



Reaching Romania

Feeding Body & Soul

Romanian History in Brief



From Ancient Times to World War II

From the 7th century B.C., the Greeks established trading colonies on the Black Sea coast which was eventually occupied by the Romans until 271 AD. Until the 10th century, the area was populated by invading Goths, Huns, Avars, Slavs, Bulgars, and Hungarians, but the indigenous Romanians survived in village communities. From the 10th century, Hungary occupied Transylvania which still contained a majority Romanian population.

The regions of Moldavia and Wallachia were also targeted for Hungarian expansion but were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire by the 15th Century. In 1877, King Carol I declared independence from the Ottoman Empire. Aiming to further extend its boundaries, Romania entered the World War I on the side of the Triple Entente (United Kingdom, France, and Russia), and at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, Romania was awarded Transylvania and Bessarabia, bringing their ethnic Romanian populations within Romania's boundaries. During the 1920s and most of the 1930s, King Carol II and Romania formed alliances with France, the United Kingdom, Czechoslovakia, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Greece, and the U.S.S.R.

From World War II to 1980s

In 1938, however, Romania supported Hitler's invasion of Yugoslavia and in 1941 of Russia. The Ploesti oil refineries came under fierce aerial assault by Allied bombers several times during World War II, which led to thousands of German anti-aircraft personnel being stationed in Romania to protect the vital oil fields.

By 1943, Soviet forces had gained superiority and started their drive west. Romanian attitude shifted and, as Soviet forces were about to invade, Romania capitulated and turned on the Germans. The pro-Soviet government of Nicolae Rădescu was replaced in 1946 by a new Communist government. In 1947, it abolished the monarchy and proclaimed Romania a People's Republic.

Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, Romania adopted a neo-Stalinist style of government, rebuilding the economy and purging religious and political opponents. Romania joined the Warsaw Pact in 1955 and Soviet troops withdrew in 1958.

In 1965, Nicolae Ceaușescu took over leadership and pursued a policy of independence from Moscow. Under Ceaușescu, Romania began to cultivate relations with Western states, in particular with the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany). As a result of this, Romania was able to receive a World Bank loan in 1974, because the Romanian economy was crumbling under Ceaușescu's regime. A state of emergency was declared in the energy sector in 1985.

In 1989, it appeared as if Romania might escape the effects of the political and cultural revolutions sweeping across Eastern Europe. Ceaușescu was bitterly opposed to the changes occurring in Poland, Czechland, and Slovakia, but in December 1989 anti-government struggles in Bucharest and Timisoara developed into a brief civil war, ending with the capture, trial, and immediate execution of the Ceaușescus.

In the presidential vote, Ion Iliescu, a former Communist, won a majority of the vote and control of the National Assembly and Senate. This did not halt the political unrest and violence though, as many people believed the election results had been heavily influenced by voter coercion, reminiscent of the previous Communist regime.

In 1990, the Securitate, the state's secret police, was disbanded and replaced by the Romanian Intelligence Service (RIS). Public religious practices were allowed to resume, but there was still a significant amount of public discontent regarding the effects of the introduction of a market economy. A treaty in cooperation and good neighborliness was signed with the U.S.S.R. in April 1991 in an attempt to restore relations with the former superpower, whose leadership had not intervened during the 1989 revolution. By September, however, the recently elected government was in turmoil as the Prime Minister, Petr Roman, resigned following an outbreak of mass rioting.

He was succeeded by a crossparty coalition government which endorsed Romania's new constitution in December. A political crisis in August 1993 led to a government reshuffle in which four ministers and 15 state secretaries were removed. By the end of 1993, the Democratic Convention created the current government.

A Closer Look at the 1989 Romanian Revolution

The spark that ignited Romania came on December 15, 1989 when Father László Tőkés, a Protestant pastor, spoke out publicly against Ceaușescu's dictatorship from his small church in Timisoara. The following evening people gathered outside Father Tőkés' home to protest the decision of the Reformed Church of Romania to remove him from his post. By 9 p.m. this had turned into a noisy demonstration, and when the police began making arrests, the unrest spread to other parts of the city and armored cars began patrolling the streets.

At noon on December 17, a huge crowd on Timisoara's Bulevardul, between the Opera House and the Orthodox Cathedral, was confronted by Securitate (secret police) units and regular army troops. When demonstrators broke into the Communist Party's district headquarters and threw portraits of Ceaușescu out of the windows, the army used tanks and armored cars to clear the vast square. Despite this, further clashes took place in nearby Piata Libertatii, known as The Freedom Square.

Back in Bucharest later that afternoon, the Executive Political Committee condemned the "mild" action taken by the army and ordered that real bullets be used—this was the start of civilian casualties. The Securitate continued mopping-up operations all night, collecting dead bodies to be buried in mass graves or sent to Bucharest to be cremated. Still, the resistance continued, and on December 19, the army in Timisoara went over to the side of the demonstrators.

On December 20, negotiators from Bucharest arrived in Timisoara to buy time until fresh troops could be sent to the city, and newly arrived Securitate units began firing on the demonstrators once again. At 6 p.m. Ceaușescu arrived back in Romania from a state visit to Iran and proclaimed martial law in Timis County. Trainloads of elite military troops were dispatched to the city with orders to crush the rebellion.

On December 21, a remarkable thing happened. Ceaușescu decided that he would address a mass rally in front of the Central Committee building in Bucharest to show the world that the workers of Romania supported him and approved his action against the “hooligan” demonstrators in Timisoara. What went on behind the scenes may never be known, but it's possible that Ceaușescu was set up by conspirators within the Communist Party who wanted to engineer his downfall.

Factories around Bucharest dutifully sent their most trusted cadres to applaud Ceaușescu as they had done so many times before, but upon their arrival early in the morning at Piata Gheorghe and Gheorghiu-Dej, they were told that Ceaușescu had changed his mind about the speech and that they could go home. A few hours later the word went out again that the speech would in fact be held at noon and that the workers should reassemble, but the reliable Party supporters had already left, and the factory bosses were forced to be less selective as they scrambled to send the required number of people to the square.

At 12.30 p.m. as Ceaușescu began to speak to the assembly from the balcony of the Central Committee building, and youths who were being held back by three cordons of police a block away started booing. Tension mounted in the silent crowd, and suddenly there was a strange crack of sound as Ceaușescu was cut off in mid-sentence by shouts of disapproval. For a second, the dictator faltered, amazement written across his face as recorded on live TV. Pandemonium broke loose as the youths attempted to break through the police lines and the assembled workers tried to escape. Urged on by his wife, Ceaușescu attempted to continue his speech even as police cleared the square, finally ending as a tape with prerecorded applause and cheers was switched off.

Meanwhile, the anti-Ceaușescu demonstrators retreated to the wide boulevard between Piata Universitatii and Piata Romana. At about 2:30 p.m. reinforcements of special riot police with clubs and shields arrived down Calea Victoriei and plainclothes police began making arrests. As more police and armored cars arrived, the growing number of demonstrators became concentrated in the two piasas (squares). Around 5 p.m., when the crowds still refused to disperse, the police at Piata Romana first fired warning shots, and then used gunfire and armored cars to brutally crush the demonstration.

In front of the Inter-Continental Hotel on Piata Universitatii armored cars also drove into the crowd. Drenched by ice-cold water from fire hoses, the demonstrators still refused to submit, and began erecting barricades within view of Western journalists in the adjacent hotel. At 11 p.m. the police began their assault on Piata Universitatii, using a tank to smash the barricades. By dawn the square had been cleared and the bodies of those killed removed.

At 7 a.m. on December 22, demonstrators began assembling in Piata Romana and Piata Universitatii once more. By 11 a.m. huge crowds faced the phalanx of army troops in their tanks with Securitate forces behind them blocking the way to the Central Committee building where Ceaușescu was still believed to be. Rumors then began circulating that Ceaușescu had forced General Vasile Milea, the Minister of Defense, to commit suicide because he had refused to order his troops to fire on the people. Army troops' loyalties began to shift, and gradually the crowd began to chant “The army is with us!” and urged protesters to mix in with the troops arrayed against them, offering the soldiers flowers and cigarettes.

As the demonstrators swarmed up onto the unresisting tanks and fraternized with the crews, the Securitate forces withdrew towards the site of the previous day's speech. At 11.30 a.m. Bucharest Radio announced the "suicide" of the "traitor" Milea, as well as a proclamation of a state of emergency. As thousands of people moved towards the Central Committee building, the Securitate continued to draw back. Around noon Ceaușescu again appeared on the same balcony and attempted to speak, but people began booing and throwing objects at him, forcing him to duck back quickly inside the building. At this point the crowd surged in through the main doors, and police did not resist. Though the crowd was just a few dozen meters away, Ceaușescu, his wife, and several others managed to escape by helicopter from the roof. Soon after, the radio and TV stations were taken over by the rebels, who did not meet any resistance.

The helicopter took the Ceaușescus to their villa at Snagov, just north of Bucharest. The plan was that they would proceed to an airbase near Pitesti, where a waiting jet would take them into exile outside Romania. Halfway to Pitesti, though, the helicopter pilot feigned engine trouble and set the chopper down beside a highway, where the two Securitate officers present commandeered a passing private car. The party then drove on to Tirgoviste, where the Ceaușescus were arrested and taken to a military base.

On December 23, Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu were tried together by an anonymous court, condemned and summarily executed by a firing squad. The next day footage of their dead bodies was aired on TV, allegedly to stifle resistance by die-hard Securitate units attempting to rescue them. News reports at the time told of fierce resistance by the Securitate, but the bullet-pockmarked buildings in Bucharest told another story. For months after the revolution, before the damage was repaired, it was clear that the targets of the gunfire were Securitate strongholds around the Central Committee building and the TV station. Had they so desired, the Securitate officers with their modern weapons could have caused tens of thousands of casualties, but did not. The secret police were mostly on the receiving end of the fire from young army conscripts, who opened up at the slightest provocation.

It is now believed that the Ceaușescus' speedy trial had much more to do with slowing the revolution and saving former Party members than in stopping the Securitate. Clearly, Nicolae and Elena knew too much and many people still in high office today might have been dragged down with them had they been given an open trial. Among the charges brought against the Ceaușescus by the kangaroo court was that they had deposited the equivalent of \$470 million (U.S.) in Swiss banks, yet none of this mysterious treasure has ever been located.

Evidently, reformers in the Communist Party had been preparing a coup d'état against Ceaușescu and his family for at least six months, but the December 1989 demonstrations forced them to move their schedule forward. So when Ceaușescu fell, the National Salvation Front was ready to take over. Most of its leaders, including President Ion Iliescu and former Prime Minister Petre Roman, were former Communist Party members.

Reports of casualties in the Romanian Revolution were widely exaggerated. At the Ceaușescus' vigilante trial, it was claimed that 64,000 people died in the revolution, which a few days later was changed to 64,000 deaths in the entire 25-year Ceaușescu epoch. After a week, the number of victims had been reduced to 7,000. In reality, the final count was around 750. In Timisoara 115 people died, not the 4,000 reported.