

What were the forces behind the Romanian Revolution and did Ceausescu's distinctive position in the Cold War chess game led to his end in December 1989?

In this essay, I will analyze the extent to which the overthrow of Ceausescu was the result of a people revolution and/or of a *coup* orchestrated by the USSR & USA as part of their strategy to move beyond the Cold War. For more contextual depth, I will also examine Ceausescu's distinctive position within the Eastern Bloc over the two decades that preceded the event.

It is important to note that Romania was the only European country where the Communist regime was overthrown violently. According to official statistics published only 15 years after, 1'166 people died and 3'138 were injured during the 1989 revolution^[1]. For many years, historians did not have much evidence to document the Romanian revolution, and even today the "Revolution file" has not been fully settled. It remains unclear who exactly was responsible for the shootings and who actually benefited from Ceausescu's elimination. It was obvious though that many of the dreaded *Securitate* agents (Ceausescu's Secret Services) prospered in the post-communist order and that the National Salvation Front (NSF) leadership featured mostly former communists - supposed to be only a transitional governing body, the NSF ran and won the first free elections in May 1990.

A popular revolution against dictatorship and austerity

The NSF's official version of Ceausescu's fall is that it was the result of a popular spontaneous revolution against dictatorship and austerity.

The oil crisis in 1979 plunged the energy industry of the Socialist Republic of Romania (SRR), making its external debt of USD 11 billion in 1980 level no longer sustainable. "Ceausescu diagnosed the crisis as evidence that debt-financed development and policy independence were incompatible".^[2] Consequently, between 1981 and 1989, the profit of state-owned firm fell by over 150%^[3] and the competitiveness of SRR's industry became frailer. This economic crisis was one of the roughest in Eastern Europe. Ceausescu imposed ratios on food and reduced daily electricity and heat supplies to the population.

Besides, culturally and ideologically speaking, the people were brainwashed by the communist propaganda and suffocated by the dictator's cult of personality. As the ultimate symbol of Ceausescu's megalomania, the construction of the *People's House*, the second largest administrative building in the world^[4] after The Pentagon, began in mid-1984 in an area where 7 square km of the old city were demolished and tens of thousands of people relocated.

Some timid attempts of a protest movement against the socialist order could be seen here and there in Romania, but they were not strong enough to spark a revolution. The strongest dissident event of those days was the «Letter of the Six»^[5], an open letter signed in March 1989 by Silviu Brucan together with five other Communist dignitaries. They publicly shared

their views on Ceausescu policies regarding the economy, the forced assimilation of minorities, the surveillance of population by the *Securitate*, proposing a number of reforms. Although it was picked up by the international press and the Radio Free Europe broadcasts in Romanian, “the six” got arrested and the letter did not hamper the regime.

An indirect but important role was played by Ion Mihai Pacepa, former chief of the “Securitate” who flew out of Romania in 1978 seeking political asylum in the USA. Ceausescu called him “a traitor” and accused him of his co-operation with the CIA[6]. In 1987 Pacepa published a decisive book for the Romanian revolution “*Red Horizons: Chronicles of a Communist Spy Chief*”. The book was translated into Romanian and, during 1988, it was serialized on Radio Free Europe, arousing “huge interest among Romanians”, despite the *Securitate* jamming and interferences. People who lived there at the time recall that the streets of Romania's cities and towns were empty during the broadcasts.

On the 16th December 1989, demonstrations arose in Timisoara in support of Laszlo Tokes, a Hungarian Reformed pastor, who had spoken out against the food shortages, heavy surveillance by a large network of secret police, destruction and relocation of entire villages, and the oppression of minorities and religious groups. The popular gathering was strongly repressed and, according to international media at the time, “two to four thousand were reported killed”[7]. These (exaggerated) numbers reached the ears of the Romanians who were staying tuned to Radio Free Europe.

On the 21st December, Ceausescu gave a speech in Bucharest in front of thousands of Romanians, qualifying the Timisoara events as a “joint action from circles that want to destroy the integrity and sovereignty of Romania, to stop the construction of socialism, to put our people under foreign domination”[8]. Ceausescu looked genuinely stunned when the crowd started to woe him. Over the next minutes, millions of Romanians could see live on the State Television how Ceausescu and his wife Elena were hastily departing by helicopter from the top of the Central Committee building.

A few hours later the Television building got under the control of the revolutionaries. Ion Iliescu, who in the 1980s was regarded by opponents of the regime as the most desirable alternative to Ceausescu, was there together with other key individuals, encouraging the people to get out in the streets to protect the revolution against Ceausescu and his *Securitate*. Guns were distributed to the population and shootings took place in strategic places in the capital. There was a high risk that the revolution turned into a civil war, as Ceausescu was not planning to give up.

The Ceausescu couple was shortly captured and tried by a drumhead military tribunal on charges of “genocide, subversion of state power and undermining the national economy”[9]. In his defense, the dictator argued that it was a *coup* made by the KGB and the traitors inside the government, but Nicolae & Elena Ceausescu were convicted on all charges and sentenced to death after an hour and a half trial[10]. They were immediately executed. It was Christmas Day.

To summarize the explanation of the official version of Ceausescu’s fall as a popular revolution, this quote from Stephen D. Roper says it all: «The economic austerity, along with political repression, were the main reasons behind the protests and revolution of 1989. His politics isolated him not only from the people but also from the party and the military».[11]

Ceausescu's distinctive position in the Eastern Bloc

Throughout the Cold War, the Socialist Republic of Romania maintained a distinctive position and had special ties with both the Communist and the Western blocs. Romania was part of the Warsaw Pact signed in 1955, Ceausescu becoming the supreme leader of the country and secretary general of the Communist Party in 1965. The treaty of mutual assistance and co-operation cemented the socialist bloc under Moscow's rule, but Ceausescu was determined to emancipate its party and country from the USSR[12]. In May 1968, Ceausescu denounced the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia ("Prague's spring"), earning local and international political respect for this bold gesture of disobedience towards Moscow. That position allowed for discreet, bilateral contacts between Bucharest and, notably, the United States and other Western countries. Reportedly these ties included Ceausescu "selling USSR secrets to the U.S"[13] in the 70's, or the USA giving funds to Ceausescu in order to "undermine the unity of the fraternal countries from inside, for the loosening of the political-military union of the socialist states"[14].

In the 80's, especially after the April 1986 Chernobyl disaster, the USSR and the USA increasingly projected a shared will to move away from the threat of nuclear conflict, aiming at a more stable international environment between the East and the West. All of Europe longed for democracy; Germany's reunification was only a question of time.[15] In this evolving context, Ceausescu's isolationist policies, cult of personality and increasing violations of human rights towards its own people were huge liabilities.

Romania's position inside the socialist block was becoming even more ambiguous, as it was losing affections from USSR and Eastern European countries, but warming relations with states like China, Libya, and Iran. As V.I. Potapov, a member of the Moldavian Communist Party said to USSR's ambassador G. Badrus: "The behavior of the Romanian leaders in connection with the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) meeting (...) demonstrates that the current Romanian leadership cannot be counted on as a reliable ally"[16]. When Poland's socialist government lost the elections in June 1989 (same day protesters were massacred in the Tiananmen Square in China), Ceausescu called to "impede the liquidation of socialism in Poland"[17]. In reaction, Hungary accused Romania of interfering with the sovereignty of Poland, and of contradicting "the principles on the basis of which Romania established its policy in 1968, referring to the events in Czechoslovakia"[18].

Romania's economic self-sufficiency doctrine and open conflict with the International Monetary Fund and Western financing further contributed to its marginalization[19]. Ceausescu was resisting Mikhail Gorbachev's drive for democratization and was rejecting his new doctrines of "system restructuration" (Perestroika) and "transparency" (Glasnost). When the Berlin wall collapsed, Anatoly Chernyaev[20], one of the most important foreign advisors of Gorbachev, talked of Ceausescu with sarcasm: "Today we received messages about the 'retirement' of Deng Xiaoping and Todor Zhivkov. Only our 'best friends' Castro, Ceausescu, and Kim Il Sung are still around--people who hate our guts". Indeed the gap between Gorbachev's and Ceausescu's positions were widening, and - as per the minutes[21] of their last meeting on 4 December 1989 - their disagreements were profound - politically and economically.

In conclusion, in 1989 Ceausescu's neo-Stalinist position and his resistance to change were no longer acceptable. As diplomacy was not likely to bear fruit, other means and options had to be considered.

A *coup* orchestrated by foreign forces

The fall of Ceausescu and his regime cannot be attributed uniquely to the will of the people and of the Romanian dissident group who created the NSF. Years after the events, with the release of confidential documents and the testimonies of individuals who played a key role before and during the events of 1989, the Romanian revolution proves to have been an element in the wider strategy designed by the USSR and the USA to drop the "iron curtain". In light of Ceausescu's position versus these powers, there is evidence that what happened on December 89 was a *coup*.

When Ceausescu refused the reforms promoted during the Malta summit of 1989[22], the dictator ignored that Bush and Gorbachev had made agreements concerning Europe's future. He also ignored or underestimated the fact that Thatcher and Mitterrand were pushing for the unification of Western and Eastern Europe as a pre-requirement for Germany's reunification.

The CIA Chief for East Europe in 1989, Milton Bearder, told in an exclusive interview with ARTE television that the "Bush administration evaluated the situation and decided to put this off the 9th November 1989".[23] According to E. Bollobas,[24] a Hungarian dissident at this time, the CIA pulled together a group of dissidents in order to prepare the overthrow of Ceausescu's regime. Thanks to this document[25], we can have a better view of how the CIA was making their assessments on East European dissidents.

According to D. Fonvielle[26] a former officer of the French secret services, the first step in inducing a "revolution" is to define the opposition forces and identify the most credible and popular among them. In Romania, one of the main dissidents involved with a foreign secret agency was the Hungarian pastor, Laszlo Tokes. In March 1989, he denounced Ceausescu's regime in a clandestine interview by a Canadian journalist. The interview was aired in July 1989 by a Hungarian television station and rapidly crossed the Romanian border by word of mouth.

According to Charles Cogan, the CIA chief in Paris in 1989[27], this kind of action officially made by local dissidents but broadcast by foreign media (in this case, BBC and Radio Free Europe) is called "black propaganda". Black propaganda allowed the dissidents to earn popularity and legitimacy, including by means of disinformation. The previous mention that "two to four thousand people were killed" in Timisoara was overstated. As shown in the ARTE documentary (37:49) the real death toll in Timisoara was 147.[28] According to O. Gheorghe Ratiu, a former officer of the Securitate, Free Europe Radio exaggerated the numbers because "without blood, the people won't revolt"[29] (38:16). Black propaganda and the Romanian state TV beginning from the 22nd of December finally managed to launch the revolution. According to Miklos Nemeth, the prime minister of Hungary in 1989[30], after a "precise analysis of the situation", the pastor was selected as he "would immediately collect the support of the bulk of the society". Nemeth also confirmed that his country sent guns and ammunition to the dissidents in Romania and that his government took actions to influence from outside.

As part of this effort, a high ranked Romanian army officer, General Victor Atanase Stanculescu, was contacted by Soviet secret services - via the Hungarian government and secret services – during the summer of 1989. In 2008, General Stanculescu explained in the book “Finally, the truth...”^[31] how he contributed to the “military putsch”. In charge of the repression of the Timisoara revolt, which was indeed galvanized by professional crowd leaders and trained foreign agents, Stanculescu was condemned in 2008 to 15 years in jail. On the 22nd December when the revolution seized the capital, it was Stanculescu who disobeyed Ceausescu’s direct order and told the army not to shoot - the crowd in Bucharest was shouting: “the army is with us!”^[32]

The main role during and after the December events was then played by Ion Iliescu. Iliescu, known for his pro-Gorbachev positions, was appointed the new leader and became Romania’s president after the transition. Years after, the Romanian general procurer who led Ceausescu’s trial, Dan Voinea, said that Iliescu’s call to arms against the “terrorists” in his speech on Romanian TV^[33] was a diversion maneuver in order to maintain insecurity and increase the hate against Ceausescu and his loyal agents until the new government was in a position to rule.

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Conclusion

Many had the interest to maintain a blurred picture of the December 1989 events. Stanculescu, who died earlier this year, said “*we are not ready to unveil the truth, not now, maybe in 2050*”^[34]. Ceausescu’s fall is a case of USA and USSR foreign policies and secret operations, a story of international intrigues and manipulations of local forces. Dumitru Mazilu, a dissident communist official jailed by Ceausescu for smuggling a human rights report to the UN, said: “I am certain now that revolutions are conceived by idealists, enacted by fighters and taken advantage of by opportunists.”^[35]

The workings of external and internal forces were complex before, during and after the events of December 1989. The Romanian revolution had to take place so that the Cold War could end, and the superpowers intervened for this reason. The popular revolution was nevertheless genuine – the flurry of joy, which flooded Romania, was not fake, and those who were there still recall those elating feelings of national pride and profound hope for a great future.

Our conclusion, based on the analysis of diversified sources, is that the most significant event of the 20th century in Romania remains largely shrouded in mystery, yet was a combination of spontaneous people upheaval and coordinated foreign interventions, with media manipulations and opaque manoeuvres by the Romanian army and Securitate forces.

In June 1990, the Piata Universitatii sit-in protests against the win of the first democratic elections by the NSF were suppressed by Iliescu’s miners^[36], which put an end to that state of grace and to Romania’s “heroic” image in the West. Gorbachev resigned on 25th December 1991, helplessly watching the dismantlement of the Soviet Union. Romania’s transition to capitalism was difficult in both political and economic terms. The savage privatization that followed and the corruption of the political leaders during the shift toward a market economy made some regret Ceausescu’s times.

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