

“TAMING THE BODY”: PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE LEGIONARY WORK CAMPS SYSTEM (1933–1937)

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The fascist concern regarding the human body, physical exercise and physical work is a well-known fact, acknowledged by many scholars. A special emphasis was placed on the exaltation of masculinity as a show of strength for fascism's revolutionary goal. Indeed, as historian George L. Mosse argued, “fascism used manliness both as an ideal and in a practical manner in order to strengthen its political structure, but devotion to a higher cause was at the center of its concept of masculinity”¹. The fascist regenerative project needed physically strong militants, especially men, in order to assure the rebirth of the nation. Exaltation of physical strength and masculinity went hand-in-hand with the fear of decay within the nation. Thus, common working projects, physical education or performance sports were encouraged, and fascist leaders such as Mussolini often posed as practitioners of such activities².

The Legionary Movement also placed a great emphasis on training its militants in a cult for physical strength. In 1932, the Sportive Legion was founded³ and it was concerned with the physical education of the legionaries. The care for physical education was established within the Legion, at a very early stage. Thus, the special nests called *Cross Brotherhoods* (containing young persons aged between 14 and 20) had to undergo a special process of education that also focused on physical and sanitary education, among other elements such as religion and nationalism. Codreanu's motivation was clear, as he considered that “the child has to be robust and with a healthy body, because he will be the soldier of tomorrow who will defend this soil”⁴. In connection with this physical education, an important part was played by sanitary education, especially against venereal diseases, which “wear out the vigor of the youth.”⁵ Analyzing these statements, one may agree with Mosse that this exaltation of masculinity and physical education was centered on a “higher cause,” that of defending the country and preventing the perceived decay of the nation while assuring its regeneration.

¹ George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, Oxford, 1996, p. 155.

² *Ibidem*, p. 168.

³ Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale (hereafter: ANIC), fund Ministerul de Interne – Diverse, file no. 15/1933, f. 308: Note from September 7, 1934.

⁴ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Cărticica Șefului de cuib*, 13th edition, București, 2000, p. 35, first published in 1933.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

However, if in Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany the emphasis was placed on physical education through sports or military exercise, the Legion used physical work as a method of “taming the bodies” of its young militants. In this respect, an analysis of the legionary “work ethic” and the work camps system provides insightful elements about the way in which the Legion wanted to shape the “new man”⁶. The current analysis also focuses on the sense of solidarity the Legion wanted to create as well as on the depiction of the work camps as micro projections of the “new Romania.”

Educating the Young Legionaries through Work: Towards a New “Work Ethic”

Wanting to bypass one of the most persistent inferiority complexes among Romanians, which claimed that they were not a hardworking people, Codreanu and the Legion advocated a new “work ethic” for the “new man.” In 1933, when this attitude crystallized, Codreanu presented his conviction to his partisans in an order calling for the building of a dyke on the Buzău River. Perceiving the period after the war as one of empty talk, which literally ruined the country, he wanted to lead his movement towards the direction of the deed, in order to physically rebuild the country.

Through physical work, and starting with minor building activities such as the Buzău dyke, a great ideal was achieved, according to Codreanu, and that was the making of what he envisaged as a “new Romania”: “We also want to build: from a broken bridge, to a road and to catching a watercourse and transform it in motive energy, from constructing a new peasant household to constructing a *new Romanian village, a new city, a new Romanian state*. This is the historical calling of our generation, on present day’s ruins to build a new and proud country”⁷.

Codreanu saw small building enterprises and the work camps as initial stages of a larger, regenerative project. The current goal was small, local, but the long-term project was large and nationwide. The new Romania, he argued, would not emerge from clubs, cafes or cabarets (places of decay) but from the “heroism of your work”⁸. Through hard work, Codreanu thought that Romanians could overcome their condition and become creators of culture and civilization in Eastern Europe. This new work ethic was propagated from early stages within the Legion. Every young legionary had to be aware of the virtues of physical work. One of the

⁶ I have highlighted in another article (Valentin Săndulescu, *Fascism and Its Quest for the “New Man”: The Case of the Romanian Legionary Movement*, in “Studia Hebraica,” 2004, no. 4, pp. 349-361) the importance of the creation of a “new man” for fascist movements.

⁷ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Pentru Legionari*, 9th edition, București, 1999, p. 365, first published in 1936.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

main laws governing the legionary nest was the law of work, codified by Codreanu: “Work. Work every day. Work with love. The reward for your work should not be material earning but the satisfaction that you put a building block for the ascension of the Legion and the blossoming of Romania”⁹.

Apart from being the driving force behind the “new man’s” bid to transform and regenerate the country, the new legionary “work ethic” attempted to change the image of the Legion in a positive way. Within Romanian public opinion, the Legion was considered a destructive, violent and often anarchic movement. The fact that since its very beginnings it was involved in numerous violent acts against authorities and rival political parties pushed the Legion towards the periphery of the Romanian political landscape. The negative and destructive image associated with the Legion was also connected with the image of similar movements in Europe. In order to counter this public perception, the Legion used the new work ethic to pose as a constructive and positive organization. This discourse has been predominant since 1934, after the Legion was outlawed because of the assassination of Prime Minister Duca by three of its most fanatical followers. This change went along with the general regenerative discourse of creating a “new man” and a “new Romania,” a discourse which also posed as a constructive one.

The fact that this negative public perception was real and the Legion wanted to counter it, was suggested by legionary writings of the time. Ion Banea, an important legionary leader, was the author of a hagiography of Codreanu entitled *Căpitanul* and first published in 1936¹⁰. In a special chapter, “The Captain as Creator,” Banea stated that “the greatest accusation everyone made against the Captain and his generation was precisely that it was a negative generation, one of destructiveness, and he was a negativist”¹¹. However, Banea went on to counter this accusation by emphasizing the constructive side of the Legion, under Codreanu’s guidance. The concrete arguments underscored by Banea were the material results of the Legion’s work camps: “Through the remarkable development of voluntary work, through countless camps, whose results may be seen in the hostels, schools, churches, hospitals, crucifixes, bridges, fountains, roads and other accomplished works, a true revolution had been made. After falling asleep for centuries, the characteristic feature of our Roman ancestors, construction, is now awaking within us with the same strength that possessed them as well”¹².

Indeed, the extent of legionary voluntary work sites was large in mid 1930s. The type of discourse exemplified by Banea, focused on the constructive aspects

⁹ Idem, *Cărticica Șefului de cuib*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰ First published in 1936 and then printed in other editions, this book is probably the best example of the personality cult dedicated to Codreanu (nicknamed *The Captain*).

¹¹ Ion Banea, *Căpitanul*, Timișoara, 1995, p. 107.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 107-108.

and reborn, ancient qualities, was also very popular. Where the state failed to help the peasants or other citizens at the local level, the legionaries intervened with their voluntary work. Disciplined and organized, they often gained the admiration of the locals. This was also one of the main reasons for their surge in popularity throughout the 1930s. In a special report of the intelligence service from 1936, it was acknowledged that the Legion's tactic to develop a "constructive policy," especially through work camps, had a positive impact among the public and among other political parties, who attempted to emulate this model¹³.

The new legionary work ethic, which advocated that "under the spell of work, the national soul coagulates more thoroughly" and that there was "a rebirth of today's generation in a Romanian work"¹⁴, proved to be engaging and successful. It showed the "new man" of tomorrow in action and defined its hardworking character. The most successful enterprises were, nevertheless, the work camps, which served as "educational laboratories" in which young legionaries were trained to be the "new man."

The Work Camps System

The work camps system played a crucial role in the regenerative project construed by the Legion and was the perfect place where the taming of the body took place. In an orderly manner, young legionaries took part in common working endeavors. Songs, prayers, physical and military exercise completed the atmosphere within the camps. Codreanu considered the work camps, due to their complexity, the ultimate legionary school¹⁵. The system became efficient in the mid 1930s, with the highest numbers of camps and working sites being reached in 1935 and 1936. Due to their sizeable popularity, the government banned the organization of such camps in 1937.

However, the history of the work camps as undertakings that produced a mental revolution, as Codreanu often liked to emphasize, began in 1924, when the Legion did not even exist. On May 8, 1924, Codreanu, together with a group of students, initiated the first work camp in a small village, Ungheni, on the bank of the Prut River. His goal was to produce enough mud bricks to build a "Cultural Christian Hostel" for the students loyal to him. Codreanu described the effect of

¹³ ANIC, fund Ministerul de Interne – Diverse, file 3/1936, ff. 301-302: Report of the Security Direction of the Police regarding the activity of the 'Everything for the Fatherland' Party.

¹⁴ Ion Banea, *Căpitanul*, p. 109.

¹⁵ For the constant mass socialization of the young fascist "new men" in Italy, see Ruth Ben Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945*, Berkeley, 2001, p. 93. For another analysis of the political socialization of the youth see Tracy Koon, *Believe! Obey! Fight!: Political socialization of youth in Fascist Italy 1922–1943*, Chapel Hill, 1985, p. XV.

this event as a “revolution in the current mentality”¹⁶ because for the first time peasants and workers saw students doing physical work and felt that this was an appreciation of their situation. Codreanu’s remarks were in fact an expression of his longings for a classless society, the perfect condition for the “new man” and the “new Romania,” a state in which class differences did not matter and peasants and workers, along with young intellectuals, were a whole, working together for the nation’s benefit.

This episode was considered the founding act of the work camps system. Another significant, and comparable, endeavor was the already mentioned attempt to build a dyke on the Buzău River in July 1933¹⁷. Although it was not successful, because the legionaries were deterred by the authorities from completing their task, this attempt had a powerful propaganda effect. However, the work camp system grew tremendously in the mid 1930s, from four camps in 1934 to 50 in 1936, along with more than 500 working sites¹⁸.

In the same way he acted about every aspect within the Legion, Codreanu also regulated the work camps in a strict manner. In May 1935, he issued a circular letter that contained the main regulations for work camps and working sites. According to him, every camp had a legionary commandant, named by the central leadership of the movement, and a legionary missionary, who was in charge with the spiritual education of the legionaries. In order to exist, the camp also had to include 30 legionaries and a working period of one month. The camp served as a school and every attendant automatically became a legionary¹⁹. In addition, attendance at the work camps became a compulsory element for awarding ranks within the Legion.²⁰ Besides the large work camps, Codreanu also encouraged smaller working sites, which were enterprises of lesser amplitude, placed at the local level (villages, households) but did not serve as a “legionary school.” At these sites, at least five legionaries had to work for a minimum of three days under the guidance of a nest’s chief and the action was reported immediately to the central command of the Legion, in Bucharest²¹.

Along with this strict organization of the work camps system, Codreanu did not overlook their educational character for shaping the “new man.” One may

¹⁶ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Pentru Legionari*, p. 157.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 364.

¹⁸ Armin Heinen, *Legiunea Arhanghelul Mihail. Mișcare socială și organizație politică. O contribuție la problema fascismului internațional*, București, 1999, p. 268. Heinen also emphasizes that the work camps were considered training sites for the “new man.”

¹⁹ The preoccupation for bypassing the conventional school system was also present in the German case, after Hitler came to power. For more on this, see Michael H. Kater, *Hitler Youth*, Cambridge, 2004, pp. 48-50.

²⁰ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. *Circulări și manifeste 1927–1938*, 5th ed., München, 1981, p. 41.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 41-42.

argue that this was the main goal of the work camps. In a circular letter issued in August 1935 from one of the Legion's largest work camp in Carmen Sylva, Codreanu emphasized the work camp as "a new school; our own school born from our Romanian soil and our Romanian soul"²². Then, he went on stating the four main educational principles governing the work camp. The first such principle was manual labor, which, ironically enough overshadowed in importance, to say the least, the intellectual work: "Manual labor: with the hoe, the pickaxe, the axe or with bare arms. It physically and muscularly strengthens the legionary and it regenerates the human brain cell, which is damaged especially by intense intellectual work. ... This work takes the man out of the world of theory and places him on the ground, developing his practical side"²³.

The other main principles advocated by Codreanu as essential to the legionary school were a life of austerity (disdain towards luxury because it softens people and turns them into imbeciles), life in common (because it creates a state of spiritual community) and theoretical education, "pouring in everyone's soul the thoughts of the Legion regarding how one should act towards God, life, his country, the world and himself"²⁴.

Analyzing Codreanu's discourse one notices his determination towards total control over the lives of the legionaries. They must follow the Legion's life principles to the letter, in order to become the "new men" of tomorrow. Codreanu argued in favor of physical work and a common and austere life in order to discipline the bodies and the minds of his followers and to prepare them as role models for all Romanians to follow.

In July 1936, Codreanu issued a circular letter for the work camps commandants in which he urged them not to forget to educate the legionaries under their supervision. He recommended to the commandants two main methods of education. The first one, again, was the example of life in common, advising the commandants to live the same life as the ordinary members of the work camp, and to act "with kindness and love"²⁵. The second method advocated by Codreanu was the education lessons conducted during special meetings. What is interesting, however, is that Codreanu recommended topics for discussions containing elements such as disunity, revolt against the leaders and treason. This showed a fear for potential acts of disobedience and infidelity within the Legion, as well as his desire to reinforce the leadership principle within the movement. It is also significant that these orders were not communicated to every ordinary legionary but to their commandants, who were in charge of their education.

²² *Scrisoarea Domnului Corneliu Zelea Codreanu către legionarii din taberele de muncă*, in "Brațul de Fier," vol. I, September 1935, no. 4, p. 1.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Circulări și manifeste*, p. 76.

Codreanu feared dissent within the movement, especially after an episode in 1934 when one of his closest men, Mihai Stelescu, became critical of his activities and broke away from the Legion²⁶. Therefore, the work camps system was also a method of reinforcing the leadership principle and respect for hierarchy within the movement. For Codreanu, treachery was one of the main causes for disunity and backwardness of the Romanian nation, and it had to be countered by total obedience to the leader and his project of a new country. Loyalty was one of the key qualities requested for the “new man,” and the work camps attempted to strengthen this quality.

In 1935 and 1936, the educational aim of the work camps was widely and openly embraced by the legionaries and this was visible in the many articles dedicated to this issue in legionary publications. The legionaries thought that they were involved in a superior, spiritual process of human transformation. The “new man” promised by Codreanu in 1933 was in the making, and embodied key virtues. One of these virtues was fairness, and Codreanu himself pleaded for the creation of the “fair man” (*omul corect*)²⁷. A 1935 unsigned article expressed Codreanu’s thoughts in a direct manner: “The work camps, besides their practical aim, besides the aim of reciprocal brotherhood and acquaintance, besides shaping the individual in a sense of heroism and supreme sacrifice, have to shape the “Fair Man,” a notion forgotten in these times of terrible moral disappointment”²⁸.

The general feeling was that all noble and humane values were lost and the morality of Romanians needed to be reinforced. The work camps, besides assuring a healthy body for the legionaries also wanted to provide the necessary moral values, and took care of spiritual education, as well. Thus, the taming of the body and the taming of the spirit took place concomitantly. Dumitru C. Amzăr, a young intellectual, underscored this duality in one of his articles and praised it as the essence of the legionary educational process: “The work is interrupted, according to a precise schedule, by physical exercises, marches, songs and discussions. In those truly Socratic conversations, somebody elaborates, answering the questions asked, political, national, social and general issues, which are of interest for the youth. In both – physical and intellectual work – the start is from the basics. Behind any achieved thing is everybody’s self-exertion. Nobody gets anything for free”²⁹.

²⁶ Later on, Stelescu founded the organization *Cruciada Româanismului*. He was considered a traitor by the Legion and was assassinated by a group of 10 legionaries who claimed to fulfill the will of the movement (Francisco Veiga, *Istoria Gărzii de Fier 1919–1941. Mistica ultranaționalismului*, 2nd edition, București, 1995, pp. 228–229).

²⁷ In this regard, he wrote a special letter for the legionaries from the Arnota work camp, in July 1935 (Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Circulări și manifeste*, p. 47).

²⁸ *Taberele de muncă ale Totului pentru țară*, in “Cuvântul Argeșului,” vol. I, September 1, 1935, no. 6, p. 3.

²⁹ *Începutul sforțării proprii*, in “Rânduiala,” vol. I, 1935, no. 4, p. 429.

This blend of physical education (marches, exercises, work) and intellectual development (through “Socratic conversations” on various topics) praised by Amzăr, generated for the legionaries an idealistic view of the work camp as a whole. It was soon considered a micro projection of the future Romania, a small-scale endeavor where legionary “new men” put the regenerative project into practice. It also served as an example for public opinion, a glimpse of how the “new Romania” would look like.

In an article from September 1935, Vasile Boldeanu, a priest, but also a legionary leader, described his experience in the Carmen Sylva work camp. He narrated about terraces, roads built from stone – one of them was named “The Romanian of Tomorrow Boulevard” –, and other material accomplishments which “serve as a strong testimony for what the legionaries will do tomorrow, when they will accede to power”³⁰ in Romania. Boldeanu also presented the camp as a place where class distinctions did not matter, a classless microcosm to serve as an example for the future, totally homogenized nation: “University professors, assistant professors, teachers, priests, high ranked, retired officers, students, merchants, handicraftsmen from cities and from the countryside, all united by the same creed, the same spirit of sacrifice, the same desire to work and to better the country”³¹.

This unprecedented unity gave Boldeanu, and probably other legionaries too, a feeling of invincibility in their quest, because they thought they had “turned the legionary into a man of faith, a man willing to sacrifice for his faith (...) a hardworking man”³². Thus, the feeling that the work camps created or were about to create the “new man” was widespread among legionaries. Another legionary, George Macrin (who wrote extensively about the work camps), described it as a “miniature state” in which “each social class and each age group lived in understanding”³³. The “new men,” although in few numbers, accomplished their project in the work camps at a smaller scale, but planned it at a larger scale, for the entire country.

However, one may also cast some doubts on the absolute effectiveness of the taming process, the same way that George Mosse argued that “taming did not always work.”³⁴ The feeling of loyalty towards Codreanu and the other leaders, and the attachment to the values propagated by the Legion was not always successful,

³⁰ *Ce-am văzut în tabăra legionară de la Carmen Sylva*, in “Brațul de Fier,” vol. I, September 1935, no. 4, p. 1.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Taberele de muncă. Tabăra de la Carmen Sylva*, in “Însemnări Sociologice,” vol. II, October 1936, no. 7, p. 23.

³⁴ George L. Mosse, *Introduction: The Genesis of Fascism*, in “Journal of Contemporary History,” vol. 1, 1966, no. 1, p. 17.

even after individuals were trained inside the work camps. In this regard, the young legionary George Beza provided an eloquent example. In the summer of 1935, he attended the activities of the legionary work camp at Carmen Sylva. In autumn, he was one of the main contributors to a special issue dedicated to the legionary work camps by the Cluj based journal “Revista Mea.” In an article dealing with the history of the legionary work camps, Beza emphasized the deep physical and spiritual transformation he experienced at Carmen Sylva³⁵. On the same issue, in another article authored by him, Beza considered that “in the work camp, I rose again to a new life!” and now he was walking “on the road of faith for the better, through the spiritual revolution”³⁶.

Nevertheless, although he was an important figure within the Legion, Beza’s faith proved not so strong. He was excluded from the Legion because he did not obey an order from a superior, and later on he wrote an article against the movement he praised just months before. Codreanu attempted to talk to him and to convince him to “chivalrously retire from the legionary ranks” because he lacked “the necessary faith of a legionary,” due to his “peculiar spiritual structure.”³⁷ However, obviously disregarding any leadership principle taught when he was in the Legion, Beza went on with the rebellion and published another article in which he criticized the movement. This last act of contempt determined Codreanu to eliminate Beza from the Legion³⁸, because of his “attitude contrary to the legionary spirit”³⁹.

Beza’s situation was not singular. The camps also attracted, besides faithful followers of Codreanu, many persons considered by him as discordant with the movement. The work camps system did not prove efficient for every attendant, thus its limits were quite clear. In a circular letter from September 1936, destined for legionary commandants, Codreanu criticized them for not being selective enough about their choice of persons who attended the work camp from Carmen Sylva. Codreanu identified some of the participants as “the scum of villages and towns,” ordered their removal from the movement and recommended more attention in future recruiting⁴⁰.

As one could see, the work camps system had an important impact on Romanian public opinion and boosted the Legion’s popularity, a reality acknowledged by authorities and by rival political parties. The education system perpetrated in the work camps performed the function of taming the bodies and the

³⁵ *Istoricul taberelor de muncă voluntară*, in “Revista Mea,” vol. I, September – October 1935, no. 9-10, p. 3.

³⁶ *Mărturisire de credință*, *ibidem*, p. 7.

³⁷ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Circulări și manifeste*, p. 72.

³⁸ Armin Heinen, *Legiunea Arhanghelul Mihail*, p. 260.

³⁹ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Circulări și manifeste*, p. 73.

⁴⁰ The full text of the circular letter is available *ibidem*, pp. 87-90.

feeling of revolt of many young Romanians. The austere life style, the physical exercises and life in common, advocated by Codreanu, gave many youngsters the feeling of belonging to a new type of community, whose aims were higher than the usual movements, i.e. towards creating a “new man” and a “new country.” In spite of the seemingly visible success of the work camps in creating the legionary “new man,” there were certain limits to the system, and some legionaries could not be educated according to the principles perpetrated by the Legion, as proved by the case of George Beza. Nevertheless, the taming of the body through the work camps system enhanced group solidarity among the legionaries and was an essential stage for the Legion’s failed attempt to create a “new man” and a “new country.”