

„The Sword Stretched between Two Worlds”:¹ the Image of the Charismatic Leader in Legionary Ideology

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Abstract: Inspired by recent historiographical contributions concerning the complex implications of the notion of charisma for the various expressions of fascism, this article attempts to explore some of the main characteristics and functions of charismatic leadership in the case of the Legion of the “Archangel Michael”. Drawing upon the classical ideal-typical model developed by Max Weber and building on the conclusions of some of its most significant refinements within the field of fascist studies, the present analysis will provide a brief outlook on the manner in which charismatic authority was theoretically developed in the case of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the founder and ruler of the Legionary Movement.

Keywords: fascism, charismatic authority, the Legionary Movement, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu

Rezumat: Inspirat de contribuțiile istoriografice recente referitoare la implicațiile complexe ale noțiunii de carismă pentru diferitele expresii ale fascismului, acest articol încearcă să exploreze unele dintre principalele caracteristici și funcții ale conducerii carismatice în cazul Legiunii „Arhanghelului Mihail”. Bazându-se pe modelul ideal-tipic dezvoltat de Max Weber și construind pe concluziile unora dintre cele mai semnificative rafinamente ale sale în domeniul studiilor fasciste, prezenta analiză va oferi o scurtă perspectivă asupra modului în care autoritatea carismatică a fost dezvoltată teoretic în cazul lui Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, fondatorul și conducătorul Mișcării Legionare.

Cuvinte cheie: fascism, autoritate carismatică, Mișcarea legionară, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu

Introduction

One of the fundamental instruments engaged in the exercise of social, political and spiritual power throughout history, charismatic authority became a subject of theoretical reflection in social sciences in the decades

¹ This metaphoric description of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu can be found in Ion Banea, *Căpitanul* [The Captain] (second edition, Sibiu: Editura Totul pentru Țară, 1937), p. 3.

preceding the First World War. Arguably the most important reference in that regard is the model of “charismatic domination” conceived by Max Weber, whose remarkable insights, however, could not anticipate the dramatic soar of political radicalism in the aftermath of the devastating global conflict.² Out of all the dire upheavals brought forth by the inter-war era, the rise of fascism best illustrated the considerable influence which charisma was able to bestow upon messianic leaders.

Informed by several recent reevaluations of the Weberian theses in the context of a prevailing “new consensus” in fascist studies, briefly examined in the first section of the paper, this article will analyze the manner in which the image of the charismatic leader was constructed within the Legion of the “Archangel Michael”, the epitome of Romanian fascism. The present argument will refer to several approaches through which the personal magnetism of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu was ideologically set up, with the perspectives under scrutiny following both pragmatic aims, such as reinforcing the inner authority of the leader and preventing internal dissent, and more abstract goals, concerning the putative higher calling of the “Captain” of the Legionary movement, frequently portrayed as the carrier of a divine mission, the embodiment of a new type of man, the protector of the nation against outer threats and inner foes, the visionary ruler able to redraw the historical course of Romania and the creator of a new order meant to bring the national community closer to its redemption.

The analysis of these complementary facets will draw upon three approaches, successively explored below: firstly, the self-referential stance of the charismatic leader, pertaining to Codreanu’s intention to provide a detailed representation of the ideal ruler, a role undoubtedly assigned to himself; secondly, the hagiographical outlook distinguishable in the writings focused on the life and deeds of the Legionary leader, an aspect examined through the comparative analysis of two biographical accounts published at different developmental stages of the cult of the “Captain”; thirdly, the connection between Codreanu’s charisma and other ideological tenets of the movement, particularly the notion of self-sacrifice, with the glorified projection of the leader becoming a catalyst of martyrdom, as illustrated by the works of Ion I. Moța. Before delving into matters of doctrine, the first section of the article will set the conceptual framework on which the present argument is based, by briefly exploring the role of charisma in the understanding of fascism.

² An extensive conceptual exposition of Weber’s model of “legitimate domination” can be found in Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 212-301.

Interpretations of Charisma in Fascist Studies

As stated above, the classical scholarly interpretation of charisma relates to Max Weber's efforts to determine the underlying sources of authority. Considering the modern state itself to be defined by relations of domination between people, more precisely by the "instrument of the legitimate use of [...] constraint",³ the German sociologist devised a threefold theoretical model meant to distinguish between the particularities of different strands of power. His theoretical construct included: "traditional domination", of a patriarchal kind, inspired by ancient forms of authority which turned obsolete with the onset of modernity; "charismatic domination", of a prophetic kind, rooted in the remarkable qualities possessed by exceptional personalities throughout history; and "legal domination", of a rational kind, grounded on the strictly regulated order of the modern era.⁴ Given its inherent fluidity, charismatic domination was the most challenging to reduce to an ideal-typical model, with its protean nature revealed by the etymology of the term, borrowed by Weber from the ancient Greek vocabulary of early Christianity where it referred to the "gift of grace", a miraculous trait which only a chosen few possessed.⁵ Consequently, in modern times, charismatic authority became an integral part of the contemporary world without losing its specific volatility. The Weberian perspective highlighted its ever present social impact by identifying an intricate process of crystallization of "charismatic communities" (*Gemeinde*), within which the former relations between members were to be profoundly reshaped: under the far reaching influence of the leader, traditional hierarchies were to dissolve and the rigid laws of the past ceased to be necessary, as the ruler himself became the sole source of authority acknowledged by his followers.⁶ Weber's untimely death in 1920 prevented him from witnessing the transformation of his conceptual formulations into social and political realities under the aegis of radicalism, with his model being frequently invoked in later decades as a key to understanding the appeal of phenomena such as fascism.

Nonetheless, several observers of the profound shifts of the inter-war era proposed alternative interpretations, some of which had a long lasting influence on future research. To offer a couple of relevant examples: Eric Voegelin, the originator of the influential theory of political religions, interpreted the authority of the leader through the lenses of his own

³ Max Weber, *Politica, o vocație și o profesie* [Politics as a Vocation] (Bucharest: Anima, 1992), pp. 9-10.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, pp. 215-216.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 241-246.

philosophical system, describing Mussolini and Hitler as leaders of “spiritual empires”, carriers of a “sacral substance” containing within itself “the spirit of the nation”;⁷ later on, Hannah Arendt, one of the main intellectuals associated with the totalitarian paradigm, emphasized the essential role of the *Führerprinzip*, which placed the leader at the center of all totalitarian movements and regimes.⁸ The former view is nowadays perpetuated by the most important promoters of the political religions paradigm, such as Emilio Gentile, whose descriptive definition of fascism includes references to the “charismatic and sacred” nature of authority,⁹ or Michael Burleigh, who highlights the self-proclamation of fascist leaders as “agents of Providence, dispatched to lead their respective chosen people from helotry and ignominy”;¹⁰ the latter perspective, in spite of the decline of the totalitarian model, provided an important starting point for numerous studies dedicated to fascism which outlined the role of the “principle of the leader”.

Notwithstanding these noteworthy alternative approaches, the Weberian model remained the main landmark as far as the historiography of fascism is concerned. In recent years, with the gradual development of an academic consensus centered on “the primacy of culture”¹¹, the readjustment of Weber’s theses resulted in several remarkable contributions to the field, three of which proved particularly useful to the present argument.

The first interpretation, advanced by Roger Eatwell, is essentially a typology of fascist charismatic leadership incorporating four main components inspired by the Weberian model: the presence of a “missionary vision”, connected to the founding myths of each fascist permutation; the instatement of a “symbiotic hierarchy”, most visible in the portrayal of the leader as the embodiment of the will of his followers, with whom he is inseparably bound; the effects of a “Manichean demonization”, related to the fascist community defining itself as fundamentally irreconcilable with a hostile Other; finally, the “magnetic personal presence”, illustrated by the development of the cult of the leader.¹²

⁷ Eric Voegelin, *Religiile politice* [Political Religions] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2010), pp. 141-142.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Originile totalitarismului* [The Origins of Totalitarianism] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1994), pp. 488-490.

⁹ Emilio Gentile, ‘Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion: Definition and Critical Reflections on Criticism of an Interpretation’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 5/3 (2004): 342-343.

¹⁰ Michael Burleigh, ‘National Socialism as a Political Religion’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 1/2 (2000): 8.

¹¹ See Roger Griffin, ‘The Primacy of Culture: The Current Growth (Or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 37/1 (2002).

¹² Roger Eatwell, ‘The Concept and Theory of Charismatic Leadership’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 7/2 (2006): 144-147.

The second interpretation belongs to Aristotle A. Kallis and views charismatic domination as both a state and a process, a dichotomy rooted in its volatile nature.¹³ This perspective stresses the need to understand “charismatization” as directed from the followers towards the leader, a course determining the nature of the charismatic community itself.¹⁴ Kallis makes use of the Weberian conceptual framework to underline the “symbolic preeminence” of fascist leadership,¹⁵ while concomitantly shedding light on the significant distinction between the cult of the leader, a generic trait of most dictatorships, and the typically fascist charismatization,¹⁶ the latter allowing the distinction between genuine fascism and the “para-fascist” or “fascistized” entities attempting to emulate it.¹⁷

The third interpretation is proposed by Constantin Iordachi, according to whom charisma is one of the core ideological components of generic fascism. By rethinking several of Weber’s theses, Iordachi develops the concept of “charismatic nationalism”, on the basis of which the nation becomes “a chosen community with a common destiny, inhabiting a sacred homeland and which, inspired by its glorious past, claims to possess a divine mandate leading towards redemption, through sacrifice, under the guidance of a charismatic leader”¹⁸. This perspective outlines charisma as “the most integrative aspect of fascist ideology”, a comprehensive concept including the relation between the charismatic leader and God, the idea of a divine mandate, the bond between God and the “chosen people”, the connection between the charismatic leader and his followers, as well as the historical mission of the national community.¹⁹ Applied to the Legionary movement, this

¹³ Aristotle A. Kallis, ‘Fascism, ‘Charisma’ and ‘Charismatisation’: Weber’s Model of ‘Charismatic Domination’ and Interwar European Fascism’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 7/1 (2006): 25-27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

¹⁵ Aristotle A. Kallis, ‘The ‘Regime-Model’ of Fascism: A Typology’, *European History Quarterly*, 30/1 (2000): 87.

¹⁶ Aristotle A. Kallis, “Fascism, ‘Charisma’ and ‘Charismatisation’”, p. 40.

¹⁷ Aristotle A. Kallis, “Fascism’, ‘Para-fascism’ and ‘Fascistization’: On the Similarities of Three Conceptual Categories’, *European History Quarterly*, 33/2 (2003): 241.

¹⁸ Constantin Iordachi ‘De la credința naționalistă la credința legionară. Palingenezie romantică, militarism și fascism în România modernă’ [From Nationalist Faith to Legionary Faith. Romantic Palingenesis, Militarism and Fascism in Modern Romania], in Constantin Iordachi (ed.), *Fascismul european 1918-1945. Ideologie, experimente totalitare și religii politice* [European Fascism 1918-1945. Ideology, Totalitarian Experiments and Political Religions] (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Institutului pentru Studiarea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2014), pp. 334-335.

¹⁹ Constantin Iordachi, ‘Fascism in Southeastern Europe. A Comparison between Romania’s Legion of the Archangel Michael and the Croatian Ustaša’, in Roumen Daskalov – Diana Mishkova (eds.), *Entangled Histories of the Balkans. Volume Two: Transfers of Political Ideologies and Institutions* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 355-468, especially p. 403.

interpretation delivers a nuanced outlook on the “relation between religion, politics and violence in the ideology and practice of the Legion”.²⁰

Informed by such compelling contributions, the present article will attempt to explore the functions and mechanisms pertaining to fascist charisma by analyzing several of the ideological underpinnings of the Legionary movement.

Corneliu Zelea Codreanu – The Self-Referential Stance of the Charismatic Leader

The rise of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu was allowed by the background of a country for which the aftermath of the First World War brought forth unprecedented transformations, arguably more favorable to the emergence of heavily personalized movements than to the consolidation of authentically democratic structures.²¹ As Oliver Jens Schmitt aptly observes, “Codreanu and his followers came to meet the enormous expectations of a profoundly disoriented society”,²² in a climate of chronic instability, severe political and economic dysfunctions, cultural confusion and social polarization. Moreover, as Constantin Iordachi indicates, following the “romantic tradition of messianic nationalism”, the charismatic leader was by no means an innovation of the inter-war years, with several intellectual and political figures previously claiming the role of “«apostles» of national regeneration”, albeit in different circumstances and serving other purposes.²³ Consequently, the portrayal of Codreanu as the providential savior of the nation did not occur in an ideological void, as there were plenty of favorable preconditions, either structural or circumstantial, for it to develop.

Initially addressing the narrow circle of the “Carriers of the new Spirit of the Age”,²⁴ the early followers who shared his Manichean worldview, Codreanu quickly realized that his movement could not survive and grow unless it managed to maintain its unity and expand its base. Aware of his charismatic potential from the first years of his political activism, he gained the unwavering conviction that he had been granted a

²⁰ Constantin Iordachi, ‘Charisma, Religion, and Ideology: Romania’s Interwar Legion of the Archangel Michael’, in John Lampe – Mark Mazower (eds.), *Ideologies and National Identities. The Case of Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004), pp. 19-20.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

²² Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. Ascensiunea și căderea „Căpitanului”* [Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. The Rise and Fall of ‘The Captain’] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2017), p. 344.

²³ Constantin Iordachi, ‘De la credința naționalistă la credința legionară’, pp. 385-386. The examples include Gheorghe Lazăr, Ion Heliade Rădulescu and Nicolae Iorga.

²⁴ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Circulări și manifeste. 1927 – 1938* [Circulars and Manifestos. 1927-1938] (München: Colecția „Europa” München, 1981), p. 4.

divine mandate to lead his people.²⁵ Naturally, this belief led him to identify his own authority as the ultimate means to provide his organization with the cohesion and appeal it needed, hence the constant emphasis on the strict following of rigid hierarchical principles, so that nothing would take place within the movement without the awareness, approval or direct implication of the leader. Decision making based on pluralism and elective initiatives, as well as all debates or differences of opinion were outright rejected, since they belonged to the democratic mentality and praxis which the Legion actively sought to overthrow: “As far as organization was concerned, we had relied on the idea of a chief and on that of discipline. [...] We had experienced anti-democracy from the start. I had been the leader all along. [...] Camps with diverging opinions, majorities and minorities confronting each other on matters of action and theory had never existed.”²⁶ In a clear illustration of the principle of “symbiotic hierarchy” described by Roger Eatwell, as well as of the view of Sven Reichardt, according to whom fascist leadership involved an ambivalent relation of power, “simultaneously rigid and flexible”, between the leader and the led,²⁷ Codreanu added: “We have never had committees and we have never voted for propositions. However, every time I felt the need, I sought the advice of everyone, yet I was the one to bear responsibility for the decisions I took”.²⁸

Moreover, Codreanu attempted to claim his place in Romanian history by constantly associating himself with the emblematic heroes of the nation. Whenever the survival of the national community had been threatened in the past, he affirmed, exceptional characters had risen above the existential line of the Romanian nation, defending it and preserving its identity through their acts of courage: “Our nation did not live through the millions of slaves who bowed their necks to receive the yoke of foreigners, but through Horia, through Avram Iancu, through Tudor, through Iancu Jianu, through all the outlaws who rejected the foreign yoke, who took their muskets and carried the honor and the spark of freedom”.²⁹ Codreanu considered himself a successor of these outstanding figures, as indicated by the frequent analogies between his own actions and those of the members of the national pantheon, whose glorious achievements were highly praised within the Legionary Movement: “The Legion kneels before the crosses of the

²⁵ Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Corneliu Zelea Codreanu*, p. 86

²⁶ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Pentru legionari* [For My Legionaries] (second edition, Sibiu: Editura Totul pentru Țară, 1936), pp. 65-66.

²⁷ Sven Reichardt, ‘Violence and Community: A Micro-Study on Nazi Storm Troopers’, *Central European History*, 46/2 (2013): 282.

²⁸ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Pentru legionari*, pp. 65-66.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

courageous and those of the martyrs of the Nation. The Legion stands as an unwavering shield around the Throne, out of which warlords and kings sacrificed themselves for the defense and rise of the Homeland".³⁰

Contemplating the destiny of great rulers, Codreanu developed a profile of the ideal leader, resembling the Weberian archetype,³¹ with the prominent self-referential component yet again present. His argument assumed the existence of "two complementary plains" of leadership: "the abstract field of the laws", a sphere of theoretical formulations, and the material realm where the rules of the former are being applied and where "the man with certain qualities deals with the art of imposing the truth"; the authentic leader must successfully balance the two: "He goes upwards, so that he is in agreement with the laws, but his place of creation is down here, on the battlefield, on the strategic and tactical field".³² Significantly, this view placing the leader both above and at the center of the order of his time was quite popular among the expressions of fascism: in the case of Italy, as Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi argues, the shaping of the myth of the *Duce* involved a clear distinction between the personality of the ruler, the party, and the regime, with the "aura of Mussolini" following its own course, beyond mundane political developments;³³ similarly, the massive propaganda machine of German National-Socialism permanently outlined the distance between the *Führer* and the petty political schemes taking place below him.³⁴

Along with his ability to navigate between the two previously described realms, the charismatic ruler depicted by Codreanu was characterized as being both a capable doctrinaire, who "masters the science of seeking and expressing the truth", and a decisive man of action, who "masters the science and art of organization, the science and art of education, the science and art of leadership", and whose legitimacy draws upon his exceptional set of skills, with moral traits being the predominant.³⁵

³⁰ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Cărticica șefului de cuib* [The Nest Leader's Manual] (fifteenth edition, Bucharest: Editura Fundației Culturale Buna Vestire, 2008), p. 4.

³¹ Constantin Iordachi, 'Charisma, Religion, and Ideology', p. 30.

³² Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Pentru legionari*, pp. 243-244.

³³ Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 55-56.

³⁴ Aristotle A. Kallis, *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 66-67.

³⁵ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Pentru legionari*, pp. 244-245. According to Codreanu, these traits included: 'an inner force of attraction', 'capacity for love', 'knowledge of human nature', 'the power to educate and teach heroism', 'mastering the laws of leadership', 'the sense of battle', 'courage to draw the sword', 'knowledge of just and moral aims as well as loyal means', and the 'virtues of a fighter': 'sacrifice', 'resilience', 'devotion'.

The charismatic leader was thus integrated into a wider ideological frame, described by Constantin Iordachi as a “charismatic scenario of divine salvation”, claiming that the world is governed based on a “divine plan” whose final stage is redemption, the Romanian nation is “chosen” to be the beneficiary of divine grace, Codreanu himself is meant to lead his nation towards transcendence, and the members of the Legion are “God’s chosen warriors”.³⁶ It is telling that the Legionary leader emphatically referred to the eschatological implications of authority and the ontological duties deriving from it: “The responsibility of the commander is great. He must not delight his armies with mere earthly victories without simultaneously preparing them for the decisive battle, out of which every soul may receive either the triumph of eternity or eternal defeat”.³⁷

The Hagiographical Representation of Charismatic Authority - Two Approaches

Aside from his own theoretical considerations on leadership, Codreanu saw his charisma fuelled by the works of his collaborators, some even preceding the creation of the Legion. In the climate of violent student revolts erupting throughout the country in the first inter-war decade, the gradual formation of a radical nucleus which later morphed into the leading core of Romanian fascism provided the background against which the future tenets of Legionary ideology coagulated. The cult surrounding Codreanu found one of its original expressions in a work whose author, Corneliu Georgescu, would become one of the founding members of the Legion of the “Archangel Michael”.

As opposed to the grandiose mythical representations of later years, which are rather marginal in Georgescu’s account, the future Legionary leader appears as a local hero, the spearhead of a tightly knit “bundle” of young fighters dedicated to the national cause, a remarkable personality binding together the “intellectual elements who deeply love the nation” with the “large masses of peasants” and directing his “vigorous action” against the enemies of the homeland, while at the same time seeking to attain “that holy national cleansing, after which our land would only be inhabited by those who have solid and deep roots in the depths of the Romanian soil”.³⁸

After this uncompromising affirmation of a Manichean worldview, the author invokes several episodes having the leader of the self-proclaimed

³⁶ Constantin Iordachi, ‘Fascism in Southeastern Europe’, pp. 419-421.

³⁷ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Însemnări de la Jilava* [Notes from Jilava] (Bucharest: Editura Majadahonda, 1995), pp. 49-50.

³⁸ Corneliu Georgescu, *Un om și o acțiune* [A Man and an Action] (Sibiu: Tipografia Poporului, 1925), p. 8.

avant-garde of the national struggle at their center, unveiling both their practical and symbolic significance. Codreanu enters the scene as a young student at the University of Iași, where he quickly makes a name for himself as a protector against the perceived threat of a relentless Judeo-Communist offensive which supposedly laid siege on the Moldavian capital. In the course of a reverent narrative, Georgescu enthusiastically celebrates the triumphs of the man who, by way of his “energy, courage, determination and willingness to sacrifice himself, contributed to a decisive degree to [...] the destruction of Bolshevism threatening to overwhelm Moldavia”. In order to reinforce the image of the defender of the ancestral homeland, Georgescu mentions a series of illustrative events, the most memorable being the time when Codreanu barricaded himself behind the university gates in order to prevent the alleged anti-national forces (in that particular context, those who opposed the traditional religious service being performed at the opening ceremony of the academic year) from coming inside, therefore “confronting, by risking his own life, the will of thousands of Bolshevik students and tens of Bolshevik professors, thus granting the victory of the Romanian ancestral custom against the tendencies meant to Bolshevize the country”.³⁹

Equally influential is the role of Codreanu as an educator and animator of the rural masses, mobilized through an assiduous campaign: “[Codreanu] resumed his wandering from one village to another, showing to everyone the Jewish threat that is hovering over us and the necessity of a vigorous reaction of all Romanians against it”.⁴⁰ Significantly, his dialogue with the most impoverished segments of the national community was not unidirectional, as Codreanu did not merely send a message across in order to galvanize the national consciousness of potential followers. Instead, he also insisted on openly receiving the claims, hopes and expectations of the marginalized, in deep contrast with the political elite of the time: “[...] the people were trembling, as the Romanian government was kneeling, as usual, before the Golden Calf. «The voice of the people» was not being heard up in the marble palaces where ministers and Jewish leaders were deciding the fate of the country together”.⁴¹ In striking opposition to the condemnable indifference or duplicity of the political class, the deeds of young Codreanu are deemed comparable to those of the apostles of the Holy Scripture: “with his voice, that of an apostle of the faith in the future of the Romanian Nation, he nourished in the souls of the forsaken the boundless longing for triumph”.⁴²

³⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴² Ibid., p. 26.

Religious references also abound in the description of the climactic episode of this early biography, the assassination of the chief of police in Iași, Constantin Manciu, killed by Codreanu in 1924 in an extreme escalation of a bitter personal rivalry. Unsurprisingly, the event is regarded as an illustrative example of divine justice, with the author of the act situated beyond any incrimination, his victim portrayed as a demonic presence whose annihilation had been a moral imperative, and the entire scene depicted as indisputable evidence that Codreanu was the authentic carrier of a divine mandate, which, through his redemptive actions, was implicitly extended upon the Romanian nation: “Codreanu was the instrument of immanent Justice, which can leave no wrongful deed unpunished. Through his arm, the Heavens have shown us that while earthly laws might be eluded, the law of God is righteous and ruthless! This sole truthful and universal law granted justice to us, the meek, by carrying, through the arm of Codreanu, the divine sentence”⁴³.

A more nuanced projection of the charismatic leader, indicating, as Oliver Jens Schmitt argues, the gradual metamorphosis of the representations of Codreanu in Legionary discourse, the transformation of the “peasants’ apostle” into the harbinger of “Romanian nationalist modernity”,⁴⁴ was provided a decade later by Ion Banea, one of the closest collaborators of Codreanu and the author of the most representative biography of the Legionary leader. The main purpose of his book was that of breaking down the idealized image of the “Captain” into a plurality of autonomous facets of his exceptional personality. Codreanu was placed at the center of an account which often doubled the theses affirmed in his own writings, thus giving the impression of a “parallel narrative”, complementary to the autobiographical works of its protagonist.⁴⁵

With metaphorical formulations and mundane episodes constantly alternating, Codreanu is portrayed first and foremost as the catalyst of national regeneration. The Legionary leader is represented as the sole force able to break with the corrupted order of the past and to inaugurate a new world on the ashes of the old one, an aspiration which Roger Griffin identifies as one of the fundamental aims of fascism:⁴⁶ “The Captain! He is a border stone; a frontier. A sword stretched between two worlds. An old one, which he bravely confronts, destroying it; a new one, which he creates, breathes life

⁴³ Ibid., p. 29.

⁴⁴ Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Corneliu Zelea Codreanu*, pp. 137-138.

⁴⁵ Ionuț Florin Biliuță, *The Archangel’s Consecrated Servants. An Inquiry in the Relationship between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Iron Guard (1930 – 1941)*. PhD Dissertation, ETD, History Department, Central European University. Budapest, 2013: pp. 214-215.

⁴⁶ Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism. The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), p. 9.

into, calls to light. His figure in the course of the national movement, from the end of the war onwards, resembles a line of fire, around which all great events gravitate".⁴⁷ Banea regarded the Legionary Movement as having provided unity to "the constructive generation", comprised of those segments of the young which were "the creators of a new life and willing to build a Country from the ground",⁴⁸ with the mobilization of their forces being inconceivable without the dynamic presence of their leader: "The red thread of this formidable Romanian turmoil, which tends to leave its mark on this historical period, is Corneliu Codreanu, the Captain of the generation of the twentieth century. [...] The great moments of heroic attitude and manifestations of Romanian dignity were either created by him or determined by him, they always belonged to him".⁴⁹

To his role as the initiator of a new historical course, connected to the anthropological revolution for which Codreanu served as both an originator and a prime example, Banea naturally devotes significant attention. The superhuman stance of the "Captain" is constantly reiterated, as he allegedly possesses the ability to alter the destiny of the nation, to project the entire national community into a glorious future, this gift turning Codreanu into a novel human type, "the new man", a concept which had already reached its maturity in Legionary ideology by the time Banea wrote his book:⁵⁰ "The figure of the Captain, surrounded by thousands of his soldiers ready to live as Legionaries and die as Legionaries, rises on the Romanian horizon as a titan. He is the man of tomorrow".⁵¹

Furthermore, Codreanu appears as an absolute creator of an almost divine stature, the sacred source of the physical and spiritual transformations envisioned as part of the imminent renewal of the national community: "The Captain is a great creator. He is a stream of creation, a perpetual incentive to action, an animator".⁵² Among the works of the leader, material realizations are subordinated to metaphysical ones, thus confirming the intentions of the Legionary Movement to channel its projected metamorphosis from the internal structure of the human being towards the external realm of reality: "The greatest work of the Captain, his main creation which will live to speak to the future, is the Legion with the

⁴⁷ Ion Banea, *Căpitanul*, pp. 3-4.

⁴⁸ Ion Banea, 'Generație tânără și cultul muncii' [Young Generation and the Cult of Labor], *Revista Mea* [My Journal], May 1935.

⁴⁹ Ion Banea, *Căpitanul*, pp. 13-14.

⁵⁰ For a compelling analysis of the concept, see Valentin Săndulescu, 'Fascism and its Quest for the 'New Man': The Case of the Romanian Legionary Movement', *Studia Hebraica*, 4 (2004): 349-361.

⁵¹ Ion Banea, *Căpitanul*, p. 101.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 105-108.

new mold of the Legionary soul. [...] The soul of the Romanian nation must be brought to a new life. The master artist, the creator of the new life, of the new soul, has always been and still is the Captain”.⁵³

Yet again, the worldview of Romanian fascism strongly resembles the perspectives of other versions of the phenomenon: the cult of Mussolini contained similar notions, promoting the image of a leader “chosen” to provide the nation with a new course, who came close to the divine as far as its omnipotent creative abilities were concerned,⁵⁴ while the authority of Hitler was invariably associated with his dynamic vitality, allowing him to draw clear courses of action for his followers and for the nation as a whole.⁵⁵ Furthermore, much like its Fascist and National-Socialist counterparts, the Legion of the “Archangel Michael” turned the image of its leader into an identity marker, an aspect perfectly illustrated by Banea’s claim that the movement itself was “a larger representation of the Captain”.⁵⁶

Significantly, all the components identified by Aristotle Kallis as determining the nature of fascist charismatization are hereby present: the discourse of national salvation, the web of mythical structures with mobilizing functions, the firm belief in a collective “mission”, the sacral motifs embedded into political thought, with their cumulative effect allowing the emergence of messianic leaders among most permutations of fascism.⁵⁷ The practical implications of such a perspective on leadership can also be observed in the organization of the movement, more precisely in the manner in which charismatic authority was hierarchically transmitted downwards, first to the Legionary elite and closest members of Codreanu’s entourage, then to the more prominent regional and local leaders.⁵⁸ Moreover, the idealized image of Codreanu was also constructed, as Constantin Iordachi noted, as part of a larger dialectic between the ideological “offer” of the leader and the expectations of his devotees.⁵⁹ The hagiographical account of Banea is a noteworthy example, as most of the enumerated traits of the ruler are

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 108-109.

⁵⁴ Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *The Aesthetics of Power*, p. 66.

⁵⁵ Ian Kershaw, ‘Hitler and the Uniqueness of Nazism’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39/2 (2004): 252.

⁵⁶ Ion Banea, *Căpitanul*, p. 76.

⁵⁷ Aristotle A. Kallis, ‘Fascism, ‘Charisma’ and ‘Charismatisation’’, p. 29.

⁵⁸ Constantin Iordachi, ‘Fascism in Southeastern Europe’, pp. 439-440. Well documented examples of the grass-roots Legionary following and the emergence of local and regional leadership are provided in Oliver Jens Schmitt, ‘Approaching the Social History of Romanian Fascism. The Legionaries of Vâlcea County in the Interwar Period’, *Fascism. Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies*, 3/2 (2014): 117-151.

⁵⁹ Constantin Iordachi, ‘Fascism in Southeastern Europe’, pp. 435-436.

correlated with their effect on the followers, hence Codreanu's defining role as a "great animator": "With the Captain and alongside him, you feel [...] ready to confront any danger and most importantly, you gain an unlimited belief in victory. [...] The secret behind the Captain's achievements lies precisely in this magical power of heroic influence on his soldiers".⁶⁰

These initiatives meant to reinforce the exceptional profile of Codreanu proved useful to the extent that they engaged the missionary zeal of the main ideologues of the movement towards practical goals, such as increasing its social base by amplifying the appeal of its ruler,⁶¹ but concomitantly managed to consolidate the internal unity of the Legion, which closely trailed behind the popularity of its charismatic founder.

Ion I. Moța - The Spiritual Implications of Charismatic Authority

Among the active promoters of the cult of the "Captain", Ion I. Moța played a decisive part. One of the original doctrinaires of the movement and an intimate friend of Codreanu, Moța theorized several of the fundamental components of the Legionary messianic scenario, such as the divine mandate of the leader, the steadfast devotion owed to him by his followers, the mandatory acknowledgement of his charismatic authority and the constant celebration of his traits, actions and visions.⁶² His numerous journalistic contributions unveil the intermingled effects of several mechanisms engaged in the construction of the fascist charismatic profile, perceptively distinguished by Roger Eatwell into categories such as "coterie charisma", originating in the entourage of the leader, comprising of the most loyal followers gravitating around him, "centripetal charisma" intended to establish him as the core of the movement itself, and "cultic charisma", resulting from the attempts to invest him with "an almost religious aura".⁶³

In the course of his lengthy ideological reflections, Moța recurrently affirmed his unconditional allegiance to the founder of the Legion, observing the "rallying of the Romanian population under the command of the Captain", under the banner of the providential figure invested by God himself with the sacred mission of guiding his nation beyond the obstacles it needed to overcome, towards the ultimate goal of regenerative triumph: "The great renewals have always been attained through the commanding captainship of a providential man. [...] Without such a great leader's hand at the helm, the

⁶⁰ Ion Banea, *Căpitanul*, pp. 118-119.

⁶¹ Ionuț Florin Biliuță, *The Archangel's Consecrated Servants*, p. 208.

⁶² Constantin Iordachi, 'Fascism in Southeastern Europe', pp. 434-435.

⁶³ Roger Eatwell, 'The Concept and Theory of Charismatic Leadership', pp. 153-154.

efforts and missions of various generations meant to pierce through difficult times could never be achieved or rise to the path of victory”.⁶⁴

Willing to bolster Codreanu’s attempts at bringing the radical forces of the student movement under his firm grip, Moța openly supported most of the theses which the Legionary leader had either publicly affirmed or illustrated through his previous actions, as well as uncompromisingly expressing his own positions on matters of leadership. To that point, in the inaugural issue of the first Legionary publication, Moța claimed the indispensable role of the leader in maintaining the organic functionality of the Legion, while at the same time stating the “consent” of the followers as the ultimate legitimating argument, defeating any elective alternative: “[...] Every living system is moved by a force [...] Organization [...] cannot be born nor healthily develop without orderliness, hierarchy, and above all a Leader. Therefore, our organization has a chief, elected by no one, but agreed upon by those who, attracted by a mysterious force, came to assemble, under the command of the chief, the orderly and disciplined cells of the organization. This chief of ours is Corneliu Zelea Codreanu”⁶⁵.

On another occasion, nostalgically reminiscing about his first contacts with the future Legionary leader, Moța proudly remembered the moment he saw the potential of the man regarded as the embodiment of the unity in thought and action of an entire generation: “He who speaks to you now has great reason for pride and satisfaction: [...] he has confessed and has resolutely shown, amidst the contempt and doubt of many, the man without whom our generation would not be capable to fulfil its mission: Corneliu Codreanu”.⁶⁶ In this context, the “achievement of myth” which Fernando Esposito has exposed as a process of axiological reconfiguration and normative reevaluation, taking place, among other means, through the “heroization” of those engaged in violent conflict in the name of sacred causes,⁶⁷ finds its own particular expressions in Legionary ideology, with Codreanu being ostensibly portrayed as the sole possessor of the combative spirit of his generation in pure and unaltered form: “None of us has kept, entirely untouched, that spirit of 1923, undiminished by the blows of life [...]

⁶⁴ Ion I. Moța, ‘Rânduri de creștet’ [Heading Lines], in Ion Banea, *Rânduri către generația noastră* [Lines for Our Generation], (Cluj-Napoca: Tipografia Gheorghe Ghili, 1935), p. 3.

⁶⁵ Ion I. Moța, ‘La Icoană’ [To the Icon], *Pământul Strămoșesc* [The Land of the Forefathers], 1 August 1927.

⁶⁶ Ion I. Moța, ‘Rânduri de creștet’, p. 3.

⁶⁷ Fernando Esposito, *Fascism, Aviation and Mythical Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 174-175.

None of us, except Corneliu Zelea Codreanu! For he owned it before us all and he brings it back to life among the entire Legionary youth of Romania”⁶⁸.

The guiding lines found in the works of Codreanu, part of what Constantin Iordachi described as an attempt to impose a new moral code rooted in the ascetic tradition of Orthodox Christianity, “a fascist guide to collective redemption through sacrifice”⁶⁹, were deeply internalized by Moța, for whom the indications of the Legionary leader signified the path towards the spiritual renewal of the national community, as well as the decisive impulse towards the materialization of an anthropological revolution. The typically fascist ideal of configuring a “new man” was indissolubly connected to the creative force exhibited by the “Captain”, resembling artistic brilliance: “The Legionary struggle is first and foremost founded on the creation of a new spirit, the Legionary spirit. [...] The realization of the new man, through Legionary education, is the most miraculous work of spiritual creation achieved by the Captain. Such a creation is yet another work of art”⁷⁰.

The climax of this idealized representation of the charismatic leader in the writings of Moța was reached in his brief testament, written shortly before his death in the Spanish Civil War, where he concomitantly reiterated his absolute loyalty towards the providential savior, as well as his unwavering faith in the materialization of the paligenetic utopia Codreanu envisioned.⁷¹ Directly addressing the latter in a brief letter in which the intimacy surrounding their friendship and the ever present ideological component intertwined, Moța reaffirmed his total devotion towards the Legion, serenely expecting to sacrifice his life for its cause, while at the same time imagining the spectacular transformation which inter-war Romania was supposed to undergo: “I am happy and I die gladly with this satisfaction, that I have had the possibility to feel your calling, to understand you and to serve you. For you are the Captain! I have done wrong to you, with things you know and things you don’t know. [...] However, I was never wrong in my most sincere Legionary faith, and in my faith in you, the Captain. [...] And may you, Corneliu, turn our country into one as beautiful as the sun, strong and dutiful to God!”⁷² The death of Moța in the Spanish Civil War would by no means

⁶⁸ Ion I. Moța, ‘Garda de Fier și L. A. N. C.’ [The Iron Guard and L. A. N. C.], *Axa* [The Axis], 1 October 1933.

⁶⁹ Constantin Iordachi, ‘De la credința naționalistă la credința legionară’, pp. 373-374.

⁷⁰ Ion I. Moța, ‘Artă și luptă’ [Art and Fighting], *Revista Mea*, December 1935.

⁷¹ Following his death, these ideas were disseminated in brochure reproductions of the original manuscripts, in Ion I. Moța, *Prezent!* [Present!] (Bucharest: Tipografia Bucovina I. E. Torouțiu, 1937).

⁷² Ion I. Moța, *Testamentul lui Ion I. Moța* [The Testament of Ion I. Moța] (fourth edition, Bucharest: Editura Sânziana, 2007), pp. 15-16.

restrain the expansion of the personality cult of Codreanu, which continued its development even in the absence of one of its long-lasting promoters.

Conclusions

Drawing upon the informative contributions of recent years in fascist studies, which reevaluate the classical Weberian model, the present article sought to identify some of the mechanisms through which charismatic authority was theorized and ideologically propagated by the Legion of the “Archangel Michael”. The construction of the image of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu as a messianic leader with exceptional attributes was analyzed based on several complementary perspectives, all particularly relevant from an ideological standpoint: that of Codreanu himself, willing to appear to his followers as the providential savior of the Romanian nation and the carrier of a divine mandate; the hagiographical works of Corneliu Georgescu and Ion Banea, whose compared writings reveal the progressive escalation of the charismatic power of Codreanu, ultimately depicted as the essential bond between the Romanian people and God himself; finally, the perspective of Ion I. Moța, who intended to portray the “Captain” as a force of renewal leading an entire generation who acknowledged him as its legitimate leader, a heroic figure ready to sacrifice his own life for the redemption of the national community. The image resulting from assembling together these different views, all of them representative for the worldview of Romanian fascism, confirms the claim of Oliver Jens Schmitt that Codreanu was an authentic “product of Romanian society as it advanced towards modernity”⁷³, while at the same time revealing a familiar character, the archetype of the millenarian prophet who, as Luciano Pellicani keenly observed, acts “*in* society but not *of* society”⁷⁴, and who propagates, through the charismatic power of his personality, a threatening radical worldview.

⁷³ Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Corneliu Zelea Codreanu*, p. 337.

⁷⁴ Luciano Pellicani, *Revolutionary Apocalypse: Ideological Roots of Terrorism*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2003), p. 11.

