

Radu Vădeanu, *Catalogul absenților. Condamnări politice ale Tribunalului Militar Cluj între anii 1956-1964*, Cluj-Napoca, Mega, 2022, 589 p.

One of the most famous quotes attributed to Joseph Stalin, although initially enounced in 1932 by German journalist and writer Kurt Tucholsky, says: "The death of one man is a tragedy. The deaths of millions are a statistic". Regardless of its real or fictional author, the cynic statement refers to the horrors of totalitarian repression that was able to dehumanize the tragedy of millions of human losses. By indexing depersonalized destinies in never-ending lists of names, codes, or aliases, totalitarian authorities collapsed all the emotion, suffering, and tribulation of life stories under one cold and empty unit of analysis: *numbers*. However, one author decided to bring the statistics back to life to understand victimhood and state repression in the late 1950s and early 1960s in communist Romania. *Catalogul absenților (The Absentees' Catalogue)* is Radu Vădeanu's most recent book, published in 2022 at Mega Publishing House from Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The oxymoron contained in the title reflects the sole purpose of the author's endeavour: indexing the absentees of history who were persecuted, accused, and then imprisoned for fictitious guilts under various accusatory narratives constructed by the Securitate, prosecutor's office, and Military Courts.

The *Catalogue* has been divided into three main chapters that address, in this order: the judicial system as an instrument of repression during the communist regime; the typologies of political convictions based on the case study of the Military Court in Cluj-Napoca between 1956-1964; and, last but not least, the third part that contains approximately 50 pages of names inserted in an extended table (name, sentence number, and detention years are specified). The 2222 names mentioned in the table are a great way of understanding the assignment of history studies – that of turning cold and distant names into living human beings – and for that, one should consider reading the third chapter first and then proceed to the introduction.

The book's objective, stated from the beginning, is to achieve a re-memorialization of repression through an extensive identification of the victims, the reason behind their conviction, and their penitentiary itinerary based on the political sentences given by the Cluj Military Court between 1956-1964. The author aims to create a general profile of convictions in court, developed by extracting information from the fund of accusations supported by the indictment conclusions. Re-memorializing the portraits of repressed individuals and groups implies a systematic deconstruction of several layers of ideological narratives created by communist authorities,

starting from the suspicions signalled in informative notes and ending with the main object of the accusation in the military court. In this regard, due to limited space and research possibilities, the present book only insists on the latter issue, emphasizing the motivational structure that was the basis of the criminal court file, as well as the conclusions of the prosecutor's office for the so-called 'enemies of the people.

Vadeanu's objective was to systematically compose a typological framework of the victims of the communist regime using a quantitative method of analysis through which he sequentially approached a limited sample of 2,879 sentences (approximately 12% of sentences from U.M. 02405 Pitesti Military Archives) subjected to judicial abuse. Information-wise, the study fills a historiographical gap in the political sentences the Cluj Military Court gave using the indictment conclusions of the military prosecutor's office. The quantitative paradigm emphasizes the multiple contexts of the groups that are taken into account, which helps the researchers point out the aspects shared and differences among various cases using an academic bird's-eye view. One example of taxonomy used by the author is built around different repressive categories based on the Criminal Code from 1948, such as opinion crime, political identity, religious identity, anti-Communist organizations, border crossing, possession and distribution of prohibited publications, omission of denunciation and other political sentences (p. 140). In this regard, the analysis follows the trail of communist repressive institutions. It operates at the linguistic level of the official ideology, using communist terminology while explaining its real functional meaning (pp. 508-520).

The researcher's merit is to clarify the rationale behind the second wave of internal repression between 1956-1964 using archival data. Although the argument does not necessarily imply a radical or overarching notion of originality, it successfully adds new data to the existing historiography. It amplifies the debate around the patterns of repression on a moral, normative, and theoretical basis. As so, the novelty comes neither from the method used nor from the systematic analysis of raw numbers and names but from the *data* itself. Due to Vadeanu's consistent effort to dig up the past from an unresearched archive, hundreds of destinies and life stories are now part of the academic debates. When referring to research questions, the scholar divides them into two main topics: who and why? Quite surprising at first sight due to their simplicity, the two topics branch into other related questions which address specific issues concerning the typologies of convictions, the trial procedure, the factual basis of the enounced accusations, what was the role of military courts in the broader framework of political repression and most importantly, why

did military courts convict civil persons? All the answers were to be gradually unfolded as the argumentation diachronically progressed from a general presentation of the institutional structure of repression to hundreds of broadly addressed particular sentences.

Another strong point in the argument is the emphasis on the preventive character of the late repression at the end of the fifth decade of the 20th century. The author reveals the state's concern in giving credibility to the act of justice, thus instrumentalizing justice to gain legitimacy and discourage anti-Communist opposition. Moreover, the rationale of the second wave of repression is presented as a political strategy to exclude undesirable individuals who were refractory to the socialist model of the *new man*. This particular context is essential in understanding that international events from the 1950s – such as the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 – generated reactions among the population, which were expressed both publicly and privately. Thus, the “opinion crime” is a symptom of this supposed type of discursive resistance used by most people as a natural reaction to the state propaganda and control promoted by the communist authorities.

One can argue that a limit of the *Catalogue* is its safe approach to the topic only using classical biography of Romanian scholars who, many of them, analyse the communist regime from the standpoint of the so-called *totalitarian model*, disregarding the variations, cracks, and incoherencies of the communist establishment in its institutional entanglement. However, the aim of Vadeanu's book was to revive a part of the absentees of history using raw statistics and to give the victims a chance to tell their story through the judicial sentences that hid abuses and human rights violations of a standard analytical method is conceivable. This aspect is strengthened by the fact that the quantitative method usually relies on existing paradigms rather than creating new theories. As so, achieving an index of victims using the methods of the *revisionist school* is improbable due to its propensity for cultural and social approaches rather than the statistically analyse of state terror, which has traditionally been the appanage of the *totalitarian school of thought*. Moreover, another limit is the sole focus on motivations that triggered the political trial while neglecting any other information contained in the personal file. An overview of all the accusations found in the surveillance file of a targeted person would have enriched the understanding of repression. However, it would have expanded the research size to the extent that it would have become inaccessible for most readers.

We can conclude that the analytical dimension of the *Catalogue* is based on solid research, vast archival material, and a clear understanding of the communist establishment. The work does not aim to bring new

historiographic perspectives, challenge concepts and symbols widely accepted among contemporary historians, or heroize repressed individuals by constructing legitimizing narratives using multi-layered sources. It aims to reveal patterns of repression and ideological categories that hid the human destinies, the unknown faces, and the life stories of people who opposed, in one form or another, a political order that refused their existence in society. The *Catalogue* is a valuable historiographical addition to communist repression studies, continuing the research direction initiated by Corneliu Pintilescu's work which addressed the 1948-1956 timespan of the Cluj Military Court's activity¹¹, meaning that scholars now have the whole picture of the first and the second wave of the political subjugation of society during the communist regime in Romania at their disposal.

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¹¹ Corneliu Pintilescu, *Mecanisme judiciare ale represiunii politice în România comunistă. Studiu de caz: Tribunalul Militar Cluj, 1948-1956*, coord. prof. univ. dr. Gheorghe Cipăianu, Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of History and Philosophy, Cluj-Napoca, 2010, later published as *Justiția militară și represiune politică în România comunistă: (1948-1956). Studiu de caz: activitatea Tribunalului Militar Cluj*, Cluj University Press, Cluj-Napoca, 2012.