



HAL
open science

The Rumanian case: the Iron Guard as Part of the fascist Network

Traian Sandu

► **To cite this version:**

Traian Sandu. The Rumanian case: the Iron Guard as Part of the fascist Network. Die faschistische Herausforderung. Netzwerke, Zukunftsverheißungen und Kulturen der Gewalt in Europa 1922 bis 1945, Jun 2012, Munich, Germany. pp.1-29. hal-00715392

HAL Id: hal-00715392

<https://hal.science/hal-00715392>

Submitted on 14 Jul 2012

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The Rumanian case: the Iron Guard as Part of the fascist Network

I thank the organizers for inviting me to talk on the topic of the width and the intensity of the Romanian participation to the fascist European network.

This approach is not the one privileged by scholars, because their efforts in the case of the so-called “small fascisms” consisted in demonstrating the autonomy of home-grown Fascisms. In terms of network theory, it means privileging the nodes over the links.

This approach incites first to a comparative, and not to a relational methodology. It is certainly indispensable to propose a generic definition of Fascism.

But the relational and transfer approaches will prove useful to evaluate some comparative theories in the view of **the actors themselves**: did they consider that ideological and structural commonalities could create international relationships?

The main point of my argumentation is the *pre-eminence of the ideology* over *Realpolitik* in Fascist international relations. Fascist States are not Westphalian States, they do not evolve in the so-called “international disorder” and do not obey only to rationality of interests, but also to ideology driven geopolitics.

I therefore propose **a three level presentation**:

- the first level is the *plain transfer through direct* contact with other kindred milieus;
- the second one is *the active linking role* of legionaries as go-between in the rapprochement between German national-socialists and Italian Fascists;
- the third level is the *interference of Fascist ideological cluster* in the multi-level relations between States, parties and individuals.

I – The transfers: “Paris und Berlin als Lernort für die Legionäre”

It will deal with the contacts of the two main legionary personalities, Codreanu and Moța, with Maurras and the German radical *Burschenschaften* at the beginning of the Ruhr crisis.

A/ The French connections proved more and more evanescent through the thirties

Florin Țurcanu, the specialist of Mircea Eliade’s legionary youth, tried to demonstrate that Action Française had an important influence on the creation of the Legion of the Archangel Michael through Ion Moța and his Romanian Action, a radical anti-Semitic counterpart of the prestigious French model. Moța translated into Romanian *The Protocols of*

the Elders of Zion in 1922, only one year after its publication in France by a member of the Action Française. So the transfer seems obvious here.

His letters of the 1st of April and 9th of June 1925 to Maurras narrate the first trials – and acquittals – of the students members of the League of National-Christian Defense of Professor Cuza. They had plotted in October 1923 to assassinate political and Jewish personalities. Codreanu had also murdered in 1924 the Prefect of Police in Iași.

However, at the end of 1925, when Moța and Codreanu travelled to Grenoble to write their law thesis, their writings do not mention any relations with Maurras. Presumably, the radicalization of the youth section of the League began to separate murrassian Cuza and Codreanu not only on the problem of violence, but also on the structure of the movement – the young leader wanted to create a mass movement permanently mobilized – and on the ideology – as Codreanu wanted to add to the monomaniac anti-Semitism of his aging mentor elements of a new affirmative ideology.

All these converging choices would lead to the creation of the Legion in June 1927.

A second manifestation of interest for Maurras reappeared at the beginning of 1934. The letter was addressed to Maurras by Vasile Marin, another organic intellectual of the Iron Guard: he intended to appease the Action Française about the accusations brought to the Iron Guard of having murdered Prime Minister Duca on Hitler's orders.

True is that until Moța's and Marin's death in Spain in January 1937, *Hitler preferred Cuza's Party* as a much more obedient partner, ready to realize Germany's aims of merging all the right parties in order to give Germany easier manipulative possibilities. But the Iron Guard resisted those attempts, certainly not in order to please French interests but to safeguard Legionary Movement's political independency.

Thus, the centre France represented for the young Romanian nationalists at the beginning of the period faded away and the link lost much of its density during the thirties.

B/ The German influence on Codreanu's organization and national ambitions ...

... seems important during a student's trip realized at the end of 1922 by Codreanu to the University of Berlin. In reality he would "study the German and Austrians students' organisation of the anti-Semitic activity"¹. When he came back from revolutionary mood Germany after the beginning of the French occupation of the Ruhr, swastikas would flourish

¹ Rapports de la Siguranța des 7 et 17 novembre 1922, Scurtu et al., doc. n°24 et 25, pp256-257.

on the Romanian students' coats to mark the adepts and gather money to support the autonomy of the movement born in March 1923, the League of National-Christian Defense².

On the way back from Germany, he also met the students in Cernăuți and Iași in order to propose "The transformation of the university student movement into a great national movement outside the university, because our struggle interested the whole nation."³ His position was soon adopted and the influence of the German youth certainly had an impact on the vantage Codreanu took upon his intellectual Francophile comrades like Moța, Marin or Polihroniade, formed in the *entourage* of the right wing Parisian *salons* of the French winner.

After the *Machtergreifung*, Codreanu showed a friendly attitude, also intended to counteract the much more noisy and servile pro-Hitler demonstrations from Cuza. But Codreanu had understood the importance of the new German element in the European balance. Romanian diplomacy was preparing its integration into the Paris-Moscow axis in gestation since the arrival of Hitler and the democratic parties gave pledges to Paris in this sense. Codreanu gave a double answer, of independence **and** sympathy towards Germany.

C/ Italian ineffective prestige

At the beginning of the twenties, in Romania as elsewhere in Europe, a lot of movements claimed to follow the Italian model, but with no much Italian support. Theodor Armon underpinned the Italian lack of interest towards the Romanian right until the German challenge. And even after 1933, its anti-Semitic stance placed it rather on the German side.

The Legionaries were represented in some Italian organs as the science and literature Institute called *Europa Giovane*, created in 1938 inside the National institute of Fascist culture, and whose honorary members were very different right wing personalities as Nicolae Iorga, Codreanu and Manoilescu, the specialist of corporatism, freshly elected on the Iron Guard's lists, but as an independent personality, also president of the CAUR in Romania⁴.

Thus, the concrete links between the Iron Guard and the Fascist Great Powers were weak.

² Rapport de l'Inspectorat général de Police et de Sûreté Chișinău du 20 février 1923, *ibid.*, doc. n°36, p311. Voir aussi la relation qu'il en donne lors de son interrogatoire consécutif au projet d'attentat d'octobre 1923 (doc. n°72 du 31 octobre 1923).

³ Supplément d'interrogatoire pris à Corneliu Zelea Codreanu le 31 octobre 1923, *ibid.*, doc. n°72, pp387-388 (ici, p388).

⁴ *Ibid.*.

II - The Iron Guard's effective role in the European Fascist net

One important question is the consciousness about ideological similarity as a condition for a good relationship: the theoretical background of this problem is that the kind of nationalism developed by Fascism is not a traditional 19th century one, framed in a country-State-people nationalism; thus the hostility among nationalisms are not the core of Fascist nationalism, and the ideological transnational commonalities and convergence do matter.

A first attempt of “international nationalism” is that of Msgr. Benigni, who had begun an activity of network building among the far right Europe grace to his *Correspondance de Rome*. He met Moța during the anti-Semitic meeting organized by Gyula Gömbös in 1925⁵. *This network activity was conserved by Moța.*

The first expertise asked to Moța was on the trial held in Bern about *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*⁶. The defender of the Swiss anti-Semites was the Welt-Dienst of Erfurt, an organism financed by Goebbels since 1933 and intended to become an international propaganda office under the direction of the retired Oberstleutnant Ulrich Fleischhauer⁷. Moța's correspondent was Georg de Pottere, a former Austro-Hungarian consul in Moscow, born in the Banat⁸, thus a former compatriot of Transylvanian Moța and who knew well the Russian context of the anti-Semitic forgery of *The Protocols*.

But the main role Moța had to play was that of go-between for anti-Semitic National-Socialists and not yet anti-Semitic Italian Fascists after the Austrian crisis of July 1934. He was invited at the Congress of the Committees for the universality of Rome (CAUR) in Montreux in December 1934; it was intended to balance the German influence. The motion on the Jewish question he presented ended in an ambivalent statement: in the Italian line, “Congress declare[d] that the Jewish question [could not] lead to an universal campaign of hate against Jews”, but the anti-Semites obtained recognition of the Jewish problem as that of “a state within the state” and an internationalist revolutionary minority, resulting in the decision to fight it⁹.

⁵ Ion Motza, *Corrispondenza col Welt-Dienst [1934-1936]*, Parme, All'insegna del Veltro, 1996 ; traduction roumaine : *Corespondența cu Welt-Dienst*, Munich, Ed. « Ion Mării », 2000, pp74-78, p10 et lettre de Moța à Pottere du 5 février 1935, pp34-39, ici p38.

⁶ Nicault Catherine, « Le procès des protocoles des sages de sion, une tentative de riposte juive à l'antisémitisme dans les années 1930 », in *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* n°53, janvier-mars 1997. pp. 68-84.

⁷ Voir la page que lui consacre Richard Alan Nelson sur Wikipedia [consulté le 22 avril 2010] : http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulrich_Fleischhauer

⁸ See the Ulrich Fleischhauer page on the German Wikipedia, consulted on the 18th of June, 2012.

⁹ Note de la Direction générale de la Police du 21 janvier 1935, Scurtu et al., *op. cit.*, doc. n°24, p81.

Thus Moța could display some support to the German thesis. Nevertheless, the motion was a compromise which Moța asked his German counterpart to accept as a fair basis of reconciliation with the Italians. He also invited him to a certain “moderation” on the biological racism, excepted towards the Jews.

In his answer, Pottere complained that the Fascist movements would not recognize the importance of anti-Semitism in the palingenetic ideological formula: “Any national regeneration movement is condemned to death if it neglects the Jewish question.”¹⁰ But he agreed with Moța that the racial criterion must have been limited to the Jews: “Let’s not forget that there is not a German or a Romanian race – there is only the Aryan race (divided among several nations) and the Jewish race.”¹¹

In exchange of this noticeable service, Moța’s intended to underpin Iron Guard’s importance and difference with the other far right movements, in order to justify its refusal to merge with them. So he refused to take part to the Welt-Dienst Congress of the 26th of August gathering twenty countries, because the Romanian anti-Semitic movement was already represented by the old rival Cuza, whereas the Legionaries “envisaged as the only possibility a solution intimately linked to an action of moral rebirth of our people”¹², illustrating what R. Griffin calls the palingenetic ideological trend of Fascism.

Further correspondence confirmed this position, for example the absence of any member of the Iron Guard at the Nazi Party’s Rally in September 1935¹³.

Whatever the Legionaries’ behavior towards the Welt-Dienst, the latter’s role was on a descending slope as the difficult years had passed and the need of ideological solidarity vanished, replaced by the *Realpolitik* advantages of power. As Michael Hagemester puts it:

“The previous staff – who were, according to Adolf Eichmann, ‘more or less dubious characters’ – were all fired. ... The era of bizarre idiosyncratic conspiracy theorists was over; the time was ripe for pragmatic, professional practitioners of power.”¹⁴

Paradoxical and not so paradoxical is that at the same moment, Codreanu placed the international affairs and his pro-Axis stance on the forefront of his propaganda. Thus, secret

¹⁰ Lettre de O.F[armer], alias Pottere du 27 février 1935 à Moța, *ibid.*, pp55-58, ici p55-56.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, ici pp57-58.

¹² Letter from Moța to Pottere of the 18th of August 1934, *Corespondența cu Welt-Dienst...*, *op. cit.*, pp32-34, here p33, answering to a letter from P[ottere] to Moța dated 8 August 1934, *ibid.*, p50.

¹³ Lettre d’invitation de O.F[armer], alias Pottere du 27 août 1935 à Moța, *ibid.*, p61 et lettre de F.M. du Welt-Dienst du 28 novembre 1935 à Moța, *ibid.*, pp61-63, ici p62.

¹⁴ Michael Hagemester, « Russian Émigrés in the Bern Trial of the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” (1933-1935), in *Les Cahiers parisiens*, sous la direction de Jan Goldstein, vol.5, 2009, pp375-391.

relationships became useless as they were in the public domain and became one of the most important power lever in the competition between the King and the Legionaries for an international balance between the Western Democracies and the Fascist Axis.

This division of roles functioned quite mechanically: in time of delicate or adverse situation for the Fascist Powers, *Realpolitik* would not work and ideology filled the gap.

Thus the impact of the Legionary underground network on the decision makers was rather weak but its influence existed certainly on the parties' apparatus vs State administration

III - The crossed-leveled relation: preeminence of ideological kinship over the *Realpolitik*

I will limit this section to some public declarations, mainly by Codreanu. I distinguish the comparative and the relationship sides of legionary international analyses.

A/ Where Codreanu goes comparative

Codreanu claimed in his main book, *For my legionaries*, that Legionarism, Fascism and National-Socialism were fundamentally kin movements: "I want to demonstrate that the nationalist movements and regimes in present Europe, as the Legionary movement, the Fascism, the National-Socialism, etc., are neither dictatorial nor democratic".¹⁵ And two years later in a press conference: "I am against democracy, as I am against dictatorship. At morning's dawn arises another system, new, never met before. This is what I am for."¹⁶

So the arguments in favor of this kinship are the popularity of the political renewal and, in fact, of the whole social system. This renewal is founded on the fertile stress between popular enthusiastic adhesion and authority principle, the adhesion being ensured by the deep and strong conviction that the authority is necessary in order to realize supra-human transfiguration in every field of social and political life. Such a virtuous circle is certainly nourished by concrete realizations in the domestic and international fields, directing society's aspirations towards the promise of improvement, of strength, of identification with the nevertheless unreachable charismatic leader.

¹⁵ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Pentru legionari ... op. cit.*, p311.

¹⁶ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Circulări și manifeste 1927-1938* (Circulaires et manifestes 1927-1938), 5^e éd., Munich, coll. Europa, 1981, 294pp., conférence de presse du 29 novembre 1937, pp.220-223, ici p.222.

So analyzing secret network is certainly useful, but more obvious evidence for kinship and intense relationships aspirations are very well known from public declarations.

B/ Codreanu and the promises of a European fascist collaboration

The legionaries' position on international relations converged with Germany's interests¹⁷ but also with King Carol's and the whole Romanian right opinion about Romania's integration to the Franco-Soviet axis. Indeed, the support for soviet red army passage through the Romanian territory in order to converge with the French army against Berlin was scarce outside some narrow circles of the Romanian chief of diplomacy Titulescu. But if the King wanted good but distant relations with the Soviets, legionaries were progressively involved in crusade propaganda against the Franco-Soviet link.

Codreanu's circular letter dated 30th of May 1936¹⁸ was clearly hostile to the Romanian diplomacy. Geostrategic realistic reflexion was not absent in this judgment, with the risks of bolshevisation in case of passage of the Soviet army or of dismemberment by the Fascist powers in case of victory on the Franco-Soviet couple¹⁹. But radical ideological motivation belonged, however, to Codreanu and the far right.

Titulescu was forced to resign at the end of August, but that changed nothing to the severe critics of Codreanu. In his open letter to the King and to the politicians dated 5 November 1936²⁰, on an urgent and solemn tone, Codreanu reacted to shift of power of the year 1936 (Rhineland, Rome-Berlin Axis and League's sanctions against Italy).

He intended to create difficulties to the King and show the Axis powers **who** was their true support on the Romanian political stage and their most fitted counterpart. *The multi-scalar approach reveals an international radicalization of the head of the Iron Guard favorable to the Fascist regimes, which was not shared by all the Legionary Movement.*

Codreanu then took an initiative articulating the two plans, interior and exterior: he decided the departure of seven high-level legionary executives, including his brother-in-law Moța, for the Spanish front²¹. There, Moța and Marin were killed near Madrid²²,

¹⁷ Chiper, *România și Germania nazistă*, ... *op. cit.*, p149. Voir aussi Traian Sandu : « La Roumanie sur l'axe Paris Moscou, 1933-1937 : sécurité européenne et coopération militaire », dans Bonneville-de Gayffier, Anne-Claire [dir.], *Sécurité et coopération militaire en Europe, 1919-1955... op. cit.*, pp. 249-267

¹⁸ « Circulaire - politique extérieure », Codreanu, *Circulări și manifeste...*, *op. cit.*, pp74-75.

¹⁹ This classical reflexion may be found, inter alia, in the personal letter from Goga to the King of 14 July 1936, ANIC, CR, vol.7/1936, f.3-9

²⁰ « Mémoire adressé à S.M. le Roi, aux hommes politiques et au pays », Codreanu, *Circulări și manifeste...*, *op. cit.*, pp97-101.

²¹ Lettre de Moța à sa famille du 1^{er} décembre 1936, *Testamentul lui Ion Moța*, Munich, éd. « Ion Mării », coll. Europa, pp21-24.

accomplishing thus a transnational choice on the side of Fascist powers, in radical ideological opposition to international communism, but with very light network preparation.

If this event was not important for the central administrations of the great powers, the *legations and the parties, at least the NSDAP, began to take into serious consideration the Iron Guard out of ideological motives*. In March, the government and the king made it clear in Berlin that support to legionnaires could have serious consequences on the German-Romanian relations²³. In spite of it, a dispatch from Wilhelm Fabricius, the German Minister in Bucharest, proved that he had understood what distinguished the Iron Guard of the rest of the far right whose emissaries succeeded in Berlin to apply for grants and moral support, while “the only ones who deserve the support and encouragement are just [...] the legionaries of the Iron Guard, who precisely because of their harshness of character and ideas, are subject to persecution, imprisoned and prosecuted without mercy.”²⁴

2 points in the conclusion

1. *The network looks rather weak:*

-*its range is limited*, as the transfers naturally concerned mainly the elites: or, the importance of Fascist movements lies in the mass mobilization by national myths, thus the transfer of international ones like the Elders of Zion might have proved important for the elite, but it had to be transformed into a popular digest to have its range widened and adapted;

- *its density is also low*: only a few intellectuals were implied in the net and the node Moța linked three other nodes – Action Française, Welt-Dienst and CAUR – who ignored and even detested each other for *Realpolitik* reasons. Moreover, the linking node came from a small country whereas the separated nodes belonged to great powers;

- *its sustainability is very unpredictable*: we have seen that the ideological convergence during high international crisis drew the Fascists nodes close to each other, but this was not a firm rule. For example, after the Vienna Award giving Northern Transylvania to Hungary, some historical Legionary leaders as Corneliu Georgescu or Radu Mironovici would risk a war against Germany; but when Barbarossa was launched, Legionaries fought well in spite of Antonescu’s repression with Hitler’s approval.

²² Circulaire du 15 janvier 1937, *ibid.*, p118. Voir aussi Scurtu et al., *op. cit.*, documents n°144 et 145, pp258-260.

²³ Chiper, *România și Germania nazistă, ... op. cit.*, p222.

²⁴ « Informations au sujet d’un nouveau rapport de Fabricius », note n°30(621) du 8 mai 1937 de la DGP, ANIC, DGP, vol.17/1937, f.20-21, ici f.21.

2. Thus I propose to come back to the ideological kinship, which do not replace *Realpolitik* relationships between States, but arises each time the Fascist regimes, movements or personalities are in danger. And danger was inherent to Fascism: after all, Mussolini had adopted the nietzschean “vivere pericolosamente”.

Thus I propose to finish with two quotations, by Codreanu and by Hitler.

At this end of his trial, which he knew it could lead him to death, Codreanu was charged with “treason”, “intrigue against the social order” and “crime of rebellion”²⁵. He rejected those accusations and referred to the commonalties of the Fascist movements:

“The accusation carried against me today by the final order, I have already encountered, and it is, it seems, always linked to these movements of moral and national rebirth on which those who hate them throw, with all the invective, all the charges in the world.”²⁶

The sentence “always linked to these movements” has meta-linguistic value for me, as the link does not lean on the relationships between movements, but rather the palingenetic ideology provides the link between the movements. Thus, Codreanu launches a subliminal threat to the court, reminding that if he was not Hitler’s hireling, some day Hitler might also remember how Carol’s regime had treated a kindred movement.

Precisely, less than two years later, *Hitler contributed hugely to crush Carol’s regime* grace to the second Vienna Award, but on realistic – and not ideological – purposes, because less than five months later, he also gave Antonescu a free hand to repress the Iron Guard, assimilated to the turbulent SA before Barbarossa. In spite of this realism displayed at the beginning of the war, Hitler warned Antonescu not to break with the popular support the legionaries could represent:

“From a historic point of view we can say, on the basis of a vast experience, that any regime has to lean on the people. The history showed that there where misses this foundation and the regime leans only on the strength, in the best case it does not survive the exceptional personality who established it.”²⁷

Thus, if Hitler took advantage of the repression of the Fascist movement in Romania in order to ensure Barbarossa, his long term political thought brought him back to a populist,

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p94.

²⁶ Défense de Codreanu du 23 mai 1938, Scurtu et al., *op. cit.*, pp98-112, ici p99.

²⁷ Entrevue d’Obersalzburg du 14 janvier 1941, *Antonescu-Hitler, Corespondență și întâlniri inedite (1940-1944)* (Antonescu-Hitler, correspondance et rencontres inédites (1940-1944)), édités par Ion Ardeleanu, Vasile Arimia et Ștefan Lache, Bucarest, Ed. Cozia, 1991, vol. I, 216p, p67.

anticonservative and transnational – the “vast experience” he invokes – legitimization of the regime. *I thank you for your attention.*