Remembrance, History, and Justice:

Coming to Terms with Traumatic Pasts in Democratic Societies

(November 11-12th, 2010, Washington D.C., USA)

The Center for the Study of Post-Communist Societies (under the directorship of Professor Vladimir Tismaneanu) at the University of Maryland (College Park) and the Romanian Cultural Institute in collaboration with the Cold War International History Project (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars) began, in 2007, a series of conferences in Washington D.C. focused on providing, by means of reflection on watershed moments of post-1945 history, an overview of the global dynamics characteristic for the 20th century and its lessons and impact upon the 21st. In the previous years, the central topics were centered on the Sovietization of Eastern Europe, the promises of 1968, and on the meanings of 1989. In 2010, the organizers wish to create a thematic framework that will provide an overview of the main issues touched upon in the previous years. Almost a decade into the 21st century, the historical experience of the previous one amounts to a rich, but often times painful legacy. One of the fundamental and founding challenges for contemporary democratic societies has been and still is that of coming to terms with the past. The memory of trauma, guilt, or collaboration in an age of extremes has left an undeniable imprint on most European societies. Moreover, the problematization of justice and memory has by now gone beyond the realm of the ‘Old Continent’. The burden of authoritarian pasts brought whole societies into national and international conversations about their history. Both collective and individual identities are essential shaped by dual processes of remembrance and historicization of large-scale state engineered violence. Indeed, healthy and sustainable democracies cannot survive in the context of amnesia and forgetting. In a post-authoritarian society responsibility, empathy, tolerance, trust, and ultimately reconciliation are essentially dependent on confronting the specters of one’s recent history.

The 20th century experienced radical evil, pathologies of the political that produced extremist policies of unprecedented scale. In the struggle to explain and understand their consequences, both history and memory find themselves pushed to the limit. From the Holocaust to the Gulag, from genocide to sociocide, from ethnic cleansing to apartheid, from mass murder to crimes against humanity, the past century forced us to find new ways to
confront and remember shattered pasts. Far from having this experience now behind us, the latter stays with us. We are yet to learn all its lessons. The questions raised by previous decades in matters of memory, history, and justice owe a complexity of perennial relevance for both the present and future of democracy. They force us into a continuous effort for judgment and representation. The present conference aims at understanding the mechanisms of pedagogy and representation necessary for a successful exit from dictatorship and for the overcoming of mass murder and violent state-engineered crimes.

The event will follow two complementary trajectories: transitional justice and the public use of history. Both of them target a common goal: striving for closure during the transition from dictatorship to pluralism. The panels of the event will deal with trauma and the reconstitution of democratic communities, with the multiple publics of historical inquiry in the context of a shift from authoritarianism to pluralism, and with the identities resultant of the process of Aufarbeitung. The conveners wish to combine case-studies with more extensive transnational approaches. It is an attempt to integrate local and regional experiences with traumatic pasts into a global structure that will allow for more general conclusions about the memory of a century touched by the ‘reek of cruelty’. We want to situate the process of coming to terms with the communist experiences in Eastern Europe within the larger context of discussing the memory and history of post-war Europe. At the same time, the process of de-communization needs to be compared with other cases of post-authoritarian transitions such as those in Latin America, South Africa, or the bloody disintegration of the former communist Yugoslav federation. The result should be a clustered image of practices of remembrance, reckoning, historiographical reevaluation.

In the 20th century, most of the countries in Eastern Europe stand out because of their overlapping violent pasts. In many of them communist rule had been preceded by right-wing dictatorships (if not all out fascist regimes). Some even experienced collaboration in the extermination of their Jewish population, thus becoming part and parcel of a European-wide Holocaust. After 1989, problems of post-totalitarian collective identity were far from being limited to the challenge of the Leninist legacy. It was no surprise then that, to varying degrees, all of these countries have stumbled their way to finding a proper way of judging and representing such a burdened past. Many a times, sharply conflicting regimes of memory have developed that nurtured new ethnocentric mythologies. Only recently, in the context of European integration, the members of the former Soviet bloc managed to develop a consensual, regional discourse and historical conscientiousness about their pre-communist, authoritarian experience. At the same time, the past five years have also produced an
increasingly transnational assessment of the communist experience. The gradual opening of the archives, state-sponsored enquette commissions, or efforts in national and international memorialization have significantly helped with breaking self-centered, often times unqualified narratives of victimhood under the various communist regimes. The surfeit of memory Eastern Europe suffers from is increasingly producing less competitive martyrlogy. Bad habits die hard, but the current public uses of history in many of the Eastern European countries seem to have exited their transitional phase. The focus is now more on a continuous history of the last century that is suspicious to the use of a past in order to reject, obstruct, or negate another.

There are two contention points to this story: that of justice, and, subsequently, that of reconciliation. Eastern Europe has only partially succeeded in solving the puzzle of how to legally pursue the perpetrators of its traumatic history. There have been various laws concerning matters such lustration, reparations, negationism, but very few exemplary cases where those responsible for crimes against humanity or blatant violations of the basic human rights were convicted. Closure via didactic justice has not been reached. On the one hand, one can wonder whether this was actually possible under circumstances of existing statute of limitations regarding the crimes perpetrated under communist regimes. On the other hand, can the societies in these countries reach reconciliation in the absence of didactic justice? Are telling the truth about the past and critical historicization enough for accomplishing the necessary anamnestic solidarity vital for democratic, post-authoritarian consensus? The conveners of the conference believe that the cases of South Africa, Latin America, or the Western Balkans can offer insights useful in coming up with answers to such questions.

Last but not least, following the practice of the past four conferences, the organizers wish to bring forth, within the larger discussion of the interplay of history, justice, and memory, the case of Romania. Since 2004, this country has experienced a resurgence in the process of dealing with its traumatic and guilty past. The creation of the International Commission for the Study of the Holocaust and the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship have produced two fundamental documents that opened a new phase in this country’s inquiry of its history. Far from being an exceptional case in the region, the Romanian one is symptomatic of the novel paths taken in dealing with the past in Eastern Europe. It reinforced the argument for an understanding of 20th century as unitary history of the extremes. It strengthened the defense of a comparative and global approach to the burden of one country’s temps présent.