

## **Reshaping Identity through "Official Memories" The Case of Romania during the Postwar Years of Stalinism (1948-1956)**

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**Abstract:** The control over mind and identity is a basic feature of a totalitarian regime. The Communist regime in Romania embarked on a lengthy process of rebuilding the national identity according to its own political standards and goals. This article examines the ways in which the Communist regime in Romania tried to erase certain events and cultural aspects from the Romanian collective memory in order to replace them with standards and principles of Soviet origin. In order to achieve its aim, the regime employed vast institutional and propagandistic instruments, meant to penetrate public consciousness and reshape national identity.

### **Collective Memories and National Identity**

The installation in power of a Communist regime in Romania, in the aftermath of World War II, had dramatic consequences on the collective identity of the Romanian society. The enmity with the West and the terrible pressures from Kremlin determined a large scale effort to reshape the Romanian national identity as to fit the political rigors of the time. This effort was initiated and conducted by the Communist regime in close cooperation with Moscow. We can identify two main reasons explaining this endeavor. Domestically, the regime felt vulnerable due to the opposition of both the society and the Western countries, given its political practices and the means through which it obtained power. On the other hand, Stalin imposed the model of anti-cosmopolitanism in all the satellite states, in order to increase his control and sever any political and cultural ties connecting the Eastern European countries to the West. In breaking away with cultural and historical traditions, the Communist regime organized a real ideological attack upon the collective memories of the society, using state instruments of compulsion.

The identity of a group is strictly intertwined with the collective memories. Remembering and forgetting is vital for any group's identity, due to the fact that identity is build through memories of what the group was in the past, what brought it together and what experiences it shared. Myths and selective memories remembered and repeated over time, offer substance and consistency to the group's national identity, giving it the meaning of a historical path or destiny to fulfill (Jović, 2004: 97). The national identity, as theoretized by Anthony Smith, is based on a continuous process of rediscovering. We know who we are through a collective personality with a distinctive culture. By rediscovering that culture, we rediscover and define ourselves (Smith, 1991: 17).

In this process, memory is an essential component which insures continuity. The core of any group identity resides in the feeling of continuity over space and time, as explained by John Gillis. This feeling is sustained by the collective memories of the community (Gillis,

1996: 3). In other words, what we remember about ourselves defines who we are. As Smith shows, nationalism is not necessarily an invented concept, but it relies heavily on numerous pre-existing motifs, visions and ideals. Nationalism, therefore, represents not only a political ideology and a social movement, but also a culture (Smith, 1991: 71). But neither memory nor identity are stable and objective realities. Memories are constantly revised to adapt the current identity of a group, to explain and justify the present. Both are relative and subjective representations of reality. Because of these features, memory and identity are subjected to exterior influences, of political nature, for example. Memory and identity serve or may serve ideological and political positions (Gillis, 1996: 3-4).

Collective memory was crucial in defining a national identity in the case of all national states which appeared on the map since the mid-19 century. As Ernest Gellner argues, these national states either formed around pre-existing states (the case of Romania or Yugoslavia) and folk cultures, or had to construct a particular culture based on traditions and folk culture (Gellner, 1998: 217). In both cases, collective memory played an important role in creating and promoting the feeling of solidarity across space and time, as defined by John Gillis.

The memory issue was fundamental to all Communist regimes. The way in which we comprehend the present, the meanings we attribute to it, depends in a large measure upon our understanding of the past. Paul Connerton argued that the context of our understanding of the present is connected to the past experiences to which we can relate it. In other words, “images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order” (Connerton, 1989: 2-3). This is the primary reason for which Communist regimes manifested hostility towards the past. Even more, in Harold Wydra’s words, the Communist regimes are responsible for organizing a real assault upon collective memory. Wydra characterizes the nature of memory as being subjective, anti-totalitarian and profoundly democratic (Wydra: 221). The premises are that there exists a fundamental difference between public memory, narrow and official, and the private memory, often different from the first (Todorova, 2004: 3). Collective memory can be both the political memory officially imposed by the political power according to its interests, and the collective memory directed against the first, through the private recollection of social injustices, abuses, etc. Since private memories cannot be controlled, their nature is ultimately subversive (Wydra: 219-220).

The Communist regimes were hostile to any historical recollection because it increased their vulnerability by revealing their illegitimacy in power. According to the official dogma, the past had to be reinterpreted along the lines of Marxist-Leninism. The ideology describes a dichotomy between an unfortunate past, dominated by misery and exploitation, and a fortunate future, completely opposed to the past, a revolutionary future in which all forms of exploitation will end. In their effort to achieve a particular legitimacy and identity, the communist regimes used the past as a delineating “Other” (Jović, 2004: 98-99). Their effort, on the other hand, met resistance from the society. Social and mental memory resistance in the private and family spheres generated a counter-symbolism which undermined the solidity of the “official memories” (Wydra: 220).

### **Instruments and Mechanisms of Memory Control**

The Communist regime came to power as an instrument of the Soviet occupant, as political scientist Stelian Tănase explained, and launched itself in a vast assault against the society (Tănase, 1996: 36). This assault was directed against the political establishment, cultural traditions and societal solidarities. The final purpose of such an endeavor was to dislocate all structures of the society in order to impose a new political and economic model, with its own culture and mentality. The model, faithful to the Stalinist model experienced in the Soviet Union, was inspired by the Marxist-Leninist ideology and aimed at creating a new

society and a new type of man, according to the utopian principles of Marxist-Leninism (Tănase, 1996: 37-40).

The success of this dislocation project depended largely on the regime's capacity to dislocate the patterns of thought and cultural motifs which created the solidarity and sense of common belonging among Romanians, along the nation-building process. In other words, the regime had to erase the collective memories of the community, in order to replace them to new "official" memories, intended to support and justify the implementation of the Soviet model. Tănase's term of an "assault" expresses correctly the ampleness of the propagandistic and institutional measures used and manipulated in order to reach the effect wanted. The regime engaged in a total reconstruction of the past (Corduneanu, 2001: 111).

Former cultural and educational institutions of the old regime were considered to be the most active in promoting ideas and memories contrary to the interests of the Communist party and were among the first to be purged or restructured after the complete seizure of power. Historian Mihai Dorin characterized the school as a "laboratory where civic and democratic beliefs were formed", which explained the terrible energy devoted by the Communist regime to the break down of the traditional educational system (Dorin, 1995: 59). Schools and universities were the birthplace of the Romanian modern identity and nationalism was promoted within the society through educative instruments along the nation-building process. Starting with 1948, a long and radical series of reforms changed completely the structural and curricular organization of the educational system in Romania (Dorin, 1995: 59).

The change began in the summer of 1948. A decree was issued in august 1948 for the "reform of education" which shattered all previous traditions in Romanian education and brought the system under Communist control. The decree placed all educational institution under state control, therefore abolishing private and confessional schools in the entire country. Schools and universities could only be organized by the state, according to the new law (Someșan, Iosifescu, 1998: 439-440). The purpose of the reform was to obtain party monopoly on the formation of the young generations and to suppress non-party autonomies and initiatives in education. The circulation of collective memories, at least at official level, was brought under control this way. Another purpose, of course, was to nurture a new group of specialized cadres for various cultural and economic tasks, under ideological supervision (Someșan, Iosifescu, 1998: 440). The control over the minds of the young generation was meant to introduce the "official memories" at private level, as well.

Special problems in the education system were the teachers and professors. Brought up in the old cultural and political environment, they were carriers of an identity which the Communists wanted demolished. Due to their mental and intellectual formation, teachers and professors were seen as extremely hostile to the new regime. Gheorghiu-Dej warned the party about the danger represented by teacher originating from "exploiting classes" or who had been members of "bourgeois parties" in the past (Ionescu-Gură, 2005: 337). Radical measures were taken soon: all the employment contracts for teachers were cancelled starting with 1 October 1948. This was a unique measure which had never been taken before in any field of activity in Romania. The Ministry of Public Education closed new contracts with the teachers, according to the "necessities", after that (Ionescu-Gură, 2005: 337). It was a frontal approach of the educational issue, which left unemployed every teacher in the country which did not submit to the Communist program. It was, at the same time, a warning, that not only professional accomplishment, but survival itself, depended on the allegiance to the regime.

New school principles were appointed in January 1949. It was compulsory for principles to be party members. The appointments were usually made under the close supervision of the local party organizations, which had the right to approve or dismiss any appointment made by the ministry (Ionescu-Gură, 2005: 338). In superior education, similar measures were imposed. The educational reform liquidated the autonomy of all universities

and under the pretext of restructuring, more than two thirds of the professors were dismissed from their positions. In 1952, new measures followed, regarding the “improvement in class composition” of the students. According to these measures, admittance in universities was conditioned by the social class origin of the student (Ionescu-Gură, 2005: 348).

These reforms displaced the entire structure of Romanian education, the most important institutional mechanism for promoting national identity. Changing the institutions and the people within them according to its needs offered the Communist regime control of the collective memories at official level. The final purpose was to create the new type of man advocated by the Marxist-Leninist ideology and named by historians and anthropologists “homo sovieticus”. Education was an instrument and a mechanism for producing new type of men, ideologically loyal to the regime and the values represented by it. Obtaining information and developing abilities was insufficient for the regime’s educational ideal. Such elements of elementary education had to be accompanied by “political education”, as well, responsible for shaping one’s opinions and convictions, his moral and civic values, and in the end, his identity (Perşa, 1998: 482-485).

A very important role in the process of reshaping the national identity was occupied by the intellectuals. They were responsible for building and promoting new values in the society. The adhesion of famous intellectuals of the interwar years was considered as a very prestigious success, increasing the credibility of the ideological strife. The control over the intellectual life grew stronger after 1945, but it was after 1948 that it became fierce. The party used two main instruments: changing the institutional and legislative framework as to fit its needs and directly removing those opposing the party line. Arresting and condemning intellectuals for political crimes was an instrument serving two purposes: on one hand it removed oppositionists and on the other hand it served as an example for other intellectuals willing to express opposition (Anton, 2004: 34). The party’s strategy towards the intellectuals was double: to convince, through a massive propagandistic campaign, and to constrain, through forceful measures (Anton, 2004: 35).

In the relation between the Communist regime and the intellectual elites, censorship was a sword with many edges. Writings with non-political content could have been easily censored should the author fail to express his loyalty to the regime. This way, scientists and scholars were deprived of their only means of affirmation. Professional life became impossible. Censorship focused not only on writings with anti-Communist character, but also on writings from the past, arguing ideas uncomfortable to the regime. The process of erasing the national identity focused especially on the past, from reasons explained above. In the late 1940s, the party set up an index of forbidden books. These were to be removed from the public libraries and kept in a secret fund, which could be consulted only with party approval. The list consisted in volumes about the former royal family, about Marshall Antonescu, extreme-rightist and nationalist books, history works, biographies of political or cultural personalities, etc (Caravia, Ţuchel, 1995: 227).

The Romanian Orthodox Church was another crucial element in the effort to reshape the national identity. The Church enjoyed a great degree of influence on the public opinion and at the same time was a reminder of the country’s Christian identity and national values. This is why the subordination of the Church started earlier than the rest of the cultural field. The Communist party used religious symbols and church ceremonials in order to legitimize its power. As early as 1944 the subordination of the church was obvious to any observer. Patriarch Justinian issued a Pastoral Letter to the orthodox faithful calling them to support the new regime and the cooperation with the Soviet Union. The Letter made a comparison between Christian Salvation and Romania’s liberation from Nazi Germany, starting a long series of political employment of religious symbols. The letter did not forget to mention the common orthodox faith that Romanians and Russians shared (Leuştean, 2005: 448-449).

During Communism, the church often used religious symbols to explain and justify the Communist regime: social liberation as advocated by Marxist-Leninism was explained as a Christian concept, the West was condemned in the Cold War for supposedly war-mongering, which was against the nature of Christianity. As historian Lucian N. Leuștean argues, the Communist regime tried to create a totally new state of Soviet inspiration using religious and political symbols previously employed by the Church (Leuștean, 2005: 440). Having played an important part in Romanian history, the Orthodox Church was a crucial element in the process of reshaping the identity. Control over church implied somehow control over history. The party could portray itself as a corollary of Romanian history.

History, due to its special nature in the formation of identity, was of a particular interest to the regime. Reinterpreting the history according to its political needs offered the Communist regime control over collective memories in the public sphere. By educating the new generations in the same spirit, the party could also gain control over the private sphere of collective memories.

### **Re-writing the past and creating “official memories”**

History supported a dramatic attack in Romania during the Stalinist years, both ideologically and institutionally. Traditional institutions which concerned themselves with historical researches and studies were abolished and the writing of history was subjected to narrow ideological constraints. The history of Romania, in its “Communist version”, had to confirm the theses of Marxist-Leninism and to help shape the Romanian collective identity in a class spirit.

The Romanian Academy, the supreme authority in science and culture, established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was abolished in its traditional form in 1948. It was replaced with the Academy of the People’s Republic of Romania (Academia RPR). Along with it, the institutes of historical research were abolished, as well, being replaced with a single institute in Bucharest, and closely controlled by the party. As head of the Academia RPR was appointed scientist Petre Constantinescu-Iași, one of the most loyal collaborators of the Communist regime. Mihail Roller, a high rank party member with studies in Moscow, became responsible for the guidance of historical studies (Zub, 1998: 556-557).

The institutional framework of re-writing history was monopolized by the Communist party. The regime focused primarily on eliminating academic competition or opposition to its demarche. Along with the Academy, several other faculties of history or philosophy were abolished in the country. Traditional publications in the field of history were suspended and replaced with new periodicals under party guidance. The journal *Studii* was almost the only scientific periodic in the field of history and focused especially on introducing ideological concepts in the research and writing of history. Also, a large number of institutions were established with the purpose of promoting the Communist approach on history: the Institute of Romanian-Soviet Studies, the Romanian-Russian Museum, etc. (Cojocaru, 1998: 572). The purpose of such institutions was to promote a feeling of solidarity with the Soviet Union and erase collective memories about the negative role Russia played in Romanian modern history.

According to the writings and directions of Mihail Roller, we can discern a number of theses pursued by history writing after 1948: the important role played by the Communist party in the modern and contemporary Romanian history; the rejection of monarchy and the superiority of a republican form of government; strong criticism of the previous parliamentary regime; vilification of both the interwar political parties and of the Western states; argumentation in favor of the class struggle concept and efforts to reinterpret history as to reveal the continuous presence of the class struggle in Romanian history (Dandara, 1998: 578).

Key events in Romanian history had been reinterpreted as to fit the political demands

of the regime and later on imposed in the collective memory by education and propaganda. The establishment of the republic was explained through the interaction of two primary factors: the people's struggle for liberation from under the bourgeois and fascist yoke under the leadership of the Communist party and the international context which favored this struggle, respectively the victory of the Soviet army against Nazi Germany. This last factor – therefore the crucial Soviet intervention – was considered vital to the liberation struggle of the toiling masses from exploitation (Pentelescu, 1998: 594). Such an interpretation left room for two concepts essential for legitimating the regime. The first argued that the Soviet armed occupation was a positive event for the Romanian people and therefore gratitude should be granted to the Soviet Union. The second regarded the leading role played by the Communist party in the social emancipation movement of the working class in Romania.

The re-writing process enfolded all relevant aspects of Romanian recent history. For example, in his book on Romanian history, Roller described the Soviet union in the most generous colors for returning North-West Transylvania to Romania. The territory was given to Hungary in 1940 with Hitler's mediation. Roller considered that the Soviet Red Army, in this respect, was the first conquering army who did not take away territories from the defeated but instead gave it formerly lost territories (Dandara, 1998: 579). About the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947, Roller argued that every benefit obtained by Romania was due to the efforts of the Soviet diplomacy. As for the Anglo-Americans, they were striving with all their power to impose enslaving conditions on the country (Dandara, 1998: 580). The abdication of the king in December 1947 was, according to the same historian, a success of the toiling masses who removed the strongest citadel of the reactionaries. The monarchy was according to him, a legacy from the dark middle ages, hated by the people and a great obstacle in the revolutionary development of the working class (Dandara, 1998: 582).

A successful alteration of the collective memories depended in a large measure upon isolation. Forbidding access to alternative sources of information, mainly Western, was a crucial preoccupation of the regime. The anti-cosmopolitan campaign in the Soviet Union was also implemented in Romania simultaneously with the reinterpretation of the past. The anti-cosmopolitan campaign was effectively launched at the end of 1948 in the Soviet Union, where at a meeting of the Writers' Union, a number of theatre critics whom had expressed negative comments regarding some dramatic plays, were harshly condemned for "Western prostration" and "anti-patriotism". The party newspaper Pravda took on the idea and published, at the beginning of 1949, a series of articles denouncing "rootless cosmopolitans" (Hahn, 1982: 519). The theme will be loudly endorsed by the Romanian party press, as by all other people's democracies.

Gheorghiu-Dej, the Romanian Communist party leader, warned against the danger represented by hostile elements within, who are not loyal to the regime and maintain intense connections abroad. Imperialism, in Dej's opinion, recruits its agents from the inside and aims at undermining the party and the successes of the people's regime. In order to prevent that, extraordinary vigilance is required to unmask the "class enemy": "they [the Imperialists] recruit bourgeois and petit-bourgeois elements, fascist gutters, corrupt faltering and backward elements from within the working people, turn into their informers any babblers who don't know how to keep a party and state secret, they manipulate unsatisfied elements" (Gheorghiu-Dej, 1951: 8). As Dej saw it, the main ideological weapon of the class enemy is the bourgeois nationalism. This ways, chauvinistic sentiments are infused among the working class. For a successful victory of Socialism, it is necessary to bitterly fight against cosmopolitan tendencies: "the enemy uses, especially among intellectuals, poisoned ideas of cosmopolitanism. As the facts show, cosmopolitanism is the anti-chamber of Imperialist espionage. Cosmopolitans with no homeland easily fall in the arms of Anglo-American espionage. This is why, the fight against nationalism and cosmopolitanism is an essential part

of the fight for Socialism” (Gheorghiu-Dej, 1951: 14). Party propaganda fervently cultivates a strong anti-Western xenophobia, parallel with the Russification of culture. Confronting the international challenges required a feeling of self-confidence and self-sufficiency able of offering the masses extra pugnacity in the struggle against the “class enemy” (Ilinca, Bejenaru, 2006: 124-125).

Advocating the rupture with the West was one of the greatest challenges of the regime, ideologically speaking. Since the Romanian nation-building process evolved under Western patterns and cultural affinities with the West were great, it was difficult to erase from the collective memories a feeling of communion with the West. The Communist regime uses a dichotomy to define its place in the world: East and West. The geographical separation took on cultural values, in which the West is described as progressive, an engine of history, opposed to decadent West, brayed by its own contradictions. The image borrows 19<sup>th</sup> century Slavophil motifs about the superiority of the Russian patriarchal civilization in comparison with the immoral capitalist West (Mihalache, 2003: 115-118). The difference between the anti-cosmopolitan campaign practiced in the Soviet Union and the similar campaign in Romania was that in the Soviet Union it was led in the name of a disguised Russian nationalism while in Romania it opposed anything national. The Soviets condemned Western values in order to stress the importance of their own. In Romania, on the contrary, rejection of Western influences was made in order to emphasize the superiority of Russian values (Nenițescu, 1995: 85). This mimetic emulation of Soviet culture and values had nothing in common with Romanian traditions, being therefore directed against the national identity. The supreme proof of patriotism was declared the love for the Soviet Union and combating nationalism a condition of the class struggle (Nenițescu, 1995: 85). It becomes obvious that the entire political project of the regime was directed against all features of national identity.

The indoctrination with parallel narratives of identity was vastly organized on the public scene. Manifestations and meetings, public speeches, written and visual propaganda as well as education, were given a ritually character (Mihalache, 2003: 115-118). The “official memories” had a monolithic character, unopened for debate or improvisation, an obsessive unicoloured ceremonial meant to infiltrate into consciousnesses and penetrate the collective memories.

Public ceremonies have an important role in identity building. They represent versions of the past; the past is conserved and ritually reproduced in words and images. Official ceremonies in the public sphere of life consolidate descriptions of the past in their “official” version. This way, they infiltrate in the collective memories of the community (Connerton, 1989: 72). Party celebrations have enjoyed great public attention, often describing a history that never happened. In 1951, for example, when the establishment of the Communist party was celebrated, a real waste of energy and space was employed to attract public attention and emphasize the party’s fundamental role in history. A large statue of Stalin was uncovered in Bucharest, followed by an immense meeting where top Communist leaders delivered triumphant speeches. Biographies of Gheorghiu-Dej and Ana Pauker are published, the Academy held a special session, socialist production competitions are organized in every major factory and the entire press published large editorials and coverages about the workers’ “enthusiastic” celebration of their party (Lăcustă, 2005: 171).

Many other events offered opportunities for such public displays of energy and enthusiasm: the victory against Nazi Germany, Romania’s “liberation” by the Red Army, the October Revolution, etc. But public invasions of collective memories were also organized through a removal of all symbols referring to the past. Besides the book index which had already been mentioned, all public symbols are subjected to an ideological assault. In a Politburo meeting in 1952, Iosif Chișinevschi, referring to the monuments, stated that: “it is clear that all monuments which are against our policy must be removed”. Obviously, this is a

measure directed against the collective memories of the community which offered consistency to the national identity. It was concluded in the same meeting that all issues regarding public monuments are a “political matter”. Starting with 1948, numerous monuments representing politicians, royalties, etc., were removed and replaced with monuments of Soviet personalities and soldiers or “heroes” of the workers’ movement in Romania. Street names were changed mostly all over the country as well as institutions whose names incorporated any historical reminder (Anderco, Duțu, 2001: 124-125). Erasing the past from the collective memories conditioned a successful construction of a new identity.

### **Conclusion**

The Communist regime established in Romania in the aftermath of World War II arduously conducted a campaign to reshape the national identity of Romanians as to justify its political and ideological purposes. Being brought to power by the Soviet army, with no political legitimacy and having embarked on a political project aiming at reorganizing social and economic relations on Marxist-Leninist principles, the regime felt vulnerable in power. All historical traditions of the society and its collective memories pointed towards an opposite developmental path. This is why the Communist regime tried to erase memories of identity from the collective mind. In order to do so, the regime employed institutional and ideological methods supported by force which tried to construct and cultivate an alternative variant of “official memories” meant to justify and legitimate the regime.

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