

Summary of History Club Presentation, 28 Sep 21

Topic: Romania and the Romanian Revolution of 1989; Presenter: Tom Butler

The presentation began with a short summary of Romania's history starting with the provinces of Moldavia and Wallachia dominated by the Ottomans (Turks) on the south and Russia to the east; and Transylvania controlled by Austria (Austria-Hungary) in the north. With the rise of nationalism and ideas about national identity in the 19th century, the pressures to form a nation state increased. A Kingdom of Romania (absent Transylvania) emerged from the Treaty of Berlin (1878) ending the Russo-Turkish War. The peace treaties ending World War I established a Romanian nation state inclusive of Transylvania. The present day border of Romania was established after World War II and influenced by the Soviet military occupation of the country in 1945. From 1945 to 1989, the Romanian communist party, led by Gheorghe Gheorghe-Dej (1947-1965) and Nicolae Ceausescu (1965-1989) governed the country and tolerated no opposition.

As communist dictators fell from power across Eastern Europe, expectations of change and improved living conditions grew in Romania. For over a decade, the Government had preached sacrifice in order to repay foreign debts and preserve the honor of the country. Repayment was completed in 1989, but shortages and repression continued. That was about to change.

(The following abbreviated comments reflect my experience while living in Bucharest during this time.) In the city of Timisoara, a popular Lutheran minister, Lazlo Tokes, began to denounce the leadership from his pulpit (12/15). He was placed under house arrest; over the next few days huge crowds gathered in protest outside the Party Headquarters. The army intervened and the crowds were dispersed with much loss of life (12/17-12/18)). On 12/20 Ceausescu returned from an overseas visit and declared martial law. Protests continued around the country. Ceausescu announced a rally for 12/22 where he would speak to the "people" from the balcony of Party Headquarters in Bucharest. A huge crowd gathers in the square, but as he speaks calls of "down with the dictator" break out. Rather than firing, the soldiers join the people. With a look of horror on his face, the President and his wife run to the building's rooftop and flee by helicopter. Celebrations break out all over the country. At nightfall, however, forces loyal to Ceausescu mount a counter attack to restore Party control. Shooting and explosions resound throughout the night, but by morning it's mostly quiet with only occasional gunfire. On the afternoon of the 23rd, I and my family are able to drive behind the American Ambassador's car as it makes its way to the US Embassy. From there, on the following day (12/24), after the marines confirm snipers have been cleared from the area, my car joins a long caravan of cars with diplomats and families from several allied countries, that slowly makes its way to Bulgaria. (Just before departure, we learn that Ceausescu has been captured). We arrive in Sophia, Bulgaria around midnight to greet Xmas morning. We learn on Xmas day that following a military trial, both Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu have been executed by firing squad. While sporadic shooting continued, effectively the revolution ended with his death. An interim government was formed and the National Salvation Front voted into power in a free election about six months later. Romania is now a member of NATO and the EU.