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Andrei Ursu, Roland O. Thomasson, in collaboration with Mădălin Hodor, *Trăgători și Mistificatori. Contrarevoluția Securității în decembrie 1989*. Bucharest: Polirom, 2019. 423 pp. RON 44.95

Reviewed by Corina Snitar, University of Glasgow

The monograph “Trăgători și Mistificatori. Contrarevoluția Securității în decembrie 1989 offers a useful contribution to the history of Romanian Revolution. The volume offers evidence that could shed a light on the 1989 events in an effort, according to the authors, to find not only the historical but also the judicial truth (pp 22-23). Their aim is to bring justice to victims, by presenting evidence that highlight the central role played by Securitate in the repression against protesters in 1989 leading to the Romanian revolution. The book also aims to demonstrate that versions of what happened in 1989 published in Romania after revolution which promote the idea of a Hungarian irredentism or a KGB-GRU plot behind the revolutionary movement (see the case of General Nicolae Militaru in appendix, pp 345-58) are part of Securitate’s plan to divert the attention from their crimes committed up until the Ceaușescu’s execution on Christmas Day. In authors’ opinion, these stories had been already fabricated in Securitate laboratory since the revolutionary movement spread from Timișoara to Bucharest, becoming now a serious threat to the regime. The diversionist measures were meant to produce a smoking screen in which a disoriented army would respond with fires against an unknown and an unseen enemy, to create popular “psychosis” of terrorists acting everywhere and, consequently, to motivate the drastic measures taken against protesters in case the Communist regime would collapse.

The first chapter covers characteristics of Ceaușescu dictatorship through the lens of its repressive organ – Securitate – and its main task of defending Ceaușescu, his family and his regime regardless the popular will. It refers to the Securitate’s plan of organising resistance on “a territory temporary occupied by the enemy” identified in “national groups, gangs and organisations which support (foreign) enemy by using violent actions against the Communist state”, as it had been described in an article published in the former top-secret journal “Securitatea” no 1(85) 1989 by Tudor Alexandru and Nicolae Catană, officers of Securitate (pp. 34-37).

The second chapter covers the events taking place in Iași, a city situated near the border with the USSR at that time, where a group of opponents to the regime under the name of “Romanian Popular Front” (Frontul Popular Român) tried to organise anti-communist manifestations on 16th, 23rd and 30th December (p 41). The initiative was quickly annihilated through arrests operated since early morning of 14th December in factories where Securitate had information about the existence of potential risk

of protests and by dispatching USLA officers (the Securitate division of counter-terrorism) in the city under the pretext of participating at a judo competition (Dinamoviada) organised in the city between 11th and 17th December 1989 (pp 42-43). It seems that the authors mention the episode, although very briefly, to highlight yet another method employed by the chiefs of Securitate in anticipation of a possible risk to the regime. What happened in Iași would be used a few days later by Iulian Vlad, the head of Securitate, to convince his subordinates about the necessity of acting against an initiative such as that taking place in Iași “which was definitely not spontaneous” and “could have developed in a serious threat” (p. 43). The repressive measures against the protesters everywhere had to be legally and morally justified and Ceaușescu’s illusion of having popular support had to be maintained.

The following chapter surveys the events in Timișoara from 15th to 21st December in an attempt to analyse the role played by Securitate in the repression against the protesters. The authors aim to raise alarm about the fact that prosecutors of the Military Court of Justice “suspiciously” ignored the large amount of evidence at their disposal that show how Securitate’s actions had produced the most important number of victims: testimonies given by direct witnesses in the trial opened in the case of Timișoara (Procesul Timișoara) and interviews of former Communist dignitaries taken in the same case in the years following the Revolution up until 2019. At the end, it was only an insignificant number of Securitate officers who had been questioned by the military prosecutors, and moreover, the majority would be released without charges at the end. The authors’ hypothesis is that it could not have been otherwise as the Securitate’s archival files show clearly that the military courts had been subservient to Securitate before 1989 and most former officers of Securitate’s department “Penal Investigations” (Direcția a VI-a: Cercetări Penale”) became prosecutors under the new rule following the collapse of Communism (pp 291-293). The book aims to highlight that blaming only the former president Ion Iliescu as the head of a filo-soviet plot for the victims of the revolution is not enough (pp. 316-8). This was only the most convenient and easiest way used by the military prosecutors to close the case. The terrorists were not the product of a “collective imagination” as the trials seem to promote, in the authors’ view, but real people shooting from apartments belonging to the family members of party activists or Securitate personnel who left them empty 2-3 days before, and from roofs and lofts of buildings situated near sights occupied by revolutionaries or army.

The monograph continues with a chronological review of events and study-cases in Bucharest, Sibiu, Brașov, Craiova, Cluj-Napoca, Brăila, Hunedoara an Arad, based on participants’ testimonies and archival files as, yet evidence of Securitate’s actions meant to create panic among military soldiers and cadets in order to determine them to open fire against each other, in many cases with victims among people caught in the middle. According to the authors, short, violent and recurrent attacks run especially during the night against important sights such as those of the Ministry of National Defence,

National Television, Radio and military units followed “the plan of resistance” described in the journal “Securitatea” in 1989 (see above) and, consequently, demonstrate Securitate’s involvement in repression, as well as the use of sophisticated arms with night vision and “dum-dum” bullets against revolutionaries that only the repressive organ possessed at that moment (pp.206-59).

Besides testimonies of participants and witnesses, the book offers new evidence gathered from the National Centre for Studying the Archives of Securitate (ACNSAS) such as the working agenda of Major Dinu and other officers of the Securitate’s department in charge with the protection of state officials (Direcția a V-a) which mention orders received those days, and from other printed and online sources published after 1990 by former revolutionaries. Authors’ effort to examine a key question concerning who the guilty part for the 1989 victims is has to be much appreciated. Although their conclusion that the secret police was the only one possessing the necessary training and weapons for an urban guerrilla-style warfare and, therefore, the “terrorists” were in fact Securitate officers is not new in Romanian literature and press, the novelty is in bringing together evidence collected from different sources in a single book.

The invaluable information can constitute a starting point for further investigation into, for example, the fate of evidence that disappeared from the Ministry of National Defence such as the map with the exact locations of terrorists (p. 237) or the devices used in simulation attacks captured by militaries in their searching missions into apartments from where shootings had been reported to take place (p.342). Another point that merits further discussions concerns the impact of the events upon the formation of the new state that had taken shape after the collapse of the Communist system. An answer to this question would be of much interest taking into account the authors’ statement that the Front of National Salvation (FSN), the first free form of government whose members would be involved in Romania’s transformation, had been already infiltrated by Securitate officers since the beginning of its existence (p. 26).