

Aurel Onciul and the loyalty towards the House of Habsburg (1902-1918)

Abstract

Through the work *Aurel Onciul and the loyalty towards the House of Habsburg (1902-1918)*, my intention was to bring to attention the history of Bukovina within the first two decades of the 20th century from the perspective of the individual destiny of one of the best-known and controversial politicians of this province: Aurel Onciul.

Aurel Onciul was the most notorious representative of a current with social, political and cultural extensions, present among the Bukovinian Romanians contemporary with him: *the Austrophilia*. The education he received, his social connections, the ideology he adhered to, his affinities, relations and sympathies left a mark on the decisions he took along his career, which influenced – in its turn – the progress of the political life in Bukovina during the activity carried on by Aurel Onciul.

An Austrophil was that citizen of the Double Monarchy, regardless of the ethnic background, for whom the oath to the Emperor and to the Empire was more important than the independence of his own nation. The national salvation was going to follow the gain of enlarged autonomy, within a future Austrian federal empire, prosperous and protected from the Russian danger. Aurel Onciul is not the only Austrophil of his time, but, for the Bukovinian space in the period between 1902 and 1918, he is the most notorious and influent among the Romanian ethnics. Consequently, I did not analyze Onciul from the perspective of his Romanian nationality (given that it was voluntarily omitted by the choice of a Central-European destiny), but by his fidelity towards the House of Habsburg and the Empire.

Onciul's loyalty towards the Ruling House and towards Austria is underlined by him on each occasion: in his speeches, during political meetings, in press articles, etc. His particular attitude towards the penetration of the Romanian army in Bukovina, in November 1918 – when most of the Romanian political elite of Bukovina had shown their enthusiasm for the annexation of the entire province to the Kingdom of Romania, while he was militating for the observance of the agreement closed with the Ukrainians and for the observance of the ethnic frontier established on November 6 – is not only the best-known moment of Onciul's political career, but also a reflection of his way of doing politics. More precisely, he was militating for Austria and he was loyal towards the House of Habsburg. However, Aurel Onciul is not the only subject of the Habsburgs to permanently underline the advantages of the Empire's existence and of keeping Bukovina as an autonomous Duchy within its frontiers. The loyalty of the Bukovinian Romanians and of their political elite is undeniable –

in the public space – until the autumn of 1918; the dynastic patriotism is part of the identity-constitution process in this province.

Though he played a fundamental role in the evolution of the Bukovinian society, the “loyalty” has been a subject ignored by the Romanian historiography referring to this province¹. I have chosen to present a social phenomenon through what seems, at first glance, a particular case, precisely because a more thorough analysis shows that Aurel Onciul is not necessarily an exception. We cannot ascertain that his political success in the period between 1902 and 1918 is, beyond doubt, a consequence of the fact that he showed his faith for Austria and for the Emperor, but it is certain that this element was a part of his success. Between 1902 and 1918, the name of Aurel Onciul is almost synonymous with the Austrian loyalty on the political scene of Bukovina. However, it is important to mention that this is not a loyalty towards Austria-Hungary. Only seldom does Aurel Onciul refer to his homeland as Austria-Hungary. His fatherland is Austria, the western part of the Empire and, without criticizing the situation in Hungary, the fact that he openly supports the need of federalization is a clear sign that he does not envisage dualism as a functional form of the Monarchy. On the other hand, Austria is almost synonymous – in the speeches of A. Onciul – with the Dynasty: Austria cannot exist without the Habsburgs, regardless of whether the discussion concerned the present or the future.

The necessity of such a thesis resides in the lack of such a monograph dedicated to Aurel Onciul, as well as in the perpetuations of certain clichés concerning the analysis of the Bukovinian political life within the first two decades of the 20th century. Nonetheless, for the period in question, studies do exist (though they are not very numerous) and they were elaborated mainly post-1989. I considered it necessary to reconsider the issue and to get an insight on the documents, which has the potential of providing a new perspective and a reassessment of the Bukovinian realities within the period studied.

The annexation of northern Bukovina in 1945 by the Soviet Union, doubled by the passage of Romania to the socialist system, turned the subject of the history of this province into a taboo one in the Romanian historiography until the 70s. The first articles on the history of Austrian Bukovina have emerged starting with 1969, in the “Yearbook of the Suceava County Museum” and then in other specialized journals, signed, among others, by Ioan Cocuz or Mihai Iacobescu.

¹ Only one attempt can be mentioned thus far: the study of Florin Pintescu, *Viața politică românească în Bucovina: loialism, autonomism sau iredentism? (1900-1914)*, in “Codrul Cosminului”, II, 2, Suceava, 1996.

The period when Austrian Bukovina became a point of interest for historians coincided with the climax of national-communism in Romania. Hence, the discourse adopted by the historians of Bukovina was a patriotic one, meant to unmask the injustice of 1775, with an accusatory tone for Austrians' policy meant to "diminish the ethnic importance of Romanians". "The national emancipation of Romanians from the Austrian iron yoke" has a central role in the historiographical discourse before 1989.

The 1991 publication by the Humanitas Publishing House in Bucharest of the work *Istoria Bucovinei* (edited by Stelian Neagoe) by Ion Nistor was just a first, symbolic step in the new era, expected to involve a democratization of the historiographical discourse, after almost five decades of totalitarianism. This opening to dialogue of the Romanian historians – including with the representatives of the other ethnic groups within the former Austrian province – was a slowed-pace process. The Romanian historiographical discourse has never been too far from the unilateralism that the Romanian historians reproached to the Ukrainian or Austrian ones.

In this context, none of the political characters such as Aurel Onciul – a controversial figure including among the contemporaries for his extreme fidelity towards "Austria" – has been presented equidistantly or with a hint of objectiveness. The need of the Romanian interwar historiography to complete the great 1918 act with a history on the same scale led to analyzing the "traitor" and "anti-unionist" Onciul exclusively by the events of 1918². As a matter of fact, this vision still stands and it is present in the current historiographical writings, too.

Thus far, the only attempt of explaining the political activity of Aurel Onciul belongs to the grandson of the Bukovinian politician, Aurel C. Onciul, who, in 1999, published at Nurnberg the work *Aurel Ritter von Onciul und der Nationale Ausgleich in der Osterreichischen Bukowina: Eine wissenschaftliche Dokumentation*³. It is also worth mentioning the works of Marian Olaru, who studied thoroughly the political portrait of Aurel Onciul⁴; however, he focused on his negative impact on the evolution of the Romanianism in

²See, among others, N. Iorga, *Istoria poporului românesc*, vol. 4, part II, Editura Casei Școalelor, Bucharest, 1928; Idem, *Supt trei regi. Istoria unei lupte pentru un ideal moral și național. România contemporană de la 1904 la 1930*, second edition, Așezarea tipografică "Datina Românească", Vălenii de Munte, 1932; Ion Nistor, *Zece ani dela Unire*, Czernowitz, 1928; idem, *Amintiri răzlețe din timpul Unirii*, Tiparul "Glasul Bucovinei", Czernowitz, 1938, etc.

³Aurel Constantin Onciul, *Aurel Ritter von Onciul und der Nationale Ausgleich in der Osterreichischen Bukowina : Eine wissenschaftliche Dokumentation*, Verlag ARVO, Nurnberg, 1999.

⁴Marian Olaru, *Aurel Onciul și revista "Privitorul"*, in "Analele Bucovinei", I, 2, Bucharest, 1994; idem, *Activitatea politică a lui Aurel Onciul, 1904-1918*, in "Analele Bucovinei", II, 2, Bucharest, 1995; idem, *Despre*

Bukovina, in the period of his activity. For the rest, the historians who dealt with the past of Bukovina (Ioan Cocuz, Mihai Iacobescu, Radu Grigorovici, Constantin Ungureanu, Pavel Țugui, Vlad Gafița, Mihai-Ștefan Ceașu, Andrei Corbea-Hoisie, etc, to mention just a small part of the authors of the most recent contributions referring to this subject) noted or analyzed the activity of Aurel Onciul in the broader context of the evolutions in the Bukovinian political life.

I organized the thesis into five chapters and I used the chronological sequence as main criterion, though not singular.

Chapter I, *Aurel Onciul – biographic sheet*, is dedicated, for the most part, to the first 33 years in the life of Aurel Onciul. The eldest of the four sons of Professor Isidor, knight of Onciul, Aurel benefitted from a great education (he attended the Theresium Academy of Vienna, then the Faculty of Law within the University of Czernowitz; he finished his law studies at the University of Vienna, from which he graduated in 1885; he presented his PhD thesis a year later). Starting with 1888, he entered the service of the State. Then, he advanced gradually on the imperial bureaucracy scale until he became a district captain in Moravia, a position that he occupied until 1900. In this period, he also published a series of law works⁵, with application in the administration⁶, concerning the issue of the multilingualism within the Empire⁷, etc⁸. I have also studied the extended family of Aurel Onciul, from the first of his ancestors mentioned in the Austrian documents – Grigoraș Onciul –, to his four sons with Hermine Gradlmiller, without forgetting his brothers Titus, Constantin, and Adrian, his sisters, and his parents, Isidor and Aglaia.

This chapter also comprises a series of characterizations made by some contemporaries of Aurel Onciul, among whom I mention Valeriu Braniște and Alexandru Vaida-Voevod. I have included this element in the second part of the chapter because, besides the information on who Aurel Onciul was and what he did, I believe it is as relevant to know the way in which his contemporaries saw him, in order to outline a realistic portrait.

crezul politic al lui Aurel Onciul, in “Analele Bucovinei”, IV, 1, Bucharest, 1997; idem, *Aspecte ale vieții politice în Bucovina la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea (II)*, in “Analele Bucovinei”, V, 1, Bucharest, 1998.

⁵Aurel Onciul, *Reforma administrației*, in “Convorbiri literare”, XXXIII, 9, 15 September 1899, Bucharest; idem, *Dreptul administrativ român. Parte generală*. Publishing house of the author, Tipografia Carol Gorischeck, Vienna, 1900; idem, *Der Versicherungsvertrag nach österreichischem Rechte*, Vienna, 1896.

⁶Aurel Onciul, Florea Lupu, *Dicționar juridic-politic*, Editura societății politice “Concordia”, Czernowitz, 1895; idem, *Repertoriu pentru secretarii comunali*, Editura societății politice “Concordia”, Czernowitz, 1895.

⁷Aurel Onciul, *Zur österreichischen Sprachenfrage*, “Die Zeit” Publishing House, Vienna, 1898.

⁸Idem, *Der neue allgemeine Zolltarif für die Ein- und Ausfuhr des Königreiches Rumaenien*, MANZ’sche k.u.k. Hof-Verlags- und Universitäts-Buchhandlung, Vienna, 1891, idem, *Das Gesetz vom 30. März 1888, R.G.Bl. Nr. 33 betreffend die Krankenversicherung der Arbeiter erläutert*, k.k. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, Vienna, 1894,

The most consistent part of the thesis is the second chapter, *Aurel Onciul – diet and imperial deputy*. Organized chronologically, the chapter contains the main moments in Onciul's political career, within the interval 1902-1914. No sooner had he entered the Bukovinian political scene, than Aurel Onciul became a decision factor. As the leader of the "democratic group", Onciul proposes to represent the interests of the peasants and of the rural intellectuals, the two groups which Onciul considers "the sole of the country". In order to promote their economic, social, national, etc interests, the democratic group took various forms throughout the time, from the "Unirea" Political society (1903) to the alliance with the Jews, the young Ukrainians and the German liberals, called the "Freethinkers' Alliance" (1904), to the collaboration with the Conservatives, and then with the Romanian nationalists in the organization triad the National Romanian Party (1905) – the Christian Social Romanian Party in Bukovina (1908) – the National Romanian Party (1909), and to the constitution of the Peasant Party (1914). In the meanwhile, Aurel Onciul, elected diet deputy (1903) and imperial deputy (1905), was not only the leader of the Democrats, but also an important decision factor on the Bukovinian political scene, taken into account by the leaders of all the other groups, and one of the most famous politicians of the province.

However, such a chapter implies – besides presenting Onciul's activity, ideas, and actions – an outline of the framework, reason for which I had to include, though rather summarily, issues such as the parliamentarism in Austria, the emergence of mass parties, the political situation in Bukovina before 1902, the organization and functioning of the Bukovinian parties, etc. This section also comprises explanations on the choice and functioning of the Diet of Bukovina, of the Country's committee or of the Imperial house, that is the central decision-making framework, the local power functioning, and the importance of local and central representations, in order to understand as thoroughly as possible the political activity of Aurel Onciul.

The third chapter contains two seemingly parallel planes. On one side, I described the situation in Bukovina, especially that of the Romanian population of this province during World War I. On the other side, I presented the activity of Aurel Onciul in this period. This organization manner is not random considering that, after 1914, Aurel Onciul lost contact with the realities of the province. While Bukovina was being devastated by the war, he made plans in Cluj, Bucharest, and Vienna for the post-war Austria.

Most of these four years, Onciul was far from Bukovina, considering that, from the fall of 1914 to the summer of 1917, none less than three Russian invasions and as many Austrian "liberations" took place. The analysis of the way in which the death of Franz

Ferdinand and the beginning of the war were mirrored by the press and reflected officially was meant to obtain some general lines regarding the state of mind in Bukovina in the summer of 1914. What happened after the autumn of the same year – following the first Russian invasion – is a chronicle of the fact that most of the people in this province gradually lost their trust in the protective shield of the Habsburgs. I also included a brief presentation of what the specialized literature calls “the east front”, meaning the battles between the armies of the Central Powers and those of Russia, which took place in Galicia and Bukovina. The purpose of the presentation was a better understanding of the situation in the province and of the impact of these battles upon the population and its faith in Austria. Another issue discussed is the way in which the fate of post-war Bukovina was seen from Sankt Petersburg, Bucharest, and Vienna.

The second part of the chapter provides details of the ideas of Aurel Onciul regarding the outline of Austria’s future, as well as of his post-war activities. I considered it necessary to present Aurel Onciul’s ideas on the federalization of Austria-Hungary and the comparison to those of Aurel C. Popovici because they offer an explanation of Onciul’s actions during the period in question. I also included in this chapter the organization of the “Romanian legion”, the attempt to solve the “national issue” in Transylvania, the participation to the utopian plan of Constantin Stere of dethroning the Romanian king, etc; I also provided, in this matter, the corresponding context and examples from historiography, reactions of the contemporaries, or personal opinions.

The exit of Austria-Hungary from World War I, the situation in Bukovina in the fall of 1918, and Aurel Onciul’s activity during the last months of the Habsburg Empire are the main issues approached in the fourth chapter of this thesis; it is entitled *The union between Bukovina and Romania and the “particular action” of Aurel Onciul*. The first part of the chapter presents the situation of Austria-Hungary at the end of the war and the impact of the High imperial manifesto (October 16 1918) on the Empire in general and especially on Bukovina. It is also worth mentioning the events in Galicia and especially the constitution, in this region, of the Western Ukrainian People’s Republic, because it influenced dramatically the actions of the Ukrainians in Bukovina. The rest of the chapter studies the events in Bukovina starting with October 27, the moment when, at Czernowitz, there was a proclamation for the constitution of the Constituent Assembly of Bukovina, until November 6, when the Romanian Army entered this province. In the aforementioned chronological interval, the politician Aurel Onciul was actively involved in the progress of the actions, though he did not have a decisive influence on the course of the events. I did not present

exclusively his role in the event because, though his role did not lack importance, there was no unanimity of opinions or solidarity in action within the camp of the Bukovinian Romanians, reason for which it was not right to ignore the actions and roles of the other participants to the events. However, when, on October 9 1918, Onciul left to Iași, his personal destiny seemingly broke forever from the fate of Bukovina.

The last chapter of the thesis, the fifth, entitled *A symbol of the Old Austria: Aurel Onciul after the Union between Bukovina and the Romanian Kingdom*, is a reconstitution of the last three years of Onciul's life (November 1918 – September 1921) and of the way in which this former subject of the Habsburgs tried to adjust to the realities of the Great Romania. Aurel Onciul's failure to build a new destiny in the Kingdom of the Hohenzollerns does not represent a singular story, though these stories were exceptions, and it provides a different perspective on the Romanian realities post-1918.

As a first step in the elaboration of this thesis, I tried to consult as many works as possible regarding the history of Austria. One cannot understand the history of Bukovina before 1918 and of Aurel Onciul without knowing the history of Austria, at least for the modern period. However, Bukovina, though situated in Austria, had its distinct features. The historiography dedicated to this province was necessary in order to outline certain general characteristics regarding the political, social, economic, etc life, within the chronological interval taken into account for the elaboration of this thesis. Using the information from older or newer papers and books on the political life of Bukovina, the portrait of Aurel Onciul can be outlined. Furthermore, the name of the Bukovinian politician appears in the memoirs of certain contemporaries that he met briefly or for longer periods, such as Valeriu Braniște, Onisifor Ghibu, Alexandru Vaida-Voevod (from Ardeal), as well as the Bukovinian Sextil Pușcariu.

I completed the information taken from historiography and memoirs with that from the press, the one published both in Bukovina, especially in the period between 1902 and 1918, and in Romania during those times. I consulted exhaustively the publications issued in the Duchy, such as "Privitorul", "Voința Poporului", "Foia Poporului", "Gazeta Bucovinei", "Dreptatea", "Patria", "Românul", "Viața Nouă"; furthermore, I found precious information on the events within this province in the Bucharest-based newspapers "Adevărul", "Universul", "Epoca", "Neamul Românesc", etc, or in the pages of the Iași-based journal "Viața Românească".

The documentary material used in the elaboration of the thesis was completed by certain documents within the Historical National Central Archives in Bucharest, the Austrian

State Archive (*Österreichisches Staatsarchiv*) in Vienna, the State Archives in the Czernowitz Region (*Державний архів Чернівецької області*), Ukraine, the Suceava County Directorate of the National Archives, and within the Archives of the University of Vienna (*Archiv der Universität Wien*).

From such a thesis, the reader usually expects “the case to be solved”. Was Aurel Onciul a traitor or not? Was he against the union? These are two questions that some people may think should be answered within this thesis. However, it fails to do so, but not because the answers would be hard to formulate, on the contrary. On the other hand, the purpose of this thesis is not to exonerate, to “rehabilitate” Aurel Onciul, but to reassess a previously settled portrait in the Romanian historiography by broadening the information framework. Erasing “the shadows” in Aurel Onciul’s career, exacerbating his merits is as harmful for the history of Bukovina as the minimization of his role and as labelling him an eternal traitor of the Romanianism. The purpose of this thesis was to present, as much as possible, Aurel Onciul only as a man of his time, neither as a champion of Romanianism, nor as a traitor of his nation.

It goes without saying that it is absurd to claim this is an objective thesis, as it would not be the truth. I do not believe that there is genuine objectivity in this domain, but I avoided, as much as I could, “judging” Aurel Onciul.

In the end, without claiming of having exhausted the entire documentary material or of leaving no room for completions, I believe that this project represents a contribution to setting light on certain relevant issues in the history of Bukovina, from the last decades of its “Austrian” period. This thesis covered, judiciously, the subject “Aurel Onciul and the loyalty towards the House of Habsburg”.