

REVIEW

Florin Müller, *Statul Național-Legionar (septembrie 1940 – ianuarie 1941)*, Editura Corint, București, 2025, 491 p.

The study of the ideology and political practices of the Romanian far right has attracted growing interest since December 1989, both within the academic community and in public debates. The subject is far from exhausted, acquiring new dimensions, for example, in understanding how members of the Legionary Movement related to the communist regime established between 1945 and 1947.

The purpose of this presentation is not to continue the debate itself, but rather to draw attention to an impressive volume in terms of both conception and documentation, published in 2025 by Corint Publishing House. It is *The National Legionary State*, authored by Florin Müller of the Faculty of History, University of Bucharest. This is a landmark achievement in the historiographical landscape, and this assessment is by no means merely formal.

Florin Müller has accustomed the academic community to rigorous studies devoted to the Romanian far right. The consistency of his scholarly endeavour is reinforced by the present volume, a genuine monograph of one of the darkest periods in Romania's history: the coexistence between General Ion Antonescu and the Legionary Movement (September 1940–January 1941). As noted above, the subject is neither unknown nor neglected, at least in the post-communist period. However, it was also addressed in previous decades, naturally within the ideological context of those times. Was there a need for a new work devoted to the Legionary Movement? In our view, the answer is unequivocally yes, because the author elevates the study of the subject to a higher level through rigorous, insightful documentation and conceptualisation, grounded in recent research on European totalitarianism. He employs a rich body of contemporary international scholarship, as well as Romanian archival sources and documents. This accounts for the distance separating the present volume from earlier works, regardless of their scope.

The perspectives from which the National Legionary regime is examined are both illuminating and clarifying regarding the nature, objectives, ideology, and political practices of the governing partners during their brief period of political coexistence (September 1940–January 1941), which ended under well-known circumstances.

Florin Müller reconstructs the actual power relations between General Ion Antonescu and the Legionary Movement, as well as the political foundations of those relations. Antonescu's position of power, his ability to present himself as the saviour of the nation in the week following the Vienna Award, his

exploitation of anti-Carlist Legionary unrest (and violence), especially between September and November 1940, and his orientation toward an authoritarian-militarist state with the potential to evolve into a totalitarian regime are all extensively discussed in the volume, whose conclusions are genuinely convincing. Similarly, the nature of the Legionary Movement, with an emphasis on its revolutionary-totalitarian dimension aimed at a fundamental transformation of society—a dimension that was minimised, almost to the point of disappearance, in much of the previous historiography—receives extensive treatment. The same applies to the violence of its discourse, the violence of its public policies, and crime as a political instrument.

This volume should be read through an interpretive lens whose conclusion is, beyond doubt, Romania's slide toward totalitarianism, embraced by both components of the dual state between September 1940 and January 1941. In the author's words, "the attitude of the Legionary Movement toward the democratic system, and even more so toward the Carolist dictatorship, as expressed in the writings of its principal ideologues, must be understood as targeting the entire political system and the politico-ideological superstructure of democracy. The Legionary Movement directed its hostility against democracy as the founding political philosophy of capitalist-bourgeois modernity" (pp. 15–16). The Legionary Movement, Florin Müller convincingly demonstrates, was an anarchic, nihilistic, anti-bourgeois, and anti-capitalist revolution.

At the same time, Ion Antonescu—who is still portrayed in contemporary public discourse, often under the guise of scientific objectivity, as a saviour of the nation and as a necessary and inevitable anti-communist/anti-Soviet solution—is convincingly defined as an "advocate of the state as an instrument of force, untouchable and standing above any anarchic-revolutionary experiments. The state envisioned by the General-Leader was a 'state of force,' independent of the volatile forces of the electorate, hostile to both the corrupt practices of democracy and the anarchic voluntarism of the 'forces of world revolution.' It was a state of order, in which civilians had to understand that they were merely tolerated within the statist war machine" (p. 19).

From this point onward, alternative interpretations lose much of their relevance: the National Legionary State as an imperative necessity in response to a profound crisis, or the patriotism of its partners (or solely of Ion Antonescu after January 23, 1941). As the author persuasively argues, this was a new military-fascist regime, not merely a new government led by General Ion Antonescu:

"The Ion Antonescu government did not constitute a mere ministerial succession. A new regime centred around the General was taking shape. At the beginning of September 1940, not only did Carol II abdicate, but Ion Antonescu became Prime Minister. The main consequence of Antonescu's rise to power was

the rapid destruction of the Carolist dictatorship and the construction of a new regime, over which the National Peasants' Party and, secondarily, the Liberals, no longer had any means of control. The problem confronting Romania in early September was not the Antonescu government itself, but a new military-fascist regime. The National Legionary State constitutes a phase of this regime, possessing a high degree of autonomy in relation to the later regime of Antonescu's (exclusive) dictatorship" (pp. 39–40).

Within this new regime, "the Legionary Movement abandoned its status as an autonomous political force and pledged full loyalty to Antonescu's authoritarian project. Horia Sima no longer felt the need for clarifications in ordinary political discourse. He accepted Antonescu's authority at the level of official rhetoric, precisely to focus on the internal management of the 'national revolution,' according to its own violent and nihilistic paradigm" (p. 132).

The end of the collaboration is interpreted not merely in terms of rivalry for control of power, with all its implications (including ethnic and racial cleansing, a core dogma of the Legionary Movement). Rather, the significance of the January 1941 confrontation is much deeper. Let us give the floor to the author:

"Legionary public violence destabilised Romania and created a permanent state of social tension. Spheres of authority had emerged in which the Legionaries sought to maintain absolute control. The legitimacy of the Conducător in the eyes of society, the civilian bureaucracy, and the Army would have been irreparably eroded had he failed to take exemplary measures to restore order. As previously noted, Ion Antonescu had exploited Legionary crimes to resolve the sensitive issue of political prisoners. The outcome of the tensions between the Legionaries and Ion Antonescu, known in historiography and public discourse as the 'Legionary Rebellion,' differs from all other changes of power in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Romania. For the first time, exclusion from power was met with violent, armed resistance by those about to be removed from government. 'Party fascism' refused to be displaced by Antonescu's militarist authoritarianism [...]. In January 1941, exclusion from power provoked the Movement's violent reaction. As Head of State, Ion Antonescu had the authority to carry out this operation. King Michael's approval was implicit, and no sources indicate that Antonescu sought the monarch's permission for such action" (pp. 433–434), the only necessary approval being that of Adolf Hitler.

The work is structured into five substantial chapters, each reflecting the complexity of the issues addressed: From Royal Dictatorship to the National Legionary State: Between Clandestinity and Violence; (Chapter I); The Collapse of the Royal Dictatorship; The Establishment of the New Regime and the Distribution of Power in the "Dual State"; Ion Antonescu, the Legionary Movement, and Nazi Germany; (Chapter II); The Ideological Profile of the Legionary Movement; (Chapter III); Public Violence and Totalitarian

Radicalisation; The Jilava Murders; The Iorga–Madgearu Case; Control and Purges in the Academic World; (Chapter IV); The Legionary Rebellion; Antisemitism as a “Negative Social Agreement”; Toward a “Fascism Without Fascists”. (Chapter V).

The author does not merely provide a new political history of the National Legionary State (for example, the rebellion is presented in all its dimensions, including local developments), but also reconstructs the character of the movement by examining its internal dynamics and its ideological “production” during the period, both nationally and locally. Readers of this work—whether members of the academic community or simply history enthusiasts—will come away with a definitive image of the movement's totalitarian nature, an aspect on which Florin Müller concentrates his entire effort in research, interpretation, and synthesis.

This is why the book's characterisation as a landmark study is fully justified. Its analysis and conclusions bring order to a debate long marked by opposing viewpoints. After following the demonstration offered in this work, there can be no doubt regarding the movement's profoundly anti-democratic dimensions. Henceforth, interpretations that seek to provide historical justifications—such as presenting it as a Romanian nationalist movement, a reaction to internal and external communist threats, an alternative to foreign (Jewish) dominance, or a salvational response to the collapse of the Romanian state in the summer of 1940 and the refusal of the historical parties to participate in government—must be examined through the interpretive framework provided by *The National Legionary State (September 1940 – January 1941)*, authored by Florin Müller.

Emanuel Plopeanu*

* Ovidius University of Constanța, Romania, emanuel.plopeanu@365.univ-ovidius.ro