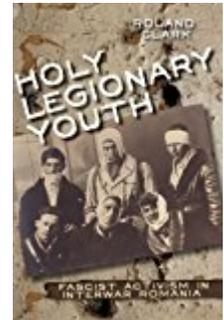


Roland Clark. *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. Illustrations. 288 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-5368-7.



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Commissioned by R. Chris Davis (Lone Star College - Kingwood)

Roland Clark's *Holy Legionary Youth* is a truly remarkable book, one that brings the historiography of Romania's most prominent fascist movement, known as the Legion of the Archangel Michael or the Iron Guard, onto a new and higher stage. This historiography has a long pedigree and includes such names as Eugen Weber, Nicholas M. Nagy-Talavera, Radu Ioanid, Armin Heinen, and Francisco Veiga, to which the names of rising stars of the Romanian historical profession, Constantin Iordachi and Valentin Săndulescu, have recently been added.[1] To date, scholars have studied the Legionaries' ideology, social composition, and social support, as well as their religious and mystical worldviews, their violence and cult of death, and their antisemitism. While Clark touches on all of these aspects, his deep interest lies elsewhere. He wants to understand "how legionaries performed fascism and how being fascist marked legionaries socially" (p. 6).

Helped by newly obtained access to numerous archival sources and periodicals from the era, as well as by recent publication of memoirs, di-

aries, and oral history collections—an enormous body of evidence processed with great diligence and attention to detail—Clark pursues his subject dispassionately and with that mixture of distanced curiosity and empathy that is the hallmark of a mature scholar. He traces the history of the Legion of the Archangel Michael, as this movement was officially known for most of the time, from its antecedents in the ultranationalist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; through its inception as a student movement in the early 1920s, with its violence and antisemitism; through its fortuitous delimitation from another right-wing grouping, the National-Christian Defense League (Liga Apărării Național-Creștine); through its slow growth and gradual transformation into a quasi-religious and mystical movement in the 1920s and 1930s; through its confrontation with Romanian governments of various sorts; and up to its violent end at the hands of Communist Romania's secret police, known as the Securitate.

Various political parties ruled the Romanian state throughout this tumultuous period, and several regimes succeeded one another. The governments' *modus operandi vis-à-vis* Legionaries evolved from repressive to more accommodating, to at one point including the Legion as a junior partner in the authoritarian government from September 1940 to January 1941 (the short-lived National Legionary State [Statul Național Legionar]), and back again to repression. Legionaries themselves, having started as gangs of violent antisemitic thugs, attracted new members through printed and oral propaganda, work camps, and efforts to improve the lot of Romania's poor. They developed their own rituals, which marked their members from the rest of society; created a specific language; recruited the support of some of the most talented Romanian intellectuals of the era; and impressed the public by their demonstrative readiness to sacrifice their lives for the "movement," its leaders, and its ideals. This is far too much to cover in a slim volume and, to his credit, Clark dwells on these aspects only to the extent that is strictly necessary for the development of his own understanding of how Legionaries' experiences transformed their personalities.

Building on the ideas of historians who showed how totalitarian regimes succeeded in creating particular types of "illiberal self," Clark investigates what he aptly calls "fascist subjectivity."^[2] He summarizes his view on this subject in a brilliant concluding section. His major point here is that Legionaries depicted their road to membership in the movement as a *sui generis* slow conversion. Slow, because they, as a rule, did not perceive it as a rupture in their personal development, dividing their lives into "before" and "after" parts. Rather, for most of them, "joining the Legion was a way ... to become more serious about an identity that they had been born into. [Their conversions] were not about them as individuals but were expressions of nationalism that any sensible Romanian would make" (p. 253). Becoming a Legionary thus involved not shedding one's previ-

ous identity but rather consolidating and purifying it by participating in, and affirming oneself within, a fighting community of devout nationalists. Very sensibly, Clark suggests that emphasizing continuous development rather than a rupture with the past was informed by the Christian Orthodox hagiographic tradition, in which the life of the saint was depicted "as a journey toward God through progressive refinement and purification of sin" (p. 250).

As the preceding sentence intimates, the book offers fascinating insights into the intricate connections between Romanian traditional religiosity and Legionary fascism. It was not only through the church-sanctioned antisemitism and sporadic participation of priests and ecclesiastical hierarchs in the movement that Legionarism was strengthened. The Legionaries' heavy borrowing from and creative redefinition of familiar tropes and imagery of Romanian Orthodoxy endowed their overall message with unprecedented—in spite of the movement's revolutionary nature—legitimacy and meaningfulness. While being intolerant, fanatical, violent, and even murderous, Legionaries felt themselves martyrs for higher, transcendental ideals. They sincerely believed that they were demiurges of their nation's better future. For them, the rhetoric of "the New Man" was not a cynical ruse but a spiritual reality animating their very existence. Without detracting from the movement's criminal nature, Clark's book brings to our attention their sincere idealism and thirst for spiritual fulfillment. In this way, he helps us better understand not only this movement's appeal in the interwar and World War II periods but also the endurance of Legionaries' myth in Romania today.

Notes

[1]. See Eugen Weber, "Romania," in *The European Right: A Historical Profile*, ed. Hans Rogger and Eugen Weber (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1965), 501-574; Nicholas M. Nagy-Talavera, *The Green Shirts and the Others: A History*

of *Fascism in Hungary and Rumania* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1970); Radu Ioanid, *The Sword of the Archangel: Fascist Ideology in Romania* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1990); Armin Heinen, *Die Legion "Erzengel Michael" in Rumänien: Soziale bewegung und politische Organisation: Ein Beitrag zum problem des internationalen Faschismus* (Munich: Oldenburg, 1986); Francisco Veiga, *Istoria Gărzii de Fier: Mistica ultranaționalismulu* (Bucharest: Humanistas, 1993); Constantin Iordachi, *Charisma, Politics and Violence: The Legion of the "Archangel Michael" in Inter-War Romania* (Trondheim: Trondheim Studies on East European Cultures & Societies, 2004); and Valentin Săndulescu, "Revolutionizing Romania from the Right: The Regenerative Project of the Romanian Legionary Movement and Its Failures 1927–1937" (PhD diss., Central European University, 2011).

[2]. Clark references the works of Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) and Johan Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). Works by Igal Halfin might also be invoked in this context. See Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); and *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

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