

# **Photography and the historical study.**

## **Possible interpretations**

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We all are familiar to see photography in different textbooks, articles. Their interpretation may be done from various perspectives, each consumer being dominated by a major degree of subjectivity when encrypting the message of these medium. Considering these, my study argues for the usefulness of the photography in the historical research, namely, by seeing them as historical sources. At the same time, by means of the case study submitted to analyses I try to raise some compulsory questions in order to better understand the roles and the significance of the photographs in historical framework.

Sharing the fate of other cultural products, the document-photography or the photography as a proof of past realities had been treated with indifference by the historians. Though admittedly recognized as delivering information about the everyday life, of the customs, outfit, etc, few historians have recovered photos as documentary sources. If we are to look for explanations for the above described situation, we may agree that for the majority of the topics debated relatively rich quantities of written documents were available. Secondly, the interrogations of the past as practiced by the historians were articulated the way that did not privileged the use of the photography. Recently, new interest in subjects like family, popular culture, gender studies could be more properly answered only by transcending the limits of the written sources; their information came to be correlated with information retrieved from “unconventional” sources.

During the last decades we assisted to a debate over the matter if the visual images are to be seen as additional to the traditional historical sources and have to be treated accordingly, or if they by their own intrinsic importance determine the transformation of the traditional historical texts consequently transforming the historical praxis. There were arguments whether a new historiography aiming to address more and more to memory must pay the similar attention to the photography as to other primary sources like the interviews, printed materials or to the archival documents.

Basically, those who have currently concentrated on the photography had been the art historians but presently they came to be used in other historical researches, as well. The major reorientation from the art history to the history of images is a consequence of the emphasis of the cultural meaning of the photography which somehow acted against its previous univocal aesthetic appraisal<sup>1</sup>. In other

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<sup>1</sup> *Images and Visual Culture* (ed. by Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Hally, Keith Moxey), London, 1994, Introduction, p. xvi.

words the historian's approach is concerned more with the expression of the photography rather than with their aesthetic side.

As for the inclusion of the photography on the terrain of historical studies some observations are still necessary. There is a usual and most frequently enacted inclusion of the images, authors simply attaching some reproductions without making many comments, not to speak of discussing images from the point of view of their narration<sup>2</sup>. The premise involved in such cases is that the image may only illustrate but does not confer a form of the historical event. The reticence is founded on an attitude of sufficiency of the photography inserted in the text. In other cases the displaying of the image within the text is fully left to the decision/ choice of the editor.

There are also lots of particular example which confirm the afore mentioned disinterest for photography; reproduced inside the text some images were printed distorted, upside down or even matched with completely irrelevant contexts. Comparing the results of the historians' working with archival photographic materials and those working exclusively with written sources places the former in an unfavorable position.

In our approach we admit the considerable importance of the photos and recognize them as functional mediums with representational force with respect to some objects, personalities or event.

Photographic images play the role of some "speechless" eyewitnesses and the translation of their testimonial in words is not at all unproblematic<sup>3</sup>. They may very well contain a subliminal message or can eloquently tell about themselves. The historic force of the photography consists in its capacity to mediate the knowledge about a past world. By means of photography it is possible a projection of the past in the present resulting in an "openness disclosure of the history"<sup>4</sup>, which in many circumstances may bring a new view to the historic research.

Surely, the photos were not taken as to serve the historian, to answer to its expectancies. The photographers had their own preoccupations as well as their intended messages. The composition of a grid serving to the interpretation of the photos was influenced by the art historians' methodology. In this respect iconography played a major role. Originally, iconography only referred to the religious artistic representations. During the 1920's and 1930's it was consecrated in the usage of the art historians defining a reaction against the formalist analyses of the works of art in chromatic and compositional terms<sup>5</sup>. With other words, those

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<sup>2</sup> Louis P. Masur, *Picture have become now a Necessity: the Uses of Images in American History Textbooks*, "Journal of American History", 84 (1997), 4, p. 1409-1424 (1410).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Burke, *Eyewitnesses: the Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, I, 2001, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Dant and Graeme Gilloch, *Pictures of the Past: Benjamin and Barthes on Photography and History*, "European Journal of Cultural Studies", 5 (2002), 1, p. 5-23 (7).

<sup>5</sup> In reality we speak about the rediscovery of the mentioned terms which have a long history going back to Cesare Ripa who in 1593 entitled his book about the study of the images *Iconologia*, while iconology was already in use in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see P. Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 34-35).

pleading for the iconographic method were favorable not only to the simple gaze to the work of art but went further by “reading”, decrypting the intentional message of the forger.

Terms like iconography and iconology were often alternatively used and initially used only in the field of art criticism. Erwin Panofsky was the first who attempted to make the distinction between the two. He understood iconography as the collection, classification and the analysis of the data which delineated the theme or the subject of the work of art. Instead, iconology starts from the results of the iconography and tries to explain the reasons the art object came into being and its entire meaning. During the 1930's a group of art historians who emigrated from Germany and Austria – among them Erwin Panofski and Aby Warburg (the last gave his name to the group) – innovated the iconographical method.

Their method consisted in making a distinction between three layers of analyses. The first layer involved the pre-iconographic description that was the meaning of the work of art and aimed the identification of the objects and of the events. The second level of analyses was actually the iconographical analyses itself while the third level was reserved to the iconographic interpretation<sup>6</sup>. To put it in a different way the interpretation involved a literary and grammatical level, a historic and last but not least a cultural level. Making things simpler iconology deals with the theory of images while iconography focuses on specific images and photos including the religious icons.

Needles to say that like many other methodologies iconography is not infallible. It was criticized for the fact of being much too intuitive, too speculative to gain full (scientific) credibility. Its degree of intuitivism and speculation is higher as far as the artistic creations are concerned and more limited when is applied to the photography which from all types of imaging records offers the most truthfully representation of reality. Nonetheless, the usage of the iconographic results in the historic research is problematic if we admit the multi-semantic implications of the photography. We can only agree with the objections made, therefore I see iconography as a useful instrument for the historian but which must be over. Besides the iconographic approach, the interpretation of the photography may involve some other methods like psychoanalysis or the semiotic. Following the psychoanalysis' paths one can examine the way in which authors project their unconscious fantasies in the photo, but, as demonstrable proof is hard to be regard them as infallible methods as they are not credited to be supported by strong scientific support<sup>7</sup>. Another perspective brings the researcher into contact with the structuralist approach which invites to a reading of the images as a system of signs favoring thus the interest onto the internal organization of the photography.

As it follows I will concentrate on a collection of unedited photos relevant for the research of the communist era with the aim to suggest some hints with respect to

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<sup>6</sup> See Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, London, 1970.

<sup>7</sup> P. Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

the interpretation of the documentary photography. This collection was discovered by chance in the collection of photos of the Mureş County branch of the Romanian National Archives, without any indication of their provenience or their chronology. Some notes on the back of some of the items - i.e. names of persons- proved to be useful to my attempt to identify the photos. Thus, starting from the names I went on investigating the archival fonds of the Mureş Military Prosecution which confirmed my basic intuition that the photos were produced by the Securitate as a step in the process of identifying and annihilating a group of opponents who found refuge in the mountains. The entire group accused of "constituting a counterrevolutionary band" and "conspiring against the social order" was captured only one day after its establishment<sup>8</sup>. I lastly realized that the photos represent the recast of the actions of the group done by the Securitate ("gang" in the language of the Securitate). The group was formed of five persons – Gáll Francisc, Ötvös László, Barabás Francisc, Ilyés Sándor and Dragoş Vasile –, found refuge in the Gurghiu Mountains. They were probations in the trial sued against the culprits convincing enough as to sentence them. According to the declarations of the members of the group their intention was to run away in the mountains and fight the regime. If their actions did not end as they planned, they took in consideration two alternatives: to flee Romania, or to unite themselves with another opposition group from the mountains.

As commonly acknowledged in the totalitarian regimes the popularity of the photography served very well as a means of propaganda thanks to the presumably authenticity this medium was thought to be capable of conveying. When dealing with the photos produced during the communist regime we associate it automatically with ideology and manipulation. They were part of a system of signs imposed by the authorities in their attempt of transforming the consciousness of the masses<sup>9</sup>. The communist regimes paid particular attention to the visual arts, among which photography as well, thanks to their property of disseminating a message in a quite accessible manner even to those less familiar with decoding of elaborate high - culture products. Through photography they succeeded to legitimize the implementation of the new ideas. The photos on which our study focuses cannot be rendered into this category. From the very beginning they are not destined to the public which rises up some difficulties in the process of analyzing them as they set us on an unexplored territory and therefore deprive us of the beneficial experience of some previous researches.

Their not-public character derives from the moment when they were taken and their place in the incrimination or building up of a file against the members of the group. So, they are what criminology calls judiciary photography. Here we identify two categories. First we deal with the *operational judiciary photography*

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<sup>8</sup> See Romanian National Archives-Mureş Branch, Fond Procuratura Militară [Military Prosecution], file 605.

<sup>9</sup> Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power. Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*, Berkeley, 1998, p. 8.

which includes the photos taken to the crime scene, the photography answering to the description of the criminal, recasting photography<sup>10</sup>. The second category is the *examination judiciary photography*, that is the photography taken in the criminologist labs.

The operational juridical photography is taken at the crime scene by the investigators and focuses on details, circumstances, traces and represent a important auxiliary of the report. There are several techniques that characterize the operational photography. Obviously they can be also traced in the set of pictures analyzed in this study. Consequently, we differentiate the orientation photography (interested in the whole frame of the criminal deed), sketch photography (following the display of the entire crime scene with what characterizes it best being taken from the level of the eye), main objects' photography (focusing on the objects relevant for the crime) or the detail photography (focusing on the significant details, traces, etc.). This short parenthesis would be useful when I will refer to the set of photos central to my study.

Before concretely describing and analyzing the photos, some references to the existence of the group (finally captured in the recasting photos).

In few words the epopee of the group sounds as follows. After preliminary discussions with each member of the group, the leader of the gang Gáll Francisc set up the details of the plans. Thus, in the night 12<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> of May from 1959 the five members of the group broke in the warehouse of the Sportive Hunter and Fishermen Association from Sovata stealing 4 guns and bullets. Afterward, during the 13 May they retreated in the mountains and on their way they robbed some sheep cots in order to get some food. At about the midday the group moved to Workers Cabin which belonged to the Forestry Reservation from Sovata, where according to the declarations given to the interrogators "stole the food of the workers working to the plantation of seedling Christmas tree"<sup>11</sup>. They also attempted to kill the ranger (which was luckily not to be found and get away with life) and later on trained with the guns stolen from the Sportive Huntsmen and Fishermen's Association; finally the group reached a deserted hut where they planned to stay over the night. There, they were tracked down and arrested.

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<sup>10</sup> Emilian Stanciu, *Tratat de criminalistică*, București, 1999, p. 69.

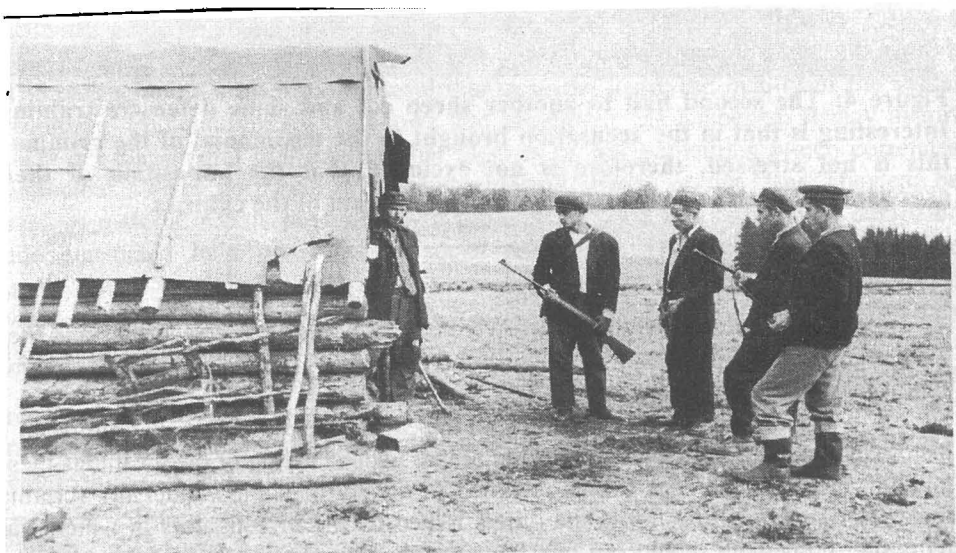
<sup>11</sup> Romanian National Archives-Mureș Branch, Fond Procuratura Militară, file 605, p. 15-16.



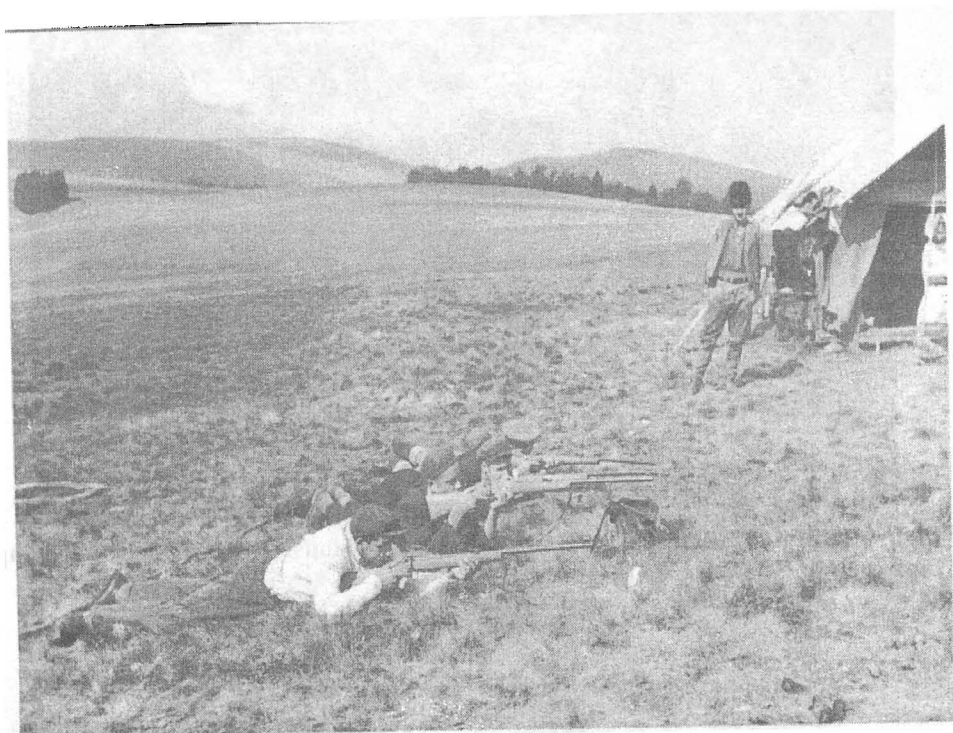
**Figure 1: Three of the members of the group stealing guns from the Sportive Fisher- and Hunting-men Association. Another participant was probably inside the building, the fifth Dragoș Vasile being assigned the task to monitor the era. Technically speaking we deal with a juridical photo of the detail-operational type, having the aim to describe one of the key moments of the “crime”.**



**Figure 2:** May 13, 1959 in the morning after previously went armed the group took their way in the woods.



**Figure 3:** Well-heeled the members of the group halted to a sheep cot to ask for food from a shepherd. Here we deal with a judiciary photo intending to contextualize one action of the culprits.



**Figure 4: The second halt to another sheep cot and some defensive training. Interesting is that in the accusation brought to the testimonial of the criminals this is not stressed, therefore is not excluded that the imposition of these exercises had been done in order to amplify the guilt of the culprits.**

As already asserted the photos were issued by the Mureș Securitate and they were organized as a small photographic archive. Having said this compels us to some short preliminary observations.

Images' interpretation requires an appeal to the context, their framing in a historical context being necessary for the proper understanding of the meanings these medium may provide. The events recorded in the set of photos under my scrutiny took place in May 1959. From the orders issued by the investigators in which was requested immediate sentencing one finds out the reasons which contributed to the amalgamation of the group; their enlisting allows us to define them as "classic": the hope a new war would eventually broke out which would lead to the fall of the



“popular democratic” regime<sup>12</sup>. One must note that in 1959 the existence of resistance groups in the Mountains of Romania almost missed, not to speak of any expectation in a future war opposing the former allied forces which would lead to the fall of the political regime installed in Romania. Chronologically speaking the focus group’s actions was positioned at a time when the resistance movement located in the mountains had been almost done with. Though much debated in the historiography, the end of these sorts of movements was credited to be the first years of the 1960’s.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, regarded in this context the statement of the chief of rebels that they wanted to “back down the mountains where they could associate to some other similar band” naturally raises some question marks. Consequently, considering the tendency of the repressive structures to amplify the facts, the photos and their intrinsic the narration must be taken with prudence.

When analyzing a photography the historian confronts with the possibility that some other viewers to have a completely different understanding of it. Some other difficulties occur when one intends to decode the received sense rather than what the photographer intended to deliver. In this study I intend to question exactly the last angle; this is due to the fact that the photos were not destined to the mass public but were a way of picturing the accusation brought up to the five members of the group. Moreover, one must recognize that by its nature the judiciary photography is itself an unfamiliar and poor.

Visually recording an event makes it more realistic as if it would not have been registered on photographic support. Photos bring evidences. Something we have only heard of attains supplementary meaning when photography is being introduced. The photography is even more useful thanks to the justifying quality of the visual recording. Photography always shows that something has happened. It may distort facts but the general presumption that there is or was something which correlates with what is being portrayed by the photography<sup>14</sup>. Photos are not ideas. They can be seen as material proofs produced by a production mode and distributed, circulated and consumed in a given set of social relations<sup>15</sup>. The interpretation requires understanding and the framing of the photography in the cultural context in which it was produced. As said the analyzed photos played a decisive role in the trial and may be regarded as guiding marks for the judiciary culture of the 1950’s.

Taking into consideration the technicalities of the photography and the reasons of its production one has to consider the photography as a document. This raises some questions: which are the profiles of the subjects, their gestures and expressions? How are they dressed up? How does the setting in which the photos is

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15-16.

<sup>13</sup> *Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România: Raport final* (ed. by Vladimir Tisnăneanu, Dorin Dobrinu, Cristian Vasile), Bucharest, 2007, p. 665-666.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York, 1977, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation. Essays on Photographies and Histories*, Minneapolis, 1988, p. 188.

taken looks like? Which is the atmosphere suggested by the photo? Besides giving clues with reference to the events narrated in the photography, this set of questions also hint toward the relation between the photographer and its subject.

As already stated one cannot impose a pattern of analysis of the photography as a whole. Many of the interpretative patterns have been connected to the aesthetic principles and do not focus on the content of historical information within the image.

In my view there are three elements which may be considered as defining elements to the understanding of photography. First of all is *the subject on which the camera focuses* and which is captured in a two-dimensional format. One of the common sense assertions with respect to the photography are that it cannot lie and necessarily conveys undisputable realities. In our opinion one must discern between the subject of the photography and the photography itself as two different items. A second element refers to the *detail*. By different means like the processing or by selecting particular frames during the shooting, the photographer may create his own photoplay. He may be subjective shooting only what he considers relevant, hence, the photo being deprived of the possibility to say the entire story. By selecting the frames to focus on, the photos are loaded with symbolical value of the whole. The viewer cannot do else but to admit that selected images reconstruct the reality. The *frame* is the third element into question. The frame defines the content of the photography. For example, if the photographer focuses on two individuals from a group of persons implies suggesting of some relations between the two actors even though they did not actually had any previous connections. Through its primary nature photography is selective and its final product is a matter of choice. The fourth influential element is the *time*. The photography captures just a glimpse, a moment in time. Another element which has to be regarded is the *favorable position*. Photographers always make their choice when shooting a subject disposing of his perspective or angle. The decision regarding the most favorable position attracts the highly possible conclusion that two perspectives on one subject may very well be different.

The aforementioned elements are the referential frame to the gazing to a photography, to describe what exactly determined its execution and the way which permits the photographer to interfere.

Besides this type of analyses also raises the problem of understanding the photographic content and the way it may be interpreted. Each photography contains details with psychological ends which are understandable simply by looking at the photography. Useful sources of information are surely conveyed by the clothing, attitudes and the behavior, in other words, by the way the subject is constructed.

As a document each photography has its worth being more or less valuable. Of major importance seem to me the questions asked so as the photography to be not only illustrating items but to supply with meaning the historical fact. By its existence, the photographic image can suggest some interrogations which can be later extended to the other historical sources.

In a study based on images, the identity of the photographer is an essential part of the documentation process. Many photos can be located in time and space after having been obtained data concerning the identity of the photographer. In this respect the classic methods of the historian are fitted to provide answers. The professional photographers used to mark and emboss on the photos their name and the studio. Some alternative sources – like the local or the national archives, newspapers, genealogical documents – may come up with some important information regarding the residence or the working place of the photographer.

On the other hand, many photos are to be found in different private collections or may be embedded in archival collections. Surely, the lack of information regarding the identity marks discussed above does not deprive the photography of its documentary value. The anonymous photos are also valuable sources. The case under scrutiny has an anonymous author but following the classical paths of the historical research we were able to precisely recreate the reasons as well as the location and date when they were taken. Thus, distinguishing some names on the back of the photos I could identify them in the judiciary archives of the epoch which enabled the access to the story of the photographs. This case demonstrates that even though one has sometime to deal with anonymous photographers, the information collected with respect to the photographic material turns to be much more relevant.

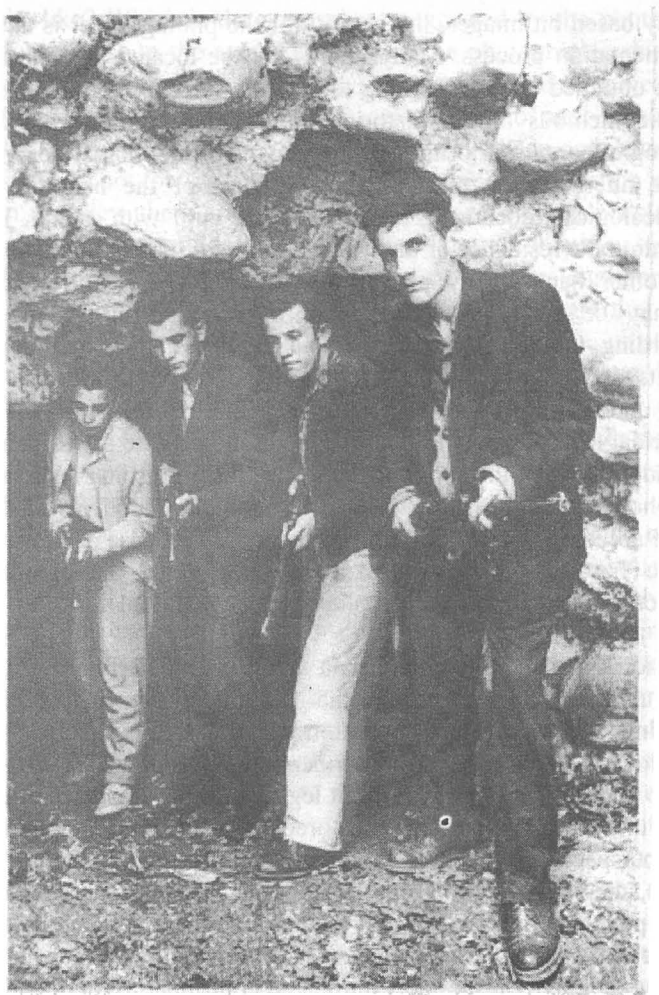
The positioning of the photographer is though particularly relevant gaining meaning only if judged in connection with the symbolic system he/she belongs to and which determines his/her behavior in relation with the portrayed subjects<sup>16</sup>.

The relations between the group members are appropriately portrayed only by means of group photos. This type of portrait legitimates the existence of the group and consecrates it in the collective memory. Moreover, group photography may very well see from the perspective of the association as a cultural phenomenon.

In its turn, the study of the group photography raises some supplementary questions. Are the people portrayed aware of their belonging to the identity attributed to the group? Is the photography able to convey such an identity? Is the photographer tempted to create typologies? Do the facts mimicked contribute to the identity of the group?

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<sup>16</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography. A Middle-Bow Art*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 80.



**Figure 5:** Expressive photography of the group. The disposition of the photographed – with the chief at the lead – describes the relations within the group. The angle of shooting conveys a strengthened feeling of “guilt”. From cultural perspective the photography may portray the outfit of the 50’s.



**Figure 6: One of the members of the group illustrating the typology of the trialed: plain image, cold and an uncomplaining look**

The analyses of the photography may open itself to the practices of “power” inserted in the visual space of the photography. The emphasis on the manner the power is enacted (by means of the investigator) or the opposition to the power (the shooting of the objectors of power) are only some examples of some possible analyses. Approaching the photography research from a Foucauldian perspective, that is seeing the camera the way the state does – in the present case the investigators as punishing state agents – as unable to be neuter may provide new views in deciphering the photography. The replicated content conveyed by the photography codifies a diffuse power which does not belong to the camera but of the human apparatus in service of the state which exercises and guaranties the authority of the images<sup>17</sup>. The archive of the images is quite homogenous as way of representation,

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<sup>17</sup> John Tagg, *Evidence, Truth and Order: a Means of Surveillance*, in *Visual Culture. The Reader* (ed. by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall), London, 1999, p. 244-273 (246).

the insignificant deviations constituting an exception. The format maintains itself. There are always groups of people separated by the open spaces between them.

One can notice an obstinately repeating pattern: the bodies of the photographed are isolated, the space seems to shrink and character-centered.

Furthermore, the characters seem to be under an empty gaze, undecipherable, made even more acute by the lighting of the photography and the edgy focusing angles. All these options indicate the presence of the power (embodied in the investigators) and are repeatedly present in every exposure.

The spaces which fill the space between the characters follow the same logic of arrangement as described above. The topography of “conspiracy against the socialist order and of the theft from the common wealth” is treated from the same frontal perspective, as plain space, unobstructed of lines or objectives, open to surveillance. In other words, we deal with a “desirable” space corresponding to the wishes of the photographer in which the bodies of the subjects seem ordered, docile and disciplined.

But power generates counter-power. This complementarity actually serves the power to even more reassert itself. The photos also illustrate this dimension; insisting on the besiege of the opponents the photos strengthen the believe the there is nobody to fight and win in the fight against the power.



**Figure 7: The moments before catchment. Detailed photography with the police dog as the key character. According to the information gathered the dog was the first who reached to the “bower where the bandits tendered and stood vigilante awaiting the arrival of our agents.” Another way of emphasizing the lack of chances of anyone rising against the regime.**

All the photos intend to create typologies. They derive from amalgamated stereotypes, not necessarily false but certainly exaggerating some traits while omitting the others<sup>18</sup>. The aim of the photo is to demonstrate the worth of the shooted characters. It established its viewpoints so as to clearly sustain the guiltiness of the convicts which consequently become unworthy people. The message within the photo may be thus considered ideological, not because it would be false but simply because the representations serve specific interests.

As compared to the answers provided the photos bring up more questions. The attempt to find some answer is possible only by following a double layer approach: a visual as well as a verbal one. The study of the relation between words and images is also necessary. Perhaps the outmost advantage of the photography resides in its capacity to quickly deliver images and details of some complex processes.

To end up, I would only say that the above suggestions are far from being infallible and consequently reflections are welcomed and desirable. The set of photos which represent the pretext of this research paper may be variously interpreted, but my aim was to propose some methods in analyzing photography in historical context. The photographic image has a particular semantic which is translatable according to its potentially various viewers. Serial analyses of this set of photos with other of the same type might be a future step that should be sometime attempted. Such an undertaking would clarify some aspects and would lead to the drawing of some typologies.

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<sup>18</sup> P. Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 125.