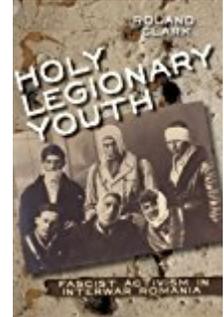


**Roland Clark.** *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. Illustrations. 288 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-5368-7.



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As a product of the First World War, fascism developed differently in various countries. In interwar Romania, it went through all the growth stages and eventually, albeit briefly, came to power in 1941—only the third such movement to do so without foreign support. Its militant core consisted not of war veterans, the usual suspects one would expect, but of first-generation university students and college dropouts—the focus of this meticulously researched book by Roland Clark.

To me, this is where the puzzle is. During the occupation of the country by the Central Powers in 1916-18, the Jewish population was widely seen as collaborating with the enemy. Plus, the servicemen must have been exposed more than any other social group to the official propaganda equating the Jews with the Bolsheviks during the victorious Romanian crusade against the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919. As Clark points out, Romanian soldiers were not as bitter as their counterparts in the defeated countries with lost territories. Their state added huge areas like Transylvania, Bucov-

ina, and Bessarabia, so “instead of facing a large group of disappointed veterans, Romanians had to contend with large minority populations who had previously dominated the occupied regions both economically and culturally” (p. 18). Although not the largest such group, Jews appeared to exert enormous influence in both new and old lands. They also seemed to enjoy foreign protection, especially after the Entente powers imposed the unwelcome Minorities Treaty—as a result, the Constitution of 1923 granted them citizenship rights. In addition to these political and social effects, the Great War also helped create “a new ultranationalist idiom” based on “fraternity, militarism, and religious ideas” (p. 21). Instead of using the notoriously slippery term “fascism,” Clark prefers “ultranationalism,” whose main ingredient is intense antisemitism (p. 23).

The ultranationalist student movement started at the University of Bucharest in December 1922 to demand improvements in the dormitories and cafeteria as well as the admission minority students only relative to their percentage of the

overall population. Although initially relying on “anarchic violence” in the manner of Italian fascist gangs (p. 38), the movement moderated over time. In 1927, it was organized by Corneliu Codreanu into “The Legion of the Archangel Michael” that aimed at entering and dominating the Romanian parliament. In some ways, it was less extreme than more established far-right parties like the Christian Defense League (LANC) that accused the Romanian Church of being “Judaized” because it used the Old Testament. Pro-Legion publications more sensibly connected Jews to atheism and socialism to attract clergy.

As fascists elsewhere, the Legion was able to appeal to any social group although students supplied most leaders and activists. The Great Depression helped politicize increasingly destitute peasants, workers, and tradesmen, many of whom appreciated the message of blaming “parasitic” bankers and industrialists as well as the corrupt government officials who bailed them out. Even already organized workers could be won over, although ex-communists had to spend a period in “special indoctrination groups.” With membership dues and donations from sympathetic entrepreneurs and aristocrats, the Legion set up work camps in the countryside, built its offices (“nests”), and subsidized co-ops and restaurants in an effort to create its networks and to amass social capital. The Legionaries also incited peasant attacks on Jewish homes and threatened and boycotted businesses that employed minority employees.

As in other fascist movements, violence and assassinations also played a symbolic role highlighting strength, decisiveness, and masculinity. Legionary imagery, rallies, and marches heavily borrowed from the Romanian Orthodox tradition, complete with priests, public prayers, and church liturgies. The latter also lent color to the typically fascist cult of the dead. Whereas the Nazis focused on the fallen heroes of the First World War, the Legionaries appeared to privilege medieval kings and saints.

To document all those formative activities, Clark unearthed a wealth of diverse sources ranging from police archives and ultranationalist publications to personal memoirs, letters, diaries, rare photos, and oral histories. Methodologically, the author relies on the history of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*) to reconstruct the experience of fascist socialization, but he is also an intellectual historian, albeit a skeptical one. He carefully examined highbrow Legionary periodicals only to conclude that their typically fascist antimodern views had little impact on the decisions and actions of the ultranationalist leaders and followers.

The author clearly prefers to focus on “how” rather than “why” (p. 245), but it would have helped to spell out the reasons why college students figured so much more prominently than war veterans in the development of Romanian ultranationalism. Is there data on how many former servicemen enrolled in universities to move up in the world, like the *Great Gatsby* character? I wonder if the author agrees with Eugen Weber that in rural countries with few genuine political parties, civic associations, or working-class organizations, university students were uniquely positioned to discuss and react to burning issues of the day. Their idealism also meant that they were more serious about them than adults.[1]

It might have been a good idea to contextualize their antisemitism by relating it to other ethnic phobias. The book does have occasional references to attacks not only on Jews but also against Bulgarian students in 1923 (p. 33). The same year, the very first ultranationalist student congress resolved not only to continue the struggle against Jewish influence but also to support the “Romanian population in Macedonia and the Serbian Banat” (p. 39). Was Russophobia on the rise at the same time as Jews were identified with communism? For some reason, secondary sources are not included in the bibliography. Most chapters are thematic and tied back to the chronological narrative concentrating on the rise and fall of the fas-

cist youth movement between 1922 and 1941. Overall, this is a landmark book of interest not only to Romanian studies specialists but to all interwar historians.

Note

[1]. Eugen Weber, "The Men of the Archangel," *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, no. 1 (1966): 101-26; 106.

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