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The History of the Communist Concentration System

The re-education phenomenon in the prison of Aiud

PH.D. THESIS SUMMARY

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The symbolic geography of the Romanian Gulag reserved a privileged spot for the Aiud penitentiary. The imprisoned personalities, the carceral regime (the hunger, the cold, the isolation), the high mortality rate, the large capacity of detainment, along with the late re-education phenomenon, particularized the prison of Aiud in the imaginary of the Romanian concentration universe.

This image, that holds powerful memorial reverberations, represented the intrigue of my doctoral studies; dedicated primarily to the Aiud re-education phenomenon and contextualized in the larger history of the penitentiary, the research covers a time span from 1941 until 1964.

The late re-education from Aiud (1959-1964) represents the main interest of the doctoral research, as well as the pivotal theme around which the penitentiary's history is being built. My interest in the re-education was first of all motivated by the unique and controversial position that the Aiud re-education holds in the memory of the survivors and in the detention literature.

The re-education process, understood in the larger context of Aiud penitentiary's history (1941-1964), represented a product of the ideological view that the regime projected while repressing "the enemies of the people". The ideological perspective in which communism understood reality reflected itself in the documents of repression. The Securitate files deliver an altered image about prison realities or about the prisoners' activity, an alteration that occurs due to the wooden language and the binomial nature of communist ideology. The ideological relation to the political adversary defined the vision towards prisoners: they were not considered individuals subjected to a regime of detention, but rather enemies of the people who continued to "plot against the regime", which, in turn, justified the repression against them.

From a methodological and historiographical point of view, the thesis approaches the subject of the re-education from a "political perspective" that narrates the confrontation between the regime and the prisoners. Integrating different perspectives, such as the institutional dimension of repression, prosopography, daily life and the prisoners' resistance, the doctoral research attempts to reconstruct the dynamics of the confrontation between the prisoners and the regime, which is particularly specific to communist prisons,

seen as “fronts” of the war between the communist authorities and those who opposed communism. The climax of this “conflict” was, in fact, represented by the Aiud re-education, a process in which the regime invested substantially.

Starting from this theoretical perspective, the doctoral research attempts to reconstruct the political history of the Aiud penitentiary by preponderantly using documentary sources that originate from the archive of the former Securitate (ACNSAS), the National Archives and the Archive of Aiud Penitentiary. This option reveals several historiography issues: the passing of three decades after the fall of communism and two decades following the opening the Securitate archives to the public (through the birth of the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives) requires a capitalization of the documentary sources that made their way into the public. Secondly, such an endeavor targets the validity of the sources and their capacity to restore a traumatic history, a history which the institutions that produced these archival sources attempted to hide. Last but not least, it also a methodological exercise that proposes to test the ability of semantic analysis in deciphering the perspective of the regime, of the repressive institutions, and in restoring a believable history by using documentary sources that illustrate reality through an ideological view.

An aspect worth mentioning is that the option for documentary sources does not exclude memorialistic literature. A “hierarchy” of sources, in the sense of excluding memorialistic literature and the testimonies of survivors in the favour of archive sources, represents a trap that researchers in the history of communism ought to avoid. Apart from being a simplistic and obsolete perspective, particularly regarding the current methodological acquisitions and debates in the historiography of communism, this manner presents the risk of over-evaluating the perspective of the repressive institutions, who thus become more “believable” than the survivors of the Gulag themselves. This is precisely why we must note that our option for documentary sources does not mean privileging the Securitate’s perspective in the detriment of the survivors’.

Structure

Considering that the re-education was a process targeted at the legionary prisoners, who were by definition the ideological enemies of the regime, the thesis reconstructs the history of Aiud by having them in the limelight; this does not exclude, however, other categories of prisoners who transited the Aiud penitentiary. This explains the focus of the research on the Antonescu period (years 1941-1944) and the transition to communism

(1944-1948), a time when legionaries represented the majority of the penitentiary's prisoners. These years uncover an animated carceral universe: prisoners that imagine political projects and plan the recommencement of their political activity after release, and who carry heated debates regarding the future relation with the regime (both Antonescu's regime, the transition regime and then communism); this eventually translated into the emergence of several legionary factions corresponding to the prisoners' beliefs. The years between 1941 and 1948, far from being a homogenous period, represented the context that ultimately shaped the legionary prisoners' attitude towards the future communist regime. In other words, during war years and during the post-war transition period, the prisoners got "accustomed" to the experience of imprisonment and developed strategies of adaptation and survival that they continued to perform even after 1948. Daily life, intellectual debates, solidarity, spiritual preoccupations and political tensions defined the prisoners' activity in the Aiud penitentiary before and after the instauration of communism.

For the prisoners inside the Aiud penitentiary, the 1944-1948 transition period represented the context of the first "confrontation" against the communist regime that was gradually taking its steps towards instauration. Different opinions regarding the desirable attitude towards the Romanian Communist Party spread during these years, their variety depending on the ideological orientations (factions) of the legionary prisoners. Attitudes varied, from prisoners who wanted to approach the Communists with the view of being released, like those from Horia Gheorghiu's group, to those in Victor Biriş's group, who were intransigent towards the administration. The tense context also made stand out the "mystics", a group of prisoners who openly declared their renunciation to any political combat and the assumption of their Christian identity.

In 1948, the definite instauration of communism and the creation of the Securitate brought major changes to the Aiud penitentiary, as an expression of the newest repressive policies. After the re-organisation of the penitentiary system, Aiud became a prison destined for prisoners of intellectual professions, along with "war criminals" (the former ministers and generals of Antonescu's government). Moreover, the carceral regime, the informative surveillance and the detention conditions worsened, which, in the context of the general growth of the number of prisoners, led to a higher death rate. The prisoners adapted their daily activity to the new detainment conditions, while at the same time developed strategies of "manipulating" the administration. Such a case were the "double agents" who, under the alibi of informative work, actually managed to improve the

prisoners' situation, by peddling food, medicine, clothes and information. An entirely exceptional event that marked the history of the confrontation between the prisoners and the regime was the March 1957 hunger strike; initiated by the National Peasant Party's political prisoners, and enjoying the rally of legionaries as well, the hunger strike was a protest against the inhuman conditions of detention.

The re-education process that took place between 1959 and 1964 was the climax of the confrontation between the prisoners and the regime. To ensure the success of the re-education, the regime unsparingly invested institutional, material and human resources. A new team made from young Securitate officers was brought to the direction of the penitentiary; leading them was Gheorghe Crăciun, a seasoned and experienced Securitate colonel. A new institutional structure was created, the Aiud Operative Group; it was ranked in importance equally to the Regional Directions of the Securitate and was led by colonel Gheorghe Crăciun, having as main objective the co-ordination of the re-education process for the legionary prisoners. An institutional restructuring also took place, as the Aiud Operative Group was pulled from the authority of the Cluj Regional Direction of Securitate and was placed under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Minister Alexandru Drăghici was directly involved in the re-education process, making frequent visits to the penitentiary.

From the regime's perspective, the purposes of the re-education were both political and moral: the dissolution of the legionary organization and the annihilation of its capacity to reactivate politically post-detention; the legionary leaders' de-solidarization from their political past and the public declaration of cooperation with the new regime; a political and personal self-blaming and last, but not least, the moral discreditation of the prisoners through the mere act of their participation to the re-education.

To ensure the success of their mission, the Operative Group deployed an intensive informative work among the prisoners, using human resources (informers) and material resources (operative technique), aiming to obtain a detailed documentation of the prisoners' daily activities. The informative work was the "the engine" of the re-education: through it, the Operative Group became familiar with the prisoners' positions and attitudes and was able to effectively coordinate the re-education.

On what concerns the re-education, euphemistically named by the documents "cultural-educational work", the Operative Group structured their efforts on two levels, according to their target groups: the legionary leaders and the large majority of the

prisoners, either members of the legionary movement or unaffiliated sympathizers. Firstly, they focused on subjecting the legionary leaders to constant pressures (investigations, blackmail, exposure, isolation) in order to make them accept the re-education. A decisive role in re-educating the legionary leaders was held by Victor Biriş, a former legionary leader himself, who was the Securitate's main agent of influence among the prisoners. Secondly, regarding the re-education of "common" prisoners, of those who did not hold degrees or functions in the hierarchy of the legionary movement, the Operative Group employed a far less intense "cultural-educational work", mainly pursuing only their de-solidarization from the legionary organization and their acceptance of the communist realities, along with the promise of integration within the settings of the regime.

The methods used by the Operative Group were diverse, and integrated at the same time "ideological persuasion" (cultural activities in the re-education clubs, Marxist bibliography, and propaganda movies), psychological pressure (exposure, blackmailing, investigations) and coercive measures (isolation in the Zarca cells, famishment). A less impactful strategy among the prisoners was the promotion of the regime's achievements, not only through the broadcasting of documentary films and television journals during the club sessions, but also through the trips organized throughout the country for several of the legionary leaders (including destinations such as Bucharest, Prahova Valley, Cluj, Hunedoara). Through these, the Operative Group successfully proved the "solidity" of the communist system, which was enjoying popular support; this successfully destroyed whatever remnants of hope the prisoners had in the fall of the regime.

The success of the re-education is arguable in two spheres: politically and individually. The political purpose of the re-education, which was the dissolution of the legionary organization and the elimination of any possibility or intent of further anti-communist activism, was successfully achieved. The "defeat" of the main legionary leaders (Nicolae Petraşcu, Nistor Chioreanu, Ion Dumitrescu Borşa, Radu Mironovici), who proclaimed self-judgement, incriminated the legionary movement and urged the prisoners to accept their integration in the communist society was a success for the Operative Group, who achieved the moral discreditation of these highly-viewed prisoners. The leaders' acceptance of the re-education was a trend-giver for the vast majority of the prisoners, either legionary members or not, who understood that the legionary organization was politically obsolete, its destiny had ended and that the possibility of post-detention political activism was an ideological chimera.

On the other hand, individually and morally, the re-education did not achieve the same success. With the exception of several traumatic biographies, such as Victor Biriş's, the large majority of the imprisoned did not appropriate the re-education among their personal values and beliefs. This imposes a dissociation between the "formal" re-education, expressed through the prisoners' participation in the re-education club sessions, and the real ideological conversion. In other words, the re-education did not convert the prisoners from legionaries to communists.

The consequences of the re-education on the lives and destinies of the former political prisoners after their release from Aiud register the relevance of the ideological stigma that followed the prisoners until the end of their lives. In the eyes of the Securitate, the former prisoners were, first and foremost, legionaries potentially capable of re-enacting their counter-revolutionary activity and who, on account of this, should be kept under permanent surveillance.

Continuous surveillance, the intense pressure and the repetitive discreditation measures employed by the Securitate in the post-detention life of those released from Aiud, illustrate the ultimate purpose of the re-education, which aimed, beyond the destruction of the legionary movement, at the ideological restructuring of the prisoners, particularly their personal discreditation and, by extension, the memorial discreditation of their prolonged suffering and of the years spent in detention. With this purpose, the Securitate created and permanently amplified among the former prisoners the suspicion of collaboration with the regime, precisely to further compromise, discredit and isolate them from the rest of their acquaintances.

Moreover, a paradoxical aspect revealed by the post-carceral destiny of the prisoners was the fact the regime and the political police continued to relate to the survivors of Aiud in the same ideological view, irrespective of their position and attitude during the re-education. The Securitate constantly viewed the former prisoners as enemies of the regime, therefore the so-called "benefits" of their collaboration with the repressive authorities were insignificant compared to the obstacles that the Securitate continued to pose for them. Not lastly, it should be emphasized that, until the final days of the communist regime, the Securitate fought against those prisoners who enjoyed the prestige of "resisting the re-education" and who had earned the respect of their fellows, particularly through their refusal of collaboration with the regime's authorities. Towards them, the Securitate used extremely diverse methods of surveillance and pressure, which varied from

creating and exploiting personal and professional troubles, to warnings, investigations and isolation of the respective former prisoners.

The re-education also had its cultural consequences, notably the collaboration of former political prisoners Nichifor Crainic, Radu Gyr, rev. Ion Dumitrescu Borșa, Victor Vojen, Gheorghe Parpalac, Iosif Costea, Radu Budișteanu, Cristofor Dancu and rev. Dumitru Stăniloae in the pages of *Glasul Patriei* newspaper. It is worth emphasizing that the regime cynically instrumented the need of socio-professional integration of these prisoners, by using them in the propaganda directed against the Romanian exile. The regime obtained three major benefits out of this “relationship”: 1) it confirmed the exile the utter defeat of any form of internal opposition; 2) it legitimated itself through the public support of several representative personalities of the anti-communist resistance; 3) it discredited the authors of the articles in the eyes of the Romanian exile.

The analysis of the memorialistic literature dedicated to the Aiud re-education revealed the distinct and sometimes contradictory perspectives in which the witnesses narrate re-education. The apparent humanness of the administration, in which the emphasis lays on the psychological pressure rather than on physical torture, along with the different recounts and tales about the re-education created memorial tensions. Therefore, although they apparently contradict themselves, the distinct positions of the witnesses faithfully reflect the complex phenomenon of the re-education, that sought, first of all, to fragilize the trust between political prisoners and to play them off against each other.

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