

Behind the 1989 reactionary coup in Romania

written by Sam Marcy
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One of the last images of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu before their execution by a masked counter-revolutionary military tribunal: “I will answer any question, but only at the Grand National Assembly, before the representatives of the working class. Tell the people that I will answer all their questions. All the world should know what is going on here. I only recognize the working class and the Grand National Assembly – no one else. I will not answer you putschists,” said Nicolae Ceausescu.

Struggle-La Lucha is publishing this article by Sam Marcy, one of the leading Marxist thinkers and fighters of the second half of the 20th century, to mark the 30th anniversary of the counterrevolutionary developments in Romania.

Dec. 26, 1989 — Let there be no mistake about it. Let there be no hypocritical assertions by the imperialist governments that they regret the murder of Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena.

It was an act of undisguised assassination. It was a coup by the most reactionary forces of the army brass in collaboration with the remnants of the old bourgeois ruling class of Romania. It was a wanton act of murder, wholly in accord and characteristic of the period of the 1920s and 1930s, when assassination of political leaders was common, when a reign of terror from ruling-class reactionary groups was on the order of the day.

Clerical reaction, anti-Semitism

What the millions saw on U.S. television, for instance—the burning of public buildings, the shooting up of libraries—is characteristic of the period long ago when the bourgeoisie, in fear of discontented and rebellious peasants, redirected their hatred against the boyars (the landlords) into anti-Semitic channels.

Anti-Semitism has disappeared as an official policy. But we are seeing its recurrence in another form. How else can one take the proclamation that the “anti-Christ”

(meaning Ceausescu) was fittingly killed on Christmas Day? The forces of deepest reaction now claim control of the Bucharest government. This is a recrudescence of the vicious, reactionary clericalism that dominated the political scene there for the whole period stretching from the First to the Second World War.

Let us look again at the television scenes of the so-called popular uprising. There is nothing in them to suggest that it was in any way a proletarian uprising. It was altogether uncharacteristic of the traditional struggle of the Romanian workers. There were no working-class, no trade union slogans. It was a rising of all the decayed, leftover bourgeois social strata who have been reawakened to life mostly on the basis of international factors of enormous significance.

Budapest and the national question

It will be proven absolutely correct that these operations were planned not in Bucharest, nor in any other Romanian city, but in Budapest, the haven of the so-called dissidents over a period of years. That is where the conspiracy was hatched, and might have remained dormant or have disintegrated were it not for the intervention of new, powerful influences which made it a certainty that the Budapest reactionaries would become the instrument for the forces of bourgeois counterrevolution and imperialist penetration.

It has been decades now since it became public knowledge that there was a dispute between Hungary and Romania over the treatment of the Hungarian minority in Romania. For years there have been negotiations, but it wasn't so long ago that both Nicolae Ceaușescu and Hungarian leader Janos Kadar had each affirmed in separate interviews that "We communists will not allow the national question to divide us."

The question of ethnic minorities has always been the acid test for communists. Fraternal solidarity was always one of the basic teachings of Leninism and was really an extension and development of the Marxist doctrine of the class struggle as

it applied to national oppression.

The efforts of the Ceausescu regime, and to some extent that of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-dej earlier, to distance themselves from the Soviet government have deep historical roots in the Balkans, with their fierce small-nation nationalism. They have been able to eke out an existence by maneuvering between the great powers, going from one camp to another in order to retain a modicum of independence, almost always remaining a pawn of one or another of the great powers, whether it be Germany, Austria, Russia, Turkey or France, and lately U.S. imperialism.

The history of the 19th century was filled with the struggles of the smaller nations to free themselves, then again becoming subjected to or being traded away by one great power to another.

It is not the existence of many nations which is a regressive factor in historical development; it is the existence of states which embody the political power of the ruling classes. That is the real source of national fervor, of so-called fanaticism, aside from the mutual antagonism of states and statelets which become the greatest source of antagonism between the workers of different nationalities.

When the Communist Manifesto arrived in 1848, it was a breath of fresh air. It was precisely at a time when the workers were becoming weary of the old nationalism and were looking with open arms for the message of working class solidarity, of workers of the world unite against the common enemy — the bourgeoisie.

Growth of Hungarian bourgeoisie

There were many, many avenues open for the resolution of the national problem between Hungary and Romania on the basis of fraternal socialist solidarity, and indeed it seemed in the early eighties that it was on the road to solution. What changed? What gave it an impetus to become a full-blown struggle between two

apparently fraternal socialist countries, tied together in a common organization (CMEA or COMECON, as it is called in the West) and with a common socialist objective?

One can name innumerable retreats away from orthodox revolutionary Marxism-Leninism over the years and decades, but none is more compelling than the series of bourgeois reforms in the USSR under the Gorbachev administration. They have delivered a momentum in the direction of bourgeois restoration which seemed inconceivable only a decade ago.

However, bourgeois reforms were inaugurated as early as 1956 in Hungary. Over a period of years, sometimes faster, sometimes slower, they were remaking the class physiognomy of Hungary to an extent that it only required a push for the Hungarian regime to become a bourgeois state, if not in all its aspects, certainly in some of its most essential ingredients, especially the abandonment of centralized planning and the beginning of the dismantling of state industry.

Hungary had gone over the brink when it canceled its agreement with the German Democratic Republic controlling the borders. It was this flagrant violation of a socialist friendship treaty, passed over by the other socialist countries, which made it possible for the Romanian counterrevolutionary elements to utilize Hungary as a base of operations for what has become open warfare.

This in turn changed the character of the struggle between Romania and Hungary. The Hungarian regime, under the aegis of the new bourgeois leadership, converted the national question, the question of the ethnic minority in Romania, into a state-to-state struggle. In effect, Hungary became a haven not just for incidental reactionary elements but for political counterrevolution.

Soviet pressure in CMEA

However, the Hungarian bourgeois regime would not have dared go beyond certain limits on its own. It must be taken account of that the Soviet reforms were not meant merely as a national policy, given the socialist, centralized economic planning in the USSR. They were also to be imported into its coordinating body for economic relations among the socialist countries, the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). Let this aspect of the struggle not be overlooked.

Thus, at the 42nd Session of the CMEA, held in Bucharest on Nov. 3, 1986, Soviet Premier Nikolai Ryzhkov made it clear in his speech that the Soviet reforms were directly linked to similar reforms in the CMEA countries. According to Ryzhkov, the implementation of the so-called Joint Program for the Development of Science and Technology could only become effective if progress were made on economic reforms. It was at this session back in 1986 that both Romania and Czechoslovakia made it clear they were opposed to establishing reforms of the type then being introduced in the Soviet Union.

The significance of this dispute should not be disregarded. By making the Soviet reforms contingent in one form or another on reforms in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union was not merely making some abstract recommendation or economic prognosis; it was in effect using a form of economic pressure on its fraternal socialist allies to weaken socialist planning in favor of the bourgeois market.

The USSR's perspective of a new, more viable coexistence with the imperialist West therefore meant that Eastern Europe would become a free market area for imperialist penetration. It was for this reason that both Czechoslovakia and Romania objected.

Hungary, which was already on the road to the restoration of the bourgeois market and the dismantling of the centralized economy, took the opportunity following this meeting to accelerate its public attacks on Romania. It blew up the issue of the status of the Hungarian minority into a virtual war scare.

The national question became converted into an instrument of bourgeois attack against a socialist country. The national aspect of the Hungarian minority was lost altogether. All this could not but awaken the counterrevolutionary elements in Romania.

U.S.-USSR coordination

Nevertheless, this alone could not have accounted for the fascist-like coup d'état by Romanian bourgeois reactionaries. Implicit in all of this was the support of the Gorbachev regime and its utter hostility to the Romanian socialist government. To all this has to be added the influence of the imperialist bourgeoisie, which was not standing outside of Romanian politics with its arms folded.

Wasn't it just this Sunday, Dec. 24, that Secretary of State James Baker on NBC-TV's Meet the Press gave U.S. approval for a Soviet intervention to support the "revolution" in Romania? Not screams about Soviet intervention, but encouragement for it! What could be plainer?

And on Thursday, Dec. 21, in an editorial entitled "Rumania: Remarkable Common Ground," the New York Times spoke ecstatically about how Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze had attacked the Ceausescu government. Where? At a NATO meeting in Brussels! This imperialist paper saw this as "a meeting of minds between East and West" that enhanced the possibilities for "drawing the East into any common response" against the Ceausescu government.

How could all of this happen?

The way it is presented in the bourgeois press, the army stood with the "popular uprising" against the security forces, as though they alone were the defenders of the government.

One thing must be clear about the character of the Romanian revolution: it was

unlike the Russian, Chinese, Cuban or Vietnamese revolutions. They were all carried out entirely by the masses, by the workers and peasants. That's where the revolutionary armed forces came from that, in the words of Marx, crushed the old repressive state apparatus. Not so in Romania and other East European socialist countries, with the exception of Yugoslavia.

The intervention of the Soviet Red Army was the most significant and fundamental factor in the overthrow of the old regime. Over 286,000 Soviet soldiers were killed fighting against the Nazi quisling regime alongside Romanian partisans.

Background of Romanian Army

The Romanian bourgeoisie had sided with the Nazis in the war, and Romanian troops fought with the Germans at Stalingrad. But toward the end of the war, when the collapse of Germany was imminent, there was a coup d'état in Romania; a coalition government under Gen. Constantin Sanatescu signed an armistice with the Allies under which it agreed to supply 12 infantry divisions to the struggle against Germany. This positioned the Romanian Army to play a political role once the war was over.

After the war, there wasn't a thorough "denazification" of the army as there was in East Germany, for instance. On the contrary, many of these same units were integrated into the reorganized military force.

Notwithstanding that almost 45 years have passed, there is still a vast difference between the Romanian Army and those popular forces wholly drawn from the masses of workers and peasants, as in Russia, China and elsewhere. The old customs, habits and ideology, while kept underground, nevertheless remained.

There is a fundamental difference when the old state apparatus is completely crushed and a new people's army arises from the ashes of the old one. Even

Napoleon's army, for instance, was almost wholly drawn from the peasantry, as were many of his generals. In Romania, the class struggle was sharp but the counterrevolutionary elements were never destroyed. The army brass were drawn from the older ruling classes and the gentry. They became integrated into the defense establishment. If socialism were to be built, it had to have not merely their acquiescence but their complete loyalty. Thus, what for 40 years appeared not much different from the great revolutions of China, Cuba and the Soviet Union has ultimately proven to be decisively different.

The bourgeois press pours vials of wrath on the security forces of the government. They were the only ones drawn directly from the people. Like in the French Revolution, with its Committees of Public Safety drawn from the masses, they were the eyes and ears of the revolution.

Secret armies? It's perfectly okay to glorify the FBI and the CIA, because they're in the service of the bourgeois ruling class. But security police in the service of a government seeking to establish socialism? They become the most reprehensible elements. Yet the bourgeois press in all the imperialist countries can't help but note that these security forces are fighting to the end in an uneven battle.

Ceausescu tried to maneuver

Of course, such a fascist-type coup could only take place where there has been an accumulation of errors by the government. Not the least was its effort to maneuver between the camp of imperialism and the socialist camp. The outstanding example of this was its effort to ally itself with the West when it sided with Israel during the Arab-Israeli war in 1967.

Earlier, it refused to join the other socialist countries in the 1968 intervention to stop a counterrevolution in Czechoslovakia, which it might have done out of solidarity even while publicly making clear its disagreement. All of these efforts

were calculated to free it from dependence on the USSR and the other East European socialist countries, to gain some economic as well as commercial advantages, and to boldly enter the world of capitalist trade and commerce.

But no significant advantages accrued to Romania as a result of its effort to accommodate to imperialism. As in the Arab-Israeli war, the most Romania got out of its pro-Western diplomatic maneuvers was an exemption from the U.S. government's discriminatory trade practices aimed at the socialist countries. It was granted "most favored nation" (MFN) status and admitted into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

But Romania soon learned that political conditions were attached. Finally, early this year, the Romanian government announced it would not seek a renewal of the MFN status, precisely because of the political requirements which inhibited the free development of socialist construction.

Program to urbanize villages

Probably the most significant error of a domestic character was to embark upon a vast urbanization of rural life in certain areas of Romania, the effect of which would be to modernize the social structure of the villages and lead them on the way to communism more rapidly than mere collectivization. In severely underdeveloped rural areas, collectivization often merely changes the legal but not the economic conditions.

On March 3, 1988, the Romanian government announced plans, to be completed by the year 2000, that would involve about half of Romania's 13,000 villages. They intended to move the peasants into agro-industrial complexes with apartments and modern communal civic centers, like those in the large cities.

It was similar to an idea presented by Khrushchev at one time during the Stalin era.

The purpose was to move collectivization further on the road toward communization. But the idea was dropped. Roy Medvedev, the dissident Soviet historian, referred to it as utopian. The idea was nevertheless progressive, even if impractical. But if impractical for the Soviet Union, with its vast resources and industrial-technological apparatus, it would certainly seem like a much more hazardous plan for Romania, particularly in the light of its almost total isolation from other socialist countries.

Nevertheless, we can't accept the interpretation of the bourgeoisie and the counterrevolutionaries everywhere, that it was repressive, destructive and virtually the annihilation of all civilized life. All this was merely ideological preparation by the bourgeoisie for an assault against the government. A big hullabaloo was raised that it was an attempt at genocide against the Hungarian minority. This is pure hocus. It involved at most 56,000 families. It didn't endanger the existence of the Hungarian minority, and the whole thing could have been solved amicably within the framework of an economic plan. But it was precisely the fear that the plan might succeed after all that frightened the bourgeois reformers in Hungary and also irritated the Gorbachev grouping, which had firmly set a course in an utterly opposite direction.

Repayment of debt

Another error (which can only be assessed as such in retrospect) was the desperate attempt by the Romanian government to free itself from Western indebtedness to the banks. Not only did they decide to pay the interest on billions in indebtedness (in contrast to Poland and Hungary, which haven't been able to), but they paid back the principal as well.

During the 1970s, the Romanian government was able to sell its oil and gas on the world market at skyrocketing prices. OPEC was riding high and it seemed like an endlessly upward spiral. But this ended abruptly and a decline in oil revenues became a significant factor in Romania.

Therefore, the decision to pay back the interest and principal, while a bold act to demonstrate political independence, could only be achieved through severe austerity measures of the type proposed by the IMF in other countries. It seems self-defeating.

The majority of the workers seemed to remain loyal to the regime, but the burden of the austerity program became ever more evident. Relenting on some of the Ceausescu experiments became inevitable. Had the regime made it possible for a responsible working-class opposition to function, either within the Party or without, the government might have been able to pull back somewhat on its plans and embark upon some immediate practical solutions.

The Romanian effort to extricate itself from the Central European arena and to strike out into the West, while retaining a socialist economic system entirely antagonistic to Western imperialism, appears to have been visionary and impractical, as well as hazardous. While the imperialists welcomed Ceausescu's maneuvers, such as his position on the Czech intervention and the Arab-Israeli war, they gave him nothing of substance in return.

Nevertheless, these subjective errors alone could not account for the counterrevolutionary overturn. It is also the virtual economic blockade and political sabotage by the imperialists and fraternal socialist governments like in Hungary that made possible the emergence of the real counterrevolutionary elements.

In the end, what the bourgeoisie really wants is the overturn of the social system and the return of capitalist exploitation and oppression.

