

Dobre Claudia Florentina, *Ni victime ni héroïne. Les anciennes détenues politiques et les mémoires du communisme en Roumanie*, Bucharest: Electra, May 2019, pp. 245.

Claudia Florentina Dobre holds a PhD in History from Laval University of Québec, Canada (2007). Her professional activity is linked in one way or another to the memory of communism, focusing specifically on the political detainees as creators of this memory. President and founding member of the Center for Memory and Identity Studies (CSMI) and of the *MemoScapes. Romanian Journal of Memory and Identity Studies* (since 2016), Claudia Florentina Dobre is the author of several articles, books, presentations and lectures dedicated to the history and memory of communism in Romania, but also in Central and Eastern Europe. Her activity, not only as an author, but also as a publisher of collective volumes, coordinator of research projects and (co)organizer of scientific events (conferences, debates, etc.), is known not only in the historical milieu of Romania, but also in countries such as Poland, Canada, Bulgaria, France, Moldova, and so on. I know about her professional activities (and follow them closely) from the very beginning as we were colleagues at the Francophone Doctoral Schools in Social Sciences, Central and Eastern Europe (2003-2004) as well as at Laval University of Québec (2004–2007).

The current book published by the author in May 2019, which by the way it was offered by Claudia herself (for which I thank her!), emphasizes one more time her research interests, that is, the memory of communism from a feminine perspective. The book is a “revised and updated” version of

her book published in 2010 under the title, *Vies ménottées, paroles libérées. Témoignages des anciennes persécutées politiques roumaines* (Saarbrücken: Éditions universitaires européennes). The latter, being a version of her doctoral thesis defended at Laval University in 2007. Although my research concerns sometimes meet those of the author (I have in mind especially the period we both study), I have read the book with great interest and not only because I have promised the author that I would convey my impressions (the impressions of an outsider, as regards the topic, but not so much as regards the research method, inspired among others from oral history and ethnology), but also because of my personal interests in the memory of the era that we used to call “communist.” Especially due to the latter reason, but also due to the coherent and easy readable style, I read it “out of breath.” However, as I did not have the opportunity to read the book published in 2010, I will not analyse the book in comparative terms and I will not evaluate the extent to which the new variant is, “revised and updated,” as the author points out (p. 9). I will only sum up my impressions about the volume recently published.

The book represents an analysis of the memorial discourse of the former political prisoners of the communist period. The volume, although it focuses on women’s experience and memory, often refers to men imprisoned for political reasons and interviewed by the author for her doctoral research. It should be noted that interviewing and analyzing the testimonies of men, former political prisoners, does not constitute a departure from the topic announced in the title of the book, but can be explained by the author’s desire to compare how the two genres construct their discourses regarding their past as political detainees (pp. 79, 180-184). The author aims to verify the validity of stereotypes which describe the testimonies of men different from those of women by a much lower emotional stance, by a discourse that would be much more concise and logical. In this regard, the elaboration of a comparative table in which the distinctive elements of the two discourses to be outlined could probably have better illustrated the conclusions reached by the author.

Some passages particularly caught my attention, also because of the topics discussed, about which I had read in other published memories. For example, the author’s observations regarding the presence (or absence) of the body in the former detainees’ memorial speech, and in particular the statement, “L’enjeu pour les détenues, dans une prison communiste, n’était pas de punir le corps, mais de réussir à le *sauvegarder*” [my emphasis] (p. 186), reminded me of the confessions of the Soviet women, taking part in the first line of the front during the Second World War, who were not scared of death, but especially of the way they will look (physically) if they are killed during

a fight. For them the stake was not so much the life itself as the preservation of the integrity of their body.<sup>1</sup> The humorous story of one of the ladies interviewed by Claudia Florentina Dobre, about how she gave birth to her daughter while in prison (p. 178), reminded me of the memoirs of the well-known Soviet screenwriter, who was politically detained between 1944 and 1954, Valeri Frid. In his memories, Frid testified that his sense of humor, his desire to find something funny in his everyday life in prisons, helped him to go through all the difficulties of detention.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the times the confessions of those who experienced prisons in the communist era shocked by their dramatic life experiences, the cases discussed by Claudia Florentina Dobre being no exception (see for example the interview fragment on p. 98). It is precisely for this reason that the author's often supportive attitude towards her interviewees is easy to understand. She prefers to call the people she interviewed "collaborators" in the sense of partner in doing the research and, therefore, in writing the book. This solidarity is also acknowledged in the Forward (Avant-propos) of the book, in which the author states that the re-edition of the book represents for her also a duty ("devoir de mémoire") to the women and men who spoke about their prison experiences, "who suffered in the cell of the Secret Police, in prisons, in the labor camps, during deportation or simply in their daily life and "who are no longer among us today" (pp. 9-10). This solidarity is also noticeable when the author accepts the point of view of her "collaborators," the one according to which, they would not be victims of the regime. Claudia Florentina Dobre adopted this stand of her collaborators both in content and in the title of the book. I would have liked the other position to be more clearly stated: namely, why these former detainees do not consider themselves as heroines («ni héroïnes»), as the title says (but also the title of a subchapter, p. 213). The answer to this question can only be inferred from the general context of the book.

In Romania, but also in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the memory of communism in general, and of prison experiences, in particular, whether they are told by men or women, former political detainees, are still quite sensitive topics, perhaps not so much for the new generations born after the fall of the Berlin Wall (for many representatives of these generations the regime which fell in December 1989 being rather a "cool" one, p. 37), but mostly for many of those who were eyewitnesses and participants,

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<sup>1</sup> Svetlana Alexievitch, *La guerre n'a pas un visage de femme*, Paris : Presse de la Renaissance, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Valerii S. Frid, *58 ½ : Zapiski lagernogo pridurka* [58 ½ : The writings of a lager buffoon], Moscow: Izdatel'skii dom Rusanova, 1996.

often without their will, to the “communist experience.” The subject arouses emotions among those we can call, “témoins de deuxième degré” (p. 9), that is, those, if I understood correctly, who started to experience communism, but who, due to their youthful age, became aware and learned more about this regime, after its fall (from interviews, articles, books, memoirs, stories of relatives and friends, etc.).

All in all, despite some minor vagueness, the book proposes a balanced analysis of the topic, and its usefulness in understanding the memory of communism and the woman’s place in building this memory, remains, in my opinion, undoubted. Consistent, accurate, and easy-to-read writing makes reading this book really enjoyable—an important thing, especially since re-writing and re-publishing the book is a memorial duty for the author. What can be better for a book, which aims to preserve and perpetuate this type of memory, than its accessibility and attractiveness to a wider audience?

*Iurie Stamati*