune, Transnistria of my son Gheorghe Burcea, the only one left to help me bear the burden of my 70 years [...]⁸³

Petitions written by Roma husbands separated from their families during the police round-ups in 1942 typically stand out, due to their deliberate efforts to adopt the tone and brevity specific to military reports. This comes as no surprise, given the petitioners' record of military service (many were World War I veterans or active duty army soldiers or gendarmes on leave) and the profile of the recipients (usually high-ranking Romanian officers or top government officials from Bucharest or Odessa). Most active duty soldiers could barely contain the disappointment they felt when they returned home from the front line and learned that their families had been deported to Transnistria, a place they had become familiar with during the military campaigns of 1941 or 1942, known for its cold climate and desolate war-torn landscape. Frustrated by the unjust treatment that their families were subjected to, despite their honourable military service and good social standing, some serving Roma wrote directly to Marshal Antonescu and asked permission to go looking for their families in

⁸² Ibid., File 1260.

⁸³ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 209 (1942 ante October 27), 1: 315.

Transnistria. The petition written in June 1942 by Gendarme Nicolae Moldovan, mobilized on the Eastern front, exemplifies this point:

[...] With tears in my eyes, I beseech you, Marshal Antonescu, to issue orders that grant me permission to travel and look for my relatives, knowing that they currently reside in the Golta County[in Transnistria] and, at the same time, authorize me to request the support of the local military and civilian authorities [in my efforts] to have my relatives returned to my beloved fatherland, for which I have fought since the beginning of the war until the present day.

I await your superior orders granting me permission to fulfil my request, because my conduct both as a civilian and as a soldier has been beyond reproach, and my relatives deported in Transnistria do not have a criminal record and do not belong to the nomadic Gypsy groups. [...]⁸⁴

The third group of petitions were drafted by groups of Roma who were exempt from deportations, but lived under threat of being forced to join deportees in Transnistria. Alarmed by the circulation of rumours about a new wave of deportations, fuelled discretely by corrupt local gendarmes and public officials seeking to gain some personal benefits, Roma groups from all over Romania began to write petitions to the local and central authorities and desperately plead their case. They were not short of persuasive arguments when it came to challenging their abusive categorization as ‘impoverished and work-shy Gypsies’ by claiming instead that they owned arable land and real estate, had a trade and a stable source of income, had no criminal record, were Christians and had done military service. In addition, they displayed ‘ingenuity’ when it came to describing their own ethnic identity (they routinely employed labels such as ‘Romanian of Gypsy origin’ or ‘Romanianized Gypsy’), stressing their complete allegiance to the Romanian nation, the Crown or the current regime by describing the sacrifices made by their parents or their sons fighting for King and country⁸⁵. Here is a fragment from the petition sent by Gheorghe Niculescu⁸⁶, the president of the General Union of the Roma from Romania, to King Mihai asking for his protection (to take the Roma under ‘the Royal Shield’) and even his intervention to stop the deportations:

⁸⁴ USHMM, RG-25.050 M ‘Selected Records from Various Archives of Romania Concerning Roma’, Reel no. 4, Folder no. 89/1942, File 1226.

⁸⁵ Woodcock, “Romanian Romani Resistance”: 38.

⁸⁶ Gheorghe Niculescu was a Roma flower merchant and activist from Bucharest who assumed the presidency of the Roma association *Uniunea Generală a Romilor din Romania* (General Union of Roma in Romania) in 1934. Under his leadership, the association became engaged in various initiatives intended to promote the social and cultural development of the Roma population and managed to expand its membership to approximately 800,000 members (according to the association’s own estimates). The establishment of the Royal Dictatorship in 1938 and the outbreak of World War II forced G. Niculescu to reduce his public activity. The General Union of Roma in Romania formally ceased its activity in 1941, but was reactivated in 1945. After a short-lived period of collaboration with the Communist authorities, the association was formally disbanded in January 1949 and Niculescu was marginalized from public life on account of his ‘bourgeois background’. For further information, see Achim, *The Roma*, 155-159.

[...] The parents, wives and children of the Roma men fighting on the front line or war invalids visit our association on a daily basis with tears in their eyes, telling us that they will be evacuated from the country and even more Roma families have already been forcefully evicted from their households and sent to Transnistria.

Since most of the Roma mobilized on the front line, where they fight for our beloved Fatherland, King, Conducător [Marshal Antonescu] and the victory of the Holy Cross against our foes, and their families have a well-defined social standing, with stable places of residence, well-administered households established centuries ago, land owners, traders, craftsmen, musicians and so forth, who adequately fulfil their duties to the Country, have no quarrels with the law, are born in this country, baptized and wed according to Christian rituals, fought in past wars and have been assimilated into the Romanian nation for centuries.

We respectfully ask you to take us under your Royal Shield, being completely confident in Your Superior benevolence and sense of justice and in ordering the suspension of these measures that bring only pain and despair to the hearts of all Roma. [...]⁸⁷

Despite having a limited understanding of the ultimate goals of the Antonescu regime, in respect to the Roma population, most Roma grasped the fact that their chances of obtaining a reprieve or an exemption for deportation directly depended on proving their alleged 'usefulness' to Romanian society or, at least, to the local communities in which they lived. In order to achieve this purpose, they requested a number of benevolent Romanian neighbours, employers or municipal officials to write letters in support of their petitions. These letters usually took the form of 'certificates of good conduct' that confirmed the positive points already mentioned in the original petitions and stressed the importance of the Roma petitioners to the local economy. One such certificate issued by the mayor of the commune of Dăești, in Argeș County and annexed to the original request submitted by Ispas Neamțu, the local Roma blacksmith, stressed that the local village community 'absolutely needs' the services of said blacksmith.

I, the undersigned, the mayor of Dăești Commune in the Argeș County, attest by the following certificate the veracity of the statement given by the Gypsy Ispas Neamțu, an inhabitant of this commune, in the request annexed above: the above-mentioned owns a house, is a good craftsman, he supports his family by what he earns from plying his trade, owns land, is of good conduct in the commune and the local community absolutely needs his services as a blacksmith.

We also confirm that the above-mentioned has been living in this locality with his family since his birth and does not move from place to place [as itinerant Gypsies do]⁸⁸.

Looking at these petitions that attempted to question the validity or circumvent deportation orders, one cannot help but ask whether the Roma who wrote to the Romanian authorities actually 'tailored' their discourse to the demands of their exigent audience and resorted to

⁸⁷ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 91 (1942 September), 1: 142-143.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, Doc. no. 182 (1942 October 10), 1: 273.

arguments that they believed would be most useful in advancing their cause. When attempting to provide a general answer, one should never overlook the fact that these petitions were usually sent by desperate people in desperate situations, who were currently facing or had already faced (imminent) expulsion from their native country and were doing their best to have deportation measures revoked or postponed. Presumably, their choice of arguments was more pragmatic than principled, often less provocative than it could have been, because they hoped against hope that by stressing their attachment to the Romanian nation and high degree of integration into mainstream society, they had a better chance of impressing their target audience.

5. Surviving exploitation: non-cooperation with the Romanian authorities in Transnistria

Only a small proportion of these petitions achieved the expected results and the vast majority of the Roma deportees had little choice but to find ways to cope with their new situation. Once they arrived in Transnistria after a long journey by wagon or freight car, they realized how hard it would be to accustom themselves to life in this war-torn and resource-depleted Eastern province, given the local authorities' general lack of preparedness to feed and house around 25,000 new deportees, the great scarcity of food, firewood and other vital resources, the inclement climate and the resentment of the local Ukrainian population, forced to share not only their meagre resources, but, in some cases, even their modest dwellings with the newcomers⁸⁹.

The Roma were subjected by the occupation authorities to forced labour⁹⁰, both inside and outside their newly assigned compulsory residences (usually small villages or work colonies overseen by gendarmes) located in the eastern regions of Transnistria, near the banks of the Bug river. But the local administration's plan to exploit them as farm hands in agriculture, wood cutters, craftsmen, road builders and so forth, outside their compulsory residences in exchange for meagre food rations encountered too many logistical and security challenges to prove effective by any production standard⁹¹. The difficulty of finding labour or food, combined with the cold weather, the spread of contagious diseases and the threat of immediate execution (for instance, the summary execution of 6,000 to 8,000 Roma in Golta County ordered by the local Romanian authorities⁹² and the mass murder of Roma deportees in

⁸⁹ Ibid, xiv-xv.

⁹⁰ Achim, *Munca forțată în Transnistria. "Organizarea muncii" evreilor și romilor, decembrie 1942-martie 1944* (Târgoviște: Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2015).

⁹¹ USHMM, RG-25.050 M 'Selected Records from Various Archives of Romania Concerning Roma', Reel no. 34, Folder no. 59, Files 113-122.

⁹² *Procesul Marii Trădări Naționale* (București: Editura Eminescu, 1946), 305.

Trihati train station, near Oceakov, in 1943⁹³) turned everyday life in Transnistria into a struggle to survive. This is how Lucia Mihai, one of the fortunate Roma who survived Transnistria, described the hardships of everyday life in the camps:

We stayed long in this place [in Transnistria], almost two years. We were most unfortunate. People went to the forest and brought firewood, as much as they could. The Gendarmes shot them, killed them because they attempted to steal corn from the fields in order to survive, they smashed and boiled the corn grains and fed them to their children for lack of anything else and to prevent them from starving to death. [...] They would sneak into the cornfields and steal some corn cobs. Some got shot, others fled, some lived. Others would die. [It became] a death camp...⁹⁴

Starvation, cold, illness, together with the guards' brutality pushed many Roma deportees to take desperate measures in order to survive. Although their freedom of movement was seriously limited and the threat of reprisals loomed over their heads, many Roma engaged in small-scale clandestine actions, mundane in nature but branded as 'illicit' by the local authorities, which defied existing orders and camp regulations in order to provide for their families⁹⁵. Therefore, one can argue that the deportees' constant struggle for survival acquired some of the traits associated with 'non-violent resistance' because it involved a number of actions of non-compliance that not only helped the Roma 'keep body and soul together', but also frustrated the local administration's efforts to segregate and exploit them as forced labour. Although the fragmentary nature of the primary sources renders generalization difficult, the information currently available indicates at least two patterns of non-compliant behaviour among the Roma: procuring food by illicit means and refusing to work in the labour detachments.

The first pattern included a wide range of 'illicit activities' aimed primarily at securing food and firewood, ranging from petty theft, crafting wood and horn utensils to barter with the locals, working as day labourers in agriculture for the locals in exchange for food or clothes and so forth⁹⁶. Here is how the same Roma survivor, Lucia Mihai, described her mother's activities:

[...] My mother had [some Romanian] clothes. She would steal into the [neighbouring] villages to meet Russian women and sell them clothes. They would speak with the Gendarmes, the Romanian Gendarmes who oversaw us, and give them gold coins and they would allow them to go outside [the camps] into the villages. They would walk for 20 or 30 kilometres to reach the village. My mother went there and sold shirts, skirts to the Russian women and brought back to

⁹³ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 383 (1943 May 18), 2: 197.

⁹⁴ Ioanid, Kelso and Mihai Cioabă, eds., *Tragedia romilor*, Doc. no. III (oral interview with Lucia Mihai), 105-106.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 107-108.

⁹⁶ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 563 (1943 December 17), 2: 405-406 and Doc. no 564 (1943 December 1943), 2: 407-408.

us [her little children] food to eat. Those Russian women gave her in exchange flower, cheese or meat and this is how our mother nourished us and prevented us from starving to death. [...] ⁹⁷

Whereas this first pattern of non-compliant behaviour was routinely treated as a ‘nuisance’ rather than a threat because it frustrated efforts to control either the circulation of the Roma deportees in the countryside or their interaction with local Ukrainians, the deportees’ refusal to work posed a more serious problem for the local administration ⁹⁸. The exploitation of Roma forced labour in work sites outside their compulsory residences proved rather unproductive and posed a security risk, due to the shortage of gendarmes needed to supervise the deportees. The Romanian administration tried to regulate this aspect in December 1942 ⁹⁹, but results fell short of expectations, as Colonel Lucian Ivaşcu aptly noted in his report investigating the merits of the complaints made by some sedentary Roma deported to Transnistria. According to him, some Roma refused to comply with the order given by the gendarmes and, ‘when included in work details usually ran away because they refuse to work. From now on, it will be even harder [to make them comply], because they are entirely unclothed and undernourished’ ¹⁰⁰.

The Roma acts of non-compliance were described in more detail by Lieutenant-Colonel Vasile Gorsky, the former Prefect of Oceakov County in Transnistria, in a statement given in 1945. He claims that upon arriving in Transnistria, some of the Roma he spoke with ‘were outraged, cried, shouted, cursed because they were forced to leave their homes and sent to Transnistria.’ He continues by describing how the hunger, cold and violent reprisals pushed some deportees to clandestine actions, refusing to work in the collective farms (‘kolkhoz’) and ‘demanding to be sent back home’ ¹⁰¹. His colleagues, however, showed far less understanding towards these acts of non-compliance and chose to explain them away as expressions of ‘Gypsy laziness’ or ‘delinquent nature’. For instance, C. Sdrobici, the Director of the Labour Division of the Governorate of Transnistria, wrote a report to Governor Gheorghe Alexianu ¹⁰² in July 1943 describing some of these ‘illicit acts’ in a more dismissive tone and stressed the need to adopt stricter measures against those Roma deportees who refused to execute the work tasks assigned to them. Claiming that ‘the Gypsies, especially the nomads,

⁹⁷ Ioanid, Kelso and Mihai Cioabă, eds., *Tragedia romilor*, Doc. no. III (oral interview with Lucia Mihai), 107-108.

⁹⁸ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 350 (1943 March 23), 2: 157.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, Doc. no. 268 (1942 December 18), 2: 54-56.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, Doc. no. 267 (1942 December post 17), 2: 54.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, Doc. no. 641 (1945 April 15), 2: 498.

¹⁰² Gheorghe Alexianu (1897-1946) was a legal scholar and professor of law who held the office of civilian governor of Transnistria from August 1941 to January 1944. This appointment afforded him a privileged position in the Antonescu regime and considerable influence over the Governorate of Transnistria (the Romanian administration in the province). The corruption and inefficiency that marked his tenure as governor directly affected not only the local population, but also the Jewish, Roma and Innochentist deportees from the Old Kingdom, who were subjected to systematic exploitation, persecution and mass murder. He was arrested after the coup of August 23, 1944 and shared the same inglorious end as Marshal Antonescu (he was executed on June 1, 1946). For further details, see Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally*, 167-168.

are averse to any sense of discipline, order and precaution', he recommended that the gendarmes should increase their vigilance towards the deportees and make an example of 'the repeated offenders' by having a few of them executed¹⁰³.

6. Fleeing from hunger, cold, diseases, abuse and death: Roma escapes from Transnistria

The unspeakable deprivations and abuses suffered in Transnistria, coupled with the looming threat of immediate execution in case of non-compliance with orders issued by the Romanian gendarmes, forced a number of Roma deportees to seek deliverance in more extreme and dangerous actions, such as attempts to escape and return to Romania¹⁰⁴. The long list of risks associated with such a perilous enterprise could not always deter the deportees from attempting to escape the vigilance of the gendarme units overseeing the Roma work colonies or villages, brave the cold weather and the long distances, clandestinely board freight trains bound for Romania or to slip through military units patrolling the border region. Convinced that they could not survive another harsh winter in Transnistria and determined to see their homes in Romania once more, a growing number of Roma engaged in the clandestine crossing of the Romanian Eastern border in 1943. The fragmentary information available indicates that the deportees usually attempted to escape in small groups, rather than individually, and did so either according to spontaneous initiative or a plan sketched in advance. In either case, improvisation and chance played a large role in the success of the operation.

Individual escapes were less common, but not completely isolated among Roma deportees who somehow got separated from the rest of their families and friends during the deportation operations in 1942 or lost almost all their relatives in the work colonies. Such is the case of Veli Ibrahim, a Muslim Roma from Tulcea who was deported, together with his family in September 1942, but was forced by 'the cold and hunger' to make a daring individual escape attempt, which proved successful. He could not stay long in Romania and crossed the Dniester again into Transnistria to find his family, was briefly reunited with them, but failed to bring them with him because he lacked 'an official permit' authorizing their return to Romania¹⁰⁵. Others, like Ștefan Moise from Iași, made the painful decision to leave his family behind in Transnistria in an attempt to reach Romania and search for help. Here is how he described his 'lucky escape':

[...] We left, we took a long detour, because you could not simply walk away, and made it to the train station in Trihati. It was not like last time, how can I put it, there were more people coming and going, more soldiers and nobody took any notice when we entered the station.

¹⁰³ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 409 (1943 July 4), 2: 236.

¹⁰⁴ Mihok, "«Transferul unilateral»,» 283.

¹⁰⁵ ., Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 404 (1943 June 24), 2: 222.

I was with another person. Nobody paid any attention to us. It was also dark and the train was already pulled into a siding, it probably arrived from Nikolayev. This train also had freight cars and a few passenger-cars-those third class type, as it was back then. [...] We boarded the train and crouched in a corner. The train departed and we left. The train rolled down the tracks, the freight car was not opened, nobody asked us anything, we sat in it undisturbed. [...] ¹⁰⁶

Outside help represented another factor that influenced the success or failure of these daring escape attempts in a decisive manner. For many Roma escapees, securing the help of benevolent Romanian soldiers on leave, who were transiting through Transnistria, or sympathetic local Ukrainians, meant gaining access to forged transit passes, train tickets, clothing and food. Here is how Ioan Marin from Bucharest described the crucial role played by a group of Romanian soldiers who were returning from the front line and heading to Romania in helping his brother escape:

- Was there anyone who tried to escape [from the camps in Transnistria]?
 - Many escaped and many more returned [to Romania] along the way. One of my brothers, a very smart and intelligent man, Marin Constantin [...] who was a kind of a headman, a group leader who oversaw and coordinated our activity; he did not spend more than a month, a month and a half and [escaped] with the help of some fellow soldiers [who] gave him a military uniform to put on, had some forged papers made in his name and shipped him back to Romania.
 - And he wasn't caught?
 - No, because he was dressed in a military uniform and he was travelling with a group of soldiers who were returning to Romania.¹⁰⁷

Group escapes tended to be better organized and relied more on planning than improvisation especially when it came to choosing the possible means and route of escape. Improvisation was never absent from their plans, but not everything was left to chance, as one can discern a certain level of preparation when it came to pooling resources for bribing camp gendarmes or train conductors¹⁰⁸, finding ways to procure forged travel papers and permits¹⁰⁹ or seeking shelter from police raids through their network of relatives and friends once they had reached Romanian soil. Sadly, not everything went according to plan and escaped deportees arrested by gendarmes patrols in Romania were usually sent back to the work camps in Transnistria, where they were subjected to disciplinary measures. Some of the Roma were not deterred by these reprisals and made repeated attempts to escape from Transnistria, to the frustration of

¹⁰⁶ Ioanid, Kelso and Mihai Cioabă, eds., *Tragedia romilor*, Doc. no. I (oral interview with Ștefan Moise), 107-108.

¹⁰⁷ Năstase and Varga, ed., *Minorități etnoculturale*, Annex no. I, (oral interview with Ioan Marin), 611.

¹⁰⁸ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 535 (1943 November 13), 2: 372 and Doc. no. 542 (1943 November 19), 2: 378.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, Doc. no 290 (1943 January 20), 2: 89-90.

the local authorities¹¹⁰. It is important to note that, despite all the variations in their personal circumstances, most of the escapees apprehended in Romania, including Florea Vasile, the members of a group of 13 Roma who tried to escape from Oceaş County, identified cold, hunger and ill-treatment undergone in Transnistria as the main reasons behind their collective escape attempts:

[...] I was evacuated to Transnistria in 1942, together with the rest of the Gypsies from all around the country, without knowing the reason why, because I was never prosecuted or convicted, I had the means to earn my living and support my wife.

Due to the ill-treatment we were subjected to in Transnistria, in the place where we were evacuated, we boarded a train in Grigoreşti station, Oceaş County on the evening of September 21, 1943 and begged the soldiers on board, who were assigned to [guard the] transport [of] an airplane, to allow us to come aboard, but we were arrested at the Barboşi station by a Gendarme patrol.¹¹¹

For some Roma, the thought of having to return to work camps in Transnistria after having successfully escaped and enjoyed for a brief moment 'the taste of liberty' in Romania was too much to bear. Rozalia Dondoczi, a Roma escapee who was arrested in Romania by the local gendarmes, chose to take her own life by jumping in front of a moving train rather than return to Transnistria. The report which confirms her 'death by unnatural causes' (dated August 2, 1943), although written in a cold and formal language, serves as a chilling reminder of how far some Roma deportees would go in their desperate efforts to avoid ever seeing the inside of a work camp in Transnistria:

[...] We have the honour to submit to you the present report, informing you that today, at the above-mentioned date, 16:45 hours, while the Sargent Gendarme Barbu Gheorghe of the [Cluj-Turda] Legion was in this station awaiting the arrival of train no. 7009 destination Odessa, the Gypsy he was escorting, Dondoczi Rozalia, took advantage of the commotion created near the train platform and jumped in front of the train engine, which led to her mutilation and passing away, thus preventing the Gendarme who escorted her from doing anything to save her.¹¹²

7. The impact of the Roma 'acts of resistance' in Transnistria

One can safely assume that these Roma acts of resistance in Transnistria went neither unnoticed, nor unpunished by the Romanian authorities. However, it is difficult to measure

¹¹⁰ Ibid., Doc. no. 300 (1943 January 28), 2: 99-100.

¹¹¹ Ibid., Doc. no. 493 (1943 September 29), 2: 324.

¹¹² Ibid., Doc. no. 442 (1943 August 2), 2: 270.

the impact of these ‘individual dramas’ upon the life-and-death decisions taken by the Romanian administration and law enforcement agencies, whose members were, with some exceptions, steeped too deeply in their bureaucratic mentality and anti-Roma prejudice to see little more than the additional costs carried, or threat posed, by the increasing number of escape attempts from Transnistria¹¹³. For instance, the Gendarme Legion in Chişinău reported the apprehension of 209 escaped Roma in the month of August 1942 alone, who were returned under escort “to the work colonies and those responsible were sanctioned.”¹¹⁴ In addition, the Gendarme Legion in Balta Country reported that, by December 1942, the local patrols had apprehended around 2000 Roma deportees who were attempting to cross the border into Romania illegally¹¹⁵. The Inspector of the Gendarme Legion from the same county travelled to Golta in Transnistria to investigate the wave of recent clandestine escapes and made the following remarks about the ‘ingenious means’ used by the Roma deportees to further their ‘nefarious purpose’ of escaping from work camps:

[...] The result of this state of affairs was an appalling state of squalor that, when combined with the proximity of the front line and the Gypsy’s well developed survival sense, led to the emergence of a tendency to escape at all costs from Transnistria by resorting to every available means to return to Romania. The Gypsies’ resourcefulness is well known and always at work, promptly using even the slightest opportunity, from spreading rumours concerning an impending evacuation by the Germans, to procuring legitimate transport permits. The eviction of cars, agricultural equipment, cereals, cattle and so forth from Transnistria to Romania by individual freight cars or trainsets, sometimes due to lack of supervision or the dishonesty of the train controllers, was an opportunity of which they took abundant advantage. [...]¹¹⁶

The escaped deportees rapidly became a burden for the state administration due to the additional costs incurred by having to identify, arrest, process and re-deport them via train to Transnistria. One report written by a local police inspector from Vaslui in April 1943 requested instructions about how to handle escaped Roma deportees who “managed to return to Romania no matter how many times they were re-deported to Transnistria, a situation which places the local police in a permanent state of agitation and alert, disrupting its daily activity and, at the same time, wasting unnecessary amounts of money paying for their transport”¹¹⁷. In addition, the numerous petitions for repatriations submitted by Roma deportees claiming that they had no criminal record significantly increased the workload of the local police precincts. The General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie routinely received such petitions from the Governorate of Transnistria and redirected some of these petitions

¹¹³ Solonari, *Purificarea naţiunii*, 262-265.

¹¹⁴ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 474 (September 4 1943), 2: 306.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Doc. no 553 (1943 December 9), 2: 392.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 393.

¹¹⁷ USHMM, RG-25.050M ‘Selected Records from Various Archives of Romania Concerning Roma’, Reel no. 4, Folder no. 89/ 1943, File 941.

to the relevant local law enforcement agencies, instructing them to check their accuracy by comparing them to their criminal records¹¹⁸.

However, it was the growing number of escapes from Transnistria that alarmed local law enforcement agencies. According to official reports, most of the Roma clandestinely returned to Romania caused the rapid spread of 'disturbing rumours' about the hardships they suffered in Transnistria, as well as about dangerous contagious diseases, such as typhus¹¹⁹. This type of clandestine action reached such disturbing proportions that it could no longer be dismissed as a mere 'nuisance', but became associated in some official documents with a form of 'Gypsy resilience', vaguely situated somewhere between 'noncompliance' and 'defiance', that needed to be dealt with immediately¹²⁰. The alarming reports sent by the local police officers eventually made their way to the top of the hierarchical chain in Bucharest, and, in September 1942, General Vasiliu ordered the exemplary punishment of all 'bandits' and Roma who attempted to escape from Transnistria:

[...] Following the conference presided on by Marshal Antonescu on September 13 this year, it was decided that all the bandits, attempting to flee while under escort from labour or concentration camps, should be shot after legal warning shots had been fired, and those captured should be transported across the Bug river, in the Ukraine. The Gypsies attempting to flee from places where they have been settled will be captured and sent back to the same places. [...]¹²¹

The issue of the petitions submitted to the Governorate of Transnistria by Roma deportees was also brought to the attention of the Council of Ministers on September 29, 1942 by Governor Gheorghe Alexianu in person. The latter provide some details about the 'special situation' of Roma war invalids, war widows and wives whose husbands currently served in the army who had been included on deportation lists, but was cut short by General Constantin Vasiliu' unfavourable comments, stressing the isolated nature of such cases and the high rate of delinquency' among the Roma deportees (all of them had criminal records, according to him). In the end, the Council decided that these petitions should be reviewed on a case by case basis and prohibited any further deportations of Roma soldiers and their families or sedentary Roma who have 'a well-established and useful trade'¹²².

The situation of the Roma deportees was discussed again in the Council of Ministers on October 10, 1942, when Vice Prime-Minister Mihai Antonescu¹²³ announced an official

¹¹⁸ Woodcock, "Romanian Romani Resistance": 37.

¹¹⁹ USHMM, RG-25.050 M 'Selected Records from Various Archives of Romania Concerning Roma', Reel no. 4, Folder no. 88/ 1943, File 877.

¹²⁰ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 569 (1943 December 26), 2: 415.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, Doc. no. 142 (1942 September 21), 1: 223.

¹²² Ciucă and Ignat, ed., *Stenogramele ședințelor Consiliului*, Doc. no. 6 (1942 September 29), 8: 228-229.

¹²³ Mihai Antonescu (1904-1946) was a practicing lawyer and professor of law at the Bucharest University who had close ties with General Antonescu. He was entrusted with key positions in the wartime Antonescu cabinets, coordinating simultaneously the Department of National Propaganda and Foreign Affairs (June 1941-August 1944), while presiding over, in Marshal Antonescu's absence, the cabinet meetings as deputy

termination of deportations to Transnistria. He did not care to explain in detail the underlying reasons behind this sudden change in state policies regarding the unilateral transfer of the Jewish and Roma population. Combining half-truths and a certain measure of hypocrisy, he made the following comments about the long list of abuses and acts of violence associated with the implementation of deportation orders, which were possibly brought to his attention by the equally long list of petitions submitted by Roma and Jewish deportees:

[...] I have issued an order last evening to stop, for the time being, any transport of Jews and Gypsies, in any case of Jews from Bucharest and the cities from the Old Kingdom due to the disorder and the acts of dishonesty and anarchy that had accompanied them and the measures taken so far, which only [had the opposite effect] by turning against us and rendering ridiculous and dishonest an operation that was supposed to be based on honesty and order!

On the other hand, a number of silly excesses were made that determined even the Germans to draw our attention to what was happening in this situation [...]¹²⁴

Following the decisions taken during these two cabinet meetings, General Vasiliu was ordered to adopt measures intended to deal with the protests, non-compliance and clandestine escapes of Roma deportees. At the risk of over-generalization, the measures that the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie adopted in order to stabilize the situation can be divided into two categories: 'corrective' and 'preventive'. The first category included the issuing of a new set of instructions ordering the establishment of commissions in Transnistria to examine on a case by case basis the numerous complaints lodged by the Roma deportees who claimed they had been abusively evicted to Transnistria in 1942. In addition, instructions were also issued to the local authorities in Transnistria to provide preferential treatment to those families of Roma soldiers who had been deported in 1942¹²⁵. Although he never assumed responsibility for the inconsistencies in the implementation of deportation measures in 1942, General Vasiliu reluctantly accepted that mistakes were made when his subordinates, in 'an excess of zeal', deported the families of many serving Roma soldiers and, pressed by the Council of Ministers and the Army General Staff, sent instructions that explicitly forbade further deportations of Roma families which fell into this category¹²⁶.

The second category of instructions he issued (labelled 'preventive' for lack of a better term) in early 1943 ordered local law enforcement agencies to perform a new country-wide census of the Roma population in order to identify and immediately apprehend escapees

prime-minister. The coup of August 23, 1944 led to his arrest and imprisonment in the Soviet Union, alongside Marshal Antonescu. He was also returned to Romania in April 1946 and was tried for 'contribution to the country's disasters and war crimes'. Found guilty, he was sentenced to death and was executed on June 1, 1946. For further details, see Neagoe, *Oameni politici români*, 27-29.

¹²⁴ Ciucă and Ignat, ed., *Stenogramele ședințelor Consiliului*, Doc. no. 9 (1942 octombrie 10), 8: 341.

¹²⁵ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 203 (1942 October 23), 1: 302-303.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 303.

from Transnistria¹²⁷. Still, several special provisions were included to exempt Roma men fit for military service and their wives and children, even if they were not legally married. One order issued by the Iași Regional Inspector of Police stated that local police agents needed to take into consideration the widespread 'Gypsy custom of not contracting a legal marriage' and act accordingly, meaning that 'those women who lived or continue to live together with conscripted Roma men or those fit for military duty without being legally married, and the children resulting from these illegitimate unions will benefit from the provisions included in the laws, namely they will be exempt from evictions.'¹²⁸

The increase in the number of escapes from Transnistria also had a noticeable impact upon the Roma population exempted from deportation orders. Even though they were not evicted, and their properties were not confiscated by Romanian authorities, many of the local Roma were alarmed by the new census carried out by local law enforcement agencies in 1943, and lived in fear that they would be included on new deportation lists. Their state of anxiety was heightened by the clandestine return of some of their relatives, friends or acquaintances who had been deported to Transnistria in 1942 and who barely made it back to their home towns or villages. Their weak physical state and the stories they had to tell about the horrors endured in the work camps dispelled any lingering vestiges of official state propaganda that depicted Transnistria as 'a model colony'.

These stories spread fast among the Roma communities and eventually caught the attention of the local police agents, who discounted them at first as 'rumours' spread to undermine morale, but were not easily able to ignore their detrimental effects on the morale of the population. A report sent by the Argeș Gendarmerie Legion goes as far as to label the stories spread by the Roma escapees from Transnistria as "hostile propaganda against the measures adopted by the Government"¹²⁹. Some Roma started to sell their properties in anticipation of a new deportation order, whereas others abandoned any attempt to make provisions for the coming winter because they were making desperate plans to flee to Hungary, as far as possible from Romania's Eastern border and the dreaded protectorate of Transnistria. A police officer from Galați wrote the following in his report about the morale of the local population:

[...] the Gypsies who escaped from Transnistria and made it all the way to Galați informed the locals of the great squalor and misery in the Bug region and that people are dying of hunger and diseases there. Due to these rumours, the local Gypsies are very discontent, claiming that they would rather get shot than be evicted [there].¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Ibid., Doc. no. 272 (1942 December 22), 2: 66-67.

¹²⁸ DJAN Iași, Fond. no. 349 'Circa a V-a Poliție Iași, ani 1935-1949', Folder no. 5 'Dosar relativ la țiganii nomazi/ 1942', File 55.

¹²⁹ Achim, ed., *Documente privind deportarea*, Doc. no. 181 (1942 October 10), 1: 272.

¹³⁰ USHMM, RG-25.050 M 'Selected Records from Various Archives of Romania Concerning Roma', Reel no. 4, Folder no. 196/ 1942, File 9.

As the tragic case of Rozalia Dondoczi (the Roma deportee who escaped from Transnistria and chose to take her own life rather than return to the camps in Transnistria) shows, such desperate words were not completely empty.

8. Conclusions

This study aimed to provide an analysis, by no means complete or without limitations, of the main patterns of 'non-compliant behaviour' adopted by the Roma deportees in Transnistria from the perspective of unarmed civilian resistance. The available primary sources, despite their scarcity and fragmentary nature, indicate that a significant number of Roma deportees engaged in various actions of protest and disobedience between 1942 and 1944 not only to ensure their own and their families' survival, but also to express their growing resentment and open opposition to the anti-Roma measures adopted by the Antonescu regime. With few exceptions, these actions were routinely carried out by individual or small groups of civilians in a clandestine, but not necessarily spontaneous, manner, and assumed a variety of non-violent forms, ranging from writing letters of protest to the Romanian administration to attempting to escape from the work camps in Transnistria.

The fact that many of these 'acts of resistance' assumed a non-violent and spontaneous form can be explained in relation to the structure of the Roma population and the wartime context in which they manifested themselves. As discussed in the section dealing with the historical background to the anti-Roma policies adopted by the Antonescu regime, the government decision to initiate the deportations in the summer of 1942 took many Roma by surprise. Lacking the protection afforded by the legal status of a recognized national minority, deprived of centralized political leadership, and with no direct access to military means to protect themselves, many of those Roma included on deportation lists had little choice but to comply with government orders. In addition, the political and social context in which the deportations took place severely limited the number of options available to those Roma. The significant resources mobilized by the state apparatus in order to ensure effective implementation of deportation policies, coupled with the effective use of propaganda and police repression, left little room for large-scale or armed opposition.

Despite the fact that they were in a situation of structural disadvantage, and were confronted with the daunting prospect of violent reprisals, some Roma deportees found the courage to petition state institutions for exemption from deportation or repatriation. The fact that they were writing letters of complaint to the very institutions that had been directly responsible for their forceful eviction to Transnistria and thus, risked further reprisals by exposing the abuses and corruption of local law enforcement agencies which implemented the deportation orders, did little to discourage them. Others summoned up the strength to openly disobey the occupation authorities in Transnistria by evading relentless efforts to police their movements and exploit them as unpaid and expendable labour. The escapes

from the work camps in Transnistria arguably represent the most daring instance of Roma clandestine activities. The intention to resist state oppression is probably best illustrated by the testimonies of those Roma escapees captured and interrogated by local police forces in Romania, who identified the injustice, brutality and deprivations experienced in the work camps in Transnistria as the main reasons behind their decision to flee.

The testimonies of those Roma who survived the horrors of the deportations offer a valuable insight into the main factors that prompted them to engage in such perilous clandestine activities. The oral interviews consulted in this study routinely bring into focus the deportees' daily struggle to keep their families alive and safe in Transnistria, as well as their refusal to succumb to the will of the Romanian authorities. In a sense, the Roma deportees' determination to ensure their survival, despite all odds, and their will to resist oppression often overlapped, but should not be seen as mutually exclusive because both were essentially directed towards the same ultimate goal: making it through the worst of the deprivations and oppression and return to a state of normalcy after the war. Without sounding too apologetic, the fact that almost half of the Roma deportees managed to survive in Transnistria and eventually returned to their homes in Romania represents in itself an act of defiance against Marshal Antonescu's plans of 'ethnically homogenizing' the country.

In the end, the Roma deportees' acts of resistance remained neither unnoticed, nor unpunished by the Romanian authorities. The deportees who managed to return clandestinely to Romania brought with them tragic stories about the many deprivations and losses they endured in Transnistria. These stories, dismissed as 'hostile propaganda' by local law enforcement agencies, increased the resolve of those Roma who remained in the country to resist deportation by all possible means. Alarmed by police reports that signalled the increasing state of discontent among the local Roma population, the Romanian gendarmerie and police adopted a number of repressive measures in order to curb what was perceived as a growing form of 'Gypsy resilience' to deportation policies.

Assessing the long-term impact of Roma acts of resistance remains a difficult task due to the many lacunae in the primary sources. Further research into this topic could bring to light new evidence that would allow the expansion of our current understanding of the impact of these *sui-generis* forms of civilian resistance by situating them in the context of the massive population displacements caused by the policy of ethnic homogenization implemented by the Antonescu regime and the large-scale destruction provoked by the war in the entire region.