

December 1989 in Romania People's Revolt, Revolution, or Coup d'État?

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Romanian Revolution (1989), Timișoara
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A LOGICAL DEPARTURE point for our discussion is a brief presentation of the events of late December 1989 in Romania that led to the overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu.

Barely a week spanned the demonstrations outside the home of pastor László Tőkés in Timișoara and the flight of Nicolae Ceaușescu from the Central Committee building in the capital. The vigil held on 15 December in support of Tőkés, whose eviction from his home had been ordered, turned into a major demonstration on the following day. Some of the protesters attempted to enter the Party county headquarters but the building was deserted and the doors locked, so they turned their attention to nearby shops and set fire to volumes of Ceaușescu's speeches looted from a bookshop. Eventually, the security forces dispersed them with water cannon. Fresh crowds gathered in the morning of 17 December in the center of the city and moved towards the local Party headquarters which they found protected by a double cordon of troops and fire-engines. As the crowd advanced, one of the engines came to

meet it and sprayed it with water, thus infuriating the protesters who pushed the troops back, thereby allowing some young demonstrators to break into the building. The youths ransacked the lower floors before the security forces forced them out. Most of the crowd streamed back towards the Hotel Continental to join hundreds of other protesters throwing stones and petrol bombs. The army garrison was also attacked and furniture from it seized and set on fire. It was amidst this chaos that in the late afternoon the first gunshots were heard and the first victims of the revolution fell.¹

The gunshots were the result of an order given to troops to use live ammunition on the demonstrators. That order was given, according to First Deputy Defense Minister Lieutenant-General Victor Atanasie Stănculescu, by the Minister of Defense, Colonel-General Vasile Milea, doubtless on the command of Ceaușescu himself.² The latter was in constant touch by telephone with Tudor Postelnicu, the minister of the Interior, to keep himself informed of the disturbances, and ordered firm measures to be taken against the protesters.³ After the ransacking of the local Party headquarters in Timișoara on 17 December, Radu Bălan, the county Party secretary, and Ilie Matei, the secretary of the Party Central Committee who was a native of the city, rang Ceaușescu to tell him of events. A full meeting of the Party Political Executive Committee was convened just after 5 pm. Ceaușescu blamed the disturbances on “revisionist circles and agents both from the East and West. Their aim was to destabilize Romania, to act to destroy Romania’s independence and her territorial integrity.” He chided Milea, and Postelnicu:

Instead of doing what I told you, you sent in the army with blank bullets. . . .

Not one of the soldiers was equipped with live ammunition. Do you know how you behaved? Pure and simple, you displayed a defeatist attitude. If I had known that you were not capable of stopping these hooligans, these wayward elements, I would have called upon 500 workers, armed them, and then we would have solved the problem. . . .

I told you what you had to do. But you did not do it. You should have fired!

You should have fired warning shots and if they did not stop, you should have fired at them. In the first place, you should have fired at their legs. . . .⁴

An hour later, Ceaușescu gave a teleconference from the basement of the Central Committee building in Bucharest in which he addressed country Party chiefs and senior officials. They must have been dismayed to see a tired, fossilized Ceaușescu flanked by his stone-faced wife and surrounded by a dinosaur-like group of Politburo members. The sight hardly evinced authority, rather the weakening of a grip on power. Ceaușescu blamed the violence on a few “hooli-

gan” elements and claimed that behind Tókés lay “foreign spy agencies, principally Budapest because he [Tókés] also gave an interview. Actually the facts are well-known. Moreover, it is known that both in the East as well as in the West everyone is saying that things ought to change in Romania. Both East and West have decided to change things and they are using any means possible.”⁵ The teleconference was followed by a broadcast to the nation in the same vein by Ceaușescu. The broadcast had a profoundly negative effect upon many viewers, especially the young. Protesters in Timișoara were infuriated to be described as stooges of a foreign power.

A stream of senior army and *Securitate* officers were sent from the capital to put down the protests. Major-General Emil Macri, head of the economic counter-espionage directorate of the Securitate, was joined by Lieutenant-General Constantin Nuță and Major-General Mihalea Velicu, the heads of the militia, on the morning of 17 December. That same afternoon Colonel-General Ion Coman, secretary of the Central Committee responsible for military and security affairs, Major-General Ștefan Gușă, first deputy Defense minister and chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant-General Victor Stănculescu, first deputy Defense minister responsible for procurement, and Lieutenant-General Mihai Chițac, head of the chemical troops and commander of the Bucharest garrison, arrived.⁶ Live ammunition was distributed to the troops as the security forces moved to the offensive. Demonstrators were shot dead in the city center, near the cathedral and in Piața Operei (Opera Square), as well as in the suburbs (Calea Lipovei and Piața Traian). Tanks abandoned by the army in Calea Girocului were withdrawn after the army fired upon protesters. The violent repression left more than sixty civilians dead and more than two hundred wounded. About seven hundred persons had been arrested.⁷

Despite the crisis facing his regime Ceaușescu flew to Iran on the morning of 18 December for a three-day state visit. He was probably persuaded to go ahead with the visit by the promise of signing contracts for the sale of arms to the Iranians estimated to be worth more than \$2 billion.⁸ His wife Elena was left in charge of the situation at home, to be assisted by Politburo members Manea Mănescu and Emil Bobu. Yet Ceaușescu’s absence undermined any authority which his regime had maintained and even ignited rumors that he had taken substantial gold reserves to Iran as insurance against possible flight. In an effort to hide evidence of those murdered by the army, the bodies of 44 civilians were taken from the Timișoara mortuary, on Elena Ceaușescu’s orders—as rumour had it—, and heaped into a refrigerated lorry which took them first to the local militia headquarters and then to Bucharest where they were cremated and the ashes scattered at the entrance to a canal in a village called Popești-Leordeni, on the southern outskirts of Bucharest.⁹ Such treatment of the bodies was regarded

as un-Christian by the largely devout Orthodox population and certainly fuelled hostility to the regime, at the same time adding confusion to calculations of the exact numbers of dead from 17 and 18 December.

More demonstrators died on 19 December as thousands of factory workers reported for work but joined in sympathy strikes with colleagues who had gone on strike elsewhere in the city. On 20 December, tens of thousands of workers decided to come out of the factory gates and joined forces in a mass march to the Opera Square in the city center. There, although confronted by lines of troops and armored vehicles, they surged forward and with shouts of “Noi suntem poporul!” (We are the people!), “Armata e cu noi!” (The army is on our side!) and “Nu vă fie frică, Ceaușescu pică!” (Have no fear, Ceaușescu will fall) they embraced the soldiers, stuffing flags in the turrets of the armored personnel carriers and tanks, and handing flowers, cigarettes and bread to the young soldiers. From that moment the regime could no longer count on the army to defend it.¹⁰ Timișoara was, some in the crowd claimed, “un oraș liber” (a free city). The crowd moved towards the Opera House and as troops withdrew to a side street, entry was made through a back door. At this point some eyewitnesses report that a certain Claudiu Iordache made an emotional appeal for the army to withdraw.¹¹ Others state that the first person to address the crowd from the Opera House balcony, where a loudspeaker system had already been set up on the balcony in anticipation that the Prime Minister Constantin Dăscălescu would address the crowd, was Lorin Fortuna, a professor at Timișoara Polytechnic.¹² His speech, delivered at around 2 pm, was followed by a succession of others from factory representatives urging the crowd, estimated at about 40,000 persons, to remain united.¹³

A few streets away, outside the Party county headquarters, another large crowd had gathered, calling upon the Prime Minister, Constantin Dăscălescu and senior Political Executive Committee (Politburo) member, Emil Bobu, who had arrived earlier in the day from Bucharest, to speak to the crowd from the balcony. When they did, they were booed and quickly withdrew. It was then agreed that a delegation drawn from the crowd should join the two officials in the building for negotiations. Several of the senior army commanders were present at the talks which culminated in a demand for the resignation of Ceaușescu and the government, and free elections.¹⁴ Dăscălescu stonewalled, pleading the need to consult with Bucharest, and gave little ground, conceding merely the return of the bodies of the dead, the release of arrested demonstrators, and immunity for the delegation. After Ceaușescu’s defiant broadcast that evening, the talks were suspended and the crowds dispersed. This proved to be a felicitous development for during the night, on Ceaușescu’s orders, between ten and twenty thousand workers from Oltenia were given patriotic guard uniforms and dragooned into boarding special

trains for Timișoara, with orders to drive from the streets of the city the “hooligans” and “drunks” who were acting at the behest of foreign intelligence agencies. When the workers arrived the next morning, they found no one to target and spent the day aimlessly until, with Ceaușescu’s approval, they returned home.¹⁵

Instead, the spokesperson of citizens of Timișoara, Lorin Fortuna, had established that same morning the Romanian Democratic Front with himself at the head. Its composition was enlarged with the inclusion of some of those who had taken part in the negotiations with Dăscălescu, but with pressure from others that it should be expanded even further it soon became clear—and this was evident in the immediate aftermath of Ceaușescu’s overthrow—that while the opponents of Ceaușescu knew what they were against, there was no agreement as to what they were for. A program was eventually issued by Fortuna which called for the resignation of Ceaușescu, the organization of free elections, the creation of a democratic media, respect for human rights, and economic reforms. According to one source, troops intervened to stop the publication of the program on 21 December and it was only after Ceaușescu’s flight that it appeared on 22 December as a leaflet with the title “The Tyranny has Fallen” and was broadcast on Romanian radio.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the protesters in Timișoara had effectively brought an end to Ceaușescu’s dictatorship and that two days before Ceaușescu fled from Bucharest. Thus for two days there were dual centers of power in Romania, one established by the anti-Ceaușescu Romanian Democratic Front in Timișoara, the other in the Central Committee building in Bucharest.

The hostility to Ceaușescu unleashed in Timișoara quickly spread to neighboring towns and then into Transylvania. Protestors took to the streets on 20 December in Jimbolia, Sânnicolau Mare, Deta and Lugoj, and on the following day came out in Buziaș, Reșița, Caransebeș, Oradea, Arad, Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu, Târgu-Mureș, Brașov, and Bucharest. On the morning of 22 December demonstrations took place in Alba Iulia, Bistrița, Miercurea-Ciuc, Sfântu Gheorghe, and Turda.¹⁷ Only in Oltenia and Moldavia did towns remain largely quiet, with bemused citizens in Pitești—for example—aimlessly milling around and limply dangling pro-Ceaușescu banners when the address of Ceaușescu, due to be relayed that morning to the main square from the capital, was abruptly abandoned. In Cluj, twenty-six demonstrators were shot dead by army units on 21 December.¹⁸ In Sibiu, where Nicu Ceaușescu, the dictator’s son, was the county Party secretary, demonstrators took to the streets chanting anti-Ceaușescu slogans on the morning of 21 December and an assortment of armed militia, Securitate troops, and cadets from three army academies in the cities were sent onto the streets to maintain public order. Eyewitnesses stated that the Securitate troops opened fire on the demonstrators at midday. The protesters eventually

made their way to the Securitate and militia headquarters, which were in the same complex and opposite one of the military academies, and demanded the release of those demonstrators who had been arrested. After getting no response from the head of the Securitate, Lieutenant-Colonel Theodor Petrișor, some in the crowd of around 3,000 began to stone the headquarters late in the evening. They then set fire to the trees around the militia HQ, an act which led to shots being fired from inside the building. Four demonstrators were killed and 11 wounded. The Securitate and militia chiefs asked the commander of the Sibiu military garrison, Lt. Col. Aurel Dragomir, for reinforcements and three armored personnel carriers (APCs) were sent to guard the militia headquarters.

The protesters remained outside the Securitate and militia throughout the night and about midday on 22 December tried to force the gates of the Securitate building. At that point automatic fire resumed, first from the Securitate headquarters and then from those of the militia. Shortly afterwards, the fire was directed at the military academy opposite and at the cadets who were guarding the militia buildings. There followed a veritable gun battle between the army cadets, led by their officers, and the militia and Securitate officers. A group of militia, dressed in khaki jackets, tried to gain entry to the academy but were captured by the defenders. Other cadets took an APC (Armored Personnel Carrier) and opened fire on the militia and Securitate buildings. In the course of the afternoon militia and Securitate officers also tried to take the two other military academies, and regular soldiers and civilians were fired upon by snipers at other points in the town. As a result of these attacks more than fifty people were killed, eight of whom were soldiers, twenty-three from the Securitate and militia, and more than thirty civilians.¹⁹

JUDGED IN retrospect Ceaușescu made three fatal errors. In his broadcast of 20 December he completely misjudged the mood of the people by displaying no hint of compassion for the victims of Timișoara and by dismissing the demonstrations as the work of “fascists” and “hooligan elements,” inspired by Hungarian irredentism. With echoes in his ears of the people’s acclamation of his speech of 21 August 1968 denouncing the Warsaw Pact invasion, he made his second mistake. He convened a public meeting of support on 21 December in Bucharest, in an atmosphere, this time, of public disgust at his lack of humanity. After the broadcast of 20 December meetings were convened at factories and military barracks to mobilize support for Ceaușescu and were addressed by local Party officials. At the same time, the Political Executive Committee took the decision to organize a mass meeting the following morning in Bucharest’s Palace Square to demonstrate unstinting approval for the regime

and therefore implicit backing for the repression in Timișoara. It was to be televised and broadcast nationally. Selected by factory, workers were taken by bus to the square the following morning, equipped with the usual banners for Party-orchestrated meetings proclaiming “Peace,” “Ceaușescu and the People,” “Ceaușescu—R(omanian) C(ommunist) P(arty).” Ceaușescu began to speak at 12:31.²⁰ Scarcely had he begun with a few introductory remarks than, to his bewilderment, a disturbance in the crowd—off camera—and high-pitched screams caused him to break off his speech. The live television and radio coverage was cut, but not before Ceaușescu’s confusion had been captured by the cameras and transmitted to the thousands watching on television. For the first time in the history of the communist regime in Romania, a stage-managed address by its leader had been interrupted in full view of the public. It proved to be a fatal blow, first to Ceaușescu, and second, to his entire regime.

The origin of the commotion in the crowd has never been clearly established. Correspondents of the BBC interviewed several members of the crowd, standing in different places in the square, in the early days of January 1990, and a number of explanations were given.²¹ One of them, Nica Leon, said that the loud, crackling noise caught by Ceaușescu’s microphone, was the sound of banners being trampled underfoot as they were discarded by their bearers, concerned that a group of young men chanting “Timișoara” standing close to them, would be arrested by the Securitate and they too detained.²² Another, a cameraman of Romanian television, said that it was the noise of short-circuiting loudspeakers, a third person claimed that the sound came from a firework let off in the crowd, a fourth that it was caused by tear-gas grenades fired at the public by the security forces. The sound may have resulted from a combination of any of these incidents but the result was that when Ceaușescu was able to resume his speech, he did so from a position of fragility. He attempted to placate the crowd by announcing salary and pension increases, but this stratagem only angered them further. At the end of his speech large groups of young people remained in the city center and, encouraged by the mild, unseasonal weather, lingered into the evening. It was at this point that they were fired upon by the army and security troops, and many were shot dead.²³

On the following morning of 22 December, Ceaușescu committed his third error. He summoned yet another public meeting of support and attempted to address it at 11:30. Boos and stones were directed at the balcony of the Central Committee building and Ceaușescu was ushered inside by the head of his personal bodyguard, Major-General Marin Neagoe.²⁴ He fled from the rooftop in a helicopter accompanied by his wife and two of his closest allies, Manea Mănescu and Emil Bobu, and two bodyguards, Major Florian Raț and Captain Marian

Constantin Rusu. Ceaușescu ordered the helicopter pilot to land at Snagov, some 30 km to the north of Bucharest, where he had a country mansion, and it was from here that he and his wife collected a suitcase of clothing. Mănescu and Bobu remained behind as the helicopter took off once more with the Ceaușescus and the bodyguards, first, according to the pilot Major Vasile Maluțan, in the direction of the helicopter base at Otopeni, and then, on Ceaușescu's instructions, to the parachutists' base at Boteni, but the pilot was told by the commandant there that he could not land. The pilot received orders to tell Ceaușescu that he was short of fuel and fearful of being spotted by radar, and so Ceaușescu ordered him to put down on a main road just outside Titu, near the village of Serdanu, some 35 km to the south of the town of Târgoviște.²⁵ The bodyguards flagged down a car driven by a doctor named Nicolae Decă, who took them as far as the village of Văcărești, just outside Târgoviște, where his car ran out of fuel, forcing the bodyguards to commandeer a second car, this one belonging to an engineer named Nicolae Petrișor who took them to the steelworks at Târgoviște, where a bodyguard got out to seek local Party assistance but did not return.²⁶ Petrișor, uncertain what to do with the presidential couple, decided to drive to a nearby agricultural experimental station where the manager, bewildered and frightened, shut them away in a room and summoned the local police.²⁷ The two policemen took them to the Târgoviște police headquarters where the Securitate was also based but crowds blocking the entrance prevented them from entering.²⁸ The policemen then drove the couple to a nearby village called Rățoiaia where they tried to remain out of sight in some reeds by a lake until the commotion in Târgoviște died down. On being informed that relative calm had been restored by an army unit around the police station, the policemen returned to headquarters in the early evening and the Ceaușescus were then taken to the army garrison in the town.²⁹

In Bucharest, following the flight of the Ceaușescus, crowds began to gather at the television center in the north of the city. A delegation of protesters was permitted to enter to negotiate a resumption of broadcasting to convey the news of the morning's events in the city.³⁰ The TV management was evasive until a number of armored cars carrying, amongst others, the well-known actor Ion Caramitru and the dissident poet Mircea Dinescu, arrived. It was Caramitru who was the first person to appear on Romanian television after the interruption of service. In a voice quivering with emotion he declared: "Brothers, thanks to God we are in the television studios, we managed here on the back of tanks, with the army and with students and with the people whom you see and with thousands and thousands of Romanians."³¹ A stream of speakers followed. They included senior Party members who had fallen out with Ceaușescu—Ion Iliescu and Silviu Brucan—and figures unknown to the public but who were to rise to

prominence later—Petre Roman and Gelu Voican Voiculescu. Iliescu, judging from eyewitness accounts, entered the TV studios with an air of authority.³²

Iliescu, a former Party head in Iași county who had been marginalized by Ceaușescu, was rumored in the West to enjoy the favor of Mikhail Gorbachev, a view which gained credence following the former's enigmatic call for reform in the literary journal *România literară* in September 1987.³³ He appealed for support for the new provisional authority which was to be established. He then withdrew to an office in the Central Committee where, in concert with a dozen or so others, including Silviu Brucan, General Nicolae Militaru, Colonel Gheorghe Ardeleanu, head of the anti-terrorist brigade USLA, and Petre Roman, a provisional government, styled “The Council of the National Salvation Front,” was formed.³⁴

The decision was taken, according to Brucan, on the evening of 24 December to place the Ceaușescus on trial, by Iliescu, Roman, Brucan, Voiculescu, and Militaru, who had all moved to the Ministry of Defense for security reasons.³⁵ General Stănculescu was tasked with making the logistical arrangements. To give a fig-leaf of legality to the proceedings an “Exceptional Military Tribunal” was constituted. It was before this kangaroo court that the unsubstantiated charge of genocide was brought as well as the accusation, among others, that Ceaușescu had undermined the national economy. Ceaușescu challenged the constitutionality of the court and argued that, as president, he was responsible only to the Great National Assembly. The CNSF was the product of a foreign plot, he claimed. But to no avail since the verdict had been preordained. The trial lasted little under an hour and after a short period of deliberation military prosecutor Colonel Gică Popa, the head of the tribunal, sentenced the two accused to death.³⁶ The Ceaușescus, hands bound, were led outside and summarily shot by a firing-squad.

The controversial nature of the above events is reflected in their historiography. Here is a sample of views:

*Someone asked: “But should we call this a revolution? After all, a revolution involves violence . . . In fact, we always have to qualify it; we call it “velvet,” we call it “peaceful,” we call it “evolutionary” . . . I call it “refolution”—a mixture of revolution and reform. Curiously enough, the moment when people in the West finally thought there was a revolution was when they saw television pictures of Romania: crowds, tanks, shooting, blood in the streets. They said: “That—we know **that** is a revolution,” and of course the joke is that it was the only one that wasn’t.”*³⁷

The Romanian revolution of December 1989 is a controversial moment in our history. The disputes involve both the synthetic definition of the event (was it a

revolution, a people's revolt, or a coup d'état?), as well as the reconstruction of some of its particular aspects and, especially, the role played by the participants, whether individuals or institutions . . . This derives from the uncertainty which hovers over the agents provocateurs, over the causes and the political effects of the principal events of December 1989.³⁸

Ruxandra Cesereanu tried to place the various accounts of the revolution in three categories: the first—of those who believe in a straightforward successful mass uprising against a dictatorship; the second—of those who believe in a coup d'état carried by either internal or external forces; the third—of those who believe in a combination of these two explanations.³⁹

The revolution of 1989 had a marked anti-communist character, exemplified by the following: the chanting of anti-communist slogans, the destruction of communist flags (red flags with the hammer and sickle), the symbolic flying of the national flag from which had been cut out the communist emblem of the country (in the overwhelming majority of places in Romania), the removal of the adjectives "communist"/"socialist" from public signs, the removal from public places of Romanian and Soviet communist statues and monuments, the removal of the names of communist activists or of communist slogans from public buildings etc. . . . In the period which immediately followed 22 December 1989, the group which seized power hijacked the pronounced anti-communist character of the revolution by undermining the spontaneous anti-communist demonstrations of the people, by censoring the anti-communist messages broadcast on the television network which had become the "headquarters" of the first "telerevolution" in history. The television was used to create the majority of the "diversions," the most effective being the permanent "danger of death" embodied by the "terrorists faithful to the dictator Ceaușescu" . . . The danger seemed entirely credible given that in the period 22–27 December there were 942 deaths recorded and thousands of wounded . . . Afterwards, not a single terrorist was arrested and tried.⁴⁰

Were, then, the events of December 1989 in Romania "a revolution"? Following Peter Siani-Davies's analysis the word "revolution" is associated with two popular metaphors.⁴¹ "The first is that it is a relatively quick and violent single incident . . . conventionally distinguished by a time-related epithet, such as 'The October Revolution' in Russia or the 'February Revolution' of 1848 in Paris," and his analysis "would argue that 'The Romanian Revolution of December 1989' might be added to this list. Secondly, the idea of revolution can embrace a longer process of social change often spanning many decades, in which case it is usually referred to in more general terms, as in the Russian, French, or Chinese Revolution."⁴²

THE CLAIM can be made that there was a rupture in sovereignty in Romania represented by the transfer of power from the Romanian Communist Party to the National Salvation Front. There were competing centers of power in Timișoara after the establishment of the Romanian Democratic Front on 20 December in opposition to the remnants of the Communist Party organization in the county council building; indeed, such a duality of power can be extrapolated to distinguish Timișoara from the rest of the country in the period 20–25 December.⁴³ Are we to disqualify the use of the term “revolution” in the Romanian context not because a rupture took place in sovereignty but because there was no rupture in continuity, i.e. communists took over power? Or is it that some see the authenticity of a revolution defined not only in policy change, but also in a change of mentality?

We can argue that Nicolae Ceaușescu’s overthrow was *not* a coup d’état. As has been pointed out, Erich Honecker in East Germany, Todor Zhivkov in Bulgaria, and Miloš Jakeš in Czechoslovakia were all victims of palace coups and had Ceaușescu been removed after the December 17 Political Executive Committee meeting and replaced by a fellow-member, he could have been placed in that category, but his retreat from the center of Bucharest in the face of vociferous protest bears the mark of revolution, as does the mass mobilization, widespread violence, spontaneous creation of revolutionary institutions, and subsequent fierce struggle between the revolutionary contenders on the streets of Romania’s cities.⁴⁴ “That multiple sovereignty did not last longer can be explained by two, at first sight, rather contradictory conditions; firstly, high levels of coercion prevented the appearance of an effective opposition prior to the revolution and, secondly, at the same time, such was the advanced level of state breakdown in Romania that in the end the regime needed only a limited challenge before it collapsed.”⁴⁵

The questions raised by the above selection of viewpoints have remained unanswered owing to the confusion surrounding a number of events whose clarity has been obscured by the rumor factories which, alongside the Securitate, were the only institutions which worked overtime during Ceaușescu’s rule. Matters have also been confused by a series of writers who invented conspiracy theories which have no convincing evidence to support them. The feeling that many had of being misled, or that the sacrifice made in December 1989 was to no avail, was aggravated by the suspicion that the fighting in Bucharest after Ceaușescu’s flight was a diversion, carried out to give the impression of the revolution, and therefore to give legitimacy to the National Salvation Front which emerged after the dictator’s downfall.

These questions were put by John Simpson to Virgil Măgureanu, Director of the *Serviciul Român de Informații* (SRI), the post-communist security service,

in a lengthy interview that he gave on 6 December 1994 at SRI headquarters.⁴⁶ Măgureanu's replies drew heavily upon a preliminary report made by the SRI about "the events in December 1989" from which I shall quote:

*The beginning of the Romanian revolution at Timișoara has not been regarded by everybody as merely the expression of spontaneous revolt of a population which, over the years, had become profoundly dissatisfied both materially and spiritually. On the contrary, numerous scenarios have been attributed to the revolution, placing its origins either outside Romania, or within in various plots which had long been hatched.*⁴⁷

These scenarios were invoked because the events of late December 1989 were marked by certain deeds which, in the opinion of the SRI, "point to the premeditated acts of certain individuals who are to be distinguished from the crowds who came out spontaneously onto the streets."⁴⁸ Among such acts cited by the report were those of a group of youths who, on the afternoon of 16 December, at a point when the number of people gathered around the home of pastor Tókés had fallen considerably, broke the windows of several shops and blocked the buses.

Question marks were also raised in the report about certain acts of provocation against the army in Timișoara. These required, it was claimed, an "expert hand" and consisted of blocking the tracks of tanks by placing strips of wire in them, using special keys to open the spare diesel tanks and setting fire to the oil, and throwing Molotov cocktails and ball-bearings at the troops. "It should be pointed out in reply to these claims of 'premeditated acts' that exactly the same measures have often been taken by demonstrators against security forces in other parts of the world during periods of civil unrest without there being any accusations of 'conspiracy' or 'foreign intervention' leveled to explain them."⁴⁹

However, there was concrete evidence of foreign involvement in the revolution, according to the SRI report, more specifically of Soviet interference:

*The data and existing information led to the conclusion that the Soviet apparatus of intelligence and diversion was involved in all phases of the events. Beginning on 9 December 1989, the number of Soviet tourists in "private" cars grew considerably from about 80 per day to 1,000. The occupants—two or three to a car—were mostly men of athletic build aged between 25 and 40. They avoided hotels, sleeping in their cars, and in the rare cases when they required hotel services, they paid in hard currency . . . Most of these cars were en route to Yugoslavia but some of them were forbidden entry to that country because weapons were found in the vehicles. One thing is certain, that during the events in Timișoara there were a large number of Soviet tourists.*⁵⁰

The report goes on to state:

*A short while after the revolution, there was an accident involving a car in which a Soviet citizen Alexandr Lout and another man were travelling. While repairs were being carried out on the car at a garage, twelve Romanian army camouflage uniforms were found together with a Soviet tunic with the pips of a major. The two men claimed that they were officers in the reserve and that they had previously fought in Afghanistan.*⁵¹

Direct Soviet involvement in the violent events during the revolution has been the subject of speculation amongst historians and commentators. The issue is not so much one of the presence of Soviet “tourists” in Romania in late December 1989, but of the scale of that presence. Convincing evidence to support the contention that 25,000 of the 37,000 Soviet tourists who allegedly visited or transited Romania in the two weeks before the flight of Ceaușescu stayed in the country for several months has yet to be produced.⁵²

The SRI report continued:

*Invisible and silent, anonymous and impeccably trained, merciless and well-armed, the “terrorists” constituted in the minds of the public the most obsessive presence of the last days of December 1989. . . . If we add to the above catalogue of considerations stray bullets which caused death and wounding, personal vendettas, the use of weapons by people untrained in their use, panic reactions and bravura deeds, the reasons behind so many human sacrifices and material losses become less mysterious.*⁵³

FATE HAS its own way of rewarding the courageous and of punishing tyrants. Despite the divisiveness of Ceaușescu’s policies towards the peoples of Romania, their shared experience of suffering under his rule brought them together. It was the defiance of László Tókéş which provided the catalyst for the display of ethnic solidarity which sparked off the overthrow of the dictator. This convergence of circumstance started the series of events which led to the revolution. One may argue that it was only a matter of time before Ceaușescu fell, given his isolation in the international arena, and the growing dissent at home. But it was the merit of Tókéş and of his supporters, both Romanian and Hungarian, that they pressed on with their protest against the regime’s abuse of power which was characteristic of a denial of human rights which typified the Ceaușescu regime. Tókéş’s stand, based on the right of his church to defend the interests of its faithful, transcended the narrowness of a sectarian claim and acquired the symbol of a common cause of peoples united against oppression. □

Notes

1. Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of December 1989* (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 61–62. Siani-Davies’s study is the most comprehensive and judicious account of the revolution of which I am aware.
2. Dinu Săraru în dialog cu Victor Atanasie Stănculescu, *Generalul Revoluției cu piciorul în ghips: Interviu-fișe pentru un posibil roman* (Bucharest: RAO, 2005), 104.
3. Sergiu Nicolaescu, *Revoluția, începutul adevărului: Un raport personal* (Bucharest: Topaz, 1995), 277.
4. Quoted from the transcript of the Politburo meeting published by Mihnea Berindei, “20 de ani de la revoluție: Ceaușescu, decembrie 1989,” *Revista* 22 (Bucharest) 20, 52+1 (1033+1034)(22 December 2009–4 January 2010) (my translation).
5. Quoted from Siani-Davies, *Romanian Revolution*, 64–65.
6. Stănculescu and Chițac were charged in January 1998 with “incitement to commit murder” for their part in events in Timișoara when they served respectively as first deputy minister of Defense and head of the Chemical Corps and commander of the Bucharest garrison. They were each sentenced by the Romanian Supreme Court on 15 July 1999 to 15 years’ jail for the murder of 72 people and the wounding of 253 others during the uprising in Timișoara on 17 and 18 December 1989. Both generals lodged an appeal against their conviction. Their sentences were upheld by the Supreme Court on 25 February 2000 but further appeals delayed their application. Eventually, on 15 October 2008, the Supreme Court upheld once again the sentence. Chițac’s health deteriorated rapidly and on 16 September 2010 he was transferred from Jilava prison hospital to the Bucharest military hospital where he died of heart failure on 1 November. After serving five years of his sentence Stănculescu was released from Jilava prison on 20 May 2014. He died in Bucharest on 19 June 2016. Gușă died in 1994 at the age of 54. Coman (1926–2016) was arrested on 22 December 1989, tried and sentenced on 9 December 1991 to jail terms of twenty-five years for his actions in Timișoara. These sentences were reduced on appeal in 1997 to 20 years, while on 11 December 2000 President Emil Constantinescu granted him a pardon for the rest of the sentence so that Coman only actually spent little more than three years in jail (from 1997).
7. Siani-Davies, *Romanian Revolution*, 68.
8. *Ibid.*, 69.
9. Filip Teodorescu, *Un risc asumat: Timișoara decembrie 1989* (Bucharest: Viitorul Românesc, 1992), 294–299.
10. Miodrag Milin, *Timișoara: 15–21 decembrie ’89* (Timișoara: Întreprinderea Poligrafică Banat, 1990), 117–118.
11. *Ibid.*, 124–125.
12. Constantin Dăscălescu (1923–2003). A lathe operator by trade, he left school at the age of sixteen. He joined the party in 1945 and studied at various party schools from 1949 to 1962. From 1968 to 1975 he was party secretary for Galați county and in 1979 became a member of the Permanent Bureau of the Politburo. In 1982, he was appointed prime minister; see Mihnea Berindei, Dorin Dobrinu, and Armand

Goșu, eds., *Istoria comunismului din România*, vol. 3, *Documente Nicolae Ceaușescu (1972–1975)* (Iași: Polirom, 2016), 186, footnote 1.

13. Teodorescu, 106.
14. Titus Suciuc, *Reportaj cu sufletul la gură (Timișoara, 16–22 decembrie 1989): Traseele revoluției* (Timișoara: Facla, 1990), 274.
15. Milin, 170–171; see also Siani-Davies, *Romanian Revolution*, 77.
16. Siani-Davies, *Romanian Revolution*, 77–78.
17. *Ibid.*, 78–79.
18. A report in the newspaper *Ziua* claimed that the Cluj military prosecutor, Titus-Liviu Domșa, had prepared the ground in March 1990 for a number of army officers to be prosecuted, but had climbed down after local commanders had threatened to occupy Cluj city center with armored vehicles if charges were brought. Foreign Broadcast Information Service (hereafter cited as FBIS) -EEU-98-071, “Romania: army chief accused of involvement in 1989 ‘massacre,’” 12 March 1998. It was only in 1997 that the decision was taken to reopen the Cluj dossiers and Gheorghe Surdescu was appointed as prosecutor. The army’s role in Cluj was especially sensitive because the name of General Constantin Degeratu, the then Army Chief of Staff, was linked to it. Degeratu was a colonel in the Fourth Army in that city in December 1989 and he was alleged to have transmitted orders from General Ilie Ceaușescu, a brother of Nicolae, to put down the demonstrations in Cluj. Degeratu strongly denied these claims in an interview given in April 1998 to the daily *Adevărul*. In his defense he argued that as an officer in the operational section of the Fourth Army in charge of research and analysis he was only charged with drawing up regional defense plans but his accusers have argued that these duties included the tactics used by the army in crushing the demonstrations in Cluj. A further twist to the story came when Constantin Darna, head of UM 0215, came to Degeratu’s support. He disclosed that the accusations were concocted by 0215 officers in Cluj, a significant proportion of whom were probably Securitate officers, since Darna himself announced that up to 50% of the 0215 officers in the counties were recruited from this source (FBIS-EEU-98-153, “Romania: officer admits plot to discredit chief of staff,” 2 June 1998). Darna’s intervention, together with the announcement several days earlier that the military prosecutor had decided to press charges against six persons who occupied key positions in the Communist Party and army in Cluj in December 1989, took the spotlight off Degeratu. The persons in question were Ioachim Moga, former first secretary of the Cluj Party Committee, Nicolae Constantin, former Political Executive Committee member, General Iulian Topliceanu, former commander of the Fourth Army, Colonel Valeriu Burdea, former commander of military unit 01215 based in Florești, Lt. Col. Laurențiu Cocan, former divisional commander of the above unit, and Major Ilie Dicu, former company commander with unit 01278 Someșeni. According to the prosecutor’s charges, the first two accused ordered the peaceful anti-Ceaușescu protests to be put down, and the army, in carrying out this order, resorted to a totally-unjustified use of force on the direct orders of Burdea, Cocan, and Dicu. As a consequence, 26 people were killed and another 52 were wounded (FBIS-EEU-98-141, “Romania: Former Cluj Party, Military heads charged

for '89 role," 21 May 1998). The charges against the army officers were adjudged to be proscribed but Moga (b. 14 March 1926) was sentenced on 23 May 2005 on two charges of murder to eight and five year' imprisonment, to be served concurrently. His lawyers successfully petitioned the court for a stay of imprisonment on medical grounds and Moga died of heart problems on 2 December 2007 in a Cluj hospital.

19. I base this account on Paul Abrudan, *Sibiul în revoluția din decembrie 1989* (Sibiu: Casa Armatei, 1990), 24–27.
20. Siani-Davies, *Romanian Revolution*, 84.
21. I was present at and translated these interviews for the BBC "Panorama" documentary, broadcast on 8 January 1990.
22. For more on Nica see Siani-Davies, *Romanian Revolution*, 85, note 99.
23. For details see *ibid.*, 86–87.
24. Personal protection of Ceaușescu and his wife was the responsibility of the Fifth Directorate of the Securitate.
25. Author's interview with Vasile Maluțan, 5 January 1990. Lieutenant-General Victor Atanasie Stănculescu, deputy minister of Defense, told me in an interview on 6 January 1990 that he had issued these orders. Both interviews were for the BBC "Panorama" documentary, broadcast on 8 January 1990.
26. As Peter Siani-Davies writes, "the other bodyguard had already been lost somewhere en route" (*Romanian Revolution*, 95). According to Gelu Voican Voiculescu, Ceaușescu wanted Decă to take him to Voinești because there was a national radio transmitter there under the command of a distant relative of Elena Ceaușescu. Ceaușescu hoped that the workers at the steelworks in Târgoviște would support him but the car carrying him was turned away (Gelu Voican Voiculescu, interview with Radu Moraru for the programme *Nașul*, re-transmitted B1 Television, 27 June 2008).
27. BBC interview with Nicolae Petrișor, 3 January 1990 (for the BBC "Panorama" documentary, broadcast on 8 January 1990.)
28. According to one account, cited by Siani-Davies, a car from the presidential fleet also appeared at the agricultural station and accompanied the militiamen's car to Târgoviște but then became detached as both vehicles tried to approach the police headquarters (*Romanian Revolution*, 96).
29. Author's interview with Lieutenant-General Victor Atanasie Stănculescu, deputy minister of Defense, 6 January 1990.
30. Siani-Davies, *Romanian Revolution*, 104.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Author's interview with Mircea Dinescu, 8 January 1990.
33. One of the earliest mentions of the rumor was an article in *Der Spiegel* in November 1986; see Siani-Davies, *Romanian Revolution*, 107, footnote 40.
34. The names of the thirty-nine members of the CNSF are listed in Siani-Davies, *Romanian Revolution*, 116, footnote 61.
35. This was confirmed by Brucan to this author (interview on 8 January 1990). According to Stănculescu, the decision was taken on the night of 23/24 December; see his account below of these events.

36. Popa committed suicide on 1 March 1990; see Richard Hall, “Rewriting the Revolution: Authoritarian Regime-State Relations and the Triumphs of Securitate Revisionism in Post-Ceaușescu Romania,” Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University Bloomington, 1997, 343–344.
37. Timothy Garton-Ash, “Conclusions,” in *Between Past and Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Aftermath*, eds. Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismăneanu (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000), 395.
38. Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Decembrie '89: Deconstrucția unei revoluții*, 2nd edition (Iași: Polirom, 2009).
39. Bogdan Murgescu, “Reprezentarea Revoluției din 1989: Câteva considerații,” in *Revoluția Română din decembrie 1989: Istorie și memorie*, ed. Bogdan Murgescu (Iași: Polirom, 2007), 11–12.
40. Vladimir Tismăneanu, Dorin Dobrințu, and Cristian Vasile, eds., *Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România: Raport final* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2007), 454.
41. Peter Siani-Davies, “Romanian Revolution or Coup d’État? A Theoretical View of the Events of December 1989,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 29, 4 (1996): 453–465 (457).
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 458. The analysis of contradiction forms the subject of Jolan Bogdan, *Performative Contradiction and the Romanian Revolution* (London–New York: Rowman and Littlefield International), 2017.
44. See Siani-Davies, “Romanian Revolution or Coup d’État?” 459.
45. Ibid.
46. Parts of this interview were included in a BBC “Newsnight” special, televised on 16 December 1994.
47. “Punct de vedere preliminar al Serviciului Român de Informații privind evenimentele din decembrie 1989,” Bucharest (1993), 3.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., 8.
50. Ibid., 20.
51. Ibid., 22.
52. See Marius Mioc’s blog “Răstălmăcirile lui Larry Watts și răstălmăcirile altora despre Larry Watts,” 24 January 2013, <https://mariusmioc.wordpress.com>; see also Richard Andrew Hall, “All the ‘Soviet Tourists,’ where do they all come from?,” *The Archive of the Romanian Revolution of December 1989* (blog), <https://romanianrevolutionofdecember1989.com>, accessed on multiple occasions.
53. “Punct de vedere preliminar,” 23.

Abstract**December 1989 in Romania: People's Revolt, Revolution, or Coup d'État?**

The paper discusses the events of December 1989 in Romania. Were they “a revolution”? The claim can be made that there was a rupture in sovereignty in Romania represented by the transfer of power from the Romanian Communist Party to the National Salvation Front. There were competing centers of power in Timișoara after the establishment of the Romanian Democratic Front on 20 December in opposition to the remnants of the Communist Party organization in the county council building; indeed, such a duality of power can be extrapolated to distinguish Timișoara from the rest of the country in the period 20–25 December. Are we to disqualify the use of the term “revolution” in the Romanian context not because a rupture took place in sovereignty but because there was no rupture in continuity, i.e. communists took over power? Or is it that some see the authenticity of a revolution defined not only in policy change, but also in a change of mentality? We can argue that Nicolae Ceaușescu's overthrow was *not* a coup d'état. His retreat from the center of Bucharest in the face of vociferous protest bears the mark of revolution, as does the mass mobilization, widespread violence, spontaneous creation of revolutionary institutions, and subsequent fierce struggle between the revolutionary contenders on the streets of Romania's cities. That multiple sovereignty did not last longer can be explained by two conditions; firstly, high levels of coercion prevented the appearance of an effective opposition prior to the revolution and, secondly, at the same time, such was the advanced level of state breakdown in Romania that in the end the regime needed only a limited challenge before it collapsed.

Keywords

revolution, coup d'état, people's revolt, Ceaușescu, Timișoara, National Salvation Front