

# The (Un)grateful Homeland

## The Hard Life of World War I Invalids in Interwar Romania

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*Glasul Eroilor 1, 1 (1930).*

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### Introduction: Support Programs for World War I Invalids

THE FIRST World War had a grim outcome, with the loss of millions of lives among combatants as well as non-combatants. In addition, many people were left severely wounded or suffering from various life-changing disabilities. Statistics compiled in 1920 listed at least 10 million invalids among the soldiers in World War I. However, there were also those affected among civilians, which raised the figure to nearly 20 million persons suffering from various degrees of invalidity.<sup>1</sup>

Among the belligerent nations, Germany was particularly affected, with 1,500,000 invalids. France had over 1,100,000 veterans who were granted disability benefits. Russia counted between 900,000 and 1,700,000 invalid men, and Great Britain had around 750,000 invalid soldiers.<sup>2</sup> Other countries had smaller numbers of invalids: in 1932 Poland counted 150,208 af-

affected persons, while Portugal reported over 8,000 invalid veterans.<sup>3</sup> Many of the war invalids found it difficult to return to pre-war normality, as physical and psychological trauma took its toll and made job searching and social reintegration problematic.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, many countries resorted to measures meant to “compensate” those affected by wounds and disability, including pension plans and other support measures for the care of World War I invalids.<sup>5</sup> Support programs were generally coordinated by the state or by various public voluntary and charitable organizations.

In France a ministerial order dated 2 March 1916 created L’Office national des mutilés et réformés (ONMR) (The National Office for Disabled and Discharged War Veterans). In terms of organization, the office was run by an administrative council composed of nine members from three different ministries, assisted by two executive bodies. The office included a rehabilitation commission in charge of the invalids’ professional reintegration as well as of the administrative, financial, and technical coordination of specialized centers and schools. Furthermore, there was a development board that oversaw the general, material, and psychological needs of the war invalids. In addition, a number of circulars issued by the Labor Department on 20–21 March and 31 July 1916 established offices for war invalids and discharged soldiers under the authority of departmental councils. A later decree, dated 20 January 1920, created the Ministry for Pensions, Bonuses and Allocations and on 19 December 1926 a National Office of Combatants (Office national du combattant) (ONC) was attached to the Ministry for Pensions. A decree of 28 June 1927 established the main role of the Office, which was to oversee the psychological and material needs of former combatants and issue specific identity cards called “combatants’ cards.” The year 1919 saw the establishment of pensions for war invalids: out of the approximately 1,000,000 beneficiaries, around 100,000 were severely disabled former combatants with a degree of invalidity of over 85 per cent. The invalids in France were also issued special books that listed a series of benefits: by 1934 there were 3,400,000 such documents.<sup>6</sup> However, even with such measures in place, the integration of French invalids, especially on the labor market, was extremely difficult.<sup>7</sup>

In Germany, state authorities paid increasing attention to the invalids, which became a priority for the Weimar Republic. From the mid-1920s, around 20 per cent of the Republic’s budget was allocated to the pensions of war victims, compared to only 7 per cent in Great Britain. However, the decision by German authorities to eliminate private and local initiatives for the support of war veterans did not have positive outcomes in the longer term. Hostility started to build between the veterans and the rest of the population. The former believed that society was not grateful for the sacrifices they had made, whereas many

Germans thought that the invalids had a privileged position in terms of social policies. Defeat in the war, the ensuing revolution and hyperinflation in 1923 were factors that increased the hostility of veterans. The discontent of those affected was increasingly directed against the state and was exploited in the political discourse, including among extremist groups.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to Germany, in Great Britain the support for those affected by the war was predominantly left in the hands of public associations and charitable organizations, and the involvement of the state remained minimal. In 1919, the King's National Roll Scheme (KNRS) initiated a program for the assistance of former World War I soldiers with disabilities: companies were encouraged to hire from this group. One year after the launch of the KNRS, the number of employers involved in the scheme rose to 500, and the number of men who found employment was 89,000. These numbers increased steadily: by 1928, over 380,000 invalid former soldiers were hired, while the employers involved in the scheme reached 27,500. The companies involved in the program included big names from the world of British business and industry, such as Hovis, Lipton, Colman's, Schweppes, Pears, Bovril, Gillette, Goodrich Tyres, Fry's Cocoa, and Debenhams.<sup>9</sup> This legislative initiative encouraging private firms to employ World War I invalids was especially important in a context where the pensions offered to this group were small and many of those affected missed out on financial support from the British state.<sup>10</sup>

In Portugal, starting in 1918, government authorities created a pension scheme for veterans with disabilities rated at a minimum of 20 per cent. They had to be reassessed periodically by a medical commission that had to decide whether they were still entitled to their invalidity pension. However, the allocated sums were quite small, barely reaching the level of a monthly salary. If they did not want to lose their entitlement, the veterans had to wear prostheses and participate in rehabilitation activities. These institutions were active for a limited time only in Lisbon, and there were only two of them. Moreover, only a limited number of war veterans were offered these services, as the Portuguese government, too, was not exactly generous and supportive.<sup>11</sup>

Poland was in a particularly difficult situation after the war. For over 100 years it had been divided territorially, and after World War I it had to face a situation where a significant number of invalid Polish soldiers had fought under Austro-Hungarian, German, or Russian flags. The government's response was an Act of 18 March 1921 which established disability pensions, free medical treatment, prosthetic equipment, and a range of rehabilitation initiatives. However, the state's financial difficulties led to the annulment of invalid pensions in March 1922. Subsequently, the Social Care Act of 16 August 1923 transferred the obligation of providing for invalids from the central government to the local

authorities. Even this did not solve the problem, as local councils also struggled financially. Ultimately, at least for soldiers who had lost their sight in World War I, help came from the Polish community in the United States.<sup>12</sup>

In Romania as well, World War I generated many victims. Over 1.4 million soldiers participated: 500,000 came from the Old Kingdom, around 726,000 from Transylvania and Bukovina, and 200,000 from Bessarabia. Of these, the amount of war invalids was over 230,000.<sup>13</sup> This significant number led the Romanian state to adopt a range of measures of financial compensation, support, and help. In the interwar period the state honored the sacrifice of these individuals with a legislative framework meant to support the social groups that had emerged after the war: invalids, orphans, and widows.<sup>14</sup>

Even though earlier studies have mentioned this range of legislation regarding war invalids, orphans, and widows,<sup>15</sup> it may be worth reviewing these initiatives. Therefore, the first section in the present study focuses on this aspect, but paying attention only on the war invalids. At the same time, a chronological presentation of the series of legal initiatives and their change over time in interwar Romania might help the reader feel less lost in the maze of legal activities.

However, the present study aims to go further by giving a voice to the war invalids. Therefore, the second section will deal with records of the difficulties these people faced in their daily lives. Whereas Maria Bucur has used extracts from their correspondence with *Oficiul Național al Invalizilor, Orfanilor și Văduvelor de Război* (National Office for Invalids, Orphans, and Widows) as her sources, the present study is based on press excerpts. More precisely, it uses the periodical publication  *Glasul Eroilor: Organ independent pentru apărarea drepturilor invalizilor, orfanilor și văduvelor din război* (The Voice of the Heroes: An independent periodical for the defense of the rights of war invalids, orphans, and widows). First published in Bucharest on 20 March 1930, with Lieutenant Dumitru Gomoescu as its director, who was an invalid himself, this publication aimed to address “all matters of interest” to these social groups, as well as relating “facts and episodes from their lives.”<sup>16</sup> A bimonthly publication, the paper only had ten issues between March and August 1930, after which it ceased publication on 20 August 1930 “due to financial difficulties.”

Despite the fact that it was short-lived, the newspaper  *Glasul Eroilor* managed to disseminate to a wider public information on the difficulties faced by invalids, especially during the economic crisis. To this were added the many changes and readjustments in the legislation pertaining to this social category. The periodical also shed light on examples of how the rights of these people were trampled on, how illegalities were committed especially by local authorities and officials, and how those affected tried to make them known to the public.

## The Normative Framework for the Assistance of World War I Invalids in Romania: A Brief Overview

**T**HE HIGH numbers of those affected in the aftermath of World War I forced the Romanian state to develop a range of support and assistance measures which marked a transition from “compassion and philanthropy” towards more coherent forms of welfare programs for those in need. A complex array of legislative and normative measures was put in place by the Romanian state for the assistance of war invalids, orphans, and widows. For example, over the period 1919–1939 a number of 49 acts, decrees, binding decrees, regulations for the application of laws and the organization and functioning of institutions, as well as bulletins of the council of ministers were issued.<sup>17</sup> By far the most important of these legal initiatives was *Legea pentru înființarea Oficiului Național al Invalizilor, Orfanilor și Văduvelor de Război* (Law on the establishment of the National Office for War Invalids, Orphans, and Widows) which came into force on 24 August 1920 and was published in *Monitorul Oficial* on 2 September 1920.<sup>18</sup>

Comprising ten chapters and fifty-eight articles, the law listed in chapter eight the special allowances and benefits granted to war invalids, orphans, and widows. The first group had the following benefits: priority in the payment of pensions ahead of the other state pensioners (article 39); exemption from security guard services, duties, taxes, and services (articles 40–41); the right to be employed in state institutions and cumulate a pension and a salary (article 42); the exclusive right to licenses for the retail of products manufactured by state monopolies (article 43); discounts of 75 per cent on the national railways (*Căile Ferate Române*), on the Romanian river transport (*Navigația Fluvială Română*) and on the Romanian Maritime Service (*Serviciul Maritim Român*), as well as 50 per cent discounts on tickets to entertainments subsidized by the state (article 44); the right to acquire and own property (article 45); exemptions from tuition fees for the children of war invalids (article 48); the right to lease regimental canteens, restaurants in train stations, market stalls, communal markets and pubs without having to go through a tender procedure (article 50); the right to free bath treatment in spas (article 51); invalids who were not fit for work and had no means of subsistence had the right to be provided with clothing and food from army supplies (article 52).<sup>19</sup>

Another important aspect of the law was a stipulation in article 30, which read as follows:

*within 30 days from the coming into force of the present law, county prefects, commune mayors, police prefects, the police, garrison commanders, the commanders of*

*recruitment bureaus, the commanders of rural gendarmeries, and the chairmen of delegate associations are to collect from subordinate staff and committees all the data regarding the invalids in each county and provide the necessary information for a good knowledge of each individual.*<sup>20</sup>

*Legea relativă la ratificarea Decretului numărul 70/1918 și introducerea unor modificări și adăugiri în legea privitoare la reformarea și pensionarea gradelor inferioare decretată sub numărul 3244/916* (Law on the ratification of Decree no. 70/918 and on the introduction of modifications and additions to the law on the revision of lower-grade pensions decreed under No. 3244/916) was also passed on 2 September 1920. This established, among other things, the monthly pension quota to be allocated to each invalid according to his family circumstances and degree of invalidity. For example, a soldier or a corporal, whether married or single, but with no children, and with a 100 per cent loss in his fitness for work, was to receive 50 lei. Those married or widowed who had to look after 1 or 2 children were allocated 75 lei per month. Those married or widowed with 3 or more children in their care were to receive 100 lei monthly. All these categories were grouped in class I. A soldier or corporal, whether single or married and without children, with an 80 per cent loss in his fitness for work was to receive 40 lei. The married and widowed with 1 or 2 children were to be awarded a monthly sum of 60 lei, and those with 3 or more children were to receive 80 lei. These were grouped in class II. Class III included soldiers and corporals, whether married or single, but without children, with a loss of 60 per cent in their fitness for work; those married and the widowers, with 1 child or 2, received a monthly sum of 40 lei; those married or widowed, with 3 or more children, were to receive 60 lei monthly. Another important provision of this law was the award of benefits to those who were entitled to a pension, but were yet to receive their entitlement: this allowance amounted to their pension quota.<sup>21</sup>

On 31 December 1920 *Monitorul Oficial* published *Regulament privitor la aplicarea legii pentru înființarea Oficiului Național al Invalidizilor, Orfanilor și Văduvelor de Război* (Regulation on the application of the law concerning the establishment of the National Office for War Invalids, Orphans, and Widows) with 404 articles. Chapter 3 listed comprehensively the rights of war invalids, orphans, and widows in terms of pensions and special benefits. The latter were divided into several categories: unconditional allowances to be awarded to all war invalids, orphans, and widows (A); unconditional allowances to be granted only to war invalids (B); conditional allowances to be awarded to war invalids, orphans, and widows (C); conditional allowances to be awarded only to war invalids and widows (D); special conditional allowances to be granted to war invalids who were totally unfit for work (E); specific conditional allowances made to invalid officers and to reassigned invalid non-commissioned officers (F); special

allowances for the children of invalids and for war orphans (G). As regards the war invalids, category A included the right to receive treatment in sanatoria and thermal spas, discounts on travel and entertainment tickets, as well as reserved seats at national holidays. Allowances included in category B were exemptions from personal taxation and public services. Category D included invalids' rights to licenses for the retail sale of products from state monopolies, tender-free leases of canteens, stalls, buffets, and employment in public roles commensurate with their training and skills. Category E provided for exemptions from civic labor as well as the right to receive clothing and provisions from army supplies. Category F listed the invalid officers' right to receive 5 hectares of land. Category G contained stipulations that the children of war invalids were to be exempt from paying tuition fees, priority admission to public or private agricultural colleges, or schools of arts and trades, free treatment in state, county and commune hospitals, exemptions from fiscal and stamp duties as well as from postal fees for internal correspondence.<sup>22</sup>

The legislation also applied to war invalids from territories neighboring the Kingdom of Romania, combatants in foreign armies or in the Romanian army, who had acquired Romanian citizenship after the union of 1 December 1918. For example, *Decizia ministerială numărul 619 din 14 Octombrie 1920* (Ministerial Decision no. 619 of 14 October 1920) reiterated the fact that the law regarding inferior ranks applied equally to servicemen from Bukovina, Bessarabia, Transylvania, Banat and the other Hungarian-speaking regions. Measures were taken to open offices to fast-track pension entitlements at Cluj, Sibiu, Cernăuți, and Chișinău.<sup>23</sup>

*Regulamentul legii privitoare la reformarea și pensionarea gradelor inferioare din 1916 cu modificările ulterioare* (Regulation on the law of rehabilitation and pensions for the lower ranks of 1916 and its subsequent recasts) was published in *Monitorul Oficial* of 4 January 1921. It focused largely on the application procedures for pensions and benefits. It also included a number of appendices listing the medical conditions included in the three main invalidity groups. Class I, for example, had 7 main categories, which included: total loss of eyesight, the complete paralysis of two parts of the body, and tuberculosis. Class II comprised 8 diagnoses, among which: partial loss of eyesight with a reduction in visual acuity, the complete paralysis of an arm, and the simultaneous ankylosis of three major joints. Invalidity class III comprised 24 diagnoses, among which: total amputation of four fingers, the shortening of a leg by at least 10 centimeters, lesions of the spine which led to bad posture and affect mobility considerably, and permanent fistulae of the airway.<sup>24</sup>

Additional legislative acts were also adopted, offering practical support to war invalids, such as *Legea pentru vânzarea de locuri de case invalizilor, văduvelor, funcționarilor* (Law on the sale of building plots to invalids, widows, and civil

servants), published in *Monitorul Oficial* on 18 October 1921, or *Legea pentru contractele de închiriere către invalizii de război* (Law on rental contracts for war invalids), published in *Monitorul Oficial* on 15 November 1921.

The Law on the establishment of the National Office for War Invalids, Orphans, and Widows underwent several changes, the first dated 14 April 1922,<sup>25</sup> with *Legea pentru modificarea unor articole din legea Oficiului Național al Invalizilor, Orfanilor și Văduvelor de Război* (Law amending some articles in the law on the establishment of the National Office for War Invalids, Orphans, and Widows).<sup>26</sup> On 29 April 1922 a new *Regulament pentru funcționarea Oficiului Național al Invalizilor, Orfanilor și Văduvelor de Război și pentru organizarea și dezvoltarea operelor de asistență națională* (Regulation for the functioning of the National Office for War Invalids, Orphans, and Widows and for the development of national welfare assistance programs) was adopted. An important provision in this document was the creation of a service for the war-mutilated and for orthopedic equipment. The role of the service was to functionally rehabilitate the invalids and to support those who had been maimed by supervising the creation of physio- and mechanotherapy, orthopedic workshops, as well as the applications for prosthetic devices or for their free repair.

At the same time, a warehousing system was established which had to supervise the distribution of medication, sanitary materials, and medical instruments, as well the dissemination of information on their distribution and use. Furthermore, a legal counseling bureau had to represent and support before the administrative authorities and the courts the rights and interests of the National Office, as well as of the war invalids, orphans, and widows.<sup>27</sup>

Despite such legislative initiatives, a review of the National Office's activities for the period 2 September–31 March 1922 does not indicate the most positive outcomes in terms of improving the situation of those affected by World War I. For instance, although this body had intended to compile a census, this was never done. Furthermore, the data sent to the Ministry of War by some recruitment centers listed only around 100,000 invalids. From a total of 19,108 invalids of lower military rank, only 10,037 were actually awarded their pension entitlement, while 9,071 "remained deprived." For the invalids to be able to produce records of their invalidity and obtain their benefits, the National Office was supposed to issue certificates of invalidity, but over a period of 2 years only 215 such certificates were issued. The results were equally disappointing for the special allowances: data shows that only 485 invalids benefitted from treatment in water spas, 471 benefitted from exemptions from taxes and public services, 378 invalids were granted land, 205 were exempted from civic labor, and a further 21,998 invalids received their discount cards for the Romanian Railways. In addition, 3,100 licenses for the state's Monopoly Directorate were



issued, and 90 invalids benefited from such licenses for the restaurants and bars of the Romanian Railways. Four invalids were awarded life pensions from the Office's credit department. Reimbursable loans to the value of 238,102 lei were awarded to 135 invalids, while 105 invalid officers received advances on their pensions. A total amount of 41,002 lei in credits was awarded to 30 invalids to start up a commercial activity. A number of 400 invalids received allocations of firewood. Free clinic consultations were offered to 1,371 invalids, while 34 invalids received home visits. Free medication was distributed to 897 invalids, while 105 received paid-for medication.<sup>28</sup>

In its session of 19 January 1929, on the basis the provisions of article 51 in the law on the National Office for war Invalids, Orphans, and Widows, the Council of Ministers authorized the agriculture ministry to deliver 3 free cubic meters of firewood each to war invalids with 80–90 per cent degrees of invalidity. Also, those belonging to this group were to receive 5 cubic meters of timber each for the construction of housing and outbuildings.<sup>29</sup>

*Legea pentru preferința acordată invalizilor, văduvelor și orfanilor de război la împroprietățire* (Law on the priority to land ownership for war invalids, widows, and orphans) was published on 7 July 1930, supplemented by regulations concerning its application. Article 5 stipulated as a priority that land was to be granted to the severely mutilated, as well as to invalids recognized as such.<sup>30</sup>

*Legea sanitară și de ocrotire* (Health and protection act), published in *Monitorul Oficial* on 27 April 1933, stipulated in its article 128 that the hospital of the Ministry for Work, Health, and Social Protection was to be transformed into a central hospital for invalids, orphans, and widows and should provide free hospital treatment, specialist outpatient consultations, as well as medication.<sup>31</sup>

*Legea pentru plasarea invalizilor, orfanilor și văduvelor de război în funcțiuni și locuri de muncă* (Law on the work placement of war invalids, orphans, and widows), dated 25 April 1936, required all state-subsidized institutions, including enterprises and commercial institutions that worked with the Romanian state, to reserve 10 per cent of vacancies for the war invalids.<sup>32</sup>

*Legea pentru înființarea Casei de credit și ajutor a invalizilor și văduvelor de război* (Law establishing the credit and loans bank for war invalids and widows) of 29 June 1936 was meant to guarantee lower-interest and long-term loans to those disabled during military operations.<sup>33</sup>

*Legea pentru unificarea pensiilor ofițerilor invalizi de război și urmașilor lor și armonizarea pensiunilor de serviciu ale reangajaților și urmașilor acestora* (Law on the alignment of the pensions of invalid officers with those of their descendants and the harmonization of the pensions of re-employed officers with those of their descendants), published in *Monitorul Oficial* of 22 May 1939, established a quota for monthly pensions depending on military rank and degree of invalid-

ity. The latter was divided into six main classes: 0 per cent, 20 per cent, 40 per cent, 60 per cent, 80 per cent, and 100 per cent. Thus, an officer with a degree of invalidity of 20 per cent was to be awarded a monthly pension of 16,000 lei, a major was to receive 10,600 lei, and a captain 9,050 lei.<sup>34</sup>

An analysis of the legislative initiatives on behalf of those left with disabilities and various degrees of invalidity after World War I shows that the Romanian state was significantly involved in measures regarding financial compensation, support, welfare, as well social reintegration. The situation of war invalids was addressed responsibly and in a speedy manner, and the legislative framework was comprehensive and often went beyond similar approaches in other European countries.<sup>35</sup> However, the following section of the present study looks at real-life situations and at aspects pertaining to the lives of war invalids.

## The Difficulties Faced by Romanian Invalids As Presented in the Newspaper *Glasul Eroilor*

**A**N ANALYSIS of the information sourced in the newspaper *Glasul Eroilor* indicates that, while the legislation included a range of rights and allowances for these social categories, in reality such measures were quite often ignored or misapplied. Thus, in spring 1930, as the discount cards for the Romanian Railways issued to the invalids and their families were discontinued, a group of a hundred invalids had discussions with the chairmen of the Senate and of the Chamber of Deputies, as well as with representatives of the Ministry of Communications. Because the Romanian state no longer had the financial resources needed, a compromise solution was reached, whereby they were to be continued for the invalids, orphans, and widows, but not for their families. The author of the article, Lieutenant D. Gomoescu, noted that “on this occasion, we can see that yet another one of our rights has been taken from us.”<sup>36</sup> The newspaper also presented the case of the invalid Stroe Tatu, from the commune of Beceni in Buzău County, who had been called for re-evaluation at the 6<sup>th</sup> Health Directorate. However, he was not granted gratuity for this journey, although this was stipulated in article 42 of the Law on war invalids, orphans, and widows. Consequently, he “was forced to walk over a distance of 160 kilometers, for two days and two nights, begging for food along the way to quell his hunger.”<sup>37</sup>

Under the title “Patria recunoscătoare?” (The grateful homeland?), Sergeant I. Rădulescu-Tilie listed a series of rights consisting of financial aid, clothing, bandages, and medication, which in fact the invalids did not receive. They were no longer admitted into hospitals and sanatoria, under the pretext that they had no one to pay for their treatment if they were ill. The number of places in ther-

mal spas was extremely limited, the construction timber and firewood from the state's forests were a rarity, and the invalids' children were exempt from paying tuition fees only on paper. The allocation of land was made to less than 50 per cent of the three categories entitled to it. Positions in state institutions were in reality filled with persons selected on political criteria, and state and commune franchises were likewise granted to other persons.<sup>38</sup>

Abuses of the law were also noted, sometimes committed with the tacit agreement of the local authorities. For example, at Ploiești, the local council invoked alleged aesthetic reasons in order to ban invalids from trading on the high street, and many of their stalls and kiosks were removed. Public opinion strongly opposed such abuses.<sup>39</sup> One war invalid lost his license for selling chestnuts in the street. Likewise, on the order of a mayor, an invalid's lemonade machine was removed, to be replaced by a machine for making doughnuts, which belonged to a local councilor.<sup>40</sup> One invalid, sergeant I. Rădulescu-Tilie, from the commune of Sericu in Vlașca County, who had to make a living for himself, his wife, and six children in his position as secretary-inspector of the grain market in Videle, Vlașca County, was fired from the job.<sup>41</sup> Another case was that of Al. Niculescu, from the commune of Radomirești, Stoicănești village in Olt County, who had been a church singer for 16 years. Having lost a leg on the battlefield, he was sacked by the parish priest who was not pleased with the invalid singer's performance.<sup>42</sup>

A series of illegalities were also committed against the families of war invalids. A letter addressed to the Ministry for Education showed that many children of invalids were being expelled from schools because they had not paid tuition fees. One case mentioned in the newspaper was that of the son of the invalid Gheorghe Tudor, from the commune of Știrbei-Romanați, who had had to drop out of the Teacher Training College in Craiova.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the newspaper noted that such cases were frequent across the country. Another case concerned the invalid Ilie Nicolae from the commune of Anghelești in Putna County. With both legs amputated, he asked for a loan of 2,200 lei from the bank to pay his daughter's tuition fees. Although article 48 of the Law on war invalids, orphans, and widows mentioned tuition exemption for the children of war invalids, even when the fees were imposed by school committees, the author of the article shows that in practice the provisions of this law were not respected.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, the invalid Alexe Nicolae, from Mihăileni in Dorohoi County, deplored the fact that his son, who had graduated from the school for apprentices of the Romanian Railways, had been fired from his job without an explanation.<sup>45</sup>

The article in the periodical also explores other difficulties in the lives of invalids who faced complex situations with limited financial resources. Such was the case of a war invalid who stated that he was "starving . . . together with his wife and six

young children, and we are struggling with 60 lei per month.” Nicolae Achim was in a similar situation, living with his wife and four children on 20 lei per month. A photograph shows him, with both legs amputated, and a poignant summary of his life: “this is all I got!”<sup>46</sup> There is a similar photo of the invalid Ilie Niculae who comments sadly: “I did my duty, today I am battling against poverty!”<sup>47</sup>

In search of solutions for such difficult situations, the invalids sent applications to the competent state authorities, which the paper mentions. For example, the invalid Vasile Drăgan, from the commune of Galați in Făgăraș County, suffered of pulmonary tuberculosis and received a monthly pension of 145 lei, although he was entitled to receive 1,500 lei. In his application, he asked for the correct pension to be paid to him, explaining that he had “to support himself and his family comprising a wife and three young children; as he had no other income, had received no land and he finds himself starving.”<sup>48</sup>

Other invalids suffered because the financial aid to them had not been paid, although article 39 of the Law on the establishment of the National Office stipulated that their pensions had be paid in monthly and they had to be prioritized



Fig. 1. NICOLAE ACHIM, war invalid  
SOURCE: *Glasul Eroilor* 1, 1 (1930): 3.



FIG. 2. ILIE NICULAE, war invalid  
SOURCE: *Glasul Eroilor* 1, 5–6 (1930): 3.

over the other state pensions. However, for example, the war invalids Stan Ene and Ion Oancea from Vlașca County did not receive a pension for almost six years. Only after numerous complaints did the two manage to have their pensions reinstated, but without the remaining amount for the period 1 April 1924–1 January 1929, as the authorities invoked a lack of funds. The two had to wait until an agreement could be reached on new budget appropriations.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Ion Țerlea from the commune of Talpegi in Tecuci County had not been paid a pension since 1923 and had not had a land allocation. Because he had to provide support for several children, he asked that at least he should receive some land, as he had no means of subsistence.<sup>50</sup> The invalid Slave M. Ivanciu from the commune of Istria in Constanța County also complained that he had not received land, because he was in hospital at Colțea at the time when the veterans' land settlement commission was at work in his home town. He explained that he had submitted many applications to the Ministry of Agriculture, but had had no result. In his first application, he wrote that “he asked the minister to kindly take measures for him to take possession of the land he was entitled to, at least in the 13<sup>th</sup> year after the war.”<sup>51</sup> Delays in due payments had been noted earlier in the case of invalids in Bessarabia. On 10 July 1926 they were received by the finance inspector requesting that measures should be taken, as their pension had not been paid for two months.<sup>52</sup> Invalids in Transylvania had faced similar situations. In Brașov County, for example, by 1933 many former combatants with serious invalidity had not even been considered for the allocation of their due pensions. At the same time, it was noted that often aid was given to individuals with a comfortable material situation rather than to many poorer and disabled veterans.<sup>53</sup>

The articles in the newspaper  *Glasul Eroilor*  mentioned a series of efforts at alerting the wider public to these difficulties. The public reacted by organizing protest movements or by compiling letters addressed to personalities and to those in power that highlighted the difficult situation of those who had suffered in the aftermath of World War I. Thus, invalid Lieutenant D. Gomoescu launched an appeal to all the war invalids, orphans, and widows across the entire territory of Greater Romania calling for a protest action in Bucharest on 11 April. The main aim was to obtain the recognition of the legitimate rights of these social categories and measures that would ensure that they have a decent life.<sup>54</sup> However, the periodical also mentioned that the event was marred by clashes with the police which resulted in one death and several people seriously wounded, as well as people beaten and arrested. Conversely, the government's official communiqué claimed that participants at the event had not been assaulted physically and that some of their demands had been met. Nevertheless, the communiqué added in a diplomatic tone that there was no significant improvement to the situation, placing the blame on the poor financial legacy of the previous government.<sup>55</sup>

Subsequently, a letter signed on behalf of all war invalids was sent to Queen Marie, the “Mother of the Wounded.” The signatories notified the queen that the invalids’ rights had not been respected for 13 years and their entitlement to a decent life had been denied. Moreover, the letter said, at the Bucharest protest meeting on 11 April, participants had been attacked by the police, beaten, trampled on, injured, and pushed back with water cannons.<sup>56</sup> On 16 July 1930 a delegation of lower-rank invalids presented King Carol II with a petition that contained some their demands. They received assurances that they were not to be subjected again to a humiliating experience like that of 11 April, that “satisfactory pensions were going to be offered to those who could no longer work,” while those fit for work were going to be given opportunities to earn a living.<sup>57</sup>

In many instances, the situation of war invalids was also complicated by divisions among those who had suffered in the war, fractions which resulted in the creation of several associations. The newspaper mentions the creation of associations such *Societatea Mutilaților de Război* (The Society of Those Mutilated in the War) as an annex to the earlier *Societatea Invalizilor de Război* (The Society of War Invalids), as well as the association *Șoimii Oituzului* (The Falcons of Oituz). Although these groups were ostensibly supposed to help those who suffered hardship, they became rivals and their leaders always argued among themselves. The author of the article stated ironically that ultimately every invalid was going to establish his own association.<sup>58</sup> This problem affected such associations at regional level, too, as early as 1926. Bessarabia is an edifying example. Here, programs of assistance and protection for war invalids, orphans, and widows were coordinated by no less than six such organisms, with six separate administrative structures and six separate teams. Consequently, in the appeal to the prime minister and the minister of social protection, signed by the Archbishop Gurie of Chișinău, the recommendation was that only one organism should be retained, thus leading to savings in the state budget and to viable solutions for the support to be offered to those affected by the war.<sup>59</sup>

The articles in the newspaper list series of dysfunctions and errors in the way the degrees of invalidity were determined. One example cited was that of 343 officers classed as having 0 per cent infirmities, although they had enough health problems that would have justified their inclusion on a scale of 5 classes of severity: 20 per cent—40 per cent—60 per cent—80 per cent—100 per cent. For example, the medical commission decided that a captain with only one kidney and an open fistula, as well as a crooked back, “could hardly work for a living.” Yet, he was classified as having a 0 per cent degree of invalidity, as opposed to 80 or 100 per cent. Another captain with bacillary tuberculosis was classed as 0 per cent rather than 100 per cent. A lieutenant with bilateral deafness, nasal atrophy, TBC, a missing kidney, and an intestinal affection was also classified as 0

per cent rather than 60–80 per cent. There were situations where invalids were included in inferior classes of invalidity. One major with only one eye and several large lesions on the body was classed as 40 per cent rather than 60–80 per cent. Another major, gravely affected physically on the battlefield, was classed in the 100 per cent category, rather than as severely disabled with 50 per cent plus. Looking at such situations, the author of the article wondered whether the commission made errors of classification or tried to save government money “at the expense of those who suffer and are afraid, or with a foot in the grave.”<sup>60</sup>

Under the title “Ploaia de... rente viagere” (It’s raining... life pensions) the periodical mentioned the significant incomes granted to officials of the Romanian state, ranging between 10,000 to 150,000 lei per month. In contrast, it reiterated the fact that the war invalids, orphans, and widows were starving and were told repeatedly by the government that there were insufficient funds. And although some officials had refused the sums they had been offered, deeming the project immoral, the law was nevertheless adopted, “and greedy rentiers lined their pockets.”<sup>61</sup> In an open letter sent to Finance Minister Virgil Madgearu, the war invalid I. Rădulescu condemned the annual salary of 3,500.000 lei granted to the general director of the Romanian Railways, ironically referring to the latter’s (in)capacity. At the same time, he also disapproved of Minister Madgearu himself, who cumulated his ministerial salary with that of professor at the Commercial Academy. Meanwhile, he explained his invalidity pay was only 60 lei, out of which he had to provide for himself, his wife, and six young children.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusions

**T**HE FIRST World War had major consequences of a military, economic, demographic, and social nature, with millions of lives lost and further millions left with health problems and disabilities. To come to the aid of these affected groups, the belligerent states initiated various measures meant to ensure their financial support, but also their social reintegration and economic independence.<sup>63</sup> The state took responsibility for displaying the nation’s “gratitude” and honored the sacrifices made, especially by those who had directly participated in combat.<sup>64</sup>

Yet, even though the Romanian state adopted a wide-ranging legislative framework meant to ensure support for the rehabilitation and social integration of the war invalids, interwar Romania had to face a series of challenges. These generated delays, readjustments, interruptions, and even elusions of the stipulations included in laws, decrees, binding decrees, and the regulations for their application and for the functioning of institutions. Some of the causes of

these challenges were linked to the fact that the Union of 1918 brought not only an extension of Romania's territory, but also a rising number of people from the new territories who needed support. To this were added the economic difficulties generated by the great economic crisis that fully engulfed Romania alongside the rest of Europe.<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, the practical aid programs offered to the war invalids were in many instances a complex process which spanned almost the entire interwar period. Delays in the definitive decisions for awarding pensions were often caused by the shortage of staff and offices responsible for the programs. A report published by the National Office for War Invalids, Orphans, and Widows 18 months after the creation of the Office showed that around 50 per cent of war invalids had not yet received the financial support they were entitled to. Many times, this generated uncertainty, discontent, and protests.<sup>66</sup>

Not least, the wide-ranging legislative program for the support of the war invalids underwent a series of adjustments especially due to the Romanian state's attempts to overcome the financial difficulties. Moreover, in many cases there is evidence of injustice, corruption, and abuses committed against the war veterans, especially by the local authorities.<sup>67</sup> The situation was similar for many war invalids, irrespective of their geographic provenance, and it did not seem to improve with time. A case in point is the situation in Năsăud County in late November 1919. The testimonies are poignant:

*We often witnessed people of sound mind, who have been invalids for a few years and appeared to bear with manly fortitude their unhappiness, burst out in bitter tears when pressed, not because of their invalidity, but because of the brutal, unbecomingly and rapacious manner of those appointed to protect them; they see this as an insult on the part of administrative bodies that obviously are lacking not only in the awareness of their official duties, but also in an elementary sense of compassionate humanity and patriotism.*<sup>68</sup>

The sources from the newspaper *Glasul Eroilor* are concrete examples of the aforementioned situations in the lives of Romanian invalids in the interwar period. These examples often refer to the denial or the rights and allowances awarded to the war invalids, to dysfunctions and errors done by civil servants, to abuses committed sometimes in collusion with the local authorities, and illegalities directed even against the families of war invalids. Among those having had to live with the poor health and the disabilities caused by the military conflict, such situations often generated a sense that society was ungrateful for their sacrifice.





## Notes

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## Abstract

The (Un)grateful Homeland:  
The Hard Life of World War I Invalids in Interwar Romania

In the interwar period there was a widespread wish to express gratitude towards those who suffered after World War I. The Romanian state assumed a central role in initiating and coordinating programs meant to ensure protection, support, and measures of social integration for the war invalids by adopting a wide-ranging legislative framework. The aim of the present study has been to review these legislative measures. In addition, it went beyond this analysis by presenting the difficult lives of the Romanian war invalids, due to the great number of affected individuals, to financial difficulties, and to frequent changes and readjustments in the law. The analysis of case studies from the periodical *Glasul Eroilor* (The voice of the heroes) has revealed examples of infringement of the invalids' rights, of dysfunctions and errors committed by state officials, of abuses and illegalities. Consequently, many Romanian war invalids felt that society was not really grateful for the sacrifices they had made.

## Keywords

war invalids, Romania, interwar period, pensions, economic crisis