

# LÁSZLÓ TÖKÉS, TIMISOARA AND THE ROMANIAN REVOLUTION

By **Mark Elliott**

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## Abstract

On the eve of the Romanian revolution of December 1989, Ceausescu exercised a stranglehold on religious expression encompassing 1) systematic interference in all aspects of church life, 2) physical intimidation, 3) a ban on Eastern Catholicism and the Lord's Army, and 4) increasing church demolitions. A truly courageous voice of protest from Reformed pastor László Tökés triggered massive multi-national inter-denominational demonstrations in Timisoara which toppled the Communist dictatorship in a matter of days.

Historically, generalizations suitable for all of Eastern Europe have been notoriously difficult to come by. So many conquerors have poured over its borders through the centuries that the region's peoples are a cacophony of disparate strains only muted after World War II by the pretense of Communist unity. Little here is a given, not even the designation, Eastern Europe, which currently is losing ground to the appellation, Central Europe, or *Mittleuropa* in German, which culturally and politically is less Slavic and more Teutonic.

One of the few generalizations safely applied to Eastern Europe is "madhouse of nationalities," a phrase originally used specifically for the region's old Hapsburg heartland, but a sadly apt characterization today as well. About the best that can be said for Eastern Europe without fear of contradiction is that each of its nations is in its own way unique:

Poland - perhaps the most Catholic country on earth, certainly more Catholic than Rome.

East Germany - of which it used to be said, here was living proof that Germans could make even Marxism work. As poor as it is, it long held the distinction of being the most prosperous country in Eastern Europe. It also is historically the only Protestant one.

Czechoslovakia - the only state in the region with a truly democratic tradition, though brutally suppressed in the eighth year of three decades: 1938, 1948, and 1968.

Hungary - with a unique language neither Romance, Slavic, nor Germanic, but Ural- Altaic.

Yugoslavia - the first East European state to snub Moscow and survive.

Albania - for a season, Europe's only outpost of Maoism, and still, the continent's most isolated and impoverished state.

Bulgaria - historically Russophile, and unique in the region today for apparently being genuinely so.

Romania - under Ceausescu, the region's most Stalinist state and, East Germany aside, possessor of Eastern Europe's largest and most dynamic Protestant community. Also unique to Romania in the East European upheavals of 1989 was the necessity of pitched battles to rid the nation of its old regime.

Looking directly at the role of the church in the fall of Ceausescu it is worth recalling a prophetic 1981 study by Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe examining "Religious Trends in Eastern Europe." Here it was predicted that "In the long term, the (Romanian) policy of religious repression may well prove to be counterproductive for the regime by widening the gulf between itself and the public."

Specifically, Ceausescu's stranglehold on religious expression included:

- 1) state controls over every denomination's administrative life including systematic interference in clerical appointments, seminary capacity and admissions, church publications, and finances;
- 2) direct intimidation through interrogations, threats, imprisonments, harassment of friends and family, and even staged accidents and fatal attacks on priests, pastors, and active laypersons;
- 3) an outright ban on Eastern Rite Catholicism and the evangelical Orthodox movement known as the Lord's Army;
- 4) in recent years, demolition of many historic churches in grandiose, ill-conceived "urban renewal" schemes; and
- 5) the forced enlistment of the religious in the cult of Ceausescu.

In August 1989, on the 45th anniversary of the liberation of Romania from the Nazis, fawning religious leaders, including Orthodox, Reformed Jewish, and Muslim, congratulated Ceausescu by telegram for having "taken the Romanian people to the highest level of civilization," for being "the most popular son of our nation," and the "greatest hero" of Romanian history. Also praised was the dictator's "supreme wisdom" and his "unique achievements for peace and justice." In contrast, the shocking level of the state's disdain for religion is perhaps best illustrated by the revelation that Romanian authorities consigned Bibles legally imported from the West to the production of toilet paper. "Occasional fragments," were found still bearing "legible verses."

In response to Ceausescu's overwhelming assault on the spiritual sensibilities of the Romanian people, one of the truly courageous voices of protest has been that of Rev. László. In the summer of 1989, Budapest television secretly videotaped an interview with this Reformed pastor which was smuggled out of Romania and broadcast throughout Hungary on July 24. No holds barred, the thirty-seven year-old Tökés decried Romanian discrimination against ethnic Hungarians, government manipulation of his church's leadership, and state plans to destroy culturally priceless historic urban districts and thousands of peasant villages. Asked about his boldness, despite years of trial and harassment, Tökés replied, "As a minister, I feel myself responsible for the people, as one of its spiritual leaders. . . . This responsibility is all the more heavy as most of my fellow-ministers are silent." Bending to state pressure, Romania's Hungarian Reformed leadership had been pressing for years for Tökés and his father, Rev. István Tökés, to keep quiet. Dismissed by his bishop from one parish in 1986 for fostering an overly energetic congregation, the younger Tökés was transferred to the Reformed church in Timisoara. There in 1988, he was strongly rebuked by Bishop László Papp for speaking out about state-restricted seminary enrollments. Following Romania's March 1989 expulsion of two Canadian journalists for interviewing the defiant minister, Bishop Papp first ordered Tökés to a remote village. Then, when the Timisoara clergyman refused to move, Papp attempted to fire Tökés, only to be thwarted by parishioners loyal to their pastor.

Circumstances rapidly deteriorated after the airing of the Hungarian TV interview on July 24. The parish telephone line was cut except for anonymous threatening calls charged to the church at long-distance rates. Authorities refused Tökés ration books and police prevented relatives and parishioners from donating food. On September 12, Ernő Ujvárossy, a church member strongly supportive to Tökés, disappeared, following a barrage of threats to him and his family. His body was discovered in woods outside Timisoara on September 16, amidst strong circumstantial evidence linking the security police to his death. Another loyal parishioner was hospitalized following major head injuries sustained during a police interrogation. Bishop Papp filed an eviction suit against Tökés in early October while local officials ordered him to leave his parsonage before the end of the month. Tökés then moved his family into the church proper where on November 2 four masked assailants attacked and stabbed the pastor in the presence of his pregnant wife. Police made no attempt to stop the assault. On audio tape smuggled out of the country, an unnerved Tökés could not hide the effects of the strain: "They've broken our windows every day," he reported. "Now they've started breaking them in the church as well . . . . The nights are terrible."

The fearless stand of Rev. Tökés and his church came to a climax the weekend of December 15-17, and to the amazement of all concerned triggered massive sympathy demonstrations first in Timisoara, then in Bucharest, toppling the Ceausescu regime in a matter of days. It all started on Friday, December 15, with a moving truck pulling up in front of the parsonage of the Reformed Church of Timisoara. In the words of Peter Dugulescu, pastor of the Timisoara First Baptist Church, "First the believers from his (Reformed) churches and then, believers from other denominations and many other people . . . came out to support him. The truck remained unloaded . . . Tökés addressed

the people from a window, asking them to trust God, to be peaceful. . . . The mayor of the town also addressed the people that had gathered (Reformed, Baptist, Catholic, and Orthodox; Hungarian and Romanian) . . . asking them to disperse, but the crowd would not."

On Saturday evening, December 16, Rev. Dugulescu drove by the Reformed church meeting Daniel Gavra, a twenty-four-year-old railway worker from his church who told his pastor that he and other young people were there to defend Tökés . He showed me that he brought with him (hidden under his coat) a bundle of candles, and he told me that after it got dark, he was going to distribute them to the young people, to keep them burning in front of Pastor Tökés' house." Badly wounded in subsequent fighting Gavra had to have a leg, amputated. His words to his pastor from his hospital bed were that he had lost a leg but he had lit the first candle.

On Saturday evening, December 16, the crowds surrounding the Reformed church came under attack by the police and were sprayed with foam and water from first engines. "People were running, others were forced into buses and later that evening many were arrested." Tökés himself was arrested on Sunday, December 17, while about 5:00 p.m. that evening, Dugulescu reports, "the first shootings were heard in the city . . . . In the square between the opera house and the cathedral, people stayed the whole night . . . among them there was a girl from our church near the opera house, and she hid and saw how armed terrorists, dressed in army uniforms, fire machine-guns at the crowds of people." Afterwards she counted 382 dead bodies between the opera and the cathedral.

In "Death of a Dictator" Ted Koppel reported that a brave soul managed to smuggle an audiotape of the December 17 shootings out of the country and that Voice of America broadcast it back to Romania immediately and repeatedly. Without question, radio and television broadcasts from the West, from Yugoslavia, and even from the Soviet Union, were responsible for spreading news of Timisoara's lethal clashes to Bucharest and the rest of the country.

Protestors and communications workers hostile to Ceausescu seized control of the capital's television facilities while the army chose to defend this and other revolutionary bastions against the dictator's security police. Two telecasts appeared to have been crucial in the course of events: 1) TV footage of Bucharest crowds booing and visibly unnerving Ceausescu seemed to galvanize a long-suffering nation and embolden the forces of resistance, and 2) repeated shots of the Ceausescus' bodies following their execution on Christmas day very likely forestalled a protracted and costly civil war. Perhaps never before had television played such a pivotal role in a successful revolution.

Meanwhile back in Timisoara, security police loyal to Ceausescu were in retreat as well. Here too army units sided with youthful protestors, confounding forces loyal to the dictator. On Friday, December 22, Rev. Peter Dugulescu was on a balcony overlooking the city's opera square when official word came of the overthrow of Ceausescu: "Of course, I reduced much of what I had intended to say. I spoke briefly; the enthusiasm was too great in those moments." After introducing himself, the pastor related the harassment

he had suffered at the hands of the Securitate, including a staged car accident in 1985 that left him with a deformed arm. He shared that he "had undergone other difficulties and problems but that God had protected me and that I was alive by His grace. Then the people started to shout, enthusiastically: 'God exists!' 'There is a God.'" With some 150,000 people in the square,

I asked the crowd that in these great, historic and critical moments we should pray together the prayer, "Our father, Who art in Heaven." Without being asked to do it, all of them knelt down, facing the cathedral, and prayed in the microphone, and they repeated after me. What I had realized was that throughout the manifestations in Timisoara, there was a strong religious accent, after so many years of atheistic education that was systematically carried out among the youth, and people. This shout, this hunger for God burst strongly several times a day--about five times--they would pray together this prayer and should shout: "God exists."

An objective observer would be hard pressed to deny the role of the churches in the East European upheavals of 1989, especially in the cases of Poland, East Germany, and Romania. "Stalin was right," the Manchester Guardian noted at year's end. "The Pope has no divisions. In that respect he is as naked as the babe born in a manger all those centuries ago. Ceausescu had countless divisions, as did Honecker, Jaruselski and all." But where are they today? Ceausescu is dead; Honecker is spared a trial only due to rapidly failing health; and Jaruselski is about to lose his presidency to Lech Walesa. Speaking for himself on January 12 John Paul II minced no words in heralding the collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and noting Christians' "heroic resistance" there. "Today's world is rediscovering," the pontiff proclaimed, "that far from being the opium of the people, as Marx wrote, faith in Christ is the best guarantee and stimulus of its liberty."

A less predictable source for such a sentiment is Secretary of State James Baker III. Recalling his September 1989 meeting with Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Baker related that in exchange for cowboy boots, "I received from him a more profound gift - an enamel picture of Jesus teaching the people. He said--only half jokingly--'You see even we communists are changing our world view.'" Speaking to the National Prayer Breakfast, the secretary of state remarked, "We are all struck by the changes taking place in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. They are not all political or economic...Could it be that a major meaning of the revolution going on in Eastern Europe is the resurgence of faith?"

Western media frequently are less comfortable with transcendent explanations for world affairs. Tökés told USA Today's Barbara Reynolds that "stories about God's intervention in the transformation of the Eastern Bloc often are edited out by the media." That Reynolds agrees is made clear by her telling reference to the New York Times' edited transcript of Czech poet-turned-president VaclÁv Havel's New Year's Day address in which references to "Jesus" and "the Christian spirit" were omitted. Reynolds wonders, "Why are people who identify God . . . as responsible for changing world events not

taken seriously by the media? In concluding that God isn't important, the press is trying to play God itself."

Similarly, a McNeill-Lehrer reporter interviewing Tökés on his recent trip to the West, asked about the sufferings he had endured at the hands of the Romanian Securitate. The reverend matter of factly stated that suffering was natural for Christians and that the sacrifice of Christ embodies our sufferings. After this came a brief but awkward pause. After all, people are not supposed to talk this way on serious news programs in the West.

In conclusion, ironically, Chinese Communists take the Christian role in the East European revolutions much more seriously than do some members of the Western media. An official Party document emanating from Beijing in mid-January 1990 singled out Christianity as a major force behind the collapse of East European Marxist regimes. "According to a reliable source in Beijing, who viewed the entire document, it reveals how shaken the current leadership is by the events that have swept Eastern Europe and how aware they are of the role Christianity has played, especially in Romania."