

The Overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu. A memoir of Bucharest.

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The Romanian revolution was for me, my own personal revolution. It brought me – to use Andy Warhol's expression - my 'fifteen minutes of fame' for it catapulted me and Romanian studies at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies of the University of London, into the public eye. On 16 December 1989, I was watching television news coverage at home featuring protests in Timișoara, when the telephone rang. It was a call from John Simpson, Chief Foreign Affairs Correspondent of BBC Television, inviting me to come down to the news centre in Wood Lane to discuss the situation in Romania. Earlier in the year, in May, John had asked me to suggest contacts in Romania for a documentary which he was fronting on Ceaușescu draconian austerity measures and his plans to 'phase out' i.e. destroy, up to half of Romania's 14,000 villages. John had wanted me to accompany him on that visit but I was unable to do so since I had been declared *persona non grata* in the previous December by the Romanian authorities for my 'hostile comments in the British media on the Romanian regime.'¹ Now, a car was sent to pick me up and I brought John up to date with Ceaușescu's attempts to shore up his regime by ever-increasing appeals to national unity and stage-managed displays of 'support' for his policies, culminating in his address to the Fourteenth Party Conference on 20 November 1989 for which he received more than thirty standing ovations.²

On 20 December, after Ceaușescu's televised address to his people which was monitored by the BBC, John put me on the spot by asking, 'Well, Dennis, is this the end for Ceaușescu or not?' Until Timișoara I had been confident that Ceaușescu would buck the trend for change in Central

¹ John and his camera crew were detained by the *Securitate* in Cluj for several hours and their video-tape 'wiped' and returned to them. What the *Securitate* did not know was that the BBC had the technology to restore 'wiped' tapes and upon John's return he asked me to translate interviews recorded with Romanians.

² After the meeting with John I was driven to the World Service studios at Bush House where I gave what was to become an almost daily series of interviews on events in Romania until 29 December when I left for the country to join John.

Europe but his appearance on television flanked by his stony-faced gerontocratic wife, and an almost fossilized Politburo, instilled in me a conviction that this moment marked the beginning of the end of his regime and I replied, 'Yes.' 'Right, then I'm off to Romania but I want you to be my anchor here in my office while I am away', was his response. And so began a week of virtually uninterrupted work for me in Wood Lane – I did not return home for two nights but slept in an office at the BBC. As 'anchor' in London I had access to the reports from the major international news agencies as they came through on a teleprinter, as well as to television 'feeds' from camera crews from thirty-six international TV companies dispersed around Romania. On 26 December, John, who had entered Romania with a camera-crew by road from Yugoslavia since Bucharest's Otopeni airport had been closed after a serious friendly-fire incident, called me from the Romanian capital with an invitation to join him with a second crew on the assumption that with Ceaușescu's execution the previous day, the ban on my entry to the country would no longer be applied. On 29 December, I flew to Warsaw with two BBC camera crews and reporters, and after a four-hour wait we caught a Balkan airlines flight to Sofia.³ Upon arrival we slept fitfully on the floor of the airport until we secured cars for the journey overland to Bucharest. The cars were two dark-blue Mercedes hired from *Hertz*, and a black jeep, all three driven by Bulgarians who were each accompanied by what we took to a security officer. in mufti. We drove gingerly through deep snow up to the Danube at Ruse where, barely awake after our previous sleepless the night, we decided to rest before crossing into Romania. At dinner in our hotel we met up with a couple of British reporters who had just come out of Romania *en route* to the UK. In my state of exhaustion their graphic accounts of shooting in Bucharest failed to move me in any way but did make enough of impact for the two news producers, who had clearly come well-prepared for signalling our affiliation, to unfurl two large Union Jacks and secure them over the bonnets of each of the Mercedes.

At daybreak on the next morning, 31 December, we drove in our lone convoy of three vehicles across the Danube bridge to the Romanian frontier at Giurgiu. As the only speaker of Romanian in our group I acted as spokesperson, explaining to the duty passport officer that we were joining another BBC team already in Bucharest, and without much ado, and payment of forty

³ One crew, reporter, and director worked for BBC 2, the second for BBC Breakfast News.

dollars for each of the visas, which he stamped into our passports, he wished us well, warning us that there had been sporadic shooting in some of the villages on our route to Bucharest. In fact, in every village through which we passed during our sixty-kilometre journey, the inhabitants, men, women and children, applauded us, giving the Churchillian V- for-Victory sign, in recognition perhaps both of our flag as well as their own victory over oppression. We reached Bucharest at midday and joined John Simpson at the Intercontinental Hotel. Two of the windows in my room, on the eleventh floor, had bullet holes. John advised me not to stray in front of them, to pull the curtains at night, and use only the table lamps because snipers were still active.

Fear of snipers certainly kept Bucharesters off the streets at nightfall, a state that I soon became acutely aware of that very evening since John asked me to accompany him by car to a district in the south of the city to interview the widow of a young man who had been shot on the evening of 22 December during anti-Ceauşescu protests. Occasional gun-shots could be heard as the car, driven by our cameraman, made its way slowly through several inches of snow. At one point the tyres lost their grip and we were stuck, a lone vehicle under the light of a single street-lamp, at the foot of the half-completed *Casa Republicii*, Ceauşescu's gigantic palace, the largest building in Europe, shrouded in darkness. As further cracks of gun-fire rang out close by, John turned to me, sitting in the back seat beside Wendy, red-head Welsh producer, and said, 'Well, Dennis, you're expendable, please get out and give us a push.' He then smiled, got out of the car with me, and we together we lost no time in putting our combined weight behind the boot. To our relief, the wheels gripped immediately and we smartly resumed our seats. But was not the last of our hitches. Without a street map, and in a virtual blackout – the product of Ceauşescu's energy-saving measures – we could not locate the widow's address which I was aware was close to an army barracks. Anxious to get directions, I wound down my window and called out to a woman trudging through the snow carrying two bulging plastic bags. When I asked for her help, she dropped the bags and screamed, '*Securitate, securitate*'. Immediately people rushed from their houses and surrounded our car. I got out and produced my passport, hoping that the woman would realize from my accent and physiognomy that I was not Romanian, but in her hysteria she shrieked, 'We know you *Securitate* people' and pointing to our Mercedes (no longer with its Union Jack), 'you use dark cars with special number plates (we had Bulgarian plates), and fake identity.' I then asked Wendy to get out of the car and said calmly to the woman, 'Look, do you really think

that this lady is *Securitate*, no, she is from the BBC, we are all from the BBC.’ In the front rank of the crowd was an elderly man who had been following this exchange intently. He now stepped forward, put his hand on the lady’s arm to calm her down, and then, with a smile, said, ‘I believe you, you must understand that our desire to see the end of Ceaușescu has created a sense of paranoia in many. How can we help?’ I translated his words for our team. His trust in us satisfied the crowd which quickly dispersed. In fact, we happened to be only a street away from the widow’s home. The elderly man knew her and walked alongside the car until we reached her house. His presence seemed to reassure the widow, who with a young child holding her hand, invited us in. After the interview John discretely gave her a wad of banknotes and we returned to our car, and to the hotel.⁴

I have recounted this incident in an effort to give some sense of the atmosphere reigning in Bucharest in the immediate aftermath of Ceaușescu’s overthrow. Paranoia, mistrust, uncertainty about the future, a glut of firearms in circulation, some in the hands of young men fired by *machismo*, who had little idea of how to use a rifle or an automatic weapon. Indeed, many of the conscripts whom I witnessed exchanging fire with snipers, returned fire over the heads of civilians, placing the latter in a direct line of fire from the adversary. Such basic failures in training resulted in many friendly-fire casualties in Bucharest. The danger posed by snipers was vividly brought home to me. On the evening of 7 January 1990, I was making my way along a lugubrious street in the centre of the city to visit a family friend when, stepping into the light of a street lamp, I heard a sudden crack and then ping from a low wall fronting a house which I was passing. On the pavement just in front of me lay the head of a bullet. As I bent down to examine it, a militiaman, rifle in hand, came running out of the shadows and shouted to me to get out of the light. I left the bullet, moved to the shadow of a car and crouched down beside it. After a few minutes the militiaman, who had taken cover behind another vehicle, crept forward, picked up the bullet, and handed it to me. It was still warm.⁵ ‘There’, he said, ‘you were a foot away from death. There is a sniper in the block of flats opposite and we are trying to take him out.’ He asked me what I was

⁴ The interview was included in one of John’s pieces from Bucharest and after it was shown, elicited a number of donations from viewers which were sent to the BBC – including a particularly generous one from a lady in Belgium. On a subsequent visit to Bucharest, a couple of months later, I went to the widow’s home to hand over the monies, but she had moved away without leaving a forwarding address with her neighbours. I returned the Belgian lady’s donation to her, and the other sums to the BBC.

⁵ I still have it.

doing on the street at that particular hour and I explained that I had come to visit a friend. He asked the name of the friend and the number of his house and from my accent realized that I was not Romanian. When I told him that I was British, he made the sign of the cross and exclaimed, 'God was watching over you tonight.' Fortunately, I was only a few steps away from my destination. He accompanied me to the gate and then retreated into the gloom. I shouted my thanks to him.

The ubiquity of snipers in Bucharest spawned a host of rumours about their aims and allegiance. Indeed, rumour factories were the only institutions which, alongside the *Securitate*, had worked overtime during Ceaușescu's rule. On the streets and in the press the snipers were generally dubbed 'terrorists'. Some Romanians regarded them as *securiști*, members of the *Securitate*, while informed commentators described them more specifically as rogue elements of USLA (*Unitate Specială de Luptă Antiteroristă*), the anti-terrorist unit of the *Securitate*, who, until Ceaușescu's execution on Christmas Day, fought to restore the dictator to power, but who, after his death, gradually faded into the shadows. A team of three or four men who broke into the residence of the British Ambassador opposite the Romanian TV studios on Strada Emil Pangratti and installed a machine-gun on the roof fitted the description of all the above categories. They sprayed the studios for more than an hour before tank-fire reduced the residence to a burned-out shell.⁶ The gunmen were never caught.

This incident can be catalogued alongside the sudden explosion of gunfire which erupted in the main square facing the Central Committee building on the evening of 22 December, just as the crowd was being addressed by a series of speakers expressing their condemnation of the Ceaușescu regime. Who carried out the attack, which left the building pockmarked with bullet-holes and set the adjacent university library on fire, has never been established. It left several people dead and some argue that it was a 'diversion', staged in order to give credibility to the existence of 'counter-revolutionary' forces who were attempting to restore the dictator to power, and therefore to give legitimation to the creation of the 'National Salvation Front', proclaimed barely hours earlier by Ion Iliescu. This view sat comfortably with the argument that a popular

⁶ The ambassador was not at home at the time, but his wife and three daughters were. On the intrusion of the gunmen they took shelter in the basement and spent a couple of terrifying hours there before the shooting ceased. They survived unharmed physically, but were so traumatized that the ambassador withdrew with them to Sofia.

revolt, begun in Timișoara, was hijacked by second-echelon Communists led by Iliescu and turned into a 'revolution'. Others went further and claimed that the events in Timișoara were the first step in a conspiracy, led by anti-Ceaușescu Communists fronted by Iliescu, to overthrow Ceaușescu but to maintain Communists, if not the Party, in power. Many Romanians felt that they had been duped, and that the sacrifice made in December 1989 had been to no avail. Their view may be summed up in the verdict that while the Communist Party was declared dead in January 1990, no one ever produced a death certificate. They pointed to the presence of Lieutenant-General Victor Stănculescu, First Deputy Minister of Defence under Ceaușescu, in the National Salvation Front Provisional Government. Stănculescu, who had played, it was proved later, a prominent role in the repression by the army of demonstrations in Timișoara on 17 and 18 December, was appointed Minister of the National Economy on 28 December 1989 and held the position until 16 February 1990, when he became Minister of Defence.⁷ My presence in Bucharest with the BBC affords me another reminiscence of the aftermath of the revolution, one involving Stănculescu.

On 6 January, I was with the actor Ion Caramitru, who, together with the poet Mircea Dinescu had been amongst the first figures to appear on Romanian TV after Ceaușescu's flight from Bucharest with an emotional appeal to support the revolution. Caramitru was an old friend and on learning of my presence in Bucharest with the BBC invited me to the seat of the NSF Provisional Government in Palatul Victoria in the centre of Bucharest where he had been given an office. He offered me a position as head of cultural affairs for the county of Bacău, saying that he wanted to replace all Ceaușescu yes-men in the field of culture. When I asked what was special about Bacău he replied that it had just come to his lips but that I could choose any county I wanted. I thanked him profusely for the honour but declined on the grounds that local Romanians would find it difficult to accept a non-Romanian in the position of cultural affairs director of their county. Whilst we were talking the phone rang and Caramitru picked it up. At the other end of the line was General Stănculescu who asked me to pay him a visit and gave me his location. He did not

⁷ Stănculescu was replaced on 28 June 1990. He had been tasked by Iliescu, Brucan and Gelu Voican-Voiculescu, the senior National Salvation Front triumvirate, with the organization of the Ceaușescu's trial. Stănculescu and Lieutenant-General Mihai Chițac, head of the chemical troops and commander of the Bucharest garrison, were charged in January 1998 with 'incitement to commit murder' for their part in events in Timișoara. They were each sentenced by the Romanian Supreme Court on 15 July 1999 to 15 years jail for the murder of 72 people and the wounding of 253 others during the uprising in Timișoara on 17 and 18 December 1989. Both generals lodged an appeal against their conviction. Their sentences were upheld by the Supreme Court on 25 February 2000 but further appeals delayed their application. Eventually, on 15 October 2008, the Supreme Court upheld once again the sentence and both generals are currently in prison, although often released for medical treatment.

have transport available for me and asked Caramitru to provide a vehicle from the government pool at Palatul Victoria. I agreed to go and jumped into a jeep that was waiting for me at the entrance. The driver then requested me to give him directions to Stănculescu's office. He explained that he had been drafted in from the provinces together with other drivers since the new Government did not trust the Communist Party drivers who had been laid off and that he was unfamiliar with the geography of Bucharest. Fortunately, I knew how to get to the General's office.

Upon my arrival I was escorted by two armed guards in civilian clothes up to the fourth floor of a building on Calea Victoriei and ushered into Stănculescu's room. He, too, was in mufti. He explained that he wanted to get an urgent message to the British Government but since the ambassador had withdrawn to Sofia, did not know whom to contact in Bucharest. He had been told that I was in the capital with the BBC and asked me to pass his message on. It was a request for medicines, food, and assistance with restoring the country's energy (electrical) generating capacity. I told John Simpson about the message. He transmitted it by satellite link to London. I informed him that I knew that at least two British diplomats had remained on duty at the embassy and said that it would be appropriate to try to contact them. He agreed and I walked to the embassy. I showed my passport to some Romanian soldiers at the entrance and was allowed in. In the courtyard I found the military attache, Lt-Col Bill Chesshyre, to whom I related General Stănculescu's message. Colonel Chesshyre thanked me for taking the trouble to contact him and a couple of months later I was thanked personally for my gesture by David Mellor, Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

During my meeting with General Stănculescu I seized the opportunity to ask him about his actions on 22 December, the day of Ceaușescu's flight. His account was largely consonant with one which he gave in 2005.⁸ He told me that he had been informed on 22 December by army telephone, which he had at home, that he should go to the Central Committee. General Vasile Milea, the Minister of Defence, was still alive.⁹ Stănculescu had come home from hospital – at 9.30 am. The officer on the phone told him that the Minister (of Defence) wanted to see him at the Central Committee. Shortly afterwards the officer phoned again to say that something had happened at the Central Committee, without saying what, and that Stănculescu should go there

⁸ See Dinu Săraru în dialog cu Victor Atanasie Stănculescu, *Generalul Revoluției cu piciorul în ghips*, Bucharest, 2005, pp.39-45.

⁹ Milea committed suicide that morning.

straightaway. Then a car came, sent by Silviu Curticeanu, head of Ceaușescu's office, with two or three men from the Fifth Directorate (personal bodyguard) of the *Securitate* who told Stănculescu that Curticeanu had sent them to pick him up immediately and take him to the Central Committee. They told Stănculescu on the way that Milea had committed suicide.

Stănculescu went up to the first floor and was met by Curticeanu who told him that 'the comrades' i.e. the two Ceaușescus, were waiting for him. The latter were waiting for him, not in Ceaușescu's office, but in the ante-room and asked him, 'What's wrong with you, what kept you?' Stănculescu replied that he had injured his leg in an accident and that it was in a cast. 'Milea has betrayed us and has committed suicide', they exclaimed. They were already panicking. 'Here's the situation. There are some army units which are to come to the square (in front of the Central Committee). Find out where they are and when they are coming.' On the same floor there was a room full of generals – the operational command of the army – among them General Voinea, the head of the Bucharest garrison, and General Eftimescu, head of the operational section of the General Staff. In a second room a communications centre for the army had been set up. The generals told Stănculescu that two regiments, one of tanks, the other of other armoured vehicles, had set out from Soseaua Olteniței for the square on the orders of Milea. Stănculescu left the room and in the communications centre found a captain, Marius Tufan, and asked him discreetly, 'are you in contact with the two units?' At his reply that he was, Stănculescu told him 'Pass on my order that they should return to barracks.' Stănculescu went back to report to the Ceaușescus. He believed that given their state of agitation that had come into the corridor. He told them that the two units were on the way.

Ceaușescu ordered him to go back and tell the units to get to the Central Committee more quickly. Stănculescu went back and considered what to do next. He decided to repeat his order. He found Tufan and told him to transmit a general message saying that he had given the order that the two units should return to barracks.

Stănculescu, by way of a parentheses, had this to say about Tufan: 'Tufan is very discreet, he doesn't speak with anyone and keeps out of the public eye but he knows a lot. He is the officer whose pistol was taken from him by Milea and Tufan went after him. He told me what had happened with Milea. The latter had emerged from Ceaușescu's office in an agitated state and 'came up to me, as I was in the corridor, and asked me for my pistol.' You know, Minister', Tufan

said, 'that you do not hand over your pistol'. 'Come on, hand it over', Milea ordered. I [Tufan] followed him up to the sixth floor and he went into his office.' That was what he [Tufan] told me. He now says that there were some twelve officers, from the patriotic guards, from the army, who were near the office. A shot was heard, several officers went in and they found the Minister shot.¹⁰

Stănculescu returned to the Ceaușescus and reported that the two units were on the way but the pressure in the square was growing. He said to them: 'in my opinion it would be better if you left the building !. 'How can we leave, in what ? ', they replied. 'The only solution now is by helicopter', he said, without knowing that there was not enough open space on the roof because of the aerals which the *Securitate* had to dismantle to allow a helicopter to land; a second helicopter had nowhere to land. The Ceaușescus went back to their office, spoke with Curticeanu, with someone else there, with Manea Mănescu, Stănculescu believed, because they had summoned Mănescu.¹¹

None of the other generals and officers came out of their offices, not one asked Stănculescu what they should do. He claimed that they avoided him because since he had been caught up in events in Timișoara he did not know what role each one had played in the violence in Bucharest. He learned later that General Hortopan was alongside Milea, and that Eftimescu transmitted Milea's order for the regiments to come from Olteniței. This he said he discovered only two months later, when he was Minister of Defence. Ceaușescu asked him: 'How long will it take for the helicopter to come ?' 'If you give agree to call for it, in half an hour !'. Ceaușescu agreed. Stănculescu then telephoned General Rus, the head of the air-force, to ask him how long it would take him to send two helicopters.

The idea of the helicopters had come, Stănculescu recounted, around 11 am, or 11.15. The Ceaușescus had gone into the President's office, but Stănculescu could see that they were frightened. They were already panicking, they had, he said, turned yellow, they were fearful, perspiring, agitated. It was then that the idea [of the helicopters] occurred to him. He telephoned General Rus from the communications centre and the latter told him that the helicopters would arrive but General [Marin] Neagoe, the head of the Fifth Directorate [of the *Securitate*] had to give his order as well – that was the procedure – the order had to come from two channels. Rus asked

¹⁰ Ibid., pp.40-41.

¹¹ Manea Mănescu (1916-2009) was a brother-in-law of Ceaușescu and a member of his inner circle.

Stănculescu to check that the roof could take the helicopters and Stănculescu told Neagoe to verify this. Neagoe's men were equipped with automatic weapons, grenades, and cartridge belts and they patrolled the corridors. There were not more than 50 or 60 of them in the building. Not one of them was in military uniform. It was only after the news spread of Ceaușescu's departure by helicopter that Neagoe's men disappeared and arms were found in various rooms, when the building was stormed by demonstrators and all kinds of 'persons, revolutionaries and pseudo-revolutionaries, helped themselves to weapons.'¹² Neagoe went off to check whether the helicopters could land and sent a colonel, a deputy of his, to do this. Stănculescu escorted the two Ceaușescus to the lift, accompanied by three bodyguards and, he thought, Mănescu, although he could not be sure.

Stănculescu stayed below and told the adjutant Mateiciuc to go up to see where the Ceaușescus could get out to the helicopter. The adjutant went up in the second lift which arrived after the Ceaușescus who got onto the roof – Stănculescu was told - through a window on the sixth floor to reach the roof terrace. Probably they were given a chair to climb on to get out through the window onto the terrace. The *Securitate* had already taken down several aerials. The second helicopter was unable to land. The adjutant told Stănculescu that the first helicopter had already landed when the Ceaușescus got to the roof. When Mateiciuc told Stănculescu that that the Ceaușescus had got into the helicopter Stănculescu, too, took the lift to the sixth floor so that he could get rid of his pistol and leave the building. Mateiciuc was also in civilian clothes and he and Stănculescu went into an office, opened a desk drawer, and deposited their pistols. They then went down the stairs and left the Central Committee building by the main door, which was being besieged by revolutionaries.¹³

Mateiciuc stayed behind. He wanted to get to the ministry as quickly as possible to find out what was happening to the Ceaușescus. When Stănculescu got to the main entrance the building had not yet been invaded at this point, but he did pass some people – he did not recognize them – as he went out of the door and limped down the steps into the streets. Someone in the crowd asked him if he was on their side and he said 'yes'. At the same time, attempts were being made to

¹² These are the terms used by Stănculescu.

¹³ Through his actions Stănculescu could claim, if necessary to Ceaușescu, that he was helping him to escape the building, and to the revolutionaries, that he was removing Ceaușescu from the seat of power, thereby facilitating his overthrow.

bring an amplifier to the entrance amidst cries of 'clear the way so that we can contact our people ! [that is, those who had already reached the main balcony of the Central Committee.] Then Stănculescu took a flag with a long pole from someone and carrying it horizontally, said to those on his right and left: 'Clear the way so that I can get to the car.' People were asking: 'What did you do to your leg ?' 'It's in plaster', he replied and then he was congratulated 'for having the courage and strength' to be with them there.

Stănculescu withdrew through the crowd to entrance D of the Central Committee building (strada ministerului) and then on to the Ministry of Food Production which was in the old Ministry of Defence Building, in the hope of finding a car. His aim was to get to the Ministry of Defence in Drumul Taberei, to take control of the army. It was only when he reached the Ministry of Food Production that he asked General Rus, on a government phone, to follow Ceaușescu's helicopter. When he got to the Ministry of Defence he received the first news from Rus about the helicopter landing at Snagov and its departure from there. While at the Ministry of Food Production he told people there that he needed a car to get to the Ministry of Defence but was informed that there was none available. He then phoned his own office and got the same reply. He instructed them to send an officer in his own private car to collect him. When he reached the Ministry of Defence he asked them to get a doctor to cut the plaster cast from his leg.

The decision to put his leg in plaster was, Stănculescu told me on a subsequent occasion, a family ploy. After he got back at about 4 am (22 December) from Timișoara his driver told him about events in the centre of Bucharest. He took a shower and told his wife he was leaving for the ministry. His wife said: 'No you are not. I'd rather hit you over the head with a vase and knock you out !' 'It would be better if you went to the hospital and get a doctor to admit you.'¹⁴ He followed her advice. When he got to the hospital he asked for the duty doctor and was told it was General Niculescu. He explained his situation to him and said that he did not want to go to the Ministry of Defence at that particular time. Niculescu decided to put Stănculescu's leg in plaster; if anyone should ask what was wrong with his leg he should reply that he had a problem with his meniscus cartilage. Niculescu never let on to anyone. Stănculescu went home and rang the duty officer to tell him to report that he had hurt his leg and that it was now in plaster and that he could not

¹⁴ Ibid., p.45.

move. However, after a while, a car turned up at the door with two or three men who told Stănculescu that Curticeanu had summoned him, on the order of Ceaușescu, and he had no option but to go (see above).

Stănculescu's revelations to me of his actions on 22 December is, I believe, one of his earliest accounts of them and for that reason I present them here. They highlight the ambiguity of the situation in which senior figures in the army found themselves in. The events of December 1989 showed that the forces of the *Securitate*, militia and army were only as efficient as their weaknesses allowed them to be. They were not trained in dealing with crowd control, and the heavy-handed actions of the army resulted in the deaths of many of the 1104 official victims of the revolution.¹⁵ The controversy about the revolution – and whether, in fact, there was a revolution – is reflected in its historiography. Here is a sample of views:

'Someone said: "But should we call this a revolution ? After all, a revolution involves violence".....In fact, we always have to qualify it; we call it "velvet", we call it "peaceful", we call it "evolutionary"I call it "refolution" – a mixture of revolution and reform. Curiously enough, the moment when people in the West finally thought there was a revolution was when they saw television pictures of Romania: crowds, tanks, shooting, blood in the streets. They said: "That – we know *that* is a revolution", and of course the joke is that it was the only one that wasn't."¹⁶

'The Romanian revolution of December 1989 is a controversial moment in our history. The disputes involve both the synthetic definition of the event (was it a revolution, a people's revolt, or a *coup d'état* ?), as well as the reconstruction of some of its particular aspects and, especially, the role played by the participants, whether individuals or institutions.....This derives from the uncertainty which hovers over the *agents provocateurs*, over the causes and the political effects of the principal events of December 1989. Ruxandra Cesereanu [in her study Decembrie 89. Deconstrucția unei revoluții¹⁷] tried to place the various accounts of the revolution in three categories: the first – of those who believe in a straightforward successful mass uprising against a

¹⁵ Of the 1,104 dead, 543 were killed in Bucharest; across the country 162 died before 22 December, 942 after 22 December. 3,352 persons were wounded of whom 1,879 in Bucharest; through the whole of Romania 1,107 were wounded before 22 December and 2,245 after that date. In the ranks of the army there were 260 dead and 545 wounded and in the ranks of the *Securitate* and militia 65 dead and 73 wounded (Ruxandra Cesereanu, Decembrie '89. Deconstrucția unei revoluții, Iași: Polirom, 2004, p.61.)

¹⁶ Timothy Garton-Ash, 'Conclusions', in Between the Past and Future. The Revolutions of 1989 and their Aftermath, ed. by Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismăneanu, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000, p.395.

¹⁷ See note 7.

dictatorship; the second – of those who believe in a *coup d'état* carried by either internal or external forces; the third – of those who believe in a combination of these two explanations.¹⁸

The revolution of 1989 had a marked anti-Communist character, exemplified by the following: the chanting of anti-Communist slogans, the destruction of Communist flags (red flags with the hammer and sickle), the symbolic flying of the national flag from which had been cut out the Communist emblem of the country (in the overwhelming majority of places in Romania), the removal of the adjectives 'Communist'/'Socialist' from public signs, the removal from public places of Romanian and Soviet Communist statues and monuments, the removal of the names of Communist activists or of Communist slogans from public buildings etc...In the period which immediately followed 22 December 1989, the group which seized power hijacked the pronounced anti-Communist character of the revolution by undermining the spontaneous anti-Communist demonstrations of the people, by censoring the anti-Communist messages broadcast on the television network which had become the 'headquarters' of the first 'telerevolution' in history. The television was used to create the majority of the 'diversions', the most effective being the permanent 'danger of death' embodied by the 'terrorists faithful to the dictator Ceaușescu'....The danger seemed entirely credible given that in the period 22-27 December there were 942 deaths recorded and thousands of wounded... Afterwards, not a single terrorist was arrested and tried.¹⁹

Were, then, the events of December 1989 in Romania 'a revolution' ? Following Peter Siani-Davies's analysis the word 'revolution' is associated with two popular metaphors.²⁰ 'The first is that it is a relatively quick and violent single incident ...conventionally distinguished by a time-related epithet, such as "The October Revolution" in Russia or the "February Revolution" of 1848 in Paris', and his analysis 'would argue that "The Romanian Revolution of December 1989" might be added to this list. Secondly, the idea of revolution can embrace a longer process of social change often

¹⁸ Bogdan Murgescu, 'Reprezentarea Revoluției din 1989. Câteva considerații' in Revoluția Română din decembrie 1989. Istorie și memorie, Iași: Polirom, 2007, pp.11-12.

¹⁹ Mihai Stamatescu, Raluca Grosescu, Dorin Dobrinicu, Andrei Muraru, Liviu Pleșa, Sorin Andreescu, O Istorie a Comunismului din România. Manual pentru liceu, 2nd ed., Iași and Bucharest: Polirom, 2009, p. 173 quoting Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România. Raport Final, no page number.

²⁰ Peter Siani-Davies, 'Romanian Revolution or Coup d'état ? A Theoretical View of the Events of December 1989', Communist and Post-Communist Studies, vol.29, [1996] no.4, pp.453-465, (p.457).

spanning many decades, in which case it is usually referred to in more general terms, as in the Russian, French, or Chinese Revolution.’²¹

It can be argued that there was a rupture in sovereignty in Romania represented by the transfer of power from the Romanian Communist Party to the National Salvation Front. There were competing centres of power in Timișoara after the establishment of the Romanian Democratic Front on 20 December in opposition to the remnants of the Communist Party organization in the county council building; indeed, such a duality of power can be extrapolated to distinguish Timișoara from the rest of the country in the period 20-25 December.²² Are we to disqualify the use of the term ‘revolution’ in the Romanian context not because a rupture took place in sovereignty but because there was no rupture in continuity i.e. Communists took over power ? Or is it that some see the authenticity of a revolution defined not only in policy change, but also in a change of mentality ?

We can dismiss the notion that Nicolae Ceaușescu’s overthrow was a *coup d’état*. As has been pointed out, Erich Honecker in East Germany, Todor Zhivkov in Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia (Milos Jakes) were all victims of palace *coups* and had Ceaușescu been removed after the December 17 Political Executive Committee meeting and replaced by a fellow-member he could have been placed in that category, but his retreat from the centre of Bucharest in the face of vociferous protest bears the mark of revolution, as does ‘the mass mobilization, widespread violence, spontaneous creation of revolutionary institutions, breakdown of the revolutionary coalition, and subsequent fierce struggle between the revolutionary contenders on the streets of Romania’s cities.’²³

The violent manner of Ceaușescu's demise set Romania's experience of political change apart from that of the other East European states and was itself an indication that in Romania the peaceful overthrow of dictatorship was impossible. Whereas Ceaușescu succeeded in uniting Romanians in opposition to him, his fall threw them into confusion. The legacy of totalitarian rule

²¹ Ibid.

²² ‘That multiple sovereignty did not last longer can be explained by two, at first sight, rather contradictory conditions; firstly, high levels of coercion prevented the appearance of an effective opposition prior to the revolution and, secondly, at the same time, such was the advanced level of state breakdown in Romania that in the end the regime needed only a limited challenge before it collapsed’ (ibid., p.458).

²³ Ibid., p.459.

in Romania was therefore markedly different from that elsewhere. In the words of one of the young 'revolutionaries' wearing the tricolour armband of red, yellow and blue whom I met guarding the entrance to a Bucharest metro station shortly after my arrival, 'we want real democracy, not Romanian democracy.' The miners' incursions into Bucharest in 1990 and 1991 bore the hallmarks of the tactics used by the Communists in Romania in 1945 and elsewhere in Central Europe to subvert democratic order and bring themselves to power. Yet the overthrow of Ceauşescu did lead to a political revolution: a single-party monopoly was removed; multi-party elections – albeit flawed in 1990 - have been held, the command economy has been dismantled, and censorship abolished. There was a democratic transfer of power in 1996 when the neo-Communists suffered their first defeat at the ballot-box since 1990. At the personal level, possession of a passport became a right, not a privilege, in early 1990 and therefore restrictions on travel abroad by the state were removed, and the reviled abortion decree, introduced by Ceauşescu, was immediately rescinded. Yet the rule of law is fragile, and reform of the judicial system is sorely needed. The political will to bring senior politicians to court to face credible charges of corruption is wanting.²⁴ Whether there has been a concomitant revolution in mentality is questionable. What the Romanian revolution does demonstrate is that the heroes die, the fighters go home, and the opportunists come to the fore.

²⁴ Commission of the European Communities, Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on Progress in Romania under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, Brussels, 22.07. 2009 COM (2009) 401 final.