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Baptists in Rumania since World War I

IT would be erroneous to assume that religious groups have automatically fared worse under communist governments of eastern Europe than before the ascendancy of the post-World War II regimes there. Particularly in the case of the Baptists of Rumania such an assumption would have dubious validity. It may be argued that the unusual position of the Baptists in Rumania vis-à-vis the Rumanian Orthodox Church and the Rumanian state has contributed as much to their generally harsh persecution as the type of government. In other words, the plight of the Baptists did not automatically deteriorate with the accession of the communist government in Rumania. But rather, the Baptists have experienced both periods of relative tolerance and severe suppression under communist and non-communist governments, (between the World Wars).

Baptist beginnings in Rumania date back to the 1850's and 1860's, and are linked to the pioneering work of Johann Gerhard Oncken, the so-called "Father of Continental Baptists."¹ Growth in the Old Kingdom (i.e., the provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia) was barely noticeable prior to World War I.² However, in the Habsburg regions of Transylvania, Bukovina and the Banat, and in the Russian province of Bessarabia (which became part of Rumania after World War I), Baptist success was notable as membership approached 20,000 by the end of World War I.³ With the unification of Rumanian-populated provinces after World War I, Baptist growth increased at a faster pace. Although figures vary markedly from source to source, reasonable estimates show approximately 50,000 Rumanian Baptists in 1930, 70,000 in 1938 and perhaps as many as 200,000 in 1947.⁴

Ethnic make-up and regional distribution of the Baptists of Rumania help to account for their difficulties at the hands of Rumanian government authorities. Initially many Germans and Russians (i.e., Ukrainians) were included in their numbers. But by the 1930's, membership was overwhelmingly ethnic "Rumanian."⁵ Geographically, the peripheral areas of Bessarabia and Bukovina (until World War II), Crisana-Maramures, and the Banat as well as the Transylvania, continued to have most of the Baptist population.⁶

The Baptists, although today comparatively insignificant numerically (perhaps 75,000 out of a total population of 20,000,000), have presented a peculiar problem to Rumanian governments — communist and non-communist alike. Unlike the

Lutherans who are largely of German origin and the Calvinists, Roman Catholics and Unitarians who are predominantly Hungarian, the Baptists are the only non-Orthodox Christian group in Rumania that succeeded in winning over thousands of Rumanians.⁷ Consequently, the Baptists cannot be dismissed as ethnic aliens in Rumania. They have further complicated state efforts at suppression because of their relative self-sufficiency, or better, their lack of dependence on a foreign based central organization or headquarters.⁸ On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that the Rumanian state has attacked churches which relied on outside help, a category in which the Baptists might be included during their first few years in Rumania. Furthermore, Baptist traditions of democratic church organization, of local autonomy and participation, and virtual equity among "baptized believers," were alien to the authoritarian rule which prevailed in the 1930's (under King Carol) and early 1940's (under Ion Antonescu). Also, the missionary zeal of the Baptists — in contrast to the Lutherans, Catholics and Orthodox whose relatively stable memberships increased in relation to the numbers of Germans, Hungarians and Rumanians, respectively — was influential in proselytism among Rumanian Orthodox Church members.⁹ Finally, Baptist beliefs and principles have had a special appeal to many industrious, self-reliant Rumanians.¹⁰

Admittedly, it is difficult in some cases to evaluate such factors. But there is little doubt on the basis of the provisions of state regulations imposed on Baptists and various state reactions to their worship, that they were considered among the most dangerous religious groups in Rumania.¹¹ It seems apparent that because of their unique position among minority religious groups in Rumania (e.g., their membership largely of ethnic Rumanians), the Baptists have been considered especially dangerous to the quasi-official Rumanian Orthodox Church. This unique position, along with their missionary zeal and beliefs, helps account for the stiff opposition of Rumanian governments to the worship of the Baptists. Obviously, the general dictatorial policies of the 1930's and the communist religious policies of the 1950's accentuated the intolerant conditions.

In the decade following World War I, the Baptists were confronted with greater persecution under the united Rumanian state than previously under Habsburg and other foreign domination.¹² According to the American Committee on the Rights of Religious Minorities, Baptists in the mid-1920's (under Liberal Party leader Ion Bratianu) were "bitterly persecuted" for religious reasons.¹³ Although some post-World War I Rumanian governments granted limited freedom of worship to most

religious groups, the Baptists were usually excepted. Among other things, they were not allowed to sell Bibles, hold worship or burial services; and their property was often seized and ministers imprisoned and fined. Also, they were denied civil marriage in parts of Bukovina and representation in the Senate of Rumania (in which every Orthodox bishop sat).¹⁴

The plight of the Baptists eased in 1928 when the Rumanian Parliament granted them virtually complete freedom of worship.¹⁵ One element of the improved situation for the Baptists was the brief rise to power of the National Peasant party (under Iuliu Maniu), which favoured increased rights for Transylvania. During the late 1920's and the 1930's phenomenal growth of the Baptists enabled them to establish by 1936 their own "foreign" missionary society and to undertake home mission work among the gypsies of Rumania.¹⁶

From 1937 to the early 1940's the Baptists suffered through one of the periods of greatest suppression. In June 1938, all churches were required by King Carol's government to register with the new cult ministry. The Baptists particularly were subjected to stringent requirements.¹⁷ The condition which most adversely affected the Baptists was Article 4 of decision No. 26,208/1938 of the Rumanian Minister of Cults. Article 4 stated that "each local organisation which wishes to receive an authorization must present to the Minister of Cults a list of 100 heads of families."¹⁸ Since the Baptists of Rumania had small church groups, such a decision threatened to close the doors of most of their churches.¹⁹ Actually, all the Baptist churches were closed for four months beginning on December 15, 1938. In April 1939, the Baptists were granted some relief due in part to pressure from American Baptists and the Baptist World Alliance.²⁰ But until 1944, the position of the Baptists—complicated by war—remained desperate under the dictatorship of Ion Antonescu.

Between 1944 and 1948, the Baptists with an improved legal status, reached their apex in terms of numbers of adherents. By 1947 there were perhaps 200,000.²¹ It should be noted that post-war territorial losses to Russia contributed to subsequent drops in membership.

New laws passed by the Rumanian communist government attacked Protestant churches, and the Baptists were reorganised and federalised.²² The Rumanian communists assumed control of the churches in 1947 and 1948 by gaining authority over property, finances and church leadership; and by cutting bonds with church groups in foreign countries.²³ According to Raoul Bossy, the communist regime first began in earnest "religious persecution."²⁴ Perhaps Bossy's assessment was valid for the Orthodox Church, but hardly as regards the Baptists in view of

their sufferings in the 1920's, the late 1930's and early 1940's. Ecclesiastical laws in early 1949 ordered government control over church property.²⁵ The Baptists, classified as a sect, were placed under state administrative control without independence in spiritual matters. The Baptist publication, *Indrumatorul Crestin Baptist (The Christian Baptist Guide)*, was made subservient to the state.²⁶

The situation which worsened in 158, had improved by the mid-1960's. However, state persecution during the 1950's and early 1960's led to great decline in the membership of the Baptist churches.

The new religious tolerance by the Rumanian Socialist Republic is largely attributable to President Nicolae Ceausescu.²⁷ Gradually, since 1965, Ceausescu has directed a liberalization in government policy toward religion, to the extent that in 1970 "churches are numerous in Bucharest and they are being used."²⁸ The predominant Rumanian Orthodox Church has benefited most, although all church groups with the possible exception of the outlawed Uniate Church (Christians who followed the Orthodox rite but recognised the papacy), are somewhat better off. The Baptists have been allowed along with other Protestants in Rumanian theological seminaries, and the state-dominated publication, *Indrumatorul Crestin Baptist*.²⁹ Clergymen of every religious group are paid by the state. In turn, however, clergymen must profess obedience to the state authorities.³⁰

A slightly improved situation is overdue for the Baptists of Rumania, who from their nineteenth century beginnings have been among the most harshly persecuted of denominations. They have suffered greatly under the post-World War II communist governments, although they today have a greater opportunity for the free exercise of worship, if not for growth, than has been the case in two or three decades. Surely, the religious persecutions of the early and mid-1920's and from 1937 to 1944, were not much more palatable than those of the late 1940's and 1950's. And the current policy of the Ceausescu government offers the hope that there could be a return to the more tolerant decade following 1928. Finally, neither the Liberal leadership of Ion Bratianu from 1922 to 1927, nor the dictatorships of King Carol (1938-40) and Ion Antonescu (1940-44) provided much improvement over the religious policies of post-1948 communist governments.

[Dr. Ronald Gouling, Secretary of the European Baptist Federation states that in addition to the concessions noted above in the penultimate paragraph, Rumanian Baptists are being allowed to receive a certain number of Bibles, to open their churches for mid-week services, and to send leaders to international Bap-

tist gatherings. Officers of the Baptist World Alliance are allowed to visit Rumanian Baptist churches. Ed.]

NOTES

1. Benjamin P. Browne, *Tales of Baptist Daring* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1961), p.138; J. H. Rushbrooke, *The Baptist Movement In the Continent of Europe* (London: The Carey Press, 1923), p.157; Irwin Barnes, *Truth Is Immortal: The Story of Baptists In Europe* (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, Ltd.: 1955), p.68.
2. Vladimir Gsovski, ed., *Church and State Behind the Iron Curtain* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1955), p.289.
3. *Ibid.*; Rufus W. Weaver, *The Roumanian Crisis* (Washington: American Baptist Survey Commission, 1938), p.3.
4. Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1950), p.209. See also Gsovski, p.289; and Weaver, p.3.
5. *Roumania Ten Years After* (Boston: The Beacon Press, Inc., 1928), p.95; Gsovski, p.289.
6. Gsovski, p.260.
7. Robert Lee Wolff, *The Balkans In Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1967), p.561.
8. Barnes, p.69.
9. *Roumania Ten Years After*, p.106.
10. Barnes, p.69.
11. Weaver, pp.16-21.
12. *Ibid.*, p.19; Gsovski, p.289; Rushbrook, pp.158-163.
13. *Roumania Ten Years After*, pp.7-8.
14. *Ibid.*, pp.90-105; Rushbrooke, pp.161-162.
15. Torbet, p.208
16. *Ibid.*, p.209.
17. "Bucharest vs. Baptists," *Newsweek*, XII (December 12, 1938), p.24; "Rumania Still Denies Religious Freedom," *The Christian Century*, LXVI (July 26, 1939), pp.917-918.
18. Weaver, pp.18-21.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Torbet, p.209.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Raoul Bossy, "Religious Persecutions In Captive Rumania," *Journal of Central European Affairs*, XV (July 1955), p.179.
23. Richard F. Staar, *The Communist Regimes In Eastern Europe: An Introduction* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, 1967), p.207.
24. Bossy, p.161.
25. "Bulgaria and Rumania Alter Church Laws," *The Christian Century*, LXVI (March 2, 1949), p.260.
26. Stephen Fischer-Galati, ed., *Romania, of East-Central Europe Under the Communists*, gen. ed. Robert F. Barnes (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1957), p.145.
27. "Rumania's Open Churches," *Time*, XCVI (August 10, 1970), p.48.
28. "Ecumenism In Sofia and Bucharest," *The Christian Century*, LXXXVII (April 15, 1970), p.439.
29. Fischer-Galati, pp.144-145.
30. "Rumania's Open Churches," p.53.