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**The repression of intellectuals in communist
Romania (1956-1961)**

SUMMARY

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SUMMARY

Keywords: communism, political repression, Securitate, political trials, intelligentsia, literary circles, political police, cultural politics, repression of minorities, field theory.

The establishment of the communist regime in Romania in 1948 brought about significant social and political changes and prompted the authorities to focus on attracting the intelligentsia to the side of the ruling elite by dismantling or reorganizing the economic, cultural and political structures inherited from the inter-war period. The communist leaders set up or reorganized a series of official unions (the Union of Writers, Fine Artists and Literary Circles) which led to the delegitimization, infiltration and, eventually, elimination of autonomous cultural structures in society. One such structure that stood at the intersection of culture, politics and symbolic prestige was the 'literary circle'. The institution of the cenacle, also known as a salon or literary circle, facilitated the inter- and trans-generational transmission of a group's cultural memory, representing an alternative ideological pole that reinforced identities that were supposed to have disappeared from the post-war social dynamics. The authorities' desire to stop any form of cultural association unauthorized by the regime and unsupervised by party activists was manifested, in parallel with the repressive campaigns, by extensive surveillance, infiltration and undermining of these meetings by the secret police, the Department of State Security (the Securitate). However, the old social and cultural identities could not soon be replaced by the ideological directives of the communist elites, but were preserved through unstructured intervals of everyday freedom, which included reading forbidden literature, the circulation of samizdat, access to the forbidden stock of libraries, the distribution of censored books in closed circles and other unofficial methods of cultural multiplication.

The doctoral thesis entitled *Repression of Intellectuals in Communist Romania (1956-1961)* deals with three political processes in the late 1950s and early 1960s - the 'Noica-Pillat' trial - in a way that is intended to be original and innovative, trial held between 24-27 February 1960 in Bucharest, the 'German writers' trial of 15 September 1959 in Braşov and the 'literary circle' trial of 24 June 1960 in Baia Mare - on the charge of organizing 'counter-revolutionary' groups whose aim was to 'undermine the state order'. In reality, the groups were made up of people with strong cultural and artistic leanings who had met spontaneously or regularly in literary circles. The novelty brought by the research lies in the valorization and analysis of the literary meetings both as a social reality and as an element of the narrative construction operated by the Securitate to legitimize its repressive acts. In this way, the operational concept

of the *cenacle* has come to be defined as the sum of the social events and narratives attributed to it by different authorial voices: participants, informers, Securitate agents, victims' families and memoirs. In addition, sociological studies, which analyze the interaction of agents and institutions at the micro-level, have provided a set of valid conceptual tools to address this issue. Given the social dimension of culture, the study developed the premise that what can be defined as 'culture' is intrinsically a socially shared creation, which develops from and through communication and which, in order to gain symbolic pre-eminence, needed social and institutional sanction. In this way, the association of several intellectuals within restricted groups was a natural form of cultural and symbolic validation, and the intrusion of the political factor emphasized the participants' strategies of resistance or adaptation.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of the repressive system of the communist regime in Romania, with a focus on the methods used by the Securitate to destroy social relations, the fabric of interpersonal trust and cultural groups that carried out politically benign cultural activity outside the direct control of the state. In order to achieve this objective, the paper brings into the historiographical debate the role that the concept of the 'literary cenacle' played in the economy of repression between 1956-1961 and the way in which this structure was orchestrated by the Securitate in order to transform everyday cultural gestures into subversive actions. The paper analyses the process of the narrative construction of the guilt the intellectuals who were supervised, investigated and convicted by the Securitate officers in collaboration with the military prosecution and the courts. For a comprehensive understanding of the regime's ambitions to orchestrate the repression of these targeted groups, the demonstration focused on three case studies starting from the opening of the informative surveillance to the moment of the final conviction. Where sources were available to reproduce the post-detention life of political convicts, a brief account of this aspect was given at the end of each chapter. We considered the post-detention period to be representative for understanding the social and cultural status of the former political prisoners who were seeking a form of social re-integration, a need that paved the way for the formal collaboration agreements with the Securitate and influenced their particular evolution in relation to the collective experience of the group in which they had previously been included.

The main aim of the paper is followed by several objectives that the argument has attempted to validate and demonstrate. Since the political, cultural and social levels intersect in the process of the narrative construction of political guilt, the demonstration was carried out on related, juxtaposed and interdependent directions: the establishment of the internal functioning system of the Securitate and the hierarchy of decisions concerning the repression,

the role of censorship in the integration or marginalization of cultural actors, the possibilities of interpersonal association and the drawing of boundaries between the public and the private in the context of the intensification of social persecution. The first objective lies in the need to provide an answer as to the Securitate's motivation for the composition and sentencing of the groups of intellectuals in the final formula, according to the indictment.

The conclusion indicates that the composition of the political trials was the result of the complex interactions between the higher and lower levels of the Securitate, the officers' strategies to bring as many people as possible under the umbrella of a common guilt was part of the objectives of operational work. Also, the arbitrariness of the agents in choosing and documenting the cases was taken into consideration as part of the operational interests within the 'problems' of the directorates and services of the Securitate.

The second objective was to establish the connections between the professional, social, cultural and financial status of intellectuals prior to their arrest and the functioning of censorship mechanisms, which influenced the course of action of writers in the event that their writings were published, and thus remunerated. In addition to this, the intrusion of the Securitate into the cultural interactions of the persons under investigation often had a detrimental effect on their professional development. Last, but not least, the argument goes that the operational interest of the agents, services and directorates of the political police was primarily driven to constructing an enemy identity. In this case, operational interest (which included decisions of superiors, interpretations and reinterpretations of informant notes, mandatory work rules, ramification of social networks through new confessions of persons under investigation, etc.) constructed a person's typology rather than his or her actual social behaviour. Social rank, forms of association of intellectuals and methods of cultural communication, as well as the status of regime collaborator, were of little importance in determining the destiny of groups targeted by the Securitate. This was demonstrated by the condemnation both of intellectuals who were integrated into the political system, and implicitly into the cultural field, and of those who were marginalized and did not exercise public authority.

A first research question to which the research tried to provide an answer was related to the extraction of the 'cénacle' from the social reality in which it was ideologically produced by the Securitate agents: where was the 'cénacle' in the national culture as a whole and, in particular, within the communist cultural field? Did it represent a public social reality or was it a subversive cultural structure whose anonymity gave it protection from possible intrusion by the secret police? After all, did the Securitate's definition of the 'cénacle' coincide with the reality of this form of socialization?

The main research hypothesis is that the political trials carried out under the Criminal Code became legal realities as a result of the Securitate's politicization of everyday gestures through discursive-narrative means. In the case of the 'Noica-Pillat' group, the 'German writers' group and the Baia Mare 'literary circle', the Securitate's strategy aimed at building 'counter-revolutionary groups', whose guilt was legally framed under the provisions of Article 209 of the Criminal Code. In this way, the analysis proposes to change the classical paradigm of understanding repression by demonstrating that these trials were not show trials, but repressive actions carried out behind closed doors, in a private rather than a public setting. Show trials could be considered as premeditated actions to denounce personalities from the artistic world, such as the case of Milița Petrașcu and Marius Nasta, which, however, are not the subject of the present study and do not fit into the given pattern of analysis.

The trials under article 209 were ideological constructs of the communist establishment, in which the 'guilt' of intellectuals was constructed by an authority that read certain cultural gestures in an ideological reading grid, emphasizing the gap between the reality of the facts and the hostile interpretation of the regime. The "Noica-Pillat" group was condemned on the basis of the Securitate's instrumentalization of the reading and dissemination of the works of Constantin Noica (*Stories from Hegel, Reply to a friend from afar, Anti-Goethe*), Dinu Pillat (*Waiting for the Hereafter Hour*), Emil Cioran (*La tentation d'exister, Lettre a un ami lointain*) and Mircea Eliade (*The forbidden forest*). This was the main accusation for the conviction of the 23 people included in the "intellectuals' trial" by sentence no. 24 of March 1, 1960. The German writers were accused of writing and publishing literary works whose 'aesthetic', 'apolitical' and 'double-meaning' content was portrayed as undermining socialist culture. The group was accused of carrying out 'activities to undermine the regime in the educational sphere'. Last but not least, the women participating in the Baia Mare literary circle were convicted for promoting Hungarian 'chauvinist' nationalism.

The second research hypothesis supports the idea that the criminal sentencing of cultural groups was as much a matter of the internal logic of the Securitate apparatus as of the dynamics of the cultural and political field in which literary circles functioned and interacted with other institutional agents. From this point of view, the topic lies at the intersection between the public and the private, which leads to the broadening of the motivations that culminated in the criminal conviction. These motivations include: the personal ambitions of officers and informers, the desire for professional advancement, the obligation to comply with a rule, voluntary or forced denunciation, the attempt to conceal past compromising episodes (such as the adherence to the Iron Guard), strategies of exculpation during the investigation as part of

the 'prisoner's dilemma' or even the arbitrariness of a situation which is almost impossible to understand with the sources available to the researcher. The arbitrary situations consist both in the obscure and often banal motivation of the secret police agents to include or omit a person from the future batch. If in the case of the German writers and the Hungarian literary circle the hierarchy of guilt was rather relative, given the small number of persons convicted (five accused in both cases), the 'Noica-Pillat' trial reveals with particular clarity the method by which the Securitate fragmented and distributed the collective guilt in a pyramidal form among the 23 members of the group. The hierarchy of guilt was expressed in sentences ranging from 25 years of hard labour to 7 years of correctional imprisonment for the 'leaders' - Constantin Noica and Constantin 'Dinu' Pillat. They were followed by the liaison persons, then by those who had discussed literature at private meetings and, last but not least, by those who had multiplied and translated the banned works. The construction of guilt had as its nodal point the creator of culture, the intellectual authority of the group, and the people who took care of the cultural 'logistics' (translation, multiplication, mailing of letters and manuscripts) became elements related to him.

The existing historiography on the subject of political trials has dealt with repression either in a descriptive and expository manner, without offering a trans-disciplinary analysis at the level of social relations, or in a predominantly quantitative manner, which has neglected the particularities and singularities of each case, such as the previously unexplored 'literary circle' trial from Baia Mare. As a result, the lack of qualitative, in-depth research on this topic has opened up the prospect of tackling a subject that has been little explored previously. To this we can add the personal motivation for the choice of the subject, which meets the more general interest in researching the phenomenon of repression and the communist regime.

Given the vastness of the documentary information and the complexity of the phenomenon of communist repression, I considered it important to qualitatively deepen the process in which the socialist system aimed to discipline its citizens. This does not bring an element of absolute novelty, but it offers different nuances to the already established perspective of the 'totalitarian' school of thought, which places repression in terms of the absolute control exercised by the communist state over society. In reality, the cultural and political levels did not successfully communicate in a unidirectional level of subordination, from the centre to the periphery, from superior to inferior. They communicated multidirectionally and had the capacity to generate unpredictable outcomes. Social discipline was often an effect achieved as an institutional ricochet, and not always as a predetermined political goal. This was due to a vertical and horizontal interaction between several institutions

and decision-making agents, as well as within the same institution, such as the Securitate. Ultimately, the motivation for choosing this topic lies in the attempt to expand historical research on communist repression by understanding the interactions between multiple intellectual groups in different hierarchical positions and the political police of the communist regime, namely how this relationship was reflected in the informational, criminal, network or SIE files from the Securitate archives.

From a historiographical point of view, the main works that I have consulted and methodologically used belong to Stelian Tănase¹, Cristina Văţulescu², Ioana-Zoia Ursu³, Corneliu Pintilescu⁴, Inna Kochetkova⁵. The most important contributions on the repression of the intelligentsia during the communist regime are represented by the works of Mioara Anton⁶, Dennis Deletant⁷, Gabriel Andreescu⁸ and Liliana Corobca⁹. In understanding the mechanism of functioning of the Securitate, the studies of Marius Oprea¹⁰, Liviu Pleşa¹¹, Anisescu Cristina¹², Florian Banu and Liviu Țăranu¹³ and the CNSAS yearbooks, published by the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives¹⁴, were included in the research. Vladimir Tismăneanu's *Stalinism for all seasons* (2014) and Stelian Tănase's *Elite and Society: the Gheorghiu-Dej government: 1948-1965* (2006) were the main scholarly sources for

¹ Stelian Tănase, *Anatomia mistificării 1944-1989*, 1st Edition, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997.

² Cristina Văţulescu, *Cultură și poliție secretă în comunism*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2017.

³ Ioana-Zoia Ursu, „*Rugul Aprins*” de la mănăstirea Antim: istorie, memorie, discurs, PhD thesis, coordinator: prof. univ. dr. Doru Radosav, Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, 2020.

⁴ Corneliu Pintilescu, *Mecanisme judiciare ale represiunii politice în România (1948-1956): studiu de caz: Tribunalul Militar Cluj, 1948-1956*, PhD thesis, coordinator: prof. univ. dr. Gheorghe Cipăianu, Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, 2010, edited and published as *Justiția militară și represiune politică în România comunistă: (1948-1956). Studiu de caz: activitatea Tribunalului Militar Cluj*, Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2012. Other notable publications on repression are: Corneliu Pintilescu, *Procesul Biserica Neagră 1958*, Ed. Aldus, Kronstadt, 2008; Corneliu Pintilescu, „Literatură și vinovăție politică în cazul procesului scriitorilor germani (orașul Stalin/Brașov, 1959)”, in Ioan Popa, Mihaela Grancea (ed.), *Interferențe culturale în Sibiu secolelor XVIII-XX*, Astra Museum, Sibiu, 2014.

⁵ Inna Kochetkova, *The Myth of the Russian Intelligentsia: Old Intellectuals in the New Russia*, Routledge, London and New York, 2015.

⁶ Mioara Anton, *Cuvintele puterii. Literatură, intelectuali și ideologie în România comunistă*, Institutul European, Iași, 2015.

⁷ Dennis Deletant, *Teroarea comunistă în România: Gheorghiu-Dej și statul polițienesc 1948-1965*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2001.

⁸ Gabriel Andreescu, *Cărturari, opozanți și documente. Manipularea Arhivei Securității*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2013, and *Existența prin cultură: represiune, colaboraționism și rezistență intelectuală sub regimul comunist*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2015.

⁹ Liliana Corobca, *Controlul cărții: cenzura literaturii în regimul comunist din România*, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 2014.

¹⁰ Marius Oprea, *Bastionul cruzimii. O istorie a Securității 1948-1964*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2008; *Banalitatea răului: o istorie a Securității în documente 1949-1989*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2002.

¹¹ Liviu Pleşa, *Politica de cadre a Securității 1948-1989*, Cetatea de Scaun, Târgoviște, 2022.

¹² Cristina Anisescu, *Arhivele Securității*, vol. I-III, Nemira Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004-2008.

¹³ Florian Banu, Liviu Țăranu, *Securitatea 1948-1989. Monografie*, Cetatea de Scaun Publishing House, Târgoviște, 2016.

¹⁴ The CNSAS Yearbook is available at: <http://www.cnsas.ro/caiete.html>.

interpreting the political context of the 1950s. Stefano Bottoni analysed the relationship between the authorities from Bucharest and the Hungarian minority in Romania, with case studies on the repression within the Hungarian Autonomous Region and the Hungarian intelligentsia in the period following the 1956 Hungarian revolution¹⁵, which facilitated the understanding of the status of Hungarian women gathered in the literary circle of Baia Mare, as well as their motivations for joining such a structure.

With regard to the German minority in Romania, the studies of Vasile Ciobanu¹⁶, Corneliu Pintilescu¹⁷ and Ottmar Trașcă¹⁸, have edified the status of this minority in the 20th century Romania, with emphasis on the interaction of different cultural groups, often antagonistic, within the community, as well as on the ways in which the Romanian authorities tried to restructure and build the loyalty of these groups in order to drive their cultural production to the regime.

The method used in the present research is a qualitative one, given that previous approaches on the subject of political processes have been predominantly quantitative and descriptive, through official document collections, oral testimonies and memoirs. By qualitative method we understand the most detailed possible analysis of the actions and cultural and social attitudes of the intellectuals in question, in parallel with the way in which the Securitate narratively constructed their image as ‘enemies of the people’. The research implies a strong inclination towards the biographical method, which seeks to reproduce the path of the accused intellectuals, as well as an image of their lived experiences, beyond the distorting version of the discourse created by the secret police. One method of primary source research used in argumentation is the method of discourse analysis and narrative studies. The present thesis takes up and develops methodological perspectives that come from historical revisionism and post-revisionism and that lie at the intersection of political discourse analysis, group identity, interpretive registers and self-referential narratives. The construction of identity and implicitly of the referential narrative is realized through discourse and results from the complex interplay of endogenous narrative (how intellectuals define themselves) and exogenous narrative (how they are defined from the outside, by the political regime and the Securitate).

¹⁵ Stefano Bottoni, *Moștenirea lui Stalin în România: Regiunea Autonomă Maghiară 1952-1960*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2021 and *Transilvania roșie: comunismul român și problema națională 1944-1965*, Ed. Institutului pentru Studierea Problemelor Minorităților: Kriterion, Cluj-Napoca, 2010.

¹⁶ Vasile Ciobanu, *Germanii din România în anii 1918-1919*, Honterus Publishing House, Sibiu, 2013.

¹⁷ Corneliu Pintilescu (ed.), *In honorem Vasile Ciobanu: studii privind minoritatea germană din România în secolul XX*, Honterus Publishing House, Sibiu și *Procesul Biserica Neagră 1958*, Aldus, Kronstadt, 2008.

¹⁸ Ottmar Trașcă, *Un veac frământat: germanii din România după 1918*, Ed. Institutului pentru Studierea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, Cluj-Napoca, 2018.

Discourse analysis enables the researcher to deconstruct the self-attributed or externally attributed multi-layered narratives in order to understand the individuality of the convicted in the overall cultural and social world in which they manifested.

A more accessible and at the same time interdisciplinary approach comes from the fields of history, sociology and the relationship between the cultural and the political fields. We applied the *field theory*, defined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The *field* consisted of the areas of production, circulation, appropriation and exchange of goods, services, knowledge or status, as well as the competitive positions held by agents in their attempt to accumulate, negotiate and monopolize different types of power resources, called *capitals*. The dominating agent, namely the Political Bureau of the P.M.R., the Securitate and the Prosecutor's Office, held the political power to create a group and to 'legally' enshrine it into reality. As a result, the *performative power* of naming brought a group into an institutionalized form that had previously been a juxtaposed association of individuals. Under communism, the holders of power were the only ones who validated and authorized the claim to scientific competence and authority, dictating the course of culture through political pressure. As a result, we share the view of Katherine Verdery that 'cultural and knowledge values play a central role in the maintenance and transformation of social orders, and that the defence of one or other of these values is part of this', which is why 'culture and intellectual activity are inherently political (not based on politics, but interwoven with it)'¹⁹. In the *field of power*, the political leadership and the Securitate sought to maintain total control of all forms of capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) by repressing the social networks that had previously held them through their functions and roles in society. These structures included intellectuals, priests, political elites, industrialists, political parties, the royal house and other social associations.

In order to prepare my research, I studied the archives of the National Council for the Study of Security Archives (A.C.N.S.A.S.). The archival fonds that formed the basis of the documentation were the Criminal, Informative, Documentary, Network and SIE fonds. In addition to these are the archival documents from the 'Eginald Schlattner' personal archive, which placed under the administration of the Transylvanian Evangelical Academy of Sibiu. A significant source consisted of compilations, such as volumes of documents, oral and written testimonies compiled by researchers or articles in different periodicals. The second category of

¹⁹ Katherine Verdery, *Compromis și rezistență. Cultura română sub Ceaușescu*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1994, p. 40.

sources is represented by prison memoirs, diaries, diaries, interviews and testimonies of convicted persons, acquaintances or family members.

Since archival documents reflect a distorted version of the social reality, they were analysed in direct connection with the memoirs of the victims in order to establish the causality, course and consequences of political repression. The documentation of the social networks consists of notes of informative action, informative reports, summaries, action plans, communication notes between the regional directorates of the Securitate, arrest warrants, interrogation minutes, home search minutes, the notes of cell informants, medical records and official documents from the trials. Linked with secondary sources, these unpublished documents allowed us to reconstruct the profile of the victim, while maintaining a high degree of subjectivity which we were aware of. The documentary value of these institutional testimonies remains low, as they reflect the official position, and implicitly the perspective of the communist establishment with regard to the people whose freedom and rights were violated. As a result, the challenge of our endeavour also consisted in reconstructing the biographies of the victims using the aspects omitted in the Securitate documents. In this direction, the primary sources convey ideological messages beyond the textuality of the document, which points to a meta-textuality as a reflection of the relationship between definition, information and historical truth. The methods related to understanding the omissions and silences in the Securitate archives are linked to the revisionist and post-revisionist historiographical approach to totalitarian regimes, which go beyond the analysis of the communist regime as a monolithic structure and propose to understand it as a centralized system with communication defects in the transmission of information and institutional instructions from top to bottom.

The research is divided in an introductory part, followed by five chapters, conclusions, bibliography and annexes. The aim of the first chapter is to introduce the research topic in the broader context of political repression at the end of the 1950s in communist Romania. Then, we tried to establish the status of intellectuals in the regime, the activity and functioning of the Securitate at the social level and the general legal framework of the trials in question.

The second chapter aims to address the three case studies from a comparative perspective in order to highlight both their similarities and differences, and to provide a historical tool of analysis in terms of the categorization of certain cultural groups as literary circles. This chapter highlights the reproductive nature of the repressive policies through the use of patterns of operative work strategies by the Securitate, on the one hand, and on the other hand, of spontaneous strategies improvised during the investigation.

The third chapter deals with the formation of the ‘Noica-Pillat’ group from a cultural, political and legal point of view. The chapter is divided into several sub-chapters concerning both the formation of micro-groups and the inclusion of persons in the future political lot. The method of analysis used in this chapter is mainly *biographical*, by assembling a gallery of portraits whose destinies intertwine, but whose developments have been treated individually and, as far as possible, differentiated.

The fourth chapter deals with the internal dynamics of the German cultural groups, with a focus on the activity of the writers from Sibiu and Braşov and on the methods used by the Securitate to extract and convict five intellectuals out of a vast social network. The method of analysis used in the case of the ‘German writers’ differs from that of the ‘Noica-Pillat’ group. It is a more concentrated demonstration, where individual developments were included in a more general, collective social dynamic, without insisting on detailed biographical aspects.

The fifth chapter analyses the trial of the Baia Mare 'literary circle' of Hungarian women who were accused of setting up an illegal literary circle in which they spread alleged nationalist ideas. The three case-study chapters follow a common methodological pattern by exposing how the Securitate monitored, arrested, investigated and convicted the persons in question. In addition to these aspects, at the end of each case study, the demonstration detailed how the group was sentenced to prison.

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