

SOVIET REFUGEES IN ROMANIA IN 1930

Refugiați sovietici în România în 1930

Abstract: *From the onset of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in the Russian Empire and the beginning of the Russian Civil War (1917-1922) between the Reds and the Whites, massive numbers of people left Russia and moved to other countries seeking to begin new lives. The Bolsheviks not only came to power through the use of force, but later implemented a regime of terror that led to the direct and indirect killing of many millions of people. Over the coming decades, all throughout the Interwar Period, either for political, economic or social reasons, many Soviet citizens did their best to escape the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and obtain refugee status in other states. Being a direct neighbour of the Soviet Union and having a rather lengthy border with it, Romania was one of the primary destinations for Soviet refugees. This article focuses on the experiences, trials and tribulations of a particular group of Soviet refugees that escaped to Romania by taking the ship “Osiris”, the property of one of them, to Sulina, a port on the Romanian coast. Given the intensity of Soviet espionage and sabotage activities throughout Romanian territory, but particularly in Bessarabia, the Romanian Government offered these refugees political asylum, but considerably restricted their movements and their economic activities within Romania, suspecting they could be Soviet agents in disguise.*

Keywords: *Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Romania, refugee, Black Sea, naval history*

* * *

At the time that this article refers to, the history of refugees coming in from Russia into Romania went back for many decades. As early as 1881, different sectors of Russian society were the target of discrimination or even direct attacks. Jews were the first group to be targeted, have their properties destroyed and their lives put in danger. The phenomenon came to be known as “pogroms”. As a result, Jewish refugees started leaving the Russian Empire and settling in other countries, Romania being one of

*PhD Candidate, “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galati, Romania; e-mail: stoica_cristinel_popa@post.harvard.edu

Date submitted: Spetember 9th 2018

Revised version submitted: October 4th 2018

Accepted: October 5th 2018

them¹. Many times, Russian Jews took exceptional measures to escape the Russian Empire and enter Romania, including by pretending to be Romanian Jews, though they did not speak Romanian, or by falsifying documents². The flow of Jewish refugees coming into Romania from the Russian Empire continued for decades, as the phenomenon of pogroms expanded and affected even Russian-controlled Bessarabia in the beginning of the 20th century. The most important pogrom from Bessarabia took place in 1903 in Kishinev (Chişinău). We should mention that these attacks against Jews were a direct consequence of the national laws implemented in the Russian Empire, which expressly discriminated against the Jewish minority by not giving them the same protection as other Russian citizens received³.

The turbulent events that took place in the Russian Empire starting in 1917 significantly increased the number of refugees coming from Russia into Romania. As a result of the Bolshevik Revolution and of the Russian Civil War, the quantity of Russian refugees in Romania, regardless of their ethnicity, increased exponentially. In 1919, an American source estimated the number of refugees from the Russian Empire in Romania to be in the tens of thousands. In Bessarabia alone, a region which had unified with Romania in 1918 when the Russian Empire disintegrated, there were 45.000 refugees. Unlike the previous refugees who were almost exclusively Jewish, these refugees were much more diverse. They came from various backgrounds, having left different regions of the former Russian Empire for political or religious reasons. They included ex-government officials, army officers from the former Russian imperial army, and many other categories⁴. Until 1934, the Romanian Government did not recognize the Soviet Government and Romania did not have official diplomatic relations with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. However, a mixed Romanian-Soviet commission functioned, which had the purpose of dealing with border issues and other issues of mutual interest. The commission was mostly focused on Bessarabia, but dealt with issues that affected Romania more generally as well, including the situation of the refugees⁵. Once the Bolsheviks expanded their collectivization policy and their repression against everyone who opposed them, more refugees started pouring into Romania from the East. Since the Soviet Union also intensified its espionage and sabotage activities in Romania, in May 1924 the Romanian Government decided to ban all incoming and outgoing travel on the

¹ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, Fund Russia 1879-1894: Correspondence with the General Consulate from Odessa, Vol. 271, 55-56.

² *Ibidem*, 167-168.

³ Weinberg 2010: 193.

⁴ Kaba 1919: 27.

⁵ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, Fund USSR 1920-1944: Relations with Romania 1925-1927, Vol. 78, 158.

Romanian-Soviet border⁶. Even so, many Soviet refugees still found their way into Romania, particularly in Bessarabia. By 1928, Russians and Armenians were the largest categories of refugees in Romania⁷.

Based on archives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, this article tells the story of a particular group of Soviet refugees to Romania. Their experience in Romania and the way the Romanian Government treated them shows on one hand that the trials and tribulations of the Soviet refugees did not end once they escaped the Soviet Union and on the other that the Romanian Government showed suspicion towards the unexpected guests. At the same time, the Romanian Government was cautious with regards to granting them political asylum since whatever actions were taken were expected to trigger a reaction from the USSR.

On the 21st of January 1930, a Soviet ship docked in Sulina port on the Romanian coastline. The owner of the ship and the crew declared themselves to be refugees and asked to exercise their international right to political asylum. The Department of State Security, the Romanian Border Guard, the Ministry of Communication, and the General Inspectorate of the Romanian Navy were to jointly decide how to best deal with the matter. On the one hand, the Romanian Government hoped not to antagonize the Soviet Government by offering the Soviet refugees the right to stay in Romania. On the other hand, the Romanian Government feared that these unexpected guests were Soviet agents in disguise⁸. On the 27th of January, the Inspector General of the Romanian Navy, Vice-Admiral Scodrea presented his own investigation with regards to the Soviet ship and its crew. He was able to establish that the owner of the ship which had come from the Soviet Union had been sentenced by the Soviet authorities to 3 years in exile back in 1926. Not long before he came to Romania in 1930, he was again persecuted by the Soviet authorities. The man was from Kertgi, from where he ran to the Caucasian Mountains and then sought refuge in Romania. He expressed a desire to remain on Romanian territory. The decision of whether he should be granted the right of stay in Romania had to be taken by various Romanian institutions. The General Inspectorate of the Romanian Navy advised for the entire crew to be disembarked from the ship that they had come with and held under surveillance. The ship was to be guarded by a permanent Romanian sentinel and placed under strict control⁹.

⁶ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, Fund USSR 1920-1944: Relations with Romania 1928-1929, Vol. 79, 247.

⁷ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, Fund Geneva 1928: League of Nations - Correspondence of the Romanian Delegation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, Vol. 8, 195.

⁸ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, Fund USSR 1920-1944: Relations with Romania 1930, Vol. 80, 2.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 13.

On the 7th of February, the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a memorandum to the Romanian Minister of War noting that it could not issue a ruling on whether the captain and the crew of the Soviet ship that docked in Sulina port should be allowed on Romanian territory. Nevertheless, the memo mentioned that the Soviet refugees could be allowed to stay in Romania based on their right to political asylum. Before suggesting that the decision of whether to grant political asylum should be taken jointly by multiple Romanian institutions, the memo emphasized that “all cautionary measures should be taken for the case in which these refugees are emissaries in disguise sent by the Soviet Government”¹⁰. Thus, we can see that more than one Romanian institution warned with regards to the possibility of Romania being a victim of a Soviet plot. Moreover, no Romanian institution wanted to take a decision on its own with regards to the fate of the refugees.

Three days after the memo sent by the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Romanian Minister of War, on February 10th, the Department of Police and General Safety issued a report of its own with regards to the situation of the Soviet refugees. The report was addressed to the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We will reproduce it here in its entirety:

“On the day of January 21st of this year the ship Osiris, navigating under the Soviet flag, docked in the port of Sulina. On board was the captain and owner of the ship, Dimitrie Nicolaevisi Burnus with his wife, a brother and four sailors, all of whom declared that they wanted to stay in our country because the Soviet authorities had confiscated their houses, their land and other ships that they had owned.

Of these, Andrei Vasilievici Cobilanschi, a turner and motorist of the ship, wants to return to Russia.

This Department has taken measures to establish the forced residence of the owner of the ship and of the crew inside the country.

It has given orders to the Regional Police Inspectorate from Kishinev with regards to the repatriation through the Mixed Commission of Andrei Vasilievici Cobilanschi.

Since the Soviet State could claim the ship, we ask you to give your orders with regards to the measures that are to be taken against the ship. Until your answer arrives, I have given the order for the ship to be held in custody by the competent authorities in Sulina.”¹¹

On the 18th of February, a Legal Council (of four individuals only mentioned as Rosental, Ottulescu, Juvara, and Raicoviceanu) issued a formal opinion for the Romanian Government. The formal opinion stated that, since the captain of the ship was also its owner, the Romanian Government should not worry with regards to possible claims over the ship to be issued by the Soviet Government. The Romanian maritime authorities

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 16. The original in Romanian, our translation.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 18.

from Sulina were instructed to examine the ship's documents and decide under what conditions could the ship be allowed to navigate in Romanian territorial waters. The formal advice, however, included the following paragraph:

*"The issue that the Council considers should be of more interest to the Romanian Government than the possible Soviet claims over the ship, is the taking of effective measures that would prevent these unwelcomed guests from making dangerous machinations and so, it should be seen whether it would be appropriate and possible to expel them from Romanian territory. If not, effective security and surveillance measures should be implemented in order to prevent them from leaving their forced residence and engaging in activities harmful to our country. A place where surveillance would be easier should be chosen as their forced residence."*¹²

The Department of Police and General Safety heeded the formal opinion given by the Legal Council. On the 26th of April 1930 they informed the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the forced residence of Dimitrie Nicolaevici Burnus and of the rest of the crew had been changed. In line with an official decision taken by the Council of Ministers, the Soviet refugees had been moved from Sulina to Râmnicu Sărat on the 4th of March of that year. The fate of the ship "Osiris", however, was yet to be decided¹³. It should be noted that Râmnicu Sărat was a medium-sized town well within Romanian territory, away from the Romanian-Soviet border and from the Romanian coast, and also outside of Bessarabia, the region where Soviet espionage was most intense. In the same document sent to the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the 26th of April, the Department of Police and General Safety informed that the Soviet refugees were unhappy in Romania and wanted to leave. Barely two weeks after their forced residence had been moved to Râmnicu Sărat, the refugees wrote a petition to the Romanian authorities describing their situation and asking to be allowed to leave for other countries. For the first time, we find out the names of all the refugees. Besides Dimitrie Nicolaevici Burnus, the captain and owner of the ship, there were Anastasia Hristoforovna Burnus, the captain's wife, Dionisie Nicolaevici Burnus, the captain's brother, who also held a captain's diploma, Timofei Danilovici Suliga, a sailor, Filip Andreevici Vecinai, a sailor, and Gavril Paolovici Ostapenco, a mechanic¹⁴.

Interestingly, the name of the turner and motorist of the ship, Andrei Vasilievici Cobilanschi, does not appear in the list. This probably means that he was either on the way back to the Soviet Union as he desired or in the process of doing so through the mixed Romanian-Soviet commission from Kishinev, Bessarabia. Presumably, he did not have a say when the decision to bring the ship to Romania was taken and thus he had

¹² *Ibidem*, 33-34.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 200.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 201.

been brought to Sulina against his will. At the same time, had the Soviet refugees been in fact Soviet agents, asking for one of them to be allowed to return home could have been a maneuver through which the Soviet Government could be informed with regards to the degree of success of the whole operation. The list of refugees mentioned here leads to the conclusion that there had been initially 7 Soviet refugees in all if we count the motorist as well. The petition written by the ship's captain for the Romanian authorities on the 19th of March is very important because, assuming it was honest, it allows us to understand how the Soviet refugees saw the situation from their own perspective:

“As known by you from the Department of General Safety, on the 21st of January 1930 all of the above mentioned we came from Russia from the port of Gagri in the Caucasus [probably today's Gagra from Abkhazia in Georgia], the undersigned Dimitrie Nicolaevici Burnus on my ship Osiris “/Parosneie motornac Sudna/” for which I have a property title issued by the Russian Soviet State with no. 33/1926. We left our country because of heavy reasons and because of the misfortunes which weigh heavily on us, even by risking our lives we willingly docked in the port of Sulina, asking the hospitality of the Romanian State.

In Sulina my ship was confiscated by the police and was given into custody to the 3rd Borderguard Platoon (from Sulina) by placing it under military escort. A record was written on the 28th of February 1930 with regards to the situation of the ship and its belongings. We were all given forced residence in Râmnicu Sărat before we would be issued documents that will allow us to live in the country.

With obedience and humility we bring to your attention, Mr. Minister, that the town Râmnicu Sărat where we were allowed to look for work has a total lack of factories and of any kind of industry or maritime connection where we could earn a living. Already from the 19th of March, we all spent our savings and today feed on bread, not having where to work.

In order to end our ordeal we ask for your help and your permission to change our forced residence from Râmnicu Sărat to Galați or Brăila, taking into consideration that there there are industrial and commercial centers where we can find work and have an easier life.

With regards to the way we act in society and the feelings that we have for the Romanian State, we can assure you that we came to Romania willingly, with an open heart, with what we could save, intending to find a quiet place to live and to escape the Bolshevik misery and misfortune.

We are Christians and we ask you in the name of Christianity to hear our prayer and deliver us from evil.

I have previously mentioned that the aforementioned ship of mine, for which I have a property title and which I have been sailing for the past 13 years, is under military escort in Sulina.

This fortune which has been evaluated at 1 million and a half is all the support that I have and, in order to have the means of existence by using my own fortune, I respectfully ask you to give the order for this ship to be used for work in Galați or Brăila either by the State or by a private person, under the leadership of a Romanian delegation of which my brother Dionisie Nicolaevici Burnus or the sailor Timofei Danilovici Suliga should be a part of.

It would be a shame for the only fortune which I managed to save from all that I had to rust and brake down, in other words not to produce anything, especially taking into account the fact that the Romanian State where we came with an open heart and willingly submitted, represented by you, understands the suffering which has befallen on the population of our brethren.

In the case in which, by the laws of the country, we cannot be offered the refuge and help that we asked for in order to live a quiet life, with obedience and humility we ask that you intervene and let us go somewhere else, such as Italy or France.”¹⁵

This petition is the last official document to be found in connection to this group of Soviet refugees in the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania. We do not know what happened to this group of Soviet refugees past this date, as the archival record goes silent. Their names may have been lost to history or archival documents from other institutions may clear the mystery later as other researchers will research the topic. However, some conclusions are in order with regards to the experience of this group of Soviet refugees in Romania during the period that is covered by the archival documents. First of all, although they escaped imminent danger by fleeing the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the refugees still had to deal with a significant number of inconveniences once they made it to Romania. The certainty of jail time and poverty on Soviet territory was replaced by a great number of uncertainties on Romanian territory. The expectations of Mr. Burnus that he would be able to lead a completely normal life, presumably the one he had had before the Bolsheviks took power in Russia, were not fulfilled once he arrived in Romania. Given that he was the owner of such a valuable ship, Mr. Burnus was an unsurprising target of Bolshevik persecution and oppression. Most rich and above average property owners suffered greatly during the collectivization period instituted in the Soviet Union. He had probably hoped that he would be able to fully restart his economic activities in Romania once he got there. However, that was not possible due to his legal status as a refugee, which gave him the right to stay on Romanian territory, but restricted many of his other rights compared to regular Romanian citizens. With regards to the actions taken by Romania, we must point out that the Romanian Government did indeed grant political asylum to the Soviet refugees. Thus, Romania respected and obeyed the international conventions that were in

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 201.

place at the time. The Romanian Government did not expel the Soviet refugees back to the Soviet Union, where severe punishment awaited them for the actions that they committed, most likely death in one form or another. However, at the same time, the Romanian Government was not extremely welcoming towards the refugees. Rather drastic measures were taken against them, as Romania had a real and well justified fear that they could be Soviet agents trying to infiltrate. The topic of Soviet espionage against Romania during the Interwar Period is rather well known and has been analyzed for quite some time by Romanian historiography. The Romanian Government received regular intelligence reports about Soviet plans to infiltrate and disrupt Romanian industry, stir the peasantry and trigger a communist revolution in Romania, all as a precursor of actual Soviet invasion and occupation¹⁶. Thus, by guaranteeing the Soviet refugees all the rights that human dignity implied, but restricting their movements and their economic activities, the Romanian Government was at least partly justified and tried to strike a delicate balance.

REFERENCES

- Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, Funds:
Geneva 1928: League of Nations - Correspondence of the Romanian Delegation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania
Russia 1879-1894: Correspondence with the General Consulate from Odessa
USSR 1920-1944: Relations with Romania 1925-1927
USSR 1920-1944: Relations with Romania 1928-1929
USSR 1920-1944: Relations with Romania 1928-1929
USSR 1920-1944: Relations with Romania 1930
Kaba, John (1919). *Politico-Economic Review of Bessarabia*. United States Army.
Weinberg, Sonja (2010). *Pogroms and Riots: German Press Responses to Anti-Jewish Violence in Germany and Russia (1881-1882)*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

¹⁶ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, Fund USSR 1920-1944: Relations with Romania 1928 - 1929, Vol. 79, 7-10.