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The Salience of “New Man” Rhetoric in Romanian Fascist Movements, 1922–44

Roland Clark

One of the recurring problems in the study of interwar fascism is that fascists did not always mean what they said or say what they meant. As the sociologist Rogers Brubaker has argued, when politicians speak about “the nation” they are articulating a political stance rather than an “ethnodemographic fact.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Terrorist attacks and assassinations by fascist groups against state officials showed that fascist “nation-statism” was more about promoting individual fascist leaders than about supporting the nation-state in its existing form.[[2]](#endnote-2) If fascist speech about the nation was ambiguous, how much more so was their talk about new men? Although he acknowledges that speech about new men was common to most fascist groups, Roger Eatwell has emphasized that almost everyone meant something different by the term. Some thought they were creating new elites, others emphasized fascist new men as warriors. Some applied the term to women, while others ignored them completely. For some fascists creating the new man meant using group activities to teach their followers to speak and act like fascists, and for others it meant encouraging individual acts of heroism.[[3]](#endnote-3)

In Romania, rhetoric about the new man was so common within the country’s most prominent fascist movement, the Legion of the Archangel Michael, that Valentin Săndulescu and Rebecca Haynes have suggested that the desire to create new men was the driving force behind most of the movement’s activities. In particular, legionaries used their extensive system of voluntary work camps to instill fascist values and to shape fascist bodies that would build a glorious new Romanian nation-state.[[4]](#endnote-4) The problem with this interpretation is that the movement preceded the ideology that apparently defined it, and continued after the rhetoric of national rebirth and the new man had faded away. Nor was the concept of the new man stable or even clearly defined during those years when legionaries used it to characterize their program. To describe the Legion as a movement animated by an ideal is to put the cart before the horse. As other historians have noted, it was the charisma, not the speeches, of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and other prominent legionaries that caused many sympathizers to join the Legion, and state violence against legionary activists shaped their activities more profoundly than rhetoric about new men ever did.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Traian Sandu has argued that the Legion had a “double character,” claiming that its ideology of the new man was simply rhetoric for intellectuals that had little relation to the novel mobilization structures and use of technology that attracted peasants.[[6]](#endnote-6) The rise of new man rhetoric did closely coincide with the ascendance of intellectuals as legionary propagandists, but ideas nonetheless matter as signifiers that identified activists with a political phenomenon of pan-European proportions. Europeans of the 1930s associated new men with fascism in the same way as they identified the goose step, paramilitary uniforms, muscular male bodies, and the “Roman” salute with fascism.[[7]](#endnote-7) By speaking about new men and national rebirth, legionaries and other Romanian activists and politicians associated themselves with Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, and other fascist leaders abroad. By tying their rhetoric of the new man specifically to the Romanian context, they emphasized the local peculiarities of their movement and argued that they were not simply importing a foreign ideology. The context in which one spoke about new men mattered. Bolsheviks and Christian missionaries also wanted to create new men, and gymnastics associations also cherished muscular masculinity, but the phrase signified fascism when it was articulated by people who also identified themselves with other fascist markers.

Constantin Iordachi has argued that legionaries’ ideas about national palingenesis emerged out of nineteenth-century nationalist mythologies, and Rebecca Haynes that talk of new men was a result of their Orthodox Christianity, but when legionaries first spoke about new men it was to contrast themselves with corruption they said was destroying the country.[[8]](#endnote-8) “Anti-politicianism,” as the legionaries called it, evolved into rhetoric about new men quite slowly and predated the Legion by roughly fifty years. The ultranationalists who populated the Legion and other fascist movements in Romania during the 1930s had been criticizing “politicianism” and the ruling elites’ willingness to tolerate Jews since the nineteenth century. Claiming that politicians were corrupted by Jews allowed ultranationalists to maintain that they, and not the state’s legally elected leaders, had the true interests of the nation at heart. Anti-Semitic student activists developed their own critique of their country’s rulers when successive governments refused to exclude Jews from the universities, and early legionaries contrasted their youth and “purity” with the corrupt political machinations of their elders. Legionary discourses about youth were initially aimed at other ultranationalists; former allies they claimed had become politicians. Over time, legionary propagandists articulated an ideal type of fascist men and women and began calling these people “new men” (*oameni noi*), the Romanian phrase being gender neutral. Legionaries talked more about new men from 1933 onward, once fascism became more popular as a political option abroad and a new political climate inside the country made violence less useful as a means of propaganda. The phrase disappeared from legionary discourse after Codreanu’s death in November 1938, only to reappear when the Legion came to power in September 1940, this time simultaneously as a way of glorifying dead legionary heroes and as a new catchphrase for fascist youth groups and institutions.

Fascists and anti-Semites, 1921–27

The first explicitly fascist movements in Romania were the Italian–Romanian National Fascist Movement led by Elena Bacaloglu and the National Romanian Fascists (FNR), led by D. C. Pădeanu. Both looked to Mussolini’s Italy for inspiration and support, and Bacaloglu’s organization merged with FNR in late 1922. The Fascists grew briefly in popularity over the next two years, with one police report estimating FNR’s membership numbers in the tens of thousands.[[9]](#endnote-9) Leadership struggles destroyed the organization, however, and its members soon joined other ultranationalist causes. FNR publications emphasized radical social reforms that included universal literacy, industrialization, new roads and train lines, and a corporatist economic agenda.[[10]](#endnote-10) Fascists talked about “saving the Fatherland” and of securing the hegemony of ethnic Romanians in the state, but in contrast to the fascist elite Mussolini promised to create, FNR propagandists humbly allied themselves with “needy Romanians.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

Other right-wing groups, such as Constantin Pancu’s Guard of the National Conscience, Romanian Action, and A. C. Cuza’s National Christian Defense League (LANC), also ignored the Italian rhetoric about new men. Articles in the Guard’s newspaper focused on the threat of Bolshevism and on protecting worker’s rights.[[12]](#endnote-12) Romanian Action publications, in contrast, fixated on excluding Jews and other “foreigners” from universities, businesses, and public life.[[13]](#endnote-13) LANC was by far the largest organization on the Romanian extreme right during the 1920s. It too focused primarily on attacking Jews and Bolsheviks, but maintained close ties with and recommended texts by anti-Semites in France, Germany, Hungary, and the United States.[[14]](#endnote-14) Cuza also adopted the swastika in 1922, a year after the German National Socialists, but claimed that it was an ancient symbol of salvation without acknowledging any Nazi connection.[[15]](#endnote-15) LANC’s program during the 1920s was a negative one, emphasizing the Jewish peril and Cuza’s struggle against it without articulating any positive vision of what the organization might offer the country if it came to power.

Romanian observers were nonetheless well aware that Italian fascists were dedicated to creating new men. In his 1927 study of fascism, the renowned sociologist Petre Andrei equated Mussolini’s new man with Friedrich Nietzsche’s Übermensch. According to Mussolini, Andrei wrote, “the fascist hero, who has the right and the duty to lead others, will be produced gradually through the awakening of the spirit of the people and through social and biological transformations. This is thus an activist and aristocratic ideology.”[[16]](#endnote-16) Though he never mentioned them explicitly here, Andrei’s major concern was a large anti-Semitic student movement that had tormented Romanian universities since December 1922. Andrei was an outspoken critic of the student violence, and he lived in such fear of revenge that he committed suicide when the Legion came to power.[[17]](#endnote-17) Andrei noted that young people in particular found Fascism attractive, and suggested that the same desire for establishing themselves motivated both Italian Fascists and Romanian youth.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Youth and purity, 1922–28

The students claimed that their goal was to limit the number of Jews allowed to study at Romanian universities, but they also referred to themselves as heroes, hinting at a concept of new men that would become explicit several years later.[[19]](#endnote-19) The lyrics of a song published in the student movement’s newspaper in May 1923 argued that the students could save the nation because of their youth and purity:

Brother students, great apostles

Good and strong Romanians,

Today our gentle nation

Awaits its salvation!

From a danger that threatens it

With a consuming flood

Of leprous Yids

Who spread out ever further

We are its apostles

Young and spotless,

Our nation calls out together with us

To pay the valleys their tribute.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Whereas older ultranationalists hesitated to identify themselves too closely with Italian Fascism, the students proudly noted that they were the first to oppose “individualism” in the name of the nation and announced that “we will unfurl the flag of a cultural fascism of which students will be the avantguarde.”[[21]](#endnote-21) The students’ conception of heroism was predominately a masculine ideal, but women were nonetheless very active in the student movement as propagandists, vandals, and advisers.[[22]](#endnote-22)

The notion that the students embodied a new spiritual ideal became popular during 1923, when several student leaders were arrested as part of a plot to assassinate leading business and political figures. In his confession to the police one of the accused, Ion Moţa, described the student movement as a “holy” cause, and another of the arrested students, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, claimed to have had a religious experience in front of an icon of the Archangel Michael in the prison chapel.[[23]](#endnote-23) Codreanu, Moţa, and others had supported Cuza’s LANC since its inception, but broke with their former professor in 1927 after a power struggle split the party’s leadership. Codreanu named his splinter group the Legion of the Archangel Michael, and in the first issue of their newspaper, Moţa wrote that “we do not do politics, and we have never done it for a single day in our lives. We have a religion, we are slaves to a faith. We are consumed in its fire and are completely dominated by it. We serve it until our last breath.”[[24]](#endnote-24) Moţa’s reference to “doing politics” was an attack on Cuza, who the legionaries argued had become just like the politicians they had always fought against. Early legionary publications made frequent references to how young the legionaries were, building on the association of youth with innocence, purity, and future promise. Legionaries are “young in spirit,” one early article explained, “pure in lifestyle, strong and disinterested in battle.”[[25]](#endnote-25)

It took several years before the majority of antisemitic students joined the Legion, but the rhetoric of spiritual youth continued to invigorate student propaganda as well. This was not an anthropological revolution, however, it was supposedly the natural result of generational change. In one article from late 1926 a student writer claimed he was part of a “new generation,” which, he said, was “free of all material preoccupations and purer in spirit than anyone else in society.”[[26]](#endnote-26) When students began a pogrom in Oradea Mare in December 1927, the journalist and future historian of religions Mircea Eliade wrote that the riots were the growing pains of an “authentic rebirth of religiosity.”[[27]](#endnote-27) Their parents who had fought in the First World War called themselves “the generation of fire,” and talk about generations was nothing new in 1920s Romania.[[28]](#endnote-28) The following year Eliade identified himself as the leader of a group of intellectuals he called “the young generation,” and other young intellectuals quickly followed suit, criticizing their elders and defining their generation in spiritual terms.[[29]](#endnote-29) Threatened both by the audacity of Eliade and his cohort and by the violence of the student movement itself, leading social commentators quickly responded, enshrining the idea of a “new generation” in Romanian public discourse.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Legionary heroism, 1927–33

Legionaries did not use the phrase “new men” until 1933, but they did claim the students’ ideology of youth and heroism as their own and incorporated it into their propaganda and their internal documents. Corneliu Georgescu, who had been arrested together with Codreanu and Moţa in connection with the 1923 assassination plot, bemoaned the lack of heroism in recent Romanian history and encouraged his fellow legionaries to “break down the murderous wall of apathy with your swords! Let in fresh air to raise up breasts grown mouldy from waiting for sacrifice and soon new pages of glory will be written into the History of this Nation!”[[31]](#endnote-31) Legionary propaganda leaflets from 1930 told Romanians that “when your voice and arm will proclaim the Victory, Romania shall reawaken. Peonies will bloom—your children. The foreigner will respect you. The enemy shall fear you.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Legionary heroism was not limited only to men, and one newspaper article from 1933 explained that “a legionary sister must be a fearless warrior and a new ideal. Her home must be an altar and her soul a ray of pure sunlight. Her soul, her mind and her hands are for serving the Legion.”[[33]](#endnote-33)

Legionaries were ambivalent on the question of whether heroes were born or made. Sometimes they implied that Romanians simply had to stand up and fight. One leaflet from 1930 stated, “History calls you once again! Come as you are. With broken arms, worn out feet. With pierced lungs.”[[34]](#endnote-34) Another newspaper article defined national rebirth as “a *reawakening* of the slumbering energies of the nation and involves restoring them to their normal creative functions.”[[35]](#endnote-35) Other publications placed the onus on mothers to “give a soldier to king and country” by raising their children “in the Christian faith” because morality had to be restored to Romanian society, which was “beginning to collapse under the enemy’s boot.”[[36]](#endnote-36) Legionaries established youth sections called “Blood Brotherhoods” whose goal was “to create good Romanian soldiers for tomorrow.”[[37]](#endnote-37) Similarly, when they began making bricks for their new headquarters at Ungheni, near Iaşi, they called the brickworks “the first anti-Semitic university in the world.”[[38]](#endnote-38) Even though they believed in their own potential, legionaries thrilled at the idea of improving themselves. A police report from 1929 stated that “Corneliu Z. Codreanu will soon establish a Christian student society aimed at cultivating sport and physical education among its members. It will focus in particular on boxing, fencing, and marksmanship in order to teach them how to handle a gun and to cultivate a sense of honour.”[[39]](#endnote-39) “The only thing the ‘[Iron] Guard’ does,” Codreanu wrote about the Legion’s paramilitary formations in a circular from 1933, “is constructive educational work.”[[40]](#endnote-40)

More explicitly fascist references to “new men” entered legionary discourse once intellectuals joined the movement. One of the most dedicated of these men, the law student Vasile Marin, wrote his doctoral dissertation on Italian Fascism in 1932. Marin had been involved with anti-Semitic student activism during the 1920s and joined the Legion soon after it was founded in 1927. He argued that Italian Fascists held “an organic, historical view of society, opposed to the atomistic and materialistic traditional view because it thinks about society in terms of its group life, which surpasses that of individuals.”[[41]](#endnote-41) Marin simultaneously emphasized the Fascist idea of “mass man” alongside the idea of “new men” as fascist heroes. He quoted Mussolini’s statement that “Fascism wants active and engaged men of action; it wants them virile, aware of and ready to confront the difficulties of the world.”[[42]](#endnote-42)

Once legionaries began winning minor electoral victories, two prominent right-wing intellectuals came out in support of them: Nichifor Crainic in May 1932 and Nae Ionescu in November 1933.[[43]](#endnote-43) Both men used their positions as university professors and newspaper editors to establish themselves as patrons and mentors of aspiring writers, whom they encouraged to join the Legion. In his newspaper *Calendarul* (The calendar), Crainic praised Italian Fascism’s “moral foundation” and claimed that Hitler was creating “a Christian spiritual front” against atheism and Bolshevism.[[44]](#endnote-44) Commenting on legionary marches, he wrote that “in its vigour this new spirit, this young spirit, toughened through suffering, strengthened by persecution, ignited by revolt, dares to give fresh moral energy to our Romania, crushed as it has been under the hooves of so many adventurers.”[[45]](#endnote-45) In *Cuvântul* (The word), Ionescu argued that any political revolution must be preceded by a “spiritual revolution” and that Romania required “a new spirituality” if it was to have a positive future.[[46]](#endnote-46)

In October 1932, journalists influenced by Crainic and Ionescu collaborated with a handful of legionary activists to publish a short-lived newspaper entitled *Axa* (The axis).[[47]](#endnote-47) In its pages they elaborated legionary doctrine for the first time, evoking “the example of fascism” as their model.[[48]](#endnote-48) “The legionary state will create a new aristocracy,” wrote Mihail Stelescu, “an aristocracy of work, honesty and genius. The blue-blooded aristocracy of money and sloth will be cut out at its roots.”[[49]](#endnote-49) Vasile Marin called his generation “the demiurges of the new world who carry a pickaxe in one hand and a trowel in the other, with which they will build a new life”.[[50]](#endnote-50) Two months later he wrote that “the Nietzschean principle of existence has caught on, fertilizing the spirit of our Romanian generation,” which has begun a political struggle to institute an “ethical state” on new foundations.[[51]](#endnote-51) Legionaries experienced increasing police persecution in the months before the national elections of December 1933 and claimed that it was because “the forces of conservatism” were afraid of the “epoch-making” forces of Fascism, Nazism, and other revolutionary youth organizations such as the Legion.[[52]](#endnote-52)

It was in the pages of *Axa* that legionaries first used the term “new man,” applying it to Codreanu as a representative of the movement as a whole. Constant Onu wrote,

The new systems, the epochal reforms which reorganized the lives of entire peoples exist thanks to a certain type of person . . . the new man [*omul nou*]. The Italian revolution succeeded through Mussolini; the German revolution through Hitler. Both had the unanimous and devoted support of the youth behind them; youth imbued with the novelty and virtue characteristic of those leaders and religions which illuminate its path. . . . The new man is the one whose name Romanian youth speak with awe and in whom they believe fanatically. Nameless multitudes come to him with a rare reverence and are inspired by his myth. He is, and apart from him there is no other.[[53]](#endnote-53)

In the same issue another legionary activist, Ion Banea, waxed poetic in his praise of Codreanu, emphasizing the image of “the Captain” as a new sort of warrior: “He is a boundary stone; a border. A sword stretched between two worlds. One old, which he confronts bravely, destroying it completely. The other new, which he creates, gives life, and calls into the light.” Codreanu, Banea said, personified the nationalist movement as a whole.[[54]](#endnote-54) The image of Codreanu as a messianic figure solidified from this point onward, and four years later Traian Herseni wrote of Codreanu that “the Captain is not chosen by men, nor is he made a leader; he is sent by the people’s destiny, which does not err, born that he might save our country.”[[55]](#endnote-55)

In articulating a leader cult, speaking of national revolution and rebirth, and in evoking the concept of new men, legionary intellectuals explicitly associated themselves with fascist movements elsewhere in Europe. Whereas early legionary newspapers such as *Pământul strămoşesc* (The ancestral land) had publicized only anti-Semitic movements abroad, in *Axa* legionaries exhibited their fascist credentials by reproducing rhetoric fascists were using across Europe. Legionaries spoke less and less about anti-Semitism from 1934 onward, and their vicious campaign against Jews remained muted until they came to power in September 1940, when attacks on Jews suddenly became a key legionary repertoire once again.

There were a number of reasons for this change of tactics, which the legionary journalist Mihail Polihroniade identified as the moment when the Legion “matured.”[[56]](#endnote-56) On one level it had to do with the increasing influence of intellectuals over legionary policy, a development that led to factionalism and rivalries within the movement.[[57]](#endnote-57) Factionalism, in particular Mihai Stelescu’s decision to break away and form his own movement in 1934, caused Codreanu to rethink the movement’s structure and core ideology.[[58]](#endnote-58) New members began joining the Legion in droves, and Codreanu responded by insisting on “a rigorous examination” and “grueling tests” for new recruits in order to protect the Legion’s elitist reputation and to distinguish them from the “true legionaries” who had been killed in 1933.[[59]](#endnote-59) One police report noted that “Codreanu says that he does not need a large number of followers, but a few well-disciplined soldiers.”[[60]](#endnote-60) Talking about “new men” rather than “youth” now became increasingly necessary as the movement’s leadership aged. Codreanu turned thirty-four years old in 1933, and most of the other leaders were also more than a decade beyond their university studies. As Oliver Jens Schmitt has shown, from this point on a smaller and smaller percentage of legionaries were younger than twenty-five years old.[[61]](#endnote-61)

As the legionaries discovered after they assassinated the prime minister, Ion Gh. Duca, in December 1933, street violence and clashes with police also provoked official repression and the movement as a whole suffered.[[62]](#endnote-62) Whereas in 1930 Codreanu had supported acts of violence against his enemies even when he had had nothing to do with them, when someone attacked the rector of the University of Iaşi, Traian Bratu, in 1937, Codreanu publically denounced the deed as “disgraceful.”[[63]](#endnote-63) Anti-Semitism also had only limited electoral appeal and failed to distinguish the Legion from other right-wing parties, which was a problem that the legionaries were only too aware of.[[64]](#endnote-64) Most importantly, however, after Hitler’s rise to power adopting pan-fascist rhetoric and affiliating the Legion with European fascism increased the number of votes in their favor when national elections came around.[[65]](#endnote-65)

New men, 1934–38

In 1935, Codreanu published a book entitled *Pentru legionari* (For my legionaries), which was part memoir, part manifesto, and became required reading for legionaries in their weekly meetings.[[66]](#endnote-66) In it he explained that the Legion had no political program because “this country is suffering from lack of *men*, not of programs. . . . Therefore,” he said, “we don’t need to create programs but *men, new men*.”[[67]](#endnote-67) The idea of “creating legionaries” shaped the movement’s activities and propaganda profoundly from 1935 until Codreanu’s death in 1938, with General Cantacuzino ordering legionaries to swear to behave with “honesty, honour, order, love of work, and faith in God”—all attributes that should characterize new men.[[68]](#endnote-68) “A new style of living was born together with the Legion,” wrote Ernest Bernea in 1937, one which “knows how to distinguish the light from the darkness and life from death.”[[69]](#endnote-69) Comparing the legionaries to mystics, the student leader Gheorghe Furdui wrote that creating new men involved “the infiltration of certain values into one’s consciousness, living them organically with the help of all of the spirit’s attributes, with the goal of being able to identify them with the spirit, giving birth to that ineffable and irrational warmth inside that irresistibly leads to [new] realities and achievements.”[[70]](#endnote-70)

In 1933, Codreanu had written a *Cărticică şefului de cuib* (Little handbook for nest leaders), which laid out what his followers should do in their regular meetings and was the definitive guide to legionary conduct.[[71]](#endnote-71) He now followed through on his promise to impose rigorous conditions on new members, and instituted membership cards, ranks, and functions, all organized according to a strict hierarchy.[[72]](#endnote-72) The behavior of legionaries was to be monitored by a group called “Legionary Control,” who periodically investigated how legionaries in positions of responsibility conducted the movement’s affairs.[[73]](#endnote-73) Codreanu was interested not only in catching thieves but also in reprimanding those who were not sufficiently careful with the Legion’s money.[[74]](#endnote-74) He also issued “Ten Commandments” that “the legionary must follow so as not to wander from his glorious path in these dark times.” The commandments emphasized following orders, mistrusting nonlegionaries, refusing bribes, bickering and giving shallow praise, and trusting in God to lead the Legion to victory.[[75]](#endnote-75) In an organization as large as the Legio, not all of these commandments were strictly followed, and Codreanu had to periodically reissue orders about several of them.[[76]](#endnote-76) More specific regulations were introduced over time, such as rules against dueling, insulting women, disrespecting authority figures, gossiping about other legionaries, and displaying excessive joviality.[[77]](#endnote-77) Those who could or would not live up to Codreanu’s expectations were suspended or expelled from the Legion.[[78]](#endnote-78) “Beware colleagues,” Codreanu wrote, “for through bad behaviour or dishonesty you lose a life of honour and any future joy.”[[79]](#endnote-79)

Different leaders took different approaches to creating new men. Ioan Victor Vojen wrote that “the legionary elite will be selected according to their spiritual purity, their capacity for work, their courage and never-ending faith in the great historic mission of the Romanian people. A stern law will govern every moment in the lives of members of this proud class of men, the harshest law, the law of one who must be a permanent example for others.”[[80]](#endnote-80) Vojen chastised those under his command who he thought were underprepared and established a “school” for new legionaries and potential leaders in 1937.[[81]](#endnote-81) In contrast, Maria Iordache, another legionary leader, told her communist interrogators in 1955 that “our ideal was to form a new man. . . . We realized this ideal through an examination of conscience, through the sincere confession of our mistakes and by going to church. We also read from the Bible at every meeting.”[[82]](#endnote-82) Others held up legionary martyrs as perfect examples of new men whose lives could serve as models for the rest.[[83]](#endnote-83) At a student congress in 1935, Alexandru Cantacuzino told his listeners that “the Romanian of tomorrow must desire severe, tough, heroic existence, to feel at one with the collective and the national good. He must have the cacophonous, cursed characteristics of being violent and extremist. The Romanian of tomorrow must know that he was born to die for his Nation.” He proposed to create this type of new man “through severe spiritual exercises and by flogging the lethargic Romanian spirit.”[[84]](#endnote-84)

Some of the most conspicuous legionary activities of this period involved summer work camps at which legionaries performed voluntary labor, building roads and bridges, or repairing churches and wells. A legionary book promoting the camps explained that they were places “where students, graduates, tradesmen, workers and peasants will become brothers through the same rough and disinterested work for the good of the community.”[[85]](#endnote-85) Codreanu ran his first work camp in 1924, but established them as a trademark of the legionary movement in 1934, expanding the number and scope of the camps dramatically over the next two years. He ordered in 1935 that “this year the work camps have an educational role of creating and of beginning *to create* *the honest man* [*omul corect*]. So far we have created: the man of faith, the man of courage, the man who sacrifices. Now we need the honest man. Honest in every aspect: towards himself, towards the outside world (in bearing, attitude, good faith, respect, etc.), towards the organization, his colleagues, his leaders, his country, and with God.”[[86]](#endnote-86) Participants at legionary work camps took part in daily group exercises, grueling marches, demanding physical labor, and a frugal diet as well as listened to speeches and discussed legionary ideology at length.[[87]](#endnote-87) Those who successfully completed fifteen days at a work camp received a “diploma” testifying to their achievement.[[88]](#endnote-88) In 1936, Codreanu made participation in a work camp or voluntary labor at the legionary headquarters in Bucharest compulsory for all student members of the Legion.[[89]](#endnote-89) Work camps were central to the Legion’s conception of new men during this period. An article from the prolegionary newspaper *Libertatea* (*Liberty*) in 1936 explained that

this legionary host does not publicize itself loudly, it does not bluster in the alleyways, it does not promise the world, but it works silently to build a new life. This new life must be created and led by new men, who do not seek riches and gold squeezed out of the helpless worker, but who must be used to living only from hard and sober work. That is why the Captain of the legionaries has filled the country with work camps where churches are built, houses are erected for the poor, things are built for the public good. Because by working arduously here, intellectuals and city folk—the future leaders of a legionary country—will become used to another life, difficult and hard, and will no longer long for a life of luxury based on theft.[[90]](#endnote-90)

Legionary rhetoric about new men reached its pinnacle in February 1937, after the deaths of two prominent legionaries, Ion Moţa and Vasile Marin, in the Spanish Civil War. “Let us establish Moţa and Marin as the basis of Romania’s future elite,” Codreanu said at their funeral. He ordered his followers to swear “to behave in such a way that you truly be a healthy beginning, a great future Romanian elite, that you will defend the entire legionary movement so that it might not slip into the ways of business, luxury, good living, immorality, the satisfaction of personal ambitions or the desires of human greed.” The crowd then promised,

1. to live in poverty, putting to death in us the desires for material wealth;

2. to live a harsh and difficult life, casting aside luxury and gluttony;

3. to refuse any attempt by one person to exploit another;

4. to sacrifice permanently for the country; [and]

5. to defend the legionary movement with all our strength, against all that might lead it toward compromises and against any deviation from a high moral line.[[91]](#endnote-91)

Fascist alternatives, 1934–41

Legionaries were not the only political group to speak about new men during the 1930s. Like the legionaries, LANC propagandists emphasized how different their electoral campaigns were from those of the major parties in that they avoided fraud, bribery, and corruption, and LANC leaders also carried out periodic inspections of members from other counties.[[92]](#endnote-92) They organized themselves along hierarchical, military lines and formed “assault brigades” to compete with legionary paramilitary units.[[93]](#endnote-93) LANC never explicitly spoke about new men, however, preferring to associate itself directly with Hitler as a political ally.[[94]](#endnote-94) Whereas Codreanu claimed to be quite strict about who was allowed to become a legionary, LANC only limited its membership to “pure-blooded Romanians who have never been condemned under Romanian law and who represent a moral guarantee for the future of the Romanian nation in all social aspects,” explicitly excluding minors, “traitors to the national cause” and members of the armed forces.[[95]](#endnote-95) A similar attitude prevailed when Cuza joined with Octavian Goga and Nichifor Crainic to establish the National Christian Party (PNC) in 1935, with members swearing to obey “ten commandments” that included believing in Christ’s teachings and promising to fight for king and country but not to transform oneself into a new man.[[96]](#endnote-96)

One LANC leader who did appreciate the power of new man rhetoric was Tiberiu Rebreanu, a law student from the University of Cluj who broke with Cuza in 1934 and established his own movement known as The New Group, which adopted the rhetoric and style of Italian Fascism.[[97]](#endnote-97) Most of Rebreanu’s black-shirted supporters were students, and although his movement was supported by the rector of his university, it failed to generate a significant following.[[98]](#endnote-98) Similarly, the brown-shirted members of Swastika of Fire, another LANC splinter group established in 1936 by the lawyer I. V. Emilian, focused on young people but failed to threaten the popularity of either LANC or the Legion. Mihai Stelescu, one of the Legion’s most prominent leaders, broke away to form his own movement in 1934. Stelescu named his group The Crusade for Romanianism, and pledged to follow the same goals as the legionaries but to do so independently of Codreanu, who Stelescu claimed was an imposter who did not live up to his public image.[[99]](#endnote-99) The authorities welcomed Stelescu’s attempt to undermine the hegemony of the Legion, financed his movement with government money, and some members of a more socially respectable nationalist group known as The Cult of the Fatherland agreed to join him.[[100]](#endnote-100) Stelescu’s Crusade was organized according to the same structure as the Legion, and Stelescu toured the country inspecting the state of the organization and giving orders to local leaders.[[101]](#endnote-101) Although the Crusade welcomed prominent individuals such as the formerly communist novelist Panait Istrati, Stelescu also followed Codreanu’s approach to ensuring ideological conformity by expelling Alexandru Talex for publishing “left-wing” articles in the Crusade’s newspaper.[[102]](#endnote-102) Legionaries assassinated Stelescu in 1936, and despite continued scuffles between rank-and-file members of both groups the Crusade quickly faded into insignificance.

In Transylvania, Fritz Fabritius established a Saxon fascist movement known as “Self-Help” in 1922, which affiliated itself wholesale with German Nazism in 1932, going through several name changes as it incorporated and reincorporated every time the government banned its predecessor. Fabritius initially fought for political representation for Saxons, established new Saxon settlements in Transylvania, and opposed capitalism as a predatory force destroying Saxon families. During the 1930s it developed a strong eugenic agenda, however, and adopted discourses about new men from German Nazism.[[103]](#endnote-103) In 1933, Ştefan Tătărescu claimed his version of Saxon National Socialism represented “a new form of collective life which has begun to develop on a superior level to that of today.”[[104]](#endnote-104) Its members were expected to undertake six years of study, including both theoretical and practical subjects, spiritual instruction, physical education, and voluntary labor.[[105]](#endnote-105) Saxon National Socialists recruited girls to live with Nazi families in Germany, telling them that by working as domestic servants for minimal wages they would learn skills and ideology that they could then use when they returned to Romania.[[106]](#endnote-106) Other right-wing commentators respected the Saxons’ methods, which became a model for legionary work camps a few years later.[[107]](#endnote-107) Both Fabritius and Tătărescu were aware of their similarities with both LANC and the Legion and discussed mergers on several occasions.[[108]](#endnote-108)

Not all right-wing groups during the early 1930s styled themselves as fascists and adopted the rhetoric of new men. Grigore Forţu, for example, a teacher at an elite school in Bucharest, established the Citizen’s Block in 1930 and then the Romanian Brotherhood in 1935.[[109]](#endnote-109) Forţu was ideologically similar to the Legion and praised it in his newspaper, one of his supporters writing that Romania needed “a man with authority, harsh and righteous, with an iron first that is ready to strike.”[[110]](#endnote-110) Nonetheless, he refused to subordinate himself to Codreanu and rejected fascism’s openness to the lower classes by associating himself primarily with lawyers, doctors, and generals.[[111]](#endnote-111) Similarly, the economist Mihail Manoilescu maintained close ties to Codreanu from 1934 onward.[[112]](#endnote-112) He wrote prefaces for legionary publications, spoke at legionary events, and offered to subsidize a legionary newspaper, but his Corporatist League did not seek to create new men and did not engage in the sorts of marches or street violence that the Legion was famous for.[[113]](#endnote-113) Another right-wing organization, the Block of the Generation of 1922, represented veterans of the student movement opposed to Codreanu. Instead of swearing oaths and donning uniforms, their meetings involved formal speeches by government ministers with patriotic exhortations to serve one’s country.[[114]](#endnote-114)

In 1935, a dissident of the National Peasant Party, Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, established The Romanian Front and advocated for a *numerus valachius* that would limit the number of Jews allowed to practice certain professions. Contemporaries were convinced that Vaida-Voevod’s anti-Semitism was opportunistic posturing and a testimony to the Legion’s popularity that a relatively mainstream politician should try and imitate.[[115]](#endnote-115) Vaida-Voevod called the legionaries his “children” because when he was prime minister in 1932 he had allowed them to campaign freely, thus giving them their early electoral successes.[[116]](#endnote-116) Members of The Romanian Front held mass rallies, paraded in uniforms and national dress, spoke about “national reawakening,” and organized paramilitary violence.[[117]](#endnote-117) In a similar move, that year King Carol II established The Sentinels of the Fatherland, a youth organization that encouraged physical fitness, staged marches and uniformed mass meetings, and preached “faith and work for king and country.”[[118]](#endnote-118) In 1937, The Sentinels ran summer camps for youth aged seven to eighteen and refused to allow anyone in this age range to attend legionary camps on the grounds that the state had provided much better camps of its own.[[119]](#endnote-119) At these camps young people played sport, listened to patriotic speeches, and performed community service, mirroring the activities on offer at legionary camps.[[120]](#endnote-120) The king encouraged university students to join the Office for the Education of Romanian Youth (ONEF) and the Royal Foundations, giving out scholarships and commandeering university buildings and other public spaces for their activities.[[121]](#endnote-121)

By the time Codreanu was killed in November 1938, the state had monopolized attempts to transform young people into a new type of human being. Official repression meant that legionaries had not been able to run their usual activities since the king appointed a government led by Cuza and Goga’s PNC that January, and after police murdered scores of prominent legionaries in September 1939 in retribution for the assassination of the minister of the interior, Armand Călinescu, the Legion became a clandestine, terrorist organization.[[122]](#endnote-122) Most legionary organizing between late 1938 and September 1940 took place in secret, and there is no record of legionaries speaking about or attempting to create new men during this period. What had been a major building block in the movement’s ideology was, by necessity, muted by the new circumstances that legionaries now found themselves in.

In September 1940, international and domestic politics conspired in such a way that legionaries unexpectedly seized power together with General Ion Antonescu, establishing what they called the National Legionary State. As privileged representatives of this new regime, many legionaries abandoned any attempt to cultivate themselves as fascist new men. Instead, they dedicated themselves to plunder, attacking Jews and confiscating their goods and their businesses in the name of the state.[[123]](#endnote-123) Legionaries drank heavily and vandalized bars, then refused to pay, stole food from shops in the name of their charity, and extorted money from people through protection rackets.[[124]](#endnote-124)

At the same time they published articles in state-sponsored newspapers describing the Legion as a “school of heroism” and promising that schools could now create honest Romanians because they had been rid of Jewish teachers and students.[[125]](#endnote-125) “The legionary state does not only mean a new regime,” the journalist Ion Protopopescu wrote. “The legionary state is the expression of new meaning that has been given to life. It is the establishment of a new era in history that has begun.”[[126]](#endnote-126) Legionaries drew a strict line between the new world that had been established by the creation of the National Legionary State and all that came before. “This new spirit is no longer shared by only part of the country,” Octav Onicescu said, because now all Romanians had apparently embraced legionary ideals.[[127]](#endnote-127) The new regime celebrated the lives of legionary heroes and martyrs, holding commemorations and writing eulogies that exemplified the ideal fascist new men.[[128]](#endnote-128) The regime promised to reopen Codreanu’s work camps and established its own charity, but there is little evidence that many people took the rhetoric of new men particularly seriously any more.[[129]](#endnote-129)

Rhetoric about new men shaped the priorities and public image of the Legion from its propaganda campaigns to internal discipline and summer work camps, but the movement cannot be reduced to its speech about new men. Following the changing salience of new men discourses over time shows that legionary ideology evolved from anti-Semitism and antipoliticianism into a self-conscious movement that used the concept of new men to identify itself with fascist movements abroad. From 1933 onward Codreanu relied on this idea to distance the Legion from the reputation for violence, assassination, and hooliganism it had cultivated during the previous decade and to rebrand it as an organization of youthful elites working for national rebirth. The contingency of the concept became apparent when others showed that they could use it for quite different political ends and by the fact that legionaries themselves abandoned it in 1938 as soon as it was no longer politically expedient. When they came to power in September 1940, legionaries revived the rhetoric of new men to legitimate the regime, but undermined it through repeated acts of murder, theft, and vandalism. Even anti-Semitism did not feature prominently in legionary discourse from 1933 onward, the National Legionary State was characterized much more heavily by acts of violence toward Jews than by attempts to create fascist new men. Words are powerful political signifiers and are often very meaningful to those who use them, but the evolution of the concept of the new man within Romanian fascism demonstrates how difficult it is to reduce a complex movement with a long history to any one ideal, no matter how prominent it may have been at certain times.

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