

REVIEWS

”THE RISE, EVOLUTION AND FALL OF THE TOTALITARIAN SOCIALIST REGIME IN ROMANIA (1957-1989)” THROUGH THE EYES OF PROFESSOR IOAN SCURTU.

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The prestigious "Junimea" Publishing House from Iași published, in October 2024, a very special book - Ioan Scurtu, *Witness to the Rise, Evolution, and Decline of the Totalitarian Socialist Regime in Romania (1957-1989)*. We believe that the appearance of this work is a premiere not only in Romanian historiography. There are few such books in the historiography of other countries in the contemporary world. The reader is forewarned at the outset of the book that "I referred to what I saw and experienced, with my understanding at the time, but I considered it necessary to include some clarifications regarding the historical reality documented and unknown to me at the time, so that readers can see that there is often a great discrepancy between the lived (visible) history of those years and the real (scientifically studied) history." They will thus comprehend the way my generation of historians lived and developed professionally during those times. Thus, in this book, Professor Ioan Scurtu suggests that we learn more about Romania's totalitarian socialist government in a unique way. Through the eyes and emotions of the people who lived through those times, and through the work of historians who study archival documents, on the one hand. It is a creative approach to learning about Romania's history. Naturally, we gain more knowledge about the larger historical, social, and political contexts as we read his book. Reading his book "through his eyes" exposes readers to important figures and momentous occasions, as well as the minute details that influence daily existence.

Historians usually provide us with a picture of the past through archival memory. This kind of "traditional" approach to researching the past presents several potential problems. First, it reveals only a fraction of all the events that took place at that time. It focuses only on events and actions that take place in a certain space and time. As a result, the opinions, experiences, and actions of ordinary people are almost ignored. Thus, we cannot know how contemporaries understood and saw those events. Deprived of the chance to understand what everyday life was like in

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those times, people of our day would also find it more difficult to feel historical empathy, a crucial prerequisite for understanding the "whys" and "hows" of historical cause and effect. This type of narrow history can also be discouraging for history buffs because they fail to understand the people in the story told by the historian and are more likely to give up reading.

Between 1957 and 1989, as the Romanian nation lived the rise, evolution, and fall of a totalitarian socialist regime, Ioan Scurtu set out with a pen on paper to note what was discernible to the "historian's eye" during this tumultuous period. Having collected several thousand notes, Ioan Scurtu began to reflect on their raw, informal immediacy alongside the recognition that they comprised an archive of a moment with unquestionable historical significance. This book presents, in approximately 250 pages, Scurtu's recollections of historical moments of the creation and evolution of the totalitarian socialist regime in Romania and his understanding of how those events link the past, present, and future. Readers of this book will know how the communist leaders were perceived during the period when they were in power by the majority of ordinary people and how their image was built by historians through researching archival documents. Very interesting are the assessments of the historian Ioan Scurtu regarding the personality cult promoted by both Gheorghiu-Dej and Nicolae Ceaușescu. Unlike other analyses of the personality cult, in Ioan Scurtu we find a balance of the image of the two communist leaders. They made both good decisions, especially in foreign policy, and also extremely bad decisions for domestic policy. Gheorghiu-Dej initiated the break with Soviet hegemony, but he was the same as Stalin in terms of the fight against political opponents. Crimes for political reasons cannot be justified and erased by any other political achievement. In the same way, Professor Ioan Scurtu also presents the personality of Nicolae Ceaușescu, also emphasizing the differences that existed between these two leaders. Usually Ceaușescu did not use brutal methods but softer ones, but these also led to personal and family dramas. The author of the book extensively highlights the role played by Nicolae Ceaușescu in international politics. He does not fail to include some of the appreciations of the Romanian leader made by great personalities of world diplomacy, such as Henry Kissinger. In November 1974, Kissinger paid a brief diplomatic visit to Romania. The Romanian press has presented the meeting in a propaganda language specific to the totalitarian regime. After 1989, the professor Scurtu found in the archival documents Kissinger's appreciation of Ceaușescu: "It is always a pleasure to talk to you, Mr. President. There are few leaders in the world who have such a global vision." Professor Scurtu emphasised that the Kissinger evaluation of Ceaușescu was also based on the American statesman's prior conversations about world events, particularly those pertaining to the Vietnam War or the Cuban Missile Crisis. The reader of this book will undoubtedly discover additional similarities between the archival records documenting the

discussions and agreements reached and the communist press's coverage of heads of state's visits to Romania.

The personal notes, his perception, and archival research of Professor Ioan Scurtu also reveal other moments and various events of Romanian society from those times, emblematic of the aspirations of the population, the expectations, the promises, and the failures of the totalitarian socialist regime. The book will provide readers with fundamental information about the relationships and challenges that emerged among the communist leaders, the ways in which the ruling class evolved over time, how the public viewed these developments, and some poor political choices that had disastrous effects on society. The personal notes of Professor Ioan Scurtu serve as a reliable indicator in this respect. Among these was the timely payment of Romania's foreign debt. A severe austerity regime was imposed on the Romanian people, beginning with certain food and consumer goods. Consequently, the debt was settled, but the cost to society as a whole was intolerable. Professor Ioan Scurtu presents the regime's accomplishments, particularly in the areas of architecture and infrastructure, including the People's House, the Danube-Black Sea Canal, the Transfăgărașan, etc.

A lived history is not the only thing presented in Professor Ioan Scurtu's book. It demonstrates how people's perceptions of themselves, their eras, and the significance they attach to their deeds are crucial in addressing what is arguably the most significant question historians and the general public have about history: Why? History is one of the oldest human disciplines because of this intense desire to comprehend their past, the foundation of their own world. As long as the historian's memory is backed up by archive documents and other objective sources, attempting to comprehend history through the eyes of the historian is still essential to understanding the past despite its shortcomings.
