

REVIEW

Dennis Deletant, *România sub comunism. Paradox și degenerare* (*Romania Under Communism*), București, Ed. Humanitas, 2025, 630 pp.

It is interesting and useful that Professor Dennis Deletant begins his volume on communism in Romania with a series of biographies of key figures, which serve as more than a simple auxiliary tool for reading the entire work. They represent an excursion into the lives of those who shaped the political and institutional configuration of the regime.

As expected, the program of the volume is announced by the author already in the introduction, and two guiding lines seem to structure the work. The first is that the book is a “detailed *vue d’ensemble*,” an expression that may appear unusual at first glance but which warns the reader that this is a study that, on the one hand, offers an overarching and comprehensive perspective necessary to grasp the disarming complexity of the communist phenomenon. On the other hand, the need for details, concrete examples, and precise clarifications is equally important for the analysis. The second guiding line, at the same time a defining feature of the entire communist regime, is paradox and degeneration: paradox between servility toward the USSR and autonomy, between an ideologically intransigent domestic policy and a fascinating foreign policy; degeneration used to describe the drift toward the neo-Stalinist abyss in which communism ultimately collapsed in Romania.

During the interwar period, immediately after the formal creation of a communist party in Romania in 1921, it was condemned to marginality and irrelevance both because of the objectives proclaimed by the weak organization and because of factors related to the structure of Romanian society and the political practices of the time. The association of the new party with the Comintern and its rhetoric about the dismemberment of Great Romania made it not only a foreign body in the Romanian political landscape but also an obvious enemy of the national order. At the same time, in a nationalist Romania with strong right-wing political tendencies, the Communist Party had little chance of gaining support. Nevertheless, during the same interwar period the cadres who would shape Romania’s destiny after 1944 were formed, foremost among them Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, Nicolae Ceaușescu, and Ana Pauker. Their prison experience was later transformed by propaganda into a founding myth, and Doftana prison became a legendary place.

The chapter on the coup of 23 August 1944 is constructed meticulously, with firsthand testimonies and details, building toward a compelling crescendo that culminates in the afternoon of that day. The scrupulous manner in which the chapter is constructed is matched by another undeniable merit: dismantling the

myth cultivated for four decades by the communists that they had played the principal role in the events, relegating King Mihai to the position of a mere spectator. For the communists, 23 August became a sacred day, yet it rested on an exaggeration—indeed a falsification—which they defended until after the fall of the regime against any competing interpretation.

As for the strategy used by the communists to gain full control over Romania and its population, Deletant's chapter presents a dense accumulation of facts, events, and figures that illuminate a relatively short but extremely complex period susceptible to partisan interpretations. The nature of relations between the Soviets, the British, and the Americans—particularly regarding the functioning of the commission responsible for implementing the armistice—the difficult position of King Mihai and his efforts, the communist takeover of state institutions, the disappearance of traditional political parties, and the falsification of the 1946 elections are all analyzed with rigorous scholarly precision and serve as models for interpreting this historiographically difficult period. The abdication of King Mihai is also included in this chapter, yet the pages dedicated to it avoid any form of partisanship. Equally interesting are the numerous pages devoted to the analysis of the situation of religious denominations, where the author focuses on several key directions: the subordination and control of the Romanian Orthodox Church, accompanied by a sober analysis of the patriarchate of Justinian Marina; the uncertain, semi-legal status of the Roman Catholic Church and the persecutions it endured; and the trauma experienced by the Greek Catholic Church.

“Police coercion and intrusion became part of daily life and an aspect of existence that generated generalized fear, a state of mind that revolutionized not only social structures but also personal behavior.” This is how Professor Deletant describes the Securitate, this “machinery of terror,” modeled by the communists after the Soviet system and unleashed against the Romanian population. Names such as Emil Bodnăraș, Serghei Nikonov (Sergiu Nicolau), Gheorghe Pintilie (Pantelimon Bodnarenko), and Alexandru Nicolschi (Boris Grünberg) populate a gallery of sinister figures from the first decades of communism. The institution itself, through its various structures and reorganizations, received discretionary power over the entire society, which it turned into a collective victim. From issuing passports to collectivization, from the deportations from Banat to the Bărăgan to the organization of the May Day celebrations, nothing escaped the control of the Securitate. Not even Gheorghiu-Dej or Nicolae Ceaușescu escaped the interception of their telephone conversations.

In the tradition inaugurated by the Bolsheviks and faithfully practiced in the Soviet Union, positions at the top of the party were always obtained and maintained through violence, blackmail, and purges, reinforcing what the author calls “a culture of violence and fear.” Romania too experienced the “internal struggles that characterized the history of the Romanian Communist Party,” from which Gheorghiu-Dej did not deviate. His path to complete control of the party

was marked by at least three major purges: Ștefan Foriș assassinated, Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu executed, and Ana Pauker reduced to the status of a “political corpse.” The purge of Pătrășcanu was a striking combination of personal rivalries, Soviet directives, and regional political context. Gheorghiu-Dej’s resentment toward Pătrășcanu’s public visibility intertwined with Moscow’s distrust of the justice minister and the furious anti-Titoist campaigns of the late 1940s.

The arrest and execution of Pătrășcanu did not solve Gheorghiu-Dej’s problem of internal rivalries. Another group—represented by Ana Pauker, Vasile Luca, and Teohari Georgescu—was neutralized on accusations ranging from Zionism to their alleged role in the Pătrășcanu affair and economic mismanagement. These accusations were formulated in close consultation with the Soviets, leaving the so-called “Moscow group” no chance of survival. Gheorghiu-Dej further consolidated his power in the context of international developments such as Nikita Khrushchev’s Secret Speech and the beginning of de-Stalinization, which allowed him to eliminate rivals such as Miron Constantinescu and Iosif Chișinevski.

Professor Deletant notes that it is tempting to analyze communism by emphasizing only its repressive and criminal nature and the numerous violations of human rights. Such an approach, although necessary, would inevitably remain incomplete. Nevertheless, because it is necessary, it is present in the volume, and the chapter dedicated to the Romanian Gulag offers a model of how the crimes of communism should be examined historiographically: with balance, a neutral tone, concrete data, and examples from both the ranks of the perpetrators and the victims. Two major examples dominate this chapter: the re-education experiment and the Danube–Black Sea Canal. The re-education programs at Pitești, the Canal, and Gherla are analyzed in their objectives, stages, and political context, illustrated with figures from both the executioners and the victims. The Canal itself was justified internally as a means of eliminating “enemies of the people,” but also externally as part of certain strategic plans attributed to Stalin. Deletant captures convincingly that the analysis of the labor camps at the Danube–Black Sea Canal ultimately becomes an analysis of human suffering, where concrete examples—such as that of the historian Șerban Papacostea—are indispensable.

The author also addresses essential questions about armed resistance. First, he clearly states that such resistance did exist, thus dispelling the accusation that Romania witnessed no opposition to the communist regime. Moreover, the claim that Romanians were too weak or intimidated “reveals ignorance of the country’s internal realities.” He also clarifies that not all members of resistance groups were associated with the Iron Guard, demonstrating—based on Securitate reports and statements from legionaries—that these groups were

politically and socially diverse. Finally, despite what post-1989 historiographical or memoir literature might suggest, the scale of the phenomenon was rather limited, both numerically and in terms of its geographical spread.

In a massive effort of synthesis and analysis, Deletant demonstrates how the distancing of the Romanian regime from the Soviet Union developed over time. The withdrawal of Soviet troops and advisers, the neutralization of internal party rivals, the acquisition of Western technology, disputes within the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, the neutral position in the Sino-Soviet split, the April 1964 Declaration, and the release of political prisoners all contributed to an autonomy that is difficult to ignore.

In the chapter dedicated to Nicolae Ceaușescu's rise, Dennis Deletant convincingly shows how Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's death triggered an internal competition whose outcome was determined by careful control of the party apparatus, previously built by Dej himself. The author emphasizes that Dej's systematic purges weakened the political elite and created the conditions for the rise of a leader like Ceaușescu, who, in his position responsible for organization and personnel within the Central Committee, had already consolidated a solid network of supporters. The removal of Alexandru Drăghici and the rehabilitation of Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu are analyzed as tactical moves through which the new leader subordinated the repressive apparatus and delegitimized his rivals from the old Political Bureau. Deletant also captures the ambivalence of the late 1960s, when a relative liberalization—illustrated by the opening of a Pepsi-Cola factory in Constanța and increased access to consumer goods—fostered hopes for genuine reform. Overall, the chapter highlights the tension between the skillful strategy of power consolidation and the beginnings of a regime that, although seemingly distancing itself from the harsh Stalinism of the Dej era, already carried the seeds of the personal authoritarianism that was to follow.

It is clear to Professor Dennis Deletant that Nicolae Ceaușescu continued the path set by Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, combining accelerated industrialization with a foreign policy aimed at consolidating the regime's "national-communist" profile, illustrated notably by establishing diplomatic relations with West Germany and maintaining ties with Israel after the Six-Day War. The author highlights the Romanian leader's skill in exploiting Western openness—visible in his dialogue with Richard Nixon—to acquire strategic technology, with the choice of the CANDU system materializing in the Cernavodă nuclear power plant project. The pinnacle of this autonomy was Ceaușescu's condemnation of the Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia, a gesture that earned him considerable international capital, though it was quickly tempered by caution stemming from fear of a Soviet reaction. Deletant convincingly captures how the appeal to national symbols became a tool for legitimization and control, gradually fueling the personality cult and consolidating a personal dictatorship. At the same time, the author dismantles the illusion of

liberalization, showing that despite reformist rhetoric, the repressive apparatus remained intact, resorting to intimidation, fabricated trials, and psychiatric abuse to silence any form of opposition.

The central paradox of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime was linked to foreign policy, which, being perceived as relatively autonomous from Moscow, generated considerable diplomatic capital in the West, symbolized by Richard Nixon's visit to Bucharest in 1969 and the granting of Most Favored Nation status by Gerald Ford. At the same time, Romania's admission to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, as well as to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, reinforced the image of a country that was economically open and strategically useful to the West. However, Deletant emphasizes that this external legitimacy coexisted with a marked consolidation of internal authoritarianism and an intensification of the personality cult, influenced in part by the model of political spectacles that Ceaușescu observed in Mao Zedong's China and Kim Il-Sung's North Korea. The author also highlights the pragmatic mechanisms through which the regime built its Western political capital, such as a relatively tolerant policy toward the Jewish community and the negotiated emigration of Jews and Germans, which generated significant foreign currency income. Economically, however, the obsession with industrialization and dependence on Western loans produced structural vulnerabilities, exacerbated by the oil crisis and the poor quality of Romanian exports. Finally, Deletant shows that with the emergence of Mikhail Gorbachev and the changing geopolitical climate of the 1980s, Romania's diplomatic advantage eroded rapidly, leaving a stark contrast between its previous international prestige and the deep internal crisis of the regime.

Dennis Deletant shows that Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime exploited the historical themes of Transylvania and Bessarabia to reinforce its political legitimacy, presenting the communist leader as the last continuator of a lineage of national heroes such as Ștefan cel Mare, Mihai Viteazul, and Alexandru Ioan Cuza. The author highlights how Romania's accession to the Helsinki Final Act opened the way for international monitoring of the treatment of minorities, which intensified Romanian-Hungarian tensions and provided the Hungarian minority with a framework to denounce the regime's discriminatory policies. Relations with Hungary deteriorated significantly after the publication of a Hungarian historical work on Transylvania, to which official Romanian historians responded with a vehement polemic in the state-controlled press. At the same time, Ceaușescu's rural systematization policy had disproportionate effects on Hungarian communities in eastern Transylvania, contributing to increased ethnic tensions and the migration of minorities to Hungary. Regarding Bessarabia, Deletant emphasizes that the reopening of debate was stimulated by the propagation of notes attributed to Karl Marx about Romanians, which were used propagandistically to legitimize criticism of the Russian annexation of 1812 and

to fuel anti-Russian sentiment. The Romanian-Soviet historiographical controversy intensified in the 1970s, also fueled by the reintroduction into public discourse of Ion Antonescu's figure through Marin Preda's novel, "Delirul" (1975), which transformed the Bessarabia issue into an additional instrument of nationalism promoted by the communist regime.

Conformism, in the author's view, largely characterized Romanian society during Nicolae Ceaușescu's rule, highlighting the near-total absence of organized dissent and the compliance exhibited by much of the intellectual community. This situation is explained by the climate of fear and institutional control, vividly described by Paul Goma, who spoke of the dual existence of citizens forced to divide their lives between the public sphere dominated by official ideology and the private space of daily survival. Deletant shows that the turning point in the relationship between the regime and the intellectual community was represented by the July Theses, through which Ceaușescu reintroduced strict ideological control over culture and reactivated the principles of socialist realism, combined with an increasingly pronounced emphasis on nationalism. In this context, the few acts of dissent, such as Paul Goma's letters in solidarity with the Charter 77 movement, represented isolated initiatives and were quickly repressed by the authorities. The chapter's analysis also highlights the ambivalence of the literary environment, where influential authors such as Eugen Barbu or Marin Preda came to indirectly legitimize the official discourse, while a small number of writers – including Ana Blandiana and Mircea Dinescu – chose to take the risks of public criticism. The entire chapter offers a nuanced interpretation of the mechanisms of conformism and the limits of intellectual resistance in an authoritarian regime that largely succeeded in transforming culture into an instrument of political legitimization.

In the chapter dedicated to dissent, Dennis Deletant emphasizes the extremely limited nature of open opposition to Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime, showing that, in many cases, intellectual nonconformity was later mistaken for genuine dissent. The symbol of critical exile was Paul Goma, while within the country, protests remained sporadic and fragmented, reflecting the climate of repression and state control. Deletant pays special attention to episodes of social contestation, such as the miners' strike in the Jiu Valley and the workers' revolt in Brașov, which demonstrated the extent of popular discontent in an apparently conformist society. In the moral and civic sphere, one of the most important voices of opposition was Doina Cornea, whose protests combined political critique with a profound appeal to individual responsibility and moral renewal. The author also highlights the unprecedented character of the "Letter of the Six," signed by former communist leaders who openly criticized the dictator's policies. Consequently, a nuanced picture of Romanian dissent emerges, presented more as a succession of courageous individual acts than as an organized movement capable of systematically undermining the regime.

The economic deterioration at the end of the 1970s led Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime to rely increasingly on the state's repressive apparatus, especially the Securitate. The spectacular defection of General Ion Mihai Pacepa in 1978 represented a major blow to the Romanian intelligence services, triggering an extensive purge and the reorganization of external espionage structures. At the same time, Deletant highlights the regime's involvement in intimidation operations and even assassination attempts against critics in exile, such as Monica Lovinescu or Emil Georgescu, which further deepened Romania's international isolation. Internal repression is illustrated by dramatic cases such as the death of the dissident Gheorghe Ursu, killed in detention after criticizing the regime, an example of the brutality of the repressive system. The author also discusses the profoundly intrusive character of demographic policies, which transformed control over reproduction into an instrument of direct state intervention in private life. Another symbol of Ceaușescu's authoritarianism was the program of urban and rural systematization, materialized in the destruction of historic neighborhoods in Bucharest to build the monumental House of the People. Overall, the chapter highlights how the combination of political repression, social engineering, and the cult of personality decisively contributed to the delegitimization of the regime and to its international isolation.

There was a very rapid succession of events that led, in less than a week, from the protests that erupted around Pastor László Tórkés to Nicolae Ceaușescu's flight from the headquarters of the Central Committee. The author considers that the dictator committed several decisive errors, among them the lack of empathy toward the victims of the repression in Timișoara and the organization of the rally of 21 December 1989 in Bucharest, which turned into a public moment of delegitimization of the regime. The televised broadcast of the interrupted speech represented a major symbolic blow to Ceaușescu's authority, revealing for the first time the fragility of his control over society. Deletant then describes the summary trial organized by the new leadership around Ion Iliescu and the rapid execution of the dictatorial couple after a verdict delivered by an exceptional military tribunal. The author draws attention to the fact that, despite the violent collapse of the regime, the structures of the former political police, the Securitate, were largely integrated into the new system of power. In conclusion, the chapter raises an important interpretative question: whether the events of December 1989 can be considered a genuine revolution or rather a political change in which the continuity of the communist elite limited the real break with the past.

In the final part of the volume, Dennis Deletant offers a critical assessment of Romania's evolution after the collapse of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime, emphasizing the hesitant and often contradictory character of the political and economic reforms of the post-communist period. The author argues that the real impetus for transformation came largely from outside, particularly

from institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the Council of Europe, the European Union, and NATO, whose conditionalities accelerated the reform process. Deletant also highlights continuities within the political elite, suggesting that former members of the Communist Party quickly regrouped around the National Salvation Front, which fueled the public perception that the revolution had been “confiscated.” In this context, the violent events known as the Mineriads appear in the author’s interpretation as expressions of authoritarian political reflexes that continued to shape the Romanian transition.

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