

What Must We Not Forget?¹

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The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICCMER), with the support of its partners, primarily the Konrad Adenauer Foundation/Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), has accumulated almost one decade of experience in researching our Communist past and that of other nations. Scientific research, through archeological investigations and documentation, as well as the preservation of the memory of the victims of the regime and the struggles of the Romanian exile, are not activities related only to the past; rather, they have an immeasurable importance for the present and future. As banal as it may sound, detailed knowledge of the workings of evil is the most efficient motivation to persevere in good.

Handling “Hot” Memory

IICCMER wants to employ all of the expertise gained until now in the realization of a Museum of the Crimes of Communism in Romania (MCCR) in Bucharest. More than a quarter of a century after the symbolic fall of political communism, such an institution is a necessity, as shown also by similar endeavors coming from civil society. We must not overlook the fact that we have, besides constant public interest, a multipartisan consensus regarding the chance of a MCCR. The question is no longer whether it will happen or not, but one of *time, place and form*: when, where and how can MCCR work?

The many visions, competing or complementary, regarding what such a museum could represent, the ideas resulting from various recent debates, mostly organized by IICCMER, prove that the traumatic past still strongly

¹ This text was elaborated with the occasion of the International Workshop *Pleading for a Museum of Communism in Romania* organized by the Institute for the Investigation of the Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile in May 2015. By and large a Romanian version was also published in the Supplementary of the 22 Magazine, in June 2015.

influences our present, generating intense and differing images, powerful passions, and surprising reactions, some profoundly contradictory. What Charles S. Maier named “hot” memory (if not a downright *unmasterable* memory) clearly exists among us, too. Whatever it may be called, *the past must be handled with care*, keeping in mind the polyphony of references: witnesses, survivors on all sides, generations of interpreters, schools of analysis, etc. Obviously, this handling must not ignore the perspectives of today’s social and cultural age, which should be represented in the museum-planning effort, which first concerns them, rather than those on the road to disappearance.

In other words, the museum—whichever it may be and however themed—bridges the gap between generations by sheltering what must be transmitted from some to the others. This mission of protecting and promoting *recent cultural heritage*, both material and immaterial, makes the museum a paradoxical space through which the rule and the exception are at once fixed in the memory. Regarding the MCCR, the aforementioned endeavors of civil society show a regard for the artifacts that illustrate recent memory. Of course, not having been coordinated or assumed by a memorial-didactic vision on the part of the state as social arbiter, such initiatives, taken together, are not substitutes for a museum, but rather emphasize, indirectly, its necessity and urgency.

Concept, vision, application

From IICCMER’s point of view, the basic concept of a museum of communism ought to stem from social memory, in its role as “guiding light” of the public and historical conscience and of democratic values. Revealing, through stark contrast, the consequences of the lack of pluralism, freedom of expression and respect for human rights, the MCCR would resort to a *negative pedagogy* whose effect would be the creation of a broader horizon of knowledge, shared understanding and responsibility for the present and future. On a second conceptual level, this “cover” represented by *social memory* will be made up of the interconnection of major historical biographies, on one hand, and smaller but significant histories and moments, on the other. This is also because, after two and a half decades, it is more fragments of life and memories rather than valuable and historically significant objects that can be collected.

Another basic idea of this future museum would be *reverence for the victims of dictatorship*, which, in IICCMER’s opinion, excludes adherence to some political position from the outset. MCCR cannot be a “party” product. Similarly, the qualities of the “new man” will be presented to the visitors, especially through temporary themed exhibits, aimed at presenting the drama, the comedy or the banality of life under Communism. As the voices of memory are heterogeneous, the representations of what this institution could include are varied, which is why IICCMER considers that, for the generation of the concept of the museum and later for the implementation of its themes, a

concerted effort will be needed on the part of other institutions and people involved in the study of recent history. There will most definitely not be a consensus regarding the content as such, but we consider that there is already a consensus regarding its “utility”: being familiar with the personal histories of those marked by the violent past, and discovering new cases along the way, we will be able to learn from them to cherish the liberty we enjoy today, in turn teaching our children to understand and protect it. In this sense, through the medium of grand and minor histories, MCCR will document and illustrate what Hannah Arendt brilliantly dubbed “the banality of evil.”

Scientifically and organizationally caring for the future Museum of the Crimes of Communism in Romania, IICCMER aims to function as a nucleus which will offer its experience and logistical support in sustaining other similar initiatives in Romania, creating a *platform of knowledge, relationship and support* on a national level. Beyond any attempt to centralize, renouncing from the outset the possibility of a monopoly over history, we need a coherent museum and memorial politic, possible only if we all know of each other. IICCMER constantly works at coordinating efforts through its participation in the big European networks in the domain and, punctually, through the development of projects with its foreign partners. One recent example: the realization of an “inventory” of all victims of communist totalitarianism in Europe.

A major step in the preparation of this major project was the international workshop of May 2015, “Pleading for a Museum of Communism in Romania”. The event was planned as an occasion for dialog and the exchange of useful ideas as to the realization of the future museum, as an opportunity to mediate a meeting between foreign professionals and Romanian specialists and representatives of entities involved in the realization of museums and/or memorials on Romania’s Communist past. Last but not least, another essential component in the progress from vision to reality is keeping attention on the subject, and sensitizing public opinion regarding it. For example, in 2014, IICCMER organized debates and promoted media campaigns centered on exercising our right to memory.

Learning from Others

In the context of designing a *European map of museums and memorials* to encourage interest in and memory of the successive tragedies of recent history, the guidelines of best practice from other countries are especially helpful. As demonstrated by the international workshop of May 2015, the experiences of Communism in other countries, like Hungary, The Czech Republic, Germany, Poland or Lithuania, can serve as points of reference in finding approaches to the main steps in this long work process, in identifying the main directions which should guide the conceptualization and representation of the memory of the recent past in Romania. A major conclusion drawn from the debates in Bucharest was setting the stages of the project: a generic museum

of Communism represents not only a difficult task, but one especially fragile for the objections, founded or not, that it can generate. This is the reason why, in the logic of small steps and focused approaches, the beginning can be the presentation of the crimes of Communism. These would ultimately, along the way, be put into context, to show their impact by enlarging the field of view.

The exchanges from the recent workshop emphasized the necessity of several apparently theoretical *questions*, the answers to which could offer form and content for the MCCR project: is the projected museum a point of intersection between public authority and civil society? Is it “claimed” by the young? Is it a display case of the country for foreign visitors? What aspects of “nostalgia” can you capture and how does it manifest itself? At the moment when it is founded, will the museum bring about a change in the way Communism is recalled?

Instead of conclusions: a challenge and another question

The complexity of Communism as a phenomenon, amplified by the ambivalence of personal agreement about a period when some made their careers, explains the systematic avoidance of it in contemporary museology. Also: the historiographic effort as such is nowhere close to being concluded. This is continually exacerbated by the lack of unrestricted access to military or judicial archives, not to mention the unclear status of, for instance, the archives of religious congregations, organizations, or state firms. This is why MCCR is a greater challenge than a mere curatorial concept. To bring the thought to conclusion, MCCR remains a challenge for the entire historiography of 20th century Romania. In 2018, we commemorate 100 years of national unity. Yet the pages since 1945 onwards are missing from the history of this century! Nor can the history after 1989 be sketched without the previous chapter. In short: out of 100+ years, our memory still has difficulty with the last 75. *A normative historical narrative is lacking*, one based on a minimum documentary and interpretative consensus, a situation that should deeply concern us.

Ultimately, returning to what MCCR aims to accomplish, the problematic aspect of recent history will inevitably undergo, in the coming decades, major changes of accent, interest and relevance. As close as the period still seems, those born today or tomorrow will see it from an ever greater emotional distance. I thus wish for us to borrow at least part of the anamnestic tenacity of the Germans, to learn from the insistence of the Jewish people and to follow the examples of all peoples which make the periodic revisiting of decisive moments into an exercise of public hygiene. Only this way will we be able to move beyond the current phase dominated by extremes, between the condemnation and the justification of Communism, stretching out in a bewildering array of opinions and positions. As obvious as the crimes of the regime appear for some, just as obvious are its unequivocal “accomplishments” for others. Here is why, simply put, MCCR must answer the question: *What must we not forget?*