Vladimir Tismaneanu
“Democracy, Memory, and Moral Justice: Romania Confronts its Communist Past”

Abstract:

The challenge of the past, its legacy and burden, was the inevitable starting point for the new democracies of Eastern Europe. The trauma of the victims and the responsibility of the perpetrators and beneficiaries des anciens regimes were and are the basis of the intersubjectivity, of the symbolic interactions in these societies. To use Hanna Arendt’s coinage, post-communist societies must “overcome the past”, that is, they have to find justice, while avoiding the logic of violence that traumatized them for decades. It is therefore imperative to emphasize the principles of moral responsibility and human dignity in the context of the recognition and historicisation of past atrocities.

For the first time in Romania’s contemporary history, the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Regime (PCADCR) rejected outright the practices of institutionalized forgetfulness and generated a national debate about long-denied and occulted moments of the past (including instances of collaboration, complicity, etc). The PCACDR had the features of a Truth Commission: it focused on the past, it investigated patterns of abuse over a period of time, rather than a specific event; it was a temporary body which completed its work with the submission of a report and it was officially sanctioned, authorized and empowered by the state. There are two main elements that distinguish it from cases such as South Africa or Germany: the absence of a parliamentary mandate meant that it had no decision-making power and no subpoena prerogative; and, it did not rely on the collection of testimonies from the victims of the communist regime. It rather took on the mission to provide the scholarly evidence for its conclusions and recommendations. Nevertheless, the PCACDR Report answered a fundamental necessity, characteristic of the post-authoritarian world, that of moral clarity. It fixed the memory of the totalitarian experience in place and in time, it overcame the burden of the denial of memory, of institutionalized amnesia.

Biography:

Vladimir Tismaneanu is professor of politics at the University of Maryland and chair of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania (April 2006 – April 2007) and the Presidential Advisory for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania (April 2007 - February 2010). He is now President of the Scientific Council of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile. Among his publications in English are: The Crisis of Marxist Ideology in Eastern Europe: the Poverty of Utopia (Routledge, 1988); Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel (Free Press, 1992, paperback with a new epilogue, 1993); Fantasies of Salvation: Nationalism, Democracy, and Myth in Post-Communist Europe (Princeton UP, 1998; paperback 2009); Stalinism for All Seasons: a Political History of Romanian Communism (University of California Press, 2003). He is the editor, most recently, of The Promises of 1968: Crisis, Illusion, Utopia (CEU Press, 2011). He currently works on a book about his experience as chairman of the
Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania. He recently finalized
the manuscript for a forthcoming book titled *The Devil in History. Lessons of the 20th Century.*

François Wisard
“The Swiss Experience with State Commissioned Historical Studies: A Short Overview and
Some Questions”

Abstract

Almost 10 years after the publication of its final report, the “Independent Commission of
Experts Switzerland-Second World War” (ICE) remains the key name for historical studies
commissioned by the Swiss state. In that context, we will see how state authorities (parliament,
government and ministries) on one side, and the ICE on the other side have dealt with the
definition of fields of research, the access to relevant archives, the publication of research
results and the meaning of such results as well as the mechanism of rectification of
wrongdoings. Given the fact that the creation and the work of the ICE took more than five
years, some developments and changes can be noticed on how state authorities and the ICE
dealt with these issues over the course of time. Nevertheless, these developments were greatly
influenced by the international and national political context.

However, the ICE report was by far not the only state commissioned historical study in
Switzerland. In some cases, there were only attempts to launch state commissioned historical
reports, but it is interesting to try to determine why they eventually failed. This presentation
will also deal, even if briefly, with other aspects of the Swiss experience. State commissioned
historical studies, or attempts to launch them, can be arranged in three categories. Firstly,
studies on aspects of the foreign relations of Switzerland, such as the relations with South
Africa during the apartheid era and with Rwanda up to the 1994 genocide, the activities of the
former East German Stasi on Swiss territory as well as the kidnapping of a Swiss citizen in
Argentina during the military dictatorship. Secondly, reports on the role of Switzerland during
the Second World War prior to the ICE report but also on behalf of the Swiss government: by
Carl Ludwig on the refugee policy and by Edgar Bonjour on the Swiss neutrality. Thirdly, studies
on issues with an almost exclusive national dimension: Jenisch children removed from their
parents and placed with foster families or homes, and more generally the forced placing of
young children in foster families.

Because of the great variety of these experiences, among other things, we will eventually see
that Switzerland is not entitled to give lessons to foreign countries on how to organize historical
research or on how to establish historians’ commissions, or to try to teach them how to do so.
The aims of this presentation are simpler than that: firstly, to provide with an overview of these
experiences - which, as far as we know, has not been written yet – and secondly, to raise some
questions for the debate.
Biography

François Wisard, PhD, has been working as a historian for the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) since 1997. As Head of the History Unit since its creation in 1999, he was involved in the last steps of the work of the “Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland-Second World War”. He represents his country in the Remembrance Working Group of the ITF (Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research), and chaired it in 2010. He published several books, mainly on issues related to the Second World War. He is also a member of the national commission that publishes the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland.

Daniel Ursprung
"The role of Historians’ Commissions between Science, Politics and Public Opinion"

Abstract

The task of historian’s commission is not an easy one, as can be demonstrated by the examples of the commissions in Switzerland and Romania: on the one hand, scholars have their professional criterion to deal with the past, on the other hand, the constitution of historian’s commission by political decision-makers follow certain political interests. As a third player, public opinion with its opinion leaders, especially in the media and NGO’s, gets involved in the creating of an authorized version of perceiving the past. It is thus not an easy task to find a proper way with dealing with the past. In my presentation I will compare the political und social context of the establishment of historians’ commission in the Swiss (Bergier) and Romanian (Wiesel, Tismaneanu) case, focusing on the initial (political decision to constitute a commission) and final (debate on the results, popularization, effects) phase of the commissions. What were the expectations and what has been realized? How have the results been perceived and what goals have been accomplished? What differences in the outcome of the commission's work can be observed and which reasons are responsible for these differences?

Biography

Daniel Ursprung, 1975, studies in East European history, Slavicists and journalism in Zurich and Bucharest. Between 2001 and 2002, he collaborated in a scientific project to save and preserve the parochial archives of the Transylvanian Saxon communities in Sibiu. Since 2002, he is research associate, department of East European History, University of Zurich. Main research interests: history of Southeastern Europe from 17th to 20th century, especially Romanian history, several academic publications on related topics, among them two books (an introduction to East European history and a monograph about legitimation of power in Romanian history).
Abstract

The way in which western German society and its decision-makers dealt with the heritage of the Third Reich and the East German Dictatorship has been the subject of much debate. In strongly polarized disputes and ongoing controversies, these debates proved to be, at the end of the day rather helpful, but also constitute, I would argue, a typical German phenomenon. Nowhere else in Europe can be detected such an enthusiasm for “Geschichtsaufarbeitung” and “Vergangenheitsbewältigung”, or “coming to terms with the past”. I will argue that the specific historical conditions of Germany in the postwar period explain why Historian Commissions or Truth Commissions were not installed after 1945 and 1990.

After the unconditional surrender and the „Third Reich“, the Allies as the occupying forces took the initiative for denazification, although the intensity with which this was applied differed between the occupation zones. It was carried out specifically by removing those involved from positions of influence and by disbanding or rendering impotent the organizations associated with it, until the West German democracy after a certain amount of time in the 1950s and 1960 was able to deal with its past in a difficult, often contested but nevertheless largely honest way. After the collapse of the East German dictatorship in 1990, the territories of the former East Germany were integrated into West Germany, which was economically stronger as well as, having learned to come to terms with its past through democratic developments, more able to cope with the effects of dictatorship, to record the crimes committed, penalize the perpetrators and allow political reconciliation.

The German case shows that under certain conditions, it is possible to deal with the past without Historians Commission. It has to be noted though that the German case might be the exception of the rule because the specific situation, especially in middle European and east European countries may suggest to proceed in a different way.

Biography


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**Regula Ludi**

"Swiss Memory Constructions after 1989 from a Transnational Perspective."

**Abstract:**

In the 1990s, memory emerged as a global concern. Stimulated by unrelated but reinforcing events, commemoration of political crimes came to occupy center stage of public grappling with the fall of Communism and its global repercussions. This happened in a cultural context where the Holocaust had become the touchstone of human evil, its remembrance the standard to gauge contemporary societies’ commitment to human rights and democracy.

In the wake of those events, Switzerland, albeit a Cold War neutral, was one of the first countries to undergo a serious crisis of memory and associated identity constructions. Beginning in 1989, popular representations of the wartime period were exposed as constitutive elements of Cold War ideology. By the mid-1990s, the Holocaust era restitution campaign had highlighted discrepancies of Swiss memory construction. International accusations against Swiss banks questioned received assumptions about the country’s commitment to humanitarianism and democracy, while sensational media revelations relating to the Nazi era history deepened lingering memory crisis. As a response, the Swiss authorities appointed an international historian commission, vested with special privileges regarding access to classified records, to investigate the charges against the Swiss banking industry. Meant as a face saving devise, official investigation antagonized the Swiss public and advanced the formation of a national conservative bloc united in its opposition to international integration and migration. In this paper, I will briefly outline international and domestic events leading up to the appointment of a historian commission in 1996, the basic epistemic assumptions and methodological approaches guiding its work and discuss some of the impacts of the commission’s findings.

**Biography:**

Abstract:

After the fall of communism, the question of property restitution rose as one of the major “dilemmas of justice in post-communist transitions” (Offe, 1997: 85). The inclusion of restitution laws on the Central and Eastern European political agendas is far from being due exclusively to the principles and projects put forward by different political parties under the name of “rectifying justice”. I argue instead that the elaboration of restitution policies has been significantly impacted by what we can call “transnational advocacy networks”, that is, a series of very heterogeneous, yet interconnected actors (finance and law professionals, leaders of international organisations, politicians, historians, writers, etc.) and their numerous interactions. This network does not act merely as a simple advocacy actor, but rather as an “epistemic community”. According to Hass, who developed this concept in the field of international relations, an “epistemic community” can be defined as a network of professionals with expertise in a particular field or domain, who share a common horizon of norms and principles, and the commitment to translate these into public policies (Haas, 1990: 42).

For illustrating the functioning of this epistemic community and its impact on property restitution in post-communist Romania, I chose a specific case study, namely, the “Jewish property”, with particular emphasis on the Holocaust Era Assets. In the view of that, I analyse the relationship between different actors and levels (local, regional, and international/transnational), and their relative impact on the different phases of the restitution process: the political agenda setting, initiation and implementation of restitution policies.

I argue that this “epistemic community” includes local Jewish communities, international human rights organization, attorneys, historians, leaders of survivors’ organizations or representatives of the American State Department. The International Commission for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania (the “Wiesel Commission”), created in June 2003, was not only a scientific commission of historians, but also a transposition of some of these heterogeneous actors. In a context where different forms of negationism were far from being marginal historical and political discourses, at least until 2003, the activity of the “Wiesel Commission” managed to challenge the historiographical master narratives, their silence towards the denial of the Holocaust and the denial of the Holocaust itself. In doing this, this commission was instrumental in making politicians and political decision-making factors to assume the principle of the needed restitution of the nationalized or “Aryanised” goods and to transpose it into legislation.

Biography:

Adrian Cioflâncă
“Holocaust and Communism: Intertwined Pasts and Parallel Historiographies“

Abstract

Two truth commissions activated in Romania to deal with its difficult past: The International Commission on Holocaust in Romania (2004) and The Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania (2006). The recommendations issued by the Final Reports of the Commissions have had partial effects on state policies and have influenced some institutional changes in fields like education, memorialization, and research.

In contrast with the ex-Soviet countries where the truth commissions studied Holocaust and communism together, in Romania, the two topics were separated for two commissions – although there are chapters in both Final Reports which deal with common issues. This is the expression of a more general historiographical divorce, which perpetuated after 1989. Most of the Romanian historians specialized in the history of communism are not interested in the history of the Holocaust and vice versa. This is partially normal, as the two fields are autonomous and each needs specialization and special research skills. But there are subjects that cannot be understood and explained without knowledge in both fields. For example, the political prisoners of the communist regime are treated altogether as victims although some of them were the result of the Romanian equivalent of denazification. The tainted past of war criminals and activists of extremist movements is often ignored and the treated as false accusation made by the Communist authorities. It is true that some of those indicted or condemned as war criminals or “legionaries” were innocent or disproportionately punished, but others were involved in atrocities and actions against democracy and they were imprisoned as part of a general international effort to bring perpetrators to justice in postwar Europe.
Competence in both domains would help to make academic distinctions between categories of political prisoners and to find the truth in each specific case.

The historiographical divorce has multiple causes. In a way, it reflects the ideological confrontation and competition between fascism and communism, or between the political right and left. Some illiberal historians borrow the logic of confrontation and excuse the crimes of one ideology invoking the dangers of the other. The infamous idea that the Jews were guilty for communism and its crimes – transmitted and deeply socialized by fascist propaganda – is an important source for ignorance and lack empathy towards the history of the Holocaust of some of the historians specialized in the history of communism.

Biography


Cristian Vasile
“The Communist Regime: Between Scholarship and Public Memory”

Abstract:

In April 2006 President Traian Băsescu established the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania (PCACDR) in order to draw up a report on the crimes of the 1945-1989 period that would allow the official condemnation of the Romanian communist system. The report had to investigate the institutions and methods that made the crimes and abuses of the communist regime possible, and to document the role of communist officials in supporting and perpetuating the system. Even after 1989, many communist crimes were concealed and denied and important communist archives, including the Communist Party archives, remained inaccessible to researchers. Especially in the 1990s historians were hindered in their efforts to study the recent past, while the victims of the communist regime could prove neither the political nature of their convictions nor the unjust manner of the confiscation of
their property. My paper will examine both the cooperation within PCACDR between historians and other social scientist, on the one hand, and former political prisoners, dissidents, members of the Romanian Diaspora, on the other hand, and the debate involving PCACDR members and other societal groups using history for their ends in the public sphere – politicians, university professors which organized conferences harshly criticizing the report on communist system, and nostalgic Romanians for Nicolae Ceaușescu's rule.

Biography

Cristian Vasile is Research Fellow at the "Nicolae Iorga" History Institute (Romanian Academy, Bucharest). He was Coordinator of the Advisory Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania (April 2007-December 2009) and former Scientific Secretary of the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania (April 2006-April 2007). He has written numerous articles on church and politics in twentieth-century Romania and on politics of culture under communism. He is author of: Literatura și artele în România comunistă, 1948–1953 [Literature and the Arts in Communist Romania, 1948–1953]; Biserica Ortodoxă Română în primul deceniu comunist [The Romanian Orthodox Church in the first communist decade] (2005); Între Vatican și Kremlin. Biserica Greco-Catolică în timpul regimului comunist [Between Vatican and Kremlin: Greek Catholic Church under Communist regime] (2003). He was also co-author and co-editor of the Final Report of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Romanian Communist Dictatorship. The printed edition was published by Humanitas in 2007 (Co-edited with Vladimir Tismaneanu and Dorin Dobrinicu). He is presently working on a book that focuses upon the cultural politics in the 1950s and 1960s Romania.