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While there is a plethora of biographies on Hitler and Mussolini, the life of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the founder and leader of the Legion of the Archangel Michael (also known as the Iron Guard), is less known. Apart from Codreanu’s autobiography For My Legionaries or hagiographic works like Ion Banea’s Căpitanul, so far there are no other attempts at a comprehensive portrayal of the leader of the third biggest fascist movement in interwar Europe. This is why Jens Oliver Schmitt’s biography Căpitan Codreanu – Aufstieg und Fall des rumänischen Faschistenführers [Captain Codreanu – Rise and Fall of the Romanian fascist leader] is a novelty on a variety of grounds. Schmitt, professor of South-East European History at Vienna University, seeks to provide a meticulous account of Codreanu’s political, ideological, and private life, drawing on a variety of source documents from Romanian archives, contemporary writings and theoretical works on comparative fascism. Crucially, too, the author attempts to place Codreanu’s life in the broader political context of the interwar period. The biography spans the period beginning with Codreanu’s birth in Huşi in 1899 and ending with his violent death in 1938. It is divided into 48 short chapters which are grouped thematically, a chronological table, and an index of names.

While Schmitt’s volume is at first glance a comprehensive narrative of Codreanu’s political life, its real strength lies in its examination of how Codreanu’s closest allies shaped his ideology and leadership. Schmitt focuses on Codreanu’s immediate circle of friends and family, aspects of his life which until now have been neglected, yet which Schmitt argues are significant for an understanding of his political career. There is much to support this assumption, as nationalist narratives were intrinsically tied to the Codreanu family’s self-image. In 1902, Codreanu’s father, Ion, a German teacher from Bukovina, changed his family name from the Polish Zelinski to the Romanian-sounding Zelea. “Codreanu” referred to the Romanian broad-leafed forest (codru), an element of the national imaginary. By making the national myths part of his family’s identity, Codreanu’s father expressed his devotion to the Romanian nation, and this was to shape his son’s political convictions. (It is hardly surprising that the family’s genealogy later became the subject of anti-Legionary propaganda, which claimed that the Codreanu were of Slavic ancestry). According to Schmitt, even Codreanu’s military ideals, which were to shape the organizational structure of the Legionary Movement, stemmed from his father and, to a lesser extent, from his
education at the Mănăstirea Dealu military school. As for Codreanu's allies, the author claims that historians have tended to overstate the impact of Bucharest-based intellectuals such as Mircea Eliade or Emil Cioran on Codreanu and his movement. Instead, Schmitt directs his reader's attention to members of the aristocracy, such as Prince Nicholas of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen and members of the Cantacuzène family, such as Gheorghe (Zizi) Cantacuzino Grănicerul, the leader of the Legionary party All for the Fatherland [*Totul pentru Țară*]. Their connections to the royal house were to become Codreanu's life insurance after 1933. At the same time, Schmitt manages to debunk many of the more lurid stories which emerged concerning Codreanu by noting the lack of evidence.

The middle chapters offer many insights into Codreanu's personality and beliefs. Schmitt depicts the founder of the Legionary Movement as a disciplined mystic who regularly withdrew to a hermitage in the Rarău mountains, as a leader who emphasized silence over the loquacity of the political establishment, and as a person who preferred pictures over words. This was indeed a novelty in Romanian politics which stood in sharp contrast to how the satirist Ion Luca Caragiale depicted Romanian archetypical characters. For Codreanu, the promotion of moral rigorousness as a Legionary virtue went hand in hand with the sanctification of violence. He raved about medieval knights and placed more emphasis on chivalric honor than the code of law. These findings are supported by recent research on Codreanu’s charismatic leadership and his and the Legionaries’ religious activism. Schmitt argues that Codreanu’s charisma was not simply a product of his own ostentatiousness, but rather was also sustained by his devotees, who occasionally regarded Codreanu as a demigod or reincarnation of the Archangel Michael. Likewise, Codreanu’s own Christian Orthodox faith was not merely metaphorical or instrumental, but rather constituted a promise of transcendental salvation to the Romanian people. However, his messianism and religious mysticism came increasingly into conflict with his role as a fascist leader. Codreanu’s inability to bring these contrasting identities in line resulted in an irresolute leadership and led to the movement’s collapse in 1938. Correspondingly, Codreanu failed to arbitrate between the different factions which emerged in the 1930s within his organization. Schmitt refers to a “moderate” royalist faction represented by intellectuals like Nae Ionescu on the one hand and a social-revolutionary faction represented by various violent-prone groups and the Legionary Worker Corps on the other. By shedding light on the role workers played within the Legionary movement, Schmitt applies
findings from recent studies on this group, which until now has only rarely been made the subject of historical inquiries.

Schmitt’s biography provides new insights into a person who has come to be regarded as one of the most notorious and charismatic fascist leaders in interwar Europe. One strength of the book is that it explores the life of the Legionary leader in settings and from perspectives often overlooked by scholars of fascism. Moreover, it is stimulating to see emphasis placed on the persons and the networks whose impact on Codreanu have been overlooked in the earlier secondary literature. For those less familiar with politics and personae from interwar Romania, the volume is at times less accessible. Some chapters introduce numerous politicians, parties, and places and are so dense that readers may lose track. A slight tendency occasionally to depart from Codreanu’s development in order to incorporate broader historical events notwithstanding, Schmitt’s biography is balanced and well-written, and it presents enough strong arguments to make it worth a read for any scholar of comparative fascism or East European or Romanian history. Overall, Căpitan Codreanu can be regarded as the first authoritative account of the life of the Romanian fascist leader, an account which has been long overdue.

Radu Harald Dinu
Jönköping University