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FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY
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STUDIES**

The University of Vienna and the Formation of the Romanian Intellectual Elite (1919–1938)

ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

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Keywords

University of Vienna, Romania, intellectual elites, interwar period, *peregrinatio academica*, *Bildung*, Romanian students abroad, cultural diplomacy, interwar Vienna, microhistory.

The present thesis offers an in-depth analysis of the role played by the University of Vienna in the formation of Romanian intellectual elites during the interwar period (1918–1938), through an approach that correlates institutional analysis with a social perspective and with the methodological tools of prosopography and microhistory. The starting point of the research is the hypothesis that academic migration—established in historiography under the term *peregrinatio academica*—cannot be interpreted exclusively as an individual option generated by the limitations of the Romanian university system, but must instead be understood as a structural phenomenon, with long-term implications for the cultural, scientific, and institutional modernization of modern Romania.

Within this framework, the University of Vienna is examined not merely as a prestigious institution of higher education, but as a genuine hub of Central European academic modernity: a space for the accumulation of symbolic capital, the transfer of knowledge, and diplomatic mediation, with tangible effects on the configuration and legitimization of Romanian elites.

The historical context of this dynamic is essential. Romania entered national modernity relatively late, and the institutionalization of higher education through the founding of the universities of Iași and Bucharest in 1864 did not eliminate the structural vulnerabilities of the system. The shortage of specialized teaching staff, insufficient infrastructure, the absence of consolidated academic traditions, and the limited number of potential students created a framework in which external training became almost indispensable.

After 1918, with territorial expansion and the integration of provinces with distinct university traditions, the Romanian system underwent a process of more coherent institutional articulation; however, imbalances persisted. In this context, the orientation of young Romanians towards Western university centers—among which Vienna occupied a privileged position—continued to represent both a strategy of professional advancement and a means of acquiring academic prestige and legitimacy within a competitive European framework.

The research is based on a substantial body of primary sources originating from the archives of the University of Vienna—files from the dean's offices of the Faculties of Medicine and Philosophy, individual doctoral files (*Rigorosenakten*), and matriculation registers—as well as from the fonds of the Ministry of Public Instruction and of the universities of Bucharest, Iași, Cluj, and Cernăuți, preserved in the National Archives of Romania, and from Romanian-Austrian diplomatic documentation held at the Austrian State Archives (*Österreichisches Staatsarchiv*).

The corroboration of these sources makes it possible not only to reconstruct individual academic trajectories, but also to understand the institutional and political mechanisms that supported or limited mobility. The methodological analysis combines the examination of universities as arenas for the negotiation of prestige and legitimacy, the interpretation of academic mobility as a strategy of social advancement within a context marked by ethnic, confessional, and political dynamics, and a prosopographical approach aimed at identifying recurring patterns and significant differences among various categories of students.

Structurally, the thesis follows a progression from the contextualization of the Romanian framework to the detailed analysis of the Viennese experience. In the first stage, it discusses the formation of elites within the Romanian space of the period, with an emphasis

on the institutional vulnerabilities of domestic universities and on the tensions generated by the expansion of the state after 1918. The particularities of Transylvania and Bukovina, shaped by different institutional legacies and complex ethnic relations, are integrated into an analysis that highlights the way in which academic mobility functioned as a structural response to the needs of a society undergoing a process of administrative and cultural consolidation. The perspective then broadens into a transnational framework, placing the University of Vienna at the center of a European academic network and examining its role as a laboratory of intellectual transfer and as an instrument of Romanian cultural diplomacy until the rupture brought about by the *Anschluss* in 1938. Viennese prestige, sustained by curricular rigor, considerable bibliographical resources, and the cosmopolitanism of the urban environment, offered Romanian students a flexible educational framework, adaptable to individual strategies and to various specializations.

The analysis of the concrete experience of Romanian students in Vienna constitutes the interpretative core of the research. The fields of study pursued are examined both from the perspective of the domestic demand for specialization and in relation to the Viennese academic offer. The thesis investigates aspects of student association, networks of solidarity and support, as well as the bureaucratic mechanisms of academic validation, ranging from the defence of theses to the recognition of degrees in Romania. The case studies reconstructed on the basis of individual files highlight the diversity of experiences: remarkable successes, careers accelerated by the symbolic capital accumulated in Vienna, but also administrative difficulties, rejections, or discontinuities generated by political or financial constraints. This microhistorical perspective makes it possible to nuance the image of academic mobility, emphasizing its ambivalence and avoiding an exclusively triumphalist interpretation.

The findings of the research confirm that the university must be understood not only as an institution for the transmission of knowledge, but also as a mechanism for the production and certification of symbolic capital, essential for integration into the state and cultural structures of interwar Romania. Viennese education facilitated the internalization of scientific practices, professional norms, and work ethics associated with Western modernity, which could subsequently be converted into institutional authority within the Romanian space. This transfer, however, was not a mechanical one; rather, it involved processes of adaptation and cultural translation, through which universal academic models were integrated into a context often perceived as peripheral. Romanian modernization thus

emerges as a process dependent on external models, in which Vienna represented a prestigious node, yet one embedded within a broader European network of circulation of ideas and specialists.

Although the chronological delimitation and the focus on a single university center require caution in making generalizations, the analysis provides a solid interpretative framework for understanding the relationship between academic mobility, elite formation, and the dynamics of Romanian modernity. By articulating the institutional level with the individual one, and by integrating the diplomatic dimension into the analysis of education, the present thesis contributes to a reassessment of the role of *peregrinatio academica* as an essential mechanism of negotiation between the universalist aspiration of *Bildung* and the realities of state and cultural construction in interwar Romania.

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