

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Nicholas Constantinesco. *Romania in Harm's Way*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 351 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-546-1.

Reviewed by Stephan Lehnstaedt (Institut für Zeitgeschichte München)

Published on H-German (September, 2005)

Romania is not really a country in the spotlight of western interest, nor is its twentieth-century history well represented in historiography. Research into its role in World War II and in the extermination of the European Jewry is rarely conducted and newer works are not available.[1] Thus it would be laudable if we had a modern, up-to-date reference work dealing with these topics. Nicholas Constantinesco has written a book concerning Romania's fate at the onset of the Second World War, focusing on its foreign relations straddled between German and Soviet national and strategic interests. But changes and decisions in the interior are also considered, since conflicts between King Carol, General Ion Antonescu and the Iron Guard played a vital role in that era. By and large, the work concentrates on *big politics*, usually leaving aside social and economic factors.

Important decisions, with a far-reaching impact on the destiny of Romania and its population, were reached between 1939 and 1941. With a thorough analysis, Constantinesco might have provided important orientation. Alas, he has not. This is due to several factors. First, Constantinesco did not bother to visit archives or study sources, but instead relies solely on previously published material. Published foreign relations documents and diaries of Romanian officials provide his main supply of information, combined with some selected secondary literature. Admittedly, many syntheses work perfectly well with this mixture. Unfortunately, various works of principal importance are not taken into account. Generally lacking knowledge of German, Constantinesco even omitted some important English and Romanian works, such as Jean Ancel's voluminous collection of documents concerning the fate of Romanian Jewry, Vitalie Varatic's work on Bessarabia and Bucovina, and Alexander F. C. Webster's book on the Romanian legionary move-

ment.[2]

Second, by omitting important details, the book not only fails in many points of its interpretation, but makes statements and offers facts long known to be false. Not all of them can be corrected here. The Legion of the Archangel Michael, the latter Iron Guard, was certainly not a movement pursuing "a new society endowed with desirable virtues" (p. xv), which only attracted anti-Semites; instead, it was in itself a fascist, anti-Semitic party trying to establish a totalitarian dictatorship. Soviet interests in Romania were certainly not the beginning of the rift in the German-Soviet treaty (p. 275), as Hitler saw the pact as only temporary from the beginning. And, of course, it is quite strange to argue that universal suffrage, "while positive in itself," first and foremost serves political extremists (p. xiv).

Third, to make things worse, Constantinesco stumbles on his own Romanian nationalism. Bessarabia and Bucovina, ceded in 1940 to the Soviet Union, are portrayed as genuinely national Romanian terrain, although they have only been part of Romania since 1919, with huge ethnic minorities making up about one-third of the total population of the entire country. Constantinesco sees it as only too logical that, in the course of the loss of these regions in 1940, a "regime which abandoned so much of the national territory and surrendered millions of Romanians to foreign yoke had to go" (p. 188). Antonescu appears, "destined to heal the nation's wounds" (p. 189), offering his aid. In fact, it was merely extortion; in no way did Carol willingly make Antonescu prime minister. But, in Constantinesco's view, Antonescu is a national hero, and when he led Romania to war with Russia, the country was a German ally having "good reason to fight" (p. 269). Following this argumentation, Con-

stantinesco wonders whether the British declaration of war really served British national interests, for Romania always admired the United Kingdom, sought to have good relations and never desired to go to war with England.

These misleading statements continue and culminate in some anti-Semitic assertions. For instance, the Jewish minority in Romania—about 750,000 people at the time—is held in general suspicion of opposing Greater Romania, especially due to their manifest sympathy for communism (p. xiv). For Constantinesco it seems quite understandable that violence against Jews—seen as foreigners—and their expropriation were executed only by the Iron Guard, without Antonescu's knowledge. Antonescu's anti-Semitic legislation was not really that bad, because most Jews "learned that the way a law was interpreted and applied was just as important as the law itself" (p. 227). These are infamous anti-Jewish statements long thought to be bygones. One wonders how this text could have gone to print in this condition—which is exacerbated by numerous errors in punctuation and orthography. Antonescu is not portrayed as anti-Semitic at all—a quite astonishing assessment of a person who assured the deportation of Romanian Jews to death camps in 1942 and was responsible for harsh anti-Jewish legislation that tolerated and sharpened violence as well as expropriation. So the reader should not be surprised that the slaughter of 19,000 Jews in Romanian-occupied Odessa on October 23, 1941 (with approximately 20,000 deported and murdered the next day) is referred to only in a footnote as a reprisal "German style. Thousands of partisans or suspected partisans, most of them ... Jews, were put to death" (p. 332).

The main text reads as follows: "The Russians finally gave up their fight for Odessa on October 16, leaving the city, full of partisans, in the hands of the Romanians, who paid dearly for their victory" (p. 269). The number of Romanian losses is not clearly stated, Constantinesco speaks of "hundreds" (p. 332); in fact, there were sixty-six.

Notes

[1]. Excellent examples include Jean Ancel, ed., *Documents Concerning the Fate of Romanian Jewry During the Holocaust*, 12 vols. (New York: Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1986); and Armin Heinen, *Die Legion "Erzengel Michael" in Rumänien. Soziale Bewegung und politische Organisation* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1986). Good, but not current, is Andreas Hillgruber's *Hitler, König Carol und Marschall Antonescu. Die deutsch-rumänischen Beziehungen 1938-1944* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1954). The latest and best study is Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[2]. Ancel, *Documents Concerning the Fate of Romanian Jewry During the Holocaust*; Vitalie Varatic, *Preliminarii ale raptului Basarabiei si nordului Bucovinei, 1938-1940. Volum de documente din fostele arhive secrete române* (Bucharest: Ed. Libra, 2000); and Alexander F. C. Webster, *The Romanian Legionary Movement: An Orthodox Christian Assessment of Anti-Semitism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1986). Even of those works cited in note 1, Constantinesco only lists Hillgruber's study in the Romanian translation from 1994 in his bibliography.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Stephan Lehnstaedt. Review of Constantinesco, Nicholas, *Romania in Harm's Way*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11131>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.