

PHOTOGRAPHING THE GREAT WAR, 1916-1918.
ADRIAN-SILVAN IONESCU
AND ROMANIAN ICONOGRAPHY OF WW1

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Though Romanian diplomacy, military strategy, and armed combat during the Great War of 1914-1918 have been extensively studied,¹ one area that has been significantly neglected is the pictorial depiction of World War I in Romania. Though, of course, archives, documents, memoirs, and the other usual sources of scholarly investigation are essential for the creation of a narrative that responds to the key questions of who, what, when, and why, since the work of Mathew Brady during the American Civil War of the 1860s,² photography has played an increasingly important role in giving historians and others the feel of war in a way that cannot be captured verbally or in print alone.

Naturally, the accounts of participants in war fill part of the gap. C.S. Lewis – who later at Oxford and Cambridge became one of the 20th century's greatest literary scholars, writers of fiction, and Christian apologists – wrote as he went into battle in 1916, "This is War. This is what Homer wrote about." Later, he remembered "the

¹ *Inter alia* from an ever-expanding bibliography: Glenn E. Torrey's *Romania and World War I. A Collection of Studies* (Iași: Center for Romanian Studies, 1998), and *The Romanian Battlefield in World War I* (Lawrence KS: University Press of Kansas, 2011); Constantin Kirițescu, *Istoria războiului pentru întregirea României, 1916-1919*, two volumes (București: România Nouă, 1922-1923); Victor Atanasiu, Anastasie Iordache, Mircea Iosa, Ion M. Oprea, and Paul Oprescu, eds., *România în primul război mondial* (București: Editura Militară, 1979); Victor Atanasiu, et al., *România în anii primului război mondial*, two volumes (București: Editura Militară, 1987); Costica Prodan and Dumitru Preda, *The Romanian Army during the First World War* (București: Editura Univers Enciclopedică, 1998); Nicolae Ciobanu and Eugen Bădălan, eds., *Cronologia Primului Război Mondial 1914-1919* (București: Editura Academiei de Înalte Studii Militare, 2001); Dumitru Ivănescu and Sorin D. Ivănescu, eds., *La Roumanie et la Grande Guerre* (Iași: Editura Junimea, 2005); Lucian Boia, *Primul Război Mondial. Controverse, paradoxuri, reinterpretări* (București: Editura Humanitas, 2014); Ioan Bolovan, Gheorghe Cojocaru, and Oana Mihaela Tămaș, eds., *Primul Război Mondial. Perspectivă istorică și istoriografică. World War I. A Historical and Historiographical Perspective* (Cluj-Napoca: Academia Română Centrul de Studii Transilvane/Presă Universitară Clujeană, 2015); and Petre Otu, *România în Primul Război Mondial: Beligeranța 1916-1917 and Marea Unirea 1918* (București: Editura Litera, 2017). For an overview, consult Paul E. Michelson, "Romania and World War I," in Kurt W. Treptow, ed., *A History of Romania, third edition* (Iași: Center for Romanian Studies, 1997), pp. 364-389; and Paul E. Michelson, "Romania and World War I, 1914-1919: An Introductory Survey," *Revue Roumaine d'Histoire*, Vol. 55 (2016), pp. 61-81.

² See Mary Panzer, *Mathew Brady and the Image of History*, with an essay by Jeana K. Foley (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press for the National Portrait Gallery, 1997), xxiii, 232 pp.

frights, the cold, the smell of H. E. [high explosives], the horribly smashed men still moving like half-crushed beetles, the sitting or standing corpses, the landscape of sheer earth without a blade of grass, the boots worn day and night till they seemed to grow to your feet," and it was obvious that these experiences played an important role in his subsequent development.³

Fortunately, Romanian wartime *memorialistica* has taken large steps forward since the turn of the 21st century, particularly as the anniversary of World War I loomed.⁴ Among these were contributions were made by our friend and colleague Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, who this year celebrates a young 70 years of age, including "Amintirile de front și de prizonierat ale unui ofițer român (1916-1917),"⁵ and "Jurnalul unui prizonier de război (1916-1917)."⁶

However, Romanian iconography of World War I has been surprisingly unexplored. Fortunately, part of this deficiency in Romanian historiography has been impressively rectified by the work of Prof. Ionescu who has had a longterm interest in photographic iconography and in World War I. He has been Director of the G. Oprescu Institute of Art History since 2011, and is also a professor at the National University of Art, and editor of *Studii și Cercetări de Istoria Artei* and *Revue Roumaine d'Histoire de l'Art*. He is, thus, not only well-placed both to promote research and study dealing with photographic iconography, but also to carry out work of his own.

His interest in the history of Romanian photography generally was reflected in a trio of works published in 2010 and 2011: "Photography in Romania in the First Half of the 20th Century,"⁷ "The History of Romanian Photography, 1900-1938,"⁸ and "Commercial and Art Photography in Romania 1900-1950."⁹ He has continued to make contributions to this field, most recently as a guest editor for the current issue of the journal of the European Society for the History of Photography, *PhotoResearcher*, Nr. 34 (2020), entitled "In Focus: Photography in Romania", Nr. 34 (2020).¹⁰

Prof. Ionescu's most important scholarly efforts in these areas relate to the photo iconography of Romanian in World War I. In 2013, he published "Art or Morale Boosting Propaganda? Photography from the Romanian Battlefield during

³ Quoted in Paul E. Michelson, "Inklings at war: J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and the Crucible of World War I," *Christian History*, Nr. 121 (March 2017), pp. 17-19.

⁴ See for example Paul E. Michelson, "Gheorghe I. Brătianu in World War I: "Pages Torn from the Book of War," forthcoming in Claudiu Topor, et al. eds, *Political Culture and International Relations (19th and 20th centuries). Essays addressed to Professor Gheorghe Cliveti at the age of 65.*

⁵ *Revista Istorică*, Vol. 11 (2000), Nr. 5-6, pp. 463-476.

⁶ *Muzeul Național*, Vol. 13 (2001), pp. 260-268. The officer in question was the author's grandfather, which might explain his interest in this subject.

⁷ *PhotoResearcher*, Nr. 14 (2010), pp. 15-24.

⁸ in Vaclav Macek, ed., *The History of European Photography*, Vol. II: 1900-1938 (Bratislava, Slovakia: Central European House of Photography/FOTOFO, 2010).

⁹ *Muzeul Național*, Vol. 23 (2011), pp. 49-80.

¹⁰ He has a contribution in this number on E. O. Hoppé (pp. 44-59).

the Great War,"¹¹ which dealt with the work of the Serviciul Fotografic al Armatei. In addition to serving political ends and aiming to contribute to fostering morale among Romanian troops, in the author's opinion, their activities in the end were more art than propaganda. That same year, he published „Serviciul Fotografic al Armatei și contribuția sa la iconografia Războiului cel Mare,” *Muzeul Național*, Vol. 25 (2013), pp. 179-238, which focussed directly with the Serviciul Fotografic, focussing on the work of the head of the department, Lt. Ion Oliva, and his team of photographers, including Ștefan Mladinovici, Nicolae Cristea, Nicolae Țațu, Ion Viță, Samuel Fucs, Ion Maksai, Carol Ulrich, Virgil Reiter, Moritș Grunberg, and Herman Haimovici. The work of this group in covering the war was exceptional and “most of these pictures had high artistic qualities worth being exhibited as art photographs.” Prof. Ionescu identifies the themes of their work – such as attempting to uplift morale to putting human faces on war – as well as discussing out how it was utilized as illustrative material following the end of the war. The article includes a good number of documents as well as 54 illustrations.

All of this work led up in 2014 to Prof. Ionescu's magnificent *The Great War. Photography from the Romanian Front, 1916-1919*.¹² The book begins with a foreword (pp. 19-24), which surveys war iconography, European contributions to the subject, and the few Romanian studies extant.¹³ This is followed by four chapters (pp. 25-63): **I.** The Photographic Service of the Romanian Army, **II.** Photography under Occupation, **III.** Amateur Photographers on the Front, and **IV.** The Victory Parade. These chapters discuss broadly the iconography which follows. They are heavily annotated and documented and include several relevant photographs, though the bulk of illustrations are in the following section, pp. 64 ff.

Chapter I on the Photographic Service (pp. 25-40) draws from Prof. Ionescu's 2013 article on same. Lt. Oliva's character and work are examined along with the endeavors of an underpaid but professional staff lacking in resources. It gives us an idea of the usual subject matter of the Service, which included King Ferdinand and Queen Marie; various military commanders, such as Generals Grigorescu and

¹¹ *Studii și Cercetări de Istorie Artei, Seria Nouă*, Vol. 3 (2013), pp. 57-100.

¹² București: Institutul Cultural Român, 2014. 303 pp., the bulk of which is devoted to the iconography itself.

¹³ These Romanian works include Constantin Stoianovici, „Fotografia, mijloc de reflectare a războiului,” *Document*, Nr. 2/20 (2003), pp. 59-61; Cristina Constantin and Luminița Iordache, eds., *Instantanee de Război/World War I in Photographs 1916-1918* (Buzău: Editura Alpha MDN, 2008); Christophe Prochasson and Florin Țurcanu, eds., *La Grande Guerre. Histoire et mémoire collectif en France et en Roumanie* (București: New Europe College, 2010); and Ioana Rustoiu, Gabriel Rustoiu, and Smaranda Cutean, *Corpul voluntarilor români din Siberia (1918-1920)* (Baia Mare: Editura Marist, 2010). Subsequently, two other works have appeared that add to this still somewhat short list: Vasile Pușcaș, *Marea Unire 1918 România Mare. Acte și Documente* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Studia, 2018), 303 pp., which intersperses text with illustrations; and Bogdan Bucur, ed., *Cartea de aur a Centenarului Marii Unirii*, with a preface by Bogdan Murgescu (București: Editura RAO Class, 2017), LXIII + 751 pp., which reproduces 199 photographs and 220 documents.

Averescu; the commander of the French Military Mission, Henri Berthelot; civilian life during a war; troop life and heroism; and so forth. Oliva understood the aims of the Service as addressing propaganda, historical, and artistic objectives. Their works were also considered as military documents. Print sizes were standardized, to be clearly captioned, and carefully filed. It was recommended that the Service should include a permanent cinematographic department. The service would also be given strict control over photographic access to the front, private photography would be prohibited, and all filming and photography had to be authorized by the General HQ. On the other hand, there is no documentary trail for the wartime work of the Service, so Prof. Ionescu had to do a lot of creative research to surface this story. It is clear that they put themselves in harms way and took their responsibilities very seriously. In the end, the Service not only contributed to the iconography of the War; it was significant in the development of documentary photography and cinematography in Romania. And, as is typical of professional photographers everywhere, there was little or no photographic iconography of these people themselves, who mostly remain nameless and faceless.

The next chapter (pp. 41-48) deals with the painful subject of the occupation of large swaths of Romania by the Central Power's armies in 1916-1918. Prof. Ionescu reviews the work of the weekly illustrated newspaper, „Săptămâna Ilustrată,” published by the German occupiers of București. Secondly, he describes the photography in prisoner-of-war camps. This is followed by a chapter on the work of amateur photographers (pp. 49-56). Though technically this was illegal, there were numerous cases of cameras brought from home. From necessity or just amateurism, these photographs are usually not labeled or dated. Still they provide candid looks at the war, important events not otherwise recorded (such as a visit of Al. Vlahuță to the front or a Bolshevik demonstration in Iași), and were more often than not tended to be artistic. Interestingly, there was a much greater quantity of amateur work done by Romanian prisoners-of-war.

This section concludes with a chapter on the Victory Parade of 1918-1919 (pp. 57-63) when the royal family returned to București and other celebrations, such as 1919 in Timișoara, Oradea, Cluj, and elsewhere. It also includes photography of the Romanian offensive in Hungary and the occupations of Budapest; as well as some postwar iconography.

The middle part is the largest section of the book on 1916-1919 (pp. 64-285), divided into 18 segments of carefully selected photographs. It consists of hundreds of photographs without commentary but including dates where available. Browsing this iconography is both interesting and instructive; it can only be selectively and briefly discussed here. “The Front,” (pp. 64-89) begins with a famous image of Romanian troops marching to battle in 1917, led by a violinist (p. 65). A shot of the trenches in

1917, shows a pensive soldier looking toward the enemy (p. 66). Another photo from the Battle of Mărăști (p. 72) shows soldiers under machine gun fire. Pp. 74-75 show a crew in a machine gun nest in an obviously posed shot. An aerial view of the second trench line at Bălărețu in 1918 shows how a defensive trench looked (p. 80). The pontoon bridge at Flămânda on the Bulgarian front is shown on p. 87.

The next section, "The Command Posts," (pp. 90-95) illustrates how the officers lived (pp. 91, 92, 93, 95). Compared to the quarters of the lower echelon, these were pretty plush. This is followed by "The Artillery," (pp. 96-107) dealing principally with gun placements and marching to position (pp. 97-107); "The Communications," (pp. 109-117) which include photos of telephone communication stations (such as pp. 110, 109, and 113), an interesting optical telegraph post (p. 116), and several rather precarious observation posts (pp. 111, 115, and 117); "The Air Force," (pp. 118-125), which has engaging shots of the first Romanian airplane in Transylvania (p. 119), balloon manoeuvres (pp. 122-124), and a group of soldiers dancing the Hora around planes at a military aerodrome (p. 125); "The Navy," (pp. 126-133), which features a torpedo launch (p. 127); and an anti-aircraft battery on the monitor, „Mihail Kogălniceanu” (p. 133).

"The French Military Mission," (pp. 134-141) features, of course, General Berthelot, hobnobbing with Romanian generals (often presenting them with the French *Légion d'Honneur*), his staff, and others. This is followed by an extensive section on "The Medical Service," (pp. 142-171). These are obviously the most touching and gruesome iconography of the war. War seems exciting when we view triumphal marches or the awesome weapons of an industrial age, but much less so when seen in human terms. I found the photos on p. 149, p. 157, and p. 169 impressive and gripping. Queen Marie reading to a wounded soldier, looks posed, but is still effective (p. 161). There are several involving an American Red Cross Mission to Romania in 1919 (pp. 164 ff.) A photo on p. 169 of soldiers being given foot "electrotherapy" looks somewhat ominous.

The succeeding section briefly looks at "The Religious Services," (pp. 172-177). These include one of a priest at a morgue (p. 173); religious services at the front (pp. 174, 175), graves (p. 174), and funerals (pp. 175, 176, 177). Next are "The Soldiers' Mess," (178-187), and "Leisure," (pp. 188-199). "Leisure" includes playing the violin, getting haircuts, singing and dancing, washing and drying laundry, taking baths, and playing games.

"The Royal Family on the Front," (pp. 200-209) covers what appear largely to be photo ops, but the wide circulation of these pictures contributed to increasing the already-high popularity of the Royal Family, especially Queen Marie. Good examples are on pp. 205, 208. This is followed by "The German Prisoners and War Trophies," (pp. 210-221), which were also of high propaganda value. Among those shown include

a group of Austro-Hungarian prisoners in Braşov in 1916 (p. 215), German prisoners in 1916 (p. 216), a prisoner interrogation (p. 217), German prisoners digging a ditch (p. 218), a large group of prisoners (p. 219), and spoils of war (pp. 220-221).

The Austro-German occupation of Romanian territories are the subject of the next section "The Occupation," (pp. 222-249). Interesting are those of Archduke Karl (future Emperor Karl II, last ruler of Austro-Hungarian Empire) and General Falkenhayn (commander on the Western Front in 1916, he was demoted to the East when his "bleed the French out of the war" strategy backfired) (p. 223); Kaiser Wilhelm II and Field Marshal Mackensen at the Carpathian summits in 1917 (p. 232); Mackensen entering Bucureşti in 1916 (p. 235); Romanian refugees (pp. 238-239); numerous photos from the German prisoner-of-war camp at Dänholm Island on the Baltic Sea, which were preserved by the author's grandfather Constantin Ionescu (pp. 240 ff.). Life there doesn't appear to have been too bad, what with rooms, not cells, pool tables, orchestras, plays, and art.

"Amateur Photographers on the Front," (pp. 250-263), which includes Romanian, Allied, and Entente photographers, especially from Lt. Grigore Drăgoescu (pp. 252-255) comes next. A photo of a hanged man (possibly in Banat) is riveting. On the whole, these more informal pictures add a dimension to official photography.

This is followed by "The Victory Parade," (pp. 264-269) which marks a moment of exhilaration for Romania and the Romanians: the entry of the Royal Family and Gen. Berthelot into Bucureşti on the first of December 1918. Next is a section on "1919," (pp. 270-279), which includes some on the occupation of Budapest (pp. 271, 276-277); Royal visits to Oradea, and Ţebea (Avram Iancu's tomb) (pp. 272-275); and a triumphal parade in Timişoara (pp. 277-279). The last chapter in this long section is "The Photographic Service," (pp. 280-285). Here we have fragmentary and somewhat whimsical pictures which "shows" one of the photographer's shadow in a picture (p. 281); another of cinematographers caught in a photo (pp. 283-285); and finally pictured in a photo by Col. Joe Boyle of Princess Ileana (p. 284).

The volume concludes with nine documentary appendices (pp. 286-297), a select bibliography (pp. 298-301), and an index (p. 302). The appendices include documents mentioned in the text, including the January 1917 report by Lt. Oliva to the General HQ about the aims and procedures of the Photographic Service of the Army (pp. 287-289); the 1915 letter of film-maker Leon M. Popescu offering his services to the Ministry of War (p. 290); a report on the activities of the Service between 1916 and 1918 (p. 291-292); decorations received by Oliva and Ion Davidescu (p. 293); and so forth.

In the final analysis, Prof. Ionescu's *The Great War. Photography from the Romanian Front, 1916-1919* is a milestone study and fills many gaps in the kind of history we have been doing about World War I. His selections seem appropriately,

thoughtfully, and usefully selected, and the reproductions are excellent. Historians take on the War will be richer as a result.

All in all, Adrian-Silvan Ionescu's work as described above are signal contributions to Romanian photographic iconography, especially that of World War I. Hopefully it will be followed by more and more studies of Romanian iconography, especially of the interwar era for which there is a wealth of unexplored riches. While I would be the last to denigrate traditional archive and document based historical work, it needs to be emphasized that doing history is fundamentally interdisciplinary. That is to say that while history has its own distinctive methodology, perspective, and ways of looking at the world, past and present, it also needs to utilize the work and ways of looking at things of other disciplines where these provide relevant insights and materials. However, that does not mean that the methodologies of these other disciplines should be allowed to supersede historical method. Because of its newness and the ease with which it can be manipulated or even falsified-ranging from the deteriorating condition of originals, to the staging of originals for various purposes such as propaganda, to the digital doctoring of photographs – historians have been slow to exploit photographic iconography. Methods of dealing with the falsification of pictorial evidence will eventually become as rigorous as our methods of dealing with the falsification of documents – including fabrications, frauds, and distortions by the producers of the originals or biased writers who have a tendency to gild the lily – or memoirs whose veracity is always suspect, and of other materials that we now commonly regard the basis for historical accounts.

So, let's be optimistic about the future of photographic iconography, while being grateful to Prof. Ionescu for what he has done and will do.

Ți-ai făcut bine sarcina. Să ai mulți ani mai rodnici!