

# **ORIGINAL PAPER**

# A case of historiographical contradiction: Communist Romania's 1975 anniversary of Michael the Brave's Unification

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#### Abstract:

Anniversaries dedicated to historical events from Romania's history were a regular phenomenon during the years Nicolae Ceauşescu was in power. This was a particularity due to the fact that the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) wanted to gain national legitimacy, which it lacked due to its seizing of power with Soviet aid. One of these celebrated events was the 375 years anniversary of the Unification of 1600, which took place in 1975. It was organized due to the fact that the Communist regime deemed Michael the Brave as the most important figure of its cult of heroes. He gained such an image because of his accomplishment of national unification. This accomplishment was in line with party policy, which promoted the "national unity myth" which stated that throughout history, the Romanians from Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania were aware that they were the same people and their struggle against foreign invaders was done in the name of national independence. Therefore, PCR stressed the importance of "honoring the memory of the ancestors" as a component of its policy. The aim of this paper is to present the historical discourse used by preeminent historians in the papers published on the occasion of the anniversary. We shall observe how some historians presented the Unification using a term that didn't toe with the party line. Their interpretations of this historical event were somewhat different from the official canon. We shall also present the event's celebration from May 20<sup>th</sup> 1975, when a gathering took place at Alba Iulia in honor of the Unification and of the city's 2000 years anniversary. Thus, we shall see what the party's predominantly biased perspective stated. Consequently, we shall have a better picture of how it differed from the one used by historians.

**Keywords:** anniversary; communism; historiography; propaganda; Romania.

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Since the late 1960s, a mythical pantheon was created in Communist Romania, which included the Romanian historical figures accepted by the ruling regime. These figures were models of authority due to the fact that they were given an image of savior heroes, who had precise traits which corresponded to a certain mental code. Nicolae Ceauşescu was presented as their follower, which meant that the Communist regime's ideologists instrumentalized national history to give it a meaning in accordance to the dictator's conception (Cioroianu, 2004: 66-67).

An important exponent of the pantheon was Michael the Brave, who had become since the 19<sup>th</sup> century a symbol of the Romanians' eternal vocation of unification, having the trait of 'unifier' (Cioroianu, 2004: 69). After a period in which the role of Slavs prevailed in historiography, PCR adopted a policy of obtaining political legitimacy by appealing to the country's national history. Therefore, a nationalistic historical discourse was adopted, which resumed and exaggerated the 19<sup>th</sup> century descriptions made to historical figures. To this end, PCR organized political celebrations dedicated to significant events from Romania's history, which meant the publishing of history papers, holding of popular gathering, scientific symposiums or mass shows on stadiums. Such was the case for the 375 years anniversary of Michael the Brave's Unification from 1975. Historian Mirela Murgescu explains how the myth of the voivode had prevailed:

"The strength of the myth lies in its ability to survive regardless of historical conditions, as well as in keeping a mobilizing and educational force even in the moment when the concrete aspirations that he represents were long achieved. For common culture, Michael the Brave is the symbol of the Romanians' revenge in the face off the vicissitudes of history, a moment of military strength, of international recognition and of full integration to the European civilization" (Murgescu, 1995: 71).

For these reasons, the celebration of Michael the Brave's Unification is a part of the logic of the legitimacy policy through history, which the regime organized. The voivode's image of model hero who had faced two empires – the Ottoman and Habsburg ones – matched the one that Ceauşescu had created to himself – an opponent of another 'empire' – the Soviet Union. Thus, to the regime, Michael the Brave's independence policy was by analogy a forerunner to that of the Ceauşescu regime, which promoted a foreign policy based on the ideas of the states' independence and national sovereignty. Therefore, the Wallachian ruler appears to Communist historiography as an exponential character.

The Unification's anniversary was the occasion of publishing new papers, as well as republishing old ones that presented the image and deeds of the voivode. The papers praised Michael the Brave's personality as a consequence of his military actions and the fact that the he was the doer of Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania's first Unification. However, although every history paper had promoted the idea that the voivode had united these states, we shall see how some historians called the occupation of Transylvania and Moldavia a 'conquest'.

## The Unification discourse

The majority of history papers and articles published in honor of the anniversary praised Michael the Brave's rule. Exponential historians promoted a speech that glorified national history since before the anniversary. However, their papers denoted a rather more propagandistic type than a scientific one.

One of these historians, an emblematic figure of the regime's nationalist propaganda, was historian Dumitru Almaş. He deemed history as a lesson, believing that

notions such as 'motherland', 'patriotism' and 'nation' are impregnated from the very beginning in the being of Romanians. Almaş played various cultural roles (Preda, 2014: 319). His scientific history speech is heavily influenced by propaganda. On the anniversary's occasion, Almaş's book *Eroi au fost, eroi sunt încă...: evocări și portrete istorice*, which had initially appeared in 1968, was republished. The way he presents Michael the Brave is relevant to the regime's historical speech, following the glorification policy of the country's past.

In reference to the voivode's deed, Almaş asserts that he was planning the Unification of Transylvania and Wallachia since 1597, along with the imperial cardinal Stephen Jósika. Concerning Michael's military action he says: "Neither Michael, nor his captains, nor chancellor Jósika, Romanian by origin, didn't see Transylvania as a country that had to be conquered, but as a part of the same Romanian body, a body that deserved to be bound in order to maintain its independence, conquered with so many sacrifices in 1595 so it can continue to exist in history" (Almaş 1975: 153).

Concerning the Unification with Moldavia, the historian asserts: "Thus, the thought of bringing Moldavia under the same leadership came as a great commandment of history, it came from the drama of the fight for freedom. It came from a solidarity instinct in the face of peril. It came from the feeling, the seed of conscience conceived since the appearance of our people that Moldavians as well as Transylvanians have the same language, the same faith, the same customs to those from Wallachia. [...] Perhaps the thought of the Unification of Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania wasn't necessarily conceived in Michael's mind and of those around him. [...] It is certain that Michael had embraced it with such power that it gave the impression that it comes from the bottom of his soul and with such bravery he fulfilled it, that he had astounded the world" (Almas 1975: 159).

In an article published in the historical magazine *Magazin istoric*, Dinu C. Giurescu, a preeminent historian, recounts Michael the Brave's battles against the Ottoman Empire, during November 1594-March 1595. He believes that these battles are, as well as those of Michael's predecessors – Mircea The Wise, Dan II, John Hunyadi, Vlad The Impaler, etc. a part of the policy of balancing the relations with the Ottoman Empire, in order to save state continuity. He asserts that due to the 200 years old military and diplomatic victories in the confrontations with the Ottomans before the rule of Michael the Brave, Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania were able to exist uninterrupted and were recognized as such, despite their small size (Giurescu 1975: 2-3).

The author asserts that Michael the Brave led an armed resistance in order to prevent the incorporation of Wallachia to the Ottoman Empire: "It was Michael's final option to oppose by any means the oppression to which his country was subjected, to restore its rights. It was the main guiding idea of his entire rule, pursued and accomplished with all the incomparable adversities that arose against him" (Giurescu, 1975: 3). In order to take his wish to fruition, the voivode initiated a common front of the Romanian countries, which materialized diplomatically, a consequence being the victory from Călugăreni and the subsequent liberation of Wallachia by Michael and Sigismund Báthory. However, the international political changes led the Romanian countries to lose border settlements, in order for the voivodes to be supervised by the Ottomans. An important factor which made the Ottoman Empire intervene in the Romanian medieval states' domestic policy is considered to be the boyar factions' struggle for power. The great gifts towards the Porte were a factor that led to the Romanian countries' economic decline (Giurescu, 1975: 2).

The Unification of Transylvania from 1599 is a consequence of its and Moldavia's foreign policies of close relations with the Ottoman Empire, which came in contradiction to the voivode's aim – Wallachian independence. This is believed to be the cause of his action that led to the victory of Şelimbăr and entering Alba Iulia, without it being suggested by The Habsburg Empire. Subsequently, the occupation of Moldavia is a consequence of the hatred of its voivode Ieremia Movilă towards Michael the Brave (Giurescu, 1975: 4-5). Concerning the voivode's Unification, the author says:

"Michael the Brave's exceptional merit is that he was the first who made the political unity of Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania – a conclusion of a long lasting reality and historical experience, built on continuity, unity of ethnicity and civilization of the Romanian people from the Carpathian fortress, stretching to the Danube and the Black Sea coast. Only in such an unity, the three medieval states had found the basis and strength for defense, with a real efficiency of their being. Achieving this Unification in 1600, be it for a very short time, shows the genius of Michael the Brave's personality" (Giurescu, 1975: 6).

# The 'conquest' term reference

The term conquest' is used in the book edited by Ştefan Pascu – *Mihai Viteazul și Transilvania*, the official paper of the anniversary, which is mainly written professionaly, and it is a good means of knowing Romanian medieval history. The included chapters make a detailed analysis concerning the voivode's reign and personality, with a slight tendency of exaggerating historical facts.

Ștefan Pascu, an important historian during the Communist period, had promoted the regime's historical discourse since this policy had begun. He was a party member, and had significant historiographical contributions throughout the years with regard to Romanian medieval history. Although he is, on the one hand, a professional historian, on the other, his writings are strongly influenced by propaganda. This is the case for his chapter regarding Michael the Brave. Pascu asserts that the voivode wanted Transylvania from the beginning of his rule, as well as the independence and the Unification of the three Romanian countries. He uses epithets such as: 'enterprising' ('întreprinzător'), 'bold' ('îndrăzneț'), 'brave' ('viteaz'), 'audacious' ('temerar'), 'unifier' ('unificator') and 'mighty oak' ('falnic stejar'). He praises Michael for deciding to conquer Transylvania on his own: "Moreover, [...] through an alliance treaty between Michael and Rudolf II, the brave leader revealed his bold intention when he was preparing to conquer Transylvania [...] with or without the will of the imperials" (Pascu, 1975: 14).

One of Pascu's important ideas is that the rule over Transylvania was based on a natural right: the fact that the subjects must be from the same nation as their leaders (Pascu, 1975: 18). Using the term 'conquest' to describe the attacking of Transylvania and the hypothesis of "a natural right" is antithetical, however. Historian Lucian Boia asserts that the Communist interpretation of Michael the Brave's deeds was: "he didn't conquer them (because you can't conquer something that you already own), he unified them" (Boia, 2016: 159). This may be why Pascu also asserts that Michael the Brave was 'obsessed' with the thought of ruling over the territories inhabited by the Romanians of Banat, Maramureş and the Danubian Turkish fortresses, which he wanted to liberate (Pascu, 1975: 22).

Regarding the foreign plots against the voivode, Pascu says: "The eagle's wings who had turned his eyes to the wide horizon had to be cut off" (Pascu, 1975: 23).

Finally, he ends by stating: "The remembrance of those heroic times had awoken in the Romanian people, as Bălcescu had wanted, the sense of a duty to keep and enhance for the future such a precious inheritance: independence and the first unification of Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania" (Pascu, 1975: 24).

However, the myth of national unity isn't promoted in the chapter written by historian Constantin Rezachevici, when speaking about the voivode's political conception of Michael the Brave. Concerning his intentions to unify Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania, Rezachevici asserts: "But there is no account from that time to allow us to highlight in the great voivode's political conception the existence of a cohesive Unification plan under his leadership of the medieval states in the period from the beginning of his reign" (Rezachevici, 1975: 51). However, the author argues that the decision to occupy Moldavia was taken gradually out of the need to participate in the anti-Ottoman struggle (Rezachevici, 1975: 61). By preferentially discussing the case of Moldavia, Rezachevici says: "Only by 1600, after the conquest of Transylvania, Michael took the decision to occupy Moldavia by himself, with no foreign help, naming a ruler under his own authority. Out of his conception expressed by direct reports results that the occupation of the medieval states from west to east of the Carpathians wasn't an act of ambition and courage but a defense necessity. Through the conquest of Transylvania, Michael defended his reign and Wallachia, and through the conquest of Moldavia he prevented a campaign of his enemies in Transylvania" (Rezachevici, 1975: 72-73).

We can observe that the term 'conquest' is again used to designate the voivode's actions, which is curious, especially due to the fact that it is present in the official paper of the anniversary. At a first glance, we can assume that it is a hypothesis of the authors. In reality, the term 'conquest' was used by every historian formed before Communism, a term that was used until the glorification of history started. However, the general use of the term shall be condemned and prohibited by the regime due to the promotion of the idea according to which Romanians had aspired for the medieval states to unite (Boia, 1995: 19). To this end, historian Dumitru Berciu dismisses the conquest hypothesis, by stating:

"The traditions of a language unity, of permanent aspirations towards national unity on the lands of ancient Dacia and of Dacia-Romania, after the fruiting of the Thracian-Dacian fund with Roman sap, had never disappeared. What Michael the Brave had accomplished 375 years ago was the inclusion together of an ancient legacy, fulfilling ideals that existed for centuries in the conscience and blood of our entire people and not a conquest, as some historians from abroad claim, willingly falsifying the historical truth" (Berciu, 1975: 40).

## A criticised book

Some history books that had appeared on the occasion of the anniversary received reviews in historical magazines. Reviews meant to verify historical accuracy and their accordance to the political correctness of that time. Such was the case of Ion Ionaşcu and Victor Atanasiu's book – *Mihai Viteazul*, a monograph that aimed to popularize history. A review published by Nicolae Stoicescu in the magazine *Revista de istorie* made a concise presentation of the book, its strong and weak points, also making suggestions of what could have been better written.

The book of the two historians shows Michael the Brave's life from before his ascension to the throne, the internal organization of Wallachia, and a general image of Europe's 16<sup>th</sup> century political situation. More than half of the book is dedicated to the

third chapter called "Drumul spre unire" ("The road to Unification"), starting with 1594, which is considered the beginning year, until 1600, the year of the Unification. The main emphasis falls on presenting the country's army.

The book is harshly criticized by Stoicescu, the reviewer, who highlights numerous errors concerning the presentation of Wallachia's administration and army. The authors' opinion that the road to unification began in 1594 is deemed as fake, because that in that year the voivode was rather more preoccupied with gaining the country's independence.

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The book is also criticized for not mentioning some 17<sup>th</sup> century voivodes who continued Michael the Brave's policy of unification. Even so, the review ends on a positive tone: "taken as a whole, with all the small shortcomings and errors reported, the monograph of Ion Ionaşcu and Victor Atanasiu can be considered a successful work to popularize the glorious reign of Michael the Brave" (Stoicescu, 1975: 1142)

In their book, Ionaşcu and Atanasiu also present Michael the Brave as 'the cleanest In their book, Ionaşcu and Atanasiu also present Michael the Brave as 'the cleanest symbol of our first Unification', saying about the voivode: "Present not just in legend, but in our entire history, he remains one of the most representative characters of soldiers, and at the same time, of a great commander, under whose banner fought with heroism not "just the soldiers of his country, but also the numerous Balkan hajduks. On most occasions victorious, he drank however, as many other commanders of universal history, from the bitter cup of defeat. He knew, however, to rise every time, strongly, above the times" (Ionaşcu, Atanasiu, 1975: 144). They also add: "The heroic figure [...] of Michael the Brave has no resemblance in our national history. [...] The exceptional personality of this man of boiling energy and great boldness in decisive moments for the destiny of his people had astounded his contemporaries" (Ionaşcu, Atanasiu, 1975: 148).

They also assert that the voivode had been greatly honored in the last 30 years that had passed from the coming to power of the Communist Party: "A number of papers, studies and articles have appeared, which gave a superior value to the historical accomplishment of the great Romanian lord through their materialist-historical interpretation. Also, some older writings dedicated to Michael the Brave were reedited. A title of national pride became the bearing of his names by settlements, institutions, schools, boulevards, streets, etc." (Ionașcu, Atanasiu, 1975: 144).

## The Unification discorse used in the popular gathering from Alba Iulia

In honor of the event, scientific sessions were organized. An important one took place in Bucharest on May 20<sup>th</sup> 1975, at the National History Museum of Bucharest with presentations concerning the city's role during Michael the Brave and how notorious his

actions were on an international scale. The presentations were done mainly by historians like those of Ion Ionașcu: "Mihai Viteazul și Bucureștii; "Originea lui Mihai Viteazul" or Dumitru Almaș – "Răsunetul european al luptei duse de Mihai Viteazul". Another session was organized in the symbolic city of the Unification – Alba Iulia, by party historical organizations, universities and the city's local county committee, with the participation of teachers, researchers, curators, party activists, etc. (Mamina, 1975: 146-148).

At Alba Iulia fortress, the Ceauşescu couple and preeminent party top officials attended a gathering in front of tens of thousands of people carrying placards brought from the entire Alba county. On the walls of the fortress the coats of arms of PCR and of The Socialist Republic of Romania (RSR) were mounted, and on the archways from the entrance to the fortress, flags of PCR and RSR were placed, that framed a portrait of Ceauşescu. With capital letters the ancient names of the city were written: "Apoulon" and "Apulum". Tens of thousands of people took place from the entire county and from around the country, such as Romanians, Hungarians and Germans. The participants carried placards that praised PCR and Ceauşescu. On this occasion, Alba Iulia received the order "Steaua Republicii Socialiste România", first class (Agerpres, 1975: 3).

Ceauşescu held a speech that criticized historians who praised the rule of foreign powers over Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania, and their efforts of insulting the Romanian people: "Despite historical and national obvious realities, such historians assert that through the Unification of Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania, Michael the Brave led a conquest policy. Is the realization of the unification for the first time of all three medieval states in a single state – a legal and objective necessity of history, or, on the contrary, was the dominance of different empires over Romanian territories an expansionist policy, one of conquest? History itself has confirmed the rightness and the objective necessity of the act forged by Michael the Brave, by the subsequent realization of his ideal – ideal of all the Romanians - through achieving in the Modern Age of the Romanian unitary state. This is why Michael the Brave remains an illustrious and progressive figure in the golden book of the Romanian people" (Agerpres, 1975: 3).

Ceauşescu also described the Unification as "a moment of crucial importance in the history of our motherland". He asserted that although the Unification was shortlived, the idea continued to exist: "But the idea of the <u>Unification</u> of the medieval states, the ideals of forming a powerful state on the lands of Dacia could never be killed, because they are deeply rooted in the very blood and spirit of our entire people" (Agerpres, 1975:3).

Ceauşescu also referred to the Székely people as co-participants of Michael the Brave, Stephen the Great and Petru Rareş, naming to this end, as well, the Saxons as participants in the battles of the Romanians throughout time, against foreign invaders. According to Ceauşescu, the goal was "the unity of the Romanian states and the formation of a strong centralized state, which would ensure living conditions, the development of the productive forces of well-being and happiness". This purpose is described as "a legal requirement, a longing of all the inhabitants of these lands regardless of nationality" (Agerpres, 1975:3).

By making such a statement, the Romanian leader follows the political correctness of the time, that promoted the idea of ancestral unity of the peoples inhabiting Romania, however false or true it may be. Therefore, it fits perfectly in the Unification discourse.

After the gathering, a show in honor of the event was organized. It began with the song "Alba Iulia – două milenii" that accompanied coreographic displays representing, in turn the formation and continuity of the Romanian people, the hardships that it had endured throughout time, as well as the struggle for unity and independence. These are pillars of the Communist historical speech of the 1970s. Afterwards, above the walls of the fortress an echo of an elder man from the Apuseni Mountains was heard, who recited a poem that praised the Romanians' ancestral presence in their lands, and their capability to survive in front of foreign invasions. (Agerpres, 1975: 4).

Then, on the background of tulnicas and cannon salvos, an actor who played Michael the Brave entered the gates of the fortress, followed by a crowd of people, reconstituting the Unification of the Romanian medieval states. The actor stated: "Get up, raise your foreheads. From now on, let no son of this nation keep his forehead bowed, fulfilling the will that you all proved by fighting. I, Michael voivode, lord of Wallachia, Transylvania and the entire country of Moldavia, let everyone know that our eternal will has been fulfilled". Then follows a vow of faith of the representatives of the three Romanian medieval states towards the new united land, together with the oath of the ruler (Agerpres, 1975: 4).

## **Conclusions**

We can see that the listed papers present, basically, the same idea: Michael the Brave had united the three Romanian states based on a natural right, as stated by Almaş, Berciu, Giurescu, Pascu and Stoicescu, in his review. On the other hand, although Rezachevici, Ionaşcu and Atanasiu, praised the ruler's actions, they used a more balanced tone. We cannot give an exact explanation for the use of the term 'conquest' by Pascu and Rezachevici, but it is clear that it is not used to challenge the official historiographical canon. We can assume that it is a term rooted in the historical vocabulary of the authors, used in specialized papers for readers with a higher level of knowledge. The condemnation of the use of the term 'conquest' by Berciu and Ceauşescu is an expression of the political correctness used in the historiographical discourse, but also a reply brought most likely to the interpretation by the Hungarian historiography's point of view concerning the Unification. The new historiographical contributions that appeared on the occasion of the anniversary were beneficial. Despite the fact that there were slight ideological deviations, the papers contain numerous valuable historical information.

The gathering in Alba Iulia was a reflection of the official historical discourse. We can observe the promotion of the theory of continuity during the homage show, as well as in the poem recited by the elder man from the Apuseni Mountains. We also note the promotion of the idea of the continuous struggle for existence of the Romanian people in the same show, as in Ceausescu's speech. Finally, we find the promotion of the myth of national unity – the idea of natural right in the discourse of the actor who plays Michael the Brave, represented through the phrase 'the eternal will'. We also see that the event was reconstructed, in which the presence of Romanian popular elements is an important factor in identifying the party with national values.

The covenant of faith is made as a transposition over time to show that PCR pursues a similar policy. Thus, the identification with the ideals of the past takes place, which is an essential component of the legitimacy discourse. At the same time, as Michael the Brave is the main character of the Romanian space in 1600, in 1975 this was the role of Ceauşescu, the one who is transposed, as we have mentioned, as the successor of the nation's heroes.

At the same time, we notice that in this assembly the presence of Ceauşescu's cult of personality manifested through banners, slogans and portraits, an allogeneic aspect, which overshadows the authenticity of the anniversary. These aspects highlight the fact that the event served a political interest, of gaining popular support, regardless of whether the price was the gradual acquisition of social antipathy, due to the fact that ordinary people took a forced part in the demonstration. This is a general phenomenon of Communist Romania that will continue to be perpetuated until the fall of the regime, in 1989.

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