


Hoping to generate support for his economic and political reforms, Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev visited the city of Bucharest, Romania in May 1987. The message he delivered was not unlike any other. Much like he had done throughout the Communist Bloc, Gorbachev appealed to the citizens and their national leader, Nicolae Ceausescu, to endorse the radical measures of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* (Almond, 212). On any given occasion, a Soviet leader speaking to the people of this nation would have certainly fallen on deaf ears. But not this time; 1987 was different. The atmosphere in Romania during and immediately after Gorbachev's visit painted a different picture than that which characterized the otherwise antagonistic relationship between Russia and Romania. Indeed, the warm popular reception offered to Gorbachev confirmed that there was a metamorphosis taking place: A country that worked for decades to maintain its sovereignty, as free as possible from Soviet intervention, was now on the brink of supporting its arch enemy. In an amazing and convoluted twist of irony, the "Romanians now looked to the Soviet Union for hope" (Deletant, 162).

The revolutions of 1989 were unprecedented, each country adding to the mix its own blend of historical significance, with equally consequential outcomes. But in the midst of all the transitions, none exemplified a nation in rebellion as did Romania. Undisputedly the most violent of the Eastern European changeovers, it was also the most paradoxical. As contradictory as it seemed, Romania--marked by decades of tyrannical rule-- became its own worst enemy, its own Russia. Put another way, Romania had become on its own what they feared Russia would make them: a poor, economically dependent, socially repressive society. How did this happen?

By way of examining the history of Russian-Romanian relations after World War II, I will illustrate how this paradox transpired. That is, only by understanding Romania's *constant* plight for autonomy, first under Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, and ultimately under Ceausescu, can we understand the events that lead to 1989. And only if we understand Ceausescu's successes, can we fairly evaluate his failures.

### **Early Politics: Foundations of Russian-Romanian Friction after World War II**

As World War II came to a close, it was evident that Josef Stalin's Russia would secure major concessions from the Yalta Agreements. To be precise, Russia gained significant influence in Eastern Europe, primarily concerning the buffer zones of Poland and East Germany, as well as benefiting from the economic gains that came with Hungary and Czechoslovakia. What this meant for the Soviet Union was a chance to make an independent bloc of Communist states. By enacting economic and political policies that, in essence, claimed some informal ownership over its neighbors, "Russia would have predominant influence in Romania and Bulgaria and equal influence with the west in Yugoslavia and Hungary" (Mason, 9). 

For Romania, the thought of a mother Russia was alarming to say the least. Truly, they had very good reason to fear, as they had conspired with Nazi Germany against Russia during World War II. Daniel Nelson writes:

For more than three years, the Romanian army participated fully as an ally of Germany in the invasion of the Soviet Union. General Ion Antonescu and the Iron Guard created a pro-German military dictatorship in Romania, and led the country head long into the war in the Ukraine and beyond. Romanian troops were present at the siege of Stalingrad, and retreated with the Germans back into Romanian territory in April 1944 (Nelson, 179).

Considering this, not only did Romania now stand a chance of paying retribution, they would also be subject to losing major parts of its national identity. Needless to say, Romania's incorporation into the Communist bloc was dubious from the beginning.

By 1945 Russia had installed "people's democracies" throughout Eastern Europe. These were coalition governments consisting of both communist and non-communist parties, which concurrently, symbolized--if not realized--a new era of modernization, liberation, and change (Mason, 11). By assuming this role, the communist party was able to bolster itself in several countries, including Bulgaria, Albania, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. In addition, many left-wing socialist and pre-communist parties cooperated, perhaps even "fused" with the Soviet Communist Party in what appeared to be a common cause (Mason, 11). Romania, however, had a very poor history of supporting the Romanian Communist Party (RCP), for among other reasons its passive peasantry and weak industry (Verdery, 103). Thus, they were not about to accept Russia's "baggage train governments".

To combat this, Stalin attempted to gain popular support in Romania, as he did in other countries, by means of propaganda, coercion, and the implementation of elections in which citizens could choose from a small variety of handpicked candidates. (Not exactly free elections, they were nonetheless more democratic than what was to come.) However, as it became clear in 1947--after the second elections in Hungary--that sustained support for the Communist Party would never eventuate through suffrage, Stalin began to move more towards a policy of complete control, or *totalitarianism*. As he carefully organized the ascension of Romanian governmental leaders, both national and international planning became increasingly pro-Soviet. For Stalin, the only thing left

to do was legitimize the government he had created. He did this--albeit under hesitant opposition-- with the declaration of the Romanian People's Republic in 1947 (Deletant, 5).

In 1948 Stalin abolished private property rights in Romania, nationalizing all aspects of industry, banking, education, and religion (Deletant, 9). Categorically ignoring all civil rights, he closed down foreign and religious schools, purged universities, and consolidated churches. Also in 1948, Russia and Romania signed a treaty of friendship, co-operation, and mutual assistance, which assured the former that Romania would, for all practical purposes, remain subservient to its neighbor (Deletant, 5). Having already installed communists in all the key positions of Romanian government, everything was essentially in place for Stalin to exercise absolute command.



### **Stalinist Romania: Forced-Draft Industrialization, Deculturalization, and Military Reorientation**

By the time Stalin had asserted full dictatorship over its western neighbors, a pragmatic Romanian leader had emerged as head of the RCP. Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej was an independence-minded, yet sensible leader who understood the power of Stalin. In addition to the international relationship with Russia, Gheorghiu-Dej and the Romanian government also had to deal with questions of internal feuding and conflicting factions *within* the RCP. Among party members, there was great dissension over the amount and nature of the directives they should accept from the Kremlin. Increasingly, it became a question of ethnicity, as "Romanian" members began to suspect fellow colleagues on the basis of their Jewish or Hungarian heritage. This should come as no surprise, since it was critically related to the mandates being sent from Moscow: Questions of forced-draft

industrialization and consolidation of churches, implicitly undermining national identity, threatened the very existence of the nation (Verdery, 104). Certainly, debate on these issues, it was thought, should not be left to those whom were not most directly affected.

Ultimately, Gheorghiu-Dej, backed by a coalition of "ethnically pure" RCP members, concentrated his own power by conducting ongoing purges of his opposition. What this did for Stalin was further increase his grip on the nation. As one author noted: "This group, dominated by ethnic Romanians and having purged its most powerful Jewish and Hungarian rivals, nonetheless submitted to Stalin's resolute internationalism and continued to accept, as had their opponents, Soviet directives concerning not only forced-draft industrialization but also the suppression of national values" (Verdery, 104).

*Forced-Draft Industrialization and Trade:*

Although Romanian leaders were certainly not against establishing a firm base in *heavy* industry--indeed, it was the sign of a developed society-- they were not about to commit all of its resources to this one "basket" (Ratesh, 5). The country had a long history of agricultural production, *light* industry, and a considerable endowment of natural resources; yet they were far inferior to its neighbors, including East Germany and Czechoslovakia, in terms of available raw materials (Nelson 1992: 160). Thus, many leaders felt that it would be wiser if the nation conducted a balanced approach. Stalin, on the other hand, had only two goals in mind: the rebuilding of Russia and the expansion of heavy industry. By using its neighbors and whatever means necessary, Moscow was determined to make an independent commonwealth of Warsaw Pact countries. Each country, regardless of its capabilities, was expected to contribute. "The basic economic flaw in these options", Nestor Ratesh writes, "was their complete disregard of Romania's

lack of raw materials and energy resources" (Ratesh, 4). Still, the Kremlin, backed by Romanian leaders, refused to acknowledge this, and embarked on what would be decades of misguided management and "irrational choices" (Ratesh, 3).

The immediate effects of forced-draft industrialization were felt most notably from 1950 to 1960, where Romania's allotted resources devoted to this sector increased by an astonishing 748 percent (Verdery, 104). Concerning public support over industrialization, RCP members were able to rationalize their decisions on the basis that industry played a positive role in increasing state sovereignty. Yet, this did nothing for the fact that Romania was dreadfully equipped to assume this role. Thus, regardless of its limitations, the nation continued on this course--even increasing its intensity levels under the leadership of Ceausescu.

Combined with these economic policies, as well as the wartime reparations Romania was paying to Moscow, trade between the two nations increased dramatically through the 1960's. As a consequence of Romania's scarcity in raw materials, imports of iron ore and other elements of metallurgic industry had to be imported (Ratesh, 2). In addition, Romania's former orientation towards trade with the West was by 1951 predominantly geared towards the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact countries (Turnock, 231). By the early 1950's over two-thirds of Romanian trade was going to Eastern Europe and Russia.

#### *Consolidation of Churches and Deculturalization:*

Although Romania's government was able to persuade much of the public that industrial advancement was the sign of a progressive society, this was not the case with many of Stalin's other policies. In hopes that Romania could itself exemplify Soviet-style

hegemony, Stalin embarked on an ambitious campaign to repress many of the nationalist virtues of the Romanian peoples. In particular, since the "church was the final major obstacle to the imposition of the Soviet model", Stalin enacted several policies to minimize the power of the religious establishment (Deletant, 10). This was especially significant in terms of national identity, since religious practice had long been a part of Romanian culture. The intrusion of Russia into this arena made the threat of deculturalization that much more a reality.

Although the Soviet Union was adamantly opposed to any form of religion, the RCP compromised with Moscow not to disallow several of the major faiths<sup>1</sup>. The compromise resulted in the establishment of the Ministry of Cults. Under the agreement, all funds and land belonging to churches were annexed by the state. In addition, the Romanian Orthodox and Greek Catholic (Uniate) denominations would be consolidated into one church. The Roman Catholic church, because of its affiliation to the Pope, would not be recognized. And perhaps most importantly, the new laws did not acknowledge any religious holidays (Deletant,11).

Adding to the connotations of servility that accompanied Soviet control over religion, there was perhaps even more suppression in the domains of secular intellectuals. Russian policies aimed at editing Romanian history included the shelving of many authors that were considered "anti-state". In fact, as the RCP continued to support Stalin's directives, many members called for a complete revision and rewriting of Romanian history (Verdery, 111). "All research institutes for history were merged into a single history institute, their several journals replaced with a new one under party

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<sup>1</sup> The Romanian Orthodox Church was the largest of the major confessions, with over 10 million members in 1948. Other major religions included that of the Greek Catholic and Roman Catholic churches.

control" (Georgescu 1983: 136, n.5). Those textbooks that did remain were rewritten to emphasize socialist values. Also, the Romanian Academy, an organization dedicated to the sciences, was abolished in 1948, to be replaced by a cadre of more party-affiliated members (Verdery, 110). To help in these repressive tactics, *intelligensia* and *Securitate* forces were used. Any signs of excessive cultural identification considered by party officials as being "bourgeois" prompted immediate prosecution.

*Military Reorientation:*

The final element of Russia's control over Romanian national identity came with the installation of Soviet troops throughout Romania. In addition to the Soviet naval and air bases throughout the country, there was also the more psychological aspect that came with Warsaw Pact affiliation. That is, the basic premise of the Warsaw Treaty was that any enemy of the Soviet Union--mostly all of the countries belonging to the World Trade Organization-- was also an enemy of all Eastern European nations. This led to a form of "subservience that no Eastern European general staff could miss" (Nelson, 178).

Concerning the question of a *national* army, there was no such thing. In its own indirect way, the intertwined nature of military and politics under the communist system meant that any Romanian military was actually a division of the Soviet Red Army. Daniel T.

Nelson writes:



The most unhealthy armies, from the standpoint of their collective psychologies, are those for whom domestic repression--i.e. firing on their own citizens--appears the most likely scenario to combat. To the extent that Communist Party regimes perpetuate systems without popular support, the latter scenario becomes increasingly possible...Forced into political roles by their own perception of ultimate responsibilities, armies never entirely "return to the barracks". (Nelson, 178).

The complete integration of Warsaw nations into one entity, with the Soviet Union at its helm, played a significant role in diminishing national identities, if not the original intention of reducing actual differences. Indeed, the connection between the military and the Party would only intensify with Ceausescu's rise to power in 1965. However, the difference in the case of Ceausescu, as we will see, is that it occurred for nationalistic reasons--truly the antithesis of the Soviet model.

### **Rise of Ceausescu: Early Signs of Romanian Nationalism**

Although Gheorghiu-Dej and Romanian leaders continued to accept many of the directives from Moscow, they regularly assumed the role of somewhat passive antagonists. After Stalin's death in 1953, the RCP began to assert a more autonomous relationship altogether. Little by little, Gheorghiu-Dej fought to decrease Soviet control and increase the influence of Romanian policy. In 1958, Russia felt comfortable enough in Romania's fidelity--since the RCP had supported Russia's intervention in Hungary in 1956-- that they withdrew all Soviet troops from Romania (Fisher, 258). This, in essence, meant that Gheorghiu-Dej's strategy was taking shape into a mini-transformation, which by the 1960s had gained considerable momentum.

#### *Declaration of Independence:*

As it became clear in 1964 that Romania could not produce heavy industry at the competitive rates that East Germany and Czechoslovakia could, Russia announced that Romania should focus its resources in the production of agricultural and consumer products. In an about face from earlier notions of forced-draft industrialization, Romania was now being compelled to be the breadbasket for the Communist Bloc. Once again, the

RCP refused to accept the mandate by publicly proclaiming its "Declaration of Independence". In what may be considered the greatest event in modern Russian-Romanian relations, the Declaration of Independence was the first time that Romania openly refused to accept an order from what they called a "supranatural body" (Verdery, 105). Although Romania argued that heavy industry was a major element of its identity and future welfare, the real issue became its willingness to subordinate to the Kremlin's demands. Russia's attempt to reduce Romania's industrial base was once again seen as a blow to its national identity. The question now was how far would the Kremlin go to defend its policies? Without the ever-present danger of the Red Army, Romania was willing to find out.

As far as Romanian leadership was concerned, Gheorghiu-Dej would be unable to lead the movement he had begun. After his death in 1965, waiting in the wings was a more resolute and charismatic leader. Always loyal to his predecessor, Nicolae Ceausescu was primed for succeeding in the footsteps of his mentor. Having occupied major positions in the Ministries of Agriculture (1949) and Armed Forces (1950), and by his membership in the Central Committee (1952) and Politburo (1954), Ceausescu was elected Party Secretary in 1965 (Deletant, 69-70).

### **More than One Path: Romania and the Soviet Union from 1964-1981**

#### *Economic and Trade Sovereignty:*

The rise of Nicolae Ceausescu to Party Secretary would test the will of Russian directives more than any of the previous RCP governments. A staunch nationalist, Ceausescu sought to distance himself from any and all Soviet policies. In particular, he

refused to abide by Comintern terms, claiming that party politics should not be a matter of proletariat identification but rather Romanian identity (Verdery, 118). His devotion to socialist-Leninist values was never in question, as he himself believed earnestly in the Marxist doctrine. However, in terms of the Warsaw Treaty Organization and Comecon, Ceausescu was unwilling to look past the singularity of his own nation in favor of a Communist bloc. He believed in "more than one path to socialism and mutual non-interference" (Fisher, 145). Always preaching for a country's right to internal diversity, Ceausescu writes:

Why should it be wrong if one country enterprise management is resolved in one way, and in another in a different way? What is wrong if in our country the First Secretary of the county Party committee is also president of the county People's Council and in another country is not like that? Can this harm the interests of socialism? Is it not our people and ourselves who must judge and see whether things proceed well or not? (Fisher, 144-145).

Moving on his predecessor's unwillingness to reduce allowable resources for manufacturing, Ceausescu embarked on an economic policy aimed at even more rapid industrialization. With no regard for human toll, he continued to invest in excess of 30 percent of the nation's GNP into heavy industry. "The dictator's Stalinist fixation with heavy industry as a priority target", Ratesh writes, "led him to develop a colossal steel and metallurgical industry at any price" (Ratesh, 7). This transformation from an agricultural, peasant economy into an industrial urban system was Ceausescu's definition of developed socialism (Nelson, 8). Well into the 1980s, Ceausescu continued to invest heavily in this sector, the consequence being an amassing of enormous debts (Fisher, 258).

In addition to his maverick stance on domestic economic issues, the Romanian leader sought to establish political and economic relations with many western nations.

Once again distancing himself from Comecon, Romanian trade with the Soviet Union was reduced from over 65 percent during the 1950s to less than one-half by 1970. On the contrary, trade with the west during this period rose dramatically. In 1971 Romania signed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT); in 1972 they joined the International Monetary Fund; in 1973 the nation received trade preferences from Europe; and in 1975 the U.S. awarded them with *Most-Favored* status (Verdery, 105). This alliance with NATO members provided Ceausescu the leverage he needed to press for self-determination in more troublesome areas, including control of the military.

*Militarily Sovereignty:*

Perhaps one of the greatest divisions between Russia and Romania came in the design and function of military forces. Having used methods of police terror and Securitate coercion throughout the Gheorghiu-Dej regime, Romanian leaders had come to prefer more informal, guerilla tactics. The Patriotic Guard, for example, was a collection of citizens, professional soldiers, and draftees that could be called upon with short notice (Fischer, 144). Created for the purpose of combating Russia's Red Army in times of resistance, the Patriotic Guard was essentially a relic of the Soviet occupation era. On the more conventional end, Ceausescu's Securitate was an elite group of 60,000 soldiers, each proclaiming fanatical allegiance to the dictator himself (Watson, 17). This group, in particular, was very dangerous, for its having an over-indulgence of military resources (weapons, training) at its disposal. One Romanian soldier wrote that, "[the Securitate] had guns with lasers and night scopes...in my two years of military service I used a total of four cartridges" (Watson,18). Indeed, Ceausescu's militant approach, especially his

bias for the Securitate, threatened the fundamental principles of Warsaw Treaty co-operation and seriously undermined the Soviet alliance system (Fischer, 258).

As was evident by his inactive role in Warsaw Pact activities, Ceausescu's military philosophy was predominantly defensive; participation in international maneuvers did not figure into his equation. Most notably in this regard, Romania vehemently denounced the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 (Fischer, 258). Using this as a means for legitimizing his rule and nationalist ideology, Ceausescu continued his quest for more autonomy:

There is no justification whatsoever for military intervention in the affairs of a fraternal socialist state...the problem of choosing the roads of socialist construction is a problem of the respective party...Nobody can pose as advisor...It is a shameful moment in the history of the revolutionary movement (Fischer, 143).

While still maintaining an outward appearance of fealty, Romania established a policy of "friendly relations" with Hungary, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. Under these agreements, the nations set strict guidelines--outside the mandates of Moscow--for intervention of Warsaw Pact countries in each other's affairs (Fischer, 144). Ceausescu argued that should "imperialism" threaten the socialist cause, then intervention by the Warsaw Treaty Organization would be justified; anything short of this would be unsupported by the nations entered in the arrangement. By entering in these agreements, it was thought, the Brezhnev Doctrine would not be as unconstrained as it had been in Prague.

## **Ceausescu's Rule in the 1980s: Romania Becomes Its Own Worst Enemy, Its Own Russia.**

*From Autonomy to Autocracy:*

Although Ceausescu was able to cut ties to the Soviet Union, he himself followed the Soviet development model more closely than any of the other Eastern European nations (Fischer, 264). By the mid-1980s Romania had become the most centralized and socially repressive country in Eastern Europe--Russia included. As one author noted: "For 22 long years Nicolae Ceausescu has ruled Romania. He has made it the poorest and most repressive member of the Soviet bloc--if the most independent one" (Willey). Ceausescu risked it all for the success of the nation under the framework of heavy industry. Ironically, it was industry that ended up paying the most. In what has been termed "overorganized chaos", Ceausescu continued to force up levels of investment in heavy industry, while at the same time installing vigorous debt-reduction measures (Verdery, 100).

Inspired by Poland's debt crisis in 1981, Ceausescu sought to repay its international debts by increasing its exports and reducing levels of consumption. By the mid 1980s almost everything was being marked for export, resulting in the most basic necessities becoming sources of great struggle (Nelson, xiv). The physical demands placed on the workers, combined with the shortages that essentially devalued earnings (since there was nothing to buy), gave workers the perception that they were bearing the brunt of an unequal burden. In addition, as average citizens entered stores to find only empty shelves, and as they were being forced to live in cold apartments with only one forty watt light bulb for illumination--since even electricity was being sold to neighbors--many were now beginning to wonder the price of independence (Willey, 27). Indeed, the

nation's struggle for autonomy was now at a dead end, with autocracy having taken its place.

### *Soviet Reforms*

As glasnost and perestroika became the vanguard of Eastern European politics, Ceausescu continued in his usual role as the defiant autocrat. Unfortunately for him, by 1987 this Stalinist mold "was out of style in Mikhail Gorbachev's Kremlin" (Watson, 17). Even though the mandates of glasnost and perestroika were widely supported, Ceausescu "rejected any suggestion that he copy Gorbachev" (Willey, 27). Ceausescu's own socialist convictions, as well as his diminished chances for political survival should these measures be adopted, abetted to his steadfast refusal to recognize the reforms. "As a Leninist-Stalinist, Ceausescu was a firm believer in centralized power and coercive economic solutions to his problems" (Fischer, 264). His entire system of governing thrived from its having absolute control, including the freedom to censor the media. The dictator's regime increasingly "persecuted entrepreneurship, raided peasants' private plots, militarized many enterprises so as to check sliding output, placed economic contracts under supervision...and chipped away at all enterprises' funds for paying workers". Provisions such as the establishment of property rights, the abolishment of central planning in favor of a market economy, and toleration of the media, would significantly challenge, if not doom, the dictator's authority. (Verdery, 100). Simply put, Ceausescu could not accept any political directives that minimized his own personal influence; nor could he enact economic policies that resulted in anything less than *immediate* economic returns (Fischer, 259).

## Conclusion: The Soviet Union as Beacon of Hope



When Gorbachev visited Bucharest in 1987 he was viewed by many as the same figure of optimism that Ceausescu symbolized twenty years before (Deletant, 162). Just like the Romanian dictator was able to rally public support in 1965, for example, Gorbachev's every word was being celebrated by thousands of Romanians. While hailing the praises of their *new* leader, "Gorby", many Romanian citizens considered rule from Moscow a better option than independence under Ceausescu. However, under the repressive dictatorial system he successfully implemented throughout his two decades in power, Ceausescu was assured that there was no viable opposition to challenge him.

By 1989 Ceausescu's political (and literal) survival was no longer related to economic policy. As Soviet domination over its Eastern European nations began to crumble, primarily in East Germany and Hungary, Romania was poised to follow in its neighbor's footsteps. As the public waited for the right opportunity, Ceausescu obliged by providing them with just cause. The massacres of Timisoara<sup>2</sup> on December 17th marked the beginning of the end for the Ceausescu family. Under the rallying cry of Timisoara, the revolution reached the streets of Bucharest by December 22nd. By the first week of January, Ceausescu and his wife Elena were tried and executed for crimes against the Romanian nation (Calinescu, 45).

Having been socially repressed more than any of the other nations, it was inevitable that transformation in Romania would result in violence. Yet, "the collapse of the last Communist regime in Moscow's former empire was hailed almost everywhere,

even in Moscow" (Watson, 17). Having survived the onslaught of dictators like Stalin and Ceausescu, the Romanian nation was now faced with the hardest task of all: the establishment of a democratic society. But as this nation unceasingly fought for its independence, one would expect their determination to persevere in this respect as well. In the end, it was the people of Romania as a whole that reclaimed their national identity. In the end, it was they who made the "Miracle of December" possible.

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<sup>2</sup> Prompted by the arrest of civil rights leader Laszlo Tokes, thousands of Romanians gathered in the city of Timisoara to hold public demonstrations. Ceausescu unleashed Securitate forces and killed hundreds of citizens.