

CONSTANTIN IORDACHI, *The Fascist Faith of the Legion "Archangel Michael" in Romania, 1927-1941: Martyrdom and National Purification* (London: Routledge, 2023)

The historiographic subfield of fascist studies dedicated to the Legion of the "Archangel Michael" has been gradually integrated in a transnational framework over the past couple of decades, particularly due to Constantin Iordachi's research. For many years, his articles and monographs have provided some of the most valuable insights into the Legionary worldview. They have contributed to a clearer mapping of one of the most controversial and misunderstood social, political, ideological and theological forces in the history of Romania's body politic. Iordachi displays his substantial advancement of knowledge once again in his latest work, a thorough revision of the entire intellectual corpus of Romanian fascism and a dauntingly ambitious endeavour which turned out remarkably successful.

The analysis accurately presents the Legion of the "Archangel Michael" as a "political faith of a theological type", enacted through three complementary ideological mechanisms: the deep internalisation of the martyric cult of fallen soldiers, the promotion of sacrificial violence to forge a pantheon of heroic paragons and the cultivation of a crusading spirit through eschatological undertakings such as the Spanish Civil War. These mental structures are depicted as tools for the "re-evangelization" of the nation (p. 1). Heuristics aside, Iordachi's academic effort is also motivated by a pressing sense of civic duty, due to the continuous political extremism in Romania following the Revolution of '89, with significant social and, recently, political and electoral consequences. His analysis, highly relevant in today's world, shows that, unfortunately, authoritarian entities have a better developed historical memory and capacity for adaptive learning than their democratic counterparts. Considering the present, this can hardly be contradicted.

In the introduction, Iordachi lays the groundwork for a constructive interpretation of Legionarism as a salvific, mass-oriented faith. He openly adopts one of the main tenets of the paradigmatic new consensus in fascist studies by claiming that fascism should be taken "seriously", but not at "face value" when it comes to its claims. The author reiterates the protean critical interpretations of the Legion of the "Archangel Michael" used in the diachronic development of fascist studies, revealing a plethora of paradigmatic options either coexisting or confronting one another. He presents the consequential particularities derived from the national context, ranging from the damaging, long-lasting hegemonic pressure of Communism to the apologetic temptation of revisionism. Iordachi argues in a compelling fashion that, despite an innovative wave of scholarly interpretation, the relationship between Legionarism and religion has remained a matter of contention, hence the need to depart from the

representation of the former as “either mimetic, syncretic or parasitic to Eastern Orthodox Christianity” (p. 8).

Methodologically, the monograph is remarkably extensive, following the access to previously inaccessible archival sources from Romania and Moldova, which provided an indispensable documentary background. Epistemically, it maintains the sociocultural, conceptually clustered, comparative and transnational framework specific to Iordachi's research, advocating for a culturalist approach to the history of fascism. Conceptually, the author alternates between two realms of fascist studies once defined by Roger Griffin as “nomological” and “ideographical”, presenting the typological-descriptive model of fascism as a “salvific political faith, a theology of liberation centred on the myth of salvation from decadence” (pp. 12-13). Therefore, it is “faith”, not merely “religion,” that becomes the operating term. Weaving these theoretical lines together, the endeavour brings to the critical forefront the nature of belief itself, the way it provides substance to ideological phenomena and becomes historically reified from the age of Romanticism until the advent of fascism. Thus, Iordachi succeeds in his objective to move beyond the obsolete notional triad of fascism – totalitarianism – political religion in favour of a more substantive historiographical account.

The volume is structured into two parts. The first provides a diachronic history of the fascist political faith through the meanders of Romanian interwar era politics. Iordachi's investigation of the First World War's aftermath highlights the structural tensions at the heart of Greater Romania. The provincial organisation was too heterogeneous, the establishment could not maintain its legitimacy throughout the unification process, the structural integration and assimilation, negotiation and homogenisation had failed and the ethnic and religious cleavages added endemic layers of complexity. The analysis also points out the unequal economic development, literacy and urbanisation. Such a context fostered nationalist resentment.

The examination of the rival national projects of the country's main political forces allows for a better framing of the nascent fascism amidst these dynamics, both within the far-right spectrum and on the wider national scene. To that end, the narrative uncovers the issues which sparked the conflict between establishment elites and “the new generation”, leading to the gradual crystallisation of the Legion of the “Archangel Michael”, as well as the open promotion of violence as *modus operandi*, camouflaged in defensive rhetoric. The analysis traces the gradual formation of the fascist movement and explores its search for identity defining features, its ideological calibration throughout its structural development, its mobilization tactics, its clashes with the state, as well as the political machinations and situational alliances it engaged in while attempting to forge its path in a hostile context.

The author pays attention especially to the theoretical corpus of the Legion, put together using a wide array of sources, which created the “charismatic scenario of divine salvation”, with millenarist underpinnings and “revolutionary ultra-nationalism, populism and social conservatism” (p. 91). Iordachi reiterates the axial nature of Legionary ideology he had distinguished in previous contributions as a manifestation of fascist historicism. Moreover, the movement is linked to other currents of the nationalist right and their intellectual protagonists

(Nichifor Crainic, Nae Ionescu, Traian Brăileanu, Mihail Manoilescu), caught up alternatively in a competitive and cooperative dynamic.

An extensive study approaches the cult of Codreanu, one of the essential doctrinal components of Romanian fascism, and expands upon the notion that inter-war era charismatic leadership was rooted in the cultural-historical shattering experience of the French Revolution, another leitmotif of Iordachi's work, as well as an established tenet of recent fascist studies. Codreanu's biography is recomposed by overviewing the national celebrity he gained as a student leader, the folk hero mirage of his image, the self-represented connections to national mythology, his proselytizing strength, prophetic religious aura and redemptive revolutionary hypostasis, as well as the social tactics he employed to strengthen the bond with his followers. Iordachi's thorough inquiry delves into the institutions of the Legion of the "Archangel Michael" and underlines its shifting political stances and loose social networks, while scrutinizing them in a systematic manner which has rarely been employed in past contributions on the topic. The research covers exhaustive ground from the grass roots to the highest echelons of the fascist hierarchy. The author provides useful charts to map out the convoluted workings of Romanian fascism, the pragmatic implications of the charismatic principle at its core and the familial unit model it tried to emulate on a larger scale. What Iordachi attains by deconstructing the Legionary social universe is the clearest picture yet of its "palingenetic doctrines of anthropological orientation", with valuable insights into prison time as a redemptive instrument and "prime site of martyrdom" (pp. 176-177), or physical work (camp networks, building sites) as the substance of a parallel societal order.

Legionary violence is contextualized in the frame of reference provided by "fascist self-sacrificial ideology and practices", hence the perceptive formula of "manufacturing martyrdom" (p. 187). The Legionary intention to alter national memory by proclaiming a cult of fallen soldiers historically linked to normative self-sacrifice is integrated in the continental climate of the time, when the sacralization of politics was ever present. This tendency is directly connected to a cultic nexus of heterogeneous tropes such as the cult of Michael the Brave as national unifier, the cult of Archangel Michael as divine protector, and the militaristic cult of national heroes as defenders of the people. The research demonstrates that the Legion assembled Dacian, Roman, Christian and popular mythologies into a *sui-generis* "national epopee" (p. 200). "Neo-martyrdom" and its expression through terrorism is inserted into the wider universe of fascist violence, which Legionarism translated into notorious assassination attempts that generated national scandals, then into the atrocities of the Nicadori and the Decemviri, and ultimately into the "international crusade" fought in Spain. The denouement of the latter, ending with the "sacrifices" of Moța and Marin, appears as a strikingly self-conscious act of "choreographed martyrdom", turned into a national, "religious-making event" (p. 215) via an elaborate funeral procession inspired by the pietist devotion awarded to early Christian martyrs.

Concluding the volume's first part, the narrative goes into further detail with a sociological exploration of fascist identity and critically evaluates previous ideological contaminations of academia, ranging from (neo)Marxist teleology to liberal preconceptions.

lordachi offers several original guidelines, paving the way for a mandatorily sociocultural approach, synthesized into three theoretical tenets. Firstly, he strongly rejects class dependency models. Secondly, he considers radicalisation a gradual process that espoused “violent counterculture through new forms of socialisation and community-building” (pp. 240-244). Thirdly, he reveals the volatility of social identity, which explains why certain variables turned the Legion into a “catch-all party” at its peak. The author pays constant attention to the undeniable appeal of native fascism among the intellectual strata and particularly to the ideological war the young generations were drawn in against the nation’s false enemies, who were allegedly colluding with the gerontocracy. The methods used to win over the peasantry are explored in the socio-economic context of a “widening gap between rulers and the ruled in the countryside” and a “weakening of traditional elites” (p. 248) after the agrarian reform. As far as the working class is concerned, the analysis points to the “message of salvation through social emancipation” disseminated by the Legion, connected to a strong Christian-socialist tradition which lordachi follows back to Heliade-Rădulescu and Bălcescu. Lastly, the electoral analysis uncovers the sources of the Legion’s support, their geographical dispersion, as well as the regional variations of its adherents, giving comprehensive explanations accompanied by data tables and graphs.

The second section of the volume expands upon lordachi’s previous studies, which present the regimes between 1937 and 1944 as hybridized political orders of a dictatorial continuum, deriving from one another to a certain extent. In a developmental sense, they are regarded as “cumulative departures from democracy [...] leading to multiple totalitarian experiments” (p. 268). A synchronic approach to the royal dictatorship shows that Carlism attempted to borrow certain aspects from the Legion and fascism such as the authority of the charismatic leader, the rule of the single party, corporatist economics, youth institutionalization, and, towards the end, unleashed integral nationalism. King Carol II understood the imperative need to ideologically delegitimise his main internal political competitor. The use of a “Bonapartism” versus “charisma” conceptualisation in the Weberian sense to describe the dynamic between Carol II and Codreanu is strikingly innovative for a Romanian case study, while also rooted in an enduring intellectual tradition. The fiercely anti-Semitic descent of the royal dictatorship illustrates the fascist influence of the former. The instatement of the Antonescu – Legionary regime, shaped by the general’s “authoritarian-paternalist rhetoric” (p. 290) and governing style, turned the Legion into a mass vehicle that provided the foundation for an authoritarian rule. The unstable nature of this political compromise undermined the Legion’s Christian ideals for the nation, despite the fact that the institutional reconfigurations operated *manu militari* by Antonescu dispensed with the veneers of democracy maintained by previous orders. lordachi compares and points out in great detail the irreconcilable worldviews of the two governing parties. The coalitionist, gradualist and orderly conservatism Antonescu saw as an exclusive path to the future opposed the Legion’s paligenetic revolutionary, elitist, nationalizing and massifying aims.

A distinct study approaches the ritualistic dimension of Romanian fascism during its short stay in power, examining its funeral rites and celebrations of martyrdom which crafted a

peculiar “style of political representation” (p. 308). The religious, anthropological, political and cultural connotations of Codreanu’s reburial are all taken into account, from the generic significance of the rites of passage to the particularities of what some academics have derided as “fascist necrophilia” (p. 309). The rival memorial representations of the monarchical dictatorship and the Legion are examined through the public displays choreographed by Carol II, such as the funerals of Patriarch Miron Cristea and the assassinated prime-minister Armand Călinescu in 1939, later overshadowed by the fascists in the attempt to ensure a “political afterlife” (p. 312) for their frail pantheon. The mass fascist rituals were given four meanings: rites of passage associated with the change of regime and the instatement of a new order; means of creating an ideological foundation, claiming a decisive break with conventional temporal and spatial orders; epitomes of the “psychological revolution” anticipating an imminent anthropological rebirth; finally, instruments of forging the fascist nation anew, expressing an aestheticization of politics in a Benjaminian sense. Such undertakings gave birth to contrived martyrs, extracted from the “re-narration of the past through musealization” (pp. 313-314), as shown by the commemorations from the Predeal Cemetery (where corpses were treated as miraculous relics), the Râmnicu Sărat prison (turned into a museum of political victimhood), the “museum of shame” from Elena Lupescu’s house, pilgrimages to mausoleums etc. The ritualistic centrepiece of the Legionary regime was the aforementioned reburial of Codreanu, along with the Nicadori and the Decemviri, on November 30th 1940. Imbued with traditional Orthodox ceremonial connotations, but complemented by an intricate web of ideologically charged rituals, the burial became the epitome of the “fascistization of the masses”. Moreover, the posthumous exhibition of Codreanu’s multi-faceted identity – “head of state, military commander, high cleric, charismatic fascist leader” (p. 351) – ultimately established him as both a Legionary and a national hero.

Given the understanding of Legionarism as a type of faith, the final analysis clarifies the controversial dynamics which engaged the Legion and the Romanian Orthodox Church. Since fascists emulated Eastern Christian practices in their own rituals and combined them with “pagan fascist paraphernalia”, the final product of this synthesis is justly described as a “peculiar syncretism” (p. 363). Of course, Iordachi does not view the Orthodox and Greek-Catholic Churches as holistic, monolithic entities. He undertakes instead a thorough inquiry into the two-sided relationship between the Legion and the official Orthodox hierarchy, the political complications it generated and the fascists’ attempts to reframe orthodoxy according to their own agenda. Iordachi shows a remarkable interest for the Legion’s involvement in the church’s inner tensions caused by administrative reconfigurations, regional divides (Transylvania, Bessarabia), and authoritative ecclesiastical figures who supported the movement over time, like metropolitans Gurie Grosu and Nicolae Bălan or bishop Bartolomeu Stănescu. The institutional position of the Orthodox Church throughout the violent conflict between the Legion and the state is revealed in close detail. First, the author analyses the alliance with the monarchy during the royal dictatorship, then the change of relationships as the Legion came to power, despite persistent tensions and hostilities. He continues with the biographies of the Legion’s intellectuals responsible for its religious identity while in power

(from minister Traian Brăileanu to theologians such as Liviu Stan or Gheorghe Racoveanu). As he draws the analysis to a close, Iordachi argues that, for the sake of its ultimate aims, the Legion attempted to “*subordinate* the church to the new fascist political faith” (p. 419) by means of a *sui-generis* charismatic nationalism.

In the conclusion, he refers to the dark legacy of Legionarism and covers its violent demise under the Communist regime’s re-education initiatives and hints at its nefarious resurgence after 1989. Considering the alarming social and political shifts of past few years, this theme is ominously relevant. Iordachi’s volume is, therefore, an important tool that fascist studies have gained for a deeper understanding of Romanian fascism.

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