

Book Review

Cristina DIAC, *Zorii comunismului în România. Ștefan Foriș, un destin neterminat* [The Dawn of Communism in Romania. Ștefan Foriș, an Unaccomplished Destiny], Cetatea de Scaun, 2014, 368 p.

On April 4th 1944, the Soviet Army troops were on the North-eastern border of Romania. The same day, several hundred US bombers launched a devastating airstrike over Bucharest—the target zone focused mainly the northern part of the city, covering the Gara de Nord Railway Station area. Several thousands were killed, another couple of thousand severely injured, many of them civilians. The same day, the Romanian political underground witnessed another “significant” event. An episode that was to remain unnoticed for a while. Ștefan Foriș, General Secretary of the miniscule Communist Party of Romania since 1940, was removed from office after a putsch ordered by Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej (informal leader of the imprisoned Communists), and carried out through the direct and energetic involvement of Emil Bodnăraș (former officer of the Romanian Army, defector, and NKVD agent). The removal from office of a general secretary appointed by the Comintern (the III Communist International) was unprecedented. But the Comintern no longer existed, as it was formally disbanded by the Soviets one year earlier. Another first was the self-appointment of a “troika”—which included Emil Bodnăraș, Iosif Rangheț, and Constantin Părvulescu—as the new collective leadership of the Communist Party of Romania. During the following months, the “troika” failed to revitalize the insignificant and stagnant Party. The Communist Party history was to change only when the political context allowed it—after August 23rd 1944, when Romania switched sides, joining the Allied troops, which would eventually place the country in the Soviet political sphere of influence. Only then did the small and insignificant Communist Party prove its usefulness, as it became the instrument which the Soviet Union used to impose its control over Romania.

Zorii comunismului în România. Ștefan Foriș, un destin neterminat [The Dawn of Communism in Romania. Ștefan Foriș, an Unaccomplished Destiny], (Cetatea de Scaun, 2014), the excellent book authored by Cristina Diac,

one of the young and proficient scholars interested in the early history of Communism in Romania, ends its story precisely on April 4th 1944. The book thus explores and recreates, with patience and scrupulosity, “*the history of the Communist Party of Romania during World War Two*”—a period during which the Party was ruled with an iron fist by Ștefan Foriș, the general secretary appointed in office by the Soviets.

The history of the Communist Party of Romania—which was to be renamed the Romanian Communist Party in 1945, the Romanian Workers Party in 1948, and, once again, the Romanian Communist Party in 1965—remains a subject scarcely covered by the recent historiography. Most of the contributions focus on the postwar history of Communism in Romania, addressing only brief and simplistic remarks regarding its pre-1945 history, a period during which the Party was outlawed. In general, the “clandestine” history of the Communist Party is acknowledged in terms of preconceptions (and often misconceptions), which classifies and labels every detail as being exaggerated or even invented. If the Communist historiography grossly overstated the role and the importance of the Communist Party within the interwar Romanian political context, recent analysis tended to follow a similar principle, but carried an opposing view—minimizing the subject to insignificance. Basically, the “myth” of a progressive, providential, and messianic party—formulated meticulously by the Communist historiography—was never deconstructed through relevant and appropriate analysis, but merely replaced with something similar to an “inverted myth,” of a party which embodied everything that was not only false, but also noxious.

This type of approach regarding the history of Romanian Communism is patiently surpassed by the current contributions of the historiography. Recent articles, studies, books, and research projects have submitted important and consisted analysis on what has often been labelled as nothing more than a mythology fabricated by the Communist propaganda. The main objective of these approaches is not necessarily to retrace the “clandestine” history of the party in a precise and objective manner. The real purpose is to understand and explain the different contexts in which many of the actors of the post-war history were cultivated, but also how they progressed and developed. Moreover, comprehensive analysis on the structure, organization, and the functioning of the underground party might provide more refined answers regarding the dynamics and the so-called organizational rigidity of the party, while also explaining how the Party managed to regroup itself strategically immediately after August 23, 1944, launching certain figures into the spotlight, while leaving others behind, in a process that seemed to take into account only the real political capital of each of the candidates.

Regarding Cristina Diac’s new book, there are some important details which must be emphasized. *Zorii comunismului ...* is not a biography of Ștefan Foriș, as one might be tempted to assume at a cursory glance. Cristina Diac

explicitly states that the “main character” of her book is the Communist Party of Romania. But she also asserts the fact that, during World War Two, the history of the party is, at some level, synonymous with the personal history of her general secretary—a detail that explains the chosen title. Another significant particularity of Cristina Diaç’s book refers to the manner in which she chooses to address the Communist Party’s history—acknowledging not the “*objectives included within the declarations and resolutions, but the results*” achieved following the undertaken actions, meaning an analysis which considers the differences between discourse and reality, and between goals and achievements. Furthermore, it is important to point out the fact that Cristina Diaç’s book reviews the history of the Communist Party by referencing the events that had a major impact on the history of Romania during Second World War. Therefore, it proposes explanations and clarifications on the manner in which the Communist Party chose to position itself in relation to the events of the “great history”: the territorial cession in the summer of 1940, the establishment of the National-Legionary State, the Iron Guard rebellion (January 1941), the military dictatorship of Marshal Antonescu, or the declaration of war against the Soviet Union. At the same time, the book comprises a “grassroots” analysis, seeking to encompass the less visible part of history—stories of the trivial clandestine existence, but also personal histories, trajectories, and dilemmas. Without minimizing the importance and significance of the other parts of this book, the analysis of the “petty” history of the Communist Party—and also of the biographical trajectories of its central figures—stands as the most interesting component of this volume. Primarily, in terms of difficulty implied by the efforts to document, but also “read” and interpret the archival sources. It takes inspiration and imagination to see beyond the (usually) succinct and (often) monotonous narrative of the sources. It takes intuition to discern the true identity of the main characters of this history—in most cases conspired under fictitious names, and sometimes under mere numbers. And it also requires patience and tenacity in order to reconstruct the (generally) prosaic histories and the complicated relations between the party members, especially because there were these histories and relationships—which seemed at some point without any kind of apparent stake - that designed the “geometry” of the Communist power system after 1945.

Last, but not least, *Zorii comunismului...* refers to the events which determined major repercussions on the history of the Communist Party: the signing of the non-aggression pact between Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, the arrests of the members of the Central Committee Secretariat (April 1941), which practically represented a “beheading” of the party leadership, or the reactions prompted by the dissolution of the Comintern (May 1943).

The “Stefan Foris” Affair is one of the macabre stories in the history of the Romanian Communist Party, a dogmatic dispute that was to be “settled” in a bloodbath. Accommodated *at the disposal of the party* after April 4th 1944

(in reality, he was under house arrest), Stefan Foris was formally arrested one year later, and in June 1946 he was brutally murdered in the basement of the Party headquarters in Bucharest. The one who carried out the decision of the Party—as Foris was never prosecuted or sentenced—was Gheorghe Pintilie (Pantelei Bodnarenko), Soviet spy, NKVD agent, and future chief (for almost fifteen years) of the General Directorate for the Security of the People (the *Securitate*). Even though in Cristina Diac's book the April 4, 1944 event (the putsch orchestrated by Gheorghiu-Dej and Emil Bodnăraș) represents an end, the same event could just as well be depicted as a beginning. The arrest and the subsequent murder of the former general secretary of the party paved the way for similar purges of top officials—translating the history of the Communist party into a bloodstained tragedy. In the following years, other important leaders of the Communist Party were to fall victim to Stalinist-type purges and repression. Ana Pauker (important member of the Communist Party since its establishment, Minister of External Affairs, and member of the Central Committee's Secretariat) was purged in 1952, arrested and subjected to intense and extensive interrogations. It is said that only Stalin's death prevented her execution. Vasile Luca (senior member of the Communist Party, Minister of Finances, and member of the Central Committee's Secretariat) was also purged in 1952, indicted and sentenced to death for economic sabotage (after the appeal, his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment). He died in prison nine years later. Another similar case is that of Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu (senior member of the Communist Party, Minister of Justice, and member of the Central Committee), arrested in 1948, indicted and sentenced in a Stalinist show trial, and executed in 1954.

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