

# STUDYING COMMUNISM IN EASTERN EUROPE: MORAL CLARITY, CONCEPTUAL DIVERSITY, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY METHODOLOGY

*Mihail Neamțu*<sup>1</sup>

“Every time the sun sets, our knowledge of Communism evaporates just a little bit. Unless we work hard, day after day, to replenish our dissipating reserves, those of us who have known tend to forget, and those who never knew – the generation coming out of childhood – tend to grow up in ignorance of all those gruesome data about the nature of the enemy we face.”<sup>2</sup> This is how William F. Buckley Jr. described the moral and scientific duties of any academic, journalist, writer, or public intellectual who would like to assess the false promises and unspeakable horrors perpetrated by Communism during the 20th century.

This yearbook attempts to meet these expectations. A culture of memory is an indispensable part of our effort of coming to terms with the last century’s traumatic events. First, we should air the ethical concerns of the victims. Eastern Europe is a region where the hammer and sickle flag brought to death millions of lives. The stories emerge from the former Communist bloc exceed the ordinary powers of imagination. Labor camps and prisons, forced exiles and hecatombs require, without doubt, a very close attention to detail. Historians of different methodological persuasion have brought to light the physical and psychological terror experienced in the Gulag. Still, one cannot view Communism simply as a graveyard of global proportions. The unspeakable evil of any dictatorship is measured by its killings. However, the killings do not explain the genesis of that particular totalitarian ideology, and its subsequent unfolding. Unearthing the dead may be a reparatory action (on moral grounds) and a groundbreaking psychological experiment (with great potential for the inner katharsis). But even a worshipper of relics will not deny that there are other acts that complement this practice (i.e., the reading of texts).

Despite the rampant fear instilled among ordinary people, under the Communist regime other-than-horrible things took place. Symbolist poets and well-read novelists, great actors in cinema or on the theatre stage, as well as outstanding sports-men or highly qualified professionals in the field of medicine, engineering, military research or education, have made their contribution to a tacit strategy of collective survival. While some quietly endured the hunger and the cold, murmuring perhaps against the nomenklatura, others

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<sup>1</sup> Scientific Director of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (since March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010) <[mihailneamtu@gmail.com](mailto:mihailneamtu@gmail.com)>

<sup>2</sup> William F. BUCKLEY, “Harvey Schlechter on liberal anti-Communism”, in *The Jeweler’s Eye*, New York: Berkley Publishing Corp., 1969, p. 47.

wrote books; a few told “reactionary” jokes, while an even smaller minority found refuge in spirituality; etcetera. The memory of dictatorship, therefore, must be told, recounted, and analyzed in this full perspective. History-writing must be inspired by the calm figure of Clio, depicted with a book in her hand. Getting the facts right and discerning the contextual meanings of particular actions – this is what inspires the critical study of the archives, the constant reshuffling of hermeneutical categories, the comparative investigation of different collective or individual trajectories.

It is not hard to accept that Communism represented one of the most catastrophic political experiments of our modern times. Hundreds of thousands of people have been caught in the grips of humiliation, punishment, and degradation. Some were zealous executioners, perhaps a few became brave men, while a large majority passively remained quiet (or dignified) victims, reluctant fellow-travelers or submissive collaborators. The multifaceted world of Eastern European citizens under the Communist rule makes it necessary for us to look at a broader constellation of facts, gestures, symbols, and practices. History of Communism cannot be reduced to a series of photographs showing ossuaries and mass graves – no matter how great their pedagogical impact on younger generations’ spirit. Equally important is the probe into the seductive nature of the Communist ideology, of the psychology of masses, of the economic, social, and moral failures triggered by the egalitarian instinct. We have to understand the motivation for surviving under, resisting against, or pro-actively cooperating with the totalitarian system. How did the transfer from utopia to dystopia take place? Must we not try to comprehend the incomprehensible and don’t we have to talk about the past in order to prevent the repetition of similar horrors in the present or in the future?

Life under dictatorship records compelling images of pain, unbearable illusions, severe disappointments, circular errors, as well as passing moments of personal fulfilment (if not happiness). Intellectual genealogies and material culture; social relationships as well as economic decisions; religion and popular culture; institutional mechanisms, but also biographical accidents – these elements are part and parcel of the real world of Communism which the new generation of scholars, in Romania and other Eastern European countries, are called to narrate. What were the ideological justifications for transforming the traditional village into a new habitat for the “new man” (such as the born again peasants, in the wake of forced collectivization)? What books were available to philosophy students during the 1970s? How was undergraduate education shaped by the Communist propaganda? What were the sources of Soviet architecture? How did censorship function? What role have the intellectuals played in legitimizing or de-legitimizing the Party? In what manner has the mass-media contributed to the cult of personality? How did the Secret Police operate at the grassroots level? In order to answer these questions, one has to embrace an interdisciplinary methodology. Moral clarity does not disappear when we put into practice the *sine ira et studio* injunction.

By following this principle, the new leadership of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (a title itself under revision) has called for the broadening of the academic research of the Communist regime. As a result of this decision, this governmental Institute has launched the first and only international journal for the study of Communism which currently exists in Romania. Its aim is to reflect the interest of a larger academic community in the study of totalitarianism.

The writing of history should never be reduced to a hybrid of detective stories and gruesome obituaries. Before there were mass graves, some people concocted murderous ideas and planned specific ways of gaining power. Archaeology cannot challenge the work in the library – just as a morally justified discourse does not lead to intellectual rigorous undertaking and to a literary sophisticated account of the past. Without a solid theoretical base, feverish gestures and inquisitorial accusations shall never sound convincing in the eyes of those who have not been directly exposed to Communism. In Romania and in Eastern Europe, collective amnesia must be counteracted with calm and wisdom. The analysis of hardcore practices (such as the “re-education”, which took place in Pitești) is necessary, timely, and useful. However, this type of research would bring even more fruits if we would avoid the temptations of predictable positivism. Harvesting data and compiling comprehensive chronologies (the type of research admirably conducted by the post-1989 Romanian historiography) are highly commendable activities. On the theoretical level, however, false dichotomies and facile simplifications will never help the Western academic audience understand the very diverse and occasionally antithetic positions articulated by various groups vis-à-vis the totalitarian regime (e.g., the anticommunist activities of the military “partisans”, who in the 1950s took refuge within forests of the Carpathian Mountains, versus the open pro-Communist support of the 1964 intelligentsia for Nicolae Ceaușescu’s anti-Soviet rhetoric).

This is why heterogeneous methodologies could prove to be far more useful than any reductionism. Empirical descriptions often fail to interpret what took place in the realm of the invisible. The life of the mind, which mattered so much under the Communist regime, cannot be easily understood with the instruments of investigation refined by natural sciences. Communism was not just a social utopia or a failed modernization, but also a worldview which clashed with some core values of the Western civilization: individual freedom, dignity of the human person, property rights, charity, and prudence. This very battle between two Weltanschauungen dramatically shaped the destiny of many. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn once put it, “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander SOLZHENITSYN, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary*

*History of Communism in Europe* presents itself as a journal open to all academic inquiries, which are sensitive to the moral sobriety, conceptual complexity, and methodological sophistication required by any sustained research on totalitarianism. The scholarly investigations of the 20th century must remain an interdisciplinary enterprise, in which raw data and refined concepts help us understand the subtle dynamics of any given phenomenon. History is polyphonic and so the writing of it must be. It is never easy to pinpoint the causal relationship between distinct events, or the agency of different ideas. Historians talk about chronologies, philosophers study the ideological mutations of the Communist doctrinal monism, sociologists and anthropologists look at everyday life (such as the interaction between majority and minority groups). Some are interested in overarching narratives, while others enrich our knowledge of the past with case-studies. The study of Communism calls for a subtle “fusion of horizons”<sup>4</sup>: on the one hand, there is the interpreter, with his or her subjective background, prejudices, and intellectual proclivities. On the other hand, a whole historical age looms at large over the object found under scholarly scrutiny. As Hans-Georg Gadamer has convincingly argued, the act of comprehension emerges from this to-and-fro movement.

It is precisely this type of interdisciplinary approach that the first issue of the *History of Communism in Europe* brings forth. We can only hope that it will be followed by other volumes of equal (if not superior) value.

Mihail Neamțu

[mihailneamtu@gmail.com](mailto:mihailneamtu@gmail.com)

The Institute for the Investigation of the Communist Crimes  
and for the Memory of the Romanian Exile (Bucharest)  
Str. Alecu Russo 13–19,  
Bucharest, Romania

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*Investigation*, English translation by Thomas P. Whitney and H. T. Willetts, London: Collins-Harvill, 1974, p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1960, p. 289 sq.