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## The Interwar Intellectuals and the Romanian Extreme Right

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### Abstract

This paper illustrates the following ideas: The Romanian Right represented an undeniable political force, starting with the interwar period and continuing up to the end of the World War II. It appeared to be the suggestion of a moral reform at the beginning, in a context in which the Great Romania, after the Great Union, succeeded in disillusioning rather than coagulating the energies and hopes of people. The nationalist currents, providing a basis for the ideology of the Right, attracted outstanding representatives of the Romanian intellectuals in that period. Even if they cannot be called ideologists of the Legionary Movement, and even less “activists”, the respective intellectuals have been impoverished by the burden of this collaboration. Ernest Bernea can be considered such a prestigious intellectual, promoting the idea of returning to the ancestral spirituality. His work represents an interesting incursion in the Romanian traditional way of thinking.

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I. Once the Great Unification of 1918 took place, the whole Romanian society was confronted with the same dilemma: what is the right way to be followed? Would it be right to follow that path leading to the synchronization with the West part of the world (this term belongs in fact to Ernest Bernea and it was consolidated by Eugen Lovinescu, but there are few people knowing this), or another one relying on tradition (as there is well-known that, all those societies lagging behind when it comes to the evolution issues, will always be more conservative and reticent when changes are involved). As a matter of fact, this is the dilemma that most of the historical analysts are aware of. Consequently, we can identify two categories of interwar intellectuals: Europeanists and intellectualists [1].

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We would be terribly wrong if we thought that the previously mentioned conflict dividing the Romanian society into two (and, nowadays, it keeps on doing it to smaller dimensions, as well) can be considered a „recent” one. Its roots can be found back in time at the end of the 19th century, but it continues and reaches the climax at the beginning of the 20th century. This way, the traditionalists, semantorism, poporanism followers, can see in the Western influence (through the intrusion of the foreign element in the society) an incredibly huge danger. This could bring about the alteration of the essence of the Romanian nation itself, the danger of losing it for good, in accordance with some outstanding representatives of these currents: Al. Vlahuta, G. Cosbuc, N. Iorga. We have only enumerated the most important ones, but we can also add on our list their followers such as: Nichifor Crainic, Ernest Bernea, Constantin Noica, etc. On the contrary, the „modernism” followers” (masterfully represented by E. Lovinescu) consider the Western way to be the only viable option and bring into discussion the necessity of giving up the rudimentary methods and rebuilding the whole Romanian society on a new foundation (taking into account administration and administrative organization, but economy and mentalities as well).

It was a complex and long-lasting confrontation. The fierce supporters of the traditionalism (right from the beginning of the 20th century) would see their actions consolidated by the movements of the right (which seemed not to be very important in our country before the First World War. We need to say, right from the beginning, that the political formations of the right were not „brightly” represented in this period. Here comes the explanation: the economy was relatively stable, ideals had been already established in people’s consciousness (first of all, the Great Unification had been accomplished), and the Romanian society had not got the chance yet to make acquaintance with all the agitation that a Western industrial society would have brought. Only echoes reached our country at that moment that had already scared the traditionalists [2].

Nevertheless, it is important to be mentioned right from the beginning that all the movements of the right (including the Romanian right as well) were characterised by strong anti-Semitic features. This phenomenon could also be found in the first decades of the 19th century, culminating in a historical moment when the Jewish emigration from the Romanian Principalities reached its climax. However, there were not any anti-Semitic attitudes associated with simple, ordinary people. Generally, the intellectuals felt like being affected when referring to their presumptive rights and interests.

The „problem” of the Jews of Romania has not been a new one. As a matter of fact, nowadays it has turned out to be an up-to-date matter as well, in spite of the fact that the historians have considered that Jews do not rank first anymore when it comes to attitudes towards minorities. In fact, we can find the origins of the Romanian anti-Semitism at the end of the 19th century and, most of all, at the beginning of the 20th century. But, just like we have previously said, it seems like the anti-Semitic attitude has become significantly weaker among the Romanians. Thus, there are only 13% of the Romanians holding an anti-Semitic attitude [3].

In our opinion, this is not because the Romanians have adopted a „softer” attitude and ceased to have chauvinistic or racist feelings, but because the number of Jews have severely decreased in our country. Although the communism shouted out loud the superiority of the system when referring to the attitude towards the „nationalities” as well, Jews went through a lot of pain during the communist regime in Romania. Consequently, they chose Israel as their refuge. Some secret protocols between our country and Israel made this situation possible. It is important to be mentioned that Romania earned a huge amount of money by letting Jews go. Nevertheless, there was a time when Jews considered the Romanian Principalities their own adoptive countries.

Thus, we can say that the expansion of the Jewish population in the 19th century within the Romanian territory (in Moldova and urban areas most of all) was a significant one. In 1912, Jews represented almost 15% of our urban population. In Bucharest they represented almost 13% of the population, in Iasi their number amounted to almost half of the population, (namely 42%) and we can say the same thing about other towns from Moldova as well [4].

The Romanian right (and German national-socialism) would turn the anti-Semitic feelings they took hold of, into a high distinction. In addition, we can associate traditionalism, the return to traditional values, etc., nationalism for short, with the „foundation” of this edifice.

Consequently, all those scholars that chose to turn to the archaic, traditional values, such as Nae Ionescu, Nichifor Crainic or Lucian Blaga, enjoyed a huge success. They rejected the Western modernism by exacerbating the values of the ancestral autochthonous spirituality and orthodoxy [5].

The autochthonism and the return to the values of orthodoxy, threatened by urban civilisation (represented, first of all, by intruders, in their opinion) represented a major value for some of the Romanian intellectuals.

Representative from this point of view could be considered „Gandirea” magazine and all the intellectuals surrounding the respective publication. As a matter of fact, in the first decade of the 20th century, such a preoccupation could be easily found in literature as well: Vlahuta, Cosbuc, Agarbiceanu, Iorga, Slavici, Goga, Sadoveanu; outstanding names of Romanian literature (and many others) would show their fear (in their writings) of the danger represented by the corruption of the pure peasant’s soul. This „danger” would be associated with the urban civilisation as it became more and more visible on the horizon of the Romanian civilisation.

By carefully analyzing the Romanian traditionalist currents from the interwar period, we could notice that, related to the above mentioned tendencies, „Gandirea” magazine had the biggest influence on the intellectual and cultural life. The supporters of the respective magazine would be interested in mystic and religious experiences, but in the primitive spirituality of the folklore as well [6].

Things are more serious than they may seem at first sight. They do not represent just a confrontation of ideas in a coffee shop as this confrontation will finally settle the direction to be followed in the Romanian political life. Irrespective of the fact they might have wanted it or not (but especially because they wanted it), the intellectuals would be the decisive factors when it comes to guiding people towards one direction or another.

Thus, historians reached the conclusion that it was perseverance in choosing autochthonism that determined the elimination (at least for a while) of the „rationalists” from the political scene. In such conditions, the ascension of the right would not seem to be accidental at all, but „understandable”. This way, while the rationalists, modernists, Europeanists, personalities owning critical spirit and behaviour oriented towards the principles of individualism lost their popularity, their opponents would succeed in gaining it by making use of the ethno nationalist myth [7]. The respective approach seemed not to be a historical solution at all but a disaster for the nation as being representative for a narrow minded ideology [8].

This way, lots of important intellectuals of that time would show their interest for this current „of ethnicity, of the nation, of tradition”, etc. Important names of our national culture could be found on the list. Some of them (such as L. Blaga, an outstanding poet and philosopher in the Romanian culture), would turn the notions of people, nation, and ethnicity into fundamental elements of their own reflection and philosophy. More than that, Lucian Blaga appears to be the inventor of a concept, namely that one of „stylistic matrix of the popular culture” . He is also known to have made career in the field of philosophy. We can enumerate in this context some other personalities as well (having the same orientations): M. Manoilescu, N. Ionescu, E. Bernea, N. Crainic, D. Botta, O. Onicescu, P. Panaitescu [9].

The national particularity, here is the major value that the intellectuals (most of them) of that time would flaunt. But the danger was a significant one as Germans took into account this particularity as well when launching the concept of racial superiority and pure Aryan race. The sociologist Traian Herseni could stand for an example, as by his ideas referring to the biologist theories (an up-to-date subject in the Nazi Germany), he offered an important support to the political environment and to a certain ideological orientation [10]. However, such an attitude was expected to bring about certain consequences (very serious some of them). This thing was illustrated by the fact that lots of people representative for our culture used to be close Nae Ionescu. Otherwise said, they were close to the Iron Guard as well (an ultranationalist movement of extreme right).

This way, we must not forget about M. Eliade, E. Cioran, C. Noica, T. Herseni, M. Vulcanescu (in his book about Nae Ionescu, he admits having had favourable feelings for that ultranationalist movement), E. Bernea, Constantin D. Amzar, Ion Ionica, M. Polihronaide, H. Stamatu, Arsavir si Haig Acterian, Paul Constantin Deleanu, I. Cantacuzino, A. Christian tell, V. Vojen, M. Streinu, etc [11].

Of course, we cannot say that any of those outstanding intellectuals were directly involved in all those crimes that the legionnaires committed. Consequently, an extremist party was endowed with cultural and national legitimacy, due to the fact the previously mentioned personalities appeared to be close to the ideology of the extreme right by praising specific ideas or actions, or by direct involvement in the legionnaire propaganda (just like in the case of Ernest Bernea). However, this would be a serious issue for the Romanian society if considering it to be a long-term process.

## II.

We are going to present a few outstanding intellectuals of that period, known as friends, collaborators and colleagues of generation with Ernest Bernea. Each of them has brought his contribution to creating and enlarging a theoretical and ideological platform of the Romanian Right.

Constantin Noica is an important name of the Romanian spirituality due to the fact that he has been an extremely complex man of culture, a philosopher, essayist, and notionalist. But his youth has been connected to this fraternisation with the extreme elements of the Romanian interwar political life due to his tendency of exacerbating the national feeling, the nationalism by all means. It is said that, in the 70's, Noica sent Cioran (in Paris) his volume, *The Romanian feeling of Being* (one of his most beautiful volumes). As an answer, Cioran sent him back these words: *The Patagonian feeling of being*. The respective project has represented one of the most important philosophical attempts concerning the ethno-national issue. Constantin Noica has been permanently preoccupied about the national matter [12]. If Constantin Noica's notoriety (a very important Romanian man of culture) has been a local one, just like Emil Cioran has suggested, we cannot say the same thing about **Mircea Eliade**, whose notoriety has been an universal one.

There have been even opinions turning him into Nowadays *Plato*. There might be hard to find another works as valuable as his works about the history of religions, and those referring to the history of thought and human mentality as well. This thing becomes reality in the context in which encyclopaedism turns into utopia in a completely divided and fragmented world (although a scientific one).

Mircea Eliade's fault is not represented only by the fact of accepting and praising the Legionary Movement, but mostly, by the fact of imposing a myth (a national one, of course), known to be personified by the **legionnaire**, in a different way [13].

The foreign researches have given different meanings to Mircea Eliade's fault. Consequently, it could have been relied (due to his way of praising the Legionary movement) to the justification of the legionnaires' political ascension and their effort of institutionalising this movement (this effort culminating with success, even if it was a partial and temporary one) [14].

There have been lots of speculations about Mircea Eliade's legionary ideas. His sympathy for the Movement, as well as his unequivocal adherence, have become extremely clear for anyone interested in reading his articles published in different (legionnaire) magazines. The respective articles have erased any doubt about his orientation [15].

But this is not a unique opinion, of course. There are not few those who think differently, such as the essayist Mircea Handoaca, for instance. In his opinion, Mircea Eliade sympathised with the Movement but he never became a member. More than that, once the respective Movement started to act in an exaggerate way he ceased to show any interest in it [16].

If Mircea Eliade is one of the most famous Romanian persons on the Planet at this moment, due to his scientific activity, we can say the same thing (at least) about Emil Cioran as well, considered to be one of the world's greatest moralist philosophers of all times. Nevertheless, his admiration for the Legionary Movement and even for Nazism has been one of the "negative aspects" of his biography (he denied the respective admiration and tried to eliminate it during several years). However, the foreign historians have clarified everything in this field, as well [17].

If lots of Eliade's admirers and of all the other intellectuals (we have previously presented) vehemently contradicted their sympathy for Nazism (as being completely different from the Legionary ideology), that attitude was not possible in the case of Emil Cioran anymore. Emil Cioran's pro-Nazi declarations were extremely illustrative [18].

There are certainly different opinions as well. Zigu Ornea praises the undeniable value of these interwar Romanian writers in one of his volumes (presenting and vehemently incriminating the Romanian right) [19].

More than that, Zigu Ornea detects, in the existence of Jews as a nation, admirable elements, which makes us to give a different meaning to Emil Cioran's notion of anti-Semitism [20]. Another important supporter of the Legionary Movement was the poet Nichifor Crainic, one of the active militants of the Legionary ideas from a cultural point of view [21]. Nae Ionescu, a professor and philosopher, has been an outstanding representative of the Legionary Movement. Due to him, there have been lots of his students, disciples and admirers adhering to the Legionary ideas. If there are not lots of things to be said about the concrete involvement in the Legionary Movement of the persons we have previously mentioned, we cannot say the same thing about Nae Ionescu. He is known to have

been close to the king Carol II and have got important political positions, especially during the Legionary governance [22].

Just like we have already mentioned, our purpose is not that of incriminating anyone. We have meant to illustrate the involvement degree of the Romanian interwar intellectuals in the Movements of the Right. Their degree of culpability concerning the development of the events in and outside the country can be inferred from the analysis of facts [23].

In this context, it is necessary to objectively reflect upon Ernest Bernea's activity. Known as a sociologist and outstanding theoretician (whose work has not been greatly popularised), Ernest Bernea has been the mentor, initiator and coordinator of a legionary magazine, *Randuiala*. He did not hesitate to praise the Legionary Movement (in that magazine), especially its leader, Zelea-Codreanu [24].

Zelea Codreanu's book has been always considered as one of the greatest books of the Romanian culture. Nevertheless, it might seem a little bit exaggerated associating such a cultural attribute with an extremist and anarchic political leader, as the most important writers and theoreticians of our culture (of all times) need to be taken into account for having developed their activity in that period [25]. An indirect accusation addressed to the "rationalists" can be found now. The main idea that can be inferred refers to the fact that the book appears not to be a rationalist, artificial and fake one, but a work of life, dealing with the real existence. This would certainly enhance its value [26].

Another chapter is about to start now. It refers to the danger that Romanians are supposed to deal with (in Ernest Bernea's opinion) once the "intellectualism" have conquered the territory. This would bring about nothing else but the eradication of the national virtues, as well as negligence and decline. Thus, the national values would be terribly endangered [27].

What would be the "salvation"? (as the movements of the Right, and those of the Left as well, have the pretention and desire of saving the nation and the individual)? The returning to the Romanian soul through the intellectual education will undoubtedly be the answer [28].

It is very clear what this essence consists of, as if it could handle the complex matters of the tumultuous Romania from that period. However, neither Zelea Codreanu, nor Ernest Bernea, the commentator of the "memorable" book, has tried very hard to do it. Nevertheless, great, enthusiastic, provocative words are about to be said. They even call for a "revolution", a spiritual one, of course [29]. But, it is important to be mentioned that we are not dealing with an ordinary revolution, but with a Legionary one. This type of revolution is not interested in changing the state but in changing the soul. However, we are not said how this takes place (if there are different methods from those constraint-based ones used by communism [30]).

If it was not sad, it would be almost funny to notice all the flagrant resemblances (in essence) between the Right and the Left. In fact, the communists were planning the same thing, namely, changing the „old" person and getting a new one. Legionnaires have as plan the modification (renewal) of the human nature itself [31]. This way, the Legionary Movement has become the only force capable of saving our nation, the only truly capable instance of becoming a leading Movement in Romania. It is hard to make any comments, as it is crystal clear that a great number of our intellectuals have joined the Movement [32]. More than that, Ernest Bernea's affiliation to the Legionary Movement has been illustrated by another distinguished Romanian researcher (precise researcher of the phenomenon), namely by Zigu Ornea. He notices that all the intellectuals (we have previously mentioned) seem to have the tendency of becoming interested in colossal things and cosmic dimensions, by considering that, once with the Legionary Movement, the new man has been born as well [33]. There is one thing we need to point out as a conclusion of everything we have presented: an impressive number of our most prestigious intellectuals (belonging to the interwar period) have become victims of the ideology of Extreme Right. Just like other researchers, it is impossible for us to understand the reason why they have become interested in this extremism representing a negative influence upon the historical and cultural evolution of our country.

## Notes:

[1] Mihai Barbulescu, *The History of Romania*, (Bucharest, Corint, 2002), p. 341

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 350

- [3] Ibid., p. 204  
 [4] Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*, (Bucharest, Humanitas), p. 203  
 [5] Vlad Georgescu, *The Romanians: A History*, (Oakland, California, Scythia Books, 1989), p.247  
 [6] Mihai Barbulescu. Op. Cit., p. 343  
 [7] Victor Neumann, *Ideology and Phantasmagoria*, (Iasi, Polirom, 2001), p.105  
 [8] Ibid. p. 116  
 [9] Ibid., p. 115  
 [10] Ibid., p. 115  
 [11] Zigu Ornea, *The thirties – The Romanian Extreme Right*, (Bucharest, The Romanian Cultural Foundation, 1996), p.19  
 [12] Victor Neumann, op. cit., p.109  
 [13] Ibid., p. 112  
 [14] Laignel-Lavastine, A: *Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco, Forgetting Fascism*, (Paris, Est Tasset Editeur, 2004), p.257  
 [15] Eliade, M. "Legionary" texts and the texts on „romanism”(, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Dacia, 2001), p. 63  
 [16] Ibid., p. 11  
 [17] Laignel-Lavastine, op. cit., p. 155  
 [18] ibid., p. 165  
 [19] Zigu Ornea, *The thirties – The Romanian Extreme Right*, (Bucharest, The Romanian Cultural Foundation, 1996)  
 [20] ibid., p. 397  
 [21] Bărbulescu, op. cit., p. 343  
 [22] Ibid., p. 345  
 [23] Ibid., p. 346  
 [24] Bernea, E., *Rânduiala magazin*, *Archive of Romanian facts and beliefs*, Volume II, notebook 1, p. 36  
 [25] Ibid., p. 36  
 [26] Bernea, E., op. cit., p. 37  
 [27] Ibid., p. 37  
 [28] What is politics all about, Ernest Bernea, „Thoughts for a new country”, „Rânduiala”collection.  
 [29] Ibid., p. 39  
 [30] Ibid., p. 41  
 [31] Ibid., p. 42  
 [32] Ibid., p. 42  
 [33] Ornea, Z., *The thirties – The Romanian Extreme Right*, (Bucharest, The Romanian Cultural Foundation, 1996), p. 350  
 [34] Ibid., p. 374

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