Nicolae Iorga was born on 5 June 1871 and was murdered on 27 November 1940 – a fate from which we academics are usually exempt: the most we risk is character assassination by our colleagues in the professional journals. Iorga was killed, however, not so much in his capacity as historian as in his capacity as politician. His death therefore neatly yokes together the relationship which I wish to explore in this chapter – namely that between political consciousness and historical explanation. I do not intend to offer an analysis of Iorga’s career as such, or to survey the range of his activity (which would require a conference in itself) but a brief outline of the main stages and characteristics of his working life is necessary.

He grew up in Botoșani, the son of lawyer; he raced through a series of schools to the University of Iași where he graduated at the age of eighteen. Thereafter advanced degree work took him to Paris, with research visits to Italy, Austria, Germany and the United Kingdom. Iorga received his doctorate from the University of Leipzig in October 1893. A year later he was appointed to the chair of World History at Bucharest which he occupied until his death. By that time he had written or edited over 1300 books and, at the last count, 10,000 articles. This output – even when one allows for multiple counting for translations – is a formidable achievement. He became an Academician at the age of twenty-seven. Apart from history, he wrote poems and plays put on at the Romanian National Theatre, founded and edited newspapers and journals and from 1913 inaugurated and directed the Institute for South East European Studies, which still flourishes.
Iorga also immersed himself in public causes initially through the press. In 1905 he became editor-in-chief of Sămănătorul, a weekly review, and thereafter was involved in managing, editing and contributing to a number of publications of which Neamul Românesc is probably the most important from our point of view. From 1907 he ran the Cultural League, an organisation devoted to exposing what he regarded as the injustices suffered by Romanians then living under Hungarian rule and to giving them clandestine help. He entered parliament in 1907 and three years later, with Professor Alexander Cuza, founded the National Democratic Party. It was reformist, calling for redistribution of the land, investment in education and the vote for all Romanians. It required the army to be expanded on a scale to allow it to dominate any of the forces of Romania’s Balkan neighbours. But ‘Romanians’ excluded Jews from the franchise and the army and sections of the economy. (The constitution already discriminated against them in land-ownership.) Education and the arts were to emphasise the national culture.

The bridge between Iorga the Academician and Iorga the Politician is provided by the summer schools at his home at Vălenii-de-Munte where from 1908 he instructed young Romanians, especially those under foreign rule, in an effort to ‘raise consciousness’ about the Romanian identity. The form was educational; the objective, political. He campaigned not only for the acquisition of Transylvania (which had been on the political agenda since 1892) but also for the reacquisition of Bessarabia which though sundered from Moldavia in the partition of 1812 had been ‘written off’ by Romanian politicians, either for reasons of prudence – tsarist Russia was a more formidable adversary than Hungary – or because they thought that Russification had gone too far. Iorga insisted that Bessarabia should enjoy exactly the same status as Transylvania in Romania’s foreign policy objectives.

In the First World War, during the period of neutrality, Iorga advocated intervention to realise ‘Greater Romania’, and after the military débâcle of 1917 exhorted the government in Iaşi to resistance à outrance. At the time of the Paris Peace Conference, Iorga campaigned for the maximum frontiers to create an integral state. In 1919 he was elected first President of the National Assembly. Thereafter he broke with Cuza (who went on to found his own anti-Semitic League of National Christian Defence). Iorga’s party consisted of a group of his personal adherents operating in the increasingly confused and fragmented state of Romanian politics until parties were abolished in 1938.