

*Literature*

**BOLSHEVISER OR SECULAR SON: READING PANAÏT ISTRATI'S  
TOWARDS THE OTHER FLAME: AFTER SIXTEEN MONTHS IN THE  
U.S.S.R.<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

In 1928-29, Panaït Istrati, by then established as a writer in France, as well as a controversial communist fellow traveller in his native Romania, undertook a secular pilgrimage across the vast extent of the U.S.S.R. After attending the celebrations to mark the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1927, Istrati was now searching for “the other flame”, a new social ethos and what he thought would be the historical instantiation of salvation for all humanity. His autobiographical account of this journey is a “confession” steeped in the morality of the Eastern Orthodox religious tradition against which he ostensibly positions himself as a secular idealist. As a pious “Bolsheviseer” seeking humanity’s secular salvation, Istrati therefore forces us to confront the Eastern Orthodox apocalypticism latent in the Soviet experiment. The same apocalypticism can be found in a superficially different form in the fascist-adjacent early work of Emil Cioran, which he was later to repudiate as part of his wider critique of the decay of western civilisation, but also in agonised penance for his youthful (ideological) sins. Cioran therefore forms a significant counterpart to Istrati, whose own disillusionment did not, however, lead to a complete break with communist ideal, although his criticism of the Soviet Union did result in his ostracism by the international communist movement. Whereas Cioran, as an émigré to France, moved away from the “enflamed” Orthodox ethnophyletism of Romania’s inter-war fascist ideology, Istrati, “broken”, as he himself put it, by his disillusionment with what he saw as the moral failure of the Soviet experiment, returned to Romania, paradoxically moving closer to the religious traditions he had always rejected. Although never converting, the former critic of organised religion, by now in declining health, stayed in an Orthodox monastery and published articles in the right-wing *Curentul*. In this context, the confessional style and structure of Istrati’s *Vers l’autre flamme* [Towards the other flame] can ultimately be read as a secular iteration of an older and underlying Orthodox eschatological tradition of humanity’s final redemption through suffering.

**Keywords:** Ideology; Communism, Bolshevism; Orthodoxy, *l’état d’âme*.

**1. A Secular Pilgrimage**

Panaït Istrati first visited the U.S.S.R. in November-December 1927, where he met and befriended Nikos Kazantzakis (Istrati, 1988; Bien, 2012), who, like himself, was a communist fellow traveller at the time. Both Istrati and the Greek Kazantzakis came from deeply

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<sup>1</sup> Article History: Received: 18.02.2026. Accepted: 18.03.2026. Published: 15.05.2026. No funding was received either for the research presented in the article or for the creation of the article.

traditionalist Eastern Orthodox social milieu, and both initially thought to have found in the land of the Communist Revolution the secular realisation of humanity's salvation in this world rather than the next. It was in the company of Kazantzakis and his partner Eleni Samiou that Istrati and his second wife Marie-Louise Baud-Bovy ("Bilili") subsequently embarked on an eleven-month journey across the U.S.S.R. Stretching from March 1928 to February 1929, this secular pilgrimage "by rail, boat, motorcar, cart, and on horseback" was to take them from "Alexandrovsk (a small Lapp fishing village in the Kola bay north of Murmansk, at the gateway to the Polar Sea)... twice from Moscow to the Caucasus, three times to Ukraine, four times from Moscow to Leningrad, then to the Moldavian Republic, the Crimea, the Volga" (Istrati, 2026, p. 89).

Istrati himself frequently emphasises the higher purpose of this epic journey, which he undertakes out of a desire for universal redemption, with the traveller "subordinat[ing] his individual interests to the better mankind to come" (Istrati, 2026, p. 229). His love of humanity transcends all literary or selfish, secular motivations for travel: "there is no need for me to create 'literature.' *I lived*. I didn't succumb to being a tourist". In his painstaking record of his peregrinations—"1) Moscow-Leningrad, Karelia, northern Russia; 2) Ukraine, Moldavia, the Crimea; 3) the Volga, its towns, its delta, the Caspian Sea; 4) the Trans-Caucasus"—Istrati the secular pilgrim is constantly aware of how it is the human element that sanctifies the place. Moreover, the atheist Istrati seems unconsciously to have assimilated the gospel injunction, "Judge not lest ye be judged" (Matthew 7:1): "I gave myself up to people and more often than not they gave themselves up to me, such as they were, good or bad, heroes or villains" (Istrati, 2026, p. 89).

Among the people Istrati met and befriended were the in-laws of his future literary collaborator, Victor Serge (1890-1947). Serge is one of the central figures in Istrati's long and impassioned article "L'Affaire Roussakov" [The Roussakov affair], an exposé of the criminality and injustice that underpinned everyday life under the Soviet system. Nowhere is Istrati's indignation more enflamed than at the vicious official persecution of Victor Serge's in-laws, the Roussakovs, which resulted from a squabble over living space in a crowded communal flat. In order to lay their hands on the Roussakovs' apartment, the other tenants had filed false charges of assault and, far more seriously in the context of the Stalinist regime, accused Serge and his father of being Trotskyites and therefore "enemies of the people."<sup>2</sup> For Istrati, the Roussakov affair is "a symptom", and for its causes and "abominable conclusion" the Soviet Union must be judged as a whole, "economically, politically, humanly, and above all, alas, *morally*" (Istrati, 2026, p. 182). Ultimately, for Istrati, the moral has universal primacy over the material(ist):

I had gone to Russia *not* to discover in the workers of the "proletarian homeland" a *material* well-being superior to that which the bourgeois countries provide their own workers. Not at all. I would even have closed my eyes *to the absence of any material well-being* (which was not the case). But I was firmly convinced that, from the *moral* standpoint, from the standpoint of *basic justice* the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' left nothing to be desired, that it could not be healthier, because, while it is very difficult to achieve comfort, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that prevents you from being *just* and *honest* (Istrati, 2026, p. 182) [author's emphasis].

In other words, Istrati's pilgrimage was never merely the search for a superior economic, social and political model, but rather it was a quest for the higher moral order of justice for the

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<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the reception of "L'Affaire Roussakov", published in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, see Dana Radler's Introduction to *Towards the Other Flame* (Istrati, 2026).

poor and oppressed, a quest that sprang from his own passions, from his own character and past experience, rather than from reason, ideology, and the doctrine of party politics. In his memoirs, Boris Souvarine (1985, pp. 56-58) recalls that when Istrati undertook his pilgrimage to the “Mecca of communism [...] he did not know anything about Marxism but was not at all worried on that account; his feelings substituted for doctrine, instinct caused him to take the side of the poor, the exploited, the victims” (Tănase, 2007, p. 46). Ultimately, *Vers l'autre flamme* [Towards the other flame] (1929), Istrati's account of his pilgrimage, sprang from moral revolt in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed betrayed by the Revolution rather than from any ideological or political critique of the Soviet Union (Nacheva, 2018).

## 2. A Secular Confession

In October-December 1929, after his return to France from the Soviet Union, Istrati published *Après seize mois dans l'U.R.R.S.* [After sixteen months in the U.S.S.R.], an impassioned account of his journey and the first part in a trilogy on the Bolshevik experiment titled *Vers l'autre flamme*. Although Istrati is stated to be the author of all three works in the trilogy, the other two works, *Soviets 1929* and *La Russie nue* [The naked Russia], were by Victor Serge and the founder of the French Communist Party, Boris Konstantinovich Souvarine (1895-1984), respectively.<sup>3</sup> The reason for Istrati assuming authorship was that, when the book went to press, Serge and Souvarine could not have put their names to works critical of the U.S.S.R. without suffering drastic, even lethal, consequences. As Serge's French brother-in-law, essayist and translator Pierre Pascal (1909-1990), wrote to Istrati in this period: “The whole country groans and shudders. The prisons are overflowing, the detention camps are full. People are being shot everywhere; where the G.P.U. and the courts vie with each other in their zeal.” (Pascal, n.d., my translation).<sup>4</sup>

*Vers l'autre flamme. Après seize mois dans l'U.R.R.S.*, published by Les Éditions Rieder, Paris, in 1929, is Istrati's only work of non-fiction.<sup>5</sup> Given the close proximity of Istrati's native country to the Soviet Union, the “flame from the East” was a metaphor that weighed significantly on the Romanian cultural and political mind at the time. It can be found, for example, in the first of George Topîrceanu's two “Pluvial Sonnets” (1921), with its wryly comic vision of a Balkan Peninsula menaced by impending madness and apocalypse ever since “the blaze” [văpaia] of Bolshevism, whose dreaded name the poet needs not state explicitly, was kindled in the East. It is significant that “P. Ioanid's”<sup>6</sup> rather inaccurate Romanian translation of the book, published the same year as the French original by Editura Cugetarea,<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In his political history of Stalinism's Romanian iteration, Tismăneanu (2003) characterises Serge, and Souvarine as early communist dissidents.

<sup>4</sup> Original source text: “Tout ce pays gémit et tremble. Les prisons regorgent, les camps de réclusion sont pleins. On fusille à tour de bras pour cela le GPU et les tribunaux rivalisent de zèle.”

<sup>5</sup> All quotations are from the author of this essay's newly published English translation of *Vers l'autre flamme* (Istrati, 2026).

<sup>6</sup> P. Ioanid: pseudonym of Ion Pas (1895-1974). Pas, who received only primary schooling, started out as a day labourer, subsequently became a typesetter and bookbinder, and made his début as a writer in 1912, with the volume *Din lumea celor obidiți* [From the world of the oppressed]. For Editura Cugetarea he published children's stories (his *Familia Chiț-Chiț* [The Squeak-Squeak family] stories were a mainstay of Romanian children's literature throughout the twentieth century), as well as translations of novels by Victor Hugo, Jules Verne, and Dostoevsky. He joined the Romanian Communist Party in 1948, despite suspicions that he had been the pseudonymous translator of Istrati's heretical *Confession pour vaincus* [Confession for the vanquished] (Vasile, 2011) and went on to hold high-ranking positions (Minister of Arts, member of the Central Committee, chairman of Radio Broadcasting, etc.) within the regime. Showered with honours and medals, culminating in the title of Hero of Socialist Labour and the Hammer and Sickle gold medal in 1971, Ion Pas ended up an embodiment of the kind of privileged regime writer that Istrati condemned Maxim Gorky for having become in *Spovedania unui învins* [The confession of a vanquished man].

<sup>7</sup> Editura Cugetarea, founded in 1920 by Petre C. Georgescu-Delafras (1885-1963), was largely unpolitical, publishing schoolbooks and works of fiction by foreign (Anatole France, Victor Hugo, Dostoevsky, Anatole France, Thomas Mann) and

Bucharest, is titled *Spovedania unui învins* [The confession of a vanquished man]. In other words, the plural of the original French “Confession pour vaincus” [Confession for the vanquished], the heading of the book’s first chapter, is narrowed to the singular, while the confession itself is turned inward towards the self, rather than outwards towards others.<sup>8</sup> At this level, the Romanian title may therefore be read as an admission of the personal defeat that his native country was only too eager to ascribe to Istrati, who was famous by this time thanks to the great literary success in France of such novels as *Kyra Kyralina* (1923), but above all infamous as a Bolshevik troublemaker.<sup>9</sup>

The *confession* of the French title is ambiguous and can be read in either religious or secular terms: as a written proclamation laying out theological articles of faith, as a declaration of sins or offences before a representative of the ecclesiastical or worldly authorities, or as a painfully honest autobiographical account. A famous example of the last of these senses would be Musset’s *La Confession d’un enfant du siècle* [The confession of a child of the century] (1836). Significantly, rather than opting for *confesiune* or the synonymous *mărturisire*, a word derived from Ancient Greek via Old Church Slavonic, both of which have the same range of religious and secular meanings as the French *confession*, the Romanian translation elects to use the religiously charged *spovedanie*. Derived from the Old Church Slavonic *ispovědanije* (a calque of the Greek *ἐξομολόγησις*, “speaking out in admission”, i.e., the full and public confession of sin practised in the Early Church), *spovedanie* is used almost exclusively to denote the sacrament of confession in the Romanian Orthodox Church. Despite the implicit revolutionary fervour of the book’s original French title, Istrati’s framing of his text as a confession—whether a declaration of faith addressed to the defeated, as it can be read in French, or the *mea culpa* of a defeated man, as it can be read in Romanian—is a clear statement of his disillusionment with the Soviet regime.<sup>10</sup> That the work is an admission of shattered illusions is reinforced by Istrati’s letter to Romain Rolland in which he simply states, “Russia broke my back” (Lérault & Rièrè, 2019, p. 472, my translation).<sup>11</sup>

In addition to pointing up Istrati’s loss of faith in the U.S.S.R., the explicitly religious overtones of the Romanian title, *Spovedania unui învins*, might also recommend Istrati’s book as a narrative of salvation deeply influenced by Eastern Orthodoxy. The messianic strain of Eastern Orthodoxy left its mark on secular society and reveals itself in Istrati’s search for both universal salvation through Bolshevism and for personal redemption through confession of defeated idealism. *Towards the Other Flame* (2026) reveals a naïve author, independently minded to the point of being an outright anarchist, who out of enflamed passion embraced a political ideology that he believed could and should have changed the world. Ultimately, as I

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Romanian writers (Mircea Eliade, Mihail Sadoveanu, Cezar Petrescu, Gala Galaction). The publishing house first prospered thanks to its translations of the works of Jules Verne.

<sup>8</sup> In 1990, after the fall of the communist regime in Romania, during which Istrati’s critique of the Soviet Union had been a proscribed work, a Romanian translation with the more faithful title *Spovedania pentru învinși* [Confession for the Vanquished (plural)] was published by Editura Dacia, Cluj.

<sup>9</sup> The Romanian cultural establishment, in the form of such leading figures as conservative historian Nicolae Iorga (1871-1940) and newspaper editor Pamfil Șeicaru (1894-1980), were contemptuous of the uncultured, upstart Braïla dock and “wretched poet of deflowered derrières” [biet poet al șezuturilor deflorate] (Șeicaru, 1929), who had had the temerity to include a homosexual character in his novel *Kyra Kyralina*. By 1931, Istrati was excoriated by fascists and communist militants alike, with the first accusing him of being engaged in an “infernal” “Judæo-Masonic” “plot to destroy Christianity, royalty and constructive nationalism”, the second decrying him as a “venal” lackey of the capitalist bourgeoisie, and both creating disturbances to prevent him speaking in public (Tănase, 2007, pp. 65-66).

<sup>10</sup> In his historical portraits of figures from the Romanian communist underground in the interwar and war period, drawing on files compiled by the Siguranța [Security] (the pre-communist secret police), Tănase (2007) describes the dire personal consequences of this disillusionment for Istrati within the wider Communist movement. The Communist International and Romanian “ilegaliști” (members of the officially outlawed Romanian Communist Party), described by Tănase as structured and operating as a criminal organisation or mafia, treated Istrati’s soul-searching as the ultimate betrayal, which, in the Soviet Union, would of course have been punishable by death.

<sup>11</sup> Original source text: “[c]’est la Russie qui m’a cassé les reins”.

shall argue below, Istrati was a secular son of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, who journeyed to the Soviet Union expecting to find a new and moral society, an instantiation of the salvation which that tradition had for centuries held out. Istrati's defeat is in this sense the inevitable realisation that fulfilment of this transcendent promise is impossible in secular time, in this world rather than the next.

### 3. Ideology as the Religious Madness of a Secular Age

Istrati's ultimate disillusionment with human history and the possibility of moral progress but also his stubborn refusal to give up the fight allow a reading of *Vers l'autre flamme* consonant with the works of Emil Cioran (1911-1995), another writer who straddled both French and Romanian cultures. Cioran, the son of an Orthodox archpriest,<sup>12</sup> was in his youth if not an actual member or fellow traveller then at the very least sympathetic to the Legionaries/Iron Guard, a Romanian fascist movement whose ideology was rooted in an Eastern Orthodox mysticism distorted by violent ethnophyletism. In this context it is worth noting that in "Le Haïdouk de la Sigurantza" [The haiduk of the Sigurantza] (Barbusse, 1935), his slanderous attack subsequent to the perceived apostasy and betrayal of *Vers l'autre flamme*, communist fellow traveller Henri Barbusse (1873-1935) was falsely to accuse Istrati of being connected to the Iron Guard death squads. Political murder, the assassination of both enemies of and traitors to the cause, was integral not only to the Iron Guard but also Bolshevism, however, each of which were fanatical messianic movements that transformed an apocalyptic strain of Eastern Orthodoxy into a fanatical modern political ideology. Like so many other intellectuals of Romania's interbellum, including Mircea Eliade and Eugène Ionesco, Cioran was consumed by what Matei Călinescu calls the "temptation of the absolute" in his essay of the same title (Călinescu, 1997): total ideological commitment, be it religious, nationalist, or communist. His later deep interest in Russia has been read as stemming from a fascination with ideology as a secularised form of religious fanaticism specific to the Eastern Orthodox space, a fascination rooted in lived past experience. Cioran himself was later to connect Russian messianism with Bolshevism (Zarifopol-Johnston, 2009), viewing it as a secular religion that replaced the symbolic structures of Eastern Orthodoxy with its own rituals, icons, and hagiographic narratives.

Having settled in France, Cioran was much later to evince embarrassment towards the impassioned youthful works he wrote in Romanian while labouring under the "temptation of the absolute", such as *Schimbarea la față a României* [The transfiguration of Romania] (1936), whose very title makes national destiny synonymous with theophany. Cioran distanced himself from *Schimbarea la față a României* when it was republished in Romania more than five decades later, after the fall of the communist regime in 1990, or at least he did from the anti-Semitic and xenophobic passages that had been expurgated from this second edition, which he called "stupid" (Totok, 2013, p. 620).<sup>13</sup> It is perhaps notable in this context that "stupid" was also the epithet that Mihail Sebastian employed in the same period as *Schimbarea la față a României* when he dismissed the impassioned political ideology of Panaït Istrati as comical and embarrassing: "A rhetorical, sentimental thinking, rather coarse in its theories, but lyrical, animated [...] What Mr Istrati says on the subject of political doctrine is guffaw-inducing,

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<sup>12</sup> Cioran was born in the ethnic-Romanian Rășinari, Transylvania, then part of Austria-Hungary and also the native village of nationalist poet and virulent anti-Semite Octavian Goga (1881-1938), who as Romania's first fascist prime-minister (1937-8) enacted drastic race laws.

<sup>13</sup> Original source text: "Daraus waren die anti-semitischen und antiungarischen Passagen entfernt, die Cioran als 'stupid' bezeichnete".

pretentious, mediocre and—and let us say it clearly—stupid” (Sebastian, 1935).<sup>14</sup> The aphorisms of *Précis de décomposition/A Short History of Decay* (1949), Cioran’s first work in French, go to the opposite extreme of impassioned, sentimental, exalted rhetoric: lapidary, unrelentingly bleak, they are pessimistic in their dissection of Western civilisation and the inflamed ideas that drive its history. For Cioran, however, even though such illusions as religious faith, metaphysical systems, utopias, and so on, are false and ultimately decline and decay, they remain indispensable precisely because, as he argues in the following passage, they kindle the flame that humanity needs in order to carry on living and creating history:

Every idea in itself is neutral, or ought to be, but it is man who breathes life into it, projecting his own *flame* and madness onto it; impure, having been transformed into belief, the idea takes its own place in time, it takes on the guise of an event: what thereby occurs is the transition from logic to epilepsy. Thence arise ideologies, doctrines and deadly games (Cioran, 1977, p. 4, my translation) [emphasis added].<sup>15</sup>

The clearest articulations of Cioran’s philosophy of the “flame” resonate strongly with Istrati’s *Vers l’autre flamme*, in which the *flamme* is a *moral and vital energy*—the irrepressible need to live truthfully and to feel passionately, even at the cost of disillusionment. More intriguing still, as part of such a consonant reading of the two writers, are Cioran’s disparate notes from the period immediately prior to the *Précis* (1975), which he wrote before he left Romania for France. Collected and published in France only after Cioran’s death, under the title *De la France* [On France] (2009), these notes set forth some of his most prescient intuitions. Of these, the idea that “The world is becoming a threat to Europe because of its excess of soul. Russia has too much of it”<sup>16</sup> (Cioran, 2009, p. 54, my translation) condenses Cioran’s belief that the danger in history does not arise from the sterility of scepticism, but rather from what he calls “an excess of soul”<sup>17</sup> (p. 54, my translation). Which is to say, humanity invests excessive psychical energy in ideas, a surplus of flame, which becomes an ideological fervour that must be released outward. Although consonant with Istrati’s flame as excessive energy, Cioran’s forewarning singles out Russia for having too much soul, what he defines in *Précis de décomposition* as “Russian apocalyptic thought” (p. 47, my translation)—a diagnosis that indicates a civilisation predisposed to radicalising everything it touches.<sup>18</sup>

Cioran’s implicit warning that in Russia Socialism is transformed into apocalyptic Bolshevism posits Bolshevism, although not always by name, as the implicit paradigm of the “flame-possessed idea.” Of greater importance for the purposes in this essay is Cioran’s view that Russia does not merely adopt ideas but rather embodies them with all the catastrophic consequences that such embodiment entails, a view that materialises in Istrati’s pursuit of the Bolshevik ideal kindled by the flame that is able to convert belief into destiny.

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<sup>14</sup> Original source text: “O gândire retorică, sentimentală, cam groasă în teoriile ei, dar lirică, animată [...] Ceea ce spune dl. Istrati în materie de doctrină politică e hilariant, pretențios, mediocru și—ca să vorbim limpede—prost.”

<sup>15</sup> Original source text: “En elle-même toute idée est neutre ou devrait l’être; mais l’homme l’anime, y projette ses flammes et ses démençes; impure, transformée en croyance, elle s’insère dans le temps, prend figure d’événement: le passage de la logique à l’épilepsie est consommé. Ainsi naissent les idéologies, les doctrines, et les farces sanglantes.”

<sup>16</sup> Original source text: “Le monde s’élève menaçant pour l’Europe en raison de son excès d’âme. La Russie en a trop.”

<sup>17</sup> Original source text: “excès d’âme”

<sup>18</sup> Original source text: “la pensée apocalyptique russe.” I wish to thank Frederic Canovas for the following, more detailed exposition of this idea, which I paraphrase: Cioran’s understanding of *excès d’âme* (excess soul) entails an exaggerated form of emotional and spiritual action identifiable among the Russians and other Slavic peoples, perceived as irrational and threatening by the Western European nations and even by those non-Slavic communities that border Russia. The concept of *l’âme russe*, the Russian soul, identified as a mixture of mysticism and melancholy, developed in Russia from the 1840s onwards, starting with Gogol’s *Dead Souls* (1840) and culminating in the novels of Dostoevsky; the concept fascinated Cioran, who found it hyperbolic and indicative of a reprehensible cultural messianic streak, of a proclivity to violence and overall hostility, which he rejected in favour of western moderation and classical cultural values.

My point is that the disparate aphorisms of Cioran's early writings are affected by the flame which later, in *Précis*, he diagnoses as catastrophic. Nevertheless, *Précis* is to be seen not as a stylistic evolution so much as Cioran's own *retreat*, his self-adjusting attempt to extinguish the flame, which he will diagnose as enabling the infusion of logic into convulsive thought. In his endeavour to quell the flame, Cioran goes West, first to Germany and then to France, where he will embrace lucidity and Enlightenment rationalism as the necessary counterbalance to the excesses of the soul. After *Précis*, continuing Cioran's post-war trajectory, *La Tentation d'exister* [The temptation to exist] (1956) fully articulates his political eschatology in a collection of essays on Russia and Eastern Europe that link Orthodox eschatology with Slavic excess of soul and revolutionary absolutism. According to Cioran, since the only way for Russia to adopt socialism was by transforming it into a religion of the end times, Bolshevism was capable of arising only as a socialism steeped in Orthodox apocalypticism, which in essence means that by adapting to political necessity, Bolshevism would become a secular eschatology with the proletariat standing in for the Messiah.

For Cioran, a denizen of the hinterlands of the Slavic soul that adjoin Russia who emigrated to France, where he wrote his major works, cultural geography played a key role in adapting his thought to a particular social milieu while he himself remained anchored in the cultural system that the Eastern Orthodoxy of his native Romania provided. For Istrati, who preceded Cioran in leaving Romania for France, the flame kindled by the Bolshevik fervour he embraced during his time in France led him also to embrace the U.S.S.R. and Bolshevism with all the fervour of a new convert, but one who nonetheless remained unconsciously grounded in the Orthodox traditions of his native land. The non-religious Istrati saw Bolshevism as a form of ultimate salvation, as a redefined Orthodoxy or secular eschatology focused on transforming the material world, not by seeking to determine how God might be made part of human society but by replacing the divine plan propounded by Orthodoxy with the collective will of the people in determining their own historical, material destiny.

#### 4. World-Consuming Ideological Combustion

In the light of the above, Istrati's excessive initial embrace of Bolshevism may be understood in terms of the unbounded mixture of mysticism and melancholy permeating what Cioran labels the Slavic soul. This Byzantine/Eastern Orthodox apocalyptic psychology is not the exclusive preserve of Russia, but in fact permeates the Romanian space, where it manifests itself both as the violent mystic nationalism of the Iron Guard and as the "other flame" of Bolshevism that kindled an excess of soul in non-religious believers such as Panaït Istrati.

For Istrati, the flame that once burned before the Orthodox icons of his native Romania now begins to burn in historical time, having been kindled within the material present of the Soviet Union. On his secular pilgrimage to the land of the eastern flame, he encounters a Bolshevism which reigns not as an ideological aberration but as a rectified Orthodoxy. Dispensing with God, secular transcendence seeks the divine essence in proletarian collectivism. Ultimately, for Istrati, Bolshevism does not so much reflect an excess of soul as preserve and legitimise it, just as Byzantine Orthodoxy, with the centuries-old weight of its mystical tradition and the eternity of its atemporal liturgy, nurtures the theological zealot and the blindly believing faithful alike.<sup>19</sup>

In *Towards the Other Flame* Bolshevism must be *inhabited*, sanctified, suffered for, with Istrati's Orthodox metaphysical temperament finding articulation as a *theory of*

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<sup>19</sup> One might note that, in his allegiance to Bolshevism, Istrati differs very little, albeit in a different context, from Alyosha Karamazov, who, although dismayed by Father Zosima's stinking corpse, which might have prompted him to doubt, is actually spurred to even more fervent devotion.

*ideological combustion*. He declares himself “consumed by my beautiful flame” (Istrati, 2026, p. 128), which also sets ablaze “the faces of the people throughout the Soviet Union” and, having consumed them, will spread to “take hold of the whole world” (Istrati 2026: 116). Entering the Soviet Union, as if passing through the gates of heaven itself, he writes:

the red train [that] makes its majestic entry into the land, passing under the red arch with its letters of flame!

PROLETARIANS OF ALL COUNTRIES! UNITE!

.....

It is with the generous blood of your millions of hearts that these grand triumphal arches and these *letters of flame* on the Soviet frontiers were painted and set ablaze (Istrati, 2026, p. 97) [emphasis added].

Viewed thus, “*la flamme*” is both metaphysical and geopolitical. Ideologies arise precisely where the flame catches hold of ideas, as Cioran foresees in *Précis* when he states, “Thus are born ideologies, doctrines, blood-stained practical jokes”<sup>20</sup> (Cioran, 1977, p. 4, my translation). Bolshevism, in the framework of *Towards the Other Flame*, is not an aberration but a symptom, which Istrati’s soul, consumed by the flame, zealously embraces, while refusing to accept that Bolshevism plus the Russian soul equals catastrophe for the U.S.S.R.

## 5. The Secular Faith of a Bolsheviser

Whereas the flame as *excès d’âme*, as incandescent, all-consuming ideology, causes Cioran to retreat into pessimism, it turns Istrati into what he calls a *Bolsheviser*: a fanatic intent on enlightening others through a substitute religion that must be blindly adhered to, with even the slightest divergence from the revolutionary creed being treated as apostasy. Unwilling to acknowledge defeat when the realities of the Soviet Union dismally fail to live up to the inflamed ideal, Istrati dons the hair shirt of self-excoriating confession, the quintessentially revolutionary confessional of the true believer, vanquished but unbowed, still burning with the fervour to destroy capitalism and the “hotchpotch of false values” (Istrati, 2026, p. 125).

In this context, Istrati cannot be viewed as “the two-faced Panait Istrati” (Volin, 1929, p. 1) who was denounced for voicing a vehement protest against “Komsomol cadres [who are] completely putrid” (Istrati, 2026, p. 85), precisely because Istrati defines himself as a “Bolsheviser”, a term meant to spell out the true task of the Bolshevik when confronted with the deplorable criminality of those who have usurped the revolutionary ideal:

*A Bolsheviser*—which is to say: for the working-class taking power and for the destruction of capitalism—is what I have always been and what I shall remain, *under the conditions that you will see once you have read this book*. They are wholly to the honour of a Bolshevism à la Lenin, à la Trotsky, à la Dzerzhinsky and all the heroes of the October Revolution who did not become the assassins of their own achievement (Istrati, 2026, p. 90).

Early in *Towards the Other Flame*, Istrati effusively describes his enthusiasm for Bolshevism upon first arriving in Russia, having “slapped the face of the selfish and cautious vermin that is this despicable West” (Istrati, 2026, p. 82), but even after he experiences bitter disillusionment, confessing, “now I am one of the vanquished. Those whom I thought as hard as stone . . . are also vermin, vermin who would sacrifice all *for the salvation of their beloved doctrine, grinding down the innocent*” (Istrati, 2026, p. 83), his Bolshevik fervour remains

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<sup>20</sup> Original source text: “Ainsi naissent les idéologies, les doctrines, et les farces sanglantes”

unabated. Far from expressing regret over what he now perceives to be the failed Soviet experiment, Istrati declares, employing italics for vehemence, “*Despite all, the U.S.S.R. must remain, for the world proletariat, what it is in reality: the unassailable fortress against which capitalism must shatter one day*” (Istrati, 2026, p. 75) [author’s emphasis]. With unmitigated faith in the communist dream, despite betrayal of the new Bolshevik civilisation at the hands of various Russian communists, Istrati declares, “the *Bolshevism* that I hailed . . . spoke to the working-class world through the mouth of Lenin and will never perish as long as there are revolutionaries sent to their deaths by criminal capitalism and to Siberia by execrable communists” (Istrati, 2026, p. 63) [author’s emphasis].

As Pierre Dominique remarks when interviewing him on his return to France after almost two years in the U.S.S.R., Istrati’s faith in the proletarian movement was so little shaken that he was able enthusiastically to proclaim, “The Revolution is dead, let us move toward the other Flame.”<sup>21</sup> Sheltering the flame close to his chest, Istrati vows that he will continue to lend his support to the Bolshevik political, economic and cultural experiment playing out in the U.S.S.R., no matter how imperfect it might be, and which he places in opposition to a capitalism envisioned as “American skyscrapers, above which the nightingale does not sing, where man is a mechanical brute, and where existence is nothing but a way of killing life” (Istrati, 2026, p. 80).

Reflecting on the disquieting background of what Cioran calls “the transition from logic to epilepsy,” Istrati not only bears out Cioran’s warning but also encapsulates the central insight of *Towards the Other Flame*: as an idea and belief Bolshevism remains embedded in historical time and events; it endures, clinging to its own myth, which “possesses the virtues of a Phoenix” (Istrati, 2026, p. 91). In a state of perpetual longing for the other flame that heats the incubator for the new civilisation to be birthed by Bolshevism, Istrati holds fast to the conviction that “it is to Bolshevism that humanity will one day owe its complete liberation” (Istrati, 2026, p. 126).

## 6. Bolshevism Brings the Flame Down to Earth

Istrati nonetheless openly acknowledges the naivety of his embrace of the U.S.S.R., his callowness as an idealistic new convert. In an interview with Frédéric Lefèvre, “Une heure avec Panaït Istrati” (1929), he frankly admits his lack of revolutionary experience and the sentimentality of his ideals. Utterly repudiating the capitalist system, Istrati appears to be hopelessly seduced by the Soviet mirage. As he himself confesses, “the emergence of *Bolshevism* . . . won me over thanks to its charm, its precision, its courage. I promptly signed up, the day after the October Revolution, regardless of the fact that I was in Switzerland at the time and that the gesture might have cost me dearly” (Istrati, 2026, p. 62). At a time when he was “sick to death” of the trades-unionism which had thitherto characterised the Romanian revolutionary movement, Istrati was won over by the enormous energy and resources that went into the implementation of the official ideology engendered by the great revolutionary events of 1917, the victory of the Bolsheviks in the Civil War, and the canonical texts of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin.

Looking back through history at “civilisations . . . that had to be beaten with a stick to evacuate the premises,” Istrati finds that “today, the stick is raised before it, in terrifying menace. It is called *Bolshevism*” (Istrati, 2026, p. 69). Critically encapsulating Russia’s imperial past before proclaiming his firm allegiance, he continues:

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<sup>21</sup> I here quote loosely from Pierre Dominique’s remarks: “Panaït Istrati ne pouvait qu’être scandalisé par ses deux ans de Russie. Il l’a été, et il a réagi magnifiquement en proclamant quelque chose comme: ‘la Révolution est morte, allons vers l’autre Flamme.’” (Dominique, 1929, p. 7).

This Bolshevism has shown what it's capable of. Perfectly. Irreproachably. It did a good job. Not one labourer, of the manual or intellectual variety, can help but applaud. I'm one too. And at the cost of my own life, I really want to contribute to the destruction of tsarist civilisations—their Rasputins, their barracks, their brothels decorated by Rome prize winners, their lying monuments and their hypocritical libraries—I really want to contribute to their destruction by *every means* (Istrati, 2026, p. 70).

What *Towards the Other Flame* therefore outlines is the flame signified and encapsulated by the word Bolshevism, which, once established, will seamlessly bring about everything else. For Istrati, the word Bolshevism is a flame signifying the concept of the world being built in Russia, where it first emerged under the tsarist regime, not as a political party but as a conspiracy woven within a diverse revolutionary underground whose aim was to overthrow the autocracy. Led by Lenin who had returned to Petrograd from

the unofficial Bolshevik headquarters in Zurich, Switzerland . . . the Bolsheviks put forth an engaging long-term vision of Russia's future in the form of a supremely confident narrative of history and all-purpose explanation of the present—a vision that was enhanced by borrowings from the programs of other political parties (Kotkin, 1995, p. 10).

Lenin, whose leadership was more than just the implementation of a Marxist revolutionary worldview, put forward a more vocal, dynamic programme than the Socialist Revolutionaries, claiming for himself the world-historical mission of speaking in the name of and acting on the behalf of the people of Russia with a tyrannical assurance that required huge sacrifices on the part of that people.

The Bolsheviks entrenched themselves as the new regime after the Civil War, which was a formative experience for the Bolshevik party. As both Sheila Fitzpatrick and Moshe Lewin argue, the Bolsheviks won because they created a state, “a dynamism that the other side lacked” (Lewin, 1989, p. 401) and because they had achieved a military victory and developed militant ethos that bequeathed them a heroic myth about themselves.

What began as a war for a generation of rebellious individuals was transformed into a popular movement founded on the idealisation of the working class and peasantry, and what were initially chaotic institutions like the Red Guards, the Military Revolution Committee, and the Communist Party gradually came to make up the regularised components of a new central administration. The Bolshevik desire to build a new state was fuelled not only by the zeitgeist but also by the urge to match the achievements of the European powers and United States. The widespread conviction that Russia had a special mission was coupled with a feeling that Russia was possessed of a specialness, an apartness that superseded the western powers while maintaining a certain moral and social superiority traceable to the mysticism of pan-Slavism and Byzantine Orthodoxy. Armed with an ideology of development centred on the working class, the Bolsheviks were not simply makers of history but also its instruments and saw themselves as embarked on a holy quest that could not be belied.

The coherence of this folk version of revolution, complete with its own mythic heroism, was able to be integrated into a master narrative of social history, a chronicle of Bolshevik visions whereby Bolshevism came to be identified as the guiding light of Istrati's *Towards the Other Flame*. Whereas Byzantine Orthodoxy placed it on high, in the transcendent, Bolshevism brought the flame down to earth, situated it within historical time as a goal towards which material reality must progress and which required total sacrifice and absolute commitment. Drawing on the sacramental, Bolshevism is religious in structure, but secular in vocabulary. The people Istrati meets in the U.S.S.R. speak of the ordinary citizen who asks only for “my

daily bread for myself and my family,” which is the promise fulfilled “in the land of the proletariat” because “bread is the whole of life” (Istrati, 2026, p. 186), while the Red Trade Unions, like a host of archangels, fight for proletarian masses in a country where “the capitalists are nothing more than a memory” (Istrati, 2026, p. 188).

During his first visit to the U.S.S.R. in October 1927, Istrati seems to have wholeheartedly embraced the general message that the Bolsheviks conveyed to the masses, which propounded a total system, an all-encompassing and seemingly consistent worldview based on a sense of social justice and the promise of a better life for all, combined with a call for international solidarity with oppressed peoples everywhere. Consumed by what he perceived to be the victory of the working class and what was trumpeted far and wide as the Soviets’ historical defeat of injustice, Istrati wrote, according to Victor Serge, “as a born poet madly in love with simple things such as adventure, friendship, rebellion, flesh and blood. He was incapable of theoretical reasoning, and therefore incapable of falling into the trap of convenient sophistry” (Serge, 2012, p. 323).

## 7. Mythic Flame, Promethean Aspiration

In addition to the emotional overtones of his writing, myth and mythical perceptions also magnified the cultural dimensions of Istrati’s visionary idealism. The mythical structure of *Towards the Other Flame* is suggested by the flame of the title, which echoes the myth of Prometheus, the hero whose name in Greek signifies “forethought”. Personifying the celebration of intellect as the highest human faculty embodied by the stolen flame, Prometheus has inspired a long line of authors—Milton, Shelley, Goethe—who have interpreted the Greek hero as emblematic of the rebellious intellectual. By his revolutionary act of defying the gods, Prometheus becomes the archetype of the thinker whose incendiary ideas inspire and provoke resistance against oppressive structures.

Modern readers may therefore readily perceive how the myth resonates with Istrati’s early embrace of the revolutionary spirit of the Soviet Union, which he interpreted early on as a new Promethean flame kindled in the Bolshevik breast—an ideological fire, whose torch was borne forward by devoted revolutionaries, the Russian people committed to liberating the oppressed masses. The Bolshevik, according to Istrati, “was a hero, a titan, a god. First among others, he was the last when it came to feeding himself and he shunned rest. The blaze of a fecundation that ennobled life devoured his breast” (Istrati, 2026, p. 115).

Such ideals were deeply appealing to Istrati, whose life had intimately acquainted him with social injustice and suffering. In his political *imaginaire*, further inflamed by his visit to the Soviet Trans-Caucasus region, the mythical site of Prometheus’s punishment, but also a space where Promethean transformation had ostensibly been realised, exiled revolutionary Leo Trotsky appears as a chained Prometheus. In a 1933 interview with Jacques Hameline, reiterating his position on the disgraced and ousted Trotsky, Istrati declares: “I have never been in direct contact with him [Trotsky]. We have corresponded and we know each other. But I am neither a ‘Trotskyist’ nor a close friend of Trotsky. I admire him very sincerely. And besides, isn’t he a ‘chained Prometheus’?” (Serge, 2012, p. 323).<sup>22</sup> The Greek mythological hero, whose earliest dramatic articulation appears in Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*, had been a familiar figure to Istrati since boyhood, when, as a poor servant working in the Kir Leonida eatery, he was befriended by Mavromati, an old Greek sea captain, now living alone and impoverished, who taught the young Istrati Greek and gave him Lazăr Șăineanu’s *Dicționar universal al*

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<sup>22</sup> “Je n’ai jamais été directement en rapport avec lui. Nous avons correspondu ensemble et nous sommes connus aussi. Mais je ne suis ni ‘trotskiste,’ ni ami personnel de Trotski. Je l’admire très sincèrement. Et puis, n’est-il pas un ‘Prométhée enchaîné’?” (Hameline, 1933, p. 3).

*limbei române* [Universal dictionary of the Romanian language] to help him improve his vocabulary.<sup>23</sup>

The servant boy and soon-to-be day labourer at the Braïla docks, who learned his language skills informally, in both Romanian and Greek, and later taught himself French, once again relying on both classical mythology and a dictionary, associated everyday life with myth and heroes from early on.<sup>24</sup> To the mature Istrati, whose sensibility craved heroes and adventure, Leo Trotsky was a new Prometheus in the guise of a revolutionary, whose defiance of Zeus's tyranny was motivated by commitment to human progress. In the tragedy that must have been familiar to the poor servant boy, the Chorus of Oceanids articulates what might be described as a proto manifesto of human progress, proclaiming Prometheus as the torchbearer of the type of emancipatory knowledge that fascinated Istrati.

## 8. A Revolutionary Writer's Betrayal of Humanity's Secular Salvation

Throughout his life, Istrati was a supporter of left-wing movements which, it may be argued, were Orthodox in structure (revolutions redeem past suffering, justify present violence, offer a reign of justice that brings heaven down to earth, achieve progress independently of God) and secular in vocabulary, steeped in tradition and tinted with religious dualism. He was convinced that education would help the workers develop a society built on secular values. For Istrati, the U.S.S.R. was a country inhabited by a self-proclaimed revolutionary proletariat that spoke Bolshevik, (Kotkin, 1995, p. 198) a language synonymous with advancement and social mobility and conducive to collective action, whose dynamic was that of comradeship imbued with the inherent Christian values of self-sacrifice and service to the collective good. Moreover, Istrati was emotionally committed to embracing Soviet citizens, who were guaranteed to become a part of the movement of history which he voices into a call to arms:

When you go to the paradisiacal Livadya, when you see two hundred and seventy tubercular *mouzhiks* filling the imperial palace where Rasputin used to dip his fingers in the sauce for the Tsarina to lick, when you discover that that Tsarina used to consign to oblivion, as if by accident, on some railway siding on her vast steppes, railcars crammed with soldier prisoners, who little by little were turned into a thousand skeletons above which buzzed fat flies, when you see and know this, nothing but this, labourer, you cannot but be a Bolshevik (Istrati, 2026, p. 69).

It was a prospect enticing to France's literary world—Barbusse and Roman Rolland whose works Istrati "held close to my heart" (Istrati, 2026, p. 63)—which had ever placed its faith in socialism's ability to transform the life of the working class. The French socialists could now hear this promise straight from the horse's mouth of a writer born in Romania, the Eastern Europe of mythical spaces and exotic characters. It was publicity coup for the French left, equal in its way to the enticement of the opposite attitude articulated two decades later by another

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<sup>23</sup> The episodes are recounted in Istrati's *Trecut și viitor* [Past and future], a Romanian-language autobiographical work published in 1925 that has never been translated.

<sup>24</sup> In this as well as in other instances cited in this essay, which are described in Dana Radler's well-documented "Introduction" to the English translation of *Towards the Other Flame* (Istrati 2026), Istrati talks about learning French by reading and studying a French dictionary. In a letter of 20 August 1919, he writes to Romain Rolland to explain how he taught himself French when he arrived in Switzerland in 1916: "Je ne connais pas la langue que pour demander du pain et produire l'hilarité: je prends Télémaque et un dictionnaire et je commence à déchiffrer. – C'est ainsi que j'appris le français, il y a trois ans et demi. Je n'ai jamais regardé dans une grammaire, même dans ma langue, que je peux enseigner à quelques professeurs" [The only language I know was to ask for bread and to prompt laughter: I pick up *Telemachus* and a dictionary and I start to decipher. – This is how I learned French, three and a half years ago. I never looked inside a grammar book, not even in my own language, which I could teach a few teachers] (Lérault & Rièrè, 2019).

exotic easterner, Emil Cioran, who was able to appeal to a larger and more diverse audience with his anti-idealist stance and view of history not as progress towards a bright flame but as boneyard of ideas sporadically illumined by the occasional corpse light.

During his first trip to the U.S.S.R. in October 1927, which lasted only a few weeks, Istrati travelled from one Soviet region to another, finding himself captivated by the sweeping scientific and industrial achievements to be found across the country's vast territories. In his correspondence with Romain Rolland and in articles published in the French press in the summer of 1928, Istrati is effusive about the prospects the country offers and contemplates moving to and living to the end of his days in the U.S.S.R. In his reportage "La Fête de Taras Sevchenko à Kaniev" (Istrati, 1928, pp. 12-13, my translation), he writes: "I think that here I shall be able to work more productively than in France. We are at home here. They are heading straight for the target: world revolution. Here is where I shall end my days."<sup>25</sup> A piece in *Le Rappel* confirms this intention, in which Istrati is quoted as saying, "Russia was the only country where a writer could live, because in other European nations he was doomed to complete moral isolation"<sup>26</sup> ("Panaït Istrati se fixe à Moscou," 1927, p. 2).

Istrati's second journey to the U.S.S.R., which is the primary focus of *Towards the Other Flame*, includes numerous accounts and reflections that gradually reveal the collapse of his faith in the U.S.S.R. There are numerous significant instances of this disillusionment, but one in particular is crucial to an overall understanding of Istrati's attraction to Bolshevism and his inflamed interiority, which is inseparable from his *metaphysical temperament* rooted in *Byzantine Orthodoxy*. Among the several positive dimensions of the U.S.S.R. that won Istrati's admiration was the Bolsheviks' emphasis on education. Avid autodidacts, they believed in the perfectibility of the New Man, in self-improvement through reading and learning quotations, and in cultivating writers who, in Stalin's words, had to be "engineers of human souls". As most historians agree, Stalin's appetite for Bolshevik ideology and absolute power were as strong as his hunger for literary knowledge. He loved his Cossack novelist Mikhail Sholokhov and regarded Maxim Gorky as his regime's chief literary ornament. As Simon Sebag Montefiore observes, "Stalin and Gorky were the two most famous men in Russia, their relationship a barometer of Soviet literature itself" (Montefiore, 2003, p. 96).

Notably, Gorky's childhood was similar to Istrati's, with both having lived on scraps and feeling like outcasts. Born Maxim Pleshkov in 1868, the 'bitter' Gorky drew on his own harsh experiences to write masterpieces that inspired the Bolshevik Revolution. Although he became disillusioned with Lenin's dictatorship and went into exile in Italy in 1921, Gorky was lured back by Stalin and quickly became a loyalist and indispensable advocate for culture in a country that only a generation earlier had been blighted by widespread illiteracy. Tall and haggard, Gorky was a commanding presence, rewarded for his ideological complicity with a Moscow Art Déco mansion, a dacha near the capital, and a palatial villa in the Crimea.

In a letter to Voroshilov and later in conversation, Stalin called Gorky "a good, clever, friendly person" (Montefiore, 2003, p. 97) and went on to say, "He's fond of our policy. He understands everything ... In politics he is with us against the Right" (Montefiore, 2003, p. 97). Using his proverbial charm, Stalin succeeded in "binding Gorky with cables to the party" (Montefiore, 2003, p. 97) to the point in *Pravda* that Gorky even lashed out at the Ukrainian kulaks: "If the enemy does not surrender, he must be exterminated" (Montefiore, 2003, p. 98).

For Istrati, Gorky is a glaring example of the moral failure of the Revolution, "guilty of complicity, the guiltiest," (Istrati, 2026, p. 84) because he was one of those "held highly in the

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<sup>25</sup> Original source text: "Je crois qu'ici je pourrai travailler bien plus utilement qu'en France. Nous sommes chez nous. On y va droit au but: à la révolution mondiale. C'est ici que je finirai mes jours."

<sup>26</sup> Original source text: "la Russie était le seul pays où en écrivain puisse vivre, car dans les autres nations européennes. Il était voué à la plus complète solitude morale."

world's esteem" (Istrati, 2026, p. 84) and because "Maxim Gorky came from as low down as can be and had a duty to remain as close as possible to the lowest" (Istrati, 2026, p. 86). Instead, Gorky became one of the "disciplined" nomenklatura, in whose name "people are starved and the prisons and Siberia are filled with workers named 'traitors' and who are the only revolutionaries in this Soviet Union" (Istrati, 2026, p. 86).

Istrati cries out against Gorky's betrayal of the Bolshevik principles and morality embodied in the eternal flame of the revolutionary mindset. More importantly, however, this denunciation of Gorky's betrayal of revolutionary ideals, which otherwise also illustrates Cioran's lucid, tragic view of ideological ethics as incapable of saving humanity, underscores the Orthodoxy inherent in Istrati's soul not as structured religious faith so much as a spiritual style.

## 9. The Vanquished Writer as Secular Monastic

For Cioran, the negative wisdom of such betrayals as Gorky's is based on the recognition that ideology, once incarnated in history, is structurally condemned to violence, illusion, and ethical ruin, as he argues in *The Fall into Time* (1970) and *Les Nouveaux Dieux* [The new gods] (1969). From this perspective, Gorky is less a historically accountable agent and more a symptomatic figure, an inevitable outcome of the human compulsion to convert ideals into totalising systems that demand obedience. Where Cioran aestheticises damnation with the resignation of high intellect formulated in polished prose, Istrati recasts damnation as an ethical scandal that demands protest, a protest in which too much of the soul, an *excès d'âme*, has been invested. In this circuit, Gorky's betrayal is subject to judgment in the name of the vanquished who suffer from *too much inwardness*: "For the day will come," Istrati insists, "when the vanquished will have a say, above all the other classes, and on that day, terrible voices will interrogate Maxim Gorky, who will not be able to give an answer, to the misfortune of his legacy" (Istrati, 2026, p. 87). Ethics, for Istrati, does not culminate, as it does for Cioran, in contemplative lucidity but in a revolt of the wounded soul verging on a cosmic, tragic, interiorised Christianity; moral responsibility persists precisely because betrayal remains historical rather than fatal. Protest thus emerges in *Toward the Other Flame* not as a residue of revolutionary faith, but as the last coherent moral convulsions of the vanquished who will project their affective, mystical, quasi-pathological energy onto ideas.

Istrati's interiorised Orthodoxy, which was, unbeknownst to him, a fundamental factor in shaping his selfhood during the visit to the U.S.S. R., recommends him as a new type of religious virtuoso in whom the professional and the personal life are intertwined. A closer examination of his life reveals that in his early years Istrati was appalled by the rapaciousness of the clergy in a small village near his hometown of Braila called Cotu-Lung and this left deep and lasting mark. He tells the story of grasping priests in an article from 1907, published in Romania and titled "Biserica și popi" [Church and clergy] (Ursulescu, 2004). A few years later, in 1910, he wrote again on the subject, describing the rape of a young girl by a church deacon in an article called "Monstruoasa faptă a unui diacon" [The monstrous deed of a deacon] (Istrati, 1911, p. 1), which the magnates of the time, such as the very wealthy Constantin Mille, tried to suppress from being published in the local press.

Istrati's toned down his revulsion towards the representatives of the Church when, around 1932, in declining health, he was taken in by Neamț Monastery, where he lived from the summer of 1932 to February 1933. During this interval, Istrati wrote four articles for *Curentul* newspaper, in which he described the hardships of monastic life. In the summer of 1934, when his health was failing due to severe bouts of the tuberculosis that was ultimately to kill him, he began a correspondence with Monseigneur Vladimir Ghika (1873-1954), who

wrote six letters to Istrati appealing to him to recant and convert to Christianity.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, according to the account of Ion Th. Ilea in “La Bușteni, într-o vară cu Panait Istrati, Cincinat Pavelescu” [While with Panait Istrati and Cincinat Pavelescu at Bușteni in a summer], an article published in *Almanahul literar* [The literary almanac] in 1970, the Monseigneur had personally attempted to convert Istrati to Catholicism.

Although Istrati never converted, I would argue that his life and the autobiographical style of *Towards the Other Flame* fit the confessional pattern of Orthodox monasticism, which is fundamentally communal in structure and not insulated from the rest of society. By virtue of the elevated educational position that monasticism holds in traditional Orthodox thinking, often even rivalling Orthodox Christian lay scholars, monks ranked higher than the parish clergy, who were not necessarily very learned or even lettered. Many monks articulated their faith and life experiences in autobiographies that laid out their devotional achievements; they were often regarded as martyrs and were held in high esteem in Byzantium, mediaeval Russia, and throughout Byzantine Orthodox Christendom more generally. Since in Eastern Orthodoxy sexual relations are not considered inherently sinful, with the priesthood being permitted to engage in marital relations, the holiness of monks often took the form of a celibacy elevated to a higher spiritual level. Finally, social activism was encouraged and in seminary textbooks such as Petr Zavedeev’s 1908 publication, “life is representative of the same asceticism as Saints Nil, but not of a contemplative, but a practical direction.” (Manchester, 2008, p. 92)<sup>28</sup>

Istrati’s book shares the dual contradictory elements of self-affirmation and defeat that characterise the narratives of those who realise that the task ahead of them is immense, even unattainable, and thus requires explicit assessments of their own lived experiences and of devoting themselves to people, as Istrati professes to do in the opening pages of *Towards the Other Flame*. While anticipating many of Cioran’s hardened expectations and fears, Istrati’s intoxicating excesses of a soul consumed by the Bolshevik flame verge on the transfigured agony of the saints depicted in Byzantine Orthodox icons. For Istrati, the U.S.S.R. is “a vast land rich in hopes” (Istrati, 2026, p. 229), where a more inclusive order was founded on the universality of the proletariat, echoing a Christian brotherhood and where “a blessed land full of the future” (Istrati, 2026, p. 229) could still be achieved, not as a product of the scientific socialism propounded by Marx, but as a victorious Bolshevism heralded by the other flame of secularised Orthodoxy.

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<sup>27</sup> Ghika, the scion of an old Moldavian princely line, was himself a religious convert, from Eastern Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism. He died under torture in a communist prison and was beatified in 2013.

<sup>28</sup> For this interesting discussion and bibliographical references, see Chapter 3 of Tosee Laurie Manchester, *Holy Fathers, Secular Sons: Clergy, Intelligentsia, and the Modern Self in Revolutionary Russia* (2008, pp. 68-93).

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