From the Enlightenment to Genocide: The Evolution and Devolution of Romanian Nationalism

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From the Enlightenment to Genocide: Romanian Nationalism and the Crisis of Modernity

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries attempts at gaining national and political recognition through the work of Uniate priests in Transylvania and secular intellectuals in the Regat eventually culminated in the 1848 revolution, led to the recognition of an autonomous Romanian state in 1878, which in turn was further enlarged at the end of World War I with the Treaty of Trianon. Along the path to nationhood nationalism took on an ever-increasing exclusivity. Using Romania as a case study, this article addresses how nationalism occasionally become murderous. More specifically it addresses the origins of Romanian nationalism and how it influenced Romania’s support participation in the Holocaust. Lastly, Romanian nationalism developed not only within the context of modernization, but also has roots within the similarly broad historical contexts of absolutism and the Enlightenment. I argue that Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson’s modernist conceptions of nationalism’s origins are pertinent to explaining the conditions necessary for the appearance of nationalism, yet they must be molded to fit Romania’s unique geographical, political and cultural conditions.

Romanian nationalism was initially patriotic, if somewhat exclusivist, and was based upon long traditions of hostility towards non-Romanians. Several factors contributed to the devolution of Romanian nationalism: resentment towards Western-promoted Romanian legislation that guaranteed the protection of minorities, the intensification of Romanian identity production through the bureaucratization of schools that explicitly excluded minorities from its definition, the flourishing of racist political parties that were competing for newly enfranchised citizens in the interwar period, and the precarious social and economic conditions in rapidly industrializing cities. These factors all colluded to create conditions conducive to the scapegoating and resentment of minorities, especially Jews, which eventually culminated in the extermination of Jews and Roma in Romania during World War II.

In order to illustrate the distinct path along which Romanian nationalism developed, I have used the works of Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner as guideposts for considering the evolution and devolution of Romanian nationalism. Anderson and Gellner are both modernist historians of nationalism whose theories predict that certain structures of modernization need to be in place before nationalism can flourish. Anderson proposes that print-capitalism, which spurs vernacular literacy, needs to be in place in order to foster an “imagined community” of individuals who relate to one another across space and time on the basis of shared culture, language and history. Gellner submits that in order for nationalism to arise society needs to first experience a marked break from medieval, agricultural norms to a new society based upon industrialization, which in turn spurs the creation of a standard culture that facilitates communication and production. In Romania’s case, nationalism arose in the eighteenth-century before the advent of print-capitalism, literacy, industrialization and homogenous, state-propagated culture, meaning that it falls entirely outside the theories of nationalism proposed by Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson. Romania’s unique path from the birth of national
consciousness to exclusive nationalism raises questions as to whether one standard theory of nationalism can ever be applicable to every nationalist ideology.