



International Workshop on Ideologies, Values and Political Behaviors
in Central and Eastern Europe

Timisoara 1989: Dead People, Revolution and Murderers

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Abstract

The deficient manner in which the international press recounted the Revolution of Timișoara in December 1989 established a depreciative framework of reference, particularly in the context of a lack of investigations, some of which would have been necessary. The negative perception was also fuelled by the amount of emotional comments made by various influential public figures. The official Romanian press did not make any reference to the number of victims and even minimized the extent of destructions in the city. This served a manipulative purpose, so that news of the insurgence would not get out. Foreign journalists could not enter Romania earlier than December 22, at approximately 1 p.m., when the borders were reopened. Until then, they relied on the bits of information that they got hold of from unreliable sources, such as Romanian, or, particularly, foreign citizens, who were able to leave Romania, or on scarce information provided by telephone and on communications between some states' diplomatic staffs and their ministries. The process of launching and spreading rumours was also impressive, and after two days and two nights of waiting in border crossing points, the journalists who arrived in Timișoara and in other cities believed that the previously gained equivocal information was being confirmed. This allowed the emergence of the enormous confusion between the horrific dead in the Paupers Cemetery and the true victims of the Revolution.

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Peer review under the responsibility of the West University of Timisoara.

Keywords: 1989 Revolution; victims; massacre; Ceausescu; mass media; crematorium

1. The truth as automatism and ease

Peter Siani-Davies, a researcher with a great interest in the events that occurred during the Romanian Revolution, dedicating numerous pages to the media side-slip, would bring into discussion the association made by those who, on December 22, 1989, exhumed the victims in the Paupers Cemetery in Timișoara, and who placed the body of a

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dead child on top of a woman's corpse. It was one of the most horrifying and intense images that circulated at the time. The author would note that, subsequently, it was established that there was no connection between the two and would explain how this deception was magnified: „The bodies had been excavated during the first frenzied search for those who were missing after the massacre of December 17 and, presumably because it made a striking picture, the baby had been placed on the woman and the image filed by Novi Sad Television and MTV of Hungary.” (Siani-Davies 2005, 281). Therefore, the bodies placed rather randomly one on top of the other were filmed by reporting crews from abroad. For television reporters from Serbia or Hungary it was easy to get to Timișoara, less than 100 km from the border with the two states. It was also very easy for them to broadcast these images... Andrei Skurtu would analyze the moment, noting: „Furthermore, photographs of what were presented as victims of the massacres were shown on televisions around the world, which also played an important role in fuelling the revolution.” (Skurtu 2009: 2004). It is, however, important to remind readers that Ceaușescu had already abandoned power at the time when these images were made public.

In time, „the Timișoara lie” stopped being analyzed, and started functioning as an automatism in illustrating facts and journalism products lacking professionalism, establishing it among the greatest press errors. The automatic invoking, without minimal precautions, is even encountered on the European Journalism Observatory website, an organization dealing precisely with preventing, highlighting and fighting low quality journalism. Rebutting what the author calls „fake”, Marcello Foa would develop the subject, referring to the victims of the violent protests in Libya, in the spring of 2011. Foa would note, more than 20 years after the events of Timișoara: „Do you remember the image of the black cormorant from the first Gulf War, a symbol of the ruthlessness of Saddam who – they said at the time – had opened the oil pipelines? The image was a fake. And the massacre in Timisoara, Romania, during the revolt against Ceausescu? It never happened. The most recent war in Iraq saw the media spread an enormous quantity of falsehoods, which no one in real-time recognized as false. Or almost no one.” (Foa 2013). Not a twitch, not a doubt... How many victims does it take to call it a massacre? Aren't a hundred enough? But even serious researchers cannot escape this danger. Therefore, referring to the Romanian-Hungarian relations and to the *Treaty on Understanding, Co-operation and Good Neighbourly Relations between Romania and the Republic of Hungary*, signed at Timișoara in 1996, the author would insist on mentioning, without it being a truly necessary piece of information in this context, that this was the city „which was considered the 'cradle' of the 1989 Romanian democratic revolution.” (Henrikson, 2000).

2. From Vietnam to Timișoara

On the other hand, *the Timișoara syndrome* would be recognized as a constant in media activity. Louis Armand did not grasp the connection to *the Vietnam syndrome*. He would, however, establish a typology for important events following December 1989. It is a series of deficient media reports from various theatres of war: „Notable throughout all of this was the lack of *any* western media presence in Timisoara, and a consequent lack of verification of reported facts even at a governmental level (in the West, an historical antecedent may be found in events like the 1983 invasion of Grenada by the United States, accompanied by an official media blackout). The “Timisoara Syndrome”—with its real life political and social consequences—finds more recent counterparts in Kosovo in 1999, and lately in Iraq, Uzbekistan and Serbia (such as the widely reported “apprehension” in February 2006 of the Serbian war crimes suspect Radko Mladic)” (Armand 2007, 49).

The 1997-1998 period meant for Algeria, country located in Northern Africa, in the French sphere of influence, a peak in confrontations between supporters of Islamic radicals and government forces. The numerous pieces of evidence of massacres occurring in this country, attributed to Islamists, triggered a wave of controversies worldwide. Among those who took a stand on this matter was Bernard-Henri Lévy. He would warn against „green fascism”, his intervention establishing an explicit connection to what had previously been the Timișoara case (Lévy 1998). The fear of exaggerations would come back intensely in 2011, the year of great revolutionary movements in Northern Africa. The image of the Libyan leader Mouammar Kaddafi has often been associated with that of Ceaușescu. Also, crimes committed in order to support the two regimes were similar, having been mostly executed by secret service agents. In an analysis of the 2011 media manipulations, the French-speaking press would return with data on Timișoara, this time making a correct reference: the initial announcement regarding the execution of a number of 4,632 to 7,614 innocent people in Timișoara (from December 17 to December 19) was false. In reality,

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