

Cordali, Adriana. Book Review. "Bejan, Cristina A.¹ *Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania: The Criterion Association*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 323 pp."

Cristina A. Bejan's book *Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania: The Criterion Association* provides valuable details on life in Romania in the interwar period and the cultural endeavors of well-known intellectuals of that time. The book published by Palgrave Macmillan is part of the series *Modernity, Memory and Identity in South-East Europe* which "explores the relationship between the modern history and present of South-East Europe and the long imperial past of the region" and "aspires to offer a more nuanced understanding of the concepts of modernity and change in this region."

Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania: The Criterion Association approaches the topic of Romanian fascism with an analytical lens at the same time as it chronicles an important cultural enterprise. Fascism has become increasingly more controversial and subject of debate in post-communist Romania, for many reasons that pertain mainly to the lack of education and information about the interwar period for the generations that lived under communism. Because of the memory of communist censorship and the elation of rediscovering a past that had long been hidden during the communist time, people have developed high expectations about a time they wish to idealize. Discussions about Romania's fascist past are exacerbated in part because Romanian and European history had been taught in the binary terms typical to propaganda, which opposed communism and fascism. Once communism fell, anti-communist fervor made some people wonder if fascist sympathies before War World II were in fact exaggerated by the communists, a result of the black-and-white totalitarian thought pattern.

Consequently, Bejan's book adds to the conversation and helps with the difficult task of understanding nuance. Many people in Romania and Eastern Europe still have strong feelings regarding these political extremes and often find themselves compelled to take sides, which is also a totalitarian legacy. However, it is understandable that this disquietude about the unsettled past continues at a time when extremist thought has resurfaced and is in fact bleeding into the mainstream from realms that had previously been on the fringes. In fact, excesses should be equally repudiated in order to see the past with clear eyes. In this sense, in this thoroughly researched book, Bejan maintains that the communist rewriting of history is the cause for Romania's "contemporary inability . . . to grapple with this difficult legacy" and that Italy and West Germany were in more fortunate positions to confront their controversial past in the absence of communist propaganda (7). Bejan also clarifies that some members of the Young Generation at the center of this book supported both communism and fascism in the periods before and after World War II (14).

To this day, a particularly sore point for the Romanian public is the acceptance that personalities held in high esteem within the Romanian culture were indeed involved in the fascist movement. After decades of silence about—and effective erasure from Romanian textbooks of—important cultural figures such as Nae Ionescu, Mircea Eliade, and Emil Cioran, in post-communism as

early as the 1990s Romanians could now enthusiastically reclaim them, only to learn that their fascist past still renders them controversial. It is within this context that Bejan's book could add to the conversation and shed light on the nuances inherent to the figures of these great intellectuals who found themselves entangled in the tumultuous political extremes of the time.

In the foreword, professor Vladimir Tismăneanu, author of *The Devil in History*, calls Bejan's book "timely" and a "valuable contribution to a significantly rich body of literature that includes writings by Zigu Ornea, Marta Petreu, Leon Volovici, Irina Livezeanu, the late Matei Călinescu, Constantin Iordachi, Valentin Săndulescu, Marius Turda, Radu Ioanid, Philip Vanhaelemeersch and the late Ilinca Zarifopol Johnston" (x-xi). The book has a total of eight chapters that include the "Introduction," followed by a "Conclusion." In the "Introduction," Bejan explains that the Criterion Association of the Arts, Literature and Philosophy (or "criterion" or the "Criterion Association") was a "cultural circle, series of conferences and exhibitions, and publication" and it was active between 1932 and 1935 (4). Its founder was Petru (Titel) Comărnescu, its publication was *Criterion*, and its literary style was confessional, autobiographical, and experiential (*experiența*). At its core was the so-called Young Generation, which is the sixth generation in the "social history of modern Romania;" Mircea Vulcănescu lists the five generations before it, as follows: *generația premergătorilor*, *generația pașoptistă*, *generația junimistă*, *generația socială*, and *generația de foc* (14). Some members of the Young Generation, however, did not continue after World War II due to premature disappearance and "purges of communism" and was in fact, in most cases, "written out of history books from 1948 onward" (5, 7).

The book's chapters have self-explanatory titles, as they chronicle and detail each stage of the Criterion Association. In chapter 2, "Nae Ionescu, the Young Generation, 'The Spiritual Itinerary' and Education Abroad, 1927-1932," Bejan begins by presenting Ionescu's intellectual influence on the youth of the time as a beloved professor of philosophy due to his "dynamic, provocative and unique style that endeared him to his students" (26). Alongside Lucian Blaga, Nechifor Crainic and Eugen Lovinescu, Nae Ionescu was part of the so-called Sacrificed Generation that was situated between the Old and the Young. He was both a philo-Semite before 1933 and an anti-Semite afterwards. In 1933 he started his sympathy for the Iron Guard. In the aftermath of Minister Duca's assassination, Ionescu was arrested, and the publication he owned, *Cuvântul*, was closed until 1938.

Nae Ionescu's most important contribution to the Young Generation was to empower his students and the Romanian culture to "stand on their own two feet" (32). In the latter part of the chapter, Bejan presents Mircea Eliade's "The Spiritual Itinerary," a series printed in 12 installments in *Cuvântul*, in the fall of 1927. In it, Eliade invited his generation to oppose the current issues in "culture, spirituality art, literature, scholarship" and move toward a "mystical Orthodox Christianity" (39). Eliade encouraged the Young generation to fill the cultural void that plagued their "newly enhanced country" (40). The chapter ends with what would count as revelations for some people regarding Emil Cioran's sympathies for Hitler and fascism as they

transpire from letters he wrote. Indeed, Bejan quotes Cioran's words in his correspondence from Germany to Ecaterina Săndulescu, in which he glorifies Hitler's dictatorship and condones his violence: "Before it could call itself a serious movement, national socialism needed *blood*" (57). As difficult as these truths are, they need to be first learned and then accepted as such by many Romanians who could not learn about them in the past.

Chapter 3, "The Criterion Association of Arts, Literature and Philosophy: Beginnings and Birth in Bucharest, 1932," details the way in which the association came into existence and its growth from the Forum Group, a lecture series. However, Bejan points out that the truth about Criterion's evolution from the Forum Group should be considered more "nuanced:" while the Forum Group had 20 members, the Criterion Association "was a network of approximately 100 writers, artists, dancers, composers, actors and journalists" (Ionel Jianu cited on p. 60). The chapter talks about the gatherings for discussions, dinners, dancing, and artistic activities, and presents the various relationships between the members, starting with Petru (Titel) Comărnescu, largely considered the "father of Criterion" (66) and the one that had all the merit for this intellectual movement.

The Forum Group had been founded by Ionel Jianu, and many of its "nuclear members" (40) became the core part of the Criterion Association. However, a fight between Paul Sterian and Jianu led to the dissolution of the Forum while the latter was caring for his ill wife in the hospital. Jianu's name did not even appear as a participant at Criterion in 1932. Nevertheless, the cultural group was put together in detail (79) and membership was "carefully considered" to include "diversity of opinion and approach" (81). In the meeting of June 17, 1932, the group members developed a plan or a series of ten conferences called "Presentations of Current Romanian Culture" followed by a group "symposia (with 'contradictory discussions') about 'Idols' ('personalities of the times'), Romanian and foreign" (82-83).

Chapter 4, "The Criterion Association's Activity of 1932: 'Idols' Symposia, Politics, Culture," contains various sections, beginning with "Criterion's Cultural Crusade." From this first part, we learn about the change of focus from individual contributions in the Forum Group to the Young Generation's efforts towards the "creation of a culture," by working together (89). Among the "idols," the group included such seminal figures as Lenin, Freud, Chaplin, Mussolini, Gide, Valery, Bergson, Krishnamurti, Garbo, Proust, Spengler, Ghandi, and Picasso. By this selection, Criterion wanted to address contemporary themes, violent and non-violent revolutions, and controversial topics of communism, Judaism, and homosexuality.

However, Criterion had to defend itself against the political environment. Chapter 5, "Criterion Activity of 1933-1935: Politics, Exhibition, Symposia, Music and the Publication," discusses the fact that its members had to assure the authorities that they were neither communists, nor fascists, but intellectuals (134), which is an important point the books makes. In 1933, the association's activity was marked by political upheaval after the Grivița strikes, while by the fall of the same year "the major menace came from the Right" (147). By December 1933, Eliade was

vocal against the “barbarism” of the Iron Guard. The crisis and imminent war were already felt, and a preoccupation for eugenics as both positive and negative did not sway the Creationists themselves toward intolerance for minorities and racism. Then, the journal *Criterion* was set up on October 15, 1934, and was meant to continue the activity of the association.

The dissolution of the association in 1935 under the internal and external threat of the Iron Guard is detailed in chapter 6, “The Dissolution of the Criterion Association, 1934-1935: The *Credința* Scandal, Male Friendship, Sexuality and Freedom of the Press.” The newspaper *Credința* accused the Criterionists of promoting homosexuality. This chapter details Comărnescu’s complicated sexuality and personal relationships and shows how *Criterion*’s end resulted from accusations of the members’ personal lives instead of “their public responsibility to create culture” (209).

The final two chapters (chapter 7, “Rhinocerization: Political Activity and Allegiances of the Young Generation, 1935-1941,” and chapter 8, “The Fate of the Young Generation and the Legacy of *Criterion*”) describe the failure of the movement to connect with the Romanian public, which made it susceptible to the slanderous attacks of *Credința* (209). Bejan brings up Eugene Ionesco’s seminal play *Rhinoceroses* as a symbol of conversion and uses it to illustrate how conversion to extremist ideologies “killed *Criterion*” (212). In a letter to Tudor Vianu, written in Paris in 1945, Ionesco describes with utter bitterness the faith of the members of this cultural and intellectual endeavor, emphasizing Petru Comărnescu’s role as the “organizer” and “animator” of *Criterion* and the disappearance of all the members (254). A vibrant cultural movement that had once catalyzed the country’s elite had been destroyed by political influence and by the extremisms of a tumultuous time in the history of Europe.

Bejan’s thoroughly researched work is a necessary account for historians and scholars in various fields, as well as the public at large who will find it an enjoyable read. One of the book’s strengths consists in the abundance of valuable details resulted from the author’s examination of diaries and correspondence materials. The analyses in this book offer insight into a historical period previously obscured to the Romanian public for a couple of generations. Bejan’s monograph should be read by everyone interested in the interwar period, Romanian literature, Eastern Europe, fascism/communism, or history in general.

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