



PALGRAVE STUDIES IN POLITICAL HISTORY

Building Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe, 1848–1939

Peasants' National Integration
and Social Mobilisation

Edited by

Sorin Radu · Constantin Iordachi ·
Ovidiu Buruiană ·
Andrei Florin Sora

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Palgrave Studies in Political History

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The contested nature of legitimacy lies at the heart of modern politics. A continuous tension can be found between the public, demanding to be properly represented, and their representatives, who have their own responsibilities along with their own rules and culture. Political history needs to address this contestation by looking at politics as a broad and yet entangled field rather than as something confined to institutions and politicians only. As political history thus widens into a more integrated study of politics in general, historians are investigating democracy, ideology, civil society, the welfare state, the diverse expressions of opposition, and many other key elements of modern political legitimacy from fresh perspectives. Parliamentary history has begun to study the way rhetoric, culture and media shape representation, while a new social history of politics is uncovering the strategies of popular meetings and political organizations to influence the political system.

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Introduction: The Peasantry and Political Participation in Central and Eastern Europe (1848–1939)

*Sorin Radu, Constantin Iordachi, Ovidiu Buruiană,
and Andrei Florin Sora*

In European societies, the nineteenth century was profoundly marked by the efforts of the ruling elites to establish a new, viable political community. Following the Enlightenment and the works of thinkers such

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as John Locke, Montesquieu, and Benjamin Constant, among others, popular sovereignty emerged as the ultimate principle for legitimizing power, given the gradual but steady decline of traditional religious and monarchical authority. The foundation of political legitimacy on both rational and democratic grounds necessitated a rethinking of the political and social body, with the subsequent integration of a large part of the population into public decision-making processes. The theorization of representative government and parliamentarism, as a means to ensure popular sovereignty, was thus accompanied by the efforts of political elites to forge modern citizenship and regulate electoral rights. However, the expansion of political participation generated a heated debate regarding the capacity of certain categories of the population to participate meaningfully in the state's democratic structure. In this context, as the modernization process remained predominantly urban, the rural world and its inhabitants, confined to the periphery of modernity, were compelled to forcefully integrate into the new social and political reality.

The national integration and political socialization of peasants, their voting practices, and the effects of electoral changes on the village have been the subject of intense but politicized academic research.¹ This is especially true for Central and Eastern European countries, where the incorporation of rural inhabitants in the functioning of the political system overlapped with processes of intense nation and state-building, as well as with the attempts of imperial states (especially Austro-Hungary, but also Russia and the late Ottoman Empire) to build loyalties and shape

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¹ Serge Noiret, ed., *Political Strategies and Electoral Reforms: Origins of the Voting Systems in Europe in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1990); Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); Raffaele Romanelli, ed., *How Did They Become Voters? The History of Franchise in Modern European Representation* (The Hague: Kluwer, 1998); Gavin Parker, *Citizenships, Contingency and the Countryside: Rights, Culture, Land and the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2002); Jonathan Murdoch, Philip Lowe, Neil Ward and Terry Marsden, *The Differentiated Countryside* (London: Routledge, 2003); Daniele Caramani, *The Europeanization of Politics, The Formation of a European Electorate and Party System in Historical Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

supra-ethnic identities.² After 1918, the construction of citizenship in these regions was tied to developments within post-imperial “successor” states and the continental wave of democratization following the “Versailles Treaties” signed after World War One. Economic developments, historical experiences, and the various layers of identity among peasants—religious, imperial, and national—shaped the construction of democratic regimes, the consolidation of citizenship, and the patterns of socio-political mobilization in the rural worlds of Central and Eastern European societies.

PEASANT STUDIES: REGIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

This volume of studies is rooted in ongoing scholarly debates, particularly among historians and social scientists, concerning the persistent marginalization of the peasant and rural life after 1800. This theme has repeatedly surfaced in local academic discourses in Central and Eastern Europe, in general, and in Romania (the home country of this volume’s editors), in particular. Until the end of World War Two and the imposition of the communist regime, Romania was a predominantly rural society in terms of demographic and economic realities as well as, arguably, mentalities.³ Given its symbolic importance, the subject of the village has dominated literature, folklore, and plastic creations, among other forms of expression. At the same time, however, historians and social scientists have shown little concern for the transformations within the rural world and the impact that the process of political and economic modernization has had on the peasants. In an apparent divorce from the program of various political and cultural actors of the last two centuries, dominated by the so-called “Agrarian” or “Peasant Question,” focused on the

² See Andrei Cușco, *A Contested Borderland: Competing Russian and Romanian Visions of Bessarabia in the Late 19th and Early twentieth Century* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2017); Harald Heppner, Christian Promitzer and Ionela Zaharia-Schintler, eds., *Die ländliche Gesellschaft im Zeitalter des Ersten Weltkrieges. Herausforderungen und ihre emotionalen Folgen* (Berlin, Bruxelles, Chennai, Lausanne, New York, Oxford: Peter Lang Verlag, 2024).

³ According to statistics, during the period from 1840 to 1940, approximately 80 percent of the total population lived in the countryside and held occupations related to working the land. See Sabin Manuilă, D. C. Georgescu, *Populația României* (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Central de Statistică, 1938), 17.

overall economic, political, and social emancipation of the peasantry from the chronic underdevelopment of the village, academic works have prioritized the theme of state-building and its institutional articulations. As recent historiographical overviews have noted, the peasantry has often been excluded from mainstream historiographical works on nation-state building.⁴

Romanian social scientists' reluctance to fully engage with the field of rural history aligns with prevailing tendencies in the social sciences, which have often 'imagined' rurality and treated the peasant as a discursive, abstract, and timeless figure—symbolically important yet devoid of individuality. Except for the sociological school of Dimitrie Gusti, whose monographic research on the Romanian village was linked to the redefinition of the nation in the new political borders forged after 1918,⁵ the peasant and his evolution constitute more of an intellectual construct serving ideological purposes, rather than a concrete historical actor. This neglect also characterizes the literary production: a recent quantitative analysis of novels written between the nineteenth century and 1947 reveals that Romanian literature is overwhelmingly urban in terms of action, themes, and values conveyed.⁶ In competing narratives, the rural world is employed as a referential point to explain both the delayed development of society in relation to the dynamic, prosperous, innovation-oriented West and the danger of homogenizing modernism, which undermined Romanian solidarity and national authenticity.

More recently, academic research has sought to overcome the traditional, biased analysis of the Romanian village. A new generation of

⁴ Roland Clark, "The Shape of Interwar Romanian History," *Journal of Romanian Studies* vol. 3, no. 1 (2021), 18; Constantin Iordachi, Trencsényi Balázs: "In Search of a Usable Past: The Question of National Identity in Romanian Studies, 1990–2000," *East European Politics and Society* vol. 17, no. 3 (2003), 415–54.

⁵ Raluca Mușat, *Sociologists and the Transformation of the Peasantry in Romania 1925–1940*, PhD diss. (London: University College of London, 2011).

⁶ Emanuel Modoc, Nicoleta Strugari, Mihnea Bălci, Radu Vancu, Ștefan Baghiu and Vlad Pojoga, "Geografia romanului românesc (1933–1947): arealul național," [The Geography of the Romanian Novel (1933–1947): Spaces from Abroad] *Transilvania* no. 9 (2021), 14–15. See also Cosmin Borza, Daiana Gârdan and Emanuel Mondoc, "The peasant and the nation plot: a distant reading of the Romanian rural novel from the first half of the twentieth century," *Rural History: Economy, Society, Culture* vol. 34, no. 1 (April 2023), published online September 2022, 75–91.

historians, sociologists, and anthropologists has rejected the conventional positive perspective on capitalist modernity, described as a “linear process of urbanization, industrialization, and de-peasantization,” with the city functioning as the engine of progress, commerce, and increased communication.⁷ Nevertheless, the development of a distinct field of rural history, although already theorized from various transnational and interdisciplinary perspectives, is still in its early stages in Romanian historiography.⁸ Consequently, the history of “the village” in Romanian studies remains to be fully deciphered as a complex social, economic, and cultural unit, with distinct developments and manifestations. The figure of the peasant is still approached in a generic and static manner, as an individual

⁷ Anca Pârvolescu, Manuela Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022), 3. See also Cornel Micu, *From Peasants to Farmers? Agrarian Reforms and Modernisation in Twentieth-Century Romania. A Case Study: Bordei Verde Commune in Braiila County* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012); Constantin Bărbulescu, *România medicilor. Medici, țărani și igienă rurală în România de la 1860 la 1910* [Romania of Doctors. Doctors, Peasants and Rural Hygiene in Romania from 1860 to 1910] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2015), 18; Sorin Radu, Oliver Jens Schmitt, “Introduction,” in Sorin Radu, Oliver Jens Schmitt, eds., *Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania: Perceptions, Mentalities, Propaganda* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 1–23.

⁸ See works by anthropologist Eric R. Wolf, *Peasants* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 12–17, sociologists Teodor Shanin, *Defining Peasants. Essays concerning Rural Societies, Expolary Economies, and Learning from them in the Contemporary World* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 21–36, 73 and S. H. Franklin, *Rural Societies* (London, Basingstoke: MacMillan Education, 1971), 7–11 and historians Eugen Weber, *Peasant into Frenchmen. The Modernization of Rural France. 1870–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), Jerome Blum, *The End of the Old Order in Rural Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978). For recent works on the rural worlds, see Andrew Flynn, Philip Lowe, *The Contested Countryside* (London: UCL Press, 1994), Keith Hoggart, Henry Buller, Richard Black, *Rural Europe: Identity and Change* (London: Wiley, 1995), Werner Troßbach, Clemens Zimmermann, *Die Geschichte des Dorfes* (Stuttgart: Ulmer, 2006); in the German historiography, see Katja Bruisch, *Als das Dorf noch Zukunft war. Agrarismus und Expertise zwischen Zarenreich und Sowjetunion* (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau, 2014); Judith Pallot, ed., *Transforming Peasants: Society, State and the Peasantry, 1861–1930* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); Nadine Vivier, Socrates Petmezas, “The State and Rural Societies,” in Nadine Vivier, ed., *The State and Rural Societies. Policy and Education in Europe. 1750–2000* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 11–31, Jaken Myrdal, “Peasants and Rural Societies in History (Agricultural History),” in James D. Wright, ed., *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd edition, vol. 17 (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015), 669–75. For conceptual spadework, see Eric Vanhaute, *Peasants in World History* (New York, London: Routledge, 2021), 1–9.

who engages in cultivating the land as an owner, small leaseholder, or agricultural worker. Living off the land, peasants develop their own norms of life and form specific networks of recognition based on personalized individual or family ties. Defined by the strength of its traditions in relation to modern contractual society, the village community represents for historians a distinct, stable universe that can be researched and ethnographically decontextualized. Resistant to novelty, in search of a secure place and comfort given by ancestral rules, the peasants have been more imagined than scientifically examined.

Historiographic developments in Romanian studies mirrored, by and large, regional patterns. Developing a sustained field of research on peasantry in Central and Eastern Europe has been a protracted process, due to the vastness of the subject matter, the fragmented nature of the historical sources available, divergent national historiographies and foci, and the ever-shifting political and ideological context that has often shaped the official interpretive frameworks.

The temptation to provide a comprehensive understanding of social dynamics in broad regional contexts has led to syntheses that integrate rural developments into a predominantly political narrative of historical causality.⁹ The peasants living in imperial structures or newly formed nation-states were viewed as passive objects of the elites' political strategies, which sought to mold them into citizens. In Marxist terms, the peasants appear as historical actors in their own right almost exclusively in moments of revolt. The professional individuation of the subject within rural history occurred in the context of discussions about the impact of the Great War, when the figure of the peasant-soldier and his sacrifices prompted governments in this part of Europe to undertake specific measures to uplift the village, particularly agrarian reform. David Mitraný's pioneering work on land redistribution in Romania in 1921

⁹ For general overviews, see Hugh Seton-Watson, *Eastern Europe between the Wars*; Hugh Seton-Watson, *The "Sick Heart" of Modern Europe. The Problem of the Danubians Lands* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1975); Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between Two World Wars* (Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 1974); Iván T. Berend – György Ránki, *East Central Europe in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1977); Iván T. Berend, *Decades of Crisis. Central and Eastern Europe before World War II* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998) etc.

analyzes,¹⁰ besides legislation and administrative governmental activity, the organization of peasant households, rural production and economy, and the social and political consequences of landownership. Viewed as essential for both the organization of the society and the public representations of citizenship, the issue of property in the region's countries has generated a new research direction, with national¹¹ and transnational approaches. More recent works by Wojciech Roszkowski,¹² Judith Pallot,¹³ Angelika Harre, Hannes Siegrist and Dietmar Müller,¹⁴ Alex Toshkov,¹⁵ Constantin Iordachi, Dorin Dobrinu, Arnd Bauerkämper, Katherine Verdery, Gail Kligman, etc., have influenced the academic understanding of the topic.¹⁶

¹⁰ David Mitrany, *The Land and the Peasant in Rumania: The War and Agrarian Reform (1917–1921)* (London: Oxford University Press, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930).

¹¹ For national approaches to post-1918 land reforms, see Marta Bład, “Land reform in the Second Polish Republic,” *Rural History* vol. 31 (2020), 97–110. For the case of Romania, see Dumitru Șandru, *Reforma agrară din 1921 în România* [The 1921 Land Reform in Romania] (Bucharest: Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1975).

¹² Wojciech Roszkowski, *Land reforms in East Central Europe after World War One* (Warsaw: Institute of Political Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, 1995).

¹³ Judith Pallot, *Land Reform in Russia. 1906–1917. Peasant Responses to Stolypin's Project of Rural Transformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

¹⁴ Dietmar Müller, Angelika Harre, eds., *Agrarian Property and Agrarianism in East Central Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Innsbruck, Vienna, Bozen: Studienverlag, 2011); Hannes Siegrist, Dietmar Müller, eds., *Property in East Central Europe. Notions, Institutions and Practices of Landownership in the Twentieth Century* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Publishing House, 2015); Dietmar Müller, *Bodeneigentum und Nation. Rumänien, Jugoslawien und Polen im europäischen Vergleich, 1918–1948* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2020).

¹⁵ Alex Toshkov, *Agrarianism as Modernity in twentieth-Century Europe: The Golden Age of the Peasantry* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

¹⁶ On the confiscation of land property during collectivization under communism and its impact on the peasantry in Romania and Eastern Europe, see Constantin Iordachi, Dorin Dobrinu, eds., *Transforming Peasants, Property and Power: The Process of Land Collectivization in Romania, 1949–1962* (Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2009); Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery, *Peasants under Siege: The Collectivization of Romanian Agriculture, 1949–1962* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Constantin Iordachi and Arnd Bauerkämper, eds., *The Collectivization of Agriculture in Communist Eastern Europe: Comparisons and Entanglements* (Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2014); Dorin Dobrinu, Constantin Iordachi, eds., *Edificarea orânduirii socialiste: violența politică și lupta de clasă în colectivizarea agriculturii din România, 1949–1962* [Building the Socialist Order: Political Violence and Class Struggle in the Collectivization of

The professional discussion about increasing the participation of the rural population in public affairs and their identification with certain political ideas, parties, or prominent figures, took shape after 1990, at a time when historians from postcommunist countries began to move beyond canonical interpretations of history. Methodologically indebted to analyses of the French peasantry—Eugen Weber’s work serving as a benchmark¹⁷—researchers have placed the political integration of the peasantry in the broader context of institutional, cultural, social, and economic modernization.¹⁸ However, they have highlighted differences in the politicization of the rural world compared to Western societies, due to the ethnic heterogeneity and the difficulties faced by societies in the region in establishing administratively viable nation-states. In the imperial context of Central and Eastern Europe, historians pointed out a different dynamic in the socialization and public involvement of the peasants, where the militant actions of elites of various nationalities shaped the political orientation of village inhabitants. However, in Gary B. Cohen’s approach, the rise of ethnic groups after 1860 is more a part of the development of the public/civic sphere within the complex society of the Empire, rather than the result of coercive government actions against minorities.¹⁹ Within this process, the political mobilization of peasants intensified, even though organizational and communication structures remained weak. The integration of the rural world into public spaces was greater in cases where urban activists combined national ideals with

Romanian Agriculture, 1949–1962] (Iași: Editura Universității “Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, 2017).

¹⁷ Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen. The Modernization of Rural France 1870–1914*. See also Maurice Agulhon, *La république au village. Les populations du Var de la Révolution à la IIe République* (Paris: Plon, 1970); Alain Corbin, *Archaïsme et modernité en Limousin au XIXe siècle 1845–1880* (Paris: Editions Marcel Rivière, 1975); Gilles Pécout, “La Politisation des paysans au XIXe siècle. Réflexions sur l’histoire politique des campagnes françaises,” *Histoire et Sociétés Rurales* vol. 2 (1994), 91–125; Louis Hincker, “La politisation des milieux populaires en France au XIXe siècle: constructions d’historiens. Esquisse d’un bilan (1948–1997),” *Revue d’Histoire du XIXe siècle* vol. 14, no. 1 (1997), 89–105.

¹⁸ Sorin Radu and Oliver Jens Schmitt, “Introduction,” in Sorin Radu and Oliver Jens Schmitt, eds., *Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania*, 1–23.

¹⁹ Gary B. Cohen, “Nationalist Politics and Dynamics of State and Civil Society in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1867–1914,” *Central European History*, vol. 40 (2007), 241–78, esp. 264–68. See also Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire. A New History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016).

the struggle to improve material conditions in villages, achieve real civic equality for inhabitants, and promote their economic interests.²⁰

In an analysis of the Ruthenian population in Galicia, a region on the eastern border of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, German historian Kai Struve concludes that the increased politicization of peasants was not the result of a strong national identification but of the division of civil society (professional and cultural associations, cooperatives, political parties, and other organizations) along ethnic identity lines.²¹ Similarly, American historian Keely Stauter-Halsted, specializing in the modern history of Poland, challenges the widely accepted thesis that national sentiments originate among intellectuals or urban middle classes and then “trickle down” to the working class and peasantry.²² By examining the evolution of Polish villages in Austrian Galicia, from the emancipation of serfs in 1848 to the eve of World War One, Stauter-Halsted explores how peasants came to think of themselves as members of the nation and demonstrates the contribution of rural societies to the construction of the new community.

Common to the countries in the region, the “Peasant Question” distinguishes the politicization of the village in this geographical, economic, and political context from that of Western Europe. According to the Italian historian Stefano Bianchini, the increased participation of peasants in public life happen outside the frameworks conceived by the state and was a social and cultural counter-reaction to the pattern of economic and political modernization implemented by government elites. Addressing the coherence of agrarian societies in Central and Eastern Europe, he discusses the movements of *Narodniks* and Agrarians, which focused on rural issues, and sought to elevate the village by embracing Western modernization while bypassing the capitalist phase in favor of rural socialism in market conditions. Resenting the inferiority of

²⁰ Kai Struve, “Civil Society, Peasants, and Nationalism in Austria Galicia from the 1860s until 1914,” 21; Pavel Kladiwa, “The Countryside between the state, Nation and Civil Society: External Impulses and Local Initiatives”, in Řepa, ed., *Peasants into Citizens*, 79.

²¹ Kai Struve, “Civil Society, Peasants, and Nationalism in Austria Galicia from the 1860s until 1914,” 32. This essay builds on the concept of “national indifference” of these groups, advanced by Tara Zahra, “Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis,” *Slavic Review*, vol. 69, no. 1 (2010), 93–119.

²² Keely Stauter-Halsted, *The Nation in the Village: The Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland, 1848–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

the rural world compared to the city, these national intelligentsias considered the material and cultural elevation of the peasants and their political mobilization as fundamental to societal transformation.²³

THE VOLUME'S FOCUS: MAIN ARGUMENT

In line with new regional and global trends in peasant studies, the editors of this volume have initiated a long-term collaborative research project aimed at systematically exploring the diverse realities of the Romanian rural world, titled “*Subjects or Citizens? Between Census and Universal Suffrage: Political Integration of Peasants in Romania (1859–1940)*.” Although the project focused on a single national case study, we have designed it as an exercise in comparative history, for several reasons. First, the evolution of the peasantry in the Principalities of Moldova and Wallachia was neither unique nor monolithic but was shaped by multiple imperial legacies and legal-political influences, most notably those of the Byzantine, Ottoman, Russian, and Habsburg empires. This historical diversity was further amplified after 1918, when the annexation of Bessarabia, Bukovina, Transylvania, and the Banat to the Old Kingdom generated a post-imperial “Greater Romania,”²⁴ characterized by significant regional gaps in rural development in terms of material, educational, civic culture, and political involvement. Writing the history of the peasantry in the Romanian lands, therefore, requires an explicit engagement with the comparative method at local, national, and regional levels.

Second, the evolution of Romanian peasantry in the modern period was strongly influenced by the larger socio-political realities of the Balkans, and of Central and Eastern European historical spaces, and cannot be written in isolation. For example, Romania’s participation in the Second Balkan War and the First World War, as well as its contacts with the Russian Army and the Bolshevik Russian peasant-soldier, made Romanian peasants aware, by comparison, of their low standard of living

²³ Stefano Bianchini, *Eastern Europe and the Challenges of Modernity, 1800–2000* (London, New York: Routledge, 2015). See also Stephen Fischer-Galati, “Peasantism in Interwar Eastern Europe,” *Balkan Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1967), 103–14; Heinz Gollwitzer, ed., *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1977); Eduard Kubù et al., *Agrarismus und Agrarreliten in Ostmitteleuropa* (Berlin, Prague: Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag, 2013).

²⁴ Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Der Balkan im 20. Jahrhundert. Eine postimperiale Geschichte* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer GmbH, 2019).

and reduced public significance. Although this realization did not automatically translate into social mobilization, the participation of peasants in Romania's military effort created societal expectations and pressure for the full integration of rural inhabitants as citizens within a multiparty political system, on par with neighboring countries.

Third, the modernization of rural areas in Romania and the emergence of modern citizenship were part of larger continental phenomena and can only be understood from a transnational perspective. A major theme of reflection for our endeavor was the issue of modernization as "Westernization." The advance of Western powers and the voluntary, normative or coercive, imposition of their economic and cultural values as measuring stick²⁵ motivated the political and cultural elites in "peripheral societies," to use Daniel Chirot's formula,²⁶ to embrace Western political and institutional forms. Illustrating the necessity of aligning and relating to neighboring countries, one of Romania's prominent political figures in the twentieth century, Ion I. C. Brătianu, stated on 19 June 1914 that the political upliftment of the peasants, through the granting of the right to vote, was linked to the imperative of the Romanian state's very existence and legitimacy in a Europe dominated by universal suffrage.²⁷

To situate the study of peasantry within a broad regional, continental, and transnational context, the editors of this volume organized a major international conference at the University of Sibiu in November 2023, titled *Integrating the Rural World. Economy, Society and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe, 1848–1939*. Bringing together the conference proceedings, this volume aims to offer a comprehensive perspective on the evolution of the peasantry in Central and Eastern European societies that confronted the challenges of Western-style modernization.

The volume explores patterns of national integration and mobilization of the peasantry across two historical regions, Central and Eastern

²⁵ On the nature of Westernization in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, see Constantin Iordachi, *Liberalism, Constitutional Nationalism, and Minorities. The Making of Romanian Citizenship, c. 1750–1918* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019), 585–86.

²⁶ Daniel Chirot, *Social Change in a Peripheral Society: The Creation of a Balkan Colony* (New York: Academic Press, 1976).

²⁷ Ion I. C. Brătianu, "Discurs în Senat," [Speech in the Senate] in *Discursurile lui Ion I.C. Brătianu* [Ion I.C. Brătianu's Speeches], ed. by George Fotino, vol. IV (Bucharest: Editura Cartea Românească, 1940), 284–85.

Europe, and a long historical timeframe, spanning from the 1848 Revolution to the outbreak of World War Two. During this formative period, the peasantry in Central and Eastern Europe underwent massive and region-specific social, economic, political, and cultural transformations. The peasantry and its demands for land reform played a prominent role in the 1848 revolutionary upheaval. The post-revolutionary period brought about significant changes in the status of the peasantry, most importantly the abolition of serfdom across these regions, from Austria-Hungary (1848–1849) to Russia (1861), followed in the next decades by the granting of limited land and political rights to various categories of the peasantry (see Romania’s 1864 agrarian reform and 1866 Liberal Constitution).

Seeking to replicate Western political models, in the second half of the nineteenth century ruling elites in Central and Eastern Europe equated Europeanization with urbanization and industrialization. In line with the Western model of economic development, governments in the region promoted industrialization and the development of a functional bureaucracy, often in contrast to the village, which seemed at odds with their vision of modern society. Modernization, understood as massive societal transformation, was generally accomplished at the expense of the rural world. To this end, financial resources obtained from agricultural exports were channeled toward state bureaucratization and the creation of its industrial base.²⁸ Even under a capitalist economic system and with these regions’ firmer integration into the global market, agriculture retained its rudimentary character, based on extensive cereal cultivation, manual labor, and limited mechanization.²⁹ Consequently, agricultural yields remained low; for example, in Romania, they were three times lower than those in Denmark, in Northern Europe.³⁰ In certain regions, rather than emancipating the peasants, uneven modernization and recurring economic crises intensified labor exploitation and traditional practices

²⁸ Chirot, *Social Change*, 120.

²⁹ For an analysis of Romania, see Henry L. Roberts, *Rumania. Political Problems of an Agrarian State* (New Haven: Yale University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1951), 332–51.

³⁰ Bogdan Murgescu, *România și Europa. Acumularea decalajelor economice (1500–2010)* [Romania and Europe. Accumulation of Economic Gaps (1500–2010)] (Iași: Polirom, 2010), 241.

of personal dependency, prompting peasant emigration to large industrial urban centers or abroad, primarily to the American continent.

At the same time, in the three multiethnic empires in these regions that attempted to nationalize their population by promoting an official version of nationalism, namely Austro-Hungary, Russia and the Ottoman Empire,³¹ and their successor states, rural populations became primary targets of nation-building. As modernization coincided with the rise of nation-states, the largely urban or recently urbanized ruling elites turned their attention to the rural world. The peasant came to symbolize the national identity that these elites sought to define. Nevertheless, while peasants were romanticized and idealized at the level of national ideology, in day-to-day politics, they were often depicted as backward and a hindrance to progress. To rectify this situation, modern state institutions were entrusted with turning peasants into modern, emancipated citizens. To this end, peasants were increasingly drawn into the orbit of the state through public education, local and central administration, the tax system, mandatory military service, and the electoral system. The rise of literacy and growing interaction with state institutions politicized rural populations, leading to the emergence of agrarian parties. To a certain extent, these parties gave the peasantry a voice in politics. Generally, however, prevailing authoritarian, paternalistic, and at times even condescending attitudes of the ruling elites toward the population at large, strongly influenced by the cultural and political traditions of the landowning aristocracy, shaped governmental actions and the political parties' approach to the Peasant Question. Established Churches, as well as nationalist, liberal, or socialist parties, launched open campaigns to "civilize" or 'modernize' the peasants, who were portrayed, in a contradictory manner, as both the repository of the national culture and traditions, and as backward and ill-adapted to modern life. Yet, while political life increasingly revolved around debates on the Peasant Question and its relation to the "National Question," these issues were oftentimes demagogically manipulated for political ends. As researcher Petia Gueorguieva points out, most new political parties in modern Bulgaria, for example, were clientelist networks pursuing partisan interests, legitimized by a demagogic appeal to the peasantry as custodian of traditions and the common national interest.

³¹ See Benedict Anderson, "Official Nationalism and Imperialism," in *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, London: Verso, 1991), 83–112.

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