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THE FALL OF THE LAST EAST EUROPEAN DICTATOR AND ITS AFTERMATH

Abstract
The Romanian Revolution of 1989 was the only bloody one among that year's upheavals in Eastern Europe. It was also the only one followed by an even bloodier, if short-lived, counter-revolution (on use and meaning of the term, see Meusel 1936; Tilly 1973; Allison 2022; Trăgători 2019; Căderea 2022). These peculiarities were largely due to Nicolae Ceaușescu's tyrannic leadership style (see Otto 1990) (he also was known as the last 'Stalinist' of the Soviet Bloc, see Whitney 1989) and his Securitate. At the time, Romanian and foreign journalists as well as military and civilian actors of the events observed that after the dictator's escape from the seat of power on 22 December 1989, a part of the Securitate continued to fight for his reinstatement (see Binder 1989; Romania 1989; and Romanian Revolution of December 1989 website). Combined with an intense

psychological campaign meant to sow panic and chaos among the military and revolutionaries, their guerilla-style attacks were considered acts of terrorism. Yet after Ceaușescu's execution, some of his loyalists were co-opted in the new administration's intelligence units. The unresolved issue of the terrorists' identity and the role of the Securitate plagued the Romanian transition to democracy and made the Romanian Revolution the most 'entangled' in Eastern Europe.

Keywords: Romanian Revolution, counter-revolution, Nicolae Ceaușescu, Communism, secret police, Securitate, terrorists

Terminology Used

In this paper we use the term 'counter-revolution' in Meusel's widely accepted sense of "an attempt to reverse the transformations effected in a revolution; its success signalises the triumph of the upper class, which has been endangered and temporarily displaced by the revolution" (see Meusel 1936, p. 368). This is the starting point used by Charles Tilly (Tilly 1973, pp. 425–447). A similar interpretation is offered by Jamie Allinson in the second chapter, entitled "What is a Counter-Revolution" of his recent book (Allinson 2022, pp. 29–65): "attempts to close a revolutionary situation in terms favourable […] to the old order," (p. 39); or, in other words, to "prevent and reverse" the revolutionary transformations, (p. 45). In his paper, Tilly suggests the matrix for identifying a counter-revolution: "find out exactly who rebelled, and then look for evidence of their motives when the rebellion began," (Tilly 1973, p. 32). Based on this frame of reference and the significant amount of evidence provided in *Trăgători* 2019, and *Căderea* 2022, we can safely conclude that the terrorist, radio-electronic and disinformation attacks that followed Nicolae Ceaușescu's flight from power on 22 December 1989 were carried out by specially trained members of his dreaded secret police, known by its Romanian name as *Securitate* (Security) and its acronym DSS (Department of State Security); and that their actions amounted to an attempted counter-revolution.

As for the term 'terrorism' used here, according to the UN, an "act of terrorism" is any action "intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a government or an international organisation to do or abstain from doing any act" (see UN definition

of act of terrorism: *Defining Terrorism*). For a broader discussion on the term, see Alex P. Schmid, *Defining Terrorism* (Schmid 2023), who offered Ben Saul's definition: "Any serious, violent, criminal act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury, or to endanger life, committed outside an armed conflict, for a political, ideological, religious, or ethnic purpose; intended to create extreme fear in a person, group, or the general public, and (a) seriously intimidate a population or part of a population, or (b) unduly compel a government or an international organisation to do or to abstain from doing any act" (Saul 2006, pp. 65–66).

Characteristics of Ceaușescu's Dictatorship

As often was the case in the Communist system, Nicolae Ceaușescu came to power after the death of the previous communist dictator, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej in 1965. A vainglorious yet skillful leader, the new Secretary General saw an opportunity to ride the reformist and nationalist wave started by his predecessor to his advantage. While denouncing the "errors and excesses" of the previous two decades, he demoted potential challengers and surrounded himself with sycophants. His persisting on a slightly independent path from Moscow brought him a measure of popularity with his countrymen and abroad. Ceaușescu registered his moment of glory in August 1968, when he denounced the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Nicolae Ceaușescu during the 11th Congress of Romanian Communist Party (PCR) on 25 November 1974. National Archives of Romania, The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania, Online communism photo collection, ref. no. /cota 1/1974, photo #B041

Yet over the following three years his tentative reforms came undone. Increasingly suspicious of dissent, Ceaușescu grew more authoritarian. As his cult of personality grew, he doled out leadership posts to members of his family, and further empowered the Securitate. He ended up exerting discretionary control of the state apparatus, while demanding a type of worship from the population similar to what he had seen in a tour of North Korea and China in the early 70's (the respected authors Linz and Stepan (1996) called his cult a typical form of "sultanism," where "all individuals, groups and institutions are permanently subject to the unpredictable and despotic intervention of the

Elena and Nicu Ceaușescu during a leisure trip in Moldova and Danube Delta in 1976. National Archives of Romania, The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania, Online communism photo collection, photo #027

sultan"; in particular the chapter "The Effects of Totalitarianism-cum-Sultanism on Democratic Transition: Romania"). In the 1980s "the most beloved son of the Romanian people," as he liked to be called, made his wife, Elena, deputy prime minister. She was the subject of a personality cult of her own, venerated as a "great chemistry scientist" and revolutionary (see Popa 2021). Some of his brothers were in charge of key structures in the Armed Forces (Ilie Ceaușescu was vice-Defense Minister and chief of the powerful Superior Political Council of the Army, while Nicolae Andruță Ceaușescu was the chief of the Securitate school at Băneasa, see Oprea 2019) and Government (Ion Ceaușescu was the chief of the Academy of Agricultural Sciences, as well as a ministerial role: Secretary of State and First vice president of the State Planning Committee, 1983–1985, see Tomas 2020), while his youngest son, Nicu, was the regional Party boss in Sibiu (a picturesque town in southern Transylvania) while waiting to take over as his successor.

A trait that distinguished Nicolae Ceaușescu from other dictators was his desire for international recognition as a principled 'great statesman,' a pacifist able to offer solutions to the world's most intractable conflicts. For a while, he was able to project such an image in the West. He was accepted as a partner by two US Presidents: Richard Nixon (whom he met in 1969 in Washington and 1970 in Bucharest) and Jimmy Carter (who invited him to the White House in 1978). He paid state visits to France (1970), Italy (where in 1973 he was received by Pope Paul VI) and England (where in 1978 he was notoriously treated to a ride in the state carriage by Queen Elizabeth II), among others. Trying to convince Western powers that "human rights and fundamental freedoms" were respected in Romania, in 1975 Ceaușescu signed the Final Act of Helsinki, the result of negotiations of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe between East and West. In 1975 he obtained the most favoured nation status from the United States. For a relatively small country in the Communist bloc it was no small feat.

Nicolae Ceaușescu's state visit in the United States: Nicolae Ceaușescu, US President Richard Nixon. White House, October 1970. National Archives of Romania, The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania, Online communism photo collection, ref. no. /cota 90/1970, photo #Z276

Nicolae Ceaușescu's state visit in the United States, (from left to right:) Nicolae Ceaușescu, US President Jimmy Carter, Elena Ceaușescu, Rosalynn Carter. White House, 12 April 1978. National Archives of Romania, The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania, Online communism photo collection, ref. no. /cota 113/1978, photo #BA343

Meanwhile, living conditions for the Romanian population were rapidly deteriorating. Ceaușescu's relative popularity abroad, coupled with increasing internal discontent and his cunning nature led to possibly the most distinct feature of his reign: the imperative to conceal the existence of opposition and repression in Romania. The loyal and all-powerful DSS, with help from over 500,000 informants (one of the largest numbers per capita in the region), was omnipresent. It spied on the people and spread disinformation and kompromat about dissidents using nationalistic tropes. It fragmented and all but annihilated the meager opposition through threats, arrests and violence as needed, primarily under various guises (such as of common law transgressions), so as to avoid accusations of politically motivated human rights abuses from the West (see Ursu 2018, pp. 3–26; Lăcătușu 2022; and for new and ongoing research, see Roland O. Thomasson's blog).

As noted by various authors, each dictator tailored his secret police according to the specifics of his cult, and Ceaușescu was no exception (see e.g., Hall 2000, pp. 1069–1093). Unlike the classic internationalist communist ideology, Ceaușescu's became increasingly nationalistic, even xenophobic, particularly in the '80s. This included more or less open anti-Hungarian and antisemitic positioning, and a subtler, mostly Securitate-driven word-of-mouth-based anti-Soviet stance, which the dictator hoped would win him back the lost popularity of 1968 (see *Trăgători* 2019, p. 31; Petrescu 2014, pp. 313–315).

Hannah Arendt observed that the institutions of terror needed to give plausibility to the "central fictions" of the respective systems (Arendt 1958, p. 378), thus totalitarian rulers established "monstrous falsehoods" "as unquestioned facts" (Arendt 1958, p. 333). Like in the classic totalitarian Nazi and the Bolshevik states which Arendt analyzed, the most powerful Romanian institution under Ceaușescu was the secret police: "Real power begins where secrecy begins" (Arendt 1958, p. 403). Thus the DSS had the complex mission of eradicating the opposition while hiding its repressive methods from the West, and yet meanwhile making the population sense and fear them, so as to further discourage acts of dissent. At the same time, the true level of popular discontent with the dictator had to be ostensibly hidden from him, while also ensuring total loyalty and secrecy within its own ranks, so as to maintain the "central fiction" that the Supreme Commander was "the most beloved son of the people" These seemingly paradoxical competing imperatives of Ceaușescu's Securitate could be viewed as a "totalitarian taboo" (*Trăgători* 2019, p. 29).

All of the above characteristics of Ceaușescu's dictatorship led to the events of December 1989, and informed the regime's response, as we will detail in the following sections.

Romania in Early December 1989

While in the USSR, Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost were well established, leading to newly democratic institutions such as the Congress of People's Deputies, the "Inter-Regional Group" (see *Sakharov Space* website, *Biography. Chapter 8*) and the freeing of dissidents long held in the Gulag (among others, the famous physicist and dissident Andrey Sakharov's exile was ended by Mikhail Gorbachev. On 9 December 1986, the party's Central Committee annulled the decree banishing Sakharov and pardoned Elena Bonner and on 16 December, Gorbachev made a personal phone call to Sakharov, inviting him to return to Moscow; see Sakharov 2010), Ceaușescu continued on the repressive, Stalinist path, becoming ever more isolated. In the late 1980's, the Romanian population lived in a state of *poverty*, *fear* and *hopelessness*. In the dimly lit streets, long lines were forming at stores, even for basic necessities such as bread and milk. Electricity and heat were often cut out in homes, even in winter. Yet during the Communist Party Congress of November 1989, Ceaușescu was unanimously re-elected as Secretary General and again acclaimed as

> "the man of genius and architect of modern socialist Romania, the clear-sighted leader of the entire nation along the path of progress and welfare, a brilliant personality of the international Communist movement, a staunch and consistent fighter for the cause of socialism and Communism, for the triumph of peace and collaboration in the world" (Binder 1989).

Discontent and a widespread desire for change ran deep in Romanian society. They were magnified by news of the changes in the other Socialist countries, which most people acquired from Western-backed radio stations such as Radio Free Europe. Yet fear of being reported to the secret police and potentially violent consequences tamped down the possibility of organised mass uprising. A spontaneous demonstration in November in Timișoara had been quickly quashed. Most people hoped for the spark to come from someone else. Yet well-known dissidents such as Doina Cornea, Radu Filipescu, Gabriel Andreescu, Dan Petrescu, Liviu Antonesei, Mircea Dinescu, Silviu

Brucan, Dumitru Mazilu, Vasile Paraschiv, Dan Deșliu, as well as the leaders of the Brașov workers' protest of 1987 were all under house arrest and thoroughly surveilled; some had been forcefully confined to psychiatric asylums (like Paraschiv); others were in jail (like Petre Mihai Băcanu) or had been kicked out of the country (Iulius Filip); while some of the lesser known opponents had been tortured and died in suspicious circumstances (like Ana Ciherean, Ferenc Csaki, Geza Palfi, Erno Ujvarossy, Arpad Visky, Gheorghe Ursu, and their numbers are thought have been much larger) (see Lăcătușu 2022). Although outrage was brewing on a large scale, not many in Romania were willing to start an uprising, nor did they envisage what was to come.

The Attempted Demonstration in Iași on 14 December 1989

Drawing inspiration from the reforms in the Soviet Union (of which he learned from Moldovan Socialist Republic radio broadcasts over the border), an economist from Iași, Ștefan Prutianu, had the audacity to plan for an anti-Ceaușescu demonstration in Iași on 14 December 1989. Although organised in secrecy according to clandestinity rules, Prutianu's group (which may have numbered in the thousands) was discovered by the DSS and most members arrested and savagely beaten (Diaconescu and Spiridon 2019, p.462).

The swift reaction of the Securitate operatives (which included members of the Anti-Terrorist Unit known by the Romanian acronym USLA) was praised by their boss, general Iulian Vlad, in internal memoranda, and offered as an example when his subordinates were not able to similarly extinguish the Timișoara uprising over the following days (ACNSAS, Document 013906, vol. 7 – Diary of General Ștefan Alexie, entry from 17 December, p. 28 v.; see *Trăgători* 2019, p. 42).

Due to the informational embargo established by the Securitate, most of the Romanian population did not find out, at that time, about the movement in Iași. The outcome was symptomatic: it showed that under the harsh surveillance of Ceaușescu's secret police and widespread delation, organised opposition was less likely to succeed than a spontaneous uprising. Which is what started the very next day in the exact opposite corner of the country (for a more in-depth look into the repression of the Iași movement, see also the chapter dedicated to this subject in *Căderea* 2022).

The Spark of the Revolution in Timișoara. Friday, 15 December 1989

László Tőkés was an ethnic Hungarian dissident and Reform pastor in Timișoara, who had recently become known in the West for his interviews with Hungarian and Canadian news channels. He had spoken up against the Ceaușescu regime's repressive policies, particularly the abuses against the Hungarian minority. On the Securitate's orders, Tőkés was supposed to move from his church in Timișoara, where he was revered by his parishioners, to a small northern town. Having publicly refused to do so, he was to be forcibly removed on 15 December. His parishioners gathered early that morning in a show of solidarity. In line with traditional Timișoara solidarity across ethnic and religious groups, members of an ethnic Romanian group from a nearby Baptist church, also discriminated against by the regime, joined the vigil.

When undercover Securitate officers showed up at Tőkés's doorstep to remove him, they discovered that Dennis Curry (an American diplomat from the US Embassy in Bucharest), accompanied by a British journalist were already there. In line with Ceaușescu's policy of hinding his repressive practices from the West, the DSS had to temporarily take a step back, allowing the crowd to grow.

In the afternoon, 300 to 400 churchgoers lit candles. More people joined them in the early evening, at one point singing the symbolic old patriotic song *Wake up, Romanians! (Deșteaptă-te, române!)*. Given the presence of the Westerners, authorities claimed to make some concessions to Tőkés, which he announced to the crowd. Yet overnight a few unconvinced members of the reformed congregation remained in the area.

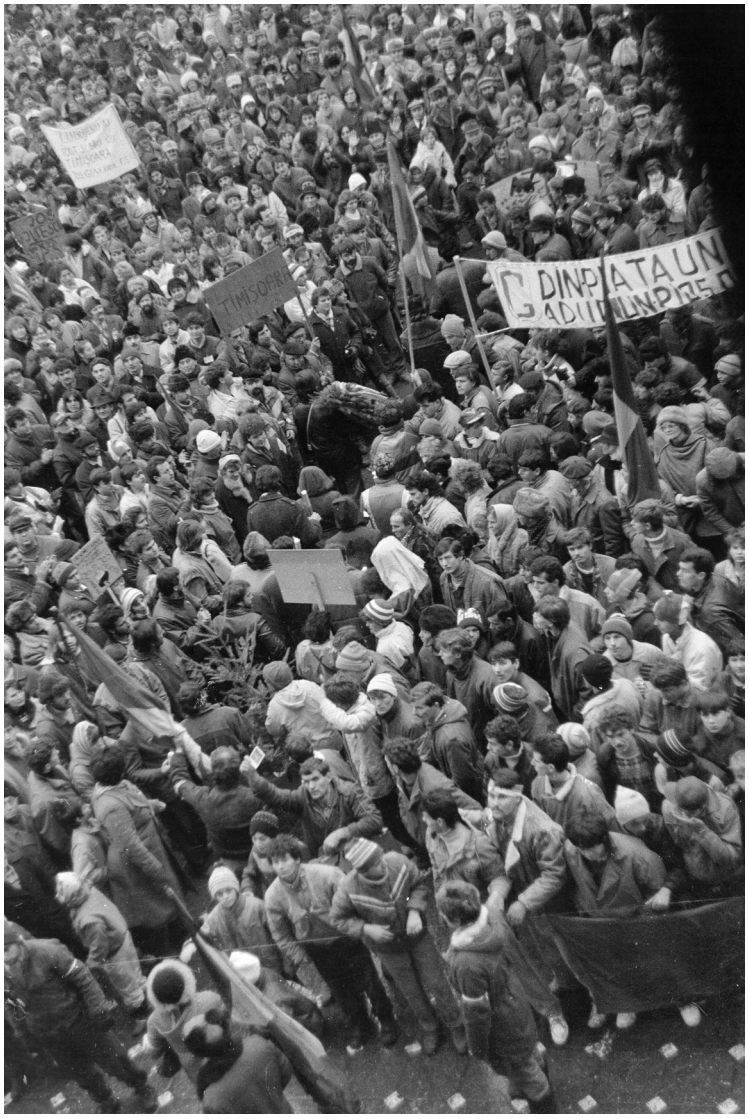
(Part of the narrative about the Timișoara uprising is based on the *Cronologia Revoluției de la Timișoara din 1989*, and from Tomoni 2015, including quotes from Marius Mioc, Miodrag Milin and others; and on research in the National College for the Study of the Securitate Archives, hereinafter CNSAS, as described in *Trăgători* 2019).

The Start of Large Anti-Government Protests. 16 December 1989

Early in the morning, people began to gather again around the home of pastor Tőkés. The house was surrounded by Securitate agents who photographed and filmed people in the crowd, trying to identify leaders and foreigners. (There were none, with the likely exception of

journalists and diplomats; see Marius Mioc article based on documents from the Revolution File, as the Dossier 11/P/2014 of the Military Prosecutor's Office of the Supreme Court is publicly known, originally pinpointed by Richard Andrew Hall; see Hall 2000; Mioc 2013). As the throng grew, for the first time, people started chanting "freedom!" and "down with Ceaușescu!". Although the DSS was on full alert all the way to Bucharest, and Iulian Vlad had notified the dictator, public relations concerns slowed the reaction of the repressive apparatus (in the context of Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship, "public relations concerns" refers to the dictator's aforementioned desire for international recognition, and the regime's efforts to hide its internal repression from Western diplomats and media). On the other hand, records show that the Securitate were quite surprised by the speed with which the mass of protesters grew and by their new-found courage. A sense of invulnerability of the heretofore all-powerful secret police, noted in the literature dealing with the downfall of totalitarian systems, may have led to the underestimation of the potential opposition (see e.g., Hall 2000).

Local Party officials showed up trying to appease the crowd, to no avail. Instead, they were booed. The first attempts were made to externalise the protest through nationalist propaganda: demonstrators were told that they are being manipulated by Hungarian 'irredentists,' who were ostensibly trying to get Transylvania back. The outrageous claim was met with further boos. The number of militiamen and plainclothes Securitate agents was growing as well. Scuffles started and the first arrests were made. Columns now numbering thousands of demonstrators were formed. They tried to walk peacefully towards the seats of communist power and were met with water cannons. They attempted to get workers from industrial areas to join them. People made barricades and, drenched in water, started to advance on the water cannons. Some reached the fire engines, breaking their hoses. Assault police units beat them with clubs and used tear gas. Provocateurs in civilian clothes, likely from DSS, infiltrated among the demonstrators and broke store windows in order to justify accusations of vandalism against them (The Timisoara File, Supreme Court, Military Section File 40/1991, "Coman şi alţii" i.e., "Coman and Others," vol. 21, testimony from 18 June 1991, pp. 54 and following; please note that some of the "Timisoara Files" were included in the collection *Procesul de la Timisoara*, vol. 1–9, 2004–2010). All throughout the day, hundreds of arrests were made. Although Iulian Vlad demanded that foreign agents be found as instigators, all those arrested were Romanian citisens. Most of them, workers, that is, the backbone of the Communist Party (ACNSAS, file 013906, vol. 7, the agenda of General Ştefan Alexie, pp. 44–48; see *Trăgători* 2019, pp. 98–99).



Demonstration in Piața Victoriei, Timişoara, December 1989. Fortepan / Dőri András, ID 218580

The Bloodiest Day of Timișoara. 17 December 1989

Before dawn, László Tőkés and his wife were forcibly taken from their home and sent to a village in Salaj county. It turned out to be too late, as the revolt against the Ceaușescu regime in Timișoara became seemingly unstoppable. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets while the dictator deployed the region's Interior Ministry forces (Securitate, Militia, border guards, firefighters) and the Army against the civilian population and the repression turned deadly.

Early in the morning, the head of the DSS, general Iulian Vlad ordered measures to prevent organised protests. This maneuver had the opposite effect, increasing the number and determination of the revolutionaries. Vlad assessed that "the situation was getting out of hand" and ordered the demonstrations in Timișoara be "radically liquidated" (ACNSAS, file 013906, vol. 7, the agenda of General Ștefan Alexie, p. 37v.). Yet at noon, the protesters managed to temporarily break into the Timiș County Party Committee building.

Army units including tanks were brought out in the streets for a show of force. Troops and resources of the Interior Ministry from several other towns were called to Timișoara. When caught, people were savagely beaten in the streets, arrested and further mistreated during interrogation (See for example, decision 6/1991, Romania's Supreme Court, Military Section, available online at website procesulcomunismului.com, section "Constatări referitoare la arestările ilegale de care au fost învinuiţi Sima şi Popescu," i.e., "Evidence regarding the illegal arrests defendants Sima and Popescu were accused of"). Those detained belonged to all social categories: workers, intellectuals, university and high-school students, including minors, and even Communist Party members. Yet the number of demonstrators grew and ad hoc leaders spoke to the crowds from symbolic locations such as the steps of the Cathedral, while being filmed by the Securitate.

An 'operative group' of 15 high level Interior Ministry officers led by General Emil Macri, head of the Securitate Economic Directorate, arrived in Timișoara. The group also included colonels Filip Teodorescu, deputy head of Securitate's Directorate III (Counterintelligence) and Gabriel Anastasiu, deputy head of Directorate I (Internal Intelligence) (Milin 2021, pp. 253–254). The group also included the head of the Military Prosecutor's Office, General Gheorghe Diaconescu. They tried to extract confessions from those arrested that they or their supposed 'organisers' were Hungarian irredentists or members of other 'foreign agencies.' No such connections were found (ACNSAS Document, file 013906, vol. 7, p. 36; see also *Trăgători* 2019, p. 93).

At that moment, the DSS was in fact aware of the size of the protests ("they still gather by the thousands") and their political demands, the most frequently heard slogans being "Down with Ceaușescu!" and "Freedom." Yet, in keeping with the totalitarian taboo, these were not relayed to Bucharest. Instead, the secret police tried to feed the dictator's obsession that foreign actors had organised and were fomenting the unrest.

In a teleconference at midday with top political, military and Interior Ministry leaders, the dictator decreed both a 'state of war' and a 'state of necessity' in Timișoara: "all the troops shall immediately receive live ammunition." He claimed that the "hooligans'" action "was prepared in advance by foreign agencies abroad [sic!] and by anti-socialist circles both in the East and in the West." The dictator's panic became apparent in his orders: anyone from his entourage who "did not act properly" was to be dismissed "with no discussion." During that teleconference, Nicolae Ceaușescu hid the fact that the Securitate forces had already been ordered to use "combat weapons, including bullets" in Timișoara. He falsely insisted that the country was under an external attack in order to justify a state of war and the use of the Army. Yet, typically for the duplicitous nature of his propaganda, the repressive measures were aimed at anyone who "attempted a demonstration," not only at "foreign groups and agents" (see "Transcript of the Recorded Discussions during the Teleconference of N. Ceaușescu on 17 December 1989," File 24/1991 of Romania's Supreme Court, Military Section, "Coman și alții," vol. 19, f. 108, see also *Trăgători* 2019, p. 66).

He likely wanted to use the Army against the demonstrators because, on one hand, he was concerned that "the DSS alone would not be able to cope with the revolt." On the other hand, he was reasonably concerned that if the widely hated Securitate, which was associated with his regime's repression, was to be seen as the aggressor "in the streets," this would further turn the population against him.

On the same day, a group of senior Ministry of Defense officers, led by Ion Coman, arrives at the Timișoara airport. The group included Major General Ștefan Gușe, Lieutenant General Victor Stănculescu, Lieutenant General Mihai Chițac and others. After the teleconference of early evening, along with Minister of National Defense Vasile Milea, these generals conveyed Nicolae Ceaușescu's order for the military forces to be provided with live ammunition (see the *Cronologia Revoluției de la Timișoara din 1989*; see also Milin 2021, pp. 70–78, 315).

On that day, the Army started to fire warning shots. Over 70 people were shot dead and hundreds wounded. While some of these shootings could be attributed to regular military units, many could be traced to DSS forces infiltrated within those units, to "armed civilians in the area," snipers shooting from civilian buildings around military units and Securitate operatives shooting from cars passing by military positions around the city. Such shootings occurred in front of the Cathedral, around the City Hall and the Opera Square, around Decebal Bridge, near the County Party Committee, Calea Lipovei and Calea

Girocului. Along with men and women, children were also killed. In the 1991 indictment of the "Timișoara Lot" there is ample evidence for the deliberate attempt by the Securitate to dissimulate its crimes and pin them on the Army (see Rado 2010; *Trăgători* 2019, pp. 77–80; and Timisoara File, Dossier 24/1991 of the Supreme Court of Justice, Military Section, "The Lot of 25" i.e., "Coman and Others," vol. IV, pp. 2285–2286, 2363, 2378–2379; vol. XIX, pp. 196–197, vol. XXI, p. 197, etc.). For example, in one such case, "Judging by the appearances, the gunshots which produced three deaths and several wounded could have been fired by the military. In reality, they were shot by DSS officers infiltrated among them." Ioana Bărbat's testimony about the death of her mother, Lepa Bărbat, and wounding of her father was relevant. Securitate counterintelligence (Directorate VI) captain Vasile Joițoiu was investigated and tried for the shooting of the Bărbat couple (Directorate IV, military counter-intelligence, or U.M. 0632, belonged to the Securitate, see entries in the CNSAS short dictionary of Securitate terms, *Index de Termeni…*, pp. 8–9). In 1991 he was sentenced to 18 years in prison by a Military Court, but was later retried and in the end, against the available evidence, acquitted (see *Trăgători* 2019, p. 306).

There are clear indications in the dictator's speeches and the Securitate diary entries that on that day, the secret police took into account the possibility that the revolt could spread to other cities, including the capital (ACNSAS, document 013906, vol. 7, Diary of General Ștefan Alexie, entry of 17 December 1989, f. 34v.; see also Nicolae Ceaușescu, Transcript of recorded teleconference of 17 December 1989, "Nota de redare a discuţiilor de pe banda de magnetofon privind teleconferinţa ţinută de N. Ceauşescu în ziua de 17.12.1989," Timisoara File 24/1991, Romania's Supreme Court of Justice, Military Section "Coman and Others," vol. 19, p. 108; see also *Trăgători* 2019, p. 66). Of significant concern for the DSS was the "operational situation in the army," made primarily of conscripted youth (ACNSAS, document 013906, vol 7, Diary of General Alexie, 17–18 December 1989; see also *Trăgători* 2019, p. 98). Hence the suspicion of disloyalty and the need to instill in soldiers the idea that in Timișoara "Hungarian irredentists" and other "foreign agents" under cover as "tourists" were trying to "destabilise and break up the country." The reality on the ground worked against this indoctrination: the soldiers could see and hear, with their own eyes and ears, that the protesters in front of them were Romanian citizens, fed up with an abusive regime responsible for the harsh living conditions, just like them. In fact, both the dictator and the Securitate started to take

Piața Victoriei after the dispersion of the protest, Timişoara, December 1989. Fortepan / Urbán Tamás, ID 47091

into account the possibility of losing control of the Army (and thus power), and the need to trigger the "resistance struggle," which we will detail in a following section (ACNSAS, file 013906, vol. 7, general Ştefan Alexie's Diary entries for 17–18 December 1989, see *Trăgători* 2019, p. 69; In that day's teleconference, the dictator said: "We must mobilise the Party, the youth, we must form defense detachments" from "youth guards," "well trusted Party activists," etc., clearly not relying entirely on uniformed soldiers of the Army any longer. See the above-referenced Transcript of recorded teleconference of 17 December 1989, see *Trăgători* 2019, p. 69). A coded announcement was published the next day (18 December) in the Party Youth *Scânteia Tineretului* newspaper, whereby the "resistance fighters" were put on standby (*Scânteia Tineretului*, Year XLV, Series II, no. 12609, 18 December 1989, p. 5).

The bloodiest day of the Timişoara uprising was also a turning point in the events: the regime realised that the shootings, arrests and beatings would not deter the people from fighting with bare hands for their freedom and dignity. It also showed that Army conscripts were not willing to kill their co-nationals in the streets and lower and mid-level Army officers, who had not been trained and indoctrinated to the point of murdering unarmed civilians, were by and large not ready to do so either.

More Bloodshed, More Determination. 18 December 1989

Perhaps in order to keep up an appearance of normalcy, Nicolae Ceaușescu left for a scheduled visit to Iran. He would be back two days later, to a new Romanian reality.

The County Hospital and other hospitals in Timișoara were surrounded by soldiers and people in plainclothes. They blocked access for families who wanted to see their loved ones who were wounded or dead. Prolonged confrontations between demonstrators and law enforcement occurred, and gunshots were fired in the area. Securitate officers interrogated the wounded, even those in serious condition. Some lightly wounded ended up dead. Attempts were still being made to find the leaders of the protests. Armed civilians – presumably from the DSS – continued to surreptitiously fire isolated shots into the crowd from various positions and cars (see Rado 2010; see also Supreme Court of Justice, Military Section's Dossier 24/1991 "Coman and Others," vol. IV, ff. 2285–2286; see *Trăgători* 2019, p. 77f.). On Elena Ceaușescu's order, over 40 dead bodies were removed from the morgue, transported to Bucharest and cremated in secrecy, in what was sardonically code-named "The Rose Operation." Their ashes were discarded in a sewer. The goal was to cover up the crimes and claim that the victims had in fact been "foreign intruders" who had fled back across the border.

Seeing that the violence could not contain the uprising but instead further angered the crowds, Iulian Vlad ordered the "shooting be done with more calculation," while investigations had to become even more "forceful" in order to find "the organisers" (ACNSAS, document 013906, vol. 7, Diary of General Ștefan Alexie, p. 45, see *Trăgători* 2019, p. 99). At the same time, "public discussions in enterprises" were to begin in order to convince workers in Timișoara that they were being manipulated by "infiltrating espionage agents" (ACNSAS, document 013906, vol. 7, Diary of General Ștefan Alexie, p. 48).

Workers Begin to Strike. 19 December 1989

The repression in Timișoara continued, but "with more calculation." However, demonstrators returned to the streets and the balance of power in Timișoara began to shift.

The attempt to massively indoctrinate workers against the demonstrators with the dictator's "foreign invasion" narrative was so absurd that it provoked the exactly opposite reaction. One testimony sums up this process:

> According to the "official line," the reason for the "state of emergency" (following which all gatherings of more than three people were prohibited) was due to some "fascists," "hooligans," and "drunks" who had caused "devastations." The workers were left with the question: "From where did so many 'fascists,' 'hooligans' and 'drunks' of all ages appear in Timișoara so suddenly?" (Elena 1990, p. 5).

Elena Ceaușescu sent two trusted members of the Politburo to Timișoara, Emil Bobu and Constantin Dăscălescu, but demonstrations continued throughout the city. The mostly female ELBA factory workers went on strike. Two hundred soldiers were sent there to "convince" the women to return to work. The effect was again the opposite of what was expected: the women started chanting "We will not work under arms!" and ended with "Down with Ceaușescu!" Other workers stopped work in protest.

In the meanwhile, "urgent" preparations for combat are accelerated in Bucharest. The "critical mission that loomed ahead" was the defense of the Supreme Commander in case his position was threatened, and demanded that its "resistance fighters" be ready for the "supreme sacrifice" (ACNSAS, file A 0000001, vol. 9, Diary of V Directorate officer, 19 December 1989, p. 64; see *Trăgători* 2019, pp. 104–105).

Victory of the Revolution in Timișoara. 20 December 1989

In the morning a general strike broke out in Timișoara. Only bread factories were still in operation. The workers set off in columns towards the city center, in a demonstration of solidarity with those who had lost their relatives and friends in the repression and who were now demanding the return of the bodies of their dead. The workers held placards and chanted the same anti-regime slogans as the revolutionaries.

Some soldiers and officers refused to carry out orders to contain the demonstration, and some even joined it (Rateș 1994, p. 334). The slogan "The Army is with us" echoed in the streets. For fear of soldiers' general fraternisation with the protesters, Army units were ordered back to

Scene from the street fights in Timişoara, December 1989. Fortepan / Fortepan/ Album040, ID 162258

the barracks. Given the dissimulation imperative of the Ceaușescu doctrine, without the cover provided by the Army's warning shots, Securitate snipers could not shoot any longer. Demonstrators took control of the city and Timișoara was declared "free of Communism."

Iulian Vlad knew from informants that "students from Timișoara" were coming to Bucharest on the "6:30 train," intent on spreading the revolt, and he ordered that they be stopped. At the same time he ordered "explanations" to be offered to workers in enterprises and to the troops: that in Timișoara "a plot had taken place aimed at the independence and sovereignty of the state." According to Ceaușescu's scenario, the plot had been organised as a result of an alleged agreement between the Soviet Union and the USA in the Malta meeting. That is, in exchange for its invasion of Panama, the US agreed to allow the USSR to invade Romania. It was debunked by both parties' transcripts of the meeting in question, which showed no interest on the part of the great powers for Romania during the Malta talks. At Malta, the Soviet leader was primarily interested in disarmament and assurances of American non-intervention in East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Besides worries related to the fall of communist regimes in most of the East European countries, he had to contend with problems at home, from unrest in Baltic States, Ukraine and the Republic of Georgia to a large miner's strike in Vorkuta (see "US Memorandums of Conversation, George H.W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev at Malta Summit, 2–3 December 1989," 2 December 1989, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, George Bush Presidential Library, National Security Council, Condoleezza Rice and Arnold Kanter files, Wilson Center Digital Archive, and "Soviet Transcript of the Malta Summit, December 2–3, 1989," National Security Archives, George Washington University).

Demonstration in Piața Victoriei, Timişoara, December 1989. Notable Romanian flags with Communist emblem cut out. Fortepan / Fortepan/ Album040, ID 162261

The Spreading of the Revolution. 21 December 1989

The victory of the Revolution in Timișoara provided a moral boost and impetus for protests elsewhere in the country. Young people from the city arrived in Bucharest on the morning of 21 December to help start the revolution in the capital. One of the slogans chanted during those days was "Today in Timișoara, tomorrow in the whole country!" The people of Timișoara had shown the country that victory was possible and that fear could be conquered through solidarity, cohesion and tenacity (see e.g., the testimonies on the Timișoara uprising in Milin 2021).

To quench his increasingly unfulfilled thirst for popular validation (albeit heavily staged), Nicolae Ceaușescu organised at midday on 21 December a large rally in front of the Central Committee building in Bucharest, where workers were called to show their allegiance to him and be "explained" about the "foreign plot to tear the country apart" in Timișoara. A string of events during the dictator's speech altered the course of Romanian history and contributed to his demise the next day.

Earlier in the morning, groups of protesters that included Timișoara students gathered in the Romana Square and other places around Bucharest. At the Central Committee, in front of a crowd made of

Nicolae Ceaușescu's portrait thrown from the town hall's window in Odorheiu Secuiesc, December 1989. Fortepan / Zoltán Zenglitzky, ID 300970

Nicolae Ceaușescu's dummy hanging on the lantern in Odorheiu Secuiesc, December 1989. Fortepan / Zenglitzky Zoltán, ID 162288

workers believed to be loyal communists who had been summoned and bused in, but who had themselves become disenchanted with the regime, the dictator started his speech by thanking "the organisers of this great popular gathering" (!). One protester group tried to enter the square chanting anti-Ceaușescu slogans. Securitate guards threw a GELA (Grenade with Light and Acoustic Effect) to repel them. The grenade was meant to create a moment of disorientation for the "enemies," enough for them to be captured. However, the resulting boom and crowd movements made other heads of security elsewhere in the square believe that the Central Committee is about to be attacked. People from an Army political branch responsible for crowd control (headed by Ceaușescu's brother, Ilie) were ordered to play tapes with deep roaring sounds on powerful loudspeakers meant to induce panic and clear the square (see Hodor 2018; and also Hodor 2016). A stampede ensued while people rushed towards the square's exits. Some were injured. Ceaușescu stopped his speech, looking confused for a few minutes. Since the moment was caught on live TV, it become another turning point of the Revolution: for the first time the country saw that something unscripted had happened during the dictator's heavily choreographed speech, and that he suddenly looked vulnerable. The episode took on an additional significance since news of the Timișoara uprising and the heavy-handed repression had already been disseminated throughout Romania by Radio Free Europe. This encouraged people to take to the streets and change their destiny.

Many in the rally attendance fled in panic, abandoning flags and portraits of the leader. Within fifteen minutes, their ranks were supplanted by plain-clothed DSS operatives and Ceaușescu resumed his speech (and the television broadcast resumed as well) (see Hodor 2018; Hodor 2016). He promised an increase in income so dismal that the population perceived it as a further insult.

The unrest in the streets of the capital grew steadily throughout the day. In late afternoon the epicenter of the protest became the University Square and the area near the Intercontinental Hotel. Like in Timișoara, significant military, Securitate, Militia and firefighting personnel were deployed to quash the protest. At 5:30 p.m. the first victims were run over by an army truck and shot at close range at the nearby Sala Dalles. However, like in Timișoara, the crowd grew, chanting anti-regime slogans. They built a barricade across the wide Magheru boulevard. After dark, simultaneously with the Army's warning shots in the air, victims fell from single bullet gunshot wounds

inflicted by snipers hiding among the soldiers or even protesters, or behind curtains in upper-floor apartments of surrounding buildings. Hundreds of demonstrators were caught, beaten, arrested and further mistreated while in detention through the night (see Cristea 2007).

Before midnight the makeshift barricade was broken by tanks, tear gas was used, the shooting became more intense and lethal and eventually the square was cleared. 50 demonstrators had been killed and hundreds wounded.

Significant demonstrations broke up on that day in several other cities, among them Lugoj, Caransebeș, Arad, Cluj, Cugir, Sibiu, Brașov, Targu Mureș, Alba Iulia. In some cases (such as Arad) there were no victims, while in others (particularly in Cluj) the confrontations with the Army and Interior Ministry forces turned deadly.

The Fall of Ceaușescu. 22 December 1989

Throughout the night, sanitation trucks washed the blood of the victims off pavements. But word of the carnage traveled to the industrial areas of Bucharest. Starting at 6:00 in the morning, tens of thousands of workers from factories and neighborhoods on the outskirts of Bucharest formed columns and started towards the center, chanting slogans such as "Down with Ceaușescu!," "We will die and we'll be free!," "Freedom!," "Come with us!" The Militia cordons that were supposed to block access to University Square and the Central Committee proved ineffective. Army units stood by, while some in the throng of demonstrators offered cigarettes and sweets to soldiers, placed flowers in their weapons' muzzles and eventually climbed on top of tanks. No shots were fired. The military rank and file tacitly sided with the Revolution, while the Interior Ministry forces, the last defense of the dictatorship, found themselves without cover and began to "vanish" (testimony by Radu Vasile, in Prosecutor's file 187/ S/ 92; also from personal agenda of former Chief Military Prosecutor Dan Ioan, see *Trăgători* 2019, p. 136, footnote 306). The belated actions or inactions of the Army were due in part to confusing orders from superiors, but also to the spontaneous decisions of a few local commanders (Hall 2000; *Trăgători* 2019, p. 135).

The dictator, who had spent the night in the Central Committee building, was informed of the critical state of affairs. After having for days blamed the defense minister Vasile Milea for the Army's failure to violently quash the uprising, with the workers closing in,

in a classic Stalinist fashion, he now blamed Milea for the dead of the previous days. Around 9:20 a.m., a public announcement claimed that "the minister of the Armed Forces acted as a traitor against the independence and sovereignty of Romania and, realizing that he was discovered, committed suicide." Most military commanders took the news with suspicion, believing that Milea was instead killed for having disobeyed the criminal orders. This led some of them to further, if still tacitly, shift their allegiance to the revolutionary movement. For example, an infantry captain withdrew his TAB (armored personnel carrier) from a key crossing point to the Central Committee building and a certain Colonel Carp removed the TABs surrounding the building (Deletant 1995, pp. 356–357). At around 10:30 a.m., the military subunits in the center began to withdraw from the demonstrators, while some tanks started to move with the crowds and turned their barrels towards the Central Committee building. These instant decisions allowed the demonstrators to occupy the square in front of the seat of communist power and besiege the building itself.

In the last, hastily called meeting of the Executive Political Committee (CPEx by its Romanian acronym), Nicolae Ceaușescu announced that General Vasile Milea had "sabotaged the implementation of the measures [sic!] and worked closely with foreigners," and that "we don't shoot workers." Yet in a sign of increased panic, Ceaușescu also instituted the "state of necessity" nationwide, and had this decree broadcast on Radio and Television: "Considering the serious violation of public order, through acts of terrorism, vandalism and destruction of public goods, pursuant to art. 75, point 4 of the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Romania, the units of the Ministry of National Defense, the Interior Ministry and the formations of the Patriotic Guards were put on 'alarm'"; "any public meetings, as well as movement in groups larger than 5 people" were prohibited (Zavalaș 2013; see *Trăgători* 2019, p. 135).

With tens of thousands of demonstrators gathered in the Palace Square in front of the Central Committee, this decree not only betrayed the dictator's level of delusion, but his reliance on a 'plan B' as well. Already during the last CPEx meeting he had forcefully challenged his cronies to "continue the fight." Then only a few hours later, on his way to a well-supplied bunker in Voinești, near Targoviște, he would invite his ad-hoc driver (Dr. Nicolae Decă) to join him in the "resistance fight" (*Căderea* 2022, p. 151). We will discuss this "resistance" in the next section.

As the protesters managed to storm the Central Committee building around noon, Ceaușescu and his wife, along with two trusted Politburo members and two personal guards ran to the roof and at 12:08 p.m. on 22 December, flew away in a helicopter, marking the victory of the Revolution. The helicopter had been summoned by General Neagoe (the chief of the V Directorate of the DSS, whose primary task was to ensure the safety of the Ceaușescus), along with the newly appointed Defense minister, Army General Victor Atanase Stanculescu, while the Securitate chief Iulian Vlad was also in attendance at the Central Committee. The two guards were Col. Rusu and Rat, and the pilot was Maluțan, all from the V Directorate. The very fact that none of these actors arrested the dictator puts to rest the idea of a *coup d'etat*, much propagated in the post-1990 media by former Securitate propagandists, their informants, and later on even by military prosecutors.

The "Resistance" Struggle

The Ceaușescus made a quick stop by helicopter at their main residence at Snagov (north of Bucharest) where the dictator made a few secretive phone calls, witnessed only by his DSS guard. Shortly after, in Sibiu, where Nicu Ceaușescu, the beloved youngest son of the couple reigned as Party Secretary, snipers in black overalls opened fire on demonstrators and a military unit from top floors of the Interior Ministry and from the attics of surrounding buildings. It was an unusual type of fire: one shot at a time, rather than automatic; rapidly shifting positions; using short-barrel automatic weapons that were easier to conceal, of smaller caliber and which produced a sound different from that of the Army AK-47 assault rifles. Their goal seemed to be provoking the Army and instilling panic, rather than outright conquering positions. This terror scene would become common in over ten Romanian cities over the next three days. Through precision direct fire or skillfully provoked friendly fire amid the Army and revolutionaries, the sniper attacks, coupled with a well-organised psychological warfare campaign through fake news disseminated via phone calls to military units, radio and TV stations, led to over 1,000 deaths. That is five times more than those registered before 22 December. The snipers were active primarily at night, when they employed night vision riflescopes (laser or infrared-based), that gave them a significant tactical advantage over

the poorly trained soldiers of the Army, who lacked such devices. Often the gunfire (live or simulated) occurred at regular intervals and specific times, when the soldiers' stress and confusion were heightened by lack of sleep. To conceal their location and identity, the snipers used muzzle flash suppressors and silencers, cartridge capture devices, multiple layers of clothing including civilian or Army uniforms, as well as fake ID's. Occasionally they employed explosive bullets (a kind of ammunition prohibited by the post-WWII Geneva Conventions), to increase the terror effect (the characteristics of the "resistance" struggle or terrorist attacks of December 1989 are described extensively in *Trăgători* 2019 and Căderea 2022, based on witness accounts, Securitate archive and the Revolution File).

Evidence from CNSAS, testimonies to prosecutors, army and intelligence reports have shown that the terrorist attacks represented the implementation of the "resistance struggle" long planned by Nicolae Ceaușescu and the Securitate for the case when they would lose power due to an Army coup or popular uprising (Hodor and Ursu 2020, pp. 398–428; see also the chapters dedicated to the "resistance struggle" in *Trăgători* 2019, and *Căderea* 2022; the same conclusion was reached by Richard Andrew Hall, see Hall 2000; see also Romanian Revolution of December 1989 website). The Securitate-trained fighters or "resisters," as they were called by their DSS colleagues, used secret tunnels and weapons caches and usually fired from safe houses and upper-floor apartments in the civilian buildings surrounding "strategic objectives" such as military units, the National Television, the Central Committee and other centers of communist power around the country (Revolution File Television section, vol. 95, ff. 214–216, letter "To the Unique Ministry of Defense Command," see *Căderea* 2022, p. 13. Please note that this document of 25 December 1989 is a detailed account of the terrorist actions of the "resistance struggle" fighters or "resisters," written by a high ranking Securitate officer, who years before had been involved in its design). Their tactics mirrored other guerilla or hybrid type of warfare, with roots in resistance movements such as that of the Yugoslav partisans of WWII. Their stated goal, per the plans discovered at CNSAS, was to create, through fear, chaos, human and materiel losses in the ranks of the more numerous enemy, the conditions for recapturing power (see Hodor and Ursu 2022, pp. 398–428). That the plans did not pan out is the result of a psychological miscalculation: once the population, in solidarity with the Army,

experienced the feeling of freedom, they were not willing to give it up, even at the heavy cost exacted on them by the terrorist attacks. Thus the Securitate-led counter-revolution failed in its main goal to bring back the dictator and his regime. On the other hand, the fear it instilled in the new leaders and the multiple levers of power the DSS maintained after December 1989 may have contributed to the sluggish and conflicted reform process that followed.

The Power Vacuum and the Creation of the National Salvation Front

Shortly after Ceaușescu's flight from the Central Committee, revolutionaries took over the building. They also entered the National Television station (TVR by its Romanian acronym), where at around 1 p.m. dissident poet Mircea Dinescu, along with actor Ion Caramitru, proclaimed on live TV the three short phrases that embodied people's elation at the un-hoped for victory: "We won! The dictator ran away! The Army is with us!" This broadcast decisively shaped the course of the events that followed.

From the balcony of the Central Committee, Petre Roman, a university professor turned revolutionary and son of a well-known communist, Valter Roman, announced the flight of the dictator to the crowd (Roman was a former volunteer in the International Brigades of the Spanish Civil War, as well as Comintern, and Romanian Communist Party activist, in his later years he had become disillusioned with Ceaușescu's leadership; his son suspected foul play when the elder Roman died in hospital in 1983, as a result of an unwarranted operation). Inside the Central Committee, new "governments" such as the one headed by old apparatchik Ilie Verdeț were soon proposed and promptly rebuked by the revolutionaries in the building. Eventually, they coalesced around Ion Iliescu, an old apparatchik himself who in recent years had been marginalised by Nicolae Ceaușescu for his reformism and budding popularity.

In the meantime, the freshly appointed defense minister Stănculescu sensed that his conscript-based army had de facto fraternised with the revolution. His own position at risk for his role in the repression of Timișoara, he promptly moved to the Ministry of Defense. After the watershed Dinescu moment live on TV and under pressure from some of the revolutionary ad-hoc leaders (Petre Roman and Mihai Montanu among them), Stănculescu arrested Ceaușescu's brother Ilie (who for

a short time had challenged him for the top military post). At this point Stănculescu probably recognised there was no way back for him. At around 2 p.m. he declared his allegiance to the Revolution on a phone call with Ion Iliescu and ordered the Army to arrest the fugitive dictator (based on the timing, i.e., 2:35 p.m., of Ion Iliescu's first speech on TVR on 22 December 1989, when he said "20 minutes ago I spoke with General Victor Stănculescu"; the transcript is available on Marius Mioc's website, Mioc 2008; see also *Revoluția română* on TVR YouTube channel).

Given the fact that the dictator had abandoned the seat of power, and no person, group or institution was recognised or credibly claimed the political leadership role until Stanculescu's declaration of allegiance at around 2 p.m., we consider this approximate interval (12:08 p.m. – 2 p.m.) as a power vacuum. At the same time, it must be noted that we found no evidence that even during this interval, the internal cohesion of the Ministry of Defence forces had crumbled.

In the afternoon, during meetings in the Central Committee and at the TVR, the group around Iliescu formed the National Salvation Front (known by its Romanian acronym FSN), which was to lead the country for the short term. The initial membership list included 40 names, notably former communist leader turned dissident Silviu Brucan (*Trăgători* 2019, pp. 353–356), former Securitate officer and diplomat turned radical dissident Dumitru Mazilu, Petre Roman, Army General Nicolae Militaru (who had been marginalised by Ceaușescu), and Mircea Dinescu. Both Brucan and Mazilu had been under house arrest until that morning (the night before Mazilu had in fact been arrested with his wife and subjected to rough treatment) (*Trăgători* 2019, pp. 276–278), while Militaru had been under close surveillance by the Securitate on suspicion of plotting the overthrow of the dictator, along with other generals (*Trăgători* 2019, pp. 345–253). Other members were the dissidents Doina Cornea, Ana Blandiana, Dan Deșliu, and László Tőkés, who would soon resign. Some of them later contended they had not even been apprised about their inclusion on the list. The FSN also included Army generals Stănculescu, Chief of Staff Ștefan Gușă (both of whom had been involved, and the former was later convicted for, the repression in Timișoara) and Gheorghe Voinea (see *Comunicat* 1989). The FSN Communiqué to the country formally abolished the dictatorship and the communist system, opening up the Romanian society to free elections, multi-party political system, separation of powers, free initiative in economy, guaranteed human rights, and joining the "European family" of nations. It was based

on Mazilu's program which he had drafted the day before and was barely able to conceal from the Securitate when they came to arrest him (*Trăgători* 2019, pp. 276–278).

As the terrorist attacks a.k.a. the "resistance struggle" raged around the Central Committee and TVR (as stated above in regard to the "resistance struggle," the goal of the "resisters," per the plans discovered at CNSAS and the initial testimonies by high-ranking Securitate officials, was to create, through fear and chaos, the conditions for bringing the Supreme Commander back to power), the principals of the FSN Council (hereinafter CFSN) retreated for the next three days within the heavily guarded Ministry of Defense. Under constant threat of sniper fire even there, realizing the terrorists were Ceaușescu staunch loyalists and fearing that the dictator might still be freed in a commando type of operation, they decided to organise a quick trial of the Ceaușescus, with the goal of executing them. The trial took place on 25 December 1989. Once the tape of the proceedings was shown on national TV, the terrorist activity suddenly began to taper off (whereas between 22–25 December 1989 there were in average around 300 dead each day, after that moment the number of victimes fell sharply – to 68, 36, 23, 10, on the 26, 27, 28, and 29 December, respectively; see Marin 2010).

This allowed the city streets to return to some level of normality and the CFSN to meet in the Central Committee building again and formalise the recent administrative decisions through decrees and laws (see Decree-Law no. 2, 27 December 1989, regarding the creating, organisation and functioning of the CFSN).

A Brief Overview of the Immediate Aftermath and Shifting Narrative of the Revolution

The Romanian Revolution achieved the main goals and aspirations of the Romanian people at the time, the first of which being to abolish the dictatorship and transition to democracy. Yet many of the CFSN leaders who hailed from former communist structures were not ready for an entirely free and fair election process. On 12 January 1990, large groups marched in the streets, challenging the new administration to increase political fairness and demanding justice for the crimes committed during the Revolution and counter-revolution. While those demands were embraced by more

reform-minded CFSN leaders such as Dumitru Mazilu, they were subsequently ignored, leading to further unrest. Mazilu was soon marginalised and he quit the CFSN. After receiving suspicious threats against himself and his family, he soon sought asylum in Switzerland (*Trăgători* 2019, pp. 276–278). More demonstrations, led by re-established main political parties (the National Peasants and the Liberals) followed on 28 January 1990.

After vowing not to turn the FSN into a political party, on 6 February 1990 Ion Iliescu did just that. Opposition parties saw it as unfair advantage in the forthcoming elections for Iliescu and his circle. The FSN leaders offered a concession: the transformation of the CFSN in the Provisional Council of National Unity (CPUN by its Romanian acronym), in which they invited opposition parties and figures. Yet, the FSN still dominated the CPUN.

In time, with help from former informants in the media, the former DSS officers' propaganda began to question the legitimacy of the Romanian revolution and found alternative culprits for the bloodshed of December 1989 (see Thomasson and Ursu 2020, pp. 437–448; Thomasson 2024). Because of these narratives, the roles of some of the main individual and institutional actors turned murkier or were even reversed, and the Romanian revolution became the most "entangled" and disparaged in the Eastern Bloc. Nestor Ratesh, the well-connected US correspondent of Radio Free Europe's Romanian service titled his book on the subject, *Romania: The Entangled Revolution* (Ratesh 1991). Similarly 'agnostic' (particularly on the critical question of the terrorists' identity), Peter Siani-Davies wrote in his book *The Romanian Revolution of 1989* (Siani-Davies 2005) about the difficulties in interpreting the "scripts and myths" of the revolution, stating that "a definitive history of these events may be impossible." This lack of clarity and justice for the crimes of the revolution was partially responsible for the slow pace and at times violent transition to democracy in Romania. Yet in recent years, troves of new documents became available from the prosecutors' long running investigations (known publicly as the "Revolution File"), the archives of the DSS, and various other sources, which provided a significantly clearer picture of the Romanian revolution and the counter-revolution of December 1989 (see Dan 2012; Ursu 2023, pp. 13–30, Ursu 2024, pp. 7–30; Ursu 2017a; Ursu 2017b; Ursu 2017c; *Căderea* 2022; for new and ongoing research, see Roland O. Thomasson's blog and Richard Hall's substack).

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