

The Legionary Movement and the Challenges of Modernity

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Abstract: The Legionary Movement and the Challenges of Modernity. Drawing upon valuable recent contributions brought about by an expanding new historiographical consensus in fascist studies, this article will briefly explore the manner in which the Legion of the Archangel Michael, regarded as the Romanian version of fascism, assigned significance to the evolution of historical and suprahistorical time, mainly but not exclusively focusing on modernity as a central component of the temporal pattern put forth by the movement. A careful selection of Legionary assessments of the modern era will be integrated into a wider temporal projection, assembled from various primary sources of notable ideological relevance. The resulting theoretical instrument which the article proposes is a sequential model consisting of five distinct, yet profoundly related chronological phases identifiable in Legionary thought, which will be successively analyzed in the course of the paper.

Keywords: fascism; the Legionary Movement; modernity; modernization; temporality.

Rezumat: Mişcarea legionară și provocarea modernității. Inspirat de valoroasele contribuții recente ale dinamicului câmp al studiilor fascismului, în contextul consolidării și extinderii perpetue a unui nou consens istoriografic, prezentul demers constituie o explorare succintă a manierei în care Legiunea „Arhanghelului Mihail”, înțeleasă ca variantă autohtonă a fascismului continental, s-a raportat, în formulările sale ideologice, asupra temporalității istorice și supraistorice, centrul de greutate al analizei fiind dat de reprezentările modernității, una dintre componentele diacronice fundamentale în interpretarea legionară a timpului. În acest scop, o suită de considerații teoretice privitoare la complexa problematică a modernității, formulate în interiorul mișcării legionare de către doctrinarii reprezentativi ai acesteia, vor fi integrate unei proiecții temporale mai ample, asamblată prin selectarea atentă a unor surse primare de notabilă relevanță ideologică. Instrumentul teoretic astfel alcătuit, pe care articolul de față îl propune în ideea mai bune înțelegeri a subiectului avut în vedere, se constituie ca un model secvențial alcătuit din cinci faze cronologice distincte, dar profund interconectate, pe care analiza de mai jos le va explora succesiv.

Cuvinte-cheie: fascism; mișcarea legionară; modernitate; modernizare; temporalitate.

Introduction

From the beginning of the post-war era, the convoluted ties between fascism and modernity have been approached along numerous lines of inquiry by several generations of scholars. For decades on end, the strikingly complex, albeit deeply idiosyncratic fascist interpretations of modernity have been distorted by a consistent margin of the historiographical field, with some of the dominating views either labeling it as an outright rejection of the modern world, or inserting it into obsolete teleological narratives, as an inherently retrograde phenomenon irreconcilable with modernity¹.

Fortunately, intellectual transformations such as the gradual fading away of the Cold War rhetoric and its underlying implications², the conceptual revisions of modernity in social sciences, no longer regarded as linear, unique or clearly compartmentalized³, as well as the paradigmatic shifts allowing fascist studies to thrive in the past few decades have all determined substantial reevaluations of the intricate relationship between fascism and modernity. With the focus of Western academia turning towards the ideology of fascism and its cultural underpinnings, an expanding historiographical consensus has been increasingly preoccupied with the “[fascist] bid to establish an alternative, rooted modern culture”⁴, as Roger Griffin has eloquently described it. In linking this “rooted modernity” to the “palingenetic myth”⁵ affirmed to lie at its core, newer studies have identified a distinctive temporality embedded in the worldview of fascism, a revolutionary perception of time, determining a specific understanding of modernity⁶. Authors such as Sven Reichardt and Fernando Esposito have convincingly argued that fascism elaborated its own temporal design, morphing multiple interconnected components into a “nexus between future-oriented dynamics and an eternity which obviously encompassed the

¹ Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945*, Routledge, New York, 1996, pp. 455-459.

² Valentin Săndulescu, „Modernism și fascism: repere ale unei evoluții istoriografice”, in Sorin Antohi (coord.), *Modernism și antimodernism. Noi perspective interdisciplinare*, Editura Cuvântul, Bucharest, 2008, pp. 207-208.

³ Arnd Bauerkämper, „A New Consensus? Recent Research on Fascism in Europe, 1918-1945”, in *History Compass*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2006, p. 538.

⁴ Roger Griffin, „Fascism’s Modernist Revolution: A New Paradigm for the Study of Right-wing Dictatorships”, in *Fascism. Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2016, p. 105.

⁵ For the inaugural stance on palingenesis as the core of fascist ideology, an idea considerably broadened and refined in later works, see Idem, *The Nature of Fascism*, Routledge, London, 1993.

⁶ Idem, „Fixing Solutions: Fascist Temporalities as Remedies for Liquid Modernities”, in *Journal of Modern European History*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2015, pp. 16-17.

past”⁷. For its part, Romanian fascism, epitomized by the Legion of the Archangel Michael, was certainly no stranger to the ideological reworking of conventional chronology, hence the conflation of traditional temporal sequences and their radical reinterpretation within an all-encompassing utopian project, revolving around what Raul Cârstocea has adequately termed the “mythical idea of the atemporal nation spanning past, present and future”⁸.

Drawing upon such innovative research, this article will attempt to briefly outline the manner in which some of the most influential ideologues of the Legionary movement understood both the general evolution of time and the particular significance of modernity. For this purpose, a selection of Legionary assessments of the modern era will be integrated into a wider temporal projection, assembled from various primary sources of notable ideological relevance. The resulting theoretical instrument will be a sequential model consisting of five distinct, yet profoundly related chronological phases identifiable in Legionary thought, successively analyzed in the course of the argument: I) the mythical past, ambivalently depicted as both an idyllic primordial state of the national community and an age of continuous struggle, with the two conflicting representations being conceived as mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory; II) the disruptive modernity, envisioned as a period of great continental turmoil as well as national decay, a massive rupture of the natural historical continuum with far-reaching consequences; III) the anomic present, a time of lacking order and reigning chaos, of perpetual crisis and continuous transition, confined between a long forsaken past and a yet unreachable future; IV) the utopian future established through revolutionary means, bringing about the materialization of the palingenetic myth and the radical transformation of man and society, nation and state; V) the redemptive transcendence of the nation, a definitive break with history and immanence, indicating the fulfillment of a sacred, God-given mandate, followed by the continuation of collective national life in the spiritual realm.

I. The Mythical Past

The starting sequence of the Legionary temporal pattern concerns the distant mythical past, set between an indefinite time immemorial and a historically anchored period which preceded the dawn of the modern era. While the frequent references to this unclearly defined past do not equate, as it

⁷Fernando Esposito, Sven Reichardt, „Revolution and Eternity. Introductory Remarks on Fascist Temporalities”, in *Journal of Modern European History*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2015, p. 43.

⁸Raul Cârstocea, „Breaking the Teeth of Time: Mythical Time and the «Terror of History» in the Rhetoric of the Legionary Movement in Interwar Romania”, in *Journal of Modern European History*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2015, p. 80.

has been claimed, with the movement simply assuming a “regressive”, backward-looking vision⁹, there is nonetheless great ideological significance attributed to this time span.

As hinted above, the mythical past was simultaneously invested with two conflicting, yet ultimately compatible meanings in Legionary thought. The first one was indebted to the “organicist” philosophy of Oswald Spengler, whose representation of history as a cycle of “eternal formation and transformation”, in which cultures and civilizations are governed by the same natural laws applied to living beings¹⁰, profoundly influenced the views of several leading intellectuals of the Legion, keen on interpreting the evolution of the Romanian nation in spenglerian terms and prone to emphasize the importance of social organisms, while at the same time downplaying the significance of their comprising units. Following these lines of thought, major ideologues of the movement, such as Vasile Marin, uncompromisingly affirmed the original primacy of the nation at the expense of the individual, with the latter being inherently reduced to a mere “tool” subordinated to the unitary national community¹¹. The mythical past was an integral component of this collectivist outlook since, as Ion Victor Vojen, another important Legionary theorist, vividly explained, it was the foundational era inaugurating the particular historical course of the nation, a pathway both dictated by the laws of organicism and consecrated by divine will¹². Aside from this prevalent communitarian ethos, the idealized Legionary projection of the mythical past was connected to another essential component, compatible with the larger narrative – the cult of the ancestral land. As recent contributions by Constantin Iordachi have demonstrated, the movement devised a double ideological axis which firmly situated its defining guidelines on two levels: a vertical one, epitomized by the cult of the Archangel Michael, the eponymous patron saint of the Legion, aligned towards transcendence, and a horizontal one, earthly oriented, illustrated by the cult of the “land of the forefathers”¹³. The latter was extensively developed in the writings of the charismatic founding leader of the movement, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, for whom the nation was “a tree with its

⁹Radu Ioanid, „The Sacralised Politics of the Romanian Iron Guard”, in *Totalitarian Movements & Political Religions*, vol. 5, no. 3, winter 2004.

¹⁰Oswald Spengler, *Declinul Occidentului. Schiță de morfologie a istorie*, Editura Beladi, Craiova, vol. 1, 1996, p. 38.

¹¹Vasile Marin, *Fascismul: organizarea constituțională a statului corporativ*, Serviciul și editura Colportajului Legionar, Bucharest, pp. 21-22.

¹²Ioan Victor Vojen, „Între Națiune și partid politic”, in *Revista Mea*, no. 5, July-August 1936.

¹³Constantin Iordachi, „De la credința naționalistă la credința legionară. Palingenezie romantică, militarism și fascism în România modernă”, in Constantin Iordachi (ed.), *Fascismul european 1918-1945. Ideologie, experimente totalitare și religii politice*, Editura Institutului pentru Studierea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, Cluj-Napoca, 2014, pp. 368-370.

roots grounded in the soil of the country"¹⁴. This metaphoric illustration of the binding tie between mythical past and ancestral land was further consolidated by Codreanu's conviction that the Romanian nation was unique insofar as it did not arrive on its destined land from any other place, instead having been "born on it from the haze of the past" and having become bound to it through the "bones of the ancestors who rest in its soil"¹⁵, particularly the heroic figures of the martyrs who had sacrificed themselves for the sake of the national community.

Herein lies the second meaning of this ambivalent representation: the mythical past deemed as a time of major turmoil, of persistent external threats and devastating foreign invasions, only held back through the glorious sacrifice of those relentless leaders and warriors of the national pantheon. Dark accounts of this time of great unrest, such as those of Alexandru Cantacuzino, a notable representative of the Legion, reveal the image of a "barren desert", throughout which a nation "thirsty" for freedom, justice and dignity resiliently made its way, eventually quenching its thirst from a few "violent springs [of water]"¹⁶, an allegorical reference to its battle-hardened heroes. Besides the essential contribution of its martyrs, the primordial nation was said to have survived the profound commotions of this era by properly channeling its spiritual resources, an argument put forth by the Legionary ideologue Ion Banea, who emphasized the fundamental importance of the religious ideal throughout the nation's early historical course, stating that one of the main explanations for its resilience was an unwavering faith, an enduring "attachment to the Holy Church and its teachings" which only confirmed the sacred destiny of a people "born in the shadow of the cross"¹⁷.

While this paradoxical reconstruction of the mythical past uncovered two apparently contradictory representations, they became mutually reinforcing given the fact that they both projected the image of a national community able to transcend the traditional constraints of history¹⁸, a vision which did not imply, however, that its pressures would prove less challenging.

¹⁴ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Pentru legionari*, second edition, Editura „Totul pentru țară”, Sibiu, 1936.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 89-90.

¹⁶ Alexandru Cantacuzino, „Cum suntem”, Editura Curierul, Sibiu, 1937, p. 6.

¹⁷ Ion Banea, *Ce este și ce vrea mișcarea legionară. Cărțică pentru săteni*, third edition, Tipografia Veștemean, Sibiu, 1941, pp. 8-10.

¹⁸ Raul Cârstocea, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

II. The Disruptive Modernity

The second phase of the Legionary chronological blueprint incorporated another stage of the past, covering the developments of modernity from its early onset until the inter-war era. Like other permutations of fascism, the Legionary movement was certainly not hostile to modernity as a matter of principle, nor did it inherently reject the multifaceted and thoroughly transformative “nexus of forces” that was the process of modernization¹⁹. However, its main ideologues unleashed a continuous wave of violent criticism aimed at the mutations modernity brought about, regarding it as a concatenation of disruptive forces culminating in nothing short of a derailment of history, an interpretation by no means particular to fascist ideology.

As several authors who have extensively studied modernity have emphasized in their works, this was an age of temporal recalibrations felt by contemporaries and later observers alike, hence its characterization by Reinhart Koselleck as a time of “temporalization” containing within itself a pervasive “alteration of rhythm”²⁰, its description by Zygmunt Bauman as a “liquid” and “flexible” state in profound contrast with the static “pre-modern solids”²¹, or its depiction by Peter Osborne as a readjustment of temporal sequences through the “openness towards an indeterminate future characterized only by its prospective transcendence of the historical present and its relegation of this present to a future past”²². As far as fascism is concerned, numerous contributions of the past couple of decades have argued that the phenomenon can hardly be comprehended without first acknowledging that, as Michael Mann put it, “fascists have been at the heart of modernity”²³ and that fascism itself, in the words of Emilio Gentile, attempted to “master the processes of modernization” and to “conquer” modernity itself²⁴. Significantly, in his most recent monograph, Roger Griffin proposed a novel definition of fascism as a “species of political modernism” whose intention to regenerate the nation involved the structuring of an alternative

¹⁹Roger Griffin, „Modernity Under the New Order. The Fascist Project for Managing the Future”, in Matthew Feldman (ed.), *A Fascist Century. Essays by Roger Griffin*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008, pp. 27-28.

²⁰Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004, p. 11.

²¹Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 3-9.

²²Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time. Modernity and the Avant-Garde*, Verso, London, 1995, p. 14.

²³Michael Mann, *Fascists*, Cambridge University Press, p. 1.

²⁴Emilio Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism*, Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 2003, p. 44.

model of modernity²⁵. Such an aspiration was strongly influenced by the fact that, as many other radical critics before them, fascists assessed the project of modernity as an ultimately incomplete endeavor²⁶, therefore seeking to appropriate it, to purify it and to carry it out on their own terms.

To these extents, the ideology of the Legionary movement was once again illustrative for the worldview of generic fascism, with its evaluation of the modern era as a span of all-encompassing decadence, a time of individual and collective, physical and spiritual degeneration²⁷. From the Legionary perspective, the origins of this deplorable state were twofold. Firstly, there was the excessively abstract philosophy of the Enlightenment, whose major thinkers were harshly criticized for having developed idealistic theories which never seemed to concern "the living, moving matter" – man himself²⁸, a long standing denunciation of modern thought in conservative and radical circles both throughout the continent and within the autochthonous intellectual environment. Given the particular nature of the fascist mindset, it is unsurprising that the firm rejection of Enlightenment's established order of reason in favor of fascism's own mythical order²⁹ was clearly one of the main tenets of Legionary ideology. Secondly, there was the major decay following the French Revolution, which had allegedly brought forth a set of utopian aspirations promptly confiscated by malicious elites and insidiously utilized as instruments for the exploitation of defenseless national communities. Yet again, the Legionary projection came in line with the generic fascist perspective, which depicted the French Revolution as a tyrannical experiment inaugurating a deceitful discourse of freedom and equality, the antithesis of what the fascist revolutionary project purported itself to be³⁰. On top of this double edged criticism, the Legion added one of the defining elements of the imaginary of the far right – the fictitious universal Jewish plot, a central component of the broader narrative it proposed. As the theories of Ion I. Moța, arguably the second most important figure of the movement, prove at great length, the deviations of modernity were understood to have a deeper, conspiratorial explanation beyond the visible ones, which could be

²⁵Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism. The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2007, pp. 181-182.

²⁶Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 230-231.

²⁷ Roger Griffin, „Modernity, Modernism, and Fascism. A «Mazeway Resynthesis»”, in *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 15, no. 1, January 2008, p. 11.

²⁸ Victor Vojen, „Evoluția doctrinelor politice. Geneza utopiei democate”, in *Calendarul*, 21 September 1932.

²⁹Fernando Esposito, *Fascism, Aviation and Mythical Modernity*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2015, pp. 77-78.

³⁰George L. Mosse, „Fascism and the French Revolution”, in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 24, no. 1, January 1989, pp. 5-6.

summarized as follows: while the dawn of the modern era, under the immediate impact of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, did bring notable benefits, such as technical progress and an increase in wealth, the mechanisms generating them were quickly taken over by a cabal reuniting the most influential political and financial circles of the world, invariably Jewish or dependent upon Jewish interests, as well as of the highest ranks of the freemasonry, serving as a designated rallying point for the occult forces around the globe³¹.

With these convictions guiding their worldview, Legionary ideologues were concerned about the dysfunctional model of modernity and the strenuous path to modernization they thought had been imposed upon the Romanian nation by pervasive external interests. Certainly, Romania had to confront the relentless issue of backwardness throughout the entirety of its modern existence and, given its specific set of circumstances, it could hardly emulate or even closely resemble some aspects of Western modernity, as shown by the poor functioning of its institutions, by its limited degree of social mobilization, by its archaic economic structures, by its narrow technological penetration and so on³². At the same time, it has been argued that between the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the country did manage to evolve from a “vertical” model of national construction, in which modern visions were only shared by a small margin of intellectuals and political leaders, to a “lateral” model, more dependent on extended political participation and genuine structural reform, which brought it closer to the advances of modernity³³.

However, the Legionary temporal pattern did not register any progress, instead underlining a constant direction of decadence, as shown by a wide range of processes and events described as flawed, either by way of faulty implementation or by their very nature. One of the most harmful such events was considered to be the Revolution of 1848, depicted as the fateful historical turn which first brought the nation under the influence of a destructive project of external fabrication, completely removed from local realities and promoted by an unpatriotic elite – a stern condemnation which implicitly placed the Legion’s original revolutionary project in perfect contrast

³¹Ion I. Moța, *Cranii de lemn: Articole 1922 – 1936*, Editura „Totul pentru Țară”, Bucharest, 1937, pp. 245-249.

³²Andrew C. Janos, „Modernization and Decay in Historical Perspective. The Case of Romania”, in Kenneth Jowitt, (ed.), *Social Change in Romania, 1860 – 1940. A Debate in a European Nation*, Berkeley, California, 1978, p. 100.

³³Sorin Alexandrescu, „Modernism și anti-modernism: Din nou cazul românesc”, in Sorin Antohi (coord.), *Modernism și antimodernism. Noi perspective interdisciplinare*, Editura Cuvântul, Bucharest, 2008, p. 134.

with the one under scrutiny³⁴. Later on, as Marin claimed, the national community found itself confined within the constraining boundaries of an artificial state – by no means a national one – created and governed by a ruling class obedient to foreign interests, thus perpetuating a predicament in which the nation was no longer the “master of its own destiny”³⁵. The anti-national developments of the recent past were perceived as all the more damaging on account of democracy, seen as the most powerful catalyst of degeneration among the numerous vicissitudes of modernity. For Marin, democracy was not only the epitome of modern decadence, but also the main existential threat posed to the survival of national communities, given its numerous malignant implications, among which the most frequently counted were the disregard shown towards the legitimate interests of the nation in favor of the trivial benefits of the state, the rule of individualism at the expense of the people as a social unity, the “mechanical” representation of reality which completely overlooked the natural laws of history, the sole focus on form and the lack of an authentic substance, the cynical manipulation of amorphous masses, the chronic inability to breed capable elites³⁶ etc.

Ultimately, from a spiritual standpoint, the modern world with its democratic ethos was thought to have “turned man into the God of man”³⁷, as Vojen put it, abandoning the axiological foundations of the previous age and recklessly engaging in what Cantacuzino described as the “extinguishing of religious passions”, since the modern man had started to worship the “idols of progress and wealth” instead³⁸. With Legionary intellectuals announcing an imminent and definitive transformation of the nation and the world alike, the change of course they envisioned was expected to begin with a process defined by Moța as the reinstatement of the “primacy of the spiritual”³⁹, requiring a radical rechanneling of modernity itself.

³⁴Valentin Săndulescu, „Generation, Regeneration, and Discourses of Identity in the Intellectual Foundations of Romanian Fascism: The Case of the Axa Group”, in Diana Mishkova, BalázsTrencsényi, Marja Jalava (eds.), *‘Regimes of Historicity’ in Southeastern and Northern Europe, 1890–1945: Discourses of Identity and Temporality*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014, p. 217.

³⁵Vasile Marin, *Crez de generație*, the fourth edition, Colecția Europa München, Karlsfeld, 1977, pp. 68-70.

³⁶Vasile Marin, „De la formalismul democratic la naționalismul constructiv”, in *Axa*, no. 19, 1 October 1933.

³⁷Ioan Victor Vojen, „Drumul credinței”, in *Axa*, 5 March 1933.

³⁸Alexandru, Cantacuzino, „Între lumea legionară și lumea comunistă”, 1935, in *Opere complete*, Editura Antet XX Press, Filipeștii de Târg, no year, pp. 7-8.

³⁹Ion I. Moța, „Acesta nu e sufletul nostru!”, in *Pământul Strămoșesc*, no. 24, 25 December 1928.

III. The Anomic Present

The third stage of the Legionary timeline was contemporary to the movement itself, being set in the anomic inter-war years, a present of lacking order seen by a substantial margin of the ones living through it as a time of great uncertainty. After a traumatic world war, looked back upon as the climax of a prolonged moral malady⁴⁰, the intellectual climate of the continent was particularly suitable to the resurfacing of archetypal myths, such as the “eternal transition” or the “perpetual crisis”⁴¹, promptly identified in the developments of the period by some of those who felt most uprooted by its shifts. Among the latter, fascists perceived with remarkable intensity the effects of the so-called “order-dissolving spirit of modernity”⁴², a state they tried to break through by way of what Roger Griffin has suggestively called “mazeway resynthesis”⁴³, a complex endeavor aiming at the reinstatement of order and structure. Furthermore, this stance involved the adoption of what the same author characterized as a mindset of “Aufbruch”⁴⁴, an awareness of transition deriving from the firsthand witnessing of the succession of historical phases, coupled with the impulse to directly intervene and influence the process.

Certainly, the manner in which the Legionary movement sought to handle this protean phase of history was greatly dependent on the particular Romanian context. Following the war, the triumphant, unified and enlarged nation was confronted with the daunting task of redefining itself⁴⁵. An intense political and cultural confrontation rapidly ensued, one whose main lines of argument concerned Romania’s national identity, as well as the proper historical course the country was supposed to follow. These crucial matters were heatedly debated by representatives of modern and anti-modern positions, democratic and anti-democratic orientations, Western and Eastern allegiances, simultaneously competing for a monopoly on the core values and principles of the anticipated new order⁴⁶. In the midst of this highly disputed

⁴⁰Roger Griffin, „Tunnel Visions and Mysterious Trees: Modernist Projects of National and Racial Regeneration, 1880–1939”, in Marius Turda, Paul J. Weindling (eds.), *Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900–1940*, Central European University Press, Budapest, 2007, p. 443.

⁴¹Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue*, third edition, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 28.

⁴²Fernando Esposito, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁴³Roger Griffin, „Modernity, Modernism, and Fascism”, p. 14.

⁴⁴Idem, *Modernism and Fascism*, p. 9.

⁴⁵Irina Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism în România Mare. 1918–1930*, Editura Humanitas, Bucharest, 1998, p. 16.

⁴⁶Sorin Alexandrescu, *Privind înapoi, modernitatea*, Editura Univers, Bucharest, 1999, p. 135.

intellectual battle, many conceptions rooted in the pre-war era were recovered and found a thriving environment under the new circumstances, among them the argument that national specificity is to be preserved at all costs, the tendency to reject foreign models and influences, a wide array of ethnic stereotypes, especially anti-Semitic ones, as well as negative evaluations of a supposedly corrupted modernity⁴⁷.

On this background, the Legionary movement came with a vision of its own, one drawing upon various preexistent intellectual strands and seeking to seize and subdue a present regarded as a pivotal point between an immediate past to be broken with and an imminent future to be prepared⁴⁸. Among the various national projects emerging in inter-war Romania, the one advanced by Legionary theorists was easily discernable as the most radical, advocating a sweepingly “totalizing”⁴⁹ revolutionary transformation of politics and society, culture and morality, the only cure for anomic dissolution. Relentlessly confronting a tormenting sense of alienation, which Moța vividly described as a “lingering connection with another world” and as “wandering through a life that does not belong to us”, the Legionaries saw themselves as the carriers of a sacred mission, as chosen men whose earthly goal was to “build up again what has been desecrated, squandered and cursed by others”⁵⁰, by salvaging the remnants of the mythical past and ingraining them into the utopian future.

Furthermore, in typical fascist manner, the movement configured its revitalizing quest at the scale of generations, with one of its ideological cornerstones being the idea of the self-sacrificing nationalist youth acting as an authentic *deus ex machina* for the national community. While generational consciousness, as well as a variety of themes pertaining to the notion of generational conflict, have been shown to predate the First World War by a couple of centuries, it was only after the greatest conflict mankind had ever experienced that, as Robert Wohl affirmed, “youth had become a state of mind, a style of life” and an uncompromising force willing to “rescue Europe” from itself⁵¹, a conviction which fascism, for its part, tirelessly affirmed. As far as the Legionary worldview was concerned, since history itself was supposed to be governed by inexorable laws of succession and rejuvenation, the coming

⁴⁷Răzvan Pârâianu, „Culturalist Nationalism and Anti-Semitism in Fin-de-Siècle Romania”, in Marius Turda, Paul J. Weindling (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 354-359.

⁴⁸Raul Cârstocea, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-87.

⁴⁹Constantin Iordachi, „A Continuum of Dictatorships: Hybrid Totalitarian Experiments in Romania, 1937 - 1944”, in António Costa Pinto, Aristotle Kallis (eds.), *Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorships in Europe*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2014, p. 237.

⁵⁰Ion I. Moța, *Cranii de lemn*, pp. 8-12.

⁵¹Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1979, pp. 204-229.

to the forefront of the radical youth was only, as Marin proclaimed, a natural phenomenon⁵², a view shared, with slight variations, by all the main representatives of the movement. For Cantacuzino, the “higher pursuit” of Romania’s new generation was nothing short of an “apostolate”, the holy responsibility to “recreate [...] the social and physical structure of the nation” on spiritual grounds⁵³. Similarly, Banea, who understood the notion of generation to designate “the totality of individuals belonging to a nation, fighting for the same ideal, carrying in their souls the same fate, experiencing the same holy aspirations and being shaken by the same longings”, described the “great ruptures, which mark the endings and beginnings of eras in the existence of nations” in generational terms, with the moment of highest transformative magnitude being identified in the present⁵⁴. Perhaps the most relevant perspective on the matter belonged to Codreanu himself, whose outlook, moving past the polarizing tensions between the traditional idyll and the dynamic novelty of contemporaneity⁵⁵, unveiled a larger, metaphorically defined temporal frame. Along the historical path of the nation, Codreanu claimed, there was a “bright line” indicating the right course which the nation was supposed to follow as it advanced through various stages of history⁵⁶. It was on this luminous line of righteousness that glorious figures of prior ages had situated themselves, thus rising above their times, and it was on the same axis of virtuousness that the Legion needed to locate itself⁵⁷ in order to guarantee the continuity between the ancestral past of heroes and martyrs, the present of a revitalizing generation and the future in which national destiny was meant to find fulfillment.

IV. The Utopian Future

The fourth phase of the Legionary temporal progression consisted of an indefinite yet imminent future, an eagerly anticipated golden age which was supposed to bring about the materialization of all previously conceived utopian aspirations of the movement. Illustrating what Roger Eatwell has suggestively described as “the fascist matrix”, the idealized representations of the future in generic fascist thought followed several intertwined directions,

⁵²Vasile Marin, „O singură ideologie: fapta”, in *Axa*, no. 5, 22 January 1933.

⁵³Alex. Cantacuzino, „Studentimea română în fața streinătății”, in *Cuvântul Argeșului*, no. 10, 8 November 1935.

⁵⁴Ion Banea, „Generația tânără și credința ei”, in *Cuvântul Nou*, 25 March 1936.

⁵⁵Roland Clark, *Sfântă tinerețe legionară. Activismul fascist în România interbelică*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2015, p. 149.

⁵⁶Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-76.

⁵⁷*Ibidem*.

concerning the radical transformation of man, the metamorphosis of the nation and the reconfiguration of society⁵⁸. Moreover, fascism sought to extract the utopian blueprint from the realm of “extra-temporality” and integrate it in the immanent course of historical evolution⁵⁹, with the path towards the chimerical future necessarily involving an acceleration of revolutionary action, the fundamental means towards the reinstatement of mythical time⁶⁰. In the case of the Legion, as Constantin Iordachi has shown, the concept of revolution was granted a double meaning which significantly determined the temporal perception of the movement: on the one hand, there was a negative connotation, relating to the dissolution of order and the prevalence of chaos; on the other hand, there was a more etymologically accurate meaning, referring to the return to an original state – the mythical past, hence the “concomitantly regressive and futurist” nature of the Legionary utopia⁶¹.

Since the future needed to definitively address the short comings of the present⁶², Legionary theorists tried to design all-encompassing revolutionary programs whose potential implementation was meant to correct the deviations of modernity and to overcome the bleak prospects of the anomic present. One of the most elaborate takes on revolutionary transformation, belonging to Mihail Polihroniade, an influential ideologue of the movement, had a strikingly eclectic content, incorporating, among others, a “revolution of ethics”, major institutional reforms, a significant demographic readjustment on ethnic grounds, an autarkic reorientation of economy, a wide range of radical social policies and a plan for cultural renewal⁶³.

However, while the direct political and social ramifications of the projected metamorphoses were clearly not ignored, it was the anthropological drive of the revolutionary endeavor which held ideological prevalence in Legionary thought. The image of the new man, of the “Romanian of tomorrow”, a gradually emerging ideal evolving at the pace of the movement itself throughout the inter-war years⁶⁴, consistently remained the epitome of the utopian future in the discourse of the Legion. Codreanu’s catchphrase, paradoxically turned into an electoral slogan, which famously stated that “the

⁵⁸Roger Eatwell, „Introduction: New Styles of Dictatorship and Leadership in Interwar Europe”, in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, vol. 7, no. 2, June 2006, pp. 132-133.

⁵⁹Roger Griffin, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

⁶⁰Fernando Esposito, Sven Reichardt, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁶¹Constantin Iordachi, „De la credința naționalistă la credința legionară”, pp. 370-372.

⁶²Raul Cârstocea, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁶³Mihail Polihroniade, „Sensul revoluției naționale”, in *Axa*, no. 14, 15 June 1933.

⁶⁴Valentin Săndulescu, „Fascism and its Quest for the «New Man»: The Case of the Romanian Legionary Movement”, in *Studia Hebraica*, no. 4, 2004, p. 354.

country is dying for lack of men, not for lack of [political] programs”⁶⁵ summarized the stance of his movement on the matter. His pledge to inaugurate a glorious new era for the Romanian people, the demand addressed to his followers, “the Carriers of the new Spirit of the Age”, to join the reconstruction of the country so that “its children will blossom, the foreigner will respect it and the enemy will fear it”⁶⁶, implied doing away with an irreparably corrupt human type, most clearly identified among the politicians of the time, portrayed as physical embodiments of national decay, as well as the creation of a novel model a man, “a giant amidst our history, to fight and triumph over the enemies of the Fatherland”, a heroic figure who could only originate in the infallible pedagogical model of “the school of the Legion”⁶⁷.

In its attempt to lay the foundations of the future from the early present in order to hasten its materialization, the Legionary movement advanced a twofold project of anthropological revolution. Firstly, it aimed at the “the taming of the body”, through an extensive range of social initiatives involving the affirmation of a cult of strength, the introduction of a new work ethic and the consistent following of a permanent quest for physical regeneration⁶⁸. Secondly, and more importantly, it strived towards “the taming of the spirit”, through various mobilization methods, integrated into a grandiose revitalization program expected to reinstate “the primacy of the spiritual”⁶⁹. The network of work camps founded by the Legion across the country in the second half of the inter-war period best demonstrated the eagerness of the movement to construct a functional and visible “parallel society”⁷⁰, inhabited by physically and spiritually rejuvenated men. This exemplary societal model, meant to be later extrapolated to the scale of the entire national community, as well as a number of additional initiatives, were conceived as the initial stage of the greater process of “building a new soul” for the “Romania of tomorrow”⁷¹, thus bridging the gap with the utopian future and bringing the nation closer to its ultimate redemption.

⁶⁵Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

⁶⁶ Idem, *Circulări și manifeste. 1927 – 1938*, Colecția „Europa” München, 1981, pp. 2-6.

⁶⁷ Idem, *Pentru legionari*, p. 286.

⁶⁸ Valentin Săndulescu, „«Taming the Body»: Preliminary Considerations Regarding the Legionary Work Camps System (1933-1937)”, in *Historical Yearbook*, vol. 5, 2008, pp. 85-86.

⁶⁹ Valentin Săndulescu, „«Taming the Spirit»: Notes on the Shaping of the Legionary «New Man»”, in Traian Sandu (ed.), *Vers un profil convergent des fascismes? “Nouveau consensus” et religion politique en Europe centrale*, L'Harmattan, Cahiers de la Nouvelle Europe, Paris, 2010, pp. 207-208.

⁷⁰ Rebecca Haynes, „Work Camps, Commerce and the Education of the ‘New Man’ in the Romanian Legionary Movement”, in *The Historical Journal*, vol. 51, nr. 4, decembrie 2008, p. 944.

⁷¹ Mihail Polihroniade, *Tabăra de muncă*, Tipografia Ziarului „Universul”, Bucharest, 1936, p. 1.

V. The Redemptive Transcendence

The fifth and final sequence of the diachronic course envisioned by the Legionary movement consisted of a temporal stage set beyond history itself, a moment of redemptive transcendence with profound eschatological implications, when the Romanian nation was expected to decisively break off from the worldly, profane historical timeline and permanently enter the suprahistorical, sacred realm of eternity, thus fulfilling its divine mandate. While the prospect of temporal regeneration up to the point of “annulling history” was an underlying characteristic of the generic fascist myth⁷², the Legion promoted a particular version of this conception, one that incorporated distinctive national idiosyncrasies, such as what Valentin Săndulescu has accurately described as the impulse “to bypass the Romanian inferiority complex about the historical past, and to actually become a maker of history”⁷³, while at the same time including numerous themes deeply rooted in the spirituality of Orthodox Christianity, as illustrated by the conviction that the national community consisted of the living as well as the dead, striving together for collective rather than individual salvation⁷⁴.

Therefore, Legionary ideologues were keen to integrate the preexisting religious sources they drew upon into a larger fascist blueprint, recalibrating them in accordance with the guidelines of the movement. To that extent, one of the most relevant examples was the cult of martyrdom, elevated, as it has been affirmed, to the status of an “eighth sacrament”⁷⁵, fundamentally connected to transcendence and immortality, but also holding significant worldly value, as an essential tool for the violent carrying out of revolutionary transformation, as suggestively summarized by Moța: “We all have at our disposal the most formidable dynamite, the most irresistible fighting tool, stronger than tanks and machine guns: our own ashes”⁷⁶. A fundamental trait of the spiritually infused

⁷²Fernando Esposito, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

⁷³Valentin Săndulescu, „Sacralised Politics in Action: the February 1937 Burial of the Romanian Legionary Leaders Ion Moța and Vasile Marin”, in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, vol. 8, no. 2, June 2007, p. 265.

⁷⁴Rebecca Ann Haynes, „The Romanian Legionary Movement. Popular Orthodoxy and the Cult of Death”, în Mioara Anton, Florin Anghel, Cosmin Popa (coord.), „Hegemoniile trecutului. Evoluții românești și europene”, Editura Curtea Veche, Bucharest, 2006, p. 117.

⁷⁵Ionuț Florin Biliuță, *The Archangel's Consecrated Servants. An Inquiry in the Relationship between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Iron Guard (1930 - 1941)*, Ph.D thesis, Central European University, Budapest, 2013, pp. 6-7.

⁷⁶Ion I. Moța, „Esențialul”, in *Cuvântul Studențesc*, 17 April 1935.

metaphysical outlook of political radicalism⁷⁷, this fervently expressed willingness to engage in martyrdom, along with other defining ideological features, resulted, in the case of the Legion, in the structuring of what Iordachi has termed “a charismatic scenario of divine salvation”, a religiously inspired narrative internalized by the leaders and the rank-and-file of the movement alike, for whom the Romanian nation was favored by God himself, Codreanu was its chosen providential leader on its holy path to collective salvation⁷⁸, and the self-sacrificing ethos of the movement mediated the transition between the material world and the beyond. Codreanu himself frequently brought up biblical allegories and borrowed dogmatic statements from the discourse of the Church while arguing for the righteous creed of his movement, claiming that the absolute goal of humanity was not “life, but resurrection”, more specifically the “resurrection of nations in the name of Jesus Christ”, with all other aspects of existence being reduced to mere instruments serving this higher purpose⁷⁹. Paramount to his view was the notion that “each nation has its place before the throne of God” and that “the most sublime purpose” to be sought by every national community was reaching the “final moment, resurrecting from the dead”, a temporal break with specific implications in the case of the Romanian nation, since it had been given a particular “mission”, a distinguishing “historical destiny”⁸⁰.

As previously suggested, the Legionary palingenetic project also recovered and adapted to the realities of the inter-war era a prior linear representation of time, which antagonistically situated two mutually exclusive directions: a path of degeneration and decay, and another one of regeneration and progress, the latter brought about by revolutionary transformation⁸¹. This binary evaluation of historical evolution implicitly determined the nature of redemptive transcendence, in so far as it consciously down played the individual aspect and reiterated the spiritual primacy of the collective, a line of argument categorically expressed by Cantacuzino, whose option is uncompromisingly clear: “I, a Romanian soul, will find redemption along with the souls of Romanians, with the soul of the Romanian nation”⁸². Conclusively,

⁷⁷ For the “cosmic” nature of such radical outlooks throughout the past century, see Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000, pp. 145-163.

⁷⁸ Constantin Iordachi, „Fascism in Southeastern Europe. A Comparison between Romania’s Legion of the Archangel Michael and the Croatian Ustaša”, in Roumen Daskalov, Diana Mishkova (eds.), *Entangled Histories of the Balkans. Volume Two: Transfers of Political Ideologies and Institutions*, Brill, Leiden, 2014, pp. 419-421.

⁷⁹ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 397-398.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 398.

⁸¹ Constantin Iordachi, „De la credința naționalistă la credința legionară”, p. 370.

⁸² Alexandru Cantacuzino, „Cum suntem”, Editura Curierul, Sibiu, 1937, pp. 11-14.

the perspective thus assembled, recently described as a variety of “redemption theology”, reinterpreted the interrelation between temporal dimensions and overstated the higher purpose of directing the national community towards atonement, which in turn resulted in the structuring of a specific chronological perception, a particular lens through which the Legionary movement observed the course of time itself⁸³.

Conclusions

In various shapes and forms, modernity – a protean era of major transformation, modernization – a nexus of intricate processes, and modernism – a set of innovative intellectual orientations, have all had a fundamental impact on generic fascism, most pervasively at its cultural and ideological level, a fact now widely acknowledged in the field of fascist studies. Drawing upon recent contributions brought about by a productive and ever-expanding new historiographical consensus, this article attempts to briefly explore, in terms of chronological dynamics, the manner in which the Legion of the Archangel Michael, the Romanian version of fascism, assigned significance to the evolution of historical and suprahistorical time, mainly but not exclusively focusing on modernity as a central component of the temporal pattern put forth by the movement. For this purpose, the analysis followed a diachronic model made up of five sequences, constructed through the critical interpretation of a variety of primary sources, each of the discussed phases revealing worth while interpretative suggestions concerning the Legionary worldview. The final, but by no means fully comprehensive image, one of convoluted progression from the original point of a mythical time, advancing through a disruptive modernity, reaching an anomic present, pushing forward towards a utopian future and ending with redemptive transcendence, might have the potential, if further explored, to provide valuable insights into the inner ideological workings of Romanian fascism.

⁸³Mihai Stelian Rusu, „The Sacralization of Martyric Death in Romanian Legionary Movement: Self-sacrificial Patriotism, Vicarious Atonement, and Thanatic Nationalism”, in *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, vol. 17, no. 2-3, 2016, p. 263.