
BOOK REVIEWS

Marele Război în memoria bănăţeană (1914–1919)

(The Great War in the Memory of the
People from Banat, 1914–1919)

Vol. 3. Anthology, edition, studies and
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THE MORE than 100 years that have passed since the outbreak of the First World War gave rise everywhere to occasions meant to mark the great event of the early twentieth century that changed the world. It was an opportunity to remember feats of bravery done by the soldiers, the prolonged deprivations of the civilians, the doctors rescuing efforts, the calls for peace from the Church, but also the fear, hunger, violence, despair, homesickness, the physical and mental suffering or the disagreements between politicians who often pave the way for armies, making them face each other. The moment of balance, reflection and compassion with the tragic fate of tens of millions of victims of the terrible cataclysm was not just assumed at the level of public sensitivity, but also by a number of specialists, able to understand the subtleties of the Great War. One such category is the professional historians, who were soon to unveil the unseen facets of the war or to investigate it in terms of new interrogations. The results of their restitutive effort were soon to appear. Everywhere, the history books dedicated to the First World War increased not only quantitatively but also qualitatively, the topic being approached

from innovative perspectives, new sources of documentation being introduced into the circuit or those already known being re-assessed. The presence of specialists in the Great War and historians in general in the public space has become much stronger during these years, the media giving special attention to the popularization and awareness of some important moments in the chronology of the event.

The Romanian historiography was not only a mere spectator to these recent trends manifested in the field. Conferences, symposia, round tables, general or specialized works, studies, articles, research projects dedicated to The First World War, etc.—all these are the proof of a Romanian historiography fully synchronized with the current developments in historical writing. Therefore, the internal historical research dedicated to the Great War was visibly enriched, not few of the published works resorting to new documentary sources, an innovative methodology or to analyses that have deepened the understanding of the subject. One such cultural product, which recently came to the attention of specialists and the general public, is the book that we are now discussing. Part of an ambitious project of publishing the entire memoirs from Banat regarding the First World War I and the Union between Banat and Romania (1914–1919), the present volume is the third in a series which began to be published in 2012. Back then, Professor Nicolae Bocşan began to put into practice the praiseworthy editorial plan which he thought about with his friend, Professor Valeriu Leu. Both historians from Banat were convinced of the importance that the publication of the texts, from public or private archives, of the actors or spectators of the First World War,

would have for a better knowledge of the great event. But this was not the only reason which led to the conception of such an extensive editorial process. Furthermore, one has to bear in mind the sense of duty that the two distinguished historians naturally felt towards their homeland, towards Banat in general. Therefore, the project of editing the journals, memoirs, memories of the people of Banat about the First World War assumes the value of an eulogy that the two eminent historians proposed to bring to Banat, to its sacrifice of blood during the war, but also to the contribution that it had in creating United Romania. Unfortunately, Valeriu Leu did not get to see any published volume of the expected series, but the project was not abandoned. The man who assumed the mission of fulfilling it was Nicolae Bocșan who, by doing so, was merely honoring the memory of his good friend and fellow historian who had passed away in 2009. The volume that we focus our attention on is unfortunately the last that Bocșan got to see published. His premature death in the summer of 2016 is not only a great loss for the historical school of Cluj, but also for the Romanian historiography in general. This makes this volume the last great historiographical achievement of the late Nicolae Bocșan, which gives it a special symbolic importance.

Like the first two sister volumes, it is preceded by an extensive introduction, designed to ensure a better understanding of the memoirs that it contains. From the notes of the 21 authors published in this volume, Nicolae Bocșan managed to extract the essence of each account and to build this interpretative part providing answers to some fundamental questions. Such questioning is linked to the identity of the authors whose notes are published or reprinted in this volume. It is an opportunity for Bocșan to create some biographical medallions, in the case of Ioan Geția, Nicolae Boldureanu (Lae from Banat), Cornel Grofșoreanu, Eftimie Gherman, Ion

Jurjac, Mihai Grofșianu, Ilie Grofșianu, Ștefan Lazăr, Ioan Ilie, Ștefan Jianu, Ioan David, Nicolae Linția, Aurel Moacă, etc. The analysis of their social status, educational level, professional horizon and cultural-ideological framework before and after the experience of the war leads Bocșan to believe that we are dealing with “people who are differentiated concerning the education, profession, social origin, especially in their participation at the events of 1914–1919.”

A second theme that emerges from the analysis of the Banat memoirists’ discourse on the First World War is the road in wartime. The theme of the road appears associated with travel not only in space but also in time. The abundance of travel descriptions, especially of nature and landscapes, is explained by the fact that in the psychology of the combatants the peace and stability in nature strongly contrasted with the noise and turmoil of the war in which they were caught. In these circumstances, the emphasis on describing the nature was equivalent to a declaration of protest against a war which was held responsible for the destruction of the natural environment, for its perversion. Many times the memoirists reverberate the natural habitat specific to their homeland, familiar geographic coordinates, as an expression of homesickness and longing after the loved ones. Therefore, Nicolae Bocșan believes, the attention to nature in the memoirs from Banat concerning the Great War betrays the authors’ nostalgia for their homeland, for Banat to be precise, but also their aversion to war, to the great problems that it produced in the world.

Another analytical level that the introductory study focuses on is the one concerning the motivation of writing memoirs by the authors from Banat. From this point of view we are witnessing a variety of reasons that led to the writing of memoirs, such as anniversaries (the celebration of the semi-centenary of the Great Union in 1968), po-

litical reasons, resulting from the desire of memoirists to reply to political opponents, personal reasons, as a consequence of the impulse to highlight their efforts and personal merits, or the reasons generated by the frustration that Banat and its inhabitants did not have their role appreciated in the creation of Greater Romania.

The mobilization and going to war is another commonplace of memoir notes in Banat. Like everywhere, both actions were marked by enthusiasm, which quickly turned into anguish and despair. Professor Nicolae Bocșan notes that the participation to war contributed, in the case of the people from Banat, to equalizing their social condition, moving away “from the society before the war to the military community that appeared on the front.” The mobilization was also, for many people, the boundary between a life lived in peace in the midst of the protective family, and a world ravaged by violence and deprivation, with suffering and death “welcoming” hosts on the battlefields.

That is why one of the most powerful images left in the mind of memoirists was that of the front. This was equivalent to the grand stage on which the spectacle of the war unfolded, where death was an omnipresent character. Facing such danger, the memoirists from Banat note that the war experience has instilled a sense of belonging to the community of soldiers, but which was subjected to an implacable destiny. Nicolae Bocșan provides a profound analysis of the main events circumscribed to the theme of the front in memoirs: the artillery bombardment, the prolonged deprivation suffered by the soldiers, the fracture which he felt between them and the upper ranks of the military leadership, the homesickness and longing after the loved ones, the psychical trauma caused by the war, the constant appeal to divinity as a last chance of salvation, the difficult task which the comrades had to fulfill of burying those who had been killed

in the war, the birth and spread of political ideologies (namely, socialism and bolshevism), the phenomenon of desertions, seen as a form of resistance to war and the difficulties of those who were demobilized in order to reintegrate into society after the war or the frustration which they felt at not having their merits appreciated or for the sacrifices they had made during the war.

The picture of the everyday life of those left behind is not painted in cheerful colors in the memoirs from Banat. Placed on a secondary level until recently, the daily hardships of those from behind the front were not overlooked by those who wrote down their war memories. In their notes one can feel the echoes of the turmoil stirred by the deprivations and sufferings endured by those from the internal front.

Another topos of the memoirs of Banat is the one referring to the revolutionary atmosphere at the end of the war. Nicolae Bocșan insists in his comments upon the significance of the destruction of imperial symbols, on the state of anarchy that swept the province and its inhabitants, on the dismantling of the old power systems, but also on the process of the political organization of guards and national councils, in which local priests and teachers assumed a significant role.

The Assembly at Alba Iulia has, in turn, a place of honor in the memoirs on the First World War. Professor Nicolae Bocșan notes that “every memoirist wanted to highlight, sometimes overstressing his role in the preparation and participation of the National Assembly in Alba Iulia.” This is understandable, given that the event was the beginning of a new chapter in Romanian history, with great expectations.

Another sequence captured by most memoirists from Banat refers to the Serbian and French occupation of the province, since the autumn of 1918. Given that Banat was a territory claimed by both Romanians and Serbs, the state of war was prolonged in the region.

The memoirs faithfully capture the atmosphere full of tension and suspicion that existed among the inhabitants of the province, the abuses of the Serbian administration and army, the trust with which the Romanians received the French presence in the area, and also the main political directions which were outlined at the time. All of these generated the uncertainty that characterized the future of the province at the end of the First World War.

What could we learn at the end of the brief thematic presentation of the memoirs of Banat contained in the third volume of the series? Firstly, that the war marked the consciences of the contemporaries, more emphatically for those who experienced the war as combatants on the fronts. Secondly, the notes that make up the volume that we analyse succeed in introducing us into the intimacy of their authors' thoughts and feelings, even though this gives them a large dose of subjectivity. Finally, the memoirs from Banat concerning the First World War are an inex-pugnable written testimony of the contribution that the province and its people had in the Great War and subsequently in the construction of Greater Romania. The merit of valorizing this contribution goes to the two historians from Banat who initiated the editorial project, through which they managed not only to (re)highlight writings worthy of being known, but also to show the appreciation for the history of their ancestors whom they, lately, unfortunately joined.

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LÉ CENTENAIRE du déclenchement de la Première Guerre Mondiale a constitué une bonne occasion pour les historiens de nombreux pays, belligérants ou non belligérants, de rédiger des ouvrages de synthèse, des monographies, des éditions de documents ou de mémoires etc., utiles à la fois aux chercheurs et à ceux qui s'intéressent à des aspects comme les causes, l'ampleur, le développement et les conséquences de la Grande Guerre. Les grandes synthèses réalisées durant les dernières années par l'historiographie d'expression linguistique anglo-saxonne se sont concentrées en particulier sur les événements déployés sur le front de l'Ouest, en plan secondaire sur le front de l'Est et assez peu, voire nullement, sur les opérations militaires du Nord de l'Italie, de la Péninsule balkanique, respectivement sur le front roumain de 1916-1918. Dans ce contexte, l'inclusion dans le circuit historiographique de recherches inédites ou l'extension à de nouvelles perspectives méthodologiques vers des fronts périphériques, restés en quelque sorte à l'écart des analyses historiographiques, demeurent les desiderata actuels, le devoir des historiens italiens, croates, slovènes, ukrainiens, bulgares, turcs, grecs etc. étant, en même temps, celui de dépouiller les archives pour y découvrir des informations autant significatives que possible sur ce qui s'est passé