

The role of historian's commission between science, politics and public opinion

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As one of the few contributors to this symposium, I have not been part of any of the historian's commissions under debate here. Even more, as a Swiss historian, but who's main research interests are Southeastern and especially Romanian history, I'm in a certain way an outsider in the Swiss as well as in the Romanian context. In this situation, I have basically two options. The first and more comfortable option is stressing the positive effects the work of all three commissions had. The other option is a critical evaluation of the commission's activity as an opportunity to reflect how it could be optimised. Please allow me to chose the second option of a critical view, not to lower the laudable efforts of all three commissions, but as a contribution to an open debate that should answer the question, posed by the organizers of this conference, what lessons could be learned from the experience of the Swiss and Romanian historian's commissions. As I was not involved in any of the commissions under debate, having observed the work of all three commissions from a certain distance, I won't concentrate on one specific commission, but rather use the opportunity to make a comparison between the Bergier, Wiesel and Tismăneanu commissions.

Of course, as an outsider I'm not able to evaluate the way in which the commissions worked. I will thus concentrate on the aspects that could be observed from outside. Let me thus make first a short introduction to the political context that led to the establishment of the three commissions to analyse in a second step the reactions and public debates of the research results and final reports presented by the commissions. To finish, I will reflect what lessons could be learned from the example of the Swiss and Romanian commissions.

The task of historian's commission such as the so-called Bergier-, Wiesel- or Tismăneanu-commission is not an easy one. The constitution of the commission was in all three cases a political decision. And in every of the three cases, political decision-makers acted in reaction to a tense political context. In case of the Bergier-commission, chronologically the first to be established, only political pressure from abroad, mainly the United States, led swiss politicians to the constitution of a commission with the task of examining the role of swiss enterprises and authorities in the context of the Nazi regime and second world war. So fear of further deteriorating the positive image of Switzerland and hoping to minimise negative economic effects for the swiss economy were main reasons for establishing the Bergier-commission.

The case of the Wiesel-commission was somehow similar, even if the context was of course a different one. As in the case of Switzerland, it was political pressure from abroad that led president Iliescu to establish a commission. Romania was criticised for tolerating if not

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supporting the cult of pro-Nazi military dictator Ion Antonescu and the widespread negationism toward Romania's contribution to the Holocaust, where even president Iliescu made some very problematic statements in an interview with israelian newspaper Haaretz. The fear of jeopardising Romania's integration in the euro-atlantic institutions, NATO and EU, were the main reason for the change of opinion that made possible a critical exploration of the country's world war 2 history by nobel-prize for peace laureate and Holocaust-survivor of jewish-Romanian origin Elie Wiesel and his commission.

The creation of the Tismăneanu-commission had a somehow different pre-history. Unlike the Bergier- and Wiesel-commissions, the Tismăneanu-commission was not set up under foreign, but mainly under domestic political pressure. By 2005 already, several intellectuals had asked Romanian president Traian Băsescu to condemn the communist regime in an official declaration similar to the condemnation of the crimes of the Antonescu-Regime. President Băsescu first avoided to fulfill this request. He changed his mind when the accusations towards his person for his own role in the communist regime began to damage his reputation, especially in the context of a growing conflict between the partners of the governing coalition. The national-liberal party of the prime-minister who became the main political enemy of the president succeeded to stage itself as the real anti-communist power, whereas president Băsescu risked to be accused as a communist nostalgic – a role that has been reserved until then to former president Iliescu's social democratic party. In this situation, the establishment of a commission assigned to create a scientific basis for a condemnation of the communist regime was a decision to free himself of the negatively-connoted image as a "communist" and to appear, quite the contrary, as one of the pioneers of anti-communism.

Thus, whereas in case of the examination of the second-world war past in Switzerland and Romania domestic public opinion didn't play a major role in the establishment of the commissions, in the case of the Tismăneanu-commission, it was mainly due to widespread, even though diffuse, negative attitudes towards communism that an official condemnation of the former regime became possible – it was never demanded as a condition of euro-atlantic integration. Even though there was growing nostalgia for the communist regime in Romania and although even former dictator Ceaușescu became to be seen uncritical by a substantial minority of the population, an at least superficial form of anti-communism prevails in Romanian society, at least when it comes to the repressive apparatus, especially the Securitate. Furthermore, most politicians, even Ion Iliescu's social democratic party, derive their political legitimation and identity from an anti-communist rhetoric, even though reduced mainly to a declarative level.

For this reason, condemning the communist regime was more popular than the task of the Bergier- or Wiesel commission. This might be also an explanation why the findings of the Wiesel-commission were the least to be discussed in public, compared to the Bergier- and Tismăneanu-commission. One of the main conclusions of the Wiesel commission was that the Antonescu-regime was responsible for about 280.000 to 380.000 Jews (if not even more) and 11'000 Gypsies that were murdered or died as an effect of the anti-Semitic and anti-Roma politic of Romanian authorities. Sad enough, the most visible public discussion on the Wiesel report was largely limited to negative reactions from right-wing extremists that used a violent language to accuse the commission's members as traitors. Some suggestions made by the commission have still been realised, as the creation of a Holocaust-memorial in Bucharest or the publication of school-books to be used in Holocaust-teaching in Romanian school. Reality is somehow different, as Holocaust-education is only taught in a small minority of secondary school classes. Coming to terms with romanias responsibility for the Holocaust is not a priority of public opinion, as it has not been in the swiss case.

Still, the symbolic act of recognising the crimes executed by Romanian authorities should not be minimised. For sure, a small number of foreign and, after 1989, also some Romanian

researchers have clearly revealed the direct implication of Romanian authorities in mass-murder during world war 2 long before the Wiesel-commission was created. So the approximate shape and dimensions of direct responsibility in the Holocaust was not a secret for those who wanted to know about it. The problem was more large-scale ignorance or even denial of what was known thanks to serious research. Therefore, the commission's findings did not produce a radical change in public opinion, even more as the commission finished its final report a little bit more than a year after its establishment what meant that the researchers involved did not have the time for a detailed re-evaluation of Romania's whole World War 2 history. Like this, the main achievement of the Wiesel report was to a lesser extent the presentation of new research results yet unknown to specialists, but more to direct the attention of the public to one of the darkest and frequently ignored aspects of Romanian history. I see this increased public awareness of specialised historical research as the biggest advantage of officially constituted historian's commissions – not only in the Romanian case but also in other contexts like the german one. Here, only very recently the public opinion became aware of the fact that the almost "traditional" differentiation between the bad guys from the SS and the good guys from institutions like the foreign ministry is not more than a myth. The foreign ministry was directly involved in the crimes of the nazi regime, a result of the respective commission's report that was presented in the media as spectacular news but what was not really a surprise to specialists. Thus historian's commissions make publicly aware what normally remains a specialised debate in a very narrow circle of scientists.

Mutatis mutandis this is also true for the "Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania". Here, the time between the establishment of the commission and the presentation of the final report was even shorter than in the aforementioned case, only about eight months. For every person involved in historical research, it is clear that in such a short time and with a group consisting of not less than almost 40 persons, members or experts of the commission, including different professional backgrounds from political scientists, historians or sociologist to experts in literary studies, journalists and well-known members of the civil society, thus under these conditions, it is not possible to create a comprehensive, homogeneous work based exclusively on new research. The final report is thus based to a great extent on previous research of the commission's members and experts and only selectively on original research. This has also to do with limited access to archives, a problem that was partially resolved only after the presentation of the final report, when one of the commission's experts became general director of Romanian national archives.

As in case of the Wiesel-commission, the main task of the Tismăneanu commission was not presenting new insights previously unknown to experts of Romanian communism, an aspect often ingnored by critics who accused the final report as a heterogeneous and sometimes even contradictory work. Sure, one can find aspects in the report that are arguable, as the use of the concept of genocide that was discussed yesterday already and that I see as highly problematic. One can also expect that experts will discuss the exact numbers of victims of communist repression for decades to come without reaching a final certitude. One could also point to the fact that the report limits itself to a description of communism based on the polarisation of a few "bad guys" that are opposed to the vast majority of "good gays", of passive victims of the regime. What is underrepresented in the final report is the intermediary level of opportunists, the complicity of ordinary citizens who, for the long-term effect, is maybe as important in understanding communism as it is repression and political terror. This category would include for example a hypothetical historian who was willingly participating in writing the national-communist master-narrative of the Ceaușescu-years and thus helped to legitimize the system as a whole, even though he was not a torturer and even though he was not an informer of the securitate. Thus victimization of Romanian citizens in their large majority of

almost 22 millions, with the exception of some ten thousands of nomenclatura members is maybe a necessary step. But, as a comparison of coming to the terms with the past in other places shows, it is only a first step, a kind of mental emancipation from the communist regime. The painful process of asking the question why one and the same communism established after World War 2 everywhere in Eastern Europe provoked quite different reactions in different countries remains still unanswered. In Poland there were not thousands or tens of thousands, but hundreds of thousand or even millions of peoples openly contesting the regime in the 1970s and 1980s, whereas in Romania, open protests were almost invisible. How and why did Ceaușescu succeed to become what he was and why did repression work so efficient in Romania?

I don't want to deepen these aspects here, I just want to stress that we should see the final report as what he was intended to be: a final report of a particular commission, but for sure it is never the intention of the commission to present **the** final stage of studies in Romanian communism. In such a case, the institution here would have become superfluous and we would not have the nice opportunity to be its guests today.

To the opposite, it can be seen if not as a starting point, since research in Romanian communism have been done before, than at least a stimulus in the cumbersome process of Romanian society coming to terms with its communist past. As this cannot be an exclusively scientific work done in specialised research institution, isolated from the world around it, it is important to have an officially assumed document as a foundation of the civic aspects of this process, a foundation that thanks to the increased awareness outside of the restricted circles of specialists can contribute to a debate that should be a public one and not a pure scientific discussion between specialists.

The same can be said for the Wiesel commission. It was the symbolic act of establishing an officially recognised view on the past that was the most important aspect of this work. I think that here, this effect is even more visible. The relativisation of the Holocaust by different Romanian officials, including president Iliescu, was the cause leading to the establishment of the commission. It's result was an official acknowledgement by the president of Romania's responsibility for the Holocaust and persecution of Jews and Roma during the late 1930's and first half of 1940's. Symbolically, this change of opinion should not be underestimated, as official viewpoints by representatives of the Romanian state are an important signal by key opinion leaders. Sure, it would be quite naive to hope that an official recognition of Romania's responsibility will lead to a sudden change in the viewpoints of the large masses. One can only hope for a long-term effect that would be quite an illusion if we still had a chief of state relativising the Holocaust.

Regrettably, a quite opposite effect could be observed in the Swiss case, where, as Regula Ludi stressed yesterday, the discussions of the late 1990s connected with Switzerland's role in the context of World War 2 led to a polarisation in public opinion. Antisemitism, almost invisible before, suddenly became socially more acceptable than it used to be before, as right wing nationalists publically condemned a so-called "servile subordination under foreign interests". In Romania, the reports didn't really lead to a polarisation, as extremists already in the 1990s legitimated the the Antonescu- and the Ceaușescu-regimes in a very rude language and with personal attacks. Under these circumstances, a polarisation was realised long before the Wiesel- and the Tismăneanu-commissions began their work. Based on this fact, the provocative question arises if there are certain contexts in which historians commissions could be even counterproductive. If the answer would be a positive one, than the second question follows if Switzerland's Bergier commission would be such a case. I don't want to answer this question here, since there are no easy answers, but we could maybe come back to it in the discussion.

When I prepared my presentation for this symposium, I looked again at the reactions the different commissions and final reports provoked. I was surprised to observe that both the serious scientific critique as well as the violent verbal attacks against the commissions were astonishingly similar in the Swiss as well as in the Romanian cases. This is not the place to repeat or even summarise all the different arguments that have been raised. Even more, I think that it doesn't make any sense to investigate the reactions by far right extremists, but to concentrate only on critical reactions formulated by intellectuals. In Switzerland as well as in Romania, polemics started in many cases from personal vanities. In some cases, the impression prevails that persons who have not been included in the commissions used a critical attitude as a form of bringing themselves in the discussion. So a central critique against the Bergier and the Tismăneanu-commission (to a lesser extent to the Wiesel commission, if I see right) derived from the fact that both commissions had a more or less precise task, formulated not by scientists but by politicians. So the central conclusion of the Tismăneanu-report, namely that communism was a criminal and illegitimate regime, was posed to the commission as a pre-established truth that only had to be substantiated by the commission through a scientific report. Thus, the methodology of the commission was a deductive one. The general nature of communism as a criminal and illegitimate regime was assumed as generally known, and had to be demonstrated on the Romanian example. To put it in other words, communism was treated as a heuristic problem. This is quite the contrary to the inductive methodology used normally in the historical sciences, where thesis and conclusions are derived from empirical evidence, namely archival sources. Much critique was thus based on implicit assumptions on how historical research should be accomplished. It lies in the very nature of historian's commissions, who have a precise political task, that their approach is quite different of what one would expect from a pure scientific work.

Misunderstandings and disagreement with fundamental methodological concepts were thus maybe the most frequent source of critiques. That shows the biggest danger a scientist can encounter when participating in a historian's commission: that he has to answer a question that is not a scientific one, to subordinate itself to a political command. As the two cases of the Bergier and the Tismăneanu-commissions show clearly, the commissions were not only accused of doing what they had to do according to their mandate, but also of doing things that went far beyond the relatively narrow duty. Especially the Bergier-commission was heavily criticised for the ample scientific work that became much more substantial than it was initially intended.

To come to an end, I think the lesson that could be learned comparing the Swiss and the Romanian case studies is that the communication of the commission's work should be taken much more serious. Of course, in every case members of the commissions were present in the media, informed about their work and gave interviews. The problem is that the members became in this way direct part of public debate, were seen as partisans of a certain viewpoint and not as independent researchers. An idea would be to separate the scientific work and the outside communication. Maybe a professional public relations department would be a solution not to all, but to a part of the problems mentioned. This PR department should not consist of members or experts of the commission, but of specialised staff responsible only for the communications, not for the scientific part. A more active way of positive communication could have had positive effects. Historian's commissions are a classical case of agenda setting, but often, its members and experts are overstrained to do scientific and media work in the same time. Like this, the agenda setting effect was more often than not in the hands of the media or of political extremists. A separate PR department could guard the scientific personal better from the heavy attacks that existed both in the Swiss as in the Romanian context. And finally, researchers could have concentrated on doing what they can do best: scientific research.