

The Uses of Absurdity: The Staged War Theory and the Romanian Revolution of December 1989

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Historiography never takes place in a vacuum—particularly not in a country that has only recently experienced the collapse of a long-standing authoritarian regime.¹ The historiography of the Romanian Revolution of December 1989 exemplifies the forces that can undermine the accuracy of contemporary chronicles in a recently post-authoritarian society. Debilitating behavioral legacies left by a pedantic, deceitful, and repressive regime, the struggle for public opinion and political power in the post-authoritarian era, and the lingering interests, identities, and loyalties of former authoritarians have fused in the Romanian case to seriously debase the historiography of the December 1989 transition.

The revolution of December 1989 was the most dramatic and important event in recent Romanian history, ending the tyrannical twenty-four-year reign of Nicolae Ceaușescu and over four decades of essentially uninterrupted totalitarian rule. More than a thousand people lost their lives in the December events. Almost a decade later, Western analysts, Romanian journalists and intellectuals, and ordinary Romanians continue to discuss and debate what happened. Romania's second, more peaceful, "electoral revolution"—the elections of November 1996, marking the first

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1. My use of the word "authoritarian" here is designed to cover a variety of non-democratic regime types, including totalitarian, post-totalitarian, bureaucratic-authoritarian, and military. Though the forces that can undermine the accuracy of historiography may be more developed in certain types of post-authoritarian societies, for example post-totalitarian societies, I believe the factors themselves to be relatively generic to post-authoritarian rule.

transfer of power in the postcommunist era and inaugurating a government whose leaders were far less linked to the communist past—would have been unthinkable had it not been for the December 1989 events.

The historiography of the December events presents a dizzying array of theories about what happened and why. The sheer number and diversity of such theories current in Romania can easily distract the observer from recognizing the broader trends that characterize Romanian historiography of these events. First, the overwhelming majority of these theories are deeply revisionist in that they dispute the central components of the original understanding of the December events.² Second, revisionist understandings have established a formidable hegemony, effectively marginalizing the original understandings to the periphery of legitimate debate.

The significance of this revisionism lies less in the specific content of its multiple variants, than in the fact that they largely deny the original understanding of the *Securitate*'s institutional responsibility for the carnage. These revisionist accounts have successfully undermined popular confidence in the belief that units of the the *Securitate* secret police fighting to defend the Ceaușescus were primarily responsible for the tremendous loss of life in December. Highly representative of the revisionist trend is the so-called staged war theory, which denies the existence and / or significance of genuine, counterrevolutionary forces still loyal to the dictator, and which—as has actually been argued—substantially reduces the blame accorded the *Securitate*.³

Were such revisionist presentations limited solely to the accounts of former *Securitate* officers and their most zealous supporters, there would be little surprise. However, this revisionism has spread across the post-Ceaușescu political spectrum and—most

2. The definition of revisionism I use here is outcome-based, rather than process-based. Whether an individual consciously sets out to contradict the original understanding of the December events, or simply comes to a different understanding as a result of investigating them, the resulting accounts are revisionist in terms of their conclusions—that is, they dispute the original understanding.

3. The key here is not how the staged war theory could hypothetically be argued (i.e., continuing to maintain the *Securitate*'s substantial institutional culpability for the bloodshed), but how in fact it has been argued in practice in Romania (i.e., substantially reducing the *Securitate*'s institutional culpability).

surprising and challenging to explain—now pervades even the accounts written by fierce critics of the former *Securitate*, many of whom were undeniably victims of the institution during the communist era.

What explains this unexpected, peculiar, and paradoxical outcome? Western scholarship has not yet addressed this puzzle—largely because western analysts have been unsystematic in their investigation of the December events, and so have not recognized that a puzzle exists. Western scholarship is noteworthy for the almost complete absence of references to, and citations from, what former *Securitate* officers and their apologists have argued specifically in regard to the December events. As a result, the striking similarity between *Securitate*-inspired accounts of December 1989 and other accounts from across the post-Ceaușescu political spectrum has gone largely unnoticed. In other words, competing versions of the December events have been weighed and judged absent perhaps the most crucial of contexts. The source of this analytical and methodological oversight is important enough to deserve comment: the personal interests of the members of the political leadership were awarded such primacy in the analysis of the politics of the post-Ceaușescu regime of President Ion Iliescu (1990–96) that the potential role played by institutionally specific interests, identities, and loyalties in shaping political behavior was severely underestimated.

If in fact the available evidence supports a downward revision of the *Securitate*'s guilt, then there is nothing fundamentally suspicious or wrong about the convergence of *Securitate*-inspired and other accounts. However, the available evidence simply does not substantiate the staged war theory and other revisionist understandings. On the contrary, it tends to confirm the initial understanding of the *Securitate*'s institutional culpability. But this still leaves unanswered the question of why revisionist understandings of the *Securitate*'s institutional culpability have filtered across the Romanian political spectrum, so that even some of the most famous victims and foes of the former *Securitate* came to embrace and advocate revisionist understandings.

Disinformation disseminated by former *Securitate* officers and their sympathizers has been a very real phenomenon in the post-

Ceaușescu era and has been important in destroying the initial understanding of the *Securitate*'s institutional culpability. But disinformation alone cannot, indeed does not, account for the outcome in question. As important as the actual content and quality of disinformation is the environment in which it is introduced: if the psychological climate and political context are not conducive to its acceptance by the public, disinformation—no matter how skillfully concocted and disseminated—will fail to accomplish its intended goals. Conversely, however, disinformation—no matter how crude, contradictory, and uncoordinated in its dissemination—can succeed in establishing its legitimacy, if the political cultural environment is conducive to its acceptance.

In the case of the historiography of the Romanian Revolution of December 1989, it is the interaction of attitudinal and behavioral legacies of totalitarian rule with the specific context of post-Ceaușescu politics that has enabled *Securitate* disinformation to triumph. Paradoxically, the enduring predilection for rumor and conspiracy theory (traits that became even more marked during the latter stages of the Ceaușescu reign) among all sectors of Romanian society (but *particularly* the intelligentsia and political class) combined with the deep distrust and suspicion of the former communists who ruled the country from December 1989 until November 1996 to create a climate where disinformation disseminated by former *Securitate* officers generally escaped serious scrutiny and came to be embraced even by some of the institution's most relentless critics. The byzantine regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu had bequeathed an appropriately byzantine legacy.

Understandings of December 1989: Then and Now

While they were taking place, the events of Ceaușescu's overthrow were viewed as clear and uncontroversial.⁴ They were almost uni-

4. The seeming clarity of the December events as they occurred is well-captured in Katherine Verdery and Gail Kligman's discussion of "What we thought we saw" in Katherine Verdery and Gail Kligman, "Romania after Ceaușescu: Post-Communist Communism?" in Ivo Banac, ed., *Eastern Europe in Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 117–47. The unity of interpretation of these events while they were taking place also comes through in newspaper accounts from the time. See, for example, coverage in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* for the period 16–31 December 1989.

versally understood as a revolution. The Ceaușescu regime's decision to evict a dissident minister from his parish had sparked anti-regime protests in the southwestern city of Timișoara in mid-December. In spite of a brutal crackdown by regime forces, these demonstrations eventually spread to other large cities (primarily in the southwestern Banat region and in Transylvania) and to the capital, Bucharest. At approximately noon on 22 December 1989, the country's first couple, Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, were forced to flee the Central Committee building in the center of Bucharest in order to escape the angry crowds in the square below.

As darkness began to fall later that evening, gunfire broke out in the capital and in many of Romania's larger cities. Battles ensued between units of the army and armed civilians, on the one hand, and elements of the *Securitate* loyal to the dictator and his wife—these counterrevolutionary forces were dubbed “terrorists”—on the other. Over the next few days, so-called terrorist violence caused tremendous popular confusion and fear, and resulted in substantial loss of life among civilians and army personnel.⁵ After a secret, summary trial by officials of the self-proclaimed, new governing authority of the country—the National Salvation Front—the Ceaușescus were executed at an army base on Christmas Day. Soon after a videotape of the Ceaușescus' bullet-riddled corpses was broadcast on national television, the terrorist violence began to subside considerably, ceasing completely over the following days.

Today, many Romanians and western analysts argue accounts that significantly revise this initial understanding. They suggest that the December events were in reality a coup d'état or a “stolen revolution.”⁶ They do not use such terminology merely—or even primarily—to highlight the background of those who came to power during the December events (most members of the National

5. Over 900 of those who died during the December events—almost 90 percent of the total—lost their lives after 22 December, thus in the terrorist violence.

6. For a discussion by western analysts of such arguments—embraced to varying degrees depending upon the author(s) in question—see the following: Nestor Ratesh, *Romania: The Entangled Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1991); Verdery and Kligman, “Romania after Ceaușescu,” 117–47; Matei Calinescu and Vladimir Tismaneanu, “The 1989 Revolution and Romania's Future,” *Problems of Communism* 40:1 (1991): 42–59; Andrei Codrescu, *The Hole in the Flag: A Romanian Exile's Story of Return and Revolution* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991); Gale Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe* (New York:

Salvation Front's senior leadership had held relatively high-ranking positions in the communist party-state apparatus at one time or another. Nor, do they use it to stress that, contrary to the initial denials of Front leaders, those who came to power clearly knew each other quite well before the December events and had planned for Ceaușescu's ouster, or even to point out that those who came to power frequently violated democratic norms and stubbornly resisted a meaningful break with the past in the years which followed. They use the term, "stolen revolution," because they believe the terrorist violence to have been a fraud, perpetrated by Front leaders to serve their own political ambitions.⁷

The centrality of the terrorist question to the historiographical battle over December 1989 is made clear by a noted Romanian journalist:

Did the terrorists exist or not? If yes, if the organized formations tried to bring the dictators back to power, then their execution after a mock trial can be partially understood and partially forgiven by history. Even if this act shocked and revolted the entire free world. If there existed terrorist formations, then these over one thousand victims recorded after the arrest of the Ceaușescu couple can be explained at this price by the defense of freedom. However, if . . .

Oxford University Press, 1993), 163–67; Radu Portocala, *Autopsie du coup d'état Roumain: Au pays du mensonge triomphant* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1990); Michel Castex, *Un mensonge gros comme le siècle: Roumanie, histoire d'une manipulation* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1990); Anneli Ute Gabanyi, *Die Unvollendete Revolution: Rumänien zwischen Diktatur und Demokratie* (Munich: Serie-Piper, 1990).

7. Indeed, I do not contest any of these points, with the exception of the terrorist question. I do not deny the pedigree of the Front leaders or the fact that the Iliescu regime manifested authoritarian tendencies and failed to make a complete break with the past. Nor do I even deny that senior Front leaders knew each other quite well before 22 December and had made plans for the ouster of Ceaușescu. I contend, however, that the terrorist question is logically prior to the question of whether or not senior Front leaders conspired to overthrow Ceaușescu. Their prior organization matters only insofar as it can be demonstrated that they invented the terrorists or deliberately exaggerated the terrorist threat for their own political gain. Otherwise, their ability to seize power is far less mysterious and can be explained by the neopatrimonial character of Ceaușescu's regime (see, for example, Richard Snyder "Explaining Transitions from Neopatrimonial Dictatorships," *Comparative Politics* 24 (July 1992): 379–99), or perhaps even more effectively, by its combination of sultanist and totalitarian features (the latter explaining the complete lack of capacity for society to mount a credible challenge for power against representatives of the rump party-state bureaucracy, i.e., those who took power had an overwhelming advantage because of their prior organization) (see Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1996), 344–65).

[there did not exist] organized formations of terrorists, then it turns out the Ceaușescu were assassinated, and the authors of this act are guilty of a crime, and the deaths from the period 22–25 December are the victims of a genocide resulting from [the staging of] the terrorist scenario, by the authors of the *coup d'état*, with Ion Iliescu at the forefront.⁸

Nestor Ratesh calls those accounts that suggest the terrorist violence was a sham, examples of the staged war theory. He summarizes the views of the theory's proponents as follows:

They call the fighting and the clashes that followed Ceaușescu's demise an "operetta war," a staged affair in which only the victims were real. According to these critics, this mini-war was meant to legitimize the new power, to give it the aura and the prestige of the savior of the revolution.⁹

The staged war theory, therefore, contradicts the initial understanding of the December events by denying that the terrorist violence was the work of *Securitate* officers still loyal to Ceaușescu.¹⁰ Significantly, the staged war theory thereby accuses Ion Iliescu and other senior Front officials of lying. At the time, Front officials justified their decision to try and execute the Ceaușescus in secret by invoking the terrorist threat: they maintained that they had concluded that as long as the Ceaușescus remained alive, the terrorists would continue their attacks, and there would exist the possibility that the Ceaușescus could be rescued and restored to power.

Writing in 1991, Ratesh suggested that within Romania the staged war theory had assumed a definite political color, characteristic of opponents of the Iliescu regime: "As unlikely as this theory seemed, it was widely aired in the opposition press and in articles and books published abroad and was accepted in certain Romanian intellectual circles."¹¹ In spite of the fall of the Iliescu

8. This is Sorin Roșca Stănescu's description. Reprinted from *Ziua* as Valentin Gabrielescu, interview by Sorin Roșca Stănescu, "Șeful comisiei decembrie '89 face dezvăluiri," *Lumea Liberă* (New York), no. 377 (23 December 1995), 9.

9. Ratesh, *Romania: The Entangled Revolution*, 62.

10. Versions of the staged war theory differ over the responsibility of the *Securitate* for the bloodshed prior to 22 December, and over who—if anybody—actually carried out the terrorist violence. What unites staged war theory accounts, however, is their denial that the terrorist violence was the work of *Securitate* officers still loyal to Ceaușescu.

11. Ratesh, *Romania: The Entangled Revolution*, 62. Opposition expressions of the staged war theory are so commonplace that I will not go into an extended exposition of them here. Two examples from the well-known journalist Petre Mihai Băcanu should

leadership in the November 1996 elections, the staged war theory continues to dominate discussion of the December events among those who fiercely opposed the Iliescu regime. Indeed, many see it as self evident.

The Staged War Theory: Exclusive to Opponents of the Iliescu Regime?

An excellent illustration of the staged war theory came from a well-known Romanian commentator during President Ion Iliescu's re-election campaign in the summer of 1992:

In order to create the impression of the greatest authentic legitimacy, the script-writers and directors of December 1989 took care to put in motion forces which would mimic as credibly as possible the resistance of the old regime in the face of the revolution. Thus, in Bucharest and in Sibiu, where Nicu Ceaușescu worked as first secretary, as well as in other county seats, especially in Transylvania, a noisy battle was unleashed, with tragic consequences, but full of echoes, in the first period of 1990. The whole civilized world witnessed in amazement the descent of the actor Ion Caramitru into the street as the great commander of soldiers. The former Hamlet called upon the enemy to cease fire and the enemy ceased fire. Such a thing has never happened before in history. . . . And it has been observed, of course, that the enemies did not fire upon the former headquarters of the CC [Central Committee] of the RCP [Romanian Communist Party] where all the leaders of the revolution were located. . . . Some of the participants who just happened to be present at the unleashing of the events in the Television building are unanimous in remarking upon the perfectly synchronized way in which employees of the respective institution, dissidents who arrived in the studio, *Securitate* and military per-

suffice: "Because now we have all the elements [at our disposal] to realize that the story with the terrorists was an invention. The unleashing of a fight between invisible terrorists and the army created support for the later declarations of those who had to legitimize their power: 'We fought under the hail of bullets'" (Petre Mihai Băcanu, "Direcția a V-a acuzată de trădare?" *România Liberă*, 25 July 1990, 1); and "It was very important for the new Power [i.e., the Front] . . . to appear as a revolutionary force, with the aura of a conqueror, and for the Army to fight against someone. Thus were invented the terrorists whom president Iliescu described as 'firing from any position,' leaving it to be understood that they belonged to the *Securitate* . . . After 21 December, the *Securitate*, the most well-informed [institution in the country], did not get involved. They destroyed files, but they did not lay their hands on weapons" (Petre Mihai Băcanu, "Rol dublu: ȘI TERORIȘTI ȘI ÎNVINGĂTORI," *România Liberă*, 20 May 1992, 1).

sonnel with responsible positions at Television, [and] representatives of foreign embassies acted.¹²

Significantly, however, these words come not from a virulent opponent of the Iliescu regime, but from one of its strongest supporters at that time, Adrian Păunescu. Adrian Păunescu was a prominent court poet of the Ceaușescu regime and an ideological mouthpiece for Ceaușescu's brand of national communism.¹³ The publication from which this quotation is taken—*Totuși Iubirea* [Nevertheless love], edited by Păunescu—has frequently hosted crude attacks against critics of the Iliescu regime, vehemently defended the Iliescu leadership against its critics, and routinely expressed nostalgia and praise for the actions of Nicolae Ceaușescu and the former *Securitate*. How then can we explain Păunescu's advocacy of the staged war theory?

The key feature of Păunescu's argument is his rejection of the original understanding of the events: that those responsible for the terrorist violence were *Securitate* officers still loyal to Ceaușescu. Although Păunescu remains nostalgic for Nicolae Ceaușescu and the Ceaușescu regime (especially his important place in it), I suspect that he is motivated more by a desire to clear the former *Securitate* of responsibility for the terrorist violence (still a very current interest) than by his desire to honor Ceaușescu's memory (a matter of historical record and personal allegiance).¹⁴ I believe this to be the case because by arguing as he does he raises serious questions about the credibility and legitimacy of the very political leadership he is vigorously supporting in the election campaign. Only a powerful, competing interest would compel him to pursue an account that cast his political benefactor in such a poor light.

I base my belief that Păunescu's argument is first and foremost

12. Adrian Păunescu, "Diversiunea cu teroriștii," *Totuși Iubirea*, no. 96 (16–23 July 1992), 1A. These are core elements of the revisionist canon: see, for example, the discussion of similar arguments in Verdery and Kligman, "Romania after Ceaușescu," 121; Ratesh, *Romania: The Entangled Revolution*, espec., 44–60; Calinescu and Tismaneanu, "The 1989 Revolution," 45; and Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 165.

13. For some background on Păunescu both pre- and post-1989, see Vladimir Tismaneanu, "The Quasi-Revolution and Its Discontents: Emerging Political Pluralism in Post-Ceaușescu Romania," *East European Politics and Societies* 7:2 (1993): 311, 319.

14. Indeed, the ties of Păunescu's "Socialist Labor Party" to the former *Securitate* have been identified. See Claudiu Hârceagă, "PSM: 'Cuibușorul de nebunii' al foștilor securiști. Cuplul Verdeț-Păunescu este condus, din umbră, de fostul șef al Securității, Ioan Stănescu," *România Liberă*, 31 May 1995, 3.

a defense of the former *Securitate* upon what former *Securitate* officers themselves have argued about December 1989. Former *Securitate* personnel write of “phantom” or “imaginary terrorists,” and accuse Front officials and television personnel of “inventing” a “scare story with the terrorists.”¹⁵ Pavel Coruț, a well-known, former high-ranking *Securitate* officer has alleged that

[T]he *coup d'état* which “recovered the Revolution” brought to power the FSN [the National Salvation Front] team. . . [which] initiated the criminal scenario with *Securitate*-terrorists in order to spill blood and justify the assumption of power by some individuals who did not have any revolutionary merits. . . [I]t was a diversion of the FSN in order to escalate the terror, suspicion, blood-spilling, [and] chaos necessary to resolve the problem of taking state power.¹⁶

According to the most vigorous pro-*Securitate* journalist in post-Ceaușescu Romania, “the psychosis with the terrorists was created in order to cover the [real] motives for trying and executing the President of Romania and his wife so hurriedly.”¹⁷

Regardless of what part of the institution they worked for prior to December 1989, and regardless of their fate after December 1989 (whether they joined one of the new security agencies of the Iliescu regime or not), virtually all former *Securitate* officers steadfastly deny the original understanding of the *Securitate*’s institutional responsibility for the December bloodshed. What unites former *Securitate* officers is not so much whom they think the terrorists were, as whom they are certain the terrorists were not: the *Securitate* itself. Significantly, almost all former *Securitate* officers

15. See, for example, Marin Lungu (former colonel), interview by Angela Băcescu, “Inter-viu cu Marin Lungu,” *Europa*, no. 17 (February 1991), 7; Committee for the Initiative to Save General Iulian Vlad (signed by four former officers), “Cazul Dreyfus al României,” *Totuși Iubirea*, no. 32 (August 1991), 12a; Gârzu Romulus (former officer of the “Special Unit for Anti-terrorist Warfare,” or USLA for short) in Angela Băcescu, *Din Nou în Calea Năvălirilor Barbare* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura ‘Zalmoxis,’ 1994), 156.

16. Pavel Coruț, *Cântecul Nemuririi* (Bucharest: Editura Miracol, 1994), 170, 172. Elsewhere, Coruț alleges that Iliescu purposely targeted as terrorists those *Securitate* units (in particular, the “Special Unit for Anti-terrorist Warfare,” or USLA) “necessary for finding and annihilating the real terrorists” and that this “anti-*Securitate* disinformation campaign” was designed to “allow the [real] terrorists and foreign interventionists to escape” (see idem., *Floarea de Argint* (Bucharest: Editura Miracol, 1993), 194–195, 197). For background on Coruț, see Michael Shafir, “Best Selling Spy Novels Seek to Rehabilitate Romanian Securitate,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Report*, 12 November 1993, 14–18.

17. Băcescu, *Din Nou în Calea*, 182.

who deny *Securitate* responsibility for the terrorist violence after 22 December 1989, also deny the *Securitate*'s role in the repression between 16–22 December 1989 that preceded Ceaușescu's flight from power.¹⁸ In spite of the very real (formal and informal) fragmentation of the former *Securitate* after December 1989, the evolution of new (institutional) loyalties and interests, and the existence of rivalries and feuds among former members, the overwhelming majority of former *Securitate* members have maintained an unwavering consensus around the role played by the *Securitate* in the December events.

Clearly, the assumption prevalent among many Romanians and Western analysts—that the staged war theory is unique to the anti-Iliescu opposition—is incorrect.¹⁹ Moreover, we can see how the former *Securitate* have a vested interest in such a theory because it undermines the original understanding of their institutional responsibility for the bloodshed. We are faced with several challenging and important questions here: (1) How and why did the staged war theory come to be associated almost exclusively with opponents of the Iliescu regime; and (2) What consequences has this ultimately erroneous characterization of the staged war theory's advocates produced for our understanding of the December 1989 events?

The Prevailing Paradigm of Post-Ceaușescu Politics and the Study of December 1989

Western scholarship on the events of December 1989 gives little indication of the similarity that exists between *Securitate*-inspired

18. That, on the contrary, *Securitate* units such as the "Special Unit for Anti-Terrorist Warfare" (the USLA) did in fact participate in the repression of demonstrators during the week of 16–22 December is clear. See, for example, Emilian David, "Dreptate și adevăr pentru ziua întâi," *Libertatea*, 12 January 1990, 1–2, and the testimony of witnesses in the charges drawn up against the members of Ceaușescu's cabinet, "Rechizitoriu, 4 June 1990," in Mircea Bunea, *Praf în Ochi. Procesul celor 24-1-2* (Bucharest: Editura Scripta, 1994), 84–88. Significantly, Petre Mihai Băcanu initially accepted claims that the USLA had not taken part in the repression of demonstrators (Petre Mihai Băcanu, "Intercontinental 21/22," *România Liberă*, 16 March 1990, 3; 17 March 1990, 1), but later reversed himself (idem., "Au evacuat 'materialele.' Stropite cu sânge," *România Liberă*, 28 December 1993, 10).

19. My use of the term "opposition" in this article refers to its static pre-November 1996 connotation: those who opposed the Iliescu regime (1990–96) and called for faster and deeper political and economic reform.

and opposition accounts, let alone of how widespread the phenomenon is or why it even exists. It is not that analysts have been totally inattentive to the role of interests in their evaluation of the various theories on the December events; rather, it is that their definition of interests has been far too narrow. Whereas we are advised to be skeptical of the original understanding of the December events—“given the utility of such a theory” for the Iliescu leadership—there seems to be almost no recognition of the utility of the revisionist historiography for the former *Securitate*.²⁰

Those few analysts who have encountered the convergence of *Securitate*-inspired and opposition accounts expressed their bewilderment, but failed to pursue the issue further to see if it is anomalous or perhaps represents a broader trend in the historiography of December 1989.²¹ Instead, assuming that the occurrence is anomalous, they have attributed it to case-specific causes. This is insufficient. We cannot merely assume that a case is anomalous without first having searched for other instances of the phenomenon. Nor can we simply assume that its causes are incidental. By failing to pursue this issue, we abandon it to the realm of Modern Mystery.²²

Why has western scholarship consistently ignored this convergence and failed to explore the causes and meaning of its existence? The answer lies mainly in the failure of analysts to research what former *Securitate* officers and their apologists have written and said about the December events. References to, and citations from, the openly pro-*Securitate* press and apologist literature—specifically in regard to the December events—are exceedingly rare

20. Stokes has merely been more explicit than others who have written on the December events in cautioning us against accepting the original understanding of the events. See Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 166.

21. See, for example, Ratesh, *Romania: The Entangled Revolution*, 62–63; and Shafir, “Best-selling Spy Novel,” 15. Ratesh relates that in June 1990 “a highly placed Romanian official” told him a version of the staged war theory which attributed the terrorist violence to the Army. He passes this off as part of “a campaign to discredit the army, in which the government was said at the time to be engaged.” He also expresses surprise at Petre Mihai Băcanu’s unexpected July 1990 article clearing the *Securitate*’s Fifth Directorate of responsibility for the “terrorist” violence (see n. 11 above), since “[o]ther journalists (of less credibility, however) investigated the charges brought against other parts of the security forces and found similar exonerating circumstances.”

22. See Jowitt’s use of this term in Kenneth Jowitt, “The Leninist Legacy,” in Banac, ed., 209.

in western literature on the December events.²³ These accounts supply a crucial context—perhaps *the* crucial context—for evaluating the credibility and validity of other accounts. Their significance cannot be overstated—to ignore them is to research the December events in a vacuum.

A systematic comparison of opposition accounts of the December events with those of former *Securitate* officers and their sympathizers reveals that opposition accounts simply lack an autonomous factual base. When we consider the *Securitate*'s reputation for, and familiarity with, disinformation techniques, and the capacity for totalitarian behavioral legacies to continue to distort perception and analysis well into the post-totalitarian era, it is simply asking too much to trust the accuracy of opposition accounts on the basis of the personal reputations of opposition authors. We must therefore independently investigate whether the evidence confirms opposition accounts, rather than accept their accuracy at face value.²⁴

To understand why analysts have failed to study *Securitate* accounts of December 1989, we must look to the prevailing paradigm that has framed and guided the analysis and interpretation of post-Ceaușescu politics. Although the paradigm is routinely employed, its assumptions have rarely been spelled out. The paradigm essentially suggests that during the years of the Iliescu regime (1990–96), the interests of former *Securitate* officers (particularly those reemployed within the Iliescu regime) were derivative of the personal interests of the political leadership of the regime. Recognizing that the Iliescu leadership was far preferable to their political and economic interests than any opposition government would be, former *Securitate* officers knew their primary interest was, therefore, to maintain President Ion Iliescu and his

23. This pro-*Securitate* press includes such publications as *Europa* (the closest thing to a mouthpiece of the former *Securitate*'s old guard), *Spionaj-Contraspionaj*, *Totuși Iubirea*, *Democrația*, *Timpul* (edited by Raoul Șorban), *România Mare*, *Românul*, *Politica*, and *Vremea*. References to *România Mare* and *Totuși Iubirea* occasionally make their way into western scholarship but almost never in regard to the December events.

24. It must be pointed out that although unexpected and odd, there is nothing inherently wrong about the coincidence of opposition and *Securitate* accounts—that is, provided the former *Securitate* are indeed telling the truth about their role in December 1989.

cohorts in power. Thus, they would encourage and spread information that favored the Iliescu leadership, while they would attempt to discredit and suppress negative accounts. Applied to the study of the December 1989 events, this paradigm leads one to expect a basic compatibility and similarity between the personal interests of Ion Iliescu and other members of the political leadership who took power in December 1989 (including Virgil Măgureanu, head of the SRI [Romanian Information Service], the official successor institution to the *Securitate*) and the personal and institutional interests of former *Securitate* members.

This tendency to see the personal and institutional interests of former *Securitate* members in the post-Ceaușescu era as derivative of, reducible to, or inherently compatible with the personal interests of the Iliescu leadership replicates the assumptions that dominated many of the principal models for analyzing communist rule. The totalitarian model, for example, did not address the potential for conflict among the personal interests of the party leader, the organizational interests of the monoparty, and the bureaucratic interests of state institutions.²⁵ Even those who did not accept the totalitarian model's assumption of the inherent compatibility of the interests of the regime's constituent parts argued that as communist regimes matured a generalized, unifying regime-wide identity and set of overriding, common interests evolved.²⁶ The totalitarian model assumes a top-down (political) definition of interests: the party leadership determines party and, hence, regime policy, and state institutions enforce it (state institutions therefore lack interests outside of those determined by the political leadership). Jowitt's model of the mature communist regime makes it monolithic and inscrutable: a collective regime-identity

25. For the assumptions of the model, see Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, 2nd ed., rev. Carl J. Friedrich (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1965), espec. 22; 31–81; 172–82; 205–18. Indeed, the view was positively trinitarian in this regard.

26. Jowitt astutely noted that neo-patrimonial patterns of leadership damaged the corporate integrity of the Communist Party and strengthened the institutional weight of particular state bureaucracies (especially the secret police) during the initial totalitarian period. For Jowitt's insights on the initial totalitarian period, see Kenneth Jowitt, *Revolutionary Breakthroughs and National Development: The Case of Romania, 1944–1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 68–69; 149. For his discussion of the creation of regime identity see idem, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 156–57.

overrides particular loyalties to the various institutions that constitute the regime.²⁷

Thus, it should not be surprising that a unity or at least compatibility between the personal interests of the Iliescu leadership and the personal and institutional interests of former *Securitate* members is assumed in the analysis of Romania's stunted transition. But is this an accurate characterization of interest-formation in the Iliescu regime? While not necessarily incorrect, I would argue that it vastly overstates the political control and authority the Iliescu leadership exercised within regime institutions and among regime members and political supporters (particularly in the immediate aftermath of the December 1989 events). And in the case at hand, it simply does not provide an accurate explanation of the content of the accounts of former *Securitate* members.

Indeed, what is striking in the case of the Iliescu leadership's treatment of the December events is the degree to which Iliescu, Măgureanu, et. al. ended up assimilating *Securitate* revisionism into their own accounts of the December events, even though such revisionism inevitably challenged their initial portrayal of the events and, hence, their credibility and legitimacy.²⁸ Their motivation for doing this was, of course, to ensure the support of former *Securitate* members for their political leadership.²⁹ What has happened

27. This is appropriately ironic for at the very time that a collective regime identity has been able to triumph over the fractiousness of particular bureaucratic identities within the regime, the collective regime identity has been corrupted by the particularistic personal interests of its members. On this latter point see Jowitt's essay on "Neotraditionalism" in Jowitt, *New World Disorder*, 121–58.

28. It is this that explains Iliescu's continued insistence that the terrorists existed, and that at the time Front leaders considered them a genuine threat to the success of revolution, but that the *Securitate*'s USLA and Fifth Directorate were mistakenly blamed for the terrorist violence when they were in fact not the terrorists. See Ion Iliescu, *Revoluție și Reformă* (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 1994), 11–85. This also suggests that Păunescu's behavior was not so completely at odds with regime policy as it may first appear (though it is still far more damaging to Iliescu's interests than Iliescu's own argument).

29. This is also Dennis Deletant's interpretation of the Iliescu leadership's behavior. Deletant appears to be the lone scholar to accept the initial understanding of the events and the *Securitate*'s responsibility for the terrorism. Like other analysts, however, he fails to investigate the pro-*Securitate* press and literature, and thus does not address the issue of why the convergence of *Securitate* and opposition accounts exists, or why the vast majority of opposition accounts appear to contradict his conclusion. See Dennis Deletant, *Ceașescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965–1989* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), espec. 388–89; 360–72. Martyn Rady partially accepts the initial understanding in Martyn Rady, *Romania In Turmoil: A Contemporary History*, (New York: IB Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1992), 104–111.

is just the opposite of what might have been expected given the prevailing paradigm of post-Ceaușescu politics. Rather than the personal, reputational interests of the Iliescu leadership defining the interests of former *Securitate* members towards the December 1989 events, the institutional interests of former *Securitate* members corrupted the interests of the Iliescu leadership and came to define that regime's policy. Unfortunately, the migration of *Securitate* revisionism did not begin or end there, and this explanation does not explain why *Securitate* revisionism permeates opposition accounts.

Testing the Original Understanding of the December Events

The longer revisionist theories circulate, the deeper their penetration of the collective imagination, the more difficult it is to remember the original understanding of an event. Such is the case with the events of December 1989. To understand why we should be skeptical of revisionist arguments such as the staged war theory, we must first recall the original understanding of the events and ask whether evidence exists to confirm that understanding.

Ion Iliescu himself illustrates the widespread amnesia that has characterized discussion of the December events in post-Ceaușescu Romania. In a July 1990 interview, President Iliescu could only muse that “[t]he question about the terrorists is indeed most obscure; I, too, would like to know who was shooting, for example, while we were in the television building.”³⁰ Yet, in December 1989, Iliescu seemed to have somewhat clearer ideas about the terrorists. During a televised address on the evening of Saturday, 23 December 1989, Iliescu stated that:

We want to say that all military units and the great majority of militia and interior ministry units [i.e., including the *Securitate*] are jointly acting against the terrorists. The diversionist, criminal, and terrorist actions of the groups of terrorists who want to prevent the proper functioning of the new power and destabilize our society is a last spasm of this monstrous creation of the anti-popular dictatorship. *Actually, I must tell you that we are not dealing with*

30. Ion Iliescu, interview by Nicolae Manolescu, *România Literară*, 5 July 1990, in FBIS-EEU-90-146, 30 July 1990, 55.

a large number of terrorist elements, but rather they are specially trained and equipped for this kind of action. . . . In the majority of cases, they succeed in creating difficulties for the activity of military units, because, as you can see, the terrorists are operating from inhabited buildings, even from apartments, something which hampers the Army's intervention and the use of military technology, which must avoid civilian losses as much as possible. . . . Likewise, we would like to inform you that the terrorists are not wearing uniforms. They are in civilian dress. Often, they try to create confusion and are even wearing arm bands, so as to be taken for people belonging to civic groups. They want to create confusion. They shoot from any position.³¹

Iliescu's statement is critical for a number of reasons. Significantly, contrary to much of the revisionist canon, Iliescu does not attempt to hide that the vast majority of the old regime forces (including elements of the *Securitate*) support the National Salvation Front's assumption of power. Moreover, his words do not suggest that he is attempting to exaggerate the terrorist threat. Quite the contrary: he states plainly that those forces are not large in number. It would seem logical to assume that had Front leaders truly invented the terrorists—in order to prevent others from taking power and in order to manufacture revolutionary legitimacy for themselves—the last thing one of its top officials would have done would have been to declare publicly that “actually . . . we are not dealing with a large number of terrorist elements.” Finally, Iliescu may indirectly admit the source of the terrorists when he suggests that “all military units,” but only “the great majority of militia and interior ministry units,” are “acting against the terrorists.”

Other adherents of the National Salvation Front were more concrete in their comments. (Reserve) Army General Nicolae Tudor made the following declaration:

In the name of the Committee of National Salvation the following information is communicated: the *Securitate* troops under the command of General Ghița are at this time, completely loyal to the people. They have missions and are fulfilling missions given to them by the Committee of National Salvation. *The reference to*

31. “Ion Iliescu Announces Capture of Ceausescu,” Bucharest Domestic Service, 1616 GMT 23 December 1989, in FBIS-EEU-89-246, 23 December 1989, 61. The phrase “they shoot from any position” is an oft-quoted, famous piece of the revolutionary folklore. Emphasis added.

“Securitate troops” acting against the people deals only with some special units. Those who are active in different areas are anti-terrorist troops and other troops of the former leadership, few in number, but embittered. These pockets of resistance are in the process of being liquidated by Army forces.³²

Once again, there is little effort to disguise the fact that parts of the former *Securitate* are collaborating with the new leadership. Moreover, General Tudor also emphasizes that the terrorists are “few in number.” Far from attempting to incite panic, he tries to reassure the public that the newly formed government has matters in hand. Indeed, he appears to overestimate the ease with which the new government will be able to consolidate its power.

The initial understanding of the terrorist violence is therefore clear: it was the last gasp of the dying Ceaușescu regime, an action on behalf of the Ceaușescus, perpetrated by elements of the *Securitate*. The *Securitate*’s anti-terrorist unit (the USLA, Special Unit for Anti-Terrorist Warfare, an entity closely affiliated with the *Securitate*’s Fifth Directorate) was believed a key contributor to the terrorist action.

In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist violence, western journalists reporting from Romania confirmed these allegations. For example, on 30 December 1989, Blaine Harden of the *Washington Post* reported that, according to army sources, the terrorists had been members of the *Securitate*’s Fifth Directorate, while according to a western diplomat, they had been members of the *Securitate*’s USLA.³³ Apart from which of the units they came from—and as noted, the two entities were closely linked—there was no debate about the identity of the terrorists or whom their actions had been designed to serve. They were from the *Securitate*; they had fought on behalf of Ceaușescu.

What evidence exists to confirm this original understanding of the terrorist question? In the early months of 1990, several citizens who had participated directly in the revolutionary events—including the capture of terrorists—attested to the responsibility

32. Quoted in Teodor Brateș, *Explozia unei clipe* (Bucharest: Editura Scripta, 1992), 112–13. Emphasis added.

33. Blaine Harden, “Doors Unlocked on Romania’s Secret Police: Elite Underground Unit of Ceausescu’s Securitate Forces Seen as Deadly, Defiant,” *Washington Post*, 30 December 1989, A1; A14.

of USLA and Fifth Directorate personnel for the terrorist campaign.³⁴ These citizens gave specific descriptions of the weapons, equipment, and institutional affiliation of those captured as terrorists. Since December 1989, a handful of dissident former *Securitate* members—including former USLA personnel—have admitted that the USLA were indeed the terrorists.³⁵ The fact that these former *Securitate* members have generally remained anonymous, or have resorted to pseudonyms, suggests that they regard their revelations as extremely sensitive. Indeed, former *Securitate* officers appear to reserve some of their most vitriolic rhetoric for those former colleagues who have revealed details of the USLA's actions.³⁶

The argument that USLA and Fifth Directorate personnel were the primary culprits is further enhanced by available evidence on the ballistics and equipment used by the terrorists.³⁷ The casings

34. See, for example, Sergiu Tănăsescu, interview by Ion K. Ion, "Dincă și Postelnicu au fost prinși pe pantera roz!" *Cuvîntul*, no. 8–9 (28 March 1990), 15, and N. F. (pensioner), letter to the editor, "Voi ați tras în noi, noi vă salvăm viața!" 22, no. 5 (16 February 1990), 10.

35. See, for example, the comments of an anonymous former USLA member to the A.M. Press Agency (Dolj County) in December 1994. The press release appeared without comment as "Dezvăluiri despre implicarea USLA în evenimentele din decembrie '89," *România Liberă*, 28 December 1994, 3. The individual requests that his name not be published since as he declares, "I fear for myself and for my parents." Some details of the story also emerge from the revelations of a former USLA member who initially only went by his initials (see Dan Badea, "U.S.L.A în stare de hipnoză," *Expres*, no. 62 (9–15 April 1991)) and was later revealed to be former USLA Captain Marian Romanescu (see *idem.*, "USLA, Bula Moise, teroriștii și 'Frații Musulmani,'" *Expres*, no. 75 (2–8 July 1991), 9). Other relevant articles by the same author include *idem.*, "Gloanțe speciale sau ce s-a mai găsit în clădirea Direcției a V-a," *Expres*, no. 63 (16–22 April 1991), and *idem.*, "Cine au fost teroriștii?" *Expres*, no. 90 (15–21 October 1991), 10; 15.

36. See, for example, former *Securitate* Colonel Ion Lemnaru's vicious denunciation of a former Timișoara *Securitate* officer named Roland Vasilevici, in Col. (r) Ion Lemnaru, "Piramida de minciuni a lui Roland Vasilevici din Timișoara," *Spionaj-Contraspionaj*, no. 24 (March 1992), 7a. Using the pseudonym of Romeo Vasiliu, Vasilevici apparently wrote a pamphlet in 1990; entitled *Piramida Umbrelor* [Pyramid of shadows], which described the USLA's role in the repression and terrorism in Timișoara in December 1989. It is clear from this article that it is Vasilevici's allegations regarding the USLA which are the focus of the officer's anger. Vasilevici may have been the source for a series of detailed articles on the role of the USLA in the December events which appeared under the name "Püspöki F." in early 1990. See the strikingly similar descriptions in Püspöki F., "Piramida umbrelor," *Orizont* (Timișoara), no. 9 (2 March 1990), no. 10 (9 March 1990), and no. 11 (16 March 1990).

37. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Richard Andrew Hall, trans. Corina Ileana Popa, "După 7 ani," *Sfera Politicii* (Bucharest) 5:44 (December 1996): 60–63. A much shorter and less-detailed version of this article appeared as Richard Andrew Hall,

of so-called grooved (*vidia*) 5.6 mm bullets show up (including in the bodies of casualties) in as geographically diverse locations as Brăila, Caransebeș, Brașov, and Bucharest during the events. We know that the Romanian Army did not have such munitions in its arsenal, that weapons of such caliber were found upon some of those arrested as terrorists during the events, and that similar bullets were discovered in the headquarters of the Fifth Directorate and at the residence of Ceaușescu's brother, Nicolae Andruța Ceaușescu, head of the *Securitate*'s elite Băneasa Academy. Nine millimeter bullets were also removed from the corpses of army personnel gunned down during the events. We know that the Romanian Army did not possess such ammunition, that USLA and Fifth Directorate personnel captured during the events were found in possession of 9 mm caliber weapons, and that the former director of the *Securitate* coyly admitted during his trial in early 1991 that the USLA and Fifth Directorate alone among the Romanian armed forces possessed the particular 9 mm weapon in question. Significantly, staged war accounts of the December events ignore the ballistics evidence.

trans. Adriana Bobeică, "Ce demonstrează probele balistice după șapte ani?" 22, 7:51 (17–23 December 1996), 10. During the events, the terrorists used the standard 7.62 mm bullets the army also used, but in addition they used bullets of other calibers (5.6 and 9 mm, for example) which were not found in the arsenal of the army. The fact that these alternative caliber bullets show up in diverse locations across the country is important: versions of the staged war theory rarely get out of Bucharest in their discussion of the December events. The tactics of the terrorists, the character of the destruction left by the confrontations, and the source and purpose of disinformation during the events have frequently been misinterpreted: see my discussion in Richard Andrew Hall, "Rewriting the Revolution: Authoritarian Regime-State Relations and the Triumph of *Securitate* Revisionism in Post-Ceaușescu Romania" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1997). Not surprisingly, the references in many accounts on the December events—even accounts that deny that the USLA were the terrorists—to the khaki outfits worn by the terrorists match the description of the so-called A1 and A2 winter outfits in the USLA's arsenal, outfits that *Securitate* accounts maintain were stolen by army soldiers and demonstrators in Timișoara and elsewhere during the December events (on the latter, see for example, "Scriori din temniță," *România Mare*, no. 17 [28 September 1990], 5, and Angela Băcescu, "Diversiunea Timișoara," *Europa*, no. 15 [January 1991], 3.) The sophisticated weaponry used by the terrorists was detailed in articles that appeared in the army press in early 1990. See, for example, "Cum ocheau teroriștii?" *Armata Poporului*, 17 January 1990, 6; Major Mihai Floca, "Servieta ucigașă," *Armata Poporului*, 14 March 1990, 3; Lt. Col. Ing. Cristian Crămpîță, "Breviar: Din recuzita teroriștilor," *Armata Poporului*, 18 April 1990, 6.

The Staged War Theory in Action: The Example of the DIA Hypothesis

In order to form a better picture of how the staged war theory contradicts the original understanding of the terrorist phenomenon—and thus of the staged war theory's problematic nature—let us examine a specific variant of the theory. The DIA (Army Information Directorate) hypothesis is an old incarnation of the staged war theory that has recently gained prominent new ground. It is also one of the most specific variants of the theory. It suggests that DIA members were the terrorists and / or created a diversion that attempted to make it appear as if the *Securitate* were engaging in counter-revolutionary violence. Most versions of this hypothesis insinuate that senior Front leaders either ordered DIA's actions or at least understood what was taking place. They chose to do nothing, however, either because they wanted to avoid admitting that there was a split in the army, or because they recognized that the myth of being opposed by *Securitate* terrorists still loyal to Ceaușescu could enhance their legitimacy, aiding their consolidation of power.

In theory, the DIA hypothesis could maintain that both the DIA and *Securitate* units such as the USLA and Fifth Directorate were the terrorists. But, in practice, the argument almost never assumes this form. Examples of the DIA hypothesis usually maintain that DIA alone was responsible for the terrorist phenomenon: the *Securitate* played no organized role and tended rather to be innocent victims of this campaign. This tendency towards mutual exclusion makes the DIA hypothesis suspect and has been neglected until now.

A major factor in the DIA hypothesis's newfound prominence was Senator Șerban Săndulescu's book on the December events, published in the fall of 1996.³⁸ The book reflects Săndulescu's findings as a member of the most recent parliamentary commission to investigate the December events. Unlike an earlier commission charged with that task—headed by close Iliescu ally,

38. Șerban Săndulescu, *Decembrie '89 Lovitura de Stat a Confiscat Revoluția Română* (Bucharest: Editura Omega Press Investment, 1996).

Sergiu Nicolaescu—this most recent commission was led by Senator Valentin Gabrielescu, who, like Săndulescu, is a member of the anti-Iliescu National Peasant and Christian Democratic party (PNȚCD).³⁹ The commission had eleven members in total, including representatives of parties both allied with and in opposition to the Iliescu regime.

The cover confidently trumpets Săndulescu's conclusions:

December '89. The *Coup d'état* Confiscated the Romanian Revolution. Romanian agents of the KGB and GRU [Soviet military intelligence] had a decisive role. The leadership of DIA created the diversion. 942 people died so that the authors of the *coup d'état* could take power.

Săndulescu endorses the idea that DIA personnel were responsible for creating the "terrorist diversion" of December 1989. According to Săndulescu, by creating mass confusion and panic, the diversion enabled Ion Iliescu and his fellow conspirators to hijack the anti-communist uprising and prevent genuine revolutionaries from coming to power and enacting real change. Săndulescu concludes that the *Securitate* did not contribute in a meaningful, coordinated manner to the terrorist phenomenon and that units such as the USLA were wrongly suspected.⁴⁰

But what is the history of the DIA thesis? Ilie Stoian, then of the weekly *Express*, appears to have been the first opposition journalist to coherently advance the DIA hypothesis. Throughout 1991, Stoian wrote a series of articles looking at what had occurred in December 1989 in various parts of the country. He concluded that the *Securitate*'s USLA had been wrongly accused of the terrorism: in reality the army's DIA unit was the real culprit.⁴¹ Ioan

39. The National Peasant and Christian Democratic Party (PNȚCD) was the driving political force within Romania's "Democratic Convention" (an umbrella organization uniting political movements opposed to the Iliescu regime) and was the largest opposition party represented in parliament under the Iliescu regime. Since the elections of November 1996 and the change of government, PNȚCD has formed the core of the new government and has been largest party in parliament.

40. Săndulescu admits that "some *Securitate* cadres in conjunction with members of the party nomenklatura executed terrorist actions in support of Ceaușescu" (page 42), but it is clear that he considers this relatively inconsequential and not associated with the terrorist phenomenon.

41. Stoian summarizes his ideas in Ilie Stoian, "Planul Z-Z a existat," *Express*, no. 100 (24–31 December 1991), 3–4. For a full discussion of his ideas, see his book, *Decembrie '89: Arta Diversiunii* (Bucharest: Editura Colaj, 1993).

Itu of the weekly *Tinerama* has argued that DIA personnel intentionally attacked their own headquarters, the Defense Ministry, during the events.⁴² According to Itu, because the “*Securitate* had abandoned Ceaușescu,” the terrorist violence in December was essentially a result of army units fighting amongst themselves.⁴³ Other opposition journalists who have advocated the staged war theory have also occasionally integrated the DIA hypothesis. Petre Mihai Băcanu, who has consistently maintained that the terrorists were invented, has, for example, also concluded that “the terrorists could only have been recruited from DIA, the ‘institution’ which was subordinated to the [army] generals.”⁴⁴

What have former *Securitate* officers had to say about the DIA hypothesis? In recent years, Valentin Raiha, a former officer of the *Securitate*’s Military Counter-intelligence unit, has argued the DIA hypothesis in the anti-Iliescu press both in Romania and in the United States.⁴⁵ In 1994, Raiha published *The Romanian Revolution and the Game of the Secret Services*⁴⁶ in Romania, an exposition of the idea that DIA was responsible for creating the “terrorist diversion” of December 1989. Heavily penetrated by the Soviet KGB and GRU, DIA’s actions made possible the Moscow-backed coup d’état of Ion Iliescu and the National Salvation Front. Significantly, Raiha maintains that the terrorist violence was thus staged and that the *Securitate* were not the terrorists. It is important to point out that Raiha argues within the context of a virulently anti-Iliescu regime, pro-opposition framework.

But if we are tempted to give Raiha the benefit of the doubt—because he worked in intelligence rather than in the repressive

42. Ioan Itu, “Armata trage în propriul minister,” *Tinerama*, no. 110 (8–14 January 1993), 7. The arguments of the article are related in detail in Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate*, 360–362. Itu identified those who intentionally attacked the Defense Ministry as members of Battalion 404 Buzău (in other words, the DIA) in Ioan Itu, interview by Emil I. Pop, “În România a fost sau nu a fost o Revoluție? (II),” *Mesagerul Transilvan* (Cluj), 30 December 1993, 1.

43. Itu, “În România a fost (II).”

44. Petre Mihai Băcanu, “Și totuși, represiunea a continuat,” *România Liberă*, 24 December 1993, 16.

45. See, for example, Valentin Raiha, interview by Dan Costescu, “Ne-a vizitat la redacție, un fost ofițer de contrainformații: Valentin Raiha,” *Lumea Liberă* (New York), no. 371 (11 November 1995), 23–25. In Romania, he has argued his views in *Evenimentul Zilei* and *Ziua*.

46. Valentin Raiha, *Revoluția Română și Jocul Serviciilor Secrete* (Baia Mare: Euxinus-Impex, 1994).

apparatus proper, and because he has been openly critical of the Iliescu regime—how should we interpret the case of former *Securitate* colonel Gheorghe Rațiu? The events of December 1989 found Rațiu at the helm of the *Securitate*'s First Directorate, the directorate charged with internal affairs and the one most clearly identified by Romanians with the term “political police.” Alone amongst the leadership of the former *Securitate* to escape arrest, Rațiu fled abroad. In a Danish television interview, transcribed and translated by the Romanian opposition press in January 1992, Rațiu advocated the staged war theory and its DIA variant. According to Rațiu, the DIA

simulated these terrorist attacks. In fact, in Romania there was not even a single terrorist. First of all, they needed to simulate that there existed Ceaușist forces which were opposing the revolution in order to buy time so that [Army General] Militaru [a fellow conspirator of Ion Iliescu] and his adepts could consolidate power.⁴⁷

Since this interview, Rațiu has gone on to inform the Romanian opposition press and the Gabrielescu commission investigating the December events to “search at DIA, those who had gone through Moscow in their training” if they want to find the terrorists, and that the whole terrorist scenario was “just a game.”⁴⁸ According to Rațiu, “the *Securitate* did in no way fire. . . . Many innocent people died because of this game created by some as a Christmas show.”⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that since returning to Romania, Rațiu has appeared in almost every issue of the pro-*Securitate*, neo-Ceaușist publication *Europa* as part of a marathon interview.⁵⁰ What does he now say about the terrorist phenomenon? “The ‘terrorist’ actions were carried out by specially-trained men from the reconnaissance units of the Army [i.e., the DIA], men who were disinformed by General Militaru and his acolytes

47. Magdalena Amancei, “În România nu a fost nici un terorist—declară colonelul Gheorghe Rațiu, fost șef al Direcției I a Securității,” *Expres Magazin*, no. 75 (9 January 1992), 30.

48. See, for example, his comments in Dan Badea, “Secretele Revoluției,” *Expres*, no. 22 (7–13 June 1994), 9, and (before the Gabrielescu commission) in Cornel Dumitrescu, “Dezvăluiri senzaționale despre decembrie ’89,” *Lumea Liberă* (New York), (11 March 1995), 20.

49. Dumitrescu, “Dezvăluiri.”

50. The interview began in 1994 and at last check (1997) was still going strong!

from the so-called military plot.”⁵¹ Rațiu’s choice of publication in which to air his views, as well as the anti-democratic, unrepentant content of his comments throughout this marathon interview, hardly enhances his credibility when he talks about December 1989. Once again, we must ask the question: why are former *Securitate* members so anxious to advance a variant of the staged war theory?

The Search for Explanations

We are left with the difficult challenge of explaining why this revisionist consensus of falsehood exists. We probably cannot effectively explain this outcome without appealing to both the old and the new in Romanian politics. Indeed, this outcome is symptomatic of what is increasingly recognized about the character of postcommunist society in general: the postcommunist era has its own specific dynamics, neither wholly reducible to the legacies of the past, nor to the emerging institutions, rules, and incentives of the postcommunist era, but incorporating both. For this reason, Crawford and Lijphart have argued that asking whether postcommunist outcomes are *either* a result of communist legacies *or* the new institutions and processes of the postcommunist era poses a false choice.⁵² Even where communist legacies do play a role, which become politically relevant and how is largely a function of the postcommunist dynamic.⁵³ At the same time, institutional choices are not unconstrained and freely made—they are informed and shaped by communist legacies. In order to explain

51. Colonel Gheorghe Rațiu, interview by Ilie Neacșu, episode no. 17, *Europa*, (20 February–6 March 1995), 5.

52. Beverley Crawford and Arend Lijphart, “Explaining Political and Economic Change in Post-Communist Eastern Europe: Old Legacies, New Institutions, Hegemonic Norms, and International Pressures,” *Comparative Political Studies* 28:2 (July 1995): 171–99.

53. Katherine Verdery has captured this dynamic well in her discussion of nationalism in postcommunist Romania. While the content of postcommunist nationalism may be a product of communist rule, the dynamics (both specific and general) of privatization and democratic political and electoral competition in post-Ceaușescu Romania have had their own independent effects in reinvigorating the nationalist argument and making it a politically salient instrument in the post-communist era. See Katherine Verdery, “Nationalism and National Sentiment in Post-socialist Romania,” *Slavic Review* 52:2 (1993): 179–203.

the Romanian case, we should rather ask then, which factors—old or new—explain this outcome?

Political Cultural “Legacies of the Past”

One seductive and potentially promising approach focuses on the character of Romanian political culture. Inevitably, this means discussing how past experience has left an imprint upon, and continues to shape, mentalities, attitudes, and behavior in the post-communist era. There is little doubt that the staged war theory is an inherently conspiratorial account, fueled by rumor. For this reason, it is appropriate to discuss the pervasiveness of conspiracy theory and rumor in Romanian society.

Katherine Verdery and Gail Kligman have written of the “‘plot mentality’ characteristic of virtually every Romanian’s description of events prior to, during, and after December.”⁵⁴ Gale Stokes has suggested that the attraction to “extreme” versions of the plot theory—“such as the view that the Hungarians were behind this plot”—is “more a reflection of the propensity for plot theories among some elements of Balkan society than it is a likely scenario.”⁵⁵ Although Ken Jowitt has not commented specifically upon the historiography of the December events in post-Ceaușescu Romania, his vivid portrayal of the legacies of a “ghetto” political culture in the wake of the collapse of Leninist rule is appropriate here. Referring to the Romanian case in general, Jowitt has quipped, “If Romania could export its rumors, it would be more developed than Germany.”⁵⁶

Verdery and Kligman have elaborated upon why this weakness for conspiracy theory exists in Romanian society. They argue that the “plot mentality” is an inevitable legacy of the “planned” image and reality of life under communist rule and the propensity of communist rulers to engage in scapegoating in order to defend themselves when reality did not match their promises and predictions. Action and behavior in Ceaușescu’s Romania was so regimented, so scripted, that it left the impression that almost noth-

54. Verdery and Kligman, “Romania after Ceaușescu,” 119.

55. Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 166.

56. Jowitt, “The Leninist Legacy,” 210–12.

ing happened or could happen by accident or without the approval or complicity of someone or some group inside the regime.

The orchestrated character and appearance of Ceaușescu's Romania definitely appear to have left their mark here. Precisely because they believed the Ceaușescu regime and the *Securitate* to be omnipotent and omniscient, many Romanians (but hardly only Romanians) today are simply unable to imagine how that regime could have fallen without the *Securitate*'s (and / or Soviet KGB and GRU) having instigated, encouraged, and solidified the collapse. Paradoxically, this also makes it difficult for them to believe that *Securitate* forces still loyal to Ceaușescu could have been responsible for the terrorist violence. How could the *Securitate* have so lost control that it had to resort to this scenario? How could these *Securitate* forces fail to restore Ceaușescu to power? Overconfidence, miscalculation, loss of control, and failure find no place in this popular conception of the *Securitate*. Yet these were critical elements in the days between 16–22 December 1989 and especially on 22 December itself.⁵⁷ It is a tragic irony that the *Securitate*'s failure to repress more effectively is today interpreted as reflecting part of a plan to overthrow Ceaușescu.

Discussing the influential and pernicious role of rumor in Romanian society, Ken Jowitt attributes Romanian society's vulnerability to rumor to a legacy of the secretive and pedantic character of the communist elite, which maintained and defended its power in part by means of an information monopoly. The scarcity of hard facts which prevailed among the population—whom

57. The comments of Army Lt. Col. Ion Pomojnicu, one of the few army officers inside the Central Committee building on the morning of 22 December, give an idea of just how critical the *Securitate*'s "momentary disorganization" and "moment of panic and disorientation" between 11 a.m. and 12 p.m. (prompted by the withdrawal of some of the army's forces from the city center) was for the evolution of the events which followed. See Ion D. Goia, "Chiar dacă fugea, Ceaușescu nu scapa!" *Flacăra*, 6–12 February 1991, 8–9. As Pomojnicu describes, *Securitate* forces were fully prepared to repress, but Ceaușescu's flight from the CC building "eliminated the object they were supposed to defend in the building and would have defended indefinitely had he stayed." Those who first entered the CC building found *Securitate* officers frantically ripping off epaulets and putting on civilian clothes. See, for example, Dr. Sergiu Tănăsescu, interview by Ion K. Ion, "Dincă și Postelnicu au fost prinși pe pantera roz!" *Cuvîntul*, no. 7 (14 March 1990), 15. There is no question here: the *Securitate* were overwhelmed by events and lost control over them during the critical hours from mid-morning to mid-afternoon on 22 December 1989. It was a loss of control they were unable to overcome.

Jowitt describes as “living in the ‘cave’ of political jokes and rumor”—paralleled the overall “economy of shortage” in communist society. Paradoxically, this information blackout encouraged the proliferation of rumors and enhanced their credibility with the population. Juxtaposed as they were to the official “truth,” the credibility of rumors was vested precisely in their being rumors and, it was assumed—often erroneously—by definition beyond the control of the state. As a consequence, rumor came to be conflated with dissent.⁵⁸

What this has implied in the postcommunist era is a continued preference for a form of communication (rumor) perceived as more personal, controllable, and trustworthy over those deemed impersonal, remote, uncontrollable, and of questionable motivation (such as government and media accounts). Clearly, the widespread populist image of the staged war theory—forbidden, dangerous, infuriating to those in power—has fueled its dissemination and credibility among the Romanian public.

The association of rumor with dissent, and faith in the accuracy of rumors, reflect a deeper societal attitude: a deeply ingrained suspicion of the state. The fact that the conformist tendencies of Romanians—inculcated by years of authoritarian and paternalistic rule—were sometimes invoked (particularly by supporters of the anti-Iliescu opposition) to explain the success of the Iliescu leadership in the elections of 1990 and 1992 distracts attention from what may ultimately be the more influential and enduring legacy of anti-state tendencies. This appears contradictory and implausible only if one fails to distinguish between public and private personae under communist rule.⁵⁹ As Jowitt has so incisively discussed, by deepening the historic division and antagonism between public and private realms, communist rule simultaneously en-

58. Ironically, however, it is not at all clear whether the societal value attached to rumor undermined regime control or may actually have served as an (intentional or unintentional) sort of safety valve, a means by which potential dissidence was channeled into a more benign form. This is indeed the corrosive and potentially counterproductive and manipulable quality of rumor. Those who engage in it frequently feel empowered by it, in possession of the secret counter-truth. Its practice may actually lead to tremendous self-deception.

59. But it also points up an enduring criticism of relying primarily upon political culture arguments to explain outcomes: that they are invoked selectively and on an ad hoc basis.

hanced both societal conformity *and* anti-state tendencies.⁶⁰ This partially explains the apparent paradox (identified by Andrei Codrescu as early as 1990) that fervent supporters of Iliescu and the Front vigorously rejected the official (i.e., original) account of the December events.⁶¹

Replicating the Past: Postcommunist Causes

This discussion raises an interesting issue. Are we really talking about behavioral and attitudinal legacies or about the replication of structural conditions, similar to those that existed during the communist era, that have in turn produced familiar outcomes? Obviously, it would appear to be both, but it is important to disaggregate these causes for analytical purposes. The continued prevalence and influence of conspiracy theory, rumor, and anti-state attitudes are not only the product of communist legacies. They also reflect a societal belief in the illegitimacy of the actions and behavior of the Iliescu regime *since* December 1989. Knowledge of the Iliescu leadership's actions and behavior since then clearly fueled the reinterpretation of the December events and colored new accounts of those events.

Verdery and Kligman tapped in early on to how disappointment, frustration, and anger over the Iliescu leadership's authoritarian tendencies and behavior was affecting the treatment of the December events:

[W]e must ask why the idea of the revolution's "confiscation" became so important for some groups in Romania—whom does such an idea serve? Allegations of a coup clearly imply betrayal of the street revolt, which suggests that some group other than the ruling members of the Front should be in power. Such allegations are, thus, in part a surface form of the power struggle.⁶²

The Iliescu leadership's willingness to sanction and encourage intimidation and violence against its critics—most vividly symbolized by the invasion of bands of club-wielding, paramilitary, "vigilante miners" into the capital on three occasions during the

60. See Jowitt, "The Leninist Legacy," 209–15.

61. Codrescu, *The Hole in the Flag*, 231–32.

62. Verdery and Kligman, "Romania after Ceaușescu," 122.

first half of 1990—inevitably raised doubts about the leadership's intentions and democratic commitment.⁶³ Many intellectuals and residents of Romania's larger cities were outraged and frightened by this behavior. The opposition's inability to oust Iliescu in the national elections of May 1990 and September 1992 seemed to deepen their sense of frustration and hopelessness.

The result was that the political importance of the events of December 1989 grew for those opposed to the Iliescu leadership. The Iliescu leadership's authoritarian behavior, its reintegration of many former *Securitate* officers into the new regime's security and intelligence structures (agencies that often engaged in political missions against the opposition), its refusal to respond to questions being raised in society and in the press about December 1989, and its failure to put the terrorists on trial or to inform the public of what had become of them, engendered suspicion and delegitimated the initial, official understanding of the December events in the eyes of many (both at home and abroad). Replication of behaviors and methods similar to those of the communist era are clear here: a political elite, suspicious of autonomous societal organization (and thus needing to control it), portrays itself as the victim of plots. Jealously guarding information, it indicates no responsibility to inform the public and to be transparent in its actions. It finally is perceived as illegitimate by large and important segments of society because of its authoritarian style and behavior.

The Role of Disinformation and Self-Interest

Dysfunctional behavioral legacies and the illegitimacy of the Iliescu regime are, however, limited in their capacity to explain this outcome. They explain the susceptibility of the Romanian public to conspiratorial, revisionist accounts of the December events, but they are unable to explain their *form*. Previous analysts who have highlighted the role of conspiracy theory in Romanian historiog-

63. The Iliescu leadership's frequently abominable behavior has been abundantly documented. See, for example, Calinescu and Tismaneanu, "The 1989 Revolution and Romania's Future"; Tismaneanu, "The Quasi-Revolution and Its Discontents"; and Henry F. Carey, "From Big Lie to Small Lies: State Mass Media Dominance in Post-Communist Romania," *East European Politics and Societies* 10:1 (1996): 16–45.

raphy of December 1989 have labeled an account “conspiratorial” and so ended analysis there.⁶⁴ But that approach treats the content of such theories as inherently irrational, and suggests further that the content is essentially unbounded and unpredictable.

Neither is true of the content of conspiracy theories about the December events—the content is not at all irrational or unbounded. Identifiable themes can be detected in these conspiracy theories. Content is important. For example, a most intriguing feature of the revisionist historiography is the glaring scarcity of accounts that combine the original understanding of the *Securitate*’s culpability for the terrorist violence with the staged war theory of the events. Accounts alleging that the terrorists were from the *Securitate*, but were engaging in these terrorist actions to enable the Front to seize and consolidate power, rather than to save the Ceaușescu regime, are far more rare than the analyst would or should expect.⁶⁵ The question is why. This observation suggests that it is the identification of the *Securitate* as the terrorists, rather than the issue of whose interests their actions served, that has really been at stake in the post-Ceaușescu era.

This encourages consideration of a factor not yet addressed: the role played by disinformation. Significantly, even renowned scholars skeptical of claims to Romanian exceptionalism and of the overblown suspicion surrounding the December events find the conclusion that disinformation has played an important role in the Romanian case almost inescapable. For instance, Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, two of the most respected scholars in the field of comparative politics, have concluded that “what we need [in the Romanian case] . . . are studies of the dynamics of myth creation

64. Such an approach characterizes both Verdery and Kligman, and Stokes. These accounts do little to dispel the conspiracy theories they criticize. This is precisely because they fail to address the *content* of these conspiracy theories, and because, after having dismissed these theories as conspiratorial, they subtly work the arguments and details of the very same theories back into their own understandings of the December events. For example, after criticizing conspiracy theories of the December events as reflecting a defective aspect of Balkan political culture, Stokes suggests that “less extreme forms of the plot theory are not at all implausible.” See Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 165–66; and Verdery and Kligman, “Romania after Ceaușescu,” 119–21.

65. It is important to observe that although such an account runs into some logical contradictions, it is far from impossible and, indeed, has been argued. For one of those rare instances, see Gheorghe Simionică, “Decembrie 1989: Și totuși cine a tras?” *Strict Secret*, no. 39 (23–30 January 1991), 12.

and the function of disinformation—a deconstruction of the revolution itself.”⁶⁶

Although I find disinformation to be an important piece of the Romanian puzzle, I do not believe that there has been any officially ordained account, and I do not believe its dissemination to have been coordinated. Indeed, *Securitate* disinformation has perhaps been so effective precisely because it did not have to follow any detailed script: the goal was not to construct a single, coherent alternative to the initial understanding of events, but to destroy the initial understanding. In other words, the goal was to create confusion for the sake of confusion. This has had unintended, but nevertheless beneficial, consequences. First, it has spared former *Securitate* members from having to worry about the problem of contradiction. Second, it has appealed to their egos by encouraging individual former *Securitate* members to add their personal flourish to the evolving tall tale.

Disinformation in the Romanian case, I suspect, has been more anarchical and individually initiated, than planned and ordered from above. Nobody needed to tell former *Securitate* members what they should or should not say about the December events. They knew well that initial accounts had identified the *Securitate* as the terrorists. None of them could be sure how their colleagues might respond to an admission that the initial account was indeed correct. Moreover, as the dust began to settle after December 1989, it did not take long to realize that even if the *Securitate* no longer existed as an institution, many former colleagues still considered the identity relevant and considered it the duty of former *Securitate* personnel to uphold that institution's reputation in the historiography of the December events. Prudence counseled a conservative approach and that meant denying the initial understanding of the *Securitate*'s culpability. Indeed, *Securitate* disinformation may have been designed as much for internal consumption as to manipulate the public. The individual former *Securitate* officer who negated the existence of *Securitate* terrorists was in effect demonstrating his continued loyalty to his colleagues. Such manifestations of individual behavior collectively preserved the meaning and

66. Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*, 346.

relevance of the *Securitate* identity beyond the institution's official death.

Silviu Brucan, the combative and controversial former high-ranking communist who played a key role in the initial Front regime, has argued for the fundamental role *Securitate* disinformation played in this revisionism. According to Brucan, after December 1989, informers and disinformers in the press who used to be "on the take of the [*Securitate*'s] Disinformation Department" deliberately spread accounts suggesting that the terrorists as characterized during the events did not actually exist and that the terrorist violence was the result of army units shooting at one another and at civilians.⁶⁷ The goal was to destroy the public memory of the *Securitate*'s responsibility for the terrorist violence. Brucan suggests that this posthumous campaign was perhaps the *Securitate*'s greatest performance ever, since they succeeded in creating "such total confusion around the terrorists that [today] nobody knows anything about who they were or what they did."

That some of the revisionist accounts appearing in the opposition press were inspired by out-and-out *Securitate* disinformation is relatively clear. The aforementioned Pavel Coruț, a former high-ranking officer in the *Securitate*'s military counter-intelligence directorate, denied the *Securitate*'s role in the terrorist violence and insinuated the staged war theory in a series of articles he wrote during 1991 and 1992 in the opposition weekly, *Expres Magazin*. Significantly, after he left the opposition press, began his highly successful series of semifictional spy novels, and allied himself openly with the national communist party of Romanian National Unity (PUNR), Coruț continued to argue the events of December 1989 much as he had in *Expres Magazin*.

Similarly, Angela Băcescu, the well-known journalist for the national communist publication *Europa*, who has spent much of the 1990s conducting sympathetic interviews with former *Securitate* officers and former high-ranking officials of the Ceaușescu regime, denied the *Securitate*'s (and, specifically, the USLA's) responsibility for the terrorism in a series of articles in the oppo-

67. Silviu Brucan, *Generația Irosită: Memorii* (Bucharest: Editurile Univers & Calistrat Hogaș), 245.

sition weekly, *Zig-Zag* in the spring and summer of 1990. After leaving *Zig-Zag*, her nostalgia for the Ceaușescu regime was much more pronounced in her writings, but she continued the same line of argument with regard to December 1989.⁶⁸

Less clear is the case of Sorin Roșca Stănescu, a well-known journalist for the opposition dailies *România Liberă* and *Evenimentul Zilei* in the early 1990s, and, after 1994, editor-in-chief of the opposition daily, *Ziua*. In 1992, documents leaked to the press revealed that Roșca Stănescu had served as an informer for the USLA for a decade between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, a fact he then acknowledged. Though much, probably most, of what Roșca Stănescu has written is unobjectionable, he has also disseminated some of the most egregious myths of the former *Securitate*. For example, Roșca Stănescu has given credence to the rumor that several thousand foreign tourists in Soviet-made Lada automobiles with Soviet tags entered Romania in December 1989 and played a role in instigating Ceaușescu's fall.⁶⁹ This is a favorite chestnut of the former *Securitate*.⁷⁰ Indeed, former *Securitate* officers and Ceaușescu regime officials have invoked Stănescu's account—not without a touch of irony and amusement—as confirmation of their own revisionist histories of the December events.⁷¹ In his writings, Roșca Stănescu has advocated a staged

68. Compare, for example Angela Băcescu, "Adevărul despre Sibiu," *Zig-Zag*, no. 15 (19–26 June 1990), 8, an article that revises the understanding of the December events in Sibiu, with the almost identical idem, "Noi lumini asupra evenimentelor din decembrie 1989," *România Mare*, no. 16 (21 August 1990), 4A–5A. For a good synopsis of Băcescu's understanding of the December events, see idem, "Fața nevăzută a revoluției și provocările maghiare," *România Mare*, no. 14 (7 September 1990), 4–5, and idem, "Diversiunea Timișoara," *Europa*, no. 15 (January 1991), 3; 2.

69. Sorin Roșca Stănescu, "Îl iescu apărat de K. G. B?" *România Liberă*, 18 April 1991, 8; idem, "Se destramă conspirația tăcerii?" *România Liberă*, 14 June 1990, 2a.

70. For one of many such accounts, with a title that says it all, see Ion Șerbănoiu, interview by Angela Băcescu, "În 22 decembrie 1989 la Cluj se aflau peste 800 de așa-ziși turiști unguri și ruși cu mașini Lada, Dacia, și Wartburg" [On 22 December 1989 in Cluj there were 800 so-called Hungarian and Russian tourists with Lada, Dacia, and Wartburg automobiles], *Europa*, no. 55 (December 1991), 5. For one of the early expressions of this thesis see A Group of former *Securitate* Officers, "Așa vă place revoluția? Așa a fost!" *Democrația*, no. 36 (24–30 September 1990), 4. The former director of the *Securitate*, General Iulian Vlad, invoked the "massive groups of Soviet tourists . . . in 'LADA' automobiles" during his trial in February 1991. See his testimony in Bunea, *Praf în Ochi*, 460–61. Not surprisingly, Păunescu also embraces this thesis: see Păunescu, "Diversiunea."

71. See, for example, the discussion of Roșca Stănescu's 1991 article in (former *Securitate* colonel) Filip Teodorescu, *Un Risc Asumat: Timișoara decembrie 1989* (Editura

war theory of the December events and, significantly, has never (to my knowledge) accused his former benefactor, the USLA, of responsibility for the terrorist violence. Not surprisingly, he has also advocated the DIA hypothesis, while denying that the *Securitate* opened fire in any organized way after 22 December.⁷²

While these cases yield support for Brucan's theory of why we should not be surprised to see *Securitate* disinformation turn up in opposition accounts, the theory is simply too cut-and-dried to explain the pervasiveness of *Securitate* disinformation in opposition historiography. In the majority of cases, it appears more likely that opposition supporters have acted as passive transmitters of *Securitate*-inspired disinformation. In some cases, this disinformation has been passed on to them directly by former *Securitate* personnel or by those who have assimilated *Securitate* myths for their own purposes. Luckily, it is possible to trace the process of how *Securitate* myths have entered and re-entered the opposition historiography.

As an example, consider again the so-called DIA hypothesis discussed above. I demonstrated that the DIA hypothesis can be found in both the opposition and the *Securitate* historiography. But under what circumstances did the DIA hypothesis enter the opposition historiography? As far as I can tell, it was first mentioned in the Cluj-based weekly *Nu* [No] in November 1990.⁷³ At the time, *Nu* was one of the most aggressive opposition publications, had a large print-run, and was hugely popular. But what is interesting is who introduced the idea: a former *Securitate* officer. As part of a series entitled "A Military Counter-Intelligence Of-

Viitorul Românesc, 1992), 93–94, and Radu Bălan (former party first secretary in Timiș county), interview by Adrian Păunescu, "Fanfara din Timișoara a început, în 17 decembrie 1989, ora 10, prohodul socialismului (2)," *Totuși Iubirea*, no. 60 (October 1991), 8A.

72. Sorin Roșca Stănescu, "Grozăvia declarației lui Victor Babiuc," *Ziua* (electronic edition), 22 April 1998. Stănescu states: "regarding the feared *Securitate*. It did not fire. And if there existed killers [among them], these were [just] individuals and very small in number."

73. DIA had been mentioned earlier in connection with the events in Timișoara which preceded Ceaușescu's flight from power. There was, however, at this point no suggestion that they were the terrorists. See, for example, G. I. Olbojan, "Morții din TIR-ul frigorific-oișteri DIA?" *Zig-Zag*, no. 9 (23–29 April 1990), and a spirited defense hinting at the possible role of *Securitate* disinformation in Olbojan's account, Colonel V. Gheorghe, "Încă o fațetă a diversivunii," *Armata Poporului*, 3 May 1990, 1; 3a.

ficer Demands the Truth,” an anonymous former officer of the *Securitate*’s Fourth Directorate suggested that “if as I have read in the press, the USLA did not act [in the December events],” then perhaps the terrorists might be from DIA.⁷⁴ From the beginning then—for the DIA hypothesis only evolved into a full-fledged explanation of the December events in the opposition press in 1991—the DIA hypothesis was compromised by the background of the source who first floated it to the opposition.

Senator Șerban Săndulescu’s advocacy of the DIA hypothesis also lacks independence from former *Securitate* sources. Săndulescu’s test case for the idea that the DIA were the terrorists centers on the events in Sibiu, the city where Nicu Ceaușescu served as party first secretary. Săndulescu maintains that he was given confirmation that those responsible for the terrorist violence in Sibiu had been transported by plane from the capital and were from the DIA.⁷⁵ It is worth noting that immediately after the December events, these same imported terrorists had been identified as belonging to the USLA.⁷⁶ But what is significant is the source of Săndulescu’s confirmation that these were instead DIA personnel: an officer of the SRI, the official institutional heir

74. Liviu Man and Eugen Popescu, “Un colonel din contrainformațiile militare vrea adevărul: Generalul Gușe și Direcția de Informații a Armatei,” *Nu* (Cluj), no. 32 (10–16 November 1990), 5. Interestingly, this former officer openly admits that DIA and his own Fourth Directorate were on very bad terms with one another during the late Ceaușescu era. Nevertheless, the journalists who introduce this article never question the former officer’s motives for alleging that the DIA and not the *Securitate* were the terrorists.

75. Săndulescu, *Lovitura de Stat a Confiscat*, 57–58.

76. See my discussion in “După 7 ani,” 62–63. The original military prosecutor investigating the Sibiu events, Anton Socaciu, had also identified these imported terrorists as USLA personnel. Even the former Interior Minister, Tudor Postelnicu, admitted at his trial that Nicu had called him requesting “some troops” and he had advised *Securitate* Director General Iulian Vlad of this fact. It is doubtful that Nicu would have called Postelnicu and Postelnicu would have informed Vlad of the request if the requested troops had been other than *Securitate* personnel (see Emil Munteanu, “Postelnicu a vorbit neîntrebat!” *România Liberă* (30 January 1990), 1. Significantly, as early as the fall of 1990, an army journalist commented upon a growing movement by certain journalists in the Romanian press to place the blame for the diversion in Sibiu upon the army by alleging that the terrorists were “pure and simple, an invention of the Army.” He specifically attacked Angela Băcescu who had written that the terrorists in Sibiu were army personnel and that the *Securitate* had been innocent victims of events there. See Colonel Dumitru Mocanu, “Sibiu: Cine a organizat diversivuna?” *Armata Poporului*, no. 41 (October 1990), 1; 3.

of the *Securitate*.⁷⁷ Perhaps not surprisingly other *Securitate*-inspired myths creep into Săndulescu's report. For example, Săndulescu writes of the role allegedly played in the demonstrations against Ceaușescu, and in securing the consolidation of power by the coup plotters, of an estimated 5,000–6,000 (mostly Soviet) tourists who "came in large groups by coach, or in small groups of 3–4 people in Lada and Moskvich automobiles."⁷⁸ Indeed, his argument for a Soviet-engineered coup d'état is largely based on the testimony of a former *Securitate* officer before the Gabrielescu commission.⁷⁹

Ioan Itu's advocacy of the DIA hypothesis reflects a slightly different example of how *Securitate*-inspired disinformation infiltrated the opposition historiography. In late 1992, Itu came across new information which he concluded suggested that army troops from Buzău (he later identified them as members of Battalion 404, in other words DIA) had attacked their own headquarters (the Defense Ministry) in Bucharest on the night of 23–24 December 1989.⁸⁰ Itu argued that this explained why seven members of an USLA unit summoned to participate in the defense of the Defense Ministry that night had been killed by army personnel: the members of the USLA unit "had to disappear because they had accidentally witnessed how one part of the Army was waging war on another part of the Army."⁸¹ Significantly, initial accounts of this event made no mention of an internal battle between different parts of the army, and instead maintained that the USLA unit had been fired upon because it had attempted to infiltrate the fortifications of the Defense Ministry, in which at that hour the military and political command of the National Salvation Front were gathered.

77. Săndulescu, *Lovitura de Stat a Confiscat*, 57–58. For reasons he does not divulge to his readers, Săndulescu maintains that after initially suspecting the SRI officer of disinformation, he decided that the officer's confirmation was, instead, a "patriotic gesture."

78. Ibid., 35; 45; 47. Săndulescu argues that "5,000–6,000" is a more sober estimate than the 40,000 alleged by Sergiu Nicolaescu, the chair of the previous commission investigating the December events!

79. See the testimony of former *Securitate* Colonel Dumitru Rășină in ibid., 246–82. Săndulescu describes Rășină's credibility as "above any suspicion," see ibid., 36–37.

80. See Itu, "Armata tragică;" idem, "În România a fost (II), I;" and Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate*, 360–62.

81. Itu, "Armata tragică."

But aside from the fact that Itu based his conclusions on an unverifiable recording of the USLA unit's communications, and on the recollections of a survivor of the incident who had made similarly fantastic claims about the event to Angela Băcescu of *Europa* in 1991, there are strong reasons to doubt Itu's conclusions.⁸² In the summer of 1990, journalists of the army daily wrote about this so-called Defense Ministry incident specifically in response to a revisionist article written by the very same Angela Băcescu (then of the opposition *Zig-Zag*). In that article, Băcescu had argued that the USLA was the target of a cynical disinformation campaign designed to deprive Romania of a defense against "international terrorism."⁸³ The USLA officers killed at the Defense Ministry had been innocent victims. The USLA as a whole had no connection to either the repression of demonstrators prior to Ceaușescu's flight or to the terrorist violence. Indeed, USLA survivors of the incident questioned whether there had really been any terrorists at all in December.

In response, army journalists observed that Băcescu seemed "remarkably well-(dis)informed" about the USLA's role at the Defense Ministry and about the terrorist phenomenon during the events in general.⁸⁴ Civilians who had witnessed the events at the

82. The authenticity of this recording, and perhaps more important, its context are unverifiable. Itu does not state who put the recording at his disposal, other than to say that the original of the recording was stored in the office of the military prosecutor. But as Brucan has argued, after Mugurel Florescu was appointed military prosecutor in 1990, this office lost most of its autonomy and became complicit in the attempt to revise the understanding of the *Securitate*'s role in the December events (see Brucan, *Generația Irosită*, 245–46). Ondine Gherguț's investigation of the so-called Otopeni incident suggests clearly how in the early and mid-1990s army personnel were in essence being hung out to dry by the military prosecutor's office in order to sanitize the December events of the role played by the *Securitate* (specifically the USLA) (see Ondine Gherguț, "Diversiunea Otopeni, decembrie 1989," *Cotidianul*, 23 and 24 December 1996). Constantin Isac, the survivor in question, alleged that after the confrontation at the Defense Ministry, someone mysteriously reoriented the USLA vehicles and the bodies of the dead USLA officers to make it look as if the USLA unit had come in a terrorist attack. This was not the first time he had made such allegations: see Constantin Isac, interview by Angela Băcescu, "Acum poporul român are dreptul să afle adevărul," *Europa*, no. 42 & 44 (September 1991) and no. 45 (October 1991).

83. Angela Băcescu, "O crimă ce trebuie neapărat dezvăluită," *Zig-Zag*, no. 9 (23–29 April 1990), 10.

84. Major Mihai Floca, "Crimă?!" *Armata Poporului*, no. 23 (6 June 1990), 3. It is important to recognize just how dissident this and the articles cited below were within the army when they appeared. Soon after becoming the new defense minister in February 1990, General Victor Stănculescu had revised the official understanding of the

Defense Ministry from the surrounding apartment blocks were interviewed by the army journalists and vehemently maintained that the terrorists had in fact existed and had fired upon the Defense Ministry from the surrounding apartment blocks.⁸⁵ Army personnel gave detailed testimony of the suspicious behavior of the USLA unit in question.⁸⁶ Two months later, some of these same army eyewitnesses reported having, in the interim since their interviews, “been warned to think long and hard since they have families and to stay on their own turf if they do not want to have problems.”⁸⁷ Perhaps more damning was the testimony of several residents of the apartment blocks. They maintained that they had been visited in the spring of 1990 by individuals flashing *Miliția* (police) identity cards who were interested in finding out what the residents had seen in December. Their visitors insisted that there had been no terrorists and that different parts of the army had merely fired at one another.⁸⁸ In other words, the seeds of the staged war theory were being sown.

Finally, *Securitate*-inspired disinformation also entered the opposition historiography through interviews with those who have appropriated *Securitate* myths to serve their own interests. For-

Defense Ministry incident, arguing that the USLA unit in question had been innocent victims and that the USLA had played no role in the repression and terrorism of December in general (see Rompres dispatch, 8 March 1990, in FBIS-EEU-90-051, 15 March 1990, 57). At the time, at least one foreign observer interpreted this as a possible attempt at rehabilitating the *Securitate*, see Mihai Sturdza, “How Dead is Ceaușescu’s Secret Police Force?” *Radio Free Europe Report on Eastern Europe*, no. 15 (13 April 1990), 33–34. Floca had noted as early as March 1990 that “Now, three months after the revolution, everyone is with the people and the Army . . . So then who was shooting? . . . The idea that only the Army fired in December is being suggested with great skill.” (Major Mihai Floca, “Servieta Ucigașă,” *Armata Poporului*, 14 March 1990, 3).

85. Major Mihai Floca and Captain Victor Stoica, “Unde sînt teroriștii? PE STRADĂ, PRINTRE NOI,” *Armata Poporului*, no. 24 (13 June 1990), 3; no. 26 (27 June 1990), 1; 3. These residents were indeed indignant that journalists who were questioning the existence of the terrorists and arguing staged war scenarios had not bothered to interview them about their experiences during December.

86. Floca, “Crimă?!”

87. Major Mihai Floca, “Eroi, victime, sau teroriști?” *Adevărul*, 29 August 1990, 1–2.

88. Floca and Stoica, “Unde sînt teroriștii? (I).” Residents also claimed that one block resident suspected of having collaborated with the *Securitate* was going around suggesting “how to ‘correctly’ interpret the incident with the two armored personnel vehicles [i.e. the USLA unit] on the night of 23/24 December.” Floca and Stoica conclude from the revelations of these residents: “Therefore, ‘the boys’ [a euphemism for the *Securitate*] are [still] at work.” This article, seems to me, critical for any accurate understanding of the December events and of the disinformation campaign since.

mer high-ranking political officials of the Ceaușescu regime have found it effective for deflecting further criminal prosecution and for cleansing their reputations.⁸⁹ Disaffected members of the Iliescu regime have used it to get back at former associates and to rebuild their reputations in the eyes of Romanian and foreign critics of the regime.⁹⁰ But, of course, just as in the case of former *Securitate* members and their accomplices, the question is why opposition journalists and politicians failed to challenge these accounts, failed to recognize and attack the self-interested character of these revelations.

The answer essentially brings us full-circle. Clearly, the predilection for rumor and conspiracy theory and the deep suspicion and distrust of the Iliescu leadership among opposition journalists and politicians played an important role here. Opposition journalists and politicians were easily manipulated precisely because they were being told what they wanted to hear: an account that confirmed their preconceived suspicions, that was seductively conspiratorial and forbidden, and that was politically appealing and useful. The tragic irony of Romanian historiography of December 1989 is that it is precisely the behavioral legacies of the communist era and the context of post-Ceaușescu politics that have made so many Romanians fall victim to the former *Securitate*'s disinformation campaign.

89. See, for example, how Ion Dincă (an influential member of the Ceaușescu regime sentenced to prison for his role in December 1989) insinuates the staged war theory in Ion Dincă, interview by Petre Mihai Băcanu, "Teroriștii ascultau și cei din balcon" *România Liberă*, 4 November 1993, 10.

90. See, for example, the case of former naval captain and Iliescu comrade, Nicolae Radu. After breaking with the Front in the spring of 1990, Radu made the rounds of the Romanian opposition press. He became a focal point of foreign advocacy of the staged war theory, telling Olivier Weber and Radu Portocala of *Le Point* in their famous 21 May 1990 exposé: "There needed to be victims in order to legitimate the new power and in order to create [the image of] a mass revolution . . . A lot of people died for nothing." (In reference to the *Le Point* article, Floca and Stoica retorted: "We do not question the good faith of the French journalists, although the idea promoted by them is remarkably convenient to those who are just dying to demonstrate that, in fact, the 'terrorists' did not exist." (Floca and Stoica, "Unde sînt teroriștii? (I)").) Radu clearly had an axe to grind and his actions raise questions about his credibility: in early 1991 he could be found giving interviews and writing virulently antisemitic articles in the pages of *Europa*. Nevertheless, he has been presented as one of the star witnesses before the Gabrielescu commission since his allegations play nicely into the revisionist historiography (see Săndulescu, *Lovitura de Stat a Confiscat*, 83–152).

Conclusions

The problem of December 1989 is not, as Andrei Codrescu once suggested, that “Romania’s TV Revolution had only *one side*. Everyone had been on it. . . .” but that the historiography of December 1989 essentially has only one side—and far too many dubious individuals with an obvious interest in distorting the initial understanding of the events (read former *Securitate* officers) are on it.⁹¹ Most analysts have missed the significance of the subtle, but critical transformation of the debate over December 1989 in post-Ceaușescu Romania. Soon after the events, the debate rapidly shifted from asking, “Is the original understanding correct?” to asking, “Which revisionist variant is correct?” This would perhaps not be so problematic had the latter question not almost completely displaced the former—as has indeed happened. This shift in the character of analysis is critical because, although otherwise diverse, these revisionist theses are united in their denial of the initial understanding of December 1989 and in their reduction of the institutional responsibility ascribed to the *Securitate* for the December bloodshed.

Although much emphasis here has been upon the role played by the institutional and political cultural legacies of the old regime, it is important to point out that this is very much a *post-communist* and *post-authoritarian* outcome. The mass-based logic of political and electoral competition in the post-Ceaușescu era (in spite of the frequently undemocratic behavior of the Iliescu regime between 1990 and 1996) fueled the perceived need to establish popular legitimacy and support, which drove this outcome. It is easy to overlook the fact that absent a quintessentially modern sensitivity to public opinion—even if that sensitivity manifests itself in a desire to manipulate public opinion, as in the case of the former *Securitate*—such an outcome may not have happened.

What more general lessons do we learn from this case? First, it would seem that we have yet another example of the problematic nature of assuming *a priori* the sources of behavior in a given case.

91. Codrescu, *The Hole in the Flag*, 232.

The primacy awarded the personal interests of the political leadership of the Iliescu regime in the study of post-Ceaușescu politics has misled us here. It has prevented us from recognizing that the staged war theory of December 1989 is not exclusive to the anti-Iliescu opposition and from recognizing how the staged war theory serves the interests of the former *Securitate*. Generalizations about the sources of political behavior in a particular society are not necessarily bad, except when they become rigid and dogmatic, and effectively muzzle analysis of a particular event or policy. The sources of behavior must be empirically established based on the evidence from the case at hand, and not imposed on the case based on general understandings about how a particular society or system works.

Second, although it is clearly preferable to have the victims, rather than the perpetrators, of an authoritarian era write the history of that era and its demise, we cannot uncritically accept the scholarship of these victims merely because we sympathize with them and respect their integrity. If we truly believe that there is something different about authoritarian rule—and in particular, its totalitarian variant—then we must be prepared for the possibility that authoritarian rule may have left a psychological imprint upon its former victims which acts at cross-purposes with their well-intentioned and understandable desire to chronicle the past. It is—we are slowly learning—those less tangible, psychological legacies of authoritarian rule that are more enduring, and ultimately more problematic, than the institutions and ideologies of authoritarian rule: they have the capacity not only to distort the historiography of the past, but also, unfortunately, to sabotage the consolidation of a democratic future.