

### Ceausescu's fall

#### **What were the forces behind the Romanian Revolution and did Ceausescu's distinctive position on 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<sup>1</sup>. 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.

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• <sup>1</sup> Ghiță O., Institutul *Revoluției Române* : 1.166 de persoane au murit în Decembrie 1989, National Press Agency, May 29, 2014.

### **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".<sup>2</sup> Consequently, between 1981 and 1989, the profit of state-owned firm fell by over 150%<sup>3</sup> and the competitiveness of SRR's industry became frailer. This economic crisis was one of the roughest in Eastern Europe. Ceausescu imposed rations 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<sup>4</sup> after The Pentagon, began in mid-1984 on an area where 7 square km of the old city were demolished and tens of thousands of people relocated.

Some timid attempts of 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

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<sup>2</sup> Ban C., *Sovereign Debt, Austerity, and Regime Change: The Case of Nicolae Ceausescu's Romania*, East European Politics and Societies, Boston, 2012. p. 752.

<sup>3</sup> Ionete Constantin, *Criza de sistem a economiei de comandă și etapa sa explozivă*, (Bucarest : Expert Edition, 1993). 104–5.

<sup>4</sup>World Record Academy

dissident event of those days was the «Letter of the Six»<sup>5</sup>, 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 for his co-operation with the CIA<sup>6</sup>. 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

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<sup>5</sup> *Letter of the Six, March 1989*, by Gheorghe Apostol, Alexandru Birladeanu, Silviu Brucan, Corneliu Manescu, William Pfaff, Constantin Pirvulescu in March 1989. *Making the History of 1989*, Item #698, Accessed November 25, 2016. <https://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/items/show/698>

<sup>6</sup> de Borchgrave Arnaud, *Red Past in Romania’s present*, The Washington Time, January 13, 2004. n/a

and, according to international media at the time, “two to four thousand were reported killed”<sup>7</sup>. 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”<sup>8</sup>. 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.

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<sup>7</sup>UPHEAVAL IN THE EAST; *Mass Graves Found in Rumania; Relatives of Missing Dig Them Up*, December 23, 1989. The Associated Press, The New York Times, accessed November 25, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/23/world/upheaval-east-mass-graves-found-rumania-relatives-missing-dig-them-up.html>

<sup>8</sup> *Nicolae Ceausescu LAST SPEECH*. Filmed [21 December 1989]. Avocatul Poporului, YouTube video, 7:30. Posted [August 2011]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uv7-LVFgd8U>

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”<sup>9</sup>. 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 a hour and half trial<sup>10</sup>. 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».<sup>11</sup>

### **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

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<sup>9</sup> English – Nicolae Ceausescu: The sentence of the trial, conviction and execution [Graphic Images]. Filmed [25/12/1989]. Jo Jo, YouTube video, 6:54. Posted [October 2011]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DD-XNTVgDW0&t>

<sup>10</sup> Elsner Alan, *Trial and Execution: The Dramatic Deaths of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu*. Huffington Post, May 25, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Roper Stephen D., *Romania: The Unfinished Revolution*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000). n/a.

emancipate its party and country from the USSR<sup>12</sup>. 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."<sup>13</sup> 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"<sup>14</sup>.

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.<sup>15</sup> 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, 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

<sup>12</sup> *When and Why Romania Distanced Itself from the Warsaw Pact*, January 1993. Raymond L. Garthoff, ", Cold War International History Project Bulletin, Moscow Conference on New Evidence on Cold War History. Accessed November 25, 2016. <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB14/doc12.html/> [Hereafter CWIHP].

<sup>13</sup> *Romanians sold soviet secrets to U.S. CIA*, May 1990, Weiser, B., Seattle Times. Accessed November 25, 2016. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/384799143/C2190C8619FB47C1PQ/2?accountid=14771>

<sup>14</sup> *When and Why Romania Distanced Itself from the Warsaw Pact*, Raymond L. Garthoff, January 1993, CWIHP.

<sup>15</sup> Kennedy Paul, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, (Ney York: Random House), 1987. n/a.

leadership cannot be counted on as a reliable ally”<sup>16</sup>. 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”<sup>17</sup>. 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”<sup>18</sup>.

Romania's economic self-sufficiency doctrine and open conflict with the International Monetary Fund and Western financing further contributed to its marginalization<sup>19</sup>. 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<sup>20</sup>, one of the most important foreign advisors of Gorbachev, talked of Ceausescu with sarcasm: “Today we received messages about the "retirement" of Deng Xiaopeng and Todor Zhivkov. Only our "best friends" Castro, Ceausescu, and Kim II Sung are still around--people who hate our guts”. Indeed the gap between Gorbachev’s and Ceausescu’s

<sup>16</sup> *Conspect of Conversations with Cde. V.I. Potapov, Head of The Romania Sector of the CPSU CC Section*. 16 May 1979, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Doc. 4 in Gheorghe Negru, “The Dispute Between the USSR and the RSR Regarding the Historical treatment of Russo-and Soviet-Romanian Relations”, *Romanian Destiny*, No.3-4 (2010), Archive of the Social-Political Organizations in Moldova (AOSPRM), p.4. Accessed November 25, 2016. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114159>

<sup>17</sup> *Transcript of Meeting of the Executive Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the RCP*. 21 August 1989, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive. Romanian National Central Historical Archives (ANIC); published by the CWHIP. Accessed November 25, 2016. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121611>

<sup>18</sup> *Information of the Romanian Embassy in Budapest to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1415HRS*. 24 August 1989, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Doc. No.74 in Dumitru Preda and Mihai Retegan, 1989 - The Domino Principal: The Collapse of the European Communist Regimes; Bucharest, Edition of the Cultural Foundation of Romania, 2000, p.170. Accessed November 25, 2016.

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<sup>19</sup> *Situation Report*. 4 May 1989, Radio Free Europe Archives p.3, p.8; OSAarchivum. Accessed 25 November 2016. [http://storage.osaarchivum.org/low/00/d9/00d9cc44-f760-4dfc-9e79-accf8c5cf0be\\_1.pdf](http://storage.osaarchivum.org/low/00/d9/00d9cc44-f760-4dfc-9e79-accf8c5cf0be_1.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> *Document No. 15: Diary of Anatoly Chernzaev regarding the Collapse of the Berlin Wall*. 10 November, 1989. Anatoly Chernzaev Diary, National Security Affairs, Electronic Briefing Book No.293. Accessed November 25, 2016. <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB293/>

positions were widening, and - as per the minutes<sup>21</sup> 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 in December 89 was a *coup*.

When Ceausescu refused the reforms promoted during the Malta summit of 1989<sup>22</sup>, 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.

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<sup>21</sup> *Minutes of the Meeting between Nicolae Ceausescu and Mikhail Gorbachev*, December 1989. Making the History of 1989, item 692. Accessed November 25, 2016. <https://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/items/show/692>

<sup>22</sup> *Dec 1989 Coverage of Bush Gorbachev Malta Summit*, filmed [2-3/12/1989], Josh Burdick, YouTube video, 3:38:06, Posted [27/09/2015]. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hg\\_exxo0cKQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hg_exxo0cKQ)



The CIA Chief for East Europe in 1989, Milton Bearder, told in an exclusive interview by ARTE television that the "Bush administration evaluated the situation and decided to put this off the 9th November 1989".<sup>23</sup> According to E. Bollobas,<sup>24</sup> 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<sup>25</sup>, we can have a better view of how the CIA was making their assessments on East European dissidents.

According to D. Fonvielle<sup>26</sup> 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<sup>27</sup>, 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

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<sup>23</sup> *Echec et mat – la révolution roumaine*, 2004. Directed by Susanne Brandstatter, ARTE, Strasbourg. [Hereafter ARTE].

<sup>24</sup> *Echec et mat – la révolution roumaine*, 2004, ARTE

<sup>25</sup> *Intelligence Memorandum CIA: Dissident Activity in East Europe: An Overview* April 1, 1971. National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No.213, 2007. Accessed November 24, 2016, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB213/usdocs/USDdoc3.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> *Echec et mat – la révolution roumaine*, 2004, ARTE

<sup>27</sup> *Echec et mat – la révolution roumaine*, 2004, ARTE

documentary (37:49) the real death toll in Timisoara was 147.<sup>28</sup> 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”<sup>29</sup> (38:16). Black propaganda and the Romanian state TV beginning from the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December finally managed to launch the revolution. According to Miklos Nemeth, the prime minister of Hungary in 1989<sup>30</sup>, 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...”<sup>31</sup> 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 of jail. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> 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!”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Girard Quentin, *Timisoara, Un faux et Intox*, Libération, July 26, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> “*Echec et mat – la révolution roumaine*” 2004, ARTE

<sup>30</sup> *Echec et mat – la révolution roumaine*, 2004, ARTE

<sup>31</sup> Stoenescu Alex Mihai, “*Finally, the truth...* Stanculescu in a dialogue with AM Stoenescu”, (Bucharest: Rao, 2008). n/a.

<sup>32</sup> *Revoluție 1989 - Înregistrări între Securitate, M.A.P.N. și armata loială lui Ceaușescu*, recorded [21-22.12.1989], Timisoreanul, YouTube video, 10:17min, posted the 24<sup>th</sup> December 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOd2SEu0Sjg>

The main role during and after the December events was then played by Ion Iliescu. Iliescu, known for his pro-Gorbachev positions, was appointed 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<sup>33</sup> 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 an 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*"<sup>34</sup>. Ceausescu's fall is 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."<sup>35</sup>

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 –

<sup>33</sup> *Echec et mat – la révolution roumaine*, 2004, ARTE.

<sup>34</sup> Stoenescu Alex Mihai, "*Finally, the truth...* Stanculescu in a dialogue with A. Stoenescu", n/a.

<sup>35</sup> Graham-Harrison, *Twenty-five years after Nicolae Ceausescu was executed, Romanians seek a 'revolution reborn*, The Guardian, December 7, 2014.

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<sup>36</sup>, which put an end to that state of grace and to Romania's "heroic" image in the West. Gorbachev resigned on 25<sup>th</sup> 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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<sup>36</sup> Pana Alexandra, *Forgive and Forget? The June 1990 Mineriad*. (Presented in the Country Report June 21, 2010).

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