

---

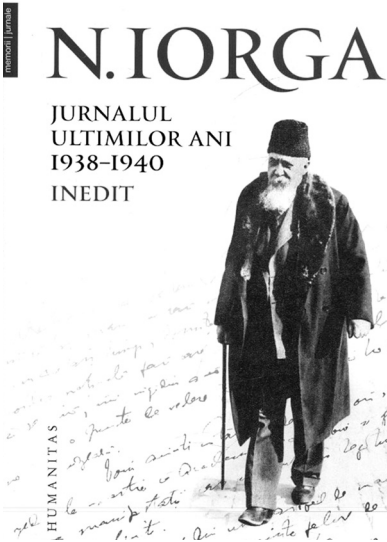
## EDITORIAL EVENTS

# The Participant-Historian and Contemporary History

VASILE PUȘCAȘ

**N. IORGA**

JURNALUL  
ULTIMILOR ANI  
1938–1940  
INEDIT



N. IORGA, *Jurnalul ultimilor ani 1938–1940: Inedit.*  
Edited by ANDREI PIPPIDI. Introduction and notes by  
ANDREI PIPPIDI. Bucharest: Humanitas, 2019.

READING N. IORGA'S *Journal of the Final Years 1938–1940*, edited by Professor Andrei Pippidi and published by Humanitas (2019), is not only an occasion to get reacquainted with the writing style of this great historian, but also an opportunity to bear witness to his everyday struggles as an intellectual and a sincere patriot. It is no small matter to see that the historian has his private experiences and perception of the history of his own time. The revelation of the subjective positioning of the historian relative to the society and the age he lives in is a measure of the honesty of the historical interpretations he offers in writing. Iorga never hesitated to make his thoughts, opinions and actions known, which facilitates our understanding of his own progress towards historical objectivity and towards the articulation of historical truth.

The present volume is a continuation of the work of editing N. Iorga's almost daily journal entries, to which the initiator of this project has added exceptionally valuable explanatory and bio-bibliographical notes, an intellec-

### Vasile Pușcaș

Professor at the Faculty of European Studies, Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. Author, among others, of the vol. **România și calea de viață europeană** (Romania and the European way of life) (2017).

tual and scientific effort for which Mr. Pippidi deserves our gratitude and our praise.

Professor Andrei Pippidi shows in his Introduction that the work of this great historian is so vast and diverse that it “discourages even the most industrious” (p. 7) of researchers. There is undoubtedly a certain inhibition: it comes from the extraordinary amount and the great variety of writings, ranging from historical and literary works to journalism etc., which, as things stand, were never indexed in their entirety. His was a release of creative and intellectual energy the likes of which has never happened before in this country and, maybe, not even in the world. This is why the intelligent and cultured American (German-born) journalist Rosa Goldschmidt Waldeck said that, with the death of this scholar, the last Goethean character has left the world. I remember that in 1990, when the historiographic community was planning to reenter the European and international scientific dialogue, the first works they referred to were those written by N. Iorga. The academician and great historian from Cluj-Napoca, D. Prodan, reflected on what it meant “to evolve in the all-encompassing shadow of this singular man that was N. Iorga.” He urged us, the younger historians, to examine the historical, cultural and socio-political work of this Teacher of the Nation, Iorga, from whom we could learn the techniques of historiographic research and understand the main movements in the philosophy of history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. D. Prodan had an explanation that he enjoyed repeating. He used to tell the story of a debate at the Romanian Academy, where his answer to the president of the Romanian forum of science and culture, who had proposed a “reevaluation” of Nicolae Iorga, was:

*Mr. president, who among us thinks he is qualified to grant us certificates? Whom would that serve? Wouldn't it be wiser to humbly return to the bedrock of his knowledge and to continue to benefit tacitly from the vastness of his work, without undertaking a “reevaluation” that is beyond our capabilities?*

One innovation that Iorga brought to Romanian historiography is the writing of contemporary history. He developed it in the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when, following A. D. Xenopol's serial and total history, he produced a work that included the epoch in which he lived. His sustained interest in contemporary history dates back to 1914, when he taught the course entitled “Politica externă a României în domnia lui Carol I” (Romania's external policy under the rule of Carol I) at the University of Bucharest. What the historian proposed there was the abandonment of the traditional approach to historiography, according to which historians should not address contemporary subjects because they are not at sufficient distance in time to attain maximal objectivity. At the

time, positivism was still a dominant movement and it was backed by the scientist ideas popular at the time. Iorga's remedy for these objections was *honesty*. While preparing his lectures, Professor Iorga discovered the documentary value of daily logs from "participants" or "witnesses" to contemporary events. He was, of course, referring to King Carol I's notes, which he appreciated as "a source of great richness, authenticity and honesty, of a moral value that is utterly superior." The historian saw such documentary sources as a prerequisite for understanding that which lies behind public acts and for avoiding writing "history according to patterns." We now know that Iorga started writing these "daily notes" as early as 1913 and only ceased towards the end of 1940, when his life was barbarically and tragically cut short, as it is documented in this volume, which covers the period between 1938 and 1940.

Being a creative genius, his writing includes a few autobiographical works—e.g. *Orizonturile mele: O viață de om așa cum a fost* (My horizons: A man's life, such as it was) (3 vols., 1934)—as well as some recollections about the political, cultural and artistic personalities in the country and abroad—e.g. *Oameni cari au fost* (Figures of the past) (4 vols., 1934–1939). The latter belongs to the memoir genre, while the book entitled *Memorii* (Memoirs), which was published in 1931 (vol. 1), is not a memoir at all, contrary to how it came to be known abroad and at home, but consists of "daily notes (May 1917–March 1920)." The writings in the first category reveal N. Iorga as a memoirist who lets some of his temperament show, his preferences, his subjectivity etc.; his "daily notes" are more of a chronicle of the participant and/or the observer, in which you can see that the author deals with the facts not only as a casual, regular recipient, but as a historian who knows how to sift the logical and rational meanings from the events he relates. It is precisely for this reason that his daily notes are doubly important: because he is both a participant or a witness and a historian who interprets the social occurrences from a historical perspective. The analysis of Iorga's daily notes confirms Professor Pippidi's affirmation whereby these writings "do not document the author's activity and his emotions, as much as the news that reach him, which he retains for their historical value" (p. 9). What is worth remarking, from the standpoint of one who is researching contemporary history, is the fact that, as Professor Pippidi pointed out, all of the volumes containing Iorga's notes enable us to recreate the atmosphere of an epoch as it was lived by a recipient who is not only able to perceive nuances, but also capable of detecting essences. From this perspective, Iorga's daily notes become a document of the utmost importance for discerning the turn that his epoch took. Their value as a historical source is augmented by the honesty and the socio-political professional experience of the author, who knew full well that sooner or later his notes would be analyzed by historians.

The inaugural lecture that N. Iorga gave in the autumn of 1919, at the University of Bucharest, was entitled “Ce istorie contimporană se face?” (How is contemporary history made?). It was the first time he advocated in a systematic manner for Romanian historians to take a professional approach to contemporary history, because he considered that this branch needed distinct autonomy in historiography and, at the same time, that it needed to be correlated to the history writing of other epochs. Iorga considered that, after World War I, the science of history also had to adjust to the new spirit of the age and a part of this process of renewal consisted in focusing more on contemporary history. In this respect, Iorga was moving with the times, in that the European public was more and more in need of a scientific historical account of the recent past. We could even say that Iorga started to see the benefits of such an approach some years before the Great War. It is unfortunate that, in Romania, historians continued to be reticent to this historiographic program. In 1933, in another inaugural lecture at the Academy of Commerce, Iorga was lamenting that contemporary history was thought of more as a subject for the press, while the history textbooks went as far as to present it as “false and dangerous,” because it was written primarily for an educational purpose and was, at times, tendentious. Iorga demonstrated in the Preface to *Essai de synthèse de l'histoire de l'humanité* (4 vols., 1926–1928) that historiographic research had the capacity to discern between the social fact and the historical fact even when it came to “current reality.” What is more, in 1940, in his “Istoria, marea judecată, în sens moral, a statelor și națiunilor” (History, the high moral court of states and nations), he explained that the methods employed by history, deduction and description, were suited not only for the analysis of the distant past, but also for the recent one and even for “what we have in front of us.” With this historiographic conception, which Iorga employed during the interwar period, he became part of the European and the international avant-garde of historiographic innovation and, what’s more, he initiated a dialogue and a practice in historiography that became central for the historians only in the decades following World War II. Worth mentioning in this context is the influential essay on history by Arthur Schlesinger (1927) in which he argued that, in order to reconstruct the current history, the research carried by the participant-historian is of “vital interest.” The renowned American historian followed the same line of thinking as Iorga when he demonstrated, half a century earlier, that historians preferred the more traditionalist and more comfortable formula *veritas temporis filia*, without acknowledging that the participant-historian had a better chance of recognizing the spirit of his time, which lay at the foundation of historiographic reconstruction.

While most Romanian historians from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century supported the need for historical synthesis, first put forward by Xenopol and then

further developed by the *Annales* school, Iorga established contemporary history not only as a logical development of the historical process, but also as a specific field of research and reconstruction—see *Istoria Românilor*, vol. 10, *Întregitorii* (The history of the Romanian people, vol. 10, The unifiers)—, covering the period between 1866 and 1938. Four years after the historian’s death, Gheorghe I. Brătianu acknowledged Iorga’s essential contribution to the study of contemporary history and even recognized the fact that the figure of the participant-historian has always been present in universal historiography, from Thucydides to the present day. Arthur Schlesinger also notices that, until World War II, professional historians did not consider contemporary history as part of their field of research, and that the history written by people who lived through the events they described was thought of as heresy, and dismissed as memoir writing. Or, what we find in Iorga’s works, namely in his “daily notes”—not to be confused with his memoirs which, as we have seen, was a genre he cultivated as such—is that not only did he record the facts that he observed, but he also analyzed and inscribed them in the process of historical evolution, which is what distinguishes his writing from that of authors with a predilection for the same genre. This means that the person who wrote down the social facts was, at the same time, a professional historian who had the capacity to find among them the historical facts. For this reason, Nicolae Iorga’s notes count as a true reconstruction of contemporary history or, as we refer to it nowadays, a reconstruction of the “history of the present” (in the English-speaking world) or of the “ultra-contemporary history” (in French culture). Another thing worth emphasizing: Iorga was aware that he was a pioneer in Romanian historiography (in the European one, we dare say). In 1938, referring to the *History of the Romanians*, vol. 10, on which he was still working, he said that he wished to “set some guidelines” for the Romanian historiographical research, and that “the young men that will come after me, if they are hardworking and modest, and if they are fortunate to be also intelligent, will bring forth new results and will be able to go further than I have with the little time at my disposal”: N. Iorga, *Conferințe și prelegeri*, vol. 1 (Conferences and lectures)(1943). To which I would add: Iorga’s guidelines and advice beckon even today to these young men, to these professional historians!

**T**HE END of the fourth decade of the last century was not only a time of crisis, but it was also the of the beginning of World War II. Reading Iorga’s *Journal*, I was curious to see, besides the events of that period that the scholar registered, how the participant-historian perceived the episodes that anticipated the greatest world conflagration. I was also interested in the way he understood the behavior of the political and intellectual leaders in Romania, and

the frame of mind of the Romanians and of the Europeans. Iorga's life was cut short on 27 November 1940, when he was assassinated, an act which will forever be a blemish on our history. He was killed by a group of Romanian citizens who claimed to be the "new generation" of restorers of Romania. In fact, eight decades ago, the Romanians suffered the greatest successive disasters in their history: the territorial losses of the summer and the winter of 1940 (Bessarabia, northern Transylvania, southern Dobruja—the national achievement from the end of World War I was, thus, undone), the devastating earthquake in November and, at the end of the same month, the assassination of Iorga along with that of some other political and intellectual leaders in Romania. Moreover, the Romanian and the European society saw how Romania failed to defend its territory due to the defeatism and the cowardice of its leaders, how a personality like Iorga fell victim to the criminal actions of extremists, being denied even a funeral worthy of a true Teacher of the Romanian Nation. That is why, when I evoke this chapter of our past, I cannot help but ask: who were we and who are we now, we, the Romanians? Answering these questions will help us better define the spirit of the times, which was the task of the historian, according to Iorga.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> volume of the *History of the Romanian People* the historiographic investigation stops at the moment when, in February 1938, King Carol II imposed a new constitution. In the *Journal of the Final Years*, Iorga explains how this act would have been justified if it had indicated a "commitment towards national work," and not, as it actually did, an attempt to cover "the ongoing corruption." The citizen Iorga observed that the governing of the country was entrusted to people who were unqualified to manage public affairs and who were only interested in providing benefits to their political protectors and to themselves (9 December 1938): "I am telling the King plainly that it is enough that those who want the Government are crooks, there is no need for the Government itself to be crooked" (pp. 114–115). Every day the Romanians were getting worrying proof that the world was changing, but no one in power told the citizens what could happen. As a royal adviser, Iorga tried to bring it to the king's attention that "The ministers are left too much to their own devices." Seeing who took part in Queen Marie's funeral procession he exclaimed: "The twilight of a generation!" because his epoch was under assault from political radicalism, incited by the so-called "1922 generation," that spread chaos while trying to provoke revolutions, without having a clear vision for the evolution of the Romanian society. Or, as Ortega y Gasset affirmed about the similar phenomenon in Europe, some factions of "the youth" believed that they only had rights in society and no obligations towards society. In a conference in the autumn of 1938, Iorga used these words to describe the age he lived in:

*The world finds itself at a difficult time. There has never been more hatred, accompanied by an even more hideous crudeness in the unanswered demands that want to join in, in order to resurface and start oppressing. Humanity seems to have lost its mind or to have cowardly chosen to walk sheepishly behind this recklessness. Flags of death and annihilation are waved by fanatical hands, shaken by the frenzy of killing, calling for the death of all the things that were done with so much honest labor since the end of the carnage of the Great War.*

The historian had warned the king, the heads of the government and the ministers about all these things, he wrote countless articles, he pleaded at the University and at the Academy. And, despite his age, he continued to travel to towns and villages in the country and to some crucial places in Europe so as to make the Romanian and the European population aware of the troubled situation in Romania, particularly in Transylvania and Bessarabia, and of the fact that “war is looming.” During his travels and in his daily conversations with the political and cultural circles, Iorga observed that the propaganda that Moscow and Budapest were disseminating using various channels, but mostly the radio, was inducing a state of unrest and fear in the population. Iorga thought that the Romanian authorities should have taken vigorous action against this propaganda, as he did himself whenever he had the chance.

But the interests of the local authorities were of a different nature, as Iorga’s notes show. Their concern was to censor the opinions of Iorga, the professor and the scholar. And, since the “Censorship” was an official institution, its efforts went towards blocking all attacks on the Hungarians, the Soviets and the Germans etc., on the grounds that it was countering the irrational fear of conflict and war. For having criticized the totalitarian system in Romania, Iorga wound up with “a record at the Security Office” which accused the scholar of speaking improperly of the king and of the ministers in his university lectures. As a consequence, he was summoned “at the Ministry” to justify his actions, he had problems at home and at the university. This context made Iorga note that his correspondence was frequently opened and some documents and photographs were even extracted, that “spies” acting at someone’s orders were twisting his words, that the “five Security bureaus,” which were at the king and the prime minister’s disposal, were “fabricating” a series of “hogwash stories.” He described the situation as a “Phanar”—also pointing, with that, at some of the Transylvanian leaders—and remarked that “I live among madmen and the Kingdom of Romania has turned into a nuthouse.” During the Crown Council of 17 March 1939, drawing yet again the attention of the king and of the political leaders on the grave dangers the country was facing, including the risk of territorial losses, he advocated true national unity, which would give Roma-

nia a fighting chance, because, he declared, “resistance is a duty.” Iorga could not refrain from remarking, regarding this duty, that “our peasants met all the expectations” when called for service in the army reserve, while the “educated men” demonstrated “an appalling behavior.”

It was for resistance that Nicolae Iorga pleaded when, in 1940, the Romanian authorities were faced with deciding the fate of Bessarabia and Transylvania. However, the majority of the Romanian political leaders of the time were saying one thing and doing another. After the Crown Council, where it was agreed to surrender Bessarabia (28 June 1940), Iorga used these words to describe the conduct of those responsible for the decision:

*the military behaved deplorably and the young ministers—whom we were forced to listen to one after the other—even more so, as for Tătărescu, “the loud pelican,” and Argetoianu, they were odious. Only the representatives of Transylvania and Bessarabia were dignified.*

Iorga was particularly virulent towards the political and military leaders who had been constantly complaining that enormous sums of money were being spent on equipping and modernizing the army to withstand foreign aggression, only to support, when the danger turned out to be real, the army’s defeatism and to encourage the same outlook in the Romanian people, while it was the corruption of these very men that had drained the budget allocated for national defense. Iorga anticipated such attitude from political leaders already in 1939, when the government agreed to sign “the second Treaty of Bucharest” with Hitler’s Germany. After Prime Minister Armand Călinescu fell himself victim to political assassination, Iorga met with some political and military leaders (Arthur Văitoianu, Florea Țenescu, Gheorghe Tătărescu, etc.) and found out that in their opinion the army and the country were not prepared to withstand both the “internal tragedy” and the “external tragedy,” that “we are not fighting” for the country. This led the historian to write (24 September 1939):

*I feel a cold wind sweeping through me this rotten morning, but above of all I feel tremendous disgust. Why should I carry on having intimate conversations within the Government and outside the Government and become an accomplice to this group of people that don’t believe in their own country? I shall detach and go home.*

Yes, Iorga was already “detached” from these leaders, nonetheless he tried to educate them, to guide them and even to help them, because he believed that “a nation doesn’t die” and because he had an unparalleled sense of duty, manifest



in the generation that had created Greater Romania, the duty to do everything possible in order to help develop the country. Because of that, after having accepted his limits, Iorga was to receive vulgar threats, death notes—of which the authorities were aware—, he was to be humiliated on the political scene and at the university. In the autumn of 1940, confined to his study, he was still sending messages to the leaders of the country, saying that “we should not insult, as the controlled press nonetheless does, those that helped us build Greater Romania, which today is falling apart.” Although his interlocutors were fewer and fewer, the historian warned that he would not cease to stand up for the truth and for the Romanian people. On 1 October 1940 he found out from reading the papers that he had been sent into retirement by the university. On the same day, the president of the Romanian Academy notified him that he was no longer allowed to lecture at the science and culture forum. In order for him to survive and to support some of the cultural and scientific institutions he had, up until then, financed from his own pocket, he was forced to ask for loans, which he received only with great difficulty.

His family was “managing the hardship heroically.” At the entrance of his house “two young men” were always standing guard. His last journal entry is dated 26 November 1940. In it, the great scholar noted once more that the leaders in Romania had given the country a dangerous direction. On 27 November 1940, Iorga was cowardly assassinated. The news shocked the entire world! Dozens of universities and academies in Europe and America raised the Romanian flag. In Romania, the funeral for the scholar was held almost in secret, following the instructions and the wishes of the government. The year 1940 was a disaster for Romania. N. Iorga’s *Journal* gives a very good and plausible account of the circumstances that led to that situation. A history of the end of the fourth decade of the last century will not be complete without this essential historical document—the daily notes written by the great historian.

Reading the last of Iorga’s *Journals* we witness the enormous drama that the historian experienced as he came to understand the dangers facing Romania at the end of the interwar period, especially since he was capable of foreseeing the consequences for the country and for the Romanian society. Nonetheless, the Teacher of the Nation continued to send mobilizing messages to help put an end to the national crisis. In 1940 he published, in Vălenii de Munte, an essay entitled *Afirmarea vitalității românești* (The affirmation of Romanian vitality) in which he reminded Romanians and their leaders that “no one can banish logic from the field of history.” He was illustrating this with a few experiences from contemporary Romanian history, in particular with those that brought about national independence (1877), when the Romanian nation demonstrated it was

capable “to act as one,” to be “moderate and intelligent,” which lead them to a “most unequivocal success” (p. 165). The logical historical conclusion that the historian drew and wanted to share with his contemporaries, who were searching for solutions to the existential crisis of 1940, was that they should follow the same path he had described. However, nobody listened to his advice: the leaders of the country were too preoccupied with their own well-being and with keeping up with the times. As a consequence, the country was torn to pieces and many of its most loyal defenders were sacrificed at the whims of the decision-makers of that decadent era.

**T**O READ a work written by N. Iorga is an intellectual endeavor that invites one to reflect on his vast and diverse body of work. It reminds one of encyclopaedism, of high spirituality and of devotion to the historiographic specialization and professionalism. My history master, the Academician D. Prodan, whom I mentioned at the beginning, reflecting on the experience of reading Iorga’s works, noted (1990):

*I always found it to be a difficult read, which overwhelms with the deluge of ideas and with his overflowing style, a work that requires meditation; he made me feel small, like a young apprentice intimidated by his commanding stature.*

Paraphrasing him, I venture to say that N. Iorga’s volume, *Journal of the Final Years* is an easy read, because of the familiarity of the author’s style, but is a hard book to get an intellectual grip on, because it demands a good knowledge of world history and of Romanian history up to World War II. Professor Andrei Pippidi has supplied this edition with a rich array of explanatory notes, which make Iorga’s text perfectly intelligible for the reader that doesn’t know all the details of the history of that age. Furthermore, the bibliographical references facilitate and open the way for new historiographic research. In fact, by editing this *Journal*, Andrei Pippidi proposed not only a more complete image of the participant historian N. Iorga, but also the continuation of his historiographical work, as well as a systematic publication of his daily notes, correspondence, socio-political, and literary writings. This can represent a valuable work program at the Romanian Academy for a least one generation of researchers operating within its institutes of history and literature.

