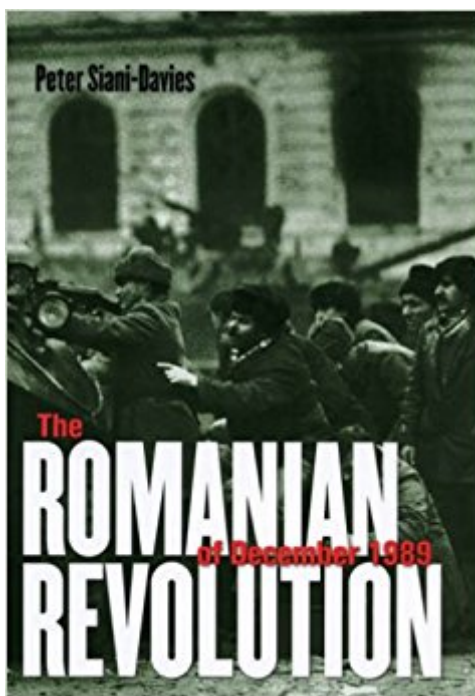


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The Romanian Revolution Of December 1989



Synopsis

The Romanian Revolution of 1989 was the most spectacularly violent and remains today the most controversial of all the East European upheavals of that year. Despite (or perhaps because of) the media attention the revolution received, it remains shrouded in mystery. How did the seemingly impregnable Ceausescu regime come to be toppled so swiftly and how did Ion Iliescu and the National Salvation Front come to power? Was it by coup d'État? Who were the mysterious "terrorists" who wreaked such havoc on the streets of Bucharest and the other major cities of Romania? Were they members of the notorious securitate? What was the role of the Soviet Union? Blending narrative with analysis, Peter Siani-Davies seeks to answer these and other questions while placing the events and their immediate aftermath within a wider context. Based on fieldwork conducted in Romania and drawing heavily on Romanian sources, including television and radio transcripts, official documents, newspaper reports, and interviews, this book is the most thorough study of the Romanian Revolution that has appeared in English or any other major European language. Recognizing that a definitive history of these events may be impossible, Siani-Davies focuses on the ways in which participants interpreted the events according to particular scripts and myths of revolution rooted in the Romanian historical experience. In the process the author sheds light on the ways in which history and the conflicting retellings of the 1989 events are put to political use in the transitional societies of Eastern Europe.

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Customer Reviews

"Siani-Davies has reconstructed the rush of events during these three revolutionary weeks literally

hour by hour. The effect is to draw the reader in as if he or she were there, while at the same time soaring above and viewing the overall flow and structure of a revolution. In short, Siani-Davies has done more than provide an exceedingly fine-grained account of the overthrow of the Ceausescu regime; he has given students of revolution an example with all the inner mechanics exposed."

— Foreign Affairs, September/October 2005

"Among the Communist governments in eastern Europe that collapsed, nowhere was the overthrow as violent and blood as in the Romanian revolution of 1989, which cost more than 1,000 lives. Peter Siani-Davies, utilizing a wide variety of Romanian sources, has written a detailed history of the revolution that brought the overthrow of the Communist government in Romania and the execution of Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena on Christmas Day, 1989."

— Keith Eubank, The Virginia Quarterly Review

"Here is a remarkable portal to a crossroad in contemporary politics for Romanian aficionados and Cold War history buffs. Peter Siani-Davies touches western and southern urban locales in focusing on the immediate background and aftermath of Nicolae Ceausescu's overthrow. He critically assesses evidence gleaned from Romanian newspapers and offers probabilities and possibilities for matters still awaiting the disclosure of primary records."

— Frederick Kellogg, Slavic Review, Summer 2006

"Splendidly researched and compellingly argued, this book is an original and persuasive contribution to our understanding of the collapse of Ceausescu's dictatorship, the December 1989 revolutionary upheaval, and the difficult birth of democracy in Romania. It is mandatory reading for all those interested in a luminously sophisticated approach to the myths and realities of the Romanian Revolution."

— Vladimir Tismaneanu, University of Maryland, author of Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism

"Finally, a near-definitive account of how Ceausescu fell! This fascinating book shows that this was indeed a classic revolution. It was violent, mass based, and it deeply transformed Romania. Peter Siani-Davies has made a valuable addition to the analytic literature on mass political movements. Impeccably documented and reasoned, his book will provide comparative students of revolution enormous amounts of material. We rarely get such detailed accounts of how various leaders, factions, and ordinary people are swept up in chaotic circumstances they often do not quite understand. In Romania, the outcome was deliverance from a stultifying tyranny, but this study makes it clear that chance and human errors play a role in determining outcomes, though underlying structural and historical factors ultimately count even more."

— Daniel Chirot, Senior Fellow, United States Institute of Peace

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Any event that is as chaotic as the 1989 Romanian Revolution is difficult to cover simply because there were so many different things going on in so many different places. Unlike the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, which had a single planned goal, the one in Romania seemed to have multiple goals that sprang up somewhat spontaneously. The book does an excellent job of trying to discuss the many various parts of the turmoil, devoting most of its attention to the events in Bucharest before, during, and immediately after December 1989. It did this effectively within the constraints of the book's 315 pages. The book's concluding chapters deal with the founding of the NSF (National Salvation Front) in the midst of the hectic days just before Christmas 1989. In my personal opinion, the NSF was simply a rehash of the old communism that the people who participated in the revolution were attempting to overthrow. Communism didn't die with the revolution nor with the execution of its dictator (Ceausescu). It simply grew a new head. But the book shows the sometimes amazing strength of the Romanian spirit to overcome the injustices visited upon them by their leaders.

I was 11 years old during the revolution and I vividly recall standing next to my father in the public square in front of our town's communist party headquarters on December 22 or 23. Since then, I've read about a handful of book-length accounts of the revolution, though only in Romanian. I was pleased to find this work on , as most other English-language treatments of the events seem to be

found only in academic journals or are otherwise difficult to obtain. The book's seven chapters deal with: the general picture of Romanian society in the 1980's (1), the spark and initial days of the revolution (2), the street fighting that occurred after the Ceausescus' flight (3), the thorny issues of who caused the deadly fighting and whether any political conspiracies triggered the revolution (4), the establishment of a new political regime and its many fractures (5 and 6), and a theoretical discussion of how to categorize and write about the events of late '89-early '90 in Romania. The author keeps a balanced stance throughout (which is particularly important in treating this subject, as more than half of Romanians nowadays do not consider that a "true" revolution took place in '89 and a variety of descriptions of the events are in circulation). The account of the events of the revolution themselves (chapters 2 and 3) make for a particularly stick-to-the-facts, yet lively, read. All in all, the book provides a great overview of the revolution and all of its social and political aspects, and pays particular attention to those thorny issues that are, as of yet, unresolved for the vast majority of Romanians. But I deducted two stars from the book's rating because the author doesn't bring anything new to the table: he doesn't uncover any new findings, doesn't conduct any new interviews, and generally doesn't seem to be interested in conducting original research into any of the actions and events that have remained unexplained or uncertain. For a history of events that occurred only twenty years ago, there is a disappointing absence of primary sources or original evidence. Furthermore, it is unclear what audience the author had in mind, as chapters 1, 5, 6, and 7 are often jargon-heavy, whereas chapters 2 and 3 have a very narrative flow to them. In trying to appeal to both general and academic audiences, I'm not convinced that the book will please either.

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