Re-Writing the History of Romania after the Fall of Communism

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Abstract

National history is constitutive to a state and to its political community, as it represents an essential tool in building loyalty and national sentiments in its citizens. For the communist states, the control over history writing and historiography was essential in imposing and preserving power. The article scrutinizes the changes in history writing and historiography in post-communist Romania, focusing on the institutional changes within the field of history and the dynamics of its relation with the field of politics, and gives an outline of the state of the field. It discusses the most important new topics and approaches that have been taken up by Romanian historians, indicating their main points of contention.

Released from the authoritarian control of the communist party state, the field of Romanian history and historiography is now significantly restructuring. In this article, I adopt an analysis that explores the institutional changes shaping history writing in post-communist Romania. By defining the frameworks, constraints, and conditions of writing history, with effect on the research themes and foci, and on theoretical and methodological approaches, the institutional forms account for most of the change and continuity in the writing of Romanian history. Initially, I outline the most important changes in the institutional setting of history writing and their consequences with respect to form and substance of historical products. I then indicate and briefly discuss the post-communist works on the present Romanian historiography. The next section of the article explores the several most important new approaches and themes in Romanian historical studies that have been embraced after 1989, indicating that their prominence is due in a considerable part to the influence of politics on Romanian history writing. The interplay between politics and history writing is illustrated more particularly by the case of the history textbook incident.

The institutional framework affects directly the history production in Romania. After having been disbanded during the 1980s austerity regime, most research institutes were re-established after 1989, opening numerous positions for historians. Similarly, the policies of restricted access and promotion within the universities were quickly abandoned, giving way to
a rapid re-organization and set up of departments, research centers and education institutes. This large process of institutional revival and recovery of history and social sciences in general was done however without giving proper consideration to their financial needs for support and development. During the last decade, a few private research centers emerged that produce significant results and are financially successful, though most of the institutions are solely state funded. Because of the poor state of the Romanian economy, the low fraction of the budget accorded to education and research, incompetent management and bureaucratic confusion, this institutional expansion took place in a context of sharp reduction in resources.

The expansion of the higher education system providing history training and research produced a demand for faculty, which was met by migrations from secondary schools, museums, and former research institutes, and more recently, by young history graduates. This affected history teaching at higher education institutions in both quality and content. There is a general feeling that the newly recruited teaching staff, for which a university position represented an upward social and professional mobility, was not properly and adequately prepared to respond to the challenges and opportunities of the ideologically liberated environment. In the context of decreasing funds per student capita and increasing number of students, the outcome of this situation is more graduates less prepared. At the same time, the inept legislation prohibits valuable young graduates of Western universities to be absorbed into Romanian history departments. The background and experience of the new faculty influence directly the curricula. Thus, such disciplines as archaeology continue to be privileged within the field of history, while new topics and new methodologies such as the study of mentalities and oral history are taken up by young scholars.

If the whole field of history production is afflicted by lack of funding, inside it there is a growing divide between the institutes of the Romanian Academy and the university departments and research units. The historians associated with the Romanian Academy depend almost entirely on centralized state funding whose agents, in the absence of an efficient management and a critical and energetic atmosphere, fix the terms of evaluation and compensation, thus imposing an outdated official approach and research agenda for the historical production. The members of the universities on the other hand enjoy a larger institutional freedom, benefiting of academic exchanges, private and international funding, and opportunities to publish abroad and to do research in cooperation with foreign academic institutions. As a result, while the historians of the Academy are involved mostly in large collective projects where they act as executors, the university historians, inspired by greater exposure to many and competing ways of writing history may and do engage in individual research projects according to their varied interests. The reaction against the communist regime’s regimentation into former collective projects serving the “national interest” and the revival of the doctoral programs at the main state universities favored
the individual projects. Most important works and original research are individual contributions. If there is any effort at structuration into research programs, this takes the form of individual research carried on within a center upholding a certain approach or methodology to historical research, or a certain study-area.  

The divide within the history field is symptomatic at the inspection of the several historical syntheses produced after 1989. As records of historiographic discourses, “reference books with their normative and centralizing tendencies” provide a good source of indicating the variation of discourses, methodologies, and functions that are attributed to them. The two most important such syntheses are the treatise written and published under the aegis of the Romanian Academy, and the volume published by a group of Romanian historians teaching at the Universities of Cluj and Bucharest and foreign specialists.

The Romanian Academy has started the publication of a work, History of Romanians, designed to comprise ten volumes, under the coordination of two academicians, Dan Berindei and Virgil Cândea. Declared by the authors a “fundamental book,” they also professed that this history of Romanians had been “written under circumstances of absolute liberty and objectivity.” The first four volumes, covering the span of time up to the rule of Michael the Brave, key character in the Romanian history, traditionally and almost uniformly portrayed by the Romanian historiography as the person who for the first time fulfilled the old aspiration for union of all Romanians, were issued in December 2001. The following four volumes, covering the history of Romania from the seventeenth century up to December 30, 1947, date that marks the forced abdication of King Michael I and the proclamation of the Popular Republic, were publicly launched in March 2003.

According to Berindei’s preface to the first volume, this work represents “the expression of the particular need of our society and of history’s mission of connecting element among the citizens of Romania.” It is intended to “clarify the confusions that have ‘flourished’ in the recent years” and to “put an end to the denigration of certain historical personalities, the exaggerations of ‘de-mythification,’ the ‘throwing of the baby out with the bath water.’” Dealing with history thus returns to specialized historians, because after 1989, this field has been attended by the wanted and unwanted.” The aim of this grand narrative’s discourse is to appease contradictions and controversies, to attest a Romanian consensus, moderation and balance, and to reassert an immovable and unalterable identity.

To the first four volumes contributed 59 authors, and to following four volumes 56 authors and 6 collaborators. Impressive and voluminous as this work is, it has been sharply criticized for inconsistencies in approach, re-use of previous texts, prepared for the former two attempts of the Academy to publish a treaty of History of Romanians of 1958 and 1977, with minimal alterations, and for the ethnocentric perspective. It was also accused of rigidity, ignoring the recent trends of research and contributions to the
historical studies. Many accusations and demonstrations of plagiarism were also brought against this treatise. Despite these reactions however, due to the infrastructural power of the Academy within the large public and the field of history itself, the synthesis of the Academy may still become the standard of the history of Romanians grand narrative. Meanwhile, it is a useful instrument in mapping out the stages reached by historical research on different periods of Romanian history.

Designed at a different, smaller scale than the treaty of the Academy, it was another attempt at synthesis that seems to have received the endorsement and acclaim of the specialized public. Named History of Romania, the work of three Romanian historians, Mihai Bârbelescu and Pompiliu Teodor from Cluj, Șerban Papacostea from Bucharest, and two foreign experts, Keith Hitchins and Dennis Deletant, intended to integrate the previously censored data now opened to scholarly use, in a “new framework of interpretation, free of any ideological constraints.” The Romanian authors dealt with the ancient, medieval and early-modern history in an informed and balanced approach, free from the essentialist and ethnocentric view of the traditional Romanian historiography. Keith Hitchins, professor at the University of Illinois, authored the most important volumes on the modern history of Romania. His analysis of Romanian state-building though compatible with the local approaches is distinctive in its most comprehensive interpretation of the relations between the particular social, economic, and cultural determinants of the rise of the nation-state, and the marked conflicts of interests, political, and institutional designs, and intellectual outlooks within the elite that carried out the state-building project. The book deals with the communist period of Romania extensively, in a chapter written by Dennis Deletant, author of several important books on the matter, which goes beyond the political history of the period to show the social consequences of the repressive apparatus of the communist regime.

The title of this second synthesis, History of Romania, is indicative of a more fundamental contrast with the Academy treatise, entitled History of Romanians, in that it sets out to investigate “the permanent interaction between Romanians and the other inhabitants of this area in the context of international realities.” The authors of the Academy treatise acknowledge to “writing about the whole nation within the state and beyond its borders” and are decided to find a place in their synthesis for the history of the minorities as well. This difference signals one of the crucial axes along which the post-communist historical discourses are positioned. At one end, there are the discourses that project the formation, existence, legitimacy, unity, and identity of Romanians to the time-space of ancient Dacia. At the other end are situated those discourses that look for and try to depict and to understand the processes and institutions of identity creation, nation-building, and state making in complex interactions of social, economic, political, and cultural structures growing in a smaller or larger area. Along this axis, much of the communist mystification of national
history is being reconsidered as Western advances in historical and historiographic methodology are being taken up by a new generation of historians. The interplay of the present historiographic discourses can be deciphered in the larger intellectual and political framework re-configured on the old lines of the traditional, pre-communist, contentious discourses. Nation continues to be the pivotal element in all history research agendas and discourses, while the positions within the field are defined accordingly when approaching larger themes such as modernization or state building.

Analyzing the identity and cultural politics of the Ceaușescu regime, the American anthropologist Katherine Verdery explored the nuanced intricacies of stakes, positions, and relations within the cultural (intellectual) field in her influential book *National Ideology under Socialism.* She set the terms for the understanding of the autonomization of the national discourse during communism and its radicalization under Ceaușescu. She highlighted the opposition autochtonist/Westerner as organizing axis of the struggles for legitimacy in the intellectual/cultural field. The autochtonists accused their opponents of the destruction of the Romanian culture through inappropriate imitations harming the national character. The Westernizers argued for the need to introduce the Romanian cultural products into world circulation, and thus the need to employ Western forms. The disputes around “foreign values” and “universality” were at core struggles for domination within the cultural field, where the “Nation” and the “Romanian identity” were main issues and instruments of contention.

Examining the neo-Stalinist line emerging in the 1970s after a short break of relative liberalization and economic development in the first years of Ceaușescu’s regime, Verdery emphasizes the shift from remunerative forms of control to coercive and symbolic-ideological modes of domination. Consequently, the communist apparatus relied increasingly more on the humanist and cultural intellectual production, creating a privileged role for a cultural elite. While strengthening the control over the institutions of cultural production, the party was forced to authorize, adopt, and adapt the language organizing the intense cultural struggles thus triggered within the cultural field – the language of the “Nation.” History was the favorite discipline used by the party to exert symbolic-ideological control alongside philosophy, and had been invested with the responsibility of reinterpreting the past in order to legitimate the political order of Ceaușescu’s national communism. The field of history was clearly divided between the adepts of a nationalist vulgate engrossed by a view of history as linear development of the nation and its institutions, and the professional historians ethically pursuing a cautious scrutiny and nuanced interpretation of the sources.

The publication of Verdery’s book also highlights two of the most important transformations in the field of historical production after 1989. Firstly, it is indicative of the intensifying interaction and mutual influence between Western scholars studying Romania and the local academics. The multiplication of contacts between the two parts, which immediately
followed the fall of the communist regime in Romania, took place in a context of institutional reorganization and expansion, increased interest in the region and its recent history, and the upsurge of ethnic nationalism in Eastern Europe alongside a reverse process of suprastatal European integration. Consequently, a trend resulted towards thematic and methodological convergence, determining a reconfiguration of the discourses and research programs of both sides. Still heavily marked by political and institutional factors, this interplay produced a refinement of the autochtonist and Westernizer position-takings on the Romanian side, and the diversification of argumentation when reconstructing the history of Romanian nation-building and state-building.

Secondly, the impact of the book is symptomatic of the paradigmatic changes undergone by the historical research as a result of the pioneering role taken by other disciplines in providing interpretations for the communist past. (American) Anthropology and sociology, exceptionally represented in works on Romania by Katherine Verdery and Gail Kligman, brought into analysis concepts of social representations, use of time and space as means of subjection and control in communism, peculiarities of socialist economies to explain the functioning of the political regime and its exercise of power, collective identities, or social relations. Local political science, sociology, and anthropology, quickly updated to Western theoretical and methodological practices and canons, provided insightful frameworks for understanding communism in Romania, and set new concepts, interpretative formulae and research agendas for historians as well.

This characteristic is emphasized by all the authors who published articles or books reflecting on the state of the present Romanian historiography and the condition of the historian in post-communist Romania. To the pieces penned by Murgescu (2000 and 2003), C. Iordachi and B. Trencsényi (2003), and Vultur (2004), other contributions can be added, of Romanian historians Zub (1998) and Iordachi (2003), as well as several foreign authors, Deletant (1991), Hitchins (1992), and Michelson (1994). Surveying the titles of history works published up to the year 2000, Murgescu remarks that about 90 per cent of the works deal with Romanian history or international relations of the Romanians, and that the texts of contemporary history (the period from 1918 on) prevail. Noticing that most of the recent studies are of political history and to a limited extent of cultural history, while theoretical and methodological discussions are almost entirely absent, he assesses that “the methodological backwardness combines with a heavily Romanian-centered approach, which takes into consideration only Romania’s relations with the “great powers,” avoiding any comparison with other small/peripheral countries.”

Iordachi arrives to a similar verdict, noting that “Romanian historiography turned yet again towards its own pre-Marxist traditions . . . The uncritical reliance on tradition reproduced numerous traditional drawbacks of history-writing in Romania, such as the absence of deep theoretical debates

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and of interdisciplinary dialogue, a primordialist perception of ethnicity, and a close relationship between historiography and the political power.”  

His overall evaluation is summarized as such: 

after more than a decade of liberty, Romanian historiography remains a heterogeneous combination of several “strata”: a significant proportion of the professional body is still rooted in national romanticism; a dominant corpus of historians adhere to the precepts of the “critical school” existing at the turn of the century; a minority of circa 10 per cent work in the spirit of the French *Annales* school; and several isolated figures are trying to be open to the historiographical evolution of the post-*Annales* period. Overall, the image of the Romanian historiography depicted by most Romanian scholars is that of a still dominant nationalist “canon” facing a sustained attack by an alternative discourse. Although it managed to win significant “battles,” the “reformist” camp is far from being able to dominate the public discourse. Reinforced by the acute polarization of the political life, the institutional confrontation between the nationalist canon and the reformist historians has been quite harsh, giving only recent signs of accommodation.  

This grim portrayal however should be slightly amended by taking into account several structural characteristics of the field of cultural production, in particular of writing history, which indicate however a more substantial change. Firstly, the editorial market liberalized after 1989, putting an end to the full control of the party and its cultural politics. Dominating the social science production and sales now are several private publishing houses which managed to gain profitability in the latest years, of which most notable are Humanitas and Polirom. Led with certain good managerial skills, these publishing houses have a reasonable distribution and have now the reputation, authority and capital to consecrate an author or a book, in both professional and larger circles. Most of the works signaling new themes, approaches, and methodologies were published by these publishing houses and sold in relatively numerous copies. Another feature of the field of writing history is the thriving activity of research centers associated with the settled departments of history and of private research centers, mostly funded from private or international sources, which all have their own editorial agendas and publications.  

And finally, one characteristic of increasing importance is the emerging transnational space created by young historians who move freely among several international and local institutions, increasingly challenging the local sources and patterns of professional and institutional authority. Of crucial importance here is the Central European University in Budapest and its Departments of History, Medieval Studies, Nationalism, and Political Science, and the associated institutions such as the Open Society Institute with its International Higher Education Support Program or CEU Press. One important “reformist” historian, Sorin Antohi, teaches at this university while continuing to be associated with institutions in Romania, and for a period acted as academic rector. This position enabled access to important resources employed to regenerate the study of history in this part.
of Europe, of which many young Romanian historians such as Constantin Iordachi or Marius Turda benefited. He also set up Pasts, Inc. Center for Historical Studies, offering a space of opportunities for new research and approaches for young historians, and declaring it to be at crossroads, between “real historians,” “theorists,” and “memorians,” trying to (a) bridge the epistemological gap between the first two; (b) bring them into a serious conversation with the “memorians”; (c) widely disseminate the results of these complex interactions, with special attention to the most topical public (local, regional, national, global) debates, challenges, and concerns.

Thus, “historical studies is a shorthand for a considerably larger intellectual, scholarly, and civic agenda, for which conventional boundaries of all sorts are irrelevant.” The CEU Press decided to translate into English and internationally circulate several of the seminal books authored by young Romanian historians, such as Sorin Mitu’s volume reviewed in this essay, and others.36

At this point, I will discuss the most important contributions renewing the Romanian historiography, pointing out authors, themes, and approaches that challenged the old ways of writing history. In his book on Being Historian in the Year 2000, Murgescu makes an inventory of the most sensitive topics of Romanian history, traditional subjects for political subordination during communism, and issues of contention among historians: the Romanian–Hungarian relations, the modest contribution of Romanians against Ottoman assaults on Europe, the poor economic performance and lack of propensity for democratic values of the inter-war Romanian elite, the political regime of Ion Antonescu, the relation between provincial solidarities and national identity in modern Romania, the level of anti-Semitism within the Romanian society, the repression mechanisms and collaboration during the communist regime. This list is expressive of the central role “nation” plays in historiographic disputes in Romania and its object produced the most innovative and valuable works of history after 1989.

Lucian Boia, professor at the University of Bucharest, is the historian who put forward the most comprehensive challenge to the nationalist historiographic discourse.37 He maintains that there can be no objective history and that the myths that are expressive of any community’s collective consciousness are constitutive to the historical discourse. Myths, he argues, may comprise true and fictive facts which are disposed and assembled into a particular structure following a specific logic. He consequently proceeds to deconstructing the fundamental myths of the Romanian history: the origins, the continuity, the unity, the Romanian-ness (constructed in contrast to the “other”), the great figures of the past.38 Addressing one of the founding events in the traditional history of Romania, the 1600 unification of Transylvania, Moldova, and Wallachia under one single ruler for a brief time, he concludes that “when Michael the Great appears as creator of the ‘national unity,’ we witness a myth-making process, for the simple reason
that over his real action is projected the ideology of the national state of the last two centuries and inexistent at 1600.”

Challenging the essentialist view of the nation as pivotal element of the Romanian historiography, he makes a radiography of the concept of nation from a modernist standpoint and illustrates its every detail with discussions of classical case studies, such as the French and the German processes of nation-building, and other less typical ones, with a special emphasis on the Romanian case. Implicitly touching upon the most debated topic of the Romanian historiography, the legitimacy of the claim over Transylvania, Boia parallels the Hungarian model of nation-building during the Austro-Hungarian dualism with the French model of nation-building succeeding the French Revolution. “Hungary failed to become a second France,” writes he, “but the mechanism of success itself would have been the same.” Moreover, scrutinizing the role of the shared language in forging nations and nationhood, and showing that there are situations when political interests and will may make or unmake a common language, he argues – against the deepest creed of Romanian nationalism – that the Bessarabians who now call themselves Moldovans may rightfully do so, and if they want they may choose to stay Romanians, or else to cease being ones.

Boia sees the historiographic national mythology grown after 1945 as the result of a mutant discursive modernization that accompanied the emergence of modern mass politics in Greater Romania after 1918, and which

was not aiming at the legitimization of a democratic system but rather at the construction of an ethno-political discourse and praxis . The cult of Romanian ethnic continuity, referred back to prehistoric timelessness, is also a perverted mythological manifestation of political modernity, where the repetition of founding acts, periodically confirming this continuity, ultimately means a regression into the “bottomless well” of the past.

While appealing to the large public, Boia’s work, taking the shape of splendid essays, was rejected not only by traditional historians refusing theoretical challenges and criticizing its lack of thick empirical data and depreciation of previous (and their own) contributions, but also by several other historians expressing their methodological pessimism regarding his version of deconstructivism. While it is true that Boia’s work does not provide a usable bibliographic apparatus or a track of steps for subsequent research, it is the challenge of his theoretical approach and the discussion it opens that make its worth.

There were other attempts at deconstruction of the genesis of modern Romanian nationalism. In his book on the emergence of national identity at Romanians from Transylvania, Sorin Mitu gives central importance to the representations, the imaginary and the ideology (deep-rooted social representations serving the goal of maintaining social cohesion and rationalizing the reality) of national identity. Maintaining that these are crucial to the global and nuanced understanding of social reality, he sets out to make an inventory of the themes and representations of Romanians’
self-image, to trace their genesis and evolution, and to produce a functional analysis of the images and stereotypes through which discourses on identity are built.

Another significant departure from the orthodox national history as of 1989 is occasioned by the revisionist trend in the assessment of the creation of Greater Romania after the First World War. The traditional “triumphalist” view held that Romanians, for many centuries’ subjects of multiethnic empires, had ceaselessly endeavored to fulfill their fiery wish for political union. The Romanian state emerged as the natural result of their struggles, an accomplishment no less deserved than fated. This view received some variation, while preserving its main tenets, in terms of sources used, critical approach of the documents, and range of themes addressed, including the discussion of the competing federalist projects, the conditions of the province’s unification with Romania, the misfunctioning of the Romanian political system, the new social and demographic situation.

The challenge came mostly from (Romanian) historians from abroad. In his book *The Romanian Paradox*, Sorin Alexandrescu of the University of Amsterdam discusses extensively and comprehensively the circumstances of the creation of Greater Romania and its collapse into authoritarianism in the 1930s. His text is introduced by a long preface, explaining the personal and professional exertions that brought it up, where he retrospectively identifies the aim of the book, constructed “as a result of a spontaneously adjustment to the object,” as that of attempting to delineate the “multiple inter-war realities” of Greater Romania. Highlighting the profound changes brought by the union, he asserts that Romania united with a large Romanian rural population and a significant non-Romanian population which dominated the local administration and constituted the entrepreneurial class. He argues that the act of unification can only be understood by considering the interaction between the ethnic and the social factors. He also points out that the Romanian governments of the 1920s were never concerned with the admissible limits to regionalism, taking for granted the full centralization of the country and disregarding the terms of the social and political autonomy set by the provinces in joining Romania. When discussing the circumstances of the union of the three provinces with Romania, he shows that they affected the way the political elite from Bucharest addressed the challenges to Romanian stateness, and shaped the state’s subsequent discourses of legitimacy. If Romania could put forward an historical argument, that of the Romanians’ continuity in the area, for her claim to Transylvania, Bessarabia, and Bukovina, she lacked the political argument for the case of Transylvania, which never had any Romanian political structures or Romanian participation in state’s affairs. And if the demographic principle legitimized the claim for Transylvania, where Romanians comprised more than half of the population, or Banat and Bessarabia, where they constituted the largest ethnic group, the criterion was not met for the case of Bukovina, where Romanians were outnumbered by Ukrainians. He clearly concludes
that the idea of the century old struggle of the Romanian people for unity was not reflected in the act of unification, nor was the latter an organic process.

Another revisionist provocation came from Irina Livezeanu of Pittsburgh University in her 1995 book, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*. Concerned with the problems and tensions that accompanied the making of Greater Romania in 1918, the first part of the book examines the strategies of state building and nation building employed by the administration in Bucharest. Rejecting a primordialist and/or perennialist understanding of the Romanian nation, her approach and methodology are based on Ernest Gellner’s theory of nations. Gellner conceives nations and nationalism as modern phenomena, in the sense of new and recent, made possible by the territorial and social mobility, standardized culture, generalized educational system and mass communication. Stating that nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones, and in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state should not separate the power holders from the rest, Gellner asserts that “nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist” and that it is “nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round.” Consequently, Livezeanu pursues a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the process of cultural expansion and unification carried out by the political elite in Bucharest in the provinces, describing the development of the Romanian educational system in the provinces, especially of the secondary schools, the centralization of the administration, the nationalization of the elites and of the institutions that produced them, and the aggressive cultural offensive. The politics of cultural homogenization and centralization, disproportionately grounded on the traditions and institutions of the Old Kingdom, triggered resistance and cultural confrontations in Bukovina, Bessarabia, and Transylvania. The difficulties of state building and nation building encountered by the Romanian state did not derive solely from the presence of national minorities, she argues, but also from the different identities and aspirations of the Romanians themselves.

In the second part of the book, Livezeanu scrutinizes the cultural struggles fought in the universities of Romania, institutions crucial for promoting the cultural politics of the state by producing a national bureaucratic elite meant to alleviate the distance between the rural masses and the state and to replace the foreign urban elites of the provinces. Paradoxically, due to the explosive expansion of the university education, an “intellectual proletariat” emerged which, confronted with unemployment and exposed to the nationalist discourses of the time, cherished a form of protofascist extremist nationalist ideology. She thus argues that the reactions of the Old Kingdom to the exigencies of the expansion bore a crucial importance for the formation of the state of Greater Romania and for the emergence of the nationalist ideology with its anti-Semitism component.
As already revealed by books of the two previous authors, another aspect of the Greater Romania nationalist discourse and state building, which has become a topic of scholarly debate in post-communist history writing, is the theme of the Romanian inter-war extreme right, the related topic of anti-Semitism, and the relationship between the prominent intellectuals of the interwar period and the radical nationalist ideology, especially Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, and Constantin Noica. If previously the research on Romanian fascism was done mainly by Western scholars, after 1989, many intellectuals felt the urge to investigate the phenomenon, which, emerging independently of the German or Italian versions of fascism and sharing the common anti-communism and anti-Semitism features, displayed distinctive ideological traits, such as Orthodox mysticism. The incorporation of Orthodox Christianity into the political doctrine, structure, and ritual of the Romanian fascist Iron Guard served to gain the support of the deeply religious rural population. A significant part of the works on Romanian fascism was devoted to portray the Legion of the Archangel Michael movement, the precursor of the Iron Guard, as the avatar of the Romanian national ideology. Another by-product of the interaction of Romanian nationalism with the social and cultural peculiarities of the country was anti-Semitism.

Up to 1989, few pieces approached Romanian anti-Semitism and holocaust, mostly in a deflective or selective form of negationism. Leon Volovici is the author of the most comprehensive intellectual history of anti-Semitism in Romania. In his view, anti-Semitism was embedded in the political culture and administrative structures of the Old Kingdom, and developed into a functioning ideology after 1918 to acquire a dominant position in the intellectual and political fields in the 1930s.

But the ultimate analysis of Romanian anti-semitism, the Antonescu regime and the holocaust in Romania was to be the result of a political blunder of the then president of Romanian, Ion Iliescu. The history of the political adversity regarding the holocaust in Romania started 12 June 2003 when the Romanian Government gave a communiqué concluding a cooperative agreement between the National Archives of Romania and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. A sample of selective negationism, it stated that Romania’s government “encourages research concerning the Holocaust in Europe – including documents referring to it and found in Romanian archives – but strongly emphasizes that between 1940–1945 no Holocaust took place within Romania’s boundaries.” The statement was followed by domestic and international protests, including an official protest from Israel, and determined President Iliescu to comment that this statement should have never been made. The government reacted accordingly, stating on June 17, 2003 that the Antonescu regime, at that time representing the Romanian state, had been “guilty of grave war crimes, pogroms, deportations to Transnistria, mass dislocations of a sizable part of Romania’s Jewish population to territories occupied and
controlled by the Romanian army, employing discrimination and extermination, which are part of the sinister mechanism of the Holocaust” and assumed its share of responsibility for the crimes initiated by the Antonescu regime.\textsuperscript{54}

Later that year, on July 25, 2003, the Israeli newspaper \textit{Ha’aretz} published an interview with Ion Iliescu declaring, among others, that “during the Nazi period the Jews and the communists were treated the same... The holocaust affected not only the Jewish population in Europe. Many others, including Poles, died in a similar way.” This form of deflective negationism triggered the reaction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel, which handed the Romanian ambassador at Tel Aviv an official protest demanding that Ion Iliescu clarifies his position regarding the holocaust. Of course Iliescu reacted in a presidency release stating that his declarations were misinterpreted and tried to reformulate and explained what he had meant to say. The diplomatic and media storm ended with the set up of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania on October 22, 2003, on the initiative of Ion Iliescu.

Conceived as an independent research body, free of any influence and political consideration and financed by the Romanian government,\textsuperscript{55} it comprised respected experts in history,\textsuperscript{56} the humanities and social sciences from Romania and abroad, survivors of the Holocaust, representatives of national and international Jewish and Roma organizations, and representatives of the Romanian Presidency. At the invitation of President Iliescu, Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace prize laureate and honorary member of the Romanian Academy, accepted to be the chairman of the Commission. The Final Report of the Commission, issued in both English and Romanian versions, was presented on November 11, 2004. Employing an extensive variety of primary and secondary sources, the report produces an anamnesis of the Romanian anti-Semitism, a detailed account of the evolution of the situation of Jews during the World War II and the minute description of anti-Semitic propaganda, policies and activity, discrimination, social exclusion, deportations, and extermination. One chapter is dedicated to an analysis of the distortion, negationism, and minimization of the holocaust in post-war Romania, structured according to an established typology of negationism.

The transformations in the writing of history in post-communist Romania are shaped, as I have shown before, by political structural and institutional factors. The public space and the political class are dominated by a primordialist understanding of the nation, by a triumphalist interpretation of the formation of the Romanian nation-state, and Romania is constitutionally declared a national and unitary state.\textsuperscript{57} It was thus only typical that they clashed with the historians experimenting with new approaches and updated methodologies, over an issue of mutual and public concern: the history textbooks. As sources and means of socialization, textbooks are unparalleled in their capacity to convey a uniform and immovable worldview, to lay the foundations of the sentiment of belonging to the nation, and create
loyalty towards the state and its institutions, as a state of and for that nation. The clash was occasioned by the legislative change which permitted and encouraged the circulation of alternative textbooks. While the process of evaluation and approval of the alternative textbooks is wholly governed by the state, the authors enjoy significant liberty with regard to the content.

The so-called “textbook scandal” was occasioned by the first production of alternative books and was occasioned by a textbook written by a group of young historians from Cluj-Napoca. This textbook departed most from the orthodox way of presenting national history, using such approaches that are not familiar to the public or school teachers, such as Benedict Anderson’s account of nation formation. Anderson elaborated a constructivist explanation for the origin and spread of nationalism, claiming that all larger communities are imagined. Print-capitalism, through the diffusion of printed products in vernaculars, mass communication, generalized access to symbolic forms of communication such as the map or the museum, practices such as the census and military service, restructured the social space–time relation, making possible large-scale community representations. Nations are thus imagined political communities, imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. The disputed history textbook comprised sections titled such as The Invention of the Modern Nation or Ethnogenesis: How Romanians Imagine the Origin of Their People, which made many people shake with horror. The scandal started off with a demand of its public burning made in the Romanian Senate by one of the members, and unfolded over the following two months in the political sphere, mass media, and the historical profession. It caused two special meetings of the united Education Committees of the two legislative chambers, and a motion against the government regarding the “Education policies promoted through the textbooks of History of Romania.” The professional historians polarized according to the lines discussed above. Most of the historians teaching in the history departments of the Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca state universities supported the textbook and its innovative approach, and emphasized the freedom of interpretation, while the Romanian Academy and certain history departments of non-established universities contended along nationalist vulgate arguments, denouncing the Cluj historians’ attack against the Romanian national identity. After a turbulent trajectory, the textbook ended up by having the authorization cancelled and being banned from bookshops and schools.

It has become apparent from the account so far that history of the twentieth-century Romania has been on great demand after the fall of communism in 1989. As the propaganda apparatus of the communist regime has been fabricating and manipulating the past on a daily basis, even making use of such measures of art as editing and reprinting old newspapers in order to update to its present needs the information they conveyed, the history of communism has been urgently approached in the 1990s. There has also been a marked political pressure, coming from the revived “historical” parties in the opposition in the first half of the decade, the National Peasant Party,
the National Liberal Party, and the Social Democratic Party, and from the civil society, represented by radical humanist intellectuals, former dissidents and survivors of the Romanian gulag. Several specialized institutes were set up to undertake the study of the anti-communist resistance and the communist repression, such as The Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism of the Romanian Academy, or the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance, under the aegis of the Council of Europe. Using archival and oral sources, topics such as the institutionalization of communism, the analysis of the Securitate apparatus, or the process of collectivization have been taken up, in a painstaking process of retrieving and revealing the communist past.

Using newly opened archive resources, several books approached the first period of communist leadership. Dennis Deletant (1999 and 2001) uses new archival data, secret police and party documents, extensive prison and detention camp memoirs, and interviews to reconstitute in detail Gheorghiu-Dej’s rise to power and elimination of political opposition, and the exercise of terror carried on by the Securitate to repress the political and social institutions. The Romanian repression apparatus, the Securitate, is the object of study for Marius Oprea and Stejăre Olaru. Exerting terror and fascination, the Securitate has been a continuing presence in post-communist Romania as the esprit de corps of its former members extended its existence after its dismantling. Present in the political discourse and interaction, and in the collective representations of the population, the Securitate has been a sensitive topic of study for historians. Marius Oprea is the tenacious, insightful and rigorous presenter of the mechanisms and functioning of the repression apparatus, exposing new documents and extending the analysis up to the present days. The mechanisms of control and surveillance within the communist party are similarly scrutinized and revealed in the collection of documents and studies edited by Oprea, Olaru, and others.

Other painful processes of communist modernization are taken up by historians. The volume published recently by Polirom gathers the fruit of a large interdisciplinary research led by Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery on the process of collectivization of agriculture in Romania. The documented account of the political and legal aspects, the popularization, implementation, and imposition of collectivization is supplemented by minute case studies revealing the complex ways and consequences of the process with respect to social stratification and social interaction, life strategies, economic relations and the property regime, the institutionalization of the new political forms, or regional peculiarities. A product of the collaboration of historians, anthropologists and sociologists, using their own methodologies and access to data, the volume breaks new ground as a comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis of the history of a societal process as central to the instauration of the communist regime.

Of less public prominence but with results acknowledged in the professional community, history writing opened up themes previously
ignored: history of elite formation, history of education and the problems of generation transfers, processes of urbanization, urban lifestyles, city monographs, city as space of multicultural coexistence and symbolic memory, history of the family, study of genealogies, history of mixed marriages, historical demography, identity formation, collective mentalities, economic and cultural history, cultural history, everyday life, and imagology. While there persists a feeling of dissatisfaction that their arduous work remains mostly unknown and confined to a small group of specialists or colleagues, it is the professional and public debates on principles, theory, method, and consequences, and the attempts at interdisciplinarity that give historians the key to history writing in a liberated context.

Notes

1 By 1989, only the universities of Bucharest, Cluj, and Iași trained students in history, within the framework of a double specialization program of studies in history and philosophy, with a total of graduates of less than 100 per year. See also B. Murgescu, “The Romanian historiography in the 1990s,” Romanian Journal of Political Science, 2 (3), 2003, pp. 33–5; Murgescu, A fi istoric în anul 2000 (București, Editura All, 2000), pp. 37–9, 66–71.

2 While talented and resourceful young historians whose access into universities has been hindered by the austerity regime of the 1980s could now join the history departments, other mediocre, regimented, historians also entered the universities, especially the newly set departments of history, at both state and private universities.

3 Doctorates or Masters taken abroad at prestigious universities such as Sorbonne or Oxford are not recognized by the Romanian Ministry of Education unless a burdensome and costly process to equate the diplomas is pursued.

4 The Romanian Academy administers 12.38 per cent and the Ministry of Education 74.47 per cent of the state budget given to research, according to S. Vultur, “New topics, new tendencies and new generations of historians in Romanian historiography” in (Re)Writing History – Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism, ed. U. Brunnbauer (Münster, Lit Verlag Quer, 2004), p. 243.

5 The same goes for historians affiliated with the only private advanced study institute in Romania, the New Europe College in Bucharest, and the few private research institutes, such as the Romanian Institute for Recent History in Bucharest, the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance in Sighet, and the Research Center for Interethnic Relations in Cluj.

6 For example, the Center for the History of the Imaginary led by Lucia Boia in Bucharest, the Center for Transylvanian Studies in Cluj, and the Center for Church History in Bucharest.


10 The ninth volume is intended to cover the communist period 1948–1989 and the tenth volume to discuss the development of the Romanian historiography.

11 Ibid., p. xx.

12 Ibid., p. xix.

13 Murgescu, “The Romanian historiography,” pp. 52–3. He accounts this by the selection of the authors, most of them hard-liners of the Academy structures in their 70s and 80s, the unwillingness to give credit to the younger generation of historians, and the absence of the best specialists of the “mature” generation, who were either not invited to contribute, or refused to (e.g. Șerban Papacostea, Ștefan S. Gorovei, and Andrei Pippidi).

bibliographies have been published by the various important research centers, such as Xenopol

Available in the indexes of the Historical Bibliography of Romania, Bibliografia istorică a României, vol. 8, “1989–1994” (București, 1996); vol. 9, “1994–1999” (Cluj-Napoca, 2000). Other bibliographies have been published by the various important research centers, such as Xenopol
Iordachi and Trenčsényi, “In search,” p. 427.

34 S. Mitu, Geneza identității naționale la români ardeieni (București, Humanitas, 1997); Mitu, National Identity of Romanians in Transylvania (Budapest, CEU Press, 2001).

35 S. Alexandrescu, Paradoxul român (București, Univers, 1998).


For example, the Institute for Oral History, the Center for Transylvanian Studies, and the Institute for Central European Studies attached to the History Department in Cluj, the Center for the History of the Imaginary of the University of Bucharest, the Xenopol Institute of the Academy linked with the History Department of the University of Iași, the Romanian Institute for Recent History whose yearbooks are published by Polirom Publishing House, the New Europe College, and the interdisciplinary group of reflection and research “A treia Europa” editing a journal bearing the same name, etc.


43 Ibid., p. 37.


46 Ibid., p. 121.

47 Ibid., p. 27.

48 Ibid., p. 26

49 Ibid., p. 27.

50 Ibid., p. 7. For the whole demonstration, see pp. 22–6.

51 Ibid., p. 34–7 for an outline of the retrospective construction of Romania and Romanians in the Romanian historiography.

52 Ibid., p. 26

53 Ibid., p. 27.

54 Another important “reformist” historian, Andrei Pippidi, also taught at the Central European University as recurrent professor. Bogdan Murgescu was a visiting professor there in 2003–2004 and Constantin Iordachi has been recently appointed as assistant professor.

55 For example, the Institute for Oral History, the Center for Transylvanian Studies, and the Institute for Central European Studies attached to the History Department in Cluj, the Center for the History of the Imaginary of the University of Bucharest, the Xenopol Institute of the Academy linked with the History Department of the University of Iași, the Romanian Institute for Recent History whose yearbooks are published by Polirom Publishing House, the New Europe College, and the interdisciplinary group of reflection and research “A treia Europa” editing a journal bearing the same name, etc.

56 Professing the approach of a “third discourse” between Romanian-centrism and the uncritical imitation of Westerner models, refusing both “the idolatry of facts” and “the idolatry of theory.” S. Antohi, Exercițiul distanței. Discursuri, societăți, metode (București, Nemira, 1997); Antohi, Civitas imaginialis. Istorie și utepic în cultura românească, 2nd rev. ed. (Iași, Polirom, 1999); A. Zub and Antohi, Ogluțiți retrovizoare. Istorie, memori și morale în România (Iași, Polirom, 2002).

For an account of post-1989 debate and work on the relationship between the intellectuals and the radical nationalist ideology in the interwar period, see Iordachi and Trencsényi, “In search,” pp. 433–8.


Radu Ioanid, Viorel Achim, Lya Benjamin, Adrian Cioflâncă, Ioan Ciuperca, Andrei Pippidi, Leon Volovici, Liviu Rotman, and Ioan Scurtu of the Romanian Academy acting as Commission secretary.


The Ministry of Education nominates a committee that makes up the curricula, to be approved by the Ministry. The proposals for textbooks are submitted to the approval of the National Commission for the Schoolbook Approval, which coordinates the approval process by appointing specialized evaluation teams consisting generally of secondary school teachers and by exception of university teachers. The textbooks authors are high-school teachers or university professors, researchers and inspectors. The regulations established by the NCSA impose them to cover at least 80–85 per cent of the school curricula, which are formulated in relatively general terms. The election of the textbook authors belongs entirely to the publishing houses. Each manuscript must be reviewed by at least one or two historical referees.


M. Oprea, Moștenitorii Securității (București, Humanitas, 2004). The book is presented with an anecdote on an EU official who, during a visit in Romania, asked who was the opposition (of that time Party of Social Democracy government), and someone answered: Marius Oprea.


For an encompassing enumeration of themes and studies in post-communist Romanian history production, see Vultur, “New topics,” pp. 262–74.

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