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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,

IRVINE

The New Man and Legionary Woman
in Romania's Christofascist Iron Guard, 1927-1940

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in History

By

Joshua Adam Block

Thesis Committee:

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Associate Professor James Robertson, Co-Chair

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Thesis Abstract

Educating a New Man and Legionary Woman in Romania's Christofascist Iron Guard, 1927-1940

By

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Master's of Arts in History

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Romania's militaristic and fascist Iron Guard movement—also known as the Legion of the Archangel Michael—called for a violent, spiritual crusade to reclaim the nation's blood and soul. This thesis considers how the Iron Guard conceived of a “new man” and “legionary woman” through topics like ultranationalism, physical education, and mysticism. The movement's forceful rejection of urbanism and foreign influences culminated in a deeply anti-semitic philosophy that asked its male followers to embark on a journey of regeneration through discipline, labor, and violence. The Iron Guard asked “legionary sisters” to defend against invading cultural forces, yet largely confined women's participation to domestic and spiritual duties. To understand the psychic appeal of Romanian fascism, this thesis will wander through rural Romanian towns, unpacking how the cult of death and spectacles of the “new man” manifested on the bodies of the legionaries. The study analyzes several publications from the movement's father, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, especially his 1933 organizational guide for legionaries, *The Nest Leader's Manual*. It will address gaps in scholarship by centering gender in the mythological core of Romanian fascism. In doing so, it considers: *what role did gender and the conception of a "new man" play in the political ideology and culture of interwar Romania's Iron Guard movement?*

Introduction

In the spring of 1919, a young man named Corneliu Zelea Codreanu huddled in secrecy with about twenty other high school students deep in the Dobrina forest. He called them comrades, and they took an oath to each other. Under the cover of the woods, they collected weapons, acted out battle exercises, and postulated plans in the event of a Bolshevik invasion. They even formed a cultural-nationalist student organization for their public affairs, approved by their high school principal.¹ The Soviet Union would not end up battling this student group; however, their debates and training would serve as a blueprint for Codreanu when organizing in college and beyond. Corneliu Zelea Codreanu would become the practical and intellectual father of the Iron Guard movement, also known as the Legion of the Archangel Michael, which operated as a militant and fascist political force in interwar Romania.² Codreanu's writings call for a spiritual crusade for the blood and soul of Romania, which included the extermination or expulsion of elites and Jewish people. He articulated a vision of violent renewal for both society and individual legionaries' bodies, which would be partly realized during and after his death.³

This study engages with Romanian fascism from its embryonic discourse during World War I to its culmination in World War II. The primary focus begins with Codreanu formalizing the Iron Guard in 1927 and ends with Codreanu's funeral procession in 1940, two years after his death.⁴ This critical period traces the evolution from organic, unorganized extremist movements

¹ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *For My Legionaries (Pentru legionarii mei)*, (1936), 12.

² By some measures, interwar Romania saw twelve distinct fascist movements or parties. However, most were small, regional, or ephemeral. So this paper will focus on the largest and longest lasting fascist movement, the Iron Guard, which initially emerged as a radical offshoot from the National-Christian Defense League led by A.C. Cuza and Codreanu second in command. Reference to the "Iron Guard" in this paper includes "Legion of the Archangel Michael" and "Everything for the Country" political party.

³ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *For My Legionaries (Pentru legionarii mei)*, (1936).

⁴ Codreanu had been assassinated by King Carol's command in 1938. Yet, nearly three years after his death, his body was exhumed, commemorated, and reburied, see Mihai Rusu, "Staging Death: Christofascist Necropolitics during the National Legionary State in Romania, 1940–1941," *Nationalities Papers* 49, no.3 (2021), 579, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.22>.

into one of the largest and most bizarre fascist movements in interwar Europe.⁵

This research will focus on textual analysis of Codreanu's 1933 writing, *The Nest Leader's Manual*, which played a significant role in institutionalizing the movement and codifying its objectives.⁶ The text—directly and indirectly—conceived of a “new man” and “legionary woman” through prescriptions on how its members should individually act and perform in society. The “new man” encompassed personal characteristics such as discipline, honor, and physical strength while emphasizing ideological values like ultranationalism, Christian nationalism, and virulent anti-semitism.⁷ The myth of the Romanian “new man” served to mobilize the masses by promising a regeneration of the human body and soul to lead a rebirthed nation.

The myth of the “new man” mobilized male fascists; however, Romanian women were not inherently included in this myth nor given a direct parallel to energize them. Yet, Romanian fascism still attempted to reshape women's gender roles and labor by creating a “legionary sister” as a supporting counterpart to the myth of the “new man.” Between World War I and II, the construction of the “new man” and “legionary woman” appealed to traditional and severe

⁵ Roland Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania* (Cornell University Press, 2015), 1; Armin Heinen, *Legiunea “Arhanghelul Mihail”: Mișcare socială și organizată, ie politică*, trans. Cornelia Esianu and Delia Esianu (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006), 357.

⁶ The research draws on a 2017 English translation. However, the foreword indicates that the translator, who is unknown, may have political biases and sympathy for Codreanu's ideas which likely shaped the translation in ways that create ethical and analytic problems. To mitigate any possible mistranslations or linguistic bias, direct quotes or critical textual analysis will be independently verified through translation software, by individuals fluent in Romanian, and comparison with another undated English translation. Primary sources will also be analyzed in Romanian to recognize the presence of gendered language. This translation will also be referenced against an undated translation of *The Nest Leader's Manual* that also does not name a translator, but seems to translate words literally rather than the ideas of more general arguments. This research will use several other primary source textual documents which will undergo the same process, even when translated by reputable sources. Some historians translate the title of the text as *The Nest Leader's Booklet*.

⁷ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *The Nest Leader's Manual (Cărticica șefului de cuib)*, (1933), 3-72; Valentin Sandulescu, “Fascism and Its Quest for the 'New Man': The Case of the Romanian Legionary Movement.” *Studia Hebraica* 4 (2004): 358; Roland Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania* (Cornell University Press, 2015).

gender roles while introducing transgressive concepts to prepare for a future fascist fantasy.⁸

Gender and sexuality played a central—but not always explicit—role in the articulation of the Iron Guard’s national goals. For men, the movement manifested in a physical and metaphysical regeneration of their bodies into soldiers for the movement and as cadavers for spectacle.

Legionary women assumed new roles as defensive warriors against cultural incursions, and entangled their bodies in national projects, but faced familiar limits to their participation, such as domestic and spiritual duties.

The territorial and population changes that resulted from World War I significantly shaped national Romanian politics, especially in relation to new ethnic minorities. Through the Treaty of Versailles, Romania's territory and population more than doubled with the additions of Bessarabia, Transylvania, and Bukovina. These land expansions transformed the country into a multiethnic state overnight by introducing many Hungarians, Russians, Jews, and other ethnic groups into the Greater Romanian polity. As a prerequisite for the expansion, the League of Nations imposed an unwelcome Minorities Treaty that would enfranchise Jews and protect the new minorities. Romanians bitterly accepted it, yet felt humiliated, perhaps even emasculated, that they allied with the winners but were not granted a seat at the postwar table with other victors. Experiencing an “embarrassment of riches,” Romania now grappled with the difficult task of nationalization and responding to the new social, cultural, demographic, and political challenges that came with the new territories. In response, the interwar state assumed expansive nationalization projects, such as the imposition of a common language, to create a Romanian people out of the new Romanian state.⁹

⁸ Bucur, “Romania,” in *Women, Gender, and Fascism in Europe, 1919-45*, ed. Kevin Passmore (Rutgers University Press, 2003).

⁹ For background on the ethnic and nationalization issues in interwar Romania especially after the Treaty of Versailles, see Roland Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania* (Cornell University Press, 2015); Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930* (Cornell University Press 1995).

The nationalization projects also occurred during a period of rapid modernization and growing Western influence on Romania. While Romania had deep agrarian roots, the urban population and industry quickly expanded during the interwar period, resulting in uneven economic development. Modernization particularly benefited the bourgeoisie in Romania, giving them increasingly greater influence on parliamentary politics.¹⁰ Bucharest and other Romanian urban centers modeled much of their cultural and economic development on the West, especially France, which deeply influenced Romanian art, fashion, and language.¹¹ These changes provided the backdrop for the perceived crisis of decadence that Romanian fascists decried as corrupting the fabric of the nation's traditions. The West, the bourgeoisie, and the mythologized Jew were deemed responsible for the overnight destruction of traditional Romanian society and the failures of parliamentary politics.

Cultural and political upheaval from rapid expansion and westernization plunged Romania into a state of ethnic tension, which notably included the 1922 student mass protests. Codreanu played a leading role in the student movement, which called for the exclusion of Jewish students from universities and restitution for the perceived preference suddenly given to minority students. The activists often resorted to violence, intimidation, and vandalism both in the university and in larger society. In 1924, Codreanu murdered a police captain and wounded others who had attempted to repress the student movement. Romanians more broadly sympathized with the students' anti-semitic and nationalist demands, to the point that Codreanu was arrested for the assassination and then unanimously acquitted twice by a jury of his peers, all

¹⁰ For background on the rapid transformations in Romania during the interwar period, see Laurențiu Radu "Political, Economic, and Social Options in Interwar Romania," *"C.S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor" Institute for Research in Social Studies and Humanities, Romanian Academy*, Issue XXIV (2023): 211-228, <https://doi.org/10.59277/CSNPISSH.2023.16>

¹¹ For more on the the cultural and fashion influences from the West, see Sonia-Doris Andraș, "Creating City Chic: The Parisian Influence on Interwar Bucharest Fashion," *Yearbook of the "Gheorghe Șincai" Institute for Social Sciences and the Humanities of the Romanian Academy* 21 (2018): 152-176, <https://doi.org/10.17613/tazpx-9s471>

of whom wore swastikas on their lapels.¹² These formative years indelibly shaped the “generation of 1922,” a cohort of radicalized youth, including Codreanu, who would search for national solutions through mass movements and violence.

The student mass protests developed into several lasting organizations, the largest of which can be traced directly to the Iron Guard. From 1927 to 1933, the newly formed Iron Guard, still largely comprised of young people, began the institutionalization of their movement by founding a newspaper and organizing terror campaigns against Jewish communities.¹³ The “generation of 1922” ideologically and functionally split from the nationalists of the past, like A.C. Cuza, who insisted on traditional parliamentarism to accomplish similarly violent visions. In 1933, Codreanu codified the Iron Guard’s ideology, organization, and rituals in *The Nest Leader’s Manual*, which rapidly expanded membership and institutionalized the movement. Having been outlawed from elections, the Iron Guard had no traditional electoral outlet from 1934 to 1937, but still experienced the most fruitful stage of their movement. They presented their organization as a school for educating the “new man” and practiced their ideological goals through volunteer labor camps, intellectual discourse, and small, decentralized cells of action and education known as “nests.”¹⁴ The Iron Guard fiercely opposed communism, liberalism, democracy, and cosmopolitanism. Instead, they organized around symbols and sentiments, such as virulent anti-semitism, ultra-nationalism, Christian mysticism, and the “new man.”¹⁵

¹² For context on the student youth movement of 1922, and Codreanu’s role, see Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania*, 35-63; Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania, 1918-1930*, 245-297.

¹³ For more information on the transformation of the student movements to the Iron Guard before 1930, see Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*, 245.

¹⁴ For more information about three stages of the Iron Guard from 1927 to 1937, see Valentin Sandulescu, “Fascism and Its Quest for the ‘New Man’: The Case of the Romanian Legionary Movement.” *Studia Hebraica* 4 (2004): 349-361; Nicolas Nagy-Talavera, *The Green Shirts and the Others: A History of Fascism in Hungary and Romania* (The Center for Romanian Studies, 2001), 383-431.

¹⁵ For more information about the Iron Guard’s ideological framework, see Radu Ioanid, *The Sword of the Archangel: Fascist Ideology in Romania* tran. Peter Heinegg (Eastern European Monographs, 1990); Nagy-Talavera, *The Green Shirts and the Others*, 343-383.

At its peak in 1937, the Iron Guard's political party, "Totul pentru Țară," or "Everything for the Country," garnered nearly half a million votes in the state election, enough to help install the authoritarian nationalist Goga-Cuza government.¹⁶ This would be the last free elections in Romania until 1990. The sudden swell towards fascism posed an existential threat to the state and monarchical powers. Accordingly, King Carol II suspended the constitution and adopted successive authoritarian dictatorships to stabilize his power. One of the regimes, led by para-fascist Antonescu, would permit the Iron Guard's "Everything for the Country" to operate as the only sanctioned political party during the short-lived "National Legionary State" from 1940-1941.¹⁷ However, the Romanian state military violently dismantled the Iron Guard after it proved too erratic and destabilizing for Antonescu and Hitler. In rapid succession, the Iron Guard "had been crushed, wooed, coopted, and liquidated," yet still played an instrumental role in the end of parliamentary democracy in Romania and its alliance with the Third Reich during World War II.¹⁸

The rise and fall of the Iron Guard coincided with an era of anxiety and flux around the role of women and sex. Agrarian societies in Romania had a multitude of local belief systems and practices, yet largely shared a traditional structure of the nuclear family wherein women provided religious and domestic services to raise their family. Orthodox religious teaching reaffirmed the value of modesty for women and their subordination to men. The growing exodus to urban centers not only challenged rural communities, but also the role of women who would

¹⁶ The Iron Guard placed third in the election and joined in a coalition with other parties to support the extremist, but slightly more palatable, National Christian Party which placed fourth and had been led by A.C. Cuza. For electoral results, see Dolf Sternberger, Bernhard Vogel, Dieter Nohlen & Klaus Landfried, *The Election of Parliaments and Other State Bodies: A Manual (Die Wahl der Parlamente: Band I: Europa)* (De Gruyter Brill, 1978), 1062–1064.

¹⁷ King Carol's monarchical dictatorship and Antonescu's regime enacted fascist goals and policies, yet lacked populist and palingenetic characteristics of Roger Griffin's definition of fascism. This paper will refer to each regime as "para-fascist" to denote the distinction from genuine fascist movements, see Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (Routledge, 1991), 159-168.

¹⁸ Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, 167; Nagy-Talavera, *The Green Shirts and the Others*, 455.

be exposed to new ideas in the cosmopolitan town centers. For instance, the introduction of the “modern woman” from Western countries influenced many urban Romanian women to aspire to be more than a homemaker by focusing on their career, self-expression, and individuality.¹⁹ The early twentieth century also saw the rise of women’s interest groups and feminist thought entering mainstream discourse, though the country did not have a unified women’s or suffrage movement.²⁰ After the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, concepts of sexual liberation and new challenges to the role of women seeped into the discourse across Romania. Facing challenges from the West, the East, and within, reactionary forces in Romania fought to codify and reassert the traditional gender and sexual expression. The general rightward shift in Romania, both from and outside the Iron Guard movement, pressured the monarchy in 1936 to rewrite the penal code which—among many other things—criminalized homosexuality, made abortion more restrictive, and unified the country under a single penal code. Anxieties about the unmooring of gender expression catapulted the role of women and sex into popular discourse and helped fuel the rapid expansion of the Iron Guard.

Historiographical Review

Gender and sexual politics in Romanian fascism remain a deeply understudied and poorly charted academic field. While the political and ideological bravado of Romanian fascism has intrigued historians, the gendered and sexualized elements of the Legionary Movement have captured scarce scholarly attention.²¹ Before the late 1990s and early 2000s, historians

¹⁹ Sonia-Doris Andraş, “Creating City Chic: The Parisian Influence on Interwar Bucharest Fashion,” *Yearbook of the “Gheorghe Şincai” Institute for Social Sciences and the Humanities of the Romanian Academy* 21 (2018): 152-176, <https://doi.org/10.17613/tazpx-9s471>.

²⁰ Maria Bucur, “Romania,” in *Women, Gender, and Fascism in Europe, 1919-45*, ed. Kevin Passmore, (Rutgers University Press, 2003), 58-78; Axinia, “Women and Politics in the Romanian Legionary Movement.”

²¹ Mihai Rusu, “Domesticating Viragos: The Politics of Womanhood in the Romanian Legionary Movement,” *Brill* 5, no. 2 (2016): 150, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00502004>.

overwhelmingly analyzed the popularity of the Iron Guard through political and ideological lenses rather than examining social and cultural factors.²² In fact, before this period, nearly all historians of Romanian fascism in this period completely ignored gender or the role of women in their scholarship.²³

Only in the past few decades, and especially in the last few years, have historians begun to make inroads into the gender and sexual politics of Romanian fascism. This shift in the literature towards social and cultural factors coincided with the introduction of gendered and sexual analysis in understanding the Iron Guard. The shift occurred at a time when larger histories of gender and sexuality matured and became more institutionally established in academia.²⁴ Importantly, it also occurred after the collapse of Ceaușescu's communist regime in 1989, which ended pervasive state censorship and opened access to new archives.

In the 1990s, scholars of Romanian interwar politics began to consider gender and sexuality for the first time. Notably, Maria Bucur centered women, reproduction, and child-rearing as integral to Romanian interwar eugenic movements.²⁵ Scholars demonstrated how Romanian eugenics introduced new frameworks of scientific racism and biopolitics to popular discourse in interwar Romania.²⁶ Yet, the literature on this topic does not adequately address how Romanian eugenic movements, while not unique to fascism, underpinned and legitimized the

²² Maria Bucur, "Romania," in *Women, Gender, and Fascism in Europe, 1919-45*, ed. Kevin Passmore (Rutgers University Press, 2003), 58-59; Axinia, "Women and Politics in the Romanian Legionary Movement," 1-4.

²³ Maria Bucur, "Romania," in *Women, Gender, and Fascism in Europe, 1919-45*, ed. Kevin Passmore (Rutgers University Press, 2003), 58-66.

²⁴ Amy Dru Stanley, "Histories of Capitalism and Sex Difference," *Journal of the Early Republic* 36, no. 2 (2016): 343-350, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4691963>.

²⁵ Maria Bucur, "In Praise of Wellborn Mothers: On the Development of Eugenicist Gender Roles in Interwar Romania," *East European Politics and Societies* 9 (1994): 123-142, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325495009001007>; Maria Bucur, *Eugenics and Modernization in Interwar Romania* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002): <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vkh6s>.

²⁶ Marius Turda, "The Nation as Object: Race, Blood, and Biopolitics in Interwar Romania," *Slavic Review* 66, no. 3 (2007): 413-441, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20060295>; Radu Ioanid, "The Sacralised Politics of the Romanian Iron Guard," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* (2006): 419-453. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1469076042000312203>.

Iron Guard's ethnic fantasies of building a modern nation-state and a "new man" and "legionary woman." Further, it does not capture how eugenic movements fueled the Iron Guard's violent and sexualized preoccupation with Jewish populations.

Although scholars have looked at gender, they have tended to give less attention to the emerging field of sex and sexuality in the historiography of Romanian fascism. Specifically, only in the past few years have historians devoted attention to non-heteronormative relations and the regulation of same-sex desire in Interwar Romania. Recent scholarship looks at how the press exposed same-sex relations in the pursuit of ideological adherence, sexual morality, and economic capital.²⁷ Another recent historical work touched on nonheteronormative literature in the interwar period in an attempt to recover queer narratives.²⁸ As scholars of other countries have fruitfully explored, sex and sexuality play a critical role in cultural and political understandings of their fascist movements.²⁹ There has been little in the context of Romania. For instance, there is limited scholarship on the role of sex, pleasure, pronatalism, and the regulation of homosexuality in constructing a national identity. Further, the scholarship has not considered possible homorelational elements, such as the homosocial bonds in fascist work camps or the depictions of desire regarding the idealized male body. While mostly outside the scope of this paper, future scholarship should consider these themes to unpack the psychic appeal of fascism through the lens of sexual politics.

Since the 2000s, scholars have considered gender in the literature on Romanian fascism.

²⁷ Andrei Dălălaș, "Weaponizing Sexual Identities: Homosexuality as Public Scandal in interwar Romania" (Anuarul Institutului de Istorie George Barițiu Series Historica: 2023), 253-266, 10.59277/AIIGB/2023.62.13.

²⁸ Ramona Dima, *Queer Culture in Romania, 1920–2018*, (Springer International Publishing, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-38849-1>.

²⁹ For example, see Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945* (University of California Press, 1992), <https://www.fulcrum.org/epubs/kh04ds310?locale=en#page=8>; Nicholas Gamso, "Fascist Intrigue and The Homo-Spatial Imaginary," *Log*, no. 41 (2017): 113–22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26323725>; Dagmar Herzog, *Sex After Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany*, (Princeton University Press, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt4cgbqw>; Andrew Wackerfuss, *Stormtrooper Families: Homosexuality and Community in the Early Nazi Movement*, (Harrington Park Press, 2015).

Bucur, the first to seriously recognize the role of gender in the Iron Guard, catalogs the way women both navigated and reinforced the patriarchal structure of the Romanian fascist movement.³⁰ In an effort to challenge the assumptions that the Iron Guard was an exclusively male movement, historians have built upon Bucur's work by emphasizing the role women played as militaristic activists.³¹ Many women adopted a "warrior ethos" to support the Legionary Movement at the same time that they were expected to be domestic and marital heroes, creating tension and contradictions in fascist gender ideology and practice.³² Analysis of the "legionary woman" in relation to the "new man" will contribute to emergent scholarship on gender and fascism.

Cultural scholars have considered the role of religion and mysticism in the Iron Guard. One of the Iron Guard's key features was the melding of political fascist ideology and Orthodox Christianity into a theatrical, spiritual, and fanatical crusade.³³ Codreanu's popular authority stemmed from blending charismatic legitimacy with messianism and a divine mission.³⁴ The spiritual crusade culminated in the necropolitical obsession with death and martyrdom for the Iron Guard.³⁵ These themes build on Gentile's assessment of Italian Fascism as a political

³⁰ Bucur's *Romania* has been cited in practically every work on gender in Romanian fascism. See, Maria Bucur, "Romania," in *Women, Gender, and Fascism in Europe, 1919-45*, ed. Kevin Passmore, (Rutgers University Press, 2003), 58-78.

³¹ For scholarship that has built upon Bucur's work about women in the Iron Guard, see Anca Axinia, "Women and Politics in the Romanian Legionary Movement," (PhD Diss. European University Institute Department of History and Civilisation, 2022), https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/73796/Axinia_2022_HEC.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y; Mihai Rusu, "Fascist Femininities: Models of Womanhood in the Romanian National Legionary State," (Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea, 2020): <http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/chco.71887>.

³² Mihai Rusu, "Domesticating Viragos: The Politics of Womanhood in the Romanian Legionary Movement," Brill 5, no. 2 (2016): 149–176, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00502004>; Roland Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania* (Cornell University Press, 2015).

³³ Radu Ioanid, "The Sacralised Politics of the Romanian Iron Guard." *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* (2006): 419–453, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1469076042000312203>; Roland Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania* (Cornell University Press, 2015).

³⁴ Constantin Iordachi, "Charisma, Religion, and Ideology: Romania's Interwar Legion of the Archangel Michael," in *Ideologies and National Identities: The Case of Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe* (Central European University Press, 2013).

³⁵ Mihai Rusu, "Staging Death: Christofascist Necropolitics during the National Legionary State in Romania, 1940–1941," *Nationalities Papers* 49, no.3 (2021): 576–589, doi:10.1017/nps.2020.22.

religion that usurped authority from the church and appropriated its symbols, rituals, and language.³⁶ However, scholarship on Romanian fascism as a political religion fails to adequately put the myth of the “new man” centrally within this framework. Understanding the figure of the “new man” as a gendered mythology helps explain how Romanian fascists imagined political and personal salvation as one. The gendered contours of the political religion addressed the unmooring of social norms while providing a roadmap for their return in a heavenly fascist future.

Cultural scholarship on the “new man” in Romanian fascism exists but remains limited. In particular, Sandulescu traces the evolution of the Iron Guard in three phases from an undefined set of ideas to a regenerative mission focused on educating the “new man.” He positions the “new man” centrally within the Iron Guard’s ideological endeavors and as part of a spiritual school.³⁷ Further scholarship delves into volunteer work camps as sites of educating the fascist “new man” through labor, discipline, and hierarchy.³⁸ However, scholarship has not sufficiently focused on the gendered, masculinist analysis of educating the “new man” and “legionary woman,” which would illuminate broader ideological or cultural endeavors of the Iron Guard.

Social scientist Roger Griffin contends that fascist ideologies center around a “mythic core,” a mobilizing mythology to energize mass movements, which helps explain fascism’s symbolic and emotional appeal.³⁹ In particular, the myth of palingenesis focused on a nation’s

³⁶ For more on the features of fascist political religion, see Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Harvard University Press 1996).

³⁷ Valentin Sandulescu, “Fascism and Its Quest for the ‘New Man’: The Case of the Romanian Legionary Movement,” *Studia Hebraica* 4 (2004).

³⁸ Rebecca Haynes, “Work Camps, Commerce, and The Education of the ‘New Man’ in The Romanian Legionary Movement,” *The Historical Journal* 51, no. 4 (2008): 943-967, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X08007140>.

³⁹ The concept of the myth stems from French philosopher Georges Sorel who saw the failures of Marxism to organically realize a socialist revolution, so he posited that violence and mythology were critical to class warfare and a proletariat revolution. Mussolini then embraced Sorelian mythology as an essential force to energize mass movements and precipitate a populist revolution. See Zeev Sternhell, with Mario Sznajder and Maia Asheri, *The*

rebirth modeled on the image of its ancestral glory. Fascists across Europe imagined and propagated palingenetic myths, like the “new man,” as transformative mechanisms to realize revolutionary ambitions and the radical regeneration of the nation’s mind, body, and soul. As with other fascist movements, the myth of the palingenetic new man occupied a central pillar of Romanian fascism. Additionally, Griffin posits that fascist movements all contain populist ultra-nationalism in their mythic cores. Fascist movements depended on mass support for legitimacy and embraced a form of nationalism that rejected Enlightenment values and anything compatible with liberal institutions.⁴⁰ Taken together, this paper uses Griffin’s analytical framework of fascism as “palingenetic populist ultra-nationalism” to position the myth of the “new man” centrally within the gendered dimensions of Iron Guard’s ideology.

Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution, trans. David Maisel (Princeton University Press, 1994); Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, 50-56.

⁴⁰ Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, 56-63.

SECTION I. THE NEST AND THE “NEW MAN”

In Codreanu's didactic text, *The Nest Leader's Manual*, the construction of the new man emerges as a systematic project central to the Iron Guard's mission. Romanian fascists endearingly referred to Codreanu as “Căpitanul,” or “the Captain.” If he were the captain, then *The Nest Leader's Manual* would be the map to guide the movement's ship and lead its crew. In this text, Codreanu details the organizational structures, laws, and rites to institutionalize the movement while outlining its regenerative mythology and sacralized political rituals. Sections include headings such as “Recruiting members,” “What a legionary believes,” or “The legionary uniform.”⁴¹ These sections map out the educational endeavor of the Iron Guard by outlining a new standard of morality, conduct, and community—almost like a bible for the fascist movement. The headings speak to the deeply practical purpose of the text to institutionalize the Iron Guard as a well-structured and highly disciplined organization, rather than a fleeting movement. It even formalizes mundane routines of the members, like the structure of weekly reports from nests and proper flag etiquette, to systematize the revolt.⁴² It was effective.⁴³

Scholars regard the year of this publication, 1933, as a turning point for the Iron Guard, marked by rapid membership growth, a fortified commitment to the “new man” as a savior for the nation, and transformation into a school for legionaries.⁴⁴ At the center of this new organizational structure existed “nests,” a hierarchical and communal structure with one rotating leader.⁴⁵ By some estimates, 270,000 legionaries organized into 34,000 different nests, often

⁴¹ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader's Manual*, Part III, IV, V, XI.

⁴² Codreanu, *The Nest Leader's Manual*, Point 4 and 5.

⁴³ Sandulescu, “Fascism and its Quest for the 'New Man.' The Case of the Romanian Legionary Movement,” 355-356.

⁴⁴ Sandulescu, “Fascism and its Quest for the 'New Man.' The Case of the Romanian Legionary Movement,” 355-356.

⁴⁵ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader's Manual*, Point 4 and 5.

ranging from 3 to 13 members in size.⁴⁶ In the nests, members would focus on collective education around a principal ideal such as ruralism, intellectualism, or paramilitarism.⁴⁷ In many ways, it replicated the small group Codreanu convened in the Dobrina Forest as a student in high school to practice battle plans and debate philosophy.⁴⁸ The system of hierarchy and camaraderie mirrored the military formation of units and commanders, providing an ideological training ground to build the necessary legionaries for a revolutionary war. The decentralization of power spread the influence of the movement and fueled its populist roots, while making the movement flexible and resistant to threats. At the same time, it narrowed and cultivated the palingenetic quest at the core of the fascist movement through group education. Nests functioned as schools to produce an ideological framework centered around a “new man,” which had the effect of setting new normative masculine and feminine gender roles for legionaries. While not always explicit in the text, the manual also speaks to the construction of sexual morality for the future racialized state.

The Iron Guard’s vision of national rebirth manifested as a totalizing transformation over individuals’ bodies and minds through the embodied myth of the “new man.” In *The Nest Leader’s Manual*, Codreanu writes explicitly that the “new state implies, firstly, as an indispensable condition, a new kind of man. A new state, with people of old sins, cannot be conceived.”⁴⁹ The overtly nationalist and spiritual movement had a deep investment in the

⁴⁶ Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania*, 1; Heinen, *Legiunea “Arhanghelul Mihail”*: *Mișcare socială și organizat, ie politică*, trans. Cornelia Esianu and Delia Esianu (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006), 357; Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*, 288.

⁴⁷ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader’s Manual*, Part I.

⁴⁸ Codreanu, *For My Legionaries (Pentru legionarii mei)*, (1936), 12.

⁴⁹ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader’s Manual*, point 68. In Romanian, the second sentence reads as “Un stat nou, cu oameni cu păcate vechi, nu se poate concepe” which directly translates to “A new state, with people of old sins, cannot be conceived.” However, the words “păcate” could refer to both “sins” but also fault, unfortunate, regret, or shame. In consultation with native Romanian speakers, the modifier “păcate vechi” indicates that it refers to “old sin.” This interpretation is in alignment with the 2017 English translation of the *Nest Leader’s Manual* that this paper follows, but does not align with the undated English translation of *Nest Leader’s Manual* describes the line in point 68 as: “A new state with old people unfortunately can not conceive.”

construction of a new man who could execute the fascist revolution and maintain a new type of state. To transform the state meant, foremost, a transformation of man. So, the national goals of the movement had a deep investment in the personal lives of men and their bodies. This section will consider how Codreanu's writings construct a "new man" through the sexualized Jew as a racial foil, the laws of the legionary, and work camps. Later, this paper will explore the role of spiritual regeneration and self-stylization in the "new man."

The Sexualized Jew and the Racialized "New Man"

In the period of heightened ethnic tensions, the new man and fascist state were directly constructed through gendered imaginations of race and state. Codreanu and the Iron Guard lambasted the failures of parliamentarism by directly associating it with urban degeneracy and "sin." It positioned the fascist political revolution in religious, moral absolutes of good and evil. A quest to atone for the sins of the old state meant a biblical crusade against the evildoers. The "new man" and the new fascist state would be modeled in direct contrast to the old state and "the sinner." After the postwar embarrassment of riches and the Minorities Protection Treaty, it was easy for Romanian nationalists to associate ethnic minority groups with the sins and failures of modern society. In particular, Codreanu consistently singled out Jewish people as *the* threat, even as Romanian nationalists wrote about other ethnic minorities such as Russians, Hungarians, and Roma people.⁵⁰ Codreanu and other fascists imagined the "new man" in both racial and gendered terms. The "new kind of man" imagined a radical break with the modern, normative construction

⁵⁰ Codreanu's texts reference a number of ethnic minorities that appear infrequently and mostly neutrally, whereas Jewish people occupy a central and negative role across all three texts analyzed by a large margin. For example, in a quantitative analysis of references to ethnic minority groups in three texts, Codreanu either omits or neutrally refers to Hungarian/Magyar, German, Ukrainian, Russian, Bulgarian, Roma/Gypsy, Moldovian, Tartar, Greek, and Italian people. The French and 'the Turks' were the only other consistently negative mentions in these texts but the references are brief and infrequent. See Codreanu, *The Nest Leader's Manual* (1933), *For My Legionaries* (1936), and *The Prison Notes* (1938).

of masculinity that underpinned the existing regime. A fascist revolution against the state and modernism meant an uprising against modern manhood and Jewish people. Elsewhere in the broader construction of manhood, the masculine stereotype was often strengthened and clarified by the negative “countertype” of “men who not only failed to measure up to the ideal but who in body and soul were its foil, projecting the exact opposite of true masculinity.”⁵¹ In this same vein, the fascist new man proposed to remodel masculine roles by identifying countertypes that represented failures of governance, manhood, and decadence. The countertype not only represented the decadence of the old regime, but also effeminacy and failure to fit their masculine ideals.

The Iron Guard consistently targeted Jewish men by vilifying them as “the other” and feminizing both their bodies and identities. For instance, Romanian fascists employed gendered strategies to define themselves in contrast to “Judeo-Bolshevik” populations that were deemed sexually deviant, dangerous, and effeminate.⁵² In his memoir, Codreanu lambasts a Jewish-owned lumber mill in a small town that employed many Jews: “We [Romanians] have lived a life of virtue for hundreds of years. The Jews brought in with them sins of debauchery... they [pay to] take the girls and women of Moti [the town] and dishonor them in night-long orgies. Moral and physical illness consume our villages in addition to poverty.”⁵³ In this quote, Codreanu combatively ascribes stereotypes of moral degeneracy and sexual deviance to the

⁵¹ George Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 6, 56-77.

⁵² The myth of Judeo-Bolshevism refers to the anti-semitic and anti-communist conspiracy theory that Jewish powers orchestrated the Russian Revolution of 1917 and controlled other international communist movements to destroy Western civilization. This myth was foundational to the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union and found influence in other anti-communist movements across Europe, such as the Iron Guard. For more, see, Paul Hanebrink, *A Spectre Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁵³ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *For My Legionaries (Pentru legionarii mei)*, (1936), 183. In Romanian, the original text has a clause that reads: “când fac plățile, opresc pe fetele și femeile.” This unknown translator writes it as: “they take the girls and women.” However, it omits “când fac plățile” which translates to “when they make the payments,” indicating there may be prostitution involved, hence why this paper includes the addition of [pay to] in the quote.

Jewish lumbermen and business owners. He depicts their modern “debauchery” as sinful threats to Romanian sexual morality to rally a particular vision of masculinity that defends women’s honor and purity from a racialized other. Further, he posits that the cultural or economic ailments of the period originate from Jewish decadence, directly linking the sexualized symbol of the Jew to the failures of the regime.

Class conflict and economic inequality lie at the heart of this sexualized narrative. Codreanu notes that the Jewish-owned lumber mill in Moti employed local Romanians at a miserably low pay rate while giving away jobs to thirty Jewish men. Further, he depicts the Jewish operation as extracting the value from the land and destroying the livelihood of future generations. In the larger narrative, Codreanu makes abundantly clear that he blames Jewish businessmen for exploiting Romanian workers and their homeland for a quick profit. His writing depicts rural Romanians as a beat-down proletariat that has been forced to accept foreign rule. On the other end of the spectrum, he casts Jewish men as greedy, corrupt bourgeoisie who care little about the land or the local village.

At the heart of Codreanu’s writings, he begs for a class revolution, yet overwhelmingly focuses on Jewish people as the economic class that Romanians must overthrow. In doing so, he conflates class and race into a narrative that directs anger and action towards Jews. He goes as far as to say that this story makes him want to grab a weapon and shoot “mercilessly” against the Jewish “enemies and traitors.”⁵⁴ The portrayal of economic and sexual exploitation distorts class consciousness into a bloody crusade to reclaim the rural communities from Jewish oppression and inequality. It fuels an “us” versus “them” that translates an image of Jewish people into violent, material action.

Codreanu’s writing aligns with broader anti-semitic tropes across Europe that aimed to

⁵⁴ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *For My Legionaries (Pentru legionarii mei)*, (1936), 184.

“feminize” Jewish men with reference to their supposed sexual deviance. These depictions would portray Jewish men as predators lusting after blond women and with passions out of control.⁵⁵ Applied to this Romanian text, the gendered and sexualized depictions exemplified the production of an anti-semitic countertype through sexualized values. In this case, the lustful yet effeminate stereotype attributed to Jewish men embodied the sinful decadence of modern society. Seeking to return to the godly virtue of traditional society, Codreanu sketches out the contours of a new Romanian man in the obverse of the sexualized Jewish man. The new man would be chaste, disciplined, and in control of their sexual passions.

Further, in this fascist vision, Romanian men are called to protect the victimized women and the honor of their community from the sexualized stereotype through an urgent revolution of both politics and gendered values. Creating a foil between Jewish sexual deviancy and Romanian honor further alienated Jewish men as internal foreigners. In doing so, it helped produce a national identity built around a Romanian race and its intrinsic sexual morality guided by godly virtues. The image of national sexual threats sought to rally Romanians around both a common enemy and remind them of their shared, holier identity. Race and sexuality were therefore central to the vision of a fascist future that returned to the traditional morality before Jewish corruption.

Romanian nationalists’ racialized fear of sexual deviance manifested in anxieties about the blood of the nation. When Codreanu writes about the alleged Jewish orgies in Moti, he decries that “moral and physical illness consume our villages.”⁵⁶ This part of the quote is important because it clarifies how Codreanu conflated morality and physicality. In addition to depicting Jewish people as a threat to women’s innocence, Codreanu also highlighted their biological potential to disrupt the lineage of pure, ethnic blood that underpinned the

⁵⁵ Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, 70.

⁵⁶ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *For My Legionaries (Pentru legionarii mei)*, (1936), 183.

racial-national community. Europeans across the continent vilified Jewish people as physically weak and biologically inferior, and Romania was no exception. Codreanu characterizes the Jewish threat as a contagious malady infecting the national and ethnic body of Romania. They were simultaneously interpersonal, national, and bodily threats. Codreanu's portrayal frames the Iron Guard as a medical intervention to cure the moral and physical ailments caused by contamination with Jewish people. That intervention would begin with violent harassment and escalate to genocide. To be clear, scholarship has recognized the outsized role of eugenics in Romanian discourse across the political spectrum, not just in the Iron Guard, throughout the early twentieth century.⁵⁷ Yet, it was the Romanian fascists who would transform the political debates of national identity into large-scale practices of racial cleansing.

Romanian's sexual and bodily logic around Jewish people also informed their own educational projects, such as the "new man," that would emphasize hygiene in contrast to the "dirty Jew." In *The Nest Leader's Manual*, Codreanu posits that the "new man" should focus on five types of education, one of them being "Sanitary Education: He [sic] must be protected from the innumerable diseases, especially the venereal ones that extinguish the youth's vigour."⁵⁸ This quote indicates that the Jewish threat from "physical illness" may also allude to venereal diseases. The common anti-semitic trope of associating Jewish people with illness reaffirms the clean, healthy, and fit attributes of "true" masculinity that the fascists' "new man" strove to embody. In particular, Codreanu saw the "youth's vigour" as essential to an energetic mass mobilization, so any threats to legionaries' bodily vitality—whether from sexual deviance, Jews, or elsewhere—posed a threat to the dynamism needed for the fascist revolution.

⁵⁷ Maria Bucur, "In Praise of Wellborn Mothers: On the Development of Eugenicist Gender Roles in Interwar Romania," *East European Politics and Societies* 9 (1994): 123-142, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325495009001007>; Maria Bucur, *Eugenics and Modernization in Interwar Romania* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002): <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vkh6s>.

⁵⁸ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader's Manual*, point 22. The other types of education include Christian, national, social, and physical education.

Work, Discipline, and Strength

Physical education in Romania represented both a departure and continuation of normative ideals of masculine athleticism. Along with a "sanitary education," physical fitness emerged as another one of the five central educational endeavors of the Iron Guard's "new man" and Codreanu's conception of masculinity. He writes that nests should teach "Physical Education: the child must have a healthy and vigorous body, for he will be the soldier of tomorrow who will defend this land. (the Sportive Legion) [sic]."⁵⁹ The idea of a "Sportive Legion," or "Legiunea Sportivă," seemingly invokes the role that athletics played in constructing modern manhood. Europeans since the eighteenth century exalted gymnastics as a critical space to achieve the sublime male ideal and as a patriotic exercise to prepare for war.⁶⁰ Fascists in Germany and elsewhere amplified this quest to sculpt the body around an aesthetic of male beauty.⁶¹ However, in Romania, the aesthetic of the male form does not interest Codreanu. Rather, the Iron Guard's physical fitness sought to forge a strong body to fit the image and form of a soldier, specifically the "soldier of tomorrow who will defend this land."⁶² Romanian fascists focused on the practical and moral outcomes of physical education. They emphasized the educational value of physical fitness that would benefit the movement in war, such as developing discipline, aggression, and community-building. Physical education in nests taught men suffering and discipline, values that Codreanu considered essential to the "new man." Instilling these values and building this masculine form produced an ideal worker necessary for the labor of a fascist future, and prepared an ideal soldier for the war to achieve it.

⁵⁹ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader's Manual*, point 22.

⁶⁰ Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, 32.

⁶¹ For more on the aesthetic sculpting of the male form in Germany, see Johann Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazi's Usurped Europe's Classical Past* trans. Richard Nybakken (University of California Press, 2016).

⁶² Codreanu, *The Nest Leader's Manual*, point 22.

Physical education epitomized the warrior ideal as an expression of both masculinity and spirituality. While deviating from the German fascists, Codreanu's conception of physical education more closely aligned with the "Muscular Christianity" that emerged in nineteenth-century England. "Muscular Christianity" believed that a robust body and mind were critical elements of a larger battle cry against all sinfulness.⁶³ To be clear, Codreanu never cites this movement, but approaches physical education in a similar manner which makes it a valuable analytical reference. The Romanian Iron Guard justified their war plans and fascist fantasies through Christian mysticism. Physical fitness played a critical role in realizing their spiritual destiny by conflating godliness with masculine archetypes. The values of the "new man" and an ideal Christian man became synonymous. Physical education gave men the moral opportunity to purge their bodies of weakness and sin, or an "internal Jew." In doing so, they resolved the sins of the old state by preparing their bodies and minds for a fascist, Christian future. It framed physical education as a return to traditional strength in direct contrast to the frailness and sin of modern decadence. Therefore, muscular masculinity supported the Iron Guard's spiritualized crusade by uniting moral and physical education.

Codreanu declared that discipline was amongst the most important qualities of the "new man." Near the beginning of *The Nest Leader's Manual*, he outlined "six fundamental laws of the nests," which map out the virtues of the "new man" and his conception of the masculine ideal. The first of which was "The Law of Discipline: Legionary, be disciplined, because only thus will you win. Follow your leader for better or worse."⁶⁴ The role of discipline plays out across the manual, which is composed almost entirely of laws, rites, and orders to educate the "new man." The manual had the practical and successful purpose of formalizing the organic movement into a

⁶³ Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, 50.

⁶⁴ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader's Manual*, point 3.

coherent system of action, in part because of its insistence on discipline and loyalty. The emphasis on discipline also speaks to the rigid hierarchy and need for unquestionable faith in the movement, replicating many of the familiar church structures. As with religion, Iron Guard members embraced self-discipline to reject hedonism or the sin of decadence, and instead conformed to the ascetic image of the godly “new man.” Discipline and the militarization of masculinity tamed the revolt by channeling recent emotions, such as emasculation from the Treaty of Versailles or frustration at uneven economic development, into the productive energy of the Iron Guard. In doing so, it cultivated an ideal soldier and ideal worker, one who could obey his wartime commander or his work supervisor. It created troops to win.

Silence, another one of the six fundamental laws of the nests, played a critical role in the “new man” and the ideology of the Iron Guard. Codreanu writes, shortly after discipline, about “The Law of Silence: Speak little. Speak right. Exceed not the length of what needs to be spoken. Let your oratory be the oratory of your deed. You accomplish, let others talk.”⁶⁵ At first, silence may seem paradoxical for such a loud activist organization or a prolific writer like Codreanu, but it informs several core tenets of the Iron Guard. While it may reaffirm hierarchy or contribute to the monastery-like discipline of the nests, silence principally aimed to reject modernism and elitism. Formed at a time of increasing economic inequality and bourgeois influence on parliamentarism, the Iron Guard’s revolutionary core aimed to replace the governing elite and the flawed system that allowed for the perceived state of crisis. With that came a rejection of Enlightenment values such as rationality, tolerance, or secularism.⁶⁶ The rejection of perceived bourgeois values included poetic language and a decadence of words, which were often only

⁶⁵ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader’s Manual*, point 3.

⁶⁶ For more on the intellectual origins of fascism, such as anti-Enlightenment and revolutionary anti-bourgeois attitudes that would influence Romanians, see Zeev Sternhell, with Mario Sznajder and Maia Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton University Press, 1994).

available to elites with higher education. The movement drew support from agrarian peasants, often with little to no formal education, and a current generation of university students, so simplified language bridged the intellectual gaps of the movement and united its members under an equally accessible lexicon.

Additionally, the Law of Silence put emphasis on action and deeds, which reveals a deeper schism within Romanian fascists. For several years after the student protests, Codreanu led the anti-semitic National-Christian Defense League (LANC) with his mentor and professor, A.C. Cuza. LANC posited theological arguments to rid Romania of its Jewish population through the gradual removal of rights and eventually citizenship, all within the parliamentary system. Ideologically, Codreanu shared the same virulent anti-semitism as his professor, but lamented the slowness of discourse to accomplish radical ends. To Codreanu, debate and postulations failed to realize the national regeneration needed to answer the “Jewish question.” So, Codreanu left the National-Christian Defense League to form the Legion of the Archangel Michael.⁶⁷ This new organization firmly rejected discourse. Instead, it opted for dynamism and direct action. In this new movement, boycotts, marches, and violent harassment replaced debates and elections to rid the nation of its “Jewish problem.” Codreanu’s focus on silence reaffirms the Iron Guard’s generational energy to act first instead of wasting time by talking. The “new man” is not silent, but speaks with his actions first rather than his words.

A few decades before Codreanu’s publication, Georges Sorel’s writings provided intellectual insight and direction on the importance of action over discourse. The French intellectual thinker directly shaped the development of fascist thought across Europe, especially in Italian fascism, which would become a blueprint for Codreanu. Sorel placed particular

⁶⁷ Roland Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania* (Cornell University Press, 2015), 63-64.

emphasis on myths that would operate as a system of images. The myths and images were critical for inciting a revolutionary fervor and producing tangible action from ideas. In the context of Romanian fascism, the myth of the “new man” provided a readily available image of a spiritual and physical warrior with superior resolve and strength. The Sorelian concept of myths focused on energizing mass action so that obstacles in the material world could be overcome by sheer force. So, as the nests practiced direct action, they put into place the very mechanisms Sorel imagined as necessary to build an unstoppable mass movement to destroy the existing order.⁶⁸ The myth of the “new man” therefore became central to the labor and violent harassment that pushed the Iron Guard movement towards a revolutionary, unified nation. Vitality, energy, and—particularly in the Romanian context—silence became key objectives of the “new man” and the broader fascist politics.

Devoted to material action and realizing the myth of the “new man,” the nests formed educational work camps that created a space for labor and personal palingenesis. The Iron Guard’s work camps organized projects that focused on constructing churches, roads, dams, or other manual labor tasks like agricultural work to improve local communities. While the camps functioned as a form of propaganda to better the image of the Iron Guard, Codreanu explicitly designated their main focus as spiritual schools to educate the “new man.” They were spaces to realize all six laws of the legionary, including the laws of labor and mutual aid.⁶⁹ In work camps, legionaries lived in hostels with a few other nests and were not permitted to leave the site without permission. They labored for long days under grueling conditions and strict orders.⁷⁰

Through hierarchy and labor, the work camps glorified suffering and taught legionaries severe

⁶⁸ Zeev Sternhell with Mario Sznajder and Maia Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton University Press, 1994), 59- 63.

⁶⁹ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader’s Manual*, Point 3.

⁷⁰ Rebecca Haynes, “Work Camps, Commerce, and the Education of the ‘New Man’ in the Romanian Legionary Movement,” *The Historical Journal* (Cambridge University Press) 51, no. 4 (2008): 951, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X08007140>.

discipline. Further, camps were a form of physical education to produce strong, athletic bodies through manual work. In reconnecting with Romania's rural soul, the camps produced a parallel society filled with a new race of ascetic and brawny men who learned virtues from mutual aid and labor.⁷¹ It created material change in the rural Romanian landscape, whether that be with roads or dams, that provided an alternative path to nationalization and development where the state failed to do so. Not only did this help the reputation of the Iron Guard and drive popular support, but it also provided a glimpse into how a parallel, fascist community could operate. Above all, the camps provided a personal palingenetic journey for men. It provided them with a masculinizing experience to shed the decadence and weakness brought upon them by the urban, bourgeois Jew. Therefore, "new men" who emerged from the work camps became a class of new elites who were capable of deposing the bourgeoisie and leading a regenerated Romania.

⁷¹ Haynes, "Work Camps, Commerce, and the Education of the 'New Man' in the Romanian Legionary Movement," 950.

SECTION II. THE FORTRESS AND THE “LEGIONARY WOMAN”

While Codreanu primarily focused on the “new man” in his male-centered vision, he occasionally addressed the role of women in the Iron Guard. In particular, he designated a nest for women called *Cetățuia*, or “the Fortress.” Much like the other nests, each Fortress included three to thirteen legionaries dedicated to communal education and action. Fortresses were the only nests that women participated in, though they often shared spaces or work camps with the male legionaries.⁷² Despite that, they did not seek to replicate the militancy and sacrificial labor of the male nests. Instead, the pedagogical apparatus taught women their roles as mothers, sisters, and guardians of a national race.⁷³ They aimed to support male nests in their quest for national rebirth through activities such as fundraising, cooking, and tending to the domestic needs of male legionaries.⁷⁴

The Fortresses were successful in folding women into the Iron Guard and defining the boundaries of women’s participation. By some measures, women composed 8 to 11.5% of the Iron Guard’s membership, a remarkably high number compared to women’s participation in other fascist movements.⁷⁵ As global currents and urbanization swept interwar Romania, the Fortresses largely served as a defensive position against modernity that reaffirmed women’s traditional roles while still giving them activist opportunities.⁷⁶ The Legionary Movement entrusted women with the spiritual housekeeping of the nation, including cultivating discipline in

⁷² For more on the role of women in the Iron Guard’s work camps, see Rebecca Haynes, “Work Camps, Commerce, and The Education of the ‘New Man’ in The Romanian Legionary Movement,” *The Historical Journal* 51, no. 4 (2008): 943-967, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X08007140>.

⁷³ Axinia, “Women and Politics in the Romanian Legionary Movement,” 4.

⁷⁴ For more on the role of women in the Iron Guard, see Maria Bucur, “Romania,” in *Women, Gender, and Fascism in Europe, 1919-45*, ed. Kevin Passmore, (Rutgers University Press, 2003), 58-78; Axinia, “Women and Politics in the Romanian Legionary Movement.”

⁷⁵ For more about the Iron Guard’s membership composition, see Haynes, “Work Camps, Commerce, and The Education of the ‘New Man’ in The Romanian Legionary Movement,” 950.

⁷⁶ For more on the dual traditional and activist roles for women in the Iron Guard, see Mihai Rusu, “Domesticating Viragos: The Politics of Womanhood in the Romanian Legionary Movement,” *Brill* 5, no. 2 (2016): 149-176, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00502004>.

the home, preparing sons for death, and sustaining the mythic purity of Romanianism within the domestic realm. In this sense, the Fortress does not become an intellectually emancipatory exercise, but rather an enclosure that defines the limits of female political being. In *The Nest Leader's Manual*, as with other nests, Codreanu tasked the Fortress with an education through communal discourse in a twelve-topic outline to prompt discussion:

- 1) *The role of legionary women in New Romania.*
- 2) *Rights and duties of the legionary woman.*
- 3) *The legionary sister as mother.*
- 4) *The legionary sister as wife.*
- 5) *The legionary sister as fighter.*
- 6) *The legionary sister and discipline.*
- 7) *The legionary woman and the modern woman.*
- 8) *How could a more nutritious meal be provided to the family?*
- 9) *As much variation in culinary art as possible, so little known about it in the village world.*
- 10) *Cleaning the house and taking care of the children.*
- 11) *How could the entire clothing be made in house.*
- 12) *Raising kids- To Church. Confession and Holy Communion. Love of books and of light, of labor, of country.*⁷⁷

Though brief and never revisited in the manual, the talking points are remarkably revealing in their structure and underlying assumptions. They do not constitute a vision for forging a generation of heroic elite, like the “new man,” to lead Romania or even for formal political participation. Rather, it supposes a blueprint for the idealized “legionary sister” whose gendered identity is segmented across domestic, moral, and symbolic roles. What emerges is an ensemble of functions designed to sustain the ideological architecture and social reproduction of the Iron Guard.

Each role for women is a duty or commitment to others. Across topics, the “legionary woman” is framed across a series of archetypes such as mother, wife, and fighter. For example,

⁷⁷ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader's Manual*, Point 12. This quote uses the 2017 translation of *The Nest Leader's Manual*, but it very closely matches the translation of the undated translation. Based on analysis of the original Romanian text, it seems to be an accurate and faithful translation.

the repetition of the gendered phrase “legionary sister/sora legionară” distinguishes women as a separate entity from the male “legionary/legionarii” in both Romanian linguistic gendering and in concept.⁷⁸ The familial connotation of “sister/sora” reinforced their bond to the movement, yet always reminded women that their identity existed in relation to others rather than individuality. While Codreanu often thought of male legionaries as “brothers,” he never needed to signify their distinction from legionaries in general as he did for women.

Codreanu envisioned the legion as the first step in producing a revolutionary new legionary family to replace the nuclear family dynamic, such that women were related not just to their biological children and married husbands, but rather related to the movement as a national and communal unit.⁷⁹ The legionary sister represented the first step in forming a symbolic national family. While the “legionary sister” would have many traditional duties, the idea of a legionary family was anything but traditional. The transgressive vision for family relations radically reimagined the nuclear family unit. In doing so, the intrinsically modern idea reconstituted gender hierarchy and valorized fascist communalism while still depending on women’s domestic support.

Scholarship has recognized that women’s participation in the Iron Guard operated between dual, paradoxical roles. For the most part, the Legionary Movement conscripted women to act as domestic and spiritual heroes. However, it occasionally asked women to serve as masculinized warriors for the fascist cause.⁸⁰ For the most part, the Iron Guard permitted masculinized values for women only when it countered masculinized values from the West. *The Nest Leader’s Manual* tacitly recognizes the tension between opposing roles for women by

⁷⁸ In Codreanu, *The Nest Leader’s Manual*, Point 12,

⁷⁹ Axinia, “Women and Politics in the Romanian Legionary Movement,” 127.

⁸⁰ Mihai Rusu, “Fascist Femininities: Models of Womanhood in the Romanian National Legionary State,” *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea*, Vol 42 (2020): 19-38, <https://doi.org/10.5209/chco.71887>; Mihai Rusu, “Domesticating Viragos: The Politics of Womanhood in the Romanian Legionary Movement,” *Brill* 5, no. 2 (2016): 150, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00502004>.

offering the topic of “*The legionary sister as fighter*.”⁸¹ While likely not a warrior in the same sense as men on the battlefield, it recognized women as agents for the Iron Guard who may fight for the fascist cause through other means, like social and cultural activism. By asking women how they would fight for a political movement, the Iron Guard offered greater opportunity to transgress traditional femininity and adopt similar goals to their male compatriots. The Fortress thus assumed a defensive role where women could simultaneously fight and remain at home. These rare opportunities created paradoxical spaces where they could both defend traditional femininity and disrupt gender roles.⁸²

Some women were asked to forgo delicate femininity by embracing discipline and labor, which were masculinized values traditionally ascribed to men. In topic six, Codreanu asks women to consider “*The legionary sister and discipline*.”⁸³ This is notable because it is the singular place in *The Nest Leader’s Manual* where Codreanu asks women the same question as he does to men. Similarly, a popular fascist newspaper directed women to be “ruthless with herself, [yet] lenient with others.”⁸⁴ This language mirrors the monastic-like discipline demanded of men in their nests to become the “new man.” Fewer opportunities existed for women to embark on a quest of personal regeneration in comparison to the revolutionary “new man.” However, fascist publications occasionally invited women to participate in parallel exercises as men in their individual palingenesis. This overlap speaks to the tensions of defining the role of women in the Iron Guard and the heterogeneity of women’s participation in Romanian fascism. Further, it emphasizes the importance of discipline in Codreanu’s vision of a fascist future.

⁸¹ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader’s Manual*, Point 12.

⁸² For more on the paradoxical tensions of womanhood in fascist movements, namely the Ustasha Regime in Yugoslavia, see Rory Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation: The Ustasha Regime and the Cultural Politics of Fascism, 1941-1945* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023), 143-167.

⁸³ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader’s Manual*, Point 12..

⁸⁴ Trandafir, Lucia: “Cetățuia,” *Cuvântul*, XVII, no. 15 (29 October 1940), p. 2 trans. Mihai Rusu in “Fascist Femininities: Models of Womanhood in the Romanian National Legionary State,” *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea*, Vol 42 (2020): 19-38, <https://doi.org/10.5209/chco.71887>

Labor, religiosity, and other essential tenets of the Iron Guard's political aims demanded discipline of the self. These tenets often required participation from both men and women, which demonstrates that the Iron Guard would find different ways of asking both genders to cultivate personal discipline.

While there were occasional moments where women could assume more masculinized roles as cultural warriors, the movement overwhelmingly prioritized traditional femininity and limited women's participation. Through the twelve topics of consideration in *The Nest Leader's Manual*, Codreanu offered a vision of fascist femininity that predominantly emphasized women's domestic and long-established duties. The reimagining of gender roles, while maintaining strict divisions, firmly places the Iron Guard as a modern, forward-looking movement that edified historic Romania while formulating a new vision of gender for a fascist future. The melding of traditional gender duties with transgressive, new roles similarly elucidates the Iron Guard's ideology as a glorification of the past but a revolution to the future. Yet, contradictions in imagining fascist femininities stress the complicated roles of women in the Iron Guard. With that being said, Codreanu still largely relegated women to a supporting role in the national project and mostly tasked them with the work of social reproduction, a duty that existed in both traditional society and an imagined fascist future.

The Fortress Vs. The Invasion

The debate between models of womanhood plays out explicitly in topic seven of point twelve in *The Nest Leader's Manual*, where the Fortress is presented as a defensive unit against foreign invasion. In this case, the idea of a foreign invasion simultaneously considers a defense against Judeo-Bolshevism and Western hegemony, which were often blurred targets for the Iron

Guard. Codreanu asks the Fortress to debate “[t]he legionary woman and the modern woman.”⁸⁵ This ideologically charged line draws a dichotomy with nationalist implications. In Western Europe after World War I, the model of a “new” or “modern” woman emerged as a significant cultural force. Women were imagined as sexless, wearing mannish clothes, hair bobbed, puffing a cigarette.⁸⁶ In Romania, urban women directly imported this model of the “modern woman” by looking west to France and the United States.⁸⁷ Urban Romanian women adopted Western fashion, consumerism, and behaviors to liberate themselves from archaic gender roles and to embrace modernity. Much like reactionary forces across Europe, Romanian fascists imagined the modern woman as “destroying” the character of her sex.⁸⁸ The modern woman, therefore, became a foil of the legionary woman and a flash point in a larger national struggle.

Along with the idea of the “modern woman,” Western influence directly led to protections for Jewish Romanians and growing urbanization across the country. These forces directly challenged the nationalism and agrarian soul that the Iron Guard valued. Rapid change in economics and culture now accompanied a perceived assault on femininity. Anxieties about the unmooring of traditional womanhood also became symptomatic of larger fears about Western hegemony and the erasure of Romanian identity. So, the Iron Guard projected their anxieties around modernization and humiliation from Western influence onto women’s gender expression.

The blurring of gender roles for women in the interwar era represented the opposite of the Iron Guard’s severe reinforcement of gender hierarchy. So, *The Nest Leader’s Manual* challenged the Fortress to construct a blueprint of a “legionary woman” by finding the antithesis of the modern woman. This task created a countertype of womanhood in order to solidify and clarify

⁸⁵ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader’s Manual*, Point 12.

⁸⁶ Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, 147-148.

⁸⁷ Sonia D. Andraş, “The Women of Little Paris: Women’s Fashion in Interwar Bucharest 1919-1939” (PhD diss., University of The Arts, London College of Fashion, 2019), 142.

⁸⁸ Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, 147.

legionary women's own conceptions of gender roles. It invited women to collaborate on defining the gender roles for a post-revolutionary parallel society, while also tacitly instructing them that the "legionary woman" must be modest, religious, rural, and everything that the modern woman is not. This exercise crafted fascist feminine aesthetics by juxtaposing the decadence of modern life with the supposed values, morality, and valor of a mythologized anti-modern model of womanhood. The myth of the "legionary woman" provided a battlefield for national and ideological conflicts. The "Fortress" symbolically became a defense and catalyst for constructing "traditional Romanianism" against incursion from Western influences and the perceived invasion of Jewish people into Greater Romania.

Clothes and the female body drew the attention of the fascist leaders as one such intimate place that demanded moral and ideological regulation. Namely, in the same passage, Codreanu's newspaper goes on to declare that women should protect their daughters from the "frivolity" and "nakedness" of "the Jews of Paris... the inventors of fashions."⁸⁹ The highly sexualized antisemitic discourse casts decadence in apparel as symptomatic of the corrupting influence of modernism. Fascists imagined fashion as an instrument of the Jewish elite and Western powers to erase traditional Romanian identity. Further, fashion represented consumerism, materialism, and individuality, which were all characteristics that the Iron Guard aimed to overthrow in their anti-materialistic and communal revolution. The cultural and ideological endeavors of the Iron Guard therefore sought to regulate the female body, her wardrobe, her modesty, and her clothing purchasing power—the very things which would have signaled modernity or economic independence.

Codreanu sees a war between nationalist values and decadence play out on the battlefield of women's bodies. He seems to designate women as both perpetrators of decadence, but also

⁸⁹ Codreanu, "Organizarea Legiunii 'Arhanghelul Mihail,'" 3-4.

easily influenced by the allure of modernity and therefore in need of special protection. As a defensive countermeasure, Codreanu asks mothers to save their daughters from the sexualized elite and corrupting Jew by considering topic eleven for the Fortress: “How could the entire clothing be made in house.”⁹⁰ Codreanu assigned domestic labor in the form of clothing production not just as an economic or practical act, but as a cultural rejection of decadence from sexual liberation and modernity. It casts fashion and bodily individualism as sexualized threats from foreign villains with both feminine perpetrators and victims. To the Iron Guard, Western aesthetics, such as the modern woman, corrupted Romanian women with frivolity and nakedness. Therefore, he enlists the Fortress to labor in opposition to this threat by further regulating intimate spaces like the household, body, and affective labor. Yet, his solutions place additional burdens on women and confine their autonomy. Codreanu imposes the Iron Guard's moral values and practical needs on mothers as they labor and rear their children.

To be clear, localizing clothing production in Romania also reinforced the Iron Guard's rejection of economic liberalism and Western hegemony. Directing women to train in garment production cultivated gendered skills that supported a nationalist vision of economics for a post-revolutionary, self-sufficient country. By developing clothing in the Romanian homeland, the Iron Guard offers an alternative that could eventually challenge Western textile industries economically and aesthetically. In doing so, he highlighted the importance of women's bodies as a site of national struggle against perceived corrupting influences from the West. Women's bodies and attire became a space that entangled the Iron Guard's cultural and sexual anxieties with the project of economic nationalization.

Women's labor is also nationalized through the ideological regulation of the domicile, which serves as a microcosm of the Iron Guard's ideological commitments against decadence.

⁹⁰ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader's Manual*, Point 12.

Codreanu extends the regulation of motherhood through other topics of discussion, such as: “3) The legionary sister as mother... 8) How could a more nutritious meal be provided to the family?... [and] 10) Cleaning the house and taking care of the children.”⁹¹ Taken together, these discussions educated women on proper domesticity through topics of motherhood, cooking, and cleaning. It outlines the expected gendered labor in an intimate household setting for the social reproduction of both the family unit and nationalist objectives. Culinary technique, nutritional understanding, and in-home clothing were more than practical skills: they speak to the Iron Guard’s national goals. These skills valorized a communal traditionalism while rejecting perceived decadence associated with urban materialism and individualism. Still, Codreanu asks women to study “as much variation in culinary art as possible, so little known about it in the village world.”⁹² While the “village world” was an important site of national purity, this phrase tacitly acknowledges that rural communities lacked the same resources and knowledge compared to urban centers, contributing to the narrative that the countryside had been left behind by modernization and government corruption. As a result, the “village world” needed support and direct action from the labor of men and women alike, which the Legionary Movement aimed to provide. Programs to educate, foster, and ensure proper domesticity—especially in the rural heart of the nation—aimed to align familial education with Iron Guard political objectives.⁹³ It politically charges nearly every action in an intimate space as a national duty or an ideological commitment.

In addition to social reproduction, the Iron Guard assigned women with fostering the spiritual purity of the nation and the household. For example, Codreanu asks women to discuss

⁹¹ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader’s Manual*, Point 12.

⁹² Codreanu, *The Nest Leader’s Manual*, Point 12.

⁹³ Bucur, “In Praise of Wellborn Mothers: On the Development of Eugenicist Gender Roles in Interwar Romania,” *East European Politics and Societies* 9 (1994): 123-142, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325495009001007>

topic twelve: “Raising kids- To Church. Confession and Holy Communion. Love of books and of light, of labor, of country.”⁹⁴ The first part of this discussion topic calls on legionary women as mothers and older sisters to prioritize the spiritual commitment of their households. This topic specifically invokes Orthodox religiosity and legionary mysticism to reinforce women’s domestic and spiritual duties. The gendered labor of raising children to participate in religious rituals centers women as spiritual mothers for the Iron Guard movement. As religious vanguards, women produce more than biological offspring—they nurture the spiritual and national character for youth who will one day lead a New Romania. In addition to religion, the topic invokes “labor” and “country” as the utmost priorities to instill in the next generation. In doing so, women played a critical role in maintaining the moral direction of the country and the Iron Guard. Mothers became the first node in a broader fascist totality to shape the next generation through rituals of devotion and patriotic affection. The religious mysticism of the Iron Guard layered additional sanctities and anxieties over the role of women in the regenerative mythology of fascism.

Both within and beyond the Iron Guard, popular eugenic discourse cast the mother as more than a biological agent of national progress, but also as a potential threat.⁹⁵ In a newspaper section, Codreanu writes that the “rise and fall of nations depend on the moral strength of the woman, of the mother: she can create heroes or villains.”⁹⁶ Women could sabotage the nationalist project if they transmitted perceived hereditary impurity or failed to nurture proper values. The intimate space of motherhood and the female body became a highly ideologized site that received both exaltation and suspicion, a conduit for either national rejuvenation or decay. This

⁹⁴ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader’s Manual*, Point 12.

⁹⁵ Bucur, “In Praise of Wellborn Mothers,” 138-140.

⁹⁶ Corneliu Codreanu, with Ion Moța, Ilie Gârneață, Corneliu Georgescu, Radu Mironovici, “Organizarea Legiunii ‘Arhanghelul Mihail,’” *Pământul strămoșesc*, October 1, 1927, I, 5, Trans. Anca Axinia, 3-4.

duality rationalized ever greater attention and regulation from the Iron Guard, even as women were not imagined as the movement's chief actors. So, the Iron Guard and the Fortress assigned women new responsibilities to ensure that their domestic and spiritual authority serves their movement.

In total, women in the Legionary Movement are not offered a revolutionary journey of their own, and the talking points do not map out an empowered political actor. Instead, they offer a mythologized image for regenerating the moral character of women and their household through spirituality, domesticity, and subordination to the male project of revolutionary palingenesis. Unlike the other prompts given to men, practically none of the 12 topics signal women's participation in politics, the economy, art, war, or physical education. These topics speak to a larger process of excluding women from the political sphere while still finding a role for women in the national project. The duties are a form of containment that outlines the parameters and limits of her agency in both the movement and an imagined, post-revolutionary New Romania.

SECTION III. THE CULT OF DEATH AND THE SACRALIZED “NEW MAN”

Sections I and II unpacked *The Nest Leader’s Manual* through the lens of gender by understanding the foundational text as a map to steer the movement. Section III looks at the movement’s application of the text and the performance of their beliefs by exploring Captain Codreanu and the crew’s final destination. More specifically, this chapter moves beyond the educational discourse in Codreanu’s writings by exploring the spaces and belief systems that put action into place.

Following Sorel’s model of mythology and Gentile’s analysis of political religions, this section delves into how motivating myths transformed ideas into a revolutionary movement. This section builds on the concept of the “new man” and “legionary sister” as myths by placing them into a larger constellation of political myth-making and mysticism. It will begin with the concept of war and the cult of death as integral features in a gendered pantheon of fascist political religion. It will examine how spectacles of power and “the new man” drove the psychic appeal of Romanian fascism as a mass movement. Then, this section will turn its attention to romanticized and sanctified depictions of Codreanu as the ultimate expression of fascist masculinity and “the new man.”

As with other fascist movements, war functioned as another central educational force in the creation of the Romanian new man and his masculine ideals. Across Europe, the myth of the war experience lauded the transformative and sublime power of the Great War in forging a new race of men with moral resolve and physical strength.⁹⁷ For instance, Mussolini revered trench warfare as a “bloody apprenticeship” capable of forging a heroic, youthful, classless elite.⁹⁸ As

⁹⁷ George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 159-181.

⁹⁸ Benito Mussolini, “Trenchocracy (Trincerocrazia),” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, Dec 15, 1917, in *Fascism* edited by Roger Griffin.

with the work camps, Romanian fascists saw war as another institution to build a heroic generation to replace the current elite. Even though most were too young to have served in World War I, they still eagerly yearned to actualize the new man through the educational and regenerative myth of war. Many across Romania internalized the humiliation and emasculation that came from the western Treaty of Versailles, the Minority Protection Treaty, and the embarrassment of riches during postwar nationalization. So, Romania's masculinist militarism, particularly violence against Jews, gave men the violent opportunity for redemption. The purifying force of war could cleanse both individual men of their sins and the nation of its sinner, the foreign Jew. This section will consider how war and religion provided the backdrop for romanticizing the "new man," death, and Codreanu himself.

In the pedagogical text, *The Nest Leader's Manual*, Codreanu underscores the necessity of war to build a new man. He writes that "In this new man, all defects and impulses toward evil must be slain. This type of hero, hero in the warrior sense, so he can impose his power through combat [sic]."⁹⁹ Codreanu outlines a masculine archetype of a physically dominant warrior, one with a violent drive and irreverence for the enemy, as necessary for success. It became a moral imperative to militarize masculine values. In particular, the phrase "impulses toward evil" employs a religious logic to center the "new man" in a totalizing, biblical crusade to overcome modern weakness and temptation. This is hardly the only time he frames the movement in absolute, religious terms. Later in the manual, Codreanu commands legionaries not to "stray from his glorious path in these days of darkness, of satanic temptation."¹⁰⁰ In concert, these two

⁹⁹ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader's Manual*, Point 70. While this quote comes from the 2017 translation of *The Nest Leader's Manual*, the undated text translates it slightly differently. In particular, "impulses towards evil" seems to be a stylized version that more literally says "tendencies" toward "evil" or "bad." In consultation with Romanian speakers, the quote "In acest om nou, vor trebui ucise toate defectele si toate pornirile spre rău" does not necessarily have a religious logic on its own, but the context and larger conversation does indicate a spiritual connotation and warrants a religious stylization.

¹⁰⁰ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader's Manual*, Ten Commandments, page 118.

quotes speak to the Iron Guard's ascetic, quasi-monastic drive to master one's own desires and weaknesses. It calls for a revolutionary rejection of evil on both a national stage and for a person's soul through both a physical and a moral war. They were training warriors to fight and die on both fronts of the war. The commitment to a godly "new man" and higher cause sanctified the life and death of the legionary—a critical prerequisite for heroic manhood.¹⁰¹

These attributes defined the ideal soldier-crusader, providing bodies ready to fight for the fascist revolution and the protection of the nation. It presented masculinity and success in binaries: the Romanian new man as an embodiment of good, and the forces on the battlefield or enemies within, as evil. The man who did not seek to fight would fail to live up to manly values and succumb to the impulses of evil. It also feminizes enemies of combat, whether it be internal Jewish populations or external countries, by presenting them as foils of the masculine new man. The Iron Guard characterized its perceived enemies as forces of evil and decadence that stand in the way of a manly fascist future. So, war would be a test of these moral and physical values and an opportunity to forge a new man in contrast to the nebulous, unmanly "evil."

The apotheosis of the heroic soldier found its ultimate expression of wartime masculinity through martyrdom, sacrifice, and the cult of death. World War I provided a backdrop for the brutalization of politics and rhetoric across Europe by exposing veterans and civilians alike to mass casualties, indifference toward human life, and a willingness to kill.¹⁰² In Romania, brutalization and ideological violence manifested in Christofascist necropolitics that edified the fallen soldiers and drove a fanatic obsession with dying for the nation.¹⁰³ By 1940, when the Legionary State came into power, some joked that the Iron Guard was "like a potato... the best

¹⁰¹ Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, 52.

¹⁰² George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 159-181.

¹⁰³ Mihai Rusu, "Staging Death: Christofascist Necropolitics during the National Legionary State in Romania, 1940–1941," *Nationalities Papers* 49, no.3 (2021): 576-589, doi:10.1017/nps.2020.22.

part of it was under the earth.”¹⁰⁴ To be precise, it was a “potato” buried six feet under the ground, having died a martyr or having lived long enough for the state to massacre them. While the underground “potatoes” represented the failures of the Iron Guard to outsiders, martyrdom was the ultimate expression of heroism and the masculine “new man.” In fact, Codreanu writes explicitly that “the legionary loves death, because his blood will serve as the cement for the foundations of Legionary Romania.”¹⁰⁵ For those still in the movement, the countless legionaries who died represented the success in achieving the “new man” and put Romania one step closer to their fascist future. The dead were eulogized and sanctified, giving more meaning to the mobilizing myth of the “new man.” Yet, romanticizing and aestheticizing martyrdom, paradoxically, depleted the movement of the very masses that they aimed to mobilize.

The glorification of martyrdom manifested in elaborate spectacles of pageantry for funeral processions, especially to engage rural communities. The ritualized ceremony immortalized the memory of fallen soldiers and their characteristics, thereby promoting the values that society should strive for. Legionary choirs often sang the “Hymn of the Fallen Soldier,” along drum lines and extended marching tours of the rural Romanian countryside, which included the verse:

*“Because you are gone forever, and will never come back
By the roads made by us, we have searched for you
All have forgotten you today, even your own
Only the wind suspires your sweet chant
Above the flowers which caress your sad tomb”*¹⁰⁶

In a largely illiterate country, the “Hymn of the Fallen Soldier” likely invoked familiar religious melodies to sacralize the death of martyrs while intertwining political and spiritual

¹⁰⁴ Nagy-Talavera, *The Green Shirts and the Others*, 425.

¹⁰⁵ Codreanu, *The Nest Leader's Manual*, Point 81.

¹⁰⁶ Simion Lefter, “Hymn of the Fallen Legionnaires (Imnul Legionarilor Căzuți)” (Internet Archive), <https://archive.org/details/youtube-RdZu-WQ3no4>.

urgency. The hymn and processions targeted disaffected, rural communities by bringing the cult of martyrdom and the “new man” to the village streets. Processions aimed to energize an apolitical population into mass mobilizations by activating their dormant sentiments and directing them toward a populist revolt. In doing so, it aimed to fold rural Romanians into the broader national project and fascist fantasies. Codreanu and the Iron Guard lauded the rural working man as the true soul of Romania and as a figure who embodied many of the characteristics of the “new man.” Therefore, the student-led movement made intentional efforts to appeal directly to rural workers. Lines like “All have forgotten you today, even your own” could speak to the rural communities who felt disillusioned or emasculated by perceived urban corruption and failures of modern society. In particular, it alluded to the feelings of betrayal and humiliation that came with the post-WWI Treaty of Versailles and the Minorities Protection Treaty, which enfranchised Jewish people against rural objections.¹⁰⁷

The hymn allowed rural workers to imagine themselves as fallen soldiers who suffered a tragic end. The forgotten rural worker could be cast as a martyr from the failures of parliamentarism and urban degeneration, which were often symbolically attributed to Jews. They were deserted by the state, which left them behind during nationalization and economic modernization in favor of the mythologized Jew. Lines like this act as a call to action for the “forgotten” rural Romanians to reclaim and rejuvenate a nation corrupted by Jews that seemingly no longer remembers its spiritual, rural heart. Further, reference to “roads made by us” evokes the labor of the ethnic Romanian masses in contrast to the corrupt Jewish people who sap resources from the country. Therefore, there is a deeply racialized element in the construction of the spiritual new man.

Figure 1

¹⁰⁷ Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*, 247.



The ceremonial processions lend credence to the argument put forth by Emilio Gentile that fascism operated as a “political religion.” He argues that fascist leaders adapted rituals, symbols, and hierarchical structures from the Church to fuse religious worship with political authority.¹⁰⁸ In Romania, the Iron Guard transformed theology into a political instrument by borrowing both symbolic roles and functions of the Church, such as canonizing its own saints.¹⁰⁹ For instance, Figure 1 depicts Iron Guard members in their militaristic uniforms marching in a funerary procession while assuming the formation of a Christian cross. The crowd of onlookers,

¹⁰⁸ Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*.

¹⁰⁹ Radu Ioanid, “The Sacralised Politics of the Romanian Iron Guard.” *Totalitarian Movement and Political Religions*, (2006): 419-453, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1469076042000312203>.

including children, saluted them using the Roman salute.¹¹⁰ This photograph exemplifies how the Iron Guard explicitly adopted religious iconography to serve political and national aims. Much like the “Hymn of the Fallen Soldier,” the funerary processions borrowed ecclesiastic symbolism and language to present their Legionary Movement as familiar and identifiable to rural folk. Spectacles like this evoked mystical connotations and fused political membership with religious fervor. In doing so, it cemented the godly qualities of the “new man” with the energizing power of religion as a unified myth to motivate mass mobilizations. Now, religion was not just a personal belief but part of the regenerative efforts to construct a new man in the image of a resurrected Christ.¹¹¹ It conflated politics and religion by asking legionaries to have faith in the Iron Guard’s messianic mission to find salvation for the nation and cleanse the country of its sins—the Jews.

These ceremonies heightened the gender imbalances at the heart of the Iron Guard by praising male sacrifice and minimizing women’s contributions. Legionary women had attempted the same glory in martyrdom, yet the Iron Guard routinely downplayed and depoliticized their sacrifices.¹¹² Thus, the spiritual and ritualistic celebration of death glorified the construction of masculine ideals. It chose the destiny men were supposed to desire, pushing them into war and violence, while ignoring women who sought to fill the same archetype of the “new man.” It both celebrated and demanded control over male bodies to serve the mythology of national rebirth through war and the new man. The spectacles of death and martyrdom aestheticized the political fascist crusade by valorizing violence, warlike heroism, and duty to the nation above oneself—a liturgy to the “new man.”¹¹³

¹¹⁰ For this photograph and other iconographic photos from this period, see Roland Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania* (Cornell University Press, 2015), 208.

¹¹¹ Ioanid, “The Sacralised Politics of the Romanian Iron Guard.”

¹¹² Anca Axinia, “Women and Politics in the Romanian Legionary Movement,” 219-220.

¹¹³ For more on the features of fascist political religion, see Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Harvard University Press 1996).

The cult of death and martyrdom offered a mystical dimension to the otherwise cultural and political movement in order to assert moral authority. For many centuries in Romania, the Orthodox Church commanded paramount spiritual and cultural power. Adapting the Church's ceremonies helped the Iron Guard usurp the position as a central tenet of Romanian nationalism. These ceremonies exemplify how the Iron Guard sought to assume the educational and moral responsibility from the Church. Whereas the Church's ceremonies generally commemorated the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Iron Guard valorized the sacrifices of fallen martyrs and "new men." So, the Iron Guard positioned martyrs as the exemplar for which Romanians should base their morality, updating the ultimate sacrifice from Biblical times to the modern moment. Above all, the Iron Guard's spectacles and religious vernacular aimed to usurp the Church's moral authority, especially their spiritual monopoly over the concept of death. By wielding greater authority over death, the Iron Guard could fulfill their violent fantasies of Jewish genocide and nationalist wars.

Codreanu as a Deified and Romantic "New Man"

If Romanian fascism is understood as a political religion, then Codreanu occupied the role of its messianic, quasi-divine figure. The Iron Guard's deification of Codreanu presented him as a religious protagonist and his writings as prophetic. In the eyes of the movement, he deserved faith and devotion, which underpinned the populist character of the mass fascist movement. The movement transfigured the ultimate martyr in Christian theology, Jesus Christ, into the martyr of the fascist political religion: Corneliu Codreanu. Comparable to Jesus, Codreanu died for the sins of the nation, a sacrifice for Romanian salvation and rebirth. Even Codreanu's funerary ceremony was depicted as a biblical resurrection with religious metaphors

and iconography.¹¹⁴ He was simultaneously the epitome of the new man and a god-like figure. Therefore, the myth of the new man represented a union between man and divinity capable of ushering in heaven-like salvation for Romania through political action. The “new man” was not just a set of physical attributes or political objectives, but also a glorified crusader for a spiritual war. As a model of divinity and the new man, Codreanu built a blueprint for how men in the movement could live and die for their national community. He embodied the myth of the new man, modeling masculine ideals as the epitome of Romanian manhood and Christian religiosity.

Codreanu’s status as an idol drew on different forms of mass appeal, including his carefully cultivated public persona with women. Scholars have suggested that Adolf Hitler had a unique, libidinous intrigue with German women or Germany as a whole, which might have factored into his fascist appeal.¹¹⁵ In Romania, Codreanu could have occupied a similar role. Bucur notes that many women across Romania were attracted to Codreanu’s personal appeal, likening him to a “medieval knight” with “romantic” characteristics.¹¹⁶ Here, the Bucur tacitly acknowledges women’s desire, which stands in contrast to fascist discourse on purity, serving as another space of tension that contradicts the position of women in the Iron Guard’s vision. The possible sexual or romantic intrigue stems from a softened image of Codreanu. This image invokes a traditional, knightly masculine archetype with values like chivalry, honor, and loyalty. While the gentler perception of manhood might seem in direct contrast to the ideals of the fascist new man, they are actually in close alignment.

¹¹⁴ Mihai Rusu, “Staging Death: Christofascist Necropolitics during the National Legionary State in Romania, 1940–1941,” *Nationalities Papers* 49, no.3 (2021), 581, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.22>.

¹¹⁵ Dagmar Herzog, *Sex After Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth Century Germany* (Princeton University Press 2007), 14; Ron Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil* (New York: Random House 1998), 99-155.

¹¹⁶ Maria Bucur, “Romania,” in *Women, Gender, and Fascism in Europe, 1919-45*, ed. Kevin Passmore (Rutgers University Press, 2003), 75-76.

Codreanu self-stylized his masculine presentation to appeal to his audience, whether that be the aggressive warrior for his male compatriots or a romantic hero for the female gaze. The fascist new man proposed a severe break with the normative values of masculinity in two ways. In one, as described throughout this paper, the “new man” amplified the violent warrior ideal. In the second, it proposed a return to traditional, rural concepts of manhood before being corrupted by modern decadence. Depictions of a romantic figure emanate from this second dimension of the new man. For instance, Codreanu wrote that legionaries must follow the “Law of Mutual Aid” and “The Law of Honor” in addition to discipline, silence, and labor. While *The Nest Leader’s Manual* is drenched in the aggressive, dominant directives from Codreanu, it does occasionally make space for helping and tending to the community. However, this is more evident in other works from Codreanu, such as his prison notes, where he shows a tenderness when recalling his mother, wife, and daughter:

On arriving, my little girl came to meet me. I took her in my arms and kissed her on the cheeks and eyes, holding her close to my heart. In this room, there was my mother and wife. They both kissed me and began to cry. My mother, the poor woman, had frozen hands.¹¹⁷

This passage aims to detail the gentle, genuine love he feels for the women in his family. It attempts to demonstrate how he cares and cries for women, inviting viewers to understand his personal nature in a softer light. Though infrequent, he occasionally revisits the love he feels for his mother, wife, and daughter throughout his publications in a similar manner. These traits on their own do not necessarily make Codreanu a romantic figure, but illustrate how he devotes some space to stylizing himself as a loving, family man or a chivalrous savior to the women of the countryside. It serves as propaganda to humanize him before his assigned death by presenting him as the loving son, husband, and father to not just his family but the whole movement. The

¹¹⁷ Corneliu Codreanu, *The Prison Notes* (1938) trans. Logik Förlag, 32.

romantic self-stylization moderates his image and aims to appeal to Romanians who may not feel attached to the hardened, activist public persona that Codreanu fostered in his movement.

As the “Captain” of the Iron Guard, Codreanu’s self-image provided both a mythology and a model for the “new man.” His political authority drew from a popular charismatic appeal that used personal charm for support not just from women, but also from male compatriots.¹¹⁸ In doing so, he assumed the position of a messianic figure whose cult following combined his personal appeal with the revelation of a divine, national mission. As a leader, he blended political, personal, and spiritual intrigue into a mythologized ideal of the “new man.” Embodying the myth of the “new man,” Codreanu infused his public persona with mystical charm and fascist masculinity. Despite some deriding him as a “mediocre and violent personality,” he nonetheless found immense success in using his mythology to mobilize the fascist mass movement into a generational crusade.¹¹⁹

On a cold November night, the King’s policemen secretly executed the already imprisoned Codreanu, then dissolved his body in acid and buried him under seven tons of concrete.¹²⁰ Despite this, the cult of Codreanu lived on. Codreanu’s devoted followers edified him as a martyr. To them, he achieved the final feature of the ultimate “new man” by dying for the sins of the movement as Jesus did. The deification of Codreanu animated him into an immortalized and sacralized “new man” who could provide a mobilizing myth for the movement even from his grave. Two years later, devoted followers exhumed the remnants of Codreanu’s body and paraded him in a resurrection of the messianic leader.¹²¹ Much like other funerary

¹¹⁸ Constantin Iordachi, “Charisma, Religion, and Ideology: Romania’s Interwar Legion of the Archangel Michael,” in *Ideologies and National Identities: The Case of Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe* (Central European University Press, 2013), paragraph 24.

¹¹⁹ Iordachi, “Charisma, Religion, and Ideology” paragraph 22.

¹²⁰ Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 968.

¹²¹ Rusu, “Staging Death: Christofascist Necropolitics during the National Legionary State in Romania, 1940–1941,” 580–581.

celebrations for fallen heroes, the procession of Codreanu aimed to eternalize his legacy as the fascist leader and ultimate “new man” for future generations to follow.

Conclusion

The Iron Guard effectively used Georges Sorel's system of mythology and images to inspire a fascist mass movement. Specifically, Codreanu drew upon masculinist imaginations of Romanians to conceive of the "new man." Embedded in the Iron Guard's fanaticism, the myth of the "new man" promised male legionaries a journey of personal education and collective action. In *The Nest Leader's Manual*, Codreanu outlines the "new man" as a strong, disciplined, and devoted crusader for the Romanian soul and nation. This image of the "new man" directly spurred a variety of revolutionary actions through nests, ranging from agricultural labor to violent raids on Jewish communities. These actions aimed to realize the system of myths and images, especially the myth of the "new man," on a national scale.

At its core, the "new man" grafted physiological, psychological, and moral elements onto political rhetoric.¹²² It provided a path of personal action for legionaries to communally participate in the simultaneous regeneration of the nation, body, and mind. Fascist politics promised a revolutionary future through the rebirth of man and nation. So, the Iron Guard as a political movement was deeply invested in its members' behaviors and actions; the movement's intellectual discourse and practical actions were fundamentally oriented around the individual actualization of its politics.

Thus, gender becomes a helpful framework for contextualizing the images and actions of both men and women in the movement. The "new man" and "legionary sister" build upon existing traditional gender roles while formulating additional gendered expectations to fit the political objectives of the movement. For instance, women's spiritual motherhood could solidify the moral character of the nation, or men's physical labor on roads could connect distant rural

¹²² Antoine de Baecque, "The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770-1800" (Stanford UP: 1997), 139.

communities into a unified country. Everywhere that Codreanu wrote about gendered expectations for legionaries were places that specifically required gendered labor to actualize a fascist fantasy. To be clear, Codreanu concerned himself principally with the actions of male legionaries, but in the moments where he recognizes “legionary sisters,” he acknowledges gendered needs that exist outside masculinist duties.

Codreanu asked legionary men to participate in nests to enact revolutionary material change and to embody the attributes of the “new man.” Through labor and war, men could develop the qualities for a fascist future. For example, Codreanu hails physical strength, discipline, and silence as necessary virtues for the masculine “new man.” He tasks men with masculineist opportunities for revolutionary action, such as bloody pogroms or arduous manual labor, that could realize these virtues and regenerate the soul and country. Much of the characteristics of the male legionaries, such as sexual morality and family values, stems from the vilification of Jewish men as feminized, sexually deviant, and as threats to women. So, part of the “new man” includes a racialized component to regenerate the ethnic character of a unified nation.

Codreanu did not afford legionary sisters the same opportunities for a total regeneration; however, the Fortress offered women new and familiar opportunities for political action. On one hand, the Fortress reformulated and reaffirmed traditional gendered duties and a strict hierarchy by relegating women to the domestic sphere. It asked them to tend to the everyday needs of male legionaries, such as household chores and cooking, while taking care of the family. It assigned women greater responsibility for the spiritual and moral development of both the family and nation. Yet, on the other hand, the Fortress created a defensive space where women could participate as activists against a perceived incursion from Jewish people and the West. For

instance, textile production or the opportunity to participate in the cultural rejection of the “modern woman” granted women a gendered participation in the Iron Guard movement. In doing so, Codreanu outlined both the opportunities and confines for women’s involvement in producing a fascist nation.

The systems of myths for men and women legionaries contributed to an expansive political religion that melded Orthodox Christian beliefs with fascist political fantasies. In particular, the obsession with martyrdom and spectacles of the “new man” fueled an energetic cult of death. Not only did death sacralize the actions of legionaries, but it also motivated material action and gendered expectations for legionaries. Further, the legionary’s political religion would deify Codreanu in biblical tones and solidify the model of manhood that he practiced.

Thus, this paper argues that gender played a central, but not always explicit, role in the Iron Guard’s national goals. Scholarship on educating a “new man” and “legionary woman” illuminates Romanian fascism’s totalizing, cultural undertakings as central to their ideological mission. Further, it clarifies the Iron Guard’s psychic appeal in a period of national, ethnic, and gender upheaval.

The study of gender, sex, and mythology in Romanian fascism has urgent implications. While communist forces dramatically deposed Romanian fascism in the midst of World War II, many of Codreanu’s ideas have found new meaning in modern political spheres. The English translation of *The Nest Leader’s Manual* from 2017 includes a forward that declares the “Romanian youth [are] a generation under siege... we cannot sleep forever. We are called to the resurrection of our nations. A holy call, heard by the youth of our times, the call of destiny and great deeds. Awaken. Arise.”¹²³ It is hard to quantify exactly how prevalent this belief is;

¹²³ Anonymous, “Forward” (published in 2017), in *The Nest Leader’s Manual*, by Corneliu Codreanu.

however, it is clear that Codreanu has a young base of followers in the present moment, nearly a hundred years after the student protests in 1922.

This thesis, written in the United States of America in 2025, also recognizes the relevancy in contemporary society outside of Romania. Gendered expectations of contemporary para-fascist movements fall upon familiar lines. For example, alt-right men's anxieties of unmooring gender roles and fears of feminization have put particular emphasis on physical strength, discipline, and a return to traditional values as a panacea. Some women on the far right have advocated for "trad wives," a role and image that simultaneously sees themselves as returning to the domestic sphere but also as activists to defend against liberalizing gender roles. It would be anachronistic to assert that these contemporary gender dynamics follow the same exact path as the Iron Guard; however, these examples have some notable parallels and seem to share similar impulses. Further, both exist within movements that blend politics and religion into a dizzying hybrid of political, spiritual, and national identities.