



'The Reign of the Ravens': The War Profiteer in Romanian Pamphlets (1918–1919)

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SYNOPSIS

At the end of 1918, Romania exits the Great War as a victorious country, following a German occupation and double change in political alliances. The after-war years are dedicated to the national unification, political and cultural alike; there is much talk in the public agenda of starting anew and the ethical dimension of this renewing process is obviously of highest priority. The present paper aims to examine a specific element of the Romanian public agenda at the end of 1918 and beginning of 1919: the press campaigns dealing with the aftermath of the occupation years, specifically the case of war profiteers, during the first months following the war. Based on various forms of press campaigns aiming to expose the war profiteers, this article showcases the *ad-hominem* literary pamphlet, largely present in the Romanian press during the immediate post-war years. Seen as an intermediate genre (closely related to the press in terms of form and immediate purpose, but claiming literary status for its use of techniques and structures borrowed from literature), the literary pamphlet is used in the Romanian press of '18-'19 for its symbolical charge and as a substitute for 'real' social justice.

KEYWORDS

Romania; 1918; literary pamphlet; German occupation; moral justice.

For the Kingdom of Romania, the war ends twice on December 1st 1918: on this day, the union of Transylvania and Romania is completed and the royal couple returns to the city of Bucharest freed of the German and Bulgarian armies that came to occupy it, together with the whole southern region of the country, in the autumn of 1916. After two years of war, of refuge and occupation by the Central Powers of nearly half the territory, after exiting two alliances¹ and signing a peace treaty that seemed to many like unconditional surrender, and finally, after a loss of human life which, in relation

1 After two years of neutrality, Romania enters the war on the side of the Entente in August 1916; after a string of defeats, it declares a truce with the Central Powers in October 1917, when the southern territory of the country, including the capital city, has already been occupied by the German and Bulgarian armies. As a result of the Peace of Brest-Litovsk, Romania signs a disadvantageous treaty with the same alliance in May 1918, which gives it the status of a non-combat nation. At the end of the war, on November 9th 1918, Romania declares itself on the side of the Entente and at war with Germany.

to the number of enrolled soldiers, will place Romania in a comparable position to France and Serbia within the Entente,² the war ends in victory. The provinces of the Tsarist Empire and of Austro-Hungary where the majority of the population is Romanian (Bessarabia; Bucovina, Transylvania and Banat, respectively) become part of the new Romanian state, doubling its territory and number of inhabitants.³

Along with the king's return, the administration regains its rights almost immediately in the free city of Bucharest. The public agenda for the first post-war period (from December 1918 to early 1920) focuses, on the one hand, on efforts to administratively unify the territory of the new state (with laws for the uniformity of tax legislation and territorial administration) and, on the other hand, on regulating the issue of land ownership of former combatants, as King Ferdinand promised in the 1916 mobilization order, and as it will happen after the successive expropriations following the royal decree of December 1918. The 'agrarian issue', a topic of constant public debate since the end of the nineteenth century, appears to be solved for the moment.

Another core of social tension supersedes it, starting just at the end of 1918: the quick and bloody defeats of 1916–1917, along with the collective culpability during the German occupation, have to be socially managed in one way or another. Indeed, after three months of war, Romania endured almost 60% territorial occupation, an exiled king living in Iași and a mostly under-armed and outmoded army sent to fight against the much more numerous forces of the very modern and German 9th Army. The collective trauma is indisputable and the first few months after the war help shape the public image of a society in which the enthusiasm of victory is intertwined with the rhetoric of moral justice: newspapers, political speeches, as well as 'the voice of the people' ceaselessly demand that those guilty of 'treachery' be punished. This large category of traitors is comprised, almost without distinction, of non-combatants, speculators, requisition beneficiaries, suppliers and collaborators of the occupant — that is, all of those who 'made a mockery of the country and of this people that is gentle and kind to a fault [...] of those who went to the battlefield to defend the Throne, the ancestral land and the nation!' (Gheorghiu-Cirișianu 1923, pp. 24 and 42).

In what follows, we intend to analyze the discursive representations of the collective need for moral justice, as they appear in the Romanian press of the first few months after the war, choosing the particular case of the war profiteer as a typical figure of 'the traitor'. Research in the archives of the daily and weekly press in Bucharest immediately after the December 1st, 1918 (collections of December 1918 — December 1919 of the socialist weekly *Clopotul* [*The Bell*], and of cultural magazines *Hiena* [*The Hyena*], *Însemnări literare* [*Literary Notes*] and *Rampa* [*The Ramp*])⁴ has given us the

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- 2 V. Table 17.1, the Military participation and military losses in World War I (mobilized, killed, wounded, missing, and % casualties of all who served), in Horne 2010 (ed.), p. 249.
 - 3 According to the 1912 census, the population of the new state is increased from 7.35 million inhabitants to approximately 18 million inhabitants (Boia 2017, pp. 51 and 85).
 - 4 For the present article, we chose from a quite restraint press collection from the immediate after-war (December 1918 to December 1919, accessible at the Romanian Academy Library in Bucharest) the journals that included a representative number of literary pamphlets. Two of them (*Hiena*, whose first number is from January 1919, and *Clopotul*, whose original name is *Facla* [*The Flare*], a leftist gazette published in 1910 who often changes its





opportunity to observe two of the axes around which the collective *travail de mémoire* was built: the glory (of the soldiers who died for the country) and the moral duty (of the survivors with respect to those who died in the war). Social discourse,⁵ as constructed by the press in the period immediately following the end of the war, brings ever more to the fore this line of obligation: the new and great Romania rises from the sacrifice of the fallen, and their sacrifice has to impose a perfect moral standard on the behavior of those remaining. If the lives of survivors turn out to be not dignified, then the deaths on the battlefield have been in vain. The social lustration effort, an inevitable and common process that ensues each moment of historical struggle, requires an identification of the guilty and a calibration of their guilt, starting with the zero degree of moral ‘purity’ — the soldier who died for his country — and ending with the most reprehensible moral profile — the war profiteer, who managed to skip the military service and enrich himself by selling goods essential for the battlefield. Between these two poles, we can observe a diffuse sense of collective moral guilt that is not expressed directly other than in intimate journals or memoirs (because it is too soon for the direct admission of a generalized guilt):

I now have the sad conviction that we haven't been beaten in three months of war merely because of the superiority of the enemy forces. The moral disintegration that consumes all social classes in Romania has undoubtedly contributed to our quick defeat. Much too often, the words duty and homeland sound hollow in this country. [...] Each man is thinking only of himself (Yarka 2010, p. 159; cf. Ciupală 2017, p. 117 [s. m.]).

It is here, in the acknowledgment of this ‘national weakness’ — of placing personal interest ahead of the collective one — that we find the founding gesture of a sanctioning discourse against the war profiteer. Once again, it is too early in the immediate after-war for this diffuse guilt to be acknowledged at a collective level — the discursive axes are maintained in the dichotomy: us (honest) / them (guilty), without any intermediate degrees.⁶ To the antagonistic us *versus* them pair, another axis of guilt distribution is added: a spatial one that distinguishes between the rural (the epitome of archaic spirituality, seen as the morally pure place where most of the fallen soldiers came from) *versus* the urban (especially the capital city, seen as an affluent place

name due to censure rigors) are anti-governmental journals, with long satirical pieces (literary pamphlets, sketches, caricatures) included in each number. The other two (*Însemnări literare* from Iași, and *Rampa* from Bucharest) are cultural journals published immediately after the Great War (first issue in February 1919, respectively in November 1918).

⁵ As defined by Marc Angenot, ‘discourse is for the public sphere what genre is for literature — a scheme that transcends and encodes what does not belong to any particular author (user) [...] an organized set of combinatorial rules and a repertoire of preconstructions’ (Angenot 2014, pp. 71–72 [here and onward, the translations from French are my own]).

⁶ Although, at a closer look, the Romanian case also displays the same gradation of compromise that F. Bouloc highlights in his volume on the subject (*Les Profiteurs de guerre 1914–1918*, 2008), between *profiteurs* (for instance traders of dubious quality products sent to the battlefield at an onerous price) and *profitaires* (people of good faith benefiting from the war economy — for example, the owners of small Moldovian fabric factories).

for the venality of the whole of Romania). This antagonism is widely expressed in literature after 1918, when the literary press abounds in emotional texts about the ‘vain sacrifice’ placed against post-war ostentation. Cezar Petrescu, founder and director of *Hiena*, a gazette of ‘political-literary polemics’, writes an article, the size of a small work in prose, expressing exactly this spatial and affective dichotomy:

I don't understand anymore, he [the old country man] said. I have traveled the country for two months trying to find the graves of my children. Everywhere I saw the same hunger, the same grim houses in which the memory of a dead man hovers. In the peaks of the most remote mountains and in the valley of the calm Siret river, I saw the same endless hordes of crosses. Their shadows live among us, they accompany all of our gestures, they bitterly writhe in every faint smile... But the same unrestrained peal of laughter still lingers here. The capital city has taken the form of an immense gambling house and of an immense bawdy house. I've been watching the winners' cortege for an hour. I recognize them: the shadow of indifference covers hidden humiliations, unavowed moral compromises, a putrefaction of the soul with which they pay their voluptuous need to splatter our poverty with the mud of their wheels. I recognize them, and the last hopes are blown away. For the first time, the memory of my dead people devours me like a feeling of remorse. For their death appears to me now as futile folly [...] (Petrescu 1919, p. 2).

This unresolved social tension persists for a long time. There is also the concern of the state with respect to the sanctioning of ‘wealth obtained through privilege, through fraud and through illegal means’ (Madgearu 1921, p. 30) which is accompanied by definite historical evidence: in the 1921 tax reform bill proposed by Finance Minister N. Titulescu,⁷ predicts an exceptional graduated income tax on those who became rich as a result of the war, which could have reached 70% for civil servants who could not justify the source of their wealth after the outbreak of the European war. Despite long debates in the Chamber of Deputies (see *Reforma financiară din 1921*), the law was never promulgated. Under these conditions, the only formula of moral justice seems to be the stylistic form of journalistic discourse.

THE PAMPHLET AS DISCOURSE OF SOCIAL SANCTION

The war profiteer is an auspicious figure for fictionalization, and an even more fertile one for the pamphlets’ attacks and charges. ‘This makes for dense and rich literary material’ (Bouloc 2009) because it brings forth not only the transformation of the character’s own existence, but also the ‘surrounding collectivity, which is the essence of social and political portrayals of the time, as diverse as they are detailed’ (ibid.). Through this figure, an entire epoch and, at the same time, a moral study of society

7 In Romanian history politician N. Titulescu (1882–1941) remains the most important figure of Romanian interwar diplomacy — President of Liga Națiunilor (The League of Nations) (1930–1932), founder of the Little Balkan Entente and several times Minister of Foreign Affairs and Finance Minister.



are made manifest. Thus, it easily becomes a preferred topic for pamphlets as, in this case, the breaching of the moral principle is easily identifiable and completely transparent: fraudulent enrichment represents a defection from the cause of the national war and underlines the choice of placing personal comfort above collective sacrifice. For the greater common good, such a transgression of norms must be sanctioned.

Out of the multitude of sanctionary options, the pamphlet seems to be one of the most suitable for at least two reasons. The first has to do with the strong authorial function that is characteristic of the pamphlet. It is said that satire presents a universal truth, one that the author seeks to reinstate through the identification of some original mistake. The debate, by contrast, presents a sort of duel between statements believed by two opposing parties to be true. In this sense, the pamphlet is in a paradoxical situation: it is the discourse of a man convinced that he is alone in knowing the truth. If nobody else shares this conviction, it is because all others have their ears plugged and eyes shut. They are an *apriori* hostile audience, because they were born into lies and remain unaware of anything else: 'The word which designates this triumphant lie is imposture, a key term for any pamphlet' (Angenot 1982, p. 91). It is clear that, under these conditions, the author of the pamphlet is the one who takes on the (self-given) task of making the others see the light, and for this purpose, he chooses the most powerful form of persuasion — linguistic violence, conducted towards a single action meant to sanction transgression of the norm: the calling out of the guilty.

The second reason the figure of the war profiteer lends itself to the pamphlet form lies particularly in this calling out and pointing out of the guilty, an operation which becomes mandatory for the reinstatement of social balance. Social reconstruction requires the identification of the guilt that produced the imbalance. The discourse of the pamphlet does nothing but reveal the guilt, elaborate on it and describe its mechanisms. It is a discourse of accusation and, what is more, a belated one, as it is always put forth after the verdict has already been declared; apparently, the healing of society comes precisely from the operation of pointing out (the *deixis* in all its power) where and who the culprit is. The task of the pamphlet would thus be to restore the sense of the world through the separation — *post factum* — of good and evil. The world does not heal immediately after the pamphlet's author reveals who the culprits are and perhaps it never heals at all. But his mission is not to contribute to the construction of a new world (he himself no longer believes such a mission to be possible), but to restore meaning all by himself. The identification, the calling out and the outlining of the guilty is an obligatory *topos* for the pamphlet, it is a 'duty of conscience'. Therefore, the pamphlet is not merely a denunciation, although it appears to have this premise: it is a manifestation of the collective morality which uses an easily recognizable discursive form in order to exercise its need to restore social balance.

In the case of the pamphlets against war profiteers, the preferred formula is the *ad-hominem pamphlet*. The guilty are identified methodically, with elaborate portrayals and detailed enumerations (which are sometimes dramatized or narrated as small 'moments from behind the front line') of thefts, abuses and ostentation on the part of the nouveaux-riches. Starting with December 1918, an entire series of pamphlet articles can be found in Bucharest satirical journals such as *Hiena* (which bears the subtitle 'a magazine of political-literary polemics'), in weekly cultural journals, or in daily newspapers such as *Universul* (*The Universe*) or *Facla* (*The Flare*). Pamphlets

represent merely a part of the sanctionary social discourse at the end of the war: they appear in the pages of newspapers — usually accompanied by caricatures — alongside stories from the trenches,⁸ news about the trials of journalists who were also collaborators⁹ and, not very rarely, revelations regarding the ‘improper’ conduct of Bucharest actresses during the Occupation (Procesul unor atitudini. Actrița 1918, p. 1). The targets of these articles are, overwhelmingly, the politicians of the time, seen as the main culprits of the defection from the duty of conscience: ministers, ministry counselors, secretaries of state. Alongside them, press campaigns identify railway executives, directors of the Forestry Administration, supply officers and local managers, among others, as war profiteers.

In the absence of a functional option for lawfully sanctioning onerous profit ensuing the war, one of the few remaining possibilities for ensuring the cohesion of moral society is the public opprobrium. The discourse of the pamphlet takes over this function, creating a gallery of detestable portraits and making them visible in the newspapers. The pamphlet chooses figures of popular resentment (for instance liberal prime minister Ion I. C. Brătianu, ‘Traitor’ Al. Marghiloman, during the government of whom the unfavorable peace treaty with the Central Powers was signed) and places them at the center of the discursive attack, in order to perform ‘a killing in effigy’. The most suitable person for such a sanctionary act seems to be — according to the frequency with which his name appears in pamphlets, denunciations, and memoirs of contemporaries — a politician that is nowadays almost forgotten: Alecu Constantinescu (1859–1926). As a liberal politician, he is part of many governments during the war: he is Minister of Internal Affairs (1916–1918), Minister of Agriculture (1918–1919) and Minister of Industry and Commerce (1918–1919). It is this political figure — known at the time by the harsh nickname ‘The Pig’¹⁰ — who is the recipient of all possible stylistic means that pamphlet authors have at their disposal. In this case, the significant effort to express the reprehensible is not at all unjustifiable: Alecu Constantinescu represents a sort of ideal portrait of the war profiteer who is guilty, among others, of having commandeered a train of the Red Cross with wounded sol-

8 The Romanian army continues its military operations in 1919, fighting in Transylvania and in Hungary against the troops of the newly-founded Hungarian Soviet Republic led by Béla Kun.

9 In 1919, at the Court-Martial, the trial of the journalists of *Bucharest Tagblat* begins. This was a newspaper of the German High Command in Bucharest and it was published between 1916 and 1918, featuring a Romanian edition as well as a German one. Symbolist poet D. Karnabatt (1877–1949), Tudor Arghezi (1880–1967), the most important Romanian Modernist poet, and Ioan Slavici (1848–1925), prose writer of the classical generation of the end of the nineteenth century, among others, will be condemned for collaborating with the enemy. The penalties (ten years in prison for the former and five years each for the other two authors) will be pardoned in the following years.

10 Alecu Constantinescu’s nickname was given to him not because of his reprehensible deeds during the war, but because of his rubicund appearance in his youth: ‘Paunchy, with short legs, and eyes that were bored into fat, he looked like a piglet and, even since he was young, a simple lawyer at The Rural Credit, he was dubbed ‘The pig’, a fiendly nickname with no moral undertones’ (Argetoianu 1996, p. 211).



diers in it, in order to carry his own wedding guests¹¹ and of having made use of an opportunistic requisition policy to ensure for himself a carefree refuge in Moldavia.

[...] *the State trucks would be driven up to the doors to bring them ham, rice, coffee, butter, eggs, flour of the finest quality, and sugar, so as to make sure they have the ingredients for cozonac and cookies, while the population, the masses, withstood terrible freezing all night long — with many of them dying of cold — and some not even receiving their brown bread mixed with straw and manure in the morning!* (Gheorghiu-Cirișianu 1923, p. 16).

The author of these dramatic accusations, D. A. Gheorghiu-Cirișianu, was a former collaborator of Minister Constantinescu, inspector at the Ministry of Agriculture during his office, who became a journalist after the war. In his native town, Buzau, he founded the magazine entitled *Dreptatea socială* (*Social Justice*), ‘a weapon for defending public services, human rights and the harmonization of interests of all social classes’, published between 1923 and 1928 (Petcu 2012 [ed.], pp. 426–427) and geared towards successive press campaigns aimed at punishing those who had violated their moral duty towards the country and had put on ‘a hypocritical mask [...], with the cross in one hand and the knife in the other, hidden at their back’ (Gheorghiu-Cirișianu 1923, p. 42). There is only one supreme culprit and he is denounced clearly and bluntly as the one responsible for everything: ‘I accuse you directly, Mr. Alecu, for all the crimes and misfortunes of the country, for you are the master of all blows, you alone are the evil genius of the country and even of the liberal party’ (ibid., p. 40). There is an act of discursive power that is characteristic to the genre of the pamphlet: the denunciation, in the form of the calling out of the guilty, takes the place of the ‘real’ punishment, which — at least for the case of Minister Constantinescu — never comes: he will continue his political activity unhindered for almost a decade.

The stylistic effort to portray the blameworthy figure of Alecu Constantinescu seems to be directly proportional to the gravity of the facts that brought him to the tribune of infamy. For example, the pamphlet from *Hiena* uses antiphrasis as a complete model of the rhetorical construction of the hyperbole, thus forming a sort of ironic appeal to public subscription for a statue depicting the detestable minister:

Readers, an unknown war hero lives among you. No sacrifice has remained foreign to him, no suffering has been spared for him; and in contempt of the whole martyrdom that he endured with tragic resignation, we, with the smallness of minute epigones, only splattered him with ingratitude.

This injustice can stand no longer [...] With the money of our poverty, with the dime snatched from widows and orphans, from the generous offerings of those who know how to value the great men of their times, in the middle of the market, we will raise the statue of the only Romanian who has risen above our vileness. [...] The project of the statue will be published in a future issue. It reveals Mr. Al. Constantinescu

11 This episode is often mentioned in the press of the time (‘The pig who, after getting married with his wife’s sister, took the engine of the gangrened soldiers in order to go on his honeymoon’, see 47 de scrisorele 1919, p. 1).

dressed in a national costume, pale and lean as a crucified Christ, looking into the future with melancholy eyes. Allegorically, a pig, akin to the golden ones that were once worshiped by the chimneysweepers of the East, slumbers at his feet. At the request of the public, we can add a couple of piglets as well [...] (Cititori 1919, pp. 18–20).



The same effort to form the portrait with the means of artistic expression can also be found in another pamphlet written in 1919 against Minister Constantinescu. Its author, Ion Vinea,¹² is a young leftist journalist who distinguished himself by his vituperative anti-liberal articles. The formula for his pamphlets is different than that of the articles of *Hiena*: it is not antiphrasis, but the portrait of an animal that serves as the frame of the pamphlet, built out of intimations that are the more neutral, the more they are transparent:

There is no animal that is more above good and evil, more aware of his rights ending where his powers stop, more persistent and more individualistic than this tireless Pig, a living plough ravishing far and wide, today here, tomorrow in Buzau. And that is why it is difficult to catch him, to deter him from his snout's business, to punish him for the damage and filth he produces, for the protest is prompt and terrible. As silent and gentile as he is when he lays by or grunts in silence, that is how deafening he cools down his revolt if you attempt to touch the wild freedom that he assumes. His shriek resonates like a denunciation. He knows all the transgressions and licenses, all the duplicities of the yard and he also knows that no one can believe himself to be spiritually less of a pig than he is (Vinea 2001, p. 292).

The style of the pamphlet is used in all three of the above-mentioned examples, but also in other similar cases, as a discursive form for sanctioning moral deviation within the community and providing a substitute for the effective legal penalty. The pamphlet (especially in its *ad hominem* form) individualizes responsibility, making it more easily recognizable and condemnable; in addition, operating with a language of affect and with expressive means, it subjectivizes to the maximum the guilt of its subject, which renders the effect of 'moral cleansing' even clearer. The discourse of the pamphlet chooses the war profiteer as a preferred subject and shapes its reprehensible portrait without reservations in an effort to participate in the re-appropriation of collective morality through a clear designation of guilty. However, the effect is temporary because collective memory does not register disapproval other than in a fulgurate manner and without notable consequences: 'I have seen many tens of thousands of people out in the street, cheering on the soldiers that were crushing us, enthusiastically insulting their bleeding homeland. [...] In any other country, this population would have been punished for its misbehavior. But the Romanian people is forgiving!' (Bacalbașa 2017, pp. 35–36).

Translated from Romanian by Andreea Paris-Popa.

12 Ion Vinea (1895–1964), poet, prose writer and journalist, founder of the first avant-garde Romanian magazine, *Contimporanul* (*The Contemporary*). His journalist work also includes writing pamphlets, which he considers a form of manifestation of lyricism that is equivalent to poetry.



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