

BOOK REVIEWS

ANDREEA CORCA, *Activismul clerical ortodox în istoria Gărzii de Fier. Biografia preotului Valeriu Beleuță (1909-1974)* (Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2025)

The substantial ground covered so far in the historiography of Romanian fascism means that the defining components of the phenomenon (ideological corpus, political configurations, social structures, cultural influences, memorial representations) have been, and continue to be, the subject of thorough and relevant research. In other areas, although theoretical foundations have been laid, much remains to be explored. One of the most prominent themes in this regard concerns biographical studies of fascist cadre. Past contributions have revolved primarily around Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and other main characters of the Legion of the 'Archangel Michael', while explorations of lesser-known figures have been lacking.

In this context, Andreea Corca's intention to examine the fascist past of a relevant grass-roots representative of the movement, as well as a man of the cloth, appears worthwhile for a number of reasons. In his double capacity as a Legionnaire and an Orthodox priest, Valeriu Beleuță, the subject of the endeavour, is an ideal candidate for the exploration of an important research avenue, ideally compatible with the biographical approach, namely the issue of the clerical engagement with native fascism. Here again, important groundwork has already been laid, through the valuable contributions of authors such as Ionuț Florin Biluță, Ion Popa, Mirel Bănică, Constantin Iordachi and others, but the intricate functions of the spiritual component in Legionary thought and action are certainly in need of further and deeper understanding. Willing to better grasp the interplay of fascism and theology, Andreea Corca moves beyond a mere biographical exploration and inspects the underlying meanings of a radical worldview in which the religious and the secular were inextricably connected.

Given the implications of the approach, the introductory argument provides a solid reading guide for the following analysis. The account is framed as a critical take on the myth of the golden age frequently ascribed to the inter-war years, a distorting, idealised representation that regrettably persists. More specifically, the narrative attempts a memorial reconstruction of a small community in Făgăraș, whose tumultuous stories and contentious self-representations are investigated through a broad selection of archival material, as well as, particularly towards the end, through the valuable inputs of oral history. Naturally, the biographical process entails a retrospective ordering of an individual life, but it is not limited to such a narrow objective. Often moving beyond personal stories, the narrative responds to the pervasive whitewashing of the

memory of fascism and to the rehabilitative views constructed around what the fascist experience signified for particular communities. Furthermore, it is an extensive documentation of the involvement of clerics in far-right politics in small rural environments, revealing the manner in which they fostered fascist sentiment among parishioners. From a methodological standpoint, the author displays a firm knowledge of social sciences paradigms concerned with the nature of biographical writing and integrates her chosen character into wider social networks, an option well explained in the theoretical preamble.

After a survey of previous mentions of the protagonist in other historical works, the analysis ensues with an opening chapter tackling the relations between the Orthodox clergy and the Legion of the 'Archangel Michael' in general terms. While portions of this path have already been walked, as the author herself is quick to admit, there are still matters that need to be addressed or revisited, particularly given the continuous interest the topic still elicits. The resilience of hagiographical and apologetic perspectives in the public sphere is rightfully deplored, as they obscure the consequential reality that priests and fascists were often brought together by a set of common convictions: fierce anticommunism wrapped in paranoid conspiracy theories, uncompromising devotion towards traditional spirituality, shared hostility towards the encroaching secularisation process, exclusionist views on the ethnic configuration of the nation state, normative rejection of modern Western values and institutions, and so on. Drawing on these commonalities, what the author describes as the clerical inclination to divert Orthodox sacrality for the benefit of the Legionary Movement (38) becomes easier to comprehend. Led slightly astray by otherwise valid remarks, Corca subscribes to the theoretical position according to which the consistent overlap of the clerical and fascist realms contributed to a sort of endemic specificity that turned the Legion of the 'Archangel Michael' into a unique phenomenon among synchronic permutations of fascism. That, of course, is not an accurate evaluation, since various other brands of fascism extracted their spiritual substance out of traditional religion in very similar fashion, from the Hungarian Arrow Cross to the Spanish Falange, from the Croatian Ustaša to the Slovak Hlinka Guards. While admittedly distinctive on account of its Orthodox orientation, the Romanian version of fascism was certainly not singular as far as the contamination of Christian metaphysics and far-right politics is concerned. Nevertheless, this section provides a useful summary on the manner in which Orthodox discourses, rituals, symbols and cadres forged an essential pillar of Legionary identity, while avoiding the trap of equating the hierarchical ensemble of the Romanian Orthodox Church in its entirety with a fascist playground.

The following couple of chapters delve into the early life and education of Valeriu Beleuță, beginning with contextual descriptions of family and community required for the deeper integration of the character within the social environment of a small Transylvanian village. Amidst carefully reconstructed portraits of various relatives that are relevant to the story, a noteworthy piece of information for developments to come is the tangential family connection between the protagonist and Horia Sima. The narrative dwells upon the ethnic and religious diversity of the Făgăraș area, the scene of Beleuță's upbringing, a heterogeneous social landscape from the times of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to those of the Romanian Kingdom. A similar plurality of layers is distinguished in Sibiu, where the future priest gained a solid theological education in a renowned

Orthodox establishment and where his radical turn occurred. In explaining the latter, the author highlights the tremendous economic turmoil and social perturbances brought about by the Great Depression. Incidentally, these were deeply felt at the same time when Beleuță first came into contact with the local structures of the Legionary Movement, established in the area in the early 1930s, under the leadership of influential figures such as Ion Banea, of later national notoriety. As it is accurately pointed out, at the local and national level alike, the growing fascist movement appealed to theologians who, like other categories, were frustrated by socio-economic disparities and interethnic tensions, but who also held a more profound sense of national decay, perceived in spiritual terms (66-67).

As a full-fledged Legionnaire, Beleuță first directed his efforts towards propaganda endeavours, becoming involved in the publication of a short-lived fascist weekly titled *Legiunea (The Legion)*, where he collaborated with future fascist figures of high standing such as Horia Sima and Nicolae Petrașcu. Though limited in scope, his theoretical contributions to the paper are depicted as particularly relevant, since they abounded in religious imagery with eschatological overtones and displayed a degree of visceral antisemitism and ethnic intolerance proving a rapid and integral internalisation of fascist doctrine. The authorities' crackdown on the publication had no deterring effect on his propaganda efforts. Covering different facets of his activism, the author justifiably insists on the essential role of family connections in the structuring of fascist political allegiances. Later on, from his newfound place as a young parish priest in the small village of Poiana Mărului, Beleuță's far-right activism amplified, a development which allows for the examination of various facets of radical clerical militantism in a time when the popularity of the Legionary Movement was on the rise. As the author highlights, the recruitment campaign launched among parishioners speculated their social discontent and economic precarity, their political disenfranchisement and lack of trust in the establishment, their strong attachment to Orthodox tradition and pervasive sense of abandonment in the face of modern transformations (96). The combined effect of fascist propaganda and religious proselytism is shown to have turned many villagers into easy prey for Beleuță's radical messages.

In the years that followed, he became a leader of local fascist structures, organised processions in rural settings and was actively involved in electoral politics, particularly in the 1937 legislative campaign that would anticipate the end of the democratic regime. With the establishment of the Carlist autocracy, he became subject to persecution and, like other Legionnaires, was coerced into joining the National Rebirth Front. However, his ideological convictions were not shaken by the change of political order, as proven by small acts of public defiance, whose meticulous evocation once again proves the author's keen attention to detail. Minor but relevant gestures, such as mentioning the name of the assassinated Codreanu during religious service or singing Legionary hymns in public contexts, earned Beleuță his first spell in jail, granting him a claim to personal sacrifice on account of his prison experience. As it is pointed out, imprisonment for one's beliefs was one of the emblematic tropes of the Legion's mythology, essential for the construction of its pantheon as well as for the transformation of its members in line with the utopian claims of anthropological revolution (120). While not even incarceration could temper Beleuță's political zeal, spiritual convictions and hostility towards the authorities, his

resistance did have contingent limits. In the repressive wave unleashed in September 1939 following the assassination of Armand Călinescu, Beleuță was among the many fascists in the penitentiary system who signed the notorious 'desolidarisation' declarations imposed by the monarchical regime. Nevertheless, while overtly breaking with his Legionary allegiance, he certainly remained attached to it in private.

As Romania descended deeper into its non-democratic spiral, the succeeding regimes impacted the fascist movement and its individual members in major ways, starting with the abrupt and fleeting political experiment that was the National Legionary State. While the protagonist's activity throughout the ephemeral new order is not documented in too much detail, his activity during the climactic demise of the regime is well accounted for, with the Legionary rebellion of 21st-23rd January 1941 dragging him into the middle of the violent unrest in the Braşov area. With the conflict decided in favour of the military pole of power, Beleuță found himself once again at the wrong end of a hostile political order, this time around the punishment being more severe. For his involvement in the rebellion, he would become part of the large-scale 'rehabilitation' initiative orchestrated by the Antonescu regime that entailed forced mobilisation on the Eastern Front. Always the outlier, he distinguished himself on the frontline and was decorated for his deeds as a military confessor in the earlier stages of the war.

Besides Beleuță's convoluted trajectory, other characters connected to him in different capacities are followed through the conflagration, ranging from lesser-known figures that are recurrent in the narrative, such as Eugen Rațiu, to more iconic Legionnaires, such as Ernest Bernea. While certainly useful for contextual clarifications, these switches of narrative focus also have a slight wandering effect. For example, the extended segment following Rațiu from his wartime clandestinity through a major detour covering his Communist era tribulations means that Beleuță himself is lost from sight for an important stretch of the narrative. This encumbers the biographical account to some degree with side stories that might occasionally read as too tangential. When the story eventually returns its protagonist, he is found isolated back to his parish, under constant surveillance, but still in contact with clandestine fascist circles, despite political persecution only gaining in intensity from here on.

The final section of the book is set during the first Communist decades, depicting the most violent regime that Beleuță had to confront. His punishment now began with uncomfortable compromises, such as reticently joining The Ploughers' Front, one of the various factions anticipating Communist hegemony, for which the enrolment of credible figures from rural areas was an essential social inroad. This would prove to be a temporary arrangement, as his past, that would continue to haunt him for the rest of his life, led to his eventual exclusion from formal politics. From 1948 onwards, with the new order firmly in place, a sequence of arrests would impede his fantasies of joining the resistance. Frequently in and out of prison, he eventually came to be condemned to forced labour in some of the harshest penitentiary conditions of the Romanian Gulag, working on the colossal infrastructure project and extermination site that was the Danube – Black Sea Canal. Punitive measures extended to his family, who suffered deportation in 1952. For the rest of his life, he remained under the surveillance of the Securitate and the psychological

damage inflicted by this status is described through a competent investigation of the vast archival material. Predictably, he remained unrepentant in his religious and political creeds.

The substantial oral history component of the biography comes towards its end, in the form of a useful conclusive chapter described as a 'postbiographical epilogue' that neatly completes the family portrait fragmentarily approached throughout the account. It is an immersion into the memorial heritage of Beleuță's descendants, of clear value for the wider goals of the research. In Poiana Mărului, Beleuță is shown to be remembered, as illustrated by several oral history interviews, as a remarkable figure for the social and spiritual life of the community. While his posthumous representation is inevitably linked to his notorious Legionary credentials, the checkered past does not seem to darken his memorialisation as a flawed, but charismatic and influential figure (230), an aspect highly revealing for the manner in which retrospective projection can alter and reconfigure individual trajectories.

In the nuanced style that is one of the stronger suits of the analysis, its conclusions reiterate the plurality of shapes and forms fascist engagement took when catering to the spiritual expectations of the clergy. To that end, what Andreea Corca manages through her insightful look into the life of Valeriu Beleuță is to contextualise, describe and explain what it was that drew a particular village priest to the palingenetic utopia of fascism. Aside from a vivid representation of radical ecclesiastic militancy, the book is also an exploration of the ideological worldview, social universe and extreme course of action specific to a certain political and spiritual type, providing a welcome addition to the field of autochthonous fascist studies.

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