

3/24/2003 L

**THE POVERTY OF POST-COMMUNIST  
CONTEMPORARY HISTORY IN ROMANIA**

Irina Livezeanu  
University of Pittsburgh



**The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research**  
910 17<sup>th</sup> Street, N.W.  
Suite 300  
Washington, D.C. 20006

**TITLE VIII PROGRAM**

### Project Information\*

<b>Contractor:</b>	<b>University of Pittsburgh</b>
<b>Principal Investigator:</b>	<b>Irina Livezeanu</b>
<b>Council Contract Number:</b>	<b>816-08</b>
<b>Date:</b>	<b>March 24, 2003</b>

### Copyright Information

Individual researchers retain the copyright on their work products derived from research funded through a contract or grant from the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research (NCEEER). However, the NCEEER and the United States Government have the right to duplicate and disseminate, in written and electronic form, reports submitted to NCEEER to fulfill Contract or Grant Agreements either (a) for NCEEER's own internal use, or (b) for use by the United States Government, and as follows: (1) for further dissemination to domestic, international, and foreign governments, entities and/or individuals to serve official United States Government purposes or (2) for dissemination in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act or other law or policy of the United States Government granting the public access to documents held by the United States Government. Neither NCEEER nor the United States Government nor any recipient of this Report may use it for commercial sale.

---

\* The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract or grant funds provided by the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, funds which were made available by the U.S. Department of State under Title VIII (The Soviet-East European Research and Training Act of 1983, as amended). The analysis and interpretations contained herein are those of the author.

## Executive Summary

With the end of communism and its obvious, oppressive censorship, history is now, post December '89, like all other disciplines, free in Romania. In fact, the changes since 1990 constitute freedom *from* strict ideological control and censorship. By itself, this state of negative freedom has not, and could not yet have, transformed the ruins of the old communist-nationalist historiography of the Ceaușescu era. This is so much more true of the area of contemporary history. A number of symptoms are revealing of this difficult transitional, not-quite-there historiographic situation.

Many former official communist historians—by which I mean those historians whose works were written at official behest and signaled to others in the profession what the acceptable and preferred topics and treatments were—have become full-blown nationalists and have been involved with the no longer veiled, unconstrained, construction of a nationalist history. Nationalism had been the identifying trait of Romanian communism since the mid-1960s, and historians were favored by Ceaușescu as necessary accomplices to his project. The intellectual legacy of the Ceaușescu regime's brand of national-communism has by no means lost its power. On the contrary, it continues to have an effect on what is now freely produced nationalist historiography (and other more popular publications that claim to touch upon or reveal historical truths).

However post-1989 nationalist historical narratives are not only a remnant of the Ceaușescu era. They also pick up and use for present purposes strands of thought from the interwar period (or even from the 19<sup>th</sup> century) that had been severed by communism. Contemporary nationalist historiography is thus strengthened by a duality of sources: pre-communist and communist nationalisms.

## Introduction

With the end of communism and its obvious, oppressive censorship, history is now, post December '89, like all other disciplines, free in Romania. In fact, the changes since 1990 constitute freedom *from* strict ideological control and censorship. By itself, this state of negative freedom has not, and could not yet have, transformed the ruins of the old communist-nationalist historiography of the Ceaușescu era. This is so much more true of the area of contemporary history. A number of symptoms are revealing of this difficult transitional, not-quite-there historiographic situation.

Many former official communist historians—by which I mean those historians whose works were written at official behest and signaled to others in the profession what the acceptable and preferred topics and treatments were—have become full-blown nationalists and have been involved with the no longer veiled, unconstrained, construction of a nationalist history.<sup>1</sup> Nationalism had been the identifying trait of Romanian communism since the mid-1960s, and historians were favored by Ceaușescu as necessary accomplices to his project. The intellectual legacy of the Ceaușescu regime's brand of national-communism has by no means lost its power.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, it continues to have an effect on what is now freely produced nationalist historiography (and other more popular publications that claim to touch upon or reveal historical truths).

Both history and these other genres are often written by those who had previously signed as orthodox communists without, anymore, the masking provided by the “twin” class slogans of earlier days. Moreover, these cultural products are no longer part of a command economy and prescribed ideology. They are now regulated by the market and the demand for them seems strong.

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, Mircea Mușat and Gheorghe Buzatu. During the previous regime they wrote or edited works with titles such as *23 August in International Context* (Buzatu); *Horthyist-fascist terror in northwestern Romania, September 1940-October* (Mușat, Fătu, Ardeleanu, Arimia); *23 august 1944: Documents* (Ardeleanu ... [et al.]). August 23, 1944 was the day when Romania reversed course to join the Soviets and Allies against the Nazis on whose side they had been fighting since 1941. During the communist period it was a celebrated national holiday.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent overview of Romanian historiography from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the post-communist period, see Bogdan Murgescu, *A fi istoric în anul 2000* (Bucharest: All, 1920), pp. 31-46.

One interesting example is Pavel Coruț and his oeuvre's reception several years ago. Coruț is a self confessed former high-ranking Securitate officer. He became a politician on the extreme right in Partidul Unității Naționale Române (the Party of Romanian National Unity, or PUNR) and eventually founded his own dissident radical right wing party, the Romanian Life Party. But in the 1990s he was also a best selling author of spy thrillers that romanticize the Securitate (the communist Secret Police) and minimize its destructive role during the events of 1989. In a struggling book market, Coruț's novels are a major financial success. By his own account, the books in his series "Octogonul în acțiune" (The Octagon in Action) were printed in editions of 200,000.<sup>3</sup> His popularity seems to be due not only to the James Bond-like appeal of these pulp novels, but also to the author's project of explaining through this vehicle the very recent past.

However post-1989 nationalist historical narratives are not only a remnant of the Ceaușescu era. They also pick up and use for present purposes strands of thought from the interwar period (or even from the 19<sup>th</sup> century) that had been severed by communism.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary nationalist historiography is thus strengthened by a duality of sources: pre-communist and communist nationalisms.<sup>5</sup>

### **Transition and the Struggle for Identity**

The burdensome communist legacy on the history profession in present-day Romania is even apparent in certain attempts to break with it. During the previous regime, history was, as mentioned, among the most subservient of Romania's social science and humanities disciplines. But within this

---

<sup>3</sup> See his prefatory "Nota" in *Să te naști sub steaua noastră!* Bucharest: Ed. Gemenii, 1993, p. 2. On Coruț see Michael Shafir "Radical Politics in East-Central Europe Part 8: Radical Continuity in Romania: The Party of Romanian National Unity" *RFE/RL: East European Perspectives* 2, no. 20, 25 October 2000, *RFE/RL Newslines* 4, no. 107, 2 June 2000, and no. 200 16 October 2000, Richard A. Hall, "The Securitate Roots of a Modern Romanian Fairy Tale: The Press, the Former Securitate, and the Historiography of December 1989," Part 1, *RFE/RL East European Perspectives* 4, no. 7, 3 April 2002, and Michael Shafir, "Best Selling Spy Novels Seek to Rehabilitate Romanian 'Securitate'" *RFE/RL Research Report* 2, no. 45.

<sup>4</sup> On this point see Murgescu, *A fi istoric*, pp. 38-41.

<sup>5</sup> See for example the weeklies *Europa* and *România Mare*, and the following books all of which reflect an extreme nationalist ideology: Gh. Buzatu, Corneliu Ciucanu, Cristian Sandache, eds., *Radiografia dreptei românești: 1927-1941*. (Bucharest: Ed. FF Press, 1996), Gheorghe Buzatu, *Așa a început holocaustul împotriva poporului român* (Bucharest: Majadahonda, 1995), Mircea Mușat, *Drama României Mari* (Bucharest: Ed. Fundației România Mare, 1992), Kurt W. Treptow, Gheorghe Buzatu, eds., *Corneliu Zelea Codreanu în fața istoriei* (Iași: Kurt W. Treptow and Gheorghe Buzatu, 1994). With the exception of the

highly ideologized field, the closer one came to the contemporary period, the more marked the distortions became. Historians of more distant pasts were generally freer in their research and of a higher professional caliber, and consequently enjoyed higher levels of international recognition.

This was likely the result of self-selection, by an extension of the logic that determined some of the most talented youth in the Soviet bloc to specialize in mathematics, physics, medicine, and engineering rather than in the humanities or social sciences that they may have otherwise favored. Some of those mathematicians, physicians, and physicists have since, under the new regimes, turned to their true vocations as philosophers, journalists, and social scientists.<sup>6</sup> Pre-modern history was less politicized, and therefore attracted more talent than modern, not to mention contemporary history, but ancient history was by no means without its nationalist politics.<sup>7</sup> It was through the archeological and ancient history discourse that territorial claims such as those against neighboring Slavs and Hungarians were mostly advanced during the late communist period.

Nor was the study of the Middle Ages without its political distortions. Lucian Boia has shown how the reigns of Ștefan cel Mare (Stephen the Great) 1457-1504, and Mihai Viteazul (Michael the Brave) 1593 - 1601, came to have contemporary significance as precursors of Ceaușescu's communist reign.<sup>8</sup> Still, overall, the medieval, early modern, and ancient subfields had been somewhat freer during the communist period than later ones.<sup>9</sup> Methodologically, cultural history had been freer than political history.

---

American Kurt Treptow, all of these historians of the contemporary period were official communist historians. (See note 1 above).

<sup>6</sup> Two prominent Romanian examples are Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, and M.D. now practicing political science, and Horia Roman Patapievici, a physicist who has become a much-acclaimed political philosopher and essayist who writes frequently for 22.

<sup>7</sup> For a recent review of the sub field of archeology in this respect, see Gheorghe-Alexandru Niculescu, "Nationalism and the Representation of Society in Romanian Archeology," in *Nation and National Ideology: Past, Present and Prospects: Proceedings of the International Symposium Held at the New Europe College, Bucharest, April 6-7, 2001* (Bucharest: New Europe College and the Center for the Study of the Imaginary, University of Bucharest, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Romanian historical periodization differs from the American. Their Middle Ages extend into the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Due to the overwhelming complicity of modern and particularly contemporary political historians with the Ceaușescu regime, many who detained positions of leadership in history faculties and institutes were promptly removed in the revolutionary months after December '89. This created a vacuum of power into which stepped the ancient, medieval, and cultural historians. They had been generally less useful to and less used by the previous rulers, and emerged from the communist rubble with their professionalism relatively more intact. As a result, in the immediate aftermath of Ceaușescu's demise, with few if notable exceptions, the institutions of the history profession, including those concerned with late modern and contemporary history, passed under the direction of medievalists, and of cultural historians.

The History Faculty in Bucharest reflects this trend. The Ancient historian Zoe Petre became Dean and the medievalist Stelian Brezeanu Associate Dean. Radu Manolescu, a medievalist, became the chair of the World History section. The exception is Ion Scurtu, a modernist who opposes any significant methodological or curricular change—other than a more openly expressed nationalism. He became and remains chair of the Romanian History section.

The Nicolae Iorga Institute of History was led from 1990 until just recently—when he was replaced by the same Ion Scurtu—by the highly reputed medievalist Șerban Papacostea. The Institute for South-East European Studies came under the leadership of the late Alexandru Dușu, whose work on culture and mentalities straddles several periods, and of Andrei Pippidi, a medievalist—in the more expansive, Romanian sense. The Deanship of the History Faculty in Iași went to another medievalist, Ioan Caprosu. In Cluj Nicolae Bocșan became the Dean of the History Faculty; he is actually a modernist but with research roots in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Chair of Medieval History and Historiography in Cluj went to another (recently deceased) medievalist, Pompiliu Teodor, whose substantial influence extended well beyond his formal function. Some of his students wrote dissertations on modern history as well.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> See Murgescu, *A fi istoric*, pp. 34-37, Șerban Papacostea, "Captive Clio: The Romanian Historiography under Communist Rule," *European History Quarterly* 26, 1996, and, specifically for a discussion of the Romanian historical profession during the Ceaușescu years Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). I thank Bogdan Murgescu for information about the restructurings in 1990.

While this configuration of power did not last everywhere beyond the first five or ten years of post-communism, it reflects the fact that late modern and contemporary historiography had lost legitimacy during the long communist era. Many of its producers could no longer—under the new conditions of overwhelming if not total condemnation of that regime—stand by the works to which they had signed their names. Their credibility had gone the way of the regime. Although losing much power, a fact they surely regretted, many were only briefly less visible than before while they devised strategies for reappearing. Some were very resourceful, establishing new research centers such as Institutul Național Pentru Românită și Românică, (the National Center for Romanianism and Romanian Studies) whose program was “to reject any kind of slight to the Romanian people.” Others—usually from the Central Committee’s History Institute—went into diplomacy and other official functions. Others still went to new or reopened universities in the provinces.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, while losing their previous closeness to the now defunct autocratic center, these historians regrouped into structures where they were once again somewhat powerful, or close to the new power, and they began writing the type of nationalist histories already mentioned. To colleagues who had not been court historians and to the educated public in general these new institutional and ideological positions stood for a continuation of the dishonest and unscientific practice of history of the Ceaușescu years, and the nationalist agenda of that regime.

The response to this trend in the field of 20<sup>th</sup> century history from the “other side,” that of liberals who saw the post-1989 moment as an opportunity to “purify” the profession, has also not been fully adequate. Bogdan Murgescu among others has outlined some of the continuities in historical practice between the pre- and post-89 periods. Among these is the dominance of political history as a sub field of the entire discipline, with “political history being the ... terrain of methodological and conceptual

---

<sup>11</sup> Institutul de Istorie și Studii de pe lângă Comitetul Central al Partidului Comunist Român was evidently closed down. It was the historical institution closest to the Ceaușescu regime. Personal communication, Bogdan Murgescu, September 9, 2002. See also Victor Eskenasy, “The Holocaust and Romanian Historiography: Communist and Neo-Communist Revisionism,” in Randolph Braham, ed., *The Tragedy of Romanian Jewry* (Boulder, New York: Rosenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, Graduate Center, The City University of New York; Social Science Monographs, 1994), p. 196.



archaism.”<sup>12</sup> In part this is due to the refusal of social and economic history, because of its ties to Marxist theory. But this emphasis has also to do with the tradition of top-down history not yet having been challenged, and with the “euphoria” of access to previously forbidden sources in order to research specifically political topics that had been taboo or completely falsely treated until 1989.<sup>13</sup>

### **Efforts of the New Historiography**

One of the problems of this new historiography of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as alluded to already, is a missing cohort of credible contemporary historians who can meet both professional and moral standards. The recent founding of a Romanian Institute of Recent History in Bucharest under the directorship of the early modern historian Andrei Pippidi exemplifies the changing of the guard in the leadership of history institutions during the post-communist transition. It also, however, signals this particular crisis. \

Pippidi is the author of a number of impressive archivally based studies, but with few exceptions, the bibliography of his scholarly works concerns the medieval and early modern periods.<sup>14</sup> A recent volume entitled *Despre statui și morminte: pentru o teorie a istoriei simbolice* (About Statues and Graves: For a Theory of Symbolic History) makes a gesture toward recent history. While it consists mainly of previously published press articles, radio talks, and research pieces, the latter about earlier periods, the essay “Mormintele ca repere ale identității naționale” (Grave Stones as Sign Posts of National Identity) is wide ranging from antiquity to the present. But the collection as a whole still does not situate Pippidi within the province of contemporary history.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Murgescu, *A fi istoric*, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-43.

<sup>14</sup> *Contribuții la studiul legilor războiului în evul mediu* (Contributions to the Study of War in the Middle Ages) (Bucharest: Ed. Militară, 1974); *Hommes et idées du Sud-Est européen à l'aube de l'âge moderne* (Bucharest: Ed. Academiei RSR, 1980); *Tradiția politică bizantină în țările române în secolele XVI-XVIII* (Byzantine Political Tradition in the Romanian Principalities in the 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries) (Bucharest: Ed. Academiei RSR, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> In *Despre statui și morminte: pentru o teorie a istoriei simbolice* (Iași: Polirom, 2000) there are not only previously published (or spoken) articles and radio talks, but also some historical research pieces, some of these also previously published. Others such as “‘Pogromul’ din 1918: un caz și o metodă pentru istoria evreilor din România” (pp. 193-201) and “Ion Antonescu ca orator” (pp. 233-237) are new.

What Pippidi brings to contemporary history, a field that he has entered only since 1990—although he has lived it intensely and intelligently even before then—is credibility and a sense of legitimacy and connection to pre-communist historiographic traditions. These contributions are grounded in his professionalism in the pre-modern area, in his personal ancestry, and in stances he has taken as a public intellectual. Pippidi has been outspoken on various key topics since the revolution of 1989, finding this to be a moment for taking public positions, getting involved, and helping to mold historically and culturally the uncertain future through the transition from communism.

Thus he is one of only a handful of historians who has written *against* the rehabilitation of Marshal Antonescu in the cultural press of the last decade.<sup>16</sup> Many others, closer by training to the thematics and period in question, have been either silent on the topic, or, have lavishly favored the Marshal's posthumous rehabilitation. As Pippidi has written, the historical work that went into this rehabilitation project has been largely of a pseudo-documentary nature assembling “without any systematic archival research, only documents that were skillfully selected by their editors with the explicit intention of rehabilitating the Marshal.”<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, Pippidi has the distinction of being the grandson of a giant of Romanian historiography, Nicolae Iorga, a hugely prolific (nationalist) historian of the old school, who was murdered and thus martyred by the extremist Iron Guard in 1940. Pippidi has recently reedited and introduced a number of works by Iorga.<sup>18</sup> Kinship ties, especially to famous men—and particularly if these lived in the interwar period which is universally imagined as a golden age by Romanians—carry a lot of weight and are sure to augment Pippidi's reputation in immeasurable but large ways.

---

<sup>16</sup> See for example Pippidi's “O statuie de prisos,” *Dilema* 7, no. 353, 19-25 November 1999, reprinted in *Despre statui și morminte*. For a monograph on Antonescu with arguments against his rehabilitation see Eduard Mezincescu, *Mareșahul Antonescu și catastrofa României* (Bucharest: Artemis, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Eskenasy, “The Holocaust,” pp. 197-201 reviews some the literature rehabilitating Antonescu.

<sup>18</sup> See N. Iorga, *Scrisori către Cătinca: 1900-1939*, ed. Andrei Pippidi, Foreword by Liliana Iorga-Pippidi (Bucharest: Minerva, 1991); N. Iorga, *Dezvoltarea imperialismului contemporan*, ed. and with a preface and notes by Andrei Pippidi (Bucharest: Albatros, 1997); N. Iorga, *Istoria literaturii românești: introducere sintetică; Artă și literatură românilor: sinteze paralele*, trans. by Lidia Simion & Andrei Pippidi; intr. and notes by Andrei Pippidi (Bucharest: Ed. FCR, 1999).

Pippidi's self-reinvention as a contemporary historian under the conditions described, fills the cohort gap of contemporary historians after the fall of Ceaușescu, but may also contribute to the "essayism" that has enveloped recent Romanian historiography of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In recasting himself in this way, this highly respected pre-modernist becomes a factor in the "essayization" of contemporary history in Romania, although his methodological sophistication is sure to soften the disparity between his earlier specialization and scholarly record, and the program of the institute he administers.

Other literati trained in fields other than modern history—sometimes other than history altogether—have also claimed a place in the historians' sphere. Sorin Alexandrescu is one example. He has been a professor of Romanian language, a semiotician and a literary scholar, teaching for many years in Amsterdam. Alexandrescu had made his mark as the author of studies on transformational grammar, modern poetics, Faulkner, the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, and as editor of works such as the bibliography of works published in Romania on Dickens, among others.<sup>19</sup> More recently, he was a consultant to Romania's former president, Emil Constantinescu (1996-2000). As the nephew of the highly-reputed scholar of religions Mircea Eliade, Alexandrescu offers an equally ponderous pedigree to Pippidi's. (Eliade is a figure currently in great vogue, whereas Iorga is an undisputed classic of Romanian culture.)

In 1998 Alexandrescu published a much publicized book in which he analyzed Romania's interwar history and intellectual history.<sup>20</sup> Taking advantage of the post-communist moment and the hunger for previously forbidden history, he offered a personal interpretation of the prewar period from a post-modern perspective. He had already tried his hand at lecturing on such subjects in a different arena: since the 1980s, he taught contemporary Romanian history in the Political Science Department at the University of Amsterdam. More recently, his Center for the Study of Images has been housed at the History Faculty in Bucharest. In 1992 Alexandrescu commented on his reorientation already underway,

---

<sup>19</sup> *William Faulkner* (Bucharest, 1969); *Logique du personnage: réflexions sur l'univers faulknerien* (Tours: Mame, [1974]); *Transformational Grammar and the Rumanian Language*. (Lisse: The Peter de Ridder Press, 1977); *Bibliografia literaturii române, 1948-1960* (Bucharest, Ed. Academiei RPR, 1965); *Dickens in Rumania: a Bibliography for the 150th Anniversary* (Bucharest: UNESCO, 1962).

explaining that he wanted to clarify to Dutch students of politics “what was in Romania after the war. For me,” he continued, “it is extremely important because I lived myself a portion of these years here in this country, [Romania, and] another portion in the West; and so I am trying to explain my own life to myself.”<sup>21</sup>

This phrasing provides a clue to the style of Alexandrescu’s experiential historianship. His enterprise departs substantially from the business of professional historians. While history scholars generally try to be aware of their own experiential input and neutralize it, by separating it as much as possible from the study of sources in order to arrive at as accurate an interpretation of their topic as possible, Alexandrescu sees no reason to do that, arguing in part on the basis of post-modernist principles. His history ends up confirming his original assumptions without recourse to evidence. He concurs, or, on the other hand, objects to other historians’ research findings based on impressions and opinions, as he has phrased it, without feeling that he needs to present historical evidence.<sup>22</sup>

Yet he has been hailed by other historians as well as respected intellectuals outside the profession as an original historian.<sup>23</sup> He has garnered praise for details in his presentation of Greater Romanian political history, such as sensitive issues surrounding the Great Union of 1918, claiming to be the first to argue points already proven by other scholars, and his audience doesn’t know any better.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> *Paradoxul român* (Bucharest: Universul, 1998). See also “Paradoxul român,” 22 1, November 5-11, 1999. The article reproduces a debate about the book at the Group for Social Dialogue.

<sup>21</sup> Mihaela Cristea, *Experiența inițiativă a exilului* (Bucharest: Roza Vânturilor, 1994) p. 189.

<sup>22</sup> Alexandrescu uses no archival or statistical sources of his own. His demographic and social history is thus based on other people’s research, including my own. Yet he finds that “in my opinion” Irina Livezeanu’s conclusion—based on archival research—that Romanian nationalism was lacking in Bessarabia before 1918 is “exaggerated if not in fact false.” No evidence is provided challenging these findings. See *Paradoxul*, p. 71, note 2, and Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995, 1998), pp. 89-97.

<sup>23</sup> See Adrian Cioroianu, “Les avatars d’une ‘nation ex-communiste’: un regard sur l’histoire roumaine récente,” in *Nation and National Ideology*, pp. 371-372, and “Paradoxul român,” 22 1, November 5-11, 1999. The article reproduces a debate about the book at the Group for Social Dialogue. See esp. H.R. Patapievici’s praise. Cioroianu, who is a professional historian, hails Alexandrescu as a hope for the new post-communist historiography.

<sup>24</sup> Adrian Cioroianu, “Les avatars,” p. 372. The conditioning of the union with Romania by Transylvanian politicians is discussed in detail in Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*, pp. 133-134.

Alexandrescu's approach in effect asks readers to accept his arguments because they share his assumptions, because they trust him, and because they admire him as a result of the publicity he has received. He capitalizes on the high regard he enjoys as a ranking intellectual of good lineage, whose standing is enhanced by having spent time in the West, and by being integrated into the local highbrow cultural circles.

His position in Bucharest society can be gleaned from the fact that he was co-opted into the rather closed Group for Social Dialogue which had formed in late December 1989, and which publishes the influential weekly review 22, in the mid-1990s when he returned to live in Romania. Since December 1989 GDS's tiny membership had remained very stable, thus his later cooptation stands out as an exception of note, confirming his status.<sup>25</sup>

The model of writing and reading history on which Alexandrescu relies is based on a couple of factors. One is an accepted tradition of essayism in Romanian culture, where professional social scientists and intellectuals are considered truly successful only if they publish in periodicals meant for a mass public, if they are widely "mediatizați," to use the Romanian term. The mediatization itself blurs the difference between a research article and an essay published in a cultural weekly, and makes irrelevant the training and professional background of the personalities thus made public and given authority by the media. Whether someone who writes or appears on TV discussing historical topics has professional credentials or has completed a significant piece of original research is irrelevant. The differences are not apparent to many educated Romanians who are not used to studying footnoted pieces, or to searching for evidence. They even seem to elude professional historians like Adrian Cioroianu.

Even in journalism proper, Romanian and Anglo-Saxon writing styles differ substantially. Whereas a *N.Y. Times* news story would be neither credible, nor publishable without "sources"—unlike an editorial in the same newspaper which argues a point of view; there is usually no distinction made in a Romanian daily between the genres of article and editorial. The latter is often translated as "articol de

---

<sup>25</sup> Gabriela Adameșteanu, Editor-in-Chief of 22, Personal communication, April 2001.

fond” but the term signals an important, front-page article rather one of opinion. Similarly, news stories in the Romanian press often contain opinions intermingled with facts, and they rarely mention sources. Far more common than citing specific sources is innuendo.

But a second factor is also involved in the production and reception of essayistic history. A specific historical relationship exists in Romania between audience and author. The relationship between a particular set of authors, to which Alexandrescu belongs, and their readers is primarily consensual and based on the consumers’ presumed and uncritical respect for the producers. Katherine Verdery has noted the genealogy of this relationship in her study of Romanian intellectuals during the Ceaușescu period. It descends from the intimate collusion established in the 1980s, with considerable effort, between cultural dissidents and their public, when resistance through culture was practically the only type of oppositional politics going on in Romania.

It is arguable whether this silent, implicit and complicit collaboration was a form of struggle against a tyrannical government, and thus a form of criticism of the political status quo. Some observers give cultural dissidence less credit than others.<sup>26</sup> In any case, it helped to create, paradoxically, a less critical readership for the writings of Romania’s cultural dissidents. In noting the emphatically *sincere* nature of the dissident discourse—as opposed to the *duplicitous* official one during the Ceaușescu regime—Verdery suggests this unintended consequence: “to invoke ‘sincerity’ as opposed to ‘duplicity’ presupposes a contractual understanding of communication, in which **sender and hearer agree to accept the sender’s account. . . . Thus, the sender lays claim to somewhat more control over the reading, which may help to fend off rival interpretations.**”<sup>27</sup>

Many of the former cultural dissidents have become powerful personalities of the liberal establishment in the post-communist period. Yet they can still profit from their audience’s implicit, contractual trust, a relationship built in the bad old days. While in the past such intimacy and the

---

<sup>26</sup> For a more critical view see Tismăneanu and Pavel, “Romania’s Mystical Revolutionaries,” pp. 428–431. The authors stress the apolitical nature of cultural dissidence, which was “tolerated” or even “encouraged.” It took place in “a pseudo-alternative space for debates freed of any reference to the dominant rhetoric” (428–429).

presumption of sincerity was meant to challenge and also to circumvent the duplicitous official discourse, in the current period, it provides the basis for a more passive, more credulous audience. Readers do not tend to demand evidence, and generally read the production of these liberal notables and former dissidents uncritically.

The contemporary history “essayism” of Pippidi and Alexandrescu differ substantially from one another. At the same time, they both point to a certain looseness. The trend exists, on the part of the producers, because of their genuine concern, interest in, enthusiasm for a history so long forbidden, a passion they share with very many of their public. Because of this cultural acceptance of an intelligent amateurishness in matters of history, it seems that every Romanian intellectual wants to be a historian of his or her country’s recent, traumatized past, and thinks s/he can do it because s/he has lived it first hand. This occurs against the background of a veritable “epidemic” of memoir and confessional writing following the lifting of censorship, as elsewhere in the region. By the same token, this trend is tolerated by the consumers of historical essays (in article or book form) because they are themselves less educated in the subject than the essayists, and because they grant the writers unconditional trust.

### **Shaky Foundations in the Study of Contemporary History**

Between the vulgar deceitfulness of the red-brown nationalist historians obsessed with rehabilitating a figure such as Antonescu and even the Iron Guard, and the clever essayism of their mediatized liberal adversaries, the study of contemporary history in post-communist Romania is not resting on solid foundations as of yet.<sup>28</sup> These problems are, of course, only one side of the coin. There are some encouraging signs as well, and these should be mentioned if not exhaustively, briefly. To the revealing literary histories of Z. Ornea (already beginning in 1980) and Leon Volovici on intellectual life in the interwar decades have been added the more recent straight historical works of Dinu Giurescu and

---

<sup>27</sup> Verdery, *National Ideology*, p. 294. My emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> See Petreu’s introduction to Nae Ionescu’s *Prelegeri de filosofia religiei* (Cluj: Apostrof, 1994), Petreu’s book on Cioran, *Un trecut deocheat sau “Schimbarea la față a României”* (Cluj: Apostrof, 1999), and her *Ionescu in țara tatălui* (Cluj: Apostrof, 2001).

Florin Constantiniu, among others.<sup>29</sup> A number of other scholars have moved to more methodologically sophisticated work on the contemporary period.

Among these, Lucian Boia's books examining Romanian historical myths have added another, necessary level to Romanian historiography, and, by all appearances, Boia is training a younger cohort in this vein.<sup>30</sup> Sorin Antohi has been also training students in Bucharest and Budapest, at the Central European University. His own work consists of highly abstract papers on the philosophy of history meant for his professional colleagues or post-modern philosophers. His more "popular" writings that a larger public would read are, once again, essayistic: essays proper, introductions, and interviews or conversations with older intellectuals who have served as good mentors during the difficult times before 1989. His conversation in print with the historian Alexandru Zub is of particular interest.<sup>31</sup>

Marta Petreu is a literary scholar who has written what amounts to an intellectual history about Nae Ionescu (the mentor of Eliade's generation), Emil Cioran, and Eugène Ionesco, and has based her work on painstaking research. Stelian Tănase, a novelist who also came close to dissidence during the Ceaușescu regime, now teaches political science and writes on contemporary history, mainly on the communist period. His works are either collections of documents (and interviews), or are based on rich archival research. He has also published a journal from the late days of the old regime together with this secret police dossier. Tănase has a doctorate in Political Science.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Z. Ornea, *Tradiționalism și modernitate în deceniul al treilea* (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1980), *Anii treizeci: extrema dreaptă românească*, Leon Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology and Antisemitism: The Case of Romanian Intellectuals in the 1930s* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1991), Dinu Giurescu (Bucharest: E. F. C. Române, 1995), *Guvernarea Nicolae Rădescu* (Bucharest: ALL, 1996), and *România în al doilea război mondial: 1939-1945* (Bucharest: All Educational, 1999). Both are available in English translation as well. See also Florin Constantiniu, *De la Războiul fierbinte la războiul rece*, Bucharest: Corint, 1998, and *O istorie sinceră a popurului român*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> Boia, *History and Myth*, among others. See also the volumes of seminar papers that he edited: *Mituri istorice Românești* (Bucharest: Ed. Universității București) *Miturile comunismului românesc* (Bucharest: Nemira, 1997-1998.)

<sup>31</sup> Sorin Antohi, *Utopica: Studii asupra imaginarului social* (Bucharest: Ed. Științifică, 1991); *Civitas imaginalis: istorie și utopie în cultura română*, Iași: Polirom, 1999); *Exercițiul distanței: Discursuri, societăți, metode* (Bucharest: Nemira, 1998); with Mihai Șora and Aurelian Crăiușu, *Dialog și libertate: eseuri în onoarea lui Mihai Șora*, Bucharest: Nemira, 1997), and *Oglinzi retrovizoare: Istorie, memorie și morală în România* (Iași: Polirom, 2001) among others. There is no monographic study among these volumes.

<sup>32</sup> See Stelian Tănase, *Acasă se vorbește în șoaptă: dosar și jurnal din anii târzii ai dictaturei*. Bucharest: Compania, 2002; *Anatomia mistificării, 1944-1989*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 1997; *Elite și societate: guvernarea Gheorghiu-Dej, 1948-1965*.



Another reason for optimism on behalf of contemporary Romanian history is the bright young generation of historians being trained in some Romanian history departments, at the Central European University in Budapest, in Western Europe and in North America. At the same time, it is not clear how the previous generation, that of the cultural dissidents who have now and will have, for some time to come, the reigns of cultural power (not necessarily in government but institutionally) will treat this younger and in some instances more widely-read, better-trained youth, who may not share their perspective.

There are, however, some worrisome indications. One set of recent Romanian intellectual debates has focused on “political correctness,” or rather a caricature of that concept. The cultural dissidents find Western intellectuals positioned anywhere left of the new conservatism to be “leftists,” an all-inclusive label that in their eyes, after the regime that they survived, can only be damning. The term liberal—applied to the West—rarely appears on their radar. It seems to them that pluralism is dead in these western institutions, which leftists dominate and in which the latter have succeeded to impose a false compulsory community, and even a single way of thinking that oppresses and de-individualizes.

Romanians studying abroad under these conditions and coming under such influences are thus accused of embracing political correctness out of a lack of backbone, and in order to please their leftist advisors and score fellowships.<sup>33</sup> There is no question that a new type of contemporary Romanian history is very likely to emerge with the coming of age of this new generation, and the completion of their dissertations. But it seems equally likely that it will be ignored or rejected as representing inconvenient cultural imports. The arguments for that rebuff have already been made, preemptively.

---

Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998; Alexandru Paleologu and Stelian Tănase, *Sfidarea memoriei: (convorbiri), aprilie 1988-octombrie 1989*. Bucharest: du Style, 1996.

<sup>33</sup> See for instance the interview, “Sorin Antohi: Un raport de țară în care ne vom păstra spiritul critic,” 22 no. 2, 8-14 January 2002.

## Conclusion

The problematic evolution of the contemporary history field at the very moment of its liberation from the ideological constraints of the communist era forms an important context for comprehending the intense, philosophical, literary—but often historically insubstantial—intellectual debates that Romania’s contemporary intellectuals are engaging in. Disputes about the country’s 20<sup>th</sup> century—particularly the interwar and war-time periods—are taking place on the wide open but arid field of clever opinion essays often tinged by the authors’ needs for ethical action, quick knowledge, recuperation, self-justification, confession, and political opportunity.<sup>34</sup>

The polemics are rarely grounded in the historian’s craft of painstaking documentation, and interpretations based on evidence are not routine. This essayistic trend is added to the communist-era legacy of profound ignorance about interwar history and fails to correct it.<sup>35</sup> The essays simply “educate” the “educated public” as to what opinions they ought to espouse. It is interesting to note in this context the late date at which Romanian historians began the process of professionalization the first time around. According to Lucian Boia this was not before the 1880s. In a sense, contemporary Romanian historians of contemporary history may be following a domestic practice that itself has a history.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> A Romanian historian told me on the eve of the 2000 presidential elections that he wanted to write a critical analysis of Sorin Alexandrescu’s book *Paradoxul român*, “after the election.” Alexandrescu was presidential adviser to the incumbent, Constantinescu, who in the end decided not to run. To the best of my knowledge the review never appeared.

<sup>35</sup> On the issue of historical ignorance in post-communist Romania see Marta Petreu, “Laignel-Lavastine: metoda ‘franceza’ (I),” 22 no. 26, June 25-July 1, 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Boia, *History and Myth*.