

## HISTORIANS' CONFERENCE BUCHAREST, 7–11 APRIL 2003

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*Have new institutional structures been put in place for the production, dissemination and reception of historical knowledge since the end of the Cold War? Do they work? How?*

One of the most pernicious consequences of Communist regimes was the perverted image of the past that they left. Since 1990 new histories of former Communist states have appeared. The approach taken by some of them is original and of value, and not only because of newly-available sources. This is inevitable, but it does not mean that all histories written before the fall of Communism are less valuable than those written after. It means simply that in the research and writing of history there are no final results.

Romanians fret about their history. Often they have given more importance to opinions than to facts. In this respect they do not differ from other peoples. Much of the historical research conducted by Romanians during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was done so with the aim of supporting and then consolidating the idea of a nation-state, in the belief that only the nation-state could offer the cultural unity in which its members could prosper intellectually and economically. The premise was that all those born to a culture must live under the same political roof. This premise was propounded, broadly speaking, in the Communist period in the historical publications sponsored by the Romanian academy, including the four-volume *History of Romania* (1960) which covered the period of antiquity to independence in 1878.

It was only after 1990 that this “national historiography” was challenged by a handful of Romanian historians. They work outside the Romanian Academy, but are based at state-funded universities. The most notable amongst them is Lucian Boia, a professor of history at Bucharest University. His books *History and Myth in the Romanian Consciousness* (1987) was the first serious attempt by a Romanian – non-Romanian scholars have already addressed this problem, albeit in a less extensive manner – to discuss how the past has been distorted for political ends, especially during the period of Communist rule when the regime attempted to forge its own version of history, through manipulating accounts of the distant and not-so-distant past. Boia’s refreshing interpretation

of history and myth, and the role they play in Romanian life, has had a potent impact, especially upon the younger generation. His book was discussed widely in the Romanian press and on television, and has been reprinted. In assessing the degree to which myth has implanted itself in the Romanian consciousness Boia shows the reader that what is important is what the Romanians believe happened, not what actually happened. Importance is given to interpretations, not to facts. Boia draws upon a host of examples – in chronological order – to illustrate his point, among them the debate about the Daco-Roman symbiosis, and the role of Michael the Brave. At times, such debates served a positive social purpose, as during the formation of the Romanian national state between the years 1856 and 1918, a time when the creation of a national mythology served the purpose, as it has in many other countries, of consolidating a national consciousness that had been quite diffuse until then. But these interpretations of myths, once considered useful, degenerated during the Communist era and were used to justify a xenophobic and nationalist policy. Virtues, such as heroism, hospitality, honesty, were generalized for that purpose, and a whole patriotic literature was developed with exemplary characters and diabolical plots involving foreigners and traitors. Real events were falsely presented and distorted in the name of those new virtues, and were conveyed in communist propaganda on multiple levels – historical, social and cultural. These distortions were inserted into school textbooks, repeated in national television broadcasts, and reiterated in the compulsory party meetings.

The consequences are not difficult to see in Romania today. Although some Romanians passed this propaganda through a filter of scepticism, many accepted the distortion because censorship denied the possibility of critical debate and contention. In the aftermath of the 1989 Romanian revolution, it has been possible to gauge the measure of this propaganda. Going beyond Boia's book, one had only to see the editorials in the Romanian press regarding the conflict in Kosovo to see how a mythical history shaped attitudes at the time. A spurious "solidarity" with Serbian "Orthodox brothers" was invented; nothing was said about the Serbian invasion of the Romanian Banat in 1919, nor about the present-day treatment of the Romanian minority in the Voivodina. The "sell-out" at Yalta was resurrected as an argument to distrust the motives of the West and Nato. The anti-Nato campaign, in which the present President and Prime Minister were vociferous participants whilst in opposition, was conveniently forgotten as they changed their tune in welcoming Nato's overtures to Romania to join the alliance in autumn 2002.

The ultra-nationalist sentiment promoted under Ceaușescu has left a powerful echo in the public consciousness. This legacy favours the invocation of scapegoats to provide an illusion of security for those who need to feel safe in their homeland. Ultra-nationalism sometimes draws on tragic figures from the past who are seen as personifying, through their own personal drama, the injustice endured by an entire nation. Removing this stereotypical image of the

past, one infused with a sense of “tragedy”, “persecution”, and “injustice”, is one of the tasks set themselves by new historical institutions that have been created since 1990.

Among the new institutions that have established themselves in the field of historical enquiry since 1990, the following have made a mark in Romania and internationally through their published research output and their conference activity; The New Europe College (NEC)<sup>1</sup>, the Civic Academy Foundation (CAF)<sup>2</sup>, the Romanian Institute for Recent History (RIRH/IRIR)<sup>3</sup>, and the National Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism of the Romanian Academy (NIST)<sup>4</sup>. The first three are non-profit bodies and were established with non-Romanian government funding. They seek to dismantle the stereotypes forged not only in Communist Romania, but also in other countries that shared a totalitarian experience during the twentieth century. Through the scholars they support, these institutions pose uncomfortable questions about the past, questions that are often inconvenient to Romania’s political class. NIST is, despite its title, focused specifically upon the totalitarian experience in Romania. The energy of its researchers is displayed in its review, although some of its

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<sup>1</sup> NEC (Director, Andrei Pleșu) was set up in 1994. It defines itself as an institution for advanced studies in humanities and social sciences and is financed by German and Swiss foundations (Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft, Volkswagen-Stiftung, Zuger Kulturstiftung Landis & Gyr), the Swiss department of Foreign Affairs, and the Higher Education Support program of the Open Society Institute in Budapest. It describes itself as “a center of excellence which aims at improving the chances of young Romanian scholars to develop their scientific personality and establish academic links which are vital for those pursuing a scientific career”. Other important objectives are the fostering of contacts between Romanian scholars and their peers world-wide, and also to contribute to the development of the intellectual elite in Romania, the enhancement of their role in the renewal of the academic and intellectual life in Romania. Fundamentally, NEC offers 10 month grants (NEC Fellowships), enabling the recipients to focus on the courses delivered by foreign and Romanian academics and on the proposed project (which is the basis of the selection procedure by an international Academic Advisory Board). The New Europe College also pays a one-month stay abroad for each grantee at the institution of the his/hers choice (see the NEC website).

<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1994 (President, Ana Blandiana), CAF’s aims are “to develop a civic spirit and the civic and especially historical education of young people.” Its main project is “The Memorial to the Victims of Communism and to the Members of the anti-Communist Resistance”, created by the Foundation in 1996 with funding from the Council of Europe and several European donors at Sighet in northern Romania in a former prison notorious for the harsh treatment by the Communist authorities given to its inmates. The Memorial consists of an International Centre for the Study of Communist Oppression, staffed by a number of scholars and archivists, and a museum.

<sup>3</sup> The Romanian Institute for Recent History (RIRH/IRIR) (acting Director, Marius Oprea; Director from 1 July 2003, Dragoș Petrescu) was set up at the end of 2000 on the initiative of Mr Coen Stork, former ambassador of the Netherlands in Romania, with a MATRA grant for institutional building from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was created to respond to the need in Romania for a dynamic historical institute that could contribute to the consolidation of the democratic process by offering a critical analysis of the country’s recent past. The recent past for IRIR’s purpose is defined as the period from 1930 to the present. Its funding is currently administered by the United Nations Development Program in Romania (see IRIR website).

<sup>4</sup> Created in 1993 (Director, Academician Dan Berindei).

published research is highly derivative – I have in mind a directory of political prisoners under Communism which draws heavily on the work of Cicerone Ionițoiu. In keeping with the *ethos* of the present direction of the Romanian Academy, its interrogation of Romania’s Communist past is largely unprovocative.

I take here the liberty of introducing two experiences of mine in Romania to illustrate the need for NEC, CAF and RIRH. Both were associated with my involvement with CAF. The objectives CAF were fourfold: the purchase, refurbishment and transformation into a memorial museum of a disused political prison at Sighet in the north of the country; the publication of a series of studies on Communism in Romania; the establishment of an oral history archive based on interviews with victims and victimizers of the regime; and the organization of an annual summer school for sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds whose theme would be aspects of the recent past. With financial assistance from the Council of Europe, from various European NGOs, and successive Romanian governments – some more generous than others – the Foundation has largely achieved its objectives.

The first experience occurred during a stay at Sighet in summer 1996. My curiosity to learn what impression – if any – the prison had left on the public drew me to cast an eye down the comments in the visitors’ book. My attention was caught by a note left by three eighteen-year-olds who had expressed their “awe at seeing the jail in which the Romanian patriots Horia, Cloșca and Crișan had been imprisoned.” The three teenagers were correct in their knowledge that the patriots had indeed been incarcerated, but this fate had befallen them at the hands of the Habsburg authorities more than a century before the construction of Sighet jail and more than one hundred and fifty years before its use as a political prison by the Communists!

The second event took place the following year, in the course of the summer school. Summer days in Sighet can be torrid, so early one morning – about eight o’clock – I went to the classroom in the museum – the refurbished prison – to ensure that there were sufficient supplies of mineral water. Upon entering the room I found to my consternation one of the pupils with his head on the desk, fast asleep. The sound of my steps roused him and he rose to his feet and apologized. He introduced himself as Mihai, declaring that fear of missing the bus – the pupils were ferried every morning to Sighet from their billets in a mountain resort some fifteen kilometers away – had led him to make the journey on foot. Mihai had walked for more than two hours. Intrigued by his dedication I asked him about his background. He was from Timișoara, the city in western Romania perhaps best-known for providing the spark for the revolution of 1989. His father, a railwayman, had insisted that he attend the summer school “to take advantage of an opportunity that he (the father) had never had at school under Communism, to learn the truth about the past, not the falsified, mythical version that was being peddled still in the secondary schools.” It was the word “still” that intrigued me. I knew that the Romanian Ministry of Education, at the

prompting of the Council of Europe, had invited tenders from publishers for five new history text-books—christened by the Ministry “alternative” text-books – for the twelfth grade (eighteen-year-olds), the year in which the history of Romania is studied in depth in secondary school.

The publication of the new text-books in 1999 removed the misgivings of people like Mihai's father. Some of the text-books were bolder than others in interrogating the Romania's past, indeed one was so bold that a Romanian senator from the Social Democratic Party (composed principally of former Communists) recommended that all copies of it be incinerated! Their publication prepared the ground amongst pupils and secondary school teachers alike for the reception of path-breaking studies on Romanian Communism, especially on aspects of its repressive mechanisms and their consequences for society, written under the aegis of CAF and RIRH. It is no exaggeration to state that both have done more than any other institution, including the National Council for the Study of the *Securitate* Archives (CNSAS), set up by the Romanian parliament in 1999, to uncover the crimes committed by the Communist secret police in order to maintain the Communist Party in power.<sup>5</sup>

If courage, enterprise and intellectual probity are hallmarks of the activity of the new externally-funded institutes of history, the same, alas, cannot be said of that of some of the Romanian Academy's most senior historians. The publication in 2001 of the first four (of a projected ten) volumes of the Academy-sponsored *History of the Romanians*, written by a team headed by Academician Dan Berindei, was met with consternation by the historical community, amongst them a distinguished corresponding member of Academy, Professor Șerban Papacostea. In a series of articles in the respected weekly review of political, social and literary comment “22”, Papacostea demonstrated, with copious quotes, that entire sections of the volumes had been plagiarized by the “authors” from other historians, both living and dead, without acknowledgement.<sup>6</sup> What is even more disturbing is that neither the President of the Academy, Eugen Simion, nor the chief editor of the history, Academician Dan Berindei, has made any public apology. Quite apart from the grave damage that publication of the history has done to the reputation of the Academy, the absence of an apology and steps to rectify the matter – either by carrying the correct attribution of the relevant sections, or by having them freshly-authored – suggests that the Academy – which was founded, in part, to guarantee

<sup>5</sup> See, in particular, Marius Oprea, *Banalitatea Răului: O istorie a securității în documente, 1949-1989* (*The Banality of Evil: A History of the Securitate: Documents, 1949-1989*), Iași, Polirom, 2002, 584 p.; Marius Oprea (coordinator), Nicolae Videnie, Ioana Cîrstocea, Andreea Năstase, Stejărel Olaru, *Securiștii partidului: Serviciul de Cadre al P.C.R. ca poliție politică. Studiu de caz: Arhiva Comitetului Municipal de Partid Brașov* (*The Party Security Agents: The Romanian Communist Party Personnel Department as Political Police. A Case Study. The Archives of the Party Municipal Committee of Brașov*), Iași, Polirom, 2002, 359 p.

<sup>6</sup> See “22”, no. 10 (5-11 March 2002), no. 13 (26 March-1 April 2002), no. 15 ((9-15 April 2002), no. 20 (20-26 May 2002), no. 28 (9-15 July 2002), no. 675 (11-17 February 2003).

impeccable standards of scholarship – condones this pernicious practice. Nothing, I would argue, demonstrates more clearly that some historians in the Romanian Academy still display the reflexes of a Communist past which perverted moral values and which attempted to raise mediocrity to the pinnacle of excellence. Insistence upon, and recognition and reward for, peer-appraised achievement, is needed if young Romanian historians are to meet the expectations of society eager to have the black holes about its past filled with precision, but equally Romanians deserve a community of historians in which vanity, and an obsession with income do not threaten to displace intellectual probity and rigour from the top of its agenda.