

MEMORY, IDENTITY AND LEGITIMACY: AVRAM IANCU AND THE MARTYRS OF THE 1784 UPRISING IN THE INTERWAR NATIONAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Our work sheds light on the avatars of the scenarios conceived by the high-ranking officials of the time to commemorate the 1784 uprising and its heroes, given that such cultural actions aimed to attract not only the elites, but also the masses, in order to offer a coherent and unitary image of Greater Romania. As part of cultural policies with an important propaganda role for the political regime of the time, such commemorative moments offered the chance to promote culture not only among the elites but could also significantly contribute to consolidating the moral image of the leaders of the time (primarily the sovereign) in front of the people. Our work has attempted to shed light on the significance of the initiatives and achievements circumscribed to the commemoration of the 1784 uprising and its leaders 150 years after the events as part of a strategy to create an idealized image of the monarch and the dynasty, encouraging a sense of loyalty to the Crown.

Keywords: festivism, National Liberal Party, Alexandru Lapedatu, heroes, King Carol II.

The period 1930–1938/1940 in Romanian history was one of political instability, social transformations and systemic crises, but also one of cultural and ideological effervescence.¹ Swinging between parliamentary democracy and authoritarian rule, Romanian society went through a stage that decisively shaped the collective mentality and the structure of the modern state.²

The longest-lasting and most successful government of the era is attributed to Gheorghe Tătărescu (January 1934 – November 1937), a period characterized by relative political and economic stability, in contrast to the deep crisis of the early 1930s.³ This

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¹ Ioan Scurtu, Gheorghe Buzatu, *Istoria Românilor în secolul XX (1918-1948)*, Bucureşti, Editura Paideia, 1999, pp. 221-222.

² Francesco Guida, *Cealaltă jumătate a Europei. De la Primul Război Mondial până în zilele noastre*, translated from Italian by Aurora Firă-Marin, Bucureşti, Editura Humanitas, 2015, pp. 63-64.

³ Aurelian Christol, *România în anii guvernării liberale Gheorghe Tătărescu (1934-1937)*, Târgovişte, Editura Curtea de Scaun, 2007, pp. 89-96.

government tried to combine economic modernization, social pacification and the isolation of political extremism, but failed to consolidate a functional democratic system, amid the imposition of a monarchical authoritarian regime.⁴

In the context of the Carlist decade, culture became an instrument for forging national identity and legitimizing the state, especially the monarch.⁵ The commemorative actions organized between 1930-1940 aimed not only to evoke the past, but also to mobilize citizens around the idea of a nation led by the king.⁶ From this perspective, public holidays had a crucial role in the strategy of consolidating the power of Carol II.⁷ These events were, therefore, not simple festive moments, but true instruments of propaganda, of creating a cult image of the sovereign and of mobilizing public opinion.

Without a doubt, the most important national celebration, at least until the transition to the authoritarian stage of the Carlist regime, was the 150th anniversary of the uprising of Horia, Cloșca and Crișan, respectively of their martyrdom.

If the previous decade was marked, from the perspective of historical commemoration festivities, by the anniversary of the first centenary of the birth of Avram Iancu,⁸ an event in which the authorities of the time invested energy and resources to honor the memory and ideals of the hero of 1848-1849, now, a decade later, other prominent figures in the national pantheon offered the chance to unite Romanians around national values.

Let us first note the similarities and differences between the two great festive moments. First of all, related to their initiators. If in 1924, the main initiator seems to have been ASTRA,⁹ closely supported by the central authorities of the time, the set of events

⁴ Gheorghe Tătărescu, *Mărturii pentru istorie*, edition by Sanda Tătărescu-Negropontes; foreword by Nicolae-Şerban Tanaşoca, Bucureşti, Editura Enciclopedică, 1996, pp. 172-198; Ion Agrigoroaiei, Gavril Preda, Gheorghe Calcan, *România interbelică. Economie, administrație, apărare*, Ploieşti, Editura Universității Petrol-Gaze, 2008, pp. 265-271.

⁵ Lucian Boia, *Capcanele istoriei. Elita intelectuală românească între 1930 și 1950*, Bucureşti, Editura Humanitas, 2011, pp. 114-116.

⁶ See Carol II, *Între datorie și pasiune. Însemnări zilnice*, vol. I (1904-1939), edited by Marcel-Dumitru Ciucă and Narcis Dorin Ion, Bucureşti, Editura Silex, 1995, pp. 143-435.

⁷ Lucian Boia, *Capcanele istoriei*, p. 134.

⁸ See Lucian Turcu, "Din culisele sărbătoririi primului centenar al naşterii lui Avram Iancu (II)", in Ioan Bolovan, Ioan Sebastian Bara (coords.), *Avram Iancu, un om între oameni. Lucrările Conferinței Internaționale Avram Iancu - 200 de ani de la naștere. Omul, contemporanii, epoca*, Deva, 9-10 mai 2024, Cluj-Napoca, Academia Română, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2024, pp. 567-580.

⁹ Ioachim Lazăr, *Contribuția ASTREI la aniversarea centenarului nașterii lui Avram Iancu (1924)*, in "Acta Musei Porolissensis", XXVII, 2005, pp. 280-281.

dedicated to Avram Iancu taking place under the careful coordination of the then sovereign, the commemorative actions that began in 1934 and continued in the following years had as their main promoters the then rulers supported by civil society (including some political parties), some of the initiatives being taken over by ASTRA, the series of all the events taking place under the high patronage of the institution of the Monarchy. In both situations, the local authorities either took the initiative themselves to organize events, or responded to calls launched from the center to promote events that would honor the memory of their ancestors.

Another point of comparative perspective can be that of the main places where the solemnities took place (the so-called “altars of memory”). If in 1924 the areas of maximum relevance for the life and activity of the person being honored were targeted (Vidra, Țebea, Muntele Găina, Câmpeni and Cluj),¹⁰ a decade later the focus was directed towards Alba Iulia, with extensions to the Zarand region, the entire Transylvania being caught up in the effervescence of the commemorative solemnities, with no shortage of events throughout the country (especially in the big cities: Chișinău, Iași, Bucharest, Craiova, etc.).

Regarding the provision of the funds necessary for the proper conduct of the festivities, the anniversary of the centenary of Avram Iancu's birth in 1924 was possible through the generous financial involvement of ASTRA and, especially, of the Council of Ministers, headed by the head of the ruling party, Ion I. C. Brătianu.¹¹ Horea, Cloșca and Crișan could be commemorated thanks to the financial support of government authorities, civil society and, to some extent, ASTRA. It is worth noting in the latter case the importance of donations coming from both private individuals and institutions, organizations and local communities, which used a series of actions as a pretext for raising funds intended mainly for the construction of public monuments dedicated to the three heroes (including members of Parliament who donated *per diems* for the construction of the monument in Alba Iulia).¹²

Another point of interest may be that of the dates chosen as national holidays for the two events. As such important details were not left to chance, it is worth dwelling on their significance. Thus, in the first case, at the meeting of July 1, 1924 at the Royal Palace, the committee organizing the solemnities decided, in the presence and

¹⁰ Lucian Turcu, *The Unseen Face of a National Holiday from the Establishment of Greater Romania*, in “Acta Musei Napocensis. Historica”, vol. 61/II, 2024, pp. 137-138.

¹¹ Alexandru Lapedatu, *Amintiri*, preface, edition, notes and comments by Ioan Opris, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Albastră, 1998, pp. 64, 201-202.

¹² “Universul”, year 52, no. 62, March 4, 1935, p. 11.

with the approval of King Ferdinand I, that the events dedicated to Avram Iancu would take place in the second half of August, more precisely “immediately after St. Mary the Great.”¹³ The situation was completely different in the case of the commemoration of the ideals and the spirit of sacrifice of the three rebels in 1784-1785. Although February 28, 1935 had been announced as the date to commemorate the martyrdom of the leaders of the uprising, the failure to complete the preparations forced the authorities to postpone the festivities to the second half of May, followed by a new indefinite postponement to the autumn of the same year, so that the central point of the ceremonies would take place only in 1937.¹⁴

The mirror-view of the two events can continue by analyzing the connotations of the dates set as “days of memory”. The fact that the festivities dedicated to honoring Avram Iancu were established immediately after the great feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary was not at all accidental. August 15/28 had become a day with strong meanings for the achievement of national unity, corresponding to Romania’s effective engagement in the war for national unification in 1916. Avram Iancu had also lived and sacrificed himself for the fulfillment of national aspirations, and linking the anniversary of his birth to the most recent event in Romanian history that brought them the fulfillment of the national ideal validated the legitimization of a continuity between the spirit of sacrifice of the ancestors and the determination to fight for the fulfillment of the most sublime goals of the contemporaries. Therefore, in the absence of the exact date of birth of the hero of 1848, the organizers of the 1924 events considered it appropriate to accompany the homage to Avram Iancu’s personality with the still vivid memories of the war of national unification. That this symbolic transfusion was deliberately intended is demonstrated by the fact that the redevelopment of the Tebea cemetery was based on the decision to exhume the existing graves and to deposit around Iancu’s burial place the remains of 90 soldiers who fell in the First World War. This number was not a coincidence either, since of the 90 graves transferred around the tomb shaded by Horea’s gorun, 18 were placed on the right and 72 on the left, thus forming the year of the death of the person being honored by joining the two numbers. The situation of the solemnities in the autumn of 1937 was completely different. Specifically, the authorities at the time chose (not coincidentally, obviously) October 14 as the main date to commemorate the three peasant heroes. That the date was not left

¹³ National Archives of Romania, Cluj County Service, *Alexandru Lapedatu personal fund*, file 1/1924, f. 37r-v (hereinafter AN SJ Cluj).

¹⁴ “Universul”, year 52, no. 52, February 22, 1935, p. 5.

to chance is demonstrated by the fact that the very next day the entire nation was invited to gather around Carol II, considering the anniversary of his birthday. In the context of the Carlist regime, the celebration of the sovereign's birthday acquired profound cultural significance and important ideological stakes, being an essential component of the strategy of establishing/maintaining the king's personality cult and legitimizing his authoritarian regime.¹⁵ Far from being a simple personal celebration, the king's birthday had become a sophisticated political instrument, intended through the ample public celebrations it occasioned to strengthen the bond between the people and the sovereign, investing the latter with the mission of providential father, unifier and protector of the nation. The symbolism of the chosen date becomes even stronger if we consider that mid-October also commemorated the coronation of King Ferdinand I and Queen Maria in the same citadel of Alba Iulia, which had taken place exactly a decade and a half earlier.¹⁶

Both events assumed special ideological, political and cultural significance. Avram Iancu symbolized national resistance, the struggle for equality and the unification of Romanian lands.¹⁷ The centenary of his birth reflected Romania's efforts to consolidate its identity after the unification of 1918. The hero of 1848-1849 was celebrated as a unifying symbol of Romanian resistance and identity, representing the aspirations of Romanians in Transylvania for justice and equality.¹⁸ The anniversary of Avram Iancu's birth was an opportunity for the authorities at the time to promote the integration of Transylvania into the Romanian state and to strengthen the ties between the different regions of the new Romania. The event also underlined the state's commitment to representing the interests of all Romanians, including those from

¹⁵ Cristian Mânea, *Manifestările naționale, expresie a cultului personalității regelui Carol al II-lea*, in "Buletinul Cercurilor Științifice Studențești. Arheologie-Istorie", no. 2, 1996, pp. 263-264.

¹⁶ See Lucian Turcu, *Behind the Scenes of a National Show: The Coronation of King Ferdinand I and Queen Maria at Alba Iulia (15 October 1922)*, in "Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Historia", vol. 66, number 2, December 2021, pp. 151-177.

¹⁷ Cornel Sigmirean, "Avram Iancu – eroul națiunii în anii tineretii", in Ioan Bolovan, Ioan Sebastian Bara (coords.), *Avram Iancu, un om între oameni. Lucrările Conferinței Internaționale Avram Iancu – 200 de ani de la naștere. Omul, contemporanii, epoca, Deva, 9-10 mai 2024*, Cluj-Napoca, Academia Română, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2024, pp. 127-127, 144.

¹⁸ Ion Cârja, "Avram Iancu la primul centenar: Serbările din Munții Apuseni, 30 august – 2 septembrie 1924", in Ioan Bolovan, Ioan Sebastian Bara (coords.), *Avram Iancu, un om între oameni. Lucrările Conferinței Internaționale Avram Iancu – 200 de ani de la naștere. Omul, contemporanii, epoca, Deva, 9-10 mai 2024*, Cluj-Napoca, Academia Română, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2024, p. 558.

previously marginalized provinces, such as Transylvania.¹⁹ The 1924 celebration conveyed a powerful message in the political and ideological context of the time, as Iancu's struggle against Hungarian domination resonated with contemporary fears about the revisionist ambitions of post-Trianon Hungary. The Romanian state used the event to assert its control over Transylvania and to counter any Hungarian claims to the region.

On the other hand, the commemorative events marking the 150th anniversary of the uprising of Horea, Cloșca and Crișan became a pretext for the authorities of the time (led by King Carol II) to convey a series of messages intended to mobilize the nation, consolidate state unity and strengthen patriotic sentiment, especially among young people. The commemoration in the 1930s emphasized the idea of the continuity of the Romanian struggle for rights, freedom and national unity. Horea, Cloșca and Crișan were presented as heroes of the Romanian people who fought not only for social rights, but also for the national emancipation of the Romanians in Transylvania. The commemoration was used to divert attention from contemporary social and ideological conflicts (fascism, communism, etc.),²⁰ promoting instead a message of unity around traditional and national values. Then, perhaps more than in 1924, the demonstrations in 1934-1935 and 1937 represented the pretext for a strong *de facto* and *de jure* reaffirmation of Transylvania's membership in Greater Romania, at a time when Hungarian revisionism was at its peak.²¹ The revolt was reinterpreted as an act of Romanian resistance in the face of Hungarian oppression, the action of the 18th-century rebels being able to represent an example of mobilization and determination for Romanians in the 20th century.

Keeping this perspective in the mirror of the two moments of national celebration, the one circumscribed to the centenary of the birth of Avram Iancu took on especially national and identity connotations, thus responding to the pressing need after the Great Union to consolidate the young state that had barely been completed,²² while the one from the middle of the fourth decade of the last century privileged the social dimension, the occasion being used by the authorities of the time to gain the sympathy of the

¹⁹ Lucian Turcu, *Din culisele*, p. 580.

²⁰ Keith Hitchins, *România, 1866-1947*, 4th edition; translated from English by George G. Potra and Delia Răzdolescu, București, Editura Humanitas, 2013, pp. 451-453.

²¹ Miklós Molnar, *Histoire de la Hongrie*, Paris, Perrin, 2004, pp. 345-346.

²² Irina Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism în România Mare 1918-1930*, translated from English by Vlad Russo, București, Editura Humanitas, 1998, pp. 19-26.

peasant masses²³ and to counterbalance the rise of the extreme right.

Then, from the point of view of political legitimacy, the 1924 anniversary was attempted to be capitalized by the National Liberal Party (PNL), the ruling party, which used the centenary to align itself with the leadership legacy and national activism of Avram Iancu. Practically, by associating their government with Iancu's fight for Romanian rights, the liberals sought to consolidate their authority and political legitimacy, especially among Transylvanian Romanians, in their attempt to break through the political dominance of the National Party, later the National Peasant Party.²⁴ On the other hand, the commemoration of the martyrdom of Horia, Cloșca and Crișan was attempted to be used as an image capital by almost all the formations on the political scene of the time (the National Peasant Party, the National Liberal Party, the Romanian Front, the National Christian Party, the People's Party, including the communists in the Craiova trial). But the greatest capitalization of the event was assumed by the then monarch, who used the commemoration to symbolically associate himself with the national tradition of popular and heroic struggles. The king was presented as the heir to Horea's aspirations – that is, a providential leader, destined to unite and regenerate the nation.²⁵

Then, both events represented a good opportunity to celebrate peasant heroism: in 1924, Avram Iancu symbolized the close relationship between the peasantry and the struggle for Romanian rights. The centenary at that time celebrated him as a folk hero,²⁶ embodying the aspirations of the common people. On the other hand, Horea, Cloșca and Crișan were transformed into almost mythical figures, sanctified by their death for the nation and the faith.

²³ Sorin Radu, «“Peasant Democracy” or What It Was Like to Practice Politics in Countryside Romania between the Two World Wars», in Sorin Radu and Oliver Jens Schmitt (eds.), *Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania. Perceptions, Mentalities, Propaganda*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, p. 43 sqq.

²⁴ Ovidiu Buruiană, *Liberalii. Structuri și sociabilități politice liberale în România interbelică*, Iași, Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, 2013, pp. 213-214.

²⁵ See in the press of the time the speeches given on the occasion of the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the uprising of Horia, Cloșca and Crișan, especially on the occasion of the inauguration of the monument in Alba Iulia.

²⁶ The (rather, failed) efforts of the National Liberal Party to retain its rural electorate in the interwar period, in Ovidiu Buruiană, “The National Liberal Party and the Failure of Political Integration of the Rural World in the Interwar Romania”, in Sorin Radu and Oliver Jens Schmitt (eds.), *Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania. Perceptions, Mentalities, Propaganda*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, pp. 144-186.

Nor should the function of national pedagogy be omitted in either situation. The centenary of Avram Iancu's birth emphasized the importance of historical figures in shaping national identity, aligning with the broader interwar efforts to promote Romanian culture and history through schools, cultural events, monuments and public ceremonies. All of this served as a means of educating the population about its heritage and the sacrifices made for national unity.²⁷

The commemoration of the 1930s was used in schools and youth organizations²⁸ to educate in the spirit of sacrifice for the homeland. Young people were taught to admire Horea as a model of courage, honor, faith and struggle for justice. Through speeches, celebrations, conferences, historical dramas, plays, commemorative lessons or religious services, the idea of civic duty, devotion to the nation and to the leader was promoted. Also, emphasis was placed on integrating the symbols of the 1784 uprising into the national culture, which was translated into the widespread dissemination of Horea's portrait in the press, in textbooks and posters, academic and popularization works, poems, songs and plays were composed in honor of the heroes of the 18th century, all these creations renewing the cultural tradition of representing the peasant hero.

A common denominator of both moments was, as already shown, the political color of the government under which they were organized: it is the political formation of the National Liberal Party. But not only was the ruling party the same, but also the one directly responsible for the coordination and good success of the festivities. It is about the holder of the portfolio of Religions and Arts in both cabinets, none other than Professor Alexandru Lapedatu. Being one of the longest-serving high dignitaries after the First World War, occupying several ministerial portfolios in different liberal or transitional governments,²⁹ Alexandru Lapedatu was one of the key personalities in building coherent cultural policies in the interwar period. As a historian and statesman, he contributed to the institutionalization of Romanian culture and historical memory, emphasizing education, research, the promotion of heritage and the consolidation of identity. His policies aimed at protecting cultural heritage as a means of strengthening national pride and unity, especially in the territories united in 1918 with the Kingdom of

²⁷ The importance of historical myths in modern national construction, in Alexandru Zub, *Istorie și finalitate. În căutarea identității*, 2nd edition, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2004, pp. 51-76.

²⁸ *Straja Tânără*, for example, was established in 1935.

²⁹ *Alexandru Lapedatu (1876-1950). Scrisori istorice*, edition by academician Camil Mureșanu and professor Nicolae Edroiu, corresponding member of the Romanian Academy, București, Editura Academiei Române, 2008, pp. VIII-X.

Romania. Lapedatu was also a supporter of the centralization and integration of Transylvania, Bukovina and Bessarabia into the cultural and political structure of Romania, which is why he sought as a minister to reduce regional differences through the Romanian language, the Orthodox Church and common cultural establishments.³⁰ As a supporter of the modernization of Romanian society through culture, Alexandru Lapedatu encouraged and supported initiatives to develop museums, libraries and national cultural institutions in order to align Romania with European cultural standards. Under his various ministerial mandates, extensive programs were carried out for the restoration and conservation of historical monuments (churches, fortresses, buildings of historical value), and editorial projects were initiated and carried out that aimed at the publication of historical works and documentary sources to support a solid historical culture. Also, the illustrious historian perfectly understood the role and power of art (in all its forms) as a means of strengthening the identity and national consolidation of Romanians around strong historical personalities and values.³¹

For all these reasons (and not only), Professor Alexandru Lapedatu seems to have been the right man in the right place on both occasions. Referring strictly to the commemoration of Horia, Cloșca and Crișan, as early as September 1934, the liberal cabinet decided to organize commemorative celebrations, the implementation of these plans falling under the responsibility of the Ministry of Religions and Arts. The mandate that was granted to him determined Alexandru Lapedatu to convene a working meeting of the prefects of the counties in the Apuseni Mountains region (Cluj, Turda, Alba, Hunedoara, Sibiu, Arad and Bihor) in order to outline the program of the future ceremonies. This happened on October 28 of that year,³² at the Prefecture of Sibiu, on which occasion the representatives of the central authority in the territory were instructed to encourage local initiatives dedicated to the commemoration of the uprising, especially by erecting monuments such as crosses and tridents, which were to be consecrated on the occasion of the central event. The date of the festivities was set for February 28, 1935, when exactly 150 years had passed since the

³⁰ Andreas Wild, *Fratii Lapedatu. Artizani ai României moderne în generația Marii Uniri*, 4th edition, s.l., s.n. 2024, pp. 27-35 (chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://www.memorialsighet.ro/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/fratii_lapedatu_romana_pdf.pdf – 15.11.2025).

³¹ Ioan Opris, *Alexandru Lapedatu în cultura românească. Contribuții la cunoașterea vieții politice și culturale românești din perioada 1918-1947*, București, Editura Enciclopedică, 1996, pp. 60-206.

³² “Universul”, year 51, no. 298, October 31, 1934, p. 7.

execution of the leaders of the uprising. On that day, religious services were to be held in all county capitals throughout the country and in all localities in the Apuseni Mountains region, and school and cultural institutions were obliged to honor the event with commemorative celebrations. Alba Iulia was to become the epicenter of the events by inaugurating the monument to Horia, Cloșca and Crișan, “on the very spot where the wheel on which Horia was pulled was”, while Crișan’s memory was to be honored by inaugurating a bust in Arad.

That the plan was ambitious is also demonstrated by Minister Lapedatu’s intention “to build more churches, schools and cultural establishments in the Apuseni Mountains”. But it was not only ambition that characterized Alexandru Lapedatu’s initial actions regarding the commemoration of the 1784-1785 uprising. But also, the existence of a model for carrying out the celebration, which had verified its validity and efficiency at the right time. And this model was none other than the centenary of Avram Iancu’s birth, marked, as we have seen, in the early autumn of 1924.³³ Specifically, I am referring to the minister’s intention “to publish and distribute in thousands of copies,” as had happened a decade earlier, “a commemorative brochure; also the portrait of Horia, Cloșca and Crișan.”³⁴ That the similarities with the celebration of the hero of 1848 did not stop there is demonstrated by the fact that this time too an attempt was made to merge the memory of the heroes of 1784-1785 with those of the First World War, through Lapedatu’s intention that “a commemorative monument be erected in Beiuș in honor of the martyrs burned alive in the 1918 revolution.”³⁵

A few days later, during the next government meeting at the beginning of November, the program designed by the Minister of Religions and Arts was approved.³⁶ I find only one observation necessary at this point: the attention paid to the area that represented the epicenter of the events that were the subject of the commemoration: the Apuseni Mountains. The major significance of those places for the history of Romanians contrasted with the constant lack of interest of political decision-makers in increasing the quality of life of the people and in reducing the development gaps between the Apuseni Mountains area and other historical regions. This is how it happened that for the politicians of the time, in power, but especially for those in the opposition, the plea they made regarding the need to invest in the area’s infrastructure, to

³³ Lucian Turcu, *The Unseen Face of a National Holiday*, pp. 137-139.

³⁴ “Universul”, year 51, no. 298, October 31, 1934, p. 7.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ “Universul”, year 51, no. 300, November 2, 1934, p 13.

increase the quality of education for the inhabitants of Țara Moților, to correct the injustices caused by the application of the agrarian reform or to limit the large properties owned in the area (by Tischler Mohr, for example),³⁷ which affected the well-being of the noble household, etc. - these and many others became a leitmotif of the public discourse of those years which aimed to correct injustices that had been perpetuated for too long. Moreover, the rich historical and cultural heritage of the region of Țara Moților was highlighted in those years by organizing excursions for schoolchildren and students in the area, by cultural and documentary expeditions carried out in the Moți villages by the scout cohorts and young guards, by academic or popularization writings and conferences supported by the great voices of historiography of the time, by establishing Moți societies, by theatrical tours carried out by actors from the National Theatre in Cluj, by building schools (for example, in Albac), by the descent into the area of the crown prince, Mihai, Grand Voivode of Alba Iulia,³⁸ or by the priority visits of his Moți shepherds by the Orthodox bishop of Cluj, Nicolae Colan.³⁹

As the date set for marking the great national holiday approached, Minister Lapedatu sent a circular to the prefects of the country, as well as to the metropolitans and bishops of both Romanian Churches, reminding them that "the government of the country, wishing that the completion of a century and a half since the bloody tragedy that occurred on February 28, 1785, near the walls of the Alba Iulia fortress be celebrated with the piety and solemnity befitting the great acts of the nation's past, has ordered: 1. That on that day, in all county capitals, in Romanian churches, liturgies with requiems for the repose of the souls of the martyrs Horia, Cloșca and Crișan be celebrated. Representatives of all public, civil, military and church authorities, as well as all Romanian schools in the locality, will take part in these services;⁴⁰ 2. Such services will be held in all Romanian churches in the villages whose inhabitants once participated to the revolutionary movement of 1784/85; 3. In all schools in the country, the significance of this national emancipation movement will be

³⁷ "Dimineața", year 25, no. 8080, June 17, 1929, p. 8.

³⁸ "Universul", year 52, no. 170, June 23, 1935, p. 10; year 52, no. 174, June 27, 1935, p. 3.

³⁹ "Universul", year 54, no. 139, May 23, 1937, p. 2.

⁴⁰ The mandatory participation of authorities in the religious ceremonies of the Orthodox Church, in Lucian Turcu, "De ce sărbătorile oficiale din perioada interbelică nu au reprezentat un motiv de bucurie pentru toți români?", in Daniela Deteșan, Mirela Popa-Andrei, Mádly Loránd (coords.), *Fascinatia trecutului. Omagiu istoricului Simion Retegan la împlinirea vârstei de 75 de ani*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Argonaut, 2014, pp. 277-297.

explained to students, showing them the causes and goals it pursued and the influence that, although it was so bloodily suppressed, it had on the development of the national consciousness of the brothers in Transylvania.”⁴¹

Even after his election as president of the Romanian Academy,⁴² Alexandru Lapedatu continued to be involved in promoting Romanian cultural values in the context of commemorating the heroes of 1784-1785. He endorsed and promoted the monographic work of his colleague from the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy in Cluj and from the Romanian Academy, Ioan Lupaș;⁴³ he managed to introduce into the Romanian Academy’s heritage the portraits of Horia and Cloșca made by the contemporary painter Sigismund Koreh, owned by the Bethlen Gábor College in Aiud;⁴⁴ he supported (as minister) the exhibition organized at the Academy’s headquarters by Octavian Beu,⁴⁵ visited by Queen Maria and King Carol II; finally, he boosted the academic and cultural life in Cluj, both at the “King Ferdinand I” University and at the University Library, where a documentary exhibition dedicated to Horia’s movement was organized.⁴⁶

Last but not least, Alexandru Lapedatu had a decisive role to play in the creation of the monument to Horia, Cloșca and Crișan in Alba Iulia, whose inauguration on October 14, 1937 represented the central and final point of the long series of events dedicated to the commemoration of the 1784-1785 uprising in Transylvania. According to the vision he tried to imprint on the edifice, it was supposed to be a “lighthouse monument, in a modern architectural style” considering the place where it was located (on the bastion of the old fortress, in front of the gate of Michael the Brave). Based on these ideas, the first project of the monument was created by the architect Octavian Mihălțan, who presented Lapedatu with a draft-sketch (“to have the guarantee of a true work of art”).⁴⁷ Later, ASTRA took over the idea of building the monument, as well as the patronage of the celebrations dedicated to the martyrdom of Horia,

⁴¹ “Universul”, year 52, no. 48, February 18, 1935, p. 12.

⁴² Andreas Wild, *Frații Lapedatu*, pp. 45-46.

⁴³ Ioan Lupaș, *Răscoalei țărănilor din Transilvania la 1784*, Cluj, Tipografia ASTRA SA, 1934.

⁴⁴ “Universul”, year 53, no. 275, October 5, 1936, p. 2.

⁴⁵ “Universul”, year 52, no. 75, March 17, 1935, p. 2; year 52, no. 78, March 20, 1935, p. 2.

⁴⁶ The exhibition included prints, manuscripts, historical documents, brochures, books and magazines. Most of the material on display belonged to the collections of the University Library, especially the Sion collection. Various documents were borrowed from the State Archives, as well as a collection of prints from Alexandru Vaida-Voevod: “Universul”, year 53, no. 86, March 27, 1936, p. 12.

⁴⁷ “Universul”, year 52, no. 109, April 20, 1935, p. 10.

Cloșca and Crișan, and published a design competition in August 1935.⁴⁸ The initial call launched by ASTRA through the Alba Iulia branch reflected the efforts of interwar civil society to symbolically mark the founding moments of Romanian identity.

The proposed form and materials – a prismatic obelisk made of concrete clad with Zlatna or trachyte stone – indicated both the desire for monumentality and durability, and the inclusion in the modernist architectural style specific to the era. The presence of a lighthouse at the top of the monument had obvious symbolic valences: that of transforming the figure of the three leaders of the uprising into a “guiding light” for present and future generations.

The bas-reliefs, designed to reproduce episodes from the lives and sufferings of the heroes, as well as their portraits, referred to a nationalist and pedagogical iconographic program. There was also a concern for the further development of the ensemble: the plinth was to be prepared in such a way that it could also support possible statues, a sign of an open and flexible architectural vision.

The total value of the monument, estimated at 600,000 lei, and the prize of 30,000 lei for the winning project, indicated a significant financial mobilization. The awarded projects were to remain the property of ASTRA.

The composition of the selection committee reflects, in turn, a collaboration between local and central institutions – including administrative and military authorities, the Bucharest Academy of Architecture, as well as artistic personalities (sculptors and architects). This heterogeneous structure was proof of both the community character of the initiative and the prestige of the project in the national context of the memory policies of the era.

Three proposals were submitted to the design competition,⁴⁹ but none of them satisfied the Association's requirements. Thus, the architect Mihălțan was chosen, who took over and adjusted some of the architectural and aesthetic ideas of the rejected projects. In the fall of 1936, the most important details of the monument's construction were clarified, the Association's approach being at an advanced stage. From the point of view of the choice of location – in front of the Second Gate of the Alba Carolina Fortress –, the project is loaded with special symbolism: the intended location is in the immediate vicinity of the cell where the leaders of the uprising were imprisoned before their execution. It is easy to see that a topographical alignment was taken into account between the space of memory and the space of martyrdom, which gave added authenticity and gravity to the commemorative ensemble.

⁴⁸ “Universul”, year 52, no. 213, August 5, 1935, p. 8.

⁴⁹ “Universul”, year 53, no. 268, September 28, 1936, p. 8.

The new dimensions envisaged – a height of 21 meters, with a structure that was to include internal stairs – indicate a tower-obelisk monument, accessible to visitors, in line with the practice of the time of creating buildings that combined a commemorative function with a pedagogical and even touristic one. From an iconographic point of view, it was finally decided that the lower part of the building would be decorated with an allegorical representation of the goddess Victoria and portraits of the three martyrs, in an artistic language that combined late neoclassicism with symbolic elements of romantic inspiration.

Adjustments were also made in the meantime regarding the funds. Upwards, obviously. The amount that the Association had recently raised from its own resources – 900,000 lei – was to be supplemented by the Alba County Prefecture up to the value of 1,500,000 lei. This co-financing illustrates how public memory projects of the era could function efficiently in a regime of cultural “co-production” between civil society and public authority.

That the involvement of local authorities was part of a well-thought-out strategic and ideological program, in which the modernization of infrastructure was subordinated to and integrated into a coherent identity and commemorative vision (specific to an era concerned with the sacralization of national space) also results from the decision of the local City Hall to boost urban modernization efforts in close connection with those of marking public space through symbols of national memory, such as the monument dedicated to Horia, Cloșca and Crișan in Alba Iulia.⁵⁰ Specifically, a series of modern urban developments were considered (the paving of the central “Mihai Viteazul” square, including the slope between the first and second gates of the fortress) with the aim of creating a representative pedestrian and road space, adequate to the modern standards of the cities of the Kingdom of Romania at that time. Then, the decision was made to expropriate a series of buildings with the declared aim of opening a “beautiful perspective” on the monument of Horia, Cloșca and Crișan, a sign of the fact that the local authorities did not only symbolically support the building, but also decided to intervene urbanistically to integrate it into a privileged visual and spatial axis. Through this, the new monument became the focal point of a reconfigured urban geography, the place vacated by the expropriated buildings (the entire Toma Jäger neighborhood and parts of the Frățilă, Pasternae and Maerovici properties) to be transformed into a park. This combination of functional expropriation and landscape design illustrates a specific way of the era to inscribe national values in the urban structure, in

⁵⁰ “Universul”, year 54, no. 268, September 29, 1937, p. 10.

an architectural and urban language consonant with the symbolic policy of the interwar Romanian state.

From what has been stated above, it is clear that the events dedicated to the commemoration of 150 years since the uprising of Horia, Cloșca and Crișan were more than a simple act of historical memory. They represented a page from the oldest books of wisdom of the nation, to which our ancestors turned when it was not easy for them either. Their example still shows the unifying force that the past can have and that it must/deserves to have today.

Conflict of interest

None to declare

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