

**BRUKENTHALIA**

**Romanian Cultural History Review  
Supplement of Brukenthal. Acta Musei**

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## **BRUKENTHALIA**

**Romanian Cultural History Review  
Supplement of Burkenthal. Acta Musei**

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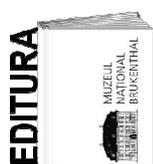
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# BRUKENTHALIA

**Romanian Cultural History Review**  
Supplement of *Brukenthal. Acta Musei*

No. 4



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# Convenient Truths: Representations of the Communist Illegalists in the Romanian Historiography in Post-Communism

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**Abstract:** The present paper analyzes the post-1989 historiography of the underground communists, in order to identify their main representation in the scientific literature. I highlight the existence of continuity between the interwar and the post-communist discourses; historiography was regarded by historians rather as a moral reform than a method of scientific investigation. I will show that the research on the Communist Party between 1921 and 1944 was not among the main interests of the historians and researchers.

**Keywords.** The underground communists, depictions, historiography, interwar period, post-communism

## Introduction <sup>(1)</sup>

The history of the underground communists was an understudied topic after 1989, as most historians have focused their attention on the communist regime. Hence, the abundant scientific literature on communism covers numerous aspects such as communist repression, collectivization, penitentiary system, history of Securitate, etc. The communist movement from May 8<sup>th</sup> 1921, the foundation of the communist party and August 23<sup>rd</sup> 1944, the moment when the communists moved from the underground directly to power, has been scarcely addressed in historical literature.

## The main characteristics of the historiography

The few studies on this topic are usually biased, governed by preconceived ideas, and with very little flexibility towards interpretation. Most of the studies on interwar history of the Communist Party published after 1989 reflect the mentality of the times when they were written.

Some of them have simply resumed ideas stated in the 1930s in propagandistic works

coming from high ranking authorities. Such an inspiring personality was the magistrate colonel Petre Popescu-Cetate, prosecutor in the trial of Ana Pauker and 18 other communists in June 1936 at Craiova; he authored the book *Conspirația comunistă în România și evreica Ana Pauker în fața Justiției militare*. In his work he identified 'their tactics', namely 'from all their thoughts and words only results the hatred against everything national, Christian and moral'. According to the former prosecutor and political prisoner during the communist regime, the first enemies that the communists tried to destroy were '**family, church and motherland** [Emphasis in the original]'. (Popescu-Cetate 1941, 46). The depiction of the communism as imminent danger for the 'priceless material and spiritual values of the Romanian people' (D. Zamfirescu 1995, 18) is an idea which originated during the interwar period. This conviction has annihilated the critical debates on the Romanian communism between the two wars.

Another book written in the 1930s, notorious for its extremely violent approach is *Jos masca!* (Mask off!), by I. Dragomir; it describes the communists sentenced in the 1936 Ana Pauker trial as not only traitors of the Romanian national interest, but also as dehumanized beings, deprived of any human feature. For Dragomir, the communists had 'fat faces, dolt minds, and their sight caused repulsion to anyone [...] a lawless mob of foreigners who wanted to start a revolution in Romania but can't even speak Romanian, and

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who talk of communism and humankind happiness but their retarded minds can't help them understand its meaning' (I. Dragomir 1936, 13).

After 70 years, the approach of some historians hasn't significantly changed; some of them still analyze this part of Romanian history in a dichotomist perspective, lacking the critical perspective and moderate language, as is the case of Vasile Pascu, historian and history teacher at 'Gheorghe Lazăr' high school. In his book, which is a history of the communist regime in Romania, he presents the communist party as follows: 'the communist party and its doctrine held nothing sacred, both in religious and humanistic sense, and therefore they had no respect for anything, staining everything that was touched by its aberrant politics. Its main purpose was to transform the society into a collection of people to clap their hands like penguins in front of the supreme leader. **It was a return to humankind Prehistory: savage, ignorant, brutal**' [Emphasis in the original] (V. Pascu 2007, vol. I, 12).

Some authors have changed perspectives after 1989, as is the case for Gheorghe Neacșu and Marin Stănescu, former researchers at the Communist Party's Institute of History, or Cătălin Zamfir, a communist historian who in the 1990s became head of the Institute of Quality of Life Analysis of the Romanian Academy.

Generally, the Communist Party was presented as an entity alien to the Romanian society, formed outside the Romanian people, mostly by ethnic minorities such as Jews, Hungarians, Bulgarians. This assumption issues from a generalization of the study of Party's leadership in 1921-1944 interval (see the studies of Dan Cătănuș, Gheorghe Neacșu, Marin Stănescu, Ioan Chiper) who conclude that these leadership positions were actually dictated by the Comintern. Actually, there is no scientific analysis so far on the number and ethnic structure which to corroborate such a generalization.

Another feature shared by all these studies is their moralizing aspect, regarded as part of the attempt to reform a society which was dominated by the communists for 50 years, as well as the revealing of a truth that was impossible to say during the communist epoch: 'Thus, a process of falsifying the national history commenced, coordinated by the former <underground fighters> trained in Moscow as docile puppets' (D. Zamfirescu 1995, 17).

Analysis of the past was not among the purposes of the main historiographic works, but rather was the presentation of a truth that could not be said during the communist years. The historians have thus taken the role moral reformers of the society, aimed at: 'demolishing the myth built upon lies and the affirmation of the historical reality the way it was' (R. Ciuceanu 1995, 74). The same historian regarded the restoration of 'the truth about communists and communism' as a redress act for 'moral cleansing of current and future generations' (R. Ciuceanu 2001, 14).

Florin Tănăsescu, editor of several collections of documents regarding the early years of communism in Romania, stated that this truth contained the following assumptions: 'The communist structures from Romania undoubtedly demonstrate that at their initial acts they were organizations alien to the Romanian spirit and tradition, nation's interests and aspirations, diverging from the nation's independent existence within its natural borders and aspirations in 1918' (F. Tănăsescu 1995, vol. I, 109).

In support for this idea, he stated a truth that during the communism used to rest unspoken: '*according to their traditions, psychical structure and aspirations, Romanians reject the bolshevism*' and went further by arguing that '**through their very nature – as the history shows – Romanians are not inclined to adhere to political extremist movements**' [Emphasis in the original]. (F. Tănăsescu 1997, vol. II, 47). This statement is in sharp contrast with the Romanians' attitude towards the Legionary party.

The study of the documents from that period reveals a situation different from the facts presented by the historians. Among the communists, some were supporting full commitment to the Comintern program, while others were advocating its modification according to Romanian context. They were also supporting the rights of Romania upon Basarabia, a topic that was debated in the first interwar years and was revived during Nicolae Ceausescu (see the memoirs of the first secretary general of Romanian Communist party, Gheorghe Cristescu-'Plăpumarul', In: ANIC, Colecția 60, ds. 447).

The role of history in moral reformation of a society traumatized for 50 years can be identified not just in the works on the interwar communist movement, but also in the study of another topic massively approached in post-1989 historiography, namely the communist

repression. This side of the historian's mission was clearly expressed by Marius Oprea, one of the most reputed scholars on the matter. He argued that writing the history of Securitate and communist repression was 'not just a historiography but also a moral approach'. He concluded that 'writing about Securitate equals standing for a moral reformation of the Romanian society' (M. Oprea 2008, 13, 15).

Historians highlighted some of the particularities of the party in interwar period: permanent competition for leadership, and the existence of several rival groups inside the party. For the end of 1930s, the historians have identified three such groups: the communists from Moscow, led by Ana Pauker, the communists from Romania, led by Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, and the free communists from Romania, led by Ștefan Foriș, secretary general of the party (A. Cioroianu, 2007, V. Frunză, 1999).

### **The number of the underground communists**

Most of the researchers agree with an estimation made by Ana Pauker that at the end of the underground period the Party had ca. 1,000 members. Also referring to the number of the members, V. Frunză stated that between the wars, the communist party was 'a head, maybe two, in the search of a body' (V. Frunză 1999, 180). It is worth mentioning that during the war, the communist leader had no longer contact with PCdR and knew nothing about the structure of the party, because contacts between Comintern and PCdR were suspended (see C. Diac 2010). As a matter of fact, Ana Pauker, the representative of the Moscow group was interested in reporting a low number of Romanian communist members and fellow travellers because of its political implications: it was standing against the demands of the Romanian communists who stayed in Romania during the first years of World War II and were led by Gheorghiu-Dej. By minimizing their number, their role in the struggle for power could be diminished. In the struggle for power, their main arguments were their relatively high number and years spent in Romanian penitentiaries.

Regarding the number of communist members before August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1944, one can talk about a true 'historians' consensus' which hampered the historical debate on the documents mentioning the numbers of communists from Romania and which could contradict Ana Pauker's statements.

Thus, the historians' efforts were oriented towards discrediting the documents indicating other numbers. In one of the most important studies on the number of the communists before the communist regime, I. Chiper states that in 1974, during the 11<sup>th</sup> congress of communist party, an internal note 'mentioned that until that moment had been acknowledged total of 5237 members prior to August 23<sup>rd</sup> 1944, of which 4385 had been members before 1940'. The same historian mentions another document in which the total number of member in 1940 was 4210. This disparity has led Chiper to disregard their importance of these documents, found by accident; he also tried to parallel those who claimed they took part in the 1989 revolution and those who claimed to be communist after august 1944. He argued that these claims were motivated by 'the privileges and benefits that could be attained by those who declared to be former party members or were involved in the revolutionary activities' (I. Chiper 1996, 25-26)

The main method to discrediting these documents was the projection of contemporary assumptions on documents belonging to the past. Employing such reasoning was most likely facilitated by the fact that many contemporary historians were aware of the means to obtain a 'revolutionary certificate', which convinced them that such methods have been previously used by the communists after World War II.

The historian's conclusion was confirming Ana Pauker's estimation which, 'although vague, is close to the truth and confirmed by other sources' (I. Chiper 1996, 26). In his paper, the author does not indicate the documents and sources. From the quotations he used one could infer that it is about documents created during the 11<sup>th</sup> congress of the communist party.

Actually, the documents which provide information on the communist party structure during the underground period were not created during the Ceausescu regime, but within the first years of the communist regime. The document was based on an internal census of communist members in 1950-1951. It was created shortly after the examination of the party members, an operation which resulted in the exclusion of 192,000 members (see S. Tănase 1998).

Communist membership for the interwar period was only validated after the verification of the activities: when and where people were active and with whom. After naming the communists they were working with, they were thoroughly checked. These three questions were

only a few of the many included in the form for underground communist inventory.

It is hard to believe that people would choose to provide false information on underground activities in a climate dominated by terror. Moreover, the Securitate had already obtained the archives of Siguranța and courts of law on the communist movement (see the statements of Teohari Georgescu, In: ACNSAS, fond Penal, dosar 246, vol. 4).

Thus, by setting a minimum number for the members at ca. 1000, as well as stressing the presence of numerous foreign members within the party, the historians aimed at highlighting the illegitimacy of communist regime and party ever since its early years.

### **The main categories of books**

When consulting the literature that covers the subject, three main categories of works can be identified: document collections, synthesis works and biographies. Within the first category, the following volumes should be mentioned, rather for the raw information than for the interpretations employed in introductory chapters: C. Feneșan, *Sub Steag străin*, București, Editura Enciclopedică, 2011; Alina Tudor Pavelescu, *Copilăria comunismului românesc în arhiva Cominternului*, București, Arhivele Naționale ale României, 2001; Florin Tănăsescu (coord.), *Ideologie și structure comuniste în România*, vol. I-III, București, Institutul Național pentru Studiul Totalitarismului, 1995-2001. Among other works worth mentioning are Dan Cătănuș, Ioan Chiper, *Cazul Ștefan Foriș. Lupta pentru putere în PCR de la Gheorghiu-Dej la Ceaușescu. Documente: 1940-1968*, București, Editura Vreamea, 1999; Stelian Tănase, *Rakovski. Dosar secret*, Iași, Polirom, 2008; Gheorghe Brătescu, *O anchetă stalinistă. Lichidarea lui Marcel Pauker*, București, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 1995; Ilie Oana, Cornel Constantin Ilie, Gheorghe Cristescu – „Plăpumarul”, *primul secretar general al PCR. Corespondențe, documente, imagini*, București, Editura Semne, 2009.

The highlights of the second category are the books of Adrian Cioroianu, *Pe umerii lui Marx. O introducere în istoria comunismului românesc*, București, Editura Curtea Veche, 2005; Victor Frunză, *Istoria comunismului în România*, București, Editura Victor Frunză, 1999; Robert King, *A history of the Romanian Communist Party*, Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1980; Ghiță Ionescu, *Comunismul în România*, București, Editura Litera, 1994. They

present the history of the Romanian communism from the founding of the party until 1964 (Ghiță Ionescu), until 1980 (R. King), or until 1989 (A. Cioroianu, V. Frunză). Unlike other works, they are less biased and generally less influenced by the stereotypes on interwar communism. Nevertheless, these volumes cover only briefly the period before August 1944.

Within the third category, among the best publications are Robert Levy, *Gloria și decăderea Anei Pauker*, Iași, Polirom, 2002; Stelian Tănase, *Clienții lu' tanti Varvara: istorii clandestine*, București, Humanitas, 2005; Lavinia Betea, *Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu. Moartea unui lider comunist*, ed. a II-a, București, Curtea Veche, 2006; Lavinia Betea (coord.), *Viața lui Ceaușescu. Ucenicul partidului*, București, Adevărul Holding, 2012; Dorin Liviu Bîțfoi, *Petru Groza. Ultimul burghez. O biografie*, București, Editura Compania, 2004; Thomas Kunze, *Nicolae Ceaușescu. O biografie*, București, Editura Vreamea, 2002 plus some of document collections already mentioned above.

### **Conclusion**

It appears thus that the history of interwar communism was a topic scarcely covered by scholars. Their attention was rather oriented towards 1944-1989 period, with particular attention to communist oppression. The literature on the Romanian communism is governed by a few stereotypes, i.e. the party's ethnic structure (Jews, Hungarians, Russians, Bulgarians, etc.) or its sectarian character (most often referred to as a cult). Aside from their lack of scientific ground, they represent a simplistic generalization of a few authors' conclusion on the number and leadership ethnic structure of the party's underground years: 'Typical for leadership structure was that most people belonged to ethnic minorities, and the percentage of Jews and Hungarians was sometimes overwhelming' (M. Stănescu 1994, 99). During the interwar period, only one secretary general was Romanian, Gheorghe Cristescu-Plăpumarul.

The predominance of such clichés in Romanian historiography can be explained by the preferential focus on oppressive aspects of the communism (especially 1945-1964), the spirit of the post-1989 era which tried to explain the 'red plague' through the activity of ethnic minorities, but also because some documents on the interwar period have only recently become available in archives.

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