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**THE IMAGE OF THE COMMUNIST TORTURER AS
REFLECTED IN THE MEMOIRS OF THE ROMANIAN
CONCENTRATION CAMPS (1947-1989)**

Summary of the doctoral dissertation

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Through this research we aim to recreate the profile of the Romanian communist torturer based mainly on the memoirs from concentration camps, as well as on archival sources, books, studies and scholarly articles from Romania and from abroad. The premise of our scientific endeavor has been to provide a conceptual, analytical and interpretative framework to the topic of torturing by following a few guidelines emerged from other investigative perspectives or as a result of the different bibliographic tools used by Romanian historians and researchers.¹

One of the reasons we chose this topic was to bring up into academic debate the reprehensible actions of the former representatives of the communist repressive machine and the manner in which they were depicted and judged by memoirists. Also, through this dissertation we aim to indirectly point out to the need of condemning communism not only at declaratory and „official” levels, but by emphasizing the depositions of the victims who recalled their convulsive experiences in memoirs or through oral history interviews.

At present, the Romanian society cannot assume its past without a historical rather than political or judicial „trial”, because only the historian can make nuanced analyses and interpretations concerning the wardens who persecuted innocent people. The main concern of our research was to outline the profiles of well-known torturers starting from the depiction of their physical and behavioral features. We also had in mind the urgent need of „not forgetting”, or as Paul Goma would say, of „not being silent” about the members of the communist repressive machine.

¹ Unlike other analysts of the Romanian Gulag, Ruxandra Cesereanu has brought a fundamental contribution to the presentation and investigation of the topic of torturing, using a vast bibliographic material in the form of memoirs as well as foreign literature which revolves around the repressive mechanisms used by totalitarian regimes.

First and foremost, we deemed that it was necessary to make a descriptive and interpretative analysis of the physical and moral profile of the Romanian oppressor, as well as a thorough inquiry into the language and gestures of torturers drawing on the pattern developed by researcher François Thom. Secondly, we intended to outline a portrait of the torturer both from a historical and a psychohistorical perspective, although in Romania there is high wariness of bringing up a topic which requires an insight at the crossroads between history and psychohistory or history and psychoanalysis.

Another guideline of this dissertation was to draft a few categories of torturers, to penetrate the complex „mechanism” between investigator and defendant and to present this relationship by referring to the case study of Elisabeta Rizea and its torturers.

A special emphasis was placed on memorizing and remembering the suffering inflicted in the Romanian Gulag and on the manner in which the prisoners related to their traumatic past. Also, we deemed it necessary to present profiles of wardens, men and women, such as Vasile Ciolpan, Petrache Goiciu, Vida Nedici and Elena Tudor.

It is worth noting that hitherto, except for Ruxandra Cesereanu, Doina Jela, Andrei Muraru, Dumitru Lăcătușu, Alin Mureșan, Mircea Stănescu, Florian Banu, Andrea Fürtös and Robert Fürtös, other historians and specialists in the Romanian Gulag did not focus so intensely on recreating the profiles of such torturers. Hence, we aimed to perform a synthesis of the study of Romanian communist wardens by revolving around the memoirs not so large in scope of the prison space, but which are at least self-evident through the approach undertaken and the selection and analysis of the profiles of wardens.

Through this dissertation we also aimed to outline as detailed as possible the terminological boundaries of the incarceration memoirs, their role and functions, and how these *plausible sources* are located within the confines of history and literature bearing more of a documentary-historical value than an esthetic-literary one.

In our reflection we have not downplayed the broad presentation of the autobiographic writings which contributed more or less to the recreation of the profile of the Romanian torturer and of other aspects as well, such as the way in which the prisoners perceived the prison and the incarceration regime.

For the sake of coherence and argumentation in a historical analysis we used *research interrogations* in order to achieve a concentration of the investigation field and to outline a generic design of the variables and concepts. Questions such as: How can we define a torturer? How many types of torturers are there? How did prisoners describe them physically and morally? What kind of torturers were, for instance, Vasile Ciolpan and Petrache Goiciu, all allowed us to have a structured approach and to devise a few clear and coherent research hypotheses.

Before studying the members of the communist repressive machine or before undertaking any scientific research one must have a good command of the specific *research methodology*.² Since this dissertation pertains to the field of social sciences, and using extensive interpretation and analysis, we performed *qualitative research*³ in a thorough examination of the knowledge on this field of study. *Methodological interdisciplinarity* was used in order to reflect the multiple perspectives of this study – historical and psychological (psychohistorical), and to represent the complexity of the topic.

Another research method referred to the hermeneutics of the incarceration memoirs and archival documents (the different minutes, autobiographies, statements and reports found in the personnel records of torturers such as Vasile Ciolpan). In these personnel files useful information can help retrace the biographical profiles of the wardens, also providing references about the physical and behavioral profiles of the former inquisitors.

Setting up the relationship between cause and effect (*the method of historical causality*) when studying the communist torturers reflects the need to have a thorough

2 In the analysis of historical topics such as the study of the Romanian communist torturers, with an emphasis on the research techniques and methods, the following works are indispensable: E. H. Carr, *What is history ?*, London : Penguin, 1961; Charles H. Feinstein and Mark Thomas, *Making History Count. A Primer Quantitative Methods for Historians*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Alun. Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, London: Routledge, 1997; Jerzy Topolsky, *Metodologia istoriei*, Traducere de Anca Țapu, București : Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1987.

³ Jonathan Grix, in the book *Demistificarea cercetării postuniversitare. De la masterat la doctorat*, Traducere de Nicolae Melinescu (under print), pp. 40-48, makes a clear delimitation between qualitative and quantitative research methods.

understanding of their psychology and behaviour, to explain the degree of sympathy or antipathy between torturer and tortured and the mechanisms which generate a tacit preservation of this relationship or its brutal degradation. Analyzing the circumstances in which inquiries were organized in the communist prisons and the torture techniques inflicted upon the defendants – an analysis of that *multiple causality* referred to by Marc Bloch⁴ – anticipates the answer to the *why* question.

Examining the *memoirs* written by the former prisoners from the Romanian communist concentration camps gave us the opportunity to reflect deeply upon the way in which suffering is memorized and rememorized, and how torturers are portrayed. One must not rely entirely on the testimonies of the defendants or of the torturers because, by their nature, memoirs are often biased. However, with a moderate sense of criticism, one can expect not to separate between true and false, but at least identify what is *authentic (plausible)*, listen to these „live sources”⁵ and allow the victim to speak up.⁶

Some realities, such as the methods of torture and the abusive behavior of the torturers, cannot be contested, but it is necessary to meditate deeply upon the act of memorizing and re-memorizing some events and historical actions by the prisoners from the communist prisons. The reinterpretation of the testimonies found in memoirs should take into account the emotions, fear and the desire for vengeance of the defendants, but should equally consider the emotional discharge, that *catharsis* of the soul that we, historians, offer to the victims of the Romanian communist gulag. This *drainage of the*

⁴ A masterful presentation of the research tools used by the historian (causality, observation, critique and historical analysis) was made by Marc Bloch in his study *Pledoarie pentru istorie*, Traducere de George Cipăianu, Cluj-Napoca: Tribuna, 2007. The French text, *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou métier d'historien*, 2 edition, Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1952 is available online at http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/bloch_marc/apologie_histoire/apologie_histoire.html. Last accessed on: 1 martie 2009.

⁵ About memory as „live source” as compared to the archival documents said to be „dead sources” for the historian, two fundamental works by Paul Ricoeur are recommended: *Istorie și adevăr*, București: Anastasia, 1996 and *Memorie, istorie, uitare*, Traducere de Ilie Gyurcsik și Margareta Gyurcsik, Timișoara: Amarcord, 2001.

⁶ Doru Radosav, “De la mărturia orală la depoziție sau două modalități de apropiere (asumpție) a trecutului” in *Anuarul de Istorie Orală*, nr. X, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2008, p. 9.

past by our confessors does not necessarily imply a loss of objective information because information is told by people and man is a complex and subjective human being. For this reason, the *historical critique*⁷ of the oral and written sources is indispensable to a study which aspires to be as close to reality as possible.

The historian knows that his confessors can lie or commit an error, but what he actually wants is to make them speak in order to be able to understand them afterwards. Achieving a physical, moral and behavioral portrait of a communist torturer based on memoirs implies a sound critique, a relevant analysis and interpretation instead of a mere reading of the various situations, because a source of any nature provides historical information provided that the historian can make a sense out of it and extract all its “historical essence”. Therefore, the historian is bound to avoid *deceit (misinformation)* and *the misrepresentation of the past*,⁸ meaning that he must refrain from presenting false information or truncated truth, although sometimes even false sources can reveal a dose of trustworthiness.

Concerning the *research methodology*, the researcher interested in the topic of communist torturers in general or in a case study will have in mind, according to the epistemological and ontological results he envisaged, a *descriptive and explanatory analysis* based on the *inductive method* (when we performe the case study first, i.e. Vasile Ciolpan) and the *deductive method* (when we do the reverse, from a typology of torturers towards a specific case). When *describing* events, facts or stories related to torturers the historian proves a good understanding of the reality in which his subjects lived and wishes to make it nuanced, to provide detailed information about their profiles, for instance. When trying to *explain* some historical circumstances centered on the torturers, the researcher tests his good investigative skills and his ability to criticize the sources, while trying to extrapolate or to correlate the results of his case study with others. Independent of the *level of analysis: macro* (the types of the Romanian communist torturer) or *micro* (case study), the historian must have clear-cut research guidelines and exercise historical critique throughout the entire investigation.

⁷ See chapter “Critica”, pp. 101-158 in Marc Bloch, *op.cit.*

⁸ For further details, see subchapter “Pe urmele minciunii și ale erorii”, in Marc Bloch, *Pledoarie (...)*, pp. 112-132.

The method of historical critique equals doubt, according to exegetes such as Marc Bloch. Applied to the study of communist torturers this method guides us through a great thirst for knowledge, for asking questions and for trying to find answers. A great force pushed us forward and drove us into our research towards gnosiological interrogations such as: What were the communist torturers, human or “beasts”? How did they treat their victims? How did former prisoners see them and what was the relationship between prisoners and their oppressors? These are only a few questions to which we cannot answer without a comprehensive knowledge of the historical critique and of the other techniques and methods referred to earlier.

A rigorous and sound research methodology is impossible without making appeal to *sources* and their rational examination according to the working hypotheses, interrogations, variables and levels of analysis developed in this doctoral dissertation.

We based our research on multiple *sources*: *primary inedited archival documents* (personnel records), *secondary edited sources* (general literature, memoirs, studies and articles) and even *artistic films*, such as *După amiaza unui torționar* and *Binecuvântată fii, închisoare*, both directed by Lucian Pintilie, or *documentaries* such as *Memorialul durerii* created by Lucia Hossu Longin.

Faced with a “cobweb” of books, analyses and memoir syntheses, we had to make a careful selection of the often fragmented information about the profile, typology and language of the torturers. Many prison memoirs lacked almost completely any reference to inquirers and wardens, which forced us to use only partially the bibliographic material at our disposal.

Although some sources were hardly studied because we decided that a careful *internal and external critical review*⁹ was redundant, in the case of archival documents we searched for the purpose for which they were written, the historical context (origins) in which they were issued and the writing style.

The hermeneutics of the documents made us understand better what stands beyond the primary texts, how they can be analyzed from the standpoint of the person who issued them and the socio-historical context in which they were drafted. Thus, we

⁹ The authenticity of sources (external critique) and the research of their credibility (internal critique) was addressed by Jerzy Topolsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 298-310.

must have in mind that most of the sources which refer to the communist torturers reflect a mentality, a coerced and a coercive society, a repressive system in which many documents were drafted either under the physical and emotional coercion inflicted by the torturers or were counterfeited in order to incriminate the defendants and exonerate the inquirers.¹⁰ Therefore, it is imperative to interrogate the sources and observe what they communicate beyond quantitative information, knowing for sure that communist sources were designed with a clear goal in mind: to legitimate the regime and the members of its repressive machine.

As sources are created by people, the perception of an event varies from one society and individual to the other. In our case, though, the collective conscience of the defendants reflects their specific features. What a defendant states about his torturers all the other defendants will confirm under a different form, with other emotions and in a different style because individual memory under communism evolved gradually into a grieving collective memory. By means of the critique of testimonials, the history of torturers and their victims becomes an emotional reality of a community, relying on mental procedures, a subtle art of transcending the substance of the sources and a need to doubt and to understand.

Historical critique also implies a continuous correlation and comparison between different sources so that information from one source can be verified or infirmed by other sources (for instance, analogies between several testimonies will be made in order to define the similarities and differences between the depositions of former prisoners: Are they narrating the same facts? What is the style of the confessions?)

The crosscheck of sources through the *comparative method*¹¹ is a *test of truth* because, as times goes by, the memory of people can mislead them. Although the authors

¹⁰ Footnote 3 from the study entitled „Reeducarea-possibile origini occidentale”, available at http://www.cnsas.ro/documente/istoria_comunism/studii_articole/activitati_plan_intern/Originile%20reeducarii.pdf, last accessed: 20 martie 2010, researcher Luminița Banu states that “the archival documents created by the exponents of the totalitarian system must be analysed with great caution (particularly!) when they were aimed at reinstating the “socialist legality”, as was the case with the inquiry of the torturers in Pitești, and of Țurcanu himself.”

¹¹ The comparative method used by historians in their researches is explained by Jerzy Topolsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 325-327.

of memoirs were the direct witnesses of some events, the actual narration of facts can be altered by certain conditions: emotions, the fear of the victims towards their torturers, the beatings during the inquiries, the acuteness of perception, the different abuses inflicted upon them (a defendant can narrate in greater detail the evolution of an inquiry than another defendant if his memory, attention and interest were more acute at that moment), their social status, education, the cultural environment in which they activated. Our role is to question the testimonies of the authors of memoirs, which means that throughout the entire research we “psychologized the testimony” concluding that “there is no good witness” but only “good or bad testimonies”.¹²

*Historical observation*¹³ has a fundamental role because the scope of knowledge of the witness-former prisoner covers only one aspect and one event – one person describes the language of the torturer, another one remembers his physical and moral profile – and thus, the individual is prevented from recreating facts by his ability to memorize or by his education and personality.

In conclusion, emphasizing the reasons which prompted us to choose the topic, structure, sources, research techniques and methods in studying the profile of the communist torturer is a useful scientific exercise for the researcher who is willing to carry out a reliable, balanced and unbiased study. As stated earlier, without research interrogations and without a good command of the methodological tools our scientific endeavor would have remained caught in a “raw” phase of mere presentation of information. On the contrary, by taking an interdisciplinary approach, we were able to treat the topic of the communist torturers in a deep and multifaceted way.

¹² Marc Bloch, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-123.

¹³ The general features of historical observation and the description of testimonies can be found in Marc Bloch, *Pleadoarie (...)*, pp. 69-90.