

ROMANIAN HISTORY-WRITING AND THE THIRD ENVELOPE

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Abstract

Due to the subservience to the previous regime, many professional historians were considered untrustworthy and discredited as interpreters of past and present in the former eastern communist countries. Their evolution after glasnost and perestroika contained some important steps. First, they challenged the communist political taboos under glasnost' and deconstructed the communist political myths and historical synthesis. Second, they restituted the national pre-communist history as well as the popularization of national traditions and heroes. Third, in most countries, the mid-1990s witnessed first attempts to counter the dominant trend of national history by re-integrating the communist past as an integral part rather than a historical aberration. In Romania some scholars turned politicians and the others focused on national democratic development in place, before communism took over. The recommendation is for "professionalism and openness".

Key words: communist legacy, revisiting history, national democratic development, objectivity.

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Introduction

Far from considering myself a novice in Romanian history or historiography, I would prefer to assume the position of an outsider for the purpose of this paper. My first major encounter with Romanian history writing was at the 2nd World Congress of the Society of Romanian Studies in Iasi 1993. At that time, I found it a very inspiring congress but later – at the 3rd congress in 1997 in Cluj - I realized that this inspiring effect had been partly due to it being the first major meeting of Romanianists from East and West after the revolution of 1989 and partly due to my being a novice in the field. Ever since my 1993 dissertation on Romanian and Soviet writing on the history of Bessarabia,¹ I have tried to stay abreast with trends and events in history-writing in Romania (and Moldova).

As even a well-informed and well-placed insider would be hard-pressed to present a fair and representative overview of historical production over the past ten years for all epochs and themes, I will take the comfortable position of an outsider and a kind of agnostic outlook as far as institutions and personalities are concerned. I would like to offer just some observations on general trends in post-communist, East European history-writing and compare these with noticeable developments of the Romanian case. Highlighting the conformities and peculiarities of Romania, Romanian history, and – most of all – Romanian historiography will raise the issue of historical science in the context of post-communist transformation.

The Third Envelope

To start with an anecdote: it is said that, on his deathbed, Konstantin Chernenko called for Michail Gorbachev, a man he disliked, but knew that he would be his successor. He gave the next Secretary General of the CPSU three envelopes, to be opened in times of crisis. Gorbachev forgot about the old man's advice until he felt his political program had turned into a dead-end street. He told his assistant to get him the first envelope. In it was just one line of advice: "Blame your predecessor." For lack of other options, at

¹ Wim P. van Meurs, The Bessarabian Question in Communist Historiography. Nationalist and Communist Politics and History-Writing, East European Monographs (Boulder Colo.: East European Monographs, 1994).

the next session of the Politburo, Gorbachev blamed Chernenko for the desperate economic and political state of affairs, and got away with it. Only a few months later, however, he found himself facing an even more intractable political conflict and opened the second envelope. After some serious hesitation, he followed this piece of advice too. It said: "Blame yourself." After some serious self-criticism, he managed to consolidate his eroded authority. Nevertheless, only weeks later he was again despairing enough to open the third and last envelope. He read: "Prepare three envelopes."

If I tried to transpose the wisdom of this anecdote to the situation of post-1989 Romanian historiography, the first envelope would say: "Blame Nicolae Ceausescu." It may have worked for some time, but not for too long. The second envelope would say: "Blame national-communist legacies." And my question in the presentation is, what is in the third envelope for Romanian historians.

Post-Communist History-Writing and the Legacies of the Past²

The substantial implication of historians in state and nation building was and is typical of the many national emancipation movements on the emerging nation states of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Their responsibilities in the different phases of the development of the nation-state had a lasting impact on their intellectual self-perception. As the culminating point of a gradual process of increasing interest in history, language, tradition and culture of the endogenous people, by the end of the 19th century, the first professional historians shouldered the task of constructing a synthesis of national history on this basis. The incongruence of nations and the delimitation of state borders *after* the consolidation of a national consciousness (with respective ideas on the character and size of the nation-state), moreover, gave historians another vital task. In particular after the First World War, the internal and external consolidation and legitimization of the newly created state became their *raison d'être*. As a consequence of this long-standing link between history-writing and politics, there is a long list of

² A longer version of this section was published as: Wim P. van Meurs and Thomas Wünsch, "Historiographie," *Studienhandbuch Östliches Europa*, ed. Harald Roth, vol. 1 (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999).

famous historians who also achieved political prominence – a phenomenon to repeat itself after the revolution of 1989-1991.

The core of these historians' self-perception was not the acceptance that their work was instrumentalized politically, but rather the paradox that this political involvement was not perceived as being in conflict with the aloofness of an academic. There is a remarkable similarity here with the communist argument that *partijnost'* for the working class does not constitute a loss of objectivity as the working class has history itself on its side. Thus, historians arguing the case of national self-determination knew they were serving a laudable cause as nation-building was the ultimate objective of history and nations it's moving force.

The communist takeover after the Second World War also reached historical sciences after a few years with the requisitioning of unwelcome historical studies and sources. At the same time, qualified "bourgeois" historians felt victim (physical or professional) to purges.

The communist rewriting of trends and heroes implied a radical reverse of national history. Kings and noblemen were replaced by workers and peasants, the struggles of national emancipation by people's uprisings, nations by classes, dynasties by socio-economic formations, and quotes from mediaeval chronicles by references to Marx and Lenin. For quite some time, the new historians struggled to find the right combination of pro-Soviet views, Marxist-Leninist ideology, and current politics. It often took until the early 1950s before the first state-approved schoolbooks and historical syntheses were published.

The phenomenon of "national communism" appeared in the historiography of all East European states and Soviet Republics, albeit with different intensities and timings. National communism was partly related to destalinization, partly with the general rehabilitation of historical and social sciences and improved access to archival sources. As a consequence a shift from class-oriented to nation-oriented discourses occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s, making good use of the ambiguity of the term "people", meaning both "ethnos" and "demos" to gloss over the contradiction in historical narratives. The rehabilitation of traditional national history and its heroes implied a reduction of pro-Soviet and pro-Russian rhetoric. Nevertheless, even the communist syntheses of the Stalin era had essentially been national histories, even though the national working class had replaced kings and knights as moving force of national liberation.

In the decline and fall of the Eastern block, the discrediting of communism and the national mobilization of the population history had a prominent role to play in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The role of the professional historians, however, was rather meager. The pace was set by journalists and movie directors. Because of their subservience to the previous regime, many professional historians were considered untrustworthy and discredited as interpreters of past and present. A serious rethinking and rewriting of history, moreover, simply required time for archival research, intellectual reflection, and academic publishing to produce a new and timely synthesis.

Overall, in most East European countries the revisiting and rewriting of the past was a rather erratic process. To some extent, however, three dialectic stages may be discerned:

1. The challenging of communist political taboos (on ground prepared by national-communist historians) under *glasnost*' and the deconstructing of communist political myths and historical synthesis. The so-called "white spots" of the communist era (e.g. purges and terror, the mechanics of communist takeover) were at the center of public (rather than professional) debate in this period. Communism became synonymous with Soviet-Russian occupation and separated from the natural course of national history, making totalitarianism a preferred model of explanation;
2. The absolute priority of breaking of communist taboos ended around 1991-1992 with the irreversible end of communism and Russian hegemony. The restitution of national pre-communist history as well as the popularization of national traditions and heroes took precedence. In this period, professional historians also managed to reassert their position as authority interpreters of the past. New studies of the "bourgeois" and communist epochs were published, although many with a strong (inverted) normative slant.
3. In most countries, the mid-1990s witnessed first attempts to counter the dominant trend of national history by re-integrating the communist past as an integral part rather than a historical aberration or foreign occupation. A broader professional de-emotionalized revisiting of the past half-century, however, still lies ahead. The same applies to a re-integration of national history in broader, regional or European, history.

In most former communist states, the net result of this erratic process was qualified by institutional and professional malaise. In some countries, a radical and quick turnover over academic personnel took place, but in countries with a strong national-communist tradition typically only the extreme cases of party-scholars were dismissed (or not even those). Many national-communist historians found it quite easy to adapt to the return of national history. At the same time, due to the hardships of post-communist transition, public interest in history dwindled rapidly after the first euphoria, as did state funding for universities, archives, and academies. The very opening of archives tended to stimulate an accumulative-declaratory approach over methodological reflection and innovation. To legitimize this approach, even facts and interpretations that had been repeated *ad nauseam* were now sold as spectacular discoveries from secret archives.³ Old-fashioned reiterations of national history tended to dominate over innovative (e.g. comparative or theory-driven), high-quality research and a scholarly exchange with the latest American and European methodological and thematic approaches. Consequently, an extreme polarization has taken place in recent years. A return to the history and historians of the pre-communist era implied a normative and positivistic approach to history. To escape this revival some adopted the narratives and (de)constructivism of Western post-modernism, whereas many colleagues were establishing the concept of historical mythologies as a compromise between one historical truth and a history as a construction.

³ E.g. Ion Antonescu, Românii. Originea, trecutul, sacrificiile si drepturile lor, 2 vols. (Iasi: Moldova, 1991). or Nicolae Titulescu, Politica externa României (Bucharest: Fundatia Europeana Titulescu, 1994). The respective covers carry banners saying "O carte eveniment" and "O carte interzisa sub trei dictatori"

*The Third Envelope or the Future of the Past*⁴

In sum, the first observation that I would like to make is that historians cannot get away from politics. Politicians and historians are essentially dealing with the same field of giving meaning to history, to current developments. So, in one way or another, historians and politicians are bound to meet again and again. One of the tendencies for historians after the period of communism and extreme politicization was a retreat into pure “ivory-tower” scholarship. The conclusion that historians and academics were the beholders of truth and virtue in a society disrupted by fifty or seventy years of communist dictatorship also occurred and induced some historians to become politicians themselves. Some scholars-turning-politicians (e.g. Havel, Meri or Plesu) indeed had a remedial effect on the credibility and legitimacy of politics in the early phase of democracy.

The second observation is that historians not only cannot escape politics, but also cannot escape the past and this past is national communism. History is a relevant science for politics and current development. There is no retreat; Historians have to take an offensive position, as they are a part of society. That does not mean that each political party has to have its own historians. It also does not mean that a history or history writing that responds to current developments or an acute issue in society is *per se* objectionable. In most communist countries, historians and journalists started in the late 1980s and early 1990s to test the limits of *perestrojka* and *glasnost*.

In the Romanian case, which is to some extent atypical, there was not much to challenge because in the party propaganda most “orthodox” communist views had long been replaced by a nationalist perspective. Therefore, it was very difficult to rediscover - as historians in other East European states did - a pre-communist or non-communist or anti-communist past. Few major historical events had not been occupied or redefined by the communists. Although this resistance in the 1940s and early 1950s is a valid area of research, there is a certain danger to exaggeration

⁴ For some of the insights in this section, I would like to thank the speakers and participants at the conference *Ein Jahrzehnt postkommunistische Historiographie. Die Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit in den 90er Jahren*, organized by the Austrian Institute for East and Southeast European Studies in Vienna on 26-29 September 2001. The proceedings will be published in *Österreichische Osthefte* 1 (2003).

resulting from a desire to find a substantial anti-communist tradition as a counterweight.

A second trend in history writing was the focus on national democratic development in place, before communism took over as a kind of externally imposed system. There has been a veritable flood of literature in the recent years, first of all on the national reunification of 1918, but also on the interwar period as an epoch of national unity and political democratic development and last but not least on the short period after war, before the communist regime was installed.⁵

To come back to the third envelope: I would say the solution for Romanian history-writing is not going to be found in a kind of academic isolation, nor in a kind black-and-white reversal of what communist historians have been writing before, nor for that matter in a veiled or open continuation of what has been written in terms of political histories before 1989. As much as both pre-communist and communist history belongs to the legacies of the past for current Romania, pre-communist and (national) communist historiography belongs to the legacies of the past for Romanian historians. The answer in the third envelope therefore should read: "Professionalism and openness."

In order to come up with some concrete recommendations, I would say that one important issue is that of museums and monuments, because that is what people on the street see from history. So it is very important that these museums become more interesting and more valuable, as an element of education. For what I have seen, most museums still have the same didactical approach and setup as 10 or 20 years ago, only having closed a room or two. The second recommendation concerns the legacy of past historiography and its use today. Rather than republishing the books of famous 19th century historians or initiating a new multi-volume synthesis of Romanian history, why not think of a critical anthology of Romanian history-writing. In such an anthology for advanced students, each piece of history-writing would be placed in its historical and social context. This would demonstrate to students that history-writing is not about true and

⁵ E.g. Dinu C. Giurescu, *Guvernarea Nicolae Radescu* (Bucharest: Editura ALL, 1996).

false or about erasing previous histories, but – as a famous Dutch historian Pieter Geyl liked to say - “a debate with no end.”

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