

BOOK REVIEW

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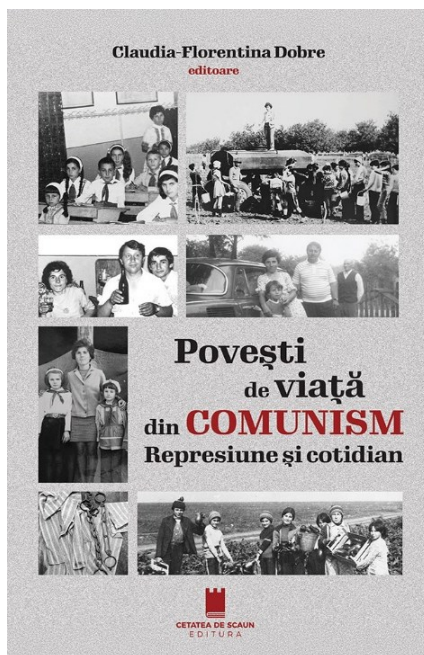
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Between Memory, History, and Nostalgia: Life Stories from Communism

Abstract: *This review examines Claudia-Florentina Dobre's book „Life Stories from Communism: Repression and Everyday Life“ (2025), a collection of twenty-one oral history testimonies reflecting on life under Romanian communism. The review situates the volume within contemporary debates on memory, nostalgia, and the communist past in post-socialist Eastern Europe. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between repression and everyday life, the diversity of personal experiences, and the role of life stories in shaping individual and collective memories. The book is discussed as an important contribution to oral history, memory studies, and the social history of communism, offering nuanced perspectives on the ways people remember, interpret, and narrate their lives under a dictatorial regime.*

Keywords: *communism; oral history; memory; nostalgia; everyday life; repression; Romania; life stories; collective memory; post-communism.*



Dobre, Claudia-Florentina (2025). *Povești de viață din comunism. Represiune și cotidian* (Life Stories from Communism. Repression and Everyday Life), Târgoviște, Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 336 p. ISBN: 978-606-537-81-17.

Claudia-Florentina Dobre, a Romanian historian and senior researcher at the “Nicolae Iorga” Institute of History in Bucharest, is the author of numerous articles and books examining different dimensions of Romania’s communist period (1945–1989) and its post-communist memorialization. Her work focuses on topics such as everyday

life, women's testimonies, repression, the memory of communism, and the lasting impact of the communist legacy on contemporary public and political life. She has recently published the book *Povești de viață din comunism. Represiune și cotidian* (Life Stories from Communism: Repression and Daily Life) with Cetatea de Scaun Publishing House. This volume continues her ongoing research into repression, daily life, collective memory, and the experiences of political prisoners and deportees during the communist era (see her other works here: <https://www.iini.ro/ro/dr-claudia-florentina-dobre>).

To better understand the significance of this book, it is important to consider the context of its publication – namely, the rise of a nostalgic trend in several Eastern European countries, including Romania, that once lived under what was called “real socialism”. One of the most prominent expressions of this nostalgia can be found in eastern Germany, where it is known as “Ostalgie” (a blend of the German words Ost, meaning “east,” and Nostalgie, meaning “nostalgia”). This term describes a sociocultural phenomenon in post-communist Germany characterized by a longing for certain aspects of everyday life in the former German Democratic Republic. It emerged after the Fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the subsequent reunification with the Federal Republic of Germany, formally completed on October 3, 1990.

In Romania, the nostalgia for the communist past was measured constantly since the fall of the regime¹. However, the results of a public poll released in July 2025 showed an increasing of the number of people expressing a positive view of the period. Thus, a significant percentage of Romanian citizens believe that “good things happened during the communist period”, that life was “better under communism than it is now”, and that the state at that time “was more concerned about the citizen” while Romania, as a country, was “richer and more respected” than it is now. However, the poll also revealed that people acknowledged that the communist government was also responsible for crimes and abuses against its population, that “hundreds of thousands of Romanians were murdered and tortured in prisons”, and that there was a lack of freedom at the time compared to the situation today (Dobre, 2025, 9).

¹ For a historical perspective on this social phenomenon see: Claudia-Florentina Dobre, “Hegemonic or Marginal Perspective!? The Many Shades of Nostalgia in Post-communist Romania”, in *Balkanistic Worlds*, 1, 2026, p. 40-64, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18077879>.

Beyond the varied reactions of indignation, astonishment, and unease – and the accompanying search for explanations for this “nostalgic” mood among a broad spectrum of public opinion, including ordinary citizens, politicians, and experts – the publication of a volume of life stories and personal narratives from those who lived under communism offers a valuable perspective for understanding this phenomenon.

The book brings together the life stories of 21 individuals interviewed between 2015 and 2025 – men and women who experienced communism at different stages of life, as children, adolescents, and adults. These narratives, marked by a strong autobiographical dimension, were collected as part of several researches conducted by Claudia-Florentina Dobre during this decade, using semi-structured interviews as well as the focus group method.

In terms of its argumentative and expository structure, the volume is organized into four sections of historical analysis that provide a coherent framework for the life narratives: an introduction, a section on the everyday reality of repression, another on the transformations and vicissitudes of daily life under communism, and a concluding part. The 21 testimonies are accompanied by evocative titles that reflect their content and tone. Among them are: “I tell young people: they don’t know, they don’t realize the freedom they have”, “For me, it was a great joy – it was a great joy to escape communism; since then, I’ve been breathing differently”, “Because of my file, I wasn’t even admitted to high school”, “You couldn’t say anything, buy whatever you wanted”, “I can’t say it was all bad”, “The Party was everywhere”, “There were good parts and bad parts”, “Every year, life became more and more gray”, “I didn’t like communism”, “Bad things and good things were done”, “Anyone who doesn’t believe that the political situation changes your life is fooling themselves – it changes it completely”, “I experienced communism with its good and bad sides”, “The truth lies somewhere in the middle”, and “Everything was gray, dreary, depressing”.

These life narratives of communism are deeply rooted in memory and in the repetition that structured everyday existence. Survival within the Romanian communist environment, as described by the interviewees and analyzed by Claudia-Florentina Dobre, involves a process of selective recollection – of what persists in the reservoir of memory: events, figures, past experiences, and knowledge acquired both formally and informally. This knowledge is shaped through the repetition

of learned behaviors and gestures, whether adopted willingly or imposed through coercion, repression, or obligation, as well as through imitation or deliberate learning.

The everyday life reconstructed in these accounts reveals a dual dimension. On the one hand, it reflects the internalization of existence under a repressive system marked by the intrusion of a totalitarian state into private life. On the other hand, it highlights the collective and intimate tactics of survival through which individuals sought to make such conditions bearable.

It is worth emphasizing that the image of Romanian communism emerging from these life stories and testimonies is diverse, complex, and nuanced. Stressing this complexity is essential in order to avoid reductive, black-and-white interpretations. Memories of the communist past are shaped by factors such as age, individual and family experiences, as well as personal trajectories marked by success or failure during both the communist and post-communist periods.

For those who were subjected to various forms of persecution, communism is unequivocally condemned in all its aspects. Their recollections are marked by trauma and suffering, and their memories of childhood, education, work, and social status during that time are often recalled with bitterness or revulsion. By contrast, the testimonies of individuals who did not directly experience repression or abuse – and who perceived that period as offering opportunities for social mobility – tend to be more positive. For them, access to education, employment, housing, and health care, paid vacation etc. within the framework of a rapidly modernizing and urbanizing society contributed to a more favorable retrospective view.

It is within this latter type of testimony that one can identify the roots of what is often described as “nostalgia”: a complex, bittersweet feeling combining longing and loss, directed not only toward a past system but also toward places, relationships, and stages of life that have disappeared. In this sense, nostalgia can function as a form of emotional compensation in the context of post-communist societies – such as Romania – where the transition to capitalism has often been accompanied by heightened individualism and social competition.

This nostalgia is defined by Claudia-Florentina Dobre as a place of refuge – a “place of resilience” (p. 372), understood as the capacity to return to an initial state of happiness. It involves a mental revisiting of particular moments in time, places, and forms of expression, including language shaped by humor and irony. Through this process, the past

is reactivated in ways that bring a sense of tranquility and motivation in the present, while also enabling a more intimate understanding of the oppression and hardships that marked human existence within a specific historical context: Romanian society over roughly 45 years of communism.

From a theoretical and historiographical perspective, Claudia-Florentina Dobre situates her research within a broad and multifaceted framework that reflects the kaleidoscopic nature of contemporary scholarship in history and the social sciences. Her approach draws on the tradition of totalitarianism studies associated with Hannah Arendt and Raymond Aron, as well as on analyses of everyday life developed by Michel de Certeau.

At the same time, her work engages with key contributions to memory studies and historiography, including Pierre Nora's reflections on memory and history, Maurice Halbwachs's concept of the social frameworks of memory, and Reinhart Koselleck's theorization of the history of the present. This perspective is further enriched by the influence of Pierre Bourdieu's social theory. In addition, the author anchors her analysis in the field of Romanian historiography and scholarship on communism, engaging with the works of Vladimir Tismăneanu, Cristian Vasile, Mioara Anton, Cosmin Popa, and Katherine Verdery, among others.

Claudia-Florentina Dobre's book does not aim to offer an overview of Romanian communism, but rather to provide readers with individual approaches aiming to clarifying, understanding, and interpreting a "corpus" of life stories shaped by the experience of living under a regime dominated by a single party (the Communist Party), governed and controlled in an ultra-centralized manner, which transformed repression in an instrument of governing collective and individual life, and which went so far as to reshape not only the society but also the human being. Let me quote an eloquent passage on the ultimate meaning and scope of Claudia-Florentina Dobre's book as stated by the author herself: "Communism was an everyday political regime in which individuals lived, loved, suffered, and realized their dreams or failed miserably; they created and built, destroyed and rebuilt from scratches. It was a regime in which, as Michel de Certeau points out, despite all the coercion and strategies employed by the authorities, 'the system's total colonization of everyday life' was practically impossible. Romanian communism, despite repression, constant surveillance, and the instrumentalization of its citizens' time, also allowed for the existence of

spaces of freedom – mostly private, but also communal, familial, and even professional. The interviews collected in this book bear witness to this mixture of totalitarianism, freedom, repression, and resistance; of adaptation and nonconformity; of resilience and resignation” (pp. 10-11).

Among the many merits of this work, several deserve particular attention. Its emphasis on oral history and microhistory brings to light dimensions of everyday life under communism that are often absent from official records. By foregrounding personal testimonies, Claudia-Florentina Dobre offers fresh perspectives that, in the context of growing nostalgia for the communist period in Romania, invite a re-examination of the conclusions drawn from sociological surveys. From an analytical standpoint, the study also highlights the diverse tactics individuals employed in order to endure and navigate life under a dictatorial regime.

The book is aimed at a broad audience, extending beyond strictly academic readers. Historians, sociologists, and students interested in the recent history of Eastern Europe, post-communist Romania, and oral history will find it valuable, as will young Romanian citizens eager to understand the lived experiences of their parents and grandparents. By presenting authentic personal testimonies, the work offers important insights into communism, helping to demystify and challenge the idealized perceptions of the regime.

To conclude, quoting the well-known line of Colombian novelist, Gabriel García Márquez, in his autobiographical memoir “*Living to Tell the Tale*”, published in 2002, ...that “Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to tell it”, we can say that this is also the approach of the 21 men and women, who shared their testimonies about their own lives and the lives of others during the era of Romanian communism.