The Middle Ages as hope for the future: Sadoveanu's reconciliation of Tradition and Modernity in 1930s Romania in *Baltagul* (The Hatchet) and *Viaţa lui Ştefan cel Mare* (Life of Stephen the Great)[1]

Abstract In the Romania of the 1930s Mihail Sadoveanu tried to reconcile the bitter and increasingly polarised debate between modernisers and traditionalists by looking for a route into the future through two novels rooted in the past. In *Baltagul/ The Hatchet* he looked at how a mountain dwelling peasant woman might learn to manipulate the modern state to solve the mystery of the disappearance of her husband. In the historical novel *Viaţa lui Ştefan cel Mare/ Life of Stephen the Great*, he attempted to replicate some of the forms of early modern and medieval texts. The two texts are also part of Sadoveanu's complex and dynamic political outlook which underwent significant changes in the early 1930s. Sadoveanu offered a method by which heritage might play a constructive role in political discussion.

Introduction

In 1938 the British diplomat, journalist and secret agent R. H. Bruce Lockhart (1887-1970) visited Bucharest and met the Romanian writer, Mihail Sadoveanu (1880-1961) whom he described as 'a fine, big fellow, and a disciple of Sir Walter Scott'. He went on to say that he was 'one of great novelists of Europe…translated into nearly every modern language except

[1] An early version of this paper was presented at the BASEES conference in Cambridge in 2022. Special thanks go to Ioana and Eugen Grigore, my colleague at Glasgow, Dr. John Bates and the anonymous reviewer, who kindly read through and commented on the paper.

English.'[2] Lockhart was right on both counts, Sadoveanu is still undervalued in the Anglophone world despite at least some of his works having been translated, and despite rivaling Scott in his ability to manipulate the past in pursuit of contemporary concerns.[3] Heritage is the owned past and as such has many political uses. In countries with no easy correlation between existence as a national community and being a nation state then the writer's interpretation of a shared culture assumes even greater significance. Romania's national consciousness has relied on a collective history which amounts to more than the sum of its constituent parts in Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania. At no time was this more true than when the country, suddenly enlarged as a result of the Paris peace settlement at the end of the First World War, negotiated the difficult politics of the 1930s. As an interpreter of the past and its legacy, very different from a historian, Sadoveanu was able to contribute and shape contemporary debate, as well as skilfully promoting himself. Like Lockhart, I am convinced that Sadoveanu is a major European writer who deserves wider scholarly consideration, not least by historians.

I

Born in Moldavia in the later nineteenth century, Sadoveanu is chiefly known for his historical trilogy *Fraţi Jderi* (1935-42) which has its own political agendas, but which its author considered his great literary work. He was astonishingly prolific and could produce works quickly aimed at a popular readership to address contemporary concerns. Two of the most important have been translated into English and are analysed here both to draw attention to Sadoveanu as a political commentator and as case studies for the role of the public

[2] R. H. Bruce Lockhart, *Guns or Butter: war countries and peace countries of Europe revisited* (London, Putnam, 1938), 185.

[3] See especially Scott's management of the visit of George IV to Edinburgh in 1822. H. Trevor-Roper, 'The Invention of Tradition: the Highland Tradition of Scotland' in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, University Press, 1983), 29-31.

intellectual in the Romania of the time. The first is *Baltagul* or 'The Hatchet' published in 1930 and written in just ten days the previous year.[4] It is considered Romania's first detective story. By then, Sadoveanu was an established middle aged writer and was possibly looking for new genres as his generation of writers were being challenged by younger rivals. Besides, Sadoveanu's productivity was enhanced by a capacity to assimilate, to put it at its most polite, the works and ideas of other writers from a broad range of backgrounds.[5] The detective story came late to Romanian literature. Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue* had appeared in the 1840s, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes in the 1880s and Agatha Christie's *Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in 1927, so there were a range of sub-genres from which the Romanian writer could choose. While it is impossible to be certain as to what inspired him, Sadoveanu's style of detection is not deductive and owes little to Conan Doyle. There is however, a passing resemblance to the knowledge of human nature used by the detective priest, Father Brown who G.K. Chesterton had created before the First World War and whose adventures had been translated into French which Sadoveanu read fluently. *The Secret of Father Brown* (1927) had appeared in France in 1929 and featured an introductory story where the priest described solving murders as 'a sort of religious exercise', rather than a scientific one.[6]

Baltagul, whatever it owes to existing detective fiction, is arrestingly original for two reasons. Firstly, the main protagonist is a woman; Vitoria Lipan is a shepherd's wife. She is used to spending long periods of time away from her husband, but when he does not return from an expedition to buy sheep, she becomes worried. For her, detection is almost literally a

[4] Profira Sadoveanu, 'Introduction', *The Hatchet* (London, Allen and Unwin,1965), 8.
[5] For instance, he wrote a novelisation of Arnold Ridley's 1925 London stage hit, *The Ghost Train* as *Trenul-Fantomă* (1934), inspired by the film of the same name, (dir Jean Mihail), released in Romanian cinemas the previous year.
[6] G. K. Chesterton, *Le Secret de Père Brown* trad. F. Maury (Paris, Gallimard, 1929).

religious exercise. She begins with prayers and a visit to the priest, ends with completing her husband's funerary rites, and in between has visions and makes a journey which looks very like a quest or pilgrimage. Sadoveanu emphasises the remoteness of her existence, the unchangingness of her largely pre-modern world. However, the people in that world let her down: the priest who writes letters for the illiterate misconstrues her instructions; the witch or wise woman invents a story about her husband's seduction by a green-eyed woman.[7] Vitoria concludes that only by following her husband's route herself will she discover the truth. Over the long journey through the mountains and into the towns of northern Moldavia, the full richness of her character is revealed: very near the beginning she shows that she can use a gun, but her success at finding her husband's murderers is more reliant on relentless questioning of the various innkeepers and their wives along the way.[8] She achieves the proof she needs with a clever piece of entrapment by talking to the wife of one of the murderers while the husband is being questioned.[9]

The second reason is that to create his detective story Sadoveanu claimed to have been inspired by the ancient ballad *Mioriţa* (Little Ewe), where two shepherds kill a third to obtain his wealth.[10] The shepherd knows that his aged mother will search for him, so he persuades the sheep to tell her that he has got married and describes his death as a marriage to all creation. The dating is difficult: it was first recorded in the late eighteenth century, but the archaisms in the standard nineteenth century edition suggest it is considerably older, perhaps fifteenth century.[11] Besides the murder of a shepherd by his companions, *Baltagul* has little

[7] *Hatchet,* 19-20, 21-22, respectively.
[8] *Hatchet,* gun 43, inns 64-5, 73-8.
[9] *Hatchet*, 106.
[10] Profira Sadoveanu, 'Introduction', *Hatchet*, 7.
[11] E. Latham, 'The Miorita: an Introduction in the form of a memoir', 12 . A. Husar, 'The Miorita: a synthesis of Romanian spirituality', implies a far earlier origin (15). Both in E. Latham (ed.), *Miorita: An Icon of Romanian Culture.* (Las Vegas, Histria, 2019) along with text and English translation. See also A. Fochi, *Mioriţa : tipologie, circulaţie, geneză, texte* (Bucharest, Editura Academiei, 1964), 531-2.

in common with the poem, so Sadoveanu may have been using Romania's literary heritage as a cover for the novelty of what he was presenting and deliberately drawing on the goodwill he had built up among traditionalists for his retelling of so many Romanian folk tales. Yet the novel begins in the same cosmic timeless tone as Miorița. The peoples of the earth are being given their attributes. To boyars and princes God grants a life of "dalliance and wickedness and sin; in atonement for which you will be pleased to raise churches and monasteries to my glory."[12] The mountain people arrive late because they can only move at the pace of their sheep and donkeys and the Lord can only give them what they already have, though he endows them with optimism:

"Everything shall seem good to you : and always your door shall be open to the fiddler and the man with strong drinks and your women shall be beautiful and full of love."

The heroine's steady acceptance of the loss of her husband does have something in common with the shepherd's reaction to his impending demise, as well as with his mother's relentless searching. One of the poem's many complex themes is that your world is what you make of it and that should also be borne in mind while reading the novel.

Sadoveanu's political message develops through his description of Vitoria's dealings with the state. While he never relinquishes the old cliches of honest country folk and cynical city dwellers, he does play with them. At first, in front of a church's candles and icons Vitoria is apprehensive of the authorities; she imagines cowed clerks at the beck and call of a fat, frowning man, be he prefect, mayor or policeman, 'the seat of the royal sway'.[13] Her

[12] I have used Eugenia Farca's translation. M. Sadoveanu, *The Hatchet* and *The Life of Stephen the Great* with an Introduction by K. Treptow (New York, Columbia University Press, 1991), Henceforth I will give the English title and page number. *Hatchet*, 3.
[13] *Hatchet*, 32.

experience of them is, first of all, as surprisingly human, and ultimately, by understanding the institution at local level she can turn it to her advantage: it is the fact that the wives turn up to support their husbands when they are being questioned by the sub-prefect which allows Vitoria and the innkeeper's wife she has befriended, to complete their entrapment.[14] There is also clever manipulation of social customs. The men declare their innocence, so Vitoria invites them both to her husband's funeral. Given that they were associates of his in his final days, they can hardly refuse. The climax of the story comes at the socialising after the funeral of Vitoria's husband, whose body she has discovered. One of the murderers is despatched (not before confessing) by a combination of Vitoria, the family dog, Lupu, and the hatchet of the title, wielded by her son, so there is private vengeance. The other is taken into custody by the sub-prefect and his policemen, so there is also the participation of the state.[15]

Despite its mystical elements, *Baltagul* addressed some specific current issues. Sadoveanu was always a political figure with a keen awareness of history. He counted the historian Nicolae Iorga (1871-1940) as a friend, who became Prime Minister in the year after *Baltagul*'s publication. Sadoveanu was himself politically active having entered the lower house of the Romanian parliament in 1927. At the same time as he served Iorga's technocratic government, he had started writing for the moderate left wing paper, *Adevărul* (Truth) which he was later to edit.[16] *Baltagul* addressed two issues of immediate political concern. Firstly it was a contribution to the ongoing debate between modernising 'Europeanists' and traditionalists.[17] Sadoveanu seems to be adopting a middle position. Vitoria is a traditionalist; the book ends with her planning further religious rites on behalf of

[14] *Hatchet,* 35, 101-06.
[15] *Hatchet*, 116-17.
[16] C. Ciopraga, *Mihail Sadoveanu* (Bucharest, Meridiane, 1966), 22-3.
[17] K. Hitchins, *A concise history of Romania* (Cambridge, University Press, 2014), 160-66.

her deceased husband by which time she, a simple peasant woman, has outsmarted everybody, solved the mystery of her husband's death by herself and has got her revenge.[18] However, she could not have done all this without the apparatus of a modern state; from the post office which she uses to summon her son, to the prefect who allows her to bury her husband after Vitoria telephones him from the mayor's office.[19] Through the novel's genre, Sadoveanu leans towards the modernisers: the detective story was itself an innovation in the Romanian context, echoing something already common in French and English literature. Yet he also demonstrated that it was possible to incorporate elements of Romania's literary heritage. *Baltagul* certainly owes something to *Mara*, Ioan Slavici's (1848-1925) novel from before the First World War about a strong mountain woman in Transylvania. Sadoveanu's keen commercial instinct would have also noted the success of his friend, Ion Agârbiceanu's (1882-1963) more recent novel, *Stana* (1929) which also had a woman left alone as its central character.

The role of women in Romanian society was topical as there was debate over female suffrage in the 1920s and this was the other issue Sadoveanu addressed in *Baltagul*. Romania did not give women full voting rights until after the Second World War, but in August 1929 an act allowing them to stand and vote in local elections was passed. The range of restrictions limiting the franchise mainly to educated women and war widows demonstrated the reluctance to allow all women to participate in political life.[20] That same year Sadoveanu

[18] *Hatchet*, 118.
[19] *Hatchet,* 25, 108 respectively.
[20] R. Cheschebek, 'Documenting Women's Suffrage in Romania. The Achievement of Female Suffrage in Romania -a Historical Overview', *Архиви на жени и малцинства* (Women and Minorities Archives), 1 (2009), 156-69, 163. G. Cozma, *Femeile şi politica în România: evoluţia dreptului de vot în penoada interbelică* (Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2002), 167. The dog 'Lupu' in Sadoveanu's novel who is lost after failing to prevent his master's death may be a reference to Nicolae Lupu, a prominent supporter of women's suffrage in the 1920s who had entered political obscurity by leading the breakaway *Partidul Ťărănesc* (Peasant Party) from 1927. K. Hitchins, *Rumania 1866-1947* (Oxford, University Press, 1994), 394-5.

speedily wrote *Baltagul*. He may well have been influenced by his sister-in-law, Izabela Sadoveanu (1870-1941), who was a notable suffragist. Sadoveanu questioned the need for formal education to be a responsible individual. As he has Vitoria say to her educated son: "My darling scholar…I can see that your wisdom comes from books and the written word, though it would be better if it came from your own head."[21] Any woman was quite capable of exercising mature judgement. The character also addresses one of the concerns of opponents of women's suffrage that women would tend to be left wing on social issues, by stressing Vitoria's conservative values of family, home and religion.[22] Moreover, in contrast to Agârbiceanu's Stana, the absence of a husband brings out Vitoria's moral strength.

II

Having tried to address one contemporary problem through the use of an adaptation of an ancient folk myth, four years later Sadoveanu addressed a transformed political landscape through *Viaţa lui Ştefan cel Mare* (Life of Stephen the Great)**,** a fictionalised biography of the Moldavian ruler Stephen the Great (r.1457-1504). [23] Turning to the most well known Moldavian ruler from history was probably inevitable at some point for a novelist like Sadoveanu and the piece can be seen as a by-product of his trilogy of novels set in the period, *Fraţii Jderi* (Jderi Brothers) which started to appear in 1935.

In personal terms, Sadoveanu had lost influence in the previous four years. In June 1930 King Carol II (1893-1953), a politician of romantic whims and authoritarian tendencies, had made a dramatic return to the throne from which he had been debarred five years earlier.[24]

[21] *Hatchet*, 71.
[22] Cheschebek, 'Documenting Women's Suffrage', 162.
[23] Again using Farca's translation, henceforth *Life* and page number, followed by Sadoveanu's original chapters and sub-sections.
[24] S. Ionescu, *Who was Who in Twentieth Century Romania*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1994), 57.

At first, Sadoveanu benefited from the change of regime and with Nicolae Iorga as Prime Minister, he briefly became President of the Senate from 1931 until the following June.[25] After the fall of Iorga's government that year he joined another old friend, Octavian Goga's (1881-1938) Partidul Naţional-Agrar (National Agrarian Party) or PNA, but failed to be elected.

By 1934 Sadoveanu may well have found his many roles difficult to reconcile. He was still writing for *Adevărul*, despite the unpopularity of its Jewish owners, Simion and Emil Pauker and the increasingly anti-Semitic tone of political debate. The PNA had not achieved electoral success and Goga was becoming an embarrassment: in the summer of 1933 he had resigned from the freemasonry, in which Sadoveanu was himself prominent.[26] After a visit to Berlin in September 1933, he had begun to share the anti-Semitism of Codreanu's Legiunea Arhanghelului Mihail (Legion of the Archangel Michael), better known as the Garda de Fier or Iron Guard. The Legion emphasised Orthodox Christianity and made use of its symbols and revered great medieval rulers such as Stephen.[27] In November 1933 in a lecture in Cluj, Goga suggested that "foreigners", by which he meant Jews, could repatriate themselves, but if this did not work, could be placed in concentration camps.[28] No doubt at the time this was largely bluster, Goga frequently denied anti-Semitism.[29]

[25] Hitchins, *Rumania,* 416.
[26] Roland Clark, 'Anti-Masonry as political protest: fascists and Freemasons in interwar Romania', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 46:1, (2012), 54.
[27] Roland Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth*; *fascist activism in interwar Romania* (Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 2015), 195-6.
[28] G. Voicu, 'Octavian Goga (1881-1938): de la antisemitism literar la antisemitism politic'*, Holocaust. Studii şi cercetări*, 2:3 (2010), 105.
[29] Voicu, 'Octavian Goga', 97-100, but it is notable that the Nazi politician, Alfred Rosenberg picked Goga out as Romania's most influential anti-Semite in 1934 (106).

The king's reign had not benefited Romania either. The country had been hit by the full force of the Great Depression and a succession of governments had failed to deal with it. In 1933 there were strikes by oil workers and railwaymen and fighting in the streets of various cities.[30] In December, in the lead up to elections (and only weeks after Goga's speech), the government tried to suppress the Legion which led to arrests, demonstrations and more street fighting.[31] This was followed by the assassination of the prime minister, Ion Duca (1879-1933) by three members of the Iron Guard.[32] Again Sadoveanu found himself in a tricky position: Goga sent the assassins gifts to try and curry favour with the Legion.[33]

If Sadoveanu, the politician, was to save himself from, irrelevance and Sadoveanu, the writer and journalist, was to keep his livelihood, then an appeal had to be made to the one political constant, the king, clearly demonstrating that Sadoveanu had no objection to strong, even authoritarian government, but that should originate from the state and its head and need not involve anti-Semitism. Sadoveanu's *Stefan cel Mare* offers an alternative way in which the Middle Ages could be mobilised for the contemporary situation, divorced from the violent costume drama of the Legion.

Sadoveanu's introduction to *Ştefan cel Mare* baldly stated where political priorities should lie.

> Order (both political and economic) and beauty (both intellectual and moral) alone truly justify the life of mankind before the Eternal Father.'[34]

[30] H. L. Roberts, *Rumania: political problems of an agrarian state* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1951), 174-5.
[31] Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth*, 103-04.
[32] Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth*, 104.
[33] Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth*, 105.
[34] *Life*, 123.

This may have to come from innovative redeployment of power. Stephen is described as an 'unaccountable presence, developing power which was not in accord with the contemporary environment' and 'a great organiser'. Just in case the reader still thought Sadoveanu was only referring to the Middle Ages, he stated that Stephen had achieved 'a well-balanced structure which is still a model for whatever is to come.'[35]

As with *Baltagul*, both form and content were adaptations of Romania's literary heritage. In the same way as Walter Scott's *Lay of the last Minstrel* referenced a cultural heritage rather than imitating it, Sadoveanu used medieval genres, but with little attempt to pass them off as authentic. The opening words of chapter one echo a chronicle with chronology and lineage being established as 'Stephen, Bogdan's son, entered the small, insignificant principality of Moldavia, 1.457 years had gone by the time of Christ.'[36] Sadoveanu quotes real chroniclers such as the great Polish writer Jan Długosz/ Longinus (1415-80) as well as drawing from early Moldavian ones such as Grigore Ureche (c.1590-1647).[37] There are elements of hagiography, such as the novel's closing words: 'the soul was released from the inanity of life….The spirit is of divine essence, it endures in things, in the arrangements made and in our hearts, endeavouring to guide us along the paths of the future.'[38] Stephen is a witness for both his faith and country. However, importantly, the genre Sadoveanu is employing more subtly is the mirror for princes, which enjoyed particular popularity elsewhere in Europe in Stephen's lifetime.[39] Within a few years of his death a masterpiece of the genre was produced

[35] *Life,* 123.
[36] *Life,* 125, I; i.
[37] *Life*, 227, VIII; iv : K. W. Treptow, 'Introduction' to Farca translation, XI.
[38] *Life,* 267, X; iii.
[39] B. Weiler, 'Mirror for princes' *Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://academic-eb-com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/levels/collegiate/article/mirror-for-princes/603005 (accessed 24-11-22). Q. Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought:* vol. 1 *The Renaissance* (Cambridge: University Press, 1978), 90.

in Wallachia, attributed to prince Neagoe Basarab (r.1512-21).[40] Sadoveanu's fictionalised history has Stephen receiving wisdom from his own father, considering his legacy in the arrangement for a family tomb in consultation with his infant son and getting Princess Voichiţa's advice how to treat his grown-up son and successor, Bogdan.[41] Stephen personifies the ideal of the ruler; he is a ruthless warrior, a pious defender of the faith and governor of the Church, as well as a legislator.[42]

Sadoveanu also owed a debt to Dimitrie Cantemir (1673-1723) whose *Description of the past and present state of Moldavia* (1714-17) he acknowledges in the text of the *Life*.[43] Cantemir had himself had political ambitions, having two brief spells as prince of Moldavia (1693, 1710-11) as well as a distinguished scholarly career. By praising both him and Stephen, Sadoveanu sent a clear message that, whatever his past allegiances, he could serve royalty in whatever capacity was required.

One inconvenient fact was that neither Moldavia and Wallachia had kings in the era of Stephen, only princes, but Sadoveanu hints at a divine approval which made this a mere technicality. The new ruler arrives at Suceava the ancient capital of Moldavia on Easter Day and is anointed by the metropolitan archbishop, and just to drive the point home Sadoveanu concludes with the statement that the resurrection of the country was to begin the next day.[44]

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[40] M. Goina, 'Medieval Political Philosophy in a Sixteenth-Century Wallachian Mirror of Princes: The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosie,' *Slavonic and East European Review*, 92:1 (2014), 25-43. English translation C.A. Skoubourdis, *Neagoe Basarab's teachings to his son, Theodosie* (Jerusalem: Virgin Mary of Australia and Oceania, 2022).

[41] *Life*, 131-2, 189 and 262, II; i, VI; ii, X; ii respectively.

[42] Skinner, *Foundations*, vol. 1, 91.

[43] *Life*, 149 is based on Cantemir's Cap.II in *Descriptio antiqui et hodierni status Moldaviae* (1714-17), *Operele principelui Demetriu Cantemiru,* Tomu I, *Descriptio Moldaviae* (Bucharest, 1872) at https://archive.org/details/demetrii-cantemirii-principis-moldaviae-descriptio-moldaviae-1716/mode/2up (accessed 29 Nov. 2022) , 3.). See also Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Moldova, 'Work of Dimitrie Cantemir' in M. Ţăpărlea and V. Ciobanu (eds.), *Dimitrie Cantemir: bridge of knowledge between the Orient and Occident* (Bucharest: Pro Universitaria, 2016), 287.

[44] *Life,* 164, IV; ii.

Although not at Easter, Carol's re-entry to his kingdom had been similarly dramatic and had led to regime change with a succession of prime ministers surrendering increasing power to the king himself.[45] As Sadoveanu points out in his Introduction, God sends his chosen ones.[46]

Sadoveanu goes on to characterise Stephen's early government in a manner which illustrates how an account of the Middle Ages could also be wish fulfilment for the 1930s. Stephen's 'tireless diligence' begins with dispensing justice. Thieves were not impaled which is a clear reference to Stephen's ruthless contemporary, Vlad the Impaler, prince of Wallachia (1430-76, r.1448, 1456-62, 1476), because that would take too much time. Instead they were hanged by soldiers or 'pushed into the salt works' by the freeholders on duty for the week.[47]

The economy and communications are prominent enough to suggest that the struggles of the 1930s were as present in Sadoveanu's thoughts as the fifteenth century. Stephen has a network of swift-footed couriers so that the prince might have news from his officials at any time of the day or night.[48] He made sure that dams were embanked and the mills worked. Much was militarised: Braşov merchants are contacted with friendly instructions for cloth for soldiers and weight of their swords.[49] Moreover, the road to Liov (Lviv) is guarded to allow free passage for that town's merchants.[50] The political catastrophes of 1933 may well be represented by the earthquake of August 1470 which demolished part of the fortress where he was staying. Stephen declares that new boyars must be appointed and has leading members of his government executed.[51] Sadoveanu emphasises the role of the young boyars, whom

[45] Hitchins, *Rumania*, 385
[46] *Life*, 123.
[47] *Life*, 166-7, IV; iii.
[48] *Life*, 168, IV; iii. When this author was learning Latin at school in the 1970s, a textbook roughly contemporary with Sadoveanu advised that 'radio' could be translated into Latin as 'very swift messenger'.
[49] *Life*, 167, IV; iii.
[50] *Life*, 166, IV; iii.
[51] *Life*, 201-02, VI; vi.

Stephen has chosen, as the probability of a Turkish invasion grows.[52] The government of Duca's successor, Gheorghe Tătărescu (1886-1957) sidelined many older politicians and appointed notably younger ministers with the king's encouragement. Carol himself founded a youth movement, Straja Ţării (Guard of the Country).[53]

Sadoveanu's foremost advice concerns foreign policy. Stephen's fifteenth century world is one where Moldavia (and by association, Wallachia) is a bridge between east and west. In Sadoveanu's account, Stephen's monastic foundation at Putna is designed by an Italian, decorated by craftsmen from the Greek monastic sanctuary at Mount Athos, had emblems and vestments made at Caffa and had bells cast in Lviv.[54] The main enemy and theme of the book is the Ottoman empire, against which Stephen constantly struggles on behalf of Christendom.and for which the Pope granted him the title of *athleta Christi* or " athlete of Christ'.[55] One recurring theme in Sadoveanu's novel is the unreliability of Stephen's Christian allies. The Poles and Hungarians pledge support, but as Sadoveanu comments; 'there is no work in the world that is slower, more intricate and more interfered with than the work of kings.'[56] There is a lengthy account of a leading Moldavian churchman's visit to Venice which concludes its beautiful description of the city with the clear inference that Venice simply has too much to lose from war with the Ottomans and will soon make peace.[57] The papacy's leadership of Christendom amounts to nothing more than warm words.[58]

[52] *Life*, 212, VII, ii.
[53] Hitchins, *Rumania*, 389-90, 418.
[54] *Life*, 200-01, VI,v.
[55] K. Treptow, *A History of Romania* (Iaşi, Center for Romanian Studies, 1995), 119.
[56] *Life,* 215, VII; iii.
[57] *Life*, 223-6, VIII; ii.
[58] *Life,* 217, VII, iii.

By contrast Germans are seen in quite a positive light; German merchants buy Moldavian produce and from the beginning of his reign Stephen employs four thousand German mercenaries, under four German captains, as a war army.[59] Interwar Romania leant towards Britain and France, but Carol II was himself a Hohenzollern and had briefly served in the German army.[60] At the time that *Ştefan cel Mare* was published there was no doubt that Germany was the most exciting country in Europe and enthusiasm for Hitler and the Nazi regime had already penetrated into the Romanian Establishment.[61] Sadoveanu's position was rather more nuanced: while wanting royal favour, he did not want to break with the view held by most of his friends and allies. Perhaps this was why Sadoveanu created the impression that the Germans were there at the Moldavians' disposal and is slightly mocking. Petru Harman, Ştefan's Saxon captain is a brilliant military tactician and speaks seven languages as well as being 'so learned that he could sign his name.'[62] In the light of subsequent history, especially the forcing of Romania into the Nazi orbit by the end of the decade, Sadoveanu's view appears naïve, but at the time he was writing it was possible to see Germany's resurgence as retaking her natural place on the European continent and little more. Doubtless Sadoveanu would also have been discomfited by Nazi anti-semitism, so his support is qualified.

Sadoveanu may have also felt constrained in expressing views about the Soviet Union. As the exponent of revolutionary Communism for export, it was a standing threat to Romania's ramshackle, corrupt democracy. Even before the tumultuous events of 1917, the Romanian peasantry's revolt of 1907 had been a threatening and embarrassing moment for the middle class.[63] In the interwar period the Soviet Union had territorial grievances since Romania had

[59] *Life,* 153, 167, III; iii, IV; iii respectively.
[60] P. D. Quinlan, *The Playboy King: Carol II of Romania* (Westport CT; Greenwood, 1995), 24-5.
[61] I. Nastasă-Matei, 'Transnational Far Right and Nazi Soft Power in Eastern Europe: The Humboldt Fellowships for Romanians, *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 35:4 (2021), 912-13, 915.
[62] *Life*, 203, VII; vi.
[63] Hitchins, *Rumania*, 177-8.

incorporated Bessarabia into 'Greater Romania' in 1918.[64] But at the moment Sadoveanu was writing relations had improved. Foreign Minister, Nicolae Titulescu (1882-1941) instituted a rapprochement with Stalin, part of which was the return of the body of Sadoveanu's inspiration, Dimitrie Cantemir who had died on Russian territory and for whom a solemn funeral was held in the Metropolitan Church in Iaşi in 1935.[65] If Sadoveanu's appeal to those around the king was to succeed, then a measure of caution was necessary Nevertheless, the one explicit reference to Russia in *Ştefan cel Mare* is tucked away, but unequivocal. Near the end of the work, Sadoveanu mentions Stephen's daughter, Olena (1465-1505) who was given as a bride for the son of the Muscovite Tsar Ivan III (r.1462-1505). Sadoveanu summarises her fate at the Muscovite court as 'a life of suffering with no one about to comfort her and finally to die from poison, together with her son Demetrius, in an underground prison cell.'[66] While the details of her and her son's end are probably correct, it does not do justice to the career of one of the most powerful figures at the Muscovite court for two decades.[67] However, it may well do for a description of Stalin's increasingly repressive rule in the Moscow of the 1930s.

If there was a reluctance to comment directly on the Soviet Union or its imperial ancestor Sadoveanu could talk about Stephen's most famous enemy which also had territorial designs on Moldavia and against which all Europe was nominally united, the Ottoman empire. Stephen's father gives a long account of threats to the "garden" (grădină) of Moldavia from the east ending with the Ottomans.[68] Sadoveanu's description of Mehmed as "wise"

[64] Hitchins, *Rumania*, 276-7, 279.
[65] A. Pippidi, 'Anniversaries, continuity and politics in Romania' in *Gebrauch und Missbrauch des Mittelalters, 19.-21. Jahrhundert / Uses and abuses of the Middle Ages, 19th-21st century*, J. M. Bak, J. Jarnut, P. Monnet, B. Schneidmüller (eds.), (Munich: Fink, 2009), 209. Hitchins, *Rumania*, 435-6.
[66] *Life*, 228. VIII; iv
[67] J. Fennell, 'The Dynastic Crisis 1497-1502', *Slavonic and east European Review*, 39 (1960), 1-23.
[68] *Life*, 132-5, II; i.

(înţelept), followed by an account of the brutal elimination of all his brothers and uncles and their children could be applied to Joseph Stalin's (1878-1953) ruthless elimination of his rivals after the death of Lenin.[69] As also could the account of toppling the Byzantine empire, the looting of its riches and the philistine use of them to make a golden toilet for the Sultan.[70] The historic Stephen achieved his defence of Moldavia in 1475-76 through a scorched earth policy which must have starved his own people as much as the invading Ottoman army.[71] This was not the image of his hero that Sadoveanu wanted to depict, especially when refugees were reaching Romania telling of the starvation policies being enacted by Stalin's government in neighbouring Ukraine.[72] However, Stephen's "dark empire" could easily be a coded warning against the Communist neighbour to the east in the 1930s.[73]

III

If this is true, then it is one of the hollow ironies of the twentieth century that, following the liberation of Romania by the Soviet army in 1944 Sadoveanu became an enthusiastic supporter of the Communist Party, becoming Vice President of the Presidium of the Grand National assembly. After the fall of communism, Sadoveanu's political manoeuvres have been viewed with some scepticism.[74] However, as may now be becoming clear, the writer's politics have more consistency than first appears. He was never a man to accept political irrelevance. In fact, in contrast to the Western writer's prioritisation of personal integrity, Sadoveanu may have felt it his duty to represent the values of Romanian history and folk

[69] *Life*, 137. II; ii,
[70] *Life*, 136, II; ii.
[71] J. Eagles, *Stephen the Great and Balkan nationalism* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2014), 57.
[72] E. Baidaus, 'The river that killed and saved' Lecture at the University of Alberta, 14 April, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j28Fdi82_Zo (accessed 03-01-2023).
[73] *Life*, 210, VII; ii, "la împărăţia neagră".
[74] Treptow, Introduction to Farca translation, X.

culture which run through his writings at the highest level, and therefore he had to be part of any governing circle.

In both novels analysed here Sadoveanu addresses what Hitchins characterised as 'The Great Debate', between "Europeanists" and "traditionalists".[75] Although his outlook changed in the period between the publication of the two works, there is a consistency in that in both Sadoveanu suggests a third way, arguing that much of Romania's medieval heritage could still be incorporated into a modern state. In *Baltagul* and *Ştefan cel Mare* he goes well beyond advocating traditional values as a model for living or recalling the past as a golden age. Instead he offers an optimistic vision of a tradition strong enough to find its own identity in dynamic change. In terms of creative political thinking with heritage, Sadoveanu was an innovator who deserves our respect.

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[75] Hitchins, *Rumania*, 292.