

‘Contagion’ from Le Figaro (24 December 1989)


Caption: On 24 December 1989, in an article for the French daily newspaper Le Figaro, Alain Peyrefitte, former French Minister, considers the causes and consequences of the popular insurrection and the overthrow of the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania.

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Contagion

by Alain Peyrefitte

Among the surprises coming from Eastern Europe, none was more astounding than the fall of the Caligula. But among all the changes that the USSR's satellites have undergone over the last three months, none was more bloody.

A number of factors merged to hasten the collapse of a dictatorship that relied on fear to survive.

1. *A failing economy.* A state-run economy works in time of war or shortage, but in peace-time it brings hardship. With winter approaching, the Romanians are cold and hungry.

2. *Culture played a decisive role.* It was the minorities who sparked off the movement: the German minority in Brasov and the Hungarian minority in Timisoara. It is a telling fact that a pastor, holed up in his church, put the spark to the tinder-box. Minorities fiercely defend their religious freedom, the only way that their collective soul can survive.

3. *The Warsaw Pact created bonds between its members.* The Polish people felt its force back in 1979 when the Pope, born on Polish soil, appealed to their dignity and freedom. Ten years later, the setting up, with Moscow's approval, of the first non-communist government on the other side of what used to be the Iron Curtain set off a chain reaction at devastating speed.

4. *Ceausescu thought he could escape the contagion through a crackdown.* He imagined that Romania could escape the Polish model by mimicking the Chinese model. But Greco-Judeo-Christian Europe, for so long used to the ideal of freedom, is not China. Elements of the army and some native Romanians switched their allegiance to the uprising when they learned on the radio that their country had been ostracised by the civilised nations of Europe.

The year closed with the end of Stalinism on our continent. Anger is now stronger than fear.

Will the contagion spread to other countries that are clinging to Marxism-Leninism? It is not out of the question, including for nearby Ukraine and for Bessarabia, to which the Conducator had unwisely laid claim. No one can control the imponderables that play a decisive role when crises break out. It is when people start out on the road to freedom that they become the most unpredictable. As Bergson said, freedom is 'an ongoing flood of unpredictable innovation'. The Romanian people have demonstrated courage worthy of our admiration, even if it was a courage born of desperation. They need to examine their consciences. Why, a quarter of a century after having thrown off the Soviet yoke, have they remained under that of a tyrant? Why did they not only tolerate him but adulate him? It so happens that, until recently, of the twelve European Community countries, five were still under a totalitarian regime ...