

The Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania

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Mihnea Berindei, Dorin Dobincu and Armand Goșu (eds), *Istoria comunismului din România. Vol. I: Documente perioada Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej (1945-1965)* (București: Editura Humanitas, 2009), 845 pp.; *Vol. II: Documente Nicolae Ceaușescu (1965-1971)* (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2012), 701 pp.; *Vol. III: Documente Nicolae Ceaușescu (1972-1975)* (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2016), 805 pp.

In 2006, the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania produced a 600+-page final report on the history of communism in Romania.¹ It was intended that the *Raport final* would be supplemented by a volume of documents covering 1945-1989, designed to provide “a useful tool for those investigating the communist era and to offer a comprehensive image” of that period in Romanian history. The editors deliberately avoided republishing documents that were already in circulation, but despite this, the annex rapidly expanded once work began on the considerable blank spaces in the documentation of the Ceaușescu years. Three monumental volumes have now appeared: one on 1945-1965 and two covering 1965-1971 and 1972-1975. There is a possibility that this handsomely produced and edited series will eventually total seven volumes.

The documents are published in chronological order and have been chosen for their relevance to the themes of the *Raport final*. The editors provide a wealth of essential biographical information related to the lives of party members and others mentioned in the documents along with useful bibliographical detail, but otherwise refrain from editorializing on the material. Use of the volumes is facilitated by the inclusion of excellent summaries in Romanian and English and comprehensive indices. And the source documentation is impeccable.

It would be pretentious to attempt to “review” these documents in terms of trying to synthesize them, but it is fascinating to “browse” this material. Vol. I of course includes documents related to the functioning of the Communist Party

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between 1945 and 1965, Soviet-Romanian relations, the Stalinization of Romania, the 1946 elections and the mechanisms of repression involved in the destruction of civil society (Nrs. 5, 10, 28, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 97, 180, 185, etc.); the functioning of the prison camp system (Nrs. 28, 29, 42, 97, 110, 111, 113, 114); Romanian exiles (Nrs. 98, 188); the collectivization of agriculture (Nrs. 38, 39, 43, 48, 61, 71, 74, 76, 82, 177); and party policy on ethnic groups, religion, education and culture (Nrs. 11, 12, 15, 17, 56 [on Zionism, Nrs. 14, 20]).

Among some of the most interesting are the following: Document Nr. 5 from April 1946 is a record of the discussion of Romanian politics between Gheorghiu-Dej and Teohari Georgescu on the Romanian side and Stalin, Molotov and Malenkov for the Russians. Stalin occasionally cracks a joke, agrees with Romanian communist leaders' plans and suggests modifications to the same. It was in this conversation that Stalin agreed to hand Marshal Antonescu and his collaborators over to Romanian authorities for trial.

Document Nr. 7 is the handwritten autobiography of Sergei Niconov, a Soviet agent in Dej's entourage, followed by Nr. 8, his personnel file. Such materials were a typical practice (for other examples, see Nrs. 83, 84, 112, 167, 168, 196) and provide insights into Romanian Communist Party personnel policies.

Four documents from Sighet Prison (Nrs. 110, 111, 113, 114) shed interesting light on the Romanian gulag. By the way, the existence of Sighet was a "state secret"; and most of its prisoners were dignitaries and intellectuals from pre-1948 regimes who were being held without being formally charged with anything.

Document Nr. 132 was a lengthy (4-½ printed pages) report presented to the central committee of the union of working youth (UTM) in the aftermath of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 by Ion Iliescu (who became the first post-communist president of Romania nearly 50 years later). Iliescu attacked "formalism" in the work of the UTM, decried the presence of "anarchic, liberal, and demagogic" attitudes among students (particularly in Cluj and Timișoara) in 1956, and pledged that revolutionary consciousness would be ramped up. This was followed by Document Nr. 133, which took no fewer than 22 pages to record the subsequent discussion of the Iliescu report by the UTM Central Committee. In Document Nr. 16 from 1948, the leaders of the UTM are listed and frankly categorized. Iliescu is described as "Devoted to the party He has initiative in work. Skilled. Has a certain theoretical level. Being young, he judges things in a hurry. He has growth prospects." His soon-to-be wife Nina, also a leader in the UTM, was described in the same document as

"devoted to the Party. Doesn't have enough initiative. Has little critical spirit. Has very little Marxist knowledge Has class consciousness. Has poor prospects. Growing slowly."

Document Nr. 94 is amusing. It was a 1953 report on "sabotage" at the *Scânteia* publishing plant: over a dozen examples of errors that produced embarrassing meanings in sentences, e.g., "Stalin is not a beacon in our struggle" instead of "he is our beacon in the struggle"; or a reference to Stalin's work as "ruining the peasantry" instead of "reunifying the peasantry"; or referring favorably to "tsarist learning" instead of "Stalinist learning." These were regarded as the product of deliberate opposition that needed severe repression.

Nr. 85 from 1952 set up security arrangements for members of the Central Committee as well as special stores for the nomenklatura including a toxicology lab to monitor their food. Nr. 92 from 1953 bemoans the difficulties of recruiting sufficient numbers of cultural activists in Iași. Nrs. 152 and 153 present statistics on surveillance activities for the period 1950-1953, which involved some 580,000 people. Nr. 156 is from 1960 commuting the death sentence of historian Aurel Decei, who had emigrated to the West in 1947 and was kidnapped in East Berlin in 1957 and hauled back to Romania.

Vol. II, covering 1965-1971, follows a similar pattern to Vol. I and illustrates in general the core themes of the *Raport final*. These include the transfer of power to Ceaușescu and the gradual repudiation of Gheorghiu-Dej. This mirrored the Soviet model following Lenin's and Stalin's deaths as Ceaușescu managed to simultaneously attack the Gheorghiu-Dej regime while ignoring his own key role in that regime. This reminds one of the strategy of another preternaturally shrewd peasant communist, Russia's Nikita S. Khrushchev. The creation of the Ceaușescu cult of personality was one result as the nomenklatura was stuffed with Ceaușescu loyalists while members of Gheorghiu-Dej's entourage were gradually marginalized. The direct subordination of police organs to the new Secretary-General; the scope and limits of a degree of regime liberalization; and the concurrent elements of re-Stalinization (such as natalism beginning in 1966, religious repression, re-ideologization of culture, and campaigns against Western youth culture) are also illuminated by these materials.

The most interesting documents include Ceaușescu's early opposition to the cult of personality (Nrs. 2, 4, 5); his use of corruption and abuse of power investigations to purge the bureaucracy (see Nrs. 57, 58, 60, 72 and 74 on the Pătrășcanu case and other "rehabilitations"); documents (Nrs. 10, 17, 30, 84, 89)

related to control of religion; the attempt to co-opt national history (Nr. 22) and escalate the role of cultural activists (Nrs. 92, 93); Ion Iliescu's role in the 1968 Christmas repressions in student hostels (Nr. 78); a "strict secret" document (Nr. 86) viewing with alarm the number of people trying to leave Romania; and a decision in 1970 to ban contacts between Romanians and Radio Free Europe (Nr. 87). Also revealing are insights into what Ceaușescu and his cohort really thought about the West they were cozying up to in the 1960s and 1970s (Nrs. 33, 39, 40, 41, 43, 46) as well as events connected with the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia (Nrs. 62, 64, 66, 70, 75, etc.).

The third volume, on 1972-1975, is a fitting tribute to one of the co-editors, Mihnea Berindei, historian and civic activist, who sadly passed away from cancer in 2016 shortly after the volume was compiled. He had been both the primary promoter of the project and of the complex scholarly apparatus of the three volumes so far. His clarity of vision about the Romanian communist regime was unfortunately a rare quantity among his compatriots. He was only 68-years-old.

Highlights of Vol. III include evidence of how Ceaușescu continued to expand his personal control over key aspects of the Romanian communist state and culture, whether this was something as nearly trivial as anniversaries (Nrs. 67, 113, 122), national symbols (Nr. 80), the collective history of Romania (Nr. 91, 100); and the proliferation of medals, pensions and so forth (Nrs. 20, 34, 46, 81, 92, 94). In addition, these years saw renewed efforts to control and "coordinate" the historical profession (see Nrs. 5, 43, 91, 136) and the social sciences (Nrs. 27, 76). On another front, the creation of a Ceaușescu cult of personality was also unleashed (Nr. 48). And in Document 16, the rise of Elena Ceaușescu was completed with her elevation to the executive committee of the Party Central Committee.

One is impressed in these documents by the growth of Ceaușescu's authoritarian instincts. For example, in Document Nr. 5 of 1973, Ceaușescu's growing obsessions with counter-revolution, economic sabotage and foreign spies come to the fore. In Document Nr. 34 of 1974, at a meeting which substantially cut the number, size and print runs of periodicals, he has the most to say and it was usually of the "I know more about this than any of you" sort; of the "we don't need a lot of similar publications, let's get rid of one," or "bi-monthly is good enough" type. In the end, the semi-literate former peasant and manual laborer cut 25% of the personnel in publications. His analysis that food shortages in 1974 (Nr. 58) were the result not of failures of the system, but of hoarding and foreigners. And in Nr. 65, he

argued that agricultural problems would be resolved if the population was more disciplined.

The regime continued to be preoccupied with money-grubbing. Nr. 23 reveals how the Party acquired hard currency; Nr. 55 dealt with the failures of export trade and Nr. 56 covered suggested remedies; Nrs. 66 and 90 discussed the use of various sectors of the economy to support the Party; Nrs. 17, 26, 30, 38, 42, 75 discussed the use of German and Jewish minorities to raise funds through ransoms.

Then there was the case of old guard communist Constantin Doncea (Nr. 33), whose estate was comprised of two houses, an apartment, two farms, a personal art collection of over 200 paintings, 36 sculptures, 535 icons, a collection of rare stamps and coins, and 8,500 rare books. His collections were valued at 2,229,000 lei and his real estate at 3,600,000 lei. An investigation after his demise examined how he was able to accumulate such wealth on the meagre salary of the professional Party bureaucrat. Documents 78, 80, 84 deal with the suicide of Chivu Stoica, which according to Ceaușescu was owed to his "irregular" "debauched" lifestyle.

The volume also contains documents related to the 1973 suicide of Ceaușescu's personal surgeon, Dr. Schäechter (Documents 11, 12, both labeled "Strict Secret. Single Copy"). The doctor was allegedly driven to this extreme step by the surveillance techniques of the Securitate. Ceaușescu was outraged to discover that no one in the Party was immune from spying by the Securitate. He declared the Securitate agents involved to be "sick" and "to have lost any sense of humanity." As a result, the Minister of Interior was sacked, the surveillance directorate disbanded and its functions transferred to the Army.

During this period, the pro-natalist policies of the regime continued (Nrs. 21, 71). So, too, did the conflict between the church and state. See Documents Nrs. 9, 10, 21, 22, 30, 50, 70, 102, 133.

These volumes are a godsend for students of the history of communism in Romania. The archival information is scrupulously precise and provides a road map through the maze of documentation for anyone who wants to go further. The accompanying biographical and bibliographical information alone is worth the price of admission. Such a work is often an unappreciated labor of love. Kudos to the editors and publishers.

Note

1. Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed., *Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România. Raport Final* (București: Editura Humanitas, 2006), available on line at [<https://archive.org/details/ComisiaPrezidențialăPentruAnalizaDictaturiiComunisteDinRomânia-Raport/page/n3/mode/2up>]. A revised print version appeared in 2007 from Humanitas, 879 pp.