

TOADER ALEXANDRA

Faculty of History, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza University” of Iasi

**Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej’s Personality Cult.
Origins, Evolution, Forms of Manifestation
(1944-1965)**

Abstract of the doctoral dissertation

“It is easy to make fool of Marishka if she wants to”¹ exclaimed Alexandru Moghioroș in May 1956 with regards to the personality cult in Romania and the manner in which the phenomenon developed after 23 August 1956. This phrase defines in the most accurate degree the way the phenomenon called “personality cult” has been perceived in the dejist period. Moreover, it highlights the genuine tendencies of the Romanian communist leaders to juggle with the term, according to the domestic and international political realities of the time, as I intend to demonstrate in this study.

The period until the proclamation of the Peoples’ Republic of Romania has been a time when the mechanisms, resources and propagandistic instruments have taken shape and allowed, from 1948 on, the development of a genuine personality cult. The emergence of such a phenomenon should not be regarded as exceptional. On the contrary, it should be integrated among the Romanian cultural and political traditions and could be seen as a continuation of the previous historical period. Therefore, the political culture and its appendix, the historical tradition have been taken into consideration in order to identify the origins of the phenomenon in the Romanian political space. To sum up, one may take into account the existence, in the interwar period, of a cult of Carol II. The authoritarian regime of the period between 1938 and 1940 represented a fertile ground for the emergence of certain tendencies to praise the king, and the forms taken by the phenomenon have incorporated considerable proportions. Likewise, one should take into consideration the emergence of a cult of the leader during Ion Antonescu. Although the cultic aspects after the installation of the communist rule incorporated more pronounced shapes comparing with those particular for the previous

¹ A.N.I.C., fond CC al PCR-Cancelarie, dosar nr. 186/1956, f. 217.

period, the role of tradition must be emphasized in the emergence and amplification of the phenomenon after World War II.

Beginning with the 1990s, several studies on the politics developed in the dejist period have been published. However, not a single biography of Gheorghiu-Dej has been edited by now. At the same time, not a single study dedicated to the analysis of Gheorghiu-Dej's personality cult has taken shape, which makes necessary the filling of this empty space in the historiography of the first two decades of communist rule in Romania. The importance and feasibility of such a study is provided, first of all, by the ritualized shapes incorporated by the veneration of Gheorghiu-Dej. It is a certainty in the fact that the phenomenon manifested differently during the two decades that Gheorghiu-Dej has been the leader of the communist Party, according to the changes that occurred at the political level. However, unlike the other communist regimes in Eastern Europe (excepting the GDR), the main peculiarity of the Romanian communist regime has been the emergence of a leader in whose case the practice of the personality cult has been amplified gradually. The explanation consists in the stability of the elite at the head of the RWP, who passed victoriously the 1950s test, especially the "secret" speech of N. S. Khrushchev and the reverberations of its content in the satellite states of the Soviet Union.

From this perspective, the analysis of the phenomenon offers information on the mechanism of controlling the means of mass communication and on the authority of those individuals that promoted a certain type of politic, in the present case, the instrumentalization of the personality cult. What is more important, many outlines of Nicolae Ceaușescu's cult have been inherited from his predecessor and –as history has shown- they have been exacerbated. Thus, if the works dedicated to the analysis of the dejist period focused on the political, cultural, institutional and economic issues of the time, the innovative contribution of my doctoral dissertation consists in the interpretation of the dejst politics in terms of personality cult. Although this manner of approaching the topic might seem limited, because in my analysis I do not take into consideration but a sole phenomenon, this opinion is not legitimate at all. On the one hand, Gheorghiu-Dej's personality cult –contrary to scholars who have the tendency to compare it with the dimension of Ceaușescu's cult minimizing its importance- gave birth to a large number of means of transmitting the phenomenon and forms of manifestation, which should be regarded in a strong connection with the realities of the period. On the other hand, this analysis, although it has been conducted from a single perspective, allowed the discovery of various dimensions of the epoch, not only that of the factual history. On the contrary, the historical, social, political and economic dimension

of the regime became an indicator of the degree of power personalization in the case of the RWP's leader.

Defining the personality cult as a system of leader worship, to which the society members obey, my research aims to identify the mechanisms which made possible the proliferation of cultic manifestations towards Gheorghiu-Dej in the twenty years he has been the leader of the RWP. The study analyses the manner in which the steady growth of Gheorghiu-Dej's power has been mirrored in various domains; the landmarks of the research are given by the publication of his first official biography (1947) and the passage towards what became known as "hypertrophy" of the dejist power in the last years of his reign. In other words, the structure of my doctoral thesis focuses on three main levels: monitoring the evolution and manifestation of Gheorghiu-Dej's personality cult, the reflection of the phenomenon in various political, economic and cultural fields and its implications or, simply put, the "heritage" that the Romanian leader left behind and the manner in which it has been manipulated by his successors. Accordingly, the parameters of the research are given by the images and representations which gravitated around the Romanian communist leader, the mechanisms that made possible the proliferation of the cultic manifestations, the instruments of transmitting the phenomenon and the fluctuations of the personality cult according to the events occurred in the international scene. The definition taken into account in my research is the recognition *-sine die-* of a favorable context for the emergence of the Romanian leader's personality cult, and the consequences of the phenomenon at the societal level. I also underlined the existence, in the period 1947-1952, of a "composite cult", seen as a consequence of the role played by other communist leaders like Ana Pauker, Vasile Luca, Emil Bodnăraș, Petru Groza etc.. Until the Party gave birth to a unique leader, Gheorghiu-Dej, the Romanian leader's cult has been fortified by the "Light from the East" or, in other words, by the manner in which the Lenin and Stalin cult has been supported and propagated.

Consequently, the main questions raised by the present research are the following: since when one may notice the first signs of Gheorghiu-Dej's veneration? Which has been the dimension of the phenomenon in comparison with other contemporary leaders or, in other words, which elements contributed to the individualization, to the uniqueness of Gheorghiu-Dej's personality cult? How can one measure the impact of the cult on the communist society? Which have been the instruments that contributed to the development of the phenomenon? To answer all these questions, I structured the theses in three main sections. In the first part of the study I focused on the identification of *the origins and evolution of Gheorghiu-Dej's personality cult*. Once outlined the political, historical and institutional

frame that allowed the emergence and development of the phenomenon, the second part of the thesis underlined *the forms of manifestation and the instruments of transmitting Gheorghiu-Dej's personality cult*. Finally, in the last part of the paper my aim was to identify *the place of Gheorghiu-Dej's personality cult within Eastern European communist regimes*.

Approaching the origins and the evolution of the Romanian general secretary's personality cult, my interest was to clarify several particular issues, which have been analyzed in two chapters. In the first chapter, *The cult of personality in the totalitarian regimes*, I focused on the manner in which the scholarly literature from the second half of the XXth century approached the totalitarian leaders' personality cult. Consequently, I answered to certain questions concerning the appearance of the first works dedicated to the phenomenon and the manner in which historians attempted to define and understand it. At the same time, my aim was to assess the form under which the phrase "cult of personality" has been used after the World War II. Accordingly, I identified the individuals that circulated the term and the form in which its meaning has been integrated in the political context of the epoch. Furthermore, I was interested to point out the moment when the term has been used for the first time in Romania and understand how the Romanian political leaders tried to define it. Once the ideological frame has been outlined, I focused on the actors who contributed to the creation and development of such a phenomenon in the PRR. Consequently, I explained the transmission of the cult through the pyramidal structure of the Party, the role of the general secretary, and the contribution of the ordinary citizens to the amplification of the phenomenon, as well. Not least, I analyzed a difficult topic, regarding the reception of Gheorghiu-Dej's personality cult at the societal level. In other words, I assessed the impact of the propagandistic message on the ordinary people.

In the second chapter I focused on *the chronological evolution of Gheorghiu-Dej's personality cult*. Accordingly, I identified several periods which reflected accurately the intensity of the phenomenon over time. The years 1944-1953 have been qualified as a period of adopting and adjustment of the Soviet model of the personality cult in Romania. Therefore, I analyzed several important moments in the history of the dejist period, when the issue of the existence of a personality cult has been raised by the Party members. I paid close attention to the manner in which the phenomenon has been understood in some moments with symbolic meaning: in 1948, when Tito's type of authority has been debated and, as a pretext, it has also been advanced the question of the popularization of the Romanian communist leaders. A second moment is 2 July 1952 when, during the meeting with the editors of the central and

local press, the attitude of Gheorghiu-Dej transformed in a formal critique against his personality cult.

The second period to which I paid attention covers the years 1953-1956. It has been generically identified as “the new course” of Gheorghiu-Dej’s personality cult. The aim was to capture the new dimension incorporated by the Romanian leader’s personality cult after the changes occurred internally and externally after Stalin’s death. Therefore, I demonstrated that the cult of the RWP’s leader depended in a high degree on the politics imposed from Moscow. In addition, I focused on the tendencies to minimize the dimension of the phenomenon in the period that succeeded the Soviet leader’s death.

The third period identified is 1956-1961 and I focused on the evolution of Gheorghiu-Dej’s personality cult between two Congresses of the CPSU. In this chapter, I analyzed the consequences of N. S. Khrushchev’s “Secret” Report on the evolution of the Romanian communist leader’s cult, presenting the debates at the Party level after the consumption of the moment. At the same time, I regarded the period between the XXth and the XXIIInd Congress of the CPSU as a lapse of time which contributed substantially to the consolidation of Gheorghiu-Dej’s authority within the RWP, which allowed the reassertion of his personality cult after the “thaw” experienced after Stalin’s death.

Finally, the last period analyzed is 1961-1965. I focused on the climax of the dejist power and the cultic aspects generated by the Romanian communist leader’s death. This five-year period, through the new internal and international image created around Gheorghiu-Dej has contributed in a high degree to the amplification of the coordinates of his personality cult. Thus, on 19 March 1965, after the leader’s death, one may observe the exacerbation of the dimensions of the phenomenon due to the measures which have been implemented in order to “perpetuate” his memory. Moreover, I presented the elements closely tied with the dejist posterity in order to explain the manner in which his image has been manipulated by his successors. I also identified the purpose of the measures adopted by Nicolae Ceaușescu in order to link Gheorghiu-Dej’s name with the idea of “obsessive decade” and confiscate his place in the history of the two decades of communist rule.

After the presentation of the background specific to the manner in which the term “personality cult” has been used according to political realities of the time, in the second part of my doctoral dissertation I analyzed *the forms of manifestation of the phenomenon and the instruments of transmitting the cult*. My research was not limited to a linear analysis, thus I have not simply presented them. On the contrary, I tried to explain the reasons that determined the emergence and development of such forms, and capture the motivation of the

creators of the cult, as well as the impact of the propagandistic message on the ordinary people. Therefore, I firstly focused on the role of the official biography of the Romanian communist leader, seen as a form of legitimizing the dejist power. I qualified the biographic works of the time as one of the most common form of manifestation of the communist leaders' cult. In particular, I analyzed the representations and images manufactured in Gheorghiu-Dej's official biographies. I identified elements closely linked with the modest origin of the Romanian communist leader, the myth of the "young revolutionary", the manner in which Gheorghiu-Dej's role in the Grivița strike of 1933 has been presented, his detention at Doftana prison, as well as the moment of his escape from the Târgu Jiu camp, in August 1944. I regarded these moments –which have been constantly highlighted in Gheorghiu-Dej's biographies- as an instrument which could be placed at the boundary between reality and myth: if certain moments of his biography have been presented in a romanticized form, the other have been totally falsified. Consequently, I explained the motivation behind this practice, underlying that the manufacturing of Gheorghiu-Dej's official biographies has been a part the large process to falsify the history, experimented so abruptly in the communist years.

In the second chapter of the second part I identified those *images and representations which gravitated around Gheorghiu-Dej* after the proclamation of the PRR, elements whose emergence has been placed in the previous lapse of time, 1944-1947. Among the images with which the Romanian communist leader has been associated, sometimes obsessively, I identified that of *the first railway man of the country*, that of *electrician, father, teacher, friend of the children, the beloved leader, supporter of science and culture*, and finally, *the ordinary man*. My aim was to capture the moment when these images took shape and the intensity with which they have been propagated in the epoch, all the more so as many of them have been inherited, completed and perfected by Nicolae Ceaușescu and used to amplify the coordinates of his personality cult. At the same time, I tried to explain the social and political context that facilitated their emergence and identify the symbolic moments when these images have been attributed to Gheorghiu-Dej.

In the third chapter I evaluated *the role of written press in the amplification of Gheorghiu-Dej's personality cult*, taking into account its importance in transmitting the propagandistic message. I catalogued the written press as the propagandistic means through which the myths and images which gravitated around Gheorghiu-Dej have been articulated the most. Thus, I analyzed the information from various newspapers of the time in order to identify the type of discourse promoted by the editors of the time and the manner in which the

“wooden language” contributed to the creation and amplification of the general secretary’s cult.

In the fourth chapter I reviewed *the role of visual agitation in the alimentation of Gheorghiu-Dej’s cult*. Although a moderate aspect, due to the main role of Lenin and Stalin in the iconography of the communist states in Eastern Europe, visual agitation, through the consistent number of pictures, paintings, newspapers photos which represented Gheorghiu-Dej contributed significantly to the amplification of the RWP’s leader cult. I conducted a qualitative and quantitative research, which highlighted the dynamic of picture exhibition in the public sphere and the manner of presenting Gheorghiu-Dej’s photos in the newspapers. My aim was to quantify the degree to which Gheorghiu-Dej’s cult has been propagated through the images of the time, taking into account three important coordinates: the number of his portraits, the public spaces where they have been exhibited, and the meaning incorporated in the epoch by this policy.

In the fifth chapter I captured the degree to which *the literature of the time participated in shaping a manufactured image of Gheorghiu-Dej*. This segment of my research is as interesting and difficult to analyze as the number of works which included him as the main character have been much lower in comparison with the case of other totalitarian leaders. However, many writers dedicated poems to him, which highlights the forms of his personality cult. Regarding this instrument of transmitting Gheorghiu-Dej’s personality cult, I firstly provided an explanation which clarifies, above all, the motivation which determined the writers to worship, through their prose and poems, the Romanian leader. At the same time, I exposed the subjects developed in these writings in order to manufacture an embellished image of Gheorghiu-Dej. In other words, I tried to offer an overview of the images with which the Romanian general secretary has been associated taking into account the moment when these works have been published, the name of the authors, and the privileges of the writers. Not least, I focused on a particular case, that of Mihai Beniuc, evaluating the impact of one of the most consistent poems which has been dedicated to the leader: *Cântec pentru tovarășul Gh. Gheorghiu-Dej [Song to Comrade Gh. Gheorghiu-Dej]*. Analyzing a particular case, I developed general conclusions regarding the motivation of the poets who addressed these types of topics.

Promoted in the XXth century, the documentary movies represented a propagandistic instrument through which Gheorghiu-Dej’s personality cult amplified its coordinates, as well. In the sixth chapter I evaluated *the role of documentary movies in the process of transmitting the phenomenon of Gheorghiu-Dej’s personality cult*. Due to the limited time and the difficult

access to the National Movie Archives, I evaluated this aspect on the basis of the documents found in the fonds of the National Archives of Romania, highlighting both the manner in which the creation of these movies was perceived and the moment when their production has been decided.

In the seventh chapter I analyzed the *naming/renaming of different streets, institutions, industrial sites etc. after Gheorghiu-Dej*, considering these types of measures of great significance when the topic of the popularization of the Romanian communist leader is being debated. This policy contributed, immediately after 23 August 1944, to the popularization of Gheorghiu-Dej and, thereafter, to the process of creation and amplification of his cult. I became interested in this practice due to its amplitude and the manner in which it highlights the way decisions were adopted and implemented at the Party level.

In the eighth chapter I analyzed *the transmission of Gheorghiu-Dej's cult through slogans, quotes, and the order of placing the name of the Party leaders*. I also placed *the orders, medals and decorations awarded to Gheorghiu-Dej* in the same context, considering their number and typology an indicator of his place at the Party level. The implementation of these measures expresses the degree of the general secretary's authority and the dimension of his personality cult.

In the last chapter of the second part of the thesis I focused the manner in which *Gheorghiu-Dej has been celebrated on the occasion of his birthday*. I became interested in this topic because of the multitude of the propagandistic instruments used on these special occasions in order to amplify the leader's cult. Furthermore, my purpose was to demonstrate that before being transformed in a "celebration of the entire people", as the propagandistic discourse tried to outline, the celebration of Gheorghiu-Dej's birthdays represented festive moments, prepared well in advance, to which the Party propagandists paid special attention.

The third part of the thesis, trying to identify *the place of Gheorghiu-Dej's personality cult within the communist regimes in Eastern Europe*, discussed the manner in which the phenomenon developed in the case of several communist leaders of the epoch. Because the Stalin cult and the forms of the manifestation of the phenomenon have already been discussed, I tried to focus on *the reflection of the Soviet Union's leader cult in the PRR*. The aim of this approach was to highlight the reason why the amplification of Gheorghiu-Dej's personality cult has not been possible until 1953. The explanation consists in the supreme role of Stalin's image not only in the Romanian political space, but also in the other communist countries in the Eastern Europe. At the same time, I approached the manner in which the cult of other communist leaders of the time mirrored in the PRR. I have chosen the case of *Georgy*

Dimitrov and I analyzed the way in which his personality has been perceived in communist Romania both during his life and after his death. Underlining the international nature of his personality cult, I demonstrated the limits of Gheorghiu-Dej's veneration, all the more so as until the end of the 1950s his personality has rarely exceeded the national borders.

In the second chapter of the third part of the thesis I analyzed the forms incorporated by *Wilhelm Pieck's personality cult* presenting the manner in which the phenomenon developed in the GDR. Using the comparative method, I presented the nature of Gheorghiu-Dej's personality cult in comparison to that of the President of the GDR. I have chosen these two cases because, together with Gheorghiu-Dej, Wilhelm Pieck has been the only leader who preserved his position at the head of the State untouched, dealing with success the 1953 and 1956 test, thus keeping his position, more and more consolidated, until his death. In order to identify the place of Gheorghiu-Dej's cult not only in the international context, but also locally, I focused on the manner in which other important Party leaders' cult reflected in different moments. Naming them "Dej in miniature" –using a term circulated in the epoch- I approached the cultic manifestations of several leaders like Ana Pauker, Vasile Luca, Teohari Georgescu, Petru Groza, Miron Constantinescu, Iosif Chişinevschi, Gheorghe Vasilichi, Emil Bodnăraş and I. Gh. Maurer. The topic is as interesting as the phenomenon has been identified and even criticized in the epoch trying to justify the fact that the dimension of Gheorghiu-Dej's personality cult did not exceed that of the other members of the Party.

I considered necessary the inclusion of a list of abbreviations in my PhD thesis, as well as of several annexes, which make easier the understanding of the topic and strengthen my opinions. This structure of my doctoral dissertation made possible the identification of the moment when Gheorghiu-Dej transformed from "the leader of our Party" to "the leader of the people", which highlights the steady growth of the coordinates of his personality cult.

In order to achieve these aims and taking into consideration the absence of studies which approach the topic, I focused on the research of the archival sources. Consequently, I examined documentary sources from three archival institutions. First, I identified unpublished information from the documents belonging to The National Archives of Romania, from ten main fonds: *Colecția Consiliul de Miniștri al României*, *Colecția Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej* and from the fonds *CC al PCR-Cancelarie*, *Gospodăria de Partid*, *Secția Administrativ-Politică*, *Secția Economică*, *Secția Organizatorică*, *Secția de Propagandă și Agitație*, *Secția Relații Externe* and *Ministerului Artelor și Informațiilor* fond.

In order to respect the comparative method and the „transnational” approach of the personality cult, I studied the content of the documents from The Archives of the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs from Cutia Germania. Moreover, the research scholarship at Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut (Freie Universität Berlin) allowed me the research various files from Bundesarchiv, like Biografische Presseauschnittsammlung SBZ/DDR, Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands, Dietz Verlag, Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, Presseamt beim Vorsitzenden des Ministerrates der DDR, SAPMO, Staatliches Komitee für Rundfunk and Volkskammer der DDR. The information I gathered from these fonds facilitated the comparative approach of the phenomenon called “cult of personality” in the GDR and PRR. This type of analysis has been necessary in order to determine the nature of the Romanian communist regime and the dimension incorporated by Gheorghiu-Dej’s personality cult in comparison with other communist leaders in the Eastern Europe and, in particular, Wilhelm Pieck.

If the archival sources represented, for the present paper, the bibliographic sources which allowed me a new understanding and approach of the topic, I also considered the study of the press of genuine importance in order to stress the propagandistic side of the topic. Accordingly, I analyzed the articles published, over two decades, in eight most important newspapers/journals of the time: „Scântea“, „Contemporanul“, „Lupta de clasă“, „Neues Deutschland“, „Pentru pace trainică, pentru democrație populară“, „România Liberă“, „Universul“ and „Viața Românească“. At the same time, when the nature of a certain chapter asked for it, I also used other periodicals, like „Facla“, „Lupta“, „România“ or „Dimineața“, especially when I needed to find information on the politics developed in the interwar period. I also investigated newspapers like „Timpul“, „Flacăra“, „Licurici“, „Lumea“, „Scântea Tineretului“, in order to capture the nuances of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej’s personality cult.

The accent on the primary sources has been demanded by the inexistence of a study centered on Gheorghiu-Dej’s personality cult. If in the case of Nicolae Ceaușescu I identified three important works dedicated to the study of the phenomenon, scholars only published very few articles about the Romanian communist leader’s cult. On the other hand, most of the works dedicated to the study of the communist phenomenon in the first twenty years after 23 August 1944 are focused on issues regarding the repressive character of the regime, the struggle for supremacy at the head of the RWP thus, by now, not a single biography of Gheorghiu-Dej has been published. It is from this reason, together with the late access of the historians in the archives, that the methodological approach of the present study is based on works on the totalitarian leaders’ personality cult published in the Occident. Although most of the historians who analyzed the phenomenon focused on leaders such as Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler, the researchers’ attention has shortly been moved on the analysis of

these aspects in the case of several Eastern European communist leaders. Unfortunately, by present, there is not a single generous study dedicated to their cult. Due to reasons closely linked with the collective memory, the analysis of the political realities in the Eastern Europe beginning with the 1960s seemed more attractive for most of the researchers. I have only identified a single work based on the research of the Hungarian communist leader, Mátiás Rákosi's personality cult of but, unfortunately, the paper, conceived as a doctoral thesis defended by Balász Apor at European University Institute in 2006, has not been published yet.

All these bibliographic sources allowed the identification of certain answers regarding the massification of certain habits which may be perceived as a consequence of the relationship between masses and leader. The analysis of the topic has been conducted using an interdisciplinary approach: I have taken into consideration both the psychology of the individual and that of the masses. At the same time, I consider that the random nature of certain type of politics should not be integrated to the hazard. On the contrary, it represented a characteristic of the dejist political project.