

Two Experiences, Two *Final Reports*

The experiences that Romania went through in the last century – the Second World War and Communism – as part of processes which profoundly marked European history, have, since the fall of the Communist regime, been the objects of different forms of approach and interpretation. The re-evaluation of the past has become a process naturally determined by the exit from a particular stage in history, in which not only the political and cultural environment is changing, but also historiographical concepts and methods. In the context of limited, but above all falsified, knowledge of the history of the last 50 years, historians have had to face considerable challenges as much in view of the discovery of new sources, as of their interpretation. The essential questions have been: ‘How was it possible?’ and ‘Who are responsible?’.

Naturally, the Second World War and the history of the Communist regime in Romania, in connection with the transformations of Central and Eastern Europe, have been in the past years the domain of predilection for researchers. In view of these two questions, confronting the past was, however, is problematic. History was quickly considered a way of healing the traumas of social memory and less an objective science which ensures the neutral knowledge of the past.

The attempt to come to terms with the recent past took concrete form in two final reports, made by two special commissions created under the patronage of the Romanian presidency. In the first case, the International Commission for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania, created on 22 October 2003, at the initiative of President Ion Iliescu, described itself as ‘an independent research organisation’, free from political influences and opinions. Elie Wiesel, the first Nobel Peace Prize laureate and correspondent member of the Romanian Academy, was invited to chair this commission. In the course of one year, the commission researched and established the truth regarding the tragedy of the Holocaust in Romania during the Second World War. It was composed of representatives of the Romanian President, specialists in history and political science from home and abroad, and Holocaust survivors, as well as representatives of international Jewish and Roma organisations.

In the second case, also at the initiative of the President, this time Traian Băsescu, there was created in April 2006, as a ‘response to society’s desire to come to terms with and condemn the totalitarian past’, a new commission headed by the American political scientist of Romanian

origin, Vladimir Tismăneanu. This commission also brought together specialists and experts in history and political science, and sociologists. In the case of the 'Tismaneanu Commission', there was an extra motivation. Romania's entry into the European Union, on 1 January 2007, presupposed an official, scientifically-founded, condemnation of the crimes of the communist regime. Traian Băsescu's gesture, on 18 December 2006, became similar to that of the French president Jacques Chirac, who had condemned as illegitimate the Vichy regime.

However, both commissions claimed to have an ethical foundation and tried to respond, in the name of the truth, to a series of sensitive issues surrounding the recent past of Romania. The aim of such approaches was knowledge of the dimensions of the Holocaust and the Gulag, with all the social, political and psychological consequences that left their mark on society. Both reports proposed an official sanctioning of the events in both periods (1940–1944 and 1945–1989), but also the placing in the public domain, for all categories of citizens, of information impossible to use before 1989. Such processes needed to take place in the years immediately following the fall of the Communist regime, but the Romanian political class and even society as a whole had difficulty accepting the imperative of memory. Undoubtedly Romanian society need to know the truth about the recent past, but this process was painstaking, while the interference of the political factor, as a reflex reaction to the preceding period, played an important role.

The destinies of the final reports, as well as the reactions it produced at the public level were, however, different. The 'Wiesel Report' far from benefited from the reactions provoked by the one published at the end of 2006. Even if it was given some publicity, the 'Wiesel Report' was not subject to real public debates. Criticism came mainly from those who deny or minimize the tragedy of the Jewish minority in Romania¹. Similarly, the reactions at a public level were few, while the 'Wiesel Report' was slowly forgotten, something which raises an essential question. It was a genuine civic debate, which responded to the natural need, internal to Romanian society, to know and understand the realities of the Second World War, but it was reduced to only a presidential gesture determined by external pressure. The experts and

¹ The commission recommended the establishment of a National Day for Commemoration of the Holocaust on 9 October; the creation of a national monument and of a museum in Bucharest to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust; the identification and registration of Holocaust victims in Romania; the creation of a special working party to analyse, correct and write school curricula and manuals referring to the Holocaust. The commission also recommended the introduction of teaching the Holocaust in the framework of university curricula and the preparation of courses for professional groups and associations; the creation of a central archive and a foundation dedicated to the teaching and research of the Holocaust; the reversal of decisions to rehabilitate war criminals, including those pronounced in the last 15 years.

specialists gathered together in this commission had the mission to give more credibility to the final product, but the extent to which the results of their activity could be received correctly in the public domain is hard to tell². The ‘Wiesel Report’ does not condemn a period or a regime, but establishes the historical and factual framework and indicates the responsibility of the Antonescu regime for the Holocaust in Romania. The ‘Wiesel report’ did not aim to make Romanian society collectively guilty, but emphasised the decision-making process that determined the drama of thousands of Jews. The direct consequences of the presidential initiative was the elaboration of an alternative manual for the study of the problem of the Holocaust in secondary schools, the introduction of courses at university and the creation of an institute which continues research along the lines of the report³.

The question that arises is: why does this dramatic episode of the Second World War continue to be ignored, passed over in silence, or considered with indifference? An analysis of the historiographical production of the last years reveals the fact that research into the dimension of the Holocaust, hidden before 1989 – ‘state-organised forgetting’⁴ – , continues to be minimalized. It was expected that the situation would change after the finalisation of the ‘Wiesel report’, and that the number of works or public debates on this subject would grow (we are not referring to those published by the ‘Elie Wiesel’ National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania). The subject continues to be marginal, whilst the ‘Wiesel Report’, in spite of the fact that it was made by a commission of specialists, did not manage to impose itself in the collective consciousness as a document which establishes the truth on this episode. An official coming-to-

² The structure of the report contains, apart from official messages, the following chapters: *Background and Precursors to the Holocaust. Roots of Romanian Anti-semitism. The League of National Christian Defence and Iron Guard Anti-Semitism. The Anti-semitic Policies of the Goga Government and of the Royal Dictatorship; Romanian-Germans Relations before and during the Holocaust; The June-July 1940 Romanian Withdrawal from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina and Its Consequences on Interethnic Relations in Romania; Anti-Semitic Propaganda and Official Rhetoric concerning the Judeo Bolshevik Danger: Romanian Jews and Communism between 1938-1944; The Holocaust in Romania; The Exclusion of Jews from Romanian Society during the Antonescu Governments with and without the Iron Guard: Anti-Semitic Legislation, Romanianization and Expropriation; The Life of Jewish Community under Ion Antonescu and Jewish community’s Response to the Holocaust in Romania; The Deportation of the Roma and their treatment in Transnistria; The Role of Ion Antonescu in the Planning and Implementation of Anti-Semitic and Anti-Roma policies of the Romanian State; The Holocaust in Northern Transylvania; Solidarity and Rescue. Romania „Righteous among the Nations“; Trials of the War Criminals; Distortion, Negationism and Minimalizations of the Holocaust in Postwar Romania; Findings and Recommendations; Afterwords.*

³ At the same time was adopted an emergency ordinance which outlaws organisations and symbols of a fascist, racist or xenophobic character, such as the promotion of the cult of personalities guilty of committing crimes against peace or humanity.

⁴ See *Final Report. International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, president of the Commission, Elie Wiesel, Iasi, 2005, p. 333.

terms has not brought with it a collective coming-to-terms, which raises question marks over not only knowledge of the period, but also Romanian society's readiness to cast off certain clichés.

Ignorance of the document brings back into discussion the criteria for interpreting and analysing the period of the Second World War. Explanations for such an attitude have their origins in:

– the period of the government of marshal Ion Antonescu, but especially the conditions of the minorities, continues to be a sensitive subject for a part of Romanian historiography, still dependent on negationist and nationalist clichés. After 1989, there were numerous attempts to rehabilitate the Ion Antonescu government – a process which began in the mid-80s – in a context in which his anti-semitism was not mentioned, whilst anti-semitic legislation, as well as measures to deport the Jews, were explained away by reasons of war economy, or submission to the German command. The rehabilitation of the Antonescu government also started with the premise that in comparison with other states in the German sphere of influence, Romania had the merit of having saved a considerable number of Jews and that therefore her own acts require nuances of interpretation (in 1943, the government suspended the deportations, thus saving 340.000 Jews). Undoubtedly such theses do not stand up to analysis of documents of the period and can be amended. Many more of such interpretations leave no place for the acceptance of responsibility and the coming to terms with discriminatory measures taken by the Romanian state against its own citizens.

– the existence of heightened sensitivity to the Jewish question and the problem of anti-semitism in Romania did not provoke a real public debate. What's more, in the first years after 1989, there was the danger that the public space would be taken over by a false debate, fuelled by nationalist currents with a hard anti-semitic discourse, as a direct consequence of the last years of the Communist government. The combat against anti-semitism is a precarious one and four years after the publication of the report, we still find the expression of erroneous theses.

– naturally, the collapse of the Communist regime channelled interest towards knowledge of a past which profoundly marked the history of the last 50 years, which determined that the memory of the war generation occupied a secondary place in this process of coming to terms with the past.

With hindsight, the 'Wiesel report' was positively received by the political class, but as far as the public is concerned, a few distinctions can be made. The popular mind is dependent

upon clichés, which find no basis in reality, thanks to a distorted knowledge of this period, but also thanks to the tendency to glorify the war period and its actors, considered to be victims of the Communist regime. As far as the younger generation is concerned, efforts are being made to spread the truth about this period, through the elaboration of manuals, the introduction to the school curriculum of special hours, the publication of books etc. But the educational approach presupposes a constant and long term process. The ‘Wiesel report’ represented only a beginning of deconstruction of the myth of an immaculate society, absolved of all responsibility.

On the other hand, the ‘Tismaneanu report’ launched the ‘battle for memory’ and the confrontation of the past within five parameters: 1. condemnation; 2. memorialisation; 3. legislation; 4. Research and archives; 5. education. As expected, the debate on the legacy of the communist past created pro- and anti- currents and divided the intellectual and political elites. It was far from being an isolated approach⁵: the idea of a trial of communism manifested itself in the years immediately after the fall of the communist regime; however, of the three dimensions - judicial, political and moral-cultural - only the last manifested itself constantly through the publication of numerous studies, memoirs and documents. With the exception of the inauguration of the Sighet Memorial (20 June 1997), when the then president of Romania, Emil Constantinescu, asked for ‘forgiveness in the name of the Romanian state’ from the victims of the communist regime, at the official level the debate on this past came down to a series of proposals which aimed primarily at the cleaning up of political life through the institution of a law of lustration. But there was no unified will on the part of the Romanian political class which would lead to the fulfilment of such a lofty aim. The acceleration of the process of condemning communism was not determined by pressure from the social body, but from competition between centres of power at the political level. Reticent to signals coming from civil society⁶, Traian Băsescu initially believed that he did not dispose of sufficient elements to begin this process⁷.

⁵ In this context it is worth recalling the decree according rights to those persecuted for political motives, adopted in 1990, an initiative by Ticu Dumitrescu concerning access to the archives of the Securitate. The declaration concerning the condemnation of communism in December 1990 and not least the adoption of the law governing access to one’s own dossier and the unmasking of collaborators.

⁶ See the appeal by vice-president Sorin Ilieșu, who in his ‘Proclamation for Romania’, called for, in April 2005, the condemnation of the communist regime in a register similar to that of the trial of the Holocaust.

⁷ See the recommendations of the report by Göran Lindblad on ‘The necessity of international condemnations of the crimes of the communist totalitarian regimes’ which recommends international acts of condemnation of the crimes of communism. Political disputes with former alliance partners, the creation at the government’s initiative of an institute for the investigation of the crimes of communism (December 2005), and suspicions hovering over his own past, as well as the crisis at the top of CNSAS, convinced the president Romanian of the need to give free rein to demands for the condemnation of communism. What’s more, in March 2006 was

The creation of the commission was the result of a tense political context in which confronting the legacy of the communist past meant playing for high stakes. Created in April 2006, the Tismaneanu commission presented its results in December of that year, before both houses of the Parliament. The Report was divided into four chapters: *Introduction*, I. *Romanian Communist Party*, II. *Repression*, III. *Society, Economy and Culture* and *Conclusions. The Necessity for the Analysis, Repudiation and Condemnation of the Communist Past*, plus a series of annexes entitled *Biographies of the Nomenklatura*⁸. The president's gesture was interpreted as an act of historical and moral justice, through the recognition of the violence of the Communist past, but in this case too there were no significant changes at the level of Romanian society. The Communist past continues to be a legacy not fully confronted, in conditions where the report did not lead to the adoption of a law of lustration, which makes the presidential initiative purely symbolic.

However, what is important to take from this is the fact that the report, with its pluses and minuses, indicates a necessary review of methods of research and analysis of the communist past. The temptation to judge and condemn naturally had to take the place of detached and objective analysis. The reactions of Romanian society were, however, far from what the authors of the report had wished for. In this case too we notice – beyond the debates in the press caused by quarrelling intellectuals⁹ – a state of apathy and indifference. There was not a social consensus around a totally negative assessment of the communist period. Understanding communism cannot happen through the exclusion of various aspects and changes in Romanian society during this half century. For Romanian society, a deep understanding of what communism meant presupposes a long-term strategy in which discussion and objective criticism of sources represent the starting points for an accessible and acceptable discourse. Otherwise the memory of communism will be subject to a natural process of social amnesia explicable in the conditions of a post-communist society interested in the present and less preoccupied with a past, which, through the changing of generations, will consider that it no longer has to come to terms with it.

launched an 'Appeal to the president of Romania Traian Băsescu', which demanded the condemnation of the communist regime as illegitimate and criminal.

⁸ See „Raportul final al Comisiei Prezidențiale pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România“, 18 decembrie 2006, in www.presidency.ro.

⁹ See *Iluzia anticomunismului. Lecturi critice ale Raportului Tismaneanu*, eds. Vasile Ernu, Costi Rogozanu, Ciprian Șulea, Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, Editura Cartier, Chișinău, 2008.

The re-evaluation of communism needs to be continuous and sustained by a real debate in civil society so that the telling of the past is not based on conflictual and partisan positions. The ethics of memory demands in equal measure symbolic as well as material reparations whose effects lead to the rethinking of the relationship between political power and society. The interpretation of the communist past only from the perspective of political power, without also deciphering the way in which society interacted with the party-state and its institutions, will result in an incomplete picture. It is noticeable that post-89 historiography has preferred to concentrate only on the first aspect, thanks to the fact that there was, quite naturally, a need to show the violent and antidemocratic nature of communist power. Studies of social and economic transformations have had a marginal importance and they have not been a priority subject for specialists in social sciences¹⁰. Research into social space leads to results in contradiction of the historiographical discourse of the last years and put into the realm of debate sensitive themes such as the ability of Romanian society to produce a real opposition, the attitude of the intellectual elites towards the regime (complicity, tacit acceptance, passivity, conformism) or, what's more, show the fact that for a certain section of Romanian citizens communism offered the chance of upward mobility.

A complete understanding of Romanian communism presupposes in equal measure knowledge of the mechanisms of the party-state, and of the transformations at the heart of Romanian society. The reconstruction of a social memory needs to start from the premise of an approach which avoids the emotions caused by suffering. Such an approach would lead, just as in the case of the Holocaust, to the renunciation of self-glorifying and immaculately pure visions of the past.

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¹⁰ See for more details Florin Abraham, *Procesul istoriografic al „Procesului comunismului“*, in „Arhivele Totalitarismului“, nr. 1-2/2007, pp. 115-134.