

VLAD BADEA

**ON WORLD WAR ONE:
AN INTERVIEW WITH PROF. LUCIAN BOIA**

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Lucian Boia (born 1944) is professor at the Faculty of History of the University of Bucharest. His work consists of titles published in Romanian and French, as well as translations in English, German and other languages. Concerned especially with the history of ideas and the imaginary, he investigated consistently a wide range of mythologies (from extraterrestrial life and the end of the world, to communism, nationalism and democracy). At the same time, he brought new interpretations to the history of France and of the Western world. In 1997, his work, History and Myth in Romanian Conscience, provoked sensation and remained, until today, a landmark in the process of redefining Romanian national history. [humanitas.ro]

VB: Prof. Boia, you recently launched *The First World War: Controversies, Paradoxes, Reinterpretations* – a book that comes 100 years after the event it discusses. What does a century mean nowadays, historically?

LB: 100 years is actually not that much; it's a man's life. We have to keep in mind however that history has been undergoing a process of acceleration. 100 years means much more now than it meant in the Middle Ages or Antiquity, not to mention Prehistory when you had to wait thousands or tens of thousands of years to observe some significant changes. History unfolds faster and faster...

VB: Generations have vanished into history in these 100 years since the First World War. What is the relevance of WW1 for those living today, for the European and Romanian present?

LB: To a great extent, the world of today has its origins in what WW1 triggered. Of course, it has its origins in all previous epochs, but WW1 brings a sum of events and evolutions and an intensification of history which altogether constitute a new beginning. If we want to look for a founding event of today's world, I believe this event is WW1. WW2 and many other evolutions that go until today derive directly from WW1. As far as Romania is concerned, WW1 means the making of Romania virtually as it appears today: from the little Romania (the old kingdom that existed until 1918), to what became Greater Romania – sure, amputated partially during WW2; nevertheless, the Romania we live in today is largely the product of WW1.

VB: What are the most profound consequences of WW1, still visible today?

LB: The world from before 1914 was a world moving towards modernity, albeit at a slower pace and preserving much of the traditional structures. It was partially democratic as well as conservative. With WW1, we witness a decisive entry of the masses on the historical arena, either as primary actors or as manipulated elements. History will be made more and more in the name of “the many” after WW1. This led either to a consolidation of democracy or to the establishment of totalitarian regimes (fascist or communist) – also designed in the spirit of the masses. Therefore, I would say that if the pre-WW1 world was predominantly elitist, the post-WW1 world is much more democratic, at least in appearance.

VB: Is WW1 an event that *had* to happen?

LB: Many books have been written on the eruption of WW1. I think the current tendency is in favour of a more thorough analysis of the events that led to the conflict. We cannot be satisfied any longer with the big causes, often invoked, namely the economic and political contradictions between the great powers. These contradictions constituted the background, of course, but they had been surpassed nonetheless until 1914. There was a strong balance of power in Europe that worked rather well from 1870-71 (when the last great European war of the 19th century took place: the French-Prussian war) until 1914 – almost half of century of relative peace. There were various crises, but Europe managed to overcome them. Cooperation deepened; people established ever more trans-national contacts; a cosmopolitan mentality emerged, in parallel to the antagonistic one. It could have been peace just as likely as it happened to be war.

VB: What happened then? Why didn't the idea of peace win? Who bears the main responsibility for the outbreak of the war?

LB: I don't have definitive answers. I have my own interpretations of which I am not even entirely sure. The situation was so unstable that it is very difficult to weigh the causes and the responsibility of every actor involved in the conflict. However, my impression, which is based also on my own readings and research as well as on more recent contributions in the field, is that the pathway towards war was covered with very small steps. Each participant feared the other would gain advantages to its detriment. Without realizing, one step led to another and eventually to the outbreak of the war. And once erupted, the conflict escalated to proportions no one had really anticipated. It is naive to believe the statesmen of 1914 desired a massacre of this magnitude. In the end, the Kaiser, the Tsar and many other leaders lost their power because of their thoughtless actions.

VB: The traditional approach finds Germany as bearing the main guilt for the outbreak of WW1. To what extent is this evaluation correct?

LB: In a sense it is true; however, we should also take a closer look at Germany's position. Germany was surrounded by two great allied powers: France and Russia. An idea circulated for quite some time in Germany that one day it would have to face a war on two fronts. This was Germany's great fear. We cannot say how justified this fear was because history unfolded in the way we know; it did not follow a different course to see whether it was a legitimate fear. This, however, made them attack first. The impression is, of course, of a German aggression and thus of a higher responsibility that Germany would bear in contrast to others. Personally, I see the outbreak of the war more as a chain of events in which every single ring has its own importance. There are smaller and larger rings, but even those smaller ones... had they been absent, perhaps it would not have come to war. War erupted due to Germany's support to Austro-Hungary. On the other hand, it also erupted due to France's unconditional support to Russia. The conflictive game started between Austro-Hungary and Russia. There are many facets, as in a Greek tragedy... something that could not be stopped. Initially, one could have imagined a regional conflict. The incident in Sarajevo... We have been accustomed to say the Serbs were right in the conflict with Vienna. I am not exactly sure 'right' from which point of view because Austro-Hungary was also right in reacting. For a long time, the premise for the rationale (which has suffered some revisions lately) was that the national ideology is ratified by history in opposition to multinational constructions like the Habsburg monarchy. Therefore, whoever supported the national idea was right against anyone who was in favour of a historical formula considered outdated – namely, Serbs vs. the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In reality, each actor had its own justification. It could have remained a local conflict had Russia not mobilized its army (this was the next step). The French assisted passively; they could have warned the Russians. By mobilizing its army, Russia envisioned an intervention against Austro-Hungary and thus Germany initiated the aggression so as not to fight a defensive war on two fronts. Oddly enough, for someone who is not familiarized with the mechanisms of the outbreak of WW1, a conflict between Austro-Hungary and Serbia led to the German invasion in France. Although they appear to have no connection whatsoever, in effect it is a domino game in which each piece has its contribution. Had one piece been absent, the game would have stopped at a certain point. But they all fell, one after another.

VB: Where does Romania fit in this equation? King Carol I (1866-1914) was in favour of joining forces with the Central Powers. However, his Council opted for neutrality in August 1914. Following Carol's death in October 1914, the new king, Ferdinand (1914-1927) – Carol's nephew – together with the majority of his Council decided in 1916 to give up neutrality and join the Entente.

LB: First of all, there was the treaty of alliance signed by Romania in 1883 with Austro-Hungary and Germany. As a German prince, Carol¹ was faithful to this alliance. He was faithful to the alliance not only by virtue of his German origin; he was also convinced it was in the best interest of Romania to ally with Germany. What happened eventually was more in favour of Romania than anyone could have imagined – although, we should not forget the high costs Romania paid: Romania incurred enormous human losses in relation to the size of its population; significantly higher than France or Germany. Romania entered the war in 1916 with the Entente in order to obtain Transylvania and Bukovina. Bukovina was not that much of a problem since Austro-Hungary suggested that it would give it away in favour of Romania should Romania join the Central Powers in the war effort. Therefore, the main issue was Transylvania². But there was also Bessarabia³! Romanians often tend to forget Bessarabia; our focus is rather on Transylvania. And to be honest, Transylvania means much more to Romania than Bessarabia. Fair or unfair, this is the reality. No Romanian would give Transylvania for Bessarabia, but this does not mean Bessarabia is not important.

VB: You discuss in your book about the Romanian germanophiles who believed Romania had more arguments for Bessarabia than Transylvania...

LB: There were some politicians like Petre P. Carp, Titu Maiorescu, Alexandru Marghiloman etc. and many intellectuals (including Transylvanian intellectuals who moved to Romania) who believed Romania should not pay less attention to Bessarabia. They believed Bessarabia was far more threatened in its Romanian essence than Transylvania, and this was true. Russia was an autocratic empire that cared little about the rights of the Romanians living in Bessarabia, while Austro-Hungary, in spite of the discriminations applied to its Romanian minority, was nonetheless a constitutional state. The Romanians in Transylvania – who of course still had much to claim and obtain – had their two churches (Orthodox and Unitarian), their own political party, newspapers and banks, and very close ties over the Carpathians, with Romania. This wasn't the case in Bessarabia. So, this was the germanophiles' main argument: Bessarabia was endangered to a higher degree. Another point they made was that an alliance with Russia was dangerous for Romania. Perhaps this is an idea that comes back nowadays... The germanophiles said: Fine, you will make Greater Romania, with Transylvania and other pieces, but this Greater Romania will still be very small next to the Russian empire and of what use will it be if Russia will engulf us, small or big. Russia's aim was to expand till Constantinople. The Allies even recognized this right to Russia in spring 1915. The situation was dangerous indeed, because you could only get to the Balkans through Romania. Therefore, one shouldn't minimize the viewpoints

¹ Karl von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen.

² Also part of Austro-Hungary, like Bukovina.

³ Part of Russia since 1812; today, the Republic of Moldova.

of the so-called germanophiles. These viewpoints were of course contradicted by history, but the politicians of 1914 or 1916 could not have foreseen all the historical evolutions we now know, so each constructed his personal scenario of the future. In the end, Romania obtained not only Transylvania and Bukovina, but also Bessarabia, which no one could have predicted given that we entered the war in 1916 as allies of Russia. Russia dismantled after the 1917 revolution and the context was thus created for Bessarabia to leave the former empire and join Romania. As Carp said, Romania has so much luck that it doesn't need politicians.

VB: And yet all these political achievements occurred in a military context where Romania lost the war. From a military point of view, do you think it was wise for Romania to participate in the war effort?

LB: I don't know if the idea to participate was good or not; in the end, Romania achieved its goals... what else is there to say? But the idea was at least bold if not risky and – in a certain interpretation – even reckless, because Romania accepted from the very beginning to fight a war on two fronts, which Germany sought to avoid at all costs. In absolute numbers, the Romanian front was *the* longest: from Northern Moldavia along the Carpathian Mountains to the Iron Gates and then the rest of the Danube to the Black Sea – and immense front that had to be defended by the Romanian army. Fighting on two fronts against the Germans, Austro-Hungarians, Bulgarians and Turks was simply unsustainable. Romania could not have had a different fate.

VB: Coming back to the European context: Germany wins on the Eastern front, but loses in the West, although even there it is quite close to winning the war. What happened? What was the fatal blow?

LB: Germany was already exhausted; the lack of supplies was considerable not only on the front, but also behind the front due to the economic blockade of the UK. With the UK controlling the seas, Germany found itself in an economic blockade throughout the entire war. They are again stopped at Marne as in 1914; they lack the energy to win on the Western front. They did not lose anything on the Western front; however, the final campaign ended and then they realized they could not win. And not winning meant – as in a game of chess – losing. Time was working against them; the Americans started disembarking troops in Europe...

VB: And this situation contributed to generating a feeling of frustration...

LB: Yes, there was a mental breakdown on the front and behind it as well; many defected; and in the end revolution started in Germany. WW1 was also a contest based on who can endure more. Russia could not resist and thus the revolution erupted in 1917. 1917 was a tough year also for the French: many riots, the atmosphere on the front was not that good either – but the situation nevertheless

stabilized. Germany endured well until 1918, but the tension buildup resulted eventually in the end of the resistance.

VB: You mentioned the Americans. Why do the United States abandon their isolationist foreign policy (the *Monroe Doctrine*) by participating in WW1?

LB: The *Monroe Doctrine* referred especially to non-intervention by others in the affairs of America, but, of course, it also corresponded to a somewhat isolationist American mentality. Why did they get involved? In a nutshell, because of Germany's submarine warfare, which affected also the United States' trade. For the German decision-makers it seemed that the submarine warfare could be an adequate response to the economic blockade instituted by the United Kingdom, and thus a feasible solution to win the war. Instead of that, it contributed to the US' participation in WW1. I am not saying the US would not have participated anyway, but they would not have entered the war so quickly. And had they not entered so soon, perhaps Germany could still have time to win on the Western front too. Who knows... The winning of WW1 was played until the very end. What is certain is that WW1 provided the opportunity for the US to play a world-power role for the first time since their establishment.

VB: How do you see the Versailles negotiations following the war?

LB: The negotiations couldn't have proceeded differently, I suppose. This does not mean they went well. Nation-states were formed, although not in the best possible formula (see the case of Czechoslovakia, for instance). The population was also quite mixed in Central and South-Eastern Europe; therefore, the nation-state solution could not be applied ideally. Nevertheless, some states resulting from these negotiations proved to be more viable than others, and a good example in this sense is Romania. Romania was not a true nation-state as we like to affirm. It was rather a combination of nation-state, in the old kingdom, and different provinces attached to it where the majority was indeed Romanian, albeit with a substantial non-Romanian minority. Yet, Romania proved to be a viable state.

VB: Was Germany treated too harshly at Versailles?

LB: Germany was treated very badly. There was the issue of German unity, on the one hand. Austria was left without its empire and back then was as German as Germany itself (meanwhile, the Austrian nation evolved into something different). The Austrians, just as the Germans, would have been in favour of the *Anschluss* (a word demonized because of Hitler; it means 'union'). They were naturally not allowed to join the Germans. Then there was the Sudetenland too. It was annexed to Czechoslovakia, although it was inhabited 90% by Germans. Of course these territories could not have been granted to Germany; it would have meant that,

losing the war, Germany would in fact still win. On the other hand, there were all the other political and economic sanctions. Germany was humiliated. It is extremely risky to humiliate a country that even on its knees is still a great power. This led to the evolutions we know: Hitler, national-socialism, WW2 etc. Germany could not have had a different chance at the peace talks; however, it would have been in the interest of all Europe if Germany were treated less harshly.

VB: Why haven't Romanians and Hungarians managed to resolve their differences like the French and the Germans?

LB: The antagonism between Romanians and Hungarians is much more complex. There were conflicts between the French and the Germans, but not throughout their entire history. The 'hereditary enemy' of France was England rather, starting with The Hundred Years' War and until more recently. The adversaries changed in the last two centuries. But even then, the competition – that is, between the French and the Germans – was generally on equal foot. In contrast, Romanians were under Hungarian domination for centuries. After 1918, the feeling of domination inverted. There is also the issue of minorities. The French and the Germans do not have something similar (there is Alsace, of course, but the problem is rather closed). Hungarian minorities are numerous in various states that descended from the Austro-Hungarian Empire and this leads to tensions not only with Romania, but also with Slovakia etc. It is a much older and complex antagonism.

VB: There are some Romanians who still fear that the Trianon treaty can be revised and Transylvania lost to Hungary. Is this a legitimate fear?

LB: This is not an issue at all. It is obvious that Transylvania is Romanian and not otherwise. If people believe that 20% of the population can decide against 80%, then Romanians are really not worth that much – and I do not believe this. And since the matter is no longer an issue, we can discuss about the past in a more relaxed manner.

VB: What should be done to improve the perceptions among Romanians and Hungarians?

LB: I think we need to let time sort out things, and hope Europe will be a success (not even this is certain, we can only hope) and that the antagonisms will gradually fade away in a new Europe, different than the conflictive one we know from history.