

*Sorin Radu*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4702-3894>  
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu

*Ramona Besoiu*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3342-5206>  
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu

## THE 'VOICES' OF SAXON PRIESTS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES. TESTIMONIES FROM TRANSYLVANIAN MEMORIAL BOOKS (*GEDENKBÜCHER*) POST-1918\*

### Abstract

The communities of the Transylvanian Saxons represented a distinct feature of the Transylvanian space and played a major role in the region's socio-cultural and economic development. This community faced an enormous challenge following the end of the Great War, when Transylvania, formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was incorporated into Greater Romania (1918). This study employs a case analysis of four Saxon rural communities from Transylvania to reveal the 'voices' of some key social actors in village life, namely the priests. Their considerations, preserved in the so-called memorial books [*Gedenkbücher*] of the Lutheran parishes, provide valuable insights into the various events that affected the communities under their pastoral care. More specifically, this study investigates how the Saxons responded to the realities of the new state and the challenges posed by legislative changes, and how they adapted to the new political system. The research draws on data collected from *Gedenkbücher* spanning the first decade following the Great Union, specifically from the villages of Alțâna, Cârța, Pianu de Jos, and Hamba, which were predominantly German at the time. Employing the case study methodology, this research examines the social, economic, and political dimensions of rural Saxon communities, with particular emphasis on the practices associated with the political integration of their members.

**Keywords:** countryside, memorial books, *Gedenkbücher*, Transylvania Saxon communities, Great Union, Romania

---

\* This paper was supported by the Romanian Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalisation under the grant CNCS-UEFISCDI, project no. PN-III-P4-PCE-2021-1352, within PNCDI III.

An open research theme in Central and South Eastern Europe concerns the status of ethnic minorities in the post-imperial world, shaped by the dissolution of great empires and by the birth or consolidation of nation-states after the Great War. In particular, Romanian historiography provides only a limited analysis of how these political, social, administrative, and psychological transformations affected rural communities formed by ethnic minorities. In the years immediately following the birth of Greater Romania, official discourse was heavily infused with ideological undertones, in which the peasant was idealised and portrayed through a set of clichés. In contrast, the authentic voices of the rural world were marginalised. Building on this interpretative framework, the present study argues that priests embodied the ‘voices’ of key social actors in village life, which are crucial for understanding the history of the German communities in Romania, with a specific focus on the Transylvanian Saxons.

In a recent study, Iuliana Cindrea-Nagy and Roland Clark<sup>1</sup> highlighted that most researchers approached the concept of rurality and the notion of peasantry through the lens constructed by social elites to view the rural world, while “rarely incorporating the voices of rural actors themselves”. They challenge the idea of a so-called ‘rural monolith’ that speaks with *one* voice and embodies *one* culture, and further argue that the very concept of ‘the rural’ is multifaceted, multidirectional, and ambiguous. Rural ‘voices’ are not necessarily and exclusively the voices of peasants, but are rather diverse and represent ‘the voices’ of all those rural actors – be they mayors, priests, teachers, gendarmes, landowners, monks, nuns, rangers, women, children, young people, and so on – individuals whose perspective diverged from those of sociologists, folklorists, politicians, public officials, or poets and various artists, who usually depicted rural Romania from a distant vantage point. Rural actors are defined here as all individuals whose identities and missions emerged out of rural spaces. Landlords, village elites – usually comprising the priest, teacher, and notary – along with gendarmes, forestry officials, and farmers, possess their own distinct rural voices which need to be heard if we are to gain the understanding of the worlds that they inhabit”.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Iuliana Cindrea-Nagy and Roland Clark, ‘Introduction: Rural Voices’, *Journal of Romanian Studies*, v, 2 (2023), <https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/10.3828/jrns.2023.8> [Accessed: 16 Nov. 2023].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 124.

Building on the argument put forward by Cindrea-Nagy and Clark, this study seeks to recover the ‘voices’ of key social actors in village life, i.e. the priests, through a case study centred on four rural Saxon communities in Transylvania. Their observations, drawn from the so-called memorial books [*Gedenkbücher*] of the Lutheran parishes, offer valuable perspectives on events that affected their communities and diverge markedly from the discourses in official documents produced by the Romanian state.

### IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE GREAT WAR: THE RURAL WORLD OF GREATER ROMANIA AND THE GERMAN MINORITY<sup>3</sup>

Central and Southeast Europe has a deep rural tradition, with the peasantry playing, at times only declaratively, an important role in the economic, social, political, and cultural life of the states in the region. The scholarly literature on this subject is both rich and diverse, demonstrating sustained intellectual efforts to understand the peasantry as a social actor, alongside the peasant family and the socio-economic relations within rural societies.<sup>4</sup> During the nineteenth century, the peasantry and the peasants’ world/culture were ‘discovered’, ‘mapped’, and ‘examined’ as part of nation-building processes.<sup>5</sup> As Werner

<sup>3</sup> Sorin Radu and Oliver Jens Schmitt (eds), *România interbelică: modernizare politico-instituțională și discurs național* (Iași, 2023), 28–33, 40–3, 403–33.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Vanhaute, *Peasants in World History*, Themes in World History Series (London, 2021); Eric R. Wolf, *Peasants* (New Jersey, 1966); S.H. Franklin, *Rural Societies* (London, 1971); Jerome Blum, *The End of the Old Order in Rural Europe* (New Jersey, 1978); Judith Pallot (ed.), *Transforming Peasants. Society, State and the Peasantry, 1861–1930* (Basingstoke, 1998); Terry Marsden, Jonathon Murdoch, Philip Lowe, Richard C. Munton, and Andrew Flynn, *Constructing the Countryside: An Approach to Rural Development*, Restructuring Rural Areas series (London, 1994); Keith Hoggart, Henry Buller, and Richard Black, *Rural Europe: Identity and Change* (London, 1995); Werner Troßbach and Clemens Zimmermann, *Die Geschichte des Dorfes* (Stuttgart, 2006); Katja Bruisch, *Als das Dorf noch Zukunft war. Agrarismus und Expertise zwischen Zarenreich und Sowjetunion* (Köln–Weimar–Wien, 2014); Alexandru Rusu, Lilian Niacșu, Andrei Enea, and Octavian Goga, *Functional Rural Areas in Romania: A Methodological Investigation* (Luxembourg, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Alex Drace-Francis, *The Traditions of Invention. Romanian Ethnic and Social Stereotypes in Historical Context* (Leiden–Boston, 2013); Valer Cosma, ‘Inventing the Romanian Peasant in Transylvania during the Nineteenth Century’, in Ștefan Baghiu, Vlad Pojoga, and Maria Sass (eds), *Ruralism and Literature in Romania* (Berlin–Bern–Bruxelles, 2019), 165–90.

Rösener argued, however, approaches to the rural world were often ideologically charged. On the one hand, the peasantry was viewed and analysed through a conservative, idyllic lens, as a world opposed to or apart from modernity, as a socio-cultural universe of its own, governed by traditions and customs. On the other hand, a contrasting perspective emerged, embodying a critical strand of ‘realism’ and often focusing on the harsh and unpleasant aspects of rural life.<sup>6</sup>

The narratives prevalent in Romanian historiography from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries regarded the nation’s development – from the formation of the modern state of Romania in 1859 until the 1938–40 dictatorships – as a continuous process of institutional, political, economic, and cultural evolution. This triumphalist narrative, however, paid only limited attention to social development and, in particular, to the condition of the rural world and the peasantry, seldom addressing how modernisation processes affected the peasantry and village life. Historians have traditionally prioritised the concept of the nation-state over social histories,<sup>7</sup> hence the marginalisation of peasants, who have been seen as objects of history rather than its subjects. Although peasants constitute the pillars of the founding discourse on the state, invoked as the “soul of the country”, and always depicted as the nation’s essential elements and landmarks of national identity, they were systematically “forgotten” by the state and political elites during the implementation of modernisation policies in the Romanian society. In recent years, an increasing number of researchers have reached the paradoxical conclusion that, despite the nation-state’s self-identification with rurality and the omnipresent discourses centred on peasants and the rural world, Romanian historiography lacks a significant, institutionalised body of research dedicated to rural history.<sup>8</sup>

Until the establishment of Greater Romania (1918), the political discourse had placed the peasant at its core, as an ever-present object of political narratives, described as the embodiment of the nation; however, the nation-state project failed to implement political, cultural,

---

<sup>6</sup> Werner Rösener, *Țăranii în istoria Europei* (Iași, 2003), 7–8.

<sup>7</sup> Roland Clark, ‘The Shape of Interwar Romanian History’, *Journal of Romanian Studies*, iii, 1 (2021), 11–40.

<sup>8</sup> Constantin Bărbulescu, *România medicilor. Medici, țărani și igienă rurală în România de la 1860 la 1910* (București, 2015).

social, and economic reforms centred on the rural world. The Greater Romania project, as envisioned by political parties, represented a state centred on the peasantry, or even a state belonging *to the peasants*, conceptualised as a rural democracy. However, it lacked a clear perspective on integrating the illiterate rural population into the liberal democratic project. Moreover, the political class showed little interest in such an undertaking, let alone in understanding how peasants perceived political modernity, democratic practices, voting power, political parties, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

This issue would be further complicated by the fact that, following the union of Bessarabia, Bucovina, and Transylvania with Romania, nearly one-third of the total population represented various national minorities, with their own traditions, experiences, and political conduct. Among these minorities, German communities (Transylvanian Saxons, Swabians from Banat and Satu Mare, as well as Germans from Bucovina, Bessarabia, and Dobruja, and those from the Old Kingdom) had a strong demographic presence. Although the Romanian ethnic element constituted the largest national group in Transylvania, surpassing alone – although by a narrow margin – the combined total of all other nationalities, which were still quite consistent (the Hungarian, Old-Hungarian/Szekler, and especially the German ethnic elements), Germans from Romania represented the largest German minority in Southeast Europe post-1918. The 1930 census registered a total population of over 18 million, of which 4.13 per cent – approximately 745,000 citizens – were ethnic Germans (the second largest ethnic minority in Romania after ethnic Hungarians, who represented 7.89 per cent of the population). Among the German population, approximately 237,000 were Transylvanian Saxons.<sup>10</sup>

The presence of German minorities in Romania is the result of migration processes that began in the Middle Ages. The colonisation of the southern and northern Transylvania in the second half of the twelfth century led to the establishment of settlements that were granted a range of specific political and religious privileges, and therefore evolved autonomously or even independently of the royal

---

<sup>9</sup> Sorin Radu and Oliver Jens Schmitt (eds), *România interbelică. Modernizare politico-instituțională și discurs național*, 17–43, 104–33.

<sup>10</sup> Vasile Ciobanu, *Contribuții la cunoașterea istoriei sașilor transilvăneni 1918–1944* (Sibiu, 2001).

and/or noble authority of the Árpád dynasty. This colonisation marked the origin of the Transylvanian Saxon ethnic group. Communities established through colonisation from the second half of the twelfth century, with roots going back to German, Walloon, and Flemish regions, formed a distinct entity, both administratively – with the county of Sibiu, and later the Saxon University – and religiously – with the Sibiu Diocese, i.e. *Praepositura Cibiniensis*, whose community later embraced the Lutheran Reformation. For 800 years, Saxon communities developed a cultural, economic, and religious model that proved successful, fostering early urbanisation (from the fourteenth to the fifteenth century) in the southern and northern Transylvania. These communities not only became important benchmarks for the Romanian or Hungarian communities living in their immediate vicinity, but also formed the core of the broader German minority, which, as a result of migrations – especially in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries – was further diversified by the presence of *landlers* (German-speaking settlers from the present-day Austria), Banat and Satu Maru Swabians, as well as Germans from Bucovina, Bessarabia, and Dobruja. The distinct model of social, cultural, and religious organisation developed by all German ethnic groups became a defining feature of the geographical areas where they resided and can be regarded today as part of Romanian, European, and global tangible and intangible heritage.<sup>11</sup>

Thanks to well-organised educational, religious, and communal structures, the Transylvanian Saxons clearly enjoyed a privileged cultural, social, and economic status.<sup>12</sup> However, the formation of Greater Romania (1918) brought some major changes to their position: formerly recognised as ‘Regnicolar’ (or autonomous nation), the Saxons were redefined as a confessional ethnic group. The incorporation of Transylvania into the institutional structures of the Romanian state began, marked by an aggressive push for ethnic homogenisation and removal of ethnic specificity, and somewhat incoherent unification policies. The Romanianisation of public institutions in Transylvania,

---

<sup>11</sup> Mathias Beer, Sorin Radu, and Florian Kühner-Wielach (eds), *Germanii din România – migrație și patrimoniu cultural* (București, 2019), 11–12; German edition: Mathias Beer and Sorin Radu (eds), *Migration und kulturelles Erbe. Das Beispiel der deutschen Minderheiten in und aus Rumänien* (Göttingen, 2024), 9–10.

<sup>12</sup> Ciobanu, *Contribuții la cunoașterea*.

or the “cultural offensive”,<sup>13</sup> and the implementation of the agrarian reform, among others, stirred confusion and apprehension in the hearts of ethnic minority communities. The Saxon rural world was likewise affected by these political and institutional changes, and the observations of local priests brought these concerns to the fore.

#### MEMORIAL BOOKS OF THE LUTHERAN PARISHES

The Church was, and remains, the most resilient institution in the history of German colonisation, particularly among the Saxons and Swabians in Banat, with priests playing an essential role in the development of these communities. Schooled at German universities, Saxon priests and teachers served as vehicles of liberal and progressive ideas. Following the abolition of Saxon autonomy and self-government, it was the Lutheran Church that assumed responsibility for shaping ethnic identity and fostering national solidarity. Priests and teachers would emerge as both spiritual and political leaders. They held the majority of seats in the district and local administration of agricultural associations [*Landeswirtschaftsverein*] (founded in 1845), banking associations [*Spar- und Vorschussvereine*] (founded as early as 1852), and occupied executive positions in Saxon banks. The Church played a particularly significant role in education, overseeing both the establishment and the financial upkeep of the school system, from primary to secondary levels<sup>14</sup> (the salaries of priests and teachers were funded by the local community through the Church tax).

The priest’s “advisory” role within the community, particularly in rural areas, is widely acknowledged; however, scientific literature offers limited analysis on the manner in which priests were involved in the cultivation of civic spirit in rural communities, and there is a lack of detailed information about the opinions of Saxon priests in Transylvania regarding the political changes that followed the region’s unification with Romania. The change in the status of the German minority, along with political, institutional, and economic transformations following 1918, impacted the development of the entire Saxon community and elicited various responses from the rural

<sup>13</sup> Irina Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism în România Mare* (București, 1998), 41.

<sup>14</sup> Konrad Gündisch and Mathias Beer, *Siebenbürgen und die Siebenbürger Sachsen* (München, 1998), 127–8.

intelligentsia. In light of this, our approach aims to present a more nuanced perspective on these changes, namely by examining how Lutheran priests reflected on, interpreted, and commented on post-1918 developments in the so-called memorial books [*Gedenkbücher*] of Lutheran parishes. This analysis covers the first decade after the Great Union, examining four Transylvanian villages with predominantly Saxon population: Alzen/Alțâna (Sibiu County), Kerz/Cârța (Făgăraș County), Deutschpinn/Pianu de Jos (Alba County), and Harnbach/Hamba (Sibiu County). The aim of analysing the documents from rural parishes, which offer a glimpse into both the life of the Church and the community, is to extract information about the attitude of the Transylvanian Saxons towards political and legislative changes (such as the agrarian reform, the electoral reform, and the adoption of the new Constitution), as well as about their collective responses to these changes and their political behaviour.<sup>15</sup> While we have selected a few villages which we consider representative of Saxon communities in Transylvania, it is important to note that *Gedenkbücher* can also be found in other Lutheran rural parishes.

Starting in the seventeenth century, Lutheran priests were encouraged to keep memorial books to document major events in their parishes. Depending on their writing skills or general culture, they would create genuine chronicles of community life.<sup>16</sup> Some more diligent authors or those with a deeper understanding of both international and domestic politics provided insights into legislative changes, economic conditions, the state of schooling and the Church, inter-ethnic relations, and other key events in the life of the community. These records, reflecting authors' perceptions of historical events, are inherently highly subjective. Furthermore, a temporal gap exists between the occurrence of events and the moment of their

---

<sup>15</sup> An analysis of memorial registers from 17 Lutheran parishes in Southern Transylvania was conducted by Liliana Popa in 2018; her book addresses the writings of parish priests concerning the events that affected rural Saxon communities between 1914 and 1919 (WWI and the Union), and represents a unique contribution to the historiography of the wartime period; see Liliana Popa, *Neue Zeiten brechen an. Aufzeichnungen siebenbürgisch-sächsischer Pfarrer aus der Zeit des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Cluj-Napoca, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. See also Lore Poelchau, 'Zur Geschichte der Pfarrarchive der evangelischen Gemeinden A.B. in Sibienbürgen', *Zeitschrift für Siebenbürgische Landeskunde*, xviii, 1 (1995), 3–22.



documentation, due to the distance between the experience and the moment of writing. Moreover, the authors themselves were responsible for selecting what they deemed important to record for posterity, emphasising specific events while overlooking others. This category of observations falls between a memoir and a diary. The memorial books (A3-sized notebooks) contain entries arranged chronologically and document significant events within the parish and community. The regularity and consistency of entries vary from document to document, and from author to author (following a daily, weekly, periodical, or annual pattern). It can be inferred that daily notes were written under the immediacy of events and, as they were intended as a record of the parish history, they sought to capture important occurrences as they unfolded, whereas entries made at longer intervals or with yearly regularity were retrospective, seeking to revisit certain episodes from the past. Regardless of their nature and category, entries in the memorial books should not be overlooked; they provide valuable insights for socio-historical research, may contribute to a deeper understanding of village communities, and, as such, represent the official 'voice' of the rural world.

The priests who produced the notes and whom we focus on in the present study include: Johann Mantsch (1909–1926) from Alzen/Alțâna, Karl Reich (1905–1930) from Kerz/Cârța), Johann Josef (1900–1937) from Deutschpinn/Pianu, a former teacher in Mühlbach/Sebeș, and Rudolf Karoli (1902–1936) from Hahnbach/Hamba.<sup>17</sup> Their memorial books are kept in the *Kirchengemeinden* (Church parishes) records of the Central Archive of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession of Romania, based in Sibiu.

The consistency of these notes, the regularity of the records, the precision in describing specific events, and the expression of particular opinions, all suggest that their authors – the priests – were cognisant of the long-term value of their observations for posterity and for the understanding of the communities to which they belonged. Above all, they recognised that they would be regarded as representative 'voices'

---

<sup>17</sup> Zentralarchiv der Evangelischen Kirche A.B. in Rumänien, Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Deutschpinn (hereinafter: ZEK A.B. Rumänien), Series Pastorum, HB 34, Gemeinde Alzen (Bezirk Hermannstadt), Gemeinde Kerz (Bezirk Hermannstadt), Gemeinde Deutschpinn (Bezirk Mühlbach), Gemeinde Hahnbach (Bezirk Hermannstadt).

of village life. In their notes from the first decade of the interwar period, Saxon priests addressed issues related to: (1) the integration of the Saxons into the new socio-political landscape of Greater Romania<sup>18</sup> (the agrarian reform, the electoral reform, the new Constitution, the status of schools and the Church); and (2) communal matters and more significant events in the life of the community (community finances, the condition of the Church and parish property, shifts in social sentiment). This study will focus exclusively on the first category of these notes.

### POSTIMPERIAL POLITICS

Saxon political and religious elites were acutely aware of the historical changes occurring over the period under discussion. As early as 1848, the Saxon University became an institution that supported the equality of rights for Romanians residing on royal grounds, at a time when Transylvania ceased to exist as a distinct state and became part of Hungary (1867–1918).<sup>19</sup> With the annexation of Transylvania,<sup>20</sup> Saxon elites realised that national affiliation was a *sine qua non* condition for securing political rights under the new state's constitution. On 8 January 1919, in Mediaş, they adopted a 'declaration of adhesion' to the Resolution

<sup>18</sup> Sorin Radu, 'Romania and the Great War: Political, Territorial, Economic and Social', *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość*, xxxi, 1 (2018), 138–67.

<sup>19</sup> Ernst Wagner, *Istoria saşilor transilvăneni* (Bucureşti, 2000), 65.

<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that while the overwhelming majority of Romanian scholarly literature refers to the event as 'the union of Transylvania with Romania', the expression 'the annexation of Transylvania by Romania' was commonly used in the public discourse of national minority leaders in Romania in the aftermath of 1918. Over time, this term became gradually established in the Hungarian and German historiographies and was subsequently adopted by most foreign historians writing on this subject. For example, see: Florian Kühner-Wielach, *Siebenbürgen ohne Siebenbürger? Zentralstaatliche Integration und politischer Regionalismus nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (München, 2014); Anikó Kovács-Bertrand, *Der ungarische Revisionismus nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg. Der publizistische Kampf gegen den Friedensvertrag von Trianon (1918–1931)* (München, 1997); Glatz Ferenc (ed.), *Magyarország és a magyar kisebbségek* (Budapest, 2002); Bárdi Nándor, Fedinec Csilla, and Szarka László (eds), *Minority Hungarian communities in the Twentieth Century* (Boulder, 2011); Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire. A New History* (London, 2016); Konrad Clewing and Oliver Jens Schmitt (eds), *Geschichte Südosteuropas. Vom frühen Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Regensburg, 2011).

of the National Assembly for the union of Transylvania with Romania, which had been approved by Romanian representatives in Alba Iulia (on 1 December 1918). Therefore, the leadership of the Church viewed adherence to Romania as a necessity. In a sermon delivered on the occasion of Reformation Day and published on 10 November 1918, Vicar Bishop Franz Karl Herfurth voiced the uncertainties looming over the German community at that time. Addressing the parishioners, he remarked: "I am certainly called to be a Saxon and a Christian, but will our people endure as a distinct group amidst the current turmoil and upheaval?" In his speech, he appealed to the national solidarity of the ethnic Saxons and the political unity of the group. He also underscored the political right to freedom and self-determination granted by the state to the people, framing this as a continuation of former medieval privileges that the ethnic group sought to reclaim and exercise collectively, notably in its capacity as the Church of the people.<sup>21</sup>

Memorial books indicate that, in the eyes of Saxon peasants, the Evangelical priests, in their role as spiritual leaders, were held responsible for the union, which was regarded as "an act of treason": "Later, the priests were blamed for Mediaș decision: it was not driven by political necessity, but by a certain fear among millions of people. 'Our priests betrayed and sold their people!' This sentiment was declared *urbi et orbi* and partially believed as well",<sup>22</sup> wrote Father Johan Josef Martini, the priest from Deutschpin. In contrast, Karl Reich, the priest of Cârța (Kerz), argued that:

[T]here is great dissatisfaction among the people regarding the voluntary unification of the Saxon nation with Romania. The blame for the situation is placed on their leaders, particularly the priests, who are subjected to great madness and blindness, hate and aversion, although they had suffered incessantly for the welfare of the people. Where it was possible, the priests would also be held responsible for the tragic outcome of the war. One day, they will come to understand it all better.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Ulrich Wien, 'Așteptări înșelate în perioada interbelică și perseverență intimidată în comunism. Biserica Evanghelică C.A. din România între anii 1918–1969', in Marian Patru (ed.), *Schimbări politice și atitudini eclesiale. Studii de istorie a bisericilor din România în secolul XX* (Cluj-Napoca, 2022), 140.

<sup>22</sup> ZEK A.B. Rumänien, *Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Deutschpin*, 400-175-370 (1875–1938), Johann Josef Martini, 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, *Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Kerz*, 400-375-10 (1736–1978), Karl Reich, 219.

Such radical perceptions, driven by the intensity of the moment and its ensuing emotions, were most prevalent among older local elites. The priests were aware of their role in providing the peasants with explanations of the political necessity of joining Greater Romania and expressed their hope that public opinion would shift and that the union would ultimately be viewed more favourably. Religious leaders appealed to ethnic solidarity and strived to foster political unity within the community.

Following the Union and Transylvania's integration into Romania, the social status of German minorities, including the Saxons, underwent a considerable change. Previously subjects of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where they had enjoyed strong political and social representation and held leading positions in the administration, they became citizens of a national state, relegated to minority status and seemingly neglected by the new political authorities.

All the memorial books that we have analysed document a pronounced wave of dissatisfaction and a pervasive sense of uncertainty, both triggered by a series of abuses perpetrated by Romanian authorities, and by social tensions and/or derogatory attitudes of Romanians assuming positions in local administration. Additionally, the zealous and somewhat vindictive conduct of the new political leadership, coupled with attempts to misappropriate property owned by the Saxon community, contributed to this unrest. At the same time, rural Saxon communities remained largely unaware of the postwar political dynamics.

The notes of Johann Mantsch, the priest from Alțâna, inform that:

[T]he administration of the country often suffers no harm, as most of the old officials have been removed – either because they were unable to adapt to the new circumstances [i.e., for their lack of knowledge of Romanian – S.R. & R.B.], or because those who have pledged allegiance to the homeland are disregarded as non-Romanian nationals. In their place, young and inexperienced elements have been favoured and have flocked into the new positions. The consequences borne by the hostile citizens can easily be imagined. Similar shifts occurred in finance, railways, etc.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Zentralarchiv der EKR Hermannstadt (hereinafter: ZEKR Hermannstadt), Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Alzen, 400-249-389 (31-219), Johann Mantsch, 216.

Although the old administration was competent, it had to be replaced – a precondition of any regime change. The change was particularly pronounced for the Saxons, who were ousted from positions of power and relegated to minority status, with most of them losing their bureaucratic privileges. Johann Mantsch provides a detailed account of the Romanianisation policy within the administration:

[T]he local council – consisting of 8 people – was predominantly Saxon, with only one Romanian member from the community. Half of the council members were the wealthiest taxpayers, while the other half consisted of elected representatives, three-quarters of whom were the Saxons. Currently, Romanians, with the sheer number of positions in mind, are fighting to enact a sweeping reform. The Saxons are expected to retain only three, possibly four positions of civil servants – though this remains uncertain – in the community which will now consist exclusively of elected members, and therefore the Saxons will become a minority.<sup>25</sup>

Although painful, this change in administration was regarded with a sense of realism: “The page is now turning, Romania will become our homeland, and Romanians in villages and cities will seek to assume control of power. The state favours them, while we are relegated to the background”.<sup>26</sup> This transition of power generated concern among the peasants; in a 1918 note, Rudolf Karoli, the priest from Hamba, remarked: “[i]t is understandable that we are anxiously awaiting the transfer of state power in the hands of Romanians, who are not particularly benevolent. ... Some Romanians in the village display an offensive and impertinent attitude towards the Saxons. Especially a few hot-headed, young nationalists, recently returned from the front and overwhelmed by all these changes, have yet to find their place in the new order of things”.<sup>27</sup>

The beginning of the new year (1919) was marked by the redrawing of state borders: Transylvania, Banat, Bucovina and parts of Hungary, extending beyond the Transylvanian Alps to the Tisza River, were incorporated into the Romanian Kingdom. The same Karoli, the Hamba-based priest, reported on the reaction of Saxon peasants

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Johann Mantsch, 216.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Hahnbach, 400-235-154, Rudolf Karoli.

to the decision taken at the meeting in Mediaş by the National Council – the Saxon Central Committee:

Our peasants view the decision with mixed feelings. Convincing people of the political necessity of this step proves difficult. Given the arrogance and conceit with which Romanians have treated the Saxons since the collapse of the Central Powers and the establishment of the state of Greater Romania, changing this prevailing mindset has become twice as challenging. Our peasants had little understanding of the much more burdensome and dangerous oppression endured by our Saxon culture from the Hungarians, and for the time being they are not yet willing to embrace the hope shared by our leaders – that within the new state, much more than in the Hungarian homeland, our people will also have the opportunity of unrestricted development, both nationally, spiritually, and, most importantly, economically.<sup>28</sup>

#### THE SCHOOL AND THE CHURCH

Throughout its existence, the Lutheran Church was regarded by the Saxons as an “institution of the people” [*Volkskirche*] (with ‘the people’ referring specifically to the Transylvanian Saxons), in the sense that ethnic and confessional affiliation were the same thing. Education was of great significance for the Transylvanian Saxon community, with schools being denominational, funded and organised by the Church. The introduction of obligatory education for both sexes in 1722 marked a pivotal moment for the German school system. The system ensured basic education for all the Transylvanian Saxons, setting them apart from other nationalities in Southeast Europe. In the post-imperial socio-political context following 1918, schools would remain under the Church’s control until 1949, when the Lutheran Church’s authority was revoked and they became secular state institutions. In the new political environment, the Saxons expected the state to uphold the rights of minorities, allowing them to use German in administrative affairs, to exercise a degree of administrative autonomy, and to benefit from educational policies that funded their schools. All of these demands were based on the provisions of the Alba Iulia Resolution, which had proclaimed the union of Transylvania with Romania. The Transylvanian Saxons were forced to come to terms with a state that lacked experience in managing strong minorities. While the Romanian state granted

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

the Saxons certain rights, including, of course, educational rights, it did not consistently uphold them in the years that followed. A key issue was that Romania assumed the role of the primary educational authority, a shift that inevitably clashed with the Lutheran Church's long-standing rights as the governing body of education. Ultimately, the Church maintained its traditional role, but new challenges emerged. The Romanian language became more prominent in the curriculum. In addition, tensions arose between Transylvanian Saxon and Romanian school concepts, and the German school system was nearly deprived of its financial foundation due to the expropriation of the Church's property. As a result, the situation was not satisfactory for the Transylvanian Saxons, at least at times, but their 'attachment' to their Church and schools remained steadfast. In fact, it can be observed that thanks to their financial contributions, Transylvanian Saxons possessed a private, denominational school system of considerable diversity before the onset of the Second World War.<sup>29</sup>

*Gedenkbücher* provide essential information about the reorganisation of the schooling system. On the one hand, there is a clear sense of relief from the burdens of the old unfavourable system permeated by the increasingly harsh Magyarisation policy: "Our schools will breathe a sigh of relief because they will no longer be forced to teach in Hungarian, without any result".<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, the memorial books also express enthusiasm regarding the new political climate: "[i]n the new state, much more than in the Hungarian homeland, our people will have the opportunity of unrestricted development, both nationally, spiritually, and, most importantly, economically".<sup>31</sup> Initially, rural elites failed to grasp the full complexity of educational reform. Rather, it was perceived as a straightforward change enacted by the new state administration, one that would not affect Saxon autonomy. However, the prevailing concern in the notes of the Lutheran priests appears to be the fear of the unknown and of the potential adverse

---

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Logemann, 'Das heutige Schulwesen der Siebenbürger Sachsen vor dem Hintergrund seiner Geschichte - auf den Spuren seines Erfolgs', *Zeitschrift für Balkanologie*, xxxviii, 1–2 (2002), <https://www.zeitschrift-fuer-balkanologie.de/index.php/zfb/article/view/402> [Accessed: 6 Apr. 2024].

<sup>30</sup> ZEKR Hermannstadt, Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Alzen, 400-249-389 (31–219), Johann Mantsch, 224.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Hahnbach, 400-235-154, Rudolf Karoli.

effects for both the schooling system and the Church. In 1923, Rev. Karl Reich of Cârța made the following observation:

The reorganisation of the Romanian school is intensifying. We have to adjust to the new regime gradually. Everything that was once Hungarian is progressively replaced by Romanian. Teachers must attend a language [i.e. Romanian] course in July and August. Those who fail the required exam will have to leave their positions on 1 January of the next year. That's tough. This is radical! ... It's getting increasingly difficult to maintain the Church's budget. Demands are growing, but our people are unwilling to make the sacrifices needed to keep pace. It's almost a fight to the death, just with no weapons.<sup>32</sup>

The following year, Johann Mantsch, the priest in Alțâna, questioned if the two intertwined institutions – the Church and the school – would ever exist in the future:

The government's threat to dismiss all teachers who fail to pass the required exam by 1 January of this year has not been enforced. No exam was administered, although it may be required later. In the first weeks of this year, important decisions will be made that may jeopardise the existence of our nation alongside its most valued cultural assets, the Church and the school, since the government's agenda includes a new law that will govern the Church and the educational system. May God grant our Saxon representatives enough strength and courage to resist these decisions and stand firm in their conviction...!<sup>33</sup>

Mantsch clearly expresses the anxiety surrounding the potential loss of one of the most defining elements of ethnic identity – the school: “The agitation among the population is high. The future will tell whether and how this law will be implemented. There will be bitterness on all sides. In addition, heavy concerns weigh on us regarding our education. The new school laws are expected to be passed nationally in 1924. If our institutions are not granted public status, we fear that restrictions and national subsidies will be imposed, ultimately leading to the slow demise of our schools”.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Kerz, 400-375-10 (1736–1978), Karl Reich.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Alzen, 400-249-389 (31–219), Johann Mantsch, 224.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 242.



In 1924, ethnic minorities faced a significant challenge: obtaining the authorisation of educational institutions under the new primary education law enacted by the Romanian Parliament. Failure to meet this requirement would entail the closure of these schools. After considerable effort, the German-language schools managed to obtain the accreditation from the relevant Romanian authorities: "We are currently in the process of gathering all necessary data. Will our Upper Consistory succeed in securing the authorisation? ... Furthermore, fees and taxes continue to rise. ... Ultimately, the school authorisation has been obtained! A sword of Damocles that loomed over our school system has been removed".<sup>35</sup> It is important to emphasise that the prevailing perception among ethnic minorities was that the legislative measures adopted by the government in Bucharest were part of a broader policy of Romanianisation that affected all the provinces brought together in 1918, including Transylvania. The political representatives of Hungarians and Germans expressed concerns over the "cultural offensive" initiated by the liberal government under Ion I.C. Brătianu.<sup>36</sup> It is also noteworthy that the priests from the Lutheran parishes shared this concern with their parishioners, voicing their apprehension about the rapid changes that occurred after 1919.

The socio-political context in the early 1920s, marked by the agrarian reform (partially carried out at the expense of the Lutheran Church's agricultural assets), the March 1923 Constitution, and new laws on secondary education, generated a series of predicaments that seemed unprecedented for both the Church and the school; the Saxon community perceived the entire period as one of crisis.<sup>37</sup> School funding, as well as the need to cover teachers' and professors' salaries from the Church's funds, led to a major increase in the church tax, which exceeded the amount of direct state taxes:

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Kerz, 400-375-10 (1736-1978), Karl Reich, 234-5.

<sup>36</sup> Livezeanu, *Cultură*; Francisco Guida, *România în secolul XX* (Chişinău, 2019), 107.

<sup>37</sup> In early 1924, Bishop Teusch wrote in his journal: "Despite all the good omens, we are in the midst of a slow-moving dissolution, in all respects... We are close to a fall we do not know how to prevent". In a letter addressed to the U.S., the bishop described the Church as "bankrupt", see Wien, 'Aşteptări înşelate', 145.

The sharp price rise, increasingly evident, has placed significant financial strain on priests and teachers, who live on fixed salaries and are on the brink of ruin. This situation has compelled the Church to pay them the same salaries as those offered by the state to employees of the same rank, as the state subsidy to our Church does not even cover half of its existing needs, and the burdens resulting from these wage regulations are transferred to the municipalities. This will be replaced by a surcharge of 400–1000 per cent, added to the current state taxes, along with a personal tax of 20 crowns.<sup>38</sup>

The situation was definitely challenging, as “it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain the Church’s budget”. As a result, the future existence of the two institutions, the Church and the school, was called into question, as attested by Alțâna priest Johann Mantsch.<sup>39</sup>

#### THE AGRARIAN REFORM

The difficulty in financing schools was also partially caused by the agrarian reform. While there were relatively few landowners among the Saxons, meaning the lands expropriated from individuals were not extensive, the agrarian reform still affected the Saxon Lutheran Church. Of the 110,000 *jugerum* (63,800 ha; 1 *jugerum* = approx. 0.58 ha) expropriated from the Transylvanian Saxons under the law of 23 July 1921, more than half – amounting to 58,000 *jugerum* (33,540 ha) – were confiscated from the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession.<sup>40</sup> The agrarian reform was politically motivated, was regulated differently across regions, and was implemented arbitrarily by local administrations. It served as a tool for building both the state and the nation.<sup>41</sup> As Dietmar Müller argues, in most Central, Eastern, and Southeast European states, the divide between large landownership and poverty or landlessness was ethnically marked. Large landowners belonged to the dominant ethnic groups of the former empires while small farmers and the rural proletariat predominantly consisted of members of the newly established titular nations: “This constellation

---

<sup>38</sup> ZEKR Hermannstadt, Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Alzen, 400-249-389 (31–219), Johann Mantsch, 225.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>40</sup> Friedrich Teusch, *Die Siebenbürgen Sachsen in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Oxford, 1924), 300; cf. Wien, ‘Așteptări înșelate’, 148.

<sup>41</sup> Wien, ‘Așteptări înșelate’, 148.

allowed elites in the centres of the new nation-states to justify a social and economic redistribution of land, while also exaggerating the process to the point where the land confiscation by the members of the new nation equated to a symbolic conquest of the newly acquired provinces".<sup>42</sup> Under these conditions, the collective property of the Transylvanian Saxons played a significant role in implementing the agrarian reform.

Such a social and political transformation could not escape the attention of the priests in rural Saxon communities, deeply affected by expropriation. As Father Johann Mantsch noted: "The secular property of the Saxon University, comprising 35,000 acres of mountain forests, has been expropriated by the state. Until now, income from these forests has been used to promote Saxon culture (by funding Saxon schools). This source of support for our Saxon educational institutions will now be lost forever".<sup>43</sup> A lengthy period of negotiations ensued, marked by arbitrary interpretations of the law, constraints, and delays: "More pressing than the issue of money is the matter of the agrarian reform. Even as late as 1920, no laws had been enacted, and instead, decrees were issued that were subject to arbitrary interpretations. The first step towards land partitioning involves compulsory leasing, whereby land that has not yet been divided is temporarily leased to starving farmers".<sup>44</sup>

The Lutheran priests also noted the political unrest and governmental instability that hindered the consistent implementation of the agrarian reform and subsequent fiscal regulations. The haste to achieve fiscal unification, along with Bucharest's obsession to treat the provinces incorporated into Romanian territory in 1918 equally, despite regional differences, were among the issues raised by the priests in their *Gedenkbücher*: "Parliamentary disputes led to the hasty adoption of some laws, such as the agricultural and fiscal ones, despite reasonable concerns. Then, the old foolishness continued, leading to the dissolution of Parliament at the end of the year. For the third time since 1918, we have been summoned to elect our representatives

---

<sup>42</sup> Dietmar Müller, *Bodeneigentum und Nation. Rumänien. Jugoslawien und Polen im europäischen Vergleich, 1918–1948* (Göttingen, 2020), 8.

<sup>43</sup> ZEKR Hermannstadt, *Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Alzen*, 400-249-389 (31–219), Johann Mantsch, 246.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

in the Parliament. The zeal for ‘unification in all regards’ is evident everywhere”,<sup>45</sup> recalled the priest from Alțâna Johann Mantsch.

The disregard of the actual conditions within the rural world, the poor adaptation of the legislation to highly specific and varying situations, and the strategy of centralising and standardising the legislation led to widespread dissatisfaction within rural Saxon communities, sometimes expressed bluntly but harshly by the priests:

On the other hand, we notice that many government delegates from Bucharest, unfamiliar with the local conditions and laws, simply impose the dispositions of the Old Kingdom. The resulting shortcomings and dissatisfaction can be easily explained. ... While there are some timid signs of improvement in the railway system, the financial policy is still shaky. Meanwhile, the agricultural law, which causes us severe harm, was passed in Parliament.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, they faced the delayed fulfilment of promises or their complete disregard, as well as the arbitrary interpretations of laws by the Agricultural Commission in charge of the reform, which disadvantaged them:

The agrarian reform looms before us as an imminent threat, a law which, unlike any other before, infringes on our property rights and, most importantly, seriously affects our churches. And yet, we would be content if it were implemented as written – according to the letter. But we have all reasons to fear that the harm will be even greater on account of the arbitrary interpretation of its provisions by the Agricultural Commission, which holds a bias against us. The greed of the Romanian people has been too greatly inflamed to be quelled, even by the wise and fair judgment of responsible men.<sup>47</sup>

In his report for the year 1920, Karl Reich, the priest from Cârța, states: “Thank God, the teachers’ strike, which caused such a difficult end to the previous year and a troubled start of the new one, has recently ended, but ... there is still widespread dissatisfaction. Agricultural products will now be subject to prices regulated by law ... On 3 January, the Agrarian Commission decided that the parish would

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 215, 243.

only retain 27 *jugerum*, and all the remaining 206 *jugerum* would be expropriated".<sup>48</sup>

In addition to the uncertainties surrounding agrarian reform, Saxon agriculture was further adversely affected by the disruption of commercial ties with former partners within the empire. Saxon farmers were particularly affected by export bans, which remained in place until the mid-1920s. After a brief recovery, prices of agricultural products plummeted due to the global economic crisis.<sup>49</sup> Entries in *Gedenkbücher* reveal widespread dissatisfaction caused by export bans on agricultural products imposed by Romanian authorities, as well as the soaring prices and the state's refusal to address the difficulties or regulate the situation. While agricultural products were sold at prices fixed by law, other goods became nearly unaffordable.<sup>50</sup>

### POLITICAL PERCEPTIONS

The union of Transylvania with Romania would have a profound impact on the privileged status of the German minority. The group was forced to adapt to the requirements of the new political system and was affected by the Romanian government's promises of equal rights for minorities, divergent views on how ethnic minorities would be integrated into Greater Romania, and by the state's obsession with Romanianisation across all public spheres. Therefore, the years following the Great War were marked by uncertainty and efforts at political integration for both the Saxons and the broader German minority. The turmoil stemming from this issue is evident in the discourse of local elites, the press of the day, and various documents produced by Saxon institutions, organisations, and associations. Interestingly, *Gedenkbücher* do not document any events or political stances arising specifically from within the rural world. The Evangelical priests from these communities seemed more focused on commenting on broader

---

<sup>48</sup> ZEK A.B. Rumänien, *Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Kerz*, 400-375-10 (1736–1978), Karl Reich.

<sup>49</sup> Ernst Wagner, *Istoria saşilor transilvăneni* (Bucuresti, 2000), 75–76.

<sup>50</sup> ZEK A.B. Rumänien, *Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Kerz*, 400-375-10 (1736–1978), 220, 235; ZEK Hermannstadt, *Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Alzen*, 400-249-389, Johann Mantsch, 208, 221, 225.

political issues with national implications and on addressing various political events, without delving into political engagement within the villages they served or exploring the experiences and turmoil generated by numerous electoral campaigns. These 'voices' from the countryside appear to embrace the role of political analysts of their time, preoccupied with how their future readerships might judge them. The recurring themes in their comments include disillusionment with the Romanian state and the unmet expectations they had of it, breaches of promises made prior to the unification process, the link between successive and concurrent political crises, and the ensuing deterioration in the economic status of the Saxon community.

From the very first year following the Great Union, Saxon priests voiced their dissatisfaction with the centralist legislation adopted in Bucharest, stressing the failure to honour the promises made to them and their subsequent disillusionment. *Gedenkbücher* entries mention political alliances and compromises that the leaders of the German minority in Romania were forced to forge with the ruling political parties in exchange for the protection of minorities' rights. Notably, in 1922, Johann Mantsch, the priest from Alțâna, declared his allegiance to the liberals, who had come to power: "Our deputies [Dr Hans Otto Roth] made the decision (later deemed to be an astute one) not to align with any party. Instead, they sought to unite the Germans from the entire territory of Greater Romania into a parliamentary block in order to establish contacts with the head of the government [i.e., liberal Ionel Brătianu]".<sup>51</sup> However, loyalty required votes and support during Brătianu's term. It was contingent upon Prime Minister Ionel Brătianu's promises to rectify the errors of the previous administration:

Brătianu promises that he will leave our schools and Church untouched, that he will support them financially, that he will allow the free assembly of associations, and that he will amend the wrongdoings committed by his predecessor. In return, the Saxons have pledged their loyalty to him, yet only during the elections. Our people have honoured their promise by participating in the elections in accordance with the directives provided. Brătianu has upheld his promises for that year. Meanwhile, negotiations on land expropriations are proceeding with caution. Some committee members strive to follow the law (including our own, see below), while others act

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 235–6.

completely arbitrarily (including those in Sibiu, Sebeș, Mediaș, all of them from the Old Kingdom) and misappropriate millions from us, the Saxons.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, it is evident that not all the cabinets supported by the Germans met their expectations. At the same time, the idea of forming a unified German minority party proved to be a challenging task and a milestone which took a long time to achieve.<sup>53</sup> In fact, it must be added that this goal remained unachieved throughout the interwar period.

In 1926, Johann Mantsch, the priest from Alțâna, commented on the change of government: "In Romania, Brătianu's government gives way to Averescu. Nothing changes for the better. The economic crisis deepens, reaching catastrophic proportions, marked by a severe shortage of capital in agriculture, which has lost nearly all of its foreign markets".<sup>54</sup> The priest recalled details that were likely not of direct relevance to his parishioners, but rather served to emphasise his personal understanding and assessment of the broader situation in Romania: "Parliament has been dissolved. As a result of a new electoral law, the second parliament is now being elected. But in this process, we find nothing but the old party quarrels. No law has been enacted with the intention to steer the wagon of the state, which had gone completely astray, halfway back on the right track".<sup>55</sup>

A decade after the Great Union, there was no sign of improvement in the unstable political situation and the ongoing economic crisis. In a 1929 report, the same Father Mantsch from Alțâna wrote: "The expectations that we placed on the Maniu government have not been fulfilled, ... the economic crisis is worsening at an alarming rate."<sup>56</sup> While it was not explicitly stated whether these expectations referred to the protection of the rights of the German minority, the

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> In the years to come, the relationship with the central government, predominantly led by the Liberal Party, was riddled with controversies and harsh disputes. From the standpoint of the German minority and its Church, these interactions were only partially successful, primarily in the areas of educational policies and school funding; Wien, 'Așteptări înșelate', 147.

<sup>54</sup> ZEKR Hermannstadt, Gedenkbuch der Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde A.B. Alzen, 400-249-389 (31-219), Johann Mantsch, 252.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 255-6.

underlying disappointment was obvious. This is particularly significant given that the hopes invested by the leaders of the German community in Romania in the National Peasant's Government led by the Transylvanian politician Iuliu Maniu proved to be in vain.<sup>57</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Research on the rural world, particularly on communities belonging to ethnic minorities, remains an ongoing pursuit in Romanian historiography. The official discourse has undergone profound ideological shifts, with the peasant being romanticised and portrayed in a series of convenient clichés, whereas authentic voices of rural communities continue to be marginalised. In light of this interpretation, the present study posits that priests within the Transylvanian rural communities were key social actors among the Transylvanian Saxons and that their voices can significantly contribute to the understanding of the history of the German communities in Romania. Comments recorded by the priests in parish registers, the so-called memorial books [*Gedenkbücher*], despite their irregularity, incompleteness, and/or avoidance of certain themes, remain invaluable historical sources for researchers investigating the rural world.

These testimonies shed light on the challenges and anxieties caused by the change in the political, economic, social, and cultural status of the Saxons, following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the union of Transylvania with Romania. Saxon peasants looked into the future with mixed feelings; while they felt a sense of relief from Hungarian domination, which had been marked by growing oppression and Hungarianisation of Transylvania, they also expressed concern over the future of their community in the context of the aggressive unification and Romanianisation initiated by the Romanian state, compounded by the post-war economic crisis, and the sweeping reforms that Greater Romania was going through. The priests of the four rural communities analysed (Alțâna, Cârța, Pianu de Jos, and Hamba), fully aware of the historical changes under way and the necessity of national affiliation to secure minority rights in the new state's constitution, fostered – together with political

---

<sup>57</sup> Iuliu Maniu took over the government in November 1928 and remained its leader until 1931.



elites and cultural leaders – an attitude of openness towards the new landscape, and cultivated an optimistic vision for the future among Saxon peasants. As evidenced by the entries in the parish memorial books, the priests were aware of their formative role and felt concerned with their future public image. Many of their entries, while not directly addressing local issues or the immediate concerns of their parishioners, i.e., the peasants, offer insights into the broader process of integrating the Transylvanian Saxon community into Greater Romania. Nevertheless, this broader focus does not undermine their relevance.

*Proofreading by Joanna Ruszel*

### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beer Mathias and Sorin Radu (eds), *Migration und kulturelles Erbe. Das Beispiel der deutschen Minderheiten in und aus Rumänien* (Göttingen, 2024).
- Beer Mathias, Sorin Radu, and Florian Kühner-Wielach (eds), *Germanii din România – migrație și patrimoniu cultural* (București, 2019).
- Ciobanu Vasile, *Contribuții la cunoașterea istoriei sașilor transilvăneni 1918–1944* (Sibiu, 2001).
- Clark Roland, 'The Shape of Interwar Romanian History', *Journal of Romanian Studies*, iii, 1 (2021), 11–40.
- Drace-Francis Alex, *The Traditions of Invention. Romanian Ethnic and Social Stereotypes in Historical Context* (Boston, 2013).
- Gündisch Konrad and Mathias Beer, *Siebenbürgen und die Siebenbürger Sachsen* (München, 1998).
- Livezeanu Irina, *Cultură și naționalism în România Mare* (București, 1998).
- Logemann Daniel, 'Das heutige Schulwesen der Siebenbürger Sachsen vor dem Hintergrund seiner Geschichte – auf den Spuren seines Erfolgs', *Zeitschrift für Balkanologie*, xxxviii, 1–2 (2002).
- Müller Dietmar, *Bodeneigentum und Nation. Rumänien. Jugoslawien und Polen im europäischen Vergleich, 1918–1948* (Göttingen, 2020).
- Popa Liliana, *Neue Zeiten brechen an. Aufzeichnungen siebenbürgisch-sächsischer Pfarrer aus der Zeit des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Cluj-Napoca, 2018).
- Radu Sorin and Oliver Jens Schmitt (eds), *România interbelică: modernizare politico-instituțională și discurs național* (Iași, 2023).
- Radu Sorin, 'Romania and the Great War: Political, Territorial, Economic and Social', *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość*, xxxi, 1 (2018), 138–67.
- Rösener Werner, *Țărani în istoria Europei* (Iași, 2003).
- Vanhaute Eric, *Peasants in World History (Themes in World History)* (London, 2021).
- Wagner Ernst, *Istoria sașilor transilvăneni* (București, 2000).

**Sorin Radu** – Romanian history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, political parties, and electoral systems; professor, rector of Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu; e-mail: [sorin.radu@ulbsibiu.ro](mailto:sorin.radu@ulbsibiu.ro)

**Ramona Besoiu** – religiosity, socio-cultural history of the Transylvanian Saxons, migration studies; scientific researcher and lecturer at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu; e-mail: [ramona.besoiu@ulbsibiu.ro](mailto:ramona.besoiu@ulbsibiu.ro)