



**Kurt Treptow, ed.** *A History of Romania*. Iasi: Center for Romanian Studies, 1997.  
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## A Master Narrative for Romanian History?

This volume, edited by Kurt Treptow and written by a team of largely Romanian historians plus Paul Michelson and Larry Watts, is readable and visually attractive. It includes many color and two-tone pictures, brightly colored maps, and inset boxes about various personalities of the kind commonly encountered in Western Civilization texts. To the best of my knowledge, there are currently no other such texts on Romania in existence in English, with the exception of the previous two editions (1995 and 1996) of this very book.

Any courses actually taught on Romanian history alone—rather than Eastern Europe, the Balkans, or East-Central Europe—tend to be at a more advanced level, and the appropriate bibliography for them might include articles and research monographs, in conjunction with a different type of textbook: Vlad Georgescu's *History of the Romanians* or Keith Hitchins' two recent volumes that cover Romanian history from 1774 to 1947.[1] For introductory Romanian Civilization courses, Treptow's might be the text to use. But for this purpose the volume should be revised in minor and major ways. Most immediately, the inset boxes should include not only capsules about

architectural monuments and personalities, but also primary sources, giving the student of Romanian history access to the available documents and the evidence on which the authors build their narrative, as well as the flavor of the times. Sources for the statistical information should be clearly indicated; these are presently nowhere to be found. The bibliography, currently at the back of the book, would be much more valuable if it were split up and moved to the end of each chapter, or chapter section, as "Suggestions for Further Reading." In order to serve as a model to undergraduates, quotations must be fully identified in the body of the text, and preferably footnoted.

Since it is unlikely that this volume will be used as a "Romanian Civ" textbook in the foreseeable future (except possibly in Romania proper in summer courses taught to foreign students), but even more so if this possibility were imminent, a reading of *A History of Romania* as a "master narrative" is in order. The book's attractiveness from this angle is even more problematic. Kurt Treptow begins by telling his readers that this is "the only work of its kind, [in that] it is a collective effort of a group of Romanian and American historians to create a syn-

thesis of Romanian history for the general reader.” Yet in some ways the book is highly reminiscent of a genre one might have thought *passé* after the crumbling of the iron curtain. Who can forget the massive tomes published regularly under the auspices of official Academy- or Party-run institutes until a decade ago, the edited collective volumes assembled by teams of historians laboring under plan assignments throughout the Soviet bloc? In the present volume, although the names of the collaborators appear on the title page, the authors are not identified with particular chapters. This is because, Treptow explains in the acknowledgments and again in the preface, “each chapter is the collective effort of several authors”; therefore it was the editor who made “decisions of interpretation” and it is he who “must assume ultimate responsibility for the final text” (pp. xx, xxi). Surely, not all ten authors wrote each chapter, and what harm could there be in identifying the one, two, or three writers actually responsible for its research and conception? In this respect even socialist era team-authored volumes were often more transparent. One hopes that the collaborators have been given their due and that their ideas have not been overruled by an authoritarian editor, but the credit, or criticism, all accrues to Kurt Treptow, and that seems either grandiose or disastrous.

A more substantive problem with this sort of “master narrative” is that the interpretation of historical evidence is not clearly presented; thus the very process of active historical interpretation that lies at the heart of the narrative, any narrative, (and of history in general), is hidden in the seemingly seamless factual tale of Romania’s progress through the ages. To be fair, some alternative interpretations appear fleetingly in this text, introduced—and dismissed—by the phrase “some historians,” without the latter being given a true voice, nor the readers their names, so as to enable those interested in these historical debates to pursue them in an informed manner.

The ten authors or single editor have chosen to title their book *A History of Romania* rather than “a history of the Romanians,” a formulation that would have been less controversial for a volume that covers territories and peoples that existed long before Romania proper ever came to pass. This choice reflects a teleological interpretation of Romanian history that renders the past into a purposeful prelude to contemporary—or better yet, Greater-Romania. For example, the “Antiquity” section of the book presents “The Romanians as a distinct ethnic group” (p. 46); they are described as among the first inhabitants of Southeastern Europe, as one of the oldest Christian peoples in the area, as having occupied a larger

territory than that of contemporary Romania, and as the descendants of Romanized Geto-Dacians who preserved elements of their native culture after Dacia disappeared. In this interpretation, Romanian ethnicity, a medieval development, and Romanian nationhood, a modern phenomenon, are presented as if born full-blown already in the ancient period.

The theme of modern Romanian nationalism suffuses the whole book, but it also emerges where we might normally expect to find it, in the “decades preceding 1848” that “marked the final stages in the creation of the modern Romanian nation” (p. 250) according to the authors. This is supported with references to various romantic conspiratorial movements aimed at establishing a Romanian republic and unifying the Romanian lands. Yet romantic nationalists of that time conspired across national boundaries, as the authors themselves concede. Leonte Radu, cited as an example of this romantic Romanian nationalism, aimed at creating a confederation that was to include Serbia together with Moldavia and Wallachia, suggesting a much more fluid sense of identity than the authors themselves do. The Revolution of 1848 is then described in the words of Nicolae Balcescu, himself a participant in those events, as caused by “eighteen centuries of hardship and suffering” (p. 257). Though this statement is of interest for its revolutionary rhetorical flavor, Balcescu’s bombast cannot be taken at face value; yet this is precisely what the reader is encouraged to do. In the absence of the textbook writers’ own interpretation of this rhetoric, Balcescu, who was both historian and revolutionary, is given the last word. The dry enumeration of general reasons for the European revolutions, none of which duplicate the immediacy of Balcescu’s “analysis,” may be quickly forgotten. The account of the revolution in Transylvania includes the well-known comment that the non-Hungarians received “as a reward much the same thing that the Magyars received as punishment” (p. 278) without attribution.

The narrative of Romania’s unification and political modernization, including the discussion of the franchise, makes no mention of Romanian women, who did not get the vote until the communist era, when it no longer counted (pp. 288, 428). Although this kind of treatment of women’s rights was common in history textbooks until two decades ago, it is no longer acceptable in Western Europe and North America where this book seems to want to find a readership.

The textbook also contains some misleading renditions of historical facts. While it is sort of true that “the

Romanians ... in the end gave in" (p. 329) on the issue of Jewish naturalization in 1878, as the price of having the great powers recognize Romanian independence, the more lasting outcome of the Berlin Treaty's Article 44 was its purposefully cumbersome implementation in Romania: Jewish naturalization was permitted in principle but only individually, requiring a special act of Parliament that had to be approved by a two-thirds majority in each separate case. Thus, aside from the 888 Jewish veterans who received citizenship for their military services during the War of Independence, only a "paltry number of Romanian Jews [were] naturalized" in the four decades before the end of the Great War.[2] For this reason, a new Jewish emancipation was necessary the next time international negotiations and territorial annexations took place on a grand scale, in Paris in 1919.

For the period between 1916 and 1944, *A History of Romania* is possibly the least reliable. For example, whereas problems of bureaucracy are discussed for nineteenth-century Romanian society, no such acknowledgement exists for the interwar period, which the authors seem to feel they must present in the best light. The book takes a "centralist" line when saying that the Romanian parliament that included "representatives from all the provinces" (p. 402) made provincial autonomy unnecessary, and that the dissolution of the provincial assemblies established in 1918 brought the country greater cohesion. In 1918-1920, this was a much disputed issue and the responsibility of historians, no matter what their personal political feelings may be, is not to take sides in the struggle, but to report it. Similarly, the rights of ethnic minorities are mentioned as existing, without any discussion of the problems these groups, amounting to almost thirty percent of the country's population, both encountered and constituted for Greater Romania.

The section summarizing interwar Romania's political parties (pp. 411-428) is strangely organized, giving the League of the Archangel Michael (LAM), or Iron Guard, pride of place, and two-to-three times as much space—and prominence—as any other party, including the historic National Liberal or National Peasant Parties. By placement, the LAM is not presented as one of the Right Wing Parties, which are analyzed in a tiny section of only one-half page, but receives five pages on its own. The argument is that Codreanu and his party gradually matured, becoming civic-minded proponents of non-violent change, although somehow the violent streak returned under Codreanu's successors. Later sections of the "Twentieth Century" chapter covering the national-legionary state and the Antonescu regime accord Mar-

shal Antonescu, Romania's wartime dictator and Nazi ally, a similarly gentle treatment. The sections treating Communist Romania are more judicious than the Greater Romania ones, perhaps because the authors do not wish to connect the prospects of contemporary Romania to the legacy of the former regime.

For the most part, this book reads smoothly. But the laudatory valence of much of the prose, unexamined historical clichés left over from the more heavily censored period of Romanian historiography, and eulogies to personalities and events interspersed throughout the text make it hard to take this work completely seriously. About mid-nineteenth-century events, one reads that "The legacies of this period are difficult to assess because of the astonishing number of significant events which the Romanians crammed into a mere decade following the Crimean War.... What is remarkable is how well, by and large, the Romanians succeeded" (p. 294). Even the replacement of the Cyrillic alphabet with the Latin in the middle of the nineteenth century is cited as proof of originality (p. 300), although it was a choice between two already existing writing systems. The overuse of terms like "monument," in the metaphoric sense of "great achievement," is symptomatic of this self-congratulatory tone (p. 311). A further problematic aspect of the overall concept of the book, aside from its triumphalism, is that Romania is too often compared with Western European countries, rather than with its East Central European neighbors with which it naturally shares many more traits.

To sum up, then, Treptow et al. have produced a "master narrative" of Romanian history at a time when that genre is in general decline, and they have made a text that is highly problematic on many counts, though physically attractive and readable. That it presents Romanian history as a seamless story of unity and continuity unfolding inevitably toward the Greater Romanian telos is its most obvious fault. Historians who choose to use this textbook in their classrooms will have to compensate by presenting the messy events and dissonant voices that make up the real history of any nation, even Romania.

#### Notes

[1.] Vlad Georgescu, *The Romanians: A History* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991); Keith Hitchins, *Rumania, 1866-1947* (Oxford: New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1994); Keith Hitchins, *The Romanians, 1774-1866* (Oxford: New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1996).

[2.] William Oldson, *A Providential Anti-Semitism:*

*Nationalism and Polity in Nineteenth-Century Romania* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1991), pp. 67, 73, 96.

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