

Secrets, Lies, and Consequences: A Great Scholars' Hidden Past and His Protégé's Unsolved Murder,
by Bruce Lincoln (Oxford University Press, 2024)



Book Review

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Abstract

*This review examines Bruce Lincoln's *Secrets, Lies, and Consequences* (2024), highlighting its exploration of Mircea Eliade's relationship with the Iron Guard, the unresolved murder of Ioan Petru Culianu, and the ethical complexities of scholarship, mentorship, and historical memory. It argues that Lincoln's work makes a significant contribution to ongoing debates surrounding Eliade's legacy and the responsibilities of intellectual history.*

Keywords: Mircea Eliade, Ioan Petru Culianu, murder, intellectual history

'In May 1991 Ioan Culianu, associate professor of history of religions at the University of Chicago Divinity School, approached a colleague with a request to safeguard some papers. Less than a week later, Culianu was shot to death in the Divinity School men's room. The papers he sought to protect would eventually come into my hands. This is their story.' (Lincoln, 2024: 9)

Born in 1946, Bruce Lincoln is Professor Emeritus of the History of Religions in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. His doctoral dissertation, later an award-winning book, *Priests, Warriors, and Cattle: A Study in the*

Ecology of Religions (University of California Press, 1980) was supervised by Mircea Eliade. His other books include *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (1989), *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (1995), *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (2002) and *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (1999), perhaps his most impressive. This latter-named work carries a warm, if brief, tribute to Eliade. I had hoped that *Secrets, Lies, and Consequences* would unpack their relationship at length. It does not really do so, however.

It is an unusual book. Lincoln's own work combines extensive erudition, bold – perhaps eclectic – comparisons, original lines of thought, and imaginative insights. This work might be closer to true crime, and contains genuine detective work, but its autobiographical aspects made the work deeply personal and painful. It might be described as a cautionary tale about mentorship. The writing was, in the author's words, 'not just technically difficult, but emotionally fraught' (Lincoln, 2024: 9). He summarised (justified?) his relationship to his mentor thus: 'Mr. Eliade was my second father, whom I loved and to whom I am indebted in countless ways' (Lincoln, 2024: 12). Lincoln had been increasingly aware of Eliade's involvement

with Romanian fascism in the 1930s but had not taken a full measure. This book records such a reckoning.

Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), it needs hardly be said, was a world-famous historian of religion, with an impressive knowledge of Asian and European languages. He was also a significant Romanian language novelist, and memoirist. Some 35 of his books are published in English. Post-World War II, he lived in France, before settling in Chicago in the mid-1950s. He was a professor and department head in the University of Chicago until his retirement in 1983.

The man widely seen as his chosen successor was fellow Romanian Ioan Petru Culianu (1950-1991). In a shocking incident, he was murdered, aged only 41. The crime was never solved, but the more likely scenario was that he was killed by agents of the Securitate, angered by articles critical of the post-Ceaușescu regime that Culianu had written. Just days before his murder, he asked a colleague, Mark Krupnick (1939-2003), to safeguard some papers. These papers were then passed by Krupnick to Lincoln.

The papers were translations into English of articles that Eliade had written in the 1930s, in which he signalled his support for the Legion of the Archangel Michael and the Iron Guard, the Legions's paramilitary wing. In a comic twist, Lincoln then lost the papers when clearing out his desk in 2017. Realizing his error, he committed himself to learning Romanian, finding the originals, re-translating and publishing them. In the process he encountered many other texts on the thorny issue of Romanian fascism, and Eliade's relationship to it. Some of these were published in Italian, German, and French, and were thereby often beyond the reach of scholars who were embroiled – pro and contra – in the controversies over Eliade's dark past.¹ Eliade's literary estate refused permission to publish many,

but the copyright runs out in 2028, so all will become publicly available in two years' time.

Eliade was a child of post-Paris Treaty and post-Trianon Treaty Romania, when the country doubled its size at the expense of its neighbours. It gained areas that included Transylvania, Banat, Bukovina, and Bessarabia. With them it gained national and religious minorities including Germans and Hungarians, Roma and Jews. The politics of the 1920s and 30s were dominated by the national 'question' with right-wing strains rejecting Western influence and modernity, favouring *volkish* culture and spirituality. Eliade was already a prolific writer in his teens, and he seemingly worked his way through this sea of opinions and worldviews. He came under the influence of Bucharest Philosophy Professor Nae Ionescu at this time and was invited to contribute to his right-wing newspaper, *Cuvântul*.

Some of these writings are quoted and examined here, in Lincoln's efforts to find out how close to Romanian fascism Eliade had been. In particular, he asks if his writings were explicitly anti-Semitic, as anti-Semitism was an explicit part of the Legion's ideology, and its charismatic founder Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (1899-1938). Plainly there was much common ground between the Legion's decidedly religious worldview and Eliade's own messianic nationalism, with its longing for spiritual rebirth (whatever that might mean in practice). In his own words, he did not seek a revolution such as those of Lenin, or Mussolini, which were merely 'political' and compromised by modernity, rather, he longed for messianic transformations akin to those of Jesus or Gandhi. While it is true that the Legionnaires did soak themselves in the language of sacrifice and martyrdom, they also freely soaked themselves in the blood of their victims. Gandhi they were *not*. But was Eliade ever active in the Legion?

In 1938 the Legion was outlawed and its leaders jailed, including Eliade's mentor Professor Nae Ionescu. Eliade was also arrested and asked to sign a declaration of 'desolidarization' committing

¹ For another notorious case of a distinguished mind's ambiguous relationship with fascism, see Jeff Collins' *Heidegger and the Nazis*, Icon Books, 2000.

himself to leave the Legion and have not further political activities. He refused to sign, claiming that he had no political role. He was then jailed in a concentration camp for several months, only being released with the help of his wife's contacts. But he still had to sign a declaration. This time he did, an

act he never acknowledged in any of his later writings. Preserved in the files of successive Romanian security services, it came to light only in the postcommunist era when the Securitate Archives were made public, years after Eliade's death. (Lincoln, 2024: 64).

From the late 1930s until the end of his life, he was deliberately evasive about his actual beliefs. Lincoln conjectures his motive:

In doing so, he sought to shield himself against two antithetical dangers that would haunt him for the rest of his life: (a) the possibility that the authorities or those hostile to the Legion would recognize the extent of his earlier involvement and believe – rightly or wrongly – that he remained loyal to the movement; (b) the possibility that his former legionary comrades would consider him a traitor. Maintaining that two-sided defense was no easy matter. (Lincoln, 2024: 65-66)

Codreanu himself said to his followers: 'If I have only one bullet and an enemy and a traitor are in front of me, I would use the bullet on the traitor'. (Lincoln, 2024: 37) His organisation was as obsessed with internal betrayal as it was with Jews. Had his former comrades considered Eliade a traitor, it might well have cost him his life.

By the 1970s, Eliade was so highly regarded internationally as to be nominated for the Nobel Literature Prize, although he was not awarded. Yet periodically rumours about his past would appear, especially in Italy and Israel. His responses were evasive and disingenuous. He was loyal to

Codreanu, who was executed in 1938, but not to his successor Horia Sima who briefly shared power with the wartime dictator Antonescu. He could not have been an anti-Semite, after all he was friends with the Jewish author Mihail Sebastian. And the anti-Semitism of the Legion was 'economic' not 'racial' (like that of the Nazis). It was true that he had left Romania before the war and had spent much of the war as a diplomat in Lisbon. But the Legion were an extremist organisation long before the war, they were deeply anti-Semitic and literally murderous.

Two people who had a role in the defence of Eliade's reputation were his second wife Christinel, and the above-mentioned Ioan Culianu. The latter owed a great deal to Eliade's personal and academic patronage, which left him in a compromised position.

But given the extent to which his own career and reputation were now irrevocably linked to Eliade's, he surely understood that it was in his interest to assume the best of his mentor and patron. (Lincoln, 2024: 124)

Christinel as wife (and later widow) was fiercely protective of her husband's reputation. He has supposedly sworn to her that he never belonged to the Legion, and that any inconvenient texts that retrospectively tied him to the movement were obviously forgeries by his enemies. 'Sad, lonely, angry, and defiant, Mrs. Eliade agonized not just over the critics' attacks, but what she came to see as the inadequate efforts of unreliable friends and wavering allies' (Lincoln, 2024: 153). Among those who incurred her wrath was the ostensibly loyal Ioan Culianu. Following Eliade's death, Culianu 'saw new information coming to light that threatened to discredit some of Eliade's customary denials and obfuscations'. He thus had to '...stave off the critics without sacrificing his own credibility and self-respect' (Lincoln, 2024: 160).

But there was more at stake than self-respect. On 21 May 1991, Culianu was shot dead in a men's room in Chicago University.

The lurid quality of the crime, plus the occult nature of Culianu's research interests, fed all sorts of speculation about the identity and motive of the killer. Some people imagined him – and given that the murder took place in a men's room, we can presume that the killer was male – to have been a disgruntled student, jilted lover, jealous spouse, drug dealer, cult member, or, as one person interviewed by the police put it, one of the 'wackos' attracted to Culianu's classes. The details, however, suggest a cool professional who performed the task with precision, then walked away, never to be caught. (Lincoln, 2024: 164)

The motive? Culianu had been writing some comic/satirical articles for *Lumea liberă* (Free World), a Romanian expatriate journal with a circulation of ten thousand. Yet several months before his assassination – so a year after the revolution – his columns dropped their political content and concentrated on literary and cultural matters. Culianu did host the long-deposed King of Romania, Michael (1921-2017) on a trip to Chicago. There was a movement to re-install the monarchy in Romania, which would have upset the new regime. But would the new regime have undertaken an assassination in the USA? Having interviewed several informed Romanians, including a Securitate defector, Lincoln thinks it unlikely. Culianu was simply not important enough to merit such attention.

Who then did kill him? Might it have been an exiled Legionnaire, as there were several in Chicago? Culianu had become engaged to Hillary Wiesner, who was Jewish. If he had been part of their community, as Eliade was considered still sympathetic to the Legion, such a betrayal might have been unforgivable. But Culianu was not considered part of the 'family', so this too is

unlikely. Lincoln does not formally accuse Eliade's obsessively protective widow, Christinel, of conspiracy. But he does suggest that a member of the Romanian diaspora might have taken it upon himself to dispose of Culianu, who had incurred Christinel's wrath. Eliade was held in great esteem by the community, and any damage to his reputation might be felt collectively. Yet nothing is conclusive, the murder remains unsolved.

What this book adds to Lincoln's distinguished oeuvre is hard to assess: the tone is crabbed and somewhat guilt-ridden. As a reader, one senses how personal and painful it was to write. It adds a layer of painful irony to something that Eliade told Lincoln when he was a graduate student in 1971. "When I take on new students," he began, in what was clearly a well-rehearsed speech, "I prepare myself for the day they will betray me." (Lincoln, 2024: 12).

The controversies over Eliade's fascist associations will continue to play themselves out in the coming years and decades. However belatedly, this book has contributed to the process.