

# **DECEMBER '89, HISTORY TEXTBOOKS AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY**

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A close analysis of the ways in which the memory of the Romanian Revolution and its aftermath has been perpetuated throughout the generations that followed this major historical event raises important questions that I will address in this essay. Even if the role of educational system and history textbooks is undeniable, it is at least questionable if the fall of communism and Ceaușescu's regime is acknowledged by the majority of young people, not to mention understood or put into a larger perspective. It is essential to underline the latter aspect, since, except the cases in which the memory of the Revolution has been passed on in the family more than in school, this transmission is often incomplete, leaving aside elements not directly related to the event itself, but which are able to explain and to reinforce the violent nature and the broad consequences of December '89. Numerous factors must be taken into consideration if we should try to understand the causes of the failure of this process. Due to the absence of a solid educational system and the inability to create a coherent perception of the events that marked the end of 1989, the conditions for the conservation of the revolution's place in the public memory were not fully met. The fragile understanding of the communist regime itself and a certain nostalgia for it by a significant part of the Romanian society contributes to the ineffective image of the Revolution and its consequences in history textbooks. In this paper I will try, on the one hand, to expose, with conclusive examples, the way in which the revolution is described in these textbooks and, on the other hand, to identify the eventual causes that led to the diminishing of its role in the eyes of the new generations.

Keywords: communism, Romanian revolution, post-communism, history textbooks, education.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper deals with the ways in which the Romanian Revolution from 1989 and its historical and political context are represented in history textbooks. The Revolution from December '89 is, for the generations that followed the fall of communism, a historical event that occurred in a past that they didn't witness. This mediated relation to the past therefore

raises the issue of memorial transmission and representation. The main role in protecting these generations from historical amnesia must be first attributed to the school system. The fact that the latter is, at least theoretically, strongly connected with the academic research should guarantee the existence of a coherent presentation of the revolution in history textbooks. In reality, the place of this event in the school curriculum is marginal, if present at all, and can hardly induce curiosity or incite to further reading. Indeed, a study carried out on these manuals shows that the fall of communism in Romania is presented in an oversimplified and reductionist manner. More specifically, the lessons provide a partial account of the events, leaving aside elements that could help to better understand the context that led to the fall of communism and the post-revolution happenings. More often than not, this contributes to a poor capacity of grasping the true proportion of Romanian recent past. It is also necessary to underline the fact that up until today few comprehensive studies have been dedicated to a rigorous analysis of the representation and transmission of the Revolution and its consequences to young generations.

Therefore, in this study I will focus my attention on the way in which the fall of the communist regime is presented to these younger generations through history textbooks, given the responsibility of the public school system to pass on this major historical heritage of the recent past. Also, I argue that the importance of the Romanian Revolution is slowly disappearing from the eyes of the young people and is mostly related to the inefficiency of history classes and textbooks. The multiple causes of this phenomenon must be found in the lack of consistency of the official educational programs, a certain disappointment with the implementation of democratic and liberal measures, as well as a persistent incapacity to clarify the exact implications of the revolution to the large public. Many questions are still left unanswered in the eyes of the people, which does not allow for a coherent and complete description of December '89, its causes and effects.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Despite its limits, in this study I will try to address the multiple questions that arise after analyzing the place of the Romanian Revolution in history curriculum throughout the last three decades. I will start by comparing the descriptions of the event in the main textbooks that were used in the school system after the fall of communism and to estimate the impact the lessons had on the students. In addition to this, I will make use of the official polls on the revolution from the last decades and see to what degree they show the interest and the

knowledge that young people have on this subject. Moreover, I will consult the academic works that were published and conclude, on the one hand, how the revolution is understood from a specialist's perspective and, on the other hand, how strong are the ties between the academic world and the school system in this regard.

My arguments will be founded on the outcome of the analysis carried on 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> main textbooks. Therefore, in this paper I will try, by using a comparative approach, to configure a critical perspective on Romanian recent history by raising a number of essential questions: Why is the importance of the fall of the Communist regime diminished in the school system? What are the consequences of this oversimplified viewpoint on the young collective perception? What is the place that the Revolution should have in the apprehension of communism in Romania? Addressing these issues will hopefully provide a better understanding of the evolution of the process of memorial transmission and its major importance at an educational public level.

## **FORGING THE PAST: THE MEMORY OF THE REVOLUTION FOR THE YOUNGER GENERATIONS**

In the Romanian school system, the December Revolution is part of the history curriculum for the 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. An important aspect that has to be mentioned is the use of the communist history textbooks even after the 1989 and the late insertion of new ones. Right after the fall of communism, for example, a tentative to restore P.P. Panaitescu's history textbook from 1942 was successful for about two years<sup>1</sup>. Starting from 1992, for no less than eight years, the school textbooks were just "corrected" versions of the communist ones, with a number of lessons being removed and others, especially concerning the post-war history, replaced<sup>2</sup>. The December revolution is missing from all of them. For example, the main 4<sup>th</sup> grade textbook that was used in school during Ceaușescu's era<sup>3</sup> was reedited up until 1997 and was still in use at the beginning of the new millennium.

Even if we could not deny the importance of mentioning the revolution in school from the early grades, the fact that not many details are provided in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade textbooks has its arguments. The revolution is here described through the eyes of Nicolae Ceaușescu, who

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<sup>1</sup> Petre P. Panaitescu, *Istoria românilor*, (București : Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1990).

<sup>2</sup>Emilian Colceru-Mihul, "De la istorie națională la istorie europeană în școlile românești", *Polis*, IV, 1(11) (2016): 85-96.

<sup>3</sup>Dumitru Almaș, *Istoria românilor. Manual pentru clasa a IV-a* (București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1969).

supposedly recounts the revolution up until he and his wife received the death penalty<sup>4</sup>. Also, one other textbook mentions the death of over 1100 people as „the foundation of regained freedom”<sup>5</sup>.

The 8<sup>th</sup> grade history textbooks should be more appropriate to offer a more detailed version of the revolution. Two particular textbooks stand out thanks to the few pages dedicated to the revolution and to the fact that they were the most popular and the most used in the last two decades. One of them was published exactly in 2000 and has four pages in which the revolution is described<sup>6</sup>, while the other has two consistent pages on the subject<sup>7</sup>, but not one line contains any information about the victims or about the chaos that followed after the dictator fled from Bucharest.

As of today, only two out of three textbooks mention the revolution<sup>8</sup>. One of the two does not stop the narrative at Ceaușescu’s flee or execution, but dedicates a few sentences to the internal conflicts that took place after December 22<sup>nd</sup>, including those from the next year. For the first time, the terrorist hysteria is mentioned<sup>9</sup>.

When it comes to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, the situation does not become very different. There is much accent placed on the communist regime and its implications on the Romanian society, but its downfall is mostly reduced to a popular uprising that overthrew the dictator and made possible the transition to democracy or, at best, to an international context that encouraged the same movement in Romania. If the victims are mentioned, they are always justified by referring to the repression ordered by Ceaușescu and under no circumstances to any post-revolutionary chaos<sup>10</sup>.

The results of some official polls that were conducted in Romania in the last decades show an increasing percentage of people who view the fall of communism as a result of a revolution. If in 1999 only 40% of respondents had this opinion, the number grew to 47% in 2009 and 52% in 2019. What is more relevant, nevertheless, is that, 30 years after the revolution, a significant number of young people (with ages between 18 and 30) were not able

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<sup>4</sup>Cleopatra Mihăilescu, Tudora Pițilă, *Istorie. Manual pentru clasa a IV-a*, (București: Aramis, 2019).

<sup>5</sup>Irina Ema Săvuță, Maria Magdalena Gheorghe, Aurel Constantin Soare, *Istorie. Manual pentru clasa a IV-a*, (București: Litera, 2019)

<sup>6</sup>Sorin Oane, Maria Ochescu, *Istorie. Manual pentru clasa a VIII-a*, (București: Humanitas, 2000); Liviu Lazăr, Viorel Lupu, *Istoria Românilor. Manual pentru clasa a VIII-a*, (București: Teora, 2000).

<sup>7</sup>Liviu Lazăr, Viorel Lupu, *Istoria Românilor. Manual pentru clasa a VIII-a*, (București: Teora, 2000).

<sup>8</sup>Stan Stoica et. al, *Istorie. Manual pentru clasa a VIII-a*, (București: CD Press, 2020); Aurel Constantin Soare et. al, *Istorie. Clasa a VIII-a*, (București: ART, 2020).

<sup>9</sup>Stoica *Istorie*, 126.

<sup>10</sup>Zoe Petre et al., *Istorie. Manual pentru clasa a XII-a*, (București: Corint, 2008); Ioan Scurtu et al., *Istorie. Manual pentru clasa a XII-a*, (București: Gimnasiun, 2008).

or eager to express an opinion on this subject<sup>11</sup>. Another poll, conducted in 2014, failed to get an answer from approximately a quarter of young respondents, while nearly 80% considered that they do not know the truth when asked about the events that led to the fall of the regime<sup>12</sup>.

The polls made on communist nostalgia are even more relevant. Last year, 30% of people aged 30 years or under considered that life was better before the revolution, even if they were barely born at that time. From all the respondents, 63% had the same opinion<sup>13</sup>. This represents a significant rise from the results of a similar poll conducted in 2014, when 44,7% said that communism had a positive impact for Romania. More than this, when questioned in 2011, 61% percent of people younger than 20 years admitted not to have any interest in this regard, while 58% said they don't learn anything in school about communism.

If we evaluate the discrepancy between history curriculum and the research made in the academic field we could not notice that the former ignores not only the answers to some important questions, but these questions are not asked at all. Despite the bad reputation surrounding the Institute of the Romanian Revolution, created and coordinated by very controversial figures like Ion Iliescu, Petre Roman or Gelu Voican Voiculescu, more serious academic work was made by unaffiliated people. The researchers who studied the revolution, Romanians and foreigners alike, often place the revolutionary chaos in the center of their studies. Ruxandra Cesereanu, for example, investigates the terrorist hysteria phenomenon in numerous occasions and argues that it was a premeditated way used by the FSN to steal the revolution and to proclaim themselves as the saviors of the country<sup>14</sup>. Others refrain from seeking explanations, while acknowledging the huge number of unexplained deaths<sup>15</sup>. Peter Siani-Davies and Steven Roper, among others, don't hesitate to mention the uncertainties surrounding the number of victims or the identity of the shooters<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup>Cătălin Stoica, A fost sau n-a fost? Percepții asupra momentului 1989, 2019, available at <https://www.castoica.com/post/decembrie-1989-ce-a-fost>, accessed at 08.06.2022, 14:33.

<sup>12</sup>Sondaj INSCOP 2014, available at <https://www.inscop.ro/22-decembrie-2014-romania-curata-romania-responsabila-dupa-25-de-ani-sondaj-inscop-despre-revolutia-din-1989/>, accessed 12.06.2022, 18:17.

<sup>13</sup>Sondaj INSCOP 2021, available at <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/rom%C3%A2nii-tot-mai-nostalgici-dup%C4%83-comunism-cre%C8%99tere-de-20-%C3%AEn-7-ani-care-sunt-motivele-/31463617.html>, accessed 12.06.2022, 10:55.

<sup>14</sup>Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Decembrie '89. Deconstrucția unei revoluții*, (Iași: Polirom, 2009); Eadem, "The Romanian Anticommunist Revolution and the "Terrorists" of December 1989", *Echinox* 19 (2010): 315-328;

<sup>15</sup> Lucian Vasile Szabo, *Sindromul Timișoara 1989: Adevăr și imaginar*, (Timișoara: Editura Memorialul Revoluției 16-22 Decembrie 1989, 2013): 21-25. Mihai Stelian Rusu, *Memoria națională românească. Facerea și prefăcerile discursive ale trecutului național* (Iași: Institutul European, 2015).

<sup>16</sup>Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of December 1989*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005); Steven Roper, *Romania: The Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

Another aspect that is mostly ignored in school curriculum, but is even more present in the academic field is the origin of the founders and members of the NFS. The fact that those who took the power after Ceaușescu was toppled were involved in plenty of political affairs during the last two or three decades and that the fall of the dictator didn't mean the rise of a new elite is well stressed in numerous works. Of course, their infamous past (which was not a mystery at that time either) can't be perceived separately from their rise in the aftermath of December 22<sup>nd</sup> in an extremely chaotic ambience.

Perhaps the most important aspect that causes the fading of the revolution from the collective memory is not necessarily the small amount of information in the textbooks (because this is not always the case), but the oversimplification of the event. If in the academic field the difficulty to put in order and to clarify what happened in December '89 is not only acknowledged, but represents the most important premise, in the school system the explanations seem to be self-sufficient.

## **CONCLUSION**

Having mentioned all of these aspects, it is important to underline the potential negative effects of diminishing the importance of the Romanian Revolution in the eyes of the future generations. In the school system, this is not necessarily done by ignoring or altering the information (although this is happening too), but mostly by exposing only parts of what is known about it. Avoiding certain questions leads not only to confusion, but also to lack of interest and suspicion. If the violent fall of the Ceaușescu's regime is described in a simple or incomplete manner, the magnitude of the event tends to be overlooked and people start to reconsider the implications of communism in Romania as well. Another aspect concerns the victims of the revolution and the way in which this subject is approached in history textbooks. Even when numbers are given, there are practically no mentions about the fact that the overwhelming deaths came after Ceaușescu left Bucharest and that there is no proof of his direct responsibility for them.

Ignoring the shootings that happened after Ceaușescu left Bucharest, as well as the terrorist hysteria and other unexplained events, might induce the idea that it was "just a revolution", which is converted by the Romanians into a perception that drastically reduces the importance of the event. On the other hand, the discrepancy between what young people learn in school and what they might hear from participants, witnesses or other members of the generation that lived through December '89 could create a fracture between the generations,

as well as a lack of credibility for those who could be able to testify about the horrors of the dictatorship.

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