

Ion Anghel, ed.. *Timisoara 16-22 decembrie 1989*. Timisoara: Editura Facla, 1990. 306 pp. 39 lei, paper, ISBN 978-973-36-0091-6.

Miodrag Milin. *Timisoara, 15-21 decembrie '89*. Timisoara: M. Milin, 1990. 188 pp. , , .

Miodrag Milin. *Timisoara in revolutie si dupa*. Timisoara: Editura Marineasa, 1997. 223 pp. Price not available,, paper, ISBN 978-973-9185-84-4.

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Ten years have elapsed since the December 16-22 1989 uprising in Timisoara that led to the overthrow of Ceausescu's dictatorship in Romania. The uprising was the first episode of what has come to be known as the "Romanian revolution," the last of the dominoes that fell during Eastern Europe's revolutions in 1989. Unlike Poland, Hungary, the GDR, and Czechoslovakia, Romania ended communism with a bloody revolution. In order to suppress the demonstrations that called for radical political changes, Ceausescu sent the army, the police, and the Securitate (Romania's dreaded secret police) with specific orders to use deadly force. For six days the population of this city of 350,000 inhabitants heroically resisted the repression, which took a heavy toll: 128 dead, 30 disappeared, and hundreds injured and disabled. This review is dedicated to their memory.

In order to better understand the difficulties of writing the history of the Timisoara uprising, it should be pointed out that the Romanian government closed the borders on December 16, 1989, as soon as the demonstrations began in earnest. Therefore, owing to the total absence in Timisoara of reliable media to reflect the events, as well as to the inaccessibility of documentary sources

(classified records, video recordings), subjective interpretations of the uprising abound: from attempts at cause and effect explanations detailing the hardships of life under Ceausescu's dictatorship[1] through exercises in cultural studies (Jean Baudrillard, for instance, has concluded that nothing happened, other than a media manipulation campaign[2]), to faithful, but incomplete accounts by witnesses. Such collections of testimonies and generalizations replace the still lacking, all embracing historical narrative of the events. What we are offered instead is the narrative that survives in the minds of the large number of people who were directly involved.

Compiling several such testimonies collected in the early months of 1990, Miodrag Milin, a professor of history at the West University of Timisoara, published in the same year *Timisoara 15-21 decembrie '89 (Timisoara, 15-21 December '89)*. [3] It was the first attempt to offer the Romanian readers a coherent picture of the events as they unfolded and as they were experienced by different participants in the demonstrations. Since Miodrag Milin, a longtime resident of Timisoara, had been out of town during the events, he relied on the accounts of eye-witnesses

to convey the feeling of immediacy usually derived from first hand experience. The main merit of this book is twofold: it puts in chronological order all the demonstrations and their repression as they occurred throughout the city (maps included), and it highlights the great sense of solidarity that animated the inhabitants of this city in their empty-handed, but determined resistance before the regimes' troops, tanks, and armored personnel carriers that all fired on them with live ammunition. Even after the army ceased firing and withdrew from the streets on December 20, this sense of civic duty prompted the inhabitants to stay out and demonstrate round the clock in the Opera Square in the city's downtown for the next two days so as to defend their newly won freedom. The massive and orderly protest cannot be overlooked: there was no history of organized protest in communist Romania, so the discipline and vast resources of solidarity shown by the city of Timisoara took the government by surprise and instilled confidence in the demonstrators.

1990 also was the year of publication for *Timisoara, 16-22 decembrie 1989* a collection of eyewitness testimonies mixed with reflections by a number of local intellectuals. However, the value of this book lies in the information conveyed by eyewitnesses, rather than in the ideas expressed in the reflective essays. Ion Anghel appears to have served only as a technical editor for the book.

All the accounts point to the spontaneity of the events, although most narrators are aware of previous attempts at organizing protest actions, all nipped in the bud by the Securitate -- most notable among them a strike initiative at the largest plant in the city in November 1989. Most interesting is the interview of Ioan Savu, a 39-year old low-level supply manager in a manufacturing company, taken by Titus Suci. Savu was one of the impromptu leaders (others were Sorin Oprea and Ion Marcu) who negotiated with Ion Dascalescu, the Prime Minister of the last Communist gov-

ernment. From Savu's account one learns of his impatience to change the situation ("the moment has come," says Savu when seeing the crowd gathered in front of Reverend Laszlo Tokes's home on December 16, p. 87), that he acted upon information of what happened elsewhere (p. 110), being also aware of previous efforts to express public opposition to the regime (p. 86).

The long interview with Savu highlights a specific phenomenon of the Romanian revolution, viz. the lack of an alternative leadership: the absence of a dissident movement, whose members could have provided alternative guidance to the insurgents, became painfully obvious. Therefore, searching for leaders, Savu shows his readiness to have Radu Balan, one of the local RCP chiefs, speak to the crowds gathered in front of the Opera in Timisoara. This also explains why the population, immediately after the Revolution, readily accepted former apparatchiks, like Ion Iliescu, to lead the country or, at the local level, Florentin Carpanu to be put in charge of Timis county. In his interview, Ioan Savu also offers interesting details about the failed negotiations with Prime Minister Dascalescu: soon after Savu, together with the other representatives of the demonstrators, sat down to talk with the high party and government delegation from Bucharest, he realized that the latter were not prepared for discussion, but rather tried to exert pressure on the insurgents and to bully them into submission. (p. 105) Under such circumstances, the achievements of the revolutionaries are even more worthy of admiration.

Other accounts center on particular experiences derived from a "professional" involvement in the events. Thus Ferenc Baranyi, a physician at the city's second largest hospital, describes the atmosphere at the emergency ward where ambulances and private cars kept bringing in wounded demonstrators, and the doctors' astonishment at the great number of casualties with bullet wounds -- they were not used to treating such wounds.(pp.

223-229) Gabriel Mitroi, a first lieutenant in the army, recalls the mission he and his soldiers conducted to strengthen the defenses of the RCP county headquarters in Timisoara. His account (pp.179-222) throws light on the confusion reigning inside the building: the lines of command were contradictory most of the time, given the presence under the same roof of party officials, Securitate officers, and army troops. Having been issued strict orders to act solely upon the command of their own officers, Mitroi's military refused to carry out whatever orders the Securitate officers and party functionaries tried to give them. In addition, Mitroi's story reveals the total ignorance by both low-ranking officers and soldiers of what was going on in the city, as well as of the demonstrators' motives and goals.

The contributions of several local intellectuals (writers, professors at the university) seek to interpret the events in the manner that has become so familiar in Romania ever since: the overthrow of Ceausescu was a miracle (pp. 26, 33), the revolution was a different reality (p.27) that ultimately delivered the Romanian people from evil, and the martyrdom of the victims is imparted a religious aura. These thoughts are most eloquently articulated in Ivan Evseev's essay "Revolutia din Timisoara ca depasire a sinelui" (Overcoming the Self: the Timisoara Revolution). From a position of literal non-involvement (the observer standing on the sidewalk, while the demonstrators crowded the roadway), Evseev, an erudite professor of Slavic linguistics, perceived the clashes in Biblical terms as the "Struggle with the Metal Whale," (p. 31) concluding that "God has not forsaken his people ... whose prayers were heard in Heaven and delivered them from the cruelest form of tyranny history has ever known."(p.38)

My problem with this "miracle" approach is that it tries to present those who were out in the street and risking their lives as simple pawns in the hands of a higher, metaphysical power. Such an explanation conveniently avoids discussing is-

ues like personal responsibility and involvement and the public good. Putting one's action or lack of action at the doorstep of divinity provides a handy explanation for any course the events might take. On the other hand, interpreting the events as a miracle, and being implicitly part of it, redeems all Romanians indiscriminately from any kind of past compliance with the dictatorship and promotes them to the special status of a "chosen" people.

In his essay "De ce Timisoara?" (Why Timisoara? pp. 11-15), Traian Liviu Biraescu, who used to teach comparative literature to undergraduates, tries to integrate the Timisoara uprising into the whole picture of the Romanian revolution: the revolution started in this city would not have been successful without the uprising of the population of Bucharest, five days later (21 December 1989). To prove this "integrationist" point, rather than bringing up some solid evidence, Biraescu relies on a rumor circulating in Timisoara after the withdrawal of the troops from the streets on December 20, namely that the Ceausescus intended to raze the city from the face of the earth and to turn it into farmland, a doomsday scenario (Biraescu likens it to Genghis Khan's or Tamerlane's methods!, p.15) that has never been substantiated.

In Biraescu's interpretation the only merit of the Timisoara revolution resides in its primordiality (p.14), rather than its uniqueness: cultural and sociological arguments such as the population's ethnic mixture and tolerance, its cosmopolitan outlook carried over from its having belonged to Mitteleuropa until 1918, as well as a shared higher degree of information about the world lying west of Romania's borders are mentioned only to be pushed aside. By voicing such a thesis Biraescu, in fact, does nothing but echo the view ("Timisoara was the dress rehearsal for Bucharest"[4]) expressed by Marin Sorescu, a well-known Bucharest poet among whose credentials it is impossible to find the faintest trace of po-

litical dissent throughout the communist regime. Such an interpretation, actually, belittles the heroic resistance of the people of Timisoara, who, throughout the uprising, never received any support, not even moral, from the leaders who emerged in Bucharest after Ceausescu's overthrow.

With the publication in 1997 of *Timisoara in revolutie si dupa* (*Timisoara During and After the Revolution*), Miodrag Milin returns with an enriched second edition of his first volume on this subject that was published in April 1990. His aim this time is to prove that Timisoara had its own political and cultural fabric, different from that of the eastern part of the country. Milin puts all this in the framework of Romania's divided legacy: the range of the Carpathian mountains separates the Habsburg tradition of central European civilization so well-represented in the Banat and its main city, Timisoara, from the Moldavian-Wallachian experience tainted by Ottoman customs.(p. 6) However, the author does not elaborate on this issue, stopping short of discussing how this divided legacy has continued to generate separate identities throughout the century since 1918. During the last ten years the issue has roused many passions in the public debate in Romania, the most eloquent dispute centering on the topic of the country's "federalization" that could be warranted by such divided identities.

This book opens with a lyrical Foreword by Livius Ciocarlie, a distinguished intellectual from Timisoara. Unfortunately, it contains the signs of precisely what is wrong with such emotional approaches: rather than providing sound explanations of the uprising, Ciocarlie continues on the well-trodden path of equating the revolt with a miracle.

The volume is made up of testimonies of participants in the uprising, all articulated along the timeline of events, thus offering the reader a multiplicity of voices dealing with the same events or time brackets from different perspectives and per-

sonal experiences. One is drawn into the progression of events, from the first overnight vigil in front of Reverend Tokes's house on December 15-16, to the news of Ceausescu's flight from the Romanian Communist Party headquarters in Bucharest on December 22, to the great rally during which the Timisoara Proclamation was launched in March 1990. Many of the interviews by Miodrag Milin maintain and faithfully render the actors' emotional involvement in the events and the mood of the participants. The mix of voices gives a good feel for the mass uprising: some, anxious not to miss the opportunity, wanted a change right away, while others only went onto the streets out of curiosity and got involved gradually.

The success of the uprising gave rise to the formation of several political groups. The last 100 pages present the rise of *Frontul Democrat Roman* (Romanian Democratic Front), which tried to fill the power vacuum created once the army had withdrawn from the streets on December 20. The author's sympathies go to *Societatea Timisoara* (Timisoara Society), a group of young intellectuals who tried to promote and implement the values of civil society, political transparency, and pluralism in post-Communist Romania. The independent newspaper *Timisoara*, launched by this society in January 1990 as an alternative to the old communist-turned-nationalist local daily, became a forum of democratic, reformist thought. The "Timisoara Society" will go down in Romania's recent history for the "Timisoara Proclamation" it issued on March 11, 1990, which laid out the first coherent and comprehensive program for the country's transition to a democratic society. Miodrag Milin puts forward the thesis that, given its tradition and revolutionary experience, Timisoara ought to assume leadership in the process of reform and restructuring of the entire country. However, this appears to be a totally utopian endeavor, which can hardly become reality in a highly centralized national state.

In the Foreword, Livius Ciocarlie mentions that the book could have profited if, among the voices included in it, there had also been those of the agents of the repression: the army and the Securitate. This void is filled by the Securitate officer Radu Tinu's book, *Timisoara... no comment!* (sic!), a highly selective and biased reading of various army orders.[5] Tinu was the Deputy Securitate Commander for Timis county, and during the uprising he played a major role in masterminding and coordinating the repression. He was arrested, along with other fellow Securitate officers, after Ceausescu's fall. His book shifts the blame for the atrocities committed in Timisoara from the Securitate troops to the army. The army, of course, points at the Securitate as the chief culprit. Tinu's book has little value due to the doubt raised by undocumented statements and the author's explicit goals and motivations. Instead of striving to establish the truth, it is a mere settling of accounts with all those who crossed his path, before and after 1989. It speaks volumes about the state of the country nowadays that, unlike the participants in the uprising, Radu Tinu enjoys a rather high standard of living as a businessman involved in export trade: mainly of oil to Yugoslavia, thus breaking the UN imposed embargo.

Historians will find the testimonies included in the collections under review to be of great help in gaining a better understanding of the composition of the crowds who filled the streets of Timisoara during the uprising, their motivations, psychological profile, and expectations. The detailed interviews and the willingness of the participants to talk draws the reader into the heart of things, recreating the atmosphere and emotions of those days. Historians of revolutionary movements might use these books as sources in comparative studies of mass upheavals.

These books are valuable in keeping alive the flame of memory. This is very important in a situation in which, even after ten years, the truth has not come to light in its entirety. Under such cir-

cumstances, memory still acts as a substitute for documented evidence. Nevertheless, interesting as the testimonies are, they offer only a limited recreation of the events from the point of view of revolutionaries. One is still left wishing that the next ten years will bring a more analytical study of the events, based on sources so far neglected: government documents, army logs, and files on the operations of the Securitate.

Notes

[1]. Edward Behr, *Kiss the Hand you Cannot Bite: The Rise and Fall of the Ceausescus* (New York: Villard Books, 1991); Andrei Codrescu, *The Hole in the Flag: A Romanian Exile's Story of Return and Revolution* (New York: W. Morrow, 1991).

[2]. See "The Timisoara Massacre," in Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, translated by Chris Turner (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 54-61.

[3]. This book is listed among the sources used by Nestor Ratesh in his *Romania: The Entangled Revolution*, foreword by Edward N. Luttwak (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies; New York: Praeger, 1991). Another reliable synthesis of the Romanian revolution is Martyn C. Rady's *Romania in Turmoil: A Contemporary History* (London; New York: IB Tauris, 1992).

[4]. Celestine Bohlen, "Ceausescu's Absolute Power Dies in Rumanian Popular Rage," in *The New York Times*, 7 January 1990, p.15.

[5]. Radu Tinu, *Timisoara... no comment!* (Bucuresti: Editura PACO, [no date], 306 pp.)

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