GRACEH 2007 -- Graduate Conference in European History -- Intellectuals and Politics

How Education Abroad Influenced the Interwar Intellectuals of Romania

Escape from Reason: From Foreign Education to Nationalist Doctrine

By Cristina Bejan
Wadham College
University of Oxford

In a work that inspired a generation of Europeans, *The Decline of the West*, Oswald Spengler wrote "What diaries and autobiographies yield in respect of an individual, that historical research in the widest and most inclusive sense – that is, every kind of psychological comparison and analysis of alien peoples, times and customs – yields as to the soul of the Culture as a whole."[1] Spengler was concerned with Cultures and an organic view of history that rejected the notion that Western Civilization circa the start of the 20C was the grand culmination of human achievement.

His insight that diaries and autobiographies give us a view of the soul of an individual and his concern as to unearthing the soul of a Culture point to two key elements of this study. Societies are composed of individuals, and as I will demonstrate, each member of the Young Generation was entirely unique in his or her own right, diverging from the friendship group in a variety of ways whether politically, philosophically or artistically.

But as Camelia Craciun is careful to explain, no study yet on this topic has comprehensively considered the historical and cultural context in which these figures existed nor have previous works considered the nuances of the group: preferring to focus on individual monograph biographies. [2] The tendency in the post-1989 era has been to condemn and dismiss the political behavior of some of these key intellectuals, behavior, which with hindsight seems entirely abhorrent and contemptible.

However Craciun has another relevant point. Unlike Italy and Germany, due to communism, Romania never had the chance to confront this difficult past.[3] This era was forgotten and members of the Young Generation were written out of the history books from 1948 onward. Those who survived such epic figures as Eliade and Noica were their disciples who naturally were concerned to preserve their mentors' noble contributions to the Romanian intellectual tradition, rather than dig up the questionable actions of their youth. When one such disciple, Ion P. Culianu, did begin to investigate Eliade's past ties to the Iron Guard, he paid for it with his life in 1991.

These suspicions and sensitivities remain in Romania and the Romanian Diaspora from Canada to Israel today. My aim is a very simple one. I wish to understand the soul of the Culture of inter-war Romanian intellectuals. In order to do so, I must come to terms with the intellectual tradition (philosophically and culturally) these minds inherited from both Europe and elsewhere

---

[1] Spengler, Oswald. *The Decline of the West: Volume One, Form and Actuality*. Translated by Charles Francis Atkinson. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1980. p. 9.
[2] Craciun, Camelia. "Surviving Nationalism" and the Politicization of an Intellectual Debate: The case of the "1927 Generation"'s Political Discourse as reflected in the post-1989 Romanian Historiography." Unpublished paper.
[3] Craciun.

(India and the USA are just two important examples). I must be able to explain why democracy was so undesirable in this period, that the intelligent politically engaged intellectual elite would reject it.

Generation 27 was comprised of self-reflecting investigating individuals who kept diaries, wrote novels, plays, journal articles and works of philosophy. This wealth of information that serves, in Spengler's eyes, as a glimpse into the individuals' souls, plus the historical research that is a "psychological comparison of alien peoples, times and customs"[4] which will serve as a glimpse into the unique Culture of interwar Romania, should yield fruitful findings relating to the paradox in question: how educated cosmopolitan men rejected Reason and embraced an ideology that promoted myth, narrow-minded intolerance and anti-Semitism, the political realization of which was fascism.

As with any historical period, the question can easily be asked: How is this relevant for us today? The obvious answer is that in our trials of today, we can learn from the hardships of the past. However this particular historical investigation has a salience for the challenges of the post-communist world in both the west and the east. The cult of death, nationalist rhetoric and extremist religio-political movements have only escalated in their prominence and importance, becoming more of an ideological threat to democracy and Enlightenment values than every before. The autobiographical writings of the Young Generation provide a window into the triumphs, passions and follies of the intellectuals of interwar Romania. Their ideas, debates and actions had an extreme influence on the culture and politics of their time, and, in a major sense, have been resurrected by cultural and political leaders of today in both Romania and beyond.

Vladimir Tismaneanu, contemporary scholar of Romanian history and politics, calls fascism, anti-Semitism and myth-making scape-goating fantasies of salvation, which have returned to the region post-communism due to damaged dignity and wounded pride.[5] This social malaise is a comprehensible consequence of nearly fifty years of communist isolation and elimination from the rest of world history. There are many similarities between interwar and post-communist Romania; discontent with weak liberal institutions, an instable economy, corruption and the perceived decadence of a very small elite.

Yet something that differentiates interwar Romanian fascism from its other incarnations of the period, is the importance of religion. Romanian Christian Orthodoxy was fundamental to the mythology and the discourse. Championed by both ideologues Nae Ionescu and Nichifor Crainic in the intellectual circles of Bucharest and advocated by the 'Captain,' Corneliu Zelea Codreanu himself, the 'New Man' of Legionary Romania was a religious man. Responding to perceived moral and societal decadence and corruption, the extremism of Romanian religious orthodoxy has resurfaced in the post-communist era. The intolerance and superstition that corresponds to the mystical nature of the Romanian Orthodox Church has also returned and feeds into this hatred of scapegoating of the many 'others' within Romanian society. One need not look too far to find other such religious extremism in our contemporary world in the preachings of Islamic fundamentalist Imams from Saudi Arabia to London. In his introduction to Marta Petreu's book, *An Infamous Past*, Norman Manea relates the Iron Guard to the current situation with Islamic extremism.[6]

---

[4] Spengler, p. 9.

[5] Tismaneanu, Vladimir. *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism and Myth in Post-Communist Europe.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998. p. 88.

[6] Manea, Norman "Introduction" in Petreu, Marta. *An Infamous Past. E.M. Cioran and the Rise of Fascism in Romania.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 2005. p. xi.

In an era where man has demonstrated that he is once again (as in the interwar period) been willing to relinquish or give up his civil rights on behalf of supra-national, communal values, it is more important than ever to evaluate what voices in society can influence public opinion and, hopefully, avert the discrimination, suffering and death toll that resulted from the acceptance and advocacy of fascism by intellectuals not so long ago. Despite their revival and celebration post-1989, the key intellectuals of the Young Generation who succumbed to the allure of fascism in Romania have not entirely escaped criticism in Romanian intellectual circles themselves, although this has only happened very recently; a debate sparked by books by Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, Florin Turcanu and Marta Petreu respectively, as well as Mihail Sebastian's journal. This recent scholarship examines the pasts of well-known figures: Mircea Eliade, E.M. Cioran, Eugene Ionesco and Mihail Sebastian. The recent Oxford DPhil thesis by Philip Vanhaelemeersch examines the intellectual climate (the philosophy of experience) of the Young Generation just before the exponential rise in popularity of the Iron Guard. My research aims to provide a more holistic analysis to this controversial era and intellectual group in Romania's recent history. By including rarely examined figures such as Petru Comarnescu, Jeni, Arsavir and Haig Acterian, and Eugen Lovinescu in addition to Eliade, Cioran, Ionesco, Sebastian, Nichifor Crainic, Nae Ionescu; and focusing on their autobiographical writings, I aim to give a more accurate picture of the intellectual and spiritual crisis of the time.

Extremist ideology does not exist in a vacuum. Fascism was enticing in Romania, not solely due to local ills, but also due to a discourse largely influenced by imported ideas from both the West and the East. The intellectual elite of Romania was no stranger to seeking higher education elsewhere. From Paris to Vienna, the men who became the politicians, academics, artists and creators of the Romanian nation received a distinctive liberal education, acquired in institutions completely foreign to their own untouched agrarian nation of peasants. By the 1930s a debate raged among Romanian intellectuals between those who promoted liberal Western values and those who outright rejected them. My paper investigates particular members of the Young Generation and how education abroad shaped their political opinions and the cultural vision they had for Greater Romania in the interwar period.

In Berlin, Emil Cioran became infatuated with both Spengler and Hitler. After delving into the metaphysics of Yoga and observing Gandhi's activities in India, Mircea Eliade returned to Bucharest in 1932 to advocate political extremism. During his time in southern California, art critic Petru Comarnescu became convinced that Romanians should adopt a more optimistic stance towards both life and their struggling democracy. Upon his return to Bucharest, Comarnescu established the Criterion conferences. After traveling to both Vienna, Berlin and Italy for theatre studies, Haig Acterian became enticed by the growing fascist movements in Germany and Italy. Eugen Lovinescu was educated in Paris and an ardent vocal liberal literary critic, who developed his own view of active aestheticism. Both Mihail Sebastian and Eugene Ionesco received higher education in France and remained immune to the 'rhinocerization' happening around to their friends around them. Both Nichifor Crainic and Lucian Blaga pursued higher education in Vienna. Through education abroad all these figures (members of the Young Generation and other key intellectuals of the time) made personal discoveries they thought could save Romania from both political and spiritual crisis.

Rationalism, liberalism and democracy were foreign imports to Romania in the 19th Century, delivered by intellectuals who had completed studies in Western Europe. As Romania opened up and became a modern European nation, many within Romania felt that the institutions

adopted from the West were artificial and inauthentic to the Romanian soul. A debate over form and substance raged in the late 19th Century, and many intellectuals accused Romania to be composed of Western forms lacking in authentic Romanian substance. A search for that substance can be found in the Junimea and Sowerist schools of the period. They identified what was uniquely Romanian to be the village and Orthodox Christianity. Thinkers of the early 20th Century drew on this discussion in their development of the idea of "Romanianness" – the endeavor to determine the specific nature of the Romanian spirit in philosophy.

Key philosophers of Romanianness include Constantin Radulescu-Motru with his seminal next *The Catechism of a New Spirituality* (1936) and Lucian Blaga with his development of the concept of 'mioritic space' based on the folk ballad, 'Miorita.' This glorification of the particular national culture, coincided with a collapse of liberalism and the rise of fascism. As Radulescu-Motru wrote, "The Italians have begun to call their nationalism fascism; the Germans call their racism; the Romanians Romanianism."[7] Still the old philosopher was cautious enough to reject xenophobia and anti-Semitism, unlike many figures of the Young Generation.

Within Romania, this 'escape from reason' and advocacy for a particular, national, spiritual Romanian substance, occurred whilst Vasile Parvan and others introduced the French élan vital and German Lebensphilosophie to Bucharest in the 1920s. This distinctively European influence shaped the discussion within the Young Generation in the late 1920s and early 1930s. And with that foundation, leaders of the intellectual group traveled abroad for education and returned with other foreign influences for Romania. From American optimism to Indian spirituality, this influx of ideas forced the young Romanian intellectual to reevaluate his conception of self and nation, the particular and universal, the individual and the community, the importance of action, his definition of culture and the relationship of the metaphysical to the physical. Some found the answer to Romania's spiritual and political crisis in the Iron Guard (such as E.M. Cioran and Mircea Eliade), but others, such as Petru Comarnescu and Mihail Sebastian, were content to debate the implications of all these foreign influences without subscribing to one political ideology.

A potentially paradoxical factor of these men's education abroad, is that contradictory nature of the philosophies they found in other countries and cultures and the resulting political activity, due to the spread of these new foreign ideas amongst intellectuals in Romania. The vitalism Cioran, Eliade and Comarnescu believed in, affirmed by their education in Germany, India and the USA, gave priority to the will and the instincts of the individual, but this gave way to the support of a collective political ideology.[8] The causal path of exactly how these men went from celebrating freedom of thought (as exercised in the Criterion Group) to supporting political ideology (as demonstrated in sympathy for the Iron Guard) is perplexing. By considering their experiences abroad, I hope to have shed some light on how Generation 27 made that intellectual transition: how foreign education influenced nationalist doctrine in the 1930s.

---

[7] Petreu, Marta. *An Infamous Past. E.M. Cioran and the Rise of Fascism in Romania.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 2005. p. 144.

[8] Hitchins, Keith. "Modernity and Angst between the World Wars: Emil Cioran and Yanko Yanev." *Cultura politica si politici culturale in Romania moderna*, edited by Alexandru Zub and Adrian Cioflanca. Iasi: Editura Universitatii "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" (2005) 151-165, p. 2.