PHILIPPE HENRI BLASEN, BRONWYN CRAGG, *Antisemiții politici români (1918-1940). A.C. Cuza, Alexandru Resmeriță, Elena Bacaloglu, Constantin Zoppa, Titus P. Vifor* (Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2025)

Academic research concerning the Romanian far-right has been consistently focused on the native version of fascism, a natural priority given the consequential historical manifestations of the Legion of the 'Archangel Michael'. However, fascist-centred approaches have inadvertently led to the marginalisation of alternative movements and figures of the far-right ecosphere. Similar to other national contexts, inter-war Romania was a fertile ground for a plethora of figures and organisations whose ideologies encompassed palingenetic ultranationalism, rabid antisemitism, religious fundamentalism, ethnocratic collectivism, staunch conservatism and revolutionary projects. In various ways, they all charted distinctive courses from the well-established path of fascism. It is to several of these overlooked, but nonetheless relevant iterations of extremism that Phillipe Henri Blasen and Bronwyn Cragg turn to, bringing together a selection of portraits meant to uncover facets of political antisemitism insufficiently addressed in past accounts. As Roland Clark, one of the foremost experts on Romanian fascism, states in the preface of the volume, all those included in this panoply of radicalism, while navigating their convoluted roads to illusory political affirmation, were to some degree responsible for the adoption of external ideological structures on home ground. Simultaneously, they all played their part in the overwhelming surge of homegrown antisemitism, exploiting the dysfunctions of the frail democratic establishment in order to advance their agendas (9-10).

The introductory section of the book, elaborated by both authors, delivers a set of compelling preliminary clarifications. It deplores the persistent relativism and obscurantism undermining the manner in which Romanian antisemitism is presently engaged with in public debates, in national politics, in ecclesiastic circles or in judicial settings. In the same vein, it touches upon the confusing retrospective perceptions on Romanian fascism and other forces of the radical realm, making the case for an imperative examination of non-fascist political antisemitism. This notion is grounded in the common-sense premise that the rejection of Jewish identity was by no means the monopoly of the Legionary Movement, but instead a stance that was omnipresent throughout the social and political body (18). At the same time, the brief historiographic review also contains some rejections of academic consensus that are less convincing. Blasen and Cragg minimise the 'internal logic' ascribed to extremist strands by researchers who presumably overstated the mystical and theological essence of Romanian fascism (such as Constantin Iordachi or Marius Turda). Such tendencies are said to have entailed an implicit marginalisation of the foundational antisemitic component of the far-right (21). While it is easy to see why an inquiry into antisemitism would avoid overstressing other ideological tenets in its own epistemic pursuits, this line of argument largely amounts to a false premise. In the mainstream historiography of Romanian fascism, antisemitism has not been dealt with in the logic of a zero-sum game in relation

to other core ideological issues. In plain terms, the far-right, be it fascist, conservative or radical, could and did simultaneously hold an antagonistic stance on the ethnic other as well as a complex transcendental understanding of reality. These mental representations, far from mutually exclusive, instead reinforced one another, as made clear by worthwhile academic contributions of the past.

Out of the five subsequent chapters, the first one is unique insofar as it concerns a well-researched character: A.C. Cuza, the notorious patriarchal figure of Romanian antisemitism. However, the narrow subject of Blasen's approach pertains to a particular aspect of his public persona, namely the meanings Cuza ascribed to the swastika, rendered in the broader context of the symbol's association with German National-Socialism. The account proceeds to demonstrate that despite his boastful claims of being the forefather of the swastika in continental politics, Cuza had mimetically imported it from German radical milieus at the beginning of the 20th century. A transnational prism is employed in order to track how the visual and ideological marker transgressed national borders and influenced the self-representation of one of the most notable exponents of Romanian antisemitism.

Structured in a two-fold thematic approach, the analysis dedicates its first half to a diachronic revisitation of Cuza's political career between the 1890s and the 1920s. The dense biographical sketch underlines the protagonist's foreign cultural influences and follows his intellectual and political development in modern Romania, at a time when antisemitism was, for all intents and purposes, a pillar of national identity. Extracts from his pre-war publications reveal a worldview determined, from its earliest stages, by the violent rejection of the ethnic other. This virulent chauvinism only accentuated with time, very much in line with the general trends of the period. In the aftermath of the First World War, expanding on failed past attempts, Cuza sought to establish proper political vehicles to serve his xenophobic fantasies. In the process, he channelled the force of the student movements of the early inter-war years and their relentless ultranationalist sentiment. A climactic point, as far as his political projects were concerned, was the formation in 1923 of the National Christian Defence League (L.A.N.C.), whose aims ranged from rewriting the Constitution in an antisemitic vein to excluding the Jews from all vital aspects of politics, society, economy, culture.

The second half of the chapter hones in on the swastika itself, which decorated L.A.N.C.'s publications, became the centrepiece of the organisation's rendition of the national flag and underwent what is aptly described as a 'visual Romanianisation process' (52). It is well argued that the popularity of the symbol within the Romanian far-right was indebted to its circulation in German ultranationalist and antisemitic milieus. Cuza's blatant appropriation of it was acknowledged as such at home, despite his claims to historical precedence. In fact, Blasen uncovers a little-known link between Cuza and Heinrich Krager, a militant antisemitic doctrinaire and leader of minor ultranationalist lodges and publications (57-60), with which the former shared grandiose projects of transnational cooperation. Therefore, through meticulous use of archival documentation and publications, the notion that Cuza was somehow the original promoter of the symbol in continental politics is irrefutably dismantled. His pseudoscientific deciphering of the swastika as a recurrent iteration in the historical and spiritual ancestry of the Romanian people is

rejected as a blood-and-soil fabrication typical for Cuza's historical falsehoods. As reiterated in the conclusion, the 'declared autochthonism' of local radicals by no means impeded external imports and 'transnational plagiarism' (65).

The second chapter proceeds towards the lesser-known characters covered in the rest of the book, beginning with Alexandru Resmeriță, an ostensibly minor radical theorist on whom biographical information, as Bronwyn Cragg observes, has been lacking in the past. The fragmentary data available, mostly alluding to his presumed (but inaccurate) involvement with the Legionary Movement, his presumed (and again inaccurate) position as an Orthodox priest and his genocidal formulations of the 'Jewish question,' never amounted to an accurate historical profile. To that end, Cragg manages to fill several gaps in his detailed account, setting the historical record straight in the process. As with the previous chapter, Resmeriță's biographical examination is two-pronged, with an initial part dedicated to the chronological review of his life and work and the second part dwelling on the publication most evoked in his historiographical mentions, the 1938 pamphlet *Cum ne apărăm de evrei* ("How to defend ourselves from the Jews").

A graphic artist and teacher from Turnu Severin, Resmeriță was already on an ultranationalist path before the First World War, his earliest writings advocating for ethnocratic exclusion. He became a prisoner of the Central Powers during the conflagration, enduring deportation and severe hardships, only to return in peacetime to his theoretical endeavours with increased xenophobic fervour. The 'pseudohistorical and protochronistic nationalism' (77) he later espoused in Greater Romania anticipated a full-fledged involvement in antisemitic politics. After joining L.A.N.C. in the 1930s, his work increasingly drew on stereotypes that associated Jewish identity with masonic cabals, anti-Christian machinations, political corruption and revolutionary conspiracies, echoing the mainstream discourse of A.C. Cuza. On the issue of political involvement, the narrative makes it clear that while Resmeriță had been an initial supporter of the Legionary Movement, even acknowledged by Codreanu as a financial contributor, he was never involved in the fascist organisation per se and remained more attracted to Cuza's political brand of antisemitism (87-88). Following his formal adherence to the radical right, he became an active contributor to several xenophobic national publications and his theoretical corpus culminated with the notorious 1938 pamphlet referred to earlier, the climax of his eliminationist fantasies. The closing part of the account revisits his frequently erroneous mentions in the historiography of Romanian fascism and the Holocaust, Cragg engaging in several biographical corrections and amending the misattributions of the character's political allegiances. All in all, as underlined in the conclusion, Alexandru Resmeriță remained, despite his limited renown, a vehement antisemitic propagandist from beginning to end.

The most substantial section of the volume is also the most intriguing from a thematic standpoint, dealing with Elena Bacaloglu, 'the sole woman in Romania who became a fascist leader' (101), whose political and ideological evolution is followed by Blasen in detailed fashion. Only referenced superficially in various monographs dedicated to Romanian fascism, usually in brief allusions to the failed projects of the early 1920s, Bacaloglu was never the subject of any thorough biographical research. Therefore, significant new ground is covered in this chapter, as Blasen's examination unveils an intricate worldview, shaped by a distinctive form of

ultranationalist antisemitism, dominated by the pipe dream of 'an alliance, a union or even an Italian-Romanian empire' (101).

Aside from her questionable literary pursuits, Bacaloglu largely flew under the cultural radar until the First World War. Her public affirmation came after the First World War, when she witnessed the radical metamorphosis of Italian society, from D'Annunzio's taking of Fiume to Mussolini's rise with the *fasci di combattimento*, the fervour of these episodes inspiring emulative undertakings. In 1920, she established the *Fascio nazionale italo-romeno*, conceived as an instrument for Italo-Romanian far-right cooperation, whose mimetic nature is made clear throughout the analysis. In its short-lived existence, the organisation relied entirely on the backing of various figures of Italian fascism and shared major ideological themes with the Mussolini regime. Dominant among them were the rejuvenation of political elites, building a bulwark against socialism and preserving national identity in the face of presumed international conspiracies, convictions which fuelled a paranoid political vision (136).

However, while Mussolini's star rose to its zenith following the March on Rome, Bacaloglu had no similar prospects at home and fell out of favour with the new Italian regime, for whom she was never a relevant factor to begin with. Furthermore, amidst the divisions provoked by competing entities such as the National Romanian Fascio (F.R.N.), she also lost her internal monopoly as a fascist imitator. To that end, her ultimately unsuccessful involvement in the F.R.N.'s internal power struggles is particularly relevant. The downfall of the Romanian fascist current of Italian inspiration marked a descent into irrelevance for Bacaloglu from the mid-1920s onwards. Unable to rekindle her ambitious plans, she faced a humiliating deportation from Italy in 1939 and became a mere contributor to far-right publications during the Second World War. It was an underwhelming finale for a character labelled as fundamentally contradictory: on the one hand, she typified the middle-class circles captivated by ultranationalist and antisemitic conspiracies and mythical representations of Latin ancestry; on the other hand, she was a strikingly atypical feminine presence in a world of patriarchal values and martial projections (163-164).

The next chapter has a more precise geographical determination, examining Constantin Zoppa as a case study for the regional developments of pre-war and inter-war-era antisemitism in Bukovina. Blasen's overarching premise favours the idea of continuity, rendering an individual trajectory regarded as 'paradigmatic' for the historical persistence of ethnocratic orientations beyond borders and regimes, from a Habsburg periphery to a Romanian territorial gain (168). A native Germanophone of Cernăuți, Zoppa joined the ranks of Romanian nationalist associations as a militant for minority rights within the Empire, but his fluid political identity allowed for other affinities as well, such as Austrian Christian-Socialism. As the continental conflagration ensued and identities grew mutually exclusive, Zoppa chose the Romanian side, for which he ended up fighting, while maintaining his uncompromising extremism. His long-standing searches for radical political outlets first touched Iorga's Nationalist-Democratic party and later brought him to L.A.N.C., under the banner of which he advanced to a leadership role in the Cernăuți organisation. Beyond political involvement, in his professional capacity as a teacher, Zoppa engaged in the antisemitic persecution of Jewish students, adding to the visceral climate of regional interethnic hatred. In

that regard, he is shown to have fanned the flames against Jewish student David Falik, assassinated by future fascist Nicolae Totu in one of the most egregious antisemitic episodes of 1920s Romania.

Ultimately, radicalisation reached its culmination with his 1930s involvement in the Legionary Movement, becoming a member of the fascist organisation's internal Senate, a personal acquaintance of the Codreanu family and an active agent in fascist electoral politics. Compellingly, Blasen registers Zoppa's blatant opportunism at every step, inspiring numerous self-advantageous shifts and turns. Persecuted by the Carlist autocratic regime for his fascist allegiance, he renounced his commitments to the Legion of the 'Archangel Michael' and joined the National Rebirth Front, the regime's single party. The short-lived change of fortune for Romanian fascism brought him several high-ranking positions in the National Legionary State, while in the subsequent power struggles of the movement he remained in the camp of Horia Sima. In the aftermath of the August 23rd coup, sensing what lay ahead, he swiftly joined the political structures of the dawning Communist regime. That did not prevent the retaliatory measures imposed on account of his political past, which followed him throughout the 1950s, as detailed by a section of his biography reconstituted through the documentation of the Securitate. All in all, the character is summarised as perpetually guided by a self-interested approach to radical politics, whether in pre-war Bukovina or in the inter-war Romanian Kingdom, essential to his long-lasting career as a 'veteran antisemite.'

The final study revolves around another ephemeral presence in the landscape of early Romanian fascism, once again an organisation willing to replicate Mussolini's project, namely the already encountered National Romanian Fascio, observed by Cragg through a close look at one of its founders, Titus Panaitescu-Vifor. A small-time journalist and entrepreneur with large political ambitions and a worldview grounded in 'virulent antisemitism and the radical deconstruction of existing systems' (199), Vifor would eventually be consumed by the same sectarian disputes that derailed concurrent endeavours such as Bacaloglu's. Nevertheless, he is depicted as a faithful preacher of fascism at home, willing to engage in cultural and economic initiatives meant to draw Italy and Romania closer together. In bringing Vifor's opaque portrait out of the shadows, Cragg also reevaluates the F.N.R. as more than a mere historical footnote, reconsidering it as a forerunner to more substantial representations of ultranationalist antisemitism (200-201). Tempted by socialism in the pre-war years, Vifor was deeply preoccupied by issues such as the rights of workers, the legitimacy of peasant revolts or the consequences of economic inequality. After the war, he moved towards the radical right, embracing its militaristic ethos, criticism of parliamentary politics and expectations of national reform. Politically, this translated into brief involvements with Averescu's People's League and Iorga's Nationalist Democrats, before deciding to found his own organisation, the F.N.R., echoing the breakthrough of Mussolini's March on Rome. In establishing his own *fascio*, Vifor was helped by a mixed bag of characters, such as the bizarre occultist Dumitru C. Pădeanu, bound by their fascination with Italian fascism, disillusion with the bourgeois establishment, monarchical fealty and Orthodox sentiment (209-210). Predictably, the party agenda encompassed a strong antiminority stance, catalysed by the national context in which it operated.

The F.N.R. could not escape the same factional tendencies which condemned all other imitative fascist projects and slowly crumbled under Vifor's mismanagement, unable to deal with

the pressure of internal competitors or external foes and losing recruits to larger forces, such as L.A.N.C. Moreover, the party doctrine, under an eclectic range of influences, from Mussolini and d'Annunzio to Atatürk, Maurras and Barrès, remained a heterogeneous and confusing mixture of Christian, antisemitic and anticommunist tropes, synthesised in Vifor's 1924 manifesto *Doctrina fascismului* (*The Doctrine of Fascism*). With the organisation formally dissolved by the late 1920s, Vifor briefly joined the Legionary Movement and remained a devotee of Italian fascism, as well as an intellectual collaborator of notorious far-right platforms and figures throughout the 1930s. These connections would grant him a brief mandate as a press attaché in Italy in 1940, in late stage Carlism and throughout the National Legionary State, only to slowly disappear from historical view in the years that followed. He was last recorded abroad following the Second World War, in a typical self-aggrandising posture, as a purported economic doctrinaire, who had actually become 'forgotten by history.' Vifor's impact on Romanian antisemitism, however, is regarded as noteworthy, being counted among the meteoric figures who fomented 'nationalism, antisemitism and fascist propaganda in inter-war Romania' (250-251).

The commonalities shared by the cast of characters approached in the volume can be summarised in three major points. Firstly, in one way or another, all of them revived and adapted pre-war conceptions of radical exclusion, of ethnic, confessional and racial intolerance, which mutated and amplified in the aftermath of the war. Secondly, in the years of political dissolution, social fracture and economic collapse following the conflict, all the discussed figures found their place in a gamut of ideologies, associations, and publications unified by the radical rejection of otherness, while at the same time devouring one another in twists and turns that condemned them to abject failure. Thirdly, with the sole exception of A.C. Cuza, they all remained far enough out of the limelight and public relevance to never play a decisive role in the eliminationist progression of the Romanian Holocaust. However, they maintained a suffocating climate of hatred that kept boiling throughout the inter-war decades and the theoretical articulations of their political structures expressed the common goal of direct, violent action against perceived enemies. It was a mantle which more popular iterations of ultranationalism, from the fascist Legionary Movement to the radical rightist L.A.N.C., were willing to push to its genocidal climax. By adding substantial detail to the broader canvas on which these better-known phenomena arose, Blasen and Cragg successfully clarify the plural intricacies and dynamic complexities of Romanian political antisemitism.

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