

Liliana COROBICA, *Book Control - Literary Censorship during the Communist Regime in Romania [Controlul cărții: cenzura literaturii în regimul comunist din România]*, Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 376 pp., ISBN 9789732330647, 2014

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Award-winning novelist, translated, so far, into Italian and German, editor of several books about the Romanian exile, Liliana Corobca graduated from the Faculty of Letters, State University of Moldova in 1997 and received her PhD from the University of Bucharest in 2001. She worked as a researcher at the Institute of History and Literary Theory “G. Călinescu” in Bucharest, from 2002 to 2011. Her extended scientific activity resulted in two important anthologies of documents about the communist caesura in Romania: *The Purging of Books in Romania. Documents (1944-1964)*<sup>1</sup> and *The Institution of Communist Censorship in Romania*<sup>2</sup>.

The study begins with the assimilation and the changes in existing structures of censorship since the Communists came to power up to the creation of DGPT<sup>3</sup>, on 20 May 1949, the new *institution of censorship* with “most duties of censure and the most intense (huge) activity in book censorship.”<sup>4</sup>

Then, the process of *book purging*, the so called “defascization” – the withdrawal of pro-fascist books, is achieved by successive raids on libraries, bookstores and bookshops. In 1948 the state monopoly on libraries and bookshops

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<sup>1</sup> *Epurarea cărților în România. Documente (1944-1964)* (Editura Tritonic, București, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> *Instituția cenzurii comuniste în România* (Editura Ratio et Revelatio, Oradea, 2014)

<sup>3</sup> Direcția Generală a Presei și Tipăriturilor (the General Directorate of Press and Printing).

<sup>4</sup> “cele mai multe atribuții de cenzură și cea mai intensă (imensă) activitate în domeniul cenzurii cărții.” Liliana Corobca, *Controlul cărții*, 21. All translations from Romanian are my own unless otherwise stated.

was ensured by the dissolution of the private enterprises. Instead of destroying only hostile, fascist-themed books, as directed, many zealous regional councilors preferred to destroy whole libraries. The booksellers, librarians, antiquarians and all those who refused to participate in the purging process itself were persecuted. A number of private libraries, owned by museums or personalities, were destroyed intentionally or negligently, the books being stored in improper conditions (for example: about 3,000 German books from the Library of Brukenthal Museum were mildewed, being kept in a basement). The most terrible waves of purges in Romanian history happened from 1945 to 1948. The idea of saving certain rare or valuable books occurs immediately after this period. Based on this idea the *Special Fund* will be established in 1951.

Since 1949, when the term “defascization” is waived, the “lists of books taken out of circulation will reflect the political life.”<sup>5</sup> The lists of banned authors reflect those who were disgraced and after the death of Stalin, the change of orientation is visible in the prohibited texts such as those works which are “permeated by personality cult” or those who extol a leader “and especially Stalin”. And with this phenomenon turning slowly into something common, due to indoctrination and “purging” of personnel that created problems or raised questions, the subterfuge was waived and books were prohibited without distinctions or explanations. The emphasis had moved from state control to self-control and *self-censorship*, librarians being the first line in the purging process.

The author makes a brief history of the Soviet Union purge criteria, analyzing documents which reveal that between 1944 and 1947 Soviet censors were sent to implement the Soviet system of censorship in countries that have just been “liberated”, followed by the purge criteria in Romania, emphasizing the existing parallels. Then it is examined, in the same parallel manner, a very important and less studied aspect, more precisely the formation of the Special or Secret Fund from prohibited material collected over time:

“After the fall of communism, the researchers of these funds think, studying them, that they stepped into a theater of the absurd, so

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<sup>5</sup> “listele de cărți scoase din circulație vor oglindi evoluția vieții politice” Liliana Corobca, *Controlul cărții*, 38.

miscellaneous are the authors that got here and so nonsensical the interdiction criteria.”<sup>6</sup>

The most generous space in the book the author has given to DGPT's analysis. In the second chapter there are analyzed all the departments, all the sections (which had as their main or secondary task the control of the book) and their later transformations, all made with massive quotations from documents for a clear and direct view of their operational procedures, the criteria for censorship and the overall thematic of prohibited books. The third chapter goes to a thorough analysis of these institutions through the actual process of censorship. There are presented in detail the stages of work, the complex system of visas every book had to receive to be printed, the lecturers' duties and the typology of interventions - where it is shown what the censors themselves believed about their work, regarded as being of huge importance to protect the public (the working class) from “hostile” and confused or unhelpful ideas, defending “the purity of Marxist-Leninist theory” etc.

Works of literature considered bleak or pessimistic were prohibited because they didn't correspond with the socialist “reality”, they “have nothing to do with our lives” and for being “politically and ideologically” wrong. Censorship of “classical heritage” was done in three stages: 1944 – 1948 the prohibition and massive burning of books including classics; 1949 – 1958 a period characterized by a “rehabilitation” of some classics in ideologized editions – forewords and interventions in the texts by deleting some phrases, or even whole passages (another practice taken over by the Romanian censors from the Soviet *Glavlit*) – interestingly, the authors reprinted in this period are still being purged in editions printed before the 1950s; the third period, beginning in 1958 and reaching its peak between 1965 and 1968, is characterized by duplicity – a book was printed in small print run editions without censorship interventions for specialized audiences, and, at the same time, it was published in a large censored print run for the masses. Examples are given from Classics as well as some of the “issues” they raised (Eminescu, Creangă, Blaga, Barbu etc.).

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<sup>6</sup> “După căderea comunismului, cercetătorii acestor fonduri au impresia, studiindu-le, că au pătruns într-un teatru al absurdului, atât de amestecați sunt autorii ajunși aici și atât de lipsite de sens criteriile de interdicție.” Liliana Corobca, *Controlul cărții*, 78.

The situations of Bessarabia is presented (not to “damage the interests of the Soviet Union” books that contain only allusions to Bessarabia, Transnistria or the Unification were banned; also, historians who had published books about Bessarabia and even writers who had a similar name, Basarabeanu, were banned) and the censorship of literature in the languages of minorities: Hungarian literature, German and Jewish literature.

Chapter three ends with “the abolition of censorship” in 1977, the abolition of the official censorship institution after a 28-year existence, which did not mean the disappearance of censorship, but, paradoxically, an increase of it, as demonstrated by the author and with general consensus of others, because now there wasn't only one censorship, that of an institution, but *many more*: of all those involved in the creative process and printing due to universal fear (those who made errors or mistakes were severely punished) creating an atmosphere of terror which culminated in the establishment of what specialized dictionaries and encyclopedias call *New Censorship* or *Self-censorship*.

The last chapter analyzes the censorship hierarchy, starting with what the author considers the first step of a long series of steps: *self-censorship*. Generalized to the whole communist bloc, a formula of a Russian writer who said that the main censor in the Soviet Union was fear, fear of making a mistake and fear of suffering the consequences, especially now that there were no indications, decrees, laws, etc. to say what you cannot say, was more effective than the officially regulated censorship. Quoting many writers who wrote in exile during the communist regime, or after its collapse, including Norman Manea, Paul Goma, Ana Blandiana, Eugen Negrici, Marta Petreu etc. has revealed a blueprint of negative effects of the phenomenon of self-censorship – long self-censorship can even change a writer's way of thinking, as Paul Goma states, but also a few positive effects such as language innovation, forcing literary creativity by trying to hijack prohibitions, according to Ana Blandiana. This led to the formation of the “Aesopian Language”, a system through which the author and the reader understand each other by skipping the censor, some considering this a great gain for plurisemantic language development, others believing that a literature emphasizing only on such tricks can very quickly become incomprehensible to those who do not know the details and subtleties of that particular literary era, losing its aesthetic value. A strange form of self-censorship was, according to the testimony of novelist Augustin Buzura, adding text

that the author knew was unacceptable and had to be removed but trying in this way to save what “had to remain”.

Finally, the editorial censorship and the arguments and quarrels between writers - editors – censors is presented: editors blamed the censors for not accepting certain books for publishing that they themselves considered poor, but also the acts of courage of some editors who approved the publication of texts they knew were “inappropriate” and for which they were going to be punished – and indeed, they were dismissed.

Then a short overview of the important role of the *Securitatea* (security police) in censorship is given - the punitive censorship (again in parallel with the Soviet Union). Reasons given for the writers arrest were extremely serious: treason, plot against the state, “crime against peace” etc. which didn’t reflect the reality. There are briefly presented the cases of some outstanding cultural personalities such as: Constantin Noica, Dinu Pillat, N. Steinhardt etc. Some were arrested just because they had read and discussed books written by Mircea Eliade and Emil Cioran, and sentenced up to 18 years of forced labor, as in the case of Arșavir C. Aterian. The last part of the chapter is allocated to the Party, top-level censorship, and the role it played. “Guidance” of culture, censorship of literature *in statu nascendi* by seeking and promoting young writers from “healthy” origins, encouraging literary activity in circles that were created and controlled by censors. The conclusion reached by the author is that the Party had been involved in all the operations of censorship: books, radio, and television. Including Nicolae Ceaușescu and the first lady, the “world renowned scholar” Elena Ceaușescu, were directly involved, banning or allowing the publication of works.

The author concludes by raising the issue of censorship after censorship, censorship in democratic regimes:

“censorship in democracy works based on other principles, because what is imposed in the totalitarian regime, the democratic one only suggests. The totalitarian ideology goes forward without a mask but the democratic one – masked.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “cenzura în democrație funcționează pe baza altor principii, pentru că ceea ce în regimul totalitar este impus, în cel democratic este sugerat. Ideologia totalitară înaintează fără mască, cea democratică – mascată.” Liliana Corobca, *Controlul cărții*, 351-352.

Written within the program “*Spurensuche / Looking for traces - Study of the inheritance of totalitarianism in Southeast Europe*”<sup>8</sup> supported by the Robert Bosch Foundation, in collaboration with Literaturhaus Berlin and Herta Müller, this is an important reference work about censorship in communist Romania, but also in the larger field of world censorship and for a comparative perspective, as the author states:

“studying censorship in a single communist country opens perspectives on the entire communist system and, in general, on censorship in all totalitarian regimes.”<sup>9</sup>

And with the knowledge of the Russian language and with access to plenty Soviet documents and Russian bibliography on the subject, she was able to make constant references to censorship from the Soviet Union, regarded by researchers to be a model for the one in Romania, a theory that the author not only agrees but also demonstrates by constantly comparing the structures, mentality and application of what she calls *the institution of censorship* in both countries:

“In communist regimes, censorship can be also studied from an institutional perspective because there were specialized institutions in this field (Glavlit, in the USSR and Bulgaria, DGPT in Romania, State Control Office of the Press in Czechoslovakia etc.).”<sup>10</sup>

The high number of quotations, through which the author demonstrates an extensive knowledge of the documents and bibliography on the subject, is made with a clear and simple purpose in the entire book: to give a voice to official documents, censors describing their work, problems, complaints, work atmosphere and mindset. One can clearly see the development and “improvement” of the institution of censorship by creating new departments and divisions, and of censors, through their constant specialization.

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<sup>8</sup> “*Spurensuche / În căutarea urmelor – Studiul moștenirii totalitarismului în Europa de Sud-Est*”,

<sup>9</sup> “studierea cenzurii dintr-o singură țară comunistă deschide perspective asupra întregului sistem comunist și asupra cenzurii în regimurile totalitare, în general.” Liliana Corobca, *Controlul cărții*, 351.

<sup>10</sup> “În regimurile comuniste, cenzura poate fi studiată și din perspectivă instituțională, pentru că au existat instituții specializate în acest domeniu (*Glavlit*, în URSS și Bulgaria, DGPT, în România, Oficiul Controlului de Stat al Presei, în Cehoslovacia etc.).” Liliana Corobca, *Controlul cărții*, 5.

As the editors of *History of the literary cultures of East-Central Europe* so eloquently stated:

“Literary texts do not merely reflect particular historical and cultural moments; more importantly, they constitute history through reading and rereading, they shape the personal and collective mentality of readers who participate in the social construction of reality.”<sup>11</sup>

In totalitarian regimes the past, present and the “collective mentality” are hijacked - from the falsification of history and data to the interdiction of critical thinking and free speech, through every means necessary, this regimes, but not exclusively as we are warned, are trying to shape a present and create a utopian future that is impossible because, and Liliana Corobca's book shows this more than once, the subjective opinion of some are passed as objective and definite truths. But when people change so does the truth. Art, literature, science through freedom of speech, of thought, of ideas are necessary for a society to grow, to change, to “progress” and to flourish.

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<sup>11</sup> *History of the literary cultures of East-Central Europe: junctures and disjunctures in the 19th and 20th centuries. Volume I*, edited by Marcel Corniş-Pope & John Neubauer, Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 2004.