

## DECEMBER 1, 1918 IN TEXTBOOKS OF HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY FROM THE INTERWAR PERIOD

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**ABSTRACT:** *In my article I discuss the role of the textbooks in shaping the historical consciousness of the pupils in the Romanian school system during interwar years. I concentrate on the way in which, by means of school curricula December 1, 1918 was imposed as a lieux de mémoire in the consciousness of the future Romanian state citizens. Although, I elaborate mostly on selected textbooks used during the interwar time, I go beyond these chronological confines and refer to the textbooks during communist era and to those published during post-communist. My choice is motivated by the awareness that school textbooks were/are often used as political tools in building a national cleansed and official historical narrative. Implicitly, regime change brings mutations or at least variables when an historical event was/is interpreted, hence, revealing the influence of ideologies in shaping the reconstruction and the dissemination of the knowledges concerning the past of any national community. By crossing the interwar chronological borders, I would be able to highlight how authoritarian manifestations of political power, notable in all regimes I will refer to, tend to privilege a monolithic interpretation of the historical event(s). The simplest way to establish control was through the replacement of a variety of didactic literature with a unique textbook. As I show, this tendency is not linked, as generally expected, to the communist regime but has its antecedents*

**Keywords:** *December 1; 1918; in History and Geography Textbooks during 1919-1945;*

### Introduction

Romanian historiography has dealt with the events of December 1, 1918 countless times, numerous researches being published over the years in author or collective volumes, the editing of documents related to the event being a priority to give consistency to the event in the national historical consciousness. Numerous studies were dedicated to the moment in symposia of different magnitudes, organized near the date, so charged symbolically in the Romanian historiographical discourse. The authors of many studies have claimed that their approach is objective, according to the Latin dictum sine ura et studio, but the extent to which they have succeeded in this is different. Often, the commemorative symposia imposed a discourse in which the patriotic notes, which are not absent, and at the level of "big/professional historiography", can acquire exacerbated accents. Regarding the unions of 1918, the general line of argument accredits the idea of unity of the Romanians, understood to have been established in an old ideal, pursued for

centuries by all ethnic Romanians, sometimes even consented to by accession and by those who they became national minorities in the new state configuration<sup>1</sup>.

Before speaking concretely about the role of history and geography textbooks in consecrating the place of this event in the public consciousness of the citizens of the national state, which through their contribution were meant to legitimize in the short, medium and/or long term the existence of this project among Romanians everywhere, we must remember that the approach was carried out in parallel with other measures to consecrate the same fundamental moment in the consciousness of Romanians. Of course, the actions in this sense were immediate and immediate to the moment of December 1, 1918. Researches of this kind highlighted how, in the interwar period, the moment of 1918 imposed itself as a national holiday. Through the analysis of newspapers, exhibitions, religious services, parades organized around this event, it was possible to highlight the importance dedicated to the event in the national historical discourse<sup>2</sup>.

## Methods and principles

Such research underlines the significance that politicians and cultural producers or animators have come to give to anniversaries as legislating narratives, as moments of mobilizing popular support and ordering/controlling collective memory<sup>3</sup>.

Of course, school textbooks had the same legitimizing and disciplinary role of collective memory, as well as the same intention to create and reiterate a national identity<sup>4</sup>. In the period immediately after the execution of this act, it was a pressing necessity that the moment be introduced into the national historical narrative capable of fueling the feeling of close adherence and loyalty to the newly formed and resized Romanian state. By developing a speech that appealed to emotions, it was intended that the unions of 1918 be interpreted as the plenary expression of the feeling of common belonging of the Romanians, beyond previous provincial/particular experiences. In the conditions of the existence of regionalist loyalties that are not negligible, which must be diluted - being almost impossible to be totally eliminated -, it is hoped that through education the idea of the legitimacy of the unity of the Romanians will be established and transmitted more firmly and coherently. For this reason, placing the act of December 1, 1918 in the national historical discourse acquired a fundamental significance. It was quickly realized that school textbooks were a very effective channel through which this national project could find support, primarily because, as Jean Marie Thiesse expressed it, "textbooks are a powerful factor of integration, being distributed by hundreds of thousands even millions, if we relate them to several generations. The texts, illustrations and their way of printing are common references throughout the state and for a long time", being, at the same time, intended and potentially read by almost all members of modern society<sup>5</sup>.

The advantage offered by this kind of historiographical production with utilitarian value in the formative sense is an undoubted fact. Influenced by the nationalist spirit - then reaching its moment of perfection and implementation through the creation of national states in Central Eastern Europe - in general, the national historiography of these states will be an essential

political tool in the elaboration of a unified feeling<sup>6</sup>.

The Romanian case is no exception, the historiographical production produced during this period being in the hands of "historians-politicians," who saw in the historian, in the manner of Nicolae Iorga, a "confessor of the nation's unity across political and class boundaries, a preacher of racial solidarity"<sup>7</sup>. Without a doubt, his perspective on this subject is relevant to the way the history and geography of the homeland was taught in school during the interwar period. As in any newly formed national state, in this chronological framework, the national cause had to be served by all considered teachers, by the political elite "servants of the nation" through which a national discourse was imposed that had to be disseminated to the masses by the teaching staff<sup>8</sup>.

Didactic literature, mainly history and geography, considered "two sisters" - able to mentally outline the temporal dimension, respectively the spatial dimension of the phenomenon of nation definition achieved through the process of union(s) - was concerned with circulating "images of the society that produced them". For this reason, textbooks can be seen as genuine "means of transporting an ideology, a culture", reflecting, above all, "what society proposes to be learned in school at a given social moment"<sup>9</sup>, the criterion according to which the cuts are made varying from one socio-political context to another.

For objective reasons our analysis will focus on a limited sample of history and geography textbooks published in the interwar period. In order to notice the progressive way in which the act of December 1, 1918 will gain in importance in the discourse promoted in textbooks - otherwise carefully supervised by the state in the idea of a thematic, conceptual and explanatory-causal standardization - we will resort to comparisons with the construction of the symbolic meaning of the event, as it was represented in the press of the time, referring to Maria Bucur's study. This look into two registers of written culture will reveal, to some extent, the way in which two channels harmonized in shaping and enshrining this moment in the national chronology. At the same time, this perspective will be able to indicate how the dissemination of a message of unity, beyond regional particularities, was simultaneous at the level of two age categories, the young one for

whom the text of the manual was intended, respectively, the adult one who could be edified with regard to the relevance of the events of 1918, through the written press.

The history works from the interwar period, but not only them, signed by historians such as Ioan Lupa?, Nicolae Iorga, Silviu Dragomir or C.C. Giurescu researched the history of the Romanians from the perspective of the theme of national unity, which confirms that the idea of the struggle of the Romanians for unification was amplified in the writings published immediately after 1918. In a theological manner, a national historical narrative is articulated that must legitimize, compensate for the lack of a national unity - states in the medieval or modern era<sup>10</sup>. This symbolic assimilation is most often encountered in historical passages inserted in geography textbooks, where geographical determinism was expected to be dominant. This is evidenced by Simion Mehedin?i's assertion in the Romanian Geography textbook for the 4th secondary class, 5th edition, published in 1924.

Referring to the Romanian borders, the renowned intellectual wrote "Whoever looks at the map marvels that after 18 centuries after Trajan's death, the Romanian state extends almost everywhere within the borders of the old Roman province. But these borders are explained (also by) the way in which the Romanian land is built and laid out"<sup>11</sup> likened to a fortified fortress whose core is Transylvania, around which the rest is arranged radially<sup>11</sup>. The overlapping of the two ancient and contemporary realities, as well as the centrality of the Transylvanian space in both state projects, were intended to emphasize the natural process whose keystone was the act of December 1, 1918.

A decisive moment that would have led to the act of national unity finalized in 1918 was linked to the figure of Mihai Viteazul. Geography of Romania for the fourth secondary class, edited by G.M. Murgoci and Ioan Popa-Buica, present on school desks since 1920 and then republished annually, saw in the coronation of Mihai Viteazul a "great moment" but lamented because "unfortunately the unitary Romanian state, frozen for a moment under this hero of the Romanians, quickly disintegrated after his assassination"<sup>12</sup>.

We find the same kind of interpretation of the episode in which the epic of Mr. Wallach was central, also in Transylvanian textbook authors such as Professor Gheorghe I. Barto?, director of

the apprentice school in Turda. He wrote with undisguised pride that he wanted to convey through a brief manual intended for students with a relatively basic level of education that "for the happiness of our nation" Mihai Viteazul "managed to unite all Romanians from the Dniester to the Tisa"<sup>13</sup>.

Even if a brief and critical look at the contents of the consulted history textbooks allows us to observe their more relaxed character compared to those of geography in terms of the ideal of unity, ideas like the above were current currency in some of them as well. For example, in Th.Avr.Agulletti's History of the Romanians for secondary IV and normal IV (boys and girls), although it talks about the conquest of Transylvania in the name of the Romano-German emperor, it ended with a subchapter entitled Michael the master over the three countries: the first attempt at union, the governance of Transylvania. The students had to remember that this "personal union" can be seen as "the first attempt to unite the Romanians"<sup>14</sup>. Having reached the conclusions, the author admits that Mr. Wallach's foreign policy was "based mainly on the sacred German empire and the personal union of the three Romanian countries", which managed to shake off the Turkish yoke, the final goal being the regaining of the old autonomy. Finally, the episode of Mihai Viteazul "ensured the perpetuation of the nationalities of the Romanians across the mountains, giving birth to the idea of the union of the Romanian countries"<sup>15</sup>.

## Research findings

We can find that the existence of a diversity of didactic materials such as textbooks could encourage alternative discourses in relation to the normative narrative. Thus, it is not a surprise to find that not in all the textbooks from the analyzed period, Michael the Brave was not regarded as the creator of the first full union. This is how things were in the case of the History of Romania textbook Developed by the history teacher, Ilie Remus, from the Aurel Vlaicu High School in Bucharest. Categorizing as an exaggeration the fact that "many saw in the conquest of Transylvania and Moldova a political plan of Romanian unity of Michael the Brave" the author spoke bluntly, stating that "the idea of national unity appeared in Europe only in the 19th

century". The student thus came into contact with a critical vision of a moment of weapons in pre-modernity that was disconnected from interpretations with a teleological, nationalist connotation favored at the time of the textbook's appearance. Through the option of placing the process of national definition and emancipation of Romanians in a wider European context, in the age of nations, Ilie Remus offered a more thoughtful and realistic interpretation of Romanian history.

However, the narrative widely taught in the interwar school was obsessively concerned with pushing, as far as possible into the past, the tradition of the Romanian unitary project in the times of the feats of arms of the voivode of the Romanian Land. Even the unique Manual of Romanian history from 1945 saw in Mihai "the unfortunate victim of the conflict between imperialisms (...) which verifies the saying that in the struggle between the great powers, the ones who suffer are the small countries drawn into this maelstrom". The students had to remember, however, the fact that, despite his ephemeral success, Mihai's success was worthy of glory because "he managed to achieve the political unity of the Romanian people, the unity that in the time of the next generations will become the ideal of our nation". We distinguish from the references to imperialism, the feeling of a victim history, in tune with the times, because at the time of the publication of the manual, the Romanian state had recently experienced the conflicts related to the First World War, which damaged its territorial integrity, through the hortist report - interpretable as a post-imperial revisionist manifestation - and through the presence - at that time - of the Soviet army on Romanian territory. The fact that we are already dealing with a unique history textbook is also not negligible, a sign that confirms that at the end of the interwar period - marked by dictatorial experiences - an increasingly monolithic vision of history teaching had been reached.

This phenomenon suggests the deepening

interference of the authority or even the voluntary subordination of textbook authors to the central forums of the nation state in the elaboration of a historical narrative agreed upon and considered worthy of forming the historical consciousness of students and future citizens.

At the same time, one thing to note is that in the current narrative, the interwar model is imitated in terms of highlighting the role of the monarchy.

The post-communist history textbooks mention Ferdinand, even if he appears eminently in the position of a passive patron, an active role for the achievement of the union falling to Queen Maria. In 2018, through the possession of materials and public campaigns, the overexposure of Queen Maria in the public space corresponds to an image crisis situation faced by the royal house due to the lack of a legitimate male heir, having a minimum exercise in the position of head of state, as it was Mihai I, who died at the end of 2017.

Unlike the interwar period, nowadays the textbook seems to be losing its relevance, being replaced by alternative forms of information as a result of the appetite for multimedial/digital content or biographical documentary film. However, he remains the first contact of the student, the future citizen with the past of the national group from which he comes, and the way in which the information is transmitted will influence in the long term, the optics on the collective identity.

Apparently, with the exception of the Rollerian manual, there was a consensus on the act of December 1, 1918, regardless of the political regime in Romania in the last century. It was recovered in the didactic national discourse as a moment of fulfillment of the historical destiny of a nation, even if it was filtered and remembered in order to highlight and legitimize the political power of the state, and even if this involved the elimination of some actors or fundamental principles that contributed to its realization.

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