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The Movement for Reform in Rumania After World War I: The Parliamentary Bloc Government of 1919–1920

In the labyrinthine world of Rumanian politics, it was easy enough to find striking examples of corruption in high places and low, year after year, both before and after World War I, and to dismiss the country's parliamentary form of government as a sham or as an imitation of the West. But in 1919 many Rumanians had reason to expect the future to be brighter than the past. The approximate doubling of Rumanian territory and population and a happy ending to the long-fought struggle for national unity seemed a most auspicious foundation for Rumania's new postwar life. Social justice and the exigencies of the modern world were being addressed by the advent of universal suffrage for men and the first stages of extensive land reform. Yet, for all these hopeful beginnings, most of the rather dismal history of interwar Rumania seems to illustrate primarily that hoary adage, "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose."

The autumn and winter of 1919–20 was a crucial period in Rumanian political life. After about a year of confusion, economic distress, rising mass discontent, quarrels with the Allies, and internal political maneuvering, the country began to settle down to unfinished business. The old political parties were in disarray; new formations were eager to fill the vacuum. The first elections held under universal male suffrage (November 3–4, 1919) brought in a parliament of fresh faces from classes and regions never before represented and a government of "new men" largely committed to radical land redistribution and other thoroughgoing reforms. Yet by the end of March 1920, the politicians of the old guard were firmly in command once again, and the erstwhile reform bloc was reduced to scurrying about after new coalitions and fending off accusations of bolshevism. The new era seemed to have ended before it had even begun.¹

The general instability of Rumanian life in the months following the armistice was reflected politically by the continuous concoction, dissolution, and recombination of parties, as each tried to secure for itself the opportunity to reconstruct Rumania in its own image. Some political formations—the Liberals,

1. Overviews of the Parliamentary Bloc government of 1919–20 are given in two recent articles (Ioan Scurtu, "Politica internă a guvernului Blocului parlamentar," *Revista arhivelor*, 1975, no. 1, and Mircea T. Mușat, "Partidele politice și alegerile parlamentare din 1919: Guvernarea Blocului parlamentar," *Anale de istorie*, 1974, no. 1), and parts of two books (Ioan Scurtu, *Din viața politică a româniei: Intemeierea și activitatea partidului țărănesc [1918–1926]* [Bucharest, 1975], and Mircea Mușat and Ion Ardeleanu, *Viața politică în România, 1918–1921*, 2nd ed. [Bucharest, 1976]). The Mușat and Ardeleanu book is by far the most comprehensive account to date of the origins, opinions, and activities of the major parties in early post-World War I Rumania.

the Conservatives, and the People's League—feared radical change and directed their energies accordingly. Others—such as the new Peasant Party, the Socialists, various regional groups, and the followers of Nicolae Iorga—hoped for wholesale political, economic, and social reformation of the country.

When it originated in 1848, the National Liberal Party was aptly named. It was a group of young, left-leaning, Paris-educated, nationalist rebels.² Its members tended to be intellectuals or the sons of the second rank of large landowners. The leading Liberal family, the very able Brătianus, cultivated a great intimacy with the royal family, and Brătianu influence on the first two kings was, until the late 1920s, an important factor in Rumanian politics. With the passing of time and increase in prosperity, the Liberals also developed close financial ties with the growing Rumanian state. The Liberal Party became the “town” party, its members the promulgators of modernization and industrialization, the principal bankers of Rumania, and, in the new century, the apostles of land reform. Peasant needs were never the focus of Liberal interest or concern, however. Rather, the Liberal leadership tended to view basic land and suffrage reforms simply as a necessary stage in creating an affluent peasantry which could provide markets for the products of industries controlled by Liberals. In addition, the Liberals hoped that a grateful peasantry would be useful in their political struggle against the other major Rumanian party, the Conservatives, who were sluggish in dealing with land reform.

The Conservatives, traditionally the “country” party of large landowners, or *boieri*, were in a much worse position than the Liberals at the end of the war.³ The Liberals were saddled with a reputation for corruption and blamed for recent hardships. They needed time and reorganization before they could resume their dominant role in Rumanian politics. But they had a clever leadership, money, royal connections, ties with the army, and great flexibility to aid them in their efforts. As a consequence, the Liberal Party survived to become the prime defender of the status quo in postwar Rumania. The Conservatives, on the other hand, had more profound and permanent problems. As early as the 1880s, the Conservative Party had begun to split into two factions, mainly over the issue of land reform. By the latter part of 1919, loss of land to the peasants, the Germanophile attitude of some Conservatives during the war, and a lack of charismatic leaders and original ideas had drained Conservative resources to an all-time low. Neither Conservative Party branch was to play a major role in postwar politics.

Although the Conservative Party stagnated, several of its leaders did not. Some avoided party politics and concentrated, with considerable effectiveness,

2. For a rather self-serving view of mostly early Liberal Party history, see *Ce a făcut partidul național-liberal de la întemeierea lui și pînă azi (1848–1927)* (Bucharest, n.d.). Ștefan Zeletin, *Burghezia română, originea și rolul ei istoric* (Bucharest, 1925), and Zeletin, *Neo-liberalismul* (Bucharest, 1927) attempt to construct a historical-philosophical framework for Liberal activity.

3. The best account of Rumanian politics by a Conservative is Alexandru Marghiloman, *Note politice (1897–1924)* (Bucharest, 1927), the diary of the Progressive Conservative leader who often proves to be an acute observer. For his theoretical views, see A. Marghiloman, *Doctrina conservatoare* (Bucharest, 1923). The views of his rival Unionist Democrat (or Conservative Democrat or Nationalist Conservative) leader, Take Ionescu, can be consulted in *Programul partidului democrat* (Bucharest, 1920).

on personally influencing the court. The main rallying point for former Conservatives, however, was a curious new group called the People's League (later the People's Party). Its leader, General Alexandru Averescu, was an immensely popular war hero, whose ruthless quelling of the 1907 peasant revolt had long since been obscured by his fatherly treatment of his troops during World War I and by his courageous leadership at Mărăști. Rather simple-minded in his devotion to authoritarian rule ("the iron hand" was a favorite phrase), Averescu nonetheless exhibited a pronounced streak of opportunistic guile: during the first nine months of 1919 he negotiated, apparently with a serious eye to fusion, with most political groups in Rumania, from Socialists to die-hard Conservatives. The former Conservatives, military men, and rightist refugees from regional parties who joined Averescu's People's League saw in him the most promising available instrument for counteracting Peasant Party influence on the masses and for supplanting the Liberals as the predominant party of law and order in the eyes of the king. New in name, the People's League was created by old politicians with old ideas. It relied on demagogic appeals to attract mass support, shamelessly promising the peasantry concessions—such as five hectares per family, which was nonsense economically—that were patently against the interests of its own leaders.⁴

To the left of center, the most important group was the Peasant Party, which had been created to promote the welfare of the four-fifths of the population who tilled the soil.⁵ It was founded in 1918 by a former schoolteacher of peasant origin, Ion Mihalache, although most of its leaders were middle-class intellectuals. Shortly after its formation, the Peasant Party was joined by the Labor Party—a small group of progressive M.P.'s who had strenuously disagreed with the government's approach to land reform in 1917—and later by regional peasant groups. Although the Peasant Party became increasingly cautious and moderate in its views as time went on, it started out with a good deal of radical enthusiasm.

The other principal new group to appear was the Rumanian National Party of Transylvania, formed in the late nineteenth century to combat Magyarization

4. The clearest account by far of the People's League and apparently a valuable source of information and commentary on interwar Rumanian politics in general is the memoir of one of General Averescu's closest collaborators, Constantin Argetoianu, only a few excerpts of which have been published (see *Magazin istoric*, 1, nos. 1–9 [April–December 1967] and 2, nos. 1–3 [January–March 1968]; see also commentary in *ibid.*, 4, no. 7 [July 1970]). This material, to which no Western researcher has yet been given access, is found in the Arhiva Comitetului Central al Partidului Communist Român, fond 104, under the title, "Pentru cei de miine: Amintiri din vremea celor de ieri," part 4, 1919–1927. (The information in the passage at hand is taken from M. Mușat and I. Ardeleanu, *Viața politică*, p. 244 and comes from Argetoianu, "Pentru cei de miine," part 4, p. 17).

There are several adulatory and insubstantial biographies of Averescu, of which U. Cioroiu, *O viață de prestigiu: Alexandru Averescu mareșal al României* (Bucharest, 1931) is typical.

5. A great deal has been published, both by contemporaries and by recent writers on the Peasant Party. For the Peasants' philosophy, see, for example, Virgil Madgearu, *Țărănișmul* (Bucharest, n.d.), and Madgearu, *Doctrina țărăniștă* (Bucharest, 1923). See also Z. Ornea, *Țărănișmul: Studiu sociologic* (Bucharest, 1969), and George C. Marica, "Contribuție la istoria politică a țărănișmului 1819–1926," unpublished manuscript. David Mitrany, *The Land and the Peasant in Romania* (London, 1930), and Henry L. Roberts, *Rumania: The Political Problems of an Agrarian State* (New Haven, 1951) are still by far the best overall accounts in a Western language of interwar Rumanian peasant problems.

pressures.⁶ Unlike most of the other parties in postwar Rumania, the Transylvanian National Party had a very broad social base and embraced persons with widely differing aims and needs. This diversity of interests, combined with the inevitable loss of the party's original *raison d'être* once unification was achieved, resulted in a continuing "identity crisis" for the National Party. Its leaders, especially its president, Iuliu Maniu, were trained largely in protest and delaying tactics in the suspicious atmosphere of the Hungarian parliament. They found it difficult to adapt to a more positive political situation. Although less radical than the Peasant Party, the National Party supported generally populist, anti-centralist positions.

Finally, there was the National Democratic Party of politician-savant Nicolae Iorga.⁷ Throughout the interwar period Iorga's following remained small and his political ideas erratic, but his powerful personality loomed large. During the first postwar years he threw his considerable polemical talents, his international reputation, and his longstanding friendship with the royal family behind peasant democracy.

These were the most important parties. There were also other political formations—the Socialists and several minority and special interest groups—whose influence was severely limited by their independence, their small size, or the extremity of their views.

The fate of all Rumanian political parties rested to an unusual degree in the hands of the king. One key to royal power was the peculiar Rumanian system of having the king appoint a new prime minister *before* parliamentary elections were held. Because the party just given power was then allowed to "make the elections" in its own interests, the king's choice of minister effectively determined the complexion of the new parliament. The theoretical power of the Rumanian monarch was further enhanced by his constitutional rights of absolute veto and dissolution of parliament, and, in practice, the king had always played a very active political role, serving as arbiter between the warring Liberals and Conservatives. Even when his mediating role became unnecessary at the end of World War I, because of the eclipse of the Conservatives and the rightward drift of the Liberals, the king was able to maintain and perhaps even increase his grip on Rumanian political life by using his constitutional and traditional powers to define the interests of the ruling class. His ally and chief adviser in this endeavor was Ion I. C. (Ionel) Brătianu, whose sharp and decisive cleverness, ability to

6. Much work has now been done on the pre-World War I Rumanian National Party of Transylvania. Constantin Daicoviciu, Ștefan Pascu, V. Chereșteșiu, and T. Morariu, *Din istoria Transylvaniei* (Bucharest, 1960) brings a large amount of material together, providing a background for understanding National Party activities after unification. For both Peasants and Transylvanians in the interwar period, see Pamfil Șeicaru, *Istoria partidelor naționale, țărănist și național-țărănist* (Madrid, 1963). For National Party development between 1918 and 1926, see Victoria F. Brown, "The Romanian National Party and the Political Integration of Transylvania into Greater Romania" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1972).

7. Nicolae Iorga's own extensive and often insightful writings are the best guide to his changing political views. See especially, Nicolae Iorga, *Memorii*, 6 vols. (Bucharest, n.d.); Iorga, *România contemporană de la 1904 la 1930. Supt trei regi, Istoria a unei lupte pentru un ideal moral și național*, 2nd ed. (Bucharest, 1932); and Iorga, *O viață de om: Așa cum a fost*, 3 vols. (Bucharest, 1932).

act, and consummate skill in the more dubious political arts provided the perfect foil for the intelligent and sensitive but timid, hesitant, and physically delicate king.⁸

On September 12, 1919, unwilling to meet Allied terms, Ionel Brătianu resigned as head of government and formally, though not actually, as principal Rumanian negotiator at the Paris Peace Conference,⁹ thereby initiating a period of uncertainty and transition in Rumanian politics. During the first week of November, under the caretaker government of an old Liberal ally, General Artur Văitoianu, elections to parliament were held, the first under universal suffrage. For a variety of reasons, notably Brătianu's conviction that the popularity of his foreign policy and a vigorous press campaign would assure him an easy victory (even in the absence of grass-roots politicking), the elections were allowed to run their course with a minimum of coercion and bribery. General Averescu, piqued at not having been chosen over Văitoianu, refused to participate, as did the Socialists and Take Ionescu's Unionist Democrats. To their great surprise, rather than sweeping the board, the Liberals secured only 103 of 568 seats. The real winners were newcomers to Rumanian politics: the Transylvanian National Party, which won 199 seats, and the Peasant Party, which garnered 130.¹⁰

Shortly after the elections, on November 25 the Peasant Party and Iorga's National Democrats joined with the regional parties of Transylvania, Bessarabia, and Bucovina to form what they termed a "Democratic Parliamentary Bloc." The official purpose of the new formation was to give a powerful and cohesive voice to the people, as opposed to the politicians. In the bombastic language of the National Party paper *Patria*, the Bloc was "created for the disenslavement of Rumanian society from 'politicism.'" It was to be a fusion of the peasant ideas of the new provinces and the Old Kingdom (*Regat*) Peasant Party with the "superior morality" of Nicolae Iorga and his followers.¹¹

Meanwhile, the Allies were becoming increasingly impatient with Rumania's reluctance to sign the peace treaties with Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria. The Supreme Council was not to be put off much longer. Of all the prominent Rumanian political leaders, only Brătianu remained unyielding in his public statements against the treaties. Even though King Ferdinand agreed with Brătianu and resented and feared Allied meddling in Rumanian affairs, "it did not suit the

8. There is no satisfactory biography of King Ferdinand—merely anniversary volumes—although a good deal of scattered material for one does exist in the Arhivele Statului București and in published sources. A careful study is needed of Ferdinand's reign, his relationship to Ionel Brătianu, the role of Queen Maria, and the influence of the so-called camarilla of friends and relatives at court.

9. A succinct description of the Liberal tendency to resign strategically at difficult moments is given by Sherman David Spector, *Rumania at the Paris Peace Conference: A Study of the Diplomacy of Ioan I. C. Brătianu* (New York, 1962), p. 188.

10. This is generally considered to have been among the least rigged of interwar parliamentary elections, although the abstentions, particularly that of Averescu's League, gave the results a less than universal character. The followers of Nicolae Iorga won twenty-seven seats and those of Alexandru Marghiloman won thirteen. The other seats went to various smaller parties (*Buletinul statistic al României*, no. 3 [Bucharest, 1920], p. 2, table 4).

11. *Patria*, December 1, 1919.

dynasty to embroil itself with the whole Western alliance,"¹² and if the election results were not to be blatantly ignored, the new Parliamentary Bloc would have to supply the next premier.

Among the Parliamentary Bloc leaders, King Ferdinand certainly would have felt most comfortable with his old acquaintance Iorga. Iorga, however, adamantly refused to consider the premiership, pointing to the weakness of his parliamentary base. The reluctant king had little choice but to appoint a leader from either the Transylvanian National Party or the Peasant Party. The Peasant Party, which the court regarded with the utmost suspicion, was out of the question. Hence, on December 3, 1919, a Transylvanian—Dr. Alexandru Vaida-Voevod—became head of the government.

The greatest significance of Vaida-Voevod's government lies not so much in what it accomplished directly as in what it tried to do and in the circumstances of its defeat. Several matters demanded immediate attention. First, and for the moment most urgent, the Allies had to be appeased and the peace treaties signed before normal life could resume. Second, some way to mollify the discontented populace, both urban and rural, would have to be found. Furthermore, interwoven with every aspect of both foreign and domestic difficulties, a myriad of political problems awaited solution by the new government: close rapport with the king had to be fostered, the impact of rival groups minimized, policies and tactics clarified, local organizations strengthened, and techniques of mass communication developed. An analysis of how the Parliamentary Bloc government handled these areas of difficulty can provide clues to the nature, limitations, and ultimate impact of the forces for reform in post-World War I Rumania.

Foreign policy was one of the new government's strong points, and some signal successes were achieved abroad. Alexandru Vaida-Voevod was especially well qualified for his post as foreign minister. His first love was always diplomacy, and he set himself the immediate task of straightening out relations with the exasperated Allies. Vaida-Voevod was a reasonable man of mild, self-effacing demeanor and thus a striking contrast to the petulant, arrogant, and quixotically brilliant Brătianu. Vaida earned universal praise in the West; the *London Times*, for example, lauded "the constructive and statesmanlike bearing which have won for Dr. Vaida-Voevod and for his country the good will of the Allies."¹³

The favorable impressions made abroad by the new Rumanian prime minister were rather surprising given the actual nature of Vaida's demands on the Allies. At the very moment that he was promising to comply with an ultimatum on the peace treaties, Vaida served notice to the Allies that he expected to see the minority treaty "eliminated or completely revised in accordance with wishes previously expressed by Brătianu and Văitoianu."¹⁴ But by yielding in those areas where no other course was possible (in the Banat question, for example), Vaida-Voevod secured concessions in areas (such as the minority treaty) that were of far greater symbolic and psychological importance to Rumania (such as those touching on the question of national sovereignty). "No one," observed

12. R. W. Seton-Watson, *A History of the Roumanians from Roman Times to the Completion of Unity*, reprinted ed. (Hamden, Conn., 1963), p. 547.

13. *Times* (London), March 16, 1920.

14. Spector, *Rumania at the Paris Peace Conference*, p. 214, see also p. 313, n. 52.

Sherman Spector, "could dispute the fact that the policy of resistance had triumphed. The Allies, not Rumania, had capitulated in the end."¹⁵ Yet it was no accident that Vaida, not Brătianu, presided at the capitulation.

Vaida pursued a course completely counter in both style and content to the Liberal position in one area of foreign policy: he strongly favored rapprochement with the Soviet Union. He had made real progress in that direction before he was ousted from office, in spite of the USSR's annoyance with Allied recognition of Bessarabia as part of Rumania, for which Vaida was also largely responsible. But Vaida's hopes, however sensible, of coming to terms with Rumania's vast northern neighbor caused much consternation at home and were used by his domestic enemies to blacken his government's reputation, particularly in the king's eyes.

Vaida's experiences under Hungarian rule had prepared him far better for foreign negotiation than for domestic administration. Problems, like charity, begin at home however, and Vaida had his hands full with internal Parliamentary Bloc and party troubles. Some of the new prime minister's problems stemmed from his decision to leave for Paris the second week in January 1920, on the grounds that Allied cooperation was the *sine qua non* of Rumania's existence. Vaida's absence detracted from the government's ability to get its bills passed, leaving the country without a fully functioning head of government at a time when strong domestic leadership was an absolute necessity.

The deputy prime minister, the Transylvanian Ștefan Ciceo-Pop—though "loyal and honest," hard-working, and socially concerned—was not at ease in his ill-defined caretaker's role. He felt paralyzed by the temporary nature of his position. "Early informed of the king's [negative] sentiments toward the Ministry . . . [Pop] lived in fear of an invitation to resign, which Vaida might receive after his return and which he did not know how to prevent."¹⁶ The conviction of other Bloc leaders that important decisions must await Vaida's opinion further weakened Pop's influence. As Conservative leader Alexandru Marghiloman rather nastily remarked, "Mr. Ciceo-Pop is a puppy without teeth."¹⁷

The Parliamentary Bloc held together throughout Vaida's tenure in office, but it is one thing to maintain formal ties and quite another for such a diverse coalition to achieve real unity and to take effective action. Many hours were inevitably consumed in disputing, cajoling, explaining, and reconciling. The problem was compounded by the Transylvanians' notorious love of debate for its own sake and the members' continual acrimonious and very public wrangling among themselves. During the Vaida regime several National Party members resigned from the cabinet.¹⁸

From its inception the Bloc suffered from serious internal disagreements, the most important of which was over General Averescu's relationship to the new government. Some Bloc leaders were tempted to invite Averescu to join the cabinet. Many, however, felt that the general's presence would vitiate the entire moral thrust of the Bloc, since its existence was predicated on vehement criticism

15. Ibid., p. 219.

16. Iorga, *O viață de om*, 3:28–29.

17. Marghiloman, *Note politice*, vol. 5, February 9, 1920.

18. Octavian Goga resigned upon Averescu's departure from the government, and Aurel Vlad and Victor Bontescu left on March 2, 1920.

of the back-room bargaining of the "old politicians." In addition, it was feared that Averescu was basically contemptuous of parliamentary government per se, and this was not an unreasonable concern, for the general was given to such remarks as "The country needs a strong government and a small parliament."¹⁹ Like the Peasants, Bessarabians, and Bucovinians, Iorga was totally opposed to asking Averescu to head a ministry, maintaining that "the demagogue is less dangerous in opposition than in the government where he is able to act contrary to his promises."²⁰

Vaida, however, was concerned that Averescu might ruin the cabinet's efforts to govern if he were not included in its decisions. Alone, the politically inexperienced Averescu could not, perhaps, work much mischief, but if he were to enter into an agreement with the Liberals, he could provoke serious trouble. As time went on it became increasingly clear that some such understanding was being attempted.²¹ Whatever the merits of his case, Vaida felt that it was his personal prerogative to make the final decisions about his ministers,²² and he offered the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the controversial general, who accepted. Even a written declaration by Averescu recognizing parliament as the national assembly, which had a mandate to revise the entire constitution and to realize the Bloc's full program, was not considered a sufficient guarantee to the Peasant Party, which refused to enter the cabinet until December 16, that is, shortly after Averescu's resignation. It was not enough for Iorga either, who ordered his followers not to participate in the government.²³

Tension within the Bloc was further exacerbated by a brief but disruptive struggle over the presidency of the chamber of deputies on December 9. A misunderstanding over whether Iorga wished to run for the office resulted in a trial of strength between him and the Transylvanians. Some of the Peasants, Bucovinians, and Bessarabians voted for Iorga, who won, thus engendering further rancor within the Bloc. Iorga's direct and successful challenge to Maniu's hand-picked candidate may well have contributed to Maniu's continued refusal to support turning the Bloc into a full-fledged party. Maniu was eager enough for the establishment of a *regnicolar* (ruling) party, but it had to be under his own aegis not Iorga's.

The falling-out over the chamber presidency had important immediate consequences for the government as well. Within three days, Averescu resigned from the government. He charged that in a speech to parliament the new president of the chamber had aimed an intolerable insult directly at him.²⁴ In his letter of

19. Mușat and Ardeleanu, *Viața politică*, p. 140.

20. Iorga, *Memorii*, vol. 2, December 15, 1919, February 9, 1920, and March 7, 1920.

21. See page 470.

22. See Zaharia Boila, "Incadrarea românilor din Transylvania în viața politică a României întregite, perioada 1918–1926," unpublished manuscript, p. 11.

23. The other members of the cabinet named on December 5 were: General I. Rășcanu, minister of war; Aurel Vlad, minister of finance and interim minister of industry and commerce; Victor Bontescu, minister of agriculture; Octavian Goga, minister of public instruction and religion; Mihail Popovici, minister of public works; Ion Pelivan, minister of justice. Ion Inculeț, Pantelimon Halippa, Ion Nistor, Ștefan Pop and Ion Cantecuzino were appointed ministers of state. On Peasant Party reluctance to join the cabinet, see P. Șeicaru, *Istoria partidului național, țărănist și național-țărănist*, p. 32.

24. *Dezbatările Adunării Deputaților*, session of November 1919–March 1920, no. 8, December 9, 1919.

resignation, the general declared that the parliamentary majority was "a pure fiction" and called for a strong government. He was also, he asserted, very much opposed to the wide-ranging agrarian reforms advocated by the Peasant Party. He did not want his name to be abused by association with radical measures, although he was, of course, quite aware of the Peasants' views before agreeing to join the government.²⁵ His departure was followed by a cabinet shuffle which gave the government a distinctly more reformist cast, since on December 16 Ion Mihalache was brought in as minister of agriculture, and on December 27 Dr. Nicolae Lupu—who had been one of the few real parliamentary critics of the 1917 land reform proposals—was named minister of the interior.

Although internecine quarreling never makes for good government, its consequences are particularly grave when the problems faced are complex and serious. Peasants, industrial workers, teachers, government bureaucrats, small craftsmen, and shopkeepers all complained bitterly and insistently about land distribution, food and housing shortages, high prices, and low salaries.

The already precarious economic situation of the Rumanian people was made even worse by middlemen who profited from the general scarcity. Although some 1,550,000 hectares had been formally expropriated in the *Regat*, few lots had yet passed into the hands of their new owners. In some places peasants had seized land.²⁶ The army was still partially mobilized, a sizable portion of the country was under military administration, and discontent was rampant among soldiers and veterans. The war had left communications and transport in a formidable state of disarray. In addition, the problems of integrating the different political, social, and economic systems of regions with disparate religious, ethnic, and cultural histories and types of administration were staggering.

The new provinces in particular experienced a great deal of turmoil. Minority nationalities protested and refused to cooperate in an orderly transfer of power to the new state. Until the Allies recognized, on March 3, 1920, the unification of Bessarabia with Rumania and a sweeping land reform law was passed on March 10, radical ideas and armed Red Army bands from the Soviet Union did in fact pose a significant threat to Rumanian rule. Elsewhere in the country radical movements had negligible political strength, but the fear of bolshevism was a potent, frightening force, especially to the king.

Strikes in crucial sectors were commonplace among civil servants and utilities and transportation workers' groups. Demonstrations protesting living and working conditions occurred frequently. Crowds of workers and the unemployed thronged the streets carrying red flags and singing the Internationale.

In spite of intra-Bloc quarrels and the inherent difficulties of the tasks at hand, the Vaida cabinet showed a seriousness of intent and a willingness to try original measures which would be conspicuously lacking in later governments. In mid-December 1919, the government presented to parliament a remarkably

25. "De ce a demisionat d. Averescu?," *Steagul*, December 19, 1919; *Patria*, December 25, 1919; Z. Boila, "Incadrarea românilor," p. 11.

26. For the agrarian situation at this time, see Tr. Lungu and M. Rusenescu, "Mișcările țărănești în decembrie 1919–octombrie 1920," in *Relații agrare și mișcări țărănești în România, 1908–1921* (Bucharest, 1967), pp. 474–508; and Arhivele Statului București, fond Ministerul de Interne, dosar 459/1919, filă 97, and fond Presedinția Consiliului de Miniștri, dosar 121/1920, file 49 and 51.

ambitious and comprehensive legislative program. The program called for radical land reform, decentralization and local autonomy, monetary stabilization and a balanced budget, a progressive income tax, taxes on war gains, complete reorganization of the unpopular gendarmerie, numerous measures to protect the worker and improve working conditions, a wide range of government-supported public health services, increased emphasis on normal and trade schools, unification of laws in the various parts of the country, and broad rights for the minorities, including Jews.²⁷

During its tenure, the Vaida-Voevod government drew up and presented to parliament well over eighty bills on a wide variety of subjects, most of which were designed to alleviate the difficulties of ordinary people and to put the government of Rumania on a peacetime footing. Thus, in early 1920, censorship and the declaration of a state of siege were lifted from all the *Regat* except Dobruja, military courts for civilians were disbanded, and military guards were withdrawn from factories and railway stations. The right to hold public meetings and demonstrations was recognized by Minister of the Interior Lupu. A law was passed confiscating the lands of "speculators and usurers," and another law created a tax on war profits. Bills regulating the situation of war widows and orphans, giving amnesty to Socialist political prisoners, and recognizing freedom of association in professional organizations were sent to parliament.

The most controversial projects were those proposed by Lupu to deal with rents and the status of the gendarmerie and Mihalache's land reform. Population growth coupled with war destruction had rendered urban living space increasingly scarce and therefore expensive, and landlords became more unwilling to sign long-term rent contracts. The Bloc government's rent bill proposed to set an obligatory length for rental contracts, to allow only certain limited rent increases, to force apartment and house owners either to rent out unneeded rooms or pay a fine, and to expropriate unused land in urban areas where no dwellings had been constructed for five years.²⁸ The king objected to this bill, however, calling it "rather Bolshevik" in form, and would not agree to its being sent unrevised to parliament by the government.²⁹

The gendarmerie bill was drawn up in response to a festering problem in the Rumanian countryside. The villages were overstocked with unruly gendarmes stationed there by the Conservative wartime government of Alexandru Marghiloman and responsible to the army rather than to civil authorities. Responding to numerous complaints, the Peasant Party had proposed that the government seek to reduce the number of gendarmes and place them under civil administration, as they had been before the war.³⁰ But this proposal met with an extremely nega-

27. *Dezbaterile Adunării Deputaților*, no. 14, December 16, 1919.

28. *Ibid.*, no. 60, March 12, 1920.

29. Iorga, *Memorii*, vol. 2, February 23, 1920. The queen also thought it "a Bolshevik law" and said Ferdinand would never sign it (see Marghiloman, *Note politice*, vol. 5, February 16, 1920).

30. Interview with Lupu in *Țara nouă*, February 1, 1920. For the text of the bill, see *Dezbaterile Senatului*, no. 42, March 8, 1920.

tive reaction on the part of the Liberal Party, whose influence with the War Ministry and general staff was decisive.³¹

Even before he was appointed minister of the interior, Lupu had a reputation in royal circles as a fomenter of trouble. Yet, during this period of popular bitterness and potentially violent demonstrations, it was Lupu who managed to keep things under control. By refusing to be overly alarmed at police reports of Bolshevik plots and incipient revolution, by talking directly to labor leaders and sympathizing with their grievances, and by granting parade permits based on a promise of peaceful conduct during demonstrations, he was able, for the most part, to calm the emotions of dissatisfied workers, veterans, and others, by allowing them a harmless and legal way in which to express their discontent. But although the handling of popular discontent was one area in which the Vaida government could legitimately claim real success, the symbolic gestures of the basically powerless workers were used to great effect by the regime's enemies.

The agrarian reform bill aroused the most indignation of all. A number of important features distinguished Mihalache's project.³² An earlier agrarian decree (the so-called "Duca decree" of December 1918) had already carried out the bulk of actual expropriation, giving the land over to temporary peasant cooperatives, but the method of permanent land allocation still had to be determined, and the actual distribution to individual peasant owners had to be carried out. The Bloc government's bill did this with greater attention to detail and consideration of real peasant needs than any other land reform project during the interwar period.

Public opinion varied greatly as to whether the two million hectares stipulated in the 1917 constitutional amendment authorizing expropriation were enough, too little, or even too much. The basic premise of Mihalache's bill was that Rumania must become a country of small, or at most medium-sized, landowners. Thus, the Peasant Party and most of the Parliamentary Bloc envisaged more expropriation, leaving no landowner with more than one hundred hectares, even though this would mean surpassing the two-million hectare limit. New expropriations were to be based on an individual's total holdings rather than on each separate property as in the Duca decree, so that no one landowner could have too large an estate. Some lands were also to be expropriated for common pasture. The compensation price was to be reckoned in a manner favorable to the peasant.

Unfortunately for the political future of the bill and of the government as well, Mihalache's draft employed a radical peasant rhetoric which could only reinforce the uneasiness of the king and the opposition. Moreover, Mihalache's extreme conscientiousness worked against him. In an attempt to make his agrarian law a true reflection of peasant needs, Mihalache continued to revise it, repeatedly consulting the peasantry in various parts of the country and ignoring the gathering thunderclouds. He finished drafting the bill only in the beginning of

31. Scurtu, "Politica internă a guvernului Blocului parlamentar," p. 53; Scurtu, *Din viața politică*, p. 40; and Mușat and I. Ardeleanu, *Viața politică*, p. 163. For examples of gendarme abuses see Arhivele Statului București, fond Parlament, dosar 1, 868/1919-1920, file 26-27.

32. *Dezbaterile Adunării Deputaților*, no. 60, March 12, 1920; and Federația democrației, *Proiectul legii de împrietărire a țăranilor* (Bucharest, 1920).

March, by which time his enemies had had ample opportunity to stir up feeling against it. Certain of the necessity to stave off any further basic change in Rumanian society, King Ferdinand saw the reformers as subversive trouble-makers, particularly in the area of land reform. From the beginning, Ferdinand relied heavily on the advice of elements hostile to the Parliamentary Bloc and refused to support many of its programs. In the beginning of March 1920, a group of prominent landowners brought the king a petition, in which they complained that Mihalache's agrarian proposals were unconstitutional and urged him to beware of the pernicious influences gathering within the government.³³ The king's most intimate confidants continually supplied him with alarming gossip about government members, especially Lupu. Police and army reports linked Peasant Party leaders and even Iorga with Bulgarian Bolsheviks or radical workers. Ferdinand became increasingly hesitant to grant audiences to his own ministers, and he tightened the guard around the palace.³⁴ Marghiloman claimed that "boyars not only had access to the palace and constantly denounced the cabinet for its 'Bolshevik' tendencies, but also prevented Mihalache from getting an audience to expound his views."³⁵ In this way the partially dispossessed land-owning class was still able to make its voice heard. Himself a large landowner and in any case always more at ease with *Regat* politicians and aristocrats than with rough populists and upstart provincials, King Ferdinand did as little as possible to help his government. Toward the end he seemed merely to be marking time until he could safely dispose of the coalition cabinet.

With the encouragement of the king, the Liberals recovered their aplomb shortly after the 1919 elections and expended much energy and ingenuity on slandering the cabinet and its parliamentary supporters and consolidating their own position for regaining power when the time was ripe. To some extent, Liberal Party disagreement with the Parliamentary Bloc on domestic matters was ideological. Increasingly attached to the status quo, the Liberals vigorously disapproved of measures which might bring about change too rapidly. Unlike the parties in the Bloc, the Liberals advocated a strong economic nationalism and curtailment of foreign investment in Rumanian industry. They were greatly distressed by the Vaida government's financial measures. As much as anything, however, the Liberals' habituation to power and their long-cultivated taste for its tangible fruits seem to have motivated their opposition to the Vaida government. Fully aware of the necessity to lie low for a time, Brătianu had acquiesced quite willingly in Vaida's appointment, as he would do in the naming of Averescu as his successor, apparently on the theory that it is more convenient to let one's enemies hang themselves than to risk being accused of having murdered them. Once the Parliamentary Bloc was in power, however, the Liberal leader and his followers did everything possible in parliament and at court to discredit the government completely. *Văitorul*, the Liberal Party organ in Bucharest, although quite restrained during the first few weeks, became increasingly shrill and extravagant in its accusations.

33. *Memoriul agriculturilor mari cu privire la expropriere* (Bucharest, 1920).

34. Iorga mentions numerous examples of royal fears (see, for example, Iorga, *Memorii*, vol. 2, January 20, 1920 and February 19, 1920; and Iorga, *O viață de om*, 3:32).

35. Marghiloman, *Note politice*, vol. 5, January 2, 1920.

Meanwhile, the other principal opposition leader, General Averescu, denounced the government for internal disunity and excoriated the leftist leanings of the Peasants, who, he warned, were leading the country to the brink of revolution and chaos. Only he himself, Averescu insisted, was the true friend of the downtrodden. He organized mass protest meetings against the government, and, during the partial senate elections in early February 1920, his candidates won all nine seats. The general and his partisans intensified their attacks, emphasizing government indecision, blocking legislation, and spreading rumors of the government's imminent collapse. Averescu assiduously cultivated the image of "man of the hour" and succeeded in convincing the king that he must be called to office. According to his right-hand man, Argetoianu, the keystone to Averescu's favorable position was a pact concluded in February 1920 with the Liberals, who promised to support his appointment as premier in exchange for his promise to refrain from meddling with Liberal industrial and banking interests. Argetoianu claims that, to become premier, Averescu "chose the path of humiliation and groveling before the king and Brătianu."³⁶ The combined attacks of Brătianu and Averescu harmonized most effectively. They did not have to wait long for the government to fall.

Besieged from every side and disorganized within, the government found itself ever more powerless to act. Ștefan Ciceo-Pop was paralyzed by his ambiguous position as mere acting head of the cabinet. Iorga gave unheeded advice. Maniu lay low, uttering occasional enigmatic warnings in the sepulchral tones of a Greek oracle. Vaida attended glittering receptions in Western capitals and evaded urgent pleas from home with reminders that Rumania's life depended on good relations with the rest of Europe. Mihalache fussed over minute details of his land reform proposals. Lupu could see the handwriting on the wall but would not compromise in the hope of erasing it. Meanwhile the government drifted, unable to pass the legislation on which its mass support depended.

Thanks to Iorga's intercession, Mihalache and Lupu were promised an audience with the king on March 8, at which they were to present the agrarian law and Lupu's rent bill for royal approval. When they appeared at the palace at the appointed time, however, they were informed that His Majesty had gone hunting. Even a requested audience for Iorga, who usually had ready access to the king, was postponed until the following day. When the audience was finally granted, Ferdinand brushed aside Iorga's warnings.

Both in and out of parliament, speculation no longer centered on whether the government would last, but on how long it would last and by whom it would be replaced (General Averescu was the odds-on favorite). Even several important triumphs during its last week did not improve the government's prospects for survival. The first success came on March 6, when word was received from Paris that, through Vaida's good offices, the Allies had recognized the union of Bessarabia with Rumania. There was a tremendous nonpartisan outburst of joy when the news was read aloud in parliament and a great celebration with dancing

36. Argetoianu, "Pentru cei de miine," part 4, p. 287 (cited by Mușat and Ardeleanu in *Viața politică*, p. 258).

in the streets and torchlight processions. Next, March 10 saw easy passage of the Bessarabian agrarian reform bill in the chamber and the following day in the senate.³⁷ Finally, on the last day of the Bloc government, March 12, the senate passed Lupu's gendarmerie bill and gave the government a vote of confidence.³⁸

These accomplishments notwithstanding, the reform government's day of reckoning inevitably approached. On the morning of March 12, a meeting of Bloc leaders and a subsequent cabinet meeting anxiously discussed what to do. That afternoon the Peasants and Iorga advocated the immediate presentation to parliament of the controversial reform proposals as simple members bills, in spite of royal disapproval. Mihalache would hand in his resignation at the same time. The Transylvanians, in agreement with the absent premier, preferred to wait for a more propitious moment. Telegrams from Vaida in London and Paris show that he was angry at Mihalache's desire to offer his bill to the parliament given the present political climate. He urgently requested that the project be postponed until his return.³⁹ The numerically dominant Transylvanians were not able to impose their will at this crucial time, however.

Thus, on that very day, the government itself offered the excuse—for which Ferdinand seemed to be searching—to call Averescu. Following the cabinet meeting, the minister of agriculture submitted his resignation to the king. Shortly afterward the agrarian and rent bills and an important bill on workers' associations were presented in the chamber and the senate simultaneously, as private members bills, by associates of their authors. The agrarian reform proposal carried almost two hundred additional signatures of M.P.'s, which gave it the character of "a truly national manifesto."⁴⁰ The surprised Liberals "turned pale," in Iorga's words.⁴¹ They quickly tried to round up their missing colleagues and, together with other opposition parties, initiated a great din in the chamber. Transylvanian National Party maverick Aurel Vlad shook his fist and shouted that the whole majority was composed of "madmen and scoundrels." The shouting lasted twenty minutes. Then a full-fledged Liberal-People's League attack began, and this occupied the rest of the session.⁴²

Lupu resigned that evening. After an agonizing night, the rest of the cabinet was still unsure on the morning of March 13 about resigning. But before the government could reach any firm decision, Ferdinand summoned Ciceo-Pop, Iorga, and Senate President Paul Bujor. Their audiences were short. According to Iorga, the deputy prime minister quietly asked if matters could be delayed until the arrival of Vaida-Voevod. "No, no, no, no, it's impossible," cried the king. Pop then presented his resignation and on his way out also handed the monarch a new telegram from Vaida, in which the just deposed premier expressed his gratitude that his return would be awaited, as he and Iorga had been prom-

37. *Dezbaterile Adunării Deputaților*, no. 58, March 10, 1920; *Dezbaterile Senatului*, session of November 1919–March 1920, no. 45, March 11, 1920.

38. *Dezbaterile Senatului*, no. 46, March 12, 1920.

39. Arhivele Statului București, fond Ministerul Afacerilor Externe, dosar special 42, telegrams no. 662 from Paris and no. 523 from London; see also "Chestia 'telegramei,'" *Tara nouă*, March 10, 1920.

40. Mușat and Ardeleanu, *Viața politică*, p. 217.

41. Iorga, *Memorii*, vol. 2, March 12, 1920.

42. *Dezbaterile Adunării Deputaților*, no. 60, March 12, 1920.

ised.⁴³ The king immediately walked to another room and administered the oath of office to Averescu and his ministers who were already waiting. On the same afternoon, the new cabinet was presented to a primarily hostile chamber. Immediately afterward, the newly appointed premier read a decree proroguing parliament for ten days, but not actually dissolving it. Averescu closed with promises to defend order and political and social institutions, which the Liberals greeted with enthusiasm.

When parliament met again after the short recess, the chamber was so hostile to Averescu that the king consented to its immediate dissolution. New elections, among the most outrageous in Rumanian history, were held in late May and early June 1920.⁴⁴ Averescu's People's Party won a resounding majority—224 out of 369 seats, with over a dozen groups participating. Six months later, the Liberals, having regained their strength and confidence, withdrew their support from Averescu, and on January 19, 1922 Ionel Brătianu was named premier, a position which he held, with one brief interlude, until his death in late 1927.

Although the Parliamentary Bloc had been unable to cope with the demands of office in a difficult period, it had possessed certain qualities that were sorely lacking in Rumanian political life. Before the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy, the Rumanians of Hungary, though largely prevented from effective personal political participation, had nonetheless been exposed to the workings of the somewhat less corrupt and more rational and straightforward political processes of the West. For all the *Regateni's* cynical scoffing at the Transylvanians' pretensions to represent the "pure and 'democratic' West, facing the Byzantine East,"⁴⁵ under rather more benign circumstances the Transylvanian Rumanians probably could have helped significantly in building a stronger and more just Rumania. What Vaida-Voevod was able to achieve abroad, away from the king and the opposition, has already been mentioned. The *Consiliul Dirigent* (Governing Council) of Transylvania, which was able to function with less hindrance than Vaida's government, also accomplished some important tasks.⁴⁶ The Peasant Party had more original thinkers than the Transylvanians and offered numerous promising ideas. Mihalache's agrarian reform was a careful and plausible bill, and it might have done much to avoid various pitfalls of the 1921 bill which was to pass under Averescu's government. In spite of his small political following, in 1919–20 Nicolae Iorga had a great deal of moral authority at home and was well known and respected abroad. The Bessarabian and Bucovinian parties, though small and provincial, had the support of the masses of two more of the new provinces.

But high ideals, fertile minds, and popular support counted little in the poisoned political atmosphere of Bucharest. A large share of the responsibility

43. Iorga, *Memorii*, vol. 2, March 13, 1920.

44. Ioan Scurtu, "Lupta partidelor politice in alegerile parlamentare din mai-iunie 1920," *Carpica*, 1972, pp. 251–64.

45. Iorga, *O viață de om*, 3:21.

46. For the work of the *Consiliul Dirigent*, see Romul Boila, "Consiliul Dirigent," in *Transylvania, Banatul, Crișana, Maramureșul 1918–1923*, 3 vols. (Bucharest, 1927), 1:89–101.

for this surely lies not just with the old-line political parties but also with King Ferdinand. By clinging to the Liberals and large landowners, resolutely turning away from the political newcomers, and refusing to consider the merits of any reform measure until events forced it upon him, Ferdinand proved quite incapable of becoming the king of all the people. He chose to defend the old elite and to maintain the political system of Rumania's past at the expense of her future.

The work of the short-lived Parliamentary Bloc was not altogether forgotten, however. The transitional period, of which the democratic Vaida-Voevod government was part, did make a modest but real impression on Rumanian political life. Rumanian politicians of all stripes learned that it was no longer possible to ignore the newly enfranchised masses. Of course, the parties—particularly the Liberals—soon learned to use the voters for their own purposes by making unrealistic promises, using the specter of bolshevism to defame their enemies, and packaging their achievements and intentions for maximum mass appeal. Nevertheless, the argument is persuasive that certain socially beneficial pieces of legislation, however underfinanced and half-heartedly implemented, would never have been enacted without the pressure from below which first created and then attained concrete expression in the government of the Parliamentary Bloc.

The lasting influence of the "new men" is clearest in the area of agrarian reform. King Ferdinand's initial land redistribution proclamation to the troops in 1917, the Liberal-Conservative "deal" deciding its extent, the constitutional amendment making it legal, and the enabling legislation of 1918 were all arbitrarily handed down from above and made without any attempt to determine the real needs or desires of the peasantry. According to David Mitrany, "the peasant masses, most of them being under arms, spectrally dominated the situation, like the ghost in *Hamlet*; but though they imposed the reform, they had no voice whatever in the making of it. They were not consulted when it was being drafted."⁴⁷ The same cannot be said of the proposals of Ion Mihalache. In the fall and winter of 1919–20, a democratically elected parliament served as an open forum for debate. Mihalache also made strenuous efforts to consult the peasants by arranging for many discussion groups, speeches, and rallies to be held in all parts of the country. What is more, he heeded what he heard, with the result that his bill was far more subtle and more attuned to real peasant needs than earlier (or later) attempts to resolve the land issue.⁴⁸

The reformists' impact did not end with the government's failure, on political grounds, to pass Mihalache's bill. Although the Averescu government would never admit the Bloc's influence, clear traces of Parliamentary Bloc ideas are visible in the agrarian program which was ultimately passed in 1921. In 1918, Minister of Agriculture Constantin Garoflid had elaborated for the collaborationist Marghiloman government a very gradual land redistribution program which retained a good number of very large estates and established a protracted intermediate stage of communal ownership on the way to full peasant proprietorship. But three years later he became the chief architect of a substantially more

47. Mitrany, *Land and Peasant*, p. 102.

48. See *ibid.*, p. 112; D. Sandru, *Reforma agrară din 1921 în România* (Bucharest, 1975), p. 60; H. L. Roberts, *Rumania*, p. 27; and Ioan Scurtu, "Proiectul de lege agrară deus din inițiativa parlamentară în martie 1920," *Analele Universității București: Istorie*, 1969, no. 2, p. 97.

liberal reform. The contrast between Garoflid's two programs speaks eloquently of the real impact of the reform movement of 1919–20. The program which ultimately passed owed some of its most important features directly to Mihalačhe's bill: for example, the emphasis on creating a nation of small landowners, the reckoning together of all the lands of each large landowner (rather than each estate individually) in determining the basis of expropriation, the distribution of land directly to the peasant, and the fixing of rates of compensation in the law. Other reformist ideas—such as those on education, health, and urban working conditions—received legislative embodiment, albeit in much modified form, because of continued pressure from the parties of the former Parliamentary Bloc and their constituents.

Nonetheless, there were very real limits to the reforms which subsequent governments would tolerate. Particularly after Ionel Brătianu came to power in 1922, the opposition could make very little headway where vital Liberal interests were concerned—as on the issues of extreme centralization, which the Liberals favored, or foreign investment in Rumania, which they discouraged.

The genius of the Rumanian elite (unlike that of neighboring Russia) lay in its ability to confront and absorb the new democratic forces and turn them to its own account. Prewar leaders who proved too rigid and short-sighted, such as the old-guard Conservatives, soon disappeared from the political scene. But their more astute colleagues, especially the Liberals, were not content simply to view the masses with alarm and to repress them; they also partially catered to them. Very substantial monetary resources, long political experience, and an impressive ability to adapt allowed the Liberals to take advantage of the new circumstances most effectively. Their combined tactics of coercion and clever propaganda made them more than a match for the rather naïve newcomers. The reform movement could be so largely disabled precisely because its potential strength was tacitly recognized.

Yet, in the long run, universal suffrage and the distribution of two million hectares of land could neither satisfy the populace nor regenerate Rumanian society. Ironically, although the old-line politicians, aided by the king, maintained supremacy for a number of years by stifling the growth of peasant democracy and by encouraging chauvinism and demagoguery in its place, it was they who were primarily responsible for the political climate in which, in the feverish atmosphere of the late 1930s, King Carol II would be able to dispense entirely with the services of conventional political parties. Thus, by side-stepping real reform, the ruling elite, was, in the end, hoist by its own petard. Unfortunately, the rest of Rumanian society was hoist along with it.