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***The imaginary of a deportation***

***The deportation to Bărăgan***

Abstract of doctoral thesis

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Timișoara

*2023*

Deportation is part of the utopia projects of the totalitarian regime. It is one of the instruments with which the totalitarian state set out to do more than rule, it set out to change the course of history and alter human nature.

Deportations follow ethnic cleansing or class struggle. The punishment is collective and aims to purge the "dangerous elements" and capitalize on remote regions with a callous disregard for the cost of human lives.

From the first phase of the deportation of kulaks, to the liquidation of entire social classes, from the deportation-abandonment that leaves people without any means of subsistence and without any chance of survival in the middle of hostile lands, to the mass deportation of a people whole, the methods used had already been tested and refined in the Soviet Union.

The scale of the measure, the very large number of people involved and its consequences made the topic of deportation to Bărăgan a representative topic for the way in which Romania was communized.

At the beginning of the doctoral research we found ourselves in the presence of a rich material in works and studies produced, especially at the regional level, by anthropologists, historians and journalists. They sought to expose the picture of the deportation process by identifying the executors of the measure, all the displaced persons, by describing in detail how the operation proceeded, the development of the road, the construction of the new villages, the presentation of life in deportation. Researchers who have previously studied the theme have not only compiled an archive of a large number of "life stories" delivered by survivors, but also an apparatus for orientation and a persistent and persistent return to the theme whenever new details they asked to be edified.

The starting point of the work is found in the history of one's own family. In the course of 2020, the mandatory residence records of my predecessors were made public, being scanned and uploaded to the website of the National Council for the Study of Security Archives in the same way that all the file records of all the deportees in Bărăgan became available for consultation on the Council's website.

The results of previous research led to a conclusion that either the deportation measure was intended to increase control over society, to generate fear, a feeling of insecurity, to break up communities in order to divide and polarise them, to drive the population into submission and silence, or that deportation was intended to remove the alleged obstacles in order to facilitate  collectivisation.

With the observation that these findings do not completely clarify the complex of phenomena that caused the punitive measure, considering that a number of ambiguities and equivocations remained in the equation, in the first chapter entitled Historical perspective on the deportation measure in Bărăgan I launched a research question related to by the fact that the measure of deportation in Bărăgan, although it appears as an impressive event in terms of scale (number of people deported, the size of the elements of the repressive apparatus involved in the organization of the plan), does not contain, beyond any doubt, a disclosure of the reason for which it was adopted.

When the facts reveal that the regime in Bucharest, political coercion forcibly transports a group of 44,000 people to an unknown land, and the motivations of the dislocation remain until today, either evasive or contradictory, this makes possible the entry into the scene of the imaginary that accompanies from the shadows the growth of history, that body of representations which exceed the limit imposed by the findings of experience and the deductive chains authorized by it.

The first considerable stake in what might be called investigating the imaginary of deportation was one of probing the anxieties, concerns and questions that people launched during the journey into the unknown. In the absence of clarifying explanations, we first sought to know what people imagined about the reason for the deportation.

During the analysis through which we tried to fix the facts and identify the connections and the causes of the punitive measure, we passed through a territory where the idea that there is no objective history and that the desire for the fidelity of memory and the claim of the truthfulness of history are illusory has crept insidiously. The ambition of the researcher who tries to reconstruct the past as faithfully as possible is opposed by the grid of interpretation incited to which Gilbert Durand mobilizingly incites: even history belongs to the realm of the imaginary.

When the methodical treatment of the documents does not bring satisfactory results, and the possibility of verifying the validity is reduced, I accepted as a working tool the proposal of Lucian Boia according to which even the ability to separate the causes of the events that happened would also come from the imagination of historians. We therefore advanced on the open path of the domain of the imaginary, disputed by the history of mentalities and historical anthropology. With these working methods, we investigated the imaginary of the political decision-maker from 1951, composed - it was revealed during the research - of the anxiety related to the imminence of a new war. Nowadays it is known that the fact seen as implacable, the war, was only an imagistic creation, something not only imagined, but amplified and potentiated, without corresponding to a concrete reality. However, the assertion of the imminence of an armed confrontation, the declaration at all levels of the "Titoist heresy" and the call to fight against Titoism preceded the declaration of the need to clean up the border area, all of which were actually used to implement and justify, among other persecutions, also the measure of deportation to Bărăgan.

What appeared to be a set of military measures taken as a result of a "cold" calculation had, as its source, a series of mental representations, an anguish inspired by an unsettling unknown. How important was the mental conjuncture and climate of that era, how significant was the social power of such a mental conjuncture defined by an atmosphere of generalized fear of a new war, how treacherously nonsense makes its way into this mental nucleus composed of the emotions and convictions of the mental universe of the decision-maker, all these, as well as their fatal role in the political decision of deportation to Bărăgan, were investigated in chapter I.

In the direction proposed by the field of the imaginary also advances the concerns of the next chapter, Bărăganul. A symbolic geography, by attempting to define, in the sense proposed by Braudel, what are the permanencies of the geographical framework as a predestined space that prefigured future configurations. Starting from the conditioning towards the geographical element, that tempus loci that claims that time is the prisoner of the place, we tried to determine what are the coordinates, first of the anticipation and then of the imposition of the project of transferring such a large group of people to the Bărăganu steppe.

The survey of the way in which the repressive project of deportation from June 1951 was made and used in the social environment was also passed through the grid of the imaginary. Thus, from the understanding of the mental configuration of the Bărăgan space as a vast expanse that has the potential to suppress any form of hypothetical collective opposition to the installation of the new regime, passing through the application of state plans with the aim of systematizing the depopulated, inhospitable area, whose reserves and whose potential were considered as exploitable, the fateful decision with tragic consequences was reached to follow the model of valorization of remote regions, regardless of the cost of human lives, according to a predetermined, rigorous and precisely explained plan, drawn up since the decade of third of the 20th century, on the occasion of the deportation of the kulaks.

I looked into how the liminal condition accompanied people: at a border there is the point of departure (the place of origin) and also at the other end is the point of arrival (the place of destination). The simple geographical location of the ancestral village within the depth limit of the predetermined number of kilometers near the border with Yugoslavia was by itself the cause of the change of destiny. The crossing of the border, the flight from the country of a family member after the establishment of the popular regime, led to the registration of those who remained in the country on the deportation list.

If at the end of the first world war, the empty spaces at the borders, those "no man's lands" were geostrategically rethought as active areas, with large rural populations massed along the borders, active and vibrant, where every patch of land was used and cherished, the return to the past of deserted borders, around which the civilian population is systematically expelled and deported en masse to the interior provinces, viewed from this perspective of a symbolic geography, had been explained in advance by Ion Conea, a geographer from Dimitrie Gusti's team. Today, the space where, in the sixth decade of the last century, people were deported, is phantasmagoric: all the constructions have been razed to the ground. That is why it demands to be brought back, reinvented and repopulated through memory, through storytelling.

Also through the grid of the imaginary passes any discourse about man, about inter-human relations, about alterities and differences, the system of alterities being the best known of the structures of the imaginary. In the chapter Image of the other in Bărăgan. A comparative approach, "The Other" is a community seen through the distorted filter of the imaginary, it is the "class enemy", the one who embodies the opposite of the proclaimed values ​​and who must be isolated in a concentration space. The game of otherness cannot be separated from the center-periphery game, the center being one of the central symbols of the imaginary (the place from where the "Other" is viewed).

Through a comparative approach, I acquired answers about the identity of the Banat people group and then put the rich and varied "self" in relation with a different and equally complicated "Other", the group of "Ragateni people". We have seen how, in a play of influences and reception, putting the other's point of view is naturally shared, received, and practiced. Bringing to light the mentalities, the feelings, the discovery of the way in which the exile scrutinizes the Other who was far away until yesterday, were developed in an imagological key.

The chapter entitled Collective Memory. The meaning of the reminder and the typology of the storytellers attempts to capture some of the vitality of the memory of the community of deportees in Bărăgan and their descendants after half a century in which propaganda forbade the remembrance or tried to distort it. A different category of storytellers is composed of those who were not born or were very young at the time of deportation, and either were not in Bărăgan at all, or were too young to be able to say that their memories are direct. These are the children or grandchildren of the deportees. Usually called second-rate confessors, they are the purveyors of what Marianne Hirsch called "postmemoir". Under this name, the philologist included the processes and configurations through which a later generation processes the memories and traumatic events that the previous generation went through, using photographs and objects belonging to the first one. I watched how they turn to "communicated memory", to what the forerunners transmitted and how they resort to the contest of "cultural memory" or to extracts from institutionalized archives. I watched how the local history, the "little history", populated by the "forgotten heroes" is pieced together and how the portraits of prominent members of the deported families are reconstructed.

In the last chapter titled Can suffering be measured? What about gratitude? A legal look and numerous obstacles I examined the issue of reparations claimed immediately after the Revolution by the people deported to Bărăgan: the public recognition of the lack of any guilt upon the application of the administrative measure, the restitution of the property on the confiscated goods, ensuring the right of free access to one's own file and lustration. I have examined, through the grid of the imaginary, the particularly charged history that the package of reparative norms has gone through, which has undergone numerous and substantive changes due to a small extent to the pressure of representative groups of persecuted people, and above all to endless exploitation and speculation in the electoral terms.

Regarding the tools used, we believe that the positivist tendency to consider only written documents is not productive. Under Jacques Le Goff's guidance, I abandoned the prejudice that the need to research unwritten documents arose only in the absence of something better, i.e. texts. We know that, even when we talk about sources, the center appears as the official source, the document from the archive, and the periphery is the related source, the voice of the persecuted. We believe that the canonical reading of history that claims the exclusivity of the written document can be enriched by recourse to less conventional sources such as "life histories".

The written source can be a source of error in the situation where it retains only the official version that belongs to the decision-maker, completely ignoring the voice of the victim. In the present study, the perspective of the persecuted abounds, and the victim of social exclusion sometimes becomes the depository of the discourse. This approach was born in an alternative and compensatory manner to the confiscation of speech by authority in the communist past. What would be the content of the information about the deportation to Bărăgan that would be revealed to us if we limited the analysis and study to the official decrees and documents revealed by the repression archive? The official document, drawn up according to the canon of repression, dispersed, fragmented or often simply inaccessible, does not respond to a horizon of expectation when seeking to obtain information about the mentalities, sensitivities, worldviews of the deportees. The present study strengthened our conviction that only through orality can we glimpse the imaginary of collective dreams.

We had the benefit of finding ourselves in front of a rich archive of already constructed interviews, intended by those who collected them to operate on them, depending on the research interest. The selections made by the researchers who listened, transcribed and edited before us gave us a good outline of the study.

Although the testimonies collected previously in very large numbers were sufficient to make up the documentation material for the thesis, we understood to add some such interviews with the descendants of the deportees. With their help, we were able to follow how the generation that is contemporary to us, that of the sons and grandsons of the deported, processed the memories of the traumatic event that the previous generation went through.

And finally, I considered iconography to be a privileged means of tracing the subtle relations between the imaginary and the real. The photo file is not only a necessary complement to the text or an illustration of the text, but composes a speech in itself.