

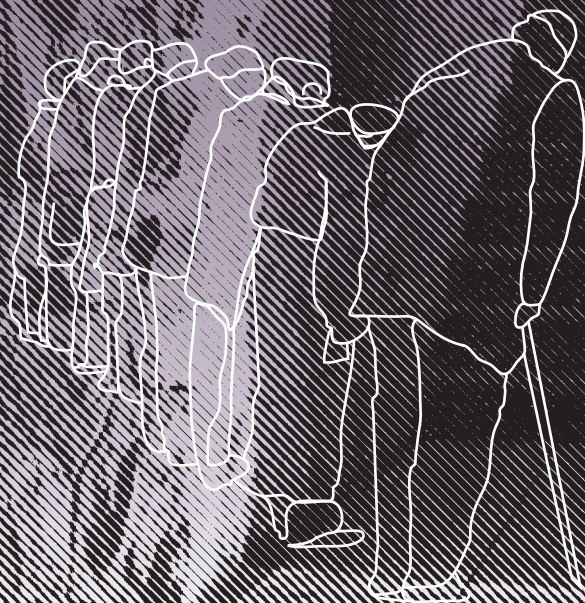
# *QUEST for a SUITABLE PAST*

Myth and Memory in  
Eastern and Central Europe

Edited by

CLAUDIA-FLORENTINA DOBRE

CRISTIAN EMILIAN GHIȚĂ



CEU PRESS

## QUEST FOR A SUITABLE PAST



# QUEST FOR A SUITABLE PAST

*Myth and Memory in Central  
and Eastern Europe*

Edited by  
CLAUDIA-FLORENTINA DOBRE  
and  
CRISTIAN EMILIAN GHIȚĂ



Central European University Press  
Budapest–New York

Copyright © by Claudia-Florentina Dobre and Cristian Emilian Ghiță 2017

Published in 2017 by

*Central European University Press*

An imprint of the  
Central European University Limited Liability Company  
Nádor utca 11, H-1051 Budapest, Hungary  
Tel: +36-1-327-3138 or 327-3000  
Fax: +36-1-327-3183  
E-mail: ceupress@press.ceu.edu  
Website: www.ceupress.com

224 West 57th Street, New York NY 10019, USA  
Tel: +1-212-547-6932  
Fax: +1-646-557-2416  
E-mail: meszarosa@press.ceu.edu

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,  
in any form or by any means, without the permission  
of the Publisher.

ISBN 978-963-386-136-3 cloth

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Dobre, Claudia-Florentina. | Ghița, Cristian Emilian.  
Title: Quest for a suitable past : myth and memory in Central and Eastern Europe / edited  
by Claudia-Florentina Dobre and Cristian Emilian Ghița.  
Description: Budapest ; New York : Central European University Press, 2016. | Includes  
bibliographical references and index.  
Identifiers: LCCN 2016008821 (print) | LCCN 2016011570 (ebook) | ISBN 9789633861363  
(hardbound : alkaline paper) | ISBN 9789633861387 (pdf)  
Subjects: LCSH: Europe, Eastern—Social life and customs. | Europe, Central—Social life  
and customs. | Myth—Social aspects—History. | Myth—Political aspects—History. |  
Memory—Social aspects—History. | Memory—Political aspects—History. | Com-  
munism—Social aspects—History. | Post-communism—Social aspects—History. |  
Europe, Eastern—Politics and government. | Europe, Central—Politics and govern-  
ment.  
Classification: LCC DJK48.5 .I5 2016 (print) | LCC DJK48.5 (ebook) | DDC 943—dc23  
LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2016008821>

Printed in Hungary

# Table of Contents

Foreword .....	vi
<i>Lucian Boia</i>	
Introduction	
<i>Claudia-Florentina Dobre</i> .....	1
An Obscure Object of Desire: The Myth of Alba Iulia and its Social Functions, 1918–1940 .....	11
<i>Gábor Egry</i>	
Croatia between the Myths of the Nation-State and of the Common European Past .....	29
<i>Neven Budak</i>	
Deconstructing the Myth of the “Wicked German” in Northern and Western Parts of Poland: Local Approaches to Cultural Heritage .....	51
<i>Izabela Skórzyńska and Anna Wachowiak</i>	
Mythologizing the Biographies of Romanian Underground Communists: The Case Study of Miron Constantinescu .....	67
<i>Ștefan Bosomitu</i>	
Women in the Communist Party: Debunking a (Post-)Communist Mythology .....	85
<i>Luciana-Marioara Jinga</i>	

Avatars of the Social Imaginary: Myths about Romanian Communism after 1989 .....	101
<i>Claudia-Florentina Dobre</i>	
Post-Communist Politics of Memory and the New Regime of Historiography: Recent Controversies on the Memory of the "Forty-Five Years of the Communist Yoke" and the "Myth of Batak" .....	119
<i>Liliana Deyanova</i>	
The Phenomenon of "Parahistory" in Post-Communist Bulgaria: Old Theories and New Myths on Proto-Bulgarians .....	135
<i>Alexander Nikolov</i>	
Note on contributors .....	149
Index of names .....	151

## Foreword

To History, myth is a challenge, a practically endless territory just waiting to be deforested and marked out. In its fullest and most profound meaning, myth is the expression of the great beliefs that animate a community—any community, including humanity in its entirety. It has accompanied humans from the dawn of history to the present day and will continue to do so. Man is a creature that needs to believe in something that extends beyond banal day-to-day existence. It is of no consequence how true or untrue that myth happens to be, for it is beyond the realm of regular truths or lies.

A myth serves multiple purposes. It explains: it gives meaning and coherence to the world, to society, to historical developments. It also provides legitimacy: to polities, states, nations, ideologies, political regimes, social projects... They all appeal to a wide range of foundation myths. Not least, a myth provides a sense of direction: it reunites people around certain values and projects and pushes them in one direction or another. In short, myth sets history in motion.

The past may be approached from a variety of directions. That is why, to a single history there correspond numerous reconstructions of history. Mythological perspective is among these and is one of the most promising. In its own language, it may provide a complete historical picture, substantially enriching the possible interpretations.



The present volume is a contribution in this direction. These contributions should be seen as only a beginning, the point of departure in a much-needed collective investigation dedicated to the myths and mythologies that have accompanied the history of Eastern Europe and its nations.

*Lucian Boia*

# Introduction

Myths are embedded in our societies' cultural memory. Cultural memory, as defined by Jan Assmann, is "a kind of institution based on fixed points in the past" (Assmann 2010b, 113). This past is not preserved as such but is cast in symbolic figures animated by memories (Assmann 2010a, 47). "Cultural memories are maintained across generations by societal practices and institutions such as texts, rites, monuments, commemorations, symbols" (Manier and Hirst 2010, 253–254).

"Cultural memory is a form of collective memory (as defined by Halbwachs),<sup>1</sup> in the sense that it is shared by a number of people and that it conveys to these people a collective, that is, a cultural identity" (Assmann 2010b, 110). Cultural memory transforms the past into an object of remembrance and finally into myth (Assmann 2010a, 47). Myth is a re-enacted, socially remembered story about the beginnings, a narration meant to illuminate a changing present (Assmann 2010b, 114–115).

---

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Halbwachs showed that individual memory depends on socialization and communication, that it is always a reconstruction of the past according to the needs of the present or influenced by the present in a dialogical interaction with others (Halbwachs 1997). The collective memory has a performative dimension, and it is shaped by memorial social frameworks (*les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*) (Halbwachs 1994).

Myths fill important roles as tools for national/local/collective self-definition and identity transfer, as agents of social cohesion, as vehicles for the transmission of cultural and ideological values, and as legitimizing narratives for various political movements and regimes (Schöpfli 1997, 22–26).

Myths have always been present in the life of groups/communities and societies. In ancient societies, they played an important role in explaining the world and the existence of various beings populating it, while providing a normative framework for communities' everyday life. Despised in ancient Greece as works of fiction, they were nevertheless *loci* of cultural memory. Christianity brought about a new approach to myths, which were depicted as the opposite of the sacred *logos*.<sup>2</sup> Developing this opposition, the Enlightenment dismissed myth as “untruth” and “unreal” (Bottici 2007, 131). However, despite their relegation to “un-truthfulness,” myths remained important in the debates that shaped the ideals of Western European critical thinking and rationalism.

Myths took on a new life once anthropology was set on firm academic grounds. The anthropologists contributed decisively to the change in the perception of myths. Lévi-Strauss saw myth as universal—something that could be grasped by people around the world (1958, 232). Mircea Eliade (1963, 15) defined myths of ancient societies as “sacred histories” narrating an event that took place at the beginning of historical time. Eliade insisted that each time a myth was told, the sacred time of the events narrated in the myth were, in a sense, brought back to life (1994, 70–71). What is more, by narrating the exemplary deeds of supernatural beings, myths put forth an ideal of human conduct (Eliade 1963, 18). Bronisław Malinowski went further, arguing that in archaic societies “myth... is not merely a story told but a reality lived” (1992, 100).

Myths occupied a well-defined place in the life of archaic societies, as anthropologists have shown. By contrast, modern society has banished mythical thought as a matter of principle but proved unable to do away with myths completely. Cornelius Castoriadis pointed out that no society can survive without symbolic constructs that give meaning to its social life. For Castoriadis, Western society, modern and postmodern, seems to

---

<sup>2</sup> Myths are fluid and subject to perpetual transformation and multiple readings, in contrast with the Christian sacred *logos*, which is stable, permanent, and unique (Bottici 2007, 20–43).

exhibit to an even greater degree the work of the social imaginary, at once instituted and instituting (that is to say, itself structured by existing historical factors while at the same structuring the emergence of novel practices and ideas) (1975, 174–248). Even in the guise of ideological and nationalist narratives, myths preserve their status as fundamental beliefs that can confer meaning upon the imagined destiny of the community.

Myths as a mode of representing the past provide access to a system of interpretation and a model of social conduct (Boia 1998, 40–41). They build creatively on a narrative core so as to meet the demands for making sense of the world (Bottici and Challand 2013, 91). Furthermore, myths are crucial instruments in cultural reproduction (Bourdieu 1993). They play an important part in defining boundaries between communities or within the community. Myths are encoded in rituals, liturgies, and symbols (Schöpflin 1997, 20).

Building an adequate conceptual framework is indispensable in the analysis of myths (Girardet 1997, 5). The challenge is that no analysis can exhaust the range of meanings of mythical thought and its embodiment in the cultural memory of a given community. Worse yet, any deconstruction of old myths is liable to give rise to new myths, because myth (as memory) is essentially a narrative (re)construction informed by the concerns of the present.

This volume, *Quest for a Suitable Past: Myth and Memory in Central and Eastern Europe*, deals with the problematic interplay of myth and memory in Central and Eastern Europe from the nineteenth century to the present. It analyzes the complex process whereby some elements of the past are transformed into myth, as well as the role of myths in the political and social life of the region. It focuses on a number of case studies illustrating the connection between communicative memory (in the sense of Jan Assmann)<sup>3</sup> and myths (as elements of cultural memory) in creating national/local identities and/or legitimizing ideologies using a *longue durée* perspective.

The case studies collected here show that myths were often instrumental in the vast projects of social and political mobilization during a period that has witnessed, among other things, two world wars and the

---

<sup>3</sup> “Communicative memories are socially mediated, based in a group, and transmitted across a community by means of everyday communication” (Manier and Hirst 2010, 253).

harsh oppression of the communist regimes. Yet another common theme throughout the papers is that the mythological dimension of modern societies continued to play a role in the twenty-first century, inasmuch as the new political/national myths reused many of the symbols that defined the earlier mythology.

The analysis of the rather complicated process of myth-making in Central and Eastern Europe, a region with a unique historical trajectory over the last hundred years, gives a fuller picture of the role of myths in establishing the European social imaginary, complementing the findings of studies about Western Europe. In particular, the present volume can be read as a complement to *Myths and Nationhood* (Routledge, 1997), a general survey of European historical and political myths. Several of the individual contributions in this volume build on Lucian Boia's *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* (Central European University Press, 2001). Other contributions engage with the ongoing debates about the construction of a shared European past, a topic recently discussed by Chiara Bottici and Benoît Challand in *Imagining Europe: Myth, Memory, and Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). The chapters on communist and post-communist myth-making aim to take further the insights of Vladimir Tismăneanu in *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in Post-Communist Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2009).

That said, the volume is not intended as an all-encompassing treatment of the subject but instead aims to give a new impetus to the role played by myth and memory in the modern and post-modern social imaginary of Central and Eastern Europe. Nor is it meant to offer a normative definition of myth. For such definitions vary not only from the historian to the sociologist (for example) but also within the same academic discipline. By avoiding rigid definitions of myth, the contributions collected in this volume have focused more closely on the multifaceted nature of Eastern European political/national myths, with a particular emphasis on Romania, a country that is under-represented in studies of contemporary political mythologies. In this sense, the volume aims to fill a substantial lacuna in the existing scholarship.

The contributions to the volume have steered away from the facile course of reducing myths' multifaceted ambiguity to some sort of essence. Since myth is sometimes defined, in the spirit of Roland Barthes, as a system of communication that traverses the centuries (Barthes 1997, 235),

some studies have drawn attention to the capacity of myths to acquire new meanings over time and transform themselves in new historical contexts, in which they are used to serve various political and social projects. Another way of looking at myths is as important elements of cultural memory transmitted from one era to another through ideological discourses and cultural practices.

Thus the papers of this volume use myths as an entry point not only into the larger sociopolitical issues but also into historians and sociologists' production of knowledge, with particular reference to the myth-making potential inherent in the elaboration of meta-narratives, be they national, pan-European, or multi-disciplinary. Several contributions converge in suggesting that the perpetuation of some national myths in public consciousness reflects the limited impact of present-day historians' efforts to educate the larger public. Conversely, the need for more nuanced analyses that shift between different perspectives, however unsatisfying these might seem to lay audiences fed on catchy formulas and sound bites, also emerges as a common theme throughout the papers.

Gábor Egry's contribution, "An Obscure Object of Desire: The Myth of Alba Iulia and its Social Functions, 1918–1940," emphasizes the role of memory and ideology in constructing national mythologies. His study argues that the starting point in the myth-making process (i.e., the manufacture of the unity myth) was the shared memory of the Great Assembly of Alba Iulia on December 1, 1918. As early as 1919, a mythological discourse of the event was developed by Transylvanian Romanian political players, gradually turning those events into their own reading of national history and a redefinition of the nation. At the same time, the Liberals of the Old Kingdom developed a counter-myth that highlighted their role in the unification of the nation and served to legitimize their rule, also supported by a distinct reading of national history. Meanwhile, splinter groups of Transylvanian Romanian politicians and the leadership of the Hungarian minority offered a different reading in order to substantiate their political demands. The competing versions slowly became foci of politics of identity dealing with the issue of the relationship of the Old Kingdom and Transylvania, asserting that Romanians from these provinces had a substantially different group character. Furthermore, the myth of Alba Iulia was used to develop a new, organic, and transcendent concept of the nation, with the Transylvanian Iuliu Maniu, the "hero" of Alba Iulia, as its destined leader. The study shows that the myth of Alba

Iulia (the myth of unity) had a powerful simplifying role and was modulated by a drive to manufacture ideological legitimization.

The process of political/national events' transformation into myths and their role in defining national identity is also analyzed by Neven Budak in his contribution, "Croatia between the Myths of the Nation-State and of the Common European Past." The chapter discusses the power of myths to cut through the ages while accumulating new meanings, transforming and evolving depending on the time and place. Throughout the history of Croatia, myths have been instrumental in forging a sense of identity and in justifying political positions. The endurance of several myths can be attributed to their flexibility, as they were adopted by several regimes and adapted to suit their particular needs. Moreover, myths have a component of ambiguity, which allows, for example, the coexistence of two mutually exclusive concepts: Croatia is seen, on the one hand, as the bulwark of the West, and on the other hand, as a bridge between East and West, and North and South. The mythological discourse adaptation to evolving realities is a permanent process, as old myths are harnessed to bolster Croats' European integration.

The fluid content of historical myths and their ambiguous contours come under scrutiny in Izabela Skórzyńska and Anna Wachowiak's contribution, "Deconstructing the Myth of the 'Wicked German' in Northern and Western Parts of Poland: Local Approaches to Cultural Heritage." The study analyzes myths as discursive practices closely connected to the identity and cultural memory of Polish local communities. It describes and interprets changes in Polish attitudes towards German heritage in Poland after 1989 that occurred through local commemorative and civic practices related to "symbolic domains." Monuments, signboards, and cemeteries in Szamocin, Gdańsk, Wrocław, Szczecin, Wesoła, Nakomiady, and many other places all over Poland play an important role in redefining the image of the Germans, and in the reconciliation process between Germany and Poland, as well as in debunking the older myth of the evil German. This national myth, which embodies stereotypes and ideological elements, shaped the life of Polish society in the last few centuries, proving remarkably enduring.

Ideology was (and still is) the driving force in creating, maintaining, and transmitting political, national, and cultural mythologies. When the personal is ideologically fashioned, myths can play an important part in

identity constructions and identity transfer. Ștefan Bosomitu's contribution, "Mythologizing the Biographies of Romanian Underground Communists: The Case Study of Miron Constantinescu," shows that under communism even public individual identities were constructed according to a mythological scheme and loaded with mythological elements. The author analyzes the function of myths in publicly validating the position of high-ranking communist officials. Examining different types of sources (biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, and secret-police files), the author seeks to outline a method through which one can reconstruct the mythological elements of a communist militant's biography. Bosomitu uses the concept of "myth-biography" (Costea 2008) to define the communist propaganda that transformed the biographies of the underground militants into a standardized ideological discourse loaded with commonplaces such as a "healthy social origin," revolutionary precocity, early commitment to the workers' movement, and imprisonment by the secret police. Focusing on the case of Miron Constantinescu, an underground communist who rose to prominence after World War II as a key figure of the communist regime in Romania, Bosomitu shows that autobiographies and memoirs can be loaded with mythological elements meant to fit a personal trajectory into an ideological discourse and, at the same time, used to transmit new mythological discourses.

Communist mythological discourses were sometimes perpetuated after the fall of this regime. Luciana-Marioara Jinga's study, "Women in the Communist Party: Debunking a (Post-)Communist Mythology," investigates both the post-communist socio-political function and the historiographical ramifications of the myths surrounding the role of women within the Romanian Communist Party. As early as 1946, the Romanian Communist Party (RCP) introduced what was called "egalitarian legislation," striving to meet the demands of Marxist-Leninist doctrine and taking the USSR as a model. In order to apply these principles to Romanian society, communist propaganda encouraged women to join the paid workforce. Despite the propaganda and the egalitarian legislation, the presence of women within the RCP was, for the first three decades of communism, one of the lowest of all the communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In the mid-1970s, Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime introduced mandatory quotas for the participation of women, as members and candidates, in all party structures. The program achieved little: the rate of women joining the party did not rise at all from the previous period.



In positions of authority, except for the small group surrounding Elena Ceaușescu, female participation remained modest. The article shows that the ideological myth of women's over-representation and negative impact in communist-era politics does not stand up to careful scrutiny, particularly when confronted with the archival record; nevertheless, it still influences the political life of post-communist Romania.

The perpetuation and the transformation of national myths of the communist era during the transitional period are analyzed by Claudia-Florentina Dobre in her contribution, "Avatars of the Social Imaginary: Myths about Romanian Communism after 1989." The author argues that myths played an important part in legitimizing the transitional political regimes and in constructing new social and national identities after 1989. The chapter illustrates the continuity of old myths as well as their adaptation to the new context. For example, the myth of conspiracy is still present in Romanian society, albeit in different forms, as well as the myth of a golden age. The process of creation of a new myth of origins is also under scrutiny. The "Revolution" myth as the ground zero of a new political order embedded all the elements of a new political mythology. The study shows that post-communist myths are deeply rooted in the cultural memory of Romanian society, as their origins can be traced to the nineteenth century, the era of the national paradigm's construction.

A similar conclusion informs Liliana Deyanova's contribution, "Post-Communist Politics of Memory and the New Regime of Historiography: Recent Controversies on the Memory of the 'Forty-Five Years of the Communist Yoke' and the 'Myth of Batak.'" The study emphasizes the role played by myths embedded in the cultural memory of Bulgarian society and in the historians' production of knowledge. Deyanova shows how contemporary historians have become complicit in the perpetuation of the mythicized, nineteenth-century nationalistic view of Bulgarian history, focusing on a case study, the myth of Batak. Another crucial aspect analyzed by Deyanova is whether researchers hold sufficient autonomy and public influence to oppose an ideological approach towards the communist past (which tends to be mythicized in a negative sense) such as the one rooted in what was called the "normalization of communism." In Deyanova's view, present-day researchers lack the political channels and positions that would enable them to publicly deconstruct the old national meta-narrative as well as the new canonical narrative on communism and thus to resist political pressures on the writing of academic history.