



# Opposing Memories: Contest and Conspiracy over 1970s Romania

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## Abstract

The history of Romanian dissidence during the Cold War often seems rather barren. Yet, as this article demonstrates, the legacy of Romanian opposition to Cold War communism is vexed with conflicts over ownership in a fragmented circle of late Cold War era oppositional voices and actors. A daring attempt to cross the Danube by a young Romanian German student in 1970 and an earthquake in the year 1977 provide the historical backdrop to these post-communist internecine battles over opposition and conformity. The prominence of the German-speaking community in these conflicts is not accidental but is itself a commentary on the structural problems related to dissidence in Romania. This article's focus on specific individuals – Anton Sterbling, Paul Goma, Carl Gibson, Herta Müller – reveals differing interpretations of dissidence and opposition, a diverse social fabric of Romanian dissidence, and a long tail of psychological battles over the memory and the ownership of opposition to Romanian communism after 1989.

## Keywords

Romanian Germans – dissidents – Paul Goma – Herta Müller – Carl Gibson

Why did some dissident and opposition voices in East Central Europe enjoy much success while others were ignored? And what impact did this lack of acknowledgement have on individuals and their ideas of dissidence? A myopic view of the late Cold War in East Central Europe conjures up individuals such as Lech Wałęsa, Adam Michnik, Milan Kundera, György Konrád, Václav Havel, or even the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt. In a broader history of the end of the Cold War, underground forums and book-smuggling feature as part of a world

in which Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia exerted its influence throughout East Central Europe and *Solidarność* in Poland engendered popular mobilization (Kind-Kovács 2014; Behrends and Lindenberger 2014). Romania's dissident landscape, however, appears devoid of prominent names and movements. Yet the networks of opposition in Romania from the 1970s reveal a lively world in which claims to opposition and accusations of conformity rumbled on for several decades and gained currency in post-communist Europe. The 1970s in communist Romania – the starting point of this article – was a surprisingly active period for oppositional voices, but the opposition in Romania lacked a unified and identifiable movement or leading figures. Dissidents operated in very different contexts, and when their paths crossed, they forcefully contested the role and meaning of opposition and dissidence.<sup>1</sup>

Oppositional figures and groups were divided geographically. Some worked in Romania while others existed in exile, and in different exile locations at that – notably in West Germany, France, and the United States. They also used different languages and forums to communicate: Romanian, German, Hungarian, as well as English and French outside Romania. Romanian opposition was not absent but rather cacophonous and difficult to pin down (Ungureanu and Pavel 2018). The German-speaking minority in Romania, a central focal point of this article, was a potent hub of opposition that produced several actors who articulated dissent against state socialism that was often distinct from ideas of dissidence among Romanian-speaking actors. Romanian Germans were active in opposition against state socialism because Romanian German networks were fundamentally transnational, as emigration throughout the Cold War created a community bound together across the Iron Curtain (Koranyi 2021: 63–114). Romanian German émigré activists in West Germany – and to a lesser extent in Austria and the United States – provided a platform for German oppositional voices in Romania in ways that elite Romanian-speaking dissidents could never rely on despite some connections to the international circuit of well-known East Central European émigré dissidents.

Opposition in Romania not only had strong roots in the country's minorities – in this case the German-speaking minority of the Banat (and to a lesser extent Transylvanian Saxons) – but was also mainly present in the domain of literature. Where oppositional activity occurred – and this article mentions a couple of instances – it was either performative or short-lived. From a provocative flight across the Danube by the young student Anton Sterbling in 1970 to the literary circle *Aktionsgruppe Banat*, Romanian German literary activity formed

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1 I would like to express my gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful, challenging, and constructive comments.

a crucial part of a growing oppositional milieu. “Mainstream” Romanian dissidence intersected with Banat Swabians actors but never really overcame it, not before 1989 and especially not after 1989. Romanian dissidence lacked a center, momentum, and a clear vision of what opposition was. While members of the *Aktionsgruppe* began by articulating a classic Marxist understanding of opposition from within, no such unity existed within the sporadic and atomized Romanian dissident scene. Paul Goma, Romania’s “only proper dissident,” did indeed liaise both with German representatives of SLOMR (*Sindicatul Liber al Oamenilor Muncii din România* [Free Trade Union of the Working People of Romania]) and writers associated with the *Banater Autorengruppe* (Behring 2012: 128; Pasincovschi 2012: 9). But these connections were fragile and short lived precisely because Romanian German opposition had greater clout both during and after the collapse of communism as compared to “mainstream” Romanian dissident circles.

As this article demonstrates, any sense of cooperation evaporated quickly from 1977 onward and was replaced by hostile claims and counterclaims asserted with particular vehemence in the new millennium, revealing some deep psychological scars left by the lack of international acknowledgement. While some actors went on to enjoy international success, others disappeared into bitter irrelevance, while others still – Goma most prominently – went down the rabbit hole of contorted antisemitic conspiracy theories. This article highlights the role of a minority community, Romanian Germans, in carving out spaces, crucially in a sustained way after 1989, in which vehement and influential debates about opposition, collaboration, and dissidence were negotiated. Their relative distance to Romanian society, made obvious by the use of German and the surge in emigration and connections to West Germany, laid bare ideas of dissidence that were more easily articulated compared to Romanian-speaking opposition voices. In the new millennium, the heated contests over the ownership of dissidence and opposition within the Romanian German community also fundamentally impacted broader Romanian and East Central European debates about opposition to communism by further dissolving ideas of a clean and untarnished opposition to state socialism. Those actors who still held onto those ideas often ended up in a milieu where antisemitism and conspiracy theories flourished. Rooted in the historical experience of dissidence in Romania, the individual stories that form the core of this article reveal the structural problems of Romanian dissidence and its long-lasting effects.

## Swimming against the Current

In October 1970, seventeen-year-old student Anton Sterbling, one of the founding members of *Aktionsgruppe Banat*, attempted to flee Romania. His flight, which he had only intended as a “provocation,” was more than daring: Sterbling began swimming across the Danube to Yugoslavia, but he was quickly caught by Romanian border guards (Sterbling 2006). He was lucky enough not to have been shot. As a minor – he was still only seventeen years old – he faced three months in custody and prison, after which he tried to continue his education by completing year eleven at the *Lyzeum* by correspondence. After his release, a career as a literary great seemed inevitable given his talent: he won a poetry competition in the spring of 1971 and planned to study German at the University of Timișoara. But his meteoric rise was quickly thwarted by the *Securitate*, the Romanian secret police, which had not forgotten his dip in the Danube. The poetry competition never awarded the first prize, and he was denied a place at university despite finishing at top of his year for his Baccalaureate (Sterbling 2015: 182). Sterbling then rebelled further: he began corresponding with contacts in West Germany, relaying very strong criticism of the regime and the secret police. Writing in German gave Sterbling, like other Romanian Germans, a greater platform and resonance than Romanian-speaking writers had. However, the reprisals Sterbling suffered were comparable to his fellow Romanian dissenters. The *Securitate* retaliated by repeatedly dragging Sterbling to the headquarters in Reșița, where he was threatened and told to stop his letter-writing to West Germany, which, of course, he did not. His original sin – i.e., the attempted flight in October 1970 – was a provocation, as Sterbling put it, to highlight the prison he inhabited in Romania, or, more precisely, in the German world of the Banat in the west of the country (Sterbling 2015a). He could afford for his opposition to be performative because his performance found resonance abroad among German-speakers.

Reprisals against Sterbling intensified in 1972 and left deep psychological scars on him (Sterbling 2015b: 127). For him and the other dissidents who appear in this article, the psychological legacy of opposition was crucial for understanding their lives after 1989. In Sterbling’s case, he continued to find a very receptive, large audience in Germany, while others, such as Carl Gibson and Paul Goma, were left frustrated and filled with a sense of being silenced twice over. But Sterbling found himself at the center of activity throughout his life. Still enrolled school as the state continued to punish him, he co-founded the literary circle *Aktionsgruppe Banat*, a name that was retrospectively applied to the *Banater Autorengruppe* in an article in the *Neue Banater Zeitung* as an

ironic remark about the group's perceived aimless activism (Schuster 2004; Sterbling 2008: 15). His *Securitate* file increased in size, as did the number of his visits to headquarters in Reșița (Sterbling 2015a). All the while, other names began to emerge around this group of nonconformists: Rolf Bossert, William Totok, Ernst Wichner, and – perhaps best known – Richard Wagner, the former husband of Herta Müller; Müller would later win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2009 for her literary lifework after the publication of her international best-seller *Atemschaukel* (The Hunger Angel) (Müller 2009a; Sterbling 2008).

The *Aktionsgruppe* considered itself to be political without being “programmatic” (Wichner 1992a). Members expressed their opposition to the regime not necessarily in political or ideological terms but through aesthetics (Wichner 1992b: 8). Their literary contributions were anchored in broader German literary traditions while focusing on everyday life in Romania. In this way, Romanian German writers were able to operate in various settings: the local Romanian German community, a broader German-speaking world centered on West Germany, and Romanian everyday life. The circle only existed for three years, until 1975 when the *Aktionsgruppe* was officially banned. After that, members of the group went in various directions: some withdrew from writing altogether; others joined the literary circle *Adam-Müller-Guttenbrunn* to which Herta Müller and Horst Samson belonged; the rest, including Anton Sterbling, left Romania for West Germany, where their biographies went in different directions. For Romanian Germans who left Romania, their influence did not decline. On the contrary, the ripples of the *Aktionsgruppe* continued to be felt. The *Adam-Müller-Guttenbrunn* circle acted as a kind of successor group while the growing number of exiles and émigrés in Germany continued to write about Romania, the regime, and everyday life long after 1989.

If we imagine the *Aktionsgruppe Banat* in 1972, made up of students born between 1951 and 1955, as the epicenter of a wave of dissent, then we move further and further out from that center as time passes (Schuster 2004). By the 1980s, the *Securitate* was monitoring German writers from the Banat (and elsewhere) in Romania and abroad. The use of German as their language of writing did not shield Romanian Germans from persecution. Instead, it amplified their voices and made them, if anything, more susceptible to secret police surveillance. The files on individuals such as William Totok, Herta Müller, and Richard Wagner continued to grow. There were rumors and disinformation about some writers acting as agents and double agents for the secret police. By the late 1980s, most literary activists had left Romania for West Germany. Müller and Wagner were among the last to emigrate, after which they rose to even greater fame beyond the Banat Romanian world. After 1989, it was these

figures around the *Aktionsgruppe* and its successor group that represented the voices of dissent, certainly in the German-speaking world and, frustratingly for some Romanian dissidents, for Romania more broadly (Schuster 2004). The landscape of opposition and its legacy could have been very different but for a natural disaster at the height of dissident activity in Romania.

### 1977: a Political Earthquake

On 4 March 1977, a powerful and destructive earthquake known as the 1977 Vrancea earthquake rocked the southeast of Romania including the cities of Bucharest, Braşov, and Galaţi, killing more than 1,500 people. It sent, in more than one way, shockwaves through Romania. As he often was, Nicolae Ceauşescu was abroad (in Nigeria) when news of the earthquake broke. His Africa tour was covered in the Romanian press as a huge triumphal procession for both Romania and him personally. The headlines and articles of the official newspapers celebrated Ceauşescu's engagement with post-colonial West Africa. Adorned with pictures of Ceauşescu shaking hands, engrossed in serious talks, and the Ceauşescus disembarking their plane while smiling and waving, the main organ of the Romanian Communist Party, *Scînteia*, led the way ("Vizita tovarăşului Nicolae Ceauşescu în Senegal s-a încheiat" 1977; "Vizita preşedintelui Nicolae Ceauşescu în Republica Ghana" 1977; "Vizita preşedintelui Nicolae Ceauşescu în Republica Federală Nigeria" 1977). The German-language newspapers *Karpatenrundschau* and *Neuer Weg* followed suit ("Präsident Nicolae Ceauşescu besucht fünf afrikanische Länder" 1977). In this frenzied atmosphere of exuberant praise, the earthquake hit Romania and shook the very foundations of the story of socialist progress.

It took two days for newspapers to cover the earthquake. When the news officially broke on March 6th, Ceauşescu's presence was carefully choreographed. He was featured on all the front pages of Romania's newspapers surveying the damage and, later, helping with the reconstruction of cities ("Tovarăşul Nicolae Ceauşescu" 1977). The official institutional responses to the earthquake were, however, poorly coordinated and insufficient. And beyond the façade of a socialist utopia, discontent was becoming a serious problem for the regime.

Anton Sterbling, who had emigrated to West Germany in 1975, returned to Romania on a visit in February 1977, just before the earthquake. Sterbling's return visit was not unusual. German emigration from Romania, even when illegal, was part and parcel of the budding West German-Romanian relationship in the 1970s and 1980s (Herbstritt 2008). While most émigré visitors came to Romania to see family and friends, Sterbling's visit was profoundly political.

He had planned to meet Paul Goma in Bucharest (Sterbling 2015: 188). Goma – whose dissidence spanned the regimes of both Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and Nicolae Ceaușescu, starting during his schooldays in the early to mid-1950s – became a communist party member in 1968, when Romania took a stand against the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. While Sterbling was making his way back to Romania, Goma was involved in trying to set up a Romanian Charter 77. Goma had publicly expressed sympathy with the Czechoslovak dissidents around Jiří Němec, Václav Havel, Jan Patočka, and others (Petrescu 2017). Sterbling, meanwhile, was on his way to visit Goma in Bucharest to try to consolidate a fledgling network of German and Romanian dissidence (Sterbling 2015: 188). But then the earthquake struck, and Sterbling never made it beyond the Carpathian Mountains. Instead, he caught up with his old friends Richard Wagner and William Totok and visited his parents in the Banat before leaving Romania on March 15th, 1977. Goma remained in Romania for a few months more, until November 1977, and would continue to position himself as a central figure in the battle over opposition to Ceaușescu both in Romania and in exile. All the while, the Vrancea earthquake ensured that disparate dissident movements and oppositional thinkers remained fragmented.

Just a few months later, in early August 1977, the miners of the Jiu Valley began a three-day strike against the regime after they had their disability allowances cut. It would be the largest protest movement in communist Romania until its violent end in December 1989. From August 1st to 3rd, 1977, Ceaușescu's position seemed uncertain while he holidayed on the Black Sea with his wife, Elena Ceaușescu. During this brief period, there was genuine chaos in the country. Rumors of infiltration by the secret police circulated, and for a while, it was unclear whether the leaders of the official trade union were mainly working with party officials or were being held captive by those very same officials. In any case, the strike was crushed beginning on August 4th, 1977, and the repercussions for the region were harsh (Petrescu and Petrescu 2007). Over the years, many of the miners were replaced by new workers from other parts of the country (Ciobanu 2009: 322). By the end of the Cold War, the population of the Jiu Valley was substantially different from what it had been in the mid-1970s.

Equally important, though, was the breakdown of trust between trade unionists, the government, and trade union leaders. Miners and factory workers had been celebrated heroes of the socialist state, but here they were, demonized and ultimately victimized by the state. The trade union had failed in its responsibility to address the workers' grievances. Two years after the strike, then, SLOMR was established as a new and independent trade union that would bring prominence to many of our protagonists and draw them into

conflict with other dissidents and non-conformists. SLOMR was set up by Ionel Cană, an intellectual and medic, in Drobeta Turnu Severin in the southwest of the country in January 1979 (Ciobanu 2009: 321). Its establishment was made public on *Radio Free Europe*, and it soon boasted between 2,000 and 3,000 members. SLOMR was strongly supported by Paul Goma, the writer who Anton Sterbling had tried to visit just before the earthquake in 1977 (Ciobanu 2009: 321, 322). New branches of SLOMR were established all over the country, but were concentrated in the West, including the Banat.

Carl Gibson, a young Banat Swabian familiar with the circle around Herta Müller, Anton Sterbling, Richard Wagner, and *Aktionsgruppistinnen*, took the lead in SLOMR's branch in Timișoara. SLOMR's demands included an end to the discrimination against workers who demanded rights, a shorter working week, and disability pension rights. From the young Carl Gibson's perspective, this was a moment of truth and integrity. Unlike Sterbling, and later others associated with the *Aktionsgruppe* who seemed to only write and then flee Romania, Gibson acted. The regime's response to the newly established trade union was swift and brutal: most leaders and officials of SLOMR were hit with various reprisals. SLOMR's founder Ionel Cană was sentenced to seven years in psychiatric care. By April 1979, Carl Gibson, who had already faced arrest in 1977 for supporting Goma's Romanian Charter 77 experiment, was sent to prison for six months for founding an "antisocial organization." Gibson paid the price for his political activity and would draw on his experiences for decades to come. Shortly after his release from prison, like many Romanian Germans, he left Romania for West Germany, where he continued to fight the regime via the World Confederation of Labour – a Christian-influenced, anti-totalitarian organization founded in the interwar period – while writing numerous texts right up until the present day. Gibson's views on opposition were determined by his experiences in the late 1970s, views that never really changed after communism. For Gibson, active resistance was the only form of opposition that counted. He found synergies with Paul Goma and others, but any potential cooperation with Sterbling, Müller, and other Romanian German intellectuals had been dashed by the events of March 1977. Gibson then witnessed what seemed to him a second injustice: his legacy and that of SLOMR faded and never received the reception he felt he deserved. That clear and narrow understanding of dissidence continued to frame a world divided into purists who opposed state socialism and those whose lives had been implicated in the communist system.

## Opposing Directions

When Romania's communist regime collapsed violently in December 1989, there were no obvious reformers or opposition leaders to take over. The limited space given to oppositional figures during the Ceaușescu period meant that no clear transitional figures emerged. Oppositional movements were “weak, disorganised, and without leadership” (Hall 2000: 1071). In comparison with other transitional societies such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, or Hungary, Romanian politics and society experienced both the greatest rupture and the greatest degree of continuity. By the 1980s, oppositional figures and dissident voices had largely left Romania for exile or a new life elsewhere. Writers and activists such as Dumitru Țepeneag, Norman Manea, Ana Blandiana, and indeed Paul Goma successively slipped out of the country to West Germany, France, and the United States starting in the 1970s. While they continued to write in exile about communism in Romania, their channels of communication into the country were fragmented and in a permanent state of uncertainty. When Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime fell abruptly in 1989, their impact on the events in December 1989 and on subsequent developments was very modest.

That vacuum also explains the prominence of German oppositional voices writing about Romanian society both inside and outside Romania. Their voices were more likely to be heard by a (West) German audience during and particularly after the Cold War had ended. Their minority status in Romania also generated a separate milieu in which they could operate without necessarily shielding them from political reprisals. Romanian Germans had established well-functioning channels between (West) Germany and Romania that had grown and intensified over the course of the Cold War as more and more Romanian Germans left Romania for West Germany (Koranyi 2021: 63–114). The Romanian German community in Romania was better connected to debates outside of Romania than mainstream Romanian society was (Banac 2018). The absence of a palpable oppositional presence in Romania in the 1980s, and specifically in 1989, was an opportunity for Romanian Germans to claim that space. After all, Romanian Germans could point to a history of minority oppression (Wittstock and Sienerth 2003), coerced migration (Weber 2003; Beer, Radu, and Kühner-Wielach 2019), and targeted show trials (Motzan and Sienerth 1993; Pintilescu 2009). For much of the Cold War, Romanian German émigrés comforted themselves that being Romanian German was sufficient to qualify them for the status of being a dissident against communism in Romania. But the sheer number of Romanian German migrants in the 1980s and 1990s – when roughly 300,000 left Romania, leaving a rump community of around 40,000 German speakers behind – put pressure on the isolated world of Romanian

German émigrés in Germany during the Cold War. Stories of intrigue, collaboration, and passivity among Romanian Germans during communism became more and more visible. And the “stars” of opposition like Richard Wagner, Herta Müller, and Anton Sterbling had done oppositional politics quite differently from the way Gibson and Goma imagined active dissidence. Some of these Romanian German celebrities, as the staunchly anti-communist Transylvanian Saxon and Banat Swabian *Landmannschaften* (homeland societies) in Germany discovered, were even left-wing. Others acknowledged the complexities of life under state socialism by broaching uncomfortable issues, as Herta Müller did, such as the oppressive domestic life of Banat Germans. Life in Romania under communism had been murky and was not, as Gibson continued to contend, a clearcut case of dissidents versus collaborators.

By the new millennium, a full-blown argument ensued over Romanian German collaboration and opposition. Even the apparently protected world of Romanian Germans in Transylvania revealed a dubious reality of coercion and mistrust. The Romanian German Eginald Schlattner, who had been a student in the 1950s, published his semi-autobiographical and politically explosive novel *Rote Handschuhe* in 2001 (Schlattner 2001). Schlattner was not just anybody; he was a well-known writer whose biography revealed the intricacies of opposition and coercion under communism in Romania. In *Rote Handschuhe*, Schlattner attempted to explain his own involvement in a famous show trial in 1959 by fictionalizing an account of a student in the hands of the *Securitate*. The trial to which the novel alluded took place on September 15, 1959, when five writers: Wolf von Aichelburg, Hans Bergel, Andreas Birkner, Georg Scherg, and Harald Siegmund were sentenced to a total of ninety-five years in prison for conspiracy against the state (Motzan and Sienerth 1993). One of the main pieces of evidence was Hans Bergel’s short novella *Fürst und Lautenschläger* (Bergel 1957). In a thinly veiled criticism of the communist government, Bergel, who would later become a doyen of the Romanian German émigré scene in West Germany, seemed to draw parallels between the feudal Lord Gábor Báthory in the early seventeenth century and the communist government of Romania in the 1950s (Kroner 1993: 31–49; Pauling 2012: 9). This novella combined with other publications and indicting oral testimonies to make up the corpus of evidence that resulted in the draconian sentences for the five German Romanian authors, which constituted a larger scale crackdown in the Gheorghiu-Dej era (1947–1965) (Kroner 1993: 39; Pauling 2012).<sup>2</sup>

2 The trial is known as *Schriftstellerprozess* in German and *Procesul scriitorilor germani* in Romanian. See Kroner, “Politische Prozesse,” 39.

The five authors were arrested following a signed confession by Schlattner, who was then a young Transylvanian Saxon student who had integrated into Romanian German intellectual circles in Transylvania. Arrested in 1957, he then spent two years in detention, during which he was subjected to torture and accused of having failed to report the alleged treasonous conspiracy of a number of his compatriots (Moldovean 2008: 55–60).<sup>3</sup> He eventually caved into the physical and psychological pressure, which resulted not only in the draconian sentences for the five writers, some of whom he had known personally, but also in prison sentences for other individuals such as the art and literary critic Harald Krasser as well as Schlattner's own uncle (Klein 2001).

In 2001, when Schlattner's novel was published, any certainties about a Romanian German default oppositional stance were destroyed. Hans Bergel, one of the five writers sent to prison in 1959 and a leading figure in Cold War *Landsmannschaft* politics in West Germany, repeatedly rebuked Schlattner in print and in person. At a reading of Schlattner's book, Bergel, who was sitting in the audience, heckled Schlattner publicly, accusing him of fabricating excuses for his own role in the authors' trial: "The whole book is lie!" Bergel proclaimed to Schlattner and the audience (Klein 2001).

The most violent reactions to Schlattner's publication came from within the Romanian German community abroad. The *Siebenbürgische Zeitung*, the official organ of the *Landsmannschaft der Siebenbürger Sachsen*, published a number of articles on and reviews of *Rote Handschuhe* and hosted several online discussions. On the website of the *Siebenbürgische Zeitung*, one such discussion opened by questioning whether Schlattner's betrayal was in any way understandable ("Eginald Schlattners Roman" 2001). It was taken for granted that that Schlattner's involvement in the trial could only be interpreted as an act of betrayal. This was repeated elsewhere in the *Siebenbürgische Zeitung* and other émigré newspapers, most of which were negatively predisposed toward Schlattner's explanation-cum-novel. Writing in the *Siebenbürgische Zeitung*, the journalist Hannes Schuster bemoaned the "clichés of his fellow Saxon countrymen's adaptability and inability to resist in the face of political coercion" (Schuster 2001: 8). The article condemned not only Schlattner's attempt at "self-justification" but also his effort to mislead the wider German public into viewing his involvement in communism as understandable (Schuster 2001). Schlattner, as a "communist apologist," was blameworthy not simply because

3 This crime was known in Romanian as "*tăinuirea delictului de înaltă trădare*" (concealing high treason).

of the “act of betrayal” itself but because of his attempts to deceive and thereby obfuscate communist crimes and wrongdoings (Schuster 2001).<sup>4</sup>

Despite the protestations in the Romanian German *Landsmannschaft* milieu, Schlattner’s novel had, on the whole, succeeded in opening up spaces for debating opposition, dissidence, and collaboration. Among the wider German public, Schlattner was received positively. His voice added to the sense of fuzziness around questions of opposition and collaboration. In Romania, the reaction was mixed. His novel was published in the middle of a political debate about reckoning with the communist past, political leadership, and new memory initiatives. At *The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and the Resistance* in Sighetu Marmației in northern Romania – established by dissidents such as Ana Blandiana – a vitrine documenting the authors’ trial spoke of the regret that the “traitor,” i.e., Schlattner, was being fêted as an author in German-speaking countries. Schlattner’s story of entanglement and coercion clashed with a vision of dissidence as clear, pure, and untarnished.

Schlattner’s novel was published in the middle of Ion Iliescu’s second presidency (2000–2004) in Romania, during which Iliescu claimed victim status under Ceaușescu’s regime. He based this claim on a political demotion he experienced in 1971, a position many sections of the Romanian public rejected as incredible (Stan 2013: 117). Iliescu’s new challenger, Traian Băsescu, the candidate running for the Justice and Truth Alliance (*Alianța Dreptate și Adevăr*, D.A.) against Iliescu’s Social Democratic Party (*Partidul Social Democrat*, PSD) in the 2004 presidential election, tried to exploit the absence of a clear anti-communist position. Toward the end of the 2004 campaign, Băsescu appealed to the public with his candor by confessing his own involvement in the communist system and the *Securitate* (Stan and Vancea 2015: 202–204). Responding to Adrian Năstase – the PSD’s candidate – in a televised debate, Băsescu expressed regret that fifteen years after the fall of communism, Romanians were still ensnared by its legacy as they faced the poor choice between two former Communist Party members. Băsescu, sensing the public’s need for a strong anti-communist message, won the election. But Eginald Schlattner’s novel *Rote Handschuhe* capitalized on the first signs of dissent directed toward the unremitting politicking under Băsescu in the name of “truth-telling.” The absence of a clear Romanian dissident presence before and after 1989 made it easy to challenge naïve views of steadfast dissidence with stories of individuals caught up in the web of surveillance and denunciation.

4 Similar narratives of a cover-up of communist-era crimes have governed post-communist portrayals of contemporary history in Baltic societies as research into history museums has demonstrated (Mark 2008: 333–367).

### Conspiratorial Memories

In this atmosphere of ambiguity, clarity and certainty about uncompromising opposition toward the communist system became weaker and weaker. Carl Gibson, on the other hand, forgotten by a German public, expressed his frustration in an obsessive crusade against Nobel Prize winner Herta Müller and other Romanian German literary dissidents. Gibson's autobiographical book *Symphonie der Freiheit*, published in 2008, was written to establish himself as the true face of German opposition during the Ceaușescu period (Gibson 2008). Gibson claimed to be "the most famous human rights activist from Romania in Germany" and gave often quite grueling accounts of his arrest as a SLOMR activist by the *Securitate* in April 1979 ("Carl Gibson" 2009; Herbstritt 2008: 70–72).<sup>5</sup> His verbose and long-winded account, however, failed to make a real impact beyond Romanian German circles, and even there, he struggled to be taken seriously. Ultimately, his voice was drowned out by Herta Müller's rise to international fame in 2009, a year after the publication of Gibson's autobiographical account, when Müller published her novel *Atemschaukel* and received the Nobel Prize for Literature for her book (Müller 2009a).

Gibson embarked on a mission to discredit Herta Müller, Richard Wagner, and others associated with the *Banater Autorengruppe* and its legacy. Banat Swabian luminaries such as Richard Wagner, Rolf Bossert, Johann Lippet, Anton Sterbling, William Totok, Gerhard Ortinau, Werner Kremm, Ernst Wichner, and Albert Bohn made up the group's membership, and they continued to have an impact on Romanian German and Banat Swabian matters even after the group was disbanded. Others, such as Herta Müller and Werner Söllner, were associated with the group despite not having been part of its activities (Schuster 2004: 40, 41). Its legacy remains contested to this very day. Even former members disagree on the importance of the group. Some played up their image as dissidents after their immigration to West Germany (Schuster 2004: 110–137). Dieter Schlesak, a writer sharing the political leanings of the group, has also repeatedly made the point that the group was active during a relative thaw at the beginning of Ceaușescu's regime (Schlesak 2010). Others, such as the former member Anton Sterbling, warned against creating a "myth" surrounding the group's history (Sterbling 2008; Langer 2010: 8).

Still, attacks on this circle of Banat authors often served as vehicles for ostracizing non-conformists within the Banat Swabian and, more broadly, the Romanian German community. The group's most ardent critics, of whom

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5 Carl Gibson has since claimed that it was his publisher's decision to call him the most famous human rights activist.

Gibson has been one, have often claimed that the group acquired the dissident tag by being regime-friendly, a claim Gibson repeated in his follow-up autobiographical novel *Allein in der Revolte* (Gibson 2011a), a telling title that portrayed Gibson as a lone warrior fighting against the tide. Indeed, the group initially viewed itself as part of the Romanian socialist state that had a duty to criticize the state, not to abandon or dismantle it (Schuster 2004: 75, 76). This view faded over time as the group and its members went through a number of phases: from constructive criticism of the regime, to open criticism of the regime, to outright opposition to the regime, and finally to reluctant emigration (Schuster 2004: 109, 136, 137, 200). The group directed its criticism not merely at the regime but, crucially, at their own Swabian community. They rejected their parents' generation for its nationalist tendencies and its unwillingness to be introspective and self-critical (Wichner 1992b: 8). Nonplussed by West Germany, critical of Swabian village life, and having attempted to effect change within the Romanian socialist paradigm by considering "alternative socialisms," this group and its associates were viewed with misgiving by fellow Romanian Germans, especially fellow émigrés in (West) Germany. Particularly after 1989, left-wingers and dissenters such as Herta Müller were, therefore, frequently accused of having been communist collaborators, sympathizers, and subversive to the Romanian German community (Wichner 1992b; Zierden 2002).

The spectrum of dissent in the milieu of the *Aktionsgruppe* was starkly at odds with Gibson and Paul Goma's understanding of a dissidence marked by moral clarity and clear boundaries. Carl Gibson's book was a moment of reckoning with a group of people he viewed as hypocritical, profoundly un-German, and guilty of conformity. His account of the founding of SLOMR acted as a counterpoint to the better-known story of the *Aktionsgruppe Banat* and to the successes of subsequent dissident writers like Herta Müller (Gibson 2009). SLOMR, according to Gibson's book, may have attracted as many as 1,200 mainly German dissidents who, crucially, wanted to escape Romania for West Germany ("Carl Gibson" 2009; Herbstritt 2008). According to Gibson, Herta Müller, by contrast, had conformed to the system ("*Systemloyalität*") under Ceaușescu and had reinvented her story only after the fall of the communist regime (Gibson 2008: 345). Gibson regarded both Müller and her former partner Richard Wagner with deep suspicion, questioning their "refusal" to immigrate to Germany until 1987, even after Müller had been approached by (and rebuffed) the *Securitate* in 1982 (Gibson 2008: 31). He further accused them of moving to a country, West Germany, which they "had not exactly deeply and dearly loved" (Gibson 2008: 31). Instead, they marketed themselves as "dissidents, which was a tag to which they had no justified claim" (Gibson 2008:

311). Müller's criticism of her "embattled and weakened [Romanian German] compatriots" was a sign of compromise with the communist regime (Gibson 2008: 363). Gibson intimated parallels between "unwilling fellow-travellers" in the Third Reich and individuals like Herta Müller, whose claim to dissidence, according to Gibson, rested on a single instance of rejecting advances made by the *Securitate* (Gibson 2008: 363). Gibson's quest for clear categories of opposition or dissidents and conformists made no allowance for Müller's critical writing directed at her own community.

Richard Wagner, too, was subjected to Gibson's anger. Whereas the writer William Totok was imprisoned without charge for eight months in 1975 during the crackdown against the *Aktionsgruppe Banat*, Richard Wagner, Gerhard Ortinau, and Gerhard Csejka were released after only a week (Gibson 2008: 361). Gibson construed this as evidence of these left-wing dissidents' loyalty to the state and the regime. Referring to an interview with Richard Wagner by the Romanian German academic Stefan Sienerth in 1997, Gibson cited Wagner's one-liner in which he claimed "[w]e did not aspire to dissidence but rather to a form of loyal criticism" (Gibson 2008: 362; Sienerth 1997). Wagner and others were thus guilty of accepting and abetting Stalinism, Gibson claimed (Gibson 2008: 362). But for all of Gibson's loud protestations, there was little appetite for stories of Romanian "true dissidence" in the new millennium. In spite of all his efforts and labor in the late 1970s, Gibson's life's work remained unacknowledged, which had serious effects on Gibson and on individuals with similar ideas about what opposition to state socialism meant.

As powerful as Gibson's rebukes of his fellow Romanian German writers were, they had little effect on Müller's standing or that of her fellow writers. Unlike Eginald Schlattner, Müller and others emerged unscathed from Carl Gibson's crusade. The timing of Herta Müller's international success and the renown she gained by being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2009 – which overlapped with the publication of Gibson's *Magnum Opus* – gave Müller's dissident voice further weight and credibility. In Germany, it simply confirmed a longer and ongoing process of scrutinizing the "dark" past. Her work also muddied the waters as far as stories of collaboration and opposition during communism were concerned, and her work collated well with a more reflective public discourse that had emerged in Germany since the late 1990s. Her own biography was also beset with fractured relationships: after the death of her friend and Romanian German literary great Oskar Pastior in 2006 – to whom she had dedicated her novel *Atemschaukel* – revelations emerged that he had worked for the *Securitate*, confirming the intricacy and all-encompassing nature of the communist system (Glajar 2023).

In what seemed like a repeat of the persecution he had suffered under Ceaușescu, Gibson claimed that he was being publicly silenced in Germany. “Only in *Die Presse* in Vienna have I been allowed to speak freely,” Gibson bemoaned on his website (2011b), while the “liberal” papers of *Die Zeit*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and *Der Spiegel* were all complicit in silencing his resistance for a second time. As such, Gibson declared that he had been forced into exile, “like Odysseus,” to Austria (2011b). Carl Gibson stalked Herta Müller online, leaving a litany of accusations on online threads below newspaper articles by and about her (Müller 2009b). Worse still for Gibson, the Romanian German community did little to endorse his views. The publication of his book *Symphonie der Freiheit* received little attention, and where it did, Romanian German commentators created enough distance between his big claims and their own position in the context of Herta Müller’s international success. The *Banater Post*, the newspaper of the Banat Swabian émigré community in Germany, featured one front-page review of Gibson’s book. Dieter Michelbach ignored the politically charged accusations leveled at Müller by Gibson and instead described Gibson’s book as “difficult to categorize” (Michelbach, 2008:1,6,7). Elisabeth Packi in the *Siebenbürgische Zeitung*, the main newspaper for the Transylvanian Saxon émigré community in Germany, found the book neither entertaining nor particularly objective (2009). Gibson’s hope to illuminate the supposed dark history of fake opposition among the *Banater Autorengruppe* quickly died away.

### Epilogue: Scars after 1989

If some of the details of this onetime dissidence sound familiar, that is because the trajectories of these individuals are relatively common in the history of opposition to the communist regimes in East Central Europe. Carl Gibson and Paul Goma found a common path of dissidence in the early twenty-first century. Their disappointment at never having been recognized as Romania’s post-child dissidents nationally or internationally translated into Gibson and Goma ending up in the dark waters of conspiracy theories and paranoia (Goma 2003). Their common paths were set in the communist period, when the political reprisals they suffered produced the psychological scars they would later bear. More broadly, however, both Gibson and Goma reveal more than merely individual stories of dissidence gone wrong. The multivocal, uncentered landscape of Romanian dissidence had created forums for other voices that complicated simple stories of steadfast opposition (Ungureanu and Pavel 2018). In the end, Carl Gibson and Paul Goma’s efforts in the 1970s to create an opposition

movement in Romania were thwarted by chance – an earthquake – and by the structural problem of the scattered nature of Romanian dissidence.

Gibson and Goma's resentment was perhaps understandable on a personal level, but it also revealed the long aftereffects Romanian state socialism had on dissidence (Hall 2000: 1070–1073). Paul Goma, surely the most famous of the “non-famous” dissidents, lurched into Holocaust denial by the 2000s. On the one hand, Goma's views on the Second World War and the Holocaust in Romania reflected a particular generational obsession with Jews and a penchant for conspiracy theory. On the other hand, however, these obsessions also reveal the structural problems of Romanian dissidence. Still celebrated by large sections of Romanian and Moldovan literary circles, reflections on Goma's work have managed to bypass his antisemitic work and views in the new millennium (Corobca 2016). Goma was even put forward as a nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature by a Moldovan writers' association in 2013. In some Romanian memory circles at least, Goma is still known as the dissident who attempted Charter 77 in Romania, even as his international reputation took a nosedive, with the academic Wolfgang Benz including Paul Goma in a “who's who” handbook on antisemitism in 2013 (Benz 2013, vol. 6: 615, 616).

This episode of internecine warfare between former dissidents, and especially between Romanian German former dissidents, therefore, reveals the structural plurality of dissidence in Romania. Without a central movement and a clear core, claims to “true dissidence” as envisaged by Gibson and Goma took these individuals down the rabbit holes of conspiracy theory and antisemitism. If their world was not as simple as they imagined, then they would create one that was. The period that followed 1989 began with what was characterized as an overexcited scramble over claims of decency and opposition to state socialism but ended with undignified insults and claims by actors who still clung onto simpler explanations of opposition to Romanian state socialism. Gibson had always sought international recognition for his role in setting up SLOMR but never received it partly, and dispiritingly for Gibson, because SLOMR was not that important. Instead, he was forced to watch his compatriots receive all the praise for both their literary work and intellectual dissidence. This was worse than being persecuted under Romanian socialism. His book *Symphonie der Freiheit* was only the start of his obsessive hunt for traitors among the ranks of Romanian Germans. He presented himself as a “dissenter” (*Andersdenkender*) in a book-cum-memoir published in 2013, before launching a full-frontal assault on Herta Müller in four books published in short succession between 2011 and 2015. One of these was self-published, and the other three were published with a small vanity press in Bad Mergentheim in Baden-Württemberg (Gibson 2011a; Gibson 2014a; Gibson 2014b; Gibson 2015). Müller

was a chameleon, a liar, and a plagiarist, Gibson claimed loudly. True to form, he continued to accuse Müller of lies and deception in two more self-published books before turning his attention to “Merkel’s experiment” in which he accused Angela Merkel of selling out Western values after the migration crisis of 2015 (Gibson 2017).

All the while, Paul Goma continued on his path into the dark world of conspiracy theory. In an essay entitled “*Săptămâna Roșie*” (“The Red Week”), Goma outlined what would become his core argument for Holocaust denial (Goma 2004): the claim that Jews had fabricated antisemitic crimes during the period between 1940 and 1944. According to Goma, Jews had been in cahoots with the communist oppressors and, as reactions to his views accumulated, Goma would allege that the negative responses to his views were precisely the same in content and form as those of the *Securitate* in the 1970s and 1980s. Goma’s antisemitism was an extension of a contained and neat picture of dissidence in which society was split into a pure opposition and shadowy, powerful oppressors. Unlike Gibson, who went into overdrive from the mid-2000s on, Goma’s work largely dried up after he revealed himself as a Holocaust denier, punctuated by only sporadic bursts of literary activity (Goma 2018).

This article was not written as a moral indictment of Gibson and Goma, nor is it necessarily a further piece of evidence of the manifold roots of political antisemitism even if a nascent conspiratorial thinking and its twin antisemitism was present in the self-understanding of opposition and Cold War dissident left-wing politics. Instead, this article indicates there are deep psychological scars on nonconformists whose lifelong dedication never received the kind of recognition they sought. The structural problems that characterized Romanian opposition were responsible for these scars. Multivocal, multilingual, and decentered, Romania’s oppositional actors and movements never presented themselves as a unified front. Instead, they operated sporadically and were divided and often at odds over their aims. While some, such as the members of the *Aktionsgruppe*, advocated criticism from within, others simply left the country. Occasionally, as in 1977, there was a flurry of oppositional activity which appeared united but was ultimately too flimsy to survive. The earthquake of 1977 was enough to permanently disrupt attempts to bring disparate voices together. Goma was spat out into a post-communist world that failed to celebrate him in the same way it fêted his fellow prominent East Central European dissidents. Carl Gibson, who poured his adolescence into dissidence, was completely unacknowledged internationally and even faced the ignominy of being rejected by a changing Romanian German community who, surprisingly to Gibson, began to embrace the very individuals he had always seen as pathetically subservient to the communist regime: Herta

Müller, Anton Sterbling, Richard Wagner, and others from the circle around the *Banater Autorengruppe*. Anton Sterbling produced a copious amount of literary work, memories, and reflections while enjoying a good career as a sociologist. Herta Müller became an international superstar. Left in the lurch, both Goma and Gibson, however, continued to feel oppressed, ignored, and vilified. Both went on to blame “the powers that be”: in Gibson’s case the media, and in Goma’s case “Jews.” As this Romanian – Romanian German story of opposition shows, Romanian Cold War-era dissidents and opposition were rarely united and, if anything, those structural divisions became even more pronounced in post-communist Europe.

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