

**Bucur, Maria. *Heroes and Victims: Remembering War in Twentieth-Century Romania*.  
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. 352p.**

***Eroi și victime. România și memoria celor două războaie mondiale*. Roxana Cazan, Ioan Bucur și  
Dan Bălănescu (Trans.) Iasi: Polirom, 2019. 360p.**

Reviewed by Oana Godeanu-Kenworthy (Miami University, Ohio).

*Eroi și victime* is the translation of the English-language edition published a decade ago in the United States, with no updates in the data consulted. The focus of the book is how World Wars I and II were—and are—memorialized in Romania, in the context of the political changes that led to the creation of the Romanian state in 1918 and to the communist takeover in 1944. Chapters 1 to 4 cover memorial practices before and after World War I, up to 1940; the five decades of communism are tackled in one chapter, while post-communist memorial policies and practices are covered in Chapters 6 and 7.

The book ambitiously straddles disciplines using a vast array of materials – from oral histories, to monuments, memoirs, artefacts, film, and novels — although occasionally the examples used seem cherry-picked to support the overarching argument the author makes. Bucur consistently argues in favor of the relevance of the Romanian example for understanding the complex East-West divisions in how the two World Wars are remembered to this day. This is indeed an important insight that can shed light on the cultural roots of some of the deep problems behind the larger European project today; the experience of war was different in Eastern-Central than in Western Europe, and on both sides of the Iron Curtain, narratives about WWI and World War II have a different periodization and engendered different debates about victims and perpetrators, although, throughout the EU space, the Western-European perspective still shapes tropes and top-down commemorative practices. Particularly, the categories of victims and perpetrators in World War II which, from a Western European perspective often overlap neatly with national categories, are much less clearly defined in Eastern Europe. In her minute analyses and creative speculations around regional and central practices of memory, Bucur demonstrates that talking about a monolithic “European memory” of the two wars is impossible, and recommends that scholars replace a state-focused approach to commemorations by one that favors regional and local cultures of remembrance.

**Chapter one** offers a detailed analysis of the culture of the dead in Romania before 1914, where 85% of Romanians lived in small rural communities, had short life spans, were mostly illiterate, and shared a worldview shaped by their religions. Local communities – Orthodox, Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish – had parallel sets of practices of mourning and commemorating the dead, which monarchs and other state representatives strove to mobilize on behalf of either the Romanian nation or some empire (Habsburg or Tsarist), depending on how borders shifted. Some of these religions enjoyed privileged official roles in the different states that controlled the territories of what was to become Greater Romania: Catholicism, and to some extent Protestantism, in Habsburg Transylvania and Bukovina, Orthodoxy in the Russian Empire and the young Romanian State, while other groups, especially the Jews, found themselves consistently as persecuted religious minorities everywhere.

**Chapter two** chronicles the various rituals around death and dying in rural Romania after 1914 with particular attention to the role of women in these commemorations. Bucur demonstrates that, unlike in the West, the cult of war heroes and memorials in Eastern Europe, did not constitute a

manifestation of state power projecting its might onto local communities via celebrations of death and dying. Rather, they emerged because of the needs of these still-weak states to legitimize their regime over newly incorporated territories, which they did by negotiating official forms of ritual and celebration with already-entrenched local practices that reflected religious and ethnic allegiances more than they did any national allegiance.

The memory of World War One was kept alive not only by monuments built in public spaces, but also through the autobiographies of the participants, as well as through the fiction about the war published and read in the interwar years. The latter two categories constitute the focus of **Chapter Three** in which Bucur highlights the silences and gaps in these literary forms of memorializing the conflict. The vast majority of them favored the perspective of Romanian white men, while women's forms of war participation and heroism were deemed unimportant and were therefore neglected and silenced, along with the perspectives of pacifists, civilians, and non-Romanian ethnics. Like elsewhere in Europe (although Bucur does not contextualize much the case of Romania beyond Eastern Europe), the decades between the first and the second World Wars saw a rise of ethnic nationalism paralleled by a tightening of state control over public rituals and practices. In Romania, this was particularly felt in the regions that in 1918 became newly integrated, namely Transylvania and Northern Bukovina. Here, as Bucur shows, the various forms of commemoration of the war became the main means through which the Romanian state tried to introduce new traditions in the occupied territories or to negotiate between recent and existing traditions and institutions. The resulting practices tended to favor an ethnically and religiously homogenous view of the 'nation' of those whose wartime sacrifices were to be remembered.

Building upon this insight, **Chapter Four** details at length the rise of the Heroes Cult in inter-war Romania under the leadership of Queen Marie, presenting it as an example of how militaristic views of commemoration that favored a male, army-based perspective on the war came to dominate national celebrations, opening the path for the Legionnaire Movement. Bucur masterfully captures the fragmented reception of the newly-established days of national commemoration from region to region, from the erection of memorials for the war dead, to celebrations of the 1918 reunification, to the rising cult of the Romanian monarchy, all of which were viewed with ambivalence in Transylvania and only deepened existing ethnic divisions. The state was by no means the only agent in this process; some of the most successful commemorations were the result of local initiatives, such as the Mărășești monument whose national prominence was the fruit of the labor of local organizations, such as the National Orthodox Society of Romanian Women and Queen Marie's Heroes Cult.

**Chapters 5, 6, and 7** discuss World War II through the lens of the national collective amnesia regarding the Romanian Holocaust and of the lack of reckoning with that tragedy that continues to this day. In **Chapter five**, Bucur dissects the "victimological discourse" that developed under communism in Romania, and which created processes and rituals through which the veterans and civilian heroes of the two wars were remembered and commemorated, but which also effectively erased from collective memory the atrocities committed by Romanian armies during World War II against their Jewish, Roma, and Hungarian co-citizens. Although she does not provide data for other groups, for instance for Roma victims, Bucur estimates that between 280,000 and 380,000 Jews were killed in the Romanian Holocaust of 1940-1941, a tragedy of horrible proportions that, despite recent governmental legislative efforts, is still not known to most of Romanian society, and is currently still not reflected in literature, popular culture, or political discourse.

After Ceaușescu's ascent to power, World War II was gradually reinvented as a nationalist founding moment for communist Romania that connected that point in time to a long historical arch leading back all the way to the Dacians. The official version of World War II was represented in museum exhibitions, written about in history textbooks, or fictionalized in film and literature. References to the Romanian Holocaust were conspicuously missing in all these practices, except for Transylvania, where the perpetrators were always indicated to be ethnic Others – German or Hungarian, thus lumping together as victims of oppression the Jews and the Romanians in the region.

A fascinating section is devoted to the competing narratives about the war that continued to exist in Transylvania where, even at a time when Ceaușescu was tightening his grip over the country, local communities still managed to build monuments that departed from the official narrative, even some that commemorated ethnic Germans and Hungarians who had fought on the side of the Axis.

Communist Romania is described as plagued by the same enduring anti-Semitism and fervent ethnic nationalism as inter-war Romania, which enables Bucur to explain the gradual rehabilitation of war-time dictator, Marshall Antonescu, during the 1980s and to subsequently fold into her argument (albeit not always convincingly) a variety of materials, from Marin Preda's portrayal of Antonescu in *Delirul*, to disparate Army decisions about monuments during Ceaușescu's regime, then, later in the book, the post-1989 building and quick removal of statues of Antonescu, or Sergiu Nicolaescu's revisionist films. Where documents about the decisions of the communist Party, the government's, or about popular perceptions during communism are missing, Bucur makes bold assumptions, a tendency that occasionally leads to sweeping generalizations with too little material support.

**Chapter 6** offers a survey of what Bucur calls 'counter-memories,' popular or unofficial stories about the war, parallel stories which she organizes still around the theme of victimhood. This crop of material is also fairly slim: a few memoirs, oral histories, and books published abroad in the diaspora, all of which articulate very idiosyncratic taxonomies of heroism and victimization, reflecting the identity of their authors: Jews in Transnistria and Transylvania, Romanians and Germans in Siberia, Hungarians in Transylvania, the anti-communist Romanian resistance in the mountains (which Bucur describes as a motley gathering, largely still animated by the xenophobia and exclusionary ethnic nationalism of the Iron Guard). When the war was considered to have ended or begun depended on one's ethnic identity and location (things felt different if you were Jewish than if you were Romanian, quite different in Cluj than in Bucharest), but some shared themes emerge.

The most important is the complete absence of references to the Iași pogrom in the stories of the Romanian interviewees. In her analysis of the gaps, turns of phrase, or silences in the texts she examines, Bucur consistently pushes against the Romanian national amnesia by arguing that the authors must have known what was happening with their Jewish countrymen, but that they chose to lie first to themselves or, through their memoirs, to others, about the atrocities in which they either participated or to which they were passive by-standers. These atrocities were not only shaped by ethnicity but also by gender, and Bucur convincingly highlights the cultural blindness to violence against women (in the form of rape or sexual abuse) that shaped the war experience of the authors, and whose truly traumatic dimension could only—and incompletely—begin to be addressed after 1989. All in all, this chapter demonstrates that, when it came to the horrors of World War II, all ethnic communities in Romania claim to have been victims, and nobody assumes responsibility as perpetrators.

**Chapter 7** feels dated, as more than a decade has passed since the book was researched and published, and new data has emerged. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a flood of memoirs where intellectuals and ordinary people narrated their own lives and stories during the fifty years of

communism. The collective and individual traumas of World War II were not addressed and remain unaddressed to this day, despite some superficial legislative attempts at changing things. The chapter also analyzes the spate of reconfigurations of public spaces after 1989 that reflect different ideological strategies of remembering the War, concluding that “the neat-ness of a Western-centric narrative of World War II, the Holocaust and the postwar (Cold War) period is not yet possible in Romania, as it is not possible in other post-communist countries.”

Bucur follows the ethno-nationalist thread that she identifies as the overarching theme tying together Romanian commemorative practices from World War I to the Legionnaire moment, to World War II, communism, and the post-communist years. Thus, the choice of December 1 as the new national holiday to replace August 23 provided the new postcommunist regime with legitimacy, by linking it with the formation of the first Romanian independent state of 1918. Bucur interprets the decision as proof that the xenophobic, nationalist narrative about the Unification constructed after World War I and II and reinforced during Ceaușescu’s years had become internalized and normalized by 1989, and still shapes Romanian policies today. The chapter’s central argument is in fact that one cannot separate the post-1944 period in Romania’s past from the decades that preceded it, and that the Legionnaire interlude was in fact symptomatic of ongoing cultural trends.

In many ways, this chapter reads as an indictment of the continued amnesia of the entire Romanian society, from intellectuals like Gabriel Liiceanu, to film-makers like Sergiu Nicolaescu, to history teachers, researchers, the government, and ordinary citizens who are still talking about the evils of communism without even trying to reckon with the Romanian Holocaust and the atrocities that preceded the communist takeover. What Bucur seems to be demanding is a society that wants to identify the perpetrators of war crimes in general – an impetus sadly still lacking in Romanian society today, although some progress has been made since the book was written. Examples include the 2004 Final Report of the Wiesel Commission (the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania), the creation of the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (CNSAS) and the opening of its archives to the public in 2005, the creation of the Institute for the Investigation of the Communist Crimes in Romania(2005), the Presidential Commission for the Study of Communist Dictatorship in Romania, and the Tismaneanu rapport released in 2006, as well as various programs funded by the European Commission and tasked with researching communism, one of the most recent of which is the COURAGE project “Cultural Opposition: Understanding the Cultural Heritage of Dissent in the Former Socialist Countries” (2018).

At its strongest, *Heroes and Victims* persuasively explains the deep ideological divisions that mark the memory of the two World Wars in Eastern and Western Europe respectively, by looking at local commemorative practices and their construction on the ground, and connects the failure of democratic principles of citizenship and tolerance with the avoidance of wartime responsibility for wartime atrocities; at its weakest, the book uses unevenly its rich and varied material. Generally, the chapters providing analyses of war-related material culture and the explaining the tensions between local and centrally-dictated commemorative practices are more open to the nuances in reception and masterfully analyze the regional variation in the implementation of state guidelines. By contrast, in the chapters dealing with film and books, particularly those published during communism, Bucur interprets her material solely as a vector of official propaganda, neglecting to explore the complex dynamics between cultural texts, their producers, and the party apparatus, or the existence of various forms of resistance in totalitarian societies. Overall, the book fights back against the hegemonic use of the tropes of heroism and victimhood in Romanian culture by offering readers instead a story of universal guilt; an alternative title could have been, to adapt the title of Chapter 6, “everyone a perpetrator.”

Since 2009 when the *Heroes and Victims* originally came out, several scholars have published work on the region, for instance Agnieszka Mrozik and Stanislav Holubec, *Historical memory of Central and East European Communism* (Routledge, 2018); Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (ed.), *Whose memory? Which future?: Remembering Ethnic Cleansing and Lost Cultural Diversity in Eastern, Central and Southeastern Europe* (Berghahn Books, 2016); Simona Mitroiu, *Life Writing and Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan 2015); Ewa Kocój, Łukasz Gawel (eds.) *Faces of Identity and Memory: The cultural Heritage of Central and Eastern Europe* (Jagellonian University Press: 2015); Vladimir Tismaneanu and Bogdan C. Iacob (eds.) *Remembrance, History, and Justice: Coming to Terms with Traumatic Pasts in Democratic Societies* (CEU Press, 2015); or Uilleam Blacker, Alexander Etkind, and Julie Fedor (eds) *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe* (Routledge 2013). Nevertheless, Maria Bucur's fills a void in the research on war and memory in Central and Eastern Europe because, with some exceptions, Romania still remains chronically underrepresented as a site of investigation, particularly in monographs.

Its multidisciplinary approach to the subject-matter makes Bucur's work relevant to, and useful for specialists in Romanian history and memory studies, in Eastern European history and culture, and particularly important for a larger Romanian readership. Bucur's work, in its recent translation, is likely to go against culturally-entrenched nationalist narratives and assumptions, and therefore will probably generate a much-needed national conversation on how the two World Wars are remembered and memorialized in Romania today.