A Legacy of Violence: The Impact of the French Revolution upon the Romanian Revolution of 1989

By: Kelsey L. May*, Dr. Alana Scott
Department of History, Philosophy, International Studies, & Legal Studies

Introduction

Romania was one of six eastern European countries to go through a revolution during 1989. The revolution was a result of the twenty-four year rule of communist leader Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife, Deputy Prime Minister Elena Ceausescu. The conflict was instigated over Ceausescu’s order that Hungarian Reformed church pastor, Laszlo Tokes, be evicted after he made critical comments against the regime during an interview. Unlike other revolutions of the time, Romania was the only country of the Warsaw Pact that violently overthrew and executed its leader. Ceausescu and his wife were executed by firing squad on December 25, 1989, after they were caught fleeing the country and charged with genocide, destroying the nation’s economy and spiritual values, and undermining the state’s power by a military court. This account is similar to that of France’s King Louis XVI whereas he also tried to flee the country, was caught, and subsequently executed by the new regime. The legacy of violence demonstrated throughout the French Revolution can be seen through the violence of the Romanian Revolution of 1989.

Nicolae Ceausescu’s Romania

Nicolae Ceausescu’s twenty-four year reign over Romania can be closely compared to the reign of King Louis XVI of France. Both rulers led absolutist regimes. Romania was a neo-Stalinist nation under Ceausescu’s rule. Ceausescu micro-managed every detail of Romanian life and instituted strict food rations and limits on electricity. Ceausescu’s peasant background can be credited for his sense of inflated self-worth and oblivious attitude toward the feelings of the Romanian people. Similar to France during the Bourbon rule, Ceausescu’s regime can be viewed as despotic as he provided important government positions to family members and close friends, thereby centralizing power and isolating himself from the public. Ceausescu faced criticism for appointing his own wife as the Deputy Prime Minister. Elena Ceausescu was often portrayed as the true mastermind behind the regime who admired affluence and finery. This characterization is very similar to France’s view of Marie Antoinette. Criticism of the regime could not be publicized without threat from Ceausescu’s private police, securitate. Ceausescu’s absolute power is demonstrated through the use of private police which is similar to the Swiss Guard that protected King Louis XVI. The securitate owed its loyalty to Ceausescu rather than the public.

The End of a Tyrant: Ceausescu’s Fall from Power

Protests in the city Timisoara occurred in December 1989, after Laszlo Tokes, a priest of the Hungarian Reformed Church, was evicted from his post by the government after Tokes had written a letter to the Bishop of Oradea which criticized Ceausescu’s policies. The once small protest in defense of Tokes escalated into a mob that he was unable to control. On December 16, 1989, the protestors began to call for freedom chanting slogans such as “Down with tyranny,” and “Down with Ceausescu,” while looting stores, breaking windows, and setting fire to writings by Ceausescu. The mob violence seen in Romania in 1989 is similar to the protests of the French. Protests occurred in several other cities and incurred deaths of protestors which totaled to 1,104. Ceausescu fled Bucharest by helicopter during protests on December 22, 1989, which can be compared to King Louis XVI’s “flight to Varennes.” After the fall of the government in Bucharest, Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu were placed on trial on December 24, 1989, for crimes against the state and executed the next day. The trial and violent execution of the head of state and his wife is startlingly similar to the death of King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.

Conclusion

The Romanian Revolution of 1989 was a violent overthrow of the ancien régime that can be compared to the French Revolution. Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu led a despotic, absolutist regime that was similar to the French monarchy of the 1700s. Ceausescu’s flight from Bucharest can be compared to the French king’s “flight to Varennes.” Both nations experienced protests that escalated into mob violence which led to the death of protestors. Elena Ceausescu’s reputation in the Romanian public is similar to Marie Antoinette. Also, in both the French Revolution and Romanian Revolution, the leaders faced a criminal trial by the new regime and were executed in a violent manner. Ceausescu’s death, similarly to King Louis XVI’s, was symbolic for the end of the oppressive regime and necessary for the new government to gain momentum and control.