

Separating Myths and Facts In the History of Transylvania

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Much has been said and written lately about the Human Rights Issue concerning Rumania.* It can be said, without any exaggeration, that the entire civilized world is upset and ready to condemn the treatment of native ethnics who achieved minority status after World War One with the stroke of a pen in Transylvania, now part of Ceaucescu's Rumania.

For most people it is hard if not impossible to even understand the policies that Ceacescu carries out in Transylvania, and for many of the Rumanians abroad it is both upsetting and embarrassing. The United Nations has been investigating the problem. The prestigious *Reader's Digest* in its February 1989 issue has a compilation of articles from newspapers the world over that condemn the events in Rumania and Transylvania. The Rumanian dictator is the most despised person in international politics next to Hitler and Stalin.

Without attempting to explain the entire Rumanian culture and national character, using the tools of the historian and the political scientist, I would like to clarify a few issues concerning the history of Transylvania and the Rumanian attitude toward Transylvania.

The Rumanian Bias.

The Union and League of Rumanian Societies in America publishes in Cleveland *America*, a monthly periodical. Not every Rumanian living in the U.S. agrees with its editorial policy and the articles. Yet, it has a great deal of influence both in American and Rumanian circles, and does a great deal of harm by presenting the problem of Transylvania and the Hungarian Rumanian relationship through the distorted lens of this paper and its articles (some in English), which are full of half truths, and often outright, irresponsible lies.

This "official organ" of the Rumanian Union and League carried a large map of "Greater Rumania" on its front page in the November 1988 issue based on the 1938 boundaries of Rumania. The title of the accompanying article, written in Rumanian, is "Dela Nistru pan la Tisa," suggesting that Rumanians (at least the editors of this paper) claim all territories between the rivers Dniester (now part of the Soviet Union) and the Tisza (Hungarian territory since 896).

The two other lead articles, written in English, deal with the 60th Anniversary of December 1, 1918. In one of the articles the Rev. Fr. Vasile Hategan, a Cleveland clergyman, begins his article, which is full of the usual historical distortions, with this statement:

“All nations have some special dates to commemorate and glorify the most outstanding events in their history. December 1 is such a date for all Romanians. On this day in 1918, Transylvania, the cradle of the Romanian nation, was finally united for all times with its mother country, Romania (emphasis in original).”

Following the Daco-Romanian theory, Hategan starts Rumanian history before 107 A.D., when the troops of Emperor Trajan’s Roman legions first occupied Transylvania, then part of Dacia. Accordingly, Hategan claims that

“the inter-mingling and inter-marriage of the native Dacian population with the Roman colonists gradually gave birth to a new nation, whose inhabitants were eventually called Romanians . . . By the time Emperor Aurelian withdrew the Roman legions, the new Romanian nation was already established.”

Hategan readily admits that this theory is not universally accepted: “Though a few prejudiced scholars have certain contrary theories, all serious and objective historians agree that there was a continuity of the Romanized Dacia in the lands which is Romania today, and especially in the province of Transylvania.” It is obvious, of course, that historians who disagree with Hategan are “prejudiced”, and those who agree with him are “serious and objective.”

The chief weakness of the Daco-Roman theory is that there is absolutely no evidence of the “new Romanian nation” in any document, archaeological find or geographical name for over a thousand years. There does not exist even indirect evidence suggesting that some “unknown” tribe of people would be hiding out in the Carpathian mountains for over a thousand years. Yet, Hategan states with complete confidence that

“there were to follow centuries of continued (sic) barbaric invasions and attacks, but the Romanians stayed their ground through this ordeal. When the hordes plundered their country and burned their villages, they retired into the mountains until the invaders left. From their tenacity and permanence on that soil, the Romanian proverb derived: ‘The water flows on, but the rocks remain’. . . During these difficult centuries, the Romanian language took form and Christianity spread.”

Daco-Romanian Theory Refuted

This might sound as a plausible plot for some fiction, but as a historical explanation it does not stand up. It has not only been discussed, analyzed, and refuted by several historians, but a much more plausible theory has been proposed and documented.

A handy volume, "Transylvania and the Theory of DacoRoman-Rumanian Continuity" has been published by the Committee of Transylvania in 1980. It not only refutes the Daco-Roman theory but includes an excellent bibliography. But perhaps the most telling and undisputable evidence comes from Colin McEvedy, a "historian's historian," who specializes in boundary changes over time.

McEvedy's work, based on excellent scholarship, has been published in four volumes as *The Penguin Atlas of History*, dealing with boundary changes in the history of Europe, from ancient Europe to our own days. In addition, McEvedy prepared *The Atlas of African History* and *The Penguin Atlas of Population History*.

McEvedy is certainly a recognized authority, who would not soil his reputation by taking part of an anti-Rumanian conspiracy to deprive the Rumanians of a valid historical claim!

For us McEvedy's *The Penguin Atlas of Medieval History* covering the era from 362 to 1478, *The Penguin Atlas of Modern History*, from 1483 to 1815 and *The Penguin Atlas of Recent History, Europe, Since 1915* are the most relevant.

The map indicating territorial borders for the year 923 shows Transylvania as Hungarian occupied area. According to the 998 map the Principality of Hungary, and on the 1028 map the Kingdom of Hungary includes not only Transylvania but part of the area that later became known as Wallachia.

It seems, however, that Wallachia, being on the other side of the Carpathian Mountains on the South-East borders of Hungary was not considered essential part of Hungary by Saint Stephen and subsequent kings and withdrew from that area and McEvedy's 1071 map shows the same South Eastern boundaries that existed in 1919. Indeed, the Transylvanian boundaries of Hungary are one of the most stable ones in European history, indicating that Hungary had no imperialistic designs on neighboring territories, even when they were under no permanent rule and were free for the taking.

On the other hand, the territory of Rumania proper, the Regat (including Wallachia and Moldavia), since 923 changed hands several times, without ever mentioning the Rumanians. The

Wallachian region belonged to the Bulgarians first, later it came under Byzantine rule. Moldavia was under Byzantine and even Russian rule, until both Moldavia and Wallachia became occupied and ruled by the Cumenians. Moldavia and Wallachia as separate principalities did not appear until 1360, with the following explanation in the footnote:

“The Latin-speaking Wallachians and Moldavians, inhabiting modern Rumania, are first mentioned at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Their claim to be descendants of the Roman colonists planted there in the second century A.D. seems tendentious and improbable, for the Romans’ withdrawal from Rumania (270 A.D.) and the appearance of the Vlach states are separated by a millennium in which the country was the property of the Slav and nomad and which is devoid of all evidence of Roman survival. Almost certainly, the Vlachs came from the Western Balkans and only migrated into Rumania as the nomads abandoned it in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century.¹

The True Rumanian Cradle

Since there is no archeological or historical evidence of their presence in the territory of modern Rumania or Transylvania, the only basis of the Daco-Roman theory is that there are a considerable number of Roman/Latin expressions in the Rumanian language.

But upon closer examination, the linguistic studies also fail to support the Daco-Roman theory. Many Latin words in the modern Rumanian language are late acquisitions: to buttress the Daco Roman theory, in the 19th century, there was a conscious effort to “latinize” the Rumanian language. As for the original Roman linguistic heritage in the Rumanian language it is traced to a much later period than the 3rd century .A.D. by many linguists, including the noted Rumanian linguist, Ovid Densusianu (1873-1938) who, in his *Histoire de la Langue Roumanie*, published in 1901, places the origin of the Rumanian language in the area of Illyria where the Roman presence lasted much longer, and there was closer contact with Italians. Densusianu’ s work was republished in Rumania in 1975, in the original French, with a preface and several notes “sanitizing” Densusianu’s “unorthodox” findings.²

This, along with the fact that a significant number of common Albanian-Rumanian words exist, especially specific shepherd words³ suggesting contact with Albanians who are still in the same region on the Western Balkan, makes McEvedy’s above quoted theory even more likely: the

Wallachians migrated to Wallachia from the area of Illyria and Macedonia, where the Roman influence lasted much longer than in Wallachia.

There seems to be some contradiction, however, between some facts and McEvedy's dates. There are several mentions of Wallachians in and around Transylvania before the late 13th century, the date McEvedy suggests for the arrival of the Wallachians into the region north of the lower Danube.

This discrepancy can be explained, however, by the fact that the Wallachians were migratory shepherds, appearing as small bands of people here and there, instead of moving on as an organized group like the Huns under Attila, the Hungarians under Arpad, the Tartars under Genghis Khan, or the Turks under the Sultans.

According to Georg Stadtmuller, the term "Wallachian" denoted not only those who spoke Rumanian, but also others who "adopted the way of life of the Rumanian shepherd population"⁴ Stadtmuller's map also confirms McEvedy's theory, although the dates are not exactly the same, by indicating that around 1200 A.D. the "Rumanishe" wandered into Transylvania along the Orsova Narrows, and into the Southern Danube region from around Northern Albania, i.e. the Albanian Alps.⁵

The seeming discrepancy disappears if we treat Stadtmuller's date of 1200 A.D. as the beginning and McEvedy's date as the conclusion of the Wallachian migration, when the Wallachians show up in large mass on the Eastern Balkan.

Thus, there seems to be an element of truth in the DacoRoman theory, but it should be more properly called WallachRoman or Illyrian-Rumanian theory. This new, more probable theory, while putting the cultural continuity with the Romans on a much firmer ground, would, of course, mean changing the place and the date of the origin of the Rumanian nation by well over a thousand years. According to this theory the Wallachians came to the Transylvanian region long after the Hungarian settlement, thus the territorial claim based on the falsely asserted historical connection between Dacia and Rumania is false.

It is pure coincidence that some Balkan shepherds whose language included Latin words ended up in an area where about one thousand years earlier Roman troops happened to be stationed. But there is absolutely no historical connection between the two events.

Transylvania a Hungarian Province

Since the Hungarians have settled in Transylvania, (McEvedy's map indicating the borders in 923 does include Transylvania with the Hungarian Principality; the traditional date of the Hungarians entry into and occupation of the Carpathian basin in 896) it was an organic part of the Hungarian Principality, and after 1001 of the Kingdom of Hungary, politically, culturally, and economically until the Turkish occupation. Following the Battle of Mohacs in 1526, when the Hungarian troops suffered a decisive defeat from the Turks, McEvedy's map of 1559 shows Transylvania as an independent Principality under Turkish rule.

This did not mean, of course, that Hungarian influence had waned in Transylvania. Hungarian was the traditional language and culture, and even the uncultured Vlachs, instead of being assimilated or oppressed, received their first Bible translations from the Hungarian. According to Dr. Milan Halmos,

"the very first Wallach book printed with Latin alphabet was George Szegedy's translation of Psalms from Hungarian: it was edited by the Hungarian printing shop of Gaspar Heltal in 1570 A.D. The same printing shop came out with the Calvinist catechism in Wallach language, translated from Hungarian. The first Wallach translation of the New Testament, by order of Duke Rakoczi, was published (in Transylvania) 40 years before the first Bible-translation in Wallachia on the Balkan"⁶.

While Transylvania continued to exist as independent Hungarian Principality, the remainder of Hungary that was not occupied by the Turks came under the rule of the Hapsburg dynasty, who were governing Hungary as Hungarian Kings, crowned with Saint Stephen's Crown, in a personal union with Austria. Their Austrian title was Emperor. Thus, although its territory was reduced, and under the personal union its independence was compromised, Hungary's sovereignty was maintained.

After the liberation from the Turks (1699) Transylvania culturally and economically returned to Hungary, although for political reasons, it was governed from Vienna as a Great Principality by the Hapsburgs in their capacity as Hungarian Kings until 1876, when it was legally reunited with Hungary. McEvedy's 1848 map of population includes the territory of Transylvania with Hungary, while the 1849 map shows it as part of the Republic of Hungary.

Thus, the Reverend Hategan disregards, or at least distorts the truth when he writes that "Transylvania became a separate province and was constituted in the 14th century. After the Battle

of Mohacs (1526), it became independent state and remained as such until 1876, when it was annexed to Hungary.” In the meantime,, the fate of Moldavia and Wallachia depended on the fortune of the Turks. They first lost them to Russia, and were able to recover both only after Napoleon’s invasion of Russia. Next, as the result of the Greek rebellion, the Sultan was forced, according to McEvedy, “to recognize the autonomy of Wallachia and Moldavia. at the same time (1821); after the Crimean war they were to unite as the Kingdom of Rumania”⁷. The two principalities did actually unite in 1858, and the Kingdom of Rumania first appears on McEvedy’s 1859 map.

It is interesting to note that the Rumanian people have never staged a revolution, a war of independence, or any other attempt to create their own country, since the alleged birth in the third century A.D. Whatever their origin, they were always passive actors, with their kingdom finally given to them as the result of the fortune or misfortune of other nations that ruled the territory.

Hategan also mentions that “for one brief moment of several months, the Romanian Prince, Michael the Brave, was able to unite all Romanians in 1599 after defeating Sigismond Bathory’s Hungarian armies. The truth is, that Michael, the Voivod (Prince) of Wallachia, was instigated by the Emperor of Austria to weaken the Hungarian hold and thus help bring Transylvania under Hapsburg rule. He was acting as a loyal servant and took an oath of allegiance “as Voivod of Wallachia and as his imperial and royal majesty’s governor of Transylvania.” Thus, if under Michael “all Romanians” were finally united, as Hategan claims, that only means that Prince Michael had brought even Wallachia under Hapsburg rule for at least a brief period. But his governorship did not last long. In 1601 the Emperor’s army had defeated and killed “his imperial and royal majesty’s governor” at Torda.

But in any case, other than King Bela IV of Hungary, acceding to the explicit request of Pope Gregory IX to grant “for the sake of God refuge to those poor Vlachs who tried to escape from. their Cuman rulers.”, designated by royal decree certain areas in Transylvania, called. “Silva Vlachorum” to receive these refugees in the 13th century⁸, the rule under Michael was the only time before 1919 that Transylvania had anything to do with Wallachia. Although there were Vlachs (or Rumanians) in Transylvania since the 13th century, it was always considered Hungarian territory since the early 10th century until Trianon in 1919. During the last millennium Transylvania had developed its own political culture, but always as an organic part of Hungary, or even the preserver of the Hungarian statehood when part of Hungary was under Hapsburg rule, and another part was occupied by the Turks.

Rumanian Mythology and Transylvania

As the result of the Daco-Roman political myth and the peculiar historic experience of the Wallachian people, Rumanians have endowed Transylvania with a mysterious quality.

“Transylvania has become a mystical, abstract concept having little or nothing to do with the concrete reality of the situation. It is seen as the embodiment of everything that is good and worthy in the Roman national soul, the cradle of the Romanian nation and the symbol of harmony which Romanians have always regarded as central to their own image of themselves. Transylvania is the mystical guarantee of Romanian-ness — ‘Romanity,’ that is, —which in itself is a potentially mystical notion... At any rate, non-Romanians are not welcome in Romanian Transylvania. And Romanian-Hungarian relations are further bedeviled by Romanian fear that the presence of a Hungarian population in Transylvania might once again provide a pretext for detaching part of it from Romania...⁹.”

Although certainly there are many moderate Rumanians of good will, even some of them are brainwashed by the DacoRomanian theory which was created in the 18th century, and are obsessed with this mysterious quality and symbolic value of Transylvania. Hategan’s and other Rumanian irredentists’ almost pathological need to create an explanation, even if untrue, to justify Rumanian rule in Transylvania and this obsession to view Transylvania as the cradle of Romanian existence makes any rational dialogue or proposal of a peaceful solution nearly impossible.

Demagogues like the Reverend Hategan seem to be intoxicated with the success of their erroneous theory and the Rumanians’ ability to convince not only many moderate Rumanians but many Western opinion-makers and politicians of the validity of their highly exaggerated claim. The false DacoRomanian theory in the hands of Rumanian diplomats, along with equally false and unfounded territorial documentation had no small role in convincing the victorious powers in 1919 to grant Rumania, for political considerations (as a reward for Rumania’s foreign policy), not only the part of Transylvania with a Rumanian majority, but the entire region (actually, Rumanians have claimed all territory, up to the Tisza River that is believed to have been the western boundary of Dacia some two thousand years ago).

Thus, Transylvania’s Hungarian and German-Saxon residents were submitted to the highly chauvinistic and inexperienced Rumanian rule. The most tragic in this is that despite their claim of being descendants of the Roman troops, they did not have, nor had they shown any~ inclination to acquire (or even a recognition of the need of) the old Roman skill to govern a multi-ethnic empire.

The “Romanians” of the 20th century did not even have sufficient experience since 1858, when they became independent kingdom, in governing themselves, let alone governing a nationally heterogenous population that had its own, quite successful political culture and was used to exercising considerable autonomy and self-government as part of Hungary and the Hungarian nation.

Rumanian Chauvinism and Irredentism

Once they had succeeded in getting Transylvania, Rumanians are adding insult to injury: Rumania not only has the most miserable human rights policy of any nation in the world, but its minority policy is even worse: it is aimed at the complete cultural annihilation of the original inhabitants of Transylvania.

It should be noted that the violent abuse of the Hungarian and German-Saxon minorities in Transylvania did not begin with Ceaucescu: it dates from the beginning. When in 1919 the allied powers demanded a separate treaty from Rumania, guaranteeing the rights of the ethnic groups that suddenly became minorities under Rumanian rule in Transylvania, the Rumanians already opposed such a treaty, showing that they never intended to have (and never had!) an acceptable human rights policy in Transylvania.

The different attitudes toward the concept of basic human rights can be explained by the different political cultures. The Byzantine Orthodox Rumanians have no, or very weak, concept of individual human rights, while the Hungarians and German Saxons in Transylvania have a thousand year western tradition which includes strong emphasis on human rights. Hungary proclaimed the Golden Bull just 7 years after the Magna Charta. It was in Transylvania that freedom of religion was first declared a basic right. And now, in the 20th Century, millions of people with western traditions must live and suffer under a crude eastern Orthodox rule.

It further complicates the situation that the inexperienced Rumanians compensate for lack of experience with zeal and chauvinism. Based on their perceived priority in the Danubian region, including Transylvania, Wallachia, and Moldavia, they have convinced themselves that “they alone have the right to form a state in this region”¹⁰.

In contrast, it should be noted that whether MeEvedy or the Daco-Romanian theory is right, if the Rumanians had survived in Transylvania, either six hundred years or thousand years of oppression” by the Hungarians, they should thank, not only God but those Hungarian “oppressors.”

Instead of being assimilated and absorbed without a trace the Rumanians were able not only to keep their language and survive but to grow in national consciousness.

Hungarians printed Bibles for the Wallachians in their own language, while the present Rumanian regime makes toilet paper from the bibles donated for their people. Yet, in the entire issue of *America* there is not one word critical of the Rumanian human rights or ethnic minority policy. Without ever mentioning the human rights abuses and the policy of cultural genocide toward the minorities, Hategan vows to keep Transylvania forever: "we will borrow a term from the Hungarian propaganda, by saying: NO, NO NEVER!!! Transylvania is Romanian and forever remain so" (emphasis in original).

There is only one complaint that Hategan has toward the Communist regime: "the Communist regime in Romania is not doing much in regaining the lost territories" from the Soviet Union and Bulgaria.

For Hategan even getting Transylvania is not enough. The "lost territories that he wants the Rumanian government to regain, for the brief period between the two World Wars did belong to Rumania, only to be returned to their previous owners: Bessarabia and Northern Bucovina to "russian Communists" and Southern Dobrogea to Bulgaria.

According to Hategan, "Romanians dream of the day when these territories will be returned to Romania where they rightfully belong." Hategan and the modern Rumanian irredentists act like the thief who demands back the stolen goods that were returned to the rightful owner.

And the Rumanians accuse the Hungarians of irredentism!

* In English there are three accepted versions to spell the name of the country and the people: "Romanian" more suggestive of the connection with the Roman legions in Dacia, Rumanian, suggesting no such connection, and Roumanian, which seems to be more neutral. In this essay "Romanian" will be used in quotes, for the sake of accuracy, and "Rumanian" at other places, according to the author's conviction. In this the author follows the practice of American scholars and historians, like McEvedy, and textbook authors in the field of International Relations like Theodore A. Couloubis and James H. Wolfe, Norman S. Padelford and George A. Lincoln, John Spanier, and John G. Stoessinger.

¹ Cohn McEvedy, *Atlas of Medieval History* (Penguin Books) p. 78.

² Also see "Transylvania and the Theory of Daco-Roman/Rumanian Continuity." (Rochester, NY: Committee of Transylvania, Inc., 1980) pp.14-15.

³ See *Ibid.*, pp. 24-27.

⁴ See *Ibid.*, pp. 74-85, also Stadtmuller, "Geschichte Sudeuropas", Wien, 1976.

⁵ See "Transylvania...", p. 81.

⁶ Halmos, *The Truth About Transylvania*, p. 12.

⁷ McEvedy, *Atlas of Modern History* Penguin Books, p. 80.

⁸ Halmos, p. 9.

⁹ Schopflin, "Transylvania: Hungarians under Romanian Rule", in Stephen Borsody, ed.. *The Hungarians, A Divided Nation* (New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1988) p. 123.

¹⁰ Sandor Torok, *Telepulestorteneti Tanulmanyok es Hatarproblemak a Karpatmedenceben* (Studies in the History of Residential Patterns and Border Problems in the Carpathian Basin) (Astor Park, FL: American Hungarian Literary Guild; n.d.), p.204.