

Book Reviews

Rudolf Dinu, *L'avamposto sul Danubio della Triplice Alleanza. Diplomazia e politica di sicurezza nella Romania di re Carlo I (1878-1914)*, collection „Dialogoi Politiké”, Aracne Publishing House, Ariccia (Italia), 2015, 212 pages.

Rudolf Dinu is known as a historian both inside and outside Romania's borders particularly because of his contributions on topics touching on the history of international relations, diplomatic and political history and the history of Italian-Romanian relations from the second half of the 19th century – beginning of the 20th. He is a professor at the Faculty of History, Bucharest University, currently active in the field of cultural diplomacy: he was director of the Romanian Culture and Humanist Research from Venice and recently was appointed director at the Accademia di Romania in Roma. Among his most important scientific works we mention: *35 anni di relazioni italo-romene, 1879-1914. Documenti diplomatici italiani* (Univers Enciclopedic Printing House, Bucharest, 2001, with Ion Bulei); *Studi italo-romeni. Diplomazia e società, 1879-1914*, Editura Militară Printing House, Bucharest, 2009); *La Romania nella Grande Guerra. Documenti militari e diplomatici italiani 1914-1918* (Editura Militară Printing House, Bucharest, 2014).

The present book responds to a need of Romanian scientific research, research to which historians also contribute – externalisation, the real need to be better known outside the country and to publish in international languages. Rudolf Dinu has published in specialised magazines from Italy, respectively coordinated the publications of the Romanian Cultural Institute from Venice, *Annuario* and *Quaderni*, both serving the same goal which is to present to the Italian historiography topics of the Romanian history.

The foreword of this book is signed by professor Francesco Guida, one of the foremost Italian specialists in the history of Romania and Eastern Europe, dean of the Faculty of Political Sciences, Roma Tre University. The foreword is followed by an introduction signed by the author, a list of abbreviations and the main contents, structured in seven chapters. At the end there is a small appendix containing documents and a name index. The main idea of the book is to present the manner in which the young Romanian state built its defence strategy in a period that was crucial for its evolution: from obtaining its independence (1878) until the start of World War I. Thus, a first chapter presents the structures, the diplomatic elite and those in charge of

Romania's foreign policy during this period. This chapter brings information about, among others, the diplomatic offices Romania had between its independence and World War I. Chapter two focuses on a topic that weighed heavily in the way "small" Romania shaped its relations with the Central Empires with which it will become allied in 1883: the Danube. The third chapter focuses on a topic that is less debated in our specialised literature: the evolution of Romanian diplomacy during the end of the Bismarck era (1883-1888). The topics covered in this chapter are Romania's position concerning the Rumelia crisis (1885-1886) and Italy joining the Austrian-Romanian treaty in 1888: both topics are presented in a synthetic manner and the relevant details are pointed out.

The fourth chapter of the book is entitled *La diplomazia romana nell'età della Weltpolitik*, and focuses in the alliance crisis and the third treaty between Romania and the Triple Alliance (Dreibund), respectively the period 1889-1892, as well as the topic of Transylvania given Romania's relations with the Triple Alliance at the end of the 19th century. The complicated evolution of the relations between Romania and the Central-European political and military alliance is well created. Particularly the relations between Romania and Austria-Hungary are well illustrated: this is a period when the Romanian problem from Transylvania reached a crisis point without political precedent given the rejection of the Memorandum and the fact that the leaders of this movement were condemned in 1894. Chapter V deals with the Romanian external policy from the Balkan area at the end of the 19th century, an area where Bucharest's interests were no less greater than with regards to Transylvania. Among the less well-known details that we encounter in this chapter we mention Serbia's attempt from 1900 to create a form of regional partnership by means of an alliance with Romania and Romania's attempt from the following year, 1901 to reorganise the Triple Alliance. Chapter VI deals with the activity of Romania's diplomacy in the years before the war, 1908-1913, and focuses on two topics: the attitudes and fears of Romania's diplomacy with regards to the Bosnian crisis from 1909-1909, respectively the manner in which Romania positioned herself in the Balkan wars, 1912-1913. Finally, chapter VII focuses on what is entitled "the end of an era": the period 1913-1916. It is a decisive period and at its end, following hesitations, dilemmas and numerous probings in the political and diplomatic environments Bucharest decided to abandon its alliance with the Central Empires and join the war alongside the Triple Entente.

The book signed by Rudolf Dinu, that we have briefly presented above, represents first and foremost a documentary contribution to the study of Romania's involvement in international relations from the second half of the 19th century – beginning of the 20th. The bibliography of the book is relevant

as it contains archived from Romania's Historical and Diplomatic Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Central National Historical Archives, Bucharest and the Romanian Academy Library, Bucharest. They are proof of the intensity of research conducted by the author, an effort he undertook with the conviction that the introduction in the scientific discourse of information from primary sources enriches historical knowledge. Secondly, the studies the volume offers excel through a spirit of synthesis, through thorough analysis and a great selection of Romanian and international bibliography. Last but not least we want to point out that the author has presented in Italian his results following the research done on the topic of Romania's relations with the political and military body represented by the Central Powers. Thus, the Italian historiography has at the ready a thorough book concerning Romania's approach towards the Central Powers of Central Europe in the period prior to World War I. Beside using information from primary sources and the Romanian bibliography covering this topic, a bibliography to which the Italian and international historiographies have difficult access, Rudolf Dinu's book offers to the same Italian historiography the needed material for a possible comparative approach between the situation of the two countries, Italy and Romania, as they both shared a similar path marked by them joining the Central Powers (1882, respectively 1883) and the decision to join the war alongside the Triple Entente in 1915, respectively 1916.

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Peasants and Politics in Interwar Romania. Perceptions, Mentalities, Propaganda, Edited by Sorin Radu and Oliver Schmitt, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017

The following volume focuses on the complexity of the interwar period of Greater Romania, a country suddenly born after the closure of the First World War. The volume and its vast selection of authors emphasize in decrypting a very sensitive yet crucial topic in order to understand the evolutionary process of the political life in the realm of peasants the vast majority of Romania's population obviously consisting of them. A significant proportion of the population in a country that has always and always will

have a significant amount of peasants and agricultural traditions. Therefore their political impact is unquestionable.

The volume *"Peasants and Politics in Interwar Romania"* challenges itself to present a much nuanced reality in the political life of an everyday peasant during the interwar period. It strives to achieve this feat in sixteen very eye opening chapters which all shed light to a different aspect of everyday political life from the viewpoint of an everyday peasant's life in interwar period Greater Romania, a period of great anomalies for almost all of the newly founded European States post the Versailles treaties.

The volume kicks off with a very strong introduction by the editors Sorin Radu and Oliver Jens Schmitt describing the general aspects and vague theme of the volume that will focus on the specifics of the peasants political life and the challenges they had to face with the old and newly formed political parties in Greater Romania. Then with a simplicity of a coin flip we will be able to see the other side, the political parties viewpoint on how challenging or easy was for certain parties to acquire the much needed votes by the Greater Romanian peasantry, because who controlled the peasant voters more than likely had won the elections in greater Romania in certain periods of time. This situation sheds light to a very gruesome reality of interwar period Romania, that of peasants being used as instruments in the process of making politics, they were subjects of the events and not participants or actors of the events by any means, only in very few instances. Another statement by the editors is the fact that the relevance and a new approach in this volume has been implemented with the attention to detail of various specific fields of the subject and that the volume contrary to previous research findings does not concentrate on agrarianism as a third way path to modernity, this is very important because it is one of the first studies to acknowledge this as a statement in the prologue of the volume. Instead the volume with the contribution of a vast selection of specialist authors have opted to emphasize on the social and political dimension of the peasants integration process and how effective this will be in the case of Greater Romania in its state-nation building endeavor. In many cases the volume also tried to examine a bottom-up viewpoint of the subject although this is many times a way more challenging aspect then the traditional top-down view.

Sorin Radu's article about "Peasant Democracy" or what it was like to Practice Politics in Countryside Romania between the Two World Wars is the first chapter of the volume and sets the tone for the rest of the following chapters with its detailed and much nuanced analyses of the peasantry situation and political integration from a social and political dimension. The author also is presenting the complexity of the situation of the process of political integration of peasants in the country's political life and culture, right

after the end of the Great War. The volume then follows with Șerban Stelu's article about communal political cultures in Interwar Romania examining the effects of Legionary and Cuzist extremism in rural Romania. But of course more studies like his will need to emerge in the future to evaluate this very uneasy subject.

The continuation of the volume stays true to its primary statement and to the prologue of presenting a very nuanced and detailed picture of the peasant situation in interwar Romania. From case studies like Micu Cornel's examination of the mayors and local elites in Bordei Verde, Brăila County, till the situation in Bessarabia and Transylvania all aspects and territories are covered by the authors and their researches focusing on different aspects and different approaches to the subject. We can see it throughout the articles that from an everyday peasant life and political integration process we arrive to the tricky parts of examining the elections, the results of these elections, the campaigns, the methods and so on, the volume gives us very valuable articles in these subjects as well.

From chapter twelve the volume sheds light on a new and very important part on the topic of the volume Politics and Peasants in interwar Romania. From here on it will heavily emphasize the minority aspect of this period focusing on the minority parties, party leaders and peasant integration into the political life of these minorities in Greater Romania.

Egry Gábor strives in His article to examine the constructs of ethnicity in Rural Transylvania and the suspicious nature of the interwar period between the majority and the minorities consisting of Hungarians and not only. While Vasile Ciobanu focuses on the peasantry and political life of the German minority in Transylvania.

Toth Szilárd continues this aspect of the volume with His article, examining the cooperation of the Hungarian Party and the Hungarian Peasantry in Romania. Shedding light on the practical approaches the Party leaders of the minorities took towards their vote casting citizens before and during the political campaigns, the propaganda aspect infused with the electoral methods and also examining their involvement and effects in interwar Romania clearly symbolizing the Hungarian minority political nature and pragmatic practices during this period.

The closure of the volume consists of two very distinct and interesting topics. After witnessing the political life and the integration of the Hungarian and German peasantry in interwar Romanian politics, we can clearly see how nuanced case studies can be born. Pintilescu Corneliu adds on top of this and lives up to our expectation with his article, where he examines the Saxon Press in Transylvania in the period of 1935-1941 and how the "Nazification process" of the local media has influenced the political life and integration of the Saxons

in Transylvania. Duminica Ivan contributes with the final chapter to the volume, where he examines the policy options of Bulgarians in Bessarabia during the period of 1919-1940 completing the circle of this very detailed and nuanced volume, covering all important aspects of this difficult period.

To conclude, the volume *Peasants and Politics in Interwar Romania* is a very complex and detailed academic achievement. The reader of this volume will have the delight to get a clear picture on just how politics and peasants mixed up during interwar Romania on all territories of the newly born country Greater Romania. From the party leaders to the ordinary everyday peasant, from a Hungarian to a German minority viewpoint, we get the chance to examine the period. The strong side of this article is that all of its articles offer something refreshingly new, therefore this volume does not disappoint, it clearly shows the complex nature of the volume. Revelations are needed are needed in future researches to go even deeper in certain topics, that has many times been regarded as a challenging period but existing to research the topics of politics and their impact on the population.

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Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941*, Penguin Books, London, 2017.

Stalin and Hitler have been by far the two most written about dictators of the 20th Century. While this means that there is a vast literature from which to choose, it also makes it more difficult to bring original contributions. In the case of Stalin, Stephen Kotkin has proven, with the first two parts of his biographical trilogy that we have yet to have seen the definitive book on the Red Tsar. The second volume, entitled *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941* presents the implementation and creation of the Stalinist system and how it came to mould the very essence of the Soviet Union and its inevitable clash with its historic opponent, Nazi Germany.

To historians of the contemporary period, Stephen Kotkin has become by now a household name. He came of fame with his ground-breaking book, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*¹, which is considered by some to

¹Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1995.

have ushered the first steps towards the post-revisionist paradigm. It was for the first time that a historian tried applying Michel Foucault's theory of the linguistic turn to an analysis of the transformations suffered by Soviet society under Stalin's leadership. Yet Kotkin's research has not been limited to this topic, as in *Armageddon Averted*² and *Uncivil Society*³ he moved towards elements of transitional studies combined with economic insight, as he looked at the decline and fall of European communist regimes and the establishment of democratic states. Currently, he is the John P. Birkelund '52 Professor at Princeton in History and International Affairs at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. He is also a Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. In the past few years Stephen Kotkin has focused much of his efforts in writing the most comprehensive biography of Stalin, a part of which is here under review.

The main difference between the first and second volumes is one of emphasis. While the former was more than biographical research, as it focused on explaining and illustrating the last decades of the Russian Empire, the latter brings Stalin at the forefront. This serves to prove how the dictator had in fact by 1929 become very much the centre of the Soviet world. While this might disappoint some readers, one can argue that it is a natural transition, given the transformations suffered by Soviet society and Stalin's role in this process. Kotkin works very hard to explain the dictator's ideological theories and interpretations and how these turned into policies with real-life consequences for the population (collectivization, heavy industrialization, etc.). In this respect it is not so much about what the author brings new to existing historiography, as it is a matter of how this information is interpreted and used in the illustration of Stalin. And in a sense it is here that Kotkin maintains his advantage over other contemporary authors, such as Oleg Khlevniuk, who was more focused on the demonization of the dictator than on historical interpretation⁴.

This volume is more oriented towards the political aspects than its predecessor as it presents what evolutions took place within the Party in the context of the Great Terror. Stephen Kotkin seemed very interested in presenting not only the interaction of leading figures with Stalin, but also among themselves and the world in which they resided. Yet it is here that he also manages to present the role played by Stalin in the demise of important

²Idem, *Armageddon Averted: the Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001.

³Idem, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of Communist Establishment*, Random House, 2009.

⁴Oleg Khlevniuk, *Stalin: A New Biography of a Dictator*, Yale University Press, New Haven, London, 2015.

figures (Bukharin, Zinoviev and Kamenev were tried and executed, and the manner in which he pitted Yezhov against Yagoda, and the latter against Beria). Kotkin manages to do this without losing any of the zest of Simon Sebag Montefiore's biography of the Red Tsar, which focused more on personal elements and Stalin's relationships with party higher-ups⁵. Also, the author is doubtful that Stalin was involved in the death of his friend Serghey Kirov, rather he punished those found responsible quite harshly and in a diabolical fashion.

Lastly, but not least, the book emphasizes the USSR's actions in foreign affairs, in its struggles for international recognition, expansion of influence, and of course the spread of the Revolution. While a good portion of the book looks at efforts put in the support of communists in the Spanish Civil War, Kotkin is one of the few Stalin biographers to analyse his decisions in Asia. Much of the focus is put on Mongolia and China, with the latter explaining to a certain extent the future break-up between Mao and his so-called Soviet comrades. Of course, this marked the perfect opportunity, while looking at Europe, for Stephen Kotkin to introduce a comparative approach towards Nazi Germany. This idea seems to suggest an inevitable clash between two opposing systems. And in fact, the title of the volume itself, *Waiting for Hitler*, serves to implant the idea that the '30s were the period in which Stalin consolidated the Soviet Union for war, while his nemesis was building up his own regime. But this analysis often seems aimed at explaining some of the inner workings of the Nazi regime in a manner which both serves to illustrate ideological differences and mounting reasons and decisions leading up to a future conflict with the Soviet Union. Kotkin manages to underline this through a parallel, a technique which can often be elusive to other authors, while he himself is not an established academic authority when it comes to Nazism. He also emphasizes, in an elegant fashion, the perils of a highly-centralized system of decision-making, for as another biographer of Stalin⁶ put it, he was the primary intelligence analyst of the country, although not necessarily the best.

As we are approaching the conclusion we must establish where this book stands in regards to the existing historiography on Stalin's life and regime. Without a doubt it marks a progress in terms of information available to the writer in comparison to what Robert C. Tucker had at his disposal⁷. It

⁵Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, Vintage, 2003.

⁶Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary: 1879-1929*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1988; Idem, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928-1941*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1990.

⁷Ed. E.A. Rees, *The Nature of Stalin's Dictatorship: The Politburo, 1924-1953*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004.

also distinguishes itself from Simon Sebag Montefiore's amazing two-book effort on the life of the Red Tsar⁸, as a more academic approach with more attention to historical consequences. Beyond other authors, a comparison between this volume and the preceding, some readers might be left disappointed by the reduced interest shown in society, but this would have been very difficult given the scope of the book. Since this is aimed at being a comprehensive look at Stalin's life, Kotkin's decision to split the biography into a trilogy was a very wise one.

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⁸Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Young Stalin*, Vintage, 2008.