

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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The years separating us from the publication of the reviewed book have undoubtedly marked our ways of understanding, approaching, and reading politics and perhaps even history. Those of us who keep historical fascism under their intellectual scrutiny must have experienced a somewhat uncanny feeling if not of *déjà-vu*—as the practice of writing history is there to raise the symbolic limits in front of unaccredited parallels—then at least of “strange familiarity.”[2] To be sure, something has changed after the recent rise of right-wing populisms and the entry of authoritarianism in the public sphere in various places of the world. Whether one is tempted to see in these unfolding dynamics reenactments of past experiences, lines of continuity, or radically new phenomena is a matter of debate, yet the nexus one is tempted to make with the interwar as a historical mirror of time out of joint is almost an intellectual reflex that few would easily repress.

It is precisely why the history of fascism becomes once again central not only as a discrete field aiming to trace the trajectory of fascist move-

ments and the intellectual horizon of fascist ideologies but perhaps, in a deeper sense, also as the disciplinary site where the encounter between past and present is mediated, and the past is articulated historically. To put it simply, under the particular strains of the present the task of the historian becomes somewhat even more demanding. Be it because public expectations of all sorts turn toward history for either solace or answers, or because the very pressure of the present makes the particular link between knowledge and power specific to scholarly endeavors more apparent, the history of fascism seems to live an ambivalent glory. It is with this reflection in mind, serving to some extent as a cautionary note, that I approach Roland Clark’s book on Romanian fascism.

I will focus first on the new venues that the book opens in the study of fascism and in the historiography of the Romanian interwar. In a second move I will isolate some points that I find particularly important and that call for some further discussion. At this juncture I will also mark some points of disagreement with Clark’s project. Last, I

will sketch a synoptic outline of the ways in which some of the contentious points raised by my reading could be overcome. All along my reflection, I am primarily guided by a particular interest in understanding fascism in relation to “law,” that is, with the regimes of legality in force during the interwar or the meaning of law conveyed by the various movements contesting the officially enacted law.

Once these caveats have been uttered, it is useful to acknowledge from the outset the importance and merits of this book, in terms of scope, style, and, more important, sources. Clark’s book is a fresh, reflexive, witty, and well-documented exploration of the Legion of the Archangel Michael, the central fascist movement in interwar Romania, in its own context, doubled by an attempt to approach Romanian ultranationalism on its own terms. Such an inquiry is perhaps not a singular enterprise, as lately there has been a growing interest with Romanian fascism aiming to bring under a new light either its relation to militarism, its ambiguous role played on the stage of established politics, or its influence over the ideological spectrum of the late interwar period. [3]

However, the particular perspective Clark adopts by focusing on the “history of everyday life,” in an attempt to map out how ideology is shaped through “petty interactions and personal decisions” of historical agents, is decidedly new (p. 6). This line of investigation is an effort to read the trajectory of the Legion in a minor tone, by moving away to some extent from the “macrohistorical forces” and by bringing to the fore “the individual experiences of fascism” (p. 7). Without sidelining some of the important questions related to the ascent of the Legion on the stage of mainstream politics, such as Romania’s transformation after the First World War, Clark’s investigation moves through no less than twenty years of Romanian history by conveying an impressive range of discourses, and by covering realms as

disparate as electoral politics, literature, music, theology, and cooking recipes (!). Along this line of analysis, both the “high” and “low” culture of the interwar are examined together with media representations and official reports, at times with almost surgical precision, in painting both the image of the daily life of the Legion and the minute work of ideological interpellation of members of the movement. To his credit, Clark keeps his distance from the redundant taxonomical debates still marking discussions of generic fascism.[4] Rather, his interest lies in offering a living image of ultranationalism in its time.

In this vein, Clark makes some very useful observations by linking the origins of the Legion to the pre-World War I ultranationalist antecedents in Romania and the assertion of the new ultranationalism of the brand later on professed by the Legion within the anti-Semitic political projects of the early 1920s. A somewhat less convincing analysis follows both the processes of ideological interpellation and the Legion’s struggle for consolidating a social and, for that matter, an electoral basis within a broader political context that is defined by an over-pervasive presence of violence. Returning to a mapping of Legionary ideology both within the intellectual context of the Romanian interwar period and within the sites of its material articulation—work camps, cooperatives, restaurants, and fascist displays—Clark embarks on a phenomenological investigation of such visual tropes as “muscular masculinity.” This is a remarkable attempt in capturing the central topoi of Romanian fascist ideology by means of a closer reading of the deeper semiotics of sacrifice and regeneration, tropes overly present in both Legionary ideology and propaganda, with obvious religious connotations. The journey into Romania’s dark history of fascism is concluded by a rather short reflection on the Legionary rise to power in September 1940 and its downfall as a consequence of its failed rebellion against the military dictator Ion Antonescu, accompanied by a

number of remarks on the place occupied by the Legion in social memory.

The project, as it stands, marks a number of important points that need to be mentioned and commended, in so far as they add to the existing knowledge of the life of and the life within the main fascist movement in interwar Romania. Clark's work usefully underlines the fact that the Legion and Legionary ideology were far from being a foreign import or a simple mimicry of Italian Fascism or German National Socialism, let alone a fringe movement. By placing both anti-Semitism and xenophobia in the context of state building and by clarifying the place of anti-Semitism in pre-First World War politics, Clark is able to connect both the emerging yet heterogeneous ultranationalist "movement" to trends in the arts, culture, and historiography (p. 23). At the end of this investigation we are compelled to note how the terrain was prepared for the Legion by a "network of respectable members of society with ... considerable financial and political resources" (p. 26). Moreover, the analysis of the "prehistory" of the Legion within the context of the early 1920s anti-Semitic protests, although marked by some theoretical shortcomings that I shall detail further, is extremely useful in drawing the line of continuity between the post-First World War nation- and state-building process and the articulation of fascism. Clark is perhaps at his best when decoding the ideological elements embedded in social practices, rituals, and the arts. His reading of key topoi of Legionary ideology, as they emerge not only from public displays and ceremonies but also from projects like work camps, cooperatives, and restaurants, is extremely useful in offering insight into the discursive construction of such notions as "Christian commerce" (p. 162), as well as in exploring the nexus between discipline and work. This analysis also details how the Legion was relating to the broader sections of society and how it framed important issues, such as division of labor, family ties, and ethnic origins. Furthermore, his exploration of the Legionnaires' self-

perceived experience in the Spanish Civil War offers a good starting point for a discussion of transnational fascist and ultranationalist networks in the 1930s.

Last, but not least, the insights offered into the public mourning organized on the occasion of the return from Spain of the remains of the fallen Legionnaires are to be commended as another possible starting point for understanding the place of public rituals in the process of the sacralization of state and statehood that probably goes beyond the "sacralization of politics" specific to fascism.^[5] Clark's reflection on the ways in which fascist ideology supported a conflation between religion and history, in which the past had "a cultic function," further supports this point (pp. 196-97). Religious commemorations and funerals were thus an important part of the public liturgy set out by the fascist movement, which is an aspect worth exploring in its own right.

Yet what Clark achieves in terms of the detailed and minute reading of fascist ideology on its own terms comes at a price. Most of the limits of his project come perhaps from responding to a methodological commandment of writing a history of "individual experiences of fascism," that is, tracing the construction of "fascist subjectivities" (pp. 7, 248-249). Such an endeavor, which he achieves only in part, necessarily at least partly expunges issues related to the overarching social structures and historical processes that go beyond the otherwise limited dimension of experienced history. To put it simply, the actions and the meaning of the social actors caught within the maelstrom of ultranationalist politics tend to become somewhat obscure, and gain significance only within their own created system of justification, that is, ultimately only as part of the narrative structures set out by the Legion itself.

As a result, the multilayered, rhizomatic micro-history that Clark aims to unearth is somewhat bound to resolve itself in aporias, enigmas, and ambiguities. A telling example is the status of

violence within Romanian interwar politics. When it comes to the affirmation of the Legion within the context of the 1920s, Clark offers a fresco of this brand of youthful violence that is both overwhelming and puzzling. The haphazard accumulation of minute details, ranging from “protests” and “broken windows” to insults, assaults, and threats, and to other forms of unlawful use of force, such as shots or resistance of authority, paints a vivid image of a half decade of student anti-Semitic militancy (p. 32). Yet this violence is both threatening and carnivalesque in so far as it “was a serious matter for Jews, university faculty and officers of the law, but for the ultranationalist students it was an excuse to enjoy themselves ... and to insist that the Romanian students—not Jews or police—dominated the country’s streets and public spaces” (p. 38). Engaging in “violence” was for sure not an easy task, as repression, in the form either of subsequent bans of the Legion and its successor, the Iron Guard, or of police or gendarmerie action, ensued. Resistance to fascist violence by communist groups was also present. However, because both state-sanctioned and fascist actions—be they acts of anti-Semitism, assassinations, or attempts of officials and leading public figures—are covered by the same term, that is, “violence,” rather uncanny consequences followed. It appears that the fascist paramilitary operations and crimes were on par with police brutality, a position that is rather tenuous as, regardless of the abuses enacted by police practice of the time, this “violence” was brought about by the Legion’s own determination in challenging state authority. Statements based on fascist propaganda and memoirs, rather than police reports, are problematic; such a context requires a great deal of historical acuity and at least some level of legal semiotics. It is in this sense that perhaps more space for an external point of view should have been opened in trying to understand both the inner ideological justifications of the actors and the objective status of their actions.

Now, while it might be difficult to sustain such an *objective* position within the structure of a narrative that does aim to approach fascist subjectivity “beyond good and evil,” Clark could have gestured toward understanding the existing symbolic frameworks at work, out of which the law was not the least important. That is to say, fascist violence did not take place in a symbolic vacuum; it was itself part of the dynamics of reconstructing the limits of what was permissible in the context of interwar Romania. Indeed, these actions ranged from being properly criminal activities from their very beginning up until 1940, to becoming part of state-sanctioned eliminationist politics for a period of time at least until January 1941. The fact that many members of the Legion perceived themselves as part of a religious movement and the social memory of the Legion, at least in some circles, is not that of a group of villains does not change the Legion’s objective legal position as an organization aimed at challenging state order through violent means and, arguably, as a criminal association. If this point is to be granted as the core in situating the Legionary movement in its trajectory, there is once again a need to further map its position within the context of the interwar and to further problematize the ways in which this context left a trace on the construction of both state and Legionary ideology. For if indeed we are to understand how fascist subjectivities were fashioned, we need to critically dissolve the narrative structures holding together their own justifications. From this point of view, Clark’s work is helpful in making a necessary step by taking fascist ideology seriously, but there is a need for moving beyond this point in terms of both method and scope.

Notes

[1]. The reference in the title is to the original title of Ernst Nolte’s classical opus on fascism. See Ernst Nolte, *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche: Action française - Italienischer Faschismus - Nationalsozialismus* (Munich: Piper, 1963). For the Eng-

lish-language translation, see Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Française - Italian Fascism - National Socialism*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: New American Library, 1969).

[2]. Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, ed. James Strachey (1919; repr., London: Hogarth, 1955), 241.

[3]. Constantin Iordachi, “God’s Chosen Warriors: Romantic Palingenesis,” in *Comparative Fascist Studies: New Perspectives*, ed. Constantin Iordachi (London: Routledge, 2010), 316-357; Rebecca Haynes, “Corneliu Zelea Codreanu: The Romanian ‘New Man,’” in *In the Shadow of Hitler: Personalities of the Right in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Rebecca Haynes and Martyn Rady (London: Tauris, 2011), 169-187; and Constantin Iordachi, “A Continuum of Dictatorships: Hybrid Totalitarian Experiments,” in *Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship in Europe*, ed. António Costa Pinto and Aristotle Kallis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 233-271.

[4]. See Roger Griffin, “‘Consensus? Quel consensus?’: Perspectives pour une meilleure entente entre les spécialistes francophones et anglophones du fascisme,” *Vingtième siècle* 108 (2010): 53.

[5]. See Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. Keith Botsford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

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