

Making the case for war in Eastern Europe

Robert D. Kaplan's In Europe's Shadow

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Robert D. Kaplan: "In Europe's Shadow. Two Cold Wars and a Thirty-Year Journey through Romania and Beyond", New York: Random House 2016, 292 pages. All references are to this book.

The latest book by Robert D. Kaplan, one of Washington's foremost geo-strategists and war apologists, makes a blatant case for transforming Romania into a military stooge for US imperialism and preparing for all-out war against Russia.

Kaplan is one of the most influential "embedded journalists" of Washington and bears responsibility for the millions of dead and wounded in the Middle East in the "war on terror". In November 2001, while working as a journalist for the *Atlantic*, he attended a meeting that was organized by then deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The purpose of the meeting was to outline a Middle East policy for President George W. Bush, with a particular emphasis on arguing for an invasion of Iraq. In Kaplan's own words, the report resulting from the meeting was "a forceful summary of some of the best pro-war arguments at the time."

For many years, Kaplan has been regularly providing reports to the CIA, the Navy, the Pentagon and the White House, in the form of more than a dozen books whose topics closely align with the main foreign policy concerns of US imperialism. More recently, he published a book on the Indian Ocean, arguing for a close alliance with India in Asia against China; as well as a book on the South China Sea, making the case for an aggressive posture of the US military to challenge China. The fact that he now devotes a book to Romania and its role in US strategy against Russia is therefore an important indicator of where to look for the coming crimes of US imperialism.

Kaplan's claims in the press that the book represents "a mixture of journalism, history and politics" and a "work of love" are ludicrous. His book has absolutely nothing to do with providing an objective account of the history and society of Romania. The only people he ever quotes or talks to are former or incumbent prime and foreign ministers, presidents, and unnamed "friends" who then turn out to be some experts on energy policy and other issues. It is a filthy work designed to convince layers of the US military and political apparatus to focus more on an alliance with Romania in the war-drive against Russia, providing a rationale for collaboration with right-wing, if not fascist, elements in the Romanian bourgeoisie and intelligentsia.

Romania as part of an anti-Russian alliance

In 2014 the World Socialist Web Site explained, "Romania's bourgeois elites have used the crisis instigated by Washington and Berlin in Ukraine to transform the country into a hotbed of imperialist intrigues. They seek to revive irredentist and nationalist nostrums, previously associated with

the fascist fringes of society, and elevate them to the status of official state policies." Kaplan's book is devoted to the task of fostering this goal of the Romanian bourgeoisie in the interest of the foreign policy goals of US imperialism.

The reader has to fight through many pages of pompous and self-righteous quotes from classics of world literature and melancholy reflections about the meaning of traveling and wisdom in journalism, before Kaplan finally provides a more or less honest explanation for his interest in Romania.

Romania is located to the southwest of Ukraine, and borders the Black Sea. It is the single most oil-rich country in the region. Since the dissolution of the USSR, the Romanian bourgeoisie has been oriented toward supporting the foreign policy goals of US imperialism in Europe. In 2004, Romania joined NATO and in 2007 the EU.

In his book, Kaplan emphasizes that "Europe's struggle with Russia might not occur only over the Baltics, but over the Black Sea and involve Romania" (p. 178). He insists on the significance of Romania as the southern flank of a war against Russia, in addition to the Baltic States and Poland, which would form the northern flank. From the standpoint of controlling both the Black Sea region, which forms a bridge to both Middle East and the Balkans, Romania is of key strategic significance. Moreover, the country is rich in energy resources, especially oil.

Of special significance for control over this region are Moldova and Transnistria. Despite its minimal size and a population of only 3.5 million people (i.e., less than the city of Berlin), Moldova has a formal association agreement with NATO, although it is not a member and is not covered by Article Five, which would obligate other NATO members to defend it.

In 1994, Transnistria, formerly a part of the Soviet Republic of Moldova, broke away from Moldova after a war that claimed over a thousand dead. It has formed an independent state but was never recognized as such. Unlike in the predominantly agricultural Moldova, the elites in the more industrialized Transnistria, an even smaller stretch of land, are oriented toward an alliance with the Kremlin. For Kaplan, this is a major cause of concern. Moreover, there are tensions in Gagauzia, an autonomous republic in Moldova, where the political leaders of the Turkic minority are also oriented toward Russia.

According to Kaplan, a Russian-oriented Moldova would constitute a major blow to US interests in the region. He writes:

"Moldova (or geographic Bessarabia) is now crucial in the world of geopolitics, far out of proportion to its small size and meager population of 3.56 million. (...) Located between the Black Sea and the Carpathians, Moldova is central to Ukraine's security to the same extent that Ukraine's security is central to Russia's. Were Moldova to fall into hostile [i.e., Russian – CW] hands, Ukraine would be threatened, for Moldova combined with Transnistria occupies what I like to term the Pontic Breach, the hinterland of the Black Sea that offers an invasion route to (or from) the Balkans and the Mediterranean. Just as the North European Plain – Poland, Belarus, and the Baltic States – comprises the northern

invasion route between Europe and Russia, the Pontic Breach comprises the southern invasion route” (pp. 158-59).

For dozens of pages, Kaplan quotes various Moldovan and Romanian professors and politicians anxious to stress the “Russian danger” in the region. The “Russians,” he argues, are well about taking over control of Moldovan politics. Needless to say, he doesn’t offer any proof for the “murky” operations he constantly talks about, except these quotes from pro-Western politicians and professors.

Kaplan’s warnings of a political crisis in Moldova are not wrong, but what he covers up is that the interventions of US imperialism in the region are not least of all responsible for this crisis.

In 2005, Moldova was already the site of a US-sponsored “color-revolution”-type protest movement which failed to bring about a regime change, however. Today, the US and the EU are actively sponsoring pro-Western forces in the country, and NATO has been anxious to include Moldova in its military demonstrations directed against Russia since 2014. The Kremlin meanwhile is no doubt concerned about fostering pro-Russian tendencies in the ruling elites and the middle classes, in order to guarantee that it does not lose all influence in the region around Ukraine. Since 2014, there have indeed been increasing power struggles in Moldova with rival factions of the bourgeoisie clashing over the foreign policy orientation (see: Political crisis in Moldova).

Kaplan’s long tirades about the danger of losing Moldova to Russia can only be understood as a very direct call for more US involvement in Moldovan politics. Moreover, since 2014 the government in Bucharest has voiced its claims to Moldova and Transnistria with increasing aggressiveness. While Kaplan remains remarkably vague on this question, one cannot help but conclude that he would favor the project of a “greater Romania” which would include Moldova and Transnistria. This becomes even clearer when one examines his historical falsifications and conscious appeals to the right-wing of Romanian politics.

Kaplan proposes for Romania to become part of an Intermarium-type alliance of Eastern European states that would serve as military stooges of US imperialism against Russia. The Intermarium (Latin for “between the seas”), a concept developed by the inter-war Polish dictator Józef Piłsudski in the early 20th century, envisages a union of right-wing governments in Eastern Europe stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea and the Adriatic.

In the inter-war period, the Polish government played a key role in establishing such an alliance system in close collaboration with the Romanian government in particular. The aim was to dismember the Soviet Union by fostering ethnic and national tensions, and encircling it with the help of the imperialist powers. Based on their mutual hostility to the Soviet workers’ state, Poland and the Kingdom of Romania established an alliance in 1921 which lasted until 1939, despite ups and downs in their relationships.

Since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, and in particular the Ukraine crisis in 2014 and the coming to power of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland, this concept has become increasingly popular among Eastern European elites and policy makers in Washington as a means to encircle and, ultimately, subjugate Russia. As the WSWS has explained with regard to Poland and Ukraine, such an alliance would base itself on the most right-wing nationalist forces. This is no less true for Romania.

Exploiting the Holocaust and the crimes of Stalinism

Not surprisingly, Kaplan joyfully exploits the crimes of the brutal Ceaușescu dictatorship in the post-war period for promoting vitriolic anti-Communism and anti-Russian sentiments. The Ceaușescu regime was

indeed one of the most brutal Stalinist dictatorships in Eastern Europe and was deservedly hated by the country’s working class.

Even more than in other countries, the Stalinist bureaucracy in the predominantly agricultural Romania resorted to recruiting nationalist and even far-right elements in the late 1940s and 1950s in order to prop up its rule and suppress the working class.

One can grasp the extent of the crimes of Stalinism in Romania by the degree to which filthy propagandists of imperialism exploit them in order to foster war propaganda and promote anti-communism. It has now become the fashion among pro-imperialist pseudo-historians and pseudo-journalists to use the crimes of Stalinism to minimize those of fascism, in order to justify alliances with Eastern Europe’s far right.

Kaplan is somewhat careful about this last step, however, although he repeatedly argues that Ceaușescu was the worst thing that ever happened to Romania. One reason for his caution is that Romania indeed did experience fascist rule before the end of World War II. In 1940, the dictator Ion Antonescu came to power and brought into the government the fascist Iron Guard.

Kaplan devotes an entire chapter to the persecution of Jews under the Antonescu dictatorship. In World War II, Romania fought alongside Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany until 1944, when the Romanian government, in light of the impending defeat of Nazi Germany, chose to switch sides and aligned with the Allies.

During the war, the Antonescu regime organized some of the worst massacres of Jews in the entire Holocaust. It was the Antonescu regime that had the Jews of Bessarabia, Transnistria and the Bukovina, which were then part of the Kingdom of Romania, murdered. In total, it is now estimated that his regime accounts for between 240,000 and 380,000 murdered Jews, more than any other regime in Europe after the Nazis (see: The Nazi war of annihilation against the Soviet Union: Part two).

Kaplan goes at some length into the responsibility of the Antonescu regime for these massacres. Indeed, one begins to wonder why Kaplan, who is at pains to portray the Stalinist (“Communist”) dictatorship of Ceaușescu as the worst of all evils (worse than fascism), is so concerned with the descent into barbarism in the Holocaust. As his own record as an apologist for US crimes in the Middle East demonstrates, it surely is not because of any genuine opposition to war or mass murder.

What then drives his more or less honest exploration of Antonescu’s crimes? He hints at the reason in one passage where he warns that the crimes of Romanian fascism are being used by “Russian propaganda” to denounce pro-Western forces in Romania and Moldova. Kaplan’s excursion into the history of World War II apparently serves to safeguard him against the charge of appealing to far-right forces in Romania.

Yet this is precisely what he does. While trying to pose as an opponent of fascism and right-wing radicalism, most notably in his chapter on the Holocaust, much of his book is devoted to developing a narrative of Romanian history that is aimed to fit the sensitivities of the Romanian right, in particular its nationalist intelligentsia.

He repeatedly emphasizes the traditions of the Romanian intelligentsia of gravitating toward the far-right. Indeed, many of the most famous Romanian intellectuals in the 20th century were at one or another point either members or sympathizers of the Iron Guard, whose chief base of support was students at the universities.

In one chapter, he explores a booklet by Romania’s best-known 20th century intellectual, Mircea Eliade, titled “The Romanians. A Concise History.” Eliade was a proponent of the fascist Iron Guard in the 1930s before becoming a distinguished and influential professor of religion at the University of Chicago. The fact that he never distanced himself from his involvement with Romanian fascism did not harm his very successful career in US academia.

Kaplan devotes dozens of pages to summarizing Eliade’s account of Romanian history. While trying to posture as a critic of the book’s evident

falsifications in the interests of Romanian nationalism, his disagreement is itself put forward from a nationalist standpoint. Thus, he takes issue with Eliade's notion that the West was saved by Romania, arguing that "the West was a cultural phenomenon in and of itself. Romania was a footnote to the rise of the West, not a central element to it." (p. 65) Then, in the end, he basically agrees with Eliade's presentation, claiming:

"Yet Eliade's account, while slanted, is by no means entirely propaganda. ...Romanian history really is, after a fashion, an unending tale of bravery and martyrdom." (p. 68)

Another chapter is devoted to glorifying religion and the Orthodox Church in Romania which, as Kaplan himself notes, "in a discreet way, of course, is an emotional proponent of Romania Mare, 'Greater Romania', with all of the lost territories restored" (p. 119).

In yet another passage he seeks, with a lot of twists and turns, to establish that the racial view of the world and societies is not so wrong after all. After quoting a passage from Hannah Arendt's book on totalitarianism, in which she denounces race as the "end" of humanity, "not the origin of peoples but their decay, not the natural birth of man but his unnatural death," he writes:

"Yet that surely cannot be the end of the argument. ...Just as to deny individuals the right to moral sovereignty denies their humanity, so it is to deny their right to express themselves through a common material culture and national character—however vague and more problematic that character might be compared to the millions of individual ones" (pp. 53-54).

He then continues by pondering on the "unique" national character of the Romanians as descendants of both ancient Byzantine and Greek culture, which, in his words, produced a unique "Romanian soul." This is nothing else but mystical racialism and nationalism, the type of which has been a historical stock-in-trade of the fascist movements and the far-right in various countries, not least of all Romania itself.

Kaplan's entire book is carefully crafted to address the sensitivities of the bourgeoisie in Romania and right-wing layers of the intelligentsia. It is these layers, he signals, on which US imperialism must rely in its war drive against Russia as they are only ones ready to turn the entire country into a field of battle with Russia, out of which Romania along with the rest of Eastern Europe might well emerge as a nuclear wasteland, in order to safeguard their national interests and class rule. It is not a coincidence that Kaplan expresses profound respect and admiration for Timothy Snyder, who is doing much of the same work for Washington, only with regard to Poland and Ukraine. (Timothy Snyder, unsurprisingly, published a glowing review of Kaplan's book in the *Washington Post*.)

Kaplan's "concerns" about Romania have to be seen as a warning about the far-advanced character of US war preparations in Eastern Europe. Kaplan maintains the closest ties to the US military and secret service establishment, as well as the elites in Eastern Europe. As his opening chapter of the book makes clear, some of these relations date back to the 1980s, the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe and the imperialist wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Kaplan recalls in the book that, as a young man who had just completed his voluntary service in the Israeli Defense Forces, he was "basically unemployable". What turned him into a journalist, Kaplan recounts, was his time in Romania in the 1980s. His life and work here revolved around the US and other Western embassies. Based on information diplomatic staff would leak to him, he started publishing anti-Communist exposures of various scandals and crimes of the Ceaușescu regime. This proved to be the springboard for his later career.

More than once, he prides himself in having been one of the first to warn of an impending war in Yugoslavia in an article in the *Wall Street Journal* from 1989. This "foresight" was largely informed by a US diplomat, Dan Fried, who, as early as 1984, had provided him with the helpful hint that Yugoslavia "has a great future in the news" and advised

him to concentrate his energies on this region (p. 9). Now, Kaplan expresses the fear that Romania too "might have a future in the news." This statement can only be read as a warning of plans well advanced in the headquarters of the US military and government to turn the region into a staging ground for military conflict against Russia.

These plans are directed primarily against the working class of Europe and the former Soviet Union. Indeed, after the permanent evil of Russia, there is nothing that horrifies Kaplan as much as the prospect of social revolution. While carefully avoiding any hint of the extent of the social crisis in Romania, whose population of nearly 20 million remains one of the poorest in the European Union, he indicates his fear of social revolution in a telling passage, where he writes: "we must all bear in mind that order in its normal form, common to democracies and mild authoritarian systems, is much to be preferred over risky, populist experiments," citing as an example the French Revolution (p. 192).



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