

RE-MEMBERING ROMANIA: A GHOST STORY

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Abstract: Remembering the year of 1989 does not always seem to produce a coherent narrative about the recent history of Romania. Most likely, when asked about their own experiences or what truly happened back then, Romanians would refer to it as “the events” because there still is a certain veil of ambiguity over their shared collective memory. The author’s personal encounters with such story tellers confirm that Romanians are still torn apart between various interpretations concerning what happened during December 1989.

Keywords: 1989 events, Romania, remembering

A few years ago, I was working on a documentary for American television in which we followed Andrei Codrescu, the Romanian American poet, around Romania for two weeks. One of our stops was Mircea Dinescu’s place on the Danube, an artist colony, hippie commune and organic farm, whose giant angel statues were created as a symbolic counterweight to the Dracula theme park that was being much debated at the time. Dinescu is a major poet (in a country where poetry matters), a popular talk show host, a magazine publisher and an entrepreneur. In December 1989, he was one of Romania’s few dissidents when the Ceaușescu regime collapsed. Because of this, he was freed from house arrest to announce on state television the victory of the “revolution”. As I have done with many Romanians over the years, I asked him to tell me his story about this turbulent time. Not only didn’t he answer my question, he stood up and left the table entirely, saying, “This is of no interest to me”. This might have just been the reaction of someone who has been asked to tell the same story again and again, but it was also a reaction that I had seen many times when Romanians are confronted with the difficult questions that surround their “revolution”.

The title of Codrescu’s book about the events of December 1989, *The Hole in the Flag*, refers to the void left in the Romanian tricolors when the Communist symbol was torn out during this tumultuous time. Scenes of revelers waving this rebel flag while hugging members of the army, after they had switched sides, were some of the most sublime. Metaphorically, I think this hole still exists in Romania’s collective memory. The quotations around the word “revolution” hint at the problem. When discussing those days in December, most Romanians just use the term “the events” because no one can say for certain what happened. Romania’s ruling party holds to the story that it was an “authentic revolution”. The other narrative – that of the “stolen revolution” – would undercut their legitimacy to govern the country.

This latter story arose among intellectuals and opposition politicians when it was noticed that many of the faces in the new government were carry-overs from the old regime. The “revolution”, according to this theory, was really a *coup d'état*, and the violence and 1,100 innocents killed (by still unnamed “terrorists”), merely a front stage distraction, while the seats of power were being rearranged. Following this account, factions within the regime saw the “domino effect” of the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and, not wanting be relegated to the “dust bin of history,” devised an elaborate plot to maintain their power in a post-Ceaușescu Romania.

Ten years after the December “Events”, a poll conducted by Romania's Center for Urban and Regional Sociology (CURS) showed Romanians are still fairly evenly divided between these two stories. Of the 2,019 Romanians surveyed, 40% believed it was an authentic revolution and 36% believed the *coup d'état* interpretation of those ten days in December 1989. Also, 5% of respondents thought that “something else” happened in December 1989 (i.e., a revolution that was subsequently hijacked by various domestic political forces with international help); 19% of those surveyed in 1999 did not answer this question or did not know what to answer. The same questions were asked again by CURS in September, 2009 in a nationwide opinion poll conducted on a representative sample of 1602 adult Romanians, at the request of the daily newspaper “Jurnalul Național.” This time around, the “Revolution” story seemed to have gained more supporters. Specifically, in 2009 47% of respondents deemed the December events a Revolution, as compared to 40% of Romanians who held similar views back in 1999. Yet, *the coup d'état* interpretation has not gained more adherents. As in the 1999 survey, the 2009 survey found that 36% of respondents view the December events as a *coup d'état*. Furthermore, 3% of those surveyed in 2009 interpret the December events as “something else”, while 15% of respondents did not answer this question. Despite changes in opinions regarding the collapse of Ceaușescu's regime, the results of both opinion polls attest that there still is a sharp divide among Romanians *vis a vis* the tumultuous events from December 1989.

The metaphorical hole in the flag is not just in memory, but also in the heart. In walking through Heroes' Cemetery, where Bucharest's martyred demonstrators are buried, one is struck by the overwhelming number of young people whose names are etched on the gravestones. As in a war, the bodies of the young were put on the line in December 1989. A good eighty percent of the graves contain the remains of men and women between the ages of 17 and 25. Twenty years after the events, you can go there on any Sunday and see parents visiting their children. I asked one of them, Constantin Voriel, a 68 year old pensioner who has visited his son's grave every Sunday since the “Events”, what happened during those turbulent days. He said, “Don't believe what others say about a Coup, it was a true revolution that my son gave his life too!” But, as I walked away from the grave a middle-age woman came up to me and said, with a sense of annoyance, “Don't believe him, it was a coup.” When I asked if I could interview her, she declined. All she would say was that

she was visiting her nephew's grave and "He gave his life and for what? For nothing!" Further on I talk to Emil Cioran, a 78 year-old pensioner who had lost his only son to the revolution and, in 1990, formed "The Association for Honoring the Martyred Heroes of the Revolution of 1989". He said that the survivors of those killed in the December Events have wanted answers since 1989. He stated that he and others formed the Association with many goals in mind. The first and foremost was "we wanted to learn the truth... we have heard many stories, many beautiful words, but no truth." He talked about an honest state prosecutor who, in the in mid 1990s, had told him "We have the facts but we can't publish them". When asked why, he said "there are too many people in high positions who were involved in what went on in 1989 and they don't want the truth to come out".

Somewhere in between those who prefer that a true picture of "the events" never emerges, and those, like the parents of the martyrs, who struggle for clarity, lies the majority of Romania. These are people who are trying to ignore a wound that never healed, but recoil whenever something bumps into it. Over the last few years I have witnessed a common scenario. When I ask about the revolution, people will usually say, "Oh, that was so long ago!" or "Questions about the revolution? What questions are left?" But as the discussion deepens (and the beers are drunk) deep emotions come to the surface. I was having a drink with an acquaintance of mine. Dana is an articulate 29-year old sociologist who is trying to get funding to study in the West. After initially dismissing my interest in the revolution, she was soon in tears while recalling a family friend who, bloodied and maimed by bullets, had to drag himself to the train station to flee the city. While I was visiting Romania a few years ago, I got into a discussion with a man on the train that was on the streets of Bucharest during those chaotic days. He also initially dismissed my questions about his experience as merely "history", but by the end of the conversation he was angrily shaking his clenched fist and yelling: "We put our lives on the line and for what? So the same people who screwed us before, can screw us again?!?"

But, historically, Romanians have become accustomed to uncertain, hidden and false memories. Living on the crossroads of many empires, from the Ottoman's to the Russian's to the Hapsburg's to the Soviet's, they came to accept people occupying their country and rewriting their history. But there is something new about post-socialist Romania. Instead of having false memories thrust upon them, *they* now have the responsibility of tending to these memories. Two striking images suggest to me that Romanians are still learning when it comes to presiding over their national history. The first is the Lenin Statue that used to adorn a main square in Bucharest. Like many places across Eastern Europe, in 1989 this ubiquitous icon of Communism was torn down. But what to do with a multi-ton, 20 foot tall metal statue? One option would be to do as the Hungarians did with Statue Park, a place outside of Budapest where the communist icons were moved so they could be quarantined, yet seen and even mocked. What did the Romanians do? Like

a repressed memory, Lenin lies prostrate in an isolated cow field outside of Bucharest, hidden from all except those in the know (I hear that it has been moved again to some unknown location). Another example is the statue of General Ion Antonescu, Romania's WWII Fascist leader. The monument was erected in the early '90s, a period when his memory was being "rehabilitated", in front of a church he founded near the center of town. In the late '90s, a law was passed that forbids displaying fascist symbols. Rather than laying Antonescu's statue in a cow pasture with the other icon of failed ideology, a white sheet was merely placed over the statue, leaving him with a ghostly appearance (this sheet was later replaced by a metal box). While visiting this site with Andrei Codrescu in 2002, he mused: "Lenin is so heavy. There is little fear that they will lift him back up. But with Antonescu, all they have to do is pull off his hood".

In John Reed's travelogue *War in Eastern Europe: Travels Through the Balkans in 1915*, the journalist wrote about the Romanian peasant belief that if a person did not die properly (with a candle in his hand), he would not reach heaven and he could potentially become a vampire. Reed concluded that the church used the myth as a way to collect money from peasants to perform death rites: "To lay this murdering ghost, the body must be exhumed in the dead of night and the heart torn out by an ordained priest, who drives a wooden peg through it. For this he charges a hundred francs." For contemporary Romania, there may be a cautionary tale in these superstitions: If a nation does not bury its dead properly, be it the martyrs of the revolution or the ideologies of Communism and Fascism, their restless spirits may cost much more to exorcise later on.

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