

Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania: The Criterion Association. By Cristina A. Bejan. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. xxix + 323 pp.

The relationship between intellectuals and politics in interwar Romania emerged as a crucial topic after the fall of communism, and it generated cultural and often ideological debates that deeply marked the public life of the country. Attitudes ranged from an idealized rediscovery of the interwar period to a more critical approach towards what was a highly complex and controversial period in Romanian history. These debates generated an impressive amount of works, varying in size and quality, which maintain a certain level of interest in the topic even today. In this context, Cristina Bejan's well-researched book represents a welcome addition to an already very crowded field of study, providing a fresh perspective on a highly controversial topic.

As has been the case with other works on this topic, the broad intellectual drive behind this book is the search for an explanation regarding the fascist sympathies of some members of what was termed “the 1927 Generation” or “the Young Generation” of Romanian interwar intellectuals. Among representatives of this trend, one could mention Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Constantin Noica, Mihail Sebastian, and Petru Comarnescu. Bejan tells the story of this generation by focusing on the Criterion Association, a cultural circle founded in 1932 which included many of the young intellectuals of the time. One of Bejan's merits is that she has provided the first book-length account on Criterion ever published in English.

While much has been written about the fascist allegiances of a sizable part of the “1927 Generation,” the fact that some of its members did not join their colleagues on the path to “rhinocerisation” (to borrow the metaphor from Eugène Ionesco's play, *Rhinocéros*) received less attention, and Bejan's work is, in this regard, a step in the right direction.

The book is divided into nine chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. It begins by setting the stage conceptually and historically. In the introduction, Bejan discusses the sensitive issue of the connection between intellectuals and political extremism, and she places the Young Generation in the proper cultural context by situating it among previous Romanian intellectual traditions. She also pays close attention to the historical context in which this generation was active, marked by the growth of the political extremism which ultimately affected its own existence.

The next chapter documents the beginnings of the 1927 Generation and the influence exerted by Nae Ionescu, a philosophy professor at the University of Bucharest who also became a staunch supporter of the Iron Guard. Mircea Eliade's prominence as a leading member of this generation is also presented in great detail, as well as the way in which these young intellectuals came together as a group, some being from similar backgrounds (former Bucharest high school colleagues), while others came from outside the capital city. Bejan puts particular emphasis on the importance of education abroad, especially for those who chose to study outside of Europe in places such as India (Eliade) and the United States (Comarnescu), instead of going to Western Europe.

Bejan is careful to make an important distinction in Chapter 3, aptly stating that the Young Generation and the Criterion Association did not fully overlap and should be seen as distinct manifestations of the interactions among young interwar Romanian intellectuals. In her discussion of the founding of the movement, the attention she gives to episodes regarding life in interwar Bucharest and the bohemian side of this group of young intellectuals helps further a more nuanced understanding of what brought these people together in the first place, the same way the brutal political turn from second part of the 1930s shows why this camaraderie did not suffice anymore to keep them on the same side. Bejan also points out the inner rivalries that marked Criterion's activity, thus avoiding a rosy picture that would not do justice to the diversity of the group. Another salient and seldom covered aspect of the volume is the insistence on the way in which Criterion was organized and managed by its founder, Petru Comarnescu.

The activity of the group in 1932, its first and most prolific year of existence, is detailed in Chapter 4, including the public lecture series, which was followed by debates focusing on a wide array of cultural and even political issues, with diverse topics ranging from Lenin to Mussolini, Greta Garbo to Krishnamurti, and Gandhi to Picasso. These topics reflected the desire of the group to serve as a hub which would connect the Romanian audience with the most important cultural and political trends of the day. In a way, the group became a victim of its own success. The conferences, which were held at the Royal Foundation building in the center of Bucharest, were very popular, but with success came controversy, contestation, and also violence. Accused of having a hidden communist agenda, some of Criterion's public conferences were targeted by far-right agitators, and this brought the group to the attention of the authorities.

Comarnescu's rich plans for 1933, carefully detailed by Bejan in Chapter 5, were torn apart by what in the terms of that age could be described as history

catching up with this generation. The political events of 1933, beginning with the February workers' strike in Bucharest and ending with the assassination of the liberal prime minister I. G. Duca by members of the Iron Guard in December, paralleled a troubled year for Criterionists, who could no longer hide their political allegiances. The backlash following the assassination was also felt by intellectuals close to the Iron Guard, including some of the Criterionists. The dissolution of the group, thus, became imminent. A last attempt to maintain its presence was the publication of the homonymous journal in 1934, but the Association never returned to its former glory. Bejan credits the publication of the *Criterion* journal as having been a salient moment, and she offers a close reading of the main topics discussed in the seven issues that were published. While this analysis of the "last throb" (Zigu Ornea) of the group constitutes a novel and useful enterprise, it is also true that the journal never enjoyed the fame or influence that the group promisingly started to have in 1932–1933.

The commonly accepted explanation regarding the dissolution of the Criterion Association underlines the insurmountable political differences that permeated the group following the rise of the Iron Guard. This rise was made possible in part because of the contributions of several young intellectuals, some of them members of or close to Criterion. To this already beaten explanatory path, Chapter 6 adds another possible explanation for the dissolution of the group, namely a well-known public scandal from the mid-1930s in which members of the group were accused of promoting homosexuality. Petru Comarnescu, Criterion's *factotum*, was one of the main targets of the scandal. As Bejan notes, this scandal marked the public and even personal trajectories of those involved, and Criterion would no longer be a part of their plans.

The "rhinocerosisation" of parts of the Young Generation did not come as a surprise, and it accompanied the growth of the Iron Guard. Bejan documents the paths taken by famous Criterionists who sympathized with and supported this movement, and she also focuses on those lesser-known members who did not join their colleagues down this path. Among those who became fierce Iron Guardists, Marietta Sadova's case has never been made the focus of serious scholarly discussion, and it is to Bejan's credit that she has accomplished this by using relevant information from Sadova's Securitate file, though it may be a bit of an overstatement to call Sadova the Romanian Leni Riefenstahl.

The book is at its best when it takes advantage of the rich primary sources which Bejan has diligently studied over the years in archives and libraries, bringing to light little known aspects such as those regarding the inner management and

functioning of *Criterion* in its beginnings. Her style is neither dry nor pretentious, offering instead a lively and passionate reading experience that does not come at the expense of academic rigorousness.

In a sense, the story of the *Criterion* Association matches, up to a point, the story of interwar Romania. It is to Cristina Bejan's merit that she has managed to capture the histories of this group so well, while also providing the reader with a portrait of interwar Romania in its best and worst moments. This well-documented work on a highly intriguing topic has been written in an enjoyable manner, thus making it a suitable reading for specialists and non-specialists alike.

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