

# **HISTORY AND MEMORY IN INTELLIGENCE**

## CHRISTOFASCISM – AN UNPRECEDENTED THREAT TO INTELLIGENCE SERVICES IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

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### Abstract:

*The main themes covered in this study concern the relationship between the far-right nationalist movement and religion in Interwar Romania, following the transformations that occurred in the political and legal status of the representative institutions, in the sense of protecting their own identities and objectives, as well as in the direction of obtaining a role as important as possible at the decision-making table in the state. Also, relying on the analysis of the recently declassified documentary fund in the Romanian Intelligence Service Archive, I have aimed to obtain a well-documented answer regarding the way in which the religious rhetoric promoted by radical groups in the Legionary Movement amplified the adversity towards the authorities - whether they were military, intelligence, political or religious – sometimes leading to violent disputes with them.*

**Keywords:** *christofascism, religious fanaticism, Romanian Orthodox Church, propaganda, intelligence.*

### Introduction

As Traian Sandu, Roland Clark or Oliver Jens Schmitt pointed out, among others, one of the most significant current challenges for the intelligence community in Romania, from the perspective of preventing the destabilization of Romanian democracy, is the recrudescence of archangelism and religious fanaticism, in fact a potentially aggressive imitation of interwar right-wing extremism (Clej, 2020; Grădinaru, 2022). This aspect is favoured by the outburst of possibilities for the

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propagation and dissemination of radical right-wing ideology, especially in the online environment.

Thus, the risk factors we analyse have become particularly significant in the last five years, as violent actions have been re-transposed into practice at the local and global level (in the United States of America, for instance), most of them using religious symbols and aspects of spiritual doctrine characteristic of the Archangel Michael Legion as an action. For example, for the benefit of neo-legionary propaganda and indoctrination, new prayers and akathists have occurred during recent years, in which some of the legionary leaders from the interwar period, especially Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, have been invoked or posed as messengers of divinity. Also, in the Christian-Orthodox rituals currently performed by the priests with neo-legionary visions, some extremist practices from the interwar period have been reintroduced, such as the parastases in the memory of the legionary “martyrs” or the invocation of God’s blessing for some nationalist actions<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, taking into account the fact that the relationship between religion and far-right nationalist movements is still one of the most debated topics in political and theological historiography, in the current article I have aimed to carry out a methodological delimitation of legionary christofascism<sup>2</sup>, by means of which the defining attributes that characterized the phenomenon in the interwar period can be emphasized not only from a conceptual point of view, but also from an affective and attitudinal consideration. In this sense, the theological writings of the main legionary theoreticians were particularly useful, as from the analysis of their content there can be highlighted the intensity, the extent, the relays of propagation, the visibility or the extent of the phenomenon I am analysing, of course with the attitude of reserve

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<sup>1</sup> Such a conclusion results from the analysis of documents in rough form or in synthesis found on the official websites of some contemporary neo-legionary groups as: <https://www.miscarea.net>, <https://www.miscarea-legionara.net>, <https://buciumul.ro>, <https://gogupuiu.ro>, <https://marturisorii.ro>

<sup>2</sup> The term Christofascism was introduced by the German theologian Dorothee Steffensky-Sölle to define that far-right ideology that sums up intersecting characteristics of fascism and Christianity.

caused by the authors' intentions to distort social-political reality for propaganda purposes.

For the same purpose, in the first part of the presentation, I will bring forth arguments for positioning the religious fanatic, anti-Semitic substrate, as a foundation for mobilizing and indoctrinating the social masses in favour of the Legionary Movement and I have defined, by referring to the pattern used in different concrete situations, the actual level to which fanatical religious precepts and beliefs have been appropriated by individuals, groups and various structures within the extremist organization. Equally, the scientific analysis aimed at establishing the stage of appropriation of religious and anti-Semitic fanaticism by the decision-making factors of the Romanian Orthodox Church, respectively the way in which fundamentalism was taken over and adapted to theological and ritual objectives, practices and dogmas<sup>3</sup>.

In the next part of my study, my intention has been to demonstrate the fact that the Christian-Orthodox doctrine was symbiotically united with the perceptions of a nationalist nature, religion representing the perfect alibi for the justification of some violence or atrocities of the radical legionnaires towards those considered to be responsible for the social and national problems of Romania.

In the second part of the paper, I have aimed to obtain a well-documented answer regarding the way in which the religious rhetoric promoted by radical groups in the Legionary Movement amplified the adversity towards the authorities – whether they were military, intelligence, political or religious – sometimes leading to violent disputes with them. In this sense, different stages were highlighted in the evolution of the relations between the Legionary Movement – the Church – the authorities, during which distinct forms of support or counterattack to

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<sup>3</sup> To fulfill these research objectives, I critically studied the works of well-known historians in the field, such as Ionuț Florian Biliuță, Radu Ioanid, Armin Heinen, George Enache, Marius Turda or Mihail Stelian Rusu. In the same sense, the theological works produced by the main legionary theoreticians were particularly useful. From the analysis of their content it is possible to highlight, of course with the reserves of rigor caused by the authors' intentions to distort the social-political reality for propaganda purposes, the intensity, the extent, the relays of propagation, the visibility or the extent of the phenomenon we are analyzing.

the initiatives of the other institutions were drawn, depending on the organizational interests of the moment.

In order to accurately substantiate the conclusions on this issue, I proceeded to the analysis of the recently declassified documentary fund in the Romanian Intelligence Service Archive, adding up a total of 657 new files related to the involvement of intelligence structures and public order, sometimes with the support of some people in the Church, in managing and combating the social and political manifestations generated by legionary religious fanaticism. Also, in order to approach and reproduce as correctly as possible, i.e. understanding the specific aspects of the informational research of the Legionary Movement, I also discussed with former officers with experience in the informational community and prominent members of the historiographical and archival community in Romania, among them mentioning Silviu-Marian Miloiu, professor and vice-chancellor of Valahia University in Târgoviște and Cristian Anița, director of the National Archives of Romania.

### **The religious factor in the extremist legionary politics<sup>4</sup>**

In the Romanian historiography (Marius Turda, Radu Ioanid, Cristian Troncotă) there is, to a good extent, a consensus from the perspective of designating right-wing extremism – whose main exponents were the legionnaires – as the pole of maximum internal vulnerability for public order and the internal and democratic security of the interwar Romanian state<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, their opinion can also be

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<sup>4</sup> The main scientific works supporting this chapter are: Rusu, M. S. (2021). "Staging Death: Christofascist Necropolitics during the National Legionary State in Romania, 1940–1941". *Nationalities Papers*, 49, 576-589; Meale, J. (2016). "The Romanian Iron Guard: Fascist Sacralized Politics or Fascist Politicized Religion?" *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, 36, 61-74; Cârstocea, R. (2014). "The Path to the Holocaust. Fascism and Antisemitism in Interwar Romania." *S.I.M.O.N.-Shoah: Intervention. Methods, Documentation*, 1. Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, 43-53; or Biliuță, I. F. (2016). "Sowing the Seeds of Hate. The Antisemitism of the Orthodox Church in the Interwar Period." *S.I.M.O.N.-Shoah: Intervention. Methods, Documentation*, 3. Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, 20-34.

<sup>5</sup> Despite the major public interest in the subject of the involvement of intelligence and public order structures in the prevention and countering of extremist propaganda, very little has been written on this topic, often tangentially. Up to the present, no complex

validated through the scientific research of the archive documents issued by the intelligence agencies of the time, the following action characteristics having to be highlighted: the importance assigned to the field through the establishment of a distinct team within the Secret Service (Team I), having operative work directions and targets from among the extreme right and right-wing groups as means of searching for information (SRI Archive, 48.340, 132-141), the unreserved allocation of resources and means (for the resolution of cases there were allocated as means "everything at hand"), the short time set for the intervention of the cadres – usually 48 hours after receiving the information note (SRI Archive, 835, page 194)–, respectively the permanent informative monitoring of the legionnaires known as having concerns and predispositions towards violent action denial (SRI Archive, 650, 10-20).

In fact, the legionary movement appeared in Romania as a denial of democracy, the affirmation of the totalitarian state and the exaltation of Christian virtues in the spirit of the cult of autochthony and Romanianism. Legionarism had a pronounced revolutionary character, reshaping the Romanian society with the aim of constantly challenging the entire post-war socio-political system, a system which in their opinion could no longer ensure national progress.

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work has been developed in this sense, and no historian has undertaken a systematic research of the ideological and organizational confrontation between the Legion of the Archangel Michael and the secret intelligence community, whose main exponent was the Secret Service (later Special) of Information. The analysis is also flawed by some historiographic currents regarding the study of the Legionary Movement. Thus, although most of the historians and political scientists adopted a critical, praxeological rhetoric of Legionaryism, in the academic and scientific environment there were stages (with influences up to the present) in which the tendency was to abolish ideology, to deconstruct it. It is, first of all, about the works made during the communist period, when the legionary myth had to be blamed, justifying the organizational repression. At the same time, another part of the scientific environment adopted an encomiastic attitude towards the Legionary Movement, basing their research almost exclusively on the books published after 1989, which was obviously an error. These works mostly grouped together different elements of legionary memorials which belonged to legionary political prisoners, the ideology of legionary action being recreated and defined according to the individual judgment of each of them.

Impersonating as the expression of a pure national community, most of them being young people (Biliuță, 2013, p. 166), the legionnaires considered themselves as the embodiment of celestial beings, archangels, educators and moral purifiers of the society in which they lived – a “world” converging with the internal agitations and disturbances that characterized the stage of consolidating Greater Romania (Ornea, 2015, p. 148). In this sense, the legionnaires assumed the task of vigorously punishing the sins of the Romanian politics and accused the Jews – but also those who ran business or mutually helped the Jews – as participants in “undermining the legitimate national interest of Romanians” (Solonari, 2015, pp. 34-36). In the light of the post-war legionary discourse, the Jews were the source of all “evils” in Romania, whether we refer to alcoholism, poverty, Marxism, social inequity, corruption or even ecological problems (Cârstocea, 2014, p. 48).

Exalted nationalism with a Christo-fascist rhetoric and the specific paramilitary organization gradually gained more and more popularity, attracting a wide range of adherents among the sympathizers and members of the Legionary Movement, from members of some noble families (Cantacuzino, Ghica, Sturdza) to young cultivated people (Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Constantin Noica, Mihail Polihroniade, Mircea Vulcănescu, Traian Herseni, Mihail Sebastian, Haig and Arșavir Acterian, Marietta Sadova etc.), many of them university graduates fascinated by professor Nae Ionescu, partisan of an authoritarian regime that would end the sterile agitation of political parties (Ornea, 2015, p. 41).

Although in historiography there are discussions regarding a prevalence of those with studies in Germany, I believe that we can rather speak of a primacy of those who completed their university studies outside the country: Emil Cioran studied German philosophy with the support of a Humboldt scholarship, context in which he was definitively fascinated by the personality and extremist ideas of Adolf Hitler, Mircea Vulcănescu and Mihail Sebastian studied in Paris, Constantin Noica based his master's studies on Kant on research carried out in France and Germany, and Traian Herseni specialized in Letters and Philosophy in Berlin (Bejan, 2023, pp. 85-97). Also, Prince Alexandru Cantacuzino studied in The Hague and Paris, his uncle, General Gheorghe Cantacuzino, “The Border Guard”, attended university in France, and Prince Alexandru Ghica completed his studies in Berlin and Grenoble.

I would like to point out the significant influence that the mothers of some of the legionaries with principled origins had on their evolution in ideological and doctrinal terms, the untainted presence in their case of the heroic spirit manifested by the willingness to fight and sacrifice for the faith, respectively a close interpersonal connection with Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (prince Alexandru Ghica, for example, was a colleague of the legionary commander at the Military High School at Mănăstirea Dealu) (Iordachi, 2014, p. 377-394; Biliuță, 2013, p. 228).

In their opinion, the real change of Romania could only be achieved by the “new generation of young people”, a category independent of biological age and correlated with a certain level of spiritual freshness (Enache, 2012, pp. 280-281).

In the stage of formation and ideological consolidation, this “generation in powder”, as Dan C. Mihăilescu described it (Petreu, 2016, p. 9), despite the doctrinal effervescence, limited the violent actions towards the members of the system they were attacking only at the level of the discursive register. Traian Brăileanu, socialist and legionary intellectual, wrote in “Sociological Notes” that “the people have made a mistake and must be punished”. In his opinion, all those who opposed the legionary victory should have been exterminated, even if the approach would have led to the disappearance of the last Romanian (Troncotă, 2008, pp. 120-124).

But, when the system began to deny and combat their efforts, the opponents were considered to be enemies of renewal, creating an insurmountable organizational and ideological divide. Starting with the year 1933, in order to punish the movement’s opponents of any nature, the so-called “death squads” were for the first time recruited and trained from the ranks of the most radical of these “young people” (Rusu, 2016, p. 254), essentially people programmed to apply from the simplest corrections to their physical elimination (Enache, 2012, p. 285).

It is striking that these terrorist actions and methods, obviously incompatible with biblical norms, were ignored in the legionary discourse. In order to distract attention from their manifestation, the legionnaires adopted the tactic of minimization, placing them in the register of passing organizational manifestations, in the shadows, without disrupting the dissemination of other “promotional” themes,

such as the Christian issue and the institutional association of the Legionary Movement with the Romanian Orthodox Church<sup>6</sup>. Precisely these considerations still produce controversies at the historiographical level, the legionary action ideology (with an emphasis on the intrinsic component of religious fanaticism) being difficult to define, especially in a comparative analysis with other movements of a fascist nature in interwar Europe (Heinen, 2006, pp. 435-460).

From our point of view, at least for the interwar period, the religious factor was assimilated to the legionary trend primarily for reasons of doctrinal individualization. At the stage when, at the European level, fascist, totalitarian ideologies encompassed thousands of young people with extremist right-wing visions, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, similar to the “young people” of the “new generation”, felt the need to impose himself on an individual level (as an organization domestically and as a state internationally), harmonizing these beliefs with Romanian specificity. In the legionary conception, the national specificity of Romania could only be a Christian, Orthodox one (Meale, 2016, p. 67), an aspect that would have also led to an ideological superiority in relation to the other extreme right-wing interwar doctrines, fascism and Nazism (Cârstocea, 2014, p. 49).

With such a motivation, at their first programmatic manifestations, in the absence of a pre-existing religious canon, the legionnaires masked their ideology of action with the precepts of Orthodox Christianity and the concept of unity between religion and the Romanian nation. On these grounds, the acceptance of membership in the extremist organization was conditioned and mystically correlated with the recognition of faith in God (Voicu, 2023). The explanatory presentation of the two concepts, legionary and Orthodox believer, had

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<sup>6</sup> The first manifestations of this nature (terrorist-paramilitary) were recorded in September 1923 when, only with the benefit of the intelligence possessed by the police and security bodies, effective measures could be put into practice to prevent plots and attacks planned by legionnaires to the directors of the newspapers *Lupta*, *Adevărul* and *Dimineața*, people with Zionist orientations and critics of the organization and the legionary trend. Later, in 1933, other attempts of the legionary assassin groups were annihilated by the Security, this time on Victor Iamandi or Nicolae (Troncota, 2008, pp. 165-170). In both situations, legionary propaganda preferred to adopt the measure of dissimulation or protection.

to suggest similar notions, which were supposed to be confused (Webster, 1986, p. 10). However, the practice of Orthodoxy was not a limiting condition for joining the Legionary Movement, as all those with an unlimited faith in God, including Christianized Jews, were accepted into the organization (Cârstocea, 2014, p. 49).

The obtained result was the development of an organizational hallucination to which thousands of Romanians zealously adhered, the legionary religious fanaticism being assumed and intrinsically applied with faithfulness, as the followers were convinced that in this way they could testify to God. On the same basis, the legionnaires claimed that their way of working was the right one, as it had been inspired by divinity – a reason why the only precepts and religious manifestations they appropriated were those of legionary emanation. Thus, with the same aim, many works of ritualistic and legionary dogma were elaborated, such as the legionary songbooks or the behavioural guidelines in which a series of religious landmarks were also inserted, e.g., “fasting as a decisive element of victory”, the altar and the prayer (Zelea Codreanu, 2012).

In other words, religion was used by the legionnaires as a means for making propaganda, influencing and mobilizing the masses. In this respect, religious symbolism and rhetoric were also directed to fill the ranks with new followers and to ensure an apparent public justification of violent anti-Semitic or extremist-anarchist actions (Ioanid, 2004, pp. 437-438).

The skilful combination of elements of legionary ideology with Christian-Orthodox substratum from the aforementioned categories of works generated, in certain situations, the manifestation of vehement behaviors such as political assassinations, the legionnaires being indoctrinated to act prophetically, under the protectorate of God. As a result, the legionnaires had a continuous willingness to fight, to martyrdom, and their sacrifice was to be rewarded with glory in the afterlife (in fact, these are elements of ideology specific to fundamentalist, ultra-radical communities) (Meale, 2016, p. 63). Against this background, the leaders of the Legionary Movement promoted action exaltation, order and discipline, and also devotion to the own organization. In my perspective, such action ideals could only be achieved by cultivating community desensitization, the removal of the

followers from any social form that could vitiate the accomplishment of the missions outlined by the legionary leadership.

With the same goal, in order to promote the organizational and action prophetism of the Legionary Movement, the legionary martyrs were presented to the followers as models of holiness, considering that they deserved to be honoured by all the people and the clergy. "The legion kneels in front of the crosses of the nation's braves and martyrs" and "defends the altars of the Church which the enemies want to remove" were life guides for the legionnaires, any action performed for their benefit being assimilated and necessary for redemption and collective salvation for the afterlife (Zelea Codreanu, 2012). At the same time, by venerating, exhuming and reburying their remains in sumptuous religious ceremonies, the legionnaires once again sanctified their struggle, the halo of the fallen ones being hypothesized as the sacred guarantor of the political order they proposed (Rusu, 2021, pp. 576-579). The funeral ceremonies also had occult practical connotations, as legionary songs were sung alongside the council of priests, and the presence of the spirits of the legionary martyrs among the participants was invoked (by shouting the legionary salute "Present" in chorus, after mentioning the name of each martyr), and taking oaths to continue the legionary cause for the salvation of the Romanian nation.

The extent of the cult would sometimes reach heretical heights, as the legionnaires assigned Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, depending on the historical context, some prophetic characteristics, as a predestined hero (the reincarnation of Joan of Arc) or a prophet (Turda, 2005, p. 145; Ioanid, 2004, p. 438), or even messianic attributes, such as resurrection and direct connection with God (Rusu, 2021, pp. 580-585). For the same purpose, the legionnaires were instructed to keep an icon with the face of the legionary commander in the pockets of their coat, alongside iconographic representations of the saints, (Haynes, 2008, p. 122).

On the same foundations presented above, the legionnaires designed major strategic objectives to influence and control the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR), an achievable step due to the priests and hierarchs that they were going to direct inside this religious institution, after they had confirmed that they were sympathizers or authentic members of the extremist movement. Their management was

much more complex, aimed at the introduction of nationalist precepts and autochthonous and anti-Semitic fanaticism, respectively expanding the capacity of influence inside as many religious communities as possible (Ioanid, 2004, p. 436-439; Țiu, 2012). In this respect, the legionnaires preached the active co-optation of priests in the reformation of society by returning to ancestral Christian traditions. As a matter of fact, to increase the success rate, legionary propaganda also involved an initiation of priests at legionary schools (Grigore, 2020, p. 58; Meale, 2016, p. 66). Moreover, with the same goal, in the elections of 1937, out of the total of 103 candidates on the lists of the *All for the Country* party, 33 were priests (Ioanid, 2004, p. 436).

Officially, at least in the first post-war decade, the church institution rejected the legionary ideology and condemned the organization's violent actions. Even in the second part of the 30s, when the popularity and penetration of the Legion reached its peak, many priests refused to associate and remained outside the extremist Legionary politics.

However, in interwar Romania, under the impact of the rise and charisma of the Legionary Movement, a large part of the Orthodox clergy self-radicalized or was radicalized, and the theological and religious discourse promoted by them was imbued with racist and anti-Semitic ideas (Biliuță, 2016, p. 12). Thus, although the attitude of the Romanian Orthodox Church towards the Jews was a tolerant one before the First World War, in the interwar period the Jewish population, mirroring the leitmotifs of the legionary discourses, was theologially transposed as an ungodly one, an exploiter of economic resources or the most morally corrupted among the ethnic groups in Romania (Biliuță, 2016, pp. 21-23). The aggressive anti-Semitic message, presented by legionnaires and priests alike, when the optimal preaching opportunities arose, was also put into practice "with enthusiasm" (Oldson, 2002, p. 305).

On the other hand, although in the 19th century the role of the religious factor in the development of national communities was minimized or even denied by the intellectual and academic elites, after the end of the First World War religion became a remedy for cleansing European societies affected by the horrors of the war. In the case of Romania, the resurrection of the Orthodox religion as a pillar of the

indigenous ancestral society was dependent on the internalization in such environments of the need to combat a new social danger, namely the spread of Bolshevik ideas and the actions of Jewry and Freemasonry.

In Nicolae Iorga's opinion, these risk factors could be managed through the emancipation and then assimilation into the "soul" of Romania of the "good Jews" from Wallachia (Ioanid, 1992, pp. 467-492), a more difficult approach to achieve in the case of the so-called "bad Jews" from Moldova, a Jewish population of a different ethnic "quality", difficult to be assimilated after the war (Oldson, 1991, p. 139). As Valentin Stoian also notes, two types of anti-Semitism were developed against this background among the intellectual and academic elites of the first interwar years, categories separated by the arguments on the basis of which the harmfulness of the Jews was described: cultural anti-Semitism caused by the cultural-religious and social substratum of Jewishness and the biological anti-Semitism caused by a hypothetical maleficity of their "blood" (Stoian, 2013).

The fact that Orthodox theologians developed, under the influence of legionary fascism, speeches and fanatical ideas towards the Bolsheviks and the Jews was also favoured by the evolution of the theological teaching and student body after the first great world conflagration. Thus, the replication of the Prussian or Habsburg theological educational model cultivated among the students a more rational political thinking, more expressive from an action point of view, so they substantially embraced fascist radicalism. The religious demonstration carried out on March 2, 1930 by a group of Orthodox theological students from Bucharest "for the commemoration of the martyrs who sacrificed their lives under the cruel persecutions of the Soviets" can be included in such a perspective (SRI Archives, 920, 12-14). Their demonstration, held under the coordination of Emil Pavel, Ion Constantinescu and Dumitru Cinciu, delegates of the theological studentship, abounded with fanatical-religious, legionary-type meanings (being preceded by a "CALL To all Christian students"), risking to degenerate violently as a result of the provocative intention associated with the last part of the event – procession and prayer in front of the Russian Church.

Moreover, on this basis, the Orthodox theological students developed missionary ideas, embodying themselves as enlighteners of the national student population regarding the importance of nationalism and anti-Semitism (Biliuță, 2016, p. 24). In this respect, the fundamentalist theological theses propagated by Alexandru C. Cuza, legionnaire mentor and economics professor at the University of Iași, and the doctor and physiologist Nicolae Paulescu, represented real sources of inspiration. According to them, the Jews were the key element for the spread of Bolshevik and Masonic ideas, a fact that threatened the very existence of the Romanian nation due to socio-economic decomposition and racial alteration. In this respect, the Jews, a race presented as inferior, intruding and uncontrollably interbred (Cuza, 1915, p. 182), should have been blamed for all the misfortunes that affected the Romanian population, thus imposing their exile from Romania (Ioanid, 2004, p. 425).

Moreover, Nicolae Paulescu had no qualms about obsessively using medical studies for propaganda purposes, basing part of his scientific theories on anti-Semitic concepts. In his morbid optics, the Jewish population was compared to “a parasite”, “bedbugs”, “lice” or “an unsleeping worm” that “sucks the energy of the country” and “poisons the sons”, thus requiring to be exterminated (Paulescu, 1915, p 55). In fact, Nicolae Paulescu was the extreme right-wing theoretician who propagated the pseudo-scientific theory of the biological inferiority of the Jews (“the brain of the Jews weighs much less than the brain of the Arians”, “congenital anomalies of the Jewish brain give rise to disorders in the development of the bones of the skull, body and limbs”), a theory that was also popular in Nazi Germany (Paulescu, 1928, pp. 18-20) and based on which the Romanian doctor brought into discussion the danger of sexual intercourse between the Romanians and the Jews ( Paulescu, 1928, p. 10).

Moreover, regarding the institution and the position of the church, Alexandru C. Cuza, a self-declared atheist with no religious beliefs (Biliuță, 2016, p. 17), condemned Romanian Orthodoxy for the lack of resistance to the Jewish danger, thus infringing an honourable national duty to protect the rights, hopes and future luck of the Romanians. In the theological work he wrote in 1925, “The Teaching of

Jesus. Judaism and Christian Theology”, Alexandru C. Cuza had no qualms to condemn the Romanian Orthodox Church for being bought by the Jews, respectively for having corrupted the dogmas and rituals so that the Jewish problem could be tolerated and unsanctioned. Against this background, Alexandru C. Cuza promoted the introduction of the messianic struggle against the Jews and their demonization as an attribute of Orthodoxy (Cuza, 1925, p. 7). Moreover, in a Christo-heretical way (as priest Ilie Imbrescu accused him), Alexandru C. Cuza demanded the reformation of the Romanian theological education by excluding the study of the Old Testament from the curriculum of religious classes, a biblical document that he considered to be “corrupted by the Jewish materialistic spirit” (Biliuță, 2016, pp. 24-25).

At the same time, the religious radicalism of a large part of the students and the Orthodox clergy developed, initially feeding on the fundamentalist ideas of some legionary essayists or philosophers (or sympathizers of the legionary doctrine) such as Nae Ionescu, Mircea Vulcănescu, Nichifor Crainic, Mircea Eliade, Mihail Polihroniade, or Traian Brăileanu, and from the theological discourse typical of Romanian Orthodoxy which was promoted, for example, owing to the interwar magazines *Gândirea* and *Cuvântul*. By means of these channels, anti-Semitic ideas sometimes had exaggerated expressions, without theological support (Jews are a damnable population for the arrogance of not admitting that Jesus Christ is Messiah, without salvation in the absence of a mass conversion to Orthodoxy), creating controversies even among legionary theorists (Biliuță, 2016, pp. 27-29).

Later, under the same editorial logo, some of the legionary theorists promoted and adapted the ideas of the superiority of the Aryan race specific to German Nazism, declaring their support for their partial application, only in the particular case of Jews and not of other races. Thus, Orthodoxy was presented as the opposing cult of Judaism, the aversion being caused by the Jews’ rejection of the resurrection. In other words, the two religions could only be antagonistic, the doctrinal matrices being incompatible and reactive (Crainic, 1935, pp. 59-66). Mihail Sebastian and Eugen Ionescu categorized these ideological manifestations as forms of affirmation of “hooliganism”, of the process of “rhinocerization” (for “the rhinoceros”, God became the state), and of the

decline of humanity after the moment of the so-called extremist conversion (Bejan, 2023, pp. 274-277).

Actually, such theories also corresponded to the interests of the Romanian Orthodox Church, and the ecclesiastical and monastic staff almost obsessively rejected the Jewish community as part of occult, atheistic or anti-Christian organizations or environments. In fact, some of them had no qualms about publicly presenting their aversion to the mentioned environments, in which context they placed the Jewish community at the centre of the threats to national ethnicity. Such a conclusion can be clearly obtained by analysing the content of the article called "Our Church and the Jewish Danger", which was published by Haralamb Vasiliu, councilor of the Diocese of Moldova, in November 1934 in no. 113, year IX, of *Chemarea* (SRI Archives, 1160, leaf 315).

### **The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Legionary Movement**

As a result of this evolution, the Legionary Movement gained great sympathy among the priests, monks and Orthodox theological students, who were some of its most zealous and effective representatives. The official assumption of Orthodox Christianity by the Legion or the concerted involvement of its members in activities of a religious nature (building churches, erecting roadside crosses) contributed decisively to this situation – aspects that were not specific to other organizations or political parties.

At this point in the study, we must make a clarification. Although the nationalist mystique constituted the central element of attraction for the Romanian Orthodox clergy due to the ideological similarity, above any type of political sympathy, the collaboration between the Legionary Movement and the Church materialized more at the level of individuals and less at the institutional level (Grigore, 2020, p. 57). In Constantin Iordachi's view, this situation was generated by the fact that, for the priesthood and petty ecclesiastical personnel, with local influence, especially among those who were active members of the Legion, there were no dogmatic and ideological differences between Orthodoxy and Legionarism (Iordachi, 2004, p. 36).

This situation was caused by the pressures of the state authorities, who judged the legionary religious manifestations as political propaganda and made efforts to limit the religious actions of the legionnaires and prevent the involvement of the priesthood in politics. These pressures were meant to limit the influence of the legionnaires in society through the Church and benefited from great support from the old Romanian political and church elites because, in their opinion, they might have represented an additional obstacle, thus affecting the positions they held in favour of legionary revolutionism.

At the same time, the restraint of the church authorities in presenting an organizational position closer to the Legionary Movement may have been also caused by a number of value factors, in the end the Legion being a secular movement and not a religious one (Iordachi, 2004, pp. 35-36).

Actually, we should not neglect the fact that the attitude of the Church leadership also evolved in line with some public reactions of the legionnaires. Thus, the reactions of the hierarchical superiors towards the Legionnaire Movement experienced stages of tacit support, "reproach" or express criticism, mirroring the extent of the situations in which the legionnaires sanctioned their haric vices. Such aspects were not approved by the Orthodox hierarchy as they sometimes targeted it directly, some of the people within it being stigmatized by the Legion as apostates and traitors (Enache, 2012, p. 286).

The first public confirmation of this type of closeness became evident in the context of the assassination of Prime Minister Ion G. Duca by a legionary death squad, on the platform of the train station in Sinaia. In the conditions in which the regrettable event of December 29, 1933 was treated equivocally by the Holy Synod, without reprimanding or directly sanctioning the organization in whose name the assassins had acted, the attitude of the priesthood and monastic staff towards the legionnaires remained in a positive register, without any changes. As a sign of "gratitude", the members of the Legionary Movement got even more involved in organizing work camps for the benefit of the Church, in order to repair some Orthodox worship buildings or construct new ones (Heinen, 2006, pp. 302-304).

Another event which certified and encouraged the closeness at an individual level between the legionnaires and the representatives of the Church was the funerals of Ion Moța and Vasile Marin, legionnaire leaders who died in the civil war in Spain<sup>7</sup>. The religious ritual circumscribed to the funeral, appreciated as honoring the “modern martyrs fighting for faith” (Voicu, 2023), was performed by three Orthodox hierarchs accompanied by an impressive procession of 200-400 priests (Săndulescu, 2007, p. 265) and about 30,000 people. It was noted the presence at the event of the Orthodox Metropolitan of Transylvania, Nicolae Bălan, one of the most influential members of the religious elite of that time and a follower of the philosophy according to which the Church, in order to maintain its social influence, should always be in the proximity of the ones who hold the power or can direct the power on a certain course. Practically, by his participation and the large number of hierarchs of different ranks at the funeral event or at the religious ceremonies held beforehand in the stations where the train with the mortuary wagon was stopped, Nicolae Bălan certified the claims of the Legionary Movement for access and possession, in a relatively short interval, of the governance in Romania (Săndulescu, 2007, pp. 264-265)<sup>8</sup>.

Immediately after the analyzed event, in March 1937, at the initiative and blessing of Nicolae Bălan, the similarity of some aspects of ideology was further strengthened. From that moment on, in Nicolae Bălan’s public speech, the legionary theories regarding the need to isolate the Freemasons and the Jewish population had a central role, communities of this type being hypothesized by the high hierarchy as nefarious, sources of corruption of the political and economic environments in the direction of anti-theism and the comunization of Romania (Biliuță, 2016, p. 30).

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<sup>7</sup> Priest Ion Dumitrescu-Bocșa was also among the legionnaires participating in the civil war in Spain.

<sup>8</sup> To go deeply into the study regarding the relationship developed by Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan with the Iron Guard, one could consult Ilarion Țiu’s works, available on the researchgate.net platform (<https://researchgate.net/profile/Ilarion-Tiu>) or the research made by Oliver Jens Schmitt: Schmitt, O. J. (2022). Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. *The rise and fall of the ‘Captain’*, the second edition, Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House.

In contrast with Nicolae Bălan, patriarch Miron Cristea, the leader of the Orthodox hierarchy, otherwise promoter and continuator of the anti-Semitic measures initiated by Alexandru C. Cuza and Octavian Goga (Oldson, 2002, p. 304), initially had a somewhat critical attitude towards legionary practices, disapproving any form of church solidarity with the radical groups of the Legionary Movement. In this vein, Miron Cristea tried at first to determine the bishops to completely abandon political activities (such as participation in legionary ceremonies or even integration into the Legionary Movement) or supporting legionary rhetoric and propaganda at the level of symbolism (through the presence of legionary elements – such as the legionary flag – in religious institutions or the consecration of flags).

In spite of Miron Cristea's appeasing position, in the same month, the Holy Synod, influenced by Nicolae Bălan and probably by pecuniary interests, refused to condemn the possible involvement of the ecclesiastical and monastic staff in supporting "All for the Country" legionary party. The legion was presented, without being expressly nominated, as the political entity that best corresponded to the moral precepts promoted by the Romanian Orthodox Church. The claim of the Church not to separate the state from the religious institution (calling for the disappearance of the spirit of secularism) and the permission for the continued operation of legionary labour camps around churches and monasteries also proved to be on the same direction (Heinen, 2006, pp. 296-297).

The decisions of the Holy Synod were welcomed by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the legionary leader assimilating the moment as a successful first step in the national battle to eliminate the entities that were consuming Romania from the inside (Biliuță, 2016, p. 30).

After this moment, especially after being appointed on February 11, 1938 as prime minister, Miron Cristea abandoned any moral-theological restraint in supporting the anti-Semitic objectives propagated by the legionnaires (an aspect valid despite the specificity of the Carlist regime of which he was an exponent – the anti-legionary regime) being directly involved in the implementation of the racist legislation sponsored by the legionary commands. The Holy Synod rallied to the policy of its leaders and later to the national-legionary

decisions regarding the application of anti-Semitic legislation. Thus, the legionary influence also determined changes in the application of the ritual of the Orthodox Holy Mysteries (the Sacrament of Baptism was invalidated in the case of Jews as a result of their racial origin) or from the point of view of ecclesiastical financial management – all rental contracts for spaces owned by Jewish people, in which Orthodox religious objectives functioned, were canceled (Catalan, 2003).

The optics of the Church in relation to the Iron Guard changed radically after the assassination of Prime Minister Armand Călinescu, on September 21, 1939, by a death squad made up of eight legionnaires. The attack on the state leader was virulently contested by the new patriarch, Nicodim Munteanu, the former metropolitan of Moldova, who criticized the assassins of the late prime minister (Enache, 2012, p. 294). According to the patriarch's opinion, the crime was also punishable by divine laws as the victim represented the state, and the moment, immediately after the outbreak of the Second World War, was one of European crisis (Bănică, 2007, p. 173). In my opinion, we should not disregard the hypothesis that Nicodim Munteanu's reaction was also determined by the fact that, at the time of his appointment as future patriarch, King Carol II held consultations with Armand Călinescu (Roșca, 2019, p. 81).

After taking over political power on September 6, 1940, the legionnaires tried to promote a so-called regenerative, progressive policy (through which the "new man" was educated, the only one capable of innovating the Romanian state), purifying and spiritual at the level of all state institutions, an aspect that did not exclude the Romanian Orthodox Church (Săndulescu, 2004, p. 350). The macro-state project that the legionnaires assumed and popularized clearly differentiates them from their governing partner, General Ion Antonescu, against the background of the soldierly, more balanced, paternalistic formation, the latter being presented as the guarantor and protector of the old values. Against this background, after a surge of activities with mystical-religious resonance (requiems, reburials of legionary "martyrs" during the regime of King Charles II), among the first decrees issued during the national-legionary government there were some whose object was the regulation of current Christian activities, particularly those of a church nature (Enache, 2012, p. 292). Such measures were in correspondence

with the new legionary social ideas, whose substance was reconciliation with divinity and the ancestors as a condition for a better future of Romania, purpose for which, in their opinion, the intensification of anti-Semitic propaganda against sectarian and neo-Protestant cultures was required. In this direction, on September 9, 1940, after the proclamation of the national-legionary state, the legionnaires admitted the freedom of worship for “traditional” Christian religions (such as Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Calvinism or Lutheranism) and for Islam, prohibiting in return the specific practices of other sectarian religious associations. Although it was taken into consideration by the legionary authorities, the practice of Judaism was not regulated in terms of concreteness, and was to be carried out after a “later” analysis (in our opinion, probably until the finalization of the agenda of persecuting the Jews), only within the limits of the laws of the new political regime (Deletant, 2006, p. 58).

At the same time, the legionnaires assumed the creation of order in the relationship between the state and the Church, according to which they initiated an extensive campaign of reforms in the Church, through which the streamlining of religious activity was officially pursued. As such, discussions were initiated with General Ion Antonescu regarding the replacement of the patriarch, the involvement and consultation of the Holy Synod in the application of anti-Semitic legislation, the issuance of a new law on the organization and operation of the Orthodox institution, the standardization of worship and theological education at all levels or regarding the functioning of monasticism.

For the same reasons, a rapid campaign was started to remove and replace church personnel who “did not inspire confidence” or who were no longer compatible with the “new times”, with obedient members of the Legionary Movement.

The legionary actions were motivated by the fact that most of the Orthodox hierarchs had been supported for appointment by the ideological opponents of the Legionary Movement and some of them, as in the case of Patriarch Nicodim Munteanu, had publicly adopted a critical position towards the legionary doctrine, precepts and actions. However, the legionary actions were not exclusively revengeful. In the legionary reformist vision, the Orthodox hierarchy, made up of “trustworthy” people, was intended to have increased attributions and

responsibilities, being agreed upon a restoration of the traditional power that the bishops used to have (Enache, 2005, p. 93).

However, a possible reform of the ecclesiastical top management was not a simple step, because any replacement among the church hierarchies could only be based on a decision of the Holy Synod, as established by the legislation on the organization of the Romanian Orthodox Church, adopted in 1925. In this context, through various interpellations and with the support of the mass media they controlled, the legionnaires repeatedly requested the emergency convocation of the Holy Synod.

In these circumstances, in order to prevent the situation from getting out of control, Nicolae Bălan, the Metropolitan of Transylvania, despite the fact that he shared the anti-Semitic legionary beliefs and was a sympathizer of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, acted directly to cancel the legionary interferences at the level of Orthodox internal politics, requesting and receiving assurances of support in this regard from Ion Antonescu. In exchange for his position, the Romanian general demanded that the church hierarchy publicly take his side, without any room for controversies or interpretations (basilica.ro, 2010).

On this background, on December 2, 1940, after a discussion with the head of state, Nicolae Bălan, supported by Tit Simeedrea, Metropolitan of Bucovina, addressed the Holy Synod, discreetly rejecting the legionary requests for reform and reiterating support for the new Romanian political reality, „led by General Ion Antonescu” (Enache, 2012, p. 296). Along with the reorganization proposals, the legionnaires also demanded, among other things, the rehabilitation of the priests who had been killed as they belonged to the Legionary Movement, the provision of reparations for the priests persecuted for legionary sympathies or the review of the crematorium issue, aspects towards which the members of the Holy Synod did not show reluctance.

Although the decisions of the Holy Synod were not among the most convenient for legionary propaganda – “the Holy Synod decides to stick to the current law”, “there is no reason to require a modification of the organic law of the Church” (See more on basilica.ro, 2010) –, they were accepted by the Government, practically certifying the sympathy

and influence of the Church among the two parties involved in the exercise of executive power, the legionnaires and General Ion Antonescu.

### **The involvement of ecclesiastical personnel in the legionary insurgency**

Obviously, after the outbreak and suppression of the legionary insurgency from January 21-23, 1941, only a small part of the legionary priesthood and monastic staff remained in the graces of General Ion Antonescu, most of them being imprisoned or deported as punishments for their support or participation during the rebellion.

This state of affairs occurred from the extensive campaign coordinated by Ion Antonescu in order to identify, trace and punish all participants in the legionary insurgency, a context in which the general benefited from the fundamental support of the interwar intelligence and public order structures.

The successful achievement of the objectives of this campaign was possible as a result of the fact that, for the good management of the Christo-nationalism proposed by the legionnaires, the intelligence structures had acted in advance, in a concerted manner, to attract collaboration and then infiltrate in the radical nests some priests loyal to the rule of law, who acted from within to temper those who were too violent or too enthusiastic in action.

On this basis, through an undercover informant within the Romanian Orthodox Church (informative note no. 27 of January 28, 1941), the Secret Intelligence Service officers established that the legionary priests had been ordered to hide the weaponry possessed by the legionary insurgents even inside churches and building annexes, to be used "for the purpose of definitive victory". Such a situation would have materialized in the case of Ghergani Church, Dâmbovița county (or possibly Gorgani Church in Bucharest), as an informant of the police bodies signaled, in the preamble of the legionary insurgency, a series of suspicious shipments of baskets that might have contained ammunition<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Alerted by the police, the army carried out a brief raid at Ghergani Church and the buildings and houses around it. Due to the lack of specific training, the soldiers were not able to discover the ammunition storage locations, thus they requested the support of the SSI for the continuation of the investigation and monitoring.

The location was of increased operative interest because, in the opinion of the intelligence and public order structures, the legionary nest that operated around it would have been one of the “hotbeds the rebellion started from” (SRI Archives, 710, leaf 57). After the involvement of SSI officers in the investigation, it was established that on February 1, 1941, a number of 15 large, 17 medium and 25-30 small baskets were taken out empty from inside the church, but it was not possible to prove that ammunition had been transported in them (SRI Archives, 710, leaf 57).

Also, through the undercover informants, it was established that in the cities this type of clandestine weaponry could also have been found in cemeteries, the hiding of the “armour” being done at night. A number of aspects of the legionary action management were also pencilled in, for the procurement of the largest possible number of ammunition, the insurgents urging their friends and relatives who were under arms to hand over to them the entire unit of fire (directly or through the priests who were part of or sympathized with the Legionary Movement), with the mention that in case they had been controlled, they would have declared that they had lost it, so that to be sanctioned only by drawing up imputation slips (SRI Archives, 7519, leaf 97).

It is true that among the 2,851 people arrested and convicted for participating in the legionary insurgency in Bucharest, 218 (about 7.64%) were Orthodox priests, and weapon caches belonging to the Legionary Movement were discovered in ten monasteries. This number does not include the other categories of Orthodox ecclesiastical or educational personnel (Catalan, 2003).

On the other hand, by means of secret human sources belonging to the SSI, it was also established that the legionary priests were also involved in the insurgency by spoiling the church service, in the sense of allocating some moments for eulogizing the legionary leaders. For example, priest Stelian Dumitriu from the village of Goești and Dumitriu Gheorghe from the village of Brăești, both in Iași county, former legionnaire commanders, “on the occasion of the Divine Service, they commemorated in the Church” persons such as Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, Ion Moța, Vasile Marin and “other legionnaires who fell in the line of duty” (SRI Archives, 7519, leaf 111).

The attitude of these priests, as established by the cadres of the Gendarmerie Service within the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie after the rebellion of January 1941, was criticized by the majority of the inhabitants of the rural territory of Romania, the peasants condemning “harshly the attitude of the priests who left the care of the altar and took up arms against the Government, associating themselves with gangs of thieves and criminals”.

Moreover, many of the peasants intended to leave the Orthodox Christian religion and convert to different religious sects. Such concrete cases were reported in Vîntul de Jos, Alba County, where the villagers refused to enter the church until the ecclesiastical unit was to be sanctified again, and some of them chose to convert to baptism. Also, in the villages of Iași County, the inhabitants wanted to join even sects in the region which had not been officially acknowledged (SRI Archives, 7519, leaf 22).

After the suppression of the legionary rebellion, some of the priests who stayed away from the events sought to prove that their honour and image had not been tarnished (by agreeing to collaborate and support the legionaries), asking the local high prelates to provide them with copies of the aforementioned appointment documents.

In such a situation was, for example, priest Aurel Bazilescu from “Saint Archangels” Church in Craiova, former arch-pope in the period 1939-1940, who asked His Eminence (IPS) Metropolitan Nifon, Archbishop of Craiova and Metropolitan of Oltenia, Râmnic and Severin to support him in the specified sense (SRI Archives, 1395, leaf 2). At the same time, Vasile C. Gregorian, the parish priest of Pitarmasu Church in Bucharest, proceeded in a similar way.

The positive-participative reaction of the Metropolitan of Oltenia, Râmnic and Severin to these requests was influenced by a personal address received from the Ministry of Cults and Arts, Directorate of Religions (address registered at the Metropolitan Church with no. 2181 on February 11, 1941) through which the ministerial authorities drew his attention to the observance of articles 4-7, 22 and 25 of the Decree – Law no. 236/1941, for the suppression of facts that endanger the existence and interests of the state, published in the *Official Gazette* no. 31 on February 6, 1941, a request that had to be brought to the attention of all

the clerical and administrative staff within that diocese, with all the “necessary clarifications”.

The request of the Ministry of Cults and Arts was immediately put into practice, as on February 18, 1941, IPS Nifon sent in writing to the church staff that they risked punishments of 10-25 years of hard labour or losing their right to pension and the diplomas they had obtained in case they failed to comply exactly with the claims of the authorities (SRI Archives, 1395, 10-13). To strengthen this idea and the future line of action, the metropolitan asked all the priests and church officials to take note of his resolution under their holographic signatures.

Later, the high prelate was submitted another address (no. 9810) from the state bodies – the Legion of Gendarmes Dolj, requesting the express provision of a nominal situation with the priests and church singers who took part to the legionary rebellion.

Obviously, response of the church was a negative one, although there were complaints at the level of Dolj Prefecture according to which “some priests continue to do politics and challenge the communal authorities” (SRI Archives, 1395, 14-17). In fact, prior to the legionary rebellion, in the first days of January 1941, the police authorities had communicated the Prefecture of Dolj County that “priests are making propaganda for gathering ranks around the idea of the Church, basically for the Legionary Movement” (SRI Archives, 1395, leaf 24).

With the support of the intelligence and public order structures, 15 “pious” priests were initially identified among the people who, according to their information, were members or sympathizers of the Legionary Movement – examples in this sense are D. Cinciu, Bălașa, Mirescu, “Stoian from the Metropolitan Church”, “deacon Sacerdoceanu from the Metropolitan Church”, Marin Popa called Nemoiu – Obedeanu, “priest Begu from the Metropolitan Church” (members), Nicolae Stoenescu, Pretorian, Preoteșcu and C. Zamfirescu from the Church of St. Nicolae Dorobăntia (supporters) (SRI Archives, 1395, leaf 55).

Most of them were “morally acquitted” because “there was no action on the part of the rebellious legionnaires on the territory of Dolj County” (an obviously flawed statement), and the suspects signed witness statements and oaths in front of the church authorities.

However, priest Virgil Pârvănescu from Radovan commune, who took an active part in the preparatory activities of the attempted rebellion, was handed over to the authorities. Also, Archimandrite Ghenadie Caraza, abbot of Bistrița Monastery and legionary activist, was proven to have contributed to the support of the legionary rebellion with various sums of money. They were joined by priest Alexandru Levinschi, who had kept secret the participation of another priest and his son in the legionary rebellion (the reason for which he was disciplinary moved to the parish in Măceșu de Jos), and priest Gheorghe Gologan from Bascov commune, who was sent to court for peddling fake news – later acquitted (SRI Archives, 1395, 140-141).

After the presented facts, on February 12, 1941, IPS Nifon sent an extensive speech to the clergy under his command, in which he expressly stated that “the horrors of January 21-23 tell us decisively that in the Church’s field of the human soul there is still so much work to do”. In this sense, the high prelate lamented on “the malice and hatred in the souls of some people”, “the ferocious crimes against the soldiers of the country and the guardians of order or against some people guilty of having other opinions and principles of serving the State”, an aspect that made him shiver because “such horrors” were also in “the world of our university youth (...) lured and led on wrong paths”. IPS Nifon also recommended a “cure” for the above-mentioned facts, namely that the priests and bishops should live as true Christians, to be servants only of the Holy Altar, avoiding any activity that could spoil their prestige, an aspect valid only by not doing politics, “and if he had entered, let him get out of the whirlwind of political battles” (SRI Archives, 1395, 28-29).

Obviously, through this speech – no. 2451/February 12, 1941, IPS Nifon was trying to excuse and separate his own organization from the extremist actions of the legionnaires, as it became more and more likely that the priesthood and the ecclesiastical staff would be declared accomplices in the initiation and degeneration of the legionary insurgency. At the same time, through the content of this document, IPS Nifon adapted his speech to “such a beautiful call of the very worthy Leader of the State, made to the servants of the Romanian Shrines”.

Three days later, IPS Nifon’s “concerns” were confirmed by the decision of General Radu Rosetti, a military officer appointed by General

Ion Antonescu to head the Ministry of Instruction, Education, Cults and Arts, which expressly forbade the clergy to join, activate or participate in political actions of any nature.

Similar to Metropolitan Nifon, sensing the risks for the future status of the Romanian Orthodox Church and considering self-protective purposes, Patriarch Nicodim took the decision to publicly support the actions of the pro-Antonescian forces and the way they acted for suppressing the insurgents. Thus, in the telegram regarding the legionary rebellion addressed to Ion Antonescu, Patriarch Nicodim showed a praiseworthy and obedient position towards the leader of the Romanian state, emphasizing the justice of the “historic step” that General Ion Antonescu made for “saving the Fatherland” and declaring that the Church representatives “warmly ask God to give you strength, so that you can successfully carry out your work until the complete salvation of the Homeland and the Romanian Nation” (Enache, 2012, p. 290-300).

Moreover, in order to prove their devotion to the Antonesian authorities, the elders of the Orthodox clergy did not hesitate to apply, even in the context in which the investigations of the Military Justice were not completed, various measures against those priests who, through the address of the Ministry of Instruction, Education, Cults and Arts no. 13.515/1941, were still suspected of supporting in the past or at present the exponents of the legionary insurgency. The nature and extent of these measures differed from one case to another, usually summing up to the extension of investigations and the investigation of church bodies (examples: priests Emil and Virgil Berbescu from the parish in Rusăneștii de Jos), suspensions from service until the presentation of the certificate of acquittal from the Military Justice and “reproaches for attitude” from the Metropolitan of origin (examples: priest Mihail Delcea from the parish of Gostavăț, Romanați, and priest Alexandru Popescu from the parish of Caracal), or disciplinary transfers to other parishes (example: priest Aurel Ionescu from Fleștenoaga parish, Romanați, transferred to Bucura parish, Mehedinți). In some particular cases, as a result of not complying with the presentation of “clarifications”, the punishments were supplemented with the measure of salary withholding, as

happened in the case of priest Ștefan Smărandescu from the parish of Dăbuleni (SRI Archives, 1395, leaf 84).

Sensing the opportune moment to secure the loyalty of most of the hierarchs, upon the advice of the intelligence structures and of General Ilie Șteflea, Ion Antonescu reacted, confidentially requesting the BOR leadership to draw up proposals for rewarding its own officials and private citizens (for example from among diocesan consistories or parish committees) who distinguished themselves or were wounded in the actions to suppress the rebellion. The proposals were centralized in separate tables for each section – officials or private citizens – and contained data on the ecclesiastical institutions to which they belonged, the positions held and the “worthy deeds” for which they were proposed for reward. For private citizens, the profession, age and domicile had to be mentioned as well.

In parallel, with the same purpose, Ion Antonescu ordered the drawing up of similar tables for ecclesiastical officials and citizens who “died in the line of duty in the battles to suppress the rebellion”, with the mention that for each proposal the action they took part in had to be specified and the locality where it took place, residence, profession, marital status (married, number and age of children) and material status (SRI Archives, 1395). These were measures approved by the Church, especially since by applying them – through premiums or financial aids – the clergy could justify the expediency and justice of the official pro-Antonescian position among the communities of believers.

Later, aiming at positioning the Church among the organizations supporting the social-political objectives proposed by loyal interest circles, the Head of the State ordered Ivan Iorgu, the head of the Department of Cults within the Ministry of Instruction, Education, Cults and Arts, to maintain permanent communication with its representatives, especially in the perspective of maintaining equidistance from legionary propaganda actions (SRI Archives, 1395, leaf 280). This initiative of the general had been agreed with the leaders of the intelligence structures, the appropriateness of the measure being unanimously assumed. For example, based on it, through the confidential address with no. 17, 354 of September 3, 1941, Ivan Iorga asked IPS Nifon to take preventive action so that the priests refrain from any

manifesto that could be interpreted as “association with the actions to leave the national discipline of those who do not understand the meanings of the historical courses which we actually live today”.

Obviously, despite General Antonescu’s decisions, there was no general applicability in the doctrinal and actional optics of the clergy, as the pro-legionary attitude continued to be shared by some of the priests even after the suppression of the insurgency in January 1941, and they also got involved in the preparation of some attacks. As it follows from the address of March 26, 1941 of the Corps of Detectives, Group IV, to the Commander of the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, the priest from Melicești village, Telega commune, Prahova county, had acted in this direction, as he was part of a terrorist group called “The Wall of Death” whose goal was to assassinate General Antonescu (SRI Archives, 1019, leaf 96).

At the same time, priest Andrei Mihăilescu, the parish of St. Ilie Gorgani Church in Bucharest, continued to be in the attention of the intelligence and police structures until the fall of 1942, as a result of his spiritual affinities with the Legionary Movement and the fact that “he paraded the piety for the cult, trying to prove this through a lot of religious services such as exhumations, reburials, memorial services, baptisms, etc., all with a specific legionary ritual” (SRI Archives, 779, 80-82). In reality, priest Andrei Mihăilescu was so closely connected to the Legionary Movement that he was regarded as the confessor of its members and his parish was the place of worship for the extremist organization. On this basis, the priest was continuously among the members of the Legion, had obtained the grace of its leaders and his position was known by everyone.

On the other hand, priest Ionescu from the parish in Obârsia de Câmp, Mehedinți, had been so caught up in the legionary ideology and manifestations that the parishioners no longer accepted him in the community, the general dissatisfaction resulting in the writing of the “complaint” with non. 7712 submitted to the Prosecutor’s Office in Mehedinți and signed by eight of them (Ștefan Tudor, D. Vlad, B. Zaragiu, F. Mladin, Ion C. Gavril, C. Ghilea, Ion M. Vlaicu and Ștefan Bălănescu). Through its content, the villagers accused the priest of a wide range of facts: legionary clandestine propaganda (“although he swore on the Holy

Cross that he had withdrawn, on September 6, 1940 he was the first to start organizing this movement”, “after the rebellion in Bucharest he declared in the town hall that he was a revolutionary, and after the revolution they would come out stronger”, “during and after the rebellion, in the holy church, he continued to salute with *Long live the Legion and the Captain!*”, insults and beatings to the opponents of the extremist organization (a villager was saved from a heavy beating by the village priest), paramilitary training and participation through an intermediary in the legionary insurgency, or illicit business and food speculation in favour of the Legionary Movement (“he distributed rice or cotton to the faithful on condition that they would become legionaries”, “it is not known what he did with the fund collected from a legionary celebration on December 25, 1940 or with other aids from the village”). To achieve the legionary objectives was a priority to priest Ionescu’s vocational responsibilities, so he concertedly neglected the traditional religious practices, such as the religious service, which made the parishioners look for a priest in another commune (SRI Archives, 1395).

### Conclusions

In order to put into practice their reformist doctrine, of spiritual preparation and purification of the post-war Romanian society, the legionary commands adopted a fanatical doctrine from the very beginning, the religious factor being one of the pillars of individualization and exaltation of the social masses for propagandistic purposes. In their ideological scheme, customs, traditions and Christian religion were pure forms of continuity of the autochthonous spiritual treasure, background in which the Romanian Orthodox Church had to assume the role of fundamental institution of the nation and participate, together with the legionnaires, in the realization and preaching of the “revolution”.

Most of the time, this collaboration between clerics and legionnaires was tainted by fundamentalist political interests, thus subjugating and directing the church hierarchies in the sense of remodelling and fanaticizing the Christian religion according to the legionary religious paradigm. On this basis, the legionary commands were able to create a source of radicalized recruits, well indoctrinated,

ready at any moment to act against the “enemies” and to sacrifice themselves for the accomplishment of the legionary ideals.

At the same time, the new legionary order also required an authoritarian reform within the Church, an action aimed at the subordination of religious institutions at a normative and human level, by placing in decision-making positions “trustworthy” people from among the followers and sympathizers of the Iron Guard.

The priesthood and ecclesiastical staff reacted differently to these challenges, depending on the level of their position in the church hierarchy, the evolution of the internal and international political situation, or the contextual interests of image, self-protection or ascension on the clerical hierarchy. The legionary ideology was generally accepted and assimilated by ordinary priests and hierarchs, who had influence on the local and zonal communities among those who showed a critical attitude towards the old regimes. Instead, the Orthodox Patriarchate and important church hierarchs adopted a more reserved, politically balanced official attitude.

In the same spirit of the need to carefully manage the legionary revolutionary project, we can argue the preference of the BOR hierarchs for Ion Antonescu compared to the radical elites of the Legionary Movement, especially during the moments of social-political tension, such as the legionary insurgency of January 1941.

On the other hand, I conclude that legionary religious fanaticism was a dominant phenomenon in the interwar socio-political reality in Romania, presupposing the adaptation of Christian-Orthodox dogma to the percept and ideology of the Legionary Movement. Since behaviours and actions of extreme violence were based and developed on such a foundation (attacks against those who contested the legionaries, the Jewish pogrom), I consider the legionary religious fanaticism constituted the most powerful threat to the optimal environment of public order and safety for the Romanian citizens during the mentioned period.

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