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For someone who does not see herself as a military historian, Maria Bucur has written a book that any military historian interested in modern Romania should read. Completed despite the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly interrupting her research, The Nation’s Gratitude: World War I and Citizenship Rights in Interwar Romania is a groundbreaking work that hopefully will enliven the rather stale field of military history that, in Romania, suffers from wartime operations tunnel vision. A war and society approach offers a breath of fresh air. The monograph couches military service as a crucial catalyst of societal change in the interwar period as Romanians learned what it meant to be a citizen through endeavoring to claim the rights afforded to them as individuals who had made a sacrifice for the nation during the First World War.

Bucur bases her work on substantial archival holdings in Bucharest relating to veterans, war widows, and war orphans that have barely been touched by researchers. The dearth of work on the National Office for War Invalids, Orphans, and Widows (Oficiu Național pentru Invalizi, Orfani și Văduve de Război, or IOVR) and the myriad of associated nongovernmental groups is dumbfounding because conservative estimates place the number of veterans at 1.4 million, war widows at 300,000, and war orphans at 400,000 for a total of over 2 million citizens—or more than 12 percent of the immediate postwar population (p. 5). Moreover, considering the amount of attention that the rise of fascism in Romania has attracted in the historiography, one would expect more research into veterans because of the important role that veterans’ groups played in the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany. Hopefully Bucur’s foray into this rich but neglected subject will encourage other historians to delve into how war reshaped society in Romania after mass mobilization and mass death between 1916 and 1919.

The book focuses on the period from the passage of sweeping and inclusive IOVR laws in 1920 to the ethno-racialized reframing of IOVR legislation in 1938. Bucur decided to explore how the average citizen affected by IOVR made sense of hav-
ing to interact with the state to obtain benefits promised in law. There is relatively little in the The Nation's Gratitude about what the press said about IOVR or veterans, war widows, and war orphans. Additionally, Bucur became especially interested in disabled veterans during her research, so the intersection between disability and gender is a central element in the monograph.

The book is organized into thematic chapters. The first chapter summarizes the legal foundations of veterans' benefits going back to laws in the nineteenth century and explains how IOVR legislation evolved during the interwar period. The second chapter delves deeper into how the central IOVR administration worked with a host of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These two chapters comprise the bulk of The Nation's Gratitude showing how ambitious the IOVR laws were but also how the state was unprepared to deliver on promises and disreputable individuals often misused NGOs for veterans, war widows, and war orphans for illicit personal gain. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine in turn veterans, war widows, and war orphans. These chapters consist of vignettes, case studies, and anecdotes about groups and individuals. An epilogue briefly looks at benefits for veterans, war widows, and orphans during the Second World War, under communism, and during post-communism.

Naturally, as the first major foray into the subject in English or Romanian, The Nation's Gratitude is not meant to be definitive, but Bucur does make some important conclusions. The Romanian state laudably offered unprecedented benefits to veterans, war widows, and war orphans. Moreover, ethnicity or race, and even the fact an individual had fought in the Austro-Hungarian or Russian army, did not disqualify anyone from benefits. Unfortunately, successive governments proved unable or unwilling to solve administrative problems arising from the IOVR legislation or to properly fund IOVR. Also, the IOVR central committee proved inept at working with NGOs, especially those catering to ethnic minorities, and failed to enact basic controls to limit corruption. Class assumptions meant the poorest veterans in most need qualified for the smallest pensions. Moreover, poorly educated peasants who lived in the countryside faced difficulty just learning about their rights much less obtaining their benefits. Gender bias led to inequalities between veterans and war widows. Additionally, veterans created groups to advocate for their interests to which politicians paid attention. In contrast, war widows, who were disenfranchised like all women, approached the state as individuals to beg for re-dress. Children had the least agency, so only a few war orphans received benefits. As adults, some war orphans at university formed student groups to demand special benefits.

In some ways, The Nation's Gratitude raises as many questions about IOVR as it answers. The book’s examination of IOVR during the Second World War is very brief. Yet benefits for veterans, war widows, and war orphans became an important focus for the regime of dictator Marshal Ion Antonescu. Additionally, in 1948, the newly installed communist regime changed the IOVR laws to also include victims of racial persecution that enabled some Jews to obtain benefits as survivors of the Holocaust. The history of IOVR in the era of the Second World War deserves in-depth examination, but no one has seriously researched the subject yet. Bucur’s pioneering work has laid the foundation for future researchers to investigate how benefits for veterans, war widows, and war orphans reshaped Romanian society in the twentieth century.
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