

BETWEEN FACTS AND POLITICAL DOGMAS:
WRITING HISTORY IN A PROPAGANDA INSTITUTE.
POLITICAL POWER AND NETWORK DYNAMICS IN
COMMUNIST ROMANIA BY FRANCESCO ZAVATTI.
A REVIEW¹

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‘Among the available instruments, history has been considered by the Romanian communist regime as the most important cultural instrument for gaining legitimacy among the population.’ (Zavatti, 2017: 324) This statement runs as a conclusion as well as an epitome in Francesco Zavatti’s doctoral dissertation entitled *Writing History in a Propaganda Institute. Political Power and Network Dynamics in Communist Romania*, and published in the series of doctoral dissertations of Elanders Publishing, in Stockholm, 2016. In order to reach this conclusion, the author employs and develops a thorough research regarding the activity of the Institute for Historical and Socio-Political Studies (IHSPS) of the Central Committee in Romania, which was founded in 1951, under the name of the Party History Institute – a replica of the Marx-Lenin-Engels Institute in Moscow. It was closed in 1990, after Ceausescu’s fall. Nevertheless, the dissertation developed by Francesco Zavatti not only analyses the relation between state, history writing, power and scholarship in the given period of time, but it also presents both an external context and a domestic one for the trajectory of history writing during the communist regime.

The book has 338 pages of written text, to which adds a rigorous list of referenced titles, as well an index of names. The study is structured in three parts – the first presenting the methodology adopted, a description of previous research on the topic, the presentation of the sources used (archival sources, autobiographies, interviews) and the motivation of the study, interestingly but somewhat too intricately and thus too unclearly described.

¹ Francesco Zavatti, *Writing History in a Propaganda Institute. Political Power and Network Dynamics in Communist Romania*, Elanders, Stockholm, 2016, 338 p.

‘The first reason is given by the trend of Romanian politics during the Cold War and its fallout on history-writing [...] – Romania appears to be a country where the phases of uniformity, fracture, rupture and diversity from the Soviet political and cultural model are better described by the use of those concepts.’(Zavatti, 2016: 47) The second reason is the ‘perennial quest for legitimacy of the Romanian Communist Party’, which the latter never seemed to gain. (Zavatti, 2016: 47)

Part Two and *Part Three* of the dissertation represent the analysis proper. The second part is dedicated to the development of the canonical historical discourse employed by the Party History Institute, starting with the taking-over of the power by the communists in 1948 until the moment when Ceausescu became the First Secretary of the State in 1965. The first half of this part, encompassed in Chapter 4, presents the political and the historical circumstances in which history writing was dictated by the Stalinists institutions in Moskow, thus employing two stages in the politics adopted, as they have been identified by Francesco Zavatti: the attempt of the Soviet Union to build a new people, the Soviets, to counter-fight the multi-ethnic ethnic state, the emergence of the Russian nationalism, and then the adaptation of the population to the new context in both historical contexts, in which scholars were taught to speak ‘Bolshevik’ (Zavatti, 2016: 116-117). The same pattern, states Zavatti, was applied to the Eastern countries where communism was installed, in a combination of control, propaganda with the aim of founding a new civilisation, where history writing was a key-element. The author also presents here the two ways in which propaganda and history writing functioned during the decade of Stalinism – the first half contains the Stalinist communism which created a canonical discourse which meant that ‘for the good of the party, the falsification of history was acceptable’ (Zavatti, 2016: 161), and in which the discourse direction was dictated from Moskow. On the other hand, the period between 1955 and 1964 shows how the voice of the party, and thus that of the Institute turned from communism into national communism, having two topics on the agenda: the first one was ‘to write a synthesis of the party and of the workers’ movement, and the second – to write the history of Romania’. (Zavatti, 2016: 148) Moreover, by 1964 one more important change had been made: involving young researchers and the role of institution of the Romanian Academy was re-considered and re-evaluated and, with the aim of the development of the national culture; thus young researchers came to the frontline of history writing.

Part Three of the book tackles the Ceausescu regime, dividing it into three chapters, and three periods of time: the transition from the politics of Gheorghiu-Dej to Ceausescu’s (1965-1968), the peak of national communism

(1968-1974), and Romania in 'the closed horizon' (1974-1989). Ceausescu's regime started from what was called 'relative liberalization' and ended with a culmination of the propaganda and power that cannibalized the process of history-writing, culminating into what was named the new Dark Age. One important observation made by Francesco Zavatti is that actually the so-called liberalization was nothing but the announcement of the very difficult years to come. (Zavatti, 2016: 193) The three parts are very well-documented, with a huge amount of information, and with an accurate depiction of the relation that Romania had during that time both with the USSR and the other Eastern countries. One important event highlighted by the author is the organisation of the World Congress of Historical Studies Society held in Bucharest, when the community of the historians celebrated 2050 years since the creation of the Daco-Roman centralised state under Burebista's rule. The importance of the Congress consisted in a firm statement of the independence of Romania from the USSR ideology, on the one hand, but the Congress was also meant to favour the elevation of the leader, even at an international level.

An important chapter in the book is dedicated to the aftermath of Communism, and to the way the Romanian Academy and the Nicolae Iorga Institute renewed themselves, even though with great struggles on behalf of Papacostea and terrible pressures from the former communists, led by President Ion Iliescu. The changes suffered by the entire Romanian society that had a hidden feeling of guilt are a reflection of the tribulations that Romania went through during Communism, as well as the process of history writing caught between power and propaganda, and topped by Ceausescu's cult of personality.

The chapter allotted to *Conclusions* underlines the picture that the study 'provides an understanding of the interplay between need for control by political power and the effective agency of the scholarly community' (Zavatti, 2016: 322) within the framework of a communist system i.e. the Romanian one, and also one with its very particularities. An important aspect of the conclusions is the fact that Romania had few political *dissidents*, the majority of the population having taken part into the processes of *compromise* and *opportunism*. The condemnation of Romanian communism as criminal, through the Report of the Presidential Commission for the Study of Communist Dictatorship in Romania (Zavatti, 2016: 332-333) is appreciated as positive, but yet considered biased because of the modality it was used as political weapon.

Francesco Zavatti's book proves to be an exhaustive approach upon the process of history writing under communist propaganda in Romania, as well as an extremely useful instrument for historians impossible to be neglected in

future studies upon similar topics. Moreover, it is a useful reading also for researchers in connected fields as it also offers a broad picture on historical events both in Romania and in the neighbouring countries during Communism. The bibliography is extremely rich, covering both Romanian and foreign sources.

One of the most valuable resources the author uses for documentation are the interviews the author took to different historians involved in ISISP, its neighbouring institutions as well as today's researchers in communism. Yet references to these interviews are only made mostly in the footnotes, and probably a transcription of the interviews or of fragments from them in Addenda at the end of the study would have been extremely useful and of great interest. Moreover, a list of the interviewed persons would have been very handy as well as, even though references are made in footnotes, the reader does not have a clear image of the contribution the interviews represented for the study.

The exhaustive character the book has also bears, especially for the first chapters, a rather abstract tone, sometimes the reader feeling the need of exemplification as, for instance, in the section dedicated to *Sources and source criticism*. This sometimes is counter-balanced by very rich sentences and information which can make the text from time to time difficult to follow.

Writing History in a Propaganda Institute. Political Power and Network Dynamics in Communist Romania is an important study for the researchers in Romanian communism, Romanian historiography as well as for a wide range of researchers but probably, beyond its acribia and academic rigour, a very important quality the book benefits from is the objectiveness such a study would take, and which has been offered by the distanced, unprejudiced foreign eye of Francesco Zavatti.