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Theories of Collective Action and Revolution: Evidence from the Romanian Transition of December 1989

RICHARD ANDREW HALL

SEVERAL OF THE EAST EUROPEAN COMMUNIST REGIMES which collapsed in the autumn of 1989 were toppled by street protests.[1] The role played by sudden mass mobilisation in the collapse of these regimes has quite naturally attracted the attention of those who study collective action.[2] As 'revolutions', the East European events were uncharacteristic in their lack of violence—both on the part of regime opponents and on the part of regime forces.[3] As has frequently been remarked, among the Soviet bloc countries, only in Romania was the collapse of the communist regime violent, and that violence was on the part of the regime, not the demonstrators. The Romanian case is interesting and significant because it presents the single case among Soviet bloc countries where street protest played a major role in precipitating the collapse of the communist regime *and* where the regime used substantial violence to prevent its downfall. It thus stands at the crossroads of both theories of collective action and theories of revolution.

Previous attempts to join theory to the Romanian transition have focused primarily on classifying the event and on drawing structural linkages between preconditions and outcomes.[4] This scholarship has not, however, adequately captured the critical interaction of structure and contingency, and thus the dynamism, of the Romanian events. Structural explanations play a critical role in our ability to understand a complex event such as the Romanian transition, but by themselves they are insufficient, for they tend to take outcomes for granted and thus fail to address the uncertainty of events recounted to us by those who participated directly in them. Structural analysis is better at explaining the fact of the Ceauşescu regime's collapse than why the regime collapsed when it did and, in particular, how it did—the questions which motivate this study. The when and how of the transition matter because they have real consequences in the lives of those who experience such events: in Romania more than 1100 people lost their lives as a result of the timing and manner in which the Ceauşescu regime collapsed.

This article attempts to explore in greater detail the dynamic interaction between societal protest and regime response in the Romanian revolution. By focusing on the dynamics of the collapse of the Romanian regime, we incorporate a broader body of the literature on collective action and revolution and delve deeper into the assumptions, hypotheses and logic which underlie these theories. In the discussion which

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follows, I will show that the empirical evidence from the Romanian case yields strong support for the following hypotheses found in the literature on revolution and collective action: (1) regimes shape their oppositions by determining opportunities for dissent and by structuring the ideological/political space of dissent; (2) pre-existing commonalities of interest and identity and pre-existing organisation critically affect the capacity of groups to respond to changes in the political opportunity structure; (3) state action or inaction in response to societal protest plays a catalytic role in the revolutionary process; (4) the withdrawal of support for the regime by the armed forces is critical to the success or failure of a revolution; (5) behaviour during the revolutionary struggle is to some extent determined by expectations concerning the participation or non-participation of others (this applies to anti-regime protesters, but it is equally applicable to regime members themselves). The empirical evidence presented here yields support for the hypotheses of a variety of theorists on revolution and collective action, but not for any one particular theory.

A few clarifications are in order here. First, because I am primarily concerned with explaining the when and how of the Romanian revolution, for analytical purposes I treat the 'transition', or period of the collapse, as a discrete event. This is not—nor does it intend to be—a longitudinal study of crisis, regime response and evolving delegitimisation over the history of the Romanian communist regime.

Second, there are many more hypotheses in the literatures on collective action and revolution than the ones discussed here: I have selected these particular hypotheses because they are among the most important and because the support yielded for them in the Romanian case is strong.[5] Clearly, by stating that the Romanian case yields support for these hypotheses, I seek to make no claims to the wider, general validity of these hypotheses: a single case cannot provide a definitive test of any given hypothesis, but it can yield additional support for that hypothesis. I seek here merely to expand the empirical data base for the selected hypotheses.

Third, virtually none of the Romanian language material used in the preparation of this article has been previously cited in the West. It has been selected not to contradict extant understanding of these events in the West but to amplify our understanding of the dynamics of these events—especially of the motivations of those who participated most directly in the events. With regard to the final stage of the revolution (the so-called 'terrorist phase'), however, the Romanian source material brings new knowledge to our understanding of the December 1989 events.

My approach in the discussion which follows attempts to be simultaneously thematic and chronological. The article thus divides the December events into five stages: a description of the character of the regime of Nicolae Ceauşescu on the eve of the events; the outbreak of anti-regime protest; the growth and spread of anti-regime protest; the collapse of the Ceauşescu regime; and the seizure and consolidation of power in the wake of the collapse of the old regime. Each stage has something to say which is relevant to the literature on revolution and collective action.

Regimes shape their oppositions

The idea that regimes structure their oppositions, and thus often unintentionally create and shape the elite which will replace them, is not a new insight. Hobbes, de

Tocqueville, Marx, Mosca and Pareto all spoke to this issue in some way.[6] In regard to the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989, quite a few scholars have argued that the character of the communist regime shaped the path and character of regime collapse.[7] Thus it was no surprise, these scholars argue, that peaceful, 'pacted' transitions evolved in precisely the two countries, Poland and Hungary, where the comparatively less repressive character of the late communist regimes allowed greater opportunities for opposition. There, organised opposition, though officially illegal and consistently harassed and manipulated by the authorities, at least existed. This, in essence, gave reformers within party-state structures 'someone to negotiate with' as they themselves attempted to introduce change.

Regimes shape their oppositions by structuring access to the state and positions of authority and by determining what opportunities—if any—will exist for those who disagree with regime policy to voice their dissent. Regimes are thus capable of coopting, defusing, fragmenting or atomising opposition or potential opposition. Regimes also structure their oppositions by determining the political/ideological space of the opposition. Regime policy often determines which issues oppositions consider most salient (and thus most in need of being changed). Regimes thus not only strongly shape the menu of options regime opponents have for expressing their dissent, but they also strongly shape the bases of the ideological legitimation of their oppositions.

The fact that communist Romania never made the transition from totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism—a transition which occurred to some extent even in Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Bulgaria—the sultanist character of leadership in the Ceauşescu regime, and the antagonistic relationship of the Ceauşescu regime with the Soviet Union, had important implications for the existence, organisation and ideological content of regime opposition.[8] These regime characteristics ensured that opposition to Ceauşescu within the party-state apparatus would be clandestine, conspiratorial and ideologically stunted, focusing primarily on replacing Ceauşescu and only secondarily on the need to reform the system (something which perpetuated illusions about the alleged 'reformability' and 'salvageability' of the system long after such illusions had lost credibility among party-state elites elsewhere in Eastern Europe).[9] These characteristics also ensured that internal regime dissidence would find little resonance in, and have little impact upon, society, because they had so greatly alienated the party-state elite from society. And they ensured that societal opposition, to the extent that it could exist at all, would be weak, disorganised and without leadership. Moreover, because of the Ceauşescu regime's longstanding cooptation of genuinely popular nationalist and anti-Soviet sentiment, potential opposition could not rely on these sources of legitimation to the extent that opposition groups could elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

Totalitarianism, sultanism and anti-Sovietism combined to homogenise and atomise both the party-state and society, internally, and to intensify the estrangement of the party-state from society. Dissent within party-state structures was construed, by definition, not only as a betrayal of the *Conducător* and as 'anti-socialist' but, because of Romania's tempestuous relationship with the Soviet Union (i.e. the modern 'Greater Russia'), as anti-national and thus potentially treasonous (particularly after Gorbachev came to power and began to speak openly of the need for the political and

economic reform of the communist system). The Securitate (the regime's secret police) effectively portrayed dissenters within the party-state (primarily it would appear by spreading rumours to the effect) as wittingly or unwittingly serving the interests of the Soviet Union, a tactic which isolated such dissenters not only within party-state structures but also from a profoundly anti-Russian population. Such a strategy was also occasionally used, it appears, to isolate intellectuals calling for reform from the rest of the intelligentsia.[10] Ironically, at least in the case of dissenters within the party-state, the position of weakness regime policies placed them in made them even more dependent upon Soviet support (and more, not less, likely to collaborate with the Soviet Union, the only outside force which truly exercised any meaningful influence within Romania) if they were to have any possibility of effecting change within Romania—a fact which from the beginning sharply damaged the credibility and popular legitimacy of the party-state officials who seized power in December 1989.[11]

The regime's control of society and Ceauşescu's personal control of the party-state were sufficiently totalistic that dissent either in society or in the party-state seemed quixotic at best, suicidal at worst: that is, dissent was seen as a solitary gesture, unlikely to generate demonstrations of solidarity or new expressions of dissent.[12] The success of the Ceauşescu regime in eliminating almost all autonomous societally organised activity has perhaps been captured best by Linz and Stepan in their comparison of Romania and its neighbouring communist ally, Bulgaria. Linz and Stepan cite a statistic which draws the comparatively dire situation in Romania into relief: according to Radio Free Europe, in June 1989 in Bulgaria (a country where the regime was at most only in the early phase of post-totalitarianism) there were 13 independent organisations, all of whose leaders' names were known, while in Romania there were only two independent organisations with bases inside the country, *neither* of whose leaders' names was publicly known.[13]

These regime characteristics greatly reduced the impact of actions which many theorists have traditionally considered of primary importance in igniting revolutions: the public manifestation of divisions among the ruling elite and the defection of intellectuals who have previously supported the regime.[14] Thus, as Radio Free Europe's senior Romanian analyst, Michael Shafir, accurately predicted at the time, the so-called Letter of the Six, which became public knowledge in the spring of 1989—the most noteworthy instance of inner regime dissidence prior to the collapse of the regime—was unlikely to have a wider impact upon the population since the signatories, all at one time high-ranking members of the communist regime, placed blame for Romania's sorry condition primarily upon the Ceauşescu couple and their sycophants, called for minimal reform of the system, and seemed unable to acknowledge their own responsibility for the systemic dimensions of Romania's crisis.[15]

The regime's totalitarian policies not only atomised but deepened longstanding cleavages in Romanian society—especially that between intellectuals and professionals and the rest of society. Thus the courageous expressions of dissent in the late 1980s by intellectuals and professionals such as the Cluj University French lecturer Doina Cornea, the poet Mircea Dinescu, or even the *România Liberă* journalists Petre Mihai Băcanu, Mihai Creangă and Anton Uncu, had little broader impact on the rest of society.[16]

Taken together, it was therefore no surprise that a peaceful, negotiated transition did not evolve in the Romanian context, and that neither the public manifestation of divisions within the ruling elite nor the defection of intellectuals from the regime were sufficient to instigate change. The characteristics of the Ceauşescu regime all but ensured that, were anti-regime protest to break out, it would be largely spontaneous, the catalyst would be individuals and groups at the fringes of society, and regime change would be violent and chaotic.

The creative force of spontaneity and the role of prior organisation in the outbreak of anti-regime protest: Timişoara, 15–17 December 1989

How do we explain the sudden eruption of anti-regime protest in Romania in mid-December 1989, especially considering how anomalous such an event was in the history of communist Romania?[17] Sidney Tarrow suggests that mass mobilisation and political change (including regime change) are a function of changes in the 'political opportunity structure'.[18] In totalitarian systems changes in the 'political opportunity structure' are critical because they allow citizens to free themselves from the 'preference falsification' and 'dissimulation' characteristic of everyday life in order to express their view that the regime is illegitimate.[19] At first glance, the outbreak of anti-regime protest in Timişoara appears to have occurred with almost no substantive prior modification of the domestic political opportunity structure. As has already been discussed, neither instances of dissent from society nor from within the party-state had sparked further, broader action: instead, these became episodic and discrete events.

In the autumn of 1989 'opportunities' to oust Ceauşescu from power did exist for party-state elites, but they were either unwilling or unable (or both) to do so. In spite of the fact that the East German and Czechoslovak regimes had recently collapsed because of their failure to act early and decisively, and with the precedent of recent events in neighbouring Bulgaria (where just a little over two weeks earlier party-state elites had ousted long-time party leader Todor Zhivkov in a bloodless 'palace coup'), members of the Romanian party-state elite did not express dissent, let alone act to remove Ceauşescu, at the XIV Party Congress in late November 1989. Indeed, on the contrary, they unanimously re-elected Ceauşescu to the post of General Secretary, even though this long-anticipated, pre-scheduled event offered them the perfect opportunity to act.

Even the 'international opportunity structure', which Tarrow admits played a much larger role in sparking mass mobilisation in Eastern Europe than it has traditionally played in the West, seems an insufficient explanation to account for the outbreak of anti-regime protest.[20] Changes in the 'international opportunity structure' were fundamental in precipitating changes in the domestic political opportunity structures of these countries, and frequently mass mobilisation occurred without substantial modification of the domestic political opportunity structure first. The Soviet decision to abstain from military intervention to save the communist party's monopoly on power in Eastern Europe—at first tacit, then confirmed in practice by the events in Poland in August 1989—had far fewer, and substantially less threatening, implications for Romania since, unlike all other Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe (save

Bulgaria), Romania did not have Soviet troops stationed on its soil, and since the Romanian party (unlike even its Bulgarian counterpart) was not dependent upon the Soviet 'military veto' for its hold on power (as we have seen, if anything, it can be argued that its hold on power was based in its limitation of Soviet influence).

Such an approach, however, defines what constitutes the 'international level' too narrowly. Romania was substantially affected by the so-called 'demonstration' ('contagion', 'diffusion') effect of events elsewhere in Eastern Europe.[21] What happened elsewhere in Eastern Europe had implications for domestic Romanian politics—in spite of Romania's anomalous relationship with the Soviet Union—because of the strong degree of real and perceived ideological, institutional and historical similarity among East European communist regimes. Thus, in spite of the absence of domestic reasons to justify being hopeful about the prospects for change in Romania, news of the fantastic events elsewhere in the bloc inevitably raised hopes and expectations within society and among members of the party-state of change in Romania. This was perhaps particularly the case when it came to the events in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, similarly hardline regimes, and especially neighbouring Bulgaria.[22] In spite of the complete news blackout of these events by the official Romanian media, news of them filtered into Romania by way of foreign radio broadcasts.[23] Moreover, the flood of matter-of-fact reports in the Romanian press on (previously unscheduled) party meetings and leadership changes in 'fraternal' communist parties elsewhere in Eastern Europe indicated that something quite unusual was going on in the rest of the region.[24] Significantly, Timişoara, which would be the site of the outbreak of anti-regime protest, was located some 50 miles from both the Yugoslav and Hungarian borders and thus was in the target range of both radio and television broadcasts from these two neighbouring and (at the time) more open countries.[25]

The very success which totalitarian regimes achieve in their efforts to control society may paradoxically leave them vulnerable to spontaneous outbursts of anti-regime collective action. Having closed off the use of official institutions as a platform for dissent and atomised society by creating a climate of fear and penetrating it with collaborators and informers working for the state, they make spontaneous action essentially the only possible avenue for dissent. The myth of 'total control' serves the regime because it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: when citizens believe this myth, they are less likely to engage in 'quixotic' attempts at dissent. But, paradoxically, this myth simultaneously undermines the regime's ability to exert effective control, and especially its ability to respond to anti-regime collective action when it does occur, because it inevitably creates a climate of over-confidence and complacency among regime officials. In a sense, the success of the myth of 'total control' is so powerful that the authorities are structurally vulnerable to being 'taken by surprise' in a way which less totalitarian regimes are not.

Totalitarian regimes are also vulnerable to spontaneous action because of their overtly ideological emphasis—which deeply politicises even routine, non-political societal behaviour—and their extreme centralisation of power within the state and in the capital. These two factors combine to ensure that issues and incidents which in another regime type might have no political implications, and which could more easily and effectively be dealt with at a lower and more proximate level of administration, instead almost immediately become politicised and are escalated to

'the centre' for resolution. Indeed, the very character of totalitarianism undermines the possibility of achieving the totalitarian goal of total control.

As theorists of the so-called Natural History school of revolution (e.g. Crane Brinton, Lyford Edwards and George Pettee) have suggested, the actual event which precipitates the collapse of an unpopular regime is frequently insignificant in itself.[26] The hyper-centralisation of state structures in communist regimes and the deeply-ingrained Marxist view that all public and private life is inherently politicised and political ensured that this would be the case in Eastern Europe. Hence, in the autumn of 1989 the event which sparked regime collapse in East Germany was the refusal of the Hungarian government to repatriate East German tourists who were refusing to return to East Germany. In Czechoslovakia it was a march marking the 50th anniversary of the martyrdom of the first Czech student murdered by the Nazis, and in Bulgaria it was a protest by an environmental group timed to coincide with the presence of a CSCE delegation in the capital. In Romania the event was the attempted eviction of a Hungarian pastor from his parish in the southwestern city of Timişoara, close to both the Hungarian and Yugoslav borders.

Revisionist historiography since December 1989 has rejected the initial understanding that this event spontaneously evolved into an anti-regime protest.[27] For example, in an article which had a great impact inside Romania, the French investigative journalists Radu Portocala and Olivier Weber maintained that the Securitate (or at least a faction of it) purposely spread the rumour of the pastor's impending eviction for weeks before it took place 'in order to prepare public opinion'.[28] The journalists maintain that this was highly unusual in Romania since 'it was always known when *somebody had been arrested* but never that *somebody would be arrested*'. According to Portocala and Weber, in the context of the ongoing collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, elements of the Ceauşescu regime decided to preemptively oust Ceauşescu in order to prevent the more thorough-going loss of power which might accompany a genuine revolution. In their estimation, then, the alleged Securitate rumour was part of a plan laying the groundwork for a premeditated coup d'état.

The impending eviction of the clergyman in question, Pastor László Tökés of the Hungarian Reformed Calvinist Church in Timişoara, was in reality no secret, however. Pastor Tökés himself writes that not only did he know of the regime's intention to evict him but he knew the date of his scheduled eviction.[29] He knew these details because the regime had apprised him of his impending eviction. Nothing particularly unusual or conspiratorial deserves to be read into this. Tökés had long had run-ins with the regime over his persistent criticism of collaboration and corruption among his superiors in the Reformed Calvinist Church and of the regime's treatment of the Hungarian minority. As Tökés himself admits, once his particular case gained Western attention in the late 1980s the regime tended to favour a more bureaucratic approach to silencing him.[30] Supremely confident in their ability to control society, the authorities had seen no need—even in the rarefied context of December 1989—to cloak its strategy against Tökés.

Thus, for example, rather than expel Tökés from the ministry completely (as had been done for a period several years earlier), the Reformed Calvinist hierarchy suspended Tökés from his Timişoara parish and ordered him to relocate to the remote village of Mineu. Tökés first found out about the church hierarchy's decision in

March 1989, he was informed of the deadline of 15 December 1989 when his first appeal was rejected in August, and he was assured on 28 November in the rejection of his second appeal that his eviction would definitely be enforced on 15 December if he did not vacate the parish residence before then. As a result, it was possible for Pastor Tökés to alert his congregation on Sunday 10 December 1989 of this impending 'illegal act' and to appeal to them to attend as 'peaceful witnesses', since the authorities would probably use force and he did not intend to go willingly.[31]

In spite of the fact that the regime had considered Tökés a serious threat for some time and in spite of the news from elsewhere in Eastern Europe where seemingly insignificant events had toppled similar seemingly invulnerable communist regimes, Ceauşescu regime officials appear to have underestimated the commitment of Tökés' parishioners to preventing his eviction and the capacity for the eviction to spark broader anti-regime protest. This was possible for the very same reason that the East German and Czechoslovak regimes were taken by surprise: absolute, unchallenged power leads to complacency and a misplaced sense of invulnerability. In spite of the increased vigilance of the Romanian regime in the wake of the East German and Czechoslovak events, Ceauşescu regime officials appear still to have believed that 'it can't happen here'. Moreover, regime officials appear to have accepted their own propaganda that Tökés' grievances had no resonance in the broader culture, that his demands were isolated and sectarian.

The fact that Tökés' case embodied both religious and ethnic dimensions, that the church structure bestows upon the minister an institutionally-ordained leadership position, and that Tökés himself was by all accounts quite charismatic, contributed to the potential for collective action among Tökés' followers. Durkheimian assumptions predict that collective action should be driven by an anomic population of individuals with little previous contact among them and with little in common other than their shared sense of anomie.[32] For those following in the Durkheimian tradition (including Ted Robert Gurr and others who stress the 'psychological' sources of protest), grievance and the shared character of that grievance are what drive collective action: prior organisation does not play an important role. The genesis of anti-regime protest in Timişoara appears to counter these Durkheimian assumptions: the prior group coherence provided by religious institutions was of critical importance.

It is precisely in environments where group coherence and organisation are low that what little opportunity for group coherence and organisation exists becomes most important. Partly because the elimination of religious institutions would have perhaps met with more resistance than even collectivisation, because communist elites came to see them as a safety valve for societal discontent, and perhaps because of a lack of commitment on the part of elites (who, in spite of themselves, were to some extent still bounded by the national culture in which they had been raised), religious institutions were some of the few forums of societal organisation which survived the totalitarian assault on society. Almost inevitably, religious institutions became potential havens of anti-regime dissidence in otherwise 'flattened' societies. Thus, particularly in pre-Solidarity Poland, the Catholic Church played an important role in curtailing the encroachment of the state on society and thus in creating an environment in which civil society organisations could develop. Indeed, as some analysts have observed, the Church's coordination of the Pope's 1979 visit provided a

laboratory in societal self-organisation which served as a springboard for the birth of Solidarity a year later.[33] The protection of societal organisation by the church was also important in East Germany, where the Lutheran and Evangelical churches sheltered the so-called peace groups which served as a primer for the later evolution of New Forum.

In the Romanian case, the Reformed Calvinist Church, along with the Catholic Church and Adventist Church, were sites of overlapping communal and associational memberships: not only were they minority religions in the face of the Romanian Orthodox Church, but they were overwhelmingly and almost exclusively ethnic Hungarian in their membership.[34] These minority religious institutions were frequently identified by Hungarians (and, no doubt, by the authorities) as vehicles for the defence of Hungarian culture and collective rights. Tökés' congregation in Timişoara was thus characterised by the conditions which Anthony Oberschall suggests contribute to a capacity for collective action: strong communal and associational ties among a group of people who are to some extent segregated from, and at odds with, the rest of the broader society.[35] Thus, when a threat to their interests developed—the regime's intention to evict Pastor Tökés—their capacity to mobilise was enhanced by their pre-existing bases of common identity and organisation.

The combination of strong group coherence and societal marginality also played a role in expanding protest beyond the initial core of Hungarian supporters from Tökés' congregation. A senior member of Tökés' congregation had informed members of the Romanian Baptist and Pentecostal communities (two fringe religions which had faced considerable regime harassment) earlier in the week of Tökés' impending eviction.[36] Members of these two churches helped swell the crowd (numbering in the low hundreds) protesting against Tökés' eviction to over a thousand people by the evening of 15 December 1989.

The expansion of the protest to the majority Romanian community and its evolution into an openly anti-regime demonstration on Saturday 16 December 1989 was also clearly facilitated by the comparatively cosmopolitan climate of Timişoara. With its close proximity to both the Hungarian and Yugoslav (Serb) borders, this city (which incidentally was the first in Europe to have outdoor electric lighting) is characterised by comparatively good relations (for this region) among majority Romanians and minority Hungarians, Germans and Serbs.[37] Finally, prior group coherence also played a large role in swelling the ranks of the protesters on Saturday 16 December as large numbers of high school and university students (especially from the dormitories of the Timişoara Polytechnical Institute) poured into the streets. On Sunday 17 December these nuclei of protesters joined together and were joined by other, unaffiliated townspeople to form the largest mass anti-regime demonstration of the Ceauşescu era.

Regime actions/inactions undermine regime control and propel collapse: the regime's informational or 'public relations' response, 18–22 December 1989

Structural theories of revolution are frequently criticised for their failure to acknowledge the tremendous contingency of the events which constituted the revolution at the

time they transpired. Such theories neglect the fact that the outcomes of the key decisions and actions which made the revolution possible were unknown to those who took them at the time. Thus, structural theories ignore how the actions and inactions of the regime in response to collective action determine whether an anti-regime protest fizzles out, is contained and defused, or spreads and sparks the overthrow of the regime.

Although we typically conceive of how state action/inaction in response to anti-regime protest shapes the evolution of events in terms of the state's use of coercion, we can also think of it in terms of the state's informational or 'public relations' response. A peculiarly modern (post-Enlightenment) concern for public opinion compels even the most dictatorial regimes to attempt to explain why anti-regime protest has occurred, why it is illegitimate, and why the regime has the right to suppress it. But such an effort requires the construction of an understanding for public consumption: it is this sort of 'propaganda offensive' which has the potential to boomerang on a regime. In a closed political system—where information is tightly controlled—the regime's effort to put out its own version of the truth often succeeds in giving the public information it otherwise would not have had, and in alienating them by insulting their intelligence.[38] The power of mass media and of the state in the 20th century have frequently been portrayed as overwhelming, yet these institutions can prove remarkably fragile in crisis situations and their very power can lead to fantastic mistakes.

Under routine circumstances, the absurdity which frequently characterises totalitarian rule is stoically accepted by its subjects. But once change is in the air—that is, once regime change seems possible—the absurdity of the totalitarian regime is drawn into relief. For example, when on the morning of Sunday 17 December 1989 demonstrators in Timişoara returned to the county party headquarters building, the site of fierce clashes with the authorities on the previous night, they found the building with its windows repaired, the previous night's graffiti scrubbed away, the flowers and grass replanted, and trees broken the previous night tied together with wire![39] The regime's philosophy seemed to be: where there are no traces of the past (even of the previous night), there can be no memory of the events which left those traces. Similarly, when on Monday 18 December regime officials announced that Romania would regrettably not be able to accept any more tourists for the winter season, they felt it necessary to justify their decision: it was necessary because of a 'shortage of hotel rooms' and because 'weather conditions' were 'not suitable for tourism', they explained.[40]

Although regime forces opened fire on peaceful demonstrators on the afternoon of Sunday 17 December—resulting in almost one hundred dead and hundreds of wounded—and continued to hunt down demonstrators well into Monday morning, the official media (including the local Timişoara newspaper) made no mention of the turbulent events which had rocked the city over the previous two days. But the Ceauşescus were simply unwilling and unable to leave well enough alone. On their orders, but apparently in particular on the orders of Elena Ceauşescu, party officials were dispatched to various factories in the city from the morning of Monday 18 December to clarify for workers what had *not* happened in the town the night before. As the former party secretary of Timiş county laments, not only did these meetings

not have the desired effect but they 'essentially enabled them [the workers] to organise':

> Monday, they discussed and organised at the lathes, at the mills, and at the workplaces, Tuesday they came out into the courtyards of the factories, and by Wednesday they had come into the centre of town. That was the evolution of the events in Timişoara. That's how it was.[41]

In other words, a regime effort designed to head off further collective action succeeded in fuelling it.

The comments of one employee at the Electrobanat (ELBA) factory illustrate how the dynamics of this process unfolded. Ironically, she observes, prior to the arrival of the party official at her factory, many workers indeed did not fully realise the scope of the violence on the previous night.[42] According to this factory worker, the presentation of the party official was so absurd that it provoked a reaction entirely opposite to what the regime wished. The party official had argued that

> … hooligans, fascists and corrupt and retrograde elements had devastated Timişoara. We also learned about László Tökés, a religious fanatic who incited vagabonds to attack, steal and set things on fire. They also attracted children into these actions. All were drunk, including the children and the women; they had got drunk with the liquor which had been stolen from the supermarkets which had been broken into. They attacked the county [party] building, but not to be worried: all of them had been captured. All of them.[43]

This was the reason, they were told, why a 'state of emergency' was now in effect (unofficially declared at this point) and all gatherings of more than three people had been banned. The workers were warned about 'rumour-mongering'. Upon returning to their workplaces, the employee claims that workers were left with a lingering question: 'Where had so many "fascists", "hooligans" and "drunks" of all ages in Timişoara come from so suddenly?'[44] Ad hoc strike committees began to form at this and others of Timişoara's most important plants later that day.

Had anti-regime protest not spread beyond Timişoara—as happened from Wednesday 20 December—it is possible that the regime could have isolated the city, waited out the protesters, and then brutally reimposed control, much as it had done in crushing a workers' demonstration in the central town of Braşov two years earlier. But, ironically, Ceauşescu's own arrogant and impulsive behaviour made such a strategic approach impossible. Unlike the almost complete media blackout which characterised the Braşov events (until well after the regime had cracked down and re-established control), this time, perhaps realising the much more serious threat to his regime posed by the Timişoara unrest given the recent collapse of communist regimes elsewhere in the region, Ceauşescu took to the airwaves.

Just hours after returning from his two-day visit to Iran, Ceauşescu went on television on the evening of Wednesday 20 December to denounce the 'terrorist actions' in Timişoara 'organised and unleashed in close connection with reactionary, imperialist, irredentist, chauvinist circles and foreign espionage services in various foreign countries'.[45] Ceauşescu's characterisation of the Timişoara unrest appears to give support to arguments about the tendency of leaders (particularly tyrannical leaders) to use a 'rally round the flag' defence in times of severe crisis. Given the

aforementioned isolationist/xenophobic character of the Ceauşescu regime, such a nationalist appeal to the population to defend the regime in the name of the homeland was in keeping with longstanding regime policy. Not only were the Timişoara events the work of foreign agents, they were anti-national in character. Just as in the case of the party official's address to the employees of the ELBA factory, many of those in the television audience learned for the first time that something serious had occurred in Timişoara in the preceding days, and that the regime was frightened by it, specifically thanks to Ceauşescu's hysterical tirade.

A second, even more misguided decision was taken the following day when Ceauşescu decided to convoke a pro-regime rally in the centre of Bucharest to denounce foreign interference in Romania's internal affairs (i.e. the Timişoara events). Though speculation has been rampant since December 1989 that Ceauşescu had been goaded by cabinet members to make such a catastrophic mistake, it appears that the idea for this rally was all Ceauşescu's. The influence of precedent and memory appear to have weighed heavily here: as Ceauşescu's comments to the members of the Political Executive Committee (the CPEx, the Romanian equivalent of the Politburo) throughout the week of 16–22 December suggest, and many former regime members have claimed, Ceauşescu believed that he and Romania were confronted with a situation very similar to, if not identical with, August 1968. At that time Ceauşescu took advantage of the opportunity offered by celebrations commemorating the overthrow of Marshal Ion Antonescu's regime on 23 August 1944 (it had become the official national day under communist rule) to denounce the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet and other Warsaw Pact forces—minus Romania—just two days earlier.[46] Ceauşescu had thus tapped into a genuinely popular nationalist and anti-Soviet sentiment and he was warmly received by the population. The event appears to have left an indelible impression upon Ceauşescu and it was the 'spirit of '68' which he apparently attempted to rekindle in December 1989—but with strikingly different results.

If Ceauşescu's decision to convene this mass rally and to believe that he could play the nationalist card as he had done 21 years earlier was misguided, his order that the event be televised live and nationwide proved to be positively suicidal. A national television audience was able to hear commotion while Ceauşescu spoke to the crowd assembled beneath the Central Committee building and to witness his confusion and frustration when stock pro-regime chants suddenly turned into cries of 'Timişoara, Timişoara'. Ironically, the commotion appears to have been caused by the efforts of groups of protesters to penetrate the cordon surrounding the official rally.[47] Regime forces let off tear gas grenades ('petardes') to prevent them from entering the rally, and demonstrators and rally participants took advantage of the confusion to shout anti-regime slogans.

It took television almost three minutes to cut the live feed, and by that time the damage had been done: an entire national audience had seen that the emperor had no clothes. In many of the larger cities (particularly in Transylvania), such as Sibiu and Cluj, the number of demonstrators and their boldness appeared to increase dramatically after this event: the televised image of Ceauşescu's shock and helplessness had suggested that the 'Timişoara virus' had migrated to the capital, that anti-regime protest had become a nationwide phenomenon, and that, for the first time, the

Ceauşescu regime was vulnerable and change might be possible. Once again, communications appear to have played an important part in spreading the revolution. Not even an Orwellian re-broadcast of the rally on national television that evening with pro-Ceauşescu chants dubbed in over the catcalls and anti-regime shouts could repair the damage—indeed, it may once again have only enraged and emboldened the population.[48]

The final instance of how the regime's information policy backfired was the televised announcement on the morning of Friday 22 December, just hours before the collapse of the regime, of the alleged suicide of the 'traitor' Defence Minister, General Vasile Milea. Rightly or wrongly—since Milea's actions during his final hours are in dispute and since Ceauşescu's paranoia was often not tightly correlated to reality—such an announcement suggested that the loyalty of the Army's high command might be in question and it may have hastened the defection of the armed forces from the regime and emboldened the demonstrators. Moreover, most Romanians interpreted the portrayal of the cause of Milea's death as a lie—it was more likely that he had been, in the language of Ceauşescu-era Romania, 'suicided', a suspicion which appears to have been confirmed since December 1989 by details which suggest that Milea was shot by a member of Ceauşescu's Securitate, more for the failure of the Army's actions than for open insubordination.

All of these incidents suggest that the control over public opinion attributed even to the most totalitarian regimes is frequently overstated. Authoritarian or totalitarian regimes may control the mass media and the flow of information to society, and they may be able to shape the understanding of the population, but they cannot completely control the interpretation of such information by the population or the connotation or meaning the population attaches to it, particularly not during times of crisis where the regime is already widely viewed as illegitimate.

The loyalty of the regime's armed forces

The defection of the armed forces from the ruling political elite is critical to the success or failure of anti-regime challenges. As D. E. H. Russell's work has demonstrated, although the defection of the armed forces may not always be enough to solidify regime change, most regimes do not collapse without such a defection having taken place.[49] This event is important because its impact is both real and psychological, and because it affects both demonstrators and the ruling political elite. The defection of the armed forces deprives the ruling political elite of the means for ensuring the regime's survival and may test their resolve to hold on to power—especially if there exists the prospect that these armed forces might now turn their guns on their former political masters. For those opposing the regime, the defection of the armed forces is a material, psychological and moral victory. The defection of the armed forces from the existing political authorities means the challenge opponents face in overcoming the regime is reduced. Prospects of success—which did not previously exist—fuel demands, embolden demonstrators and encourage a bandwagon effect in which those previously wary of extending their support to the demonstrators (even when supporting the demonstrators' goals) now do so.

Throughout the week of 16–22 December 1989 the military response of the

Ceauşescu regime to anti-regime protest mirrored its public relations response: it demonstrated a concerted unwillingness to leave well enough alone. Ceauşescu's inability to grasp the depth of his own personal, and his regime's, popular illegitimacy was manifested in his decision to dispatch army units—complete with fanfare, flags and patriotic songs—to parade through Timişoara on the morning of Sunday 17 December. The Miliţia and Securitate having forcibly removed Pastor Tökés from the parish residence in the early hours of Sunday 17 December, Ceauşescu apparently believed that such an action would be a fitting culmination to the regime-society confrontation and would encourage Timişoara's citizens to think twice before joining in protest again.

The former party secretary of Timişoara (sentenced after December 1989 for his part in ordering the repression of demonstrators) maintains that Ceauşescu ordered the military parade as a show of force to demonstrate to the people just how strong and invincible the regime was, but that the action backfired.[50] No doubt the townspeople instead viewed this action as both absurd—given the magnitude of the crisis the regime was facing, it seemed symbolic of Ceauşescu's divorce from reality—and provocative.[51] The townspeople responded by gathering to jeer the soldiers and pelt them with stones.

Ceauşescu's decision to deploy the army was probably motivated at least in part by his perception that, because the army was both objectively a more 'popular' organisation (given that its rank-and-file were conscripted) and was held in higher esteem than other regime institutions by the population, the army's participation in the regime's show of force would lend regime action (including repression) legitimacy. Of course, it was precisely because the army's core membership was more genuinely 'popular' that its participation proved so destabilising. Demonstrators seemed to seize on this immediately, thereby contradicting 'irrationalist' assumptions concerning the behaviour of individuals when in crowds. Demonstrators attempted to appeal to the sympathy of army soldiers by chanting 'Armata e cu noi' (the army is with us). 'We are the people, whom are you defending?' and 'You also have wives and children'.[52]

Though army units (including conscripts) appear to have opened fire with other regime forces on the evening of Sunday 17 December—killing almost one hundred and wounding hundreds more—it appears that the refusal of the townspeople of Timişoara to give up the fight in the days which followed may have weakened the commitment of these soldiers to their mission. For example, army units appear to have begun to refrain from direct intervention in the activities of the demonstrators beginning from the evening of Tuesday 19 December. The event which may have triggered this change in policy was a confrontation at the aforementioned ELBA factory where the mostly female workforce had gone on strike.

Two hundred soldiers had been dispatched to the plant in order to 'persuade' the women to return to work. The effect was the opposite of what was intended: the women began by chanting 'We will not work under arms!' and ended up chanting 'Down with Ceauşescu!' Several leading officials of the city and an army general (General Guşe) who rushed to the scene were temporarily cornered by the women. The party secretary of Timişoara frantically scribbled the demands of the women in his notebook—'We want heat … We want chocolate for our children … socks, underwear, cocoa, and cotton'—until a diversion outside the plant allowed them to

make their escape in the resulting confusion.[53] For the recruits, in particular, they had been confronted not by the foreign terrorists and agents they had been led to expect by the regime propaganda which was being heavily disseminated to them at their barracks, but by a workforce of determined women who were voicing many of the same concerns that they and their families shared. Significantly, after the incident, regime forces evacuated the area around the ELBA plant and the employees took to the streets. And that afternoon and evening gunfire in the city tapered off and later ceased completely.

By the morning of Wednesday 20 December a general strike prevailed throughout Timişoara and only the bread factories were in operation. A demonstration in solidarity with those who had lost family members and friends in the violence of the preceding days—and were now demanding the return of their dead—drew columns of workers to the city centre. Army units allowed citizens to proceed unhindered. This was the first clear indication of support by the army rank and file for the demonstrators' cause. Soldiers reportedly refused to carry out their orders and some even joined in the demonstration.[54] The slogan 'the army is with us' resounded throughout the centre of Timişoara. Soon after, the army began to withdraw to barracks. As soldiers disappeared from the streets, reports suggest that the remaining Securitate and Miliţia men either followed their lead or were overwhelmed by the crowds.[55] By evening, as many as 100 000 people—almost a third of Timişoara's population—had reportedly taken to the centre of town in triumph.

At the time, observers were tempted to interpret the army's action as evidence that the military chain of command was disintegrating and mid-level officers were taking matters into their own hands. Moreover, the *withdrawal* was viewed as an unequivocal sign of support for the demonstrators' cause. Army Major Viorel Oancea, who on 22 December (prior to the flight of the Ceauşescus) was to become the first army officer in Timişoara to declare publicly his allegiance to the revolution, nevertheless denies the idea of a spontaneous retreat: 'Evidently, it was an order, the army was not in a position to be taking independent decisions … Probably General Guşe or Ion Coman [took this decision] …'.[56] The Army's high command was undoubtedly concerned about its ability to maintain its institutional coherence under these circumstances and the only way to prevent a further breakdown in control was to take the soldiers off the streets.[57] Regardless of how it was intended, however, the townspeople of Timişoara nevertheless interpreted the action of retiring troops to barracks as support for their cause.

The Romanian case suggests that the armed forces' *withdrawal* of support from the existing regime, rather than its *transfer* of that support to those contesting the regime, may be enough to fatally wound the existing regime, even when the opposition is fragmented and isolated. Once again, in a totalitarian regime, the non-existence or extreme weakness of societal opposition makes regime behaviour all the more central to outcomes. For anti-regime demonstrators, the military's declaration of a position of neutrality in the current confrontation or its return to barracks is a change in the status quo and is interpreted as a victory. Its impact is twofold, both practical and psychological: it permits and emboldens anti-regime protest. Perception can be as important as reality. That the high command of the Romanian Army appears to have withdrawn from Timişoara primarily in the interests of maintaining institutional

cohesion does not really matter in the final analysis. Romanian citizens interpreted this as moral support for their struggle and as a defeat for the regime. It increased the chances that the demonstrators' cause would succeed and it increased their confidence that they would triumph.

Clearly, in the capital, Bucharest, and elsewhere, the army did not exhibit any signs that a general decision had been taken to defect from the regime. In Bucharest, Cluj and other cities the army participated alongside the Miliţia and the Securitate in the repression of demonstrators from the afternoon of Thursday 21 December into the early morning hours of Friday 22 December, including opening fire on peaceful demonstrators (leading to the death of several dozen protesters). On the morning of Friday 22 December, however, columns of workers from the factories ringing the outskirts of Bucharest were allowed to advance relatively unhindered towards the city centre. Overwhelmed commanders in the field were constantly inquiring of their superiors how they should proceed in light of the rapidly changing situation. In some cases they apparently received the order from mid-level commanders to mass around their equipment; in others they apparently followed their own conscience. According to army sources, the effect of the soldiers grouping around their equipment was de facto to break up the cordons of regime forces designed to prevent the forward progress of the demonstrators.[58]

Contingency—chance—perhaps even the snap judgement of one or two mid-level commanders, may ultimately have played an important role here in determining whether protesters were able to storm the key square in front of the Central Committee building and breach the building itself—thus putting the Ceauşescus on the run—or whether the regime would be able to launch another round of bloody repression and re-establish control. The apparently spontaneous decisions of an infantry captain to withdraw his armoured vehicle at a key crossing point leading to the main square in front of the Central Committee building, and of a certain Colonel Carp to remove the armoured vehicles surrounding the building (apparently upon hearing of the announcement that the Defence Minister had 'committed suicide') were critical to the evolution of events.[59] These snap decisions enabled demonstrators to occupy the main square in front of the Central Committee building and to lay siege to the building itself, something which foiled the plan of some within the army's higher command to retake the square and which prompted the Ceauşescus to flee from the roof of the building in an overloaded helicopter.

According to Lieutenant Colonel Ion Pomojnicu, one of the few army officers in the Central Committee building at the time, the army's fragmentation was critical since the Securitate inside had indeed been 'armed to the teeth' with machine guns and piles of ammunition and 'determined to face anything'.[60] The Securitate were caught off-guard, however, by the rapid development of events precipitated by the unanticipated actions of the army units defending the building:

> Generally speaking, you know the withdrawal of the army created great surprise. The moment the army withdrew, the other forces fragmented and those forces belonging to the Interior Ministry fled. If this momentary disorganisation of theirs had not intervened between 11 a.m. and 12 noon when it happened, it is possible that these Interior Ministry forces would have intervened. This moment of panic and disorientation favoured the future evolution of events.[61]

The evacuation of the Ceauşescus from the CC building, in turn, left the Securitate (the sultan's praetorian guard) flat-footed:

> … [The Securitate] fled as soon as their mission was finished; their mission was to defend this person, Ceauşescu. If he had remained, they would have [opened fire]. I believe that for these people the flight of Ceauşescu from the CC building eliminated the object they were supposed to defend in the building and would have defended indefinitely had he stayed … Don't forget that there were similar forces not only inside the CC building. There were also troops barricaded in the headquarters of the Fifth Directorate and in the [National] Library. They did not come down from the top of the building until the helicopter had taken off … I am convinced that neither at the television station would anybody have penetrated inside if it had not been known that Ceauşescu had fled. The flight of Ceauşescu was vital to the unfolding of the Romanian Revolution.[62]

In spite of a devious and byzantine attempt to reconquer power in the days and nights which followed, the rapid disintegration of regime control on Friday 22 December was essentially devastating and impossible to overcome. The army's arbitrary and anarchic defection was the key to the collapse of the regime.

The shadow of the future: bandwagoning and atomisation strategies in the context of the death throes of the Ceauşescu regime, 22–25 December 1989

Pre-existing capacities to effect change, and commitment to a cause, never tell the whole story: the prospect of success plays an important role in shaping behaviour. This explains the critical function performed by ideology and propaganda: they provide hope, even in the face of the most overwhelming odds. In spite of the pervasive resentment of the Ceauşescu regime prior to mid-December 1989, direct protest was a rarity. But the very appearance of the previously unimaginable—anti-regime demonstrations—changed the calculus of the population: protest was possible, others would join, perhaps political change was then also possible. (Indeed, it could be argued that the very rarity of direct action prior to mid-December 1989 contributed to an 'intoxicated' and exaggerated 'redefinition of the possible' when protests did break out—much to the regime's consternation.) Most people, it would appear, tend to be what Charles Tilly describes as 'run-of-the-mill' (utility maximisers, as opposed to the categories of 'zealots', 'misers' and 'opportunists') when it comes to what they are willing to sacrifice for their beliefs and interests.[63] Without some prospect of success, they are unlikely to be willing to act.

At midday on Friday 22 December 1989 Nicolae and Elena Ceauşescu fled from the roof of the Central Committee building by helicopter, just minutes before demonstrators broke into the building and reached the roof. The Ceauşescus apparently had no intention of fleeing the country—during a frantic stopover at their Snagov villa they had underlings pack piles of underwear and towels—and instead flew in the direction of a provincial town from which they apparently intended to supervise their recapture of power. The strategy for retaking power among those charged most directly with the task of defending the regime—the Securitate—appears to have reflected either a conviction that such a plan should be known only to a small group of people and should involve small units specifically trained for such a venture

(rather than an unwieldy and potentially problematic mix of regime forces) and/or reflected the far-reaching disintegration of the regime (including within the Securitate itself) precipitated by the Ceauşescus' impromptu flight from the capital.

Given both the extent of the regime's disintegration on the afternoon of 22 December, and perhaps the initial provisions of the plan for restoring the Ceauşescus to power, the Securitate strategy relied on a mix of real and psychological warfare. Gunfire by small, well-trained and well-equipped units of men (predominantly from the institution's special unit for anti-terrorist warfare (USLA) and from the closely associated Fifth Directorate) was to be accompanied by a multi-faceted campaign of disinformation and psychological warfare. Indeed, these latter components were particularly pronounced, and were in keeping with the institution's penchant for exaggerating its own size and capacities and for exploiting popular fear and paranoia regarding the institution's power.[64] The Securitate apparently banked on the fact that Romanian society's vulnerability to rumour-mongering and its deep fear of the regime would make it particularly manipulable in the period of disbelief and great uncertainty which would characterise a collapse of the regime. Indeed, they banked upon similar behaviour among those forces (especially the army) which might be tempted to abandon the regime in such a situation. Thus, their strategy relied heavily on the dissemination of disinformation, disinformation which was designed to sew confusion and panic, to keep people off the streets and the army in their barracks, to strengthen the impression that the Ceauşescus might yet be restored to power—all outcomes which would facilitate and aid their recapture of power on behalf of the Ceauşescus.

Teodor Brateş, one of the commentators for Romanian Television who was a central figure during the events, describes what happened at the television station after those party-state bureaucrats who seized power[65] in the wake of the Ceauşescus' flight announced the capture of the Ceauşescus at approximately 6 p.m. on the evening of 22 December (an announcement which was shortly followed by the outbreak of gunfire in Bucharest and other major cities throughout the country):

> In this newly-created and extremely serious situation, where there had been gunfire exchanges witnessed by millions of spectators for dozens of minutes, the content of the messages received by telephone directly into the studio or through couriers to the eleventh floor changed radically. Most of them spoke of fighting, attacks and terrorist actions. Meanwhile, *the places* in which such news was being received multiplied considerably (in a geometric progression). In addition to the team in studio 4 … telephone calls were being received in the director general's office, his deputy's office, at the editorial office of the news division, at the office of the service officer on the first floor, in many of the studios, and even in … the infirmary. Consequently from *dozens of sources*. We were truly stunned at how many telephone numbers in the Television building were 'known' by the population. The central operator at Dorobanţi communicated to us that the equipment could not withstand so many phone calls for much longer. Today it is crystal clear to me that these telephone numbers were well 'known' by those who wanted to disinform, to introduce 'viruses', to disorient. Thus, *they were used to the fullest* [emphases in the original].[66]

Brateş suggests that those at the television station (including the military command which had been established there) concluded that

> … all these numerous messages about attacks and fighting could be—pure and simple—*acts*

> *of diversion and disinformation*, designed to frighten the population, to prevent them from acting in large, compact groups, so that those interested in the return of the dictator could achieve their criminal goals.[67]

What made it so difficult to separate fact from disinformation was that real attacks were indeed taking place: at Romanian Television, for example, 62 soldiers and civilians lost their lives.

The army was subjected to a similarly bewildering campaign which mixed real and imaginary elements. A military aviation colonel describes the characteristics of the so-called 'radio-electronic war' the army faced as follows:

> … we were confronted with a powerful adversary which operated on the basis of long-prepared plans which were centrally directed and permanently adapted to changing conditions. [They attacked] by radio-electronic means by creating signals on our radar identical to those which represented real targets. When they reached a distance between 800 and 1500 metres from an objective on the ground they would simulate gunfire of various types of weapons. These two things created the image of an air attack. They were combined with ground attacks, real or false, with various types of telephone calls by identified or unidentified callers, and with the spreading of rumours … on our operating frequencies there were conversations between what were presumed to be aircraft in flight and base command. You didn't know what to make of it, and the confusion was intensified by the fact that they were speaking not only in Romanian, but also in English, Turkish and Arabic … You can imagine in what a situation we had to perform our duties …[68]

Army General Nicolae Militaru, the senior military official of those who seized power on 22 December, explains both why forces loyal to the new regime were unable to extinguish the Ceauşescu resistance more quickly and effectively and why the Ceauşescu resistance ultimately failed in their attempt to reconquer power. Questioned by a reporter in 1992 about whether the television station had ever really been in danger, Militaru responded:

> No … You see, not even those of our commanders who were responsible for the defence of such objectives thought through and analysed well enough exactly whom they were confronting. Because the adversary did not have an extraordinary number of men with which to take an object such as the TV tower by assault. They [the army commanders] did, however, have to face a very well-equipped, well-prepared and perfidious enemy. Not having sufficient forces, they [the 'terrorists'] resorted to 'gunfire simulators' which caused extraordinary confusion. They thus sought to do something completely different: to infiltrate.[69]

The event which essentially scuttled the Securitate counter-revolutionary effort was the decision by the leaders of the new, self-proclaimed National Salvation Front (those party-state bureaucrats who had seized power) to execute the Ceauşescus. Partly based on what they learned from the Securitate 'terrorists' who had been captured, and partly based on their own suspicions, they concluded that the only way to put an end to the loyalist action was to eliminate the object of the loyalists' struggle. Front leaders feared that, as long as the Ceauşescus were still alive, the 'terrorists' were going to continue to fulfil their mission and there would exist the possibility that the Ceauşescus could be rescued and restored to power.

Gelu Voican Voiculescu, one of the key Front figures, maintains that Front leaders

decided that 'either we kill them [the Ceauşescus] or we will perish' when, at the television station on the morning of 24 December 1989, they again only narrowly escaped 'terrorist' sniper fire.[70] Voiculescu claims that he prevailed upon the Front's senior leader, Ion Iliescu, with the memorable words: 'Sir, do you want to end up like Allende?'[71] The decision to execute the Ceauşescus on Christmas Day 1989 ultimately appears to have been the correct one, since the 'terrorist' actions sharply subsided after images of the corpses of the Ceauşescus were broadcast on television, and died off almost completely in the following days. The sultanist dimension of the Ceauşescu regime, which had led the Securitate 'terrorists' to fulfil their mission, now led them to abandon it. The human cost of the Securitate's unsuccessful counter-revolution had been high, however: of the approximately 1100 people who lost their lives during the revolution, over 900 of them died in the gunfire, confusion and panic of the Securitate 'terrorist' campaign.

From the standpoint of theories of revolution and collective action, the Securitate's plan is interesting since it appears to have been premised upon the mirror-image of Granovetter's 'threshold' hypothesis concerning the propensity of citizens to participate in collective action.[72] Granovetter suggests that any individual's propensity to participate is contingent upon the actions of others: once a certain threshold has been crossed, 'band-wagoning' ensues. Granovetter clearly had in mind those participating in anti-regime collective action, but his ideas seem just as applicable to the explanation of the behaviour of regime actors. The Securitate realised that the actual military situation of the counter-revolutionary resistance was far less important than its perception. Create the impression that the number of Securitate resisters was larger than it actually was, and, gradually, many of those regime members (especially among the army) who had abandoned Ceauşescu for lack of an alternative option might begin to play a 'double game', fearful of punishment should the resisters somehow put Ceauşescu back in power. Thus, the Securitate's plan recognised that, even among regime members, the ultimate motivation which had kept them from ousting Ceauşescu or defecting from the regime had been fear. Those Securitate members associated with the disinformation campaign reckoned that the perception of the revolution's chances of success would influence the perception of self-interest on the part of other regime members and influence their behaviour.

The Securitate plan appears to have failed because its creators never envisioned its activation in a context in which the regime had lost as much control as it had on the afternoon of 22 December 1989. It did not anticipate that loyalist forces would have to confront such a wide array of united regime and societal forces, nor did it realise how the very fear of the prospect of Ceauşescu's return would enhance the determination of those forces to defeat such a counter-revolutionary attempt. Indeed, it was the Securitate itself which may have fallen victim to the 'numbers game'. Their effort was inevitably undermined by their knowledge of just how much control they had lost and of the herculean task they faced in attempting to restore the Ceauşescus to power. In other words, the plan's creators underestimated the important role played by what Jaroslav Krejci has identified as the 'Khaldunian contrast' (after the 14th century Muslim scholar, Ibn Khaldun): how ideological conviction and esprit de corps affect behaviour in battle.[73] Ultimately, the illegitimacy of the Ceauşescu regime out-

weighed the fear of what would happen if the Ceauşescus were restored to power—even among regime members, it would appear.

Conclusions

As the only country in Eastern Europe where the collapse of the communist regime was precipitated by sudden mass mobilisation and was accompanied by the regime's use of substantial violence to prevent its downfall, the Romanian Revolution of December 1989 offers a good test of hypotheses found in the literature on collective action and revolution. The totalitarian, sultanist and anti-Soviet features of the regime of Nicolae Ceauşescu greatly narrowed the universe of possible transition paths in Romania. Dissent was rare both within society and within the party-state and where it did occur it was isolated and unable to spread to a wider audience. These regime features meant that outside influences—especially, the 'demonstration' or 'contagion' effect—would be a critical factor in precipitating change within Romania. Moreover, they meant that the impetus for change was likely to come from the fringes of society, from people who had tight bonds among themselves but who as a group were generally marginalised from the broader population.

Totalitarian regimes are particularly vulnerable to being swept away in a sudden brushfire of anti-regime protest. The very level of their actual control and the image of total control they portray paradoxically make them inflexible and unexpectedly brittle when confronted with anti-regime protest. Precisely because of the level of control exercised by totalitarian regimes, the role of state action/inaction in response to anti-regime protest in determining the outcome of events is greater than in other regimes. Thus, the totalitarian regime's thirst for unchallenged control, and its obsession with preserving the utopian image of reality it has created, lead it to respond to the outbreak of anti-regime protest with impulsive, provocative and ultimately counter-productive informational/public relations and military measures. As the Romanian case suggests, measures designed to shore up regime support and to defuse anti-regime sentiment often backfire in times of crisis and hasten the regime's collapse.

Finally, the Romanian case gives evidence that 'prospects for success' are important in determining behaviour during such episodes of collective action, not only among members of society but also among members of the regime. This suggests that although tyrannical regimes may portray instances of anti-regime collective action as 'irrational', they treat such events as eminently rational and anticipate that both members of society and members of the regime (especially the regime's institutions of coercion) will calculate the costs and benefits of their actions before engaging in them.

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[1] Spontaneous mass mobilisation played a fundamental role in toppling regimes in East Germany and Czechoslovakia as well as Romania. It was also a relevant factor in the collapse of the Bulgarian and Albanian regimes.

[2] See, for example, Sidney Tarrow, ' "Aiming at a Moving Target": Social Science and Recent Rebellions in Eastern Europe', *Political Science & Politics*, 24, 1, March 1991, pp. 12–20. By

'sudden mass mobilisation' I refer to the development and expansion of public, anti-regime demonstrations over a period of days or weeks, especially where there was little or no prior history of such organised protest actions.

[3] Chirot formally articulates this characterisation in Daniel Chirot, 'The East European Revolutions of 1989', in Jack A. Goldstone (ed.), *Revolutions: Theoretical, Comparative, and Historical Studies* (New York, Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 178.

[4] Steven D. Roper, 'The Romanian Revolution from a Theoretical Perspective', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 27, 4, December 1994, pp. 401–410; Peter Siani-Davies, 'Romanian Revolution or Coup d'état?', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 29, 4, December 1996, pp. 453–465.

[5] Particularly in a single case study, I am wary of searching for confirmation of hypotheses, rather than letting the case first speak for itself. As I demonstrate below, the former approach easily leads to an inflation of 'confirmed hypotheses' and the overdetermination of the phenomena being explained because such confirmation is often acontextual and mistakes the presence of a factor for causation.

[6] For a discussion see Michael S. Kimmel, *Revolution: A Sociological Interpretation* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1990); and James B. Rule, *Theories of Civil Violence* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988).

[7] László Bruszt & David Stark, 'Remaking the Political Field in Hungary: From the Politics of Political Confrontation to the Politics of Competition', in Ivo Banac (ed.), *Eastern Europe in Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 13–55; Patrick H. O'Neil, 'Revolution from Within: Institutional Analysis, Transitions from Authoritarianism, and the Case of Hungary', *World Politics*, 48, 4, July 1996, pp. 579–603; Juan J. Linz & Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

[8] For a discussion of the influence of these three factors see Linz & Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*, pp. 347–356; and Richard Andrew Hall, 'Rewriting the Revolution: Authoritarian Regime-State Relations and the Triumph of *Securitate* Revisionism in Post-Ceauşescu Romania', PhD thesis, Indiana University, 1997, pp. 79–140. For a discussion of what the shift from totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism entails, see Linz & Stepan, pp. 40–51; Linz & Stepan's analysis is useful because they do not treat 'communist rule' as a static regime type.

[9] On the demoralising and atomising impact of sultanism within the party-state see Vladimir Tismaneanu, 'The Quasi-Revolution and Its Discontents: Emerging Political Pluralism in Post-Ceauşescu Romania', *East European Politics and Societies*, 7, 2, Spring 1993, pp. 309–348.

[10] See the case of the poet, Mircea Dinescu (mentioned below), in Dennis Deletant, *Ceauşescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965–1989* (Armonk, NY, M. E. Sharpe, 1995), p. 280. Such rumours worked much more effectively than those alleging that a dissenter was doing the bidding of a Western intelligence agency. The Securitate realised well that anti-Russian sentiment was much stronger than anti-Western sentiment, particularly among the intelligentsia.

[11] See note 65 for more details on those who captured power.

[12] Totalitarianism is self-replicating in this way, since the exercise of pervasive control and the image of complete control conveyed by the state discourage dissent.

[13] Linz & Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*, p. 352 (citing Jiri Pehe, 'An Annotated Survey of Independent Movements in Eastern Europe', *Radio Free Europe Research*, RAD Background Report/100 (Eastern Europe), 13, June 1989, pp. 1–29).

[14] The first is most directly associated with the work of Tocqueville, Lenin and others, while the second is identified particularly with Crane Brinton. For a discussion see Kimmel, *Revolution: A Sociological Interpretation*.

[15] Michael Shafir, 'Former Senior RCP Officials Protest Ceauşescu's Policies', *Radio Free Europe Research*, Romania/3, 29 March 1989, pp. 8–11.

[16] For a discussion, see Deletant, *Ceauşescu and the Securitate*, pp. 235–293.

[17] Workers' protests had occurred in 1977 and 1981 (among miners) and in 1987 (among factory workers), but in none of these cases did these protests spark more broad-based societal participation. See discussion of events in Deletant, *Ceauşescu and the Securitate*, pp. 243–254.

[18] For a discussion of the theory and its history, see Sidney Tarrow, *Struggle, Politics, and Reform: Collective Action, Social Movements, and Cycles of Protest* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 32–38.

[19] For discussions of 'preference falsification' see Timur Kuran, 'Now out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989', *World Politics*, 44, 1, October 1991, pp. 7–48, and of 'dissimulation' see Ken Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992), p. 80.

[20] Tarrow, ' "Aiming at a Moving Target" ', p. 17.

[21] For a discussion of the 'demonstration' effect see Thomas H. Greene, *Comparative Revolutionary Movements: Search for Theory and Justice* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall, 1990), pp. 147–149.

[22] See Chirot, 'The East European Revolutions', p. 177, on the significance of the events in Bulgaria for Romanians.

[23] The fact that the Romanian regime did not attempt to jam these signals highlights the difference between late communist totalitarianism of the variety practiced by Ceauşescu and that which had existed in the 1940s and 1950s in Eastern Europe.

[24] Based on my reading of *România Liberă* for the period October–December 1989.

[25] In fact, at the time Belgrade Television was running taped CNN broadcasts at night.

[26] For a discussion see Kimmel, *Revolution: A Sociological Interpretation*, pp. 47–53.

[27] Revisionist historiography has haunted Romania since the December events, with tragically misguided conclusions and consequences, as I discuss in Richard Andrew Hall, 'The Uses of Absurdity: The Staged War Theory and the Romanian Revolution of December 1989', *East European Politics and Societies*, 13, 3, Fall 1999, pp. 501–542.

[28] Radu Portocala & Olivier Weber, 'Romania: Revelations about a plot', *Le Point* (Paris), 21 May 1990, pp. 42–49. The article was translated by several opposition weeklies in 1990 and has been cited in positive terms frequently since.

[29] László Tökés, with David Porter, *With God, For the People: The Autobiography of László Tökés* (Toronto, Hodder and Stoughton Publishers, 1990).

[30] *Ibid*., pp. 102, 120. This hardly meant the regime renounced its recourse to intimidation and force. Tökés and his family were subject to repeated telephone threats and rumour-mongering, his associates were detained, beaten up and arrested on trumped-up charges (indeed, a church elder who had organised a petition in defence of Tökés was found murdered in September), the windows of the parochial residence were smashed, and in November Tökés and his family were attacked in the middle of the night by knife-wielding assailants (Tökés was slashed on the forehead during the altercation).

[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 1–4.

[32] For a discussion see Kimmel, *Revolution: A Sociological Interpretation*, pp. 36–39, 73–82.

[33] Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89* (New York, Random House, 1990), pp. 133–134.

[34] The fact that the Uniate (Eastern rite Catholic) Church of Transylvania was integrated into the Orthodox Church during the early communist era (thus completely losing its identity) accentuated the ethnic-religious cleavage by further separating Hungarian and Romanian Catholics.

[35] See the discussion in Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York, Random House, 1978), pp. 81–84. It is interesting to note that Oberschall's argument is mirrored to some extent in the 'poor but free' assumptions of Eric Wolf with regard to peasant participation in revolutions (see Kimmel, *Revolution: A Sociological Interpretation*, p. 199).

[36] Tökés, *With God, For the People*, pp. 1–20.

[37] For some arguments on how the political culture of Timişoara contributed to the outbreak of the December events there see Victor Neumann, 'De ce tocmai Timişoara?' (Why exactly Timişoara?), *Orizont* (Timişoara), 9 February 1990, p. 4.

[38] Totalitarianism may even enhance the importance of the state's public relations response to the evolution of regime-society confrontation. Because totalitarian regimes exercise high levels of control, over such a wide array of resources, the expansion of anti-regime protest is dependent upon regime miscalculations and blunders to an extent it is not in less totalitarian regimes.

[39] Mircea Bălan, 'Masacrul', *Cuvîntul*, 9–15 October 1990, p. 7.

[40] Belgrade Domestic Service, 1400 GMT 20 December 1989, in FBIS-EEU-89-243, 20 December 1989.

[41] Radu Bălan, interview by Adrian Păunescu, 'Fanfara din Timişoara a început, în 17 decembrie 1989, ora 10, prohodul socialismului (2)', *Totuşi Iubirea*, 60, October 1991, p. 8a.

[42] Adelina Elena, 'Martor ocular. Faţă în Faţă', *Orizont*, 6 January 1990, p. 5.

[43] *Ibid.*

[44] It is interesting to observe just how much the party official's explanation of the Timişoara unrest echoes the arguments of the so-called 'irrationalist' school of revolution. The 'irrationalist' school, which was led by such turn-of-the-century theorists such as Gustave Le Bon and Scipio Sighele, argued that 'criminals, madmen, the offspring of madmen, alcoholics, the slime of society, deprived of all moral sense, given over to crime' were the driving force behind the 'crowd' and that women and children, because of their 'inferior form of evolution', were particularly susceptible to being drawn into the 'irrational' actions of the 'crowd' (Rule, *Theories of Civil Violence*, pp. 91–95).

As the party official's comments suggest, the wording of the epithets may have changed to reflect modern ideological categories, but the character of the argument remains much the same. Unfortunately, for as Rule notes there is something undeniably mystical about the 'crowd' which cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts, the claims of the 'irrationalists' remain the favourite final recourse of tyrannical leaders attempting to explain protest against their rule.

[45] Martyn Rady, *Romania in Turmoil: A Contemporary History* (New York, IB Tauris & Co., 1992), p. 97.

[46] Most analysts concur that the Romanian regime had supported Dubcek and the Czechoslovak Communist Party less out of support for the liberalisation of the Prague Spring reform movement than because they wanted to defend the concept of national autonomy, which they too could use in their relations with the Soviet leaders.

[47] See the report on Sofia Domestic Service, 1400 GMT 21 December 1989, in FBIS-EEU-89–244, 21 December 1989, p. 71.

[48] Rady, *Romania in Turmoil*, pp. 97–98.

[49] See the discussion in Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, pp. 214–216.

[50] Radu Bălan, 'Fanfara din Timişoara', p. 8a.

[51] See the comments of participants in Titus Suciu, *Reportaj cu sufletul la Gură* (Romania, Editura Facla, 1990).

[52] See Suciu, *Reportaj cu sufletul*. The rationalism of demonstrators approached tragic dimensions, as Mircea Bălan relates: 'very many [of the demonstrators] had bags in their hands and children with them. It was a naive rationalisation—that if they were arrested by the forces of order they could escape by claiming they had been out shopping or taking a walk' (Bălan, 'Masacrul').

[53] Elena, 'Martor Ocular'.

[54] Nestor Ratesh, *Romania: The Entangled Revolution* (New York, Praeger, 1991), pp. 33–34.

[55] Budapest Domestic Service, 2115 GMT 20 December 1989, in FBIS-EEU-89–244, 21 December 1989.

[56] Major Viorel Oancea, interview by Tudorel Urian, 'Frică, din nou pe străzi', *Cuvîntul*, 14 February 1990, pp. 5, 11.

[57] Other factors have also been suggested as having hastened the withdrawal, such as the threat of the strike committee at the Solvent petrochemical works to blow up the plant if the army did not withdraw immediately. See Rady, *Romania in Turmoil*, pp. 96–97.

[58] Ion D. Goia, 'Chiar Dacă fugea, Ceauşescu nu scapa!, *Flacăra*, 6–12 February 1991, pp. 8–9, comments of Lt Col. Ion Cotîrlea and Lt Col. Alexandru Rafaelescu.

[59] Discussed in Gelu Voican Voiculescu, interview by Adrian Păunescu, 'L-am ajutat pe Ceauşescu să moară în picioare (3)', *Totuşi Iubirea*, 5–12 March 1992, p. 7a; and Deletant, *Ceauşescu and the Securitate*, pp. 356–357.

[60] See Goia, 'Chiar dacă fugea', p. 9.

[61] Pomojnicu in *ibid*.

[62] Pomojnicu in *ibid*.

[63] See the discussion in Tilly, *From Mobilization to Collective Action*, pp. 84–90.

[64] The 'rumour' that one in every four or one in every three Romanian citizens was working for the Securitate (the real number appears to have been substantially lower) is a good example of this. In the final analysis it does not matter a great deal whether this rumour was begun by the Securitate itself or evolved naturally in a fearful society and was exploited by the institution: the result was the same; it was plausible given the Securitate's reputation, and it gave the impression that societal dissent was impossible and futile, and thus discouraged dissent.

[65] These party-state bureaucrats emerged calling themselves the National Salvation Front. Its leaders apparently knew one another prior to 22 December and had conspired to overthrow Ceauşescu, but their plans were overtaken by the unanticipated outbreak of anti-regime protest in mid-December. Initially they clearly intended only to replace Ceauşescu and to introduce Gorbachev-style political and economic reforms and they were pro-Moscow in their orientation. Their prior, conspiratorial contacts with one another, their prior organisation and their prior planning—to say nothing of their experience in and knowledge of the party-state apparatus—put them in a tremendously advantageous position versus other groups (especially societal groups) vying to seize control of the state in the wake of the flight of the Ceauşescus. The personalist character of the Ceauşescu regime had often personalised dissent within the party-state, and thus, although the Front's senior leader, Ion Iliescu, did not pose a well-developed ideological alternative to Ceauşescu, his name had been whispered in the party-state and in society for many years prior to the December 1989 events as someone who had raised Ceauşescu's ire and thus might be an appropriate replacement for him. Iliescu thus had a name recognition and popular image that few other individuals in Romania could counter, something which served him and the Front well in consolidating their power both during and

after the December events. The core of the National Salvation Front, including Iliescu, would dominate politics (often by less than democratic methods) for the next seven years until being voted out of office in the elections of November 1996.

[66] Teodor Brateş, *Explozia Unei Clipe* (Bucharest, Editura Scripta, 1992), p. 110.

[67] *Ibid.*, pp. 110–111.

[68] Colonel Mireca Budiaci, interview by Maior D. Amariei, 'NU! Teroriştii n-au avut elicoptere', *Armata Poporului*, 21 March 1990, p. 4.

[69] Nicolae Militaru, interview by Corneliu Antim, 'Ordinul 2600 în Revoluţia din decembrie', *România Liberă*, 17 December 1992, p. 2.

[70] Gelu Voican Voiculescu, interview by Adrian Păunescu, 'L-am ajutat pe Ceauşescu să moară în picioare (II)', *Totuşi Iubirea*, 27 February–5 March 1992, p. 7a.

[71] Gelu Voican Voiculescu, interview by Adrian Păunescu, 'Gelu Voican, e adevărat că tu l-ai împuşcat pe Ceauşescu? (3)', *Totuşi Iubirea*, 30 January–6 February 1992, p. 5a.

[72] Mark Granovetter, 'Threshold Models of Collective Behavior', *American Journal of Sociology*, 83, 6, May 1978, pp. 1420–1443. For an excellent discussion of Granovetter's hypothesis see Rule, *Theories of Civil Violence*, pp. 43–49.

[73] Jaroslav Krejci, *Great Revolutions Compared: The Outline of a Theory* (New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 38.