

BETWEEN DUTY AND PASSION: THE IMPLICATIONS OF A CONTROVERSIAL KING'S POLICY IN A CONTROVERSIAL COUNTRY ¹

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Abstract: *Michael I, the last king of Romania (July 20, 1927 - June 8, 1930; September 6, 1940 - December 30, 1946), went into exile on December 30, 1947, and Romania came under a communist regime. Consequently, until 1989, Romanian historiography uncritically portrayed the Hohenzollern Sigmaringen monarchy, which had ruled Romania between 1866 and 1947, exaggerating its defects and failures and utterly disputing any kind of merits. Furthermore, state censorship prevented interwar publications about the lives of Romanian monarchs, their written memoirs or those of politicians of that time.*

Following 1989, the role of the Romanian monarchy was critically reassessed, gradually attempting to provide an unbiased appraisal of this institution. Censorship was lifted, allowing access to archives and the publication of memoirs by Kings Carol I, Carol II, Michael I, Queen Marie and Prince Nicholas, and numerous Romanian political leaders responsible for the country's fate in the first half of the twentieth century.

After the romantic era when these memoirs were regarded as “forbidden fruits” until 1989, apparently revealing only true events, a critical reconsideration of the monarchy's role in Romania, particularly of the controversial King Carol II, followed. The five volumes of the major work under consideration represent the “peak” of the recent critical reassessment of King Charles II's position and contribution to the history of Romanians and, to a limited extent, to the history of South Eastern Europe.

Keywords: *Charles II, monarchy, Romania, internal policy, foreign policy, private life*

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¹ Review on Narcis Dorin Ion, *Carol al II-lea al României. Un rege controversat* [Carol II of Romania. A Controversial King], vol. 1-5, Onești, Magic Print Publishing House, 2020 (vol. 1-4) and 2021 (vol. 5), 315 + 511 + 303 + 431 + 573 pages.

Rezumat: Între datorie și pasiune: implicațiile politicii unui rege controversat într-o țară controversată. La 30 decembrie 1947, ultimul rege al României, Mihai I (20 iulie 1927 – 8 iunie 1930; 6 septembrie 1940-30 decembrie 1946), pleca în exil iar în România se instaura regimul comunist. În consecință, până în 1989 istoriografia română a prezentat în mod necritic instituția monarhiei de Hohenzollern Sigmaringen, care condusesse România în perioada 1866-1947, hiperbolizându-i defectele și scăderile și contestându-i, aproape în întregime, orice fel de merit. În plus, scrierile din perioada interbelică care prezentau viețile monarhilor români, memoriile scrise ale acestora sau ale oamenilor politici au fost interzise publicului de către cenzură.

După 1989, rolul monarhiei în România a fost reevaluat critic, încercându-se treptat o analiză obiectivă a acestei instituții. Acest fapt a fost ajutat și de către desființarea cenzurii, fapt ce a permis deschiderea arhivelor și tipărirea memoriilor regilor Carol I, Carol II și Mihai I, ale reginei Maria și principelui Nicolae, ca și a numeroșilor oameni politici români, responsabili de destinele țării în prima jumătate a secolului XX.

După faza romantică, de considerare a acestor memorii drept un „fruct oprit” până în 1989, ce ar fi prezentat numai fapte adevărate, a urmat faza de reconsiderare critică a rolului monarhiei în România, în special a controversatului rege Carol al II-lea. Cele 5 volume ale amplei lucrări supuse recenziei reprezintă până în prezent „vârful” reconsiderării critice a locului și rolului regelui Carol al II-lea în istoria românilor și, parțial, în istoria sud-estului Europei.

Narcis Dorin Ion, general manager of the Peles National Museum, is a specialist in contemporary Romanian history, notably the era of Charles II. Since his student days in 1995, he has been involved in the scientific editing of Charles II's six-volume journal (Rom. „Daily Notes”). The most recent volume released in 2003 covers the years 1904-1951². His involvement in the editing process and authoring several thousand explanatory notes prepared him for the monographic research reviewed in the following pages.

The author's early life interest in the subject inspired him to write an extensively-documented work that uses many authentic sources from Romania's National Archives, Peles National Museum Archives and many letters and images from various public and private collections in Romania and abroad (Austria,

² Carol al II-lea, *Între datorie și pasiune. Însemnări zilnice* [Charles II, *Between Duty and Passion. Daily Notes*], vol. I (1904-1939), vol. II (1939-1940), vol. III (1941-1942), vol. IV (1943-1945), vol. V (1946-1948), vol. VI (1941-1951), edition supervised by Marcel Dumitru Ciucă and Narcis Dorin Ion, Bucharest, Curtea Veche Publishing House, Șansa SRL Publishing House and Press, Satya Sai Publishing House, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003.

France, Poland).

This work is currently the most thorough historical study devoted to Romania's most controversial king and, indirectly, to the country's interwar years.³

Since the material is abundant, it is necessary to provide the main facts about each volume before reaching conclusions about the work's overall strengths and weaknesses.

The first volume, with the subtitle *Carol II of Romania. Itineraries of a Life. The Fresco of an Era* examines the future Playboy King's (Paul D. Quinlan) childhood and adolescence (1893-1914), his time as the crown prince of Romania (1914-1930) and the first two years he took the role of „player king” (1930-1932), attempting to impose coalition governments led by several political personalities.

The volume focuses on the Romanian internal politics of the time (more information about foreign policy is given in volumes 3-5). It provides a complete fresco of the political world in Romania in the 1930s-1940s: corruption, intrigues, personal rivalries between politicians, distortion of political life to the point of caricature by the intrusion of the secret services and the royal *camarilla*, the power of certain Romanian businessmen having business and other types of connections in Western Europe and the USA. The following three facts are representative of the author's overall picture. Elena Lupescu, the king's mistress, established her own information service within the state, managed by Ion Pitulescu, chief of the postal and telegraph service. The industrialist Max Auschnitt (1888-1957), a member of the *camarilla* and one of Carol's unjustly imprisoned financiers, did business in the USA after leaving Romania and became friends with the future CIA director, Allen Dulles. Auschnitt's rival in business, Nicolae Malaxa (1884-1965), the most powerful Romanian industrialist, has also immigrated to the USA, did business and befriended the future president Richard Nixon.

The relevance of this volume lies in the detailed study based on numerous historical testimonies of the king's political goals: although a constitutional monarch, Charles II planned to abolish parties and institute a personal power system from his first year of rule, 1930. He would ultimately be able to achieve

³ He actually contributed to the controversy, both through his diary (see *above*) and his work, a combination of memoirs and political opinions, particularly on Romania's foreign policy after 1918. The work was completed in 1945 and published in 1994 (*Carol II, În zodia Satanei. Reflexiuni asupra politicii internaționale* [Under the sign of Satan. Reflections on international politics], edited by Jipa Rotaru, Tiberiu Velter and Horia Șerbănescu, s. l., Universitaria Publishing House, 1994).

such a “performance” in 1938.

The second volume is divided into two sections: *The Constitutional King* (1932-1938) and *The Egotistical King* (1930-1938). The first part is a sort of political history of Romania, accompanied by numerous references to memoirs of politicians of the time and archival documents, with three elements standing out. The first is the king’s particular role in promoting Romanian sports, the scout’s movement and Straja Tarii youth organization. The second is the king’s particularly complicated relationship with the former far-right Legionary Movement party, which evolved from benevolent neutrality to disinterest and reached repression. These pages are among the best written in Romanian historiography in this regard. The third reviews the country’s 1938 notable economic performances (Europe’s first producer of petroleum products and corn, fourth in wine production, fifth in wood and cereal, etc.), illustrating the country’s notable economic achievements despite the corruption of his regime.

The second part of the volume lists the king’s strained relationships with his family members, as shown by his unfair and abusive behaviour towards his mother, Queen Marie, his brother, Prince Nicholas and his sister, Archduchess Ileana. This part of the work highlights the king’s versatile psychology, excellently underlined in the work of American historian Paul D. Quinlan⁴, as well as the love and care for the education of his son, “Mihăiță”.

The third volume subtitled “the dictator king” (1938-1939) analyses four issues: the establishment of the king’s authority regime (February 10, 1938) and the government changes implemented until 1939, the king’s involvement in various foreign-policy actions, his armament concerns and the decimation of the Legionary Movement. The impartial observer may discover in these pages that the monarch was highly active in the country’s foreign affairs, bringing allies and benefits and conducting official visits to the British Empire, Belgium, France, Germany, and Turkey.

Attempts to arm the country were made too late, as felt in 1940 as a result of ultimatums when Romania would lose Bessarabia and northern Bukovina to the USSR, north-western Transylvania to Hungary, and southern Dobrogea (the Quadrilateral) to Bulgaria, without fighting back. The king believed the troops’ morale was “splendid”, but their training and equipment were deficient. The cavalry received just half of the saddles required for mobilization. The remainder were to be received from England, with 17,000 ordered from India. The

⁴ Paul D. Quinlan, *The Playboy King: Carol II of Romania*, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1995, VIII + 264 p.

deficiencies in aviation and anti-aircraft artillery provision were astonishing. Unfortunately for the king and especially for Romania, he and the leading military looked at the military training of the troops superficially. For example, the king personally designed uniforms for his soldiers who marched in the May 10, 1931, parade but he never seriously considered their training and equipment for war.

The volume's conclusion, which spans several pages, is that Carol II had become a kind of puppet king in 1939 because the various ministers were imposed not by him, but by his mistress, Elena Lupescu, and the palace marshal, Ernest Urdărianu. Furthermore, these individuals undermined the little moral authority he still enjoyed among the masses.

The fourth volume consists of two parts: *The Dethroned King* (1940) and *The Wandering King* (1940-1953). The first part highlights the king's ten-year reign jubilee (June 8, 1940) when the country's representative writers presented the king with a handwritten tribute volume, so far unpublished, containing texts that, in form and substance, almost equalled the cult of personality established later by Nicolae Ceausescu!

Dense, well-written and well-documented pages are devoted to the aforementioned Romanian territorial losses in the summer of 1940, the reasons behind them, the king's abdication and General Ion Antonescu's power takeover on September 6, 1940.

The extensive conclusions of this first part of the volume scientifically validate what his son, King Michael I, had stated, influenced of course by his father's mistreatment of his mother, Queen Helen: Romania needed an enlightened monarch in the inter-war period (and Carol was one, both culturally and from an urban standpoint). However, Carol gradually turned into an operetta dictator under the influence of Elena Lupescu, Ernest Urdărianu and the camarilla.

The second part of the volume deals with the journey of the dethroned king through Portugal, Cuba, Mexico, Brazil and, again, Portugal, where he died, in his villa in Estoril, on April 4, 1953.

The fifth volume synthesizes the king's undisputable achievements in equipping the army (in 1938, the Ministry of National Defence had a third of the country's budget), his general devotion to the military institution, and his initiatives in the field of Romanian diplomacy, which he had a particular preference for.

The volume's final, most consistent section recounts his cultural endeavours, unmatched by any other Romanian king, for which he was rightfully called "the voivode of culture" by the people of culture and letters. Indeed, the monarch was a genuine Maecenas for writers and artists, patronizing the

construction of various cultural edifices and, in 1933, establishing the “King Carol II Foundation for Literature and Art” that published the most important literary and scientific works of interwar Romania.

The king's urban planning achievements are also noted since he is rightfully considered the second modern creator of Bucharest, endowed with Western European buildings during his reign. It is symbolic that King Carol I was the city's first modern founder.

Overall, this last volume of the book is an excellent orientation guide for foreign specialists interested in presenting the essence of Romania's cultural situation in the interwar period.

The scientific benefits of this work are evident: the introduction of a large number of archive documents, personal letters and original illustrations into the scientific circuit; the presentation and necessary amendment of the most authoritative opinions, for and against this king's reign, linked with views on this subject arising from the memoirs of politicians.

Less successful is sometimes the overuse of quotes from the memoirs of Charles II's contemporary Romanian politicians. Some works on Charles II by historians from the United States (for example, Paul D. Quinlan's *The Playboy King*) or Western, Central, and Eastern Europe are not cited. Therefore, it is advised that the author address the issues identified in a subsequent edition of his work or another book.

In attempting to analyse King Charles II's reign as a whole, one might conclude that he was undeniably a very gifted figure for the “job” of head of state. Descendant of an illustrious dynasty in European history, he was a polyglot (he spoke and wrote in Romanian, English, French and German), and had phenomenal intelligence, according to his contemporaries. His reign could have created such favourable results for the country because he was incredibly diligent (he woke up every day at 6 a.m.), possessed excellent work capacity and reigned over a major country in terms of economic and military power. This was not to be, for he prioritized his passion for his favourite, Elena (Magda) Lupescu, over the interests of the country, his family and his people. This fact, together with the acts of the camarilla led by the same Elena Lupescu, harmed both the country and him personally.

Unfortunately, this could not counterbalance what the world-class economist and politician Mihail Manoilescu truthfully stated:

“Carol was someone who loved Romania more than many of Romania's finest; he suffered when her prestige was harmed in any way; he held great

ambitions and dreamed of a European role for his country's people such as they had never known before"⁵.

The elites and the people paid little attention to the king's sincere love for the country and his great abilities since it had become public knowledge that all appointments in politics and all state orders in the economy were assigned from the royal mistress' residence in Vulpache Alley in Bucharest (demolished today).

Finally, as a last conclusion, one of the acknowledged experts on the issues of his reign stated, "Overall, it was a time of notable progress, particularly in the economy and especially in industry. Political life was very turbulent, there were great confrontations between democratic and extremist forces; political parties were eroding, making it easier for Charles II to formally dissolve them in March 1938, against the background of the Iron Guard's obvious ascent. [...] in terms of culture, remarkable progress has been made, both in improving the cultural level of the masses and establishing a real intellectual elite. Romania's foreign policy was marked by dynamism, by continental efforts to preserve peace; in the end, the position of the great powers was decisive, leading to the second world war, our country becoming the victim of the Soviet Union's, Germany's and Italy's forceful and dictating policy"⁶. *Quod erat demonstrandum*.

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⁵ Mihail Manoilescu, *Memorii* [Memoirs], vol. I, edited, prefaced, annotated, and indexed by Valeriu Dinu, Bucharest, Enciclopedica Publishing House, 1993, p.106.

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