



Peter Siani-Davies. *The Romanian Revolution of December 1989.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. 315 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-7389-0.



Reviewed by Gábor Egry (The Institute of Political History/Politikatörténeti Intézet)

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Commissioned by John C. Swanson (University of Tennessee at Chattanooga)

The Last of the Revolutions?

The year 2009—the twentieth anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall—witnessed many public events and brought a new wave of studies dedicated to the change of regime throughout Europe after the collapse of communism. Although individual works differ in their approach, methodology, and conceptual framework, they usually rely on common basic assumptions: the reason behind the sequence of events in 1989 and the collapse of the socialist regimes can be unearthed, and the motivations as well as the underlying social and political processes can be identified. Only a few works search for obscure forces or conspiracies behind the political changes.

Nevertheless, in the case of the bloodiest, most delayed revolution—in Romania—(the often forgotten Albanian case, aside), more fanciful explanatory models not only are present at the margins of public discourse, but are also relatively popular in respected sources. For example, the mainstream newspaper *Adevărul* (Truth) published a series of articles on the twentieth anniversary of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s fall, “unveiling” concerted action of Soviet spies and Romanian Communist cadres as the

main factor of the dictator’s demise. Although the findings in these pieces were far from novel and irresistible, usually bringing up personal memories as proof of this conspiracy, the very fact of their publication is a sign of how mystified the memory of Romania’s revolution remains today.

At one time, this myth was a positive one. Among the unexpected and abrupt revolutions at the end of the 1980s, Romania stood out in many aspects. It was belated: the country was perceived as the last bastion of hard-line Stalinism; its dictator relying on the oppressive practice of the secret service, threatening the population with physical repression, and pursuing an economic course of building autarkic industries in order to pay down sovereign debt at the price of hardships for the population. Ceaușescu seemed unwavering in his denial of the necessity of any reform; his system was strong enough to defy pressure from outside. As no opposition comparable to the Polish, Czech, Hungarian, or even East German was visible, the outbreak of the events—the only “true” revolution in Eastern Europe, with blood on the

streets, barricades, tanks, and soldiers exhausted from fear—was a mystery and a myth in itself. In the next years, however, widespread doubts over the reality of the revolution emerged (exemplified in Cristian Poromboiu’s 2006 award-winning movie *A fost sau n-a fost?* [12:08 *East of Bucharest*]) and produced the countermyths of the well-prepared coup d’État of a few Communists and the “stolen revolution.”

This unsettled memory is an indirect topic of Peter Siani-Davies’s book. One of his main questions is whether the events of December 1989 and January 1990 can be classified as a revolution. He takes on the burden and responsibility of making a judgment on this controversial issue, instrumentalized politically by different factions and parties soon after the events. In this sense, the book is written equally about the present as it is about the recent past.

There is another reason to emphasize this aspect of the work. Siani-Davies approaches the Romanian change of regime with the methodology of political science and bases his account on a wide range of sources only indirectly reflecting the events, such as transcripts of television and radio programs, newspaper articles, reportages, and memoirs. The sparsity of his sources is not astonishing, since most primary sources are still off limits to the public. Moreover, given the author’s conceptual framework, their use would not have been necessary. But as a result of this choice of material, many of his questions will only be answered and cleared satisfactorily in the future.

Even with these limitations, Siani-Davies has written a convincing book based on an impressive amount of material and research. He starts, in chapter 1, with the broad theoretical problems of what constitutes a revolution and what kinds of forces and factors stand behind such events in general and specifically in Romania. He argues that the most popular explanations—focusing on poverty and deprivation, prevalent in Romania since the beginning of the 1980s—fail to explain the sudden eruption of revolution in 1989. Siani-Davies offers a set of factors as preconditions for a revolution: the breakdown of the state, a permissive international environment, and the mobilization of challengers to the established power. Romania—despite presenting a contrary impression on the surface—was a weak state, where the rule of the dictator couple (Ceaușescu and his wife, Elena) generated a widespread sense of injustice toward the end of the decade. The exaggerated personal cult accompanied by the visible incompetence of the leadership, the mediocrity of the party

cadres due to Ceaușescu’s practice of intensive rotation, and demand of unconditional loyalty, all reinforced this popular perception. Meanwhile, small, but not insignificant, currents of dissent emerged either inside or outside the party, and the dictator alienated important segments of the army as well. The homogenization policies pursued by the party provided the society with very similar experiences of grievances, making mass reaction more probable while mass organizations, paradoxically, offered channels of mobilization. As the international environment not only was permissive, but also in a sense expected a change, all three preconditions were present in Romania in December 1989.

The next chapter presents in chronological order the events from December 15 to December 22 when the Ceaușescus set out on their flight from Bucharest. Chapter 3 examines the period before December 25, when the couple was executed. In this chapter, the focus lies on Timișoara and Bucharest. The former is the place where the protest of a Calvinist minister of Hungarian nationality, László Tőkés, against his eviction from his office and home sparked more protests and later riots; the latter is the place where the dictator tried in vain to repeat his 1968 performance and marshal the support of the masses with the use of the menace of foreign powers. The book follows the sequence of events meticulously, with an emphatic narrative, paying attention to details, such as how the decision to convene workers in factories to condemn the riots led to the extension of the revolt or how the fact that the place of the initial protest was a tram station, which facilitated the spread of the news across the city.

The initial small protest against the action of the authorities grew to a full-fledged demonstration, and the authorities mishandled the situation. They either wanted to avoid the events being noticed and refrained from more effective measures or overreacted. The crowd gained control of the Timișoara city center, and the army dispersed them with force on December 17. The situation seemingly under control, Ceaușescu (who interpreted the revolt as part of a broad conspiracy ranging from the United States to the Soviet Union) left for a visit to Iran. But calm was only superficial, and rumors of a huge massacre led to strikes and another mass demonstration. Ceaușescu, back at home, overestimated the support he enjoyed, and after a mass rally that he had convened, protests (with dead and wounded) spread over Bucharest, eventually leading to the dictator’s flight.

The next days brought confusion, fear, and terror, or as Siani-Davies labels it, a “Bloody Bachanalia.” From the

ruins of the collapsed state an “enemy” emerged; army units fought real or imagined enemies for days; and panic spread throughout the city, transmitted almost immediately to the world by television. The bulk of the deaths during the revolution happened at this time, while the revolution spread all over the country. In a series of cities, it resulted in violence, either in the form of fighting or beating up (in some cases lynching) policemen and other officials, as well as sacking public institutions. In other places, the revolution took the form of demonstrations, while surprisingly many localities experienced a relatively peaceful transformation. Bucharest remained the center, and confusion in the capital settled as the image of the revolution reached the outside world, not least because of foreign media (most notably Hungarian radio) spreading hysteria. After the fall and rapid dissolution of the regime, only vague contours of a new system existed, which was centered in a television studio, from where intellectuals and politicians addressed the nation. The Front of National Salvation was established under the leadership of Ion Iliescu, a Communist sidelined by Ceaușescu. (Contrary to Siani-Davies, the closest relative of the Front in terms of similarity of its name was the Front of National Regeneration, established by King Carol II in 1938.) The Front declared the end of the secret service and the abolishment of the old institutions of the party and government, and appealed to the population for the establishment of local councils of the Front. However, at the beginning it was not clear whether the Front would bring about a democratic change of regime similar to the ones in other parts of Eastern Europe or develop into a reformed version of the former regime. In the end, the Front’s program turned out to be similar to the changes across Europe.

The next chapter analyzes two popular myths: the existence of a terrorist network that fought against the revolution during these days and the possibility of the revolution being a well-prepared plot against Ceaușescu. Siani-Davies carefully assesses the sources and evidence in both cases and more or less dismisses these notions. The former one seems to be almost entirely unfounded, a result of the confusion of the revolution, while the later could have a core of truth, as party politicians later appearing in the Front had made earlier attempts to overthrow the dictator. One such politician, Silviu Brucan, even tried to gain support from Mikhail Gorbachev. However, these attempts remained unsuccessful, and therefore it was not the act itself but only the simple fact that they were seen as being in opposition to Ceaușescu that elevated them to their position in the

Front of National Salvation.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore the structure of the Front of National Salvation, the composition of its leading bodies (Council of the Front of National Salvation, Executive Committee, etc.), its countrywide organization, its ideology, the appearance of rival political forces, and the resulting transformation of the political scene and the Front itself. The council acted as a substitute for the parliament, while the Executive Committee headed by Iliescu exercised its power between sessions of the former. A new government with Petre Roman as prime minister was installed on December 26. The council included almost no one from the former Central Committee of the Party; instead technocrats and dissidents were present. Most leaders had a reformist background that influenced their ideological stance as well. In the initial period, “consensus,” “dialogue,” and “competence” were the key concepts. Consensus not only meant broad support for the overthrowing of the dictator, but also pointed to the Front’s role in establishing the new regime and unity for this purpose. Dialogue allowed for pluralism, but only in the context of consensus, channeling alternatives into the council and simultaneously having a dialogue with society. Competence was seen as the necessary precondition of running the country and a clear break with the past, as Ceaușescu was blamed for running Romania with incompetent appointees.

Although the author refers to integral nationalism as one of the sources for the idea of consensus, he mainly derives it from the worldview of reform Communists in the sixties. However, Romania was a textbook example of national communism, where nationalism was driven to the extreme, as shown by the dictator’s attempts to point out external enemies deeply rooted in the nationalist imagination. The notion of unity in organic, integral nationalism was compatible and complementary with the similar concept of the Communist ideology. From this perspective, it is probably not as easy to distinguish between reformist heritage and integral nationalism as sources of “consensus,” as Siani-Davies seems to do.

The era of “consensus” did not last long. The Front faced a collapse of economic production and a series of challenges to its political monopoly—an open denial of “consensus” as they perceived it. In the new year, traditional parties (National Liberals, Peasant Party, etc.) reorganized themselves and rejected the model of the Front. After mass demonstrations in January, when both opponents and supporters of the Front occupied the streets, important concessions were gained, namely, the

establishment of a Provisional Council of National Unity. Meanwhile the Front itself decided to run in the election as a separate political organization, breaking with the “consensus.” As a result, the Romanian political scene was transformed and polarized, with the Front as one of its poles and the coalition of traditional parties as its opposition.

In the closing chapter, the author revisits the events and concludes that Romania witnessed a revolution in December 1989. It was different from regular coup d’États with mass demonstrations and storming of public buildings. The new leaders did not come from circles of established power, but from background offices, where they spent their lives sidelined. The events aimed at (and ended with) not only rectification of grievances as it is customary with popular uprisings, but also a major transfer and transformation of power. However, since the winter of the revolution, its memory was shaped by narratives built on myths. The image of the young revolutionary, the myth of the violence of the secret police, the figure of the terrorist, and the exaggerated death toll: they all were broadcast by external and internal media already during the events. The lack of reliable information and later the wide-scale disillusionment of the population reinforced many of them and culminated in the widespread acceptance of the notion of a “stolen revolution.”

The main virtue of this book is the rich material it uses and the author’s willingness to address sensitive

and controversial issues head on. Siani-Davies’s narrative is meticulous and well balanced. However, in some cases, he is too reliant on the strength of the narrative, instead of in-depth analysis. For example, he analyzes CeauĂescu’s leader cult in a broad sociopsychological essay without much particular detail, echoing statements without much content, such as: “like Narcissus, CeauĂescu fell in love with his reflection” (pp. 24-25). Sometimes he does not try to overcome the initial lack of material resulting in out of context assessments. At one point, he characterizes the party membership as disproportionately poorly educated with 47 percent having only finished primary schools and only 11 percent holding a degree from higher education in 1980 (p. 21). Yet the proportion of people with primary education in the party did not differ significantly from the national figure, while the ratio of university graduates in the party ranks was much higher than the national one. It is doubtful how much erecting the Front of National Salvation councils in enterprises and factories resembled a Hungarian model, as the reforms in Hungary in 1968 had not much to do with the internal position of workers. It is also probable that broader research of local “revolutions” (one such project is currently being carried out at the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities, Cluj) will enhance our knowledge and balance the overall picture of the events. Nevertheless, Siani-Davies’s book is a thorough and detailed account of Romania’s turbulent change of regime, one that will remain a reference book, not easily replaced for a long time.

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