

**Political Mythbiography and Oral History**

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So it seems that 18 years after the dramatic change of political regime in Romania a certain historiographic maturity begins to shape itself in the representation of the recent past, of that chaotic period of Romanian communism with all its ages and avatars. Signs increasingly tend to show that it is time for a more nuanced, complex, and comprehensive, therefore highly critical and anti-mythicized analysis, which should counter-balance the hitherto institutionally developed tones of accusation and judgment. The conscious attempts to not so much condemn, but rather understand in a twofold, cognitive and ethical approach seem to dominate the essential work of distancing oneself from the past and vigilantly focusing upon the present and the future.

I would say that the recent book of historian Ionuț Costea, entitled *Lazăr de la Rusca – Mitbiografie în comunism și postsocialism* (Lazăr of Rusca – Mythicized biography in communism and post-socialism), published by the Argonaut publishing house in March 2008, is inscribed into such tendencies. The author is Associate Professor and PhD at the Department of Medieval History of the Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj, important collaborator of the Institute of Oral History and lecturer for the MA in Oral History course entitled *Biography and Memory in Communism*.

In the preface of the book the author confesses the double intention of his comprehensive work: “At the origins [of this book] lies the subjectivity of the person who wishes to understand <the world he passed through>. (...) Understanding, in this case as well, has a double meaning that we need to expose from the very beginning: firstly, it refers to the act of knowledge, as part of the register of historiographic research; secondly, it implies the affective-human, Christian dimension of the term, of the reconciliation with a <past which will not pass>, a reconciliation with residual forms and contents of my existence which, in a way or other, more or less visibly, have been incorporated into my

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intellectual DNA, despite the permanent desire to eradicate everything that had ever belonged to the <old regime>.”<sup>1</sup>

It should be remarked from the very beginning that this attempt to approach the recent past by knowledge has a certain implicit relation to identity, characteristic of a generation. It is clear that the emergency of a critical evaluation of the past is all the more emphatic as it is involved in the core of present-day history which is developing between the alive memory of witnesses and the creation of documentary, historical sources about this period, with the crucial problem of identity and the establishment of truthful relations to the past as a constitutive part of our personal and social identity.

For the over 30 generation, or, to employ a socio-political metaphor, the *(post)Decretei* generation<sup>2</sup> to which the author also belongs – as a generation which was first socialized in the twilight zone of communism, and socially, politically, and culturally formed in this context (but fortunately not de-formed by it, due to the sudden change of regime in 1989) – the imperative of understanding the recent past and its identity values is rendered by certain definitive traits. The representatives of this generation, who could not have been the accomplices of this political regime, are given the chance to exterminate the malignant cells of communism by operations of a surgeon’s refinement, short, precise, nuanced and professional, with no long (and risky) rituals of lamenting, demonizing, and exorcism.

The emerging genre of the discourse on the recent past is characterized, on the one hand, by a certain serenity and detachment of hatred, while on the other by a scrutinising lucidity regarding the investigated phenomena meant for a historical and cultural presentation at large. Extrapolating, one can see how a variety of representations, including the more efficient visual and cinematographic types of representations, whose authors also belong to the same generation, is developing in the same discursive way about the recent past.<sup>3</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> Ionuț Costea, *Lazăr de la Rusca – Mitbiografie în comunism și postsocialism* (Lazăr of Rusca – Mythicized biography in communism and post-socialism), Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2008, p.7.

<sup>2</sup> The so called “Decretei” designate, in a playful and bitter linguistic register, the generation of children born after 1966, the year of the Decree 770 that banned the abortion within the framework of Ceausescu’s communist demographic policy.

<sup>3</sup> The public reception of the films about the revolution in the years 2006 and 2007 is indeed revealing, as also the recent success of Romanian documentaries

I would launch the hypothesis that a certain tendency is crystallizing in the representations of recent past and its generational and identity correlations, to which this book also belongs.

*Mythicized Biography in Communism and Post-Socialism* focuses, once again, on the subject of anti-communist resistance in the mountains, a subject intensively treated, reconstitutively and recoveringly, in post-1989 Romanian historiography, but this time in a new, broad and consistently de-mythicizing perspective. The book proposes a critical, nuanced, and de-mystifying approach, which consistently deconstructs both communist and post-communist clichés, unveiling the dualist black and white schemes of the old regime propaganda, as well as the temptation to prolong them, with changed orientation, in certain anti-communist discourses of the transition period. Therefore, reading Costea's book is just as much an appealing intellectual endeavour as it is uncomfortable as an ethical tension.

The author constructs his work around a "problem of political history, the symbolic legitimization of Romanian communists in the 1950s", emphasizing not so much "the repressive character of the regime, but rather the construction strategies of political myths and symbols, of the ways they were diffused, received, and accommodated to social memory".<sup>1</sup>

The story that the author chooses to recount, or rather to deconstruct, is that of a controversial figure, by the name of Lazăr Cernescu, or Lazăr of Rusca, whose romanticized (that is, intensely ideological and politically instrumentalized) biography has transformed him into a hero of the first years of communism. The hero-making happened through a sophisticated process, which Ionuț Costea's analysis accurately grasps, synchronically and diachronically following its development. With an ingenious handling of both levels, his investigating skill follows, on the one hand, the diverse social instances on which Lazăr Cernescu's mythicized biography has crystallized, and on the other hand, it examines the historicity of this political myth within a broad and tense time horizon. The historian identifies the turning points, in the period between the instauration of communism and its demolition as a political regime, when the construction and reception of

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and fiction films based on the realities of the recent past, accurately experienced and interrogated in cinema.

<sup>1</sup> Ionuț Costea, *Lazăr de la Rusca*, p. 8.

this myth has been altered on the levels of social and collective memories, always plural and conflicting.

The work is thus not so much a re-constituting, but rather a problematizing, re-constructing and de-constructing one, circumscribed to a history of memory. Nevertheless, the entire attempt is anchored in history as reality, as a reference point, being related to it with the rigour of a classical historian, seriously, without excessively relativistic and symbolizing outbursts.

In short, this is how the events around this character, the bare facts (as bare as historical facts and our access to them can be at all, that is, lacking any connotations and political, ideological, or subjective constraints) would look like in the author's well contextualized biographical reconstruction:

In the 1950s, the brutal and illegitimate instauration of communism in Romania provoked vehement reactions and radical resistance in certain areas of the country. The Teregova-Domaşnea area was one of the central points of armed resistance in the Banat Mountains, where the events connected to our main character took place. Monographic studies on this group of partisans emphasized its gradual organization, its transformation from a passive, informal group joined around some local personalities with war experience into a military, organized and offensive group, whose intransigence grew as it felt itself threatened by communist repressive forces. Once they attracted the attention of the Securitate (the Romanian communist political police), especially after the partisans (the "bandits" in the language of the authorities of the age) assaulted the Mayor's Office of Teregova, the members of the group decided the exemplary punishment of the informers recruited from among the villagers. Of these, Lazăr Cernescu was the most zealous, a young peasant from Rusca, a Gipsy musician, whom the partisans, in complicity with the villagers, captured and brutally murdered.

The author of the book is critical and empathic at the same time about the character's life story, trying to reconstruct his motivations for certain central biographical episodes. He reconstructs the character's profile by corroborating a variety of sources, with special emphasis laid on testimonies – of various types and ages – despite their subjectivity and historicity, about which the author proves to be very perceptive. Even if Lazăr of Rusca's option to join the Communist Party could not have been attributed to his political conviction, but to the promise of a relative material safety as opposed to a poor subsistence, his zeal of collaboration

was excessive, and he was harshly punished for it by the partisans who caught him, arrested him, tortured him with cruelty, and finally murdered him. It was a classic and efficient modality to intimidate thus the collaborators of the Securitate. “The thirst of revenge, the torturing of families by the Securitate, the wildness of the woods, all had a role to play in the circumstances of this murder” – concludes the historian from Cluj.<sup>1</sup>

The chain of violence and exemplary punishments on both sides of guerrilla fights between anti-communist partisans and the representatives of the new regime continued to survive, symbolically and asymmetrically, in the denominations given in time to the victims of this ceaseless war, as elements of the complex process of political myth generation. “Lazăr was only a little more than thirty years old, when he died, and nothing of his short life left any of his heroic potentiality to be shown.”<sup>2</sup> This was politically instrumentalized right away by the propaganda machinery of the age, which employed all its powers in order to transform a tragic incident into an exemplum, and its hero, Lazăr Cernescu, into an infallible communist martyr hero.

Hence, the myth of the communist fighter was carefully diffused in the society: from Dan Deșliu’s Proletkult poems to school manuals, from communist initiation rites of the “pioneers”<sup>3</sup> to symbolic topoi (names of streets and cultural establishments), becoming thus an ingredient of primary (political) socialization for generations of young and industrious future communists. The myth was silenced during the 1970s, again due to political reasons, and then it survived again after 1989 in various communities of memory, in vague and contradictory forms.

Starting from these events, to which Lazăr Cernescu’s biography is connected – a sort of zero degree biographical reconstruction, over which the cultural and political layers of a mythical biography have been superposed in time – the researcher scrutinizes the character’s posthumous, intense and long-lasting life based on the suggestions of a provocative book of political anthropology by Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*.<sup>4</sup> As the core of the paper is

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-27.

<sup>3</sup> Communist organization for schoolchildren from 7 to 14 years of age. (translator’s note)

<sup>4</sup> See Katherine Verdery, *Viața politică a trupurilor moarte. Reînhumări și schimbări postsocialiste*, Bucharest: Vremea, 2006. (Original title: *The Political*

the deconstruction of Lazăr Cernescu's mythical biography, it excels in this endeavour in its analytical, conceptual, and methodological virtuosity, leaving aside the attractive and persuasive style of the writing.

The sources of the investigation are multiple and varied: the author searches attentively, "probing the traces of the past" in memories and written documents, "the traditional province of historians" alike, in testimonies of various ages and oral history interviews, which he treats in a critical, argumentative, and expressive way, in the visual marks of the past (photographs, funeral stones, statues, medals, and the symbolic organization and decoration of the public space), in cultural practices, as well as in rituals of commemoration.

Thus, the insistence and seriousness of Ionuț Costea's research eventually leads to a fine articulation of the inextricable relations between memory, history, and myth. He manages to problematize, in an edificatory manner, the complex relations between the complementary genres of the representation of the past, memory and history, which are permanently short-circuited by the red line of political power. This is one of the very problems that historical debates have lately been centred upon, and especially that which one could call the epistemological core of oral history as a comprehensive and critical attempt to know the recent past. Thus, by the complexity of the analysis, the book as a radiography of mythical biography during communism and post-socialism proves to be a pioneering work on the Romanian scene of historiography. It opens up the perspective of a new age of oral history, in the proximity of a highly complex and refined cultural history which, giving up hagiography, prefers – paraphrasing Peter Burke – to remind people of exactly what they wish to forget.<sup>1</sup>

I consider that, by this book, Ionuț Costea exercises, skilfully and naturally, his competence of a European historian, bidding once more to be an elite representative of a(n im)possible School of Oral History in Cluj.

Translated by Emese G. Czintos

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*Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Peter Burke, "History as Social Memory", in *Varieties of Cultural History*, London, 1997, p. 59.