

**THE SPIES WHO DEFENDED US:
SPY STORIES AND LEGITIMATING DISCOURSES
IN CEAUȘESCU'S ROMANIA, 1965-77**

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Abstract

The present paper analyses the intricate issue of legitimization of non-democratic regimes by focusing on the communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu during a particular time span, namely, 1965-77. This author contends that the issue of legitimization of communist rule in Romania should be addressed not only from the perspective of recent history and communist studies, but also from the perspective of history of intelligence. Thus, this paper demonstrates that in the particular context of August 1968, the Ceaușescu regime acquired "limited legitimacy through consent." Furthermore, from the perspective of history of intelligence, this paper argues that certain communist spy novels set forth fictional characters of Securitate officers as defenders of the Romanian "socialist nation" against the hostile actions of Western spies. Thus, for a limited period of time such spy novels contributed to persuading some segments of society to believe that the Securitate's mission was actually to protect the nation against foreign, that is, Western enemies.

Keywords: 1968, legitimization, communism, Securitate, spy novels, role models

Introduction

This paper addresses the intricate issue of legitimization of non-democratic regimes by focusing on the case of the communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania. The main argument set forth in my paper is that the Ceaușescu regime actually managed to achieve legitimacy, but a particular type of legitimacy, which can be termed following the British social theorist David Beetham as "limited legitimacy through consent." Ceaușescu lived his finest hour on Wednesday, 21 August 1968, when he publicly condemned the Soviet-led military invasion of Czechoslovakia. This gesture of defiance brought him and the Romanian Communist Party

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(RCP) a broad popular support and silenced the domestic critical voices towards the regime for many years.

Furthermore, the present paper argues that the immediate post-1968 context should be discussed from the perspective of the history of intelligence. This author contends that popular perceptions of the secret police apparatus deserve thorough investigation, all the more that in the post-1989 context research concentrated almost entirely on unmasking the wrongdoings of the Securitate. Thus, it is important to assess to what extent large strata of the population were persuaded to believe that the main purpose of the Securitate was to defend them from the hostile actions of Western spies. It may be argued that the communist spy novels featuring Securitate officers waging an „invisible war” against Western spies in order to defend the „achievements of socialism” supported the regime’s efforts at legitimizing itself. To illustrate this argument, the present paper addresses the works and the main characters of the novels written by three generations of writers of spy novels in communist Romania (Theodor Constantin, Haralamb Zincă and Rodica Ojog-Braşoveanu).

On the Road to Absolute Power: Socialist Modernization, Nation-Building and Limited Legitimacy

After coming to power in March 1965, Ceauşescu basically followed the political strategy of his predecessor, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, based on cautious independence from Moscow and sustained industrialization. This was accompanied by a closely watched ideological relaxation combined with a modest improvement of the living standards of the population. As a consequence, popular perceptions of the regime improved gradually over the period March 1965–August 1968. The modest improvement of the standards of living of the population found an echo in the hearts and minds of a majority of Romania’s population.¹ Thus, in August 1968 – ten years after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Romania – when Ceauşescu gave his famous “balcony speech” in which he condemned the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the WTO troops, large segments of the population supported him without hesitation. The effect of Ceauşescu’s discourse on Romania’s population at large was enormous. Arguably, that speech represented for many Romanians the “proof” of Ceauşescu’s charismatic

¹ For more on this, see Dragoş Petrescu, “Closely Watched Tourism: The Securitate as Warden of Transnational Encounters, 1967–69,” *Journal of Contemporary History* (2015) Vol. 50, No. 2, pp. 341–345.

qualifications.² In fact, Ceaușescu's "charismatic leadership" – to use Reinhard Bendix's inspired term – emerged in the dramatic conditions of that August 1968.³ At the same time, as David Beetham rightly argues, the use of the Weberian concept of "charismatic authority" is problematic in the sense that it "assigns far too exclusive an importance to the individual, and leads to fruitless, because unresolvable, disputes about whether particular leaders possess the indefinable quality of 'charisma' or not."⁴ When analyzing the mechanism that provided the Ceaușescu regime with unprecedented mobilizing capacity one should concentrate on two major issues: (a) Ceaușescu's personality and leadership style; and (b) the particular circumstances in which popular mobilization occurred in 1968.

Ceaușescu was by far less flexible in adopting various policies than his predecessor, Gheorghiu-Dej. Nonetheless, he was only 47 when he became secretary general of the party and managed to build a positive image of himself as a "man of the people" by proceeding consistently to grassroots consultations. One can easily grasp the extent of the phenomenon from the large number of domestic mass rallies analysed above only for the period January-August 1968. During the period 1965–68, Ceaușescu's domestic visits were carefully staged and quite often he visited the most relevant historic monuments in the respective area, thus paying respect to the deeds of the ancestors with an emphasis on the medieval rulers of Romanian principalities. This was in sharp contrast with the leadership style of his predecessor, Gheorghiu-Dej, who did not champion such staged domestic visits. Furthermore, the launch of his belated and short lived de-Stalinization – which was intended primarily to unmask the wrongdoings of Gheorghiu-Dej and damage his legacy among the nomenklatura members – made of Ceaușescu the undisputed leader of the RCP.

Ceaușescu's policy of independence from Moscow and opening toward the West – which was initiated in fact by Gheorghiu-Dej – contributed decisively to the mass mobilization that followed his speech of 21 August 1968. In this respect, Ceaușescu benefited largely from the line inaugurated by Gheorghiu-Dej. Recollections by critical intellectuals, some of whom became after 1977

² According to Max Weber, charisma is: "A certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities." Quoted in Reinhard Bendix, "Reflections on Charismatic Leadership," in Reinhard Bendix et. al., eds., *State and Society: A Reader in Comparative Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 619.

³ Bendix, "Reflections on Charismatic Leadership," pp. 616–629.

⁴ David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 156.

fierce political opponents of the supreme leader of the RCP, support this argument. Writer Paul Goma, the initiator of the 1977 Goma movement for human rights and perhaps the most famous Romanian dissident, wrote about the atmosphere in Bucharest on 21 August 1968. According to Goma, Ceaușescu's appeal to the population to take arms and defend their country had a tremendous mobilizing force.⁵ Writer Dumitru Țepeneag remembers that Ceaușescu's discourse had an instantaneous effect on him: "For some days, I was a convinced Ceaușescuist."⁶ A bitter confession by journalist Neculai Constantin Munteanu, who became one of the most acerbic critics of Ceaușescu's dictatorship as part of the Romanian desk of Radio Free Europe during the 1980s, deserves further examination. In 1977, Munteanu addressed a letter to Ceaușescu himself, in which he stated that he had decided to leave Romania forever and put forward his main reasons for making such a decision. In his letter, Munteanu also mentioned that on 21 August 1968, while he was in front of the CC building and listened to Ceaușescu's speech, he felt proud of being a Romanian: "The vehemence of your condemnation of the armed aggression of some member countries of the WTO against a friendly and allied country made me feel proud of being a Romanian."⁷

Simple themes, such as the struggle for independence and return to traditional values, found an echo in the minds and hearts of a majority of the Romanian population. At the same time, people could experience on an everyday basis a cautious ideological relaxation, a slight improvement of the living standards and an opening towards the West. In 1968, things seemed to move in the right direction, and many felt that the RCP leadership was truly concerned with improving the general situation of the population. Such a widespread positive perception of the regime permitted the RCP to achieve a "limited legitimation through consent."⁸ Moreover, the "balcony speech" – which was generally perceived as a "proof" of Ceaușescu's charismatic qualifications – was given at the beginnings of his rule. At the same time, as Max Weber puts it, if a charismatic leader "is for long unsuccessful, above all if his leadership fails to benefit his followers, it is likely that his charismatic

⁵ Paul Goma, *Amnezia la români* (Amnezia to Romanians) (Bucharest: Editura Litera, 1992), p. 54.

⁶ Dumitru Țepeneag, *Reîntoarcerea fiului la sânul mamei răătăcite* (The return of the son to prodigal mother's breast) (Iași: Institutul European, 1993), p. 95.

⁷ Neculai Constantin Munteanu, *Ultimii șapte ani de-acasă: Un ziarist în dosarele Securității* (The last seven years at home: A journalist in the files of the Securitate) (Bucharest: Editura Curtea Veche, 2007), p. 120.

⁸ Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power*, p. 117.

authority will disappear.”⁹ It took, however, more than ten years for Ceaușescu’s charisma to erode.¹⁰

Spy Stories: Securitate Officers as Positive Role Models

From the history of intelligence perspective, it is relevant to assess popular perceptions of Securitate officers during the time interval 1968–77. As mentioned above, the concept of “limited legitimacy through consent” permits the study of legitimization processes under non-democratic regimes. In this respect, the case of Romania is relevant for the above-mentioned period because during that particular period a series of factors, such as economic improvement, ideological relaxation, cultural openness to the West or increased permeability of the borders for international tourism. Ceaușescu’s nationalism also contributed in legitimizing the regime in the eyes of the population. Spy novels, though a minor literature genre, contributed significantly to this process of legitimization by setting forth role models which young audiences were eager to emulate. Fictional characters, communist spies on of the 007 kind thus emerged as daring defenders of the “achievements of socialism.”

Given the technological backwardness of the Soviet bloc countries, one could ask nevertheless what were those “achievements of socialism” the Western spies were eager to steal and smuggle to the West. To this question, the authors of communist spy novels manage to find an answer, which at the time sounded convincing, including for this author. This answer reads as follows: in spite of the technological backwardness of communist Romania, under popular democracy the country has established a network of research institutes, which produce amazing research project with many practical applications. As a consequence, the plot of many spy novels published under communism revolves around the way the Securitate officers manage to hamper Western spies steal the results of cutting-edge research performed by research teams led by gifted Romanian scientists. This paper concentrates on the fictional characters developed by the most talented writers of spy novels in communist Romania, who at the same time represent three generations of writers: Theodor Constantin (1910–75); Haralamb Zincă (1923–2008); and Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu (1939–2002).

Theodor Constantin published several spy and detective novels. One of the most successful spy novels is entitled *La miezul nopții va cădea o stea* (A

⁹ Quoted in Bendix, “Reflections on Charismatic Leadership,” p. 620.

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of the meaning and consequences of Ceaușescu’s gesture of defiance of August 1968, see Dragoș Petrescu, “Legitimacy, Nation-Building and Closure: Meanings and Consequences of the Romanian August of 1968,” in M. Mark Stolarik, ed., *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia, 1968: Forty Years Later* (Mundelein, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2010), pp. 237–259.

star will fall at midnight), whose plot is placed during WW II, in Transylvania, after the coup of 23 August 1944. Romania shifted sides and the Romanian army is engaged in war against Nazi Germany. In this context, the Romanian military intelligence eventually uncovers and annihilates an experienced Nazi spy infiltrated in the Romanian Cipher Section.¹¹ Subsequently, the novel was made into a movie, *Secretul cifrului* (The secret of the cipher), released in 1960, which was well received by the public considering the limited offer of action movies in Romania at the time.¹² Theodor Constantin wrote both spy and detective novels, and some of the main characters of his novels, Securitate and Militia officers, sometimes collaborate in solving difficult cases. In terms of propaganda and ideology, the author uses arguments related to class struggle and antifascism (*La miezul nopții va cădea o stea, Fiul lui Monte Cristo*) or to the critique of the interwar “bourgeois” political system and the institution of monarchy (*Urmărirea abia începe*).¹³ The main character of his most successful spy novels, which are those featuring an international spy agency called the Nebel Trust, is the Securitate Major Radu “Ducu” Mănăilă.

“Ducu” Mănăilă featured first in the novel *Fiul lui Monte Cristo* (Son of Monte Cristo) published in 1958.¹⁴ The novel covers the period 1937–50 and takes place in Brăila, the author’s native town. Ducu, who comes from a modest, working-class family is seventeen and falls in love with Ingrid Richter, the daughter of a wealthy Swiss businessman. Ducu’s father – nicknamed Monte Cristo – is assassinated. After a while, Ducu finds out that Ingrid’s father, whose real name is Walther, is a Nazi spy and the assassin of Monte Cristo. Walter puts an end to the love story between his daughter and Ducu by sending Ingrid abroad to continue her studies. Eventually, Ducu prompts Walter to commit suicide by threatening to unmask him as a Nazi spy. After the coup of 23 August 1944, Ducu joins the army and fights against the Nazis and, after the communist takeover and the establishment of the Securitate, he enters the secret police apparatus. While on secret mission in Switzerland, Ducu meets Ingrid, now married and mother of a boy, and realizes that their love story ended for good.

The novel *Doamna în mov* (Lady in purple), was published in 1966, during the Ceaușescu period. The Securitate Major Radu “Ducu” Mănăilă is

¹¹ Theodor Constantin, *La miezul nopții va cădea o stea* (A star will fall at midnight) 3rd revised ed. (Bucharest: Editura Tineretului, 1962).

¹² Lucian Bratu, *Secretul cifrului* (The secret of the cipher), Romania, 79 min., 1960.

¹³ Theodor Constantin, *Urmărirea abia începe* (The chase has only started) 2nd ed. (Bucharest: Editura Militară, 1963).

¹⁴ Theodor Constantin, *Fiul lui Monte Cristo* (Son of Monte Cristo) (Bucharest: Editura Tineretului, 1958).

briefed by his superiors that the Nebel Trust intends to steal the results of the “secret research” performed by a team headed by Alcibiade Robescu, from the Romanian Academy, regarding the military uses of a laser device.¹⁵ While Major Mănăilă works on the case, he finds out that the Nebel Trust sent to Romania one its most experienced spies. Eventually, Mănăilă finds out that the agent is a woman, actually Ingrid, his only true love, but does not hesitate to arrest her. Once unmasked, Ingrid commits suicide.

Haralamb Zincă is the pen name of Hary Isac Zilberman (1923–2008), an author who also wrote spy and detective novels. His most successful spy novel is *Moartea vine pe bandă de magnetofon* (Death comes on magnetic reel-to-reel tape),¹⁶ which was made into a movie released under the title *Un om în loden* (A man in loden overcoat).¹⁷ The main characters are two Securitate officers, Captain Lucian and Lieutenant Frunză, who have to solve the case of engineer Dan Stamatiad, who had received several death threats. Stamatiad, a gifted geologist, was involved in a major geological survey codenamed “U-74” aiming at mapping the uranium ore deposits in Romania. Zincă draws a bright portrait of a Securitate officer in the early Ceaușescu epoch. For instance, Captain Lucian calms down Stamatiad, who was deeply disturbed by the death threats received, with the following words: “Please be assured that, from this moment on, *you are not alone anymore...* Please do understand, no matter if this is a joke or not, *you are not alone anymore*. This case will be given our outmost care [original emphasis].”¹⁸ In ideological terms, Zincă depicts the “new” Securitate, close to the people and “defender of socialism,” in line with the tenets of Ceaușescu’s national-communism and in contradistinction with the “old” Securitate from the time of Gheorghe-Gheorghiu-Dej, which was allegedly under Moscow’s control. Turning back to the above-mentioned novel, the two Securitate officers manage, quite obviously to solve the thorny case of industrial espionage. The spies are unmasked and caught, and it turns out that it was about an organization specialized in industrial espionage founded in the West by a former Iron Guard member under the cover of an antique business company named Venus of Milo.¹⁹

Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu (1939–2002) is perhaps the author who proposed to her readers the most interesting fictional characters of spy and

¹⁵ Theodor Constantin, *Doamna în mov* (Lady in purple) (Bucharest: Editura Tineretului, 1966), pp. 33–34.

¹⁶ Haralamb Zincă, *Moartea vine pe bandă de magnetofon*, (Death comes on magnetic reel-to-reel tape) (Bucharest: Editura Militară, 1967). As for Zincă’s detective novels, see, for instance, *Ochii doctorului King*, (Doctor King’s eyes) 2nd ed. (Bucharest: Editura Militară, 1972).

¹⁷ Nicolae Mărgineanu, *Un om în loden* (A man in loden overcoat), Romania, 78 min., 1979.

¹⁸ Haralamb Zincă, *Moartea vine pe bandă de magnetofon*, pp. 25–26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

detective novels in communist Romania. Ojog-Braşoveanu differs fundamentally from other authors in the field due to the narrative keys she uses, that is, comedy and irony. Although her novels feature Securitate and Militia officers and are set in the particular context of Ceauşescu's Romania, her spy and detective novels proved to be successful with the generations born after the fall of communism and who learned in school about the systematic violation of fundamental human rights under the communist dictatorship.²⁰

The most interesting character of Ojog-Braşoveanu's spy novels is the Securitate Major Minerva Tutovan, who teams up with Lieutenant Vasile Dobrescu to counteract Western spies. It may be argued that Major Tutovan epitomizes the "new" and national Securitate established after Ceauşescu's coming to power, but in a more imaginative and less ideological way as compared to the fictional characters in Zincă's novels. Major Tutovan is a woman and, even more importantly, is someone from among "us" who decided to work for "them" in order to defend her country and ours. This is how the argument between the lines reads.²¹

It is worth mentioning the dedication to one of her early works, *Omul de la capătul firului* (The man at the other end of the line), in which the author states that the book is dedicated to the "anonymous heroes fighting on the invisible front of counter-intelligence" on the occasion of celebrating 25 years from the establishment of the Securitate on 30 August 1973.²² Major Tutovan used to teach Mathematics in a Bucharest high school and was feared for her severity. She was recruited after solving a murder case while on thematic trip nearby Bucharest with her pupils.²³ The success of Ojog-Braşoveanu's novels is also due to the unusual team Tutovan-Dobrescu, given the fact that Tutovan was Dobrescu's teacher in high school and he had great difficulty in taking a passing grade since he was not exactly gifted for Mathematics.²⁴

At the same time, the spy novels by Ojog-Braşoveanu does not depart from the recipe used by most writers of the genre in communist Romania. Thus, the results of fundamental research performed by state institutes

²⁰ See in particular the collection Rodica Ojog-Braşoveanu (on paper and in E-book format) established by Editura Nemira; accessed 4 September 2017 at <https://nemira.ro/catalogsearch/result/?q=ojog+brasoveanu&cat=>; accessed on 4 September 2017.

²¹ One should also mention Ojog-Braşoveanu's detective novels whose main character is Melania Lupu, an old lady whose way of lessening boredom is to involve herself in economic crimes.

²² Ojog-Braşoveanu, *Omul de la capătul firului* (The man at the other end of the line) (Bucharest: Editura Albatros, 1973). The novel was made into a movie. See Geo Saizescu, *Şantaj* (Blackmail), Romania, 95 min., 1982.

²³ Ojog-Braşoveanu, *Omul de la capătul firului*, pp. 17–18.

²⁴ Ojog-Braşoveanu, *Spionaj la mănăstire* (Espionage at the monastery) (Bucharest: Editura Militară, 1972), p. 10.

remains the main objective of Western espionage. For instance, in the spy novel *Spionaj la mănăstire* (Espionage at the monastery), Major Tutovan and Lieutenant Dobrescu manage to hamper the stealing and smuggling across the border of a revolutionary anesthetic developed by a Romanian team headed by professor Lucaci. An international organization specialized in industrial espionage, the TEX Trust, sends an agent to Romania. The agent is a gorgeous but also extremely clever young woman, Nora Roman.²⁵ Major Tutovan is not able to hamper the assassination of professor Lucaci, but succeeds in unmasking the Western spy and hampering the smuggling of the precious formula across the border.

Concluding remarks

This paper has focused on the period 1965–77, a period in which the communist regime in Romania displayed a less ferocious face and which is associated in the folk memory with economic improvement and ideological relaxation. The main argument set forth by this paper is that the Ceaușescu regime actually managed to achieve legitimacy, but a particular type of legitimacy, which can be termed following the British social theorist David Beetham as „limited legitimacy through consent.” Ceaușescu lived his finest hour on Wednesday, 21 August 1968, when he publicly condemned the Soviet-led military invasion of Czechoslovakia. This gesture of defiance brought him and the Romanian Communist Party a broad popular support and silenced the domestic critical voices towards the regime for many years.

At the same time, this author has demonstrated that the immediate post-1968 context deserves to be analysed from the perspective of the history of intelligence, more precisely, by examining popular perceptions of the secret police apparatus and thus shed more light on the legitimizing process mentioned above. In this respect, the present paper has shown that communist spy novels featuring Securitate officers waging an „invisible war” against Western spies to defend the „achievements of socialism” supported the regime’s efforts at legitimizing itself. This paper has discussed the works and the main characters of the novels written by three generations of writers of spy novels in communist Romania (Theodor Constantin, Haralamb Zincă and Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu). The analysis has also revealed that a process of memory borrowing emerged after 1989, which deserves to be further investigated by corroborating recollections posted on the Internet and reception of certain communist spy novels after 1989 by generations born after the fall of the communist regime.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 187 and pp. 194–202.

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