

BETWEEN HISTORIOGRAPHY AND POLITICS. THE RECEPTION OF AVRAM IANCU AFTER 1989

Abstract: 1989, the year when the communist regime collapsed in Romania, saw the anniversary of 165 years since the birth and, respectively, the commemoration of 117 years since the demise of Avram Iancu, Prefect of the Auraria Gemina Legion and a central figure in the 1848 Revolution from Transylvania. At the watershed moment marked by the Romanian Revolution of 1989, the reception of this personality in the Romanian historiography and consciousness was based, therefore, on utterly respectable grounds, which entailed, for the scientific research establishment, at least, the disappearance of the ideological conditionings imposed by the former regime. Since then, the historiographic research directions that were consolidated for decades have continued among the Romanian historians, in particular those from Cluj, who have attempted to reconstitute the sources of the 1848 Revolution and to conduct analytical and interpretive approaches on the most diverse aspects pertaining to the two years, 1848 and 1849, including the causes and the immediate or lasting consequences of the revolutionary events. While the revolution as a whole has essentially remained in the sphere of scholarly concerns, featuring in the research programs of the history faculties and specialised institutes, its personalities have been, over the past two decades, the subject of jubiliary and commemorative actions with a far broader impact and social reverberation. Avram Iancu is one of the representative personalities of the 1848 Transylvanian Revolution that have been most vividly evoked in extra-scientific manifestations over the past two decades, benefiting from both natural gestures of reverence and homage and from political instrumentalisation. The suggestive charisma of Iancu's personality and his value as a symbol in the national struggle of the Transylvanian Romanians in the 19th century has been a somewhat convenient theme, accessible to nationalist political discourse, among others, in Romania over the past two decades. Capturing the attention of professional historians and other milieus of contemporary Romanian society, the so-called Prince of the Mountains has remained, across the centuries, an irresistible, enigmatic and baffling point of attraction, especially as regards the less clarified aspects of his behaviour and conduct during the period of the 1848 Revolution.

Keywords: Avram Iancu, revolution, 1848-1849, historiography, instrumentalisation

1989, the year when the communist regime collapsed in Romania, saw the anniversary of 165 years since the birth and, respectively, the commemoration of 117 years since the demise of Avram Iancu, Prefect of the Auraria Gemina Legion and a central figure in the 1848 Revolution from Transylvania. At the watershed moment marked by the Romanian Revolution of 1989,² the reception of this personality in the Romanian historiography and consciousness was based, therefore, on utterly respectable grounds, which entailed, for the scientific research establishment, at least, the disappearance of the ideological conditionings imposed by the former regime.³ Since then, the

¹ Associate Professor, PhD, at the Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of History and Philosophy, ioncarja@yahoo.it .

² On this theme, see Ioachim Lazăr, Nicolae Marcel Morar, *Avram Iancu în memoria posterității*, Deva, Ed. Emia, 2008.

³ Regarding the impact of ideology on Romanian historical writing during the communist period, see: Vlad Georgescu, *Politică și istorie. Căzul comuniștilor români 1944-1977*, Bucharest, Ed. Humanitas, 1991; Florin Müller, *Politica și istoriografie în România 1948-1964*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Nereamia Napocae, 2003;

historiographic research directions that were consolidated for decades have continued among the Romanian historians, in particular those from Cluj, who have attempted to reconstitute the sources of the 1848 Revolution and to conduct analytical and interpretive approaches on the most diverse aspects pertaining to the two years, 1848 and 1849, including the causes and the immediate or lasting consequences of the revolutionary events. While the revolution as a whole has essentially remained in the sphere of scholarly concerns, featuring in the research programs of the history faculties and specialised institutes, its personalities have been, over the past two decades, the subject of jubiliary and commemorative actions with a far broader impact and social reverberation. Avram Iancu is one of the representative personalities of the 1848 Transylvanian Revolution that have been most vividly evoked in extra-scientific manifestations over the past two decades, benefiting from both natural gestures of reverence and homage and from political instrumentalisation. The suggestive charisma of Iancu's personality and his value as a symbol in the national struggle of the Transylvanian Romanians in the 19th century has been a somewhat convenient theme, accessible to nationalist political discourse, among others, in Romania over the past two decades. Capturing the attention of professional historians and other milieus of contemporary Romanian society, the so-called Prince of the Mountains has remained, across the centuries, an irresistible, enigmatic and baffling point of attraction, especially as regards the less clarified aspects of his behaviour and conduct during the period of the 1848 Revolution.

Historiography represents a reception area for Iancu's figure in which the quantitative accumulations of information and the studies focusing on his role in the events from the years 1848-1849 have revealed new aspects and dimensions of this personality, continuing, in broad lines, the directions and trends evinced by the Romanian historiography devoted to the phenomenon of the 1848 Revolution, which were established in the interwar period or between 1948 and 1989. The Romanian historiography of this period (1948-1989) has the undeniable merit of having conducted large-scale studies focusing exclusively on Iancu's personality and role in the context of the revolutionary events and of the petitionary movement addressed to Vienna during the revolution and over the next period. The publication of the monumental monograph authored by Silviu Dragomir in 1968 was meant to revive the interest of the Romanian historiography in Avram Iancu,⁴ and was followed by a series of scholarly studies and popularisation works, such as the book written by Horia Ursu and published two years earlier in the collection "Outstanding Men" of Tineretului Publishing House;⁵ in 1968 there came out another popularisation work, signed by Marin Mihalache,⁶ while the 1970 work of Leonida Loghin and Constantin Ucrain, dedicated to the military aspects of the 1848 Revolution, reconstructed the role Iancu played in the context of these

Gabriel Moisa, *Istoria Transilvaniei în istoriografia românească: 1965-1989*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2003.

⁴ Silviu Dragomir, *Avram Iancu*, second edition, Bucharest, Ed. Științifică, 1968.

⁵ Horia Ursu, *Avram Iancu*, Bucharest, Ed. Tineretului, 1966.

⁶ Marin Mihalache, *Avram Iancu*, Bucharest, Ed. Militară, 1968.

events.⁷ Two years later, coinciding with the centenary of Iancu's death, the correspondence of Alexander Papiu Ilarian was published; edited by the historians Iosif Pervain and Ioan Chindriș, this book may clarify some biographical aspects of the character under discussion here.⁸ Besides hundreds of studies and articles, this commemorative moment was accompanied by the publication of several monographs and works of documentary restitution: *Avram Iancu - viața și faptele unui erou și martir* [*Avram Iancu - The Life and Deeds of a Hero and Martyr*], signed by the Academy Member Ștefan Pascu,⁹ *Avram Iancu - scrisori* [*Avram Iancu - Letters*], written by Liviu Maior,¹⁰ and *Avram Iancu în memorialistică* [*Avram Iancu in Memoirs*], by Pompiliu Teodor.¹¹ Among the more substantial studies and articles published on this occasion, we should mention a few, such as Liviu Botezan's study about Iancu's activity in the spring of 1848,¹² Iacob Mârza's overview of the studies Iancu carried out in Zlatna between 1837 and 1841, as a student at the local royal gymnasium¹³ and Simion Retegan's examination of the importance of several unpublished petitions that Avram Iancu submitted in 1852.¹⁴ This bibliographical reconsideration of Avram Iancu, occasioned by the centenary of his death, came after a period of prohibition that was partly coeval with the so-called obsessive decade, the 1950s, in which a number of restrictions were imposed on the historiography of the problem. The revival of historiographical studies dedicated to Avram Iancu in 1972, which marked the centenary of his death, continued two years later with a bibliographical repertory in the book entitled *Avram Iancu, documente și bibliografie* [*Avram Iancu, Documents and References*], signed by Ioan Ranca și Valeriu Nițu, which still serves as a working instrument of undeniable topicality for historians in the year 2013.¹⁵

In the context of re-launched approaches to the personality of Avram Iancu and, implicitly, to the importance of the 1848 Revolution in the modern history of the Romanian nation, research dedicated to these topics diversified during the following period. Thus, studies focusing on the phenomenon of the 1848 Revolution in Transylvania benefited from a coherent, solid, and systematic research program, deployed by the team of specialists on the "Revolution of 1848," from the History Institute in Cluj-Napoca, which, in the same atmosphere of restitution mentioned above, inaugurated the series of documents entitled *Revoluția de la 1848 în Țările Române*.

⁷ Leonida Loghin, Constantin Ucrain, *Aspecte militare ale revoluției din 1848 în Transilvania*, Bucharest, Ed. Militară, 1970.

⁸ Iosif Pervain, Ioan Chindriș, *Coroșdența lui Alexandru Papiu Ilarian (scrisori, documente, memorii, note)*, Cluj, Ed. Dacia, 1972.

⁹ Ștefan Pascu, *Avram Iancu-viața și faptele unui erou și martir*, Bucharest, Ed. Meridiane, 1972.

¹⁰ Liviu Maior, *Avram Iancu. Scrisori*, Cluj, Ed. Dacia, 1972.

¹¹ Pompiliu Teodor, *Avram Iancu în memorialistică*, Cluj, Ed. Dacia, 1972.

¹² Samu Benkő, Liviu Botezan, Ákos Egyed, "Avram Iancu, exponent al dreptului poporului la înarmare în primăvara anului 1848," in *Apulum*, 1978, 16, pp. 345-354.

¹³ Iacob Mârza, "Avram Iancu, elev la 'Regium Gymnasium Zalatnense' (1837-1841)," in *Revista de pedagogie*, XXI, 9-10, pp. 109-115.

¹⁴ Simion Retegan, "Cinci petiții inedite din 1852 ale lui Avram Iancu," in *Sargeția*, IX, 1972, pp. 247-258; see also Idem, "Răzvrătirea moșilor din 1852. Rolul lui Avram Iancu," in *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie și Arheologie Cluj*, XV, 1972, pp. 239-262.

¹⁵ Ion Ranca, Valeriu Nițu, *Avram Iancu-documente și bibliografie*, Bucharest, Ed. Științifică, 1974.

Seria C. Transilvania [*The Revolution of 1848 in the Romanian Lands. Series C. Transylvania*]: the first volume appeared in 1977, and the series has now reached its ninth volume, which was printed two years ago, in 2011.¹⁶ Similar to other research institutes in Central Europe, the History Institute of Cluj included the 1848 Revolution, with its elites and masses, among the priorities of research into the period of the 19th century. Moreover, in the decade before the 1989 Revolution there started the publication of memoirs relating to the 1848 Revolution in Transylvania and the Banat, coordinated by the historians Nicolae Bocşan and Valeriu Leu, the first volume being published by Dacia Press in Cluj, in 1988, and being followed, a decade later, by a second, even more substantial volume on this theme, authored by the aforementioned historians.¹⁷ The image of Iancu in folklore and the collective mentality rounds off the area of scholarly concerns dedicated to him, with works such as those published by Romulus Felea¹⁸ or Florian Dudaş,¹⁹ an important work under the latter's signature appeared at Facla Press in Timișoara, in 1986, emphasising the significance of Avram Iancu's figure in the tradition of the Romanian people.

In this article we do not aim to provide a comprehensive historiographical overview of the 1848 Revolution or the figure of Avram Iancu, but merely intend to point out the major landmarks of historical writings on these subjects up until 1989, for the good reason that the specific research concerns from before the 1989 Revolution have continued to be addressed in the historiography of the two decades following the December 1989 Revolution. This represents, in our view, the first major feature of the reception of Iancu's figure at the level of post-1989 historiographical concerns: the continuation of the solid research directions that were begun in the previous decades, specialising on the retrieval of unpublished documentary, narrative and epistolary sources, which may provide information about the 1848 Revolution and its personalities. We shall note, in this context, the expansion - among the historiographers from Cluj - of studies devoted to a distinct category of sources on the Revolution, in particular, memoirs, which, as we noted before, had already begun to be published systematically. In addition to the two volumes of memoirs relating to the 1848 Revolution in Transylvania, edited by Nicolae Bocşan and Valeriu Leu, new documents of this type have entered the scientific circuit, including, for instance, the original manuscript published by N. Bocşan and V. Leu in the volume entitled *Revoluția de la 1848 în Munții Apuseni* [*The 1848 Revolution in the Apuseni Mountains*],²⁰ the

¹⁶ So far nine volumes of this work, *Revoluția de la 1848 în Țările Române. Seria C. Transilvania*, have seen the light of print at Ed. Academiei Române, Bucharest, vol. I-1977, vol. IX, 2011.

¹⁷ *Memorialistica revoluției de la 1848 în Transilvania*, introductory study, notes, glossary, edited by Nicolae Bocşan and Valeriu Leu, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Dacia, 1988; Nicolae Bocşan, Valeriu Leu, *Revoluția de la 1848 din Transilvania în memorialistică*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2000.

¹⁸ Romulus Felea, *Avram Iancu în tradiția orală a moșilor (la 120 de ani de la moartea eroului)*, Cluj-Napoca, Academia Română, 1992, re-edited under the title *Avram Iancu în folclorul moșilor*, edited by Ioan Felea and Virgiliu Florea, Cluj-Napoca, [our emphasis] 1999.

¹⁹ Florian Dudaş, *Avram Iancu în tradiția poporului român*, Timișoara, Ed. Facla, 1989, re-edited in 1998 at Editura de Vest in Timișoara, under the title: *Avram Iancu în tradiția românilor*.

²⁰ Nicolae Bocşan, Rudolf Gräf, *Revoluția de la 1848 în Munții Apuseni. Memorialistică*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2003.

memories of the siege of Timișoara during the revolution, written by General von Rukavina and edited by Rudolf Gräf,²¹ or the part dedicated to the 1848 Revolution from Transylvania in Sava Popovici Săvoiu's memories of great scale, reported and published by Valeriu Leu and Nicolae Bocșan.²² In addition to these, there are various approaches to the 1848 Movement in Transylvania, numerous studies of smaller or larger scale published in the yearly reviews of the Academy Institutes and the History Museums, or in other specialised publications from the country and abroad, signed by prestigious scholars of our contemporary historiography, such as Gelu Neamțu, Ioan Chindriș, Nicolae Bocșan, Teodor Pavel, Ela Cosma, Ioan Bolovan, and many others.²³

In the post-1989 historiography, this category of professional approaches to the figure of Iancu and the events that consecrated him also includes commemorative and anniversary pieces. The year 1998, celebrating 150 years since the revolution, was rich in scientific initiatives dedicated to this subject. We may mention here, along with many other events, the international session held in Cluj-Napoca, which produced an important and well-known volume entitled *Revoluția de la 1848 în Europa centrală. Perspectivă istorică și istoriografică* [*The Revolution of 1848 in Central Europe. Historical and Historiographical Perspectives*].²⁴ Other institutions in the country also seized this anniversary moment to organise scientific events, which led to the publication of volumes of studies, such as the one that came out under the aegis of the Museum of Deva.²⁵ Another anniversary manifestation dedicated to Avram Iancu occurred in 2008, when the Museum of Alba Iulia organised a symposium in homage to this personality, marking the celebration of 184 years since the birth of the hero and 136 years since his demise.

Another area in which we may notice that scientific interest in Iancu's figure materialised after 1989 refers to the re-editing of reference works, such as re-publication, in 1998 and 2012, of Silviu Dragomir's 1868 monograph²⁶ or the partial reprint, in Ioan Ranca's 1996 book, of period texts referring to Avram Iancu,²⁷ which he

²¹ Rudolf Gräf, *Timișoara sub asediu: jurnalul feldmareșalului George v. Rukavina (aprilie-august 1849)*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2008.

²² See N. Bocșan, V. Leu, *Revoluția de la 1848 din Transilvania în memorialistică*, pp. 173-268.

²³ From among the contributions of this type, we shall selectively mention a few, by way of exemplification: Ela Cosma, "Liberalism versus conservatorism la sași la 1848-1849. Cu o privire introductivă asupra liberalismului german și austriac," in Camil Mureșanu (ed.), *Transilvania între medieval și modern*, Cluj-Napoca, Centrul de Studii Transilvane/Fundația Culturală Română, 1996, pp. 62-82; Ioan Chindriș, *Ideologia revoluționară a lui Alexandru Papiu Ilarian*, Bucharest, Ed. România Press, 2002; Gelu Neamțu, Ioan Bolovan, *The Revolution of 1848-1849 in Transylvania. Contributions to the History of Mentalities and of the Social Imaginary*, Cluj-Napoca, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2004; Teodor Pavel, "Laic și ecleziastic în revoluțiile de la 1848 din Europa Centrală," in *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie*, Cluj-Napoca, 42, 2003, pp. 259-268; Gelu Neamțu, *Avram Iancu-mit, realitate, simbol*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Argonaut, 2012.

²⁴ Camil Mureșanu, Nicolae Bocșan, Ioan Bolovan (coord.), *Revoluția de la 1848 în Europa centrală. Perspectivă istorică și istoriografică*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2000.

²⁵ *Avram Iancu 1824-1872. Volum dedicat împlinirii a 125 de ani de la moartea eroului*, in the series *Restituiri*, V, Deva, 1997.

²⁶ Second editions released by the Cluj-based publishers Dacia (1998) and Eikon (2012).

²⁷ Ioan Ranca, *Avram Iancu pe baricadele Apusenilor. Relatări contemporane ale unor apropiați și adversari*, Târgu Mureș, Ed. Pax historica, 1996.

had originally published in the volume cited above, *Avram Iancu - documente și bibliografie* [*Avram Iancu - Documents and References*], which Ranca had signed in collaboration with Valeriu Nițu in 1974.

After 1989, the preoccupations of Romanian historiographers with the 1848 Transylvanian Revolution have also featured an innovative trend, manifested at the level of the approach perspective, methodology, and discourse. Foremost, in this respect, is Gelu Neamțu's study on the competitive presence of national symbols in the Transylvanian landscape during the revolutionary years.²⁸ Professor Nicolae Bocșan has reconstituted the meanings of the concepts of revolution and revolutionary for the Romanians and the Hungarians, with references to the revolutionary mentality of the 1848 Movement in Transylvania.²⁹ The same line of concerns gave birth to several valuable studies devoted to the relationship between the sacred and the profane in the collective mentality of the Romanians in 1848, such as those written by Liviu Maior, Simona Nicoară, or Ioan Bolovan.³⁰ Last but not least, we would like to mention the research undertaken from the perspective of collective mentalities and political mythology, such as the ones on dynastic patriotism and the myth of the good emperor in relation to the figure of Iancu in the Romanian collective mentality from the period of the revolution.³¹

Over the past two decades, in the area of scientific research, interest in the figure of Avram Iancu has therefore gone hand in hand with the general approach to the 1848 phenomenon in Transylvania and in Central Europe. There have been quantitative accumulations; a relatively considerable amount of sources have been published, and so have numerous analytical and interpretive studies and articles, of diverse amplitude and unequal value, whose quantitative ascertainment is made possible by the latest volumes published as the Historical Bibliography of Romania.³² It is equally true that the

²⁸ Gelu Neamțu, "Simboluri naționale în timpul Revoluției de la 1848 din Transilvania," in *David Prodan – Puterea modelului*, Cluj-Napoca, 1995, pp. 173-189.

²⁹ See, in this sense, the introduction to the volume N. Bocșan, V. Leu, *Revoluția de la 1848 din Transilvania în memorialistică*, pp. 7-94.

³⁰ Liviu Maior, *1848-1849. Români și unguri în revoluție*, Bucharest, Ed. Enciclopedică, 1998; Simona Nicoară, *Mitologiile revoluției pașoptiste românești. Istorie și imaginar*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, 1999; Ioan Bolovan, "Contribuții la cunoașterea imaginii sociale în revoluția de la 1848 din Transilvania," in Nicolae Bocșan, Sorin Mitu, Toader Nicoară (eds.), *Identitate și alteritate. Studii de imagologie*, II, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, 1998, pp. 184-207.

³¹ Mirela Andrei, "Aspecte privind mitul 'bunului împărat' în sensibilitatea colectivă românească din Ardeal la 1848," in Nicolae Bocșan, Valeriu Leu (eds.), *Identitate și alteritate. Studii de imagologie*, I, Reșița, Ed. Banatica, 1996, pp. 89-95; Ion Cârja, "Avram Iancu și 'bunul împărat' în sensibilitatea colectivă românească la 1848," in *Buletinul cercurilor științifice studențești*, II, Alba Iulia, 1996, pp. 203-210; Idem, "Les Roumains de Transylvanie et l'Empire des Habsbourg dans la période 1848 – 1851 - entre réalité et imaginaire," in Ionuț Costea, Valentin Orga (eds.), *Studii de istoria Transilvaniei*, IV, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Accent, 2000, pp. 231-244; Doru Radosav, *Arătarea împăratului. Intrările imperiale în Transilvania și Banat (sec. XVIII-XIX). Discurs și reprezentare*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2002.

³² The latest five volumes of the Historical Bibliography of Romania have inventoried the scientific yield of Romanian historiography after 1989; the order of their appearance is as follows: vol. VIII: 1989-1994, Bucharest, Ed. Academiei Române, 1996; vol. IX: 1994-1999, Bucharest, Ed. Academiei Române, 2000; vol. X: 1999-2004; Bucharest, Ed. Academiei Române, 2005; vol. XI: 2004-2006, Bucharest, Ed.

Romanian and, in particular, the Transylvanian historiography of the past two decades has failed to produce a new monograph dedicated to Avram Iancu's personality and that the one written by Silviu Dragomir in 1968, with its further editions that saw the light of print before and after 1989, remains an irreplaceable historiographical reference on this topic.

During these two decades, the extra-scientific reception of Iancu's figure has been less uniform and not very easily decipherable in clear terms. Several aspects can, however, be highlighted. Thus, given the efforts to re-legitimise the Romanian national symbols and personalities after 1989, Iancu's image figure has seen an incontestable rise, which has been noticeable at the level of commemorative activities and institutional onomastics. We are referring here to a number of educational institutions at secondary, high school and even university level that have opted for bearing his name. At the same time, a certain civic cult around Iancu's figure has expanded in Romania during this period, evidently by multiplying the number of statues that represent him at Câmpeni, Abrud, Brad, Alba Iulia and Cluj-Napoca, rather uneven in terms of their aesthetic value; in addition to this, mention should be made of the unfinished project undertaken by the former Prime Minister Victor Ciorbea of having a statue of Avram Iancu erected in Bucharest.

We could also talk about yet another level of the perception and valorisation of Avram Iancu's image after 1989, that of his instrumentalisation and politicisation in various strands of political discourse, often for very polemical reasons. In the political discourse of nationalist expression, Iancu's figure is vehemently invoked as a founding figure of Romanian national identity and values, opposed to otherness, which is seen as hostile and competitive. Over the past two decades, well-known political parties and power holders in Romania have used the suggestive force of Iancu's personality to ground their nationalist discourse in and make it more convincing and incisive. This instrumentalisation of Iancu's image through his association with and use as a flagship for various themes of the nationalist discourse of the last twenty years, which are reminiscent of the national-communism of the previous period, have simply debunked and, to some extent, discredited the figure of Avram Iancu in the public consciousness, especially in the urban milieus, as it has happened with other Romanian national symbols too (such as the tricolour flag), whose excessive use has led their erosion, temporarily at least, in the collective perception. Invoking the personality of the 1848 prefect from the Apuseni Mountains in such contexts has not been in his favour, because it has affected the possibility of his accurate and pertinent reception, impairing a broader understanding of this figure, who coalesced not only the essence of the Romanian nationalism exhibited in the 1848 Revolution, but also many influences from the European culture and mentality of the time, as well as the influences of liberalism and the political romanticism of the time.

For the Transylvanian Romanians above all, Avram Iancu is the symbol with the most obvious adherence at the level of collective sensibility and the personality with the

highest degree of representativeness for the Romanian national identity. It is not by chance that he has been targeted and victimised by approaches designed to denigrate him and to diminish his prestige, coming from the Hungarian radical nationalist discourse of the recent years (see the Csibi Barna episode). This ultimately demonstrates the force and power of suggestion inherent in national symbols in the context of the identitarian disputes of (post)modern society.