

**ALEXANDRU D.  
XENOPOL AND THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF  
ROMANIAN  
HISTORIOGRAPHY**

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Paul A. Hiemstra

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# Alexandru D. Xenopol and the Development of Romanian Historiography

Paul A. Hiemstra

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## INTRODUCTION

When Romania declared war on Austria-Hungary in August of 1916, enemy troops quickly overran the small Balkan state. Bucharest fell in December; by the end of the year the Central Powers were in control of two-thirds of Romania's territory. The Romanian government withdrew from Bucharest to Jassy, a city which in the previous fifty years had been losing its political and cultural significance. Formerly the capital of the Principality of Moldavia, Jassy had become increasingly provincial after the Great Powers' recognition in 1861 of Moldavia's unification with Wallachia in a centralized Romanian state.

In December of 1917, the Romanian government signed an armistice with the Central Powers, who during that year had maintained their domination of Romanian territory. During the early months of war Alexandru D. Xenopol, a seventy-year-old invalid, had been moved to his native Jassy in the hope that there he would escape the privations and uncertainties of a capital already being threatened by enemy troops. A historian and philosopher of history of international reputation, the aging Xenopol scribbled on February 11, 1917, a pathetic note to C. I. Istrati, the Minister of Industry and Commerce; complaining of the need for sugar and other staples, Xenopol begged Istrati to do "everything possible to give me some sugar, salt, and whatever else you can get."<sup>1</sup>

The author of the first multi-volume synthesis of Romanian history and the writer of a widely discussed treatise on the philosophy of history, Xenopol had used his international reputation in the preceding decades to defend Romania's interests and prestige in scholarly circles throughout Europe. At home, during a half-century crucial to the development of intellectual life in the Romanian state, Xenopol had asserted his positions on literary, political, economic, and historical controversies from the period following national unification until

the outbreak of world war. But in 1917 the bedridden Xenopol suffered personal neglect and national defeat in a condition which one observer described as that of a paralyzed invalid "with mumbled speech, an absent gaze, and expired vigor."<sup>2</sup>

Although Romania's fortunes recovered, Xenopol's did not. Prime Minister Ion I. C. Bratianu resigned in March of 1918 to allow a new, pro-German Romanian government to conclude a separate peace with the Central Powers, strategically enabling Bratianu to preserve his own good standing with the Allies. Later that year, one week after Austria-Hungary's surrender and the day before the signing of the armistice between Germany and the Allies, the Romanian government re-declared war and ordered the troops of the Central Powers out of the country. The collapse of the defeated Dual Monarchy in Budapest and Vienna, together with the establishment of a Soviet government in Petersburg, created a power vacuum from which the Romanian state did not fail to benefit. By the conclusion of the Paris negotiations in 1920, Allied and neighboring states all had recognized the annexation by Romania of southern Bukovina from Austria, Bessarabia from Russia, Dobrogea from Bulgaria, and eastern Banat, Transylvania, and other important districts from Hungary. Romania had expanded to include an area and population that were more than double the size of the pre-war Romanian state.<sup>3</sup>

Many nationalist Romanian intellectuals and politicians in preceding decades had expressed a continuing interest in the affairs of their co-nationals beyond Romania's borders. None of these intellectuals, however, had predicted the World War and the subsequent collapse of three empires -- Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg -- in whose aftermath the victorious Allies would allow Romania suddenly to expand and include so many adjacent territories and people in a centralized national state.

As a nationalist historian, Xenopol had looked to his nation's past for inspiration as he examined the present and looked to the future. In 1871, at an

early occasion of public recognition, the 24-year-old doctor in law and philosophy had spoken at a ceremony in the Austrian province of Bukovina, honoring the foundation of Putna Monastery by the fifteenth century Moldavian prince, Stephen the Great:

"May we not believe...that it is only the past that calls us to this spot; ...no, we come here for our future which is the desire of all noble souls among our people.... We feel in this common recollection the seeds of the powers of life that can strengthen and make possible the flourishing of justice and of truth, which maintain and elevate a people."<sup>4</sup>

Xenopol had hoped not only that his people would "spill out into the world the entire content of its soul," but also that

"all Romanians, from whatever sphere or country, who feel in themselves a soul apart and a heart more noble, will work tirelessly, whether separately or together, to discover and distribute the means for rooting their common beliefs, desires, and hopes in one and the same future...."<sup>5</sup>

Later in his career, Xenopol's historical writings had continued to emphasize the Romanians' essential unity. The title of his multi-volume work, The History of the Romanians from Trajan's Dacia ('Istoria romanilor din Dacia Traiana'), designated lands in Austria-Hungary which, although containing large Romanian populations, had never been controlled by the modern Romanian state. The central theme in several volumes of this historical synthesis had been an argument which Xenopol repeatedly had presented to audiences of Romanian and foreign scholars: that the Romanians and their ancestors had been living in Transylvania continuously since Roman times.

Even while affirming his vigorous nationalism and while evoking the common heritage of Romanians as he also advocated their common future, Xenopol had

always considered himself to be realistic and pragmatic. When the World War began, he had written bluntly that "our interest, like Italy's, is that Austria-Hungary should disappear and be dismembered into its constitutive elements."<sup>6</sup>

At the end of the war, however, Xenopol was too sick to comment extensively on the state of affairs that had been created by the Habsburg Empire's dissolution, by the defeat of Germany, and by the defeat and fall of tsarist Russia. "A smile wandered occasionally across the lips which no longer could speak," reported Xenopol's former student, the historian Nicolae Iorga, who described Xenopol as "a physically crushed invalid."<sup>7</sup> During the final weeks of the war, in October of 1918, Ion Petrovici, a philosophy professor and former student of Xenopol, argued in Parliament that an honorable pension should be awarded to the national historian who by then had become "miserable, sick, and forgotten."<sup>8</sup> And as the Paris Peace Conference was convening in January of 1919, Xenopol's wife appealed to Iorga for financial support on behalf of her dying husband: having sold his clothing and belongings, Xenopol remained without possessions except for a house.<sup>9</sup> Finally, on February 27, 1920, Parliament voted to give Xenopol a pension, but on that very day he died.<sup>10</sup>

Xenopol received a modest but proper funeral and a simple but prominently situated gravesite in Bucharest's prestigious Bellu Cemetery. Iorga delivered a speech of eulogy on behalf of the Romanian Academy, proclaiming that Xenopol had represented "that which is active, ambitious, and engaging in Romanian scholarship."<sup>11</sup> Strada Columbus, a short and narrow street in the center of Bucharest, was re-named Strada Xenopol, and the administrators of the University of Jassy commissioned the sculpting of a statue which was finally dedicated twenty years later.<sup>12</sup>

These several modest expressions of respect for the deceased historian had been preceded by decades of turmoil in the turbulent and competitive world of

Romania's intellectuals. After the war, intellectuals in Romania involved themselves in new conflicts and rivalries in which Xenopol's work did not remain a focus of controversy. Although the postwar generation turned its attention away from its immediate predecessors to address the problems of nationality, peasant unrest, and economic stagnation, these issues already had been addressed by Romanian intellectuals in the prewar era.

Intellectual life had developed quickly after the unification of the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia in 1861; within that decade, the Universities of Bucharest and Jassy had been founded in addition to the Romanian Academy. Beyond these formally established, government-supported institutions, schools of social, literary, and historical criticism also were formed. Members of these groups had been eager to pronounce their opinions on one another's positions on past and current affairs. Within these personal rivalries, Romania's intellectuals were attempting to understand their country's predicament as a recently created state with a large, poor, peasant population, a steady immigration of Jews, and an agricultural economy closely connected with west European markets. By the time of the First World War, divergent opinions on issues of nationality, social concern, and economic development had been articulated and discussed extensively in print.

Romanian history also had become an important subject of intellectual disagreement as historians collected and analyzed the sometimes scanty evidence of their ancestral origins and national history. The historians' disagreements frequently revealed the conflict between their patriotic nationalism and a desire for scholarly respectability at a time of increasing respect for scientific activity. Reflecting contemporary social, economic, and political concerns, the historical accounts of past events sometimes provided a background with implications for the analysis of current affairs.

Xenopol's scholarly but confidently nationalistic presentation of the

Romanian past as factual reality had led away from a more purely emotional view of the nation's history. Despite the criticism of his peers and the inattention of his successors, Xenopol had provided Romanian nationalistic historiography with a greater measure of respectability, especially with the general public; he had imposed discipline on romantic nationalism, strengthening its appearance of validity to generally educated Romanians. By the time of the First World War, a strong sense of national identity had become entrenched as an intellectually respectable mentality among Romania's literate classes. This study will examine Xenopol's participation in the creation of this mentality in Romania during decades that were crucial to the development of institutionalized intellectual life and educated behavior in that country.

## I. BACKGROUND

### The Growth of Russian Influence

Alexandru Dimitrie Xenopol was born on March 24, 1847, in a settlement called Parcurari on the outskirts of Jassy, a city which during four hundred years as the capital of Moldavia had grown to include a population of about fifty thousand. Situated in a plain and surrounded by low hills, Jassy was only ten miles from the River Prut, which since 1812 had formed the border between Moldavia and Russia.

The extension of Russian influence in the Romanian lands and in the European portions of the Ottoman Empire had proceeded rapidly during the century before Xenopol's birth. By 1847, nearly two decades of booming commerce and political stability under Russia's supervision had followed more than a century of conflict between Turkish and Russian armies in the Romanian lands. Despite the conservative nature of the Russian state, the high point of its influence in the Romanian territories accompanied profound changes there which created the problems which Romanian intellectuals came to discuss during Xenopol's lifetime.

Although Moldavia and Wallachia had been overrun by Turkish armies in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Danubian Principalities had never been administered directly from Constantinople. Ruled by tribute-paying native princes until the eighteenth century, the principalities were not absorbed into the Ottoman system of land tenure or administration; their boyar aristocracy retained and developed its hold on the land.<sup>1</sup>

In 1709 Peter the Great profited from the principalities' loose connection to the Ottoman Porte and won the support of certain Moldavian boyars and of the prince, Dimitrie Cantemir; in 1711 the Russian army took control of Jassy but was turned back by the Turks who forced it to withdraw. Because of the

Romanians' cooperation with Peter, the Ottomans replaced the native princes with Phanariote Greeks from Constantinople whose task it became to administer the principalities and to deliver their tribute.

Later in the eighteenth century Catherine the Great resumed the Russian expansion into Ottoman territory and moved her army into the Danubian Principalities. In the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji, which ended Catherine's conflict with Turkey in 1774, Russian troops were withdrawn and the Romanian territories were again returned to the Ottoman Porte, but Russia gained ill-defined rights to represent to Constantinople the interests of the Christian populations of the Ottoman Empire in general, and of the Danubian Principalities in particular.

Russia was again at war with Turkey in 1806-1807 and from 1809 to 1812, when Russian troops withdrew from the Balkans to meet Napoleon's threat farther north after extending the Russian boundary, in the Treaty of Bucharest, to the Prut River and the Danube delta. Moldavia and Wallachia again became a field for Russo-Turkish conflict in 1821, when Ypsilanti began his campaign for Greek independence by marching into the principalities. The Turkish armies stopped Ypsilanti's rebellion and remained in Moldavia and Wallachia until Nicholas I, in the Convention of Akkerman, forced the Ottoman Porte to agree to remove its troops. The state of war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire was renewed in 1828, however, and the tsar's army pushed as far as Adrianople, where a treaty was signed in 1829 that initiated a quarter-century that marked the Russian Empire's greatest influence in the Romanian lands.<sup>2</sup>

Russia annexed the Danube delta and was allowed to maintain troops in the principalities until a sizeable Ottoman indemnity had been paid. Moreover, although the Ottoman Porte retained the right to a fixed monetary tribute from Moldavia and Wallachia, the Treaty of Adrianople authorized Russia to draw up and implement a new plan for administering the Romanian territories. Although

the Russian plan, called the Organic Statutes, facilitated that country's intervention in the principalities' internal affairs and extended the boyars' economic and political control, the era of the Organic Statutes also coincided with economic, social, and cultural developments which neither Russia nor the boyars managed to supervise effectively.

In each principality the Organic Statutes established a political system which was manipulated by Russia by means of boyar-controlled elections of both the legislative and executive branches of government;<sup>3</sup> these political arrangements protected boyar interests at a time when the Danubian Principalities, like Russia, were quickly being absorbed into an economic orbit which focused on the West European grain market. This Western grain trade could develop rapidly because the economic clauses of the Treaty of Adrianople not only had opened up the Straits to international shipping, but also had ended the Ottoman right to preemptory purchase of Moldavia's and Wallachia's grain and cattle products; while continuing to exploit the traditional Ottoman market, the principalities began to profit extensively from trade with the West.<sup>4</sup>

While statistical reports from the Danubian Principalities in the early nineteenth century are not entirely reliable, they are certainly indicative; according to Constantin C. Giurescu the quantity of wheat produced in Wallachia almost doubled between 1831 and 1839.<sup>5</sup> Andrei Otetea adds that Wallachian exports increased in value from 21 million lei to 64 million lei between 1835 and 1844; in Moldavia the increase was from 26 million lei to 52 million lei between 1843 and 1847.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, according to a contemporary French source, the total value of Wallachia's exports from 1831 to 1833 exceeded the value of its imports by 7.6 million francs.<sup>7</sup> Other data confirm this dramatic increase in foreign commerce: the number of ships passing through the Moldavian port of Galati rose from 449 to 1,383 between 1843 and 1847; the Wallachian port of Braila received 236 ships in 1833, 1,046 in 1847.<sup>8</sup>

As this dramatic growth of agricultural trade occurred, the boyars were in the political position to increase their ability to profit from it. They succeeded in passing legislation which strengthened their control of the land and of the peasants' labor: the peasants' labor dues and taxes were standardized and increased, while the boyars' hold on the land was defined for the first time in terms of ownership; their traditional exemption from taxation was also confirmed.<sup>9</sup>

But dominating the land and politics of the Danubian territories could not ensure control over the complicated developments occurring there after 1829. The increased labor obligations imposed on the Romanian peasants and the difficulty of enforcing the procedures designed to keep them on the land which they worked led to a migration of Romanians from the countryside into towns.<sup>10</sup> Even more importantly, a growing number of foreigners moved into the Romanian lands, lured by the considerable influx of money from the export trade and by the peaceful conditions imposed by Russia in the aftermath of Adrianople. As the Romanian boyars attempted to secure their profits by confirming their hold on the land and by keeping the peasants on it, foreigners increasingly assumed the managerial and commercial positions created by the booming Danubian agricultural economies.

In Wallachia, the important river towns of Turnu Severin, Braila, and Alexandria were founded during the 1830s;<sup>11</sup> in Moldavia the older towns swelled with new arrivals. Botosani doubled its population between 1831 and 1859, while Jassy's population grew from 48,350 to 65,745.<sup>12</sup>

The numerical importance of foreigners in these and other key cities was increasing. 25% of the heads of household in the principal Wallachian port on the Danube, Braila, were listed as Bulgarian in a census taken in 1838, and a Wallachian representative in Constantinople reported in that year that twenty thousand Bulgarians, all Ottoman subjects, wished to legalize their status in