Romanian Attitudes and Stereotypes Towards Hungarians During the 1848 Revolution

Sorin MITU
Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca
E-mail: sorin.mitu@ubbcluj.ro

Abstract: This article analyses the Romanian political attitudes towards the Hungarians during the 1848 Revolution. The main sources used are the political statements of the revolutionaries, selected from political manifestos, historical works, letters or press articles. Their analysis highlights Romanian symbols, stereotypes and ideological positions, in relation to the Hungarian revolution. The conflicting nature of the relations between the Romanians and the Hungarians, and the fact that this situation was interiorised precisely when modern national solidarities were gaining shape meant that their images of the other would become a stock ingredient of the two peoples' political mythologies. The image of the age-old enemy, who had for centuries been their opponent, was to serve as the cornerstone of national identity both for the Romanians and for the Hungarians.

Keywords: Romanians, Hungarians, 1848 Revolution, ethnic stereotypes, historical imagology

Rezumat: Acest articol analizează atitudinile politice ale românilor față de maghiari în timpul Revoluției de la 1848. Principalele surse utilizate sunt declarațiile politice ale revoluționarilor, selectate din manifeste politice, lucrări istorice, scrisori sau articole de presă. Analiza acestora evidențiază simboluri, stereotipuri și poziții ideologice românești în raport cu revoluția maghiară. Natura conflictuală a relațiilor dintre români și maghiari și faptul că această situație a fost internalizată tocmai în momentul în care solidaritățile naționale moderne prindeau contur a făcut ca imaginile reciproce să devină un ingredient de bază al mitologiilor politice ale celor două popoare. Imaginea dușmanului, care le-a fost adversar timp de secole, avea să servească drept piatră de temelie a identității naționale atât pentru români, cât și pentru maghiari.

Cuvinte cheie: români, maghiari, Revoluția de la 1848, stereotipuri etnice, imagologie istorică

SUBB Historia, Volume 70, Number 1, June 2025
doi: 10.24193/subbhist.2025.1.02

In the fatidic year of 1848, the prospects of Romanians and Hungarians living together in harmony were called into question and two possible scenarios had been outlined. On the one hand, these nations could understand and tolerate one another, in keeping with the Enlightenment tenets; on the other hand, they could continue the tradition of medieval conflicts and peasant uprisings, exalted by the Romantic ideology. It is quite clear that history—that is, the sum of countless causalities, conditionalities, and chance occurrences—chose the latter scenario.

In the history of the relations between the two nations, the Revolution of 1848 was possibly the most significant event. It quite likely exceeded the importance of the union of Transylvania with Romania in 1918, because what happened in 1918 was the logical consequence of the rift created seven decades earlier. Suffice it to think that Romania's present-day national anthem, which evokes the historical dispute between the Romanians and the Hungarians (or the "barbaric tyrants"), dates from 1848, not from 1918.

At the same time, one cannot say that this revolution substantially changed the Romanian society. Like Horea's uprising, which lasted only two months, the 1848 battles waged between the Romanians and the Hungarians in the Apuseni Mountains lasted under a year, from October 1848 until August 1849. The importance of the revolution resided not in what it managed to accomplish, but in the significance assigned to it later, as a pathbreaking event. As both the Romanian and the Hungarian historians wrote afterwards, both revolutions "had been defeated."

It is true that this was the first time in history when thousands of Romanians and Hungarians had slaughtered one another (also) because of their ethnicity. In a way, this was also the last time, because the disputes in which the Romanians and the Hungarians were involved during the two world wars of the twentieth century were not bilateral conflicts (for the most part) and had also other causes than interethnic or national adversity, largely pertaining to international politics.

In 1848, the Romanians and the Hungarians did not raise arms against one another just for the above reasons. They also went to battle because they were nobles against serfs, rich men against poor men, soldiers loyal to the emperor against followers of Kossuth, or defenders of Transylvania's union with Hungary against champions of the region's autonomy. Many of these conflicting affiliations overlapped the ethnic differences between the Romanians

and the Hungarians, albeit not completely. In Banat, Arad, Bihor and Maramureș, regions not included in the Great Principality of Transylvania (which begs the question why its union with Hungary should have caused discontent amongst the Romanians), most of the Romanian leaders sided with the Hungarian revolution and Kossuth. They were followed by thousands of their countrymen who had enrolled in the revolutionary troops. To them, being Romanian did not mean being against the Hungarians, as it happened in Transylvania, but fighting on their side against the reactionary politics of the Viennese court, which imperilled everybody's freedom.

However, the option that came to prevail amongst the Romanians and was subsequently regarded as having been the only just choice (because history tended to confirm it) was to go to arms against the Hungarians.

To the Hungarians, the Romanians were not as important as the Hungarians were to the Romanians. Austria was their great enemy in 1848. Russia had dealt them a final blow. The nationalities that had been involved in the revolution had been deceived and manipulated into doing so by the Viennese court. This was their real foe, so the Hungarians couldn't really consider the Croats, Serbs, and Romanians as true enemies. Only their leaders, agitators, and instigators, who had led the innocent masses on a wrong path, were to blame. The Romanians were among those nationalities, but they represented only one of the many heads of a much larger and dangerous hydra.

As a result, the Hungarians' patriotic anthems make no reference to the Romanians. Still, the fact that they battled the Romanians in their historical struggle for freedom remains imprinted in their historical memory. As shown above, plenty of Romanians had sided with the Hungarians in this struggle and it was only the Hungarians in Transylvania that would have perceived the Romanians as an inimical population.

In the Hungarian historical consciousness, the Revolution of 1848 is linked to several important sites of memory in Transylvania: the battlefield near Sighișoara, where Petőfi died in the fight against the Russians, the battlefield of Șiria, where General Görgei capitulated to the Russians, and Arad, where the Austrians executed thirteen high-ranking Hungarian military commanders. Aside from the violent outbursts of the Romanians in Aiud, Abrud and Zlatna, Transylvania is not perceived as a space in which the Hungarians fought primarily against the Romanians in 1848.

However, the Romanians' and the Hungarians' major national symbols date from this very period. This was the time in which these two modern nations came into being. The two tricolour flags, reminiscent of the flag launched by the French Revolution, the two national anthems, written by Andrei Mureşanu and Kölcsey Ferenc, and the two prominent leaders of the Transylvanian Romanians and Hungarians, Avram Iancu and Kossuth Lajos, all these originate from this foundational moment for the national mythology of the two peoples. But if we consider that the Romanians' heroes were the Hungarians' enemies and the other way around, that the flag of one nation was the detested, subversive or dominating symbol of the other, it becomes clear that the rise of the two nations coincided with the birth of hostile images towards the Other.

Kőváry László, the foremost representative of Hungarian historiographic romanticism in Transylvania, described Michael the Brave, the Romanians' national hero, as follows: "This man, who is featured in the history of Wallachia as its greatest ruler, behaved like a usurper in Transylvania, smearing his good name through acts of vandalism."[1] This was the same kind of sentence that Romanian historians could pass against the Hungarians' national hero, Kossuth Lajos, after 1848.

For any human community, whether ethnic or national, the rejection of foreigners represented a major strategy of asserting self-identity. However, the conflicting nature of the relations between the Romanians and the Hungarians, and the fact that this situation was interiorised precisely when modern national solidarities were gaining shape meant that their images of the other would become a stock ingredient of the two peoples' political mythologies. The image of the age-old enemy, who had for centuries been their opponent, was to serve as the cornerstone of national identity both for the Romanians and for the Hungarians.

The birth of the Hungarian and Romanian nations occurred in the presence of the foreign and oftentimes detested Other. From then on, the two national constructs remained indelibly connected by this twisted fraternity, as if they were united in a family torn by rivalries and mutual hostility. It is equally true that in liminal situations, this cultivated familiarity with adversity, this notion that we can only live together even though we have every reason to hate one another also fostered a genuine attitude of tolerance, or a sceptical,

[1] László Kőváry, *Erdély történelme*, Vol. 4 (Kolozsvár: Stein-Ráth, 1859-1866), 102.

albeit realistic science of cohabitation, embraced by both communities in Transylvania. This can be seen, for instance, in a letter Avram Iancu, head of the Romanian resistance in the Apuseni Mountains, sent to the Hungarian commander he was fighting against at that time, in June 1849:

> *Brothers! Trust us that we see all too clearly and lucidly that in these two sister countries of ours, there can live no Hungarian, now or in the future, without Romanians, nor can Romanians live without Hungarians. We believe and all too clearly realise that some giant power may soon be upon us or you, in the near or distant future, and they will crush us, leaving behind only the traces of our existence [a hint at the Russian menace]. Both our camps can see that the threat is well-nigh upon us and yet we cannot see eye to eye. I know not why but enmity and pride are swishing their swords between you and us lest we should get together to speak even as we are being plunged into agony.*[2]

The historian Kőváry László (a former revolutionary combatant himself) said something along the same lines in his book about the 1848 revolution in Transylvania: "The fate of nations living side by side is just like the fate of families with numerous children: they either make peace after breaking up, or mutually destroy themselves."[3]

This mechanism of identity-building adversity is not specific just to the Romanians or Hungarians. For other people too, the image of the enemy has played a central role in shaping their ethnic and, later on, national identity. In the Middle Ages, the Spaniards' fight against the Moors during the Reconquista, or the rivalry between France and England during the Hundred Years' War, contributed not just to the political unification and the administrative centralisation of those kingdoms, but also to the emergence of "popular proto-nationalism," which could generate collective solidarity and identity.[4] Similarly, in the modern period, the activation of national sentiment because of external attacks clearly fuelled the rise of the first cases

---

[2] Letter of Avram Iancu to Lieutenant-Colonel Simonffy, June 1849, published in Liviu Maior (ed.), *Avram Iancu. Scrisori*, Cluj, Dacia, 1972, 86-89. If not marked otherwise, all translations from Romanian into English were made by the author of the present article.

[3] László Kőváry, *Erdély története 1848-49-ben* (Pest: Emich, 1861), 103.

[4] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Naţiuni şi naţionalism din 1780 până în prezent. Program, mit, realitate* (Chişinău: Arc, 1997), 48-80.

of nationalism in European history: for instance, the French one, started off by the foreign invasion that preceded the battle of Valmy (1792), the Polish one, after the dismantling of Poland in the late eighteenth century, and the German one, spurred by Prussia's catastrophic defeat by Napoleon in 1806.

When the Hungarian revolution broke out in Pest, on 15 March, 1848, many Romanians reacted enthusiastically because it announced an age of freedom and promised to carry out universally desired political and social reforms, which had been obstructed by Chancellor Metternich's conservative regime. Timotei Cipariu and George Barițiu, the opinion leaders of the Transylvanian Romanians, did not reject the last point of the Hungarian revolutionary programme, which stipulated Transylvania's union with Hungary, because they believed that the Romanians' national rights would be guaranteed in the new, liberal Hungary, alongside all the other positive transformations:

> *There can be no longer any doubt that the union with Hungary is desirable not just everywhere [in general], but also for the Romanians […] the country's laws will guarantee special rights to all the nationalities, different from the Hungarian one, in Hungary. […] Hungary wishes the Romanian provinces to adopt such liberal measures, to go hand in hand with Hungary, in strong brotherly communion, against the colossal absolutism that threatens the freedom of Europe.*[5]

But before long, this nebulous brotherly atmosphere was dispelled by the much more persuasive intervention of other, more radical Romanian intellectuals, who believed that their conationals ought to reject the union of Transylvania with Hungary and adopt a national agenda of their own. To them, it seemed that the generous principles avowed by the Hungarian revolution were but a ruse. Even though they laid the foundations of a liberal state, the Hungarians would never grant national rights to the Romanians. Therefore, the Romanians would have to walk their own path, which diverged from that of the Hungarians. This was the path Avram Iancu and his tribunes would walk in their fight against the revolutionaries led by Kossuth, thus becoming allies of the Habsburg imperial court.

---

[5] Timotei Cipariu, "Uniunea," *Organul luminării* 2, no. 65 (1848): 368.

The one who first gave clear shape to this national programme was an intellectual, Simion Bărnuțiu. In the speech he gave in Blaj in May 1848, he offered a historical overview of the relations between the two nations over the course of one thousand years. He imprinted the image of Hungarians in the Romanian national consciousness as no one else would later be able to do. If we read the conclusions reached by today's Romanian historians, as they appear in school textbooks or scholarly articles, we can notice that this mode of interpretation has changed rather little since Simion Bărnuțiu.

The main argument Bărnuțiu brought to reject the union and the political offer of the Hungarian revolutionaries was history itself. Ever since the Hungarian Tuhutum had sneaked into Transylvania like a cunning fox and slain Duke Gelu, the Hungarians had oppressed the Romanians in every way possible: "All the evils that have beset the Romanians for one thousand years come from the Hungarians." What is more, contemporary Hungarians "are even more barbaric today than they were a thousand years ago."[6] The barbarity that was attributed to the Hungarians would resound even in the lines of the anthem written by Andrei Mureșanu. It would become one of the defining features of their image as viewed by the Romanians. Its historical explanation lies in the invading Hungarians' Asian roots, but it is also clearly attested by their current behaviour, as well as by their tyranny and the acts of cruelty they have consistently committed against the Romanians.

While most of the Romanians had imagined—and would continue to do so for the next seven decades—that their national emancipation would be achieved through a division of political power in Transylvania, Bărnuțiu believed they could lay claim to everything. "Transylvania truly belongs to the Romanian nation," he said, first and foremost because the Romanians had been the owners here for one thousand and seven hundred years (ever since their ancestors, the Romans, conquered it), and secondly because they were the most numerous inhabitants of the province. The crucial issue of political modernisation, that is, of freedom, which had been fundamental for the revolutionaries of 1848, was also approached in national terms, contradicting the Hungarian point of view. Freedom could only be national and "in the Hungarian land, freedom itself will be Hungarian."[7]

---

[6] Simion Bărnuțiu, "Raporturile românilor cu ungurii şi principiile libertății naționale," in Ştefan Pascu (ed.), *Documente privind revoluţia de la 1848 în ţările române. C. Transilvania*, Vol. 4 (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 1988), 3.

[7] Ibid., 15, 19.

Through his speech, Bărnuțiu managed like no one before to raise a symbolical barrier between "us" and "them," showing that the Romanians and the Hungarians were two nations with irreconcilably opposed goals. Their Good could only mean Evil for us, since "it is life to the Hungarians but death to the Romanians; boundless freedom to the Hungarians but eternal servitude to the Romanians."[8]

Bărnuțiu's disciple, Alexandru Papiu Ilarian (whose father had been executed by the Hungarian revolutionaries in 1849),[9] enlarged upon these ideas in a historical work he published right after the revolution:

> *The history of the Hungarians, their character, their geographical position and, above all, that inherent evil of human nature won't let them be just and kind towards the other nations, for evil will drive a nation, just like an individual, to oppress, to subdue, to devour the weak, just like big fish devour the small. This human weakness is typical, to a larger or smaller extent, of all nations. The culture of even the most advanced nations is not genuine unless it is predicated on justice and not on shallow refinements. This human weakness is perhaps most evident in the case of the Hungarians and their relations with the cohabiting nations. This inherent desire to oppress others is the result of several circumstances: for instance, that insufferable, immeasurable national pride that is so specific to the Hungarians; their history of one thousand years, in which the sole purpose of the Hungarian nation has been to oppress the Slavs and the Romanians.*[10]

The Hungarians' tendency to oppress other peoples is therefore explained through their historical circumstances, geographical position, and their "ethnic psychology." In the spirit of the Enlightenment, Papiu admits that such tendencies could be found among any other nation—including the Romanians, we might add. But this provisional concession, which puts forth a universalist and tolerant vision inherited from Enlightenment ideology, is immediately withdrawn and replaced with the Herderian theory which lays emphasis on the unique features of each individual nation. The Hungarians, Papiu believes, are by nature inclined to commit injustices and are driven by

---

[8] Ibid., 27.

[9] Ioan Chindriș, Gelu Neamțu (eds.), *Procese politice antiromâneşti care au zguduit Transilvania în toamna anului 1848* (Bucharest: Viitorul Românesc, 1995), 12, 86.

[10] Alexandru Papiu Ilarian, *Istoria românilor din Dacia Superioară*, Vol. 2 (Vienna: Gerold, 1852), LXXXIX-XC.

a national pride that has no limits. Throughout history, these features have led to endless conflicts between the two nations, and this has left its mark on the Romanians: "The history of the Romanians in Dacia Superior has been nothing but ceaseless oppression at the hands of the Hungarians: a continuous struggle between these two nations."[11]

Without a doubt, the events that took place during the revolution and the mutual crimes and atrocities that were committed exacerbated the Romanians' negative image of the Hungarians. It is also true that nationalist principles of Herderian extraction also influenced this evolution. The historical past and the present were largely explained through the filter of national antagonisms, rather than by reference to religious, political or social causes. In June 1848, the young revolutionary Constantin Romanu-Vivu wrote to Nicolae Bălcescu about an incident that had occurred in Mihalţ:

> *Their barbarity is beyond words, for such cruelty could not be encountered even in the darkest ages. Despite such acts of terrorism, Romanians will stick to their own. And we [the revolutionary leaders] are to blame for what happened because we ordered the Romanian people to keep the peace, thinking that this is the age of liberty and even the nomadic Hungarians and Szeklers may have been contaminated by the European spirit. But we were wrong to think so and their deeds have proved to us that they are very much the same as the ones who invaded us from Mongolia. Yet this is their loss, for we will live in peace while they will perish.*[12]

An isolated event like the clash of forces in Mihalţ, which caused the death of a group of Romanian peasants who were shot by the troops sent to restore order in the region,[13] was "explained" and could be understood through the prism of the Hungarians' negative image. Their barbarian behaviour happened due to their "nomadic" history for they were surely not "Europeans" like the Romanians. A nation's Europeanness was first and foremost a matter of political conduct, defined by its attachment to liberal political values. At the same time, Europeanness was a matter of a nation's origins. It could be inherited historically.

---

[11] Ibid., Vol. 1, 224-225.

[12] Cornelia Bodea, *Lupta românilor pentru unitatea naţională. 1834-1849* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 1967), 319.

[13] For two different interpretations of this episode, see Gelu Neamţu, *Revoluţia românilor din Transilvania 1848-1849* (Cluj: Carpatica, 1996), 46-50; Ákos Egyed, *Erdély 1848-1849*, Vol. 1 (Csíkszereda: Pallas—Akadémia Könyvkiadó, 1998), 132-135.

Indelibly connected, politics and history shed light on one another and reinforced the logic underpinning the Romanians' attitudes towards the Other.

Geographical realities were of lesser importance compared to the two other factors. Although they were geographically positioned closer to the centre of Europe than the Romanians, the Hungarians could not be regarded as genuine "Europeans" because of their "barbaric" political attitude. This could also be explained by their Asian origins. They appeared to be "Mongolians," from that viewpoint. By contrast, the Romanians were truly "European" because they respected the values of the continent's civilisation, in keeping with their historical legacy. Last but not least, considering that only the nations that respected the European principles of freedom and equality could have a future (the Hungarians were incapable of embracing such values, unlike the Romanians), the Hungarians "will perish," while the Romanians will have a political destiny that will mirror their "European" conduct.

Given these irreconcilable conflicts, was it still possible to forge an alliance between two nations that were facing countless foreign threats? Did the brotherhood of peoples (a watchword of the 1848 Revolution) still have a chance to materialise and unite the Romanians and the Hungarians? At first glance, we might be tempted to answer yes, especially if we read the following lines with which Bărnuțiu concluded his speech:

> *We shan't forgive the Hungarians because they do not regret the evil they have committed but wish to perpetrate even greater evils; we shall unite with and befriend them when they deserve it […] that is, when they acknowledge the freedom of our nation, just as they demand that the Romanians and other nations should acknowledge their freedom. Only when the Romanian nation is formed and founded on the grounds of freedom, shall we federate with the Hungarians for the sake of a common defence, for this is only possible between free nations.*[14]

In other words, we could *theoretically* become allied with the Hungarians, but this cannot be achieved *in practice*. A union with the Hungarians would conceal the deadly threat of denationalisation. Consequently, the idea of a pact with them was advanced only as a rhetorical argument meant to show that the Romanians actually desired peace and the Hungarians were to blame for the outbreak of the conflict. Alexandru Papiu Ilarian illustrated this idea with

[14] Bărnuțiu, *Raporturile*, 28.

outmost clarity. Even though the Romanians and the Hungarians appeared to be predestined, because of their geographical position, to form a "natural barrier" against the Slavs, such an alliance could only be made "with just Hungarians who respected the nationalities, though history has yet to produce such Hungarians."[15]

Papiu's irony suggestively addressed the problem of "national alliances." A true Romanian nationalist could only be anti-Hungarian because the Hungarians were the ones who posed the greatest threat. We might state that we can cooperate with the Hungarians, but we are well aware that this would be impossible. As the poet Corneliu Vadim Tudor wrote, more than 150 years later, "we will never get along!"

Along the same lines, a Hungarian journalist asked himself the following question in March 1849: "Will future Romanian and Hungarian generations ever forget their mutual hatred and desire for vengeance?"[16] The answer he gave, in the midst of the civil war, was again *no*.

Despite those seemingly definitive verdicts reached by Bărnuțiu and Papiu, the prospect of the Romanians' cooperation with the Hungarians remained open. As seen above, there were Romanians who did not just cooperate but identified with the Hungarian revolution, who were elected members of the Hungarian Parliament and joined the Hungarian revolutionaries into exile after 1849. It is also true, on the other hand, that the idea of an alliance between the two revolutions was never given up even in the anti-Kossuth Romanian revolutionary camp. Avram Iancu himself did more than just dispatch a few letters stating his good intentions. He eventually agreed to maintain a position of neutrality during the final battles between the Russians and the Hungarians. In the midst of the fights against the Hungarian troops he addressed himself to the enemy and surprisingly reconciliatory terms:

> *Brother Hungarians, nature has placed us in one and the same homeland so that together we may work the land assiduously and together we may suck up the sweetness of its fruit. We are not against you. On the contrary, we are the sons of the same homeland, and we wish to have the same friends and enemies as the Hungarians if, that is, we deem that our conditions have been met.*

[15] Papiu Ilarian, *Istoria*, Vol. 2, CX sq.

[16] V., "Debrecen, márc. 22. 1849," *Márczius Tizenötödike* (Debrecen) 2, no. 32 (1849): 125-126.

> *To prove our brotherly sentiments towards the Hungarian nation, we have decided to stay neutral towards the Hungarian army. Taking up arms shall never settle things between us.*[17]

Paradoxically, although these letters were sent straight from the battlefield, their message was almost the reverse of the verdict passed by the above-mentioned intellectuals. Romantic ideology did not promote just national emancipation but also the solidarity of peoples against reactionarism and absolutism. Moreover, the idea that the Romanians and the Hungarians were living in two "sister countries" (Hungary and Transylvania), or that they were the "sons of the same homeland" in Transylvania was too strong for Avram Iancu not to invoke it when the "brothers" acted out as adversaries.

Iancu's fraternal rhetoric was to be exploited in different ways by subsequent generations. In the 1950s, the communists, champions of the brotherhood of these two oppressed nations, emphasised it as proof that the Romanians and the Hungarians from the exploited classes had been fighting side by side against their oppressors. It was also employed by Romanian nationalists, who could find no fault in their favourite hero's words and deeds. In their view, Iancu's reconciliatory gestures showed that the Romanians were peaceful and tolerant even when they defended their rights with spears in hand. What their argument hinged on was that the Romanians were superior to the Hungarians from a moral standpoint. Even when they fought against Hungarians, not only did the Romanians not wish to destroy their enemy but they were always willing to shake their hands if their just claims were accepted.

Epitomising this idea, the statue erected in Cluj during the mandate of the nationalist mayor Gheorghe Funar (1993) represents Iancu with sword in sheath, held with poise in his left hand. His attitude is far from threatening.[18] Legend has it that most of the Romanian hero's lovers were Hungarian.[19]

Two decades before, when Dinicu Golescu was undertaking his voyage in Europe, the Romanians across the Carpathians were barely concerned with the issue of the relations between Romanians and Hungarians. Shortly afterwards, however, the Romanian journalists in Transylvania and the Transylvanian intellectuals who had meanwhile settled in Iași or Bucharest

---

[17] Maior, *Scrisori*, 86-89, 94, 99.

[18] Sorin Mitu, "Rumänische Erinnerungsorte in Klausenburg," *Zeitschrift für Siebenbürgische Landeskunde* 43, no. 114 (2020): 18.

[19] Idem, *Transilvania mea. Istorii, mentalități, identități* (Iași: Polirom, 2013), 305-318.

managed to bring it to the attention of the public in the Principalities. The 1848 uprising of the Romanians in Transylvania gave further urgency to this issue.

Should we fight or cooperate with the Hungarians? This was a question with geopolitical implications that Nicolae Bălcescu would also attempt to answer later. A prominent leader of the 1848 Revolution in Muntenia, Bălcescu was to be exalted, much like the Romanian Avram Iancu or the Hungarian Kossuth, as a quintessential figure of national mythology. The political triangle they formed in 1849 was hailed as another crucial moment in the entangled history of Romanian-Hungarian relations.[20]

Bălcescu was a romantic ideologue who dreamed of uniting all Romanians in a national state. Any realistic politician of the time would have regarded this as an impossible utopia. Such a goal would have entailed disrupting the European political order and entering a conflict with the Hungarians, whose national project was to integrate the Romanians from Transylvania in a Hungarian state and civic (or even ethnic) nation. The solution Bălcescu proposed to address this twofold dilemma was derived from the ideological arsenal of the European revolution, endorsed by the Italian Mazzini or the Polish Mickiewicz. Every nation that had been subjugated by tyrants (the despotic regimes of Austria and Russia) had to join forces and fight side by side, for this was the only pathway to victory. So how could the conflict between the Romanians and the Hungarians be settled? Simply, through an alliance between the two peoples, in the form of a vast democratic Danubian confederacy. Within this generous framework, all nations would be free to resolve their bilateral disputes in peaceful manner.

So, in that spirit, during the military chaos from the summer of 1849, Bălcescu embarked on an apparently impossible mission to reconcile Avram Iancu's Transylvanian Romanians with Kossuth's Hungarians. However, the alliance he wished to create was not a pragmatic *Realpolitik* solution but an idealistic—and, ultimately, morally compulsory—union between two nations whose destinies had been entwined. That was the only way, Bălcescu believed, not simply because that was the only military solution for defeating the reactionary Austrian and Russian empires. An even stronger argument was

---

[20] Béla Borsi-Kálmán, *Hungarian Exiles and the Romanian National Movement, 1849-1867* (Boulder: Columbia University Press, 1991); Béla Borsi-Kálmán, *Au berceau de la nation roumaine moderne / Dans le miroir hongrois. Essais pour servir à l'histoire des rapports hungaro-roumains aux XIX^e^ et XX^e^ siècles* (Paris: Éditions des archives contemporaines, 2018).

that Providence itself, invoked by both the Hungarians and the Romanians in their national anthems, was in fact a God that belonged to all nations. However naive such a profession of faith might appear, Bălcescu managed to persuade the revolutionary leaders in Debrecen, Szeged, or in the Apuseni Mountains. Neither Kossuth, nor Iancu wished to breach the general principle according to which nations—in this case the Romanians and Hungarians—had to strike an alliance and fight for freedom together, even though they were butchering one another at present. Without a doubt, their treaties or mutual pledges were influenced by the actual balance of forces. When this balance visibly tilted in favour of one of the camps, as was the case of the Hungarians in the summer of 1848 or of the Romanians in the winter of 1918, they could, of course, claim everything for themselves and make no concessions to the others.

Since Bălcescu, the idea of Romanian-Hungarian treaties has been consistently employed in steering political relations between the two nations. It is true that such bilateral negotiations never amounted to much because neither of the two parties was willing to make any concessions to the other, so effective solutions had to be imposed either unilaterally or internationally. Notwithstanding all this, negotiations continued to be made, as if neither the Romanians nor the Hungarians could once and for all decide whether "we will never get along" or "taking up arms shall never settle things between us." To give some examples, the Romanian and the Hungarian revolutionaries who emigrated after 1848 consistently held such talks all the way into the reign of Cuza (1859-1866) and even later. The Hungarian government and the leaders of the Romanian National Party engaged in negotiations in 1913-1914. Other examples include the talks held in Arad between the Hungarian Government and the Central National Romanian Council in November 1918, or the Budapest Declaration of June 1989. Even Ceaușescu's regime, in one of the last foreign policy projects it launched at a time of growing international isolation, proposed a summit with the Hungarian communist leaders in August 1988. That summit was held in Arad, marking the contact zone between the two nations—the very same town where Jászi Oskár had discussed possible solutions with Iuliu Maniu in 1918 and where Bălcescu had met Kossuth for the last time in 1849.