

Irina Marin

# The Causes of Peasant Violence and Antisemitism

The Triple Frontier between Austria-Hungary, Tsarist Russia,  
and Romania (1880–1914)

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## Abstract

This paper explores the potential and actuality of social violence within the borderlands between Austria-Hungary, Romania and Tsarist Russia, namely the provinces of Transylvania and Bukovina for Austria-Hungary and Bessarabia for the Tsarist Empire, alongside Moldavia and Wallachia, the former Danubian Principalities, which merged to form the Romanian state in 1859. In so doing, it proposes a comparative, transnational examination of the ways in which the 'Jewish question' and the 'peasant question' were intertwined in this region and inquires into the causes that led to social unrest and antisemitic violence in some provinces but not in others. Given that these borderlands shared striking similarities in terms of patterns of land tenure (mainly dominated by latifundia), ethnic composition, considerable numbers of Jewish population, low levels of development (literacy rates, taxation, investments), the main thrust of the paper is to account for the dissimilarities in social combustibility which affected how the Jewish population fared on the three sides of the border and how rebellious the peasantry was in this region. The paper looks comparatively at the legislative framework of the polities around the triple frontier and the place occupied by the Jewish population in the process of economic modernisation and in relation to nation-building.

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## Introduction

For centuries, the triple frontier between Austria-Hungary, Tsarist Russia, and Romania had represented a fault line between three empires struggling for hegemony in the region (Romania only acquired independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878). The frontier divided very different polities but also demarcated borderlands that shared commonalities in demographics and land tenure as well as a sizeable Jewish population. Thus there were peasants and Jews all around the triple frontier. The area was also characterised by land scarcity, great estates, and a medley of ethnic groups (Germans, Romanians, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Russians, Roma, and Jews) that were to be found on all sides of the border in variable proportions. The three sides of the border saw episodes of social unrest at various points in time, but they were not equally prone to social violence, despite their similarities. Of the three sides of the frontier, by far the most prone to social violence was the Romanian side. It was here that in 1907 one of the last great peasant uprisings in Europe broke out, which devastated the countryside and neighbouring market towns. What rendered this borderland particularly explosive, by contrast to the similar regions across the border, is what this article sets out to explore.

This article is part of a broader project looking at the reverberations of the Romanian peasant uprising across the triple frontier into the imperial borderlands, which

will be published at the end of 2018.<sup>1</sup> This study uses a combination of theoretical tools derived from communication studies (rumour theory),<sup>2</sup> sociology (causes of rural violence),<sup>3</sup> and traditional historical analysis. In its borderland perspective, the study is drawing on previous cross-border analyses, some looking specifically at a particular borderland and its dynamics,<sup>4</sup> others taking a broad birds'-eye view of complex frontier systems.<sup>5</sup> What the present article and the above-mentioned study contribute to this literature on borderlands is the cross-border analysis of a frontier which has not been looked at before as well as an analysis of the ways in which the 'Jewish question' and the 'peasant question' were interconnected in this region. From the point of view of the historiography on the Romanian peasant uprising, this contribution represents an exploration of a historical episode that was later hijacked by Communist historiography for ideological purposes and that has been in need of revisitation and integration in mainstream English-language historiography. The last major studies of the uprising in English and German respectively date back to the 1970s.<sup>6</sup>

### Antisemitism and the 1907 Romanian Peasant Uprising

In the spring of 1907, a great peasant uprising engulfed the young Romanian kingdom. Heavy artillery was used against the rebels and an estimated but never confirmed 11,000 dead resulted as a consequence of ruthless army repression. Contemporaries and some later historiography cast Jewish leaseholders in Romania as the main culprits for the conditions of the peasantry that led to this major peasant uprising.<sup>7</sup> Evidence thereof was not lacking. The upper part of Moldavia was known as *Fischerland* given that the arable land in those counties was to a great degree rented out to members of the Jewish Fischer family.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, antisemitic discourse at the time portrayed Jews as exploiters, meaning that the prominent presence of Jews within the exploitative land leasehold system made for an easy conflation of Jews and exploiters. However, there were Jews and land-hungry peasants all around the triple frontier, which begs the question why the combination became particularly explosive only in Romania and not so much in the neighbouring borderlands.

1 Irina Marin, *Peasant Violence and Antisemitism in Early Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*, London 2018 (forthcoming).

2 Gordon Allport/Leo Postman, *The Psychology of Rumour*, New York 1947; Cass Sunstein, *On Rumors. How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, What Can Be Done*, Farrar 2009; Nicholas DiFonzo/Prashant Bordia, *Rumor, Gossip and Urban Legends*, in: *Diogenes* 54 (February 2007) 1, 19-35.

3 Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Boston 1966; Henry A. Landsberger, *Rural Protest. Peasant Movement and Social Change*, London 1973.

4 Paulus Adelsgruber/Laurie Cohen/Börries Kuzmany, *Getrennt und doch verbunden. Grenzstädte zwischen Österreich und Russland 1772–1918*, Vienna/Cologne/Weimar 2011.

5 Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz (ed.), *Shatterzone of Empires. Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands*, Bloomington 2013; Alfred Rieber, *The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands. From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War*, Cambridge/New York 2014; DiFonzo/Bordia, *Rumor, Gossip and Urban Legends*.

6 Karl Scheerer, *Die Rumänischen Bauernaufstände vom Frühjahr 1907*, Mainz 1971; P. G. Eidelberg, *The Great Rumanian Peasant Revolt of 1907. Origins of a Modern Jacquerie*, Leiden 1974.

7 Marea răscoală a țăranilor din 1907 [The Great Peasant Uprising of 1907], Bucharest 1967, 68-69; George D. Creangă, *Grundbesitzverteilung und Bauernfrage in Rumänien. Erster Teil*, Leipzig 1907, 150-155; Scheerer, *Die Rumänischen Bauernaufstände vom Frühjahr 1907*, 32, 33, 43; Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, Bloomington 1983, 175.

8 Joseph L. Love, *Resisting Liberalism*, in: Maria Eugenia Mata/Michalis Psalidopoulos (ed.), *Economic Thought and Policy in Less Developed Europe. The Nineteenth Century*, London/New York 2001, 112.

## The 'Jewish Question' around the Triple Frontier

The three states around the triple frontier covered the whole spectrum of Jewish/non-Jewish cohabitation in Eastern Europe, from the most favourable situation of the Jews in Austria-Hungary, where full emancipation of the Jewish community, based on a coincidence of interests, was granted in the wake of the major reorganisation of the empire in 1867, to deferred emancipation in Romania, and ending with the Tsarist Empire, which was characterised by full-blown segregation without even the prospect of emancipation.

In Tsarist Bessarabia, part of the Pale of Settlement – the western region of Imperial Russia, in which permanent residency by Jews was allowed and beyond which Jewish permanent or temporary residency was mostly forbidden – and the least propitious of the borderland provinces, the Jewish population rose vertiginously throughout the nineteenth century, from 20,000 in 1812 to 228,620 by 1897, when they formed 11.8 per cent of the total population.<sup>9</sup> Segregation in the Pale was not entirely watertight, with Jewish agricultural colonies established in northern Bessarabia and Jews also residing in villages on informal arrangements. The province became infamous for the Kishinev pogroms in the early twentieth century, which were a mixture of state-condoned violence, incitement through the press, and administrative *Schlamperei*. These pogroms were, however, primarily an urban occurrence and did not affect the agricultural colonies in the north or other Jews residing and plying their trade in the countryside.

The fate of the Jewish community in Romania was shaped by state-building legislation such as the Organic Statutes of the 1830s and Article 7 of the 1866 constitution, which stigmatised Jews as deleterious foreigners. In Romania, the emancipation of the Jews was not an internal matter of debate born of domestic necessity, but rather an external imposition: The Congress of Berlin 1878 stipulated the obligation of the newly independent states to treat all their subjects as equal before the law, with equal civic and political rights. Subsequent legislation such as an 1881 law on 'foreigners' facilitated the expulsion of any inhabitants who were deemed "dangerous to state security". An 1884 law against peddling and an 1887 law of rural communes, which prevented 'foreigners' from settling in the countryside and also led to expulsions, similarly facilitated abuse at the hands of local authorities and potentates. In Romania, Jews had citizen duties (for instance being liable for military service) but enjoyed no citizenship rights. The compromise reached by the Romanian government was a studied avoidance of full emancipation, which was replaced by a rarely effective case-by-case 'naturalisation'.<sup>10</sup> Similar avoidance strategies were practised in the wake of the First World War by imperial successor states such as Yugoslavia in relation to their minorities and in reaction to the minority protection clauses contained in the peace treaties.<sup>11</sup>

Austria-Hungary offered the best possibilities of Jewish/non-Jewish cohabitation in Eastern and Central Europe. The 1867 constitutional overhaul also introduced the full emancipation of the Jews. The Jews of the Austrian half of the monarchy were

9 Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia and the Russians*, London 2002, 258-259; <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bessarabia> (19 April 2018); Charles King, *The Moldovans. Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture*, Stanford 2000, 23; John W. Slocum, *Who, and When, Were the Inorodtsy? The Evolution of the Category of 'Aliens' in Imperial Russia*, in: *Russian Review* 57 (April 1998) 2, 173-190, 174.

10 Carol Iancu, *Evreii din România (1866–1919). De la Excludere la Emancipare [The Jews of Romania (1866–1919). From Exclusion to Emancipation]*, translated by C. Litman, Bucharest 1996, 218-233.

11 Dietmar Müller, *Staatsbürger auf Widerruf. Juden und Muslime als Alteritätspartner im rumänischen und serbischen Nationscode*, Wiesbaden 2005, 413.

among the most loyal Habsburg subjects and in their a-national outlook they best embodied the *kaisertreu* imperial subjects.<sup>12</sup> In the Hungarian half of the monarchy, Jewish emancipation dovetailed neatly with the Magyarisation project of the Hungarian gentry: Hungarian Jews assimilated to the Magyar nation and became 'Magyars of the Mosaic faith'. This process of emancipation was, however, asymptotic to full integration in the sense that Hungary was by no means a Jewish utopia: Anti-semitism simmered beneath the surface, but was kept in check by the state apparatus and by legislation.<sup>13</sup>

There were interesting similarities between the Hungarian half of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and Romania, although the outcome of Jewish emancipation was completely different in the two states. The process of modern state-building began at about the same time in both states, from the 1860s onwards, and was accompanied by virulent national projects, resulting in aggressive Magyarisation policies in Hungary and rampant xenophobia in Romania. In both cases, the nation was presented as under siege: Linguistically, the same metaphor of an island in a sea of Slavs was applied to both language groups, Hungarians and Romanians, the former speaking a Finno-Ugric language and the latter a Romance language. The two states, however, reached completely different conclusions as to the best way to relate to their Jewish population. Two polar opposite processes thus came into being: While Hungarian statesmen actively embraced Jews in their Magyarisation policies, across the border in Romania, the statesmen sought to exclude them by every possible means. On the Romanian side of the border, Jews were deemed an economic bane and a threat to the nation, while on the Hungarian side they were viewed as great boosters to economic modernisation and as staunch allies of the Hungarian nation. This great disparity can be explained by looking at where the Jews featured within the two nation-building projects and how they fitted in, or not, within these two societies. Animosity to or alternatively acceptance of Jews was also a function of the economic configuration and the extent to which the dominant nation in the respective state felt threatened or displaced by Jewish economic activities.

In Hungary, ethnic Hungarians made up less than half of the population, the rest being a combination of Romanians, Serbs, Croats, Germans and Slovaks. By contrast, Romania was ethnically largely homogenous, the only considerable 'non-Romanian' group that the ethnic Romanians having had to come to terms with being the Jews. Hungarians represented the dominant nation in their state and therefore suffered from a legal and economic superiority complex. Romanians achieved state independence in 1878 and were masters of their own country but, if anything, suffered from an inferiority complex, both in relation to the Western world and in relation to their Jewish population. The tendency in Hungary was to assimilate all nationalities and religions into one single political and, eventually, ethnic Hungarian nation. The Romanians felt no need to create Romanians out of other ethnic or religious groups since Romanians formed the majority of the population. In other words, the Hungarians had political and economic power, but were a numeric minority in their state; the Romanians had the demographic numbers and had just acquired political power, but economically they felt dependent on 'foreigners' such as Jews or Greeks/Armenians, who traditionally dominated trade and incipient capitalist institutions such as the banking system. This is how it came about that

12 Martin Broszat, Von der Kulturnation zur Volksgruppe. Die nationale Stellung der Juden in der Bukowina im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert, in: Historische Zeitschrift 200 (1965) 3, 562-605, 580.

13 William O. McCagg, A History of Habsburg Jews, Bloomington 1988, 133; Raphael Patai, The Jews of Hungary. History, Culture, Psychology, Detroit 1996, 360.

Hungarian endeavours were targeted at making up the numbers, while Romanian policies aimed at nationalising the economy and creating an ethnically Romanian middle class. The two states thus practised two different types of aggression – an exclusionary and an inclusionary one respectively. It so happened that in Hungary Jews fitted the magyarising national project of the Hungarian elites like a glove and did not pose a threat to their economic power. Once emancipated, the Jews of Hungary enthusiastically assimilated and came to view themselves as ‘Hungarians of the Mosaic faith’. Indeed, assimilation offered itself as the best solution for the progressive faction of Hungarian Jewry in their struggle for community modernisation against the Orthodox Jews.<sup>14</sup> The inclusionary effect of Hungarian nation-building was a blessing for the Jewish community but was seen as an act of aggression against the national aspirations and sensibilities of the non-Hungarian nationalities. Hungary gave its Jews what Romania and Russia would never have dreamed of giving theirs. Since the *Ausgleich*, the political reorganisation of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1867, Hungarian Jews enjoyed full emancipation and their religion was accepted among the other state religions and supported by means of state funding. The Hungarian state treated the Jews as full Hungarian citizens, greatly prized their contribution to the economy, and promoted a “sympathetic image of the hard-working, resourceful, useful, Magyarizing Jew”.<sup>15</sup>

### Situation of the Peasantry in the Borderlands

The economic status of the peasant population differed around the frontier depending on the initial terms of peasant emancipation, land tenure patterns, and literacy rates. Peasant emancipation and land reforms occurred at roughly the same time around the border: in 1848 in the Habsburg Empire, 1861 in Tsarist Russia, and 1868 in Romania. Literacy rates were higher in the Hungarian borderlands of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy: 20 to 74 per cent in Transylvania and the Banat (20 to 46 per cent in the Romanian-inhabited counties), and quite low in Romania (22 per cent) and Tsarist Bessarabia (less than 16 per cent). Land tenure was polarised all around the frontier between the great properties and dwarf holdings.

In Hungary, land distribution was thus as follows (in percentage of the total land – one *hold*, a unit of area used in Hungary, having its roots in the Roman *jugerum* – equals approximately 0.5 hectare or 4,316 square meters):<sup>16</sup>

dwarf (0-5 <i>hold</i> ).....	6 per cent
small (5-100 <i>hold</i> ) .....	49 per cent
intermediate (100-1,000 <i>hold</i> ) .....	4 per cent
large (over 1,000 <i>hold</i> ).....	31 per cent

14 McCagg, *A History of Habsburg Jews*, 133.

15 Patai, *The Jews of Hungary*, 360.

16 R. Vargha, *Hungary*, Budapest 1906, cited in Doreen Warriner (ed.), *Contrasts in Emerging Societies. Readings in the Social and Economic History of South-Eastern Europe in the Nineteenth Century*, London 1965, 111; Katherine Verdery, *Transylvanian Villagers. Three Centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1983, 199.

In the Austrian half of the Monarchy (one are equals 100 square meters):<sup>17</sup>

0-50 ares .....	38.37 per cent
50 ares to one hectar .....	20.37 per cent
one to five hectar .....	31.29 per cent
over five hectar .....	8.69 per cent

## In Romania (of the total arable land):

up to ten hectares .....	9 per cent
50-100 hectares .....	2 per cent
100-500 hectares .....	10 per cent
great property (over 500 hectares) .....	39 per cent

In Tsarist Bessarabia:<sup>18</sup>

peasant tenure .....	48.6 per cent
great property .....	42.3 per cent
church and other institutional holdings .....	8.2 per cent

Despite these broad similarities, a major difference in the fate of the peasantry around the triple frontier was conditioned by the legal framework and the set of economic and social practices in which the relations of land tenure were embedded. Thus, in Hungary (the Transylvanian borderland), there was subsistence agriculture but with the possibility of wage labour; land could be sold and mortgaged and, vitally, the peasants had access to pastureland and forests. If conditions became unbearable, there was always the prospect of emigration, which occurred on a major scale in Hungary and became a great concern among officials. In Tsarist Bessarabia, land reform allowed for subsistence agriculture and ensured there was enough land allotted to peasants so that wage labour was rare and the great estate owners usually invested in machinery and brought in workers from abroad. The Russian land reform did not allow for selling or mortgaging land, but it was very specific about access to pastureland and forests, which was granted to the local peasants. Emigration was officially encouraged and did take place, thus defusing some of the potential for discontent in the province. In Romania, subsistence agriculture went hand in hand with wage labour for a pittance and, as was the case in Russia, the impossibility of selling or mortgaging one's bit of land. The two major differences in Romania were the minimal to no access to pastureland and forests, which meant the peasants did not possess the bare necessities to make ends meet, and the total lack of emigration, which was actively discouraged by the Romanian authorities.<sup>19</sup>

17 Michael Lytwynowytch, *Die bäuerlichen Besitz- und Schuldverhältnisse im Wiznitzer Gerichtsbezirke, Chernivtsi 1911*, 17.

18 Ion G. Pelivan, *The Economic State of Bessarabia*, Paris 1920, 7.

19 Parteniu Cosma, *Răscoala țărănească în România* [The Peasant Uprising in Romania], Sibiu 1907, 4-6, 19; Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, *Neoiobăgia. Studiu economico-sociologic al problemei noastre agrare* [Neoserfdom. An Economic and Sociological Study of our Agrarian Question], Bucharest 1910, 64; Zamfir C. Arbure, *Basarabia în secolul XIX* [Bessarabia in the Nineteenth Century], Bucharest 1898, 135; Negyed Rész, *A Magyar Korona Országainak Mezőgazdasági Statisztikája* [Agricultural Statistics of the Lands of the Hungarian Crown], Budapest 1900, 30-35; Constantin Stere, *Publicistică* [Journalism], Chișinău 2006, 149; Lytwynowytch, *Die bäuerlichen Besitz- und Schuldverhältnisse im Wiznitzer Gerichtsbezirke*, 18; Nagy Mariann, *A magyar mezőgazdaság regionális szerkezete a 20. század elején* [The Regional Structures of Hungarian Agriculture at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century], Budapest 2003, 262-270; Arhivele Naționale Centrale București [The Central Romanian National Archives, Bucharest], Arhiva CC al PCR [Archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Romania], Fond 59/6066.

### Intersections between the Jewish and Peasant 'Questions'

There were three different legal frameworks conditioning what the Jewish populations could and could not do around the triple frontier. There were also three different paths that were taken after peasant emancipation. In Romania, land lease holding was ruthlessly exploitative. For the most part, contracts were short-term, on average for a period of three to five years, which in itself was insufficient for investments to pay off. To make things worse, leasehold contracts actively discouraged such initiatives. Thus a typical rental contract in Tecuci County for one of the estates of D. A. Sturdza, the Liberal Prime Minister under whose government the 1907 uprising was suppressed, stipulated: "Any new improvement or building which the leaseholders make will remain after the expiry of the contract on the estate without any reimbursement from the landowner."<sup>20</sup> The result was a general tendency among leaseholders in both Moldavia and Wallachia to "not so much exploit land intensively as to exploit the peasant completely."<sup>21</sup>

Despite the emphasis on egregious Jewish leaseholder families in the public sphere, contemporary statistics of leaseholders according to nationality and religion paint a rather different picture, with Jewish leaseholders by no means forming the majority of the total leaseholders in Romania:

Provinces	Romanians	Foreigners	Jews	Total
Moldavia	556	106	440	1102
Wallachia	1304	249	25	1578
Oltenia	387	75	7	469
Dobruja	170	13	—	183

[Table showing the nationality and religion of leaseholders in Romania]<sup>22</sup>

What such statistics fail to reveal, however, is the extent of land rented by these groups of leaseholders.

Leaseholding was common in Hungary too, but there it occurred on a smaller scale and under different legal conditions. Thus there was a comparatively low percentage of pure leaseholds (as opposed to mixed leaseholds), the average being 25 per cent of the land in 1895. Wealthy Jewish businessmen rented 49.5 per cent of the estates over a hundred *hold* (fifty hectares) and 75 per cent of the estates over 1,000 *hold* (500 hectares). Leases were of long duration, in some cases generational, and modernisation of and investment into the rented estates were common practices.<sup>23</sup>

In the Tsarist province of Bessarabia, land lease holding was very similar in kind and practice to the Romanian version: exploitative and wasteful. Despite the legal restrictions on land ownership or leasing for Jewish subjects, Jewish leaseholders were favoured by the great landowners and an array of ploys and stratagems were

<sup>20</sup> Marea răscoală a țăranilor din 1907, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Radu Rosetti, *Pentru ce s-au răscolat țăranii* [Why the Peasants Rose Up], Bucharest 1907, 505, cited in: *Marea răscoală a țăranilor din 1907*, 68-69.

<sup>22</sup> Creangă, *Grundbesitzverteilung und Bauernfrage in Rumänien*, 145.

<sup>23</sup> Puskás Julianna, *Zsidó haszonbérlok a magyarországi mezőgazdaság fejlődésének folyamatában. Az 1850-es évektől 1935-ig* [Jewish Lessees and the Development of Hungarian Agriculture. From 1850 to 1935], in: *Századok* 126 (1992) 1, 39.

employed to circumvent the law. The major difference was that the negative effects of leaseholding on the peasantry were kept in check by the initial terms of land reform, which ensured that there was little need for the peasants to go out and work for leaseholders as they more often than not had enough land to make ends meet.<sup>24</sup> As a consequence, the great landowners had recourse to foreign workers and showed more interest in agricultural modernisation.<sup>25</sup>

There were Jewish lessees in Bessarabia just as there were all around the triple frontier. Here, because of the legal restrictions debarring Jews from land ownership and from leaseholds, only the richest of estate owners could afford to lease their land to Jewish lessees as this presupposed using proxies and breaking the law in order to achieve this. In addition to being regular and reliable payers, Jewish leaseholders also had the desirable quality of keeping a low profile and not antagonising their neighbours. As the Bessarabian governor Count Sergei Urussov pointed out:

“A Jewish tenant runs his farm business in such a way as to avoid any friction with neighbours, and affords no ground for litigation and disputes, endeavouring to settle every difficulty in a peaceful way without resort to the courts or the authorities. A Jew will not collect his debts by such methods as seizing the grain in the stacks, selling his neighbour’s property, and the like. He bides his time, jogs the debtor’s memory, chooses the right occasion, and gets his bill without the aid of the police or the sheriff. He does not mar the mutual relations of owner and neighbour, and creates no basis for disputes and hostility. On account of all this, I have for example never received or heard any complaints from the people of the province against Jewish tenants, while we had some litigation in connection with difficulties in which either landowners themselves, or especially non-Jewish tenants, were principals. I think it entirely correct to say that Jewish land lease in Bessarabia is an evil in so far as it is land lease and not because it is Jewish. At any rate, this conclusion will not be questioned either by the landowners or by the peasants of Bessarabia.”<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusions

What was the relationship between peasant unrest and antisemitism around the triple frontier? How did the ‘Jewish question’ relate to the ‘peasant question’? In the case of Austria-Hungary, there was no officially drawn connection between the Jewish presence and rural hardships and misfortune. Moreover, the legal framework of peasant emancipation ensured comparative rural prosperity and, where this was not the case, there were safety valves in place, such as emigration, which prevented discontent from assuming explosive proportions. In Romania, the intersection of the two ‘questions’ – Jewish and peasant – was predicated on the myth of Jewish exploitation of the peasantry. When exploitation did occur at the hands of Jewish leaseholders, it had nothing to do with their Jewishness and everything to do with the system of land tenure relations. Leaseholders – whether Jews or Christians – were equally ruthless in their dealings with the peasants because the system allowed them to be. The condition of the peasantry was less dependent on the number of oppor-

24 Arbure, *Basarabia in secolul al XIX-lea*, 419.

25 S. D. Urussov, *Memoirs of a Russian Governor*, translated by Herman Rosenthal, London/New York 1908, 71; Arbure, *Basarabia*, 422-423.

26 Urussov, *Memoirs of a Russian Governor*, 159.



tunistic exploiters who were willing to take advantage of the peasants' need for land and credit, and more on the peasants' degree of system-induced vulnerability. Antisemitism usually functioned as a red herring, the Jewish population being held out as a lightning rod for systemic failure by the local elites. Finally, the institutionalised antisemitism of Tsarist Bessarabia meant that the association between Jewish land lease holding and the hardships of the peasantry was commonly made but, despite this, the Pale of Settlement restrictions here led to guarded and cautious behaviour on behalf of Jewish lessees and less inclination to exploitation than among their non-Jewish peers. The amount of peasant unrest around the triple frontier had, therefore, nothing to do with the Jewish presence or absence in the area. It was determined, rather, by the system of laws and practices in place in each state that allowed or denied peasants the possibility of making ends meet or at least provided some safety valves to defuse conflicts when they arose.

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Quotation: Irina Marin, The Causes of Peasant Violence and Antisemitism. The Triple Frontier between Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Romania, 1880–1914, in: S.I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 5 (2018) 1, 125-134.

DOI: 10.23777/sn.0118/ess\_imar01  
<http://doi.org/cqqt>

Essay

Copy Editor: Tim Corbett

**S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON.**  
ISSN 2408-9192

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5 (2018) 1  
DOI: 10.23777/sn.0118  
<http://doi.org/csf6>

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S:I.M.O.N. is the semi-annual e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

The Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) is funded by:

 Federal Ministry  
Education, Science  
and Research



 Federal Chancellery

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