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## Breaking the Teeth of Time: Mythical Time and the «Terror of History» in the Rhetoric of the Legionary Movement in Interwar Romania<sup>1</sup>

On 16 July 1936, a «punishment team» of ten legionaries assassinated the former legionary commander and defector Mihail Stelescu in his hospital bed. The murder was the most gruesome the members of the «Legion of the Archangel Michael», Romania's interwar fascist movement, had committed to that date: Stelescu was shot with 36 bullets and his body afterwards cut into pieces with axes. The assassins then surrendered serenely to the police.<sup>2</sup> At their trial in May 1937, they showed no signs of remorse regarding their crime and even invoked the «Christian principles of love and forgiveness» that the movement typically upheld in its rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> Accounting for the extreme violence of the crime while claiming to be good Christians would appear absurd, and yet the unrepentant assassins «solved» any and all such contradictions by recoding their murder in the context of a national «destiny» where their personal «sin» was a necessity for safeguarding the future «legionary Romania». Mentioning an alleged plot of Stelescu to assassinate Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, founder and undisputed leader of the Legion, they made reference to historical examples of Romanian revolutionaries who had been defeated, captured or killed as a result of treason, and defined their act as a form of pre-emptive strike that not only prevented Codreanu's murder but redeemed the nation of the «curse of treason»: «We have killed the principle and the consequences of treason. We have entered the path of dignity, we have aligned ourselves with Romania's destiny. Now the new century begins.»<sup>4</sup>

The *Decemviri* – as the ten assassins were glorified in legionary publications using a denomination that, like the Legion itself, harked back to the Roman origins of the Romanian people – were not alone in their interpretation of the murder.

1 The research for this article was made possible by a generous grant from the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies.

2 *Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității* (National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives, henceforth CNSAS), Bucharest, Romania; *Fond Documentar* (Documentary

Fund, henceforth Fund D), File 10160, vol. 1, 267–268.

3 «Impresii de la procesul celor zece» (Impressions from the trial of the ten), in: *Brațul de fier* (The Iron Arm) 3 / 20 (1937), 4.

4 *Ibid.*

A manifesto issued by student organisations (which the legionary movement was firmly controlling by the mid-1930s) one day after Stelescu's assassination employed the same vision of a mythical history that enlisted the support of historical characters while justifying the crime in the name of the future: «In the basements of the police, Ion Caratănase, Iosif Bozântan and their comrades are in chains, but the shadows of Tudor and Horia caress their foreheads and kiss them brotherly. The Romanian student body, understanding the gesture of the ten imprisoned comrades, gazes across the twilight of the world of today, [seeing] how new generations are ascending, freed from the curse of treason and the serfdom of cowardice. On the horizon, only now is the light of true Romanian greatness beginning to dawn.»<sup>5</sup> Speaking to an audience of one hundred theology students on 17 December 1936 on the issue of the compatibility of Christian faith with the killing of Stelescu (two of the assassins were theology students), Codreanu himself depicted treason as «the most odious crime», stated that Stelescu betrayed not only the legionary movement but «the future Romanian state», and concluded that, a sin nonetheless, the murder was «absolved by the great services brought to the [...] state by the elimination of treason».<sup>6</sup>

### 1. Fascist Temporalities

The examples above show an interpretive scheme that symbolically absolved criminals of their murderous deeds and transformed them into «martyrs» for the higher cause of the Romanian nation; that was faithfully reproduced by the actual murderers, by rank-and-file members and by the movement's leader. Rather than an isolated occurrence, they constitute exemplary statements illustrating the ideology of a movement that combined from its inception extreme acts of violence with a rhetoric that proclaimed its spiritual character and its mission as a regenerative process whose envisaged outcome was expressed through the Christian trope of «resurrection» of the nation.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, these statements exemplify a temporal vision that recurs consistently in legionary ideology, opposing the alleged decadence of

5 *Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale* (National Central Historical Archives, henceforth ANIC), Bucharest, Romania; *Fond Ministerul Justiției, Direcția Judiciară* (Fund Ministry of Justice, Judicial Directorate, henceforth Fund MJ), File 11/1936, 303. Tudor Vladimirescu was the leader of the 1821 Revolution, aimed at obtaining Romania's independence from the Ottoman Empire, while Horia was the leader of the 1784 peasant revolt in Transylvania, striving for the emancipation of the (primarily Romanian) serfs from Hungarian nobles. Notably, both revolutions combined a national with a social component.

6 CNSAS, *Fond Penal* (Penal Fund, henceforth Fund P), File 11784, Vol. 11, 261–262.

7 This positive valorisation of violence as a common thread traversing both the urge to «punish» the «enemies of the nation» and the appeal to «martyrdom» for the «national cause» as well as its connection with the Christian notion of resurrection can also be encountered in the ideology of other fascist movements, for example the Croatian Ustaša. See e.g. R. Yeomans, «Cults of Death and Fantasies of Annihilation: The Croatian Ustaša Movement in Power, 1941–1945», in: *Central Europe* 10 (2005), 234–256; R. H. Dinu, *Faschismus, Religion und Gewalt in Südosteuropa. Die Legion Erzengel Michael und die Ustaša im historischen Vergleich*, Wiesbaden 2013.

interwar Romania by invoking a mythical idea of the atemporal nation spanning past, present and future, decisively oriented towards an imminent future while firmly anchored in a present seen as the threshold between the old and the new world. Thus oscillating between the seemingly opposing poles of revolution and eternity, this alternative temporality that the legionary movement put forth was not, I argue, an epiphenomenon to its ideological structure of pure scholarly interest, but a central aspect of its fascist ideology, a vision grounded on an unreal mythical edifice that was no less real in its murderous consequences. Responsible on the one hand for the attraction of a significant number of intellectuals belonging to the self-entitled «new generation» to the movement, and on the other for the Legion's typically fascist radicalism that justified and valorised violence as a form of «creative destruction» that would bring about the eschatological abolition of history and the establishment of a new order, the alternative legionary temporality (or rather temporalities) that I set to explore represents a key aspect simultaneously allowing the conceptualisation of the movement as a fascist one and emphasising its context-specific features that distinguished it from Italian Fascism or German Nazism.<sup>8</sup>

In this endeavour, I subscribe to the theoretical interpretations of generic fascism making up the so-called «new consensus» that began to emerge in the 1990s, shifting the focus from its antitheses (whether to liberalism, positivism or Marxism) to a treatment of fascism as a political ideology in its own right.<sup>9</sup> Within this consensus, indebted to Roger Griffin's definition of fascism as «*a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism*»<sup>10</sup> and to other interpretations that emphasised its revolutionary nature,<sup>11</sup> increasing attention was given to the mobilising function of palingenetic myth for fascist movements.

It is in this context that recent studies addressing the issue of temporality in fascist ideology have emerged, tracing its expression in programmatic statements, aesthetic forms or mobilisation strategies employed by fascist movements and regimes, and increasingly making use of diverse material from art history, philosophy, psychology, anthropology and religious studies. Among this material, Mircea Eliade's work on myth, archetypes and the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane – involving the distinction between mythical, sacred time and the profane nature of history in the modern acceptance of the term – was valorised by authors

8 I follow the established practice of capitalising «Fascism» when referring to the Italian regime, and using lower-case «fascism» when referring to the generic phenomenon.

9 See R. Griffin (ed.), *International Fascism: Theories, Causes and the New Consensus*, London 1998.

10 Idem, *The Nature of Fascism*, London 1993, 26 (emphasis in the original; all emphases in this

article are in the original unless specified otherwise).

11 See e.g. Z. Sternhell (with M. Sznajder and M. Asheri), *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, Princeton, NJ 1994; G. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, New York 1999.

working on fascism, starting with Roger Griffin.<sup>12</sup> However, while Eliade's study of sacred time and its contrast with the «terror of history» (to which modern man is exposed in a desacralised universe) provides a wealth of material derived from the comparative study of religious practices, the heuristic value of his hermeneutics rather than history of religions appears problematic when applied to the study of fascism, due to Eliade's own involvement with Romania's interwar fascist movement, the «Legion of the Archangel Michael».<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, this aspect could be seen as invalidating the applicability of his concepts to the study of an ideology to which he had been personally committed. On the other, his approach to temporality, albeit never touching directly upon the legionary movement, could be seen as providing a peculiar and interesting vantage point – not only that of an «objective» comparative observer of religious practices, rituals and notions of the sacred (an objectivity the very nature of which Eliade would contest) from across the world, both ancient and modern, but also of a «fellow traveller» who had at some point approached the fascist mythology uncritically and enthusiastically.

The latter perspective appears especially important in light of the tendency common among recent scholars of fascism to take «fascist self-descriptions and self-representations more seriously than previously».<sup>14</sup> Yet, while it is impossible to ignore Eliade's commitment to the legionary movement when employing his theoretical insights in the analysis of fascist temporality, his outright identification as a «fascist thinker» would be equally problematic, as he never held any official position within the movement, nor did he exercise any programmatic influence on the development of its ideology. As such, I argue that by properly historicising Eliade's writings and positioning him in the context of the self-entitled «new generation» of

12 See e.g. R. Griffin, «Shattering Crystals: The Role of «Dream Time» in Extreme Right-wing Political Violence», in: *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15 (2003), 57–95; idem, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, Basingstoke 2007; idem, ««I Am No Longer human. I Am a Titan. A God!» The Fascist Quest to Regenerate Time», in: M. Feldman (ed.), *A Fascist Century: Essays by Roger Griffin*, Basingstoke 2008, 3–23; D. Moses, «Genocide and the Terror of History», in: *Parallax* 17 (2011), 90–108; A. Kallis, «The «Third Rome» of Fascism: Demolitions and the Search for a New Urban Syntax», in: *Journal of Modern History* 84 (2012), 40–79.

13 As it becomes immediately clear to a historian, Eliade's work is not exactly a «history» of religions in the methodological sense of the term. This is in line with Eliade's expressed criticism of the application of analytical or historical methods *sensu stricto* to the study of religion, and his view of this field as more than a discipline, rather

«a total hermeneutics [...] called to decipher and explicate every kind of encounter of man with the sacred, from prehistory to our day». M. Eliade and H. B. Partin, «Crisis and Renewal in History of Religions», in: *History of Religions* 5 (1965), 1–17 (5). See also D. Allen, «Eliade and History», in: *The Journal of Religion* 68 (1988), 545–565, especially 545–547. Of the numerous studies that make reference to Eliade's involvement with the legionary movement, the most recent and comprehensive ones are A. Laignel-Lavastine, *Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco: uitarea fascismului. Trei intelectuali români în vârtoarea secolului* (Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco: The forgetting of fascism. Three Romanian intellectuals in the turmoil of the century), Bucharest 2004; F. Țurcanu, *Mircea Eliade – Prizonierul istoriei* (Mircea Eliade – The prisoner of history), Bucharest 2007.

14 S. Reichardt, «Violence and Consensus in Fascism», in: *Fascism. Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 1 (2012), 59–60, 59.

interwar Romanian intellectuals, the majority of whom were attracted to the legionary movement, this apparent impasse confronting a scholar of fascism when referring to Eliade's conceptual apparatus could actually represent a most fruitful path of enquiry, allowing us to discern more clearly the appeal that the fascist vision of temporality presented to an intellectual who was fully aware of its importance.<sup>15</sup>

For these purposes, a twofold exploration of the notion of temporality in the ideology of the legionary movement and of Eliade's concept of the dichotomy between mythical/sacred time and the «terror of history» appears extremely relevant. Such an approach allows us not only to examine the legionary notion of time – revealing a fascination with eternity and with a «special» or «festival time» in which this was actualised –, which shows striking similarities with comparable conceptions held by Italian Fascists or German National Socialists, but also to unravel the elements that attracted Eliade to this vision, in light of his own, much broader and «scientific» understanding of mythical temporality. To do so, I will briefly present the legionary vision of the timeless Romanian nation as well as of its acceleration of the present towards an impending future, making use of Eliade's notions of «sacred time» and its opposition to the «terror of history» as a conceptual framework, to conclude with a comment on the aspects of legionary ideology which conformed to Eliade's visible preference for a transcendental, religious understanding of history, endowing it with meaning and allowing modern man to escape the meaninglessness of clock time.

## 2. The Atemporal Nation and the Urgent Present – the Legionary Notion of Time

Founded on 24 June 1927 by a group of five students, the «Legion of the Archangel Michael» witnessed a spectacular growth in the course of a decade to become the most significant mass movement in Romanian history and the third largest fascist organisation in Europe as well as the only one that came to power without direct support from the fascist regimes in Italy and Germany.<sup>16</sup> While even a cursory

15 This endeavour has its roots in an argument raised by Hayden White in relation to fascism's approach to history: «The appeal of fascism not only to the masses but to any number of intellectuals who had certainly been exposed to a culture of history that explained and understood the past to the very depths of all possibility leaves us with the necessity of trying to understand why this culture provided so weak an impediment to fascism's appeal.» H. White, «The Politics of Historical Representation: Discipline and De-Sublimation», in: idem, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore, MD 1987, 58–82, 75. Drawing on the same

question, Claudio Fogu provided an excellent analysis of Giovanni Gentile's theory of «actualism» and its relationship to Italian Fascism; see C. Fogu, «Actualism and the Fascist Historic Imaginary», in: *History and Theory* 42 (2003), 196–221; idem, *The Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy*, Toronto 2003.

16 A. Heinen, *Legiunea «Arhanghelul Mihail»: o contribuție la problema fascismului internațional* (The «Legion of the Archangel Michael»: A contribution to the problem of international fascism), Bucharest 2006, 357; S. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945*, Madison, WI 1995, 275–277.

evaluation of its ideological tenets and political style allows us to firmly include it in the category of fascist organisations, it is also immediately apparent that the legionary movement did not represent a mere imitation of Italian or German fascism but a case of «native» or «autochthonous» fascism, incorporating elements that were extremely context-specific.<sup>17</sup> In line with its ideology that put forth a vision of regeneration and rebirth in response to what the movement identified as all-pervasive crisis and degeneration, the legionary movement adopted a vision in which a timeless Romanian nation spanning both an immemorial past and an infinite future was made salient in an urgent present, interpreted as a threshold between two worlds.

The legionary vision of the nation transcended its contingent reality (which was always found wanting), translating into an atemporal mythical projection that spanned past, present and future. According to Codreanu, it comprised «1) All the Romanians presently alive. 2) All the souls of the dead and the graves of the ancestors. 3) All those who will be born Romanians.»<sup>18</sup> This formulation points towards the double dimension of the fascist temporal imaginary, its Janus-faced simultaneous orientation to the past and the future, where the past was not valued in itself, but rather «selective moments from a nation's historical past were utilized for their mythic appeal as a catalyst for the radical transformation of present society».<sup>19</sup> As both Roger Griffin and Roger Eatwell point out, the concept of rebirth refers both to the return of something that already existed as well as to the «need to create something new out of the ashes of the old».<sup>20</sup> This argument echoes Eliade's conceptualisation of rituals of regeneration and rebirth, where the «new» is always a repetition of a paradigmatic gesture associated with the cosmogony, an attempt to restore «mythical and primordial time, «pure» time, the time of the «instant» of the Creation».<sup>21</sup> In the Judeo-Christian tradition, which Eliade associates with the valorisation of linear time, such rituals are maintained in the form of an eschatology meant to put a definitive end to history, replacing the endless cycles of destruction and regeneration with an irreversible, one-time redemption preceded by the Apocalypse.<sup>22</sup> In the case of fascism, these regeneration rituals were translated on the one hand into the search for an original «glory» (historically) or «purity» (socially) in past events or a particular social group, respectively; and on the other,

17 See e.g. F. Veiga, *Istoria «Gărzii de Fier», 1919–1941. Mistica ultranaționalismului* (The history of the «Iron Guard», 1919–1941. The mysticism of ultra-nationalism), Bucharest 1993, 106–117, 230–236, 248–251; Payne, *A History*, 280; Griffin, «Shattering Crystals», 80; C. Iordachi, *Charisma, Politics and Violence: The Legion of the «Archangel Michael» in Inter-war Romania*, Trondheim 2004; R. Carstocea, *The Role of Anti-Semitism in the Ideology of the «Legion of the Archangel Michael», 1927–1938*, London 2011, 189–234.

18 C. Z. Codreanu, *Pentru legionari* (For my legionaries), Sibiu 1936, 423.

19 M. Antliff, «Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity», in: *The Art Bulletin* 84 (2002), 148–169 (150).

20 R. Eatwell, «Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism», in: *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 4 (1993), 161–194, 173; Griffin, *The Nature*, 35–36.

21 M. Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, New York 1959, 35, 52–54, 54.

22 *Ibid.*, 102–112. For a comment on Italian Fascism in light of «redemption theology», see H. U. Gum-

into the desire to create a new society, as a result of the activities of a revolutionary elite. The «glorious» past and the equally «glorious» future (because unreal) were contrasted by a not-so-glorious present (because real). As a result, the time for change was the present, the place a well-defined territory.<sup>23</sup> The immediacy of standing on the threshold of a new order subsumed both past and future to the imperatives of the present.

For Codreanu, the glorious ancestors were the warrior princes of the Middle Ages and the revolutionaries fighting against foreign rule in the modern period. A general category of «heroes» (although names like Iancu Jianu were occasionally invoked) were the brigands known as *haiduci*, whom Romanian folklore had fashioned into Robin Hood-style figures.<sup>24</sup> This aspect appears extremely important in light of Eliade's perspective on popular memory, which «remembers» categories rather than historical events, archetypal models rather than historical personages, and is consequently useful for understanding the appeal of the movement among the peasant population.<sup>25</sup> It is also indicative of the absence of a real historical model – lacking either an ancient or a medieval period of glorious history, the envisioned «legionary Romania» was not to be a «Third Rome» or «Third Reich», but was seen as the resurrection of some vague mythical past after centuries of oppression.

In an ultra-nationalist myth of the national community, the past of the nation had to be traced back to its origins. The denomination of the movement harked back to the Roman legions, pointing to the Latin heritage of the Romanian people. This was one of the typical arguments put forth by Romanian nationalists for both national specificity (among its neighbours, mostly Slavs) and Romania's cultural belonging to the Western tradition.<sup>26</sup> However, for legionaries, these origins were traced back even beyond the Roman conquest, to the mythical time of beginnings, with the nation being directly identified as eternal. Codreanu wrote that «all the other nations around us have come out of somewhere and settled on the land they live in. History gives us precise dates about the coming of the Bulgarians, the Turks, the Hungarians, etc. Only one nation did not come from anywhere. That nation is us. We were born in the dawn of time on this land, together with the oaks and the firs.»<sup>27</sup> Tracing these origins back to the «primordial slime» endowed the mythical nation not only with its very own eternity that transcended history, but

brecht, «I redentori della vittoria: On Fiume's Place in the Genealogy of Fascism», in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 31 (1996), 253–272; and F. Esposito, *Mythische Moderne: Aviatik, Faschismus und die Sehnsucht nach Ordnung in Deutschland und Italien*, München 2011, esp. 131–140.

<sup>23</sup> Griffin, *The Nature*, 35.

<sup>24</sup> «Our nation has not lived through the millions of slaves who put their neck into the foreign yoke, but through Horia, Avram Iancu, Tudor, Iancu Jianu, and all the brigands who did not yield to the

foreign yoke, but took their rifle on their backs and climbed on mountain paths, taking with them honour and the spark of freedom.» Codreanu, *Pentru legionari*, 78.

<sup>25</sup> Eliade, *Cosmos*, 38–46.

<sup>26</sup> K. Hitchins, *Rumania 1866–1947*, Oxford 1994, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Codreanu, *Pentru legionari*, 92–93.

also with a territory to which it saw itself as indissolubly linked – the fact that much of it had been part of other political entities only two decades before was no longer an issue.

If the past was important for positing a prelapsarian existence of the nation, for purposes of (both mythical and historical) legitimacy, the drive of the palingenetic project was towards the future. Everything that was found lacking in contemporary Romanian society was contrasted with a vision of the redemptive legionary future. The nation was consequently seen as a «historical entity living across the centuries with its roots deep into the mist of time and an infinite future».<sup>28</sup> For Codreanu, this atemporal nation was the superior entity to which both the individual and the contemporary community were subsumed and responsible. If this concern for the future generations gave the Legion its proto-ecological concerns that represented a novelty in interwar Romania,<sup>29</sup> it also gave it the radicalism of the combatant who is certain that his cause is just – for what nobler, more altruistic cause could there be than sacrificing your present for the benefit of future generations? Moreover, the contemporary state of decadence meant that the future was in danger, and this threat came from the only Other that the virulently anti-Semitic legionary ideology projected as a mortal enemy: «the Jew». The danger Jews allegedly posed to Romania's future was invoked, the voting of Jewish emancipation in 1923 was seen as «the enslavement of our future» and, in apocalyptic scenarios, images of «children with no country and no future» were conjured.<sup>30</sup> Speaking of his time in Parliament, Codreanu justified his rejection of democracy by stating that «nothing of the healthy future of this nation was being built there».<sup>31</sup> As the letters received after the publication of the first legionary newspaper (significantly entitled «Ancestral Land») show, the mythical vision of the future fell on fertile ground: a village accountant wrote after the first issue: «You are the hope of our tomorrow. Our future and the future of our children we lay at your feet.»<sup>32</sup>

If past and future were important, no less was the present. The present was exclusively viewed in light of the novelty of the legionary movement in Romanian politics and beyond, as a break from the (immediate) past and the herald of the new age. The first manifesto of the organisation, posted in Iași a week after its foundation, was entitled «Appeal to the bearers of the new spirit of the times» and proclaimed that «when your voice and your arm will call out the victory, Romania will resurrect».<sup>33</sup> The birth of the Legion thus coincided with the notion of legionary

28 Ibid., 421.

29 These included considerations about Romania's deforestation as well as about the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. See *ibid.*, 422; V. Boldeanu, «După faptă și răsplată» (Measure for measure), in: *Brațul de fier 2 / 10* (1936), 1–2; Veiga, *Istoria*, 114, 122.

30 Codreanu, *Pentru legionari*, 97, 110, 127.

31 *Ibid.*, 434.

32 *Pământul Strămoșesc* (Ancestral Land), 15 September 1927.

33 ANIC, *Fond Ministerul de Interne, Diverse* (Fund Ministry of the Interior, Varia, henceforth Fund MI), File 2/1931, 34.



rebirth, always formulated in its Christian variant, as «resurrection». An overview of legionary texts, whether written by the leadership or rank and file members, consistently returns to us a similar vision of the present: introducing a rupture in the historical continuum, viewed as a threshold between two worlds, the present was meaningful only in light of the future, towards which it was constantly accelerated.<sup>34</sup> National rebirth was at hand: «The resurrection of our nation is seething underground and it will soon erupt, enlightening with its light our entire future and our entire dark past.»<sup>35</sup>

As shown in the introduction, one of the direct consequences of this atemporal vision of the nation combined with the revolutionary drive towards an imminent future of legionary making was the radicalism of the movement even in the context of an interwar Romania that witnessed a proliferation of radical nationalist organisations. Claiming to speak in the name of all the dead as well as in the name of future generations conferred legionaries their murderous «certainties». The mythical vision of the nation allowed the discarding of personal responsibility, placing it upon an impersonal, supernatural entity that symbolically absolved the individual of his crimes: the murderer became a hero. The «perfume of eternity», as philosopher Emil Cioran called it, conferred the Legion its specific radicalism.<sup>36</sup> In the concluding lines of his programmatic memoirs, Codreanu summoned his legionaries to forgive those who have harmed them personally, but not those who have harmed the nation. Arming them with weapons that bore the marks of the timeless community, he reminded them that «the swords you bear are of the nation. In her name you bear them. In her name you will use them to punish her enemies: ruthless and unforgiving. Thus and only thus will you prepare a healthy future for this nation.»<sup>37</sup>

### 3. The Temptation of Spiritual Revolution – Mircea Eliade and the Legionary Movement

The temporal dimension of legionary ideology found echoes among the self-proclaimed «new generation» of intellectuals, who, at least initially independently of the movement, were arguing for a similar break with the old cultural canons, denounced as inauthentic and borrowed from Western Europe.<sup>38</sup> A few months after the establishment of the Legion, when the organisation counted less than one

34 This perception of the present as a threshold and a «turning point in the historical process» is a feature that Griffin identifies as characteristic of the paligenetic political myth. Griffin, *The Nature*, 35.

35 Codreanu, *Pentru legionari*, 369.

36 E. Cioran, «Profilul interior al Căpitanului» (The inner profile of the Captain), in:  *Glasul Strămoșesc* (The Ancestral Voice), 25 December 1940.

37 Codreanu, *Pentru legionari*, 474.

38 For an overview of the debates regarding the direction of Romanian culture, see K. Hitchens, «*Gîndirea: Nationalism in a Spiritual Guise*», in: K. Jowitt (ed.), *Social Change in Romania, 1860–1940. A Debate on Development in a European Nation*, Berkeley, CA 1978, 140–174.

hundred members and Mircea Eliade had most likely not heard of it, he was writing his «Spiritual Itinerary» that was to become a veritable manifesto of his generation. In it, he wrote of the «new spirit of the times», of the «pure, spiritual, absurdly spiritual values», and the «necessity of mysticism».39 While the manifesto lacked any explicit nationalist content, it showed a clear rejection of rationalism and positivism – Eliade proposed a «critique of sufficient reason» (the ironical allusion to Kant impossible to miss) in a future work entitled «The Apology of Virility», and described his own generation as «the first generation tortured by the imperative of synthesis».40

The synthesis he was alluding to was one that the vast majority of young intellectuals aimed at, despite otherwise striking differences in their attitude to culture: the focus on «authentic» elements of Romanian culture, seen as occupying a unique position as a bridge between East and West, was combined with a desire for synchronism with the European avant-garde. This was coupled with a rejection of materialism in favour of spirituality, increasingly seen within the framework of Orthodoxy, as well as with an argument against «Western» individualism favouring collective interests that, given the opposition to communism in interwar Romania,41 were almost exclusively identified as national ones. These concerns were explicitly voiced by Nae Ionescu, philosophy professor at the University of Bucharest and mentor to the «new generation» of intellectuals, who showed a fascination for the acceleration of the rhythm of history,42 arguing for the «primacy of the spiritual, the surmounting of the «economic» through the «spiritual»43 and politically for the «instauration of the dictatorship of the masses».44 These two sides of the nationalist synthesis corresponded to the double dimension of the legionary temporality, oscillating between the eternal vision of the mythical nation and the importance of the historic moment, viewed in a European perspective.

It comes as no surprise then that the «new generation» of intellectuals, spear-headed by a small activist group formed around the journal *Axa* (The Axis) and shepherded by their mentor Nae Ionescu, began to join the ranks of the Legion enthusiastically, so that by the late 1930s the list of young intellectuals who were not legionary sympathisers or members was far shorter than that of those who were.45

39 M. Eliade, «Itinerariu spiritual» (Spiritual itinerary), in: *Cuvântul* (The Word), 6 September 1927.

40 Ibid.

41 This had an international dimension due to the Soviet Union's claims to the province of Bessarabia, acquired by Romania at the end of World War I. As a result, the interwar Romanian Communist Party (functioning as an illegal organisation) counted less than 2000 members. See D. Deletant, *Communist Terror in Romania: Gheorghiu-Dej and the Police State, 1948–1965*, London 1999, 23.

42 Țurcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 108.

43 N. Ionescu, «De la «Semănătorul» la noul stat românesc» (From the «Seed-sower» to the new Romanian state), in: *Cuvântul*, 13 August 1930.

44 Idem, «Criza partidelor politice. Paradoxul dialecticii partidelor și partidul de masă» (The crisis of political parties. The paradox of party dialectics and the mass party), in: *Cuvântul*, 30 July 1930.

45 M. Petreu, *Diavolul și ucenicul său. Nae Ionescu – Mihail Sebastian* (The devil and his disciple. Nae Ionescu – Mihail Sebastian), Iași 2009, 248.

Eliade's adherence to the movement was however not as straightforward as that of many of his contemporaries. Denouncing the anti-Semitic nationalism of Nichifor Crainic, a leading figure of the «Orthodoxist» orientation in Romanian culture,<sup>46</sup> condemning the barbarity of communism and Nazism as «dictatorships of the brute, the imbecile, the incompetent – in Russia as in Germany»,<sup>47</sup> Eliade was also unimpressed by Italian Fascism during his visits to Italy in 1927 and 1928.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, he argued as late as 1935 for the attitude of political non-engagement that intellectuals should adopt.<sup>49</sup> However, he also believed that intellectuals should be «an avant-garde on the frontiers of time»,<sup>50</sup> a «spiritual elite» whose mission was that of attempting to transcend the limits of experience, «escaping history».<sup>51</sup> These views, which would be elaborated at length in his scholarly writings dealing with the diverse array of forms taken by the attempts to temporarily abolish the «terror of history», also led to his fascination with the practical side of Yoga, with the relationship between magic and religion, and with surrealism and modernist art in general, viewed as different examples of techniques aimed at transcending the human condition and acceding to a superior or deeper level of reality.<sup>52</sup>

If Eliade remained aloof from the political disputes in interwar Romania and Europe in general, referring to them only negatively, he «became sensitive to politics in India», as he later admitted in his dialogues with Claude-Henri Roquet.<sup>53</sup> During his stay there Eliade witnessed the civil disobedience campaign led by Mahatma Gandhi and was swayed by the nationalist cause, appreciating not only its non-violent form but also the occasional violent attacks against the British authorities. Attracted by the messianic side of the revolution as well as by the idea of a mass movement rising against European oppression, Eliade ascribed to Gandhi's movement a significance that went beyond politics, seeing it as a reproduction of mystical and ascetic experience at a collective level, as a spiritual revolution that was at the same time inscribed in India's soteriological tradition. If successful, he believed, it would inaugurate «a new era in history. The spirit will prove once again invincible.»<sup>54</sup>

It is out of these disparate elements that Eliade's attraction to the legionary movement developed against the background of the poverty and unemployment of

46 M. Eliade, «Cretinion», in: *Cuvântul*, 25 November 1932.

47 I. Plăeșu (M. Eliade), «Contra dreptei și contra stângii» (Against the right and against the left), in: *Credința* (Faith), 14 February 1934. Eliade chose to publish his article under pseudonym at a time when his mentor, Nae Ionescu, was awaiting trial for his association with the officially dissolved legionary movement. However, he repeated the argument in 1935 in M. Eliade, «Noul barbar» (The new barbarian), in: *Vremea* (The Times), 27 January 1935.

48 Țurcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 208.

49 M. Eliade, «Renaștere românească» (Romanian rebirth), in: *Vremea*, 25 April 1935.

50 Idem, «De ce sunt intelectualii lași?» (Why are the intellectuals cowards?), in: *Criterion* 1 / 2 (1934), 2.

51 Cited in Țurcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 289–292.

52 *Ibid.*, 183–185, 457–458. Eliade / Partin, «Crisis», 11–12.

53 Cited in Țurcanu, *Mircea Eliade*, 207.

54 *Ibid.*, 207–212, 210.

intellectuals in interwar Romania, which he was not spared in spite of his already established reputation, leading to his increasing disillusionment with the Liberal Party government and what he perceived as its disregard for Romanian culture, and with the corruption and growing authoritarianism of King Carol II and his camarilla.<sup>55</sup> Rather than revealing some «fascist background» in his thinking, with considerable evidence pointing to the contrary, they are instead indicative of the success of the Legion in projecting a vision of revolution that appeared at the same time grounded in tradition and folklore, a temporality that was inexorably forward-looking while anchored in a vision of eternity that transcended empty, homogeneous clock time and promised a collective escape from an oppressive history. In 1937, Eliade thought he saw in the legionary movement an example of the same spiritual revolution he had witnessed earlier in India, not least because of the Legion's own self-representation as such.

As a result, if in the spring of 1935 Eliade still argued for the non-engaged position that intellectuals should adopt, on the occasion of Romania's national holiday in December that year he published his first article that included a positive reference to Codreanu. «A political leader of youth who had said that the purpose of his mission is «the reconciliation of Romania with God» carried a messianic message, entailing «first of all a transvaluation of values and the clear primacy of the spiritual».<sup>56</sup> For Eliade, this was indicative of a religious attitude, whose repetitive nature his studies attested in various cultures and across historical periods: «Even under a profoundly laicised aspect, the modern world still maintains the eschatological hope of a universal *renovatio*, fulfilled through the victory of a social class, of a political party or even a political leader.»<sup>57</sup> And if initially Eliade's admiration for Codreanu did not extend to his movement, which he viewed as rather «puritan» than «revolutionary»,<sup>58</sup> this only demonstrates that it was *precisely* the revolutionary nature of Romanian fascism that eventually led to his adherence to the Legion, once he came to see not just Codreanu but his legionaries as the ascetic death-defying spiritual elite that they always claimed to be.

Once «converted» to the legionary cause, Eliade's commitment left aside all criticism as Codreanu's revolution took on the meaning that Gandhi's – to which he frequently compared it – had held for him earlier. His statements in favour of the Legion – similar in many respects to those of other intellectuals belonging to the «new generation» – point towards the «escape from history» that remained one of the most important themes in Eliade's writings, understood both in a particular (i.e. specific to Romania) and a universal dimension.

Its particular dimension relates to the hyperbolic characterisations of the movement and its perception as transcending history itself. The intellectuals who sup-

55 Ibid., 299–314.

56 M. Eliade, «Popor fără misiune?! ...» (People without a mission?! ...), in: *Vremea*, 1 December 1935.

57 Idem, *Mefistofel și Androginul* (Mephistopheles and the Androgyne), Bucharest 1995, 148.

58 Idem, «Popor».

ported the Legion not only argued for its synchronicity with the European movements of national regeneration, they also proclaimed its alleged superiority over them. As such, while Eliade noted that «today the entire world stands under the sign of revolution», he added that «while other people live this revolution in the name of the class struggle and the primacy of the economic (communism), the state (fascism), or the race (Hitlerism) – the Legionary Movement was born under the sign of the Archangel Michael and will triumph through God's grace. That is why, while all other contemporary revolutions are *political* – the legionary revolution is *spiritual and Christian*.»<sup>59</sup> According to Eliade this conferred the movement a significance that transcended its national context and rendered it meaningful in the European one: «This is why the meaning of the Legionary Movement is different from everything that was done in history until today, and the legionary triumph will bring not only the restoration of the virtues of our nation, a worthy, dignified and powerful Romania – but will create a new man, corresponding to a new type of European life.»<sup>60</sup> The legionary revolution was understood by Eliade as exemplifying the «supreme primacy of the spirit against the temporal» and its historic effects were consequently compared to the transformations brought about by Christianity, the Renaissance, or the Reformation.<sup>61</sup> In the context of interwar Romania, this is indicative of an effort to compensate the lack of a meaningful national history (perceived instead by Eliade and most other intellectuals as a history of perpetual suffering) by projecting an exaggerated importance onto a particular, legionary vision of the present. This inferiority complex of the representatives of a minor culture on «the edge of Europe»<sup>62</sup> is pivotal for understanding the intellectuals' adherence to the legionary movement and the «higher meaning» they attached to it. This aspect is made explicit in Cioran's hyperbolic characterisation of Codreanu and his movement, acutely aware at the same time of Romania's position in «backward» Eastern Europe: «The faith of a man gave birth to a world that leaves behind Greek tragedy and Shakespeare. And in the Balkans no less!»<sup>63</sup>

The European or indeed universal value Romanian intellectuals associated with the legionary revolution was but one side of the «meaning» they attached to its importance in history. The other, «universal» one, corresponds to the «actualism» that Claudio Fogu has analysed with regard to Giovanni Gentile's philosophy of history and the Italian Fascist historic imaginary.<sup>64</sup> The positivist view of a history that «happened» to its helpless subjects and consequently determined their actions was

59 Idem, «De ce cred în biruința Mișcării Legionare» (Why I believe in the triumph of the Legionary Movement), in: *Buna Vestire* (The Annunciation), 17 December 1937.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.; idem, «De unde începe misiunea României?» (Where does the mission of Romania begin?), in: *Vremea*, 28 February 1937.

62 E. Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism*, New York 1966, 462.

63 Cioran, *Profilul*.

64 Fogu, «Actualism». See also Claudio Fogu's article «The Fascist Stylisation of Time» in this issue.

contrasted with fascism's history-making potential. In that, the actions of the legionary movement were no longer historical but historic, not just temporarily annulling time in events that expressed the «sublime eruption of a historical sign from the transcendental continuum of history»,<sup>65</sup> but changing history itself. The boundaries between historical agents and observers were blurred, and the masses were invited to contribute to the epochal making of history. One of Codreanu's earliest appeals was entitled «It is *your* time: Come!»<sup>66</sup> – the formulation indicating not only the urgency of the present, but also, in the choice of the pronoun, the populist appeal to participation of the masses in the legionary revolution of history. The populism of the Legion proved indeed extremely effective in generating increased participation among all social groups, surprisingly so among the peasant «masses». Associating legionary commemorations with religious holidays, making recourse to an image of eternity that was grounded in folklore and to a popular Orthodoxy whose liturgical year was attuned to the cyclical rhythms of nature, and particularly by employing the symbolism of death and resurrection, the legionary movement successfully managed to render a modernist vision of time salient to masses that had proven opaque to the propaganda of democratic parties. The sense of mythical time as well as the empowerment that its actualisation in the present seemed to confer to the participants to legionary ritual events, played an important role in projecting the image of unity and solidarity of diverse social groups that was central to legionary propaganda. Of these, the funeral of Ion I. Moța and Vasile Marin, legionary commanders who died in the Spanish Civil War and were virtually «consecrated» as legionary «martyrs», exemplified better than any other ceremonies the pageantry of legionary events as well as showing the participation of rank and file members of different social backgrounds on an impressive scale.<sup>67</sup>

At the end of the first decade since the establishment of the Legion, intellectuals could not only point out to the existence of a recent legionary past (which «absolved» Romania from its previous history and marked the beginning of a new era of «glory») due to which they could «fearlessly face the present and serenely look towards the future»,<sup>68</sup> but also view the present as aligned with the «eternal destiny» of the nation.<sup>69</sup> For Nae Ionescu, this was a time when «the structure of history coincides to such a degree with the genius of our race that it is enough to be truly Romanian for your gesture to create imperial perspectives»; the path of the legion-

65 Idem, «Actualism», 205.

66 C. Z. Codreanu, «E ceasul vostru: Veniți!» (It is your time: Come!), in: *Pământul Strămoșesc*, 1 August 1927 (emphasis added).

67 See ANIC, Fund MI, File 4/1937. For an analysis of the event following the lines of Emilio Gentile's concept of the sacralisation of politics, see V. Săndulescu, «Sacralised Politics in Action: The February 1937 Burial of the Romanian Legionary

Leaders Ion Moța and Vasile Marin», in: *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8 (2007), 259–269.

68 M. Polihroniade, «Legiunea în viața României» (The Legion in the life of Romania), in: *Buna Vestire*, 27 June 1937.

69 N. Ionescu, «Sub semnul arhanghelului» (Under the sign of the archangel), in: *Buna Vestire*, 27 June 1937.

any movement coincided with that of the nation, «which is the one of salvation, because it is guarded by God»; as a result, opposing the movement meant opposing the «necessity of destiny», and doing so meant «not taking history seriously».<sup>70</sup> Reminiscent of Giovanni Gentile's views of the immanence of history, of its belonging to the present, such statements are indicative of a temporal order in which any legionary action acquired an immediate meaning which subsumed past, present and future, permanently abolishing time in its profane form and establishing an eternal present. For Romanian intellectuals, this immanence was interpreted as a manifestation of the transcendental, and as such firmly anchored in an eternal, immutable «truth». For Mircea Eliade in particular, this essential, transcendental truth was posited against a positivist historicism that he thought divested history of its transcendental meaning, desacralising time and consequently leaving modern man fully exposed to the «terror of history» and to the inevitability of a death not followed by any rebirth.<sup>71</sup>

To conclude, in the divergent vision of the present that one encounters in the rhetoric of members or sympathisers of the legionary movement, between the profane and decadent present of 1930s Romania as an «objective» reality and the «sacred» legionary present that subsumed past and future, always directly pointing to the eternal as well as accelerating time towards it, we can see the establishment of a parallel history, or parallel temporality – inasmuch as it was only relevant to «insiders» who identified with it, and was distinct from the official, state time. At the societal level, this corresponds to what Rebecca Haynes, making reference to legionary work camps and legionary commerce, has called a «parallel society» that challenged the hegemony of the state and the dominant class of Romanian politicians and Jewish capitalists, while endeavouring to found an alternative and competing raft of economic and social institutions».<sup>72</sup> Pursuing Haynes' argument beyond these two examples, archival evidence shows that this project was indeed more extensive at the institutional level than previously assumed, encompassing plans for a legionary agriculture and a legionary industry.<sup>73</sup> Such a project, predicated on the solidarity of people from diverse social classes and different regions of Romania, was simultaneously supported by and fed back into an ideological projection of a parallel history in which Romania was no longer the latecomer to a modernity defined by Western European paradigms (including those of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany) but at the forefront of a transformative revolution that not only affected institutions, but the human condition itself. This was the significance that Mircea Eliade attached to the legionary movement, whose revolution he associated

70 Ibid.

71 M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, New York 1987, 112–113.

72 R. Haynes, «Work Camps, Commerce and the Education of the «New Man» in the Romanian

Legionary Movement», in: *The Historical Journal* 51 (2008), 943–967, 944.

73 CNSAS, Fund D, File 12671, 148; CNSAS, Fund P, File 11784, Vol. 9, 33.

with the «splendid destiny» of Romania «to make history through supra-historical values» – «and to make history means to create a «new man», to give a different meaning to existence».<sup>74</sup> And it is along these lines that Eliade's elaborate and comprehensive analysis of myth can be employed to unravel the impressive appeal of legionary myth-making, while at the same time provide possible hints towards his own fascination with it.

#### 4. Conclusion: Mythical Time and the «Terror of History»

In a study examining the political engagements of the «mythologists» Mircea Eliade, Carl Gustav Jung and Joseph Campbell, Robert Ellwood, a former student of Eliade, counteracts the charges that see a connection between the conservatism of myth and reactionary far right politics, arguing instead that Eliade was a «radical modernist».<sup>75</sup> Such conclusions, drawn from Eliade's scientific work, are corroborated by his articles expressing support for the legionary movement – as shown above, in all of these the movement is described in terms of a «Christian» or «spiritual revolution» associated with a profound transformation not only of Romania, but of the human condition. In spite of his fascination with tradition and sympathy for «archaic man», Eliade's attraction to the legionary movement cannot be explained in terms of nostalgia («for childhood, for historical times past, for cosmic religion, for paradise»<sup>76</sup>), as he clearly identified with the forward-pointing arrow of legionary time and with its rhetoric of an eschatological rebirth of the nation that would institute eternity in the plenitude of a perpetual mythical present. In his scholarly writing and political stance alike, Eliade's attitude was firmly anchored in modernity, inasmuch as he viewed the modern condition as inevitable. As such, his solution to the perceived crisis of a specific modern, i.e. «historicist» (in Eliade's terminology) temporality was «rather than a resistance to history, a revolt against historical *time*, an attempt to restore this historical time, freighted as it is with human experience, to a place in the time that is cosmic, cyclical, and infinite».<sup>77</sup>

The same fascination with surrealist exercises, which he compared to Oriental techniques aiming to transcend the human condition, led Eliade to appreciate certain legionary practices, such as the piety and asceticism of the members, the sessions of collective prayer and atonement of sins, or the spirit of sacrifice visible from more banal manifestations such as fasting to complete self-annihilation through «martyrdom».<sup>78</sup> All of these elements were subsumed to the constantly invoked

74 Eliade, «De unde incede», 3.

75 R. Ellwood, *The Politics of Myth: A Study of C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell*, New York 1999, 119.

76 Ibid., 99.

77 Eliade, *Cosmos*, 153.

78 See for example the oath of the legionaries at the funeral of Ion I. Moța and Vasile Marin, written by

Codreanu and described by him as a «baptism in the legionary faith»: «I swear before God, before your holy sacrifice for Christ and the Legion, To tear away from me all earthly joys, To sever myself from human love, And for the Resurrection of my nation, at any moment, to stand ready for death». ANIC, Fund MI, File 4/1937, 157. In the wake of the funeral where this oath was recited by thou-



legionary affirmation of the primacy of the spiritual and of faith, which directly corresponded to Eliade's envisaged solution to the crisis of modernity through a «philosophy of freedom that does not exclude God», where faith was posited as the highest form of freedom imaginable for modern man, a creative freedom that represented for Eliade the only formula that provided a defence against the terror of history «since the traditional horizon of archetypes and repetition was transcended».79 This type of freedom was the one he had in mind when he wrote that legionaries are «the only people that know and live out freedom», adding that «all those who come to the Legion do so because they feel free».80 And, as shown above, Eliade understood this «freedom» not along political lines, but as the outcome of a spiritual revolution establishing a decisive break from the material world and from the terror of history, in other words, as a collective path to salvation through the abolition of profane time.

With regard to the much-debated issue of legionary religiosity, it suffices to say here that the version of Christianity the movement adopted deviated significantly from official church dogma, being much closer to the «popular Orthodoxy» of the Romanian peasant masses.<sup>81</sup> Unlike the philosopher Nae Ionescu or the legionary theologian Gheorghe Racoveanu, who engaged in lengthy arguments in defence of the movement's «genuine» Orthodoxy, Eliade was unconcerned with questions of dogma, feeling much closer to the Romanian peasant «cosmic Christianity».82 Revolving around the liturgical year and thus still attuned to the cosmic rhythms of nature, the Orthodoxy of East European peasants was grounded on the symbolism of death and resurrection, a symbolism that the legionary movement fully adopted and skilfully manipulated in its ideology. The ideas of regeneration and rebirth involved in this symbolism were central both to the particular political vision of the Legion and to Eliade's conception of myth, which he viewed as having universal validity. Finally, the redemptive promise of the legionary movement was equally appealing, albeit in very different ways, for both the peasant masses and the «new generation» of intellectuals of which Eliade was part: while to the former it prom-

sands of legionaries, Eliade wrote an article about it, describing the oath as mystical, revealing a tragic ascetic vision of life and ultimately indicative of the fact that the Legion was not a political movement, but a Christian revolution as Europe had never seen before. It is highly suggestive that Eliade compares this oath to the Satyagraha, and the Legion to Gandhi's «national and social revolution», of which he was highly supportive, and which he saw as animated by a «Christian and Tolstoyan spirit» – yet another indication of Eliade's constant search for syncretism between different cultural traditions. M. Eliade, «Comentarii la un jurământ» (Comments to an oath), *Vremea*, 21 February 1937. Needless to say, such an

interpretation of the legionary revolution glossed over the movement's extreme violence.

79 Idem, *Cosmos*, 160–161.

80 Idem, «De ce cred», 1.

81 See R. Haynes, «The Romanian Legionary Movement, Popular Orthodoxy and the Cult of Death», in: M. Anton et al. (eds.), *Hegemoniile trecutului: evoluții românești și europene: profesorului Ioan Chiper la 70 de ani* (Hegemonies of the past: Romanian and European evolutions: to professor Ioan Chiper at the age of 70), Bucharest 2006, 113–125.

82 M. Eliade, *Memorii (1907–1960)* (Memoirs, 1907–1960), ed. by M. Handoca, Bucharest 1991, 207; Allen, «Eliade and History», 555.

ised radical redistribution and social justice, to the latter it provided an ideological escape from an inglorious and traumatic past to a redemptive future that claimed to transform everything, including the past, subsuming all temporal dimensions to a mythical temporality that was simultaneously eternity and revolution.

Rather than reflecting a nationalist narrow-mindedness typically associated with a fascist political vision, Eliade's analysis and ultimately defence of mythical time is replete with examples spanning geographically the entire world and chronologically the history of humanity. As such, the correspondences between Eliade's vision of temporality and the fascist one are rather indicative of fascism's ability to convincingly tap into the inexhaustible reservoir of myth and manipulate it for political purposes, putting forth a palingenetic vision that appealed both to the common man and to intellectuals alike. In turn, as Griffin shows in the case of Italy, the intellectuals «were able to project their own schemes for the nation's renewal onto Fascism, ensuring that new currents of palingenetic myth [...] intensified the momentum of the movement».<sup>83</sup> In that, they remained blind or indifferent to the extreme violence of fascist movements, consequence of its valorisation as a «creative destruction» projected as necessary for a transcendent rebirth.

The intricate details of Eliade's contested legionary membership and all the issues (such as his position on legionary anti-Semitism, his attitude towards the National-Legionary State and the leadership of Horia Sima, his reflections on the Holocaust as adding a new horrific dimension to the terror of history, the shadows thrown over his career after World War II by his involvement with the Legion, etc.) that this raises for the intellectual validity of his scientific work far exceed the scope of this brief article. The issue that concerned us here was that of the correspondences between the legionary temporal vision and Eliade's own reflections on time and history as well as his identification of a solution to the crisis of modernity in the «freedom» that could only be guaranteed by «faith». And in this respect, we can safely conclude that the alternative temporality that the legionary movement put forth was pivotal for the organisation's appeal to Mircea Eliade, and quite probably to many of the young interwar intellectuals who expressed their support for the Legion. This being said, considerable work remains to be done on the appeal of the fascist palingenetic myths at the level of the «masses», in an attempt to provide a more nuanced answer to the still open question of the relationship between grass-roots mass mobilisation and elite manipulation within fascist movements and regimes, not least with respect to the alternative temporalities that these put forth.

83 Griffin, «I Am No Longer Human», 8.

ABSTRACT

**Breaking the Teeth of Time:  
Mythical Time and the «Terror of History» in the Rhetoric  
of the Legionary Movement in Interwar Romania**

This article analyses the alternative temporality visible in the rhetoric of the «Legion of the Archangel Michael», Romania's interwar fascist movement. It argues that, in line with its palingenetic ideology, the legionary movement adopted a temporal vision in which a timeless Romanian nation spanning both an immemorial past and an infinite future was made salient in an urgent present, interpreted as a «threshold» between the old and the new world. Thus oscillating between the seemingly opposing poles of revolution and eternity, this alternative temporality was responsible both for the attraction of a significant number of intellectuals to the movement and for the Legion's typically fascist radicalism that justified and valorised violence as a form of «creative destruction» that would bring about the eschatological abolition of history and the establishment of a new order. These aspects are illustrated by focusing on the case of Mircea Eliade, one of the most prominent interwar Romanian intellectuals who became a legionary sympathiser. Making use of Eliade's notions of «sacred time» and its opposition to the «terror of history» as a conceptual framework, the article analyses the correspondences between the legionary temporal vision and Eliade's visible preference for a transcendental, religious understanding of history, endowing it with meaning and allowing modern man to escape the meaninglessness of clock time.

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