

DISTORTING THE PAST AS A POLITICAL TOOL CASE STUDY: ALTERING THE NATIONAL IDENTITY IN PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF ROMANIA

Daniel Ionică, PhD Student, University of Bucharest

Abstract : In Romania's case as in the other soviet satellite states, in order for the new communist regime that took power in 1944 to hold it, history had to be rewritten and reinterpreted in such an order to make use for the current political goals the Government had. Large amounts of people were put to work for achieving the goal of altering the national identity to a more favorable one to the new power.

As in Orwell's 1984, remodeling the past was a basic method for creating an entire platform of criteria, standards and habits designed to motivate the actions in the immediate reality taken by the regime's leader. The consequences of staging mass forgetting by forging facts from the past were dire and are still noticeable today in the lack of adequate civic memory in the Romanian society.

This article is conducted on the relationship between the two main apparatuses used to stage mass forgetting (censorship and propaganda) and how their actions reflected in the collective mind. I am emphasizing here the distortion of historical facts such as the coming of Communists to power by force, imposed by the Soviets, were presented as a result of the will of the entire Romanian people; past events were reinterpreted in order to be useful to the communist doctrine. The "new man" should no longer have any connection with the adverse influences of the past. It is necessary for an imposed and artificial regime to stand the test of time it must blend into reality, to be justified by the past therefore to determine the future in an organic way. By doing this, any doubt about its might and its validity is removed.

Keywords: *memory, communism, history, censorship, manipulation*

MOTTO : *"Culture is the arena in which political struggle occurs in order to obtain identity and legitimacy"*

- **Mihai Dinu Gheorghiu**

Introduction

In order to fulfill the Communization of the entire society, the new regime had to secure its long-term existence by justifying its legitimacy in a country such as Romania. Late '40 Romania wasn't the most fertile society, sociologically speaking, for the apparition of a strong communist movement. Given the strong religious nature of the country and a weak proletariat in conjunction with the majority of the nation being conservative small owner peasants, Romania was a better breeding ground for far right movements.¹

In this paper I would like to demonstrate that controlling human communication is a fundamental mean of action for totalitarian regimes in remodeling human thought. The

¹ The most successful of the far-right political movements was the Iron Guard which promoted a nationalist anti-communist doctrine within a conservative Christian Orthodox faith. Its electoral scores and popular support surpasses the leftist movements of the time such as the Socialist Party of Romania or Romanian Social Democratic Party. The Romanian Communist Party, while outlawed for the greater part of the interwar era, had few members and promoted ideas that were deemed anti-romanian by the majority of the citizens.

analysis will focus on communist template of remodeling of the past in order to ensure its survival and authority, centering the Stalinist phase of Romanian communism spanning roughly between 1945 and 1958. The main methodology I will use will mix quantitative and qualitative research based upon archive materials from the former censorship institution², newspapers and textbooks from the aforementioned period.

Throughout my research I will rely upon history textbooks from the time, which especially became the expression of communist ideology and nationalism which promoted a mystic perception of history, being viewed as instruments of party ideology rather an independent social science. Also, in order to make a more complete research I will make use of scientific literature on the subject such as Robert Jay Lifton, Klaus Mehnert, Roger Markwick or Marc Ferro who have touched on the relationship between national identity and remodeling history. The historical revision of facts in order to make benefit to present day issues is a practice done by democratic and totalitarian societies alike, with different tools and expected results in mind however. In this short research I will focus on the totalitarian case with a strong accent on Romania's experience.

1. Changing History in Totalitarian Regimes

It is a well known fact that regardless of the nature of regime we are putting into question, democratic or totalitarian, some ideas and/or actions could be seen as dangerous for the status quo.³ This is especially the case for oppressive regimes where censorship and propaganda are vital tools in maintaining political power and legitimacy.

In what is perhaps one of the best books ever written about manipulation Robert Lifton states that *whatever its setting, thought reform consists of two basic elements: confession, the exposure and renunciation of past and present "evil"; and re-education, the remaking of a man in the Communist image. These elements are closely related and overlapping, since they both bring into play a series of pressures and appeals- intellectual, emotional, and physical- aimed at social control and individual change.*⁴

Ideology involves both a philosophy of history and usually some sense of teleology, an assumption that history is working towards a certain goal or in a certain direction. This relation between history and ideology can be seen as an action program that provides guidelines about how people should act.⁵

Any truly revolutionary change will involve the substantial reworking of the cultural sphere. The new structures of power that these norms represent become embedded in the patterns of action and the webs of relationships that develop in the society, and they are reinforced by the daily interactions which are structured by these norms and which give

² General Direction of Press and Prints/Committee for Press and Prints (1949-1975/1975-1977)

³ Marc Ferro, *The Use and Abuse of History: Or How the Past Is Taught to Children*, Routledge, New York, 2003, p. 12

⁴ Robert Jay Lifton *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1989, p. 5

⁵ Klaus Mehnert, *Stalin Versus Marx: the Stalinist historical doctrine*, Port Washington Kennikat Press, New York, 1972, p. 81

concrete realization to their essence.⁶ This principle applies best to totalitarian regimes regardless of which place they situate themselves on the political spectrum.

This so-called “Stalinist civilization” has been seen as emanating from the dramatic social changes imposed upon Soviet society from the end of the 1920s with the introduction of rapid industrialization, forces-paced agricultural collectivization and through discursive domination principally through the involvement of the population in a process of participatory totalitarianism.⁷

The totalitarian regime invents a new vocabulary, giving well-known words special new meanings, making them into trite clichés. The clichés become “ultimate terms”, either “god terms”, representative of ultimate good, or “devil terms”, representative of ultimate evil. Totalitarian language, then, is repetitiously centered on all-encompassing jargon, prematurely abstract, highly categorical, relentlessly judging, and to anyone but its most devoted advocate, deadly dull: the language of non-thought.⁸

The soviet historiography that served as an example for all the satellite states after the Second World War ended has been influenced by Marxism. Marxism believes that the moving forces of history are determined by material production and the rise of different socioeconomic formations. Applying this perspective to socioeconomic formations such as slavery and feudalism is a major methodological principle of Marxist historiography.⁹ Based on this principle, historiography predicts that history there will be an abolition of capitalism by a socialist revolution made by the working-class. Soviet historians believed that Marxist–Leninist theory allows for applying categories of dialectical and historical materialism for studying historical events.¹⁰

The materialist or dialectic basis of history does not normally have a place in the discussion of policy alternatives. The discussion of policy and the interaction between regime and society must be structured in terms consistent with the ideology. All the successes of the Soviet Union, from the 1917 revolution to the construction of socialism, were attributed to Stalin’s leadership. *He was keeping the locomotive of history on the socialist rails* as a saying of the time stated.¹¹

2. Rewriting History in Communist Romania

The early years of communism accounted for the postwar Romanian culture extensive and profound changes, bearing the generic term of “*cultural revolution*”. Both the traditional structure of the scientific community of the historians, and the modern historiographical Romanian rhetoric, shaped in the last eighty years starting with Xenopol and Iorga was radically reconfigured in just a few years.¹² Given that even an ailing authentic prewar

⁶ Gill Graeme, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. 2

⁷ Graeme, *Op. cit.*

⁸ Lifton, *Op. cit.*, p. 429

⁹ Roger Markwick, Donald Raleigh, *Rewriting History in Soviet Russia: The Politics of Revisionist Historiography*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, p. 133

¹⁰ Markwick, Raleigh, *Op. cit.*

¹¹ Mehnert, *Op. cit.*, p. 89

¹² Andrei Mihalache, „Ideologie și politică în istoriografia română (1948-1965)” în Anuarul Institutului de Istorie „A.D. Xenopol”, XXXVI, 1999, p. 37

Marxist “tradition” was missing from the cultural sphere, the Bucharest political elite embraced the Soviet cultural model, in a first phase at least, without hesitation. Historical science, like other “*politically sensitive*” social sciences and humanities, was thus entirely subordinated to the political interests of the Party.¹³

As the communist power grew, aided by the Soviet Red Army and commissars, the Romanian culture entered a new phase in its history. The entire spiritual tradition of the country will be reconsidered radically by means of the communist ideology and the soviet proletcultist practice; the new “cultural production” will be tailored by Kremlin tenets. The soviet cultural model which broke through along with the Red Army has set up a destructive trend that had a great impact on the national identity in the first decade at least. Romanians never had a fidelity tradition towards the Soviet Union or Russia for that matter; this problem had to be dealt with for a long-term solution as the same thing was true for Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary or the Baltic states. This was to be done by censoring press, stopping access to traditions, printing in large numbers of soviet books and Russian authors, reorganizing education, changing the teachers who had an anti-communist stance in the past, establishing various soviet cultural institutions (such as joint museums, magazines, theatres etc.), statues and monuments depicting soviet personalities, making Russian language a mandatory school discipline or controlling/banning some religious cults.

On the other hand, given the fact that the political system itself had an indisputable ideological nature, relying on a questionless philosophy and a certain vision of the past which had to justify its existence, further increased the ideological aspect of the historical discourse. Its most extreme form was established and took form in the sole and mandatory history textbook “The history of the People’s Republic of Romania” in its various editions that have followed between 1947 and 1956.¹⁴

History was based on directives from Moscow, diverting it accordingly. Everything that had to do with Romania’s pre-communist past had to be reconsidered and truncated. Topics such as the role of the masses and elites in Romania’s past were reinterpreted on Marxist terms; events that took place in ancient and medieval times were linked to communist dogma. Issues like the Royalist period, the role of the communist party and the events of 23rd of August 1944 due to the fact that were much closer, chronologically speaking, to the communist establishment was altered the most both by censorship and propaganda. Using history books as propaganda tools through which facts and events were manipulated or falsified was a common sight until the fall of the regime.

Once the “*peoples democratic*” regime was officially institutionalized after the 30 December 1947, it did not take long until historical research suffered a radical change as a whole, in the image of the Soviet Union experience. This radical change was accomplished through two complementary mechanisms that functioned interrelated and were coordinated simultaneously by the political power: first of all reorganizing the universities, academic and research centers and by giving a more ideological tone of the historical research. This was

¹³ Gabriel Catalan, “Istoriografia română sub impactul modelului sovietic 1947-1955” în *Intelectualii și regimul comunist: istoriile unei relații. Anuarul Institutului de Investigare a Crimelor Comunismului în România*, vol. IV, Ed. Polirom, 2009, p. 60

¹⁴ Florin Muller, *Politică și istoriografie în România, 1948 – 1964*, Editura Nereamia Napocae, Cluj Napoca, 2003, p. 19

part of totalitarian political prerequisite of restructuring the human condition by subordinating and controlling people's conscience.

After the 175 decree of the 2nd of August 1948 issued by the Presidium of the Grand National Assembly of the RPR, eliminated the vast majority of scholars, renowned university historians were substituted by secondary school teachers and intellectuals, activists, and the faculties of Letters and Philosophy were dismantled into other faculties.

Mihai Roller's mission mainly concerned with giving higher education a more ideological tone and controlling universities by political means.¹⁵ Thus, at the 15th of May 1948 meeting of the Propaganda and Agitation Department Office, he stated: *"We must introduce the study of Marxism-Leninism in universities. This problem must be radically solved. The country's highest science and culture forum will not be as it was in bourgeois-landowning regime, a feudal caste, limited and isolated from the masses and the people's needs, but an alive and active factor in the development of our science and culture. The Academy of the Peoples Republic of Romania needs to unite theory with practice. [...] By creating six departments in different branches of science, one should not forget that there is a branch of science that all those working in the scientific realm need to know, regardless of their specialty. That is the Marxist-Leninist science on society, the science of laws that develop a society, the science of the development of the proletarian revolution, laws about developing socialist construction, the victory of communism."*¹⁶

In light of the positions Mihail Roller held and the commissions that's he received from Party, he practically held control of the entire historiography during 1948 and 1955. His speech became the norm of expression, setting limits on what would be the new Romanian historiography.

The aim was to eradicate traditional Romanian values and consciousness and to replace them with propaganda themes that expressed the new power's vision. Among them we can include:

- the exaltation of the U.S.S.R. and Stalin and an exaggerated and extended vision on Tsarist Russia and the Slavic migrations (Roller says study Marxism-Leninism leads to *"the appropriation of the most advanced culture in the world – the Soviet culture"*¹⁷);
- condemning other external factors, especially if they are Western inspired, starting with ancient Rome, France, the United Kingdom;
- condemning old ruling class – the boyars were called "traitors" in favor of the Ottomans and the bourgeoisie (which was deemed as *"cosmopolitan"*, *"submissive to imperialist capitalists"* etc.)
- minimizing the role of historical personalities Romanian, shifting the historical concept that focused on the role the elites had in making history in the favor to the masses

¹⁵ Florin Constantiniu, *De la Răutu și Roller la Mușat și Ardeleanu*, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 2007, p. 102

¹⁶ Mihalache, *Op. cit.* p. 39

¹⁷ *Ibidem*

- the characterization of Romania's participation in World War I as an “*imperialist action*”, thus condemning the occupation of Bessarabia and intervention in Béla Kun’s ruled Hungary etc.

All these theses regarding Romania’s past were developed by activists from the Propaganda and Agitation Department or the Party’s History Institute, being approved at the Romanian’s Worker Party congresses and penuries and thus became dogma.

Starting with 1948, the main focus was on combating old historiography¹⁸, accused of being “bourgeois” and “reactionary”, “excluding the masses”, “subservient to the West”, or just plain “anti-Romanian”.

Infamous for the time was the new history textbook that was designed to change the approach on education, which gained a more ideological tone. Below are some of the political ideas that laid the basis for new manual, becoming historiographical theses overnight, and shaping the official historical writings that were to come for almost a decade:

- class struggle became the driving force of historical evolution, history being pegged to all kind of social conflict, often being out of context and amplified, sometimes even invented (such as those regarding the ancient history of Dacia) and the great historical personalities were considered as belonging to the exploiting classes. Thus they were trying to legitimizing the communist regime - the victory of the dictatorship of the proletariat, in alliance with the “peasantry” was being presented as a natural conclusion after centuries of struggle of the masses against the “exploiting classes”;¹⁹

- In the foreground of it all stood the hailing of the “*great brother from the east*”. By any means necessary the beneficial influence of the Slavic factor was to be highlighted: starting with the migrations period, continuing with the middle Ages and the 1877 War of Independence and ending with the contemporary;

- As a counterweight, Western values were strongly contested (in subsequent editions the tone will become more and more virulent, as divergences between the Western countries and Eastern countries grew);

- Out of the leaders of the 1848 Revolution, only Nicolae Bălcescu was highlighted, as he was perceived to have fought against feudalism and supporting the same position as czarist Russia. Instead, Avram Iancu was accused of serving the counterrevolution by joining the Habsburgs, in opposition to Bălcescu;

- The 1859 union between Wallachia and Moldova was only beneficial to the bourgeoisie (which sustained the act only with the will to create a larger market for the products they produced), not the masses, therefore being a political class act, not a national one;

- The name “Transylvanian School” was replaced with “Latinist School” and its leaders were accused of hiding the influence of the Slavs and “great Russian people” upon the Romanians and by their theories they encouraged chauvinism;²⁰

- In accordance with the tenets of Comintern PCdR Congress, creating Greater Romania in 1918 was not presented as a union per se, in the case of Bessarabia the act being

¹⁸ Muller, *Op. cit.*, p. 65

¹⁹ *Ibidem*

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 66

entitled “*Imperialist intervention against the socialist revolution in Russia*”, and the union of Transylvania by “*intervention against the Hungarian Revolution*”;

- Besides the alterations mentioned, there were significant changes introduced in periodizing history: Contemporary history was considered to begin with the Great October Socialist Revolution, not the 1918 Union as before; Using Marxist theory of history and stages of history the term “Paleolithic” was replaced with “wilderness” and the “Neolithic” with “barbarism” and claims society as fundamentally determined by the *material conditions* at any given time.

- The communist strikes and demonstrations that took place in the interwar period were highlighted and exaggerated in importance, aiming at shaping Romania’s contemporary history (1917-1948) more than the Monarchy of the various Governments the country had in that time;

- The Church’s role in national history was greatly reduced, secularizing official history;

- The immediate political struggle plan was compromising the political parties and the Monarchy (“*the most reactionary exponent of the political class and the largest landowner*”), the democratic regime and its institutions. The aim was to legitimize the class struggle and especially the repression against the representatives of these categories, because if they were perceived as being sociologically against the masses, the subsequent dispossession of their property (nationalization) and their imprisonment would be much easier;²¹

- Also some events that occurred after 1944 were shown in a biased manner: the 23rd of August Act was presented as “*Liberation Day by the Soviet Army*” which protected Romania from the intervention by the imperialist powers; Transylvania was returned to Romania only through the intervention of the U.S.S.R.; the sovrms helped the economic development of the country; during the Paris Peace Treaty all favorable terms towards Romania were due to the Soviet Union and the unfavorable clauses to the imperialists etc.

Special care was put into giving a more ideological aspect to archaeological research.²² The new regime wanted to shift the focus from the Roman archeology, to the study of pre- and post Roman era. Ancient Rome was considered by Marx and Engels an essentially exploitative empire, neglecting its role in the development of European civilization.²³ Roller insisted that ancient history should be interpreted using Joseph Stalin’s teachings²⁴, which pointed out the “*unscientific position of the old bourgeois historians*” that Russia had begun its history since the foundation of the Kievan Rus’ State, thus denying the human society until that point. Similarly, in Romania the bourgeois historians only concentrated on the period near the Roman conquest, “denying the human development until the conquest of Dacia” or the formation of a Dacian state.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 67

²² Liviu Pleșa, „Mihail Roller și stalinizarea istoriografiei romnești” în *Annales Universitatis Apulensis Series Historica*, nr. 10/1, 2006, p. 55

²³ Vlad Georgescu, *Politică și istorie*, Editura Humanitas, București, 1991, p. 61

²⁴ Pleșa, *Op. cit.*, p. 56

Contributing to this idea, some of Gheorghiu-Dej's guidance were also used, who stated that Romania was plundered over thousand years by Romans, barbarians, then by French, English, German imperialists.²⁵

After Stalin's death, the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Since and the more relaxed climate allowed by Moscow, changes started to take shape in Romanian's internal politics including the way history was looked upon. Although it kept a strong ideological tone and it continued to be used as a tool for the regime's survival and legitimacy, history was put to use (along with the entire culture for that matter) into the aid of the national element of the communist party.

Conclusions

For the first time in Romania's history, the *historical* discipline became an "ideological weapon" in the arsenal of the party, fact clearly stated by Roller himself during the completion of the first review of historical research in the People's Republic of Romania in September of 1949: "...historians have to study and explain that based on the teachings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, that the people's fight on PRR's territory ever since the most remote times until today was to combat the influence of cosmopolitan bourgeois historical school, to transform the historical sciences in our country into a powerful ideological weapon in the service of the working people, in the service of educating the builders of socialism, using to the maximum great achievements of the Soviet science."²⁶

The project communist cultural revolution, which was to happen "under the banner of the ever so victorious Marxism-Leninism" and taught by "the great teacher of the proletariat", Stalin, was inserted into the discourse and practice of power politics even before 1948. Since that time however, significant efforts were made more intensely both in terms of cutting all ties with the values of Western culture - proclaimed without appeal as being in a state of advanced decomposition - and the full adoption of the cultural model of the Soviet Union proclaimed as being "*the science of the most advanced country in the world*".

Over the second half of last century, the communists' reinvented biography of the Dacian king Burebista to create a fictitious connection with Ceaușescu's need for a charismatically-mythical legitimacy through the descent from a genuine ancient autochthonous "hero" which proved in time to be a decent propaganda tool. History has always been an instrument of power and legitimating of the present and future through the past is not a mythological logic invented by the communists. A reconfiguration of mythical history especially that of the beginnings, aims to strengthen a common consciousness through a founding myth provides an essential part of a civilization.

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²⁵ *Ibidem*

²⁶ Mihail Roller, „Realizări și sarcini noi pe tărâmul științelor istorice” în *Studii. Revistă de istorie și filosofie*, nr 4, anul 2, (octombrie-decembrie 1949), p. 24

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