

CELEBRATIONS OF COMMUNIST POWER. THE 23RD OF AUGUST – NATIONAL HOLIDAY AND CONTROLLED LEISURE TIME IN ORAL HISTORY REPORTS

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Abstract The study reveals the preservation in the Romanian collective memory of communist festive culture elements based on 40 interviews concerning communist celebrations of the 23rd of August from Moldova, Muntenia, Oltenia and Transylvania taken in 2012 and 2018. The repetitive scenario of the event had determined clichés and stereotypes, without stimulating striking national feelings. We point out that people remember, reimagine and reinvent the same event of the Ceaușist era in three manners: subconsciously nostalgic, in an Orwellian way and the comparative approach (in terms of communist social certainty and post-communist uncertainty).

Keywords Totalitarian celebrations, collective memory, post-communist period, communist Romanian national day, recollection, re-imagination and popular appropriation.

Brief Historical and Political Background

The totalitarian celebrations have the specific repetition of religiosity; that is why they are called “political liturgies” in the language of the historians of imaginary. Among the starting

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points of our study we mention G. Balandier's idea that totalitarian regimes use the theatricalization of power through political events/festivities¹ and P. Burke's idea of political rituals as miming experiences of social consensus.² Moreover, we must highlight that the World War II events are the central point of reshaping social relations both in the Soviet Union and in Romania: the cult of victory in Brezhnev's era and the festivities around the monuments of war heroes³, as part of the de-Stalinization campaign in Soviet Union,⁴ on the one hand, and the 23rd of August 1944 as the Romanian national day - the Romanian liberation from fascist occupation by the Soviet troops, on the other hand.

The Romanian national day, established on the 23rd of August, is part of a larger campaign of expressing gratitude to the Soviet Union, the founder of all communist regimes in Eastern Europe. The day of the liberation from the fascist occupation is merely one example of the celebrated Soviet-Romanian friendship – an overview includes a set of myths and symbols designed to manipulate the social representations from above. ARLUS (The Romanian Association for Bonds with the Soviet Union) is the institution that organized the week of Soviet-Romanian friendship on November 1-7.⁵ The main objective of the politically instrumentalized cultural week (Soviet plays in theatres, Soviet movies and books popularized through newly founded publishing houses and radio broadcasts) was to popularize the image of the Soviet Union as the liberator.⁶ Moreover, a National Committee for celebrating the Soviet-Romanian friendship was established in 1948; the Romanian-Russian Museum was founded in 1948 – everything to serve the legitimation for the new political situation.⁷

¹ Georges Balandier, *Scena puterii* [Le pouvoir sur scène], trans. by Sandală Fărcaș, Afterword by prof. Dr. Ioan Drăgan (Oradea: AION, 2000), 18-19.

² Peter Burke, *Istorie și teorie socială* [History and Social Theory], trans. by Cosana Nicolae, Afterword by Sori Antohi (București: Humanitas, 1999).

³ Christel Lane, *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society: The Soviet Case* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁴ Gabriela Welch, "Memoria celui de-al Doilea Război Mondial în Uniunea Sovietică: sacrificiu, victorie, cult" ["Memory of the Second World War in the Soviet Union: Sacrifice, Victory, Cult"] in Andi Mihalache, and Adrian Cioflâncă, *Istoria recentă altfel: perspective culturale* [The Recent History Otherwise: Cultural Perspectives] (Iași: Editura Universității „Al. I. Cuza”, 2013), 223-239.

⁵ Georgiana Leșu, "Instituționalizarea «prieteniei» între România și Uniunea Sovietică. Aspecte din activitatea ARLUS" ["Institutionalising the «Friendship» between Romania and the Soviet Union. Aspects from the Activity of ARLUS"] in Adrian Cioflâncă, Lucina M. Jinga (eds.), *Represiune și control social în România comunistă* [Repression and Social Control in Communist Romania], Anuarul I.C.C.M.E.R., vol. V-VI, (Iași: Polirom, 2011), 313-325.

⁶ Alexandru Aioanei, "Săptămâna prieteniei româno-sovietice (1-7 noiembrie 1948): un prototip al sărbătorilor comuniste" ["The Week of Romanian-Soviet Friendship (1-7 November 1948): A Prototype of Communist Celebrations"] in Mihalache, and Cioflâncă, 279-287.

⁷ Alexandru Zub, "Mituri istoriografice în România ultimei jumătăți de secol" ["Historiographical Myths in Romania of the Last Half Century"] in Lucian Boia (ed.), *Miturile comunismului românesc* [Myths of Romanian Communism], II (Bucharest: Editura Universității, 1997), 11.

Even the Romanian independence day was moved in 1948 from the 10th of May (linked to Romanian monarchy) to the 9th of May (linked to the Victory Day in World War II) in the attempt to “reposition the significance of the national day and to modify the structural elements of national history according to the requirements of communist ideology,”⁸ while the entire Romanian history was rewritten in the proletarian spirit by Mihai Roller and other historians. Under these circumstances, establishing the 23rd of August as the national day might have seemed only natural. And some of the interviewed people admitted that “communists chose the 23rd of August because they truly did not have another historical event to celebrate” (Viorel Asprițoiu, born in 1954, sports teacher, Drăgășani, Vâlcea); “In school, we learned a version of history that proved to be incorrect, but I understand why communists distorted the events of the 23rd of August 1944; otherwise, it would have been impossible to create a national day to identify with” (Aneta Bădiță, born in 1941, former headmaster, Amărăști, Vâlcea county).

The new celebrations aimed to invent or re-invent a new history, rooted in the Marxist-Leninist theory. Moreover, the new authorities launched a new conception regarding celebration and commemoration, inspired by the Stalinist regime - transforming celebration into a tool of indoctrination in order to legitimise the communist rule and to manipulate the masses.⁹ The 23rd of August, instituted as a day of celebration by the newly established Romanian communist regime, marked the efforts of legitimating the communist system by propaganda and systematic manipulation. Among other new celebrations of communist power, the 23rd of August played a crucial role, as it represented the initial moment of the new regime, its most significant manifestation (with two main components – the military and civil parade of the “working people” – *oamenii muncii*¹⁰).

Known as the “day of revolutionary social and national, anti-fascist and anti-imperial liberation,” it became in 1945 the “national day of the Romanian people.” It was also referred to, in the wooden language of the era, as the “great historic act” in 1946, the “day of liberating the people from under the fascist yoke by the glorious Soviet army, alongside which our army began fighting after the turning of weapons” in 1948. Moreover, in 1950-1964 the event is also regarded as the “popular revolution,” the “anti-fascist military insurrection”¹¹ and even the

⁸ Virgiliu Țărău, “9 sau 10 mai? Sărbătorirea independenței de stat a României în tranziția de la democrație la *democrația populară*” [“9 or 10 May? Celebrating the independence of the Romanian state during the transition from democracy to *popular democracy*”], *Caiete de antropologie istorică*, IV, no. 1 (7) (Cluj-Napoca: Accent, January-June 2005), 230.

⁹ Mihai Teodor Nicoară, “Sărbătorile comuniste de la comemorare și celebrare la îndoctrinare (1947-1953)” [“Communist Celebrations from Commemoration and Celebration to Indoctrination (1947-1953)”], in *Caiete de antropologie istorică*, 249.

¹⁰ Constantin Manolache, “Paradele de 23 august în România lui Nicolae Ceaușescu” [“Parades of 23 August in Nicolae Ceaușescu’s Romania”], *Archiva Moldaviae* vol. VII (2015): 217-218.

¹¹ Nicoară, 251-251.

“anti-fascist and anti-imperial national military insurrection” in 1977.¹² Thus, the festivities dedicated to the liberation brought by the Soviet army began to take place in Bucharest on the 23rd of August 1948, vividly described in the press with relentlessly repeated ideological clichés. In several years, a thorough script of the newly established legitimating national day would be prepared, following the example of the Soviet Union¹³ and in the first period importing elements from Stalin’s cult of personality.

Nevertheless, in Romania, especially during the years of Ceaușescu’s cult, the national day of the Romanian state meant nothing less than a convention, an occasion to display the hypostases and representations of Nicolae Ceaușescu as a young revolutionary,¹⁴ an architect of modern Romania, a strategist / hero of the national independence, and a champion of peace.¹⁵ As we noticed from the reports (40 interviews from Moldova, Muntenia, Oltenia and Transylvania taken in 2012 and 2018) in the case of the communist celebrations of the 23rd of August the repetitive scenario of the event had determined clichés and stereotypes, and it stimulated no striking feelings. However, the selective memory had also operated subtly and had schematized the deployment of that day so that we have a dry report of a conventional holiday. For this reason, we have chosen the narrations that offer several details and significant nuances, elements derived from various experiences and of people of different social statuses.

Interviews About the Former Romanian National Day

Our intention is to reveal the preservation in the collective memory of communist festive culture elements, as well as the manner in which people remember the day of the 23rd of August 1944, the functionality of this holiday as an occasion to spend leisure time, rather than a “place of memory.” While all 40 interviewed people from Moldova, Oltenia, Muntenia and Transylvania had related differently to the same event, the semantics and conclusions are similar. The socio-cultural background, generational membership, self-image, historical distance, the quick succession of historical fundamental events during a short chronological

¹² Dinu C. Giurescu, “România în al doilea război mondial: de la 15 septembrie 1939 la 23 august 1944” [“Romania during World War II: from September 15, 1939 to August 23, 1944”], in Stephen Fischer-Galați, Dinu C. Giurescu, Ioan-Aurel Pop, *O istorie a românilor. Studii critice* [A History of Romanians. Critical Studies] (Cluj-Napoca: Fundația Culturală Română, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 1998), 297.

¹³ Sanda I. Ducaru, “*Religia cincinală. Funcțiile sărbătorilor comuniste*” [“Five-Year Religion. Functions of the Communist Celebrations”], in Boia, 171.

¹⁴ Unlike Gheorghiu-Dej, Ceaușescu had no special merits in his revolutionary activity; once becoming general secretary, the new ruler engaged in a hectic activity of creating and consolidating his own myth (see Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism pentru eternitate. O istorie politică a comunismului românesc* [Stalinism for All Seasons. A Political History of Romanian Communism], trans. by Cristina Petrescu and Dragoș Petrescu, revised and added edition, Preface by Cristian Vasile, Afterword by Mircea Mihăieș (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2014), 233).

¹⁵ Manuela Marin, “Cult și sărbătoare în România comunistă: cazul lui Nicolae Ceaușescu” [“Cult and Celebration in Communist Romania: the Case of Nicolae Ceaușescu”], *Caiete de antropologie istorică*, 269.

sequence had determined such perceptions, explanations, clichés and stereotypes. Some interviews made in small communities – villages, families, colleagues and neighbours – are colourful and captivating narrations that unconsciously reconstitute the re-imaginings of the 23rd of August in the manner of the Rashomon effect. People remember, reimagine and reinvent the same event of the Ceaușist era in three manners: as a (subconscious nostalgic) manifestation of a historical period with personal significance (the time of their childhood and/or youth); as an Orwellian space or as a world that seemed certain (free education and medical services, granted job and housing) when compared to the post-communist present, which they perceive as a period of uncertainty.

Stereotypes in Narrating the Celebrations of 23 August

There is a process of preserving and transmitting the collective representations regarding the national holiday of Romania as an effect of some social, ideological and historical circumstances. As such, we must mention the repetitive function of the festive scenario (see especially the parade of the working people and military forces, the festive meals and others) and the linearity of options in spending leisure time (see the meals with traditional *mici* and beer, pastry, and romantic meetings). Moreover, the relation between memory and oblivion, as well as the selection mechanisms of subjective memory played their role in the process of recollection.

The stereotypes in narrating the political festivity of August 23 include: the celebrating aspects (parade, holding the portraits and flags, speeches); negative feelings (obligation, monotony, fear, rehearsals in Bucharest and cities); positive aspects (2 days off; joy for children and teenagers; only 2 cases of (nostalgic national feeling); controlled leisure time (festive meal; *mici* and beer; love affairs/football; picnic, TV (and gossip); difference between the '70s and the '80s.

The celebrating aspects were mentioned in most cases in a displeased tone, sometimes ironically, even sarcastically: “we were organized like school children and led to the so-called field of liberty, where we marched and sang patriotic songs to honour comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu” (Florina Sămărtinean, born in 1968, Blaj); “There were festivities in the honour of Romanians and especially in honour of the rulers Nicolae Ceaușescu și Elena Ceaușescu” (Petru Ionaș, born in 1940, Blaj); “We received flags, balloons, banners displaying texts like «Long Live Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu!», «Long Live the Communist Romanian Party!»”¹⁶ (Cristiana Tănăsoiu, born in 1960, librarian, Drăgășani, Vâlcea county). Other respondents shared their memories in a more neutral tone: “As pupils, during the Dej period, we took part in celebrations; [...] there were dances and poems at the community house... We recited patriotic poems, about love for the country, respect for the heroes; there were no poems about the rulers, but the portraits of the comrade were everywhere” (A.M., female,

¹⁶ On the change of slogans see Antonella Asandei, “Simbolistica aniversărilor în anii 1965-1989: 1 mai și 23 august” [“Symbolism of Celebrations in 1965-1989: 1st May and 23rd of August”], in Mihalache, and Cioflâncă, 368.

born in 1954, engineer, Craiova); “There were festivities in the centre of Alba, and presence was mandatory, then, before 1977 there were concerts organised in Sebeş, in the Arini park, and a table with *mici* and beer was set up” (Văleanu Muntean, born in 1949, worker, Sebeş, Alba county). Some described the entire procession of these political liturgies in detail, from the gates of the factory, with flags, portraits, banners, the order of people marching (“the army first, then the pioneers, the sportsmen” – C.E.C., female, born in 1953, shop assistant, Ploieşti), the special role of the tribune where people had to slow down and cheer slogans learnt before the event.

In many cases, the children involved in festivities were selected based mainly on their performance at school and on their looks, especially when children had to hand over flowers to the *politrucci* seated at the tribune (Vasilie Mircea Paul, born in 1949). There were cases of rejecting pupils considered unfit for the “artistic ensemble” even after intensive rehearsals, causing humiliation (Mihaela Grancea, born in 1959, professor PhD, Sibiu).

There were differences between organising the 23rd of August in towns and villages. The event was marked on a smaller scale in villages: “There was a small festivity, but not every year, there were patriotic poems recited, small sports competitions between the schools from the area [...]. In our village, 23 August was a common day” (Aneta Bădiţă, born in 1941, former headmaster, Amărăşti, Vâlcea county). In the case of villages, there were lists of people or pupils who had to attend the parade in the nearby town or city (S.B., male, born in 1947, former mayor 1984-1989, Petreşti, Dâmboviţa county). In some remote regions, untouched by collectivisation “there were no festivities or events related to the 23rd of August,” “only a day off spent within the family” (Alexandru Dumbravă, born in 1978, teacher in Sibiu, from Bran, Braşov county); “in the Cincu village (30 km from Făgăraş), it was not a special day, just an occasion for family meetings, with anti-communist discussions” (Mihaela Grancea, born in 1959, professor PhD, Sibiu).

Rehearsing the Political Rites

Many interviewed people remember the rehearsals and preparations for the celebration: “There was a period of preparations, for approximately one month before 23 August, and the heads of institutions had to start the preparations. It had to be a typical military behaviour” (Constantin Dumitrescu, born in 1949, economist, Vitomireşti, Olt County). As the same person explains, there were several stages prior to the event: the mobilisation of workers, informing them about the program, the distribution of flags, banners, the involvement of the party secretary, the march and its organisation (places where to wait, where to stand) and the final instructions on the participants’ behaviour. Talking about the preparations for the event, Cristiana Tănăsoiu specifies that they started about two weeks before: “There was the cleaning, the flags being hanged, and a preliminary mobilisation where they informed us about the day, the time and the location for rehearsals” (Cristiana Tănăsoiu, born in 1960, librarian, Drăgăşani, Vâlcea County). The same exhausting rehearsals carried out in the summer heat are the central focus of remembrances in Bucharest (“we had been practicing the steps to form flowers with our bodies for several days in the heat and dust of the summer” – Florentina Niţu,

born in 1971, senior lecturer PhD, Bucharest) and in Sibiu, especially “on the occasion of Ceaușescu’s only visit to Sibiu, when the festivity path was reconfigured” (Ioana Narcisa Crețu, born in 1969, professor PhD, Sibiu).

Pupils were involved in varied activities on the 23rd of August across the country. In Sebeș, selected pupils had to walk 3 km in the summer heat to a plateau near Râpa Roșie to form a white dove or the shape of the country (Nicolae Muntean, born in 1978, freelancer, Sebeș, Alba County), while in a village near Caransebeș the selected pupils attended the parade in Reșița, tirelessly practicing the march with guns in their hands, in 1988 (Elena Muntean, born in 1974, shop assistant, from Bocșa, Caraș-Severin County). In Cluj-Napoca, there were discrete cases of rebellion when pupils attended the parade and had to shout, replacing *Ura!* with *Gura!* (“Hooray!” with “Shut up!”) (Cosmin Mureșan, born in 1974, electrician, Cluj-Napoca).

The absence of rehearsals before the event is also noted in some cases (A. M., female, born in 1954, engineer, Craiova), mostly in small communities and only establishing several details (Vasile Gâlcă, born in 1936, worker, Mediaș, Sibiu county). The periodicity of communist celebrations generated mental and behavioral automaticity so that in many cases people would know what they were expected to do. This aspect reinforces Aurora Liiceanu’s remark on people’s complicity to their own manipulation.¹⁷

However, children were called for rehearsing traditional dances: “They called us for rehearsals several weeks ahead; it was simpler in the village, everybody knew each other and they came to our houses. We prepared intensively, so as to not embarrass ourselves on stage. We were dressed in traditional costumes, everyone had one” (A.M., female, born in 1954, engineer, Craiova); “We were rehearsing a 10-15 minutes dance for about one month, and rehearsals took around two hours daily” (Neculina Jugravu, born in 1964, worker, Brașov); “selected from different high schools, as pupils with the best results and behaviour, we practiced for one week for a performance on the stage of the Sala Palatului [Palace Hall] in 1988 [...]. The show was broadcast, Ceaușescu was not present at the event” (Florentina Nițu, born in 1971, senior lecturer PhD, Bucharest).

Remembering Negative Aspects

The negative feelings regarding the celebration of 23 August were expressed both by people responsible with the organisation of festivities and by the simple participants. Aneta Bădiță, former headmaster, admitted that “it was a day of ordeal, because it was during the summer vacation [...] and it was difficult to gather children back to school, and when somebody came from the *raion*, it the pressure was just too much!” (Aneta Bădiță, born in 1941, former headmaster, Amărăști, Vâlcea County); “Disgust is what I feel when I remember those parades, which were a grind for most of us; we would have preferred to be elsewhere” (A.M., female, born in 1954, engineer, Craiova); “In Făgăraș, after 1970, my parents attended the parade,

¹⁷ Aurora Liiceanu, “Cotidianul comunist” [“Daily Communist Life”], in Adrian Neculau (ed.), *Viața cotidiană în comunism* [Daily Life under Communism] (Iași: Polirom 2004), 71.

which they considered a hateful ordeal, especially in the '80s" (Mihaela Grancea, born in 1959, professor PhD, Sibiu).

Moreover, C.E.C., a shop assistant in Ploiești's biggest commercial centre, stated that "if you let one of Ceaușescu's portraits lie on the ground, you were done, as they could have you arrested. You were not allowed to put it on the ground, you had to hold it in your hands all the time, as doing otherwise would deem you careless. They arrested someone for that once, people said,¹⁸ [...] and it was stressful, you were worried about getting everything right, to hold the pace, to smile, and so on..." (C.E.C., female, born in 1953, shop assistant, Ploiești). Having to carry portraits of the Ceaușescu couple was yet another reason for discontent: "I was indisposed by the fact that we, the teachers, had to carry their portraits during the festivities in Slatina (1983-1989). I hated them almost obsessively. In 1989 I refused the portraits and carried a banner displaying Romania's socialist national emblem" (Mihaela Grancea, born in 1959, professor PhD, Sibiu).

A former mayor of a village admitted that "the only reason for discontent was the fact that people had to participate [at the parade]" (S.B., male, born in 1947, former mayor 1984-1989, Petrești, Dâmbovița County), while others mentioned that the (only) negative aspect was the waiting time until entering the marching space in the parade – between two and four hours (Constantin Dumitrescu, born in 1949, economist, Vitomirești, Olt County; Maria Bozdog, born in 1949, shop assistant, Sebeș, Alba County; Văleanu Muntean, born in 1949, worker, Sebeș, Alba County).

According to several workers of the Ciserom factory in Sebeș, Alba County, "people were constantly, yet discretely commenting unfavourably among themselves on the mandatory attendance to the festivities in Alba-Iulia, especially on having to bear the portraits, banners and flags" (Ioana Muntean, born in 1956, worker, Sebeș, Alba County). They would not fear their engineers, chiefs or party leaders, as those who would report (*turnătorii, ciripitorii*) were from among the simple workers: "There was a doorman (of "Ciserom") who reported everything he heard. I think they paid him, not much, but they paid him for that. However, it was not a widely spread phenomenon, as in Bucharest or in bigger cities, the same as in the case of the Revolution of 1989" (Văleanu Muntean, born in 1949, worker, Sebeș, Alba County); "We became aware of those who reported in the late '80s and refrained from commenting whenever they were present" (Ioana Muntean, born in 1956, worker, Sebeș, Alba County).

Quite surprisingly, some respondents claimed that there were no people expressing their discontent towards the communist regime in the workplace (Vasile Gâlcă, born in 1936,

¹⁸ A former mayor told a different story: "Some propaganda materials disappeared, they were lost. They probably tore them apart, not out of hatred, but they probably threw them away so that they did not have to go back to hand them in. Sometimes they left propaganda materials (banners, flags, portraits) near a tree or a fence; they threw them away and no one was ever punished for that" (S.B., male, born in 1947, former mayor 1984-1989, Petrești, Dâmbovița County). A similar testimony supports this idea: "Some people tore apart the banners or threw them away, especially in the late '80s. And they went unpunished, although there was an inventory; they say that the materials were destroyed during the transportation and it was not that much of a problem as long as you offered a reasonable justification" (A.M., female, born in 1954, engineer, Craiova).

worker, Mediaş, Sibiu County). Others specified that they would not openly express their hatred towards that day, but “certainly before and after the event we would comment whenever possible and we would manifest our outrage” (Tünde Coltofean, born in 1959, programmer at the Întreprinderea de Unelte și Scule (IUS), Braşov).

Expressing Positive Aspects

Among the positive aspects associated with the communist celebration of the 23rd of August, a teacher emphasised that the spirit of a national holiday is important and that “people overlooked the fact that it was a communist day and, as Romanians, they felt that it was their day as well” (Viorel Asprițoiu, born in 1954, sports teacher, Drăgășani, Vâlcea). Expressing her opinion about the event, a former headmaster admitted that “it was not a perfect moment, but people always found good things in celebrating this day” (Aneta Bădiță, born in 1941, former headmaster, Amărăști, Vâlcea county). Besides, she opposed 23 August to 10 May, the post-communist celebration of the Romanian monarchy: “To be honest, I prefer 23 August, which seemed to truly be a day for Romanians, rather than 10 May, a day dedicated to the king; I believe that there should be a national day, something significant for the popular masses.”

In an attempt to bring a balanced perspective on the event, Adelin Bădiță stated that despite the “theatricality, organisation, obligation, ordeal,” probably “as an effect of patriotism, we managed to find positive aspects, because the 23rd of August was among the few moments that allowed for some fun, obviously, in the end” (Adelin Bădiță, born in 1969, dentist, Drăgășani, Vâlcea). The same reconciliatory attitude inspires S.B. to share his thoughts on the celebration: “That was a great event, the same as the 1st of December nowadays. It was not like a personal or religious celebration, but military units had to participate. Do you think they were happy to do this? It is true that people attend the parade of the 1st of December only if they want to; they are not organised to attend, they join spontaneously, as there were in those days people who wanted to watch the spectacle – in Târgoviște, people would watch from their windows, balconies and in the street, of course” (S.B., male, born in 1947, former mayor 1984-1989, Petrești, Dâmbovița County).

Some people expressed their positive attitude towards the event and its organisation: “I liked the 23rd of August very much, as everything was well organised. [...] There were no anti-regime feelings among the participants, at least not openly declared... All people considered themselves equal; there was a feeling of egalitarianism”; “Undoubtedly, the 23rd of August was loaded with the atmosphere of celebration, at least for me, given the fact that we had everything we needed – salary, home, free education etc. [...] The majority of people awaited the event with delight – it was, after all, an event of socialisation” (Constantin Dumitrescu, born in 1949, economist, Vitomirești, Olt County). The nostalgic feelings about the youth years find their way into the remembering process: “Anyway, it was beautiful at the festivities back then, and we were young. We especially enjoyed the time at the ball, in the evening, in Sebeș, at Leul de Aur [The golden lion]” (Maria Bozdog, born in 1949, shop assistant, Sebeș, Alba County). The comparison with the current entertainment options is brought up by another

respondent: “We enjoyed it, because we had no other entertainment back then, as they have nowadays, with clubs and discos, and we had the days off, we could hardly wait to have *mici*, because you could not find them otherwise, and to enjoy the picnic” (Ioana Muntean, born in 1956, worker, Sebeș, Alba County).

Patriotism, as the result of the totalitarian pedagogy, is also mentioned as the key ingredient of that communist festivity, projecting pieces of liturgical language onto remembered events and actions: “I consider that those were moments full of emotion. When we shouted the slogans, I remember that I intensely felt a sentiment of patriotism. Today, this feeling is different; nowadays, we more rarely feel proud that we are Romanians, when we get noticed at certain sports events at international contests. Those feelings of patriotism faded in time. Yes, it was a festive atmosphere” (Cristiana Tănăsioiu, born in 1960, librarian, Drăgășani, Vâlcea County).¹⁹

Some recalled the pleasant (pseudo)cultural activities during the day: “People delightedly took part in the singing [...],” mentioning the communist ethics of the period as well: “What must be said is that people had quite a high level of civilisation and they acknowledged the fact that they would not embarrass themselves in front of the collective they were working with” (Vasile Gâlcă, born in 1936, worker, Mediaș, Sibiu County). The cultural activities may have been the reason for the enjoyment of the celebration: “Others would come only for the pleasure of the festivities, as it was a patriotic theme, not necessarily a communist one. It was beautiful nevertheless – children on stage singing, dancing, reciting poems... Even the traditional dances were beautiful [...]” (A.M., female, born in 1954, engineer, Craiova).

Controlled Leisure Time

The illusion of people as masters of their own leisure time under communism was thoroughly constructed. The extraprofessional time satisfied three essential social-human functions: the need for rest, entertainment and cultural evolution (under the ideologised form). The communist celebrations aimed to fulfil all those needs by transporting the participants into a pseudo-reality, extracting them from the (harsh and intolerable) reality and inducing the false and allegorised idea of unity between the people, the communist party and its ruler. The communist leisure time was nothing but a form of control through festive picnics, collective contests, traditional concerts of “artistic brigades.”

The mandatory presence was however eluded. Even though some mention that only in case of illness or other serious situations could someone avoid attending the parade (Cristiana Tănăsioiu, born in 1960, librarian, Drăgășani, Vâlcea County), others point out that absence did not go unnoticed and it was brought up later when the person needed a favour or a day off (S.B., male, born in 1947, former mayor 1984-1989, Petrești, Dâmbovița County;

¹⁹ On the nostalgic feelings regarding the communist national day, see “Melancholia comunismului: 23 august a rămas în sufletele româșcanilor” [The melancholy of communism: 23 August remained within the souls of the people of Roman], *Roman TV* (23 August 2013), <https://romantv.ro/2018/08/23/melancholia-comunismului-23-august-a-ramas-in-sufletele-romascanilor/> (Accessed on 5 March 2019).

Ioana Muntean, born in 1956, worker, Sebeș, Alba County). However, in order to avoid future problems, people preferred to attend the manifestation (A.M., female, born in 1954, engineer, Craiova; Văleanu Muntean, born in 1949, worker, Sebeș, Alba County). Even though the hierarchical superiors took notice of people not coming to the event, they did not report (Tünde Coltofean, born in 1959, programmer at the Întreprinderea de Unelte și Scule (IUS), Brașov).

People developed strategies for ways of leaving the parade early and returning home: “We did not all leave at the same time; we would talk it over and decide who would leave earlier, discretely. Others would pretend to have lost their group. There were the militia’s men on each side of the group, but we could say that our factory had already finished the march without specifying which factory” (A.M., female, born in 1954, engineer, Craiova); “We sometimes slipped away and went home before the parade ended, especially if we were lucky enough to not get Soviet and Romanian flags to carry; otherwise, we had to go back to hand the flags over” (Ioana Muntean, born in 1956, worker, Sebeș, Alba County).

In some cases, people left on vacation in that particular period to avoid attending the event and to avoid exposing their children to it: “My parents took me on vacation to the seaside several times, so I did not participate” (Bianca Karda, born in 1973, librarian, Sibiu); “I have no such memories [about the 23rd of August], and I have a suspicion/hypothesis about that. In all my life as a pupil [...] I never attended the famous rehearsals for the festivities of 23 August. Either my parents refused to let me, or we spent the vacation somewhere else at the time. They sometimes sent me away to the village as a preventive measure” (Cătălina Mihalache, born in 1973, history researcher, Iași).

However, in most cases, the satisfaction of the event is linked to the day off, even with the pre-arranged schedule by communist authorities: “The day of the 23rd of August was awaited with satisfaction by the workers, firstly because it was a day off, and besides, there were sports contests and educational manifestations organised, which meant that every company had a cultural club with traditional dancing, choir, orchestra, traditional music” (Vasile Gâlcă, born in 1936, worker, Mediaș, Sibiu County). In fact, the difference between the public and private time was faded so that the disciplined crowd followed the rules in spending their leisure time.²⁰

Several hours a day or half of the day was, in Katherine Verdery’s words, the “time tax”²¹ to be paid for the two days off: “Everything took several hours” (A.M., female, born in 1954, engineer, Craiova). The same amount of time was mentioned in the case of participating in the parade (Cristiana Tănăsoiu, born in 1960, librarian, Drăgășani, Vâlcea County). Even after those hours, some pointed out that “there were few options to spend the leisure time [...], so I was reading, or sewing, or just spending time with my family” (Tünde Coltofean, born in 1959, programmer at the Întreprinderea de Unelte și Scule (IUS), Brașov). Usually, people hurried

²⁰ Tiberiu Troncotă, *România comunistă, propagandă și cenzură* [Communist Romania, Propaganda, and Censorship] (Bucharest: Tritonic, 2009), 25.

²¹ Katherine Verdery, *Socialismul – ce a fost și ce urmează* [What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?], trans. by Mhai Stroe and Iustin Codreanu (Iași: Institutul European, 2003).

home to their children and family, to do some gardening, or making jam or tomato paste (Ioana Muntean, born in 1956, worker, Sebeș, Alba County).

The confusion between two significant days for the Romanian communist regime and the most ritualised celebrations in 1965-1989²² – the 23rd of August and the 1st of May – was also pointed out: “This was our only joy – that we could be free of work for two days and we could go on a picnic somewhere. We felt the joy of the celebration from this perspective, not because we felt ‘liberated’ [by the Soviet Army], but because we had a holiday, we were free, we had a day off. But it was a joy after we managed to get rid of the parade, we got on cars and we went on a picnic. There were four days in a year when we could do that – May 1 and 2, and August 23 and 24” (A.M., female, born in 1954, engineer, Craiova); “When I was a child, I probably went with my mother to the park to await my father after the festivities, although I am not certain if this is not a false memory, overlapped with the day of the 1st of May” (Ecaterina Lung, born in 1967, professor PhD, Bucharest).

If not because of mere confusion, the two important communist celebrations were associated in people’s mind due to their use of the same script – festivity, two days off, concerts given by the “artistic brigade” of factories and enterprises, traditional and rarely received *mici* and beer. Another possible confusion would be between the 23rd of August and one of Ceaușescu’s visits in the Hunedoara County, when even a column resembling Trajan’s column was erected on a hill nearby leader’s descent from a helicopter (Diana Petrescu, born in 1980, economist, Cluj-Napoca).

The Significance of the Event for Different Ages

The majority of the interviewees expressed the fact that they were unaware of the significance of the celebration during childhood; it was a joyful, out of the ordinary event: “When I was only 3-4 years old (1962-1963), I was spending time with my parents in the park in Făgăraș, where there was an orchestra, traditional dances on a stage, and *mici*. People seemed cheerful and in a good mood back then. Anyway, the universe was big and colourful for me” (Mihaela Grancea, born in 1959, professor PhD, Sibiu); “For that age it was something impressive, although I understood the significance only when I became a teenager. For a child, it was something extraordinary; we had waited eagerly for the manifestations, and for those years that was a terrific day” (Florina Sămărtinean, born in 1968, worker, Blaj). Moreover, some would mention that children became “indoctrinated during primary school”: “every 10 year old knew about the liberating Soviet Army without knowing a single fact about World War II, a painful reality” (Petru Ionaș, born in 1940, worker, Blaj).

Thus, a distinction can be made between the two types of information: the official, linked to the system of education and indoctrination, on the one hand, and the informal, related to parents or relatives discussing the un-ideological reality on the other hand. The official information was transmitted and repeated in the customary wooden language, while

²² Asandei, 355.

the off the record information was handed over and kept in the daily familiar language. The two channels of information are also pointed out by some respondents (Neculina Jugravu, born in 1964, worker, Braşov; Angela Vătafu, born in 1960, worker, Găujani, Giurgiu County). Vasile Ciobanu shares his inconvenient-for-the-communist-period family story of August 1944, when the “Soviet allies stormed our village, and my parents had to flee south, but the liberators caught up, and my father barely escaped”, while his mother witnessed the behaviour of both Germans and Soviets as “belonging to different civilisations” (Vasile Ciobanu, born in 1947, history researcher, Sibiu).

For the adults, the celebration offered few, if any, reasons to be content: “Everybody was equally displeased”; “People were bored, unenthusiastic about the event” (C.E.C., female, born in 1953, shop assistant, Ploieşti); “As the celebration itself lost its essence, the people’s feelings concerning it mostly revolved around loathing” (Tünde Coltofean, born in 1959, programmer at the Întreprinderea de Unelte și Scule (IUS), Braşov); “In my youth, the celebrations were beautiful, but after I became a teacher, I began to dislike them, as they became tensed days” (Viorel Asprițoiu, born in 1954, sports teacher, Drăgășani, Vâlcea).

While, for pupils from the primary education level, the rehearsals for the event were also a delightful occasion to meet pupils from other schools, it was obviously the source of stress for the teachers-organisers. Even high school pupils found positive sides of the tiresome rehearsals: “the fact that there were actors rehearsing their poems in the show represented the exciting part of that experience, as we could take autographs. Otherwise, there were vigilant comrades in the room deciding whether or not everything was in order, and the organisers were quite stressed and careful so that nothing inappropriate would be said or done that could cause problems” (Florentina Nițu, born in 1971, senior lecturer PhD, Bucharest).

The interviews mark the difference in the perception of the event: as a child (“When I was a child, I liked it, we went to the parade in Drăgășani, with patriotic songs, banners and everything; for us, children, everything seemed as part of a game”) and as a teacher and organizer of festivities, stressed to find tall pupils for the parade, in fear of informers (Viorel Asprițoiu, born in 1954, sports teacher, Drăgășani, Vâlcea). The same difference is revealed in case of the younger ages - “when I was a child, I went with my parents to the park, and I asked few questions” - and as observing teenagers - “teachers were utterly transformed by the stress of organising the event in Ploiești for Ceaușescu’s visit” (Daniel Dumitran, born in 1968, senior lecturer PhD, Alba-Iulia).

As a child, the 23rd of August is associated with walking in the park (the traditional communist way of spending leisure time) and fireworks, while as a student it is connected to an unpleasant memory for Ecaterina Lung: “in the summer 1988 it was very hot and before I went to the faculty (we were summoned to attend the festivities), I fainted, but the doctor gave me no proof, so I was sanctioned – written reprimand with a warning. It was a reprimand on the political line, and it did not affect my scholarship. The only consequence was that I did not get a free ticket to the camp, but I was quite upset and frightened” (Ecaterina Lung, born in 1967, professor PhD, Bucharest). The same “written reprimand with a warning” was received by Daniela Zaharia for not attending the festivities in 1988 under the pretext of ankle sprain: “it

did not affect me, as I was not living in the dormitory and I did not have a scholarship, but I did not tell my parents either” (Daniela Zaharia, born in 1968, lecturer PhD, Bucharest). A harsher punishment awaited a worker in Făgăraş for not being able to attend the festivities in 1969 due to commuting problems – 10% penalty of his salary for several months (Mihaela Grancea, born in 1959, professor PhD, Sibiu).

All people noted that the 23rd of August was associated with two days off for adults, or, in some cases, only one day off. In some cases, people had to work, while only a group from their workplace would attend the festivities: “there were years when we celebrated through work; everything was in accordance with the orders given by the party” (Gheorghe Oltean, born in 1942, worker, Blaj, Alba County). Some people chose to work on the communist national day in order to have a day off whenever they needed it (Elena Butucea, born in 1937, nurse, Negreni, Olt County). For many of the interviewed people, the 23rd of August became regular days, especially in the rural area, with some exceptions – nothing special apart from the mandatory parade participation, a source of discontent and fear.

Most respondents drew attention to the anatomy of the leisure time in the park, a so-called “small release, a sort of celebration resembling today’s fairs” (Daniel Dumitran, born in 1968, senior lecturer PhD, Alba-Iulia), eating *mici* or sausages, making new acquaintances, exchanging telephone numbers, telling non-political jokes (Gina Teodoru, born in 1969, Bucharest). However, having *mici* at the event came with the specific communist price – queuing seen as an “adventure” in an impressive crowd. The huge collective gathering played the role of dominating the individual existence and of contributing to the sense of losing oneself in this theatrical idea of collective unity.²³

Basic Food Products as Special Occasions

Many respondents pointed out that the communist national day was special due to the unusual availability of more basic food products on the market shelves, beer, or even the traditional *mici* in the park. Those not working in the commercial field (Maria Bozdog, born in 1949, shop assistant, Sebeş, Alba County) or who did not have relatives in that field (Mihaela Grancea, born in 1959, professor PhD, Sibiu) waited for the 23rd of August to indulge in *mici* and beer, butter and/or Pepsi (Ioana Muntean, born in 1956, worker, Sebeş, Alba County). The connection between the national day and these “special” occasions on the market shelves is significant for a communist state with a “draconian system of food rationing, a system of starvation in Făgăraş that drove my father mad and that was slowly killing him” (Mihaela Grancea, born in 1959, professor PhD, Sibiu). That system was the reflection of the Soviet pseudo-economic socialist system in place, according to which “educating people in socialism means creating socialist habits of consumption, a socialist rigour and discipline in choosing the

²³ Raoul Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, coll. « L'Univers historique » (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986), 118-119.

desirable goods and in the way of accessing these goods.”²⁴ Moreover, the economic control meant penury: “the subject has to be in a chronic state of dependence, to feel dependent day by day,”²⁵ and the great instrument of economic constraint is the queue mentioned by the majority of interviewees. After a period of penury, when discovering some basic, but rare food products on the market shelves or in the park, the subject “feels as if this is a reward and a gift given by the state.”²⁶ The link between the communist Romanian national day and the special possibility of buying rare food products must have played a propagandistic role.

Here are several other examples of these special occasions: “That was the only period when you could actually find beer and *mici*, as normally you could not find any. There was a hunger period, when you could not find virtually anything. Assistants from the stands were not allowed to sell anything until the end of the parade and you could not even get close to the stands – the access was blocked”; “The grocery stores were closed on that day and opened only in the afternoon. They were better supplied, but there were few products, I cannot remember exactly, and they ran out of items very quickly”; “As a woman, I did not drink beer, I took a bottle of juice, Cico, or you could find Pepsi – that was quite an event to dazzle the masses” (C.E.C., female, born in 1953, shop assistant, Ploiești).

The '80s bring a change even to this rare treat linked to communist celebrations: “After '82-'83, there was no butter, no meat, you could not find any of these anywhere” (Ioana Muntean, born in 1956, worker, Sebeș, Alba County); “While in the '60s you could find anything in the shops, in the late '70s a crisis began, and then in the '80s it was a complete disaster” (Văleanu Muntean, born in 1959, worker, Sebeș, Alba County).

23 August in the '70s and in the '80s

Half of the interviewed people pointed out the difference between the way the celebration of the communist national day was conducted in the '70s and in the '80s. There was a shift from celebrating an actual historical event (despite it being instrumentalised by the communist Romanian power to suit the propaganda and communist myths) to celebrating Nicolae Ceaușescu, his rule and achievements, since, over time, the perception changed together with the rise of Ceaușescu's cult: “Theoretically, 23 August was the day of the communist victory over fascism, but over time the celebration of this day turned into celebrating Nicolae Ceaușescu. All of the speeches held by various party activists aimed at praising the accomplishments of communism, the great rule of Ceaușescu, not the reality, or the historical achievements” (Tünde Coltofean, born in 1959, programmer at IUS, Brașov).

The mandatory nature of the event and the shift in the organisation of the event was also highlighted by another teacher: “In the '70s the people were somehow relaxed, laid back,

²⁴ Alain Besançon, *Anatomia unei stafii. Falimentul unei utopii intrupate* [Anatomie d'un spectre], trans. by Mona Antohi and Sorin Antohi (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2014), 66.

²⁵ Besançon, 67.

²⁶ Besançon, 69.

the things were organised, but the atmosphere was loosened up. For example, you could comment something over a pint of beer, after the parade, and some would even venture into political criticism, there was no fear back then. After 1980, everything was done under fear, people carried out the requirements for the 23rd of August mechanically; there was a terror, more of a fear, we were afraid of being reported, of getting in trouble with the party organisation figures” (Viorel Asprițoiu, born in 1954, sports teacher, Drăgășani, Vâlcea). Moreover, the teacher mentioned that several colleagues from a neighbouring village were reported by the headmaster for their negative comments about the event. He also pointed out that “people lost their joy associated with the 23rd of August, the joy that had existed a decade prior.” The ’80s are regarded as “the years of Ceaușescu’s maximum grandeur, when probably all adults, maybe with several exceptions, hated everything pertaining to communism, false ideology, Ceaușescu, and subsequently hated the day of 23 August” (Tünde Coltofean, born in 1959, programmer at IUS, Brașov).

In line with the above testimony, the difference perceived between the late ’70s and the late ’80s is pointed out: “Looking back, with the mind of a historian, I can state the difference between the two moments I was part of: [...] the festivities of the late ’70s were less of a source of stress and hysteria for organisers, as there was a pleasant atmosphere despite the repetitive movements, the dust and the heat. [...] The second moment, in 1988, was much more tense; there was an obsession for perfection, an almost aggressive one that bothered us” (Florentina Nițu, born in 1971, senior lecturer PhD, Bucharest).

Nevertheless, in some cases people talk about another change in the ’80s: “It was no longer mandatory for all workers to attend the festivities in Alba-Iulia. There were appointed workers, men mostly, and party members and activists” (Ioana Muntean, born in 1956, worker, Sebeș, Alba County). There was a relative ease, but, using Besançon’s terms, there was no “food reward” for the mandatory attendance either, taking into account the general lack of basic food products on the market shelves.

Regardless of the decade, people were reluctant in expressing their thoughts and feelings concerning the celebration of the 23rd of August, especially in the working environment: “ We were not afraid to discuss certain things in the workplace, but we avoided political topics, even within the family, as my brother-in-law was the mayor of a village and a party member [...]” (A.M., female, born in 1954, engineer, Craiova); “We were watching the Bucharest parade on the TV together with our friends , [...] and the atmosphere was quite relaxed, we could comment on the aspects related to that day and the way the party ruled, even though at work we were all serious and we did not dare to say anything” (Aneta Bădiță, born in 1941, former headmaster, Amărăști, Vâlcea County); “I have realized that all those discussions after the parade could have gotten us in serious trouble. Men would start to make jokes about the system and the ruler; there were even jokes about the *Securitate* [political police]. For example, one would ask: What is the *Securitate*? And the answer was: It is the party’s heart that beats, beats, beats. Well, there were also serious subjects discussed – political, economic, social [...]” (Petru Ionaș, born in 1940, worker, Blaj).

Communist Television

This shift determined the change in people's attitude towards the event, as the organization and control of the event made everything less pleasant and more unbearable. The '80s proved to be yet another turning point, as it is evident from the conducted interviews – affordable TV sets and family/friends gathering around it: “We were watching the Bucharest parade on TV with our friends, after my husband came home from work, as we had one of the first TV sets in the village [...]” (Aneta Bădiță, born in 1941, former headmaster, Amărăști, Vâlcea County); “At the end of the '80s, when we managed to buy a TV set, a Romanian one, *Diamant*, we spent the day off at home, together with friends and relatives, watching the TV on the only channel available” (Petru Ionaș, born in 1940, worker, Blaj); “In general, families watched the TV broadcast dedicated to that day, but not so as to celebrate, but merely out of curiosity and out of the desire to watch the Ceaușescu couple's grandeur and the organisers' servitude” (Tünde Coltofean, born in 1959, programmer at IUS, Brașov).

The importance of TV sets in the propaganda efforts is underlined by many respondents: “as a child I watched the festivity, trying to identify my father in the crowd, from among the people of the Flacăra Roșie [Red flame] factory”; “everything on TV was about the importance of the revolution of national and international liberation from under the fascist and imperialist yoke, there were films with communist heroes, the same ones over and over again, so that I knew them by heart” (Ecaterina Lung, born in 1967, professor PhD, Bucharest). Nevertheless, the efficiency of that “propagandistic avalanche” is questionable: “I formed a reflex to ignore absolutely everything on the TV and radio – the broadcasts became mere noise with no significance.” In other cases, adults preferred to turn off the TV set, even if the children were fascinated by the military parade (Mihaela Grancea, born in 1959, professor PhD, Sibiu).

However, secretly listening to the *Europa liberă* [Free Europe] broadcast is another mentioned practice of the '80s. In terms of shared feelings about the two decades, people highlighted the “relaxed atmosphere in the '70s” and the “loss of joy” and/or “fear, tension, weariness, abhorrence” in the '80s. Whether or not this perception is due to partial memory obliterations or due to rendering a nostalgic aura to distant events remains to be discussed.

Conclusive Remarks

As revealed by the interviews, the great event of the Romanian people, held during the communist period on the 23rd of August, brought no sense of social unity, despite the aim to produce the powerful impression of people's cohesion. As time went by, people noticed the distortion of the historical event of 1944 to suit the cult of Ceaușescu and shared no nostalgic feelings about those decades. On the contrary, they expressed their discontent with the mandatory participation in the celebrations and with the controlled leisure time. Whereas several interviewed people concluded that 23 August was a mere convention, with no stimulating patriotic feelings, as it was designed to be, others expressed nostalgic feelings about patriotism under communist rule, linked to their youth.

There is a process of preserving and transmitting the collective representations regarding the communist Romanian national day as an effect of social, ideological and historical circumstances. We thus mentioned the repetitive function of the festive scenario (particularly in the case of the parade of the working people and military forces, the festive meals and cultural events) and the linearity of options in spending leisure time (as were the picnics with traditional *mici* and beer, gathering around the TV set, family time and romantic meetings). Moreover, the relation between memory and oblivion, as well as the selection mechanisms of subjective memory played their role in the process of recollection.

People remember, reimagine and reinvent the same event of the Ceaușist era in three manners. The first way of remembering is a (subconscious nostalgic) manifestation of a historical period with personal significance (the time of their youth). The second one is an Orwellian space, with absurd facets of everyday life and profane celebrations by use of a wooden language, serving to “mask the rupture between the system and the reality, tasked to magically fold reality onto the world vision.”²⁷ The third remembrance way reflects a world that seemed a universe of certainty (job stability, house, free access to medical treatment, free education) when compared to the post-communist present perceived as uncertain, with no imposed axiology.

Despite the communist aims of the 23rd of August political liturgy, with the invasion of images and political symbols in a legitimation performance, with controlled leisure time and festive-cultural rewards, the feeling of being part of a collective self was not achieved. As the 40 interviews disclose, forging the collective self was sometimes successful, but most of the respondents describe it in gloomy tones. Most of the interviewed became aware of the fictitious solidarity, the real alienation of the Romanian society despite the ostentatious attempts of control under the unifying pretexts of the political celebration of 23 August. Regardless of the communist rulers' efforts, the Carpathian version of *homo sovieticus* was not delivered into the world.

²⁷ Besançon, Alain, *Nenorocirea secolului. Despre comunism, nazism și unicitatea „Șoah“-ului* [Le malheur du siècle. Sur le communisme, le nazisme et l'unicité de la Shoah], trans. by Mona Antohi (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2017), 36.