Did the Great War End? Memory and Memorialisation of the First World War in Romania

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Introduction

In the Romanian collective mentality, the First World War is perceived not only as an event generating enormous suffering and loss of life, but also as a necessary and unavoidable sacrifice for the creation of Greater Romania. According to Romanian mythology, nothing sustainable can be achieved without sacrifice. The legend of Manole the Builder, which refers to the 16th-century construction of the Curtea de Argeş Monastery, claims that the walls kept crumbling until Manole buried his pregnant wife Ana between the walls of the cathedral.[1] It is no coincidence that the Curtea de Argeş Monastery afterwards became a sanctuary for Romania's kings, being considered a symbolic place of Romanian spirituality.

In Romania, the First World War is known not so much as the 'Great War' or as a regular military confrontation, but as the 'War of National Unification',[2] a new military *Risorgimento*, after the 1877-1878 war of independence against the Ottoman Empire. The approximately 335,000 people who died just among the military (from a total of 900,000) are not considered 'victims', but 'necessary heroes' for the country's unification. In the popular perception, Romania emerged from the First World War as a winner, even if historically the situation is much more complex.[3]

The official interpretation of the First World War has undergone several metamorphoses during the last hundred years, on both the national[4] and the international level.[5] In the case of Romania, during the interwar period, the First World War was considered the most important political and military event and the final point of a *Risorgimento* that began in the mid-19th century. Romania entered the Second World War precisely in order to defend what it had made so many sacrifices to conquer in the Great War.

During the first two decades of the communist regime, the official interpretation was the Soviet one: the First World War was a consequence of imperialist rivalries, a 'conflict of bourgeoisies'. The regime censored references to the union of Bessarabia with the motherland, but this changed after 1960; the First World War was reintegrated in the nation's history as an essential moment, even if the communists had played no role in it. After the fall of communism, the Romanian Revolution of December 1989 became the new central event of an official, though not hegemonic, narrative. This narrative no longer emphasised the nation's heroism through the dead soldiers from the two world wars, but through the 'anti-communist resistance' which, according to the predominant narrative, had included almost the entire nation. The issues of the First World War and of the Great Union were rediscovered after Romania's accession to the European Union and used as a tool to strengthen national identity which, it was considered, had been eroded by globalisation and European integration.

The Interwar Period and the Second World War: The Burden of the Recent Past

Most ethnic Romanians integrated the First World War into their memory as the continuation, on a much wider and more violent scale, of 19th-century history. Some minorities, mainly Hungarians, perceived the war as a great tragedy. The idea of achieving a great state to encompass the majority of Romanians had just been realised and was considered a miracle paid for with the lives and blood of many countrymen. The idea of a 'Great Romania' therefore became dominant in the interwar period, in political and cultural life alike.[6] Participation in the war was

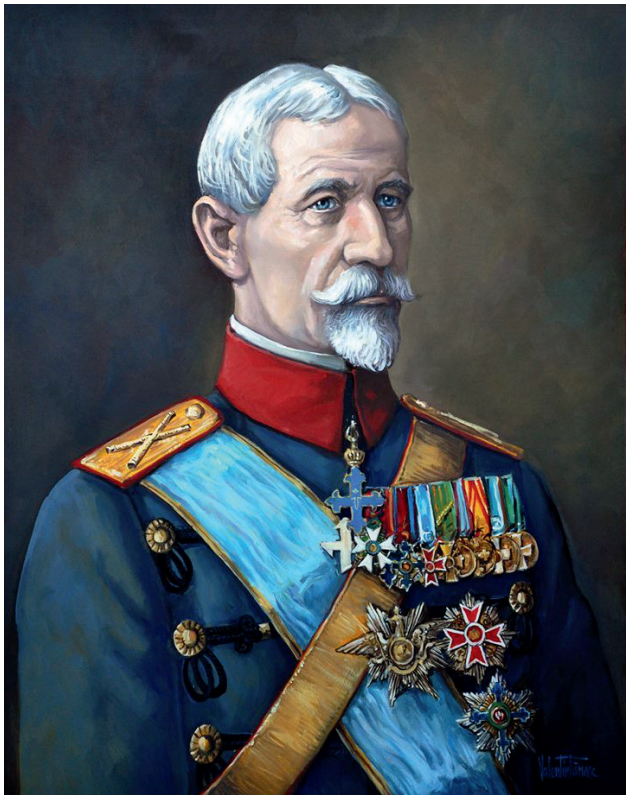

Fig. 1: General Alexandru Averescu, painted by Valentin Tănase, 2015.

an important source of political legitimacy. King Ferdinand (1865-1927) was called the 'unifier', which meant that the German dynasty of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen was fully accepted as a 'Romanian/national dynasty'. One of the war's heroes, General Alexandru Averescu (1859-1938), became Prime Minister of Romania (1920) and his People's Party enjoyed broad popularity during the general elections of May 1920.

In 1921, the Romanian government established a 'Heroes' Day', to be celebrated at Pentecost. Under the Monarchy's patronage, steps were undertaken to create memorial places for the victims of the First World War. Various monuments such as statues and triptychs were created for war heroes all over Romania. The heroes' names were also given to various settlements or streets.[7] The Arch of Triumph in Bucharest and the Cross from the Caraiman Mountain (2291 m) are only two of the most visible monuments dedicated to Romania's victory in the First World War. The most important mausoleums are those dedicated to dead and missing people from the battles of 1917 (Mărăşti, Mărăşeşti, Oituz). These mausoleums contain the remains not only of soldiers from the Romanian Army, but also of those from the Central Powers army. The government also set up several cemeteries, in which the remains were to be laid according to the army from which they originated (Entente or Central Powers), but there are numerous cemeteries in which these remains were laid regardless of the religion of the deceased (for example, in Mangalia).[8]

Numerous veteran associations have kept the memory of the war alive. Political parties have included specific provisions for their war veterans' programmes.[9] The main beneficiaries of the agrarian reform (1921) were the war veterans and the survivors of those who died in the First World War. War veterans, orphans, and widows suffered during the Great Depression when the state reduced its aid. In spite of public and often violent protests against the government, in the 1930s state benefits remained below the level necessary for a decent life. Although it would have been strategic for the veterans to join together to defend their interests, they did not succeed in doing so.

The war and the Great Union served as dominant themes in literature and the visual arts, treated by artists such as Liviu Rebreanu (1885-1944), Camil

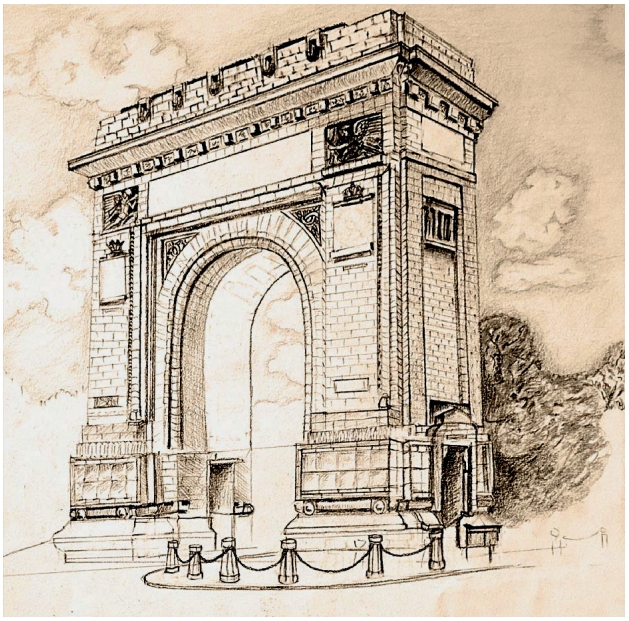

Fig. 2: The Arch of Triumph in Bucharest was built 1935/36, drawing, 2017.

Petrescu (1894-1957), Cezar Petrescu (1892-1961) and Gheorghe Brătianu (1898-1953).

The territorial losses of the summer of 1940 (Bessarabia and Bukovina to the Soviet Union, part of Transylvania to Hungary) shocked Romanians. The sacrifices of the First World War now seemed pointless, a sense of futility that triggered the collapse of King Carol II's (1893-1953) regime and his banishment from the country. Seemingly paradoxically, Romanian society therefore at first viewed General Ion Antonescu's (1882-1946) establishment of a military dictatorship, with its implicit promise of recovering a part of the lost territories, with great hope. Yet Romania's entry into the war alongside the Axis powers meant the emergence of a new generation of widows, orphans and victims on the front, and hope turned into despair. After the end of the Second World War, the issue of the legacy of the Great War was eclipsed by new geopolitical and social realities.

The Totalitarian Era: From *Damnatio Memoriae* to Selective Past

The issue of Romania's involvement in the First World War presented multiple ideological challenges to the Communist Party of Romania, which had recently come to power thanks to Soviet support. The first resulted from Lenin's taking Russia out of the war by signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (3 March 1918), in order to ensure the final success of the Bolsheviks in the struggle for power. This decision was legitimised by the theory that the First World War was a confrontation of imperialist forces, while the working class was advocating pacifism. Romania's Sovietisation implicitly meant an ideologisation of historical interpretation. Secondly, Romania's position towards Bessarabia had to be clarified, as the province had been occupied by the USSR in 1940 and remained within the Soviet Union. Lies and mystifications were the communists' only solutions. In the schoolbook *Romania's History*, issued in 1947 and intended for secondary schools, coordinator Mihai Roller conveyed the communists' position: Bessarabia's union was illegitimate because the 'reactionary Romanian government' had hindered the revolutionary Soviets.[10]

In the 1948 issue of the same schoolbook, the authors extended this approach towards Transylvania. The Bolshevik interpretation was that Transylvania 'joined' (and not 'united with') the Old Kingdom, and that this had happened under 'armed pressure' and not as a result of the openly expressed will of the majority ethnic group, the Romanians. Such mystification is also obvious in the book's description of the military intervention against Hungary in 1919, which omits the attack on the Romanian troops and condemns the 'military intervention against the revolution in Hungary'. Third, what was called the 'labour movement in Romania' did not play a major role in the Great Union, unlike the paramount role of the monarchy and the 'historical parties', which were banned in the early stages of the country's communisation. Recognising the exceptional dimension of the Great Union from the perspective of the Romanian state would implicitly have meant confirming the legitimacy of the monarchy and the bourgeois parties, an unacceptable hypothesis for the totalitarian party-state. Finally, but no less importantly for the government, the most difficult problem concerned the veterans, invalids, widows, and orphans of the Second World War, who had to be provided with the resources necessary for survival. The heroes of the First World War thus entered into a true and ideologically motivated *damnatio memoriae*, and the communist regime did not completely abandon war invalids; it helped them materially, while keeping them anonymous.

The *damnatio memoriae* operation was multidimensional. The regime not only falsified history in schoolbooks and university curricula, including the removal from libraries and burning of books discussing the First World War, but also took other actions.[11] It changed the names of places or streets memorialising the First World War and altered monuments dedicated to war heroes by eliminating any reference to King Ferdinand and Queen Marie (1875-1938).

The exit from the Soviet paradigm of the First World War was made with difficulty and incompletely. The essential reason was Bessarabia and Bukovina, as communist leaders tried to avoid disputes with the Soviet Union around this issue. The communist regime acquired a national tinge at the end of the Gheorghiu-Dej (1901-1965) regime and, then, during Ceausescu's time, a part of the historical truth began to be officially recognised.[12] The Great

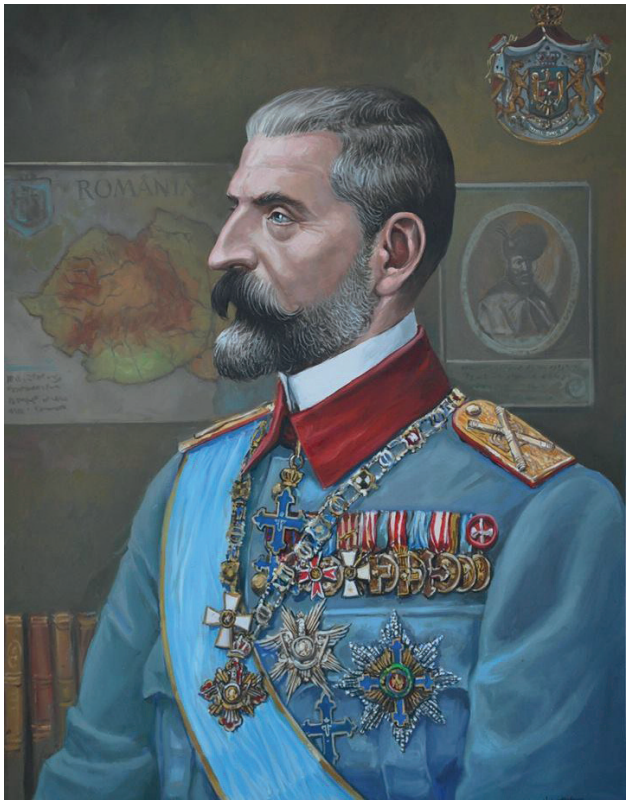

Fig. 3: King Ferdinand of Romania 1914-1927, painted by Valentin Tănase, 2015.

Union began to be mentioned in official documents of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR), schoolbooks, and university curricula, by referring only to Transylvania and obliterating the issue of Bessarabia and Bukovina. In 1968, Romania officially celebrated the half-centenary of the union of Transylvania with Romania. On the other hand, from the 1970s onwards, the issue of national unity became the subject of a new nationalist mythology, its roots being sought in the pre-Roman Antiquity, the so-called 'centralised and independent Dacian state'. This orientation in historiography and literature has been called 'protochronism'.[13]

The spectacular recurrence of the First World War theme in the official memory accepted by the communist regime was achieved by bringing back into cultural circulation the literary and historiographical works related to the first world conflagration (but with elements of censorship).[14] Film production easily conveyed to the public the message designed by political factors. There were subsidies for movies such as *Ecaterina Teodoroiu* (1978), which tells the story of a young woman who enrols in the army as a volunteer, is wounded while fighting on the first line of the front, and then dies in the 1917 military confrontation with the Central Powers army. In 1964, the public was presented the movie *Pădurea spânzuraților (Forest of the Hanged)*, after the novel (inspired by true events) written by Liviu Rebreanu in 1922. The main hero of the film is a young officer from Transylvania who is forced to fight against his fellow Romanian countrymen and decides to desert, but is caught and sentenced to death by hanging. Another movie is the screen adaptation of the novel *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război* (*Last Night of Love, First Night of War*, 1930) written by Romanian writer Camil Petrescu, undertaken by director Sergiu Nicolaescu (1930-2013) in 1979-1980. The movie relates both the love story of a young officer of the Romanian army and the drama of war.[15]

During the period of the communist regime, no great memorial places were built for the heroes of the First World War; the existing ones were only maintained to avoid decay. They even entered the educational circuit, becoming places of memory meant to instil patriotism in young generations.

The Post-Communist Period: Between Oblivion and New Recall of Memory

Over eight decades after the First World War, in a society heading towards the unknown, searching for a rebirth of democracy and transition to the market economy, the issue of the first world conflagration has become a preoccupation of historians and a chapter in schoolbooks, but not an important public subject. Veterans of the First World War have almost entirely vanished, much like the participants in the creation of Greater Romania. The memory of the First World War seems to have lost its active force for the present, in the absence of the characters who animated it.

In the mid-1990s, Romania's major preoccupation became NATO and acceptance in the European Union, which also had consequences for public policies of First World War memorialisation.

In 1990, Romania's national day became 1 December, when the 1918 union of Transylvania with the Kingdom of Romania is celebrated. The official public

Fig. 4: Image from the film 'Pădurea spânzuraţilor' (Forest of the Hanged), 1964.

discourse does not emphasise the causal relationship between the Great War and the Great Union and avoids references to the war – implicitly, to the war against the Central Powers[16] – so as not to bring back painful memories to the nation's new NATO and EU allies (Germany, Austria, Hungary). This strategic approach to historical events makes it seem as though the Great War were over, the heroes commemorated for their individual and collective sacrifice (as an act of civil compassion), not as part of a (geo)political discourse with any meaning for the future. During the interwar period, references to the heroes from the War for National Unification were correlated first with the danger of Hungarian revisionism and then with the rise of Nazism. In contrast, after 1990 the victims – either from the Entente or from the Central Powers camp – were commemorated as examples of the possible consequences of war.

The Romanian government did not invest significant sums in new great memorial places dedicated to those who died during the First World War, but instead restricted itself to maintaining existing ones. City halls or various military units created new memorial places, of smaller and local interest, sometimes for victims of all wars waged by Romania (1877-1878, WWI, WWII).

After the 2008-2010 economic crisis and the renewed nationalisation of policies in Europe, countries became increasingly preoccupied by their national identity. The commemoration of the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War became the object of competing narratives in Europe.[17] Transnational history offered the following narrative: nationalism and rivalries between great powers led to the First World War; Leninism-Stalinism and Fascism/Nazism were born from the First World War, which generated a new world conflagration; the solution to the issue of war in Europe was European integration (European Union); the best guarantee against new conflict in Europe is a deepening of European integration.

Another type of narrative looks at the First World War as a great geopolitical catastrophe that toppled the German and the Austro-Hungarian empires, creating a European power vacuum that would then become one of the main causes of the Second World War.[18] According to political reinterpretation of this historiographical interpretation, the situation of ethno-cultural minorities that was created by the

Fig. 5: Monument to the Heroes of the Engineer Arm, built 1929, drawing, 2017.

Versailles treaties remains unsolved until the present day, thus legitimising interference in the sovereignty of other countries in order to 'offer protection to the nation beyond state borders'. The explanatory model is the following: military defeat in the First World War was followed by an 'unjust peace' imposed by victorious great powers; because the 'Versailles system' was unjust, demands to revise borders or change the political organisation of countries emerging or expanding after the end of the First World War were legitimate.

Another kind of historical narrative was created in Romania, in the context of the return of discussions about First World War drama and its consequences.[19] In the absence of a significant Eurosceptic political concept or of illiberal theories of democracy, Romanian society broadly accepted the historiographical narrative produced in the transnational paradigm and rejected theses challenging the legitimacy of the Versailles treaties. Romanian historians often stress that the Versailles system was confirmed – in its essential lines – both at the end of the Second World War and by the Helsinki Final Act; border changes in Europe (with the exception of the 'velvet divorce' between the Czech Republic and Slovakia) were achieved only through war (see the implosion of former Yugoslavia).

Romania is one of many countries – including Austria, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Baltic States, and Serbia – with a state policy of celebrating the 100-year anniversary of the creation of the modern state or its territorial extension. In July 2016, for the celebration of 100 years from the entrance into war on the side of the Entente, the Centenary Department was established, subordinated to the Prime Minister. A year later, in 2017, the structure was integrated into the Ministry of Culture. That same year, the government adopted the 'Law Concerning the Centenary of the War for National Unification (1916-1919) and the Centenary of the Great Union'. This is a significant act for historical narrative, as it legally formalises a historical reality, mainly concerning the causal relation between the First World War and the creation of Greater Romania. The interwar title returns and the war's purpose is teleologically fixed: 'for national unification'. Significantly, the First World War period was also extended past 11 November 1918, in order to commemorate the victims of

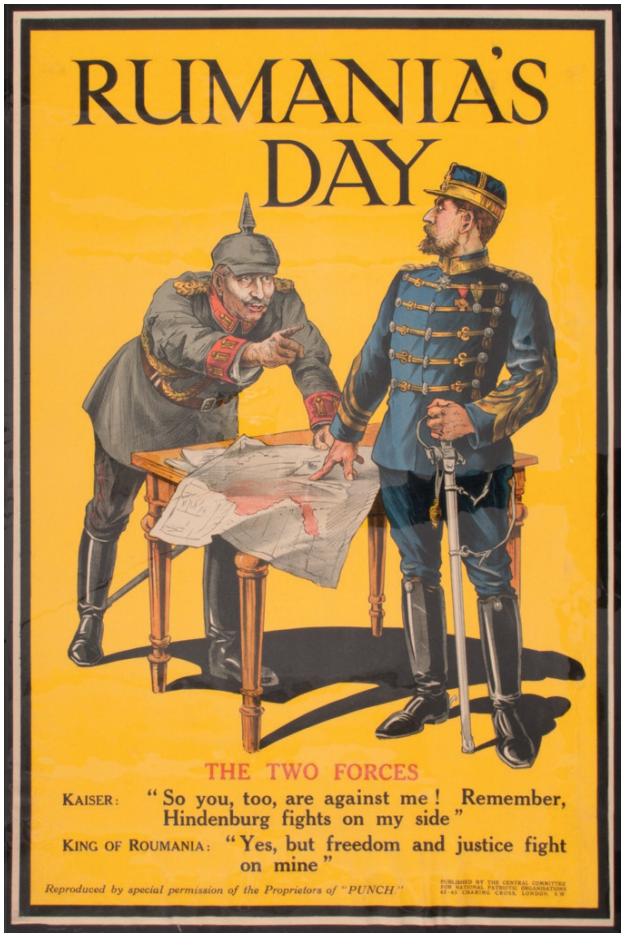

Fig. 6: British propaganda poster with the Romania´s entrance into war on the side of the Entente in 1916, designed for the Central Committee for National Patriotic Organisations, London.

the 1919 military confrontations (the Romanian army's campaign against the Hungarian Soviet Republic .

The celebration of the Centenary has become a space of political consensus between Romanian political parties, for multiple reasons. Political and intellectual elites considered that, as after Romania's NATO and EU accessions there was no other national project around which society could rally, a new symbolic moment such as the memory of the First World War and the Great Union could be a useful tool for social mobilisation. In a general context in which mass media mainly offers negative and conflicting news, the Great Union's symbolism can have a positive effect, helping to reduce Romania's social anomy. The manner in which the Great War has been commemo-

rated, with a special emphasis on memorialising all victims, is also an implicit assumption of the European Union's liberal democratic values.

Romania celebrated the end of the First World War and the Great Union in several different ways: local authorities organise public events within the main memorial places, in memory of those who died in the war,[20] and a vast programme of publications about the First World War and political and diplomatic events related to the Great Union has been published. The Romanian Academy took on the coordination of scientific publications, but several universities and research centres are also working towards this objective; the government awards several types of distinctions and medals for people, civilian and military institutions or administrative-territorial units (towns, villages). The Romanian Orthodox Church, claiming an essential role in national identity, inaugurated at 25 November 2018 the National Cathedral of Redemption, a few days before the centenary of the Great Union. According to the Romanian Patriarchate's official discourse, the gigantic building serves as the 'national cathedral', thus expressing the thesis of unity between the Romanian ethnic group and the Christian-Orthodox confession. This approach to the main ecclesiastical institution of Romania is very influential in the public discourse. Although Romanian society does not fully accept this hegemonically ambitious narrative of the Orthodox Church, especially in the intellectual segments defined as 'European', it is tacitly supported by most political parties, for electoral purposes.[21]

Concluding Observation

Over the last century, the memorialisation of the First World War has witnessed various contents, forms, and motivations, related to the specificity of the political regime and the influence of geopolitical factors. The massive losses Romania suffered during the three years of military conflict imposed a heavy burden on the Kingdom of Romania and instilled the need to keep alive the memory of deceased soldiers. This has meant the creation of memorial places in settlements in which the main military confrontations took place. The war also figured strongly in interwar literature and visual arts. During the Second World War, the heroism of soldiers from the preceding world conflagration was offered as a model of military bravery, the more so as some of them, including General Ion Antonescu, had participated in both wars.

Soviet ideological correctness expelled the 1917-1918 period from Romanian history, only for it to be gradually reintroduced after 1960 in official memorialisation. Artistic productions financed by the communist state were the most important political message of the Communist Party in taking on and becoming reconciled with its own past. Afterwards, in the context of celebrating the Centenary of the Great Union, the memory of the Great War was revitalised, with an emphasis both on the war's drama – including all victims, from both the Entente and the Central Powers – and on the patriotism of Romanian soldiers. Romania's current narrative emphasises both the drama produced by the war (the humanist message) and the need to keep awake the nation's conscience in case the country's unity is threatened (the patriotic message).

Officially, the Great War ended a century ago, but its legacy was too strong, since Germany's National Socialist totalitarian regime wanted to rewrite its end through a new world conflagration. The fourth and fifth generation after the First World War hope that the demons of populist extremism will remain locked in the past – yet historians know that humanity only rarely learns from its errors.

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