The interwar period, which followed the traumatic experience of the unprecedented destruction brought about by the Great War, marked a profound shift in the perception and experience of notions such as modernity, historicity, and temporality. With the ever more radical distrust that targeted the optimistic and progress-oriented modernizing programs of the nineteenth century came the development of new political ideologies that posed as alternative projects for managing the future of the nations. Fascism, a latecomer (Juan Linz) among political ideologies of the time, mounted one of the toughest and most destructive challenges against the status quo, including a revision of the way in which modernity was perceived, while also highlighting a novel kind of relationship with the historical past. In East-Central and Southeastern Europe, fascism took a particular turn if compared with the developments in Western Europe, and exploring this experience by looking at the intellectual support it garnered at the time could prove to be a fruitful endeavor.

Despite several decades of intensive research, the study of fascism as a major political phenomenon of the twentieth century is still far from reaching its endpoint.\(^1\) While the literature on paradigmatic cases such as the Italian or the German one is abundant, ‘peripheral’ yet salient cases such as Romanian fascism remain less researched. The main theoretical constructs regarding the origins, the evolution, and the success of fascism as a political movement were based almost exclusively on analysis of Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany, with small additions of the French, Spanish, and, sometimes, British cases. The present research will position Romanian fascism in the history of regenerative, revolutionary projects that matured in the interwar period as an alternative to what a disenchanted generation considered the decaying system of fin-de-siècle liberalism, while thoroughly examining how they were rooted in the historical and intellectual environment of the epoch.

The wider focus of research is an in-depth look at a group of intellectuals who sympathized with, and in some cases even joined, the Iron Guard (the most important fascist movement in interwar Romania) and had a genuine
impact on its development in the 1930s. An inventory of these intellectuals would include historians (Vasile Christescu, Vladimir Dumitrescu, and Petre P. Panaitescu), sociologists (Traian Brăileanu, Traian Herseni, Ernest Bernea, and Leon Țopa), philosophers (Dumitru C. Amzar), men of letters (Dragoș Protopopescu, Arșavir and Haig Acterian, and Radu Gyr), and lawyers (Alexandru Cantacuzino, Alexandru Constant, and Mihail Polihroniade). The present contribution consists of a case study, the formation of the Axa group, which included several of the aforementioned young intellectuals, who adhered to the Iron Guard in 1932–33 and enhanced its ideological strength.

The research looks at their radical response to the temporal crisis that interwar Romania had to face, how that time horizon shaped their political views, and their ideas for an alternative extreme right-wing revolutionary way toward modernity. As a suggested interpretative framework, the current project argues along the same lines as historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat does when referring to the Italian case, that fascism as a ‘project of national regeneration’ appealed to many intellectuals ‘as a new model of modernity that would resolve both the contemporary European crisis and long-standing problems of the national past’ (Ben-Ghiat, 2001, p. 2). In this sense, many intellectuals were motivated in their actions by what has been termed ‘the “sense of a beginning”, the mood of standing on the threshold of a new world’ (Griffin, 2007, p. 1). In order to meaningfully contextualize the emergence of this group of intellectuals, one also had to assess the relevant social and political precedents that occurred in interwar Romania, such as the emergence of the ‘1922 student generation’ and its influence on the intellectual foundations of the Iron Guard.²

Post-1918 Romania, the student generation of 1922, and the turn to fascism

Romanians were on the winning side of the First World War. The ‘1918 Great Union’ was regarded as the culmination of centuries of struggle, and those who contributed directly to its accomplishment were revered as heroes of the nation. The case of General Alexandru Averescu, who became a legendary figure after the war, and served twice as prime minister (1920–21; 1926–27), is quite eloquent in this regard.

However, unlike in other European countries, those who fought during the Great War, the veterans, who took part in the battles, would not become a distinctive and decisive force in the political and social environment of interwar Romania. The fact that Romania was on the winning side and that ‘Greater Romania’ had been accomplished made them feel that they had played their historical part and that they only had to consolidate these gains.

In this context, one of the most important political challenges that interwar Romania had to face was mounted by the young generation, which consisted primarily of those who had been teenagers during the war and unable to fight and who were in the universities in the early 1920s, benefiting from the recent ‘democratization’ of the university system.