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## **“Teaching about the communist era in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”**

European Seminar for Educational Staff  
Sinaia, Romania, 3-5 May 2001

### **Report**

**Council for Cultural Co-operation**

**Learning and teaching about the history of Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

in association with the

**In-Service Training Programme for Educational Staff**

**Strasbourg, 2001**

The **Council of Europe** was founded in 1949 to achieve greater unity between European parliamentary democracies. It is the oldest of the European political institutions and has 43 member states,<sup>1</sup> including the 15 members of the European Union. It is the widest intergovernmental and interparliamentary organisation in Europe, and has its headquarters in Strasbourg.

With only questions relating to national defence excluded from the Council of Europe's work, the Organisation has activities in the following areas: democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms; media and communication; social and economic affairs; education, culture, heritage and sport; youth; health; environment and regional planning; local democracy; and legal co-operation.

The **European Cultural Convention** was opened for signature in 1954. This international treaty is also open to European countries that are not members of the Council of Europe, and enables them to take part in the Council's programmes on education, culture, sport and youth. So far, 48 states have acceded to the European Cultural Convention: the Council of Europe's full member states plus Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Holy See and Monaco.

Four steering committees – the Steering Committee for Education, the Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research, the Steering Committee for Culture and the Steering Committee for Cultural Heritage – carry out tasks pertaining to education and culture under the European Cultural Convention. They also maintain a close working relationship with the conferences of specialised European ministers for education, culture and the cultural heritage.

The programmes of these four committees are an integral part of the Council of Europe's work and, like the programmes in other sectors, they contribute to the Organisation's three main policy objectives:

- the protection, reinforcement and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms and pluralist democracy;
- the promotion of an awareness of European identity;
- the search for common responses to the great challenges facing European society.

The education programme of the Steering Committee for Education and the Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research currently covers school, out-of-school and higher education. At present, there are projects on education for democratic citizenship, history, modern languages, school links and exchanges, educational policies, training for educational staff, the reform of legislation on higher education in central and eastern Europe, the recognition of qualifications, lifelong learning for equity and social cohesion, European studies for democratic citizenship, the social sciences and the challenge of transition, learning and teaching in the communication society, education for Roma/Gypsy children in Europe and the teaching of the Holocaust.

These multilateral activities are complemented by targeted assistance to the newer member states in bringing their education systems in tune with European norms and best practice. Co-ordinated under a strategy of "partnerships for educational renewal" projects are carried out, in particular on education legislation and structures, citizenship and history teaching. The priority regions are South-east Europe and the countries sprung from the former Soviet Union.

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<sup>1</sup> Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

**COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL CO-OPERATION**

Learning and teaching about the history of Europe in the 20th century

in association with the

In-Service Training Programme for Educational Staff

European Seminar for Educational Staff on

**“Teaching about the communist era in the 21st century”**

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3-5 May 2001

**Report by**

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*Attila SZAKOLCZAI, Institute for the Hungarian Revolution of 1956*



## Introduction

Inarguably, Communism remains one of the main areas of debate in 20th century history. At the present stage of the project “Learning and teaching about the history of Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century”, which has already addressed themes relating to nationalism, the role of women, the Holocaust, new information technologies and use of historical documents, a new subject of discussion therefore offers added interest and food for thought.

But what in fact was Communism? From the definitions of Marx and Lenin to those of Jean Besançon or Ronald Reagan, this historical phenomenon has been much discussed with frequent mention of the “present time” or “immediate history”. In its specific context, the appearance of Communism as a socio-political system caused a tremendous upheaval in the geopolitical scheme. Early support, hope and enthusiasm later gave way to a great deal of despair, discontent and not least oppression. Backed by an economic, political and cultural philosophy, Communism proclaimed the liberation of mankind but ultimately became an instrument of oppression and torture. Nor should it be forgotten that in becoming a universal political system, Communism exerted attraction and fascination, at least in some respects, on many artists, intellectuals and writers. It is not exactly known what current figures are worth for assessing the Communist regimes. Books by Martin Malia, François Furet, Stéphane Courtois and Pierre Hasner have incisively impressed upon the public the human effects of Communism, offering some admittedly incomplete statistics on the liquidation of political opponents, the Stalinist terror, the deportations and the labour or re-education camps.

The true dimensions of the Communist regimes began to be discovered even during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Let us mention, for instance, Nikita S. Khrushchev’s secret report to the 20<sup>th</sup> Soviet Communist Party Congress, the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s works, the activity of political dissidents, and the testimonies given after 1989 during the break-up of the Communist regimes. But what is learnt about Communism at school? Most probably dates, key figures and some aspects relating to political programmes. What is known, though, about the nature of Communist ideology and the way in which it actuated and influenced millions? Can pupils fully grasp the truth, the role of the Communist parties and the Communist International, or the aim of the dissidents’ activity? What is really known about the daily life of the millions who lived and worked under the Communist regimes? These are just a few of the questions worth answering.

## Teaching the history of the Communist era in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

The seminar held at Sinaia (Romania) in the splendid architectural setting of the casino built in 1913 sought to analyse the development of Communist regimes, their relationship with the society in which they originated, and their impact in socio-economic, political, cultural and ideological terms. The 30 participants from 12 states also wished to examine the new history syllabi and textbooks and to exchange information about teaching experience.

Participants agreed that it was important for the younger generation to know truly what the Communist regimes and 20<sup>th</sup> century history have amounted to. In that regard, Council of Europe support to reform of history teaching is crucial, as was pointed out by Dr Carole REICH, Deputy Secretary to the Council of Europe Education Committee.

Professor Mihai RETEGAN presented the high points of the installation of Communist government in Romania, stressing that the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Romania (1958) and the Romanian Workers' Party statement in 1964 on problems of the world Communist movement were milestones along the individualistic road travelled by Romania to gain its place in the Communist world, one which culminated in the Bucharest government's refusal to participate in the intervention of the Warsaw Pact troops to quell the Springtime of Prague (1968). This independent posture should be extensively presented to pupils to teach them the essence of a process fundamental to 20<sup>th</sup> century history - Communist rule.

Ms Nicole TUTIAUX-GUILLON highlighted the changes made to the history curriculum and textbooks in France after 1969 in relation to the subject under discussion. This change shifted the focus towards the USSR, often treated on a par with the great Western powers. The 1917 Russian Revolution remains an important subject since study of the history of the Communist period should look beyond the political aspect to the social, economic and cultural aspects. Accordingly, in France the desirable aim of studying this period should be to make clear to pupils the economic and political basis of Communist regimes and the causes that led to their final downfall in 1989. However, even after the 1989 events, many stereotypes persist in teaching about the history of this period.

The French syllabus is compulsory throughout the country (with some exceptions for non-mainland regions). The aims of history and geography education are the same from primary school to the end of the secondary course: developing critical judgment or discernment in order to sustain political identity and a sense of the world's past; equipping young people to comprehend the world and approach it with sensitivity. In this perspective, curricula are wide open to the world (already the case at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and must provide insight into the major political and economic changes. The general structure of the curriculum in France means that the same theme is studied once in lower secondary school and again in upper secondary. Russia, the USSR and Europe are studied in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> years of the lower secondary course and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and final years of the upper secondary course. Attention is also paid to geography, because teaching about Russia's present-day economic problems and spatial organisation involves historical factors (a history-based explanation is important in school geography in France); the change in the geography syllabus is of relevance to the new outlook on the economic effects of Communism.



Where development of course content is concerned, the two landmark dates are 1993 and 1995/96. In 1993 the curriculum registered the changes which had occurred in 1989, and some adjustments were made, the main one being not to test certain subjects in the final examination, owing to the lack of reliable knowledge and the uncertainty of the facts taught. During those years, in fact, many teachers no longer taught anything about Russia but its topography, climate and population. In 1995 and 1996, the new curriculum was prescribed for lower and upper secondary school; it is worth examining and comparing with older ones.

In history teaching, three years are relevant: the final year of lower secondary and the last two years of upper secondary. In the course on the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Communist model is presented as bygone, linked with the bipolar organisation of the world. The Socialist world no longer features in the French curriculum, and the former European Communist countries are not studied except as regards the Soviet sphere of influence. The chief concern is to give pupils some notions for understanding how Communist Europe ended or, as the curriculum puts it, exploded. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe are no longer studied for their own sake as was the case before 1989, but simply mentioned as part of the general presentation of Europe (natural space and population) and in relation to the EU as candidates. In the final years of the lower and upper secondary courses, however, attention centres on the EU and France. This is permissible because, with reference to the USSR, these European Communist countries no longer represent an alternative economic and social model.

The main change is felt to be the one concerning the USSR in the first half of the century. The 1917 revolution is still studied, but the period from October 1917 to the death of Lenin is not compulsory. Stalinism is now explicitly compared to Fascism and Nazism and the two are studied together as totalitarianism and totalitarian regimes. This explicit analogy is something new, at least in school. In 1996 when this curriculum was issued, historians were divided on the legitimacy of such an analogy and especially on drawing a parallel between the Stalinist and Nazi mass crimes and associating totalitarianism with both regimes, as well as on the question of talking about a Stalinist or Communist form of totalitarianism.

The outlook is clearly oriented towards politics and civil society. It is not certain that this always affords a meaningful historical perspective. The contrasts and differences between Fascism and Communism can be played down by contemplating the similarities or convergences, even on a superficial level. The economic and social aspects of history can be discarded and the evolution of political systems obliterated by a monolithic perspective. There is also a danger of discrediting Communism through an implicit as well as an explicit association with Nazism.

It is not easy to ascertain what is really taught. The teaching profession is based on a liberal conception; in France, teachers are free to use whatever method they prefer or find effective for their pupils, and in fact the curriculum just dictates the general subjects and proposes detailed content for only a few of them. Teacher trainers and inspectors promote and recommend a few types of content and methods, but have no real influence.

As a rule, the perennially dominant conventional items of knowledge taught in class are set out in that form in the textbooks: generally accepted, uncontroversial, irrefutable and with documentary proof. Teacher-pupil dialogue of course occurs, but as a means of testing knowledge and getting the class to accept what is taught. The teacher asks the questions and

sometimes answers them too when the pupil does not reply quickly. The dialogue has a very rapid pace, with only a few seconds between the teacher's question and the answer. This style of teaching allows no time for anything but superficial thought, and its main aim is efficient presentation to the pupils of what they need to learn and retain. The content is made up of events and sometimes historical or geographical definitions. There are few pauses for reflection or critical thought because they do not appear necessary.

Thus history and geography classes do not make for analysis of current events. A few questions are addressed by pupils' class projects or documentary research but are not actually taught. The intention of teachers is to impart historical or geographical knowledge, not to dabble in journalism. Normally they use news items where they discern a potential for making the past or the geographical facts more meaningful. In the 1990s in France, a few teachers made reference to the nationalist tensions in the Balkans in order improve pupils' chances of comprehending the pre-World War I situation in that region. The present sheds light on the past, but more by way of strange analogies than through a critical comparative history approach. Teachers do indeed answer pupils' questions, but most of the replies are given privately and very briefly at the end of the lesson. Teachers are committed to cautious treatment of media content which they consider unnatural but use in an effort to provide additional information that will place the question in a broader context or recall the historical background to the event. This was their predominant attitude towards the young people interested in the development of the Balkans or Russia.

In this commentator's opinion, teaching the Communist period can cause teachers to doubt their subjects.

Attila SZAKOLKCZAI extensively presented the situation regarding teaching the history of the Communist era in Hungary. Plainly there can be no teaching without knowledge to impart and without pupils who are presumed receptive to knowledge. Their level of motivation depends on family and social background.

Researching (and teaching) contemporary history is a worthwhile but also thankless task.

It is worthwhile because it holds greater interest than the earlier periods and therefore has higher discussion and publication potential. According to the Hungarian syllabi, at a minimum the period is taught at the end of each phase of education - elementary school and grammar school - when the pupils are probably most interested in discussing it.

On the other hand, it is a thankless task because there are legal and other barriers. Many events and relations remain unknown and inaccessible.

Objective scholars seeking the whole truth certainly wish to know more than those who witnessed the period care to remember. The Institute of the 1956 Budapest Revolution holds oral history records from almost 900 interviews, but many of our efforts to obtain more statements have been fruitless.

Scholars of the recent past find themselves in a very difficult position when yesterday is suddenly sharply differentiated from today, when everyone who took part in yesterday's events becomes suspect. This is because everyone in public life belonged to the State party

which imposed dictatorship, until the delayed emergence of the opposition groups. Nowadays, a very different construct has presented itself to the reform-minded Communists in Hungary who acquired their merits in 1989. At that time, the important point was the distinction between them and the others in power. Now, the salient fact is that they were members of the government formed by the State party. The history of Communism has to be salvaged from complete oblivion. The task matches that period, with the interest of the governing class in State security and the estrangement of the ideocratic system from its ideological roots. In normal circumstances the past continues into the present, but here a trauma has occurred.

The basic school syllabus, under normal democratic and constitutional conditions, cannot differ from or exceed the professional view accepted by society. In other words, a period of history can only enter the syllabus after much study and research and after the publication of at least one complete monograph laying down the precise standards. It is only possible to teach those sections of the past which have been fairly thoroughly explored and ascertained. Otherwise, the history of the Communist period in Hungary cannot enter into the school curriculum. Although many descriptions, analyses, reminiscences and collections of documents have been published, they are very unevenly distributed. Comparatively well researched and analysed periods alternate with periods of obscurity, and the disproportion is of course reflected in the textbooks and materials.

At a certain level of abstraction it is historically accepted that the Communist period was the sad and gloomy chapter of Hungarian history, but there is no professional or social consensus on the basic details.

Unfortunately historians are divided not so much by professional as by political coteries. They disagree over the starting date of the Communist system in Hungary. According to the national and conservative school of thought, it all began in 1945 when the Red Army drove the Nazis from the country, and one dictatorship followed another. The foundations of Communist power were already in place that year.

Teaching of this period is dubious according to the strictly professional criterion, but the fact that it will have to be common and taught as a school subject is not denied.

Teachers are embarking on teaching without sound knowledge or a past to rely on. The situation is all the more distressing in that most of them gained their diplomas before the change of system, so they must realise that what they learned is not the truth. In Hungary, teachers are incapable, or partially so, of replacing the invalid material with something else which has professional or human credibility. Teacher training still suffers from teething troubles, so that courses are of an uneven standard. Often they do not cover the entire period, or are stopped in order to raise funds.

Successive governments have been incapable of motivating teachers, and compulsory courses have yielded poor results. Although each party's electoral manifesto since the change of system has included a salary increase for teachers, the promise has not been kept. Teachers' limited income, comparatively low before 1990, has further decreased since 1990. As this often compels them to take another job or to give private tuition, they are too busy to undertake demanding preparation.

History teachers, during the crisis of the Communist system, often found themselves in a position of considerable ideological freedom. Then after 1989 they were alarmed to learn that the new government had political demands to make of them and their subject. As a result, teaching by a right or left-leaning textbook was by no means without repercussions on their career or their chances of being accepted by their pupils. The same social reflex has continued to operate under the left-wing coalition which replaced the first right-wing government in 1994, though of course the bias is reversed.

Up to 1994 (and since 1989), the way to recognition and success was barred by an attitude severely condemning Communism and the exercise of power prior to the change of system. The period of government dominated by Socialism forced teachers to be cautious, for it was led by a Prime Minister who had held an important appointment under the former regime.

It would be mistaken to infer from these comments that Hungarian teachers are faint-hearted and cynical, veering in whichever direction the wind of politics blows. Their constant readiness to meet the wishes of the authorities stems from the social reflex that persisted after 1989. Even so, it would be easy to free ourselves from the political wishes conveyed by the official media if we had solid and irrefutable knowledge, could live and work in an environment of confirmed democratic instruction, and received salaries affording a decent standard of living.

Historians as a profession, and consequently history teachers in Hungary, have not found any satisfactory solutions to the problems posed by the characteristics of the history of Communism. There is always a special emphasis on political history in Hungarian school history teaching.

Other suitable methods for describing the period exist, but they would incur considerable provocations. Social history is held back by dearth of useful information. This is because the political yardstick of the time certified that the discoveries made were false or concerned subjects not lending themselves to interpretation outside the Communist world. One example is the category which lumped together on an equal footing the village priest, the policeman, the big landlord and the industrialist.

In Hungary as elsewhere, people try to equate Communism with Nazism, another type of genocidal 20<sup>th</sup> century dictatorship. The national conservative school of thought flatly refuses to draw any moral distinction between the two. Indeed it sometimes regards Nazism as the lesser evil, deeming it more rational because it did not persecute its own people and claimed fewer lives. Relying on that reasoning, attempts have been made to prosecute and condemn both types of dictatorship equally and in the current school year it has been compulsory for grammar school pupils to commemorate the Holocaust on one day and the victims of Communist dictatorship on another. The underlying political motives of these commemorations have lessened their impact, and so has the impossibility of associating a chosen day with certain specific events in the mind of the public.

Yet there is no reason to make the image of Communism still darker in the attempt which, if successful, will create a black spot reflecting nothing at all. The phenomenon of neo-Communism is nevertheless beginning to appear as something very modern among young people whose natural rebelliousness makes them ever susceptible to radicalism. For

many of them, the red star is not a fearsome symbol, and Lenin and Trotsky are not devils incarnate but ideologists promoting a more or less serious alternative and not to blame if their ideas are ruined in practice.

Whether referred to as socialism as in Germany, national communism or authoritarian socialism as in Romania, this historical process embodies a very complex sociocratic reality. It is still more pronounced in the states that witnessed extremely rigid Communist regimes. Speaking of Romania's national communism, Professor Adrian CIOROIANU raised the topic of history as related to memory, considering that since 1989 a few nations have too quickly forgotten the true countenance of the Communist regimes. Also of note are the aspects which should be more prominent in history textbooks, as for example the consequences of the personality cults surrounding the great leaders, and the real face of these individuals who were human beings after all.

During the discussion, two 4<sup>th</sup> year students from the University of Bucharest history faculty presented some specific aspects relating to the history of the Communist period in Romania. In her statement, Christina ABRAHAM highlighted the political biography of Elena Ceausescu.

Political biography in historiography requires the identification of numerous problems:

- Political behaviour of the Communist elite
- Selection conditions of the elite and members' rise in the party system
- Political culture of the Party
- Intermediaries in the dissemination of the personality cult.

Her case study centres on Elena Ceausescu, wife of the Secretary General of the Romanian Communist Party, Nicolae Ceausescu. In historiography and textbooks, Elena Ceausescu is merely the evil counsellor at her husband's back. In the first textbook published after 1989, government was described as a "family affair", and just one alternative textbook presents Elena Ceausescu as the second most important figure in the Party and the State.

The rise of Elena Ceausescu in the Party demonstrates a "uniform career" typical of a party frozen in the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat (the majority were workers) and in political patronage, pursuing an anti-intellectual, authoritarian cultural policy.

Elena Ceausescu completed only the first three years at primary school; she was a worker in her youth; her lack of intellectual abilities was compensated by the political backing of her husband as supreme leader of the Party. Almost unknown in the Party and completely unknown in the scientific community, she was to become an omnipresent figure in public life in the 1970s.

In 1972 Elena Ceausescu was promoted to the Party Central Committee and a year later to the Executive Committee, the chief organ of Nicolae Ceausescu's power. Three other women were promoted with her, the most important being Lina Ciobanu, President of the National Council of Women. Elena Ceausescu was to become the model of the dynamic

woman in socialist Romania. In 1974 Lina Ciobanu called her “The shining example of what the women of our society should become”.

In 1977 Elena Ceausescu joined the Permanent Bureau, the supreme body of the Romanian Communist Party. In 1979 she became head of the member selection board of the Central Committee and thus the second-ranking Party figure. At the same time she joined the government as President of the National Science and Technology Council, a state agency co-ordinating scientific policy.

Elena Ceausescu was not the only member of the Ceausescu family to attain high Party office.

Nicu Ceausescu, the spoiled child of the family, was first secretary to the Union of Communist Youth and in 1982 he too was promoted to the Central Committee. In 1993 he was Minister for Youth Affairs.

The General Secretary’s brothers also held special posts in the Ministry of the Interior and Defence.

The precedence of family connections over competence as criteria for selecting members was to transform the leader into a protector of his clients who condoned his power. An example is the President of the Council of Ministers, Manea Manescu, who in January 1979 (Elena Ceausescu’s birthday) read an open letter addressed to Elena Ceausescu by the Party Executive Committee, acknowledging her political authority as the “revolutionary Communist militant” and “universal scientist”. This marked the beginning of her personality cult, built on the “technocrat” model.

Eugen STANCIU presented another type of historical source for understanding the Communist period in Romania: science fiction literature.

Use of fiction as documentary evidence on society carries risks. Literature presents imaginary scenarios and characters according to its own narrative convention and thus does not necessarily represent an incontestable picture of reality. However, the elements of reality present in the science fiction works published in Romania are those that the Party would have liked to hear, and the outward form in which writers enveloped the idea generally stands the test of ideology and censorship. The entire machinery of censorship was aimed at controlling literature and making it the direct instrument of Communist government.

Even with all the aforementioned elements which confine literary works to a rigorously defined and controlled framework, fiction nevertheless offers a dimension where many scattered pieces of information on the various aspects of the Communist lifestyle are discernible. Ideologically, science fiction writers could not be expected just to single out a typical problem - scientific method or morality - and provide details of how it might be overcome. After all, censorship could not be omnipresent in Romania. Despite the path prescribed for them, writers and even engineers were fortunate in that their work required imagination. The duality involved in the writer’s profession was very considerable. Through a character or other implicit content, these writers were able to suggest ideas that they could never express on their own behalf.

In conclusion, science fiction is very important as a historical source. Firstly, it provides two types of information together; on the one hand it points up the values which the Party wished to propagate, and on the other hand, indirectly, the real values which are also an excellent source for study of private life.

Besides archival documentation, this type of source provides a fresh outlook on the history of Communism. Accordingly, such sources can be analysed as part of the history teaching process and reveal a special class of material. Pupils will learn that the historical perspective gives a literary text new connotations in addition to the type of interpretation which they owe it during the Romanian lesson.

Use of sources of this kind can lead to comprehension of the political phenomenon from within, and understanding of Communist history is equal if not higher in importance to aimless speculations about, for instance, what Stalin or Ceausescu were thinking at a given time.

A proper understanding of this major 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon should also rely on archives, many of which are still waiting to be opened in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The case of Greece was presented by Vassilios VASSILIADES. In his opinion, Eastern and Western Europe have very different experiences of Communism. Western Europe experienced it potentially though never actually as an external strategic opponent and an internal political option, Eastern Europe as a totalitarian regime which not only deprived people of civil liberties but also brought decline in the direction of the peripheral economies.

Greece is the only country in Eastern Europe not to have become Communist in the 1940s.

Under the crisis conditions of Axis occupation from 1941 to 1944, a national popular movement of mass resistance called the National Liberation Front (EAM) was formed and led by a small Communist party (KKE) with many young and enthusiastic new devotees. The party strategy was to seize power through the EAM after the 1948 conflict, on the Prague model. However, according to the Churchill-Stalin pact of 1944, Greece came within the Eastern sphere of influence. In October 1944 the KKE was involved in an uprising in Athens which was quelled by the British forces, and agreed to hand over its weapons. Then in 1946 the KKE reverted to armed revolt encouraged by persecution of followers, and this escalated into civil war (1946-1949).

The Truman doctrine (March 1947) ensured large-scale American economic and military aid. The KKE was inevitably crushed on the military front and politically outlawed. Never having possessed the power to develop into a Stalinist dictatorship, it can only be remembered for its quality of a deadly threat and, for its supporters, as a pledge of popular democracy. Up to 1967, anti-Communism was in complete control of the State structure and the political system, while Communist sympathisers sided with parliamentary democracy of a guided type.

Something happened which was to alter things with time: Greece became the only country in the post-war West European bloc to undergo a military coup imposing a

dictatorship of colonels which, from 1967 to 1974, abolished all civil liberties, tortured opponents and collapsed in 1974 after offering the ideal opportunity for the Turkish invasion of Cyprus and ethnic cleansing of all Greeks in 40% of the northern part.

The other Communism again recalls the dictatorship of the colonels, and the KKE poses no threat to the democratic system with its marginal vote in a prosperous and influential lower middle-class society; it is treated with restraint rather than animosity as an historic party of misguided fanatics and martyrs. But they did represent a threat to democracy in 1940, and a whole generation of them were mercilessly persecuted up to 1974. Their bitterest enemies imposed the colonels' dictatorship which persecuted and even tortured brother officers who opposed it. The painfulness of this memory has marked people who were students at the time and are now in their forties or fifties; it is passed on to all schoolchildren by the national anniversary of the November 1973 uprising of polytechnic students and other similar historical memories. The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe was not celebrated in Greece. Rather, it has nonplussed all those who speak as socialists and behave as capitalists. History textbooks reflect this confusion: Communism is presented as well-meaning but ending in betrayal of the noble promise. Indeed, this message is not even taught, since only the Greek history sections of the textbook for the final secondary year are taught and examined.

Dzidra LEPINA presented the situation regarding teaching of the history of the Communist era in Latvia. With the separation of the Baltic states of the former USSR, new history syllabi and textbooks have been issued, particularly emphasising the effects of Soviet domination and deportations of the Latvian population to Siberia. As the tendency to forget history is making itself increasingly felt, the role of non-governmental organisations has become much larger even in the Baltic countries, a role of educating youth in the spirit of respect for the past, which ought not to be abandoned.

In his address, Ulrich RESECK presented the way in which contemporary history is taught in the Land of Sachsen-Anhalt, stressing that the best lessons are those which begin at the teacher's initiative. People living in present-day Germany's Eastern regions are now discovering the true history of the German Democratic Republic but also the diplomatic effort towards German reunification. Thus history has the role not only of transmitting information but also of helping to build the national identity.

A lecture of great interest was delivered by teacher Ioan SCURTU on some new problems in approaching the history of Communism.

The first problem raised was whether there really existed a Communist society and a Communist regime. The founder of the theory of so-called scientific Communism, Karl Marx, held Communist society to be characterised by an abundance of material and spiritual assets. It is a well-known fact that this was never achieved in any Communist country but that, especially in the 1970s, deterioration was recorded in the economic and material situation and had serious effects on people's standard of living. In certain countries, as for example Romania, things reached the stage where ration cards were introduced for the chief consumer goods, while on the intellectual side the existence of censorship and ideological control over education, science and culture severely restricted freedom of artistic expression and intellectual fulfilment.



It can of course be argued that the political regime was basically constituted by the Communist Party which directed society and imprinted its own name on it.

A close analysis of reality can bring us to the conclusion that we did in fact try to build a society on a certain ideological model imposed by the Communist Party or more precisely the Party apparatus which formed a downright oligarchy. The real facts have demonstrated that Socialism was built with predominantly remedial methods affecting the fundamental interests of citizens - firstly their basic right of free expression.

The second problem that arises concerns the documentary background to this historical period. The Communist era should be approached on the basis of documents, principally from official records. History is founded on facts, and they alone can allow correct interpretations uncoloured by subjectivism or by the current political circumstances. Analysis of documents must be carried out with a sharper critical sense than for other periods; no other stage of history has been marked by such a large discrepancy between political propaganda (the official document) and the material reality. The usual function of propaganda was to manipulate public opinion and divert it from the real problems. For instance, in order to justify political repressiveness, the authorities fabricated all kinds of anti-Party conspiracies aimed at the State, and the citizens were summoned to various meetings to be shown the danger posed by the various public enemies, who were lashed with proletarian fury.

Where the Communist era is concerned, the oral confessions of persons who lived through it and were implicated in certain events have a very important role. Time and again, the written documents omit certain realities, particularly frame of mind and inner disquiet. Consequently oral testimonies are invaluable, describing the atmosphere in which people lived, the machinations behind certain elevations to or downfalls from public office, how various decisions and even laws could be circumvented, making promises to oust the totalitarian regime.

Analysis of the Communist regime must take account of the double language, which also served individuals as a verbal defence mechanism against the authorities' repressive policy. A certain public style of expression has been recorded on the one hand, professing attachment to the regime and its policy, and on the other hand that of the family or friends. This reality is elusive, but recently access to the *Securitate* records in Romania has made it possible to establish that there were informers even in intimate circles. They took notes which were transmitted to the security authorities, reporting even the blandest statements or jokes which could have a political shade of meaning. It was no small surprise to discover that the collaborators of the *Securitate* as political police included top-ranking personalities some of whom received important appointments after 1989 precisely for the sincerity with which they opposed Communism and the *Securitate*.

## A questionnaire and some findings

To gain a more complete picture of the way in which the subject - the Communist era - is presented in textbooks and syllabi of European states, a small questionnaire was produced and circulated to the participants. Five of the 12 states represented at the Sinaia seminar answered the questionnaire: Greece, “former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, France, Romania and Switzerland.

The questionnaire encouraged the participants to think about the following questions:

1. How many lessons are devoted to our subject area in your country’s history syllabi?
2. Name the principal subjects relating to the Communist period which you approach in class.
3. Is this subject important in your country’s history syllabus?

The results were most interesting.

1. In Greece 4-5 lessons are allocated. In Latvia almost half the lesson time of each history class contains references to the Communist era, since Soviet domination profoundly marked the development of this Baltic country. In the “former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, the subject is handled during one lesson only, whereas in Romania two lessons are allocated in years 7, 8, 11 and 12. Switzerland deserves special attention; because of the Federal education system and its adaptations in the various cantons, it is very difficult to specify the number of lessons since the Communist period is studied in different chapters to which 1-8 lessons are allocated. In France, depending on the level of education - general education classes, leaving classes - the topic is studied over 1-5 lessons.
2. The participants stressed that a wide variety of subjects are studied. In France the emphasis is placed on the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, the USSR under Stalinism, and Cold War international relations, with special interest in the Communist regime in China. In Greece, compulsory subjects cover the Russian revolution (1917), German occupation in the years of World War II and the Greek resistance movement, the Communist revolution in China and the Communist movement in Greece (1914-1945). In Switzerland, the subjects studied are some of the most varied: the Communist Party Manifesto and the Industrial Revolution, the 1905 and 1917 Russian revolutions, the domination of Lenin and Stalin, the Cold War, 20<sup>th</sup> century China, Euro-Communism after 1945, the Communist regime in the German Democratic Republic, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, the Solidarnosc movement and Poland. In Latvia, teachers’ interest focuses on the Soviet occupation and the national resistance movement. In the “former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, the history syllabus comprises common themes: the Russian Revolution (1917), Yugoslavia during the years of the Second World War, Tito’s domination, and Macedonia after the Second World War. In

Romania, subjects of significance for 20<sup>th</sup> century history are studied, for example Lenin and the Bolshevik takeover (1917), Communist experiments in Europe after the First World War, the Communist International, Stalin's domination, the Communist world after 1945, the Communist regime in Romania, and the collapse of the Communist regimes (1989).

3. Understandably, assessing the importance of a subject in history syllabi and textbooks is no easy task. In Greece, the 1917 Russian Revolution and the local role of the Communist movement in the 1950s command attention. In France, prescribed subjects cover Soviet Russia and the major influence of Communist ideology in this country in the 1920s. Switzerland is again a special case since, for the subject area in question, there is no one subject that outweighs another. In Latvia, the special importance of the analysis stems from the fact that the country was Soviet-dominated and the same effects are felt today. Romania's normal historical development was suspended for 45 years by the Communist regime, and for that reason the subject acquires special relevance not only for those involved in the teaching process but also for ordinary people. In the "former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", study of the Communist regime commands attention because the first Macedonian state was recognised during that period.

It is possible to draw the conclusion that in most cases the subjects approached are drawn from the political sphere. There are still too few references to daily life, social history, impact of ideology on ordinary people, the dissidents' activity and the political oppression of the period when Communist regimes held sway.

*English-French bilingual group*

Chair: Claude-Alain Clerc  
Gheorghe Borovnia  
Attila Szacolkeczai  
Walter Sotolartz  
Elvira Rotundu  
Simona Stigeer  
Ljupka Smilanovska  
Vassilios Vassiliades  
Ulrich Reseck  
Gabriela Mitkova  
Mihail Kiryazov

*French-speaking group*

Chair: Nicole Tutiaux-Guillon  
Carole Reich  
Veronica Fuselova  
Mihai Retegan  
Antonio Eduardo Mendonca  
Doru Dumitrescu  
Mihai Manea  
Liviu Lazar  
Danila Obesterescu

## **The working groups**

The seminar provided the opportunity for worthwhile scholarly debate as well as a profitable exchange of information on syllabi, textbooks, the history teacher's role, and modern teaching methods. Discussion in the working groups proceeded freely and without bias, identifying certain problems which European history teachers face today.

As history invariably and almost immediately reflects political changes, as for example in Latvia, Portugal and Romania, the participants discussed at length what should be altered in the area of teaching the history of the Communist period so that young people properly grasp the significant changes of the present-day world. Thus, history as an object of study can aid comprehension of political events, since pupils often regard history as realistic fiction and have a poor understanding of many contemporary events (forgetfulness of history).

Many participants appreciated the specific role of oral history and of studying daily life in the presentation of this theme to youth. Teaching it remains a valuable medium for trying to highlight the human ideal that should be pursued by history education. As it is a multifaceted theme, an interesting facet such as the guilt of the internal forces that backed the setting up of the Communist regimes most often remains at the level of desiderata.

At the same time, it is very difficult to make pupils in the Western European countries understand the true dimensions of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. With the main emphasis on the negative aspects, neither pupils nor the public in countries like France, Germany and Sweden know much about the fact that medical service was free of charge under the Communist regimes, even though the quality of medical attention was abysmal. It was stressed that teaching of the subject should take in many aspects relating to sociological and psychological inquiry about those years, with the inclusion in textbooks of the latest scientific research findings and the few exercises in oral history.

As the participants observed, the teacher has a difficult assignment, being required to explain to pupils and teach them how the Communist regimes came into being, who was to blame, and why Western Europe calmly looked on while the Soviet occupation took hold in those regions. At the same time, it is nonetheless true that not every Communist regime in Europe can be spoken of in the same way.

One easily passes over the fact that pupils forget very quickly and do not have the same memories as adults. That is why the teacher must reconstruct the truth through instruction in history and thereby strike a blow against dictatorial regimes.

At the opening of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is imperative for teachers to nurture pupils' critical sense and make them appreciate why they are learning a particular historical fact or event. The textbook is becoming more and more a learning aid for pupils especially. The introduction in many East European countries of alternative textbooks has caused lively debate in society because it often happens, as in Romania, that numerous political compulsions and a mythical conception have outranked rational interpretations.

However, the problem does not appear to be textbooks and syllabi but mainly the teacher's attitude to them. From the angle of studying immediate history, greater attention

must be paid to pupils' level of comprehension and to explanations, in which economic, social and cultural factors should predominate.

Teachers are increasingly required to adjust the educational method, and pupils are becoming partners in the educational process as well as passive recipients of information. That is in fact the basis of interactive teaching. Meanwhile, teachers who cling to traditional methods argue that pure history teaching is easier than, as they say, political instruction skimming rapidly over the last half-century. Still, regardless of precautions, history has to be taught and learned. That is why the teacher will continue to perform the central role because, even if equipped with the best textbook, a teacher without a vocation will alienate young people from history and everybody, not least society, will be the poorer.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

The seminar participants approved the following conclusions and recommendations:

- The history syllabi and textbooks of European countries still contain too little about the role of Communist ideology and on the processes whereby the Communists gained power.
- Presentation of the historical facts and events marking the period of Communist regimes still predominates, to the detriment of exploiting pupils' potential for critical thought.
- Many phases of Central and Eastern Europe's history in the 1950s and 60s continue to be inadequately reflected in the history syllabi and textbooks of countries of Western Europe.
- These events should be approached in a strictly scientific and non-political perspective.
- It is imperative for teachers to use interactive teaching and discussion-based methodology.
- Teachers' in-service training courses should focus more on the problems of 20<sup>th</sup> century history, including study of the Communist period.
- Teaching of this subject can be considered a major opportunity for cultivating democratic values among pupils and the younger generation, and for preparing them to become good citizens in present-day society.

## APPENDIX I

**Nicole Tutiaux-Guillon**  
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**USSR, Russia, Central and East Europe: which approaches in  
 French school history and geography since 1991?**

Teaching recent history or geography of Russia and Central / East Europe is very problematical for teachers. During the last decade the political upheaval in Europe has passed on to historiography and to curricula, imposing some radical bend in what is prescribed. This means for teachers not only looking for information, to update their knowledge, but too adopting a largely new point of view on ex-USSR. This is difficult because it is somehow an ideological turn, not so easy to manage when one believes to neutrality and truth of school history and geography; and furthermore some questions on present Russia and Europe belong to “immediate history”, on which there is neither social nor scientific consensus, and finally that is more interrogations than sure knowledge. I would like in this paper to develop two points: the historiographic bend in the curricula and textbooks; the problems linked to the teaching of unsettled questions.

**The changes in the curricula**

French curricula are compulsory in the whole State (with some fitting out for overseas regions). The aims of history and geography are the same from elementary school to the end of the upper secondary school: to develop “critical mind” or ability to think critically, to sustain political and social identity by transmitting a shared view of the past and of the world, to give to young the means to understand the world and to act sensibly in it. In this perspective, the curricula are largely open on the world (this is true even at the end of the XIXth century) and must echo the important political or economical changes. The general structure of the curricula implies that the same thematic are studied one time in *collège* (medium school) and one more time in *lycée* (upper secondary school). I will speak only here of the *general* upper secondary school<sup>2</sup>. Russia, USSR, Europe are studied on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year of *collège* and on 2<sup>nd</sup> and last year of general *lycée*. I take in account not only history but geography too because teaching the present economical problems and the present spatial organisation of Russia<sup>3</sup> implies the historical factors (the explanation through history is important in French school geography); the change in the geography curricula is significant of a new point of view towards the communist economical consequences.

As for the evolution of the contents, two dates are relevant: 1993, 1995/96. On 1993, the curricula took note of the changes from 1989, and some adjustments are introduced: the main is that such topics would not be tested at the final exam, because of the lack of sure knowledge and of the uncertainty of what to teach. In fact on those years a lot of teachers

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<sup>2</sup> Topics about USSR, Russia and changes in Europe are too studied in vocational and technical schools, but less time is devoted to history and geography, and some questions are optional.

<sup>3</sup> Nowadays, Russia is the only « post-soviet » state taught in France.



don't teach anymore on Russia except on relief, climate or population. On 1995 and 1996, new curricula were prescribed for upper secondary school and for medium school. These curricula deserve attention and comparison with the former ones.

In geography four classes are relevant: "*quatrième*" and "*première*" (3<sup>rd</sup> year of medium school and 2<sup>nd</sup> year of upper secondary school) where Europe is studied; "*troisième*" and "*terminale*" (last year of medium school and last year of general upper secondary school). Before 1989, Russia was taught as a global power, on three basis: because of its (reputed) economic achievements, because of its political influence and capacity to organise a large part of the world, and because of the opposition and struggle with United States. This study was intended to present to students a model that implicitly enhanced or criticised the liberal capitalist one. But it was agreed by everybody, since the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, that Russia was a great power, and since the interwar period, that so was USSR: communism was a way to reach economic power and world power. This approach was correlated with a presentation of Stalinist era as a period of building successfully the USSR economical development.

Since 1995, there is a deep change: in *collège* Russia is no more studied in the last year, where the curriculum deals always with great powers (United States, Europe ... and France); Russia is set now as a European state, as Germany, United Kingdom or Spain, in the curriculum of the former class. Furthermore its study is only optional and I'm not sure that it is generally chosen (no precise information on this point). The recommendation to link geography and foreign languages does not incite to study Russia first. The study of the European countries is generally planned at the end of the year, teaching Germany seems a priority, and so there is no much time, and sometimes not at all for the other states.

The change is different but nevertheless analogous for the *lycées*. As in *collège*, Russia is no more studied as a global power. Its study allows to approach some "problems", and specifically the one of natural constraints. More or less, it is not put on the same rank as European countries (either studied in the former year, or for Germany as a world economic power), it is taught in the same part as developing countries. Implicitly it reveals that communism *failed* to develop Russia at least as a real power. As China is studied in the same part, communism is always linked to economic, demographic and/or natural problems ... and always too to the necessity to limit it or to come out of it to develop a sufficient, dynamic and competitive economy. (But of course it may be that teachers present some problems of present Russia as resulting of a rough passage to capitalism).

East and Central European countries are no more studied for themselves as it was the case before 1989 (as optional example, most times Hungary): they are only touched on through the general presentation of Europe (natural space and population) and through the approach of EU, as candidates. But in both *quatrième* and *première* the attention is focalised on EU and on France. This may be because, as for USSR, they mean no more an alternative economical and social model.

As for history, three classes are concerned: the last year of *collège* and the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the last years of *lycée*. In the study of the second half of XX<sup>th</sup> century, the communist model is presented as a past one, linked to the bipolar organisation of the world. The socialist world in itself is no more a point of the curriculum; former communist European countries are not studied except as area of soviet influence. What is the most important is to give students

some means to understand the end of communist Europe, or as says the curriculum “the burst” of it.

The main change in my opinion is the one concerning USSR in the first half of the century. The revolution of 1917 is always studied, but the period between October and Lenin’s death is not compulsory (in fact it is probably taught quickly, either as a consequence to the communist revolution or as an introduction to Stalin’s ruling). Overall, the Stalinism is now explicitly compared with fascism and Nazism: they are studied together as totalitarianisms or totalitarian regimes. This explicit analogy is new, at least in school. In 1996, when these curricula are published, historians are divided on the legitimacy of such an analogy, and especially of the comparison between Stalinist and nazi mass crimes, on the relevance of "totalitarianism" for both regimes, and too on the question to speak of a "Stalinist" or a "communist" totalitarianism – i.e. on the question of the nature of communism. Where the historians debate, the school decides, not exactly of the conclusion (the curricula do not specify it) but at least of the "right" approach.

The point of view is clearly directed on politics and on the surrounding of civil society. It is not so sure that it implies always a fruitful historical view. The oppositions and differences between fascisms and communism may be minimised in regard of similarities or convergences, even superficial. The economical and social components of history may be discarded, the evolution of the regimes suppressed to a monolithic view. The risk is too to discredit the communism (and not only the Stalinism), by an implicit or explicit association to Nazism. On these points, the curricula do not give any indication. To know better one has to look at textbooks and at "real" teaching.

### **The changes in the textbooks: the example of USSR 1917-1939 in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of upper secondary school (lycées)**

The French textbooks generally offer two main components: a text written by the authors and documents (historic texts, pictures, sometimes maps and graphs). The documents are numerous, because the main practice is to ask students questions on them, in order to support and strengthen knowledge. Some complements differ in either textbook: exercises, documents set in files, definitions etc. Authors are always several, with some academics and more teachers. Between 1989 and 1996, there was a general change, on one hand to a rather common layout (one page of text facing one page of documents), on the other to an abridgment of the authors' text (this does not mean always a simplification: the resulting text may be allusive and really difficult to understand).

Textbooks are very important, not so much because they reveal what is taught really – teachers create their own lessons – but because French teachers inform themselves mostly through textbooks. This may result of a difficulty to get university publications. On this specific question, it has been really hard: recently, several university books have been published on new Russia, on the end of soviet system, on the evolution of Europe<sup>4</sup>, but a few years ago the main publications were in English. The last papers on Russia in the history and geography teaching professional review (*Historiens et Géographes*) were published on 1994.

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<sup>4</sup> Par exemple Van Regemorter, *la Russie et le monde au XXe siècle*, Radavanyi, *La nouvelle Russie*, H. Carrère d'Encausse, *La Russie inachevée* pour l'année 2000.

Furthermore a teacher in secondary school has to teach history from XVIIIth to nowadays (in *lycée*) or from antique Egypt to nowadays (in *collège*), and to teach a nearly universal geography. S/he has no time to read every new publication on every school topic. A review largely distributed (*L'Histoire*) present some serious articles, but it is more a review for general public than a professional one. And some enquiries testify that teachers read few. However, one major reason is that the textbooks propose directly "what to teach" (even if it differs lightly from one to the other) and so lighten the work to recompose a teachable content from university books and papers.

The documents are important too, this time because they are the support of the lesson. Not all of course, but they give indications about which possibilities are open to teachers.

*a new historiography?*

To answer to this question I have compared three main textbooks from 1988 and 1997 (Nathan, Hatier, Belin). In the three, the Stalinism is in 1997 explicitly presented as totalitarianism. This is not completely new except for Hatier: Belin and Nathan used the concept in their previous edition. But it is largely more used in Belin and in Nathan, and it is now used without the subtleties introduced in the 1987 edition. Furthermore, totalitarianism is no more a question with a complex answer, or the result of an evolution (sometimes said "perversion") of Stalinism, it is a characteristic of the regime. The comparison between the fascism, Nazism and Stalinism is differently managed by the textbooks: either a thread of several chapters (Belin) or a point of view in some specific files (Hatier). *VOIR COMMENT COMPARAISON CONDUITE.*

This induces a nearly general silence on social progress (e.g. school is not a way to eliminate illiteracy, but to control young, for example, as in Italy or Germany) that was evoked in the previous editions. Parallel, the new point of view is accompanied by a bend in the presentation of economy: it is so-to-say submitted to the political approach; in the same time it seems that there is no possibility now to present the economical growth as a success. The intention to build a powerful economy, to develop industry and energy, is in the present textbooks less important than the authoritarian collectivisation and the threat to peasantry. If we compare the documents illustrating the evolution of agriculture from 1917 to 1939, the new point of view is clear. The documents relative to a progress are less numerous; some are now set as expressing "propaganda" (pictures) or "official truth" (data); the documents relative to poverty and to terror are more, and more tragic. It is not a reversal, because the 1987 editions evoked the kulaks' elimination; but it was set in a different general frame: the one of an economic project, not the one of a totalitarian control of society.

A more striking change intervenes in the approach of art. The part devoted to socialist realism has increased in a large proportion and is always presented as an expression of totalitarianism, not only because of its links with propaganda, but because of the control of artists and intellectuals and of the submission of art to ideology. The place of the avant-garde, of the burst of modern art during the years of the revolution and even of the Civil War is very limited except in Nathan. In fact it has nearly disappeared.

*a new "truth"*

As always in France, this new approach to history is presented without any reference to the changes that allowed or imposed it. There is no reference to the opening of the soviet

archives, and to its consequences on the credibility of former sources and conclusions, on the possibility to have access to new sources, on the renewed credit allowed to testimonies once discarded. At most one can find some allusion as "archives now attest" that Stakhanov has in fact been helped by other workers. There is no reflection on the teleological link between the collapse of the soviet system and the new school problematic on USSR, and no reference to the renewal of historiography. There are historians' texts (rarely), but mainly of Nicolas Werth, and none of the French or German historians who have been engaged in the controversies on Stalinist mass crimes and on totalitarianism. These controversies are not evoked. This is not specific of "communist topics". This is the result of schooling.

Knowledge instituted as school one, at least for history and geography, is till now knowledge that can take part in a *vulgate*, recognised by everybody as "what must be legitimately taught and learnt in school". It is mainly constituted with tested indisputable results, with undoubted facts, with conventional documents that everyone expects to find in the textbooks and in the classroom. And overall it must be consensual. There is no place there for historiographical controversies, for critical approaches, for uncertainty or open questions. To be taught and learnt, this knowledge must be taken for truth, and truth is reputed not submitted to doubt or to debate. Furthermore the textbooks are written as a record of what happened truly, in a rather realistic speech. This suggests that the past is easy to know, with some attention (to sources) and some intelligence. The school knowledge is not presented as the result of the historians' works and as the result of the authors' choices and work, but as a "the real past". Totalitarianism is thus not a concept, an interpretation, tested and discussed, but a reality.

### **the question of practices: from classic teaching to new ambitions**

It is not so easy to know what is really taught. The conception of the profession is largely a liberal one: the teacher is free to use any method that s/he finds efficient for his/her pupils or likes best; in fact the curricula command only very general topics, and only suggest detailed contents on some of them. The teachers' trainers and the inspectors promote and recommend some contents and some practices. But they have no sure influence. For example, during the teachers' training period for the new curricula in *college*, in the *académie* of Lyon, it was clearly prescribed to teach Russia and to teach Europe in its largest extension (and not to limit it to its occidental part or to the Union). But in a recent record from the *Inspection Générale* it is attested that East and Central Europe is generally not taught in geography. And, as I said before, those contents are planned at the end of the school year. On this specific topic I cannot take in account observations and analysis of lessons: I had not the possibility to do it these last months, and my previous analysis concerned the previous curricula. But I would like to develop some questions and perspectives, largely inspired of researches on teaching Europe and of others didactical researches.

Most of time, the classic and still dominant knowledge taught in the classroom is just as the one exposed in the textbook: consensual, silent on controversies, undisputable, proved by documents. Of course there is a dialogue between teacher and students, but this dialogue is mainly a way to get the adherence of students to what is taught, and to test their learning. The one who says what is important, what is true, the one who asks questions, and sometimes who answers if students fail to do it quickly, is always the teacher. The dialogue is very quick: only a few seconds between teacher's question, pupil's answer, "right" answer, new

question or teacher' s speech etc. This management do not allow a time for reflection, except superficial one. The main aim is to expose efficiently to students what they must learn and know. The contents are largely facts and sometimes definitions, either in history or in geography. There are few moments of problematic reflection or of critical thought, because it does not seem necessary. The former exams evaluated mostly knowledge.

Thus history or geography lessons don't lead to an analysis of current events. Some questions are dealt with by pupils constituting press files, or documentary researches, but they are not "taught". The teachers intend to pass on historical or geographical knowledge, not journalese ones. Most of time, the teachers appeals to news if s/he sees there a potential to give more sense to past (in history) or to geographical facts: in the 90, some invoke the current nationalistic tensions in the Balkans to give students more chances to understand the situation in this area before the 1<sup>st</sup> world war. Present enlightens the past, but more through dubious analogies than through critical comparative history. However, teachers answer to the students' possible questions. But most of answers are given privately and briefly, at the end of the lesson. The teachers engage to take carefully what is in the media, because it is not neutral, and try to dispense a few complementary information, to set the question in a larger frame, or to recall the past of the event. This was the dominant attitude face to young people interested in the evolution of the Balkans or of Russia.

In my opinion, teaching soviet era may induce teachers to question their subjects.

- about the presumed truth of school history and geography. If the teacher is a little informed of the debates about the soviet era, s/he can not take what is in the textbook for a quiet scientific truth. If s/he compares what was the presentation of Russia before 1996 (a global power) and what it is nowadays (either a periphery depending on Europe et United States, or a country confronted with major natural and economical problems) s/he cannot but ask where is the "truth". These questions may develop a critical approach of school knowledge, that lacks too often.

- about the presumed neutrality of school : the comparison from Stalinist USSR with fascisms is openly a mean to develop adherence to democracy and concern of young people for democracy. It is not neutral: it is a medium for promoting the dominant political values of our society, well taken in charge by some textbooks that insist on resistance to totalitarianism. This may give some opportunity to reflect on the aims of history and geography teaching.

Since a few years, it seems that changes in the practices of history and geography teaching are planed by the Institution. It is intended to broach "real" questions, that is to say political, cultural, social present questions. It is intended to broach complexity, at least in the *lycée*, and to give students some notions of how university history and geography are produced: this may open to historiography and to controversial interpretations. It is intended to train the students to argue, to adopt a point of view: this may give the opportunity of confronting different interpretation of the same documents, and analysis of the interpretation in the 80 and in 2000 for example. This may open too to a reflection on current events. It is intended to test the ability to deal with a file of documents, possibly contradictory ones. Generally speaking, the main changes are to train students to think by themselves. Parallel, the basis of knowledge would not be any more the teacher's authority, but the efficiency of the interpretation to give sense to reality and to fit with sources and tested information.

The soviet era, the present situation of Russia and of Central and East Europe can be topics perfectly convenient for such a bend. Would they be?

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**APPENDIX II**

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**Teaching the History of Communism in Hungary**

I have been asked to give a short lecture on the situation with teaching the history of communism in Hungary, including the achievements and the failures that we have experienced. However, there can be no teaching without knowledge to be imparted and without students who are presumed to be receptive to that knowledge. Their degree of motivation depends on family background and on the broader environment in which they live. For that reason, I would like to begin by saying something about the attainments and failings of research into Hungarian contemporary history, and about the way society relates to the communist period that came to an end, we hope, in 1990.

Researching into contemporary history (and teaching it) is both a rewarding and a thankless task.

It is a rewarding task because there is usually much more interest than there is in earlier periods, which means more opportunities to speak and greater opportunities to publish. According to the Hungarian syllabus at least, the period is taught at the end of each phase of schooling—elementary and secondary—when the students are obviously at their most interesting to teach and dispute with.

On the other hand, it is a thankless task because there are legal and other barriers to it. Many presumed facts and relations remain shut away and unknown. The dissecting scalpel often cuts into live tissue, because many of those associated with the subject matter are still alive and protest vigorously against scholarly dissection, against being mounted with a pin like an insect in a museum.

I state this despite the fact that older people are well known to be fond of reminiscing about themselves. Indeed the ones who clashed with the communist system in some way or were vilified by it positively demand an opportunity to have their say. Their willingness to speak differs from the matter of scholarly, objective investigation. Often it may be intended to promote the idea of erecting a memorial to the speakers or their sufferings.

Objective researchers seeking the whole truth certainly want to know more than such witnesses would like to remember. My institute, the 1956 Institute in Budapest, possesses an Oral History Archive of almost 900 life interviews, but many of our efforts to expand that body of evidence have been unsuccessful. Many well-known fifty-sixers, who hold leading offices in various veterans' organizations today, shrank back from giving us an interview when they realized they would have to give an account of their whole lives, not just the part they played in 1956. They withdrew even though all respondents can decide how the interview may be used and what restrictions are placed on reading it, since the main purpose, after all, is to preserve on record memories that would otherwise be lost when the respondent died.

I remember one lecture at a conference about 1956 that was devoted to the social structure of the members of the revolutionary organizations. One veteran present objected strongly, not just to the conclusions, but to the investigation itself, using the analogy I just mentioned, of an insect mounted with a pin.

Researchers into the recent past are in an especially difficult position when yesterday is suddenly divided sharply from today, when everyone who took part in yesterday's events suddenly becomes suspect. For everyone in public life belonged to the state party imposing the dictatorship, until the belated appearance of opposition groups. These days, a quite different construction is put on the reform communists in Hungary who earned merit in 1989. At that time, the important aspect was the distinction between them and the other people in power. Nowadays the salient fact is that they were members of the top leadership of the state party. Public life in a democracy is subject to publicity. Events become known and the historian's main task is to identify the driving forces behind them, the deeper context of the superficially known facts. The history of communism, on the other hand, has to be drawn out of complete oblivion. The task is made much more difficult by the special archiving practices of the period, with their focus on state security, and by the divorce of the 'ideocratic' system from its ideological roots. Under normal circumstances, yesterday continues into today, but in this case, there was a trauma. The recent past of the former communist countries was cut off and something quite different begun. The objective and requirement of this radically new start was to change not only the political structure, but people's mentality, habits and system of values. Then came the bitter realization that the old political system could not be demolished or the new system built in a day. There was even less chance of changing people so rapidly, who are connected by so many strands to their past. The workings of the society that suddenly declared itself democratic and civil and of the state designed to run it inevitably contained non-democratic and non-civil elements. These might even dominate on occasions, and were all the worse for society's lack of awareness of them.

The basic school curriculum under normal democratic, constitutional conditions cannot differ from or go beyond the corpus of agreed professional opinion that society accepts. In other words, a historical period can only join the syllabus after a great many studies and sources have emerged and at least one comprehensive monograph of exacting standard has appeared. It is only possible to teach those parts of the past that are more or less explored and known. According to those criteria, the history of Sovietized Hungary cannot form part of the school curriculum. Although many descriptions, analyses, reminiscences and books of documents have appeared, they are very unevenly distributed. Relatively well-researched and analysed periods alternate with periods of obscurity. This disproportion is reflected, of course, in the current textbooks and syllabus materials.

On a certain abstract level, there is historical agreement that the communist period was one of the sad, dark chapters in Hungarian history, but there is no professional or social consensus in basic details.

Unfortunately, historians are divided less on professional than on political grounds. They disagree on the starting date for the communist system in Hungary. According to the national, conservative side, it emerged essentially in 1945, when the Soviet army had driven the Nazis out of the country, that one dictatorship would succeed another. The foundations of communist power were already in place in that year. Left-wing and liberal historians deny this, arguing that the country retained some room for manoeuvre until relations between the



victorious powers sank into the Cold War. If to a limited extent, the political system remained democratic and the process of Sovietization did not commence until 1947.

Along with the many details that are still unclarified, there are some underlying unanswered questions. Indeed scholars may not even have reached the stage of asking them in many cases.

The situation is well exemplified by what we know and do not know about the political police. Several articles and books of studies and even a separate monograph have appeared. We know, or more precisely, we suspect that the state-security organizations played throughout the period an important role beyond that of intimidating society, but we do not know in which fields this occurred. Nor do we know whether they were executing the political will of the party or acting to some extent independently. We suspect that they also played an essential role in the economy between 1945 and the change of system, but here there is even less or less certain information available. We suspect that the state-security organizations of each country in the communist camp were in close contact with each other, but there is firm evidence only in a few specific cases. It cannot even be stated approximately whether the task in this respect, along with cooperating with and informing the partner organizations, included disinformation as well, or how far national interests were promoted alongside the internationalist expectations. The Soviet direction and control is known to have occurred along several lines, but in general, there is no knowledge of the reports made by them or their relations with each other.

There is uncertainty about the basic phraseology. There are several terms for the period in circulation—communist, Bolshevik, socialist or Soviet—and these often appear alternately, as synonyms in one piece of writing. In better cases distinctions can be discerned, but the terminology is still individual, with no professional or general social consensus behind it. The terminological uncertainty is even more obvious when the details of the system are discussed. Distinctions are lost between earlier expressions and institutions: class enemy and class alien, or police, political police and special police.

Teaching the period is therefore doubtful according to strict professional criteria, but there is no denying that it should be known and that there is a demand from society for it to be taught in schools. Due to the factors I have mentioned, teachers set about the task without a firm knowledge or background on which to base it. The situation is all the more troublesome because most of them graduated before the change of system, so that they certainly know at first hand that what they learnt is not the truth. They are unable or only partly able to substitute for the invalid material something else that has professional or human credibility. Professional extension training is still suffering from various teething troubles, so that the courses are uneven in standard. Often they do not cover the whole period or break off for want of financing.

Successive governments have been unable to motivate teachers and compulsory courses have not brought many results. Although the election manifesto of every party since the change of system has included a significant rise in teachers' salaries, the promise remains unfulfilled. The low earnings of teachers, relatively low before 1990, have fallen further since 1990. This obliges most of them to take a second job or give private lessons, so that they are too busy to undertake major self-training. The freeing of research opportunities and the book market created opaque conditions, in which the large quantity of literature available includes

many writings of no value. The accustomed gauges of value no longer work, while the new ones do not yet operate reliably. Selection is made harder still because publishers are directed entirely by the market and favour the kind of journalistic writing that sells well, rather than a scholarly approach that caters to a smaller readership. The outcome is that the knowledge of the broader public is professionally untenable or at least strongly debatable, but drawn from texts that are well marketed and sell in large quantities.

Society's assessment of the communist period has become inconsistent as well. Hungarian society in 1990 was fairly united in rejecting communism, and at the same time, scrapping leftism and socialist or social-democratic values. However, partial rehabilitation of these ensued quite soon, as an antidote to the policies of the right-wing government that came to power in 1990 and because many people became disillusioned with the democracy that was developing. This gave the successor party a sweeping electoral victory in 1994.

Since then, the views current on communism in Hungary have been diametrically opposed, logically unclear, and indicative of confusion in the consciousness of society. The only common denominator is condemnation of the classical Stalinist period, for many people look back with hardly disguised nostalgia on the Kádár period that followed the 1956 reprisals.

The national, conservative parties and governments, along with those in society who support them, try to equate the two periods and emphasize the continuity between them. Their politicians try to use the atrocities of the Rákosi period to attack and discredit both the Kádár period and their most dangerous present-day rival, the successor Socialist Party. In reviving the traditions of the inter-war period, they condemn not only communism, but the socialist and liberal systems of ideas, again for present-day political purposes. This makes it harder for a more or less uniform, well-defined view of communism to emerge in society.

Another section of society shows a contrary tendency. Instead of broadening the category, they narrow it down, drawing a distinction between communism and Kádárite policy. They still expect the Socialist Party to continue the latter and its failure to do so contributed to its electoral defeat in 1998. The confusion in the consciousness of society is increased by the terminological uncertainties mentioned already and by the two meanings of dictatorship employed, the professional one and the common usage. Social scientists class as a dictatorship the period from 1945 or 1947 until 1989, because there was uncontrolled concentration of power and the branches of power were unseparated. Open violence in the exercise of power is not considered a basic criterion. Dictatorship in common parlance entails primarily violent exercise and misuse of power, which was employed sparingly and only for specific purposes under the Kádár regime, so that they were not apparent to those less versed in politics.

Some part in Hungary's change of system was played by the increasing knowledge the public gained about the recent past. The story that emerged from books published in the West and samizdat publications in Hungary were a destabilizing factor for the Kádár system, which suffered a serious blow when Prime Minister Imre Nagy and the other politicians executed with him in 1958 were reburied after a mass funeral in 1989. Exploiting the past for momentary political purposes is not specific to present-day Hungary, but the political kudos to be gained from possessing an appropriate slice of the past was demonstrated graphically and attractively in the summer of 1989. This means that the recent past (and in some cases,

the more distant past) belongs to politics as well as history, as the political rows surrounding the millennium events in Hungary last year exemplify.

History teachers found themselves possessed of considerable ideological freedom during the crisis of the communist system. They were then alarmed to find after 1989 that the new government also made political demands of them and their subject, so that it was by no means immaterial to their careers or the admission chances of their students whether they taught from left wing-liberal or national-conservative textbooks. The same social reflex continued to operate under left-wing-liberal coalition that replaced the first right-wing government in 1994, but with the bias in the opposite direction, of course. Up to 1994 (and since 1998), extreme condemnation of communism and the exercise of power before the change of system have paved the way for recognition and success. The period of the Socialist-dominated government urged caution on teachers, since it was headed by a prime minister who had held high office under the old regime.

It would be a mistake to conclude from these comments that Hungarian history teachers are cowardly or cynical—weathercocks who change direction with the political wind. The readiness of most of them to meet the expectations of the authorities at any time derives from social reflexes that survive from before 1989. However, it would be easier to free ourselves from the direct political expectations conveyed by the public-service media if we all had firm, irrefutable knowledge, if they lived and worked (school councils, local government) in an environment of tried, democratic institutions, and if their salaries afforded them a livelihood.

Historians as a profession, and therefore history teachers, have not found satisfactory solutions to the problems that the specific features of the history of communism raise. There has always been a focus on political history in Hungarian historiography and history teaching in schools.

Let me exemplify this by discussing for a moment the textbook on the communist period that is used most commonly in Hungarian secondary schools. The book, designed for 14–18-year-olds, squeezes the social, cultural and scientific history of the period into a single chapter, disregarding the essential divisions of the period into phases, while the political history is spread over twelve chapters. This it does although it is obvious that the political history cannot be defined in this case by traditional means.

Political history consists essentially of the struggle among forces present on the public stage, but once the Hungarian communist system had been installed, there remained only a single political force. There could not have been a struggle in the usual sense. The traditional descriptive methods of political history become applicable only at three junctures in the history of communism: the communist take-over, the change of system that brought its downfall, and the 1956 revolution and struggle for independence that occurred between those two. It is not surprising to find that these three junctures are the subjects of the most abundant historical literature and that presenting them takes up over three-quarters of the space in the secondary-school textbook.

There are other methods more suitable for describing the period, but these also face big challenges in doing so. Oral history and personal history form a new branch of the discipline, still struggling for professional recognition and acceptance. Social history is held

back by the absence of usable data. This is because the political criteria of the time ensured that the findings were generally false or spoke of subjects not susceptible to interpretation outside the communist world. An example is the class-alien category mentioned earlier, which placed in one basket the village priest, the gendarmerie sergeant, the great landowner and the factory-owning industrialist.

The chronological approach and the concentration on political history mean that the book omits to describe the system itself or its mode of operation and their presentation of its effects becomes one-sided. The communist power structure retained many bourgeois institutions, such as Parliament and the government, but in an empty form, so that the structure itself was quite different from the present one. Such conditions are alien and baffling to students today. A serviceable textbook would need a separate chapter devoted to presenting them, not least because their incomprehensibility demonstrates how relatively mild are the operating problems of democratic institutions today. The fragmentary description of the system and the bad choice of vantage-point mean that the defencelessness and forced dependence of the individual and society disappear or pale into empty phraseology.

Since the political history of the Kádár years has not been or cannot be presented, the period is depicted only through its economic history. There was little underlying change in the management of the economy up to 1989 and the textbook likewise emphasizes the system's continuity. However, by doing so it asserts indirectly a half-truth about the Kádár system, while presenting the change of system as something relative. If the currently dominant interpretation in Hungarian public education is correct in concluding that communism fell because it bankrupted the country, there is also a devaluation of democracy, which is unable to pull the economy out of crisis.

There is a very simplistic account of how society lived through the more aggressive and more peaceful periods of communism. The textbook mentions only the negative events: peasants were forced into collective farms, middle-class property was expropriated, clergy were persecuted and became impoverished, and the whole country was corrupted. However, by the time communism went into crisis, the situation of the public had improved in many respects, not just deteriorated. The predominantly peasant society of the pre-1945 period became urbanized. Discrimination against women eased. Health care improved, bringing some increase in life expectancy. Pronounced differences in wealth and education before 1945 gave way to a more even distribution. The proportions of the population completing secondary and higher education increased, and so on. Far be it from me to claim that these developments are to the credit of the communists. Indeed, the development would presumably have been much greater if Hungary had not been forced onto that path. I would simply like to point out that not even a fundamentally bad, negative system could suppress the natural will and ability of society to live and develop. That aspect cannot be demonstrated if the communist period is approached from the direction of power. Omission of it causes a serious discrepancy.

In any case, there is no point in trying to blacken further the already dark picture of communism. If the attempt succeeds, the result is just a black patch that conveys nothing. Meanwhile the phenomenon of neo-communism is beginning to appear as a fashionable stance among young people, who are always susceptible to radical views out of a natural spirit of rebellion. For many, the red star is not a ghastly symbol and Lenin and Trotsky are

not devils incarnate, but ideologists proffering an alternative, light-heartedly or seriously, and not to blame if their ideas are distorted in practice. Budapest has a pub called the Marxim—popular with young people and already something of a tourist attraction—stuffed full of the symbols of communism, which it is illegal, incidentally, to display.

In Hungary as elsewhere, many people try to equate communism with Nazism, the other great type of genocidal 20th-century dictatorship. The national-conservative school of thought emphatically refuses to draw a moral distinction between them. Indeed, it sometimes treats Nazism as the lesser of the two evils, judging it to be more rational because it did not persecute its own people and calculating arithmetically that it took fewer lives. On these grounds, attempts are made to equate and condemn equally the two types of dictatorship, and in this school year, it was compulsory for secondary schools to commemorate the Holocaust on one day and the victims of communist dictatorship on another. However, the effectiveness of the commemorations was weakened not just by the overtly present-day political motivations behind them, but because neither of the days chosen could be linked in the minds of society to any specific event.

The laboured parallel drawn between the two systems could easily have an opposite effect from the one intended. For Nazism remained a dictatorship in both senses until Germany's defeat in the war. It never had a period of consolidation such as the European brands of communism underwent. This means that with insignificant exceptions, Nazism has a blanket connection with inhuman, negative personal or indirect experiences, which communism does not. The Nazi atrocities became known immediately (in historical terms). Photographs of the death camps were shown all over the world, arousing inescapable reactions of horror. The atrocities of communism came to light after an interval and there is little or no experiential knowledge of them. A wood, a grove or a hillside where an internment camp once stood can only arouse genuine feelings in those who experienced the atrocities there personally. That difference between the two systems can be called unjust, but it cannot be denied.

To sum up, I do not think I can present any big surprises. As young people prepare for their school-leaving certificates, there is dreadful chaos in their heads about the history of communism. Although the school year is steadily being lengthened, only about ten per cent of students in secondary schools have dealt at all with the period since 1945, and they have only studied it up to the 1956 revolution. They know the names of just two of the communist politicians, Rákosi and Kádár, but their knowledge even of them is sketchy and uncertain. When I was teaching trainee journalists with a secondary education, one student described Rákosi, the communist party leader until 1956, as a prime minister in the 1970s, immediately before Árpád Göncz. Göncz, of course, was not a prime minister either, but the first president after 1990. The students could only describe the communist system in cliché terms (people were persecuted) and the most readily produced fact about it was the absence of national freedom.

While the teachers' responsibility for how they teach the period is exceptionally great, the conditions for doing so are more difficult than usual. The one hope is that the difficult conditions themselves will breed a resolve to cope with them and succeed.