

MARIA BUCUR

The Nation's Gratitude:

World War 1 and Citizenship Rights in Interwar Romania

(London: Routledge, 2023), 231 pp.

Although an increasingly voluminous scholarship has contributed to unpacking Central and Eastern European (CEE) “hybrid welfare regimes,” significant gaps still remain, particularly vis-à-vis the very first policy choices.¹ This occurs due to a preference for macro-structural approaches which do not fully dissect the layered and complex “etatization of welfare programs” (9). Picking up the gauntlet, Maria Bucur offers an in-depth historical analysis on the transformation of individuals into socio-political stakeholders, via state centralization (9). Echoing recent fashionable trends in the literature on welfare state development, the book zooms in on two distinct facets of policy creation – the development of citizenship, entailing a change in welfare benefits from rights to entitlements *and* the role of agency, not just at the level of policy entrepreneurs², but also at the level of individual citizens. To pursue such a wide aim, Bucur draws on a range of primary sources (laws, government reports, bulletins, periodicals and correspondence – p. 12), which allow unpacking the umbrella-term of a “welfare state” to its very core.³

¹ Tomasz Ingłot, *Welfare States in East–Central Europe 1919-2004*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008; Tomasz Ingłot, Dorottya Szikra, Cristina Rat, *Mothers, Families, or Children? Family Policy in Poland, Hungary, and Romania, 1945-2020*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburg, 2022.

² Elisabeth Anderson, *Agents of Reform. Child Labor and the Origins of the Welfare State*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

³ Julia Moses, *The First Modern Risk: Workplace Accidents and the Origins of European Social States*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Elisabeth Anderson, *Agents of Reform. Child Labor and the Origins of the Welfare State*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

In a very broad sense, the book argues, following historical institutionalists, that particularly in “unsettled times”, political elites can pick and choose welfare “winners” and “losers” leading to the enfranchising of otherwise small socio-economic groups⁴. This is immediately visible in the very broad and inclusive definition of “sacrifice” included in the establishing 1919-1920 IOVR Laws (National Office for Invalids, Orphans and War Widows), which departed drastically from the pre-1914 ethnicized definition (18; 30-33). In fact, the 1920 law instituted low eligibility qualifications such as voluntary signing of a document declaring loyalty to the Romanian state, covering in this situation even dependents of former hostile combatants (39). By extending pension rights to heirs and sometimes even to parents (30), and adding further benefits regarding employment and education, the nationalizing “Greater Romania” essentially sought to highlight its “commitment to all citizens, who served it” (20).

Yet, despite the crucial legal clarification that emerging benefits were social rights and not simple acts of charity (68-69), the emerging legal-institutional picture was however far more complicated. On a superficial level, the IOVR suffered from many of the conventional problems associated with (re)constructing and centralizing a state – porous institutional structure, hence unstable budgeting (46) and lack of implementation capacities due to segmentation, respectively lack of adequate time and resources to train relevant personnel (67). Despite an increasing volume of beneficiaries’ complaints over the 1920s, it was only in the latter half of the 1930s that the Romanian state actually clamped down on implementation, through the establishment of a control and verification committee (CVC), which would only come to reify the problems of a highly centralized approach (69). On a deeper level, further complications stemmed from issues of class and gender. For instance, while officers constituted barely 3% of the total veteran population, which was in and of itself a highly unclear statistic (84-86), due to the army’s strong institutional standing and emerging classist assumptions of nationhood, they came to receive a disproportionate

⁴ Pieter Vanhuysse, “Silent Non-exit and Broken Voice: Early Post-communist Social Policies as Protest-preempting Strategies,” *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 67, no. 2 (2019): 150-174, <https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2019-0012>.

amount of benefits (50-52). Similarly, for all its success in remedying some of the accountability issues in the IOVR central administration, the CVC was ultimately woefully ignorant of women's distinct grievances (76). The gender issue is particularly relevant for the macro-level shift in defining welfare benefits - women's increasing usage of the language of "rights" throughout the 1930s highlights their growing self-understanding as "engaged citizens", via the unique route of expanding citizenship to accommodate for those who had "served the nation" (159-161).

In this particular line of thought, Bucur's highly detailed presentation on the gendered aspect of expanding citizenship also points to a clear top-down bias in studying nation building in interwar Romania, to the detriment of bottom-top studies. Above and beyond atomized stories of suffering stemming from invalids, widows and orphans (Chapters 4 and 5 in particular), the book also offers an important overview of nation-state-building through the co-constitutive roles of agency, structure and contingency.⁵ On the one hand, IOVR policies brought new categories of citizens into a more direct relationship with the state, allowing the latter new avenues into the private life of individual inhabitants (143). The newly enfranchised individuals also understood that rights effectively meant a legal obligation taken on the part of the state (143). This opened up new possibilities for bottom-top mobilization and ensuing policy entrepreneurship. For instance, the increasing 1930s activism of widows and the coming of age of orphans enabled "politically hungry veteran activists", who had burst onto the scene already from the early 1920s, to find new voting constituencies for national as well as local elections (159). Similarly, the detailed inquiry into veterans' complaints also reveals differential difficulties across institutional levels, from the central authorities (84-86 for instance), to the local implementing agents (Chapter 5 in particular). At this level, the book also engages the case-specific literature on social radicalization⁶, showing why and how "Greater Romania's" failure to live up to its social policy commitments, did not entail a full-fledged migration of veterans towards the Iron Guard.

⁵ Alexander George, Andrew Bennet, *Case Studies and Theory Development in Social Science*, (MA: MIT Press), 2005.

⁶ Philip Vanhaelemeersch, *A Generation "Without Beliefs" and the idea of Experience in Romania (1927-1934)*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

Quite clearly, in order to offer a finely-tuned historical analysis of such intricate developments, some facets of the discussion are either limited or omitted. For example, the looming sense that Greater Romania's abnormally high commitment to minority veterans was due to international commitments rather than inclusivity is mentioned but not fully explored (208). Similarly, in the attempt of giving voice to hitherto unknown policy entrepreneurs and agents, the author sacrifices some of the space devoted to disentangling how broader power holders debated the issue of citizenship, veterans' rights and emerging welfare benefits. While some discussion is present (Chapter 2 and Chapter 4), it does not fully engage the macro-level transformations of modernity that typically lead to the emergence of national welfare states. In this sense, while the detailed historical analysis prompts a re-consideration of some typical conceptual tenets of historical institutionalist literatures, it does not offer fully fledged hypothesis regarding the emergence of welfare institutions in late-developing Romania.

On the whole, Maria Bucur's book impresses through an in-depth historical narrative that brings to the surface an otherwise poorly explored area of welfare state history. By going beyond conventional political structures, the author offers a finely tuned analysis on the creation of new social policy constituencies and their emerging interaction with state institutions, focused at the level of war veterans. While the dialogue with conventional historical institutionalist studies is protracted, the book does manage to send out the strong message that the development of welfare states unfolds as a multi-layered process of inclusion and construction of institutions, above and beyond an underlying social-democratic thinking.⁷

SERGIU DELCEA
(University of Bucharest)

⁷ Franz-Xaver Kaufmann, *European Foundations of the Welfare State*, (New York: Berghan Books, 2013).