



ORIGINAL PAPER

**Processing the Political Image of a King: An Overview of the
Interwar and Communist Discourse about Carol II of
Romania**

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Abstract

Carol II was the most controversial personality of the Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen Romanian dynasty. After he had renounced his right to the throne, Carol changed his mind and, consequently, took the Romanian crown in 1930. At the end of his reign, the King decided to change the political regime, by recasting the constitution and creating a single political party – the National Renaissance Front (1938). Carol II's personality, the events of his life and the decisions he took were analysed by the historians from the interwar period, as well as by the communist historiography. On the one hand, before World War II, the discourse was strongly influenced by the cult of personality that Carol II promoted; on the other hand, during the communist regime, Carol's last years as king were seen as a dictatorial period.

Keywords: *Carol II, political image, cult of personality, interwar period, communist period*

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Introduction

Our study is comprised of three distinct parts: the first part presents the idyllic image that some of his contemporaries were trying to create to King Carol II of Romania; the second part, the very short period of transition from eulogies to vehement criticism against the Sovereign, outlined by us through the presentation of articles that appeared in the newspaper *Romania* (the official newspaper of the political party founded by King Carol II – the National Renaissance Front). The last part presents a negative image that some of the authors of specialized works published in the Communist period tried to create to the former Sovereign. How exactly is perceived a historical character, be it even the king, by the general public? The image of that character is, overwhelmingly, the image written down on paper by: his contemporaries and especially by historians in their studies concerning that personality. King Carol II, the most controversial monarch who occupied the throne of Romania, has triggered, since the period during which he was Prince, the interest of media and of the public opinion at large. His accession to the Romania's throne has further intensified the interest of contemporaries in terms to form an opinion on the behavior and characteristics of the Monarch. Communist historiography did not avoid this issue, on the contrary, Carol II was the favorite sovereign for the historians of that period; the reasoning of those authors, was simple – Communist leaders wanted to denigrate Romanian monarchical institution and Carol II proved to be the easiest target. Without proposing to make an exhaustive research of the image of the sovereign, in our study we will attempt to present, in an objective manner, the image that, initially, his contemporaries and later, historians from the Communist era created to King Carol II. This presentation will be based on quotations in which we emphasize the characterization made by different authors to the King.

Period 1930-1940

After he had previously renounced the succession rights repeatedly, even leaving Romania, in 1930 Carol changed his mind and aimed to become king. Carol II came to the throne of Romania by removing his son Michael, still a minor at that time (Scurtu, 2001: 70-88). This return was facilitated by the misunderstandings between Romanian political party leaders and also by the diminution of the regency's prestige and the decrease of the Romanian monarchy's prestige as well. The Restoration from June 8th, 1930 was performed by Carol from a privileged position, being helped in his approach by leading politicians representing the entire Romanian political spectrum (Scurtu, Buzatu, 1999: 210-214).

Since the beginning of his reign, the sovereign showed interest in imposing his political will and making known his wish to dominate the Romanian political class. The King initially tried to create a government coalition bringing together members of different political parties. This formula was not viable, disagreements between representatives of opposing political groups proving to be far more powerful than the monarch's desire for determining them to ally (Scurtu and Buzatu G., 1999: 249). A rather long period of Carol II's reign, George Tătărescu (1934-1937) held the position of prime minister, an obedient politician who allowed the King to impose his will even over the actions of the Government (Dima, 2010: 146-219). It was during this period that it was settled around the Sovereign what his opponents have called the *royal camarilla*. This camarilla was formed mainly of big businessmen and influential political figures, of what

today we generally call *lobbyists* (Țurlea, 2010). Precipitation of events at international level by emphasizing revisionist tendencies and the establishment of authoritarian regimes in many European countries (Berstein and Milza, 1998: 112) gave confidence to King Carol II that he could impose such a regime in Romania. The plan has been implemented since February 1938 when, after a coup d'état, the monarchic authoritarian regime has been imposed. Among the important measures taken to strengthen the regime may be mentioned: the change of the Constitution, the outlawing of political parties, the introduction of censorship and the establishment of a single political party – the National Renaissance Front – on 16 December 1938 (SANIC, Fund FRN, file no. 1/1939: 8). Under the new system, special attention was paid to the propaganda, a conclusive example in this respect being the establishment of a special ministry called Ministry of Propaganda (SANIC, Fund Președinția Consiliului de Miniștrii, file no. 167/1939: 87). Thus were launched the series of some high-profile public ceremonies meant to mark various events, but, in reality, those were simple propaganda events. From major religious celebrations to the anniversaries of the royal family, national celebrations and to marking important dates of the reign of Carol II – as the Restoration from June 8th, 1930, these data represented a good opportunity for staging propaganda apparatus (Buzatu, M. C., 2010). National Guard – National Renaissance Front auxiliary formation – was the essential body for organizing and coordinating these events; Guard members were also those who reported to the central bodies the success or, conversely, the failures in each event (Bruja, 2002-2003: 77-94; Buzatu, M. C., 2012: 113-122).

Besides propaganda made to the regime in general, those events gave a special place to the praise of the monarch who was presented as the savior of the nation, the one who have an objective view on domestic and foreign policy of Romania and the only one who could put in practice the great work of *national revival*. More than its predecessors, Carol II was very interested in organizing such events where the pomp and grandeur were defining terms. King Carol II believed that laying the foundations of a cult of personality was indispensable for creating the image of the supreme leader, for which he supported and encouraged the initiatives taken in this regard. Undoubtedly the Monarch was delighted to hear the words full of praise that were addressed to him; no less true was the fact that many of those around him, among whom were remarkable intellectuals, have surpassed themselves in flattering the sovereign with “beautiful words”. Appeared from overlapping two needs (one need coming from the King – to be worshiped by his subjects, and the other need expressed by some of those subjects to enter into the amiability of their ruler) King Carol II's cult of personality was a premiere in Romanian politics (Sandache, 2001: 289).

Having its origins lying between the sovereign's vanity and the trend traced on the European scene by the great political leaders of the era, the cult of personality will record the first steps in the early 1930s. The period of the monarchic authoritarian regime was, however, one that exemplified the specific key issues that led to its base: from monarchical messianism – one of the defining elements of the doctrine of the National Renaissance Front (Bruja, 2006: 104-105; Savu, 1970: 167-176), to the presentation of the achievements of the single political party, and hence of the regime in general, in a favorable light and up to the endless pages in which the Royal Word was idolized, all have tried to create an idyllic image of the leader. Celebrations organized throughout the country during the period from 1939-1940, at the orders of the Royal political party leadership were all favorable moments for the expression of adulation in relation to Carol II.

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Although representatives of the National Renaissance Front contributed in an essential way to the development of this cult of personality, his appearance cannot be claimed by members of the single political party. Between the first “flatterers” of the King one can identify Dimitrie Gusti, Al. Rosetti, Dr. Vergil Leonte and Octav Onicescu that, since 1930, believed that King Carol II represent the “classic prototype of monarch reformer”, making reference to the achievements of Peter the Great and Frederick the Great (Sandache, 2001: 289). For Aurel Sacerdoțeanu the sovereign appear as “a hostage of power and justice, voievode of culture and redemption, icon of love of country and nation”, calling him “Carol the Great” (Sacerdoțeanu, 1937). Ion Constantinescu, in turn, has sketched a portrait of the King as an all-knowing character: “He’s versed in literature, in science, in arts, in music, in poetry and the military art has no lock hidden or mysterious to him. He knows French, German, English and Italian. He is versed in the history of peoples. He is a great master of sports. He has all the strengths of a President of a Republic in the most democratic country in the world” (Constantinescu, 1932). In this trend of glorification and praise of the King, which debuted, as we have seen, with the ascension to the throne of Carol II, but intensified during the authoritarian regime, were enrolled also writings belonging to intellectuals and cultural figures of that time. Celebrating ten years since the Restoration has provided the perfect opportunity for the expression of such praise addressed to the King. On June 8th, 1940 in addition to the organizing of national demonstrations specific to the single political party, there were also published numerous volumes dedicated to the King, in which the authors have outdone themselves in eulogies at his address. It is worth noting that, because of the situation quite turbulent throughout Europe, the demonstrations in the summer of 1940, dedicated to the Restoration, did not have the magnitude of those from October 16th, 1939 organised to celebrate the birthday of the King.

One of the most important book published on this occasion was “Ten years of the reign of H.M. King Carol II”, which was structured in three volumes totaling an impressive number of pages – 1269. Between those who signed, one could find: the Patriarch Nicodim, Nicolae Iorga, Alexandru Vaida Voevod, Constantin Argetoianu, G.G. Mironescu, A.C. Cuza, Victor Iamandi, Mitiță Constantinescu, Grigore Gafencu, Constantin C. Giurescu, Grigore Antipa, Dimitrie Gusti, Silviu Dragomir, Ion Lupaș, Mihail Ghelmegeanu, N.I. Herescu, Camil Petrescu, Lucian Blaga, Emanoil Bucuța, Nichifor Crainic, Petre Andrei, George Enescu, Ion Marin Sadoveanu, I.D. Enescu, D. Danielopolu, Șerban Cioculescu, Grigoraș Dinicu, Constantin Rădulescu-Motru, Mihail Ralea, Ion Agârbiceanu (Cioroianu, 2000: 35), and the list could go on. We will present some of the “beautiful words” addressed to the Sovereign included in the pages of these books, which clearly fall among texts meant to embody the King Carol II’ cult of personality. Patriarch Nicodim, as in a prayer, said: “Humbled I pray Almighty God to give his Majesty the King health, power, glorious and long reign, as to Mircea the Old, Stephen the Great and King Carol I the Wise and help him aciving to overlook from the heights of five to six decades of reign over happy Romania, feeling himself happy at seeing his work” (Cioroianu, 2000: 36). Alexandru Vaida Voevod, among the lines dedicated to the Sovereign, wondered: “Who wants to go back to the ways of the labyrinthine, imposed by centralist politics, instead of following the straight path of autonomous decentralization outlined by His Majesty the King? With patience and faith we must build the grand temple of National Renaissance Front for him to surpass, in grandeur and power, the masterpiece of master Manole and to proclaim to future generations the glory of King Carol II” (Cioroianu, 2000: 35).

Referring to the benefits of the authoritarian regime, Constantin Argetoianu said: “If the policy initiated in the spring of 1938 could pay off in the midst of a Europe shaken from the foundation [...] then the proof is done abundantly that it was the regime that we needed. Thanks again to King Carol that gave it to us!” (Cioroianu, 2000: 35). With the occasion of the Restoration in June 1940, appeared a special issue of the “Journal of the Royal Foundations”; there were published 39 articles dedicated to the Romanian Monarch (Catalan, 2000: 37). Tudor Arghezi presented King Carol II as a national immortal hero – “For ever from here before / Times will take him in mind”, calling it “beautiful Prince” (Catalan, 2000: 37). Cezar Petrescu, in the article signed by him, compared Carol with Constantin Brâncoveanu and called his reign “cultural voievodship” (Catalan, 2000: 37).

The President of the Romanian Academy, Constantin Rădulescu-Motru, gave the King the ratings of “protector” and “direct inspirer” of the prestige of the Romanian Academy (Catalan, 2000: 37). Petru Comarnescu stated the following: “Plato, who saw as the ideal ruler of his ideal State only a wise man being at the same time the son-of-King, could not have asked for more than what God has bestowed upon our country” (Catalan, 2000: 38). Another album entitled “Writers of Your Majesty worship the Writer King with their heart, faith and pen” was dedicated to King Carol II who has recalled this in his diary: “In the morning I started to receive again gifts [. . .] from the writers, what moved me very much, a tribute volume, in which each has written a page, including some very beautiful and very touching” (Carol al II-lea, 1998: 196). In the poem signed by him, Ion Barbu wrote: “Triumph of the stalk of aloe/ And floral flag for hot climates /The planet’s meaning is in harvest and leaves/ And the meaning of tribes is in Princes” (Otu, 2000: 39). Referring to the king’s transcendent image, Otilia Cazimir specified: “We would waste ourselves in a dust of grounds/ and all, one by one, will forget about us/ but in the deep light of ages/ you will live, my Lord” (Otu, 2000: 40).

Recalling the significance of the day, Demostene Botez wrote: “Restoration from June 8th, 1930 is a decisive act of the people. It has the high moral significance of an act of justice committed by an entire nation” (Otu, 2000: 40). George Bacovia, under the title “Great and brilliant work of progress through faith and work”, stated: “A nation completes its ideal for a future of true civilization, under efficiency and rare leadership qualities of his Sovereign. The years passed, they awakened a new consciousness towards the mists of time remaining forever ago” (Otu, 2000: 40). Ion Minulescu enrolled among those that signed the tribute album dedicated to the King by writers; he wrote, addressing to the Monarch: “And – today – / You are the Lord of those forever defeated by oath / Of those defeated by water / Of those defeated by wind / Of those defeated by lyrics / By icons / And by song / Of those resurrected like Lazarus by your royal word ... / Yeah! / You are the Lord of those forever defeated by oath” (Otu, 2000: 41). It should be also noted that the reign of King Carol II was not a period of endless praise and glorification of the sovereign. He received, since coming to the throne, some criticism coming mainly from his political opponents; complaints have increased with the establishment of the monarchical authoritarian regime in 1938. Among the most vocal we can mention Iuliu Maniu, the leader of the National Peasant Party, who stood at the head of the Government in June 1930, when took place the return of King Carol in the country. Though sceptical with regard to the intentions of the future King, Iuliu Maniu, accepted Carol’s return, but, shortly after, resigned from the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (Scurtu, Buzatu, 1999: 213). He became after this episode one of the main contestants of the policies implemented by King Carol II.

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Along with Maniu, another political leader of the time – Corneliu Zelea Codreanu – contested step by step the path followed by the Sovereign. The leader of the legionary movement, since its establishment and until his death in 1938, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu expressed, throughout the '30s, his disapproval regarding actions taken by Carol II or the actions taken by his relatives. Although, among the contestants of the King stood other politicians of the time, we summarize the reference to the two political leaders. It should be emphasized, however, that, although there were more such voices of disapproval, they were not in a position to influence the great mass of the population, so that the overall image of the Sovereign Carol II cannot be regarded as a negative one in the era. During the period of the authoritarian regime the opposition trend intensified, but this phenomenon coincides with the introduction of censorship throughout the country, which has led to the halting of creating a mass phenomenon. In conclusion we can say that during the period of his reign, in general, King Carol II (in particular during the period 1930-1938) enjoyed the sympathy of a large part of the population, positions of disapproval being circumstantial.

Romania Newspaper

From praising the sovereign to vehement critiques at his address was only a step; this shift was accomplished in a short period of time and debuted with the territorial losses in the summer of 1940, when Romania lost approximately a third of its territory and a third of the population: Bessarabia (then occupied by the Soviet Union), North-Western Transylvania with Bukovina (Romanian territory taken by Hungary) and Dobrudja (which, following the Treaty of Craiova, was given to Bulgaria) (Midan, 2008: 284-357). Since then there have been voices that characterized King Carol II in pretty hard terms. Those voices belonged to both major political figures of the times, but also to ordinary people. An example that highlights the radical change of optics in terms of the image of Carol II was given by the official newspaper of the royal political party – *Romania*. In the pages of this journal we find initially endless praise addressed to the sovereign. In the number appeared on October 15th, 1939 there were published numerous articles dedicated to the birthday of King Carol II. Among these we present some rows written by I. Valerian: “Suddenly the mist began to clear the horizon / From the heart of the mountains / And to the shores of the sea/ Same song of glory fills the air with joy/And as in the past royal days/ A long convoy of flags and cheers/ All subjects are gone / On the path of His Majesty”. The celebration of the Restoration (June 8th, 1930) was also a new opportunity for praising the sovereign. On June 9th, 1939 the newspaper *Romania*, which usually had 20 pages, included no less than 36 pages. One of the articles devoted to the King wore the following title: “Descending from the air, like an archangel of salvation, H.M. King Carol II has re-knotted the thread of dynastic continuity” (*Romania*, June 9th, 1939; Cristoiu, 2011: 18).

A year later, celebrating 10 years since the Carlist restoration, the newspaper *Romania* had a special issue with 48 pages. Between the articles dedicated to King we find: “The King consolidator of the country”, “King of writers – King of Romanian culture” (*Romania*, June 9th, 1940; Cristoiu, 2011: 18).

Less than 3 months after the occurrence of the number dedicated to the celebration of a decade since the Restoration in 1930, the newspaper *Romania* radically change its editorial policy. King Carol II, who, in early September 1940 was in the ungrateful situation to abdicate and leave the country, was completely forgotten by the newspaper

which praised him until recently. The numbers of 6 to 7 September were dedicated to the eulogy of the new head of state – Ion Antonescu (Romania, 6-7 September 1940; Cristoiu, 2011: 22).

The era of flatterers and eulogy of King Carol II ended. There was a lull period in terms of appearances of the former sovereign of Romania; this was understandable if we consider that during that period the Second World War was in full swing at international level. The attention of the public and the journalists was captured by armed clashes and by the imminent entry of Romania into war. War and, later, the establishment of the Communist regime have put discussions and writings relating to Carol II in a cone of shadow. Set aside but not forgotten, the sovereign returned in the Romanian historiography during the communist period. The political picture of the first king of Romania born on Romanian earth was quite changed; this new perception of the former sovereign recalls the notes found in the diaries of his direct political opponents.

The Communist period

During the Communist era, the authors of the various items that were related to Carol II entered its discourse on the direction mapped out already by the Communist rulers, namely, discrediting the monarchy as political institution in general and the Romanian Royal family in particular. Being, without a doubt, the most controversial ruler of Romania, Carol II was a much easier target than Carol I, Ferdinand I and Mihai I. From repeated disclaimers of the throne to the tensioned relation he had with his family, from the connections that Sovereign has had with big businessmen of that time to the actions and properties held by him, from the royal camarilla and its actions to the reputation of adventurer and extramarital relationship of the Sovereign, from the attempt to discredit the political parties and up to the authoritarian regime of the King, all these were the subjects of defamation of Carol II and the Hohenzollern Sigmaringen family. Among representatives of the Communist historiography, which remind the Sovereign Carol II in their writings, we can identify the authors who attempts an objective characterization, up to a certain point (creating a negative image of the King on the whole), but also authors who have a vehement tone and use phrases with a purely negative connotation to describe the Monarch. Livia Dandara is part of the first group of authors, who, as mentioned earlier, tried to fall on the line proposed by the Communist leaders, but at the same time tried not to use negative epithets in describing King Carol II. The author, without bringing direct criticism to the Sovereign, uses terms such as “antidemocratic”, “antiparlamentar”, “contradictory measures”, “atmosphere of confusion and provisional state” (Dandara, 1985: 46, 85), when speaking about political actions undertaken by the King. A negative description is also made to the political party which was set up by the Monarch in December 1938 – the National Renaissance Front – the same author calling him “reactionary, totalitarian, unsustainable and harmful political fiction” (Dandara, 1985: 91).

Costin Murgescu, in his work relating to the currencies affairs of the Royal House, brings to the attention of readers various businesses in which the ruling family was involved, focusing on the negative aspects of such involvement (Murgescu, 1970). The author emphasizes also that, in the eight decades of existence of the Romanian monarchy, the royal family used their position held for interventions both in addition to the members of the government, and in addition to representatives of the various organs of the State in order to fostering various persons or companies close to them (Murgescu, 1970: 79).

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Trying to sketch a picture of King Carol II in which negative connotations prevail, Murgescu note: “In the time of Carol II the practice has not only reached its peak, but has gain the most degrading forms. Former King not only did not hesitate to require State institutions to give him personal grants to finance some activities that had nothing in common with his public functions or to make him gifts, but openly demanded favors, privileged treatments or even committing blatant illegalities on behalf of capitalist societies in which he was interested, which offered him packet of shares or various sums of money as a gift. He come to make the appointments in public functions as those to whom such request were addressed to have proved to be receptive, reluctant or recalcitrant” (Murgescu, 1970: 79).

Referring to the same economic implications, but also to the political connotations of the actions which the Monarch had undertaken in its financial benefits, Emilia and Gavrilă Sonea contribute to shaping a negative picture of King Carol II. The authors characterize the Sovereign in their work as being “an adventurer element and avid of enrichment by any means,” who “sought to achieve some political and economic changes in favour of the Crown” (Sonea, E. and Sonea, G., 1978: 26). Exploiting another topic often used to point out a negative image of King Carol II, Florea Nedelcu speaks, in his book – *From restoration to royal dictatorship*, about the decisive role played by the sovereign in “the collapse of the Romanian political life” (Nedelcu, 1981: 7). The author also contributes to shaping the painting of the politician Carol II, claiming the following: “Avid of power and enrichment by any means and known as a sympathizer of «iron fist» regimes, Carol II – installed on the throne of Romania with the help of reactionary circles in the country and abroad – has pursued with perseverance the establishment of a regime of personal dictatorship. To succeed, he used all possible machinations directed towards undermining parliamentary-constitutional regime” (Nedelcu, 1981: 8).

One of the most vehement authors as regards constructing an unfavorable image of King Carol II was Al. Gheorghe Savu. In his book – *The royal dictatorship* – he is using numerous adjectives with negative connotations to describe the former Sovereign. The author seems to bring in front of the readers a character with a fundamentally negative structure: “in the memory of his contemporaries, Carol remained a man of unusual rapacity, of a stubbornness and diabolical perfidiousness, self-centered and lacking the most basic sense of loyalty, with an unhealthy penchant for debauchery and adventure, unrestrained and fickle, coward, paltry, showing an innate revulsion towards the popular masses, reactionary to the bone and with the manners of oriental despot. Carol II seems to mass together all the negative traits of his ancestors the Hohenzollern, of the feudal boyards and those of imperialism” (Savu, 1970: 31).

Conclusion

The interwar period and, in particular, the last two years of Carol II's reign (the period of the authoritarian regime) is replete with information on the Sovereign. Whether we are talking about representatives of the media, cultural figures interested to capture the attention of the sovereign or politicians who have interacted directly with the King, each had something to say and said it: directly, in the form of articles and books published during that period or indirectly through rows written in their own diary. We found in the image created to Sovereign in the interwar period a multitude of accents from praising to irony and to vehement criticism. On the other hand, the Communist historiography offered a more subjective description of the monarch. This time the image that emerged was a

purely negative one. This trend of widening and hyperbolizing the negative characteristics of King Carol II follows the line drawn by the Communist leaders namely defaming the Romanian monarchy. The only difference between the different studies devoted to the Sovereign is given by the tone used by each author. Thus we find within Communist historiography authors who try keeping an objective description of the events that occurred in the fourth decade of the 20th century, but who nevertheless manage to impart a negative note to the actions of the monarch. We also found authors who presented Carol II as a negative personage, placing him in the middle of some circles that were not to be trusted. In the Communist period there were authors who have not hesitate to condemn directly on Sovereign and to sketch him an image reminding us of monarchical absolutism of the past centuries.

Starting from praising and even adulation and reaching up to the most severe criticism, the political image of King Carol II is, as we have seen, one that could not be more complex. If many of his contemporaries, for various reasons, have sketched an idyllic portrait of the Sovereign, the representatives of the Communist historiography were very harsh regarding the characterization of the same personage. It is our duty, of those who approached since 1989 and will further address this issue, to be objective and to outline a complete picture, including both the positive and the negative aspects of the personality of the most controversial monarch of Romania.

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