

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The “Is” at Home, the “Ought” Abroad: Self-Comparison as Self-Criticism and the Transylvanian Model in Early Twentieth-Century Romania

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Abstract

What happens when nation-builders in an independent state imagine themselves to have fallen behind kinfolk living under imperial oppression, and how does this affect their vision of a future of national unity? This paper explores the shapes that critical self-comparison could take among Romanians in the Kingdom of Romania around the turn of the twentieth century by considering three interconnected vignettes. First, it outlines the context in which politicized notions of mutual interdependence between the Kingdom and Transylvania allowed for comparison as self-criticism to take root and gain salience in the public sphere. It explores the implications that comparison as self-criticism had on ascribing agency and apportioning blame for causes of the disparity between state and kinfolk. Second, it examines two Transylvanian travelogues produced by major political and cultural figures on the fringes of the Romanian establishment, and, in a reflexive move, contrasts their politics of comparison. Third, it offers a grassroots perspective on how the travelogues of teachers and priests, as rank-and-file nation-builders, expressed these topoi. The article contributes to the nascent trend of considering historical comparisons in actors’ own terms, and as historical processes unto themselves.

Keywords: Romania; Transylvania; Austria-Hungary; nineteenth-century nationalism; self-comparison

Introduction

In August 1905, a grand exhibition set up by the ASTRA¹ association in Sibiu/Hermannstadt, Transylvania celebrated the fruition of four decades’ effort on the

¹ASTRA is the acronym for Asociațiunea transilvană pentru literatura română și istoria poporului român (The Transylvanian association for Romanian literature and the history of the Romanian people). “Transylvania,” here, is, unless specifically stated, used as shorthand for all territories inhabited by Romanians in the Kingdom of Hungary, since this was how historical actors tended to refer to the region at large.

part of the region's nationalist Romanian intellectual, ecclesiastic, and political elites: the inauguration of an ethnographic and historical museum, accompanied by a series of public events showcasing the cultural achievements of the Romanian community, past and present. The support of a dense network of institutions (such as popular banks,² for the establishment of which ASTRA had militated³) and numerous fund collection drives gave the inauguration the legitimacy of a truly collective effort.

Since its founding in 1861, ASTRA had been the most prominent and active Romanian association in Habsburg lands, setting itself the task of mediating between the vanguard of the national movement and the Romanian-speaking peasantry, across the Orthodox-Uniate confessional divide. At a time when tactics espoused by nationalist Romanian political elites in Austria-Hungary oscillated between all-out activism and boycotting a political system seen as geared toward their oppression, ASTRA became increasingly preoccupied with co-opting the rural masses, through village libraries stocked with significant holdings from the neighboring independent Kingdom of Romania, and popular conferences.⁴ The relative weakness of an urban Romanian middle class—even as it had come to lead the national movement⁵—was, as in Romania, a stumbling-block, and it made the reliance on teachers and priests as foot-soldiers of nation-building, to a degree, comparable. Likewise, low literacy rates were an obstacle to nationalizing the peasantry, though this applied to Hungarian efforts as much as Romanian ones.⁶ Yet, in Transylvania, the role of local actors was even more important, particularly because the state opposed rather than supported this nationalizing project. That fact, in turn, gave such mid-level elites further bargaining power and prominence within the movement and particularly in ASTRA.⁷ The Hungarian nationalizing project attempted to carve out a space for economic and cultural dominance in its own half of the empire after the *Ausgleich* of 1867. In reaction, Romanians, too, embarked on a program of economic nation-building, with associational life at its forefront.⁸

Certainly, all of the above held true of *nationalist* Romanian activism: national indifference,⁹ contingent and fluid forms of everyday ethnicity in regional

²Lucian Dronca, *Băncile românești din Transilvania în perioada dualismului austro-ungar (1867–1918)* (Cluj: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2003), 463–96.

³Matei Pamfil, “Asociația Transilvană pentru Literatura Română și Cultura Poporului Român” (ASTRA) și rolul ei în cultura națională (1861–1950) (Cluj: Dacia, 1986), 260–69.

⁴Alexandru Nicolaescu, “The Initiatives of ASTRA Meant to Improve the Lives of the Romanian Peasants in Transylvania (1900–1914),” *Transylvanian Review* 26, 4 (2017): 71–83.

⁵Keith Hitchins, *A Nation Affirmed: The Romanian National Movement in Transylvania, 1860–1914* (Bucharest: Encyclopaedic Publishing House, 1999), 101–7.

⁶Ágoston Berecz, “The Languages of Village Governments in the Eastern Stretches of Dualist Hungary: Rights and Practices,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 99, 1 (2021): 1–30, 28.

⁷Tanya Dunlap, “ASTRA and the Appeal of the Nation: Power and Autonomy in Late-Nineteenth-Century Transylvania,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 34 (2003): 215–46.

⁸Katherine Verdery, *Transylvanian Villagers: Three Centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 181–229.

⁹Robert Nemes, “Obstacles to Nationalization on the Hungarian-Romanian Language Frontier,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 43 (2012): 28–44.

peripheries,¹⁰ or forms of state loyalty diverging from the nationalist script¹¹ were also present, though mostly suppressed in the historiography by subsequent teleological narratives. Even scions of nationalist elites often attended Hungarian high schools as a means of maintaining upward mobility via language competency acquisition,¹² and, in some sub-regional contexts, members of the ASTRA leadership involved themselves in Hungarian politics. Nevertheless, both ASTRA's museum and exhibition *and* the lead-up to them were meant to be interpreted as a deliberate, nationalist show of forces, and a privileged arena for competitive comparison¹³: a display of cross-class, inter-confessional unity and cooperation, equally intended for local,¹⁴ imperial, and trans-Carpathian audiences.

This was certainly the lesson internalized by a delegation of two children and one teacher from the “Ferdinand” Agricultural Orphanage near the village of Zorleni, in Moldavia. The orphanage, established in 1898 by King Carol I (1839–1914, r. 1866–1914) and named after the heir to the throne, was intended to serve as an institution through which peasant children could receive comprehensive agronomic training. The 1905 field trip was chronicled by teacher Leon Mrejer[i]u (1879–1945), who immediately published it as a short pamphlet. Although its subtitle billed it as a report to “the Administration of the Royal Court,”¹⁵ judging by its tone and exhortations, peasants seemed to have been its intended audience. In any case, this was not a document one could have suspected of subversive intent. Yet, the pamphlet returned, time and again, to a take-home message that seemed inherently problematic: Romanians in Transylvania, in the absence of—or, rather, despite—state intervention, had achieved a higher level of cultural and social development than those in the independent Kingdom of Romania. A key moment of the sixteen-page text described the teacher and two children visiting a village near Sibiu/Hermannstadt/Nagyszeben, in one of the most prosperous Romanian regions of Transylvania, culminating with Sunday mass: “Great were our wonder and our spiritual contentment upon hearing the villagers; their women and their children all sing in response to the liturgy as one. It seemed as if we were dreaming, when that handful of Romanian peasants, in their ancient costume, beautiful and pure, raised their voice to the Almighty in pious song. We looked at each other, wonderstruck by

¹⁰Gábor Egry, “Unruly Borderlands: Border-Making, Peripheralization and Layered Regionalism in Post-First World War Maramureş and the Banat,” *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 27, 6 (2020): 709–31.

¹¹Tímea Berki, “From Grigore Moldovan to Moldován Gergely: A Career in Homeland,” *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Series Philologica* 3, 2 (2011): 156–66.

¹²Ágoston Berecz, “Building a Bilingual Elite: ‘National Indifference’ and Romanian Students in Hungarian High Schools (1867–1914),” *Austrian History Yearbook*, <Building a Bilingual Elite: “National Indifference” and Romanian Students in Hungarian High Schools (1867–1914) | Austrian History Yearbook | Cambridge Core> (last accessed 1 Aug. 2024).

¹³Wilibald Steinmetz, “Introduction: Concepts and Practices of Comparison in Modern History,” in Wilibald Steinmetz, ed., *The Force of Comparison: A New Perspective on Modern European History and the Contemporary World* (New York: Berghahn, 2019), 1–32, 15.

¹⁴Stéphanie Danneberg, “L'exposition artisanale: représentation et «mise en scène» de l'économie «nationale» en Transylvanie, 1868–1914,” *Revue d'Allemagne et des pays de langue allemande* 50, 2 (2018): 441–56.

¹⁵Leon Mrejeru, *O călătorie în Transilvania făcută de învățătorul Orfelinatuului Agricol “Ferdinand” împreună cu doi orfani flăcăi cu prilejul Expoziției românești din Sibiu în august 1905: raport făcut Administrației Curtei Regale* (Bucharest: Carol Göbl, 1905).

what we saw and heard, as if to ask one another: ‘When will we, in our free country, reach this level of progress?’¹⁶

Mrejeru further noted that the experience that Transylvania offered to his pupils, compared to the decrepit social and moral landscape of Zorleni, was a salutary reminder for the children, “who may now see and feel that not all Romanians are like that, for they would otherwise wholly lose their confidence in the good future of our nation.”¹⁷ Wards of the state, the orphans were nevertheless in the awkward position of needing to step beyond the nation’s borders in order to witness its full potential. The “is” at home fell short of the “ought” abroad, the latter being a more potent signifier of the temporal horizon of emancipation of the superordinate national “we.” The pamphlet’s conclusion was straightforward and categorical: “Romanians in the Kingdom may learn from what took place in Sibiu: a) where brotherhood between the learned and the foundation of the nation, the peasant, without whom all is precarious, may lead; b) the beautiful results that may be achieved by associations of all kinds; c) what constant work may achieve ...; d) how Romanians in the Kingdom of Hungary know to love and honor their national treasures.”¹⁸ To either king or peasant, this pedagogical glorification of the agency of kinfolk thriving beyond the nation-state, accompanied by a sense of self-deprecation, would have surely read amiss—unless, of course, such a discourse was already institutionalized and domesticated.

Though this travelogue is a relatively minor shred of textual evidence, it serves as a fitting introduction to the core issue of self-comparison as a historically situated practice that could take strange and counterintuitive forms. Increasing attention has been paid in recent years to recovering the historiographic tradition(s) of historical comparison as a practice¹⁹ and the more abstract issue of historicizing practices of comparison in and of themselves.²⁰ It has been remarked that, born as a handmaiden of the national project, modern historiography has proven largely resistant to comparison²¹ and to the relativization of national exceptionalism that this might entail.²² It nonetheless is true that (self-)comparison was no less a matter of concern for nationalists and nation-builders. It is with this in mind that the present article seeks to elucidate how the idea that Romanians in Transylvania managed to thrive

¹⁶Ibid., 7. This, presumably, was an Orthodox rather than Uniate church; Uniates retain many Orthodox rituals but adhere to Catholic hierarchies.

¹⁷Ibid., 11–12.

¹⁸Ibid., 14.

¹⁹Balázs Trencsényi, Constantin Iordachi, and Péter Apor, eds., *The Rise of Comparative History: Perspectives on Comparative and Transnational History in East Central Europe and Beyond: A Reader* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2021).

²⁰*Inter alia*: Bruce Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges: Explorations in, on, and with Comparison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Renaud Gagné, Simon Goldhill, and G.E.R. Lloyd, eds., *Regimes of Comparatism: Frameworks of Comparison in History, Religion and Anthropology* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Wilibald Steinmetz, ed., *The Force of Comparison: A New Perspective on Modern European History and the Contemporary World* (New York: Berghahn, 2019); Angelika Eppel, Walter Erhart, and Johannes Grave, eds., *Practices of Comparing: Towards a New Understanding of a Fundamental Human Practice* (n.p.: Transcript Verlag, 2020); Eleonora Rohland et al., eds., *Contact, Conquest and Colonization: How Practices of Comparing Shaped Empires and Colonialism around the World* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

²¹Marcel Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), x.

²²Aram A. Yengoyan, “Introduction: On the Issue of Comparison,” in Aram A. Yengoyan, ed., *Modes of Comparison: Theory and Practice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 1–31, 8.

despite oppression became a recurring theme in Romanian public discourse in the 1890s and was fully entrenched by the first decade of the twentieth century, as a conclusion drawn from what we may call self-comparison as self-criticism. Empirically grounded in a wealth of sources, including parliamentary debates, periodicals, travelogues, and pamphlets, this study examines this dynamic of contrasting the “is” at home with the “ought” abroad, and thereby broadens our understanding of how (and what) nationalists compared.

Perhaps the best-known treatment of self-comparison in the field of nationalism studies is Benedict Anderson’s “specter of comparisons,” taken as a key component of the (post-)colonial condition vis-à-vis the internalized normative image of the Western metropolis, which operates within a binary relational framework of empire versus nation-building.²³ Certainly, in our case, entanglements between nation and empire become immediately apparent. These include Transylvanian Romanians’ position within the imperial order of Austria-Hungary; their reactions to both Hungarian intra-imperial processes of nation-building and the process of nation-state-building in the Kingdom of Romania; and finally, and closer to the subject of our inquiry, the way in which nation-state-builders in the Kingdom themselves made comparative sense of their position in relation to the Transylvanians. Recent work questioning the binary division between processes of empire- and nation-building notwithstanding,²⁴ another caveat must be made here. “The experience of living comparatively,” of being molded and haunted by the cultural, political, and civilizational normativities of the West, was common to the global semi-periphery even where direct colonial intrusion was absent.²⁵ This, too, was the case in Eastern Europe whenever tensions arose between the trajectories and categories of Western historical development and those of self-perceived national specificity.²⁶ But though in independent Romania actors made comparative sense of what the putative historical absence of, for instance, Western-style “feudalism” might, for better or worse, allow them to imagine in terms of their agency and civilizational status,²⁷ this was not the only salient discourse of comparison.

The trans-partisan consensus in *fin-de-siècle* Romania was, as I will demonstrate, that the independent Kingdom of Romania somehow fell short of its developmental expectations, and that self-comparisons to Romanians across the Carpathians, in the Kingdom of Hungary, revealed the latter’s superiority. The notion that, by some (quasi-)utopian displacement, a space outside the geographic core of the state could offer the nation a better chance at virtuous development was, for instance, a feature of the late Victorian imperial experience, whereby white settler dominions imagined

²³Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

²⁴See, for instance, a special issue of *Thesis Eleven*, 139, 1 (2017).

²⁵Harry Harootunian, “Some Thoughts on Comparability and the Space-Time Problem,” *Boundary 2* 32, 2 (2005): 23–52, 26.

²⁶Antonis Liakos, “The Canon of European History and the Conceptual Framework of National Historiographies,” in Matthias Middell and Lluís Roura, eds., *Transnational Challenges to National History Writing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 315–42.

²⁷Andrei Dan Sorescu, “National History as a History of Compacts: Jus Publicum Europaeum and Suzerainty in Romania in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *East Central Europe* 45, 1 (2018): 63–93.

themselves as “better Britains.”²⁸ Yet fantasies of national rebirth offered by some colonial blank slate do not readily translate into how Romania saw kinfolk in Transylvania. For those in the Kingdom, the latter *were*, if anything, the “natives” of the region, embarked on a historical journey of anti-colonial *Reconquista*. Transylvania was therefore not imagined as a dumping-ground for a proletarian surplus population in the Kingdom that would somehow offer it the proper conditions for its regeneration. Instead, against all odds, the agency of local kinfolk appeared to have set them on a comparatively surer course of progress.

The crux of the tension lay in the background assumption that, once the nation-state established itself as the legitimate custodian of the interests of the nation writ large, negative self-comparison could only lead to self-criticism. After all, why would Romanians under foreign oppression offer models for socio-economic and cultural development when their own respective imperial states were emphatically perceived not to be on their side? Comparisons between the “is” at home and the “ought” abroad bedeviled Romanian nation-builders and prompted a search for culprits. But self-critical comparisons were also quickly institutionalized, defanged, and integrated into official discourse on a ritualized level, though that did not prevent dissenting political forces from making full rhetorical use of the contrast between the paltry achievements of the state and the heroic triumphs of kinfolk under duress. Inasmuch as the temporal horizon of political union existed in some unspecified (if much-desired) future, literate elites in the Kingdom saw this lag as something that had to be overcome if the state hoped to retain its legitimacy as the core of a subsequently enlarged polity. Moreover, the temporal politics of projecting superlative authenticity onto kinfolk created a spectrum spanning a past of rootedness and purity, preserved in the present as a model for future development.²⁹ Focusing on the discourse of actors from Romania proper, this article brackets the question of just how invested Transylvanian Romanians themselves were in projects of political union at that time. Doing so nevertheless allows us to see how their voices or gazes—their own supposed visions of comparison—were strategically ventriloquized or reproduced by political actors in Romania proper.

That “the fictive we” of the nation relies on comparisons that generate a “specular play of self and other”³⁰ is a mainstay of theories of nationalism, just as it holds true of how empires engaged in processes of self-comparison as a matter of course³¹ and in ways that may be productively historicized.³² As has been remarked regarding Transylvania, the entangled processes of intra-regional identity-building in the Habsburg periphery were part of a “web of comparisons.”³³ Yet one may also point to situational distinctions between the “we-hood” generated by “shared activities within the collectivity” and the “us-hood” contrasted to the foreign Other

²⁸James C. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Angloworld* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 467.

²⁹I am grateful to an anonymous CSSH reviewer for this insight.

³⁰Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, “Transnationalizing Comparison: The Uses and Abuses of Cross-Cultural Analogy,” *New Literary History* 40, 3 (2009): 473–99, 475.

³¹Philippa Levine, “Is Comparative History Possible?” *History and Theory* 53, 3 (2014): 331–47, 339.

³²Ann Laura Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post)Colonial Studies,” *Journal of American History* 88, 3 (2001): 829–65, 862–63.

³³Borbála Zsuzsanna Török, *Exploring Transylvania: Geographies of Knowledge and Entangled Histories in a Multiethnic Province, 1790–1918* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 9.

“through competition, enmity, symbiosis, or the contrastive use of stereotypes and boundary symbols.”³⁴ In our case, the preordained unity of the nation across time and borders was taken as an axiom that allowed for the projection of a superordinate “we” on the part of utterers invested in a national(izing) project. More simply said, *all* “Romanians” could be envisaged as working toward the accomplishment of some grand shared cultural-historical task, even if ultimate political unity was not necessarily or openly stated as its conclusion. But there was also room for an “us” and “them,” when exercises in comparison were meant to highlight differences *within* the body of the nation as a geographically distributed agent. Pedagogical reflections and temporal projections of prognosticated flourishing or decay demarcated the otherwise intensely similar Transylvanian Other, with “difference-as-inferiority” assumed by the Kingdom in terms of self-criticism.³⁵

It has been argued with reference to nineteenth-century Bosnia that there could be such a thing as a national “core” that happened to be—when viewed from the perspective of national awakensers in Serbia and the Habsburg Empire—out there, over among the villagers and cattle herders beyond the Ottoman border.³⁶ To a degree, the same may be said of the place taken by Transylvania in the imagination of the Kingdom of Romania, though not as a place of unredeemed backwardness, populated with “(br)others” as a liminal category of difference, and unsettling the binary between “brother” and “Other.”³⁷ True, “national awakensers” were aware that in Transylvania (as in Bosnia) empire had left its mark on some kinfolk, turning them from Orthodox into Uniates (or in Bosnia, into Muslims). However, in our case, the difference thus produced was not as destabilizing, and Transylvania had been, in fact, the region whence a “national revival” first arrived in the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But the category of “(br) other” does point to the difficulties of formalizing the mechanics of comparison when a gap and oscillation between “we” and “us” existed, even as this very gap allowed for comparison to make sense, to function as a practice and topos. Rather than seeking to reify historiographic teleologies according to which the preordained unity of the “we” found its logical and necessary territorial fulfilment in a unitary nation-state, in what follows I will unpack how, running parallel to the imaginary of expansionism, self-criticism fueled by self-comparison was also a salient feature of nationalist thought.

What remains to be clarified before our analysis can begin in earnest is where exactly such a propensity for self-criticism came from in the Kingdom of Romania. In what has aptly been called “the age of questions,”³⁸ Romanian politicians grappled with the irresolution of the “social question,” and also the “national question.” Or, rather, it may be said that both the “social question” of abolishing serfdom and the “national question” of securing international recognition of the autonomy of the

³⁴Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 67.

³⁵Simon Harrison, “Cultural Difference as Denied Resemblance: Reconsidering Nationalism and Ethnicity,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, 2 (2003): 343–61, 345–46.

³⁶Edin Hajdarpašić, *Whose Bosnia? Nationalism and Political Imagination in the Balkans, 1840–1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 31.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 15–17.

³⁸Holly Case, *The Age of Questions: Or, a First Attempt at an Aggregate History of the Eastern, Social, Woman, American, Jewish, Polish, Bullion, Tuberculosis, and Many other Questions over the Nineteenth Century, and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

United Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia had appeared to have been felicitously dealt with as a preamble to nation-state-building in the 1860s. By the century's end, these questions were perceived to have mutated, intersected, and reopened, triggering significant anxieties among Romanian statesmen. Hindsight proved troubling since, first, the effects of the 1864 land reform had turned out less than satisfactory, with the illiterate and politically disenfranchised peasant majority left still economically dependent on its former masters. Second, even after independence was attained in 1877–1878 and the Kingdom proclaimed in 1881, the “national question” persisted in the form of entanglements with kinfolk in an external form. And it was also internally extended to cover, to a growing degree, the perceived vital importance of the “peasant question” itself, which detonated in a major uprising in 1907.³⁹ It was against this backdrop, then, that self-comparison as self-criticism could function.

Here I will explore the shapes that this self-comparison on the part of Romanians in the Kingdom of Romania could take around the turn of the twentieth century by considering three interconnected vignettes. First, I will outline the context in which politicized notions of mutual interdependence between the Kingdom and Transylvania allowed for comparison as self-criticism to take root and gain salience in the public sphere. I will explore the implications it had for ascribing agency and apportioning blame for the causes underlying the disparity between state and kinfolk. Second, I will examine two Transylvanian travelogues produced by two major political and cultural figures on the fringes of the Romanian establishment, and contrast their own politics of comparison, in a reflexive move. Third, I shall offer a grassroots perspective on how the travelogues of teachers and priests as rank-and-file nation-builders reflected these topoi.

Who Is to Blame?

Our study begins with a turning-point in Romania's involvement with the national cause of its kinfolk: the 1890s, when Transylvanian political activism became a topic of explicitly political, rather than self-assumedly “cultural,” debate. In the 1880s, Transylvanian Romanians had become increasingly vocal and organized. They set up a Romanian National Party in 1881, which in 1882 issued a manifesto outlining its program and demands. The party systematically boycotted Hungarian elections: “passivism,” as this stance was called, was seen by all as a deliberate (if somewhat paradoxical) exertion of political agency until the early twentieth century. Between 1889 and 1892, however, factional struggle erupted over the submission of a further “memorandum” to emperor Franz Josef describing the historical and political injustices befalling Transylvanian Romanians and petitioning for national autonomy within Hungary. In the meantime, nationalist student organizations in Budapest, Bucharest, and Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg became embroiled in a transnational controversy and traded blows via pamphlets and counter-demonstrations over the same topics.⁴⁰ Moreover, the younger generation of

³⁹Irina Marin, *Peasant Violence and Antisemitism in Early Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁴⁰In Romania, the organization involved in the controversy was the “League for All-Romanian Cultural Unity” (Liga pentru Unitatea Culturală a tuturor Românilor), established in 1890. For an account of its militancy and the European impact of pro-Memorandist agitation, see Ștefan Pascu and C. Gh. Marinescu,

Romanian National Party leaders began seeking guidance from Bucharest, where a newly reorganized Liberal Party, under the leadership of D. A. Sturdza (1833–1914), sought to recapture power and popularity after its twelve-year tenure had ended in 1888. Things finally came to a head in 1892 when the delegation tasked with submitting the memorandum failed to reach the emperor, and a wave of political and legal repression subsequently targeted the movement. The trials of the so-called *memorandiști* between 1893 and 1894 became something of an international *cause célèbre* as the National Party was forced to languish on the fringes of legality.⁴¹

At the height of these tensions, MPs in Romania began marshalling a politicized discourse of positive difference, in the context of the Liberals' initial willingness to lend public support to the cause of the memorandum. Given this was simultaneously a matter of international relations and national import, such discourse came to reflect on state and nation alike. As Sturdza argued in the Senate in the autumn of 1893, the very existence of Transylvanian Romanians created a fortuitous ethnic buffer shielding the Romanian nation-state from foreign encroachment. In fact, he went on, the combined existence of Romania and Romanian kinfolk also represented “the most stable and brightly shining [nodal] point in solving the Eastern question.” Calling for stronger government support for the *memorandiști*, Sturdza further lauded their initiative, cautioning that, should the Transylvanians appear weak, the Kingdom would seem doubly so.⁴² Reactions were, predictably, quick to come. In December, the Chamber of Deputies saw Conservative Ion Grădișteanu (1861–1932) acknowledge the importance of the Transylvanian ethnic buffer, while still seeking to downplay fears of irredentism by framing the matter as an “external national question” in which intervention would be impossible, not least due to Transylvania's different historical trajectory.⁴³

But it was village teacher Constantin Dobrescu-Argeș (1856–1903), leader of a nascent peasant movement, who attempted to reframe the issue most originally: in a Europe where countries took “questions” seriously, Romania failed to do so. Dobrescu-Argeș saw the political attention given to the “Transylvanian question” as little more than a convenient way of ignoring the “peasant question” at home, which was ironic given the state of Transylvanian peasants: “In the political question, our peasant has everything to demand. [...] The question that must preoccupy us with every instant, regardless of party affiliation, is the peasant question, from a political, social, economic, national point of view. We are constantly concerned with the fate of our brothers beyond the mountains, of whom 85 percent are literate, and here not 10 percent. Romanians there have reached a full consciousness of their rights, but let us see—how have we fared?”⁴⁴

L'opinion publique internationale et le problème de l'unité nationale et politique des roumains (Bucharest: Editura Academiei R.S.R, 1989), 29–81. Uncomfortably, a secret treaty of alliance between Romania and the Central Powers had been signed in 1883.

⁴¹Keith Hitchens, *A Nation Affirmed*, 122–58.

⁴²D. A. Sturdza, *Senate*, 27 Nov. 1893, in *Desbaterile Senatului României* [Debates of the Romanian Senate], 54–55.

⁴³Ion Grădișteanu, *Chamber of Deputies*, 13 Dec. 1893, in *Desbaterile Adunării Deputaților* [Debates of the Chamber of Deputies], 178–80.

⁴⁴Constantin Dobrescu-Argeș, *Chamber of Deputies*, 13 Dec. 1893, in *Desbaterile Adunării Deputaților*, 185–88.

This was not intended as an anti-national(ist) dismissal of the Transylvanians' plight, even as Dobrescu-Argeș greatly exaggerated the literacy rate of Romanians there.⁴⁵ On the contrary, it called upon the Romanian state, through its political class, to prioritize its involvement in the "peasant question" insofar as Transylvania seemed to be well in the lead, and the "peasant question" itself was complex and crucial enough to be a "national question" in its own right.

The following years saw the recurring issue of not only *which* questions deserved to be prioritized, but *how* questions mirrored and refracted each other. Thus, in 1894, Sturdza fanned the fire of debates by proclaiming that a "national question" did still exist, albeit beyond the borders of the state, which had solved it by attaining its independence: "For our country, the national question is the greatest, for the current suffering experienced by Romanians there reminds us of our own past suffering."⁴⁶ The underlying thrust of this argument, therefore, lay with the assumption that the past of oppression had become a *past* thanks to the state: Transylvania, then, lived in the past from the standpoint of the Kingdom. Yet this argument could lend itself to an opposing stance. As historian Grigore Tocilescu (1850–1909) countered soon after, "Let us not confuse state politics with national ideals," drawing applause when claiming that, since the nation outside the state was *not* the state and therefore less important, he was prouder of being a Romanian *citizen* than of simply being a Romanian. Tocilescu put forth that "fortifying the kernel of Romanianism" that the nation-state represented was the logical priority, for if historical necessity would bring about the emancipation of all Romanians in the coming century, this first required a healthy Romanian Kingdom.⁴⁷ Revealingly, the reaction of the socialist press to Tocilescu's public acknowledgment of the relative superiority of Transylvanian peasants, and the corresponding need for a Cultural League to work to emancipate those in the Kingdom, was an ironic one: "This statement will be printed in the Official Gazette, like many other words spoken in our parliament. But these are words good only for 'the parliamentary struggle'—it's not as if they're mad enough to take them seriously, too!"⁴⁸ To dissenting political groups, the ritualized and wholly defanged nature of a potentially-subversive official discourse of self-blame already seemed obvious enough.

The above notwithstanding, soon after Sturdza came to power in 1895 he pivoted toward the position that Transylvanian matters were internal matters for Austria-Hungary to decide. He went so far as to cancel Romanian subsidies to various Transylvanian schools and churches, a form of state involvement he had loudly proclaimed as necessary but mismanaged by the previously-ruling Conservative Party.⁴⁹ This was a controversial move in view of the solidarity and gratitude Romanians in the Kingdom had long felt toward the Transylvanians. The role that Transylvanian scholars and teachers such as Gheorghe Lazăr (1779–1823) had played in kick-starting the development of national education and Westernization in the

⁴⁵ As "backward" regions in the imperial periphery, Romanian counties in Transylvania had low literacy rates (20–46 percent in 1907), but they were still higher than that in the Kingdom of Romania (17 percent in 1899); see Marin, *Peasant Violence*, 79.

⁴⁶D. A. Sturdza, *Senate*, 10 Dec. 1894, in *Desbaterile Senatului României*, 80.

⁴⁷Grigore Tocilescu, *Senate*, 12 Dec. 1894, in *Desbaterile Senatului României*, 177–78.

⁴⁸"Țeranii în Senat," *Lumea Nouă*, 14 Dec. 1894.

⁴⁹Keith Hitchins, "Austria-Hungary, Rumania and the Nationality Problem in Transylvania, 1894–1897," *Rumanian Studies* 4 (1979): 75–126, 81–87.

first half of the century was thoroughly acknowledged, and rhetorical parallels were drawn between their role and the Transylvanian-born princes who had founded the Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia in the Middle Ages.⁵⁰ But what the 1890s had brought about, in the context of the parliamentary debates we have just analyzed, was a correspondingly explicit politicization of how the relationship between state and nation functioned, with Transylvania as a sounding-board. The perceived success of Transylvanians' handling of the many facets of the "peasant/social/rural question" and the "national question" was systematically invoked—the state no longer appeared to have a monopoly on "question"-solving.

The rural press, for its part, used Transylvania as a benchmark when addressing and rebuking the peasantry, but also when writing *about* the peasantry and rebuking the state and society: Transylvania, in fact, was already in the future. At the same time, Transylvanian comparisons became part and parcel of the official output directed, even if at times obliquely, to the peasantry. Writers and politicians across the political spectrum referenced this topos, on a continuum between two rhetorical positions. On the one hand, indigence and ignorance in "free Romania" could be interpreted as proof of just how dysfunctional elites, the state, and society were—if a nation-state failed to catalyze the development of its national peasantry and fell short of the achievements accomplished by kinfolk, that was a major indictment of its legitimacy. On the other hand, glorifying the virtues of kinfolk self-organization and national consciousness could have as its corollary a critique of local peasants' lack thereof—if peasants elsewhere could flourish even under duress, then they, too, had the potential to do so, and were therefore (at least partly) to blame for their continued ignorance and indigence. Two caveats are necessary, however. First, these rhetorical positions are best understood as ideal-types. Blame was seldom ascribed strictly either to the peasantry or to the state/elites/society; rather, this was a process through which the limits of the agency and blameworthiness of either party were reflected upon. Second, even if the achievements and progress of kinfolk were lauded, this did not prevent the simultaneous existence of a discourse bemoaning and condemning their oppression.

For instance, such arguments were used in official communications on Romania's Crown Estates, whose purpose of providing income for the royals was doubled by that of offering a model for rural development, something which placed them in direct symbolic competition with Transylvania. But competition entailed comparison. In the circulars submitted to the staff of the Estates by chief administrator Ioan Kalinderu (1840–1913), equally intended as public proclamations to be read to villagers, one could find musings and instructions on "The Cultivation of Religiosity." Therein, Transylvanian kinfolk were lauded for their regular attendance of mass, their priests for their artful sermons, and their mayors and teachers for updating peasants assembled in the churchyard on political and administrative news.⁵¹ This was the image of an orderly community, where piety intertwined with national consciousness, and it became a popular topos unto itself.

Non-official rural publications were at least as likely to invoke the example of Transylvania. It is instructive to consider the case of *Șeșetorea Sățenului* (The villager's evening gathering), one of the several incarnations of a periodical set up

⁵⁰A. Papiu Ilarian, *Vieti'a, operele si idele lui Georgiu Sincai din Sinc'a* (Bucharest: Tipografia Nationale, 1869), 3–4.

⁵¹Ion Kalinderu, *Îndrumări date agenților Domeniului Coroanei de către Ion Kalinderu* (Bucharest: Joseph Göbl, Bucharest, 1900), 16.

by a committee of teachers and priests. Within the space of one year between 1900 and 1901 it made constant references to Transylvania. The economic emancipation of Transylvanian Romanians through self-organized financial institutions was offered as an example to peasants.⁵² The evils of “luxury in lowland villages” appeared typical of Romania⁵³ but not Transylvania,⁵⁴ and the absence of Transylvanian-style sermons and popular conferences was decried as a cause for uprisings, which in turn proved to the international public (presumably Transylvanians included) that Romania was anything but advanced.⁵⁵ As one article exhorting peasants to “be thrifty” put it, “Transylvanians, though politically subjugated, are, by and large, masters of both land and commerce, the two pillars of a people’s life.”⁵⁶ All of this had a double thrust: self-blame, insofar as it was teachers and priests who ruefully noted that they lagged behind their Transylvanian counterparts, and a desire to convince peasants that collective self-emancipation was indeed achievable, as proven by their brethren.

By 1906, however, the state’s role also came under scrutiny, in the context of the national exhibition set up in Bucharest to mark the fortieth year of Carol’s reign and the 1,800th anniversary of the Roman victory over the native Dacians. It was intended as a counterpoint to Hungarian celebrations marking the “millennium” of the conquest of the Carpathian basin in 1896, and it openly implied the historical precedence of Romanian presence on either side of the mountains. The lavish event was intended to showcase the Kingdom’s achievements to one and all, including local peasants and Romanians beyond its borders, who also participated in the proceedings. And yet, as one article in *Șeșetorea Sătenuului* noted, calling for “the peasants’ awakening,” peasant delegates from abroad were welcomed mostly by town-dwellers, with local ploughmen insufficiently visible. Then again, the comparison was already painful: “Looking at our guests, peasants from subjugated Romanian provinces, all sturdy and well-built, with a look of alertness in their eyes, we could not help but think of our own poor villagers, all weak and wretched, old beyond their years, and saw all the better just how far our villagers have come to lag behind their brothers. It looked as if peasants living under foreign rule were the free ones, and the subjugated ones were our own. Subjugated in a free country.... What mockery!”⁵⁷

Thus, while the Sibiu exhibition of 1905 was an acceptable point of reference for lauding the agency and development of kinfolk, the Bucharest exhibition could be interpreted by dissenting voices as a failed exercise in bolstering the legitimacy of the state. The same sentiment was echoed throughout the pages of the socialist journal *Protestarea*, set up, as its name suggested, to protest the frivolousness of celebrating the accomplishments of the dynasty in a still-backward country. In its sixth issue, a two-part article⁵⁸ contrasted rumors of Romanian peasants emigrating—a phenomenon hitherto unheard of in the Kingdom but thoroughly associated with

⁵²P. Ciocâlțeu, “Necesitatea și foloasele societăților economice la sate,” *Șeșetorea Sătenuului* 4, 1 (1900–1901): 13–15.

⁵³“Luxul la satele de câmp,” *Șeșetorea Sătenuului* 4, 2 (1900–1901): 58–62.

⁵⁴[Sergiu] Cujbă, “Fiți economi,” *Șeșetorea Sătenuului* 4, 7–8 (1900–1901): 238.

⁵⁵Atty. D. Ciocănescu, “Revolte țărănești,” *Șeșetorea Sătenuului* 4, 4 (1900–1901): 133–36.

⁵⁶Cujbă, “Fiți economi,” 238.

⁵⁷“Deșteptarea sătenilor,” *Șeșetorea Sătenuului* 9, 9–10 (1906): 251–53.

⁵⁸“Emigrarea țaranilor. Cauzele emigrării. Noi și românii de peste munți,” *Protestarea*, 26 Feb. 1906, 1–2.

Transylvanians voting with their feet against ethnic oppression—with the relative prosperity of the rural population beyond the Carpathians. The article's first part depicted emigration as tragic but justifiable if one considered the prevalence of chronic diseases, ever-shrinking plots of land, and the local administration's corruption: "We are lucky that the peasantry, though plunged in the deepest misery, is gentle and patient—almost impossibly so—for if the wave of four million peasants would stir in the same way that [armed] electoral [hooligan] bands or the other social classes of the cities do, we cannot know what might come of it." In other words, the long-suffering peasant's peacefulness was what kept the state economically afloat and geopolitically-existing. The article's second part began, in fact, by stating, "As we must confess from outset, finding a similarity [between Romanian peasants on either side of the Carpathians] would be difficult: differences, however, are aplenty." The "degree of civilization" that the cleanliness and prosperity of Transylvanian households evidenced, as opposed to dwellings in the majority of villages in the Kingdom, made it plain for the unnamed author that the state had failed its duty and that substantive measures had to be taken to nip the danger of mass emigration in the bud: the prospect of indifference toward the state now loomed.

When discussing political self-organization, periodicals seemed more open to blaming the peasants, since self-emancipation was proving squarely within the realm of the possible. As one author argued to his peasant readership in 1904, while in Romania "the elected MP becomes, if anything, the owner of his constituency," in Transylvania, "our brothers have reached the moral level at which, interested in the needs of their nation, [they] set the terms of how and what their delegates may debate in the Hungarian Chamber in Budapest. When we see that our brother, the Transylvanian voter, though politically subjected by a foreign nation nevertheless has the courage of speaking to his deputies in such terms.... All that is left for us to say is—'We are guilty!'"⁵⁹ This *de facto* imperative mandate proved that an involved and conscious citizenry could act decisively even in spite of restricted suffrage in Austria-Hungary, once the National Party there had abandoned passivism. It was implied that this could be achieved in Romania, too. The trans-partisan oligarchy of Romania, therefore, was seen as no more unassailable than an establishment wholly geared against the Transylvanians' national struggle: a captured state, one hoped, would not be a more formidable foe for the nation than an openly hostile one.

Iorga and Stere Go to Transylvania

Exhibitions in 1905 and 1906 managed to stimulate comparative reflection by both visitors and those who received them. However, the crux of the question remained just who was meant to see what, and which comparisons were to be made. Perhaps one of the harshest criticisms of 1906 as a nexus for dangerous if important comparisons came from the nationalist historian and politician Nicolae Iorga (1870–1940), *spiritus rector* of the populist-conservative "Sămănătorist" cultural movement and future co-founder of the antisemitic Nationalist-Democratic Party. The periodical *Neamul Românesc* ("The Romanian Nation"), was born as the historian's public tribune in the wake of his meteoric rise to academic and cultural prominence. It began publication in 1906 and spared no criticism of the Exhibition as

⁵⁹"De-ale noastre," *Deșteptarea satelor*, 14 Nov. 1904.

a futile attempt to cover up the true state of the Kingdom of Romania. One of Iorga's most pointed tirades, titled "Hide the Peasants!," was prompted by the rumor that a delegation from prosperous south Transylvania had, to their horror, encountered the unvarnished truth about peasant misery in the Kingdom when their train stopped for repairs in the middle of a field near the trans-Danube bridge at Cernavodă. The bridge neatly happened to be a symbolic centerpiece of infrastructural development, connecting Wallachia to the recently-annexed multi-ethnic province of north Dobruja. It served to amplify the contrast between what the Transylvanians were intended to see and what they actually saw. A group of local peasants, it was said, had timidly approached the train and were asked "by a clergyman 'from across the mountains' with perplexity and disgust" whose land they tilled ("A Greek's."), and if they owned any ("No."). Their shirts, "black as dirt," had become visible when the priest tugged at their coats. Iorga took this act of seeing as a stand-in for a broader revelation about the irrepressible truths of conditions in the Kingdom, to the point that claims to "brotherhood" with the Transylvanians required scare quotes on account of incomparability:

Throw our peasants into a dungeon, lest they cross paths with our 'brothers.' Don't let them roam free and ruin with their untold misfortunes the effect of those impassionate speeches in which the élan of state-sponsored champagne reigns triumphant—all paid for by them, the feral slaves of the black furrow.... For otherwise it may be that by an act of God ... the prison of the train carrying our 'brothers' might stop for an unforeseen moment, and, as if from the bottom of a deep dark grave, Abel would rise drenched in blood, demanding his justice in the world of Cain.⁶⁰

What mattered in this account (which Iorga insisted was "word for word, the truth") was not just that the contrast between Transylvania and the Kingdom had become visible for those at home; it was also observable to Transylvanians themselves, once they were taken beyond the exhibition grounds in Bucharest.

At the forefront of nationalist rhetoric, Iorga was of course no stranger to the topos of a more advanced Transylvania, even as the role of the Kingdom was, ideally and normatively, that of taking the lead. Iorga's dedication prefacing a 1902 volume on priests and teachers across the mountains was to "those through whom the nation is preserved, in the expectation of a future that depends on our diligence."⁶¹ The agency of Transylvanians in the present was lauded, but also framed as part of a temporal progression in which that of the Kingdom would assert itself as the logical and necessary next step. Even in some of Iorga's more obscure occasional publications of the time, Transylvania insistently cropped up as a yardstick and model. Thus, in a conference held at a youth reading circle in the southern Wallachian town of Alexandria, where impending closure of the local middle school was rumored, Iorga exhorted his audience to emulate the Transylvanians' tactic of directly stepping in where authorities failed to do so. In light of Transylvanian examples, the strategy of securing funding from local benefactors—Iorga added offhandedly

⁶⁰N. Iorga, "Ascundeți țeranii!," *Neamul Românesc*, 1 Oct. 1906, 685–86.

⁶¹Nicolae Iorga, *Sate și preoți din Ardeal* (Bucharest: Inst. de Arte Grafice "Carol Göbl" S-r I. St. Rasidescu, 1902), n.p. (corresponding to p. 4).

but with emphasis—was “not news.”⁶² It was, then, high praise on his part that, when describing the small provincial town, Iorga spoke of “a democracy like in those Transylvanian towns, where there is a tighter bond between those high and low.”⁶³

Most importantly, however, was Iorga’s two-volume account of his travels through Transylvania and other areas in the Kingdom of Hungary that Romanians inhabited, published in 1906 as the conclusion of a broader project that had begun with the Kingdom of Romania and had continued with Austrian Bukovina and Russian Bessarabia. Aside from a wealth of historical documents and information he collected from archives, churches, and myriad other places, this grand tour afforded Iorga a broad comparative perspective on the trajectories of development taken by ethnic Romanians under independent and imperial rules. In this final travelogue, though, one does not always get a sense that Iorga was explicitly contrasting Transylvania to all the regions he had already visited, so much as that he kept the Kingdom as an implicit yardstick. Whenever he lauded or chastised Romanians in the Kingdom of Hungary, he praised them with regards to what would have otherwise been absent in Romania and criticized them wherever he encountered pathologies similar to those he vilified at home.

A certain geographical bias becomes apparent in volume one: by his own admission, Iorga had spent more time in the southern Transylvanian region of Făgăraș than elsewhere, due to its relative proximity, but he argued that “even to the detriment of proportion, I thought it well that at least one purely Romanian region be more fully described.”⁶⁴ Arriving in the village of Săliște/Szelistye/Grossdorf, the reputation of which was already cemented in the cultural imagination of both Transylvania⁶⁵ and the Kingdom, Iorga could not resist the pull of the incomparable superlative (“nothing, however, can surpass [it]”). He employed italics to highlight not just implicit difference (“*no-one here skips school*”), but also, as a more explicit criticism, the contagion of the Kingdom. Thus he recounted his observation at a village dance: “Like a stain of *modernization*, spreading more from ties to Romania, one sees some Western clothing worn by a few young men who, even at home, are happier to ask [the musicians] for waltzes and quadrilles.”⁶⁶ On the whole, Iorga’s journeys in the south made for an optimistic assessment of the future of Transylvanian Romanians; framed in a discourse that dovetailed with anxieties expressed by Hungarian officials,⁶⁷ he saw their demographic and racial vitality exhibit a process of accelerating “conquest,” particularly in relation to the neighboring Transylvanian Saxons.

Iorga depicted the Saxons, colonized beginning with the twelfth century in the easternmost reaches of the Kingdom of Hungary, as being now at long last displaced

⁶²Nicolae Iorga, *Conferință ținută la șezătoarea literară-naționalistă în Alexandria Duminică 7 Mai 1906 urmată de o descriere a Alexandriei și împrejurimilor* (Alexandria: Tipografia și Librăria “Alexandri” Anghel N. Vasilescu, 1906), 14–15.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁴Nicolae Iorga, *Neamul românesc în Ardeal și Țara Ungurească*, vol. 1 (Bucharest: Minerva, 1906), 6.

⁶⁵Barna Ábrahám, “The Idea of Independent Romanian National Economy in Transylvania at the Turn of the 20th Century,” in Balázs Trencsényi et al., eds., *Nation-Building and Contested Identities: Romanian and Hungarian Case Studies* (Budapest: Regio Books and Polirom, 2001), 209–26, 211.

⁶⁶Iorga, *Neamul*, vol. 1, 168–70.

⁶⁷See, for instance, Ignác Romsics, *Istvan Bethlen: A Great Conservative Statesman of Hungary, 1874–1946* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1995), 19–20, 35–39, 50–52, 60–62, et passim.

and/or assimilated by the Romanians. Their racial strength was depleted and their role as vanguards of civilization had become an anachronism in the capitalist age of “Hungaro-American commerce.”⁶⁸ At a time when ideas of racial superiority were ever more present in Hungary,⁶⁹ when accounts of Romanians’ power of racial assimilation could provide building-blocks for canonical representations of vampire myths,⁷⁰ Saxons themselves had begun to be concerned with racial/demographic decline.⁷¹ Iorga’s own direct comparisons between local Romanians and Saxons were meant to be read as an indirect comparison between Transylvanians and Romanians in the Kingdom, over whom the threat of degeneration at the hands of misrule was thought to loom. Thus, in Codlea/Zeiden/Feketehalom, Iorga spoke of “Saxon children returning from school, here and there their faces again revealing a rapid degeneration. However, here, as in Râșnov [Rosenau/Barcarozsnyó]”—which he had noted with satisfaction “threatened to become Romanian”⁷²—“we are almost as victorious and are nearly outnumbering them.”⁷³ The Romanian demographic onslaught also meant an infrastructural takeover, and Iorga delighted in listing villages whose former Saxon names had by now been Romanianized along with their populations.⁷⁴ He placed even greater emphasis on the contrast between ruination and revitalization as an extension of racial dynamics. Saxons in Amlaș/Hamlesch/Omlás were “famous for their idiocy” and passively watched their ancestral homes crumble, “their numbers daily decreasing by some inexorable law of slow decay,” while in neighboring Apoldu-de-Jos/Kleinpold/Kisapold “the inhabitants of these sturdy, flourishing households, not gone to wrack and ruin as in Amlaș, are now Romanian, some with lively black eyes and round swarthy faces, others with long white faces and blond hair, some the conquerors, the others showing that they are part of the nation of the conquered and vanquished.” Indeed, what was Saxon was only *still* Saxon—“It is perhaps sooner than we might think that time will come when [in Amlaș] we shall also be the sole masters”—and what could remain Saxon was, as typified for Iorga by Apoldu-de-Jos, at best a vestigial sign of racial assimilation into the Romanian nation.⁷⁵ This comparison between two villages was intended as one between the present and the future, a future in which the temporal horizon of racial conquest seemed tangible and imminent, perhaps even more openly so than that of Romanian political unity.

Iorga’s optimism extended even to “colonial” encroachment in the present: the recent settlement of Danube Swabians on lands purchased by a Saxon bank near Batiz/Batiss/Batizfalva, a complex instance of economic competition between

⁶⁸Iorga, *Neamul*, vol. 1, 152–53.

⁶⁹Marius Turda, “‘The Magyars: A Ruling Race’: The Idea of National Superiority in Fin-de-Siècle Hungary,” *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire* 10, 1 (2003): 5–33.

⁷⁰Stephen D. Arata, “The Occidental Tourist: ‘Dracula’ and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization,” *Victorian Studies* 33, 4 (1990): 621–45, 630.

⁷¹Tudor Georgescu, *The Eugenik Fortress: The Transylvanian Saxon Experiment in Interwar Romania* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), 3–4.

⁷²Iorga, *Neamul*, Vol. 1, 40.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 48–49.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 66–67. See also Ágoston Berecz’s excellent *Empty Signs, Historical Imaginaries: The Entangled Nationalization of Names and Naming in a Late Habsburg Borderland* (New York: Berghahn, 2020).

⁷⁵Iorga, *Neamul*, vol. 1, 189–91.

Transylvanian nationalities, gave him no pause.⁷⁶ Neighboring Romanians would, in due course, learn the crafts and trades of the Swabians and “in a century’s time, one will be hard pressed to find even a trace of their presence.” Whether this was to take place through assimilation or displacement Iorga did not say, but the implication was that Romanians were vital enough to overcome civilizational gaps through emulation.⁷⁷ Sometimes, their surplus vitality was almost too much for Iorga. Yet, if local virtues seemed alien, it was precisely because they were comparatively absent elsewhere within the ethnic body that their development seemed surprising in this laboratory of historical divergence: “Perhaps I prefer the good timidity, the slow and measured speech that set the Moldavian peasants in Romania, Bukovina, Bessarabia apart, to this self-assuredness and sprightliness. But it is equally true that [the Moldavian] would be incapable—given the ways in which time has molded him—of building such households as these, or of going to America, as they do here in every village, and returning with hundreds of florins.”⁷⁸ Even emigration, so long as it represented only a brief quest for monetary accumulation, could serve to illustrate the risk-taking that ensured the nation’s economic autonomy.

Wherever the *not yet* of Romanian conquest was not immediately apparent, wherever stagnation or even decay unnerved Iorga, the Jews were handy to blame. And it was in those pages that Iorga’s readers, familiar with the antisemitic tirades in *Neamul Românesc*, were sure to detect a key similarity with the Kingdom: the Jew was a common enemy and common denominator.⁷⁹ This was most visible in the second volume of the travelogue: in Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg, Transylvania’s capital, the “giant buildings redolent of Babylonian pride and American megalomania, built with the blood and sweat of the oppressed peasantry,” were symbols of a culture in which Hungarians and Hungarianized Jews had joined hands.⁸⁰ Further north, in Întădăm/Intradám, a Jewish village next to the town of Năsăud/Nassod/Naszód, the topos of infrastructural takeover was reversed, as rows of peasant houses uncannily revealed themselves as Jewish homes. Here, Iorga’s narrative fixation on children as a convenient embodiment of the future drove him to describe “their solemn pacing through the mud, with their long sidelocks of gravitas, with their searching gaze of born hunters of men. Some twenty Romanians hide behind three hundred peasants with sidelocks.” This dehumanizing passage was illustrated on the following page by a picture (possibly a postcard) of an elderly Jewish man, bearing the caption, “A ‘peasant’ from Întădăm”—if Romanians were *the* normative peasants, then Jews were to be denied connection to this identity and to the land, just as bans on foreigners owning land had been legislated for in the Kingdom of Romania.⁸¹ After the photograph, Iorga offered his vision of a dangerous synergy between Jewish and

⁷⁶On Saxon banks and “Innerkolonisation,” see Gábor Egry, *Nemzeti védgát vagy szolid haszonszerzés? Az erdélyi szászok pénzügyi rendszere és szerepe a nemzeti mozgalomban (1835–1914)* (Miercurea-Ciuc: Pro-Print Könyvkiadó, 2009), 299–323.

⁷⁷Iorga, *Neamul*, vol. 1, 268–69.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 85.

⁷⁹More generally, see Radu Ioanid, “Nicolae Iorga and Fascism,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 27, 3 (1992): 467–92.

⁸⁰Iorga, *Neamul*, vol. 2, 468.

⁸¹For a comparative treatment of Romanian and Hungarian attitudes towards Jews, see Marin, *Peasant Violence*, 122–26; and Raul Cârstocea, “Uneasy Twins? The Entangled Histories of Jewish Emancipation and Anti-Semitism in Romania and Hungary, 1866–1913,” *Slovo* 21, 2 (2009): 64–85.

Hungarian infrastructure: benefitting from a state-sponsored Hungarian school, “the young Jews would also be given the one thing that they still need for subjugating the other peoples: Hungarian patriotism.”⁸² North of Transylvania proper, the historical region of Maramureş presented Iorga with his most nightmarish vision of all: in Vişeu-de-Sus/Felsővisó/Oberwischau—“like in Bistriţa, a Jewish stalking-ground”—he perceived in the casual mingling in the streets between Romanians and Jews a bad omen. That was confirmed by the crowd assembled in the local Uniate church, where a half-Hungarian, clean-shaven priest delivered mass to an ill-looking crowd. Maramureş was the homeland of the legendary princes that had founded the principality of Moldavia in the Middle Ages, and Iorga spoke of how “in the degeneration of that race of eagles ... one must detect crossbreeding with the Russians [Ruthenians or Rusyns], and, in particular, the copious amount of drink which tempts it in the countless Jewish pubs.”⁸³

Also in 1906, Constantin Stere (1865–1936) began publishing an account of a short journey across the Carpathians, titled “Four Days in Transylvania—Fleeting Impressions.” He was a Bessarabian-born political activist now distanced from both his youthful involvement in Russian anarcho-socialism and the contemporary Romanian socialist movement. Stere advocated a form of neo-*narodnik* politics, a doctrine dubbed “Poporanism,” wherein the development of an agrarian democracy was seen as preferable to industrial development. He was an exponent of left-wing currents in the Liberal Party and a rising figure in university circles, and his visits to South Transylvania and around Arad on the northern edge of the Banat, were meant to (re)connect him with various notable figures, some of them collaborators on his influential tribute, *Viaţa Românească* (Romanian life). What seems striking about Stere’s account is just how similar it often is to Iorga’s in terms of topoi, even though the two espoused different views on the political and economic emancipation of the peasantry.

Their first shared trope was that of an intrusive state infrastructure, with which Stere began the description of his arrival to Sibiu: the aural strangeness of Hungarian words announced the station, “a state institution outside the walls of which, in a town inhabited almost exclusively by Germans and Romanians, Aryan sounds regain their rightful domain.” But little in the way of “Aryan”/Indo-European solidarity is apparent in Stere’s impatience with his Saxon hotel concierge, a young man whom he instantly branded “a living illustration of the Zweikindersystem [two-child system] under which the Transylvanian Saxons slowly become extinct,” a slow-moving and slow-witted example of racial degeneration.⁸⁴ Even the small bust dedicated to Schiller in the public garden by the local Saxon community appeared to Stere as a perfect encapsulation of the “miserliness of this branch of the proud German nation; this bust, at best suitable for the corner of a conference-hall, which in a public square can only convey a feeling of spiritual impotence, disfigured ugliness, or mockery.” To this incapacity of meeting the symbolic demands of public/infrastructural presence in a climate of heightened competition,⁸⁵ Stere

⁸²Iorga, *Neamul*, vol. 2, 515–17.

⁸³Ibid., 546–52.

⁸⁴The idea was that Saxons restricted the size of their families to only two children per couple, here understood as both a cause and a symptom of degeneration. See Georgescu, *Eugenic Fortress*, 16.

⁸⁵Bálint Varga, *The Monumental Nation: Magyar Nationalism and Symbolic Politics in Fin-de-siècle Hungary* (New York: Berghahn, 2016).

nevertheless counterposed the overall effect that Sibiu had on the visitor when compared to towns of similar size in Romania.

But buildings notwithstanding, (including the recently opened Romanian cathedral) Stere deferred to Iorga's expertise on the matter with a hint of irony: "I am more interested in the living people of today than in things built by those no longer among us."⁸⁶ Stere's belief in Romanian vitality was confirmed by his meetings with the living: poet Octavian Goga (1881–1938), and future head of the Romanian Orthodox Church Miron Cristea (1868–1939), who would both serve consecutive terms as prime ministers and enact key antisemitic legislation in 1937 and 1938. He offers an effusive passage on the Transylvanian (Orthodox) clergy as both a democratic organization and a school for "a strong and lively rural democracy, healthy, conscious, rich, against which all the efforts of the oppressor are dashed," and then tenders Cristea's views on the Saxons, their "villages incomparable to ours" in every negative respect, not assimilated but displaced by Romanians. Foreshadowing the next leg of his journey to Săliște, Stere noted how, on the way to the awaiting carriage, he noticed, "as it happened," two groups of pictures in the window of a photo cabinet. Portraits of "Romanian and Saxon peasant women" were displayed side by side, "a living illustration of the conversation we had just concluded": "And Goga, pointing at the sturdy and beautiful figures of the Romanian women [quipped]—'Look! There's no chance of a Zweikindersystem with them!'"⁸⁷

While Iorga's go-to imagery for illustrating the racial future were children, Stere's gaze (and, he says, that of his companions) was thoroughly male in singling out women as proxies for Romanian vitality in Transylvania. Calling Săliște "the pearl of Transylvania," Stere wasted little time describing it (cobblestones—"in a village!") before speaking of how,

the much-vaunted beauty of its women—to which, I, poor soul that I am! could not remain insensible—is perhaps still less impressive than that superior spiritual culture that their every movement exudes. Before us are only the daughters and sons of peasants, yet when you notice how a lad greets and invites a lass to a dance, how he takes her by the arm back to her place in the round afterwards, and she curtsies with a gentle smile to thank him, you feel it unreal—as if in some prophetic vision you catch a glimpse of the distant future, of how all our peasantry could be under more favorable circumstances....

The link between peasant utopia and a well-performed display of gendered order was evident. Yet the bourgeois form of the performance that Stere applauded perhaps threatened to undermine it. As he continued on to note, "every girl is dressed in peasant garb," and "the young ladies of our salons [in Romania] would stand to learn much from these peasant girls ... if such things could be learned...." Stere had to once more draw an unstable boundary between peasant essence and bourgeois markers of civilization as signs of its fulfilment when he elatedly spoke of the musical education the village school offered: "Good Lord! Peasants' daughters, Romanian peasant girls,

⁸⁶Constantin Stere, "Patru zile in Ardeal: impresii fugitive (I–III)," *Viața Românească* 1, 4 (1906): 87–101, 87–95.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*: 87–101, 99–100. Note the laxness of "living illustration" as a term that could apply to both a hotel concierge and a group of photographs.

playing the piano! Hats off, gentlemen, to these free people who are proud of calling themselves peasants, who have known no serfdom, who have for seven centuries kept at bay the encroachments of the [Saxon] magistrates in Sibiu, and who will in the future also know to thwart all attempts at subjugation, achieving with the beautiful life of their truly Romanian village the ideal of a healthy and well-rooted democracy!”⁸⁸ Such was Stere’s nationalist effusion that, rhetorically, it threatened to burst the banks of heteronormative desire: “And oh, wretch that I am, in love—laugh not, Șărcăleanu! [one of his pen-names]—with every girl, and every wife, and even every strapping and jolly lad that comes my way!”

Back in Sibiu, Stere met with Partenie Cosma (1837–1923), a nationalist politician and long-time president of the flagship “Albina” popular bank, in his “modest” office—“if one were to judge it by the perverse standards of the [Romanian] Kingdom.” The importance of Romanian popular/rural banks in Transylvania never quite reached critical mass,⁸⁹ and Transylvanians themselves sometimes singled out parallel developments in the Old Kingdom for emulation.⁹⁰ Yet, Stere’s fascination remained undiminished. Praising the well-organized and minimally staffed practical housekeeping school run by “Albina,” Stere could not resist comparing it favorably to that in Iași—again, a gendered take on the basic preconditions for disciplined national growth. But it was over an informal glass of beer that Stere heard Cosma’s pointed criticism of Romania’s state of affairs. Using phrases virtually identical to those that he would soon reprint in a pamphlet on the risings of 1907, Cosma’s comparison between the effects of the abolition of serfdom in Transylvania and Romania were decidedly unfavorable to the latter. As per the admission of a leading Liberal politician, Cosma noted, the land reform of 1864 was intended to keep peasants in servitude to their former masters as a matter of “national interest”: “Is it then the case that in Romania peasants are seen as mere living inventory on the farm, in the absence of machinery and landowners’ know-how? It is up to the owners to buy machines and educate themselves! How did landowners here manage to adapt to new conditions?”⁹¹ The one conclusion Stere saw fit to draw also had a comparative thrust. Given that Cosma was known as something of a conservative by Transylvanian standards, Stere rhetorically pondered just “how much some of our ‘liberals’ would stand to learn from him.” This read not simply as a jibe against the “Liberal” party’s mainstream from one of its left-wing dissidents, but also as a further reflection on political backwardness in the grander scheme of ideological progress.⁹²

A final memorable encounter was a near miss, yet it occasioned some of Stere’s most openly comparative reflections. Visiting Pecica/Pécska/Petschka, a village near Arad that had none of Săliște’s storied aura, Stere was accompanied by journalist Ioan Russu-Șirianu (1864–1909) and a few local notables on a quest to “visit peasant homes of all stations, richer or poorer.” It soon became apparent to Stere that, “There

⁸⁸Stere, “Patru zile în Ardeal (IV–VIII),” *Viața Românească* 1, 5 (1906): 263–77, 274–75.

⁸⁹Gábor Egry, “Egy önelgitimáló narratíva kérdőjelei—nemzetiségi bankok, nemzetiségi mozgalmak a századforduló Erdélyében,” *Múltunk* 51, 3 (2006): 4–34.

⁹⁰Vasile C. Osvadă, *Băncile populare din România: Cu un adaus informativ* (Sibiu: Tipografia Arhidiecezană, 1907), 3.

⁹¹Compare with Partenie Cosma, *Răscola țărănească în România* (Sibiu: Tipografia Archidiecezană, 1907), 3–7, where the Liberal statesman in question is identified as former Prime Minister Ion C. Brătianu (1821–1891). See also: Marin, *Peasant Violence*, 111–14.

⁹²Stere, “Patru zile în Ardeal (IX–XV),” *Viața Românească* 1, 6 (1906): 425–42, 433–35.

was only one type of house, and even the poorest would, of course, seem a palace to even a well-off peasant in Moldavia.” Comparison was thus barely relevant on a local scale, but troublingly so when the Kingdom was taken as a yardstick. But Stere admitted that what “was most impressive of all, was the house of old Toader Orga, whom I did not have the good fortune of finding at home.” Orga was an avid reader who had been notified by Russu-Șirianu (to whose newspaper he sometimes wrote) to leave a catalogue of his personal library of more than one hundred volumes. The presence of the peasant himself mattered less, in a sense, than his voracious reading habits, exceptional enough in and of themselves, yet proof that *elsewhere* such things were in fact possible. Added to this was a letter that Orga had left to Stere in which he voiced his “great pleasure at reading about the progress achieved in all respects by you in the Kingdom; *it pains me, however, to read about the miserable state of most of the peasants....* But merciful is the God of our parents, for he shall bring light to our common folk.” Yet again, a criticism voiced by a Transylvanian, this time a peasant. Stere left Orga’s house, talking to his companions “about the state of the Transylvanian peasantry compared to that in the Kingdom, under the impression of what we had just seen,” but then an impromptu visit to a Romanian craftsman down the street further amplified the mixed feelings that the contrast prompted. Although the craftsman was only a landless blacksmith, his teenage daughter avidly read the classics of the national (trans-Carpathian) literary canon. “My contentment with having met such people was involuntarily soured by the sad recollection of village life on the other side of the mountains. What an awesome lesson this could offer regarding the vileness and savage egotism of our ruling classes,” Stere wrote, even as he himself was becoming an exponent of the very political establishment he criticized, rising through the ranks of the Liberals.⁹³

Teachers and Priests across Borders

The travelogues Iorga and Stere published offered the visions of two dissenting political actors with prestigious cultural credentials and an ever-growing popularity. But what of the bottom-up perspective of rank-and-file nation-builders in the villages? In 1903, as head of the Administration of Schools (Casa Școalelor), the writer Alexandru Vlahuță (1858–1919) proposed that teachers who distinguished themselves be offered subsidies for summer travels that would give them a chance to better know their country, and also act as model propagandists wherever they went. Vlahuță had in 1901 published a popular travel narrative describing the Kingdom, titled *România pitorească* (Picturesque Romania), under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. He was clearly attuned to the value of travel, though he restricted his book’s purview to the territory of the state. Its conclusion observed that “our borders were once broader”⁹⁴ but also that “the free and proud Romania of today, not growing sideways, had to grow upward, and rises with every day, with the power of youth and its thirst for light!”⁹⁵ The invocation of the superordinate “we” in a past that had only offered the occasion for greater territorial unity in passing was counterposed to a present in which the intensive took precedence over the extensive.

⁹³Stere, “Patru zile în Ardeal (XIX),” *Viața Românească* 2, 2 (1907): 297–309, 299–304.

⁹⁴Alexandru Vlahuță, *România Pitorească*, 2d ed. (Bucharest: I. V. Socecu, 1902), 270.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 275.

Yet such narratives, though instantly canonical, did not have the final word: beginning with 1908, a stipend and subsidized transportation were offered to teachers, and sometimes priests, who would, in pairs that reunited different counties, travel both at home and, in the near abroad, plotting a course of their own choosing. As part of this arrangement, at least some travel reports were later published in a bulletin dedicated to the “Social Activity of Priests and Teachers,” as a supplement to the quasi-official rural periodical *Albina* (The bee).⁹⁶ The reports are a rich yet overlooked corpus of sources, and offer a glimpse into how a language of comparison was employed by Romanian teachers and priests—members of two socio-professional categories who had come to both see themselves and be seen as village elites and vanguards of national propaganda. There was a palpable sense of how the burden of pre-existing expectations weighed upon those setting out on their travels, in terms of both what other parts of the Kingdom might hold in terms of comparison and what might be particular to Transylvania. As one teacher put it:

How many things I had imagined about how villagers in a certain part of the country might be, and what households I would find in Transylvania and in the rich valley of the Prahova River [in northern Wallachia, undergoing rapid industrialization during an oil boom], compared to my village! There was something in my soul that made me doubt whether what I had been doing in the village and beyond the walls of my school had been useful enough for my villagers, if it would prove equal to or inferior to what is done elsewhere.⁹⁷

Some readily turned to superlatives. One referred to Romanians near Sibiu as “even in spite of the burdens they must carry ... the best Romanians I have seen until today.”⁹⁸ Another ruefully noted that in the Transylvanian village of Galeș/Szebengálos/Gallusdorf, near Săliște, locals had repurposed a classroom as a makeshift chapel, while in his own village peasants had languished for some ten years without a church, and concluded, “In all, Săliște itself leaves nothing to be desired, from any point of view, so that it may wonderfully serve as an archetype, as an ideal for our villages!”⁹⁹ That the Romanian nation had achieved this in isolation from the broader Transylvanian social milieu was not a foregone conclusion for everyone. The racial hierarchies of Iorga and Stere notwithstanding, one priest from the western Wallachian town of Craiova proposed that, aside from the absence of serfdom or latifundia near Brașov and Sibiu, Romanians also flourished economically thanks, at least in part, to their judicious emulation of Saxon models, but in the same breath, he applauded the wisdom of priests and teachers, who knew how to both stimulate and set national(ist) limits to it.¹⁰⁰ The report’s conclusion was still more

⁹⁶Information on the program is provided in one such report: Em. Popescu, “Dare de seamă asupra excursiunii făcute între 15 iulie și 15 august 1908 (I),” *Buletinul activității sociale a preoților și învățătorilor* 1, 36 (1908–1909): 647–57.

⁹⁷Z. Săndulescu, “O excursie în județul Gorj și peste granița dinspre Ardeal,” *Buletinul activității sociale a preoților și învățătorilor* 1, 35 (1908–1909): 639–42, 639.

⁹⁸I. Biber, “Dare de seamă asupra excursiunii de vacanță din 1909,” *Buletinul activității sociale a preoților și învățătorilor* 2, 29 (1909–1910): 421–25, 423.

⁹⁹Ct. G. Coman, “Memoriu asupra excursiunii de vacanță din 1909,” *Buletinul activității sociale a preoților și învățătorilor* 2, 31 (1909–1910): 451–59, 455.

¹⁰⁰Fr. D. Lungulescu, “Dare de seamă despre excursiunea făcută în Transilvania (I),” *Buletinul activității sociale a preoților și învățătorilor* 3, 17 (1910–1911): 251–63, 260.

explicit in articulating a hierarchy of civilizational (or at least economic) emulation, expressed through an analogy: “What the Saxons were and are for Transylvanian Romanians in the economic realm, so will the Transylvanian Romanians be for us.”¹⁰¹

Perhaps the most interesting of these reports is that by Constantin Rădulescu-Codin (1875–1926), a teacher who had made a name for himself as a folklorist. Arriving in the Transylvanian village of Porcești, he noted that the school had four teachers, of which only one taught exclusively in Hungarian, paid for by the state, whereas the others were supported by the local community.¹⁰² Once more, the existence of a children’s choir in the village church, and the fact that all the faithful joined in song during mass, left a positive impression: “Their language, their [folk] garb, their well-developed national sentiment, their religiosity.... I am pleased to see that our brothers, [though] groaning under a foreign yoke, are possessed by such strong national sentiment, stronger and more conscious than even our own.” To this self-criticism, Rădulescu-Codin added as further proof (no doubt also bolstering his credentials) the feelings voiced by a noted German linguist who had prefaced one of his folklore volumes, in 1901: “I remember how, in 1899, Dr. Gustav Weigand [1860–1930] of Leipzig, who knows well every region inhabited by Romanians, arrived in [my own village of] Priboieni, and—though himself a foreigner—spoke with pain of how people in Romania were found wanting when compared to how Romanians under foreign rule show their love for their nation.”¹⁰³ The gaze of the sympathetic outsider was, on this reading, an even more damning indictment of relative national indifference within the privileged space of the nation-state.

Conclusion

Focusing on the final years of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth, this study has chosen depth over chronological breadth. Still, it can be noted that, with the establishment of a Greater Romania in the wake of the Great War, the topos of comparison saw a shift in polarity. As Bucharest strengthened its centralizing grip on newly acquired regions and reneged upon early promises of limited autonomy, resentment grew among Transylvanian elites who felt they were in the thrall of a more backward establishment. The Old Kingdom had, as I have shown, lamented its own inadequacies, but after 1918 Transylvanians found themselves retroactively in agreement with a now-mooted self-criticism.¹⁰⁴ An even broader, multipolar

¹⁰¹ Fr. D. Lungulescu, “Dare de seamă despre excursiunea făcută în Transilvania (III),” *Buletinul activității sociale a preoților și învățătorilor* 3, 19 (1910–1911): 281–84, 283.

¹⁰² A persuasive case for questioning the actual extent to which the Hungarian state’s educational policies in general were either particularly effective tools of Magyarization or unusual in nature in their nineteenth-century context is made by Ágoston Berecz, *The Politics of Early Language Teaching: Hungarian in the Primary Schools of the Late Dual Monarchy* (Budapest: Pasts, Incorporated, Central European University, 2013).

¹⁰³ C. Rădulescu-Codin, “Memoriu privitor la călătoria de studii făcută în vara anului 1909 (II),” *Buletinul activității sociale a preoților și învățătorilor* 3, 2 (1910–1911): 36–47, 43.

¹⁰⁴ See Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation-Building and Ethnic Struggle, 1918–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Florian Kührer-Wielach, *Siebenbürgen ohne Siebenbürger? zentralstaatliche Integration und politischer Regionalismus nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Munich: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2014); Daniel Citirigă, “‘Ardealul pentru ardeleni’—federalism,

process of imagological reshuffling and boundary-making was afoot, resembling the dynamics I have analyzed here, but embedded in a new “web of comparisons” if viewed within a post-imperial context.¹⁰⁵

First, resistance to Bucharest centralism and its perceived “colonial” encroachment brought, in the self-perception of Transylvanian Romanians, an inversion of the binary between “freedom” and “unfreedom” in the former imperial setting, which sometimes allowed them to imagine the Old Kingdom as comparatively more “oligarchic” and unfree, thus perpetuating a cleavage between a “we” and “us” along regional lines.¹⁰⁶

Second, the continued peripherality of Transylvania was compounded by the impact the redrawing of borders had on flows of information and people, and what “at home” and “abroad” could mean for newly-minted minorities in terms of “ought” and “is.” The question of whether interwar Transylvania or Hungary could now claim to be a locus of equality, progress, and Europeanness became a source of contention for Hungarians on both sides of the divide, something amplified by a sense of growing distance and divergence.¹⁰⁷

Third, and more ambiguously still, those who failed to conform to new nationalist scripts found themselves displaced both spatially and temporally. Cross-border migration regimes and nationality laws did not just present opportunities or conundrums to individuals; there was also a shift in the communal frames of reference regarding what counted as unwittingly subversive or deliberately transgressive. Thus, cultural markers of Hungarian-ness inherited from before 1918 could be grounds for arrest, even if they were not coded as political (or displayed/performed by Hungarians). But they could also be deployed by self-identified Romanians to distinguish themselves from the Old Kingdom Other.¹⁰⁸

Finally, zooming out, we can speak of an even broader “web of comparisons” that encompasses the imagological fallout from Hungary’s break-up post-Trianon, including the new communities of kinfolk scattered across neighboring nation-states as subjects of representation. At times, this could have a surprising effect in terms of how models presented themselves. Thus, in Hungary, Transylvanian Romanians could now be perceived as “Western” and as models of self-organization, with a strengthening middle class.¹⁰⁹ More generally, imagological reshuffling saw comparable, albeit not identical developments across ethnic divides, in not just Transylvania but also Slovakia

autonomie și regionalism în discursul lui Alexandru Vaida-Voevod (1918–1923),” *Archiva Moldaviaei* 11 (2019): 185–211.

¹⁰⁵Dominique Kirchner Reill, “Post-Imperial Europe: When Comparison Threatened, Empowered, and Was Omnipresent,” *Slavic Review* 78, 3 (2019) 663–670.

¹⁰⁶Gábor Egry, “An Obscure Object of Desire: The Myth of Alba Iulia and Its Social Functions,” in Claudia-Florentina Dobre, Ionuț Epurescu-Pascovici, and Cristian Emilian Ghiță, eds., *Myth-Making and Myth-Breaking in History and the Humanities* (Bucharest: n.p., 2012), 99–114, 111.

¹⁰⁷Gábor Egry, “Frontline, No-Man’s Land or Fortress? The Hungarian Minority Elite in Romania between National Identity and Regional Self-Consciousness (1918–1944),” in Gábor Demeter and Penka Peykowska, eds., *Political, Social, Economic and Cultural Elites in the Central- and East-European States in Modernity and Post-Modernity* (Sofia and Budapest: MTA Történettudományi Intézete és Bolgár Kulturális Intézet, 2010), 168–88, 182.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁰⁹Gábor Egry, “New Horizons from Prague to Bucharest: Ethnonational Stereotypes and Regionalist Self-Perceptions in Interwar Slovakia and Transylvania,” *Historie-Otázky-Problémy (History, Issues, Problems)* 8, 2 (2016): 47–58, 54.

and further afield. The vexed question of how a formerly united national “we” could now give way to multiple “they-groups” with their own self-images overlapped with projections of victimhood or passivity was compounded by minority calls for support (but with minimal meddling).¹¹⁰ In sum, the logic of self-comparison and self-criticism was complicated by the newly fractured “selves” created by the Great War and the Versailles treaty system.

This reflexive inquiry into the logics and topoi of intra-national, yet simultaneously inter-national comparison need not be understood as pointing to some form of Romanian exceptionalism. It is easier to imagine now how, in *fin-de-siècle* Europe, with French *revanchisme*, Italian *irredentismo*, and Balkan national movements seeking to expand “rump” states, could have, as a corollary to saber-rattling on behalf of unredeemed kinfolk, a self-critical streak that also saw the latter as not just models for heroic resistance but also—damningly for the state—models in earnest. As I have shown here, in morphological terms this was squarely within the realm of the possible.

As a specific discursive formation, self-comparison as self-criticism took shape in parliament and in the press but its perpetuation was equally reliant on exhibitions, cross-border travel, and deliberate attempts at generating comparative knowledge. Laterally, it could branch out into other forms of comparison, drafting *other* Others to reveal where hope could be placed and how lessons might be learned from kinfolk who had triumphed over difficulties. This dislocation of the locus of the nation’s agency to beyond its actual borders was a source of criticism and also a reason to seek the closer integration of kinfolk. Self-criticism did not function to limit nationalist designs, but could instead be taken as an even more imperious argument for their fulfilment: the “ought” could not remain *abroad*. The heroic agency of kinfolk was compatible with victimhood, allowing politicians and nationalist activists in the Kingdom of Romania to claim agency as collaborators (if not saviors) of their beleaguered brethren. At the same time, the idea that Transylvanians were more advanced insofar as they were more “Western” by virtue of their socio-economic embeddedness as Austro-Hungarian subjects was a systemic explanation seldom volunteered by those in the nineteenth-century Kingdom. The punchline *had* to be the agency of *the nation*. Politicized as a means of both challenging the establishment and deflecting blame along social lines, comparison was integral to negotiating how the nation’s agency could be ascribed and imagined within and across borders.

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¹¹⁰Gábor Egry, *Etnicitás, identitás, politika: Magyar kisebbségek nacionalizmus és regionalizmus között Romániában és Csehszlovákiában 1918–1944* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2015): 53–75, *passim*.

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