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## MICHAEL THE BRAVE — EXALATIONS AND REVELATIONS OF THE WALACHIAN PRINCE

By George Ciomarescu

Summary: This year marks the 375th anniversary of the death, in August 1600, of the Walachian voivode Michael the Brave. He was the major partner in the Christian League on the Lower Danube, which had been set up by Pope Clement VIII and supported by Philip II of Spain and Rudolf II of Germany. Michael was a well-to-do boyar who held several high offices and also, in 1595 upon approval by the Sublime Porte in Constantinople, became Prince of Walachia. As soon as he ascended the throne, he rose in arms against his patrons and inflicted a resounding defeat upon the Turks at Calafarnesti in 1595. His political program included consolidation of his territory, strengthening the country's independence, putting an end to Turkish interference into Rumanian domestic affairs, and the unification of all Rumanians. In his anti-Turkish struggle, Michael engaged in extensive diplomatic efforts, uniting for the first time, under his rule, the three Rumanian principalities, Walachia, Transylvania (1599-1600), and Moldavia (1600), thus becoming a symbol of Rumanian unity and independence. This picture of the Walachian voivode was first sophisticated by communist historians, but then, as the Rumanian party began to emphasize nationalism, he was again made the subject of officially approved myth. Michael the Brave is now described as a progressive prince whose foreign policy was remarkably similar to that of Nicolae Ceausescu.

### A Historical Celebration Becomes Political

Michael the Brave was the subject of extensive celebrations last year, on the occasion of the 375th anniversary of the unification, under his rule, of the Rumanian principalities in 1600. Scholarly studies and articles devoted to that anniversary were published in specialized periodicals. (1) A commemorative meeting of a political character, attended by Ceausescu, was held in

(1) Berichte de Istorie, No. 4, 1973; Rumanian Istoric, No. 1 (98), May 1973.

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Alba Iulia, where Michael had been proclaimed Prince of Wallachia, Transylvania, and all Moldavia, and where an equestrian statue by sculptor Oscar Han had been unveiled in 1928. (1)

Normally, last year's celebrations of the 375th anniversary of the union of the Rumanian principalities and this year's celebrations of the 375th anniversary of Michael's death would probably have been merged into a single commemoration marking both events. This was not done, however, for a political reason. It was decided that historical events of national significance, considered to be of educational and inspirational value, should be celebrated as often as possible.

Although all the articles written on both anniversaries contain political implications, the most thoroughly political interpretation of the life, achievements, and symbolic importance of Michael the Brave was published in the Rumanian Communist Party's theoretical semi-monthly, Era Socialista. (2)

#### Considering, Discrediting, and Reconsidering Michael the Brave

Michael the Brave's warlike feats and political achievements projected him to become the symbol of the Rumanians' struggle for national independence and unity. His first modern apotheosis came from the pen of the romantic 19th century historian Nicolae Balcescu (1819-1852) in his work, The History of the Rumanians During the Reign of Prince Michael the Brave. This unfinished work was posthumously published in 1879. The presentation of Michael as a symbol of Rumanian national freedom and unity was accepted by modern Rumanian historians, especially in the pre-World War I era, when the goal of Rumanian foreign policy was to recreate a new Rumania within the same frontiers as those achieved by Michael. The historians Ion Scuru (4) and Nicolae Iorga (5) wrote their works in this spirit.

The first history textbooks produced after the institution of Communist rule degraded Michael, cutting his stature down to that of a simple conspirator. According to the standard history text for the Rumanian People's Republic of 1955, Michael was the son of an innkeeper's wife; he turned into a representative of the interests of the big boyars, uniting the Rumanian principalities only in order to fight the Turks more successfully. (3) The Marxist historian Mihail Reller failed to detect any national characteristic in the unification of the Rumanians, reducing it to a purely anti-Ottoman alliance which failed, since its economic foundation was insufficient to support a centralized state. According to the Rumanian Academy's official treatise on history,

- (1) Nicolae Ceausescu, speech at the popular meeting at Alba Iulia during the festivities commemorating the semicentennial of the unification of Transylvania with Rumania, Scinteia, 19 November 1958.
- (2) Stefan Stefanescu, "Significance of the First Union of the Rumanian Principalities," Era Socialista No. 15, August 1958.
- (3) Ion Scuru, Istoria lui Mihai Voda Titural domul Jurii Romanești (History of Prince Michael the Brave of Wallachia), 2 volumes (Bucharest, 1904-1907).
- (4) Nicolae Iorga, Istoria lui Mihai Viteazul (History of Michael the Brave) (Bucharest, 1935).
- (5) Mihail Reller, Istoria Republicii Populare Romane (History of the Rumanian People's Republic) (Bucharest, 1956), pp. 152, 162, and 195.

Michael was a disjointed personality: "a feudal boyar, a rapacious invader of peasants' land," but at the same time, "the holder of supreme power in the feudal state, who sometimes had to protect the general interests of the ruling class even against individual interests or those of the boyars' class." "Political thinking" and a historical role were not denied Michael, but they were centered on the idea of the liberation of Christendom from the Ottoman yoke, "not solely the liberation of his own country and people." The above-mentioned treatise concludes by stating that although Michael was not the conscious savior of national unity, nevertheless, an awareness of national identity arose in the Romanians as a result of his achievements. (7)

Once the RCP began to pursue a more nationalistic policy, the Michaelian prime came again emerged in a more favorable guise. In 1974, a new history of Romania was published, a collective work under the editorship of Professor Andrei Stroea. This time, the unification achieved by Michael was described as "the result of a historical solidarity which had been developing throughout the centuries," supported by the linguistic unity of the Romanians residing in the various provinces of the country. According to this work, had Michael's reign in Transylvania lasted longer, it would have acquired "the character of an increasingly more obvious Romanian rule." (8)

#### Michael the Brave -- A Progressive Prince

The studies produced on the occasion of the two recent celebrations put an end to this discussion by presenting Michael as a hero who clearly represented the independence and unity of Romanians as "a reflection of his own national awareness," (9) although the national idea in the form known today is, in fact, a product of the 19th century.

A further step was taken at the commemorative gathering in Alba Iulia in 1975, when Nicolae Ceausescu proclaimed Michael a progressive leader: "Michael the Brave will remain a luminous, progressive personality in the golden annals of the Romanian people." (10) The socially backward policy pursued by Michael who, as did other feudal princes, strengthened his own economic and political power to the detriment of the peasants, is ignored; emphasis is laid only on his struggle for national independence and unity, ideals that have since been taken over by the Romanian Communist Party. According to Ceausescu, "the ideal for the sake of which the great valiant fought and so many prominent Romanian leaders sacrificed their lives, the ideal that always mobilized our people to struggle, has been engraved on the battle flag of the communists." (11)

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(7) Istoria Romaniei (History of Romania), Volume II (Bucharest, edited and published by the Academy of the People's Republic of Romania, 1963), pp. 493-498.

(8) Andrei Stroea, Istoria poporului roman (History of the Romanian People) (Bucharest, The Schoolastic Publishing House, 1970), p. 168.

(9) Constantina Rusanovitch, "Universal Symbol of the National Unity of Our Country," Romania libera, 7 August 1976.

(10) Nicolae Ceausescu, speech delivered at Alba Iulia, Scritoria, 19 May 1975.

(11) Ion Spalatu, "The Romanian Communist Party, Standard-Bearer of the Struggle for National Unity and Independence," Scritoria Teoretici, 28 May 1975.

Michael is now not only regarded as progressive, but he has also gradually become a symbol in the struggle for the building of communism. According to Scintila, "Michael the Brave is alive in the awareness of the Romanian people as a symbol of the nation's rebirth: to live united and free in a sovereign and independent country, to build a fatherland that can take its place in the ranks of the most advanced countries in the world, successfully to organize the most advanced form of government — communism — on our ancestral land." (12)

#### The Foreign Policy of Michael the Brave . . . and of Ceausescu

Whenever contemporary writers describe the international situation of Michael's time, the parallels with the current situation emerge in striking fashion. As any contemporary political leader, the feudal Prince Michael had to cope with "increasingly strong outside pressures, as well as with domestic difficulties of both a political and an economic nature." (13) In any case, some of the articles published on the occasion of the most recent celebrations lead themselves to serving as a sort of key to current interpretation, for both the personality of Michael the Brave and the historical events connected with him are, to some extent, comparable to Ceausescu's personality and to contemporary political developments. Actually, this is not the first time that authors have made use of historical allegory to glorify the president of the RSR. Some have claimed that the real character depicted in the motion picture dealing with Tudor Ceausescu was not the Moldavian prince, but rather the secretary-general of the party. (14) Tudor Ceausescu is, however, a far more controversial figure than Michael, for historians such as Valtaire, A.D. Ionescu, Nicolae Iorga, and Arnold Toynbee have condemned him for siding with the Russians. Therefore, the comparison with the Wallachian prince can go considerably further. Michael had to cope with a situation which "jeopardized the country's autonomy"; "beside of the political changes around him, he displayed an amazing inventiveness in his strategy of alliances, which contributed to strengthening his rule at home, and to enhancing the role of the Romanian principalities in the eyes of the world." (15)

In short, the foreign policy conducted by Michael the Brave was characterized as a dynamic one, designed to maintain diplomatic relations with all states and peoples in southeastern Europe by means of "contacts, negotiations, and alliances." (16) Just as present-day Romanian foreign policy is, according to Ceausescu, "an active policy of co-operation with all countries in the world, irrespective of their social order." (17) Mention is also made of the fact that Michael maintained direct links with German Emperor Rudolf II. These links,

(12) Constantin Camanisteanu, "The Historic Act of 1880 Served as a Torch to Light the Struggle for National Independence and Unity," Scintila, 28 May 1975.

(13) Stefan Stefanescu, "Significance of . . ."

(14) Marxism Working, 8 January 1976; see also Romanian Situation Report/28, Radio Free Europe Research, 12 December 1975, Item 2.

(15) Stefan Stefanescu, "Significance of . . ."

(16) Constantin Balas, "Assessment of the Political and Diplomatic Achievements of Michael the Brave in 1887," Revista de Istorie No. 4, 1975.

(17) Nicolae Ceausescu, speech delivered at the Congress on Political Education and Socialist Culture, Scintila, 3 June 1976.

part of his vast program of maintaining international bonds, gave Malachia the chance to acquire more clout in pushing its own policy. (18) Here, there may also be the intention to draw a certain parallel with Ceausescu's personal relationship with Presidents Nixon and Ford.

#### Michael's Basian Project

In pursuing his foreign policy, Michael the Brave allegedly also conceived a "Basian Project," which consisted of "creating, in a Rumanian form, a strong Carpatho-Basian state with full historical rights." (19) In his speeches, Ceausescu has also alluded to a centralized Basian state, if not to a Basian Project per se. This state would cover all of greater Rumania (and thus include Bessarabia). In his speech to the Congress on Political Education and Socialist Culture, Ceausescu mentioned both the Gothic King Murzilana and the Basian ruler Decabal. He went on to say that the Rumanians have inherited from their Basian-Ruman ancestors "a steadfast and undaunted attitude on the battlefield" and "the will to be masters of their own destiny, to develop their future in full freedom." (20) The fact that the Rumanian population was aware of its Latin origin and spontaneously joined Michael's army, "facilitating the union of the intra-Carpathian provinces with Malachia," helped Michael to carry out his Basian Project. The same development took place in Moldavia, where Michael was "enthusiastically" received, for national feelings and aspirations toward unity lay deep down in the hearts of all Rumanians. (21)

The Hungarian nobility opposed Michael's Basian Project, its discontent further incited by Emperor Rudolf II, who wanted to drive Michael out of Transylvania. (22) Supported by the broad stratum of peasants, Michael was planning to introduce Rumanian as an official language in Transylvania, along with Latin, Hungarian, and German -- a fact which alarmed the Hungarian aristocracy. (23)

#### Michael the Brave and the Coexisting Nationalities

Nevertheless, Michael succeeded in his Basian Project, achieving the unity of all Rumanians. In this national Rumanian campaign he enlisted the help of the coexisting nationalities, the Transylvanian Saxons and the Szeklers. Thoroughly acquainted with the ethnic and political situation in Transylvania, Michael first won over the Transylvanian Rumanians, then he secured for himself "the loyal support of the Szeklers and, in part, the assistance of the Saxons." (24)

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(18) Constantin Balan, "Assessment of . . ."

(19) Stefan Stefanescu, "A Brilliant Moment in Our National History: The 375th Anniversary of the Political Unification of the Rumanian Principalities: The Political Program of the Unification," Scinteia, 22 May 1975.

(20) Nicolae Ceausescu, speech delivered at the Congress on Political Education and Socialist Culture, Scinteia, 3 June 1976.

(21) Stefan Stefanescu, "A Brilliant Moment . . ."

(22) Stefan Stefanescu, "Significance of . . ."

(23) Stefan Panceu, "The Torch of Unity Shining Across the Centuries: The 375th Anniversary of Michael the Brave's Death," Scinteia, 22 May 1975.

(24) Stefan Stefanescu "Significance of . . ."

According to a Hungarian historian of Rumania, the poor sections of the Szekler population, cheated and enslaved by the aristocracy, lent full assistance to the Rumanian prince, fighting by his side and regaining in exchange their old freedoms. (25) This close Rumanian-Szekler military co-operation "had a special significance, both in the anti-Ottoman struggle, and in the drive to unite Wallachia, Transylvania, and Moldavia; it was neither temporary, nor fortuitous. It was a continuation of a centuries-old tradition. . . ." (26) The friendship, apartir de acum, and co-operation between Rumanians and Szeklers did not cease with Michael's death; "it was meant to last through the centuries, to grow, and strengthen, thus building up sound underpinnings for the present-day fraternal work and rehabilitation, when the aspirations toward freedom and social justice of all inhabitants of our fatherland, irrespective of their nationality, have been fully realized." (27)

The Saxon historians of Transylvania have particularly emphasized that the Saxon community of that region had also supported the Moldavian prince since the early days of his rule, contributing money and soldiers to the struggle to defend the Rumanian principalities and to maintain their unity in a strong political organism. (28) The historical truth, however, is that both the Szeklers and the Saxons who fought in Michael's army were mercenaries -- which is hardly voluntary participation in the creation of a large Rumanian national state. This, however, has not prevented Ceausescu and some of his historians from claiming that the cohabiting nationalities had fought alongside the Rumanians to bring all Rumanians under one roof. Ceausescu has said: "In all these battles waged by Michael the Brave against the foreign invaders and for the unity of the Rumanian principalities -- a unity which he succeeded in bringing about for a brief time -- the cohabiting nationalities also fought shoulder to shoulder with the Rumanians." (29)

As was the case with his famous forerunner, Ceausescu bears in mind the fact that the existence of the cohabiting nationalities on Rumanian territory constitutes "a historic reality" and strengthens the need "to develop friendship and fraternity in battle and at work" between the Rumanians and the above-mentioned nationalities. (30) This time, the negative role which the Hungarian nobility had played in the past is attributed to "past reactionary Rumanian and Hungarian policies which provoked feuds among the working people in order to make rule over them easier." (31)

(25) Ladovic Demeny, "The Szeklers in the Campaign for the Liberation of Wallachia in 1699," Revista de Istorie No. 4, 1975.

(26) Ladovic Demeny, "Side by Side with the Rumanians, the Szeklers Enthusiastically Answered the Voivode's Call," Scinteia, 24 May 1975.

(27) Ibid.

(28) Adolf Archbruster, "For Us, Saxons, It Has Been a Time of Progress and Prosperity," Scinteia, 14 May 1975; Pavel Binder, "Assessments on Michael the Brave's Role in Transylvania," Revista de Istorie No. 4, 1975.

(29) Nicolae Ceausescu, speech delivered at Alba Iulia, Scinteia, 19 May 1975.

(30) Nicolae Ceausescu, speech at the Congress on Political Education and Socialist Culture, Scinteia, 3 June 1976.

(31) Nicolae Ceausescu, speech at the grand popular assembly in Gradina, Scinteia, 19 July 1976.

Michael the Brave's Defensive Policy on His Southern and Northern Flanks

The preparations for and subsequent unification of the three Romanian principalities were part of Michael the Brave's over-all foreign policy, which was designed to protect the state against any possible political or military threats from either north or south. Michael's so-called "Byzantine Project" was a plan devised solely to protect his northern flank by rallying Balkan Christians to his cause in the great struggle against Ottoman domination. He did not plan to attempt any revival of the old Byzantine Empire. (12) If one wishes to use contemporary communist terminology, Michael the Brave won his "propagandists" south of the Danube to establish closer contacts with the other Balkan peoples.

The steady goal of Comintern's Balkan policy has been to generate multi-lateral co-operation in the Balkan area and even to give this co-operation a concrete, institutional form in order to maintain and strengthen Romania's autonomy, and to secure its southern flank against any possible pressures and interventions from the Soviet Union. (13) "In international affairs," the NRP secretary-general said, "we pay particular attention to the development of inter-Balkan friendly and good-neighbourly relations, which should contribute to strengthening confidence and co-operation in this area." (14)

As a skillful strategist, Michael the Brave also made efforts to cover the northern flank of his country through his so-called "Polish Project," a plan that would win him an ally on the Polish throne while simultaneously covering the Danube-Black Sea flank. He therefore launched operations to seize and neutralize the major fortresses occupied by the Turks on both banks of the Danube, and even became involved in the Black Sea basin, where at one time his "naval formations" apparently constituted a real threat to Turkish ships operating off the Black Sea coast and at the mouth of the Danube." (15)

Michael is indeed a very central figure in the history of the Romanians, for he has become a symbol, one that has inspired most Romanian patriotic efforts since the 1848 revolution, including the union of the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia in 1859, and the unification of all Romanians under one flag in 1918. He has become the spiritual patron of all major historical events. His statue, opposite the University of Bucharest, is the rallying point for mass meetings at times of national danger or exultation, while his example has inspired many of the Romanian political leaders who came after him.

Since Romania's communist historians consider history to be a committed science — istoria militara — whose purpose is to strengthen the national awareness of the people through "inspiring contact" with the glorious past

- (12) Eugen Stanculescu, "Michael the Brave's Epic — The Antecedents and Inspirations of the Struggle for the Liberation of Peoples in Southeastern Europe," Scinteia, 27 Mar 1975.
- (13) Robert R. King, "The Athens Conference and the Balkans: Old Variations on an Old Theme," IMD Background Report/15 (East-West), WTEB, 1 March 1976.
- (14) Nicolae Ceausescu, speech delivered at the Congress on Political Education . . .
- (15) Sergiu Colanbescu, "The Naval Actions of Michael the Brave to His Control of the Danube," Revista de Istorie No. 4, 1975.

while "constantly bearing in mind both the present and the future," (36) Michael the Brave has also become a standard-bearer of progress, a figure who will help to mold the new man, devoted to the fatherland, socialism, and communism. Thus, in a historical pageant, a present-day Romanian dressed as the Wallachian vojvoda headed a procession to the Fortress of Alba Iulia, which opened its gates to receive him in the presence of the current head of state, (37) and communist historians say that to honor Michael and his armies meant "to do everything to help achieve the triumph of socialism and communism in Romania, and everything to rally the entire population, all citizens, irrespective of their nationality, around the party, and for the independence and sovereignty of our socialist fatherland." (38)

Nevertheless this presentation of the Wallachian prince is of a nature bound to irritate some still unidentified historians, who, according to Gheorghiu, in unconstructed fashion "try to offend the Romanian nation," claiming, "in the face of obvious national and historical facts, that, in writing the three Romanian principalities -- Transylvania, Wallachia, and Moldavia -- Michael the Brave was allegedly conducting a policy of conquest." (39) More recently, the party secretary-general made a similar allusion when he said: "We shall reject any attempt to insult our people by insulting our forefathers." (40) According to present historiography, Michael has descended from his historic pedestal to enter the political arena, and thus he may well again cease to be the indispensable patron of Romanian history, once again becoming transformed into a controversial figure. (40b)

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- (36) Paulin Niculescu, "Socialist Patriotism, Source of Noble Social and Moral Values," Era Socialista No. 12, June 1974.
- (37) "Anniversary of the First Political Union of the Romanian Principalities," Scutaria, 29 May 1975.
- (38) Maria Buzatu, "A Vividly Unforgettable Recollection of the Heroic Past," Romania Libera, 2 July 1975.
- (39) Nicolae Ceausescu, speech at Alba Iulia, Scutaria, 29 May 1975.
- (40) Nicolae Ceausescu, speech in Iasi, Scutaria, 1 August 1976.