

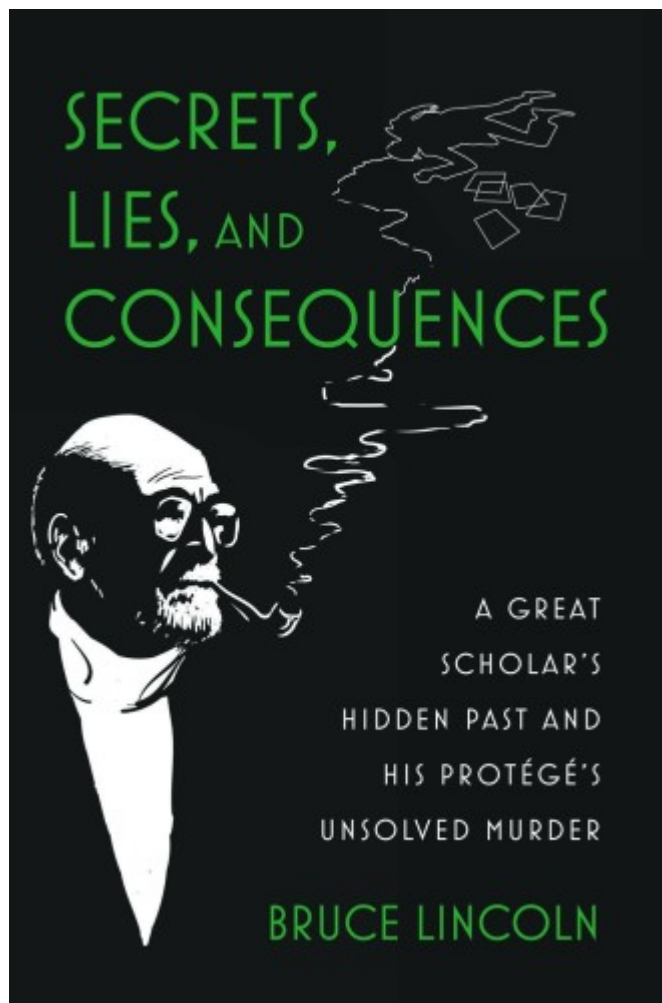
True crime at the div school

In 1991, religion scholar Ioan Petru Culianu was murdered at the University of Chicago. Was this killing related to his controversial mentor, Mircea Eliade?

by [J. Scott Jackson](#) in the [November 2024](#) issue

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In Review



Secrets, Lies, and Consequences

A Great Scholar's Hidden Past and His Protégé's Unsolved Murder

By Bruce Lincoln
Oxford University Press
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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

On May 21, 1991, an emergent Romanian scholar was shot to death in a men's room stall at the University of Chicago Divinity School—a murder that rocked the campus community, bedeviled law enforcement, and remains unsolved to this day. Murdered at age 41, Ioan Petru Culianu—an expert on Gnosticism, Renaissance magic, and the occult—had come to teach in the school through the advocacy of his mentor, fellow Romanian expatriate and distinguished religion scholar Mircea Eliade. So impressed was Eliade with Culianu and his research that he tapped the younger scholar as his literary executor and heir apparent, an imprimatur which earned Culianu a permanent faculty appointment after Eliade's death in 1986. Bruce Lincoln, emeritus professor of history of religions at Chicago, who also studied under Eliade, frames Culianu's brief career and tragic death within the context of a 50-year controversy centered on Eliade's early roots in Romanian fascism.

In the 1930s, Eliade became immersed in a Romanian nationalist, antisemitic, and anti-democratic terrorist group known as the Legion of St. Michael, also known as the Iron Guard, founded by the charismatic leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. In the face of increasingly trenchant exposés of his past, beginning in the 1970s and renewed after his death, Eliade refused to admit his close ties to this (ostensibly) Orthodox Christian nationalist movement, whose members terrorized and murdered Jews and assassinated high-level public officials deemed national traitors. As Lincoln shows, the young Eliade, initially drawn to the legion's mystical spirituality and idealization of sacrifice, became one of its key leaders and apologists, actively campaigning for its candidates in national elections.

When King Carol II assumed dictatorial power to suppress the legion in 1938, Eliade and other legionaries were interned in concentration camps. After being released on the condition that he sign a statement eschewing all political activity, Eliade received a diplomatic appointment to England and fled his homeland. He later moved to Lisbon and then to Paris, where he garnered the scholarly accolades that earned him a professorship in Chicago, where he taught for two decades. Eliade denied the full scope of his involvement with the legion; he also never fully renounced it. He may have feared that former legionaries among the Romanian

expatriate community, which held him in very high regard, would deem him a traitor and perhaps even exact vengeance.

As Lincoln's riveting narrative reveals, relations between master and protégé were often vexed by Culianu's incongruous commitment to maintain both scholarly integrity and loyalty to Eliade as the chorus of Eliade critics swelled. Culianu, who had gained political asylum in Italy in 1972, wrote his first monograph on Eliade just as details of the elder Romanian's troubling past were coming to light among researchers in Israel and Italy. In one episode, after a damning dossier was published by an Israeli journalist, Eliade sought to deflect plaintive, private inquiries from his friend Gershom Scholem, the distinguished scholar of Jewish mysticism, by pointing to his own (dubious) support 40 years earlier for a former friend, Jewish novelist Mihail Sebastian, in the face of an antisemitic attack by Bucharest philosopher Nae Ionescu. Culianu repeated and amplified Eliade's defenses in several publications, though he was forced to concede ground and regroup as potentially damning details were uncovered.

Lincoln's research shows the devastating consequences, sometimes fatal, of repressing troubling secrets.

Lincoln's project originated with a set of pro-legionary articles by Eliade, translated by biographer Mac Linscott Ricketts, that were published originally in right-wing Romanian periodicals in 1937–1938. As access to such texts was strictly guarded under Romania's communist regime, the content of these articles even now is not widely known outside a select circle of experts. Culianu and Ricketts had planned to publish the translations alongside scholarly commentaries, which they hoped would contextualize and circumscribe Eliade's early politics and mitigate the growing scandal swirling around their mentor's life and work.

When Eliade's widow, Christinel—a tenacious defender of her husband and guardian of his legacy—learned of the planned volume, she quickly derailed it, asserting her sole prerogative as her husband's literary executor. After receiving death threats (and shortly before his murder), Culianu entrusted the file containing Ricketts's translations of the articles to a colleague for safekeeping; this colleague, in turn, gave it to Lincoln. Upon his retirement, Lincoln mistakenly discarded these translations—and thereafter vowed to learn Romanian, to track down the original articles, to study and translate them along with other relevant material, and to make

them widely available. Though one executor, Eliade's nephew, refused permission to republish the pieces, Lincoln plans to release them when they come into the public domain in 2028.

Lincoln lays out and analyzes this troubling material with meticulous objectivity, while also expressing empathy for those devastated by Eliade's web of secrets and lies. "One cannot help feeling anger, bewilderment, and regret at those who created, prolonged, and exacerbated the vortex, as well as deep sorrow and sympathy for those caught in it," he writes. "If I had the faith that some of them professed, I would ask God to show them all mercy." Lincoln's work shows the devastating consequences, sometimes fatal, of repressing troubling secrets.

As for theories about who killed Culianu and why, Ted Anton has proposed that he was assassinated by agents of the Romanian secret police after Culianu pilloried the post-Ceaușescu regime in a series of contemptuous, satirical articles. Others have suggested he was killed by Chicago legionaries who deemed him a traitor. Lincoln proposes, without taking a firm stance, the suggestion that Romanian friends of the Eliades might have acted independently, prompted by Christinel's growing contempt for Culianu and her fervent wish to end explorations of her husband's past.

Lincoln claims, without really defending the claim textually (a task that would entail another monograph), that Eliade's early reactionary commitments remained lifelong, shaping his subsequent intellectual work. Over a stunning, six-decade career, Eliade published autobiographically inspired novels and groundbreaking scholarly works on topics ranging from yoga to shamanism to magic to mythology. He sought to rehabilitate respect for "the sacred" as ballast against a modernist, materialist, secularized academy. The young Eliade had come to view the legion as embodying the spiritual quest for the "new man" who would be the agent of salvation for a decadent society. Perhaps, Lincoln suggests, this yearning was transformed into the "new humanism" that the older Eliade hoped might sanctify his academic field and help revitalize Western culture.