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Eugenics "Technologies", Race and Freemasonry in the Interwar Transylvania.

Abstract

This analysis takes into account a significant chapter of the history of elites and eugenics from Transylvania during the interwar period. In his famous „Black Notebook”, Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, one of the most important personalities of the Romanian Great Union generation, wrote some surprising reflections about eugenics, race, and Romanian national superiority. In different ways, his reflections underline an invitation to analyze Romanian elites from the interwar period, as well as their way of thinking and feeling. Vaida's "Black Notebook" can therefore be considered "a torn page" from an important chapter in the history of the Romanian eugenics movement. It also represents an important key for understanding the history of Romanian freemasonry in Transylvania from the first two decades of the 20th century.

Keywords: *Eugenics Technologies, Race, Freemasonry, Interwar Transylvania, Romania*

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Motto: We must establish a Ministry of Hygiene and Race, as well as special departments.

These must deal with the preparation of the laws for excluding the non-values...

(Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, "The Black Notebook")¹

¹ See Varga Attila, "În spatele măștilor. Caietul Negru al lui Alexandru Vaida-Voevod" [Behind the masks. The Black Notebook of Alexandru Vaida-Voevod], *Yearbook of the George Barițiu Institute of History of Cluj-Napoca. Historica*, LXI (2022): 379-390

The Interwar Transylvanian Eugenics: new research perspectives

This analysis represents a sequel of some very important archive researches done by two researchers of the Romanian historical writing: Alexandru Șerban and Liviu Maior. These two scholars focused on the valuation of the personal documents of Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, the well known doctor, brilliant politician and also a representative personality of the generation that in 1918 achieved the Great Union of Romanians.

For the very first time, Alexandru Șerban has the merit of publishing the precious memoirs of Alexandru Vaida-Voevod². In the same time, Liviu Maior valued his correspondence and personal documents.³ Due to the fact that some months ago I discovered at the National History Museum of Transylvania new and important manuscripts of Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, I decided to continue their historical research⁴.

Based on these secret notes of Vaida-Voevod, I managed to highlight two significant aspects: the memoirs that Alexandru Șerban has published so far are incomplete, in other words they have shortcomings, which greatly reduces the quality of the mentioned critical edition. Therefore, this is a serious deficiency for the Romanian historical literature.

On the other hand, the newly discovered archive sources shed light on unknown aspects of his thinking. In fact, beyond their historical value, the newly archive sources open up interesting perspectives in the research of a fundamental theme for Romanian and Central European historiography: eugenic activism, the role of the elites, respectively of Freemasonry, in the political thinking of the time and also the deeply impact that this kind of activism had on the society of the interwar Romania.

Using the present analysis, I will also refer to Vaida's famous "Black Notebook" which brings to light controversial parts of his successful political activity. The already mentioned "Black Notebook" contains all his reflections related to race and eugenics, and then to the notes belonging to the period when he was the Minister of the Interior

² Alexandru Șerban, *Alexandru Vaida-Voevod. Memorii* [Alexandru Vaida-Voevod. Memoirs], (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1994).

³ Liviu Maior, *Alexandru Vaida-Voevod între Belvedere și Versailles. Însemnări, memorii, scrisori* [Alexandru Vaida-Voevod between Belvedere and Versailles. Notes, memoirs, letters.], (Cluj-Napoca: Sincron, 1993).

⁴ National History Museum of Transylvania, Cluj, *Manuscripts of Alexandru Vaida-Voevod. The Black Notebook*.

having a close connection with Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and the Legionary Movement as well.

So far, I have managed to underline all the connections created around Vaida's concerns regarding sensitive subjects such as race and eugenics. This "Black Notebook" bears such a name as it has black leather covers. On the other hand, his reflections seem to highlight the most radical ideas he ever conceived. The assessments included in the "Black Notebook" were outlined in the 1920s, when eugenic ideas asserted a lot in the Romanian area. That's when inside the communities specialized landmark institutions appeared and supported the dissemination of such of controversial paradigms.

Connecting interwar Romanian political personalities to eugenic ideas implies a new vision of the history of elites from the 20th century. From this point of view, it must be analyzed from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Eugenic "technologies": the selection of superior races.

In the 1920s, when Alexandru Vaida-Voevod mentioned his ideas about the protection of the Romanian race, the eugenic ideas already had a great impact in the society. After World War I, well known names of the Romanian science such as professor Iuliu Moldovan⁵, Salvator Cupcea⁶, Emil Pocrean or Dominic Stanca⁷ War emphasized the fact that the Romanian nation needed all the necessary conditions for its health and well-being.

They stressed that the strength of a nation did not depend only on the degree of economic prosperity, but also on the guarantee of its healthy development in the future.

In order to ensure this kind of development, there was a great need for a coherent national medical strategy. This was based on the "eugenic technologies of national

⁵ Iuliu Moldovan (1882-1966), Romanian doctor, corresponding member of the Romanian Academy since 1920 and participant to the Great National Assembly in Alba Iulia. After the end of the World War I, between 1919 and 1920, he organized the "Sanitary and Protection Service" in Transylvania. In 1932 he was elected President of ASTRA.

⁶ Salvator Cupcea (1908-1958) was a Romanian psychologist, doctor and politician. He asserted himself as a pioneer of Romanian psychology and as a psychoanalyst, he studied especially social marginals. Later he was concerned with social hygiene and eugenics, anthropology and criminology.

⁷ Dominic Stanca (1926-1976) was a primary care gynecologist-oncologist, professor of hygiene at the Theological Academy in Cluj, scientific researcher, founder of the first state obstetrics-gynecology clinic in Cluj and also of the Women's Hospital in Orăștie. He managed to lay the foundations of an important assistance center for sick and pregnant women, where countless specialists in the field were trained. Today, the clinic in Cluj-Napoca bears his name.

perfection"⁸ which aimed at the observance of the social hygiene principles as a vital part of the post-war reconstruction process focused on consolidating the unity and health of the Romanian nation.

For his part, in his famous "Black Notebook", Vaida-Voevod underlines this kind of eugenic "technologies" put in the service of consolidating and perfecting the Romanian nation. He underlines the ideas of natural selection, the exclusion of non-values and also the importance of sterilizing those who, through the major defects, contributed to the degeneration of the nation⁹. Vaida conclusively highlights the importance of crossings of well-off families that, for generations, have benefited from a high standard of living, physical and mental care.

Another important reference focuses on the idea of "race of titans of the intellect and character" that possessed physical vigor and aesthetic harmony. From Vaida's point of view, for this "race of titans" to take shape, it was absolutely necessary that:

"1. The inferior varieties should give way to the superior ones

2. Quality should prevail over quantity

3. The selection of individuals with the right to reproduce should be based on health, physical and mental genealogy¹⁰

4. Supporting the crossing of descendants of races whose qualities harmoniously complement each other.

5. Promotion of the individual talents

6. Harmonization of physical and mental education

7. Exclusion of non-values by sterilization (more exactly those sick people having syphilis and tuberculosis, the mentally retarded, and those with various handicaps that cannot be corrected)

8. The establishment of a Ministry of Hygiene and Race, but also special sections to deal with the preparation of the laws for the exclusion of non-values."¹¹

⁸ Marius Turda, *Eugenics and Modernity. Nation, Race and Biopolitics in Europe (1870-1950)*, (Iași: Polirom, 2014), 68.

⁹ National History Museum of Transylvania, Cluj, *Manuscripts of Alexandru Vaida-Voevod. The Black Notebook*, f. 5, 23-24.

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*

¹¹ *Ibidem.*

These are surprisingly radical ideas for a personality like Alexandru Vaida-Voievod. It is also known about him that, before launching into high-level politics, he was also a general physician in Olpret, his native village. Therefore, Vaida as a medical graduate from Vienna, who also did an internship as a balneologist in Karlovy-Vari, distinguished himself as a well known doctor.

However, he was not as unpopular as is widely believed in Romanian historical writing. In 1927, for example, Vaida-Voievod was invited to speak at one of the famous meetings of the Eugenics and Biopolitics Section in Cluj. By this, he proved the fact that he was up to date with all the anthropological researches of his time.

This updating of his knowledge related to anthropology and eugenics is not accidental. After 1918, anthropological researches offered the academic elites a certain scientific legitimacy. According to this, there was an ethnic-racial core of the Romanian nation that survived centuries and unfavorable historical contexts. Such an ethnic-racial core was, in fact, the basis of what the authors of the Interwar period called as "the national specificity"¹².

Later, following the model of the Fascist Italy and also the Nazi Germany new interpretations of the national identity took shape in the Interwar Romania. They had a special impact on the Romanian's eugenicists. It is also the case of Vaida-Voievod's vision concerning the Race of Titans that has already been mentioned. In addition, some of these scholars attributed a direct role to anthropology, trying to build a Romanian racial science. Certainly that included all the territories where the Romanians were found.

Alexandru Vaida-Voievod was a brilliant model of this "caste" of thinkers. In 1927, when he was invited to speak at the Eugenics and Biopolitics Section in Cluj there had already been a great effervescence along the lines of anthropological and eugenics ideas.

This academic ebullience was in fact due to the group of scientists and anthropologists affiliated to the famous Institute of Social Hygiene led by Iuliu Moldovan¹³

Beside him there were other important scholars like Petru Râmneantu, Mihai Zolog and Gheorghe Preda, respectively those grouped around the well known Institute

¹² Marius Turda, *Science and Ethnicity. Anthropological research in Romania in the 1930s*. (București: Muzeul Municipiului București, 2014).

¹³ *Ibidem*, 64.

of Experimental, Comparative and Applied Psychology inaugurated in 1922 by Florian Ștefănescu Goangă¹⁴.

They were all very interested in constitutional types, then the blood groups of ethnic minorities or the anthropology of educational groups. That occasion in Cluj, in 1927, Alexandru Vaida-Voievod emphasized an important aspect: „*In the case of the Romanian nation, it can be seen that it is the result of a crossbreeding of nations.*

Craniometry researches underline the fact that, even today, throughout the territory inhabited by Romanians, two races live mixed: the principal races and their intermediate varieties.”¹⁵

Transylvanian freemasonry and the eugenics activism

Over time, in Cluj, various research centers appeared, and there were very intense debates concerning issues focused on the race and its superior qualities. It is also related to another very important aspect: the competing Hungarian eugenics movement. Its important representative in Cluj was the well known scholar István Apáthy¹⁶.

He was initiated to Freemasonry in Cluj to the famous "Unio" Lodge, then he was a corresponding member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Dean and also Rector of the "Franz Joseph" University. He stood out worldwide for his new microscopy techniques, then for the field of neurohistology, eugenics and the study of neurofibrils.

For all this important researches he was proposed to receive the Nobel Prize for Medicine.

At the same time that Alexandru Vaida-Voievod warmly sustained the "Race of Titans", the promotion of the quality race and the need to sterilize those considered to be inferior, Apáthy founded the Hungarian Association of Social Sciences.

Simultaneously he also created a scientific journal, constantly supporting the Hungarian nationalist ideas of the social and biological improvement.

¹⁴ Florian Ștefănescu Goangă (1881-1958) distinguished himself as a psychologist, being, from 1937, a corresponding member of the Romanian Academy. Over time, he developed a whole series of scientific research methods, creating the Publishing House of the Institute of Psychology. Here he published the collection of "Psychological studies and researches". Later he established the well known "Psychology Magazine" which appeared regularly for 12 years.

¹⁵ Marius Turda, *Science and Ethnicity. Anthropological research in Romania in the 1930s.* (București: Muzeul Municipiului București, 2014), 110.

¹⁶ Apáthy István (1863-1922) became known worldwide for his new microscopy and preparation techniques applied to the field of histology. He was Dean and Rector of "Franz Joseph" University of Cluj. He became also member of the "Unio" Lodge in Cluj.

He carefully analyzed the relationship of eugenics with degeneration, understanding racial degeneration as a disease of the species and the nation that could be cured by extremely special methods. Studying the secret registers of the Hungarian freemasonry lodges, that before 1918 worked under the obedience of the Hungarian Symbolic Grand Lodge, I have discovered more than 300 doctors initiated in different freemasonry lodges within the Austrian-Hungarian Empire.

After I have inventoried all these names kept inside the freemasonry registers, I did the same as in the case of István Apáthy from the "Unio" Lodge in Cluj. I sought to observe what each of these doctors had published on a medical topic.

Later I tried to observe how exactly all these publications contributed to the dissemination of eugenic ideas in the profane sphere. Following the research I carried out, I highlighted that the publications of the freemasonry doctors had a wide circulation, including Cluj the heart of Transylvania.

To a good extent their ideas it constituted one of the foundations of the famous "Eugenics File" promoted by the Hungarian delegation led by Apponyi Albert to Trianon.

They have pleaded there for the Hungarian national and racial superiority, underlining that the dismantling of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy in favor of the "inferior" national states only generated instability to the whole area of the Central Europe. The arguments presented in Hungary's "Eugenic File" from Trianon showed the firm belief in an idealized vision concerning Hungarian nation and state.

In the context of all lost territories in favor of the nationalities, Hungarian eugenicists emphasized the disaster of Hungary. On the other hand, they considered that a smaller Hungary could be overburdened with intelligence, so it was going to agglomerate on a small territory. Not being able to ensure a decent living, Hungary risked reducing its lust for life, not having enough children and disappearing in a short time. In that context, it was considered that many families would try to move to Budapest, where all conditions for raising children were not favorable¹⁷.

Following this population transfer, there was a risk of creating a capital too big for a small Hungary, similar to the monstrous head put on the trunk of a dwarf. Any territorial lost and population displacement was considered to have some serious

¹⁷ Marius Turda, "*Holy War of the Race*". *Eugenics and the protection of the nation in Hungary, 1900-1919* (Cluj: Romanian Academy, Center for Transylvanian Studies, 2020), 289-298.

eugenic consequences for all the Hungarian people. Its elite underlined that this could lead to serious issues with continental impact.

As a representative of the upper social level, but also as a president of the Hungarian Society for Racial Hygiene and Population Policy, Count Teleki Pál started an intense lobby in the British academic area. In the name of some common eugenic values, he asked the public and competent people from England: "*to take into account the special situation of Hungary and not to ask for a solution to the problem of nationalities that would destroy the nation's best families.*"¹⁸

His approach, however, ended in an unfortunate failure. The expected echoes of his action were not up to the mark. In reality, no British eugenics society took a stand in favor of Hungary. No important member or any prominent figure of the British elite could do anything to prevent the inevitable: the signing of the Treaty of Trianon which announced the end of Great Hungary.

I have mentioned this competing Hungarian eugenics movement, as it had a special relevance in the context of the present analysis. As it is well known from Vaida's memoirs published so far, his initiation to the "Ernest Renan" Lodge in Paris, and also the other members of the Romanian diplomatic delegation, had long-term consequences. Analyzing all the unpublished documents of the Hungarian Symbolic Grand Lodge from Budapest, we shortly understand why Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, after the creation in 1918 of the Great Romania failed in his mission to open into Transylvania an acces "corridor" for French liberal Freemasonry.

After 1918, here in Transylvania the jurisdiction of the Hungarian Symbolic Grand Lodge suddenly stopped, and the Austrian and German Freemasonry had no longer influence. Following the impulse of the Hungarian Symbolic Grand Lodge, all the 18 Transylvanian lodges, which had initially worked under its obedience, decided to form themselves the Symbolic Grand Lodge of Transylvania.

In the new context, the Hungarian Symbolic Grand Lodge intended to conclude a concordat, and through it to maintain its influence in Transylvania¹⁹. As it is well known, the Symbolic Grand Lodge of Transylvania was established in 1919, becoming the main obstacle to the creation of the unity of Romanian Freemasonry. This is where the numerous tensions between this Transylvanian freemasonry power and the Romanian National Grand Lodge frequently resulted.

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

¹⁹ See Varga Attila, "Romanian-Hungarian freemasonry connections after the Great Union of 1918", in Mircea Alexandru Birt, Tudor Sălăgean (eds.), *Freemasons and Patriots. Freemasonry, national ideal and the creation of the Great Union* (Cluj-Napoca: Școala Ardeleană, 2020), 95-106.

Until 1930, this Romanian freemasonry power kept trying to create with Transylvanian lodges a great unity, but failed in its attempts. Through the voice of Victor Sterea²⁰ two other Romanian freemasonry powers such as the American-Romanian Grand Masonic Lodge and the Grand Orient of Romania had the same intention, but without notable results.

In the Hungarian freemasonry documents I found a lot of information about all the efforts that the well known diplomate and freemason Jean Pangal made for the Transylvanian lodges to unite them with the Romanian National Grand Lodge and not with its rivals.

At one point, in a document already mentioned, Jean Pangal adopted a violent position, stressing that: "*the Transylvanian lodges are chauvinists, they close themselves in this, refusing to admit Romanians, which is very serious!*"²¹ Pangal's words are not a baseless accusation uttered in a moment of tension. His extremely harsh assessment of the chauvinism of the Transylvanian lodges is as real as it gets. One of its great sources is even the idea of the national superiority that after 1880 was acutely felt in Transleithania²².

Later, this idea metamorphosed into a form that emphasized Hungarian racial superiority. This form represented the core of the Hungarian eugenics movement that was supported in the profane area and beyond. Returning, therefore, to the Romanian eugenics movement having Alexandru Vaida-Voevod strongly involved, it had the purpose of contributing to that scientific legitimacy aimed at the ethnic-racial core of the Romanian nation.

Then, it also aimed at countering the Hungarian eugenics movement in a geographical area where the French Freemasonry could not benefit from a penetration corridor. On the other hand, the ideas of Hungarian national and racial superiority not only had "infected" the Transylvanian lodges, but also continued to block the Romanian Freemasonry which almost a decade after the Great Union, was still looking for its great unity.

²⁰ Victor Sterea

²¹ Varga Attila, "Romanian-Hungarian freemasonry connections after the Great Union of 1918", in Mircea Alexandru Birț, Tudor Sălăgean (eds.), *Freemasons and Patriots. Freemasonry, national ideal and the creation of the Great Union* (Cluj-Napoca: Școala Ardeleană, 2020), 100-106.

²² Marius Turda, *The idea of national superiority in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire (1880-1918)* (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2016).

Vaida's "Black Notebook" can therefore be considered like "a torn page" from an important chapter in the history of the Romanian eugenics movement. It also represents an important key for understanding the history of Romanian freemasonry in Transylvania from the first two decades of the 20th century. One more reason to look "behind the masks", not only of those who were important actors of this history on the visible stage, but also of those who, being behind the curtain, equally contributed to its writing...