

NICOLAE IORGA HISTORY – A DUTY TO MANKIND

Jipa ROTARU*

DOI <https://doi.org/10.56082/annalsarscihist.2021.1.76>

Abstract. Nicolae Iorga's historical work, elaborated in the course of half a century, represents, by the vastness of his concerns, by the richness of the themes addressed, by the valuable results reached, a priceless scientific and cultural treasure given by the Romanian scholar to national and universal history.

Keywords: Nicolae Iorga, Romanian culture, universal culture, Second World War

By temperament but also by his universal spirit, scientist Nicolae Iorga can be compared to a phenomenon of nature. A proof of this is his monumental work which, by the quantity and variety of the themes treated, goes far beyond the limits considered maximum for the human being, being, in this aspect, without equal, not only in the history of Romanian culture but also in that of universal culture. According to a still incomplete statistic, the great Romanian scholar left to posterity tens of thousands of titles, including 1959 volumes totalling 165,656 pages, 12,755 articles and 4,965 reviews published in over 700 periodicals all over the world.¹

Nicolae Iorga's historical work, elaborated in the course of half a century, represents, by the vastness of his concerns, by the richness of the themes addressed, by the valuable results reached, a priceless scientific and cultural treasure given by the Romanian scholar to national and universal history.

Brilliant student and laureate of the Hautes Etudes in Paris, doctor of the University of Leipzig, professor of universal history since 1894, at the age of 23 of the University of Bucharest, member of the Romanian Academy since 1911, member of the Academy of Inscriptions in Paris, of the Czech, Serbian and Swedish academies, professor at the Sorbonne, corresponding member of the Polish and Italian academies, member of the Slavic institutes of London and Prague, of the Society of Byzantine Sciences, Doctor Honoris Causa of the universities of Paris, Rome, Oxford, Geneva, Lyon, Strasbourg, Vilnius, Prague, Brussels, Bratislava, Stocholm, Chernivtsi, Cluj, Bucharest, etc.a., Nicolae Iorga has surprised by his extraordinary creative activity, his originality, his power of

* C-dor (rtg) PhD, Full Member of the Academy of Romanian Scientists.

¹ *Enciclopedia istoriografiei românești*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1978, p. 183.

evocation, his ability to synthesise, his style sometimes burdened by the many themes he tackled, sometimes clear, direct and keen at the same time.

Referring to this great personality of our culture, George Călinescu in his well-known *History of Romanian Literature* remarks the following: "He is a total specialist, a historian who has sipped everyone's water. It is not possible to choose a field, however narrow and shaded, of Romanian history without noticing that Nicolae Iorga passed through it and treated the subject in its fundamentals... The almost monstrous knowledge of universal and Romanian history in the smallest details directly from the sources enabled the historian to improvise on demand and in a short time partial histories, monographs of cities, of domains, of families, histories of relations, church history, military history, history of commerce, history of literature, history of foreign travels, history of printing. And these are not mere pointing out, they are complete, exhaustive summaries, sometimes desperately detailed, selfish in their notes to the point of not leaving others the joy of an addition¹.

Reviewing his vast preoccupations and works in so many fields, we can speak of Nicolae Iorga as historian of France, England, Italy, Poland, the Ottoman Empire, South-East Europe and so on, just as we can speak of him as historian of Transylvania, Banat, Oltenia, Muntenia, Dobrogea, Moldavia or as historian of the army and education, of national unity, of Romania's independence and of the creation of the unitary national state.

Like his great predecessor Nicolae Bălcescu, whom he considered a spiritual mentor, Nicolae Iorga saw history not as a collection of data but as a book of lessons for the present and the future, a means of raising human consciousness. In his view, the duty of history is to shed light on everyday problems, on the questions that are presented to everyone, because history is human life; the problems of the past are the problems of the present, in a different form, with other people, the same humanity, when it has reached its goals, when it has been trampled and crushed. Pointing to the usefulness, beauty and ethical-social function of history, the illustrious scholar stressed that history is the most human discipline of all, because it broadens life "by the immense perspective of the past, by the hunch of the endless future. There is no human discipline that can make us more sociable, more altruistic, more loving of man and of life".²

Nicolae Iorga has conscientiously and competently studied the phenomena of universal history of all times, constantly concerned with understanding and framing national history in the overall development of human society around the world. Speaking in his memorable reception speech at the Romanian Academy on 17 May 1911, about universal history as he envisioned it, in the series of desires

¹ George Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române*, Editura Minerva, București, 1982, p. 612.

² Barbu Teodorescu, *Nicolae Iorga 1871-1940*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1976, p. 36.

he formulated, Iorga wanted it to be his field of work in the future, so as not to leave room for a science or philosophy of history, with other specialists, who often do not know not the teaching intimacy of historical studies, but not even the degree of certainty and significance to which specialists have reached¹.

The in-depth research of the history of neighbouring peoples, of the great empires as well as the scientific study of the role and place of the Romanians in the universality, of their contribution to the development of European culture and civilization were permanently manifested in the scientific activity of the Romanian historian since the end of his university studies and until the moment when dark minds and criminal arms took the life of the titan who was considered at the time as the only Romanian historian who could include in his work the evolution of the whole world².

The culmination of a superhuman effort, the fruits of his research in the field of universal history have materialized, over the years, in countless works of synthesis, monographs, studies, articles or conferences whose aim was to present "the universal history that our time requires according to its needs, lest, without the lights of the past, it should take, in its political and social movements, the paths it has taken"³.

In Nicolae Iorga's view, history was a duty to mankind, a duty that entailed above all the obligation to respect the truth and to portray the facts "as they were". In order to achieve this, the work of the historian cannot be limited to the testimony of the sources alone, since "history is truth and art", and in order to bring it to life the historian's imagination and experience must intervene. "I will allow myself to say," said Nicolae Iorga, "that in all my life I have done nothing but society. Everything, literature, art and science, I consider to be related to our human life, confined within the borders of a nation and a state and, beyond the nation and the state, to the general life of mankind".

A profound connoisseur of national and European history, Iorga understood that the phenomena of Romanian history, far from representing isolated manifestations, were integrated into the great currents of general history. Pointing out that Romanian history cannot be separated from universal history, the great scholar wrote: "...isolated, our history has no meaning. A small nation, but placed in a place favourable to synthesis, we have appropriated all that we have received, harmonising according to our instincts and our soul's needs all the borrowed elements. We had no reason to continue to accept the history of mankind as it is written, in a divergent way, according to ambitions, which no

¹ Nicolae Iorga, *Discurs de recepție la Academia Română, 17 mai 1911* în "Neamul Românesc", Vălenii de Munte, 1913.

² Pamfil Șeicaru, *Istoricul Nicolae Iorga* în "Ramuri, revista literară", an XXXVIII, nr. 9-10, septembrie-octombrie 1942, Craiova, p. 277.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 281.

method can stop and defeat, of great peoples. But taking advantage of our geographical position and of the experience of the synthesis which has been imposed upon us, we must draw lines and stopping points for the life of the world which others, even when they see them, do not take into account"¹.

The simple journey through European archives and libraries and the remarkable capacity of synthesis of the Romanian scholar are felt immediately after the end of his university studies when Nicolae Iorga will publish the works "Thomas III, marquis de Saluces", Paris 1893 and "Philippe de Mazieres (1324-1405 et la croisade de XIV-e siecle", Paris, 1896. Continuing his research on Romanian and European history, establishing analogies, comparisons, similarities and differences in the evolution of the Romanian people and neighbouring nations, Iorga will work hard to edit new and new documentary sources, which will form the basis of an extensive history of the Crusades, in six volumes, published between 1899 and 1916.

The study of the Crusades will lead the author into a tangent with the history of Byzantium and implicitly with that of the Ottoman conquerors, heirs of this immense kingdom. The documentation he acquired during these studies enabled him to produce his first major works of world history: "The Byzantine Empire" in 1907 and "Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches" in five volumes published between 1908 and 1913.

At the same time, Nicolae Iorga was busy compiling a unified account of the history of the Romanian people, which took the form of three major syntheses: "Geschichte des Romanischen Volkes im Rahmen seiner Staatsbildungen", Giotta 1905, "Histoire de la Roumains et de leur civilisation", Paris, 1920 and "Istoria Românilor", ten volumes published in Bucharest between 1935-1939. In these syntheses, as the author appreciated them, he melted all his documentary treasure gathered from numerous Romanian archives and from all corners of Europe, seeking, at the same time, on the basis of an original thought and his own architecture, to illustrate in them, with a brilliant intuition, the meaning and the way of development of the unitary life of the Romanian people as well as its future prospects.

The prestige gained in the field of the history of the peoples of the Balkan Peninsula and its links with the history of the Romanians led Nicolae Iorga to establish in 1914 the Institute of South-East European Studies, which would become one of the most prestigious research institutions of history in Europe.

During the First World War and in the period immediately following, the great historian worked feverishly on important works such as "Austrian and Russian Imperialism in Parallel Development", "The Origins and Development of the Austrian State" to which will be added "The Question of the Oceans", "The Development of the Political and Social Settlements of Europe", "Elements of

¹ C.I. Brătianu, *N. Iorga* (3 cuvântări), București, 1944, p. 8.

Unity of the Medieval, Modern and Contemporary World", "Representative Books in the Life of Mankind", etc., which will constitute the scientific dowry on the basis of which the scholar wrote the work "Essai de synthese de l'histoire de l'Humanité", a work which definitively established him as one of the greatest historians in Europe.

His work in the field of universal history was not limited to the above-mentioned writings. Between 1920 and 1940, Nicolae Iorga completed his European work with lectures, conferences and communications at many international congresses, universities and academies in Europe and America. The results of his scientific work and the recognition of his value as a world historian were also reflected in the more than 30 titles of Doctor Honoris Causa and member of the most renowned academies in the world¹, which was unprecedented at the time.

The prodigious scientific activity of the great Romanian scholar was thus honoured by the American historian Paynton, on May 3, 1930, when Nicolae Iorga was conferred the title of Doctor Honoris Causa of the University of Oxford: "I present to you a man of many scholars and of many writers whom if I were to call Titu Liviu of his transdanubian Dacia, it would be to conceal what should be uttered above all, namely, that he wrote historical works in four languages, that he went to the most hidden sources, that he pretended historical stories into plays, and interwove his name with history itself. For he has not only described the deeds of the Romanians, he has not only published monuments, but has traversed with a curiosity like Pliny's art, their villages and monasteries, he has traced the Turkish annals over a span of five centuries, in as many volumes he has depicted them, as he has also investigated the customs and settlements of all the nations in the south and sunny parts of Europe. For no one enjoys greater and more widespread fame in the scientific world in this respect"².

The approach of the storm that was to engulf the peoples of the world in the hurricane of the Second World War made the Romanian historian gather his thoughts around a humanity whose most elementary rights of freedom and dignity were contested. In a speech given at the Congress of the Cultural League in 1939, Nicolae Iorga drew attention to the lessons of the past: "Look at history and you will see the fate of the regimes that have attempted to undermine the free thought of mankind; look at the history of mankind and you will see where all the conquerors, all the predators of countries and destroyers of nations have ended up". And in his last opening lecture of the academic year, delivered to the students, the great teacher emphasized the idea that history is a great tribunal, in which peoples and nations are judged, apparent triumphs end in terrible disasters and national upheavals, such as the present German upheaval, can have a

¹ Nicolae Iorga. *Omul și opera*, Editura Junimea Iași, 1971, p. 82.

² V.I. Brătianu, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

disastrous effect. Nicolae Iorga, making a lucid analysis of historical events, concluded that "any violation of the normal conditions of life brings nothing but the fatigue of an organism and the inability to play the natural historical role on the part of those who have surpassed, beyond their powers, this role".

The Romanian scientist's concern for the study of universal history never ceased. Even when the murderous hand of terrorist forces fell upon this monument to Romanian culture, on his desk were the pages of his preface to an "historiography" - a summary and synthesis of all the knowledge gathered during decades of research on all peoples.

On the basis of known data, we are entitled to say that Nicolae Iorga was the scholar who wrote the most, not only among Romanians, but even among all scholars of the world.

His lifelong contribution to Romanian and universal culture was unanimously recognized and appreciated, the great Romanian scholar establishing himself as the most representative historian of Europe in the 20th century.