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The Romanian Eastern-Orthodox Clergy and the Challenge of the Iron Guard Movement

Abstract of Doctoral Thesis

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Most recent studies focusing on the involvement of the Romanian Eastern-Orthodox Church in interwar social life limited themselves to only certain aspects, in analysing the entire interpretative corpus, mainly concerning themselves with themes pertaining to the cultural and national domains. Political activism among part of the lower-level clergy into interwar political parties, and most of all inside far-right extremist groups, still remains a controversial issue within historiography debates. Besides the small number of primary sources, any objective discussion can easily denaturate the issue due to a certain dose of bias that pertains to the standing of the Eastern-Orthodox Church within Romanian society, but also to an ideological assessment of the Legionary problem. At the same time, historiography saw the closeness between part of the lower-level clergy and the Legionary Movement, together with its causes and effects, as a secondary element of the ideological and factual interaction between the institution of the Eastern-Orthodox Church and the Legion of Archangel Michael, regardless of the names the latter was called during the interwar period. With rare exceptions, the emphasis was never on the lower clergy or its importance as a social group. The Church's position, as stated by the Holy Synod, towards far-right groups, cannot be explained without understanding why priests adhered to such groups and became active in them.

Descriptions of the relationship between the Romanian Eastern-Orthodox Church and political powers over the last century often use generalisations. Such a generalisation posits that the Church was close to the Legionary Movement or many of its priests were enrolled into this political group. Another reason for this choice of theme derives from a curiosity to find archive resources able to confirm or deny such a generalisation.

The importance of the theme chosen for this work, *The Romanian Eastern-Orthodox Clergy and the Challenge of the Iron Guard Movement*, is reflected by its topicality. Subjects such as the relationship between the Church and the State, or the involvement of priests into politics, sparked public opinion debates from the beginnings of the modern State until today, regardless of the colour of the current political regimes. My work here attempts to analyse a controversial page in the

history of the interwar period: the attitude of the national Church towards a far-right extremist movement. After rigorous and arduous research in Romanian archives, I was able not only to comment on how high Church hierarchs related to the Legionary Movement, but also how the latter was perceived by lower clergy.

One goal of my work is to lay out an ample analysis of all the aspects that led some members of the Romanian Eastern-Orthodox Church (Biserica Ortodoxa Romana – BOR) to embrace Legionary ideas during the period 1927–1941, from the emergence of the Legion of Archangel Michael to the Legionary Rebellion. Given the dynamics of the political situation in interwar Romania and the status of the Church and clergy within society, I attempted to build a chronological perspective on how the Legionary Movement got close to the Eastern-Orthodox clergy. One characteristic of that particular time was the search by the entire society for an identity at institutional, political and cultural levels. Both the Church, as a secular institution, and closely linked to the development of the State, and its clergy often perceived as a backwards element within the new modern State, had to adapt and evolve with the new realities, trying to establish their exact place in society and in relation to the State.

On the other hand, in order to assess the involvement of priests with the far-right movement, I needed to analyse the positioning of interwar political regimes towards the Church and its clergy, but also how Church hierarchs, through the decisions of the Holy Synod, stood in relation to political powers.

The element of novelty in my work is the analysis of relationships between Church members and the legionary movement as a political group, under the ecclesiological perspective where hierarchs, clergy, monks, and believers all have an important role to play.

In outlining an overall picture of all the factors that encouraged among some priests Legionary sympathies and enrollment into the Movement, I also considered a comparison to the political activities of the other priests inside the parties that acted on the interwar political scene.

In achieving the goal of my thesis, I kept in mind several research objectives, some of them being discovered during my documentation effort:

- the political, economic and cultural contexts of the interwar period;
- the relationships between political regimes – parliamentary democracy, the authoritarian regime of King Charles II, the Legionary regime of Ion Antonescu – and the upper Church hierarchs;

- the involvement of clergy in political life, and the position of the Church through its supreme decision body, the Holy Synod, with regard to such practices;
- a quantitative and qualitative review of political actions by Legionary priests;
- how public opinion perceived the actions of Legionary-leaning clergy.

Any treatment of this subject needs an interdisciplinary effort, wherein historical sources are to be completed with information from religion sociology, cultural anthropology, theology, ethnology and statistics.

In the Legionary space we can distinguish four important works treating the subject of how Legionarism may be close to Eastern-Orthodox Christianity. Three of them¹ are commendatory discussions attempting to separate Legionarism from the European Fascist current, by emphasizing the mystical and religious character of the Legion. In fact, the religious attitude that sometimes reaches mystical connotations gives the main argumentation in resisting an inclusion of the Legion into the European Fascist movement. However, even by bringing into focus the contradiction with the 'anti-clericalism' or 'anti-Christianism' of European Fascist movements, these works cannot paint a purely objective image of the phenomenon itself. Another goal of those works is to find the necessary elements that would make it possible to put the Legionary movement close to the Church inside the doctrine spectrum, rather than the immanent one. Even if all the other doctrinary arguments do not go beyond the theological boundary of orthodoxy, the major problem was to find an explanation for the main 'sin' that Legionaries are accused of: political assassination. The fourth work, written by theologian Gheorghe Racoveanu², and based on a conference held on 15 March 1943 inside the Buchenwald concentration camp, proposes another perspective, which is profoundly theological, to approach this closeness, and going beyond a justification and apologetical manner of seeing the issue. For this theologian, who was never an active member of the Movement, the manner of discussion in approaching the subject demands first and foremost canonical and exegesis elements.

Most works debating this theme focus on the role of lower-level clergy inside the Movement, almost always making reference to a very specific event: the funerals of two

¹ Pr. Ilie Imbrescu, *Biserica și Mișcarea Legionară: apostrofa unui teolog*, București, Cartea Românească, 1940.; Pr. Victor Moise, *Mișcarea legionară și credința strămoșească*, București, Editura Majadahonda, 1994., Flor Strejnicu, *Creștinismul Mișcării Legionare*, Sibiu, Editura Imago, 2000.

² Gheorghe Racoveanu, *Mișcarea Legionară și Biserica. Omenia și frumusețea cea dintâi*, București, Editura Samizdat, 2002.

Legionaries who fought and died in the Spanish Civil War, i.e. Ionel Moța and Vasile Marin. A statement made by the Spanish historian Francesco Veiga in relation to the events of 1937, "Of the ten thousand priests living in the country, two thousands were members of the Legion,"³ actually quoting Sergio Miranda Carrington, was taken as a fact by all historians without discussing it. More recently, the subject of the number of Legionary priests was taken up by the American historian Roland Clark, but without any final conclusions⁴. Thus, Legionary clerics were reduced to a proportion of 20% of the total number of Eastern-Orthodox priests without discussing any of the premises that had led to such a massive adhesion or its importance, both from a perspective of political activism within the Legionary group, and that of the clergy's pastoral mission.

Another historiographical manner to debate this vast subject was to reactivate the old interwar discussion about the involvement of priests into politics, trying to find causes that imported the material, rather than the transcendental⁵. A third perspective suggests, as a possible solution, to interpret the relationship between the Church and the State⁶.

Another recent type of analysis consists in taking up from international studies on Fascism the concepts of political religion, sacralization of religion or clerical Fascism, thus forcing a phenomenological explanation through stereotypes⁷.

Oliver Jens Schmitt is the very first historian who takes a different approach by proposing as a working hypothesis the analysis of the social and political roles played by priests into far-right extremist movements, delimiting it from church thought or extremist legionary ideology – "At the center we do not find BOR as an institution, but the clergy as a social group."⁸ Although it is the

³ Francesco, *Istoria Gărzii de Fier (1919-1941). Mistica ultranaționalismului*, București, Editura Humanitas, 1995, p. 231.

⁴ Roland, *Sfântă tinerețe legionară. Activismul fascist în România interbelică*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2015, p. 199.

⁵ Mirel Bănică, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română, stat și societate în anii '30*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2007, p. 170-176.

⁶ Florin Muller, *Metamorfoze ale politicului românesc 1938-1944*, București, Editura Universității București, 2005, chapter „Ortodoxismul, religiozitatea și Mișcarea Legionară”, Dan Pavel, *Legionarismul* in „Doctrină politică. Concepte universale și realități românești”, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (ed.), Iași, Ed. Polirom, 1998; Constantin Iordachi, *De la credința naționalistă la credința legionară. Palingenezie romantică, militarism și fascism în România modernă* in „Fascismul european 1918-1945”, Constantin Iordachi (ed.), Cluj-Napoca, Institutul pentru Studiarea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2014; Zigu Ornea, *Tradiționalism și modernitate în deceniul al treilea*, București, Editura Eminescu, 1980.

⁷ Ionuț Biliuță, *Fascism as Political Religion. The Case of Romanian Iron Guard*, www.ceeol.com (accessed on 20.05.2016); Mihai Chioveanu, *Arhanghelul acestei lumi. Legionarismul ca religie politică*, in „Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review”, vol. VII, nr. 3/2007, p. 555-582.

⁸ Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Clerul ortodox și extrema dreaptă în România interbelică*, in „Archiva Moldaviae”, vol. VIII, 2016, p. 95-115.

only study centered on this theme, it cannot solve the most stringent problem: what caused a part of the clergy to embrace the Legionary ideology.

Given that a large part of my work focuses on an analysis of what the clergy did in rural areas, the most important documentary source had to be a study of archives. The most important resource of this type is definitely the BOR Archive, but unfortunately closed to the public, and all my efforts to gain access were denied. Important resources I could find at the National Historical Archives of Romania (Arhivele Naționale Istorice ale României A.N.I.C.) and the Archive of the Council for the Study of Communist Secret Service Records (Arhiva Consiliului pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității A.C.N.S.A.S.). My work at those archives resembled that of a detective. By searching in the records of the Ministry of Interior – Various, the General Police Directorate, I managed to find information about priests, statistics and lists of Legionary Movement members. Starting from the File no. 10/1936 – Ministry of Interior (Various) – A.N.I.C., which includes identification lists made by the Communist Secret Service (Securitate) in 1956, for priests who were suspected of Legionary activity, I asked A.C.N.S.A.S for their individual files. I only received the investigation files of three priests, Ion Dumitrescu-Borșa, Georgescu-Edineți and Grigore Cristescu, as the others could not be found or were confused with people having the same names. An important resource for my analysis of the relationship between the Holy Synod and the State was the archive Fondul Miron Cristea at A.N.I.C.

The second historical source of importance was the press of the time, especially the religious press, such as the journal *Biserica Ortodoxă Română. Revista Sfântului Sinod* (The Romanian Orthodox Church. The Holy Synod), together with its supplements or transcriptions of the meetings held by the Holy Synod, the journal *Mitropolia Moldovei* (The Metropolitan of Moldova), and the regional newspapers *Telegraful* in Sibiu and *Renașterea* in Cluj.

Another valuable documentation source included the memorialistic works of priests and theologians: Nichifor Crainic, priest Ion Dumitrescu-Borșa, priest Ilie Imbrescu, Nicolae Grebenea, Viorel Trifa and bishop Valeriu Anania.

This thesis has a chronological structure, considering the development stages of the Legionary Movement: 1927–1933, from the formation of the Legion of Archangel Michael to the assassination of the Prime-Minister I.G. Duca, an early stage when the political movement leaves regional anonymity and tends to become a mass movement; 1934–1937, the time of glory for Legionaries, when they apply a new political strategy and finally manage to achieve election

success; 1938–1940, the period of the authoritarian regime headed by King Charles II, characterized by a conflict between the King and Legionaries; 1940–1941, the period of the National Legionary State ending in the Legionary Rebellion.

The first chapter of my thesis, titled "Great Romania: Between Conservatism and Reform", although not a novelty in its character, has the role of summing up the political and social situation of Romania in the aftermath of the Great Union, and describing the factors that encouraged the emergence of a far-right extremist current in the country, and placing it within an European context.

My second chapter, titled "Challenges Faced by BOR During the Interwar Period", presents the role of the Church within the Romanian society and the main challenges it faced between the two World Wars: the need to act as a unified body after the Great Union, the relationships with the Greek-Catholic Church and the Romano-Catholic Church, but also the involvement of clergy into politics.

My third chapter, titled "The First Clerics under 'the Sword of Archangel Michael'. 1927–1933", considers how some of the priests were attracted by far-right extremist ideas. During this time the Legion of Archangel Michael, and subsequently the Iron Guard, compete against the LANC – the very body they had separated from to attract new members. After a chronological outline of this time, I tried to discuss several issues specific to that period: a comparison between the Legionary propaganda and that of the Cuzist movement, the evolution in numbers of the Iron Guard, case studies of clerics who became role models for nationalistic university students, the electoral behaviour of Legionaries, and how public opinion saw political assassinations.

In my fourth chapter, titled "'We build up churches, we valiantly sit in prisons...'. 1934–1937", starting from the way Legionaries rethought their political propaganda, I listed the main actions used by the Legionary Movement, under the name Partidul „Totul pentru Țară” ("All for the Country" Party), to get into contact with rural clergy, but also with Church hierarchs – a relationship with many ups and downs, culminating in the 'martyrdom' of Moța and Marin on the Spanish War front.

My fifth chapter, "The Church and Its Priests During the Authoritarian Regime. 1938–1940", describes the relationship between the Church and the authoritarian regime of King Charles II. The second sub-chapter outlines the attitudes of hierarchs and priests towards the actions of the Goga-Cuza Cabinet. After the authoritarian regime was instituted, and political parties were

banned, since the Patriarch of the Church assumed the Prime-Minister function, the clergy found themselves facing a difficult choice: to support the regime or to keep doing party politics. In order to understand how strongly legionary values had taken root with some priests, it is important to analyse individual cases within the context of all the events from that period, including imprisonments, written declarations of rejection of the Legionary Movement, and enrollment into the FRN.

My sixth and last chapter, "The National Legionary State. September 1940 – January 1941", outlines the activities of hierarchs and priests under the government of General Ion Antonescu in collaboration with the Legionary Movement. The Holy Synod through its high hierarchs had a reserved attitude during this period, and strongly condemned the events of 21-23 January 1941. Although it was impossible to develop a statistic of priests that enrolled in the Movement starting with the autumn of 1940, the violences committed by some of them during the Rebellion painted a negative image over the entire clergy, and the Church, through the voice of its Patriarch, condemned their acts.

Summing up, I therefore did my best throughout these six chapters to perform as objective as possible an X-ray of the motives that led part of the Eastern-Orthodox clergy to feel attracted towards the Legionary ideology, trying to underline individual actions in order to be able to build pertinent conclusions that exclude generalisations.