GEORGIANA ȚĂRANU, *Nicolae Iorga și seducția fascismului italian* [Nicolae Iorga and the seduction of Italian Fascism] (Humanitas: Bucharest, 2025)

When it comes to larger-than-life national icons, posthumously invested with an aura of sanctity through memorial or ideological projections, the act of revisiting their legacy faces the inherent risk of being denounced as a perilous contestation of canon and consensus. More often than not, deeper layers beneath the mythical façade contain nuances that are difficult to acknowledge and uncomfortable to process. Yet in the study of history, as in most other aspects of human experience, sunlight remains the best disinfectant.

Undoubtedly the most recognisable figure of Romanian historiography, Nicolae Iorga has been rendered, for the better part of his life, as well as in the decades following his tragic death, the emblematic intellectual of the national pantheon. However, several generations of hagiographers who have tirelessly celebrated his cultural merits have either conveniently omitted or blatantly ignored the darker shadows looming over a complicated biography. Concerned with what remained unaddressed, Georgiana Țăranu dedicates her debut monograph to shedding light on one of the most overlooked facets of Iorga's thought, namely his historical and cultural, political and ideological, pragmatic and emotional comprehension of fascism. It is a worthwhile pursuit, carried out not under the banner of gratuitous demythization (as fashionable as that trend might be nowadays), but for the purpose of advancing the understanding of a highly idiosyncratic, frequently contradictory worldview, in which open fascination for Mussolini's national project played a substantial part.

The nature of the theme provides a favourable opportunity, taken up in the introduction, to first reassess the cumulative construction of Iorga's towering image, shifting, under the Communist regime, from initial marginalisation to enthusiastic rehabilitation, then surviving largely unaltered to the present day. Obviously, the unapologetic embrace of Italian fascism, which would have darkened the radiant portrait, was excluded from view, and it is this precise aspect which the reviewed book attempts to bring front and centre. Throughout the account, the historical protagonist, a forefront leader of cultural nationalism as well as an influential political actor, strikes a paradoxical note, his perception of fascism revealing the perennial tensions of his broader thought, meant to reconcile, among others, modernity and tradition, peace and violence, legitimacy and revisionism. In perhaps the most significant such dichotomy, the revered external model under scrutiny was fiercely opposed in internal circumstances, as illustrated by an unabashed hostility towards the Legionary Movement, which brought Iorga's brutal demise and added martyrdom to the tenets of his later glorification.

Țăranu's extensive analysis employs a broad range of Romanian and Italian documentary sources, the consistent archival material and wide gamut of inter-war era publications revealing Iorga's dynamic oscillations between Bucharest and Rome. In anticipation of the sequential diachronic exposition, a brief preamble is devoted to the mutations of political radicalism in late modernity, sometimes meandering too far into the realm of philosophical considerations, but

mainly dealing with the interplay between cultural thinkers and autocratic levers of power. For his part, Iorga is assigned to the plethora of wholehearted participants in the metamorphoses of his era, internalising 'ethnocratic nationalism as a political religion' (29) and joining the numerous ranks of those who deemed the dawn of fascism as a momentous turn.

Subsequently, the option for concise chapters, revolving around precisely determined themes or episodes, ensures an accessible read, allowing the exposition of otherwise dense events and ideas to never feel excessively loaded. The first sections of the text approach the ideological volatility of Iorga's earlier years, retracing a sinuous path from youthful socialist temptations to the right-wing hardline, with conservative nationalism, dynastic loyalty, xenophobic antisemitism and autocratic aspirations gradually becoming pillars of his thought. By the fin de siècle and the beginning of the 20th century, the profile of the full-fledged nationalist had already been defined, modelled in good measure by the remnants of the exalting spirit of Romanticism, with its sacralisation of politics and cult of the past, veneration of heroical figures and ardent belief in communal regeneration. Such visions were harnessed into the theoretical project of 'sămănătorism', correctly labelled as an 'antimodernist, anticapitalism and anticosmopolitan' formulation (49), idealising an atemporal representation of the village as the absolute historical topos. Significantly, the earliest interests towards Italy are traced to the same period, deriving from academic concerns such as the historical ground it shared with Romania through Latin ancestry. The willingness to foster tighter cultural and political connections between the two nations emerged in the 1890s, following several study visits, and progressively gained intensity until the climactic moment of the First World War. Throughout the conflict, Iorga was an ardent voice in favour of Italian irredentism, framed as the culmination of national construction, in a clear parallel to concomitant developments on the home front. Naturally, the formal diplomatic and military alliance consecrated through Romania's involvement in the war only augmented the sense of kinship.

Nevertheless, a major disruption of historical analogy occurred in the aftermath of the conflagration, when the daunting task of managing the 'mutilated peace' threw Italy into years of violent internal strife, laying the groundwork for the breakthrough of fascism. By contrast, peace in Romania brought about the completion of national unification, an ideal outcome which came with the novel imperative to defend the new status quo. From a political standpoint, the first years after the war were a stagnant period in Iorga's trajectory, with his marginal Nationalist Democratic Party maintaining slight relevance only through makeshift coalitions and short-lived alliances. The national historian navigated through bitter personal rivalries and engaged in cynical political manoeuvres, described in vivid detail over several chapters, while consistently failing to transform from the 'prophet of nationalism' into the 'providential political leader' expected to arise in such uncertain times (76).

Eventually, the internal context stabilised, allowing for Iorga's foreign policy interests to resume, his profoundly personalised vision of the international agenda being examined in terms of a *sui-generis* 'paradiplomacy' (84), a missionary zeal exacerbated following the fascist March on Rome. Mussolini's swift seizure of power in October 1922 was accompanied by a political marketing campaign catered to audiences abroad, which found fertile soil in a general continental climate where providential saviours were expected to emerge as bulwarks against socialist unrest. Once

again, Iorga is depicted as a man of his time, whose support for fascist ideals was just as much a synchronic product of the epoch as a radical development of previously held conservative values.

One of the most relevant sections of the book concerns fascism's early transnational versatility, with an appropriate insistence on the Romanian mimetic experiments that regarded the Mussolini regime as a political, cultural or ideological beacon. Fascist replicas are painted as dynamic, albeit peripheral realities on the political scene, their ephemeral iterations sketched summarily, from Elena Bacaloglu's Italo-Romanian National Fascist Movement, an abortive political project, but a relevant sample of the rapidly spreading influence of Italian fascism within, to the short-lived National Romanian Fascio, ideologically and structurally emulative of the original phenomenon. Brief consideration is also awarded to the radical student movements of the early 1920s, later generative of the native fascist variant, temporarily absorbed by A.C. Cuza's National Christian Defence League (L.A.N.C.), like various other entities which had set Mussolini's movement as an example. While occasionally expressing disapproval towards the excesses of these local fascist reproductions, Iorga never rethought his stance on fascism in a generic sense, espousing a double standard as far as internal and external permutations of the phenomenon were concerned. Down the line, this posture entailed a degree of ambivalence on key issues, such as Mussolini's expansionist ambitions, which Iorga had to balance with his uncompromising opposition towards revisionism, illustrating a 'wilfully selective reading' (144) of Italian political realities. There were even instances of veiled criticism on his part, particularly surrounding the Matteotti crisis of June 1924, when the violent suppression of one of the *Duce*'s most popular adversaries undermined the credibility of the regime, a crime which Iorga somehow managed to publicly denounce on moral grounds without changing his tune on fascism overall, however repressive its political mechanisms became. In fact, it was precisely after Mussolini formally announced his dictatorial grip on society, in 1925, that the Romanian historian's connections with Italy turned stronger than before. Beyond political pragmatism, various theoretical articulations irradiating from Rome proved compatible with his conservative, traditionalist convictions and his antiparliamentarian, antidemocratic inclinations, with notions such as Giovanni Gentile's 'ethical state' as the 'cultural and moral guardian' of collective existence evoked as particularly resonant (154). Significantly, these were also the years when functional components of fascism were imported on home soil, with corrosive effects for the democratic establishment, as proven by the 1926 electoral reform, infamously inspired by the Acerbo Law of 1923, which would fatefully damage the representative and participative substance of the Romanian legislative apparatus in the long run.

It was on this background that Iorga had the chance to meet Mussolini in 1927, an encounter which left a lasting impression. From here on, references to the creative oeuvre of fascism would abound in Iorga's interventions, with a profound chronopolitical component at the heart of his ideological representations, synthesised by Țăranu in a compelling dichotomy: an homage to continuity, referring to the vital recovery of the mythical past, was juxtaposed with a valuation of rupture, which implied surmounting the decadence of the modern democratic ensemble, a duality by no means unique to Iorga's conception (178-179). Such convictions were augmented by a general sense, deeply felt in intellectual milieus throughout the continent, that

democracy had expired and needed to be done away with, while the context was ripe for providential dictatorships.

Romania saw the signs of dawning authoritarianism from the beginning of the second inter-war decade, with the Carlist restoration not yet overthrowing, but significantly perturbing the democratic establishment. These developments attracted Iorga's support from the onset, a stance deriving both from long held expectations for a strong-handed leader and a keen sense of political opportunism. The latter, coupled with favourable internal circumstances, allowed him a spell as prime minister, between April 1931 and May 1932, an interval when the prospective national prophet gained the ideal platform to display his affinity for the fascist project. At this analytical level, Țăranu adapts Roger Griffin's canonical definition of generic fascism to Iorga's ideological framework, identifying a brand of palingenetic nationalism devoid of the violent drive, but nonetheless founded on strong antisemitic underpinnings, a hostile comprehension of the modern nexus, an affirmation of charismatic leadership, an open embrace of the collective will at the expense of individual freedom, and an overemphasis of principles of order and hierarchy, all constitutive of the common ground between authoritarian conservatism and fascism (214). As head of the government, his diplomatic courtship of fascist Italy, now in an official capacity, was naturally reciprocated by a foreign regime delighted to collaborate with a staunch Italophile at the helm of the country. To that end, the account reveals how Iorga was the subject of a favourable propaganda campaign in the Italian press, a charm offensive effectively appealing to his notorious ego, assembling his profile as the 'spiritual *Duce*' of Romania. Conversely, the year in power brought the resurgence of several conundrums which the prime minister had to confront: Italian revisionism advanced relentlessly, much to the dismay of the Romanian political elite; the intensely discussed economic model of corporatism had an ambivalent internal reception, particularly among more conservative social and political forces; last but not least, Hungary's arduous efforts to ingratiate itself to Rome were regarded with predictable anxiety in Bucharest.

An intriguing aspect pertaining to Iorga's favourable evaluations of dictatorship, frequently touched upon in the course of the monograph, concerns his consistent repudiation of Hitler and National-Socialism. From its earliest years, he discussed German fascism in disparaging fashion, showing equal contempt to its perceived internal imitators, particularly the L.A.N.C. and the Legion of the Archangel Michael (both of which the author assigns, improperly, to the fascist camp, omitting the substantial distinctions that separated the radical right, embodied by A.C. Cuza's organisation, from the proper fascism of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu). Here Iorga remained an outlier, insofar as he counterposed Hitler's negative autocratic project to Mussolini's ostensibly positive dictatorship, the former derided as the mystical, superficial, anarchical imitation of the rational, effective, orderly original fascism. As a theoretical explanation, Țăranu determines two fundamental dimensions of *mussolinismo* which, from Iorga's perspective, kindled the fascist flame: on the one hand, the traditionalist component, which appealed to the conservative nationalist understanding of history, particularly in the case of the idealised past framed as an essential instrument to temper the radical revolution; on the other hand, while not advocating for totalitarian rule per se, but remaining dismissive towards the democratic system, Iorga celebrated the Italian case as an exceptional political model, which integrally encapsulated the regenerative

implications of the fascist mission. Pushed far enough, these tenets could lead to moral absurdities, such as the validation of the genocidal colonial conquest of Ethiopia (1935) as a legitimate, civilising undertaking, illustrated by Iorga's egregious apologies of the conflict. Ultimately, such instances signified, as keenly remarked, a defence of their author's own 'symbolic capital' (265).

A belated, partial and frail 'disenchantment' phase is distinguished around the second half of the 1930s, grounded in external factors which revolved around Mussolini's ceaseless support of Hungarian revisionism, Italy's obedient subordination to the ideals of German expansionism, as well as various diplomatic incidents, such as Rome's public validation of the Legionary Movement. Therefore, the search for forceful leadership concentrated inwards, particularly after the instatement of the royal autocracy in February 1938, which Iorga fervently celebrated. It is a striking irony that this peculiar 'disenchantment' was running its course precisely at a time when king Carol II 'engaged on the path of philofascist mimeticism' (293), a bitter paradox that might have blindsided Iorga himself. In his final couple of years, he attempted a rhetorical separation of Mussolini's flawed political persona from the Italian nation's historical destiny, a position increasingly untenable in the context of the Second World War. Needless to say, Iorga's naïve expectation that the *Duce* would break from the shadow of the *Führer* was proven as false as most of his other assessments on fascism.

As the conclusion accurately registers, Iorga's posthumous projection into the realm of mythology was very much dependent upon the thesis that his death was the sacrificial culmination of uncompromising antifascism, a notion denounced by Țăranu as mere memorial distortion, a red thread of instrumental glorification. It is through such lucid observations that the book succeeds in filling a historiographical gap, revisiting a figure too rarely contested by history or memory. Intertwined in Iorga's worldview was the passionate admiration for the Italian past and the enthusiastic support for the fascist project, which strenuously coexisted with the visceral rejection of German National-Socialism or the Legionary Movement. Like plenty of intellectuals of his time, he was utterly seduced by the palingenetic ideal of the nation's rebirth, by fascism's firebrand understanding of the state as an absolute expression of 'order, authority, hierarchy, centralism and national solidarity' (310), and all these notions remained integral to his thought, in one form or another, until the very end. Eulogies aside, even the most praiseworthy national icons need to be understood for their clear faults as much as for their undeniable merits, making this particular contribution a notable step towards a better grasp of the place Nicolae Iorga holds in history and historiography.

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