

Red and Brown

The Absurd Being Normal or The Heroic Middle of Humanitas

by Hans Bergel, Munich

Having been invited several times to the “Political Summer Courses” which are organized by the “Memorial Site of Sighet” and the “Academia Civică” in Sighet in Northern Romania – one of the largest institutions of this kind in Europe – and are dedicated to the memory of the victims of communism and to coming to terms with communist crimes, Hans Bergel delivered several lectures in front of nationwide selected high-school-graduates. In 2007 he spoke to approx. 350 attendants about the topic “Red and Brown. The Absurd being Normal or: The Heroic Middle of Humanitas”. This is the English translation of the German version of the summary which was originally published in Romanian under the title “Absurdal ca normalitate: Între brun si roșu” in “Școala memoriei 2007”, Bucharest.

Relatively early in my life I came to the realization that the ideological powers which were combating each other in Europe during the 20th century were essentially one and the same. Compared to many other historians, this led me to perceive one of the most disastrous periods in European history differently. Many historians separated the two dictatorships Communism and National Socialism by addressing them as either “left or right” or “red and brown”.

My life forced me to deal with both dictatorships. I realized that portraying the two powers as complete opposites was incorrect. I believe that by separating the two powers the danger of subjectivity is increased, not to mention ideological vagueness or narrow-mindedness. I am aware of the inconvenience of this remark and I also know, paraphrasing Ernest Hemingway, that nothing might be more dangerous than questioning an academically sanctioned doctrine. Far be it from me, however, to tamper with doctrines. That is not my intention.

Until 1944/45 I was involved in the National Socialist non-world dictated by Berlin followed by the communist non-world dictated by Moscow until 1968. My judgement of both dictatorships does not stem from ideological sympathy or aversion but rather from the facts to which I was exposed and with which I had to deal, including my conclusions. I did so as it were under the patronage of the most outstanding philosopher since antiquity, Immanuel Kant, who in his treatise “What Is Enlightenment?” challenges us to use our own mind i.e. our

own power of judgement, last not least concerning issues of public matters. In 1783 he wrote: “The public use of one’s reason must be free at all times.”

In the following text I will try to illustrate my messages of the factual i.e. my biography, through my own judgement.

In June 1942, one month before my seventeenth birthday, a representative of the NS-Ministry of Propaganda in Berlin was touring Romania; the country where I was living at the time and which was a close ally of Nazi Germany. The representative’s task was to spread Nazi ideas among the people, above all among the youth. He was an excellent choice: around thirty, elegantly dressed and disciplined in his style of expression as well as clear in his diction. To top it all off, his name contained the affix “von” – a sign of a young aristocrat and intellectual. I was part of the approximately 350 adolescents who had gathered in the school hall following the instruction of the headmaster to listen to the guest. I don’t remember which topic this young man covered. I only remember that he also addressed the “race issue” one of the major concerns of the Nazi ideologists. He tried to make it clear to us that there were different racial groups within the Europeans: one group was comprised of more clever, braver, more efficient people, the other of less clever, less brave and less efficient people, and so on. In order to challenge the clever ones he said that the government in Berlin had enacted a law to protect German Blood and Honor in 1935. He addressed “racial hygiene”, “racial purity” and similar things.

As already mentioned, I was not yet seventeen, but both my school and my family had encouraged me to think independently. My maternal grandfather had expanded my world view at a young age. In the early 20th century he had spent seven years in the United States of America. In 1914, at the onset of the First World War, he returned to Europe and voluntarily enlisted in the army of the Central Powers. In 1916 he was captured by the Russians and lived several years as a prisoner of war in Russia which by then had turned into the Soviet Union. There he acquired an astonishing knowledge of Marxist theories and their effects upon the lives of the people. He often talked about this after his return to Transylvania.

While sitting in the school hall in June of 1942 among 350 peers and listening to the man from Berlin, all of a sudden the description of my grandfather’s life in the Soviet Union came to my mind. I realized that the tirade of this thirty year old aristocrat basically amounted to a communism of a different cast. The communists considered the members of the working class as being superior and in need of protection from the dangers of capitalist exploitation. The Nazis, on the other hand, considered the members of a certain race as being superior and in need of protection from the danger of subversion. While half-heartedly listening to the

lecturer I continued to expand upon my own thoughts. If the theory that external characteristics such as brown, blond or black hair, a slim, a round or a square head define the belonging to a certain race is accurate, then every circle of friends, every family, maybe even every marriage will be divided just like, *mutatis mutandis*, according to the communist theory, the social Status defines the “revolutionary” value of workers, teachers and farmers. Following this train of thought I pondered over my parents. My mother, daughter of a farmer and sheep breeder, had black hair and brown eyes. My father, son of a headmaster, was blond and had blue eyes. How was it possible that these two enjoyed a very harmonious married life?

Even today I remember very clearly that my realization of the basic similarity of the two forms of dictatorship – the red and the brown one – struck me like lightning. And my reflections took me to the next thought: Under a different label, the communist theory or ideology has the same effect as the National Socialist one: both divide the society, the one based upon the class-principle, the other based upon racial membership.

I never had the ability to listen to every kind of nonsense without challenging it. Therefore I did something which in those times of military discipline in all areas and especially in the realm of education was considered outrageous, if not unthinkable. In the middle of the lecture I raised my hand and demanded furiously to be allowed to say something. You must know that in those years we had to accept everything which was trotted out to us during such events without having the right to reply, let alone to voice an opposing opinion. By the way – was that not the exact same thing in communism? To the astonishment of my friends, the horror of the headmaster and the chagrin of the youth leaders, I crossed the school hall, went up to the rostrum, stood next to the man from Berlin and said: “Neither my parents nor my friends nor I let us be insulted by such nonsense any longer.”

A deep silence fell upon the school hall. No one moved while I left the room and closed the door behind me. I described these moments in my novel “The Return of the Wolves”, pp. 526-530 (in 2016 the novel was reprinted in Berlin, in 2016 the Romanian Version was also reprinted in Bucharest. Note of the author, 2017).

The following day I was expelled from school and a few hours later from the youth organization which we were obliged to join. I still have the original document stating the reasons for my expulsion. Despite the ridiculous argumentation – or maybe for this very reason – it belongs to my most precious personal documents.

Please be sure to memorize the following because it plays a key role in understanding the message of my remarks: When I went to the school office to collect the written

notification of my expulsion, the headmaster who was indoctrinated by the Nazis and one of our youth leaders, both being there accidentally, berated me as a “communist” and a “Stalinist”. I was familiar with the slogan of the French revolution “Fraternité ou la mort” and its German equivalent which is even more precise: “If you don’t want to be my brother I’ll bash your skull in.” This slogan reflects the atmosphere of those moments in the school office. Only a few years later, however, I learnt that this slogan was the motto of the communists as well, even if it was worded differently. The similarity cannot be argued, regardless what one or the other may say. I will come back to it later.

But for now: Key date August 23rd, 1944 – after heavy fighting in the Eastern Carpathian Mountains the Red Army invades the country. Liberation day? By no means. Rather the day of the beginning of communist tyranny. My grandfather’s reports had made me sensitive to what was happening. I was nineteen years old. Like everybody else, I had heard about rapes by Soviet soldiers, about random and mindless killings, about veritable raids of households by Soviet marauding troops. In short, I had learnt of brutalities of all kinds. The people were paralyzed. One incident to illustrate the situation: Tănase, a legendary comedian – outstanding in the theatre of Bucharest at the time, which was famous for its artistic qualities – recited a rhyme on one of the major stages in the capital to a capacity crowd: “Rău a fost cu der, die, das. Dar mai rău cu davai ceas.” – “Bad it was with der, die, das. Worse yet it is with davai ceas.” From this evening on nothing has been heard nor seen from Tănase.

More than six decades have passed since then. Tănase was one of the millions of victims of Stalin’s secret service NKDW, drilled in murder and mass murder, which evolved 1934 from the GPU. No human feelings can be attested to this organization, not with the best will in the world. To my rage about the arrogance of power exhibited by the Nazis came rage about the insolence of power displayed by the Communists. More and more I conceived Red and Brown as twins, and in my circle of friends we asked ourselves: Does nobody else see it?

Before I continue I would like to take you on a short detour. What I want you to become aware of can only be comprehended if illustrated by experiential history, in this case my biography. Otherwise we will get lost in the abstract. First of all, another key date: the end of September 1944. The Soviets had been ruling the country for one month. A friend, a young Romanian lawyer living in Hermannstadt, asked me – whispering although we were in his flat – if I was ready to climb up to some refugees who were hiding in the southern Carpathian mountains and deliver some important information and forged identity documents. They were hiding “somewhere in the Munții Sebeșului”, the Mill-Creek-Mountains, he told me. According to him, they were “enemies of the Muscovite gang of communists grinding the

country”. I knew Dr. Ciapa, the lawyer, from sporting activities. He knew about my solitary climbing, skiing and hiking tours in the Southern Carpathians. One night in the beginning of October I set off. After several days of searching I found the men in a caldron below the peak of mount Cindrel which is approx. 2400 m (7874 feet) high. There were officers of the Royal Romanian Army who had refused to fight for the Soviets but also farmers and shepherds whose live stock had been confiscated by Red Army soldiers, students, doctors and teachers whose Christian faith bid them to oppose the atheist communism, as well as some members of the fascist “Iron Guard” and a few German soldiers and officers who had been scattered behind the front which had moved towards the West, and two men who had been dropped off by parachute behind the front serving in the “Operation Regulus”. Those two came from Hermannstadt und had been members of the “Waffen-SS”. I knew both of them.

In short, a motley crew of very different men, all in all about forty of them, who had only one thing in common: they rejected communism. They had to be equipped with forged identity cards. Among them were sick and injured men. They lived in burrows which they had dug. A group of helpers, also risking their lives, brought them food, medicine and clothing through the valley of Zoodt (Valea Sadului). Other men were hiding in the mountains of Zibins and Ghihan, Munții Cibinului and Munții Ghihan. In one of these winter nights I carried an officer of the Romanian Air Force with a severely injured upper leg from the mountain of Prejbe down to the valley of Zoodt. The danger of being caught and shot by one of the many Soviet-Romanian police patrols roaming through the mountains was ubiquitous. In Hermannstadt, a handful of men and women – among them my father, as I later found out – were procuring supplies assisted by some young railway men.

In the beginning of 1945 they and also the men in the caldron of Cindrel were betrayed. Those who survived were imprisoned in Hermannstadt or surrendered to the Soviets.

Via the infamous prison of the NKDW, Lubjanka, located in the Department of the Interior in Moscow, they were taken to the Vorkuta Gulag which was located 160 km (99 miles) above the Arctic Circle. The man who betrayed the group in the caldron of Cindrel was a German officer, whereas the man who betrayed the group which assisted them was a Romanian doctor. The code name of the officer was Puiu, the real name of the doctor was Țăranu. In return for his betrayal, Puiu was allowed to move around freely in Hermannstadt. He married a German woman with whom he soon emigrated to the GDR. There the ominous as well as legendary head of the secret service, Markus Wolf, admitted him in his troop of spies and sent him to the Federal Republic of Germany several times. At the end of the sixties

he was caught in Munich – in the Café Hörn –, exchanged for West German agents and never seen in the Federal Republic again.

In January 1945, the Soviets arrested around 70 000 German Transylvanians and Banatians and deported them to the Soviet Union. Along with two friends I managed to slip away and lived like others during the following years as an outlaw. Until the autumn of 1947 I went on numerous trips to the scattered men – and a few women – who were bivouacking in the Southern Carpathians and were soon to be known as “Partisans”. Temporarily, the US Air Force supplied them with weapons, medicine, radio equipment and so on. They formed the armed anti-communist resistance. Then and still many more years to come there was a saying among the Romanian mountain farmers: “Să trăiască partizanii până vin americanii!” – “May the partisans live until the Americans come!” A grim ambiguousness: Neither the US-Americans nor one of the other Western powers ever thought of “coming”. The last and most famous of the resistance fighters in the Carpathians managed to stay undercover until the middle of the seventies. But they were only chessmen in the hands of the Allies who were hoping to cause trouble in the Soviet sphere of influence.

To me, the three years until autumn 1947 felt like a time of events right out of ancient Greek mythology. Please pardon me if this may seem exaggerated to you, but it corresponds with the events and my state of mind at that time. With this I mean that nothing was a game. Each step was accompanied by the unpredictable as a final warning. Every second of my life I felt the power of the uncanny. It was as if Atropos, the inevitable, one of the goddesses of fate and destiny whom Homer and Vergil describe as being almighty, was invisibly right next to me. To a much greater extent, this existential feeling of the inevitable must have dominated the women and men of the armed resistance who fought for up to ten years for their cause. They didn't have a “Hinterland” to which they could withdraw from the dangerous zone, nor a base at which to recuperate after an operation on the front line. According to Romulus Rusan around 10 000 of them became victims of the Securitate special commandos – men, women, children.

The fact that a certain type mainly of German journalists and publicists generalizes these members of the armed resistance in a stylish political correctness as “fascists” and “right-wing extremists” distorts history and is an invention accommodating the zeitgeist. Of course there were rightists among the thousands of people who were chased by trained troops of the Securitate in individual and mass operations – one of them commanded by no one less than Ceaușescu. But they, too, were embraced by the President of the Federal Republic of Germany Johannes Rau (1932-2004) in a masterful way when he in 2003 referring to the

political dissidents in the GDR stated: “Some of their political ideas we do not share at all. This doesn’t, however, make their opposition less valuable. It deserves our honorific memory.” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Jan. 31st 2003, page 9.)

So far the announced detour. Now the next key date has arrived: the end of September 1947. Dr. Ciapa informed me that Siguranța, the predecessor of Securitate, was looking for me and that I ran the risk of being court-martialled and shot. A failed attempt to flee the country landed me in the military prison of Temeswar where I was safe since Siguranța believed me to be everywhere but not behind bars in this Banatian city. When I was taken into the gloomy building on Strada Silimon the following occurred: The captain whose armlet identified him as the commanding officer – he was in his forties – bellowed at me calling me “Fascist! Hitlerite! Nazi!” Oh yeah, I thought. Had not a few years earlier, in June 1942, the NS-indoctrinated headmaster spat at me in a similar spiteful way, berating me as a “Communist! Stalinist!?” Do you remember? Do you recognize the similarity of those two squallers? Of the Nazi and the Communist? The only difference was their label.

I would like to modify the Latin phrase “Sic transit gloria mundi” (“Thus passes the glory of the world”), once uttered three times in the ritual of papal coronation while burning a tow of smoldering flax, bearing in mind those two scenes – in the school office and behind the iron gate on Silimon Street: “Sic transit absurdum ad normalitatem” – “Thus the absurd transforms into normality.” And for this no flax being burnt by a candle flame nor a pope is necessary, one might add derisively, but only the mentioning of the modern 20th century in which mankind used half of the brain given to it by God to fly to the moon and the other half to kill millions of their fellow men. This is what I mean when describing the absurd as normality. Contrary to the appearance, National Socialists and Communists again and again do seem to get along with each other strikingly well. This brings us beyond the secondary to the primary issue to which I would like to call your attention: the necessity of equidistance when reflecting upon the two dictatorial systems of the 20th century, provided we recognize realities and do not want to repeat old mistakes. Various ideologies, even those which were and are disseminated in historiography, obstruct the view for recognizing the structural similarity, even equality between National Socialism and communism. Don’t those who sympathize with communism denounce National Socialism and vice versa? Such simplifications seem to me to be an ailment of our media society where only the surface is perceived. Just as I as an adolescent was not a communist because I rebelled against Nazi ideology, later on I was neither a Nazi nor a fascist because I rebelled against communist practices. I know that it never was easy to live a consistent life in the context of the terms

freedom and humanities. But who can point out an alternative to me which leaves our dignity unimpaired and makes us immune against the extremes in thought and action?

I would like to point out once more, if I may, the programmatic base of the two dictatorships – their ideological key concept. Communism decreed: *You as an individual are nothing, the socialist collective is everything, you as an individual are only of value if you are of use to the socialist collective.* National Socialism decreed: *You as an individual are nothing, the people's community ("Volksgemeinschaft") is everything, you as an individual are only of value if you are of use to the people's community.* Therefore, the ideological key term of both decrees is the extinction of man as an individual respectively his use or his uselessness as part of the collective. Please let me add a personal remark. For me, it does not matter whether the socialist or the National Socialist collective deprives me of my individuality and my personality and only sees and accepts me in my functional value as part of the collective. Of course it is debatable whether the collective of the communists or the community of the National Socialists might be considered as being of greater value, but this leads us to another discussion. In each case, it starts to become fatal when one or the other principle is practiced by fanaticized ideologists lacking the intelligence to differentiate; for whom I am only of value as a chessman without a will of my own which they can move on the chessboard of their "leftist" or "rightist" intentions. The leftists' intended appropriation cannot be answered by the rightists' one and vice versa. The answer to both can only be found in the humane middle. Whenever this was not understood, disaster came about.

Finally, one notable remark: Statisticians place the blame for approx. seven million murder victims on the rightist National Socialists who are wrongly called fascists. In his "Gulag Archipelago" (1973 published in the West) Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn attested approx. forty million murder victims in the USSR, many of whom, by the way, died in gas chambers which were installed for the first time under Stalin, as Donald Rayfield, a British historian, reported in "Stalin and His Hangmen" (2004). In 1997, Stéphane Courtois and his five co-authors wrote in "Le livre noir du communisme" ("The Black Book of Communism") that all in all more than one hundred million people were killed in communist countries.

I share Courtois' view that when judging the atrocities committed by communism and National Socialism for the sake of objective cognition as well as out of respect no difference can nor should be made between the eleven year old Jewish girl who died in Auschwitz by the National Socialists' Zyklon B and the eleven year old Ukrainian girl who belonged to the approx. eight million farmers who until 1932 starved to death under communist rule. There are only external differences between the atrocities committed by the Himmler-police which

Soma Morgenstern hauntingly describes in “Die Blutsäule am Sereth” (1946) (*The Pillar of Blood. Omens and Miracles at Sereth, 1997*) and the atrocities just as abominable committed by the Cheka under the leadership of Felix Dzerzhinsky about which the German magazine “Spiegel Spezial” reported 2007 under the title “Revolt and Revolution. Hangmen or Saints”. When recalling these bloody deeds one will agree with André Malraux’ despairing statement: “The basic fact is Europe’s death ...“. Is this the European conclusion about the 20th century?

But why, one has to ask at this point, is Hitler’s terror regime with seven million deaths today worldwide considered as more worthy of condemnation than the one of Stalin with forty million murder victims? Joachim Fest who wrote a biography of Hitler stated towards the end of his memoir “Not I” (2006) that it was Moscow’s greatest triumph of propaganda to divert the attention of the world away from Soviet mass crimes by focusing on the ones committed by the National Socialists. When nowadays Western heads of state gather in commemoration ceremonies recalling the war of 1939-1945, they understandably express their gratitude to the Soviet Union for its help in bringing down Hitler. But no word is being said in honoring commemoration regarding the incomparably greater number of victims of Stalin, not a hint of admonition is directed at the present government in Moscow that they should make it their business to reveal the crimes of the preceding regime in the name of truth. I find such tolerance on the part of the Western states to ignore ethical codes and objectivity when dealing with historic reality disgraceful. It inevitably stirs political desires in Moscow in regard to dealing with Europe, diverts the view from the facts and gives leeway to right-wing extremists.

While decisively rejecting the numerical comparison of the criminal deeds of one side to the ones of the other side, I find it inevitable to state numbers when one wishes to give a precise account of the matter. A footnote: How many victims would the Nazi regime have claimed if its criminals not only had been “granted” twelve years, 1933-1945, but like the Soviet criminals seventy-two years, 1917-1989? However, the issue is not to compare numbers but to shed light on things.

In his comprehensive work „Das Gesicht des Jahrhunderts. Monster, Retter und Mediokritäten” (“The Face of the Century. Monsters, Savers and Mediocrities”, German edition 1998), Hans Peter Schwarz, a historian from Bonn, provides us with a portrait gallery of the 20th century, identifying prominent and influential intellectuals as fatal contributors to the distortion of history in favor of communism. “It is remarkable”, he writes, “how many intellectuals let themselves be roped into Stalin’s disinformation policies.” When in 1932 Moscow’s “murderous campaign against the farmers” was at its peak, the Irish Nobel laureate

in Literature, Bernard Shaw, was granted an audience with Stalin. Afterwards he praised the Kremlin chief who was long since known as a mass murderer, calling him a “Georgian gentleman” and “magician of reason”. The English author Herbert George Wells who talked with Stalin two years later went even further. He called the monster “the most open-minded, most honorable man” he ever met and claimed that “nobody fears him, everybody trusts him”. The French feminist and author Simone de Beauvoir excused Stalin’s mass murders with the statement that the realization of great ideas requires human sacrifices. The French author Louis Aragon payed homage to the cruel police, Moscow’s GPU, in a hymn: “Je chante le Gépéou ... “ – “I extol the GPU... “. Neither did the US-American novelist Howard Fast want to hear anything about Stalin’s gulags and massacres, he remained a member of the communist party ignoring red mass murder. The same is true of the Spanish author Jorge Semprún and the Frenchman Romain Rolland. Even the philosopher Max Horkheimer, co-founder of the “Critical Theory”, praised the Moscow of Lenin and Stalin enthusiastically as the new holy Jerusalem. Last but not least the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht who deeply affected and moved by Stalin’s death claimed that the heart of the people who “liberated themselves from their oppressors on five continents” “skipped a beat when hearing about Stalin’s death” – Stalin, the man who had been called the devil in the Kremlin – because the deceased, he continued, had been the “incorporation of their hopes”. It is safe to assume that the German before delivering his hardly bearable sermon did not consult anyone of the people who in 1944/1945 were brought under the yoke of the perverted Kremlin chief and were liberated as late as 1989/1990, including his own people.

If you multiply these prominent writers with any odd number you will be horrified to see a conspicuous army of intellectuals denying the truth, an armada of clever people who let themselves be deceived, thus deriding the murder victims to an inconceivable extent. What was their mental state like when they seriously claimed and still claim to be the spiritual guides of our society? All that makes me shiver.

One of the disappointingly few writers who were communists at first but did not hesitate to draw the right conclusions after having acquired the necessary knowledge was the Romanian author Panait Istrati who wrote in French and was praised as “Maxim Gorki of the Balkan”. After two extended visits to the Soviet Union between 1927 and 1929, Istrati, then forty-five, became one of the most ardent anti-communist authors of Europe and published three books with his observations and experiences. Due to their factual accuracy and their ruthlessness they belong to the best which has ever been written criticizing Moscow’s communism. Nevertheless, they did not inspire the adherents of communism among the

intellectual top nobs in Europe to revise their views but bestowed their spite and anger upon him. Did they all have the same chilling concept of history as Mme de Beauvoir? Were they obsessed as once the inquisitors were? Are intellectuals in general more prone to ideological constructs than non-intellectuals?

From their ranks was and still is to be heard that it was only Moscow's fervor in the practical application of the doctrines of Karl Marx during the first revolutionary vigor that led to understandable distortions. As soon as things were settled, it was claimed, normalcy would return. At this very point the basic error in the interpretation of Marxism or communism, which I outlined at the beginning of my remarks, becomes clear. No, not revolutionary fervor of the first vigor or wrong people putting theory into practice led to the countless crimes of communism. Rather, its very ideological quintessence is opposed to men *as free beings* in the sense of Schiller – that “man is created free, and is free though he be born in chains”. The concept of the collective advocated by communism as well as the concept of the community advocated by National Socialism are both opposed to this concept of freedom. By the way, some late interpreters of National Socialism also claimed that this totalitarian system would have found to reasonable normality after its terrible excesses if it had only been granted more time. No, I reply, reality is what counts, not speculation. Nothing can change the fact that both ideologies and their proponents cruelly failed to define man. They responded to the right by adopting leftist positions and to the left by adopting rightist positions. How well it would have befitted the Europeans and would have served us all if we had not let ourselves become entrapped or blinded by the right or the left but had defended the heroic middle of Humanitas as an answer to both these systems. Its preconditions were contained in Europe's classical cultural heritage.

Finally, let me give you a thought to take with you on your future paths: Whenever you make a decision, please keep in mind the spiritual, moral and cultural homeliness of our continent on which presumably most of you will spend your lives and be attentive not to become homeless on your native continent of Europe by letting yourselves be lured, like the Europeans in the 20th century, by one side or the other.