

THE TIMIȘOARA SYNDROME AND THE PANAMA INVASION: COMMUNICATION, PUBLIC RELATION AND THE SENSITIVE ISSUE OF THE DEATH TOLL

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Abstract: At the end of 1989 two important events were marking the world's media reality: the revolution in Romania which started in Timișoara, and the American invasion of Panama. It is somehow surprising that the American journalists were rather interested in the anticommunist protests in Romania, in the confrontations with the repressive forces here, than in the course of military actions in South America, a region geographically much closer. There are several explanations for this focus of attention, of which we are mentioning two: 1) uncertainty in the conflict between the citizens of Romania and the country's leadership. The victory of revolutionary forces which claimed democratic changes seemed a utopia compared to the certainty shown by the American structures in the success of the action in the capital city of Panama; 2) the simplicity of the American invasion as compared to the complexity of the situation in Romania. In the first case, invasion was supported ideologically and by well trained troops, equipped with modern gear. In the second, weapons were in the hands of repressive troops, while the revolutionaries had on their side justness of cause and... nothing more.

Keywords: 1989, Revolution, Invasion, Panama, Timișoara, Deaths, Ceaușescu, Noriega

1. Two events, several interpretations

The communist authorities in Romania took in December 1989 radical decisions to wipe away the traces of repression. Not for a moment did they consider informing the public opinion, domestic or foreign, regarding the number of casualties: dead, wounded, arrested. Some of the deceased, 40 according to some sources, 42 or 43 according to others, were taken from the morgue of the Timișoara County Hospital to Bucharest and incinerated, an operation which was carried out in great secret. After Ceaușescu's fall, all information became available, except that many events were exaggerated, even professional journalists being fooled or letting themselves be fooled for the sake of sensational news. There were no official sources at the time, and the failure of public relations was obvious. In the Panama case, American authorities provided only convenient information, as they had no interest in confirming more deaths than there really had been. Of course, they insisted on their own casualties, especially those before the commencing of hostilities, which was part of the action PR.

My analysis follows the evolution of death tolls in the two major confrontations and the context of some media reports which would later prove to have been wrong. In Timișoara, during the four days of actual confrontations, December 16th-19th 1989, there were tens of dead, most of them registered Sunday, December 17th. On December 20th, two days before Ceaușescu's fall, the family members of the deceased, wounded or arrested did not know much about them, except for some imprecise information. Abroad, however, the death toll going around ranged from 300

to 4,600. Sources were often anonymous and of little credibility. At the end of the year, the circulation of thousands of victims killed in Timișoara is no longer surprising, especially that these would be accompanied by frightening photos, taken by foreign journalists at the Cemetery of the Poor. It would only be in March 1990, during the Timișoara Trial, that official numbers would be brought forward. These would not change much in time, holding much below the exaggerations at the end of 1989. In Panama, the media control imposed by the Americans and the handling of casualties through an efficient PR system, which in Romania could not have existed, kept the death toll for a long time somewhere over 200. Subsequent research proved there had been more bodies, possibly hundreds, possibly thousands, a figure close to reality being hard to pin down.

2. Looking for meaning

The expression *The Timisoara Syndrome* has been used in various contexts by various authors, among whom Jean Baudrillard, who also wrote a consistent study on this topic (1993). The size of error is so vast that it stirred the interest of an impressive number of researchers, from the whole field of social sciences and communication. Baudrillard defines *The Timișoara Syndrome* thus: „Absolving the real event and substituting a double, a ghost event, an artificial prosthesis, like the artificial corpses of Timisoara, testifies to an acute awareness of the image function, of the blackmail function, of the speculation, of the deterrence function of information (Baudrillard, 1993: 65). In order to be understood in all its complexity, it is important to resort to other works by the same author, among which *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). Baudrillard's error is built into a succession of arguments, which the author places in order with the purpose of proving the validity of the supported idea. He starts out from real facts, the authenticity of which cannot be contested: the presentation by the mass media (television stations, especially) of deceased persons' bodies in a deplorable state, with the assertion that they were supposedly the victims of repression during the 1989 Revolution in Timișoara. Subsequently, the same mass media would come back and show that those bodies and mass graves had no connection with repression.

The *Timișoara Syndrome* formula, however, has a higher degree of generality. This type of definition, by associating a name to the term *syndrome* is not new, it had been used in other cases, as well. Noam Chomsky would identify the explosive, complicated, difficult to understand, diverse and demanding nature of the phenomenon. Shades are important, just as raw, obvious facts are relevant. But in such cases nothing is clear, and there is always a dose of uncertainty left. The expression as a *pattern* would be characterized by referring to the Vietnam War, with a profound emotional charge and great difficulty with detailed evaluation. The American author defines this type of syndrome as a “technical malady” (Chomsky 2002: 30).

Regarding the term with which the American offensive in Panama would be identified, the situation is much simpler, because, most often, the term *invasion* would be the one used, even in the American high governmental circles. Invasion has the meaning of negative, unwanted act, but this aspect would not even be mentioned by the USA army's official propaganda. In a text with obvious propaganda inflexions, two

researchers bearing American military ranks would textually state: "December 2009 marked the twenty years since the United States invasion of Panama, codenamed Operation Just Cause, in December 1989" (Whidden and Wade 2010). There is no holding back in other researchers, either, who recognize the invasion even from the beginning of the article: "On Wednesday, 20 December 1989, the United States launched a military invasion of Panama" (Yates 2005). Other authors, however, not from the military or governmental area, but independent researchers, would formulate reserves regarding this unilateral way of seeing things. Tumber and Palmer (2004: 1) would refer to the acceptance of the term in the political-administrative vocabulary, regarding the 2003 American invasion in Iraq, but their appreciations are also relevant in the Panama 1989 case. Later on, Lukin (2012) would lead the discussion in historical context, invoking the invasion of Vietnam. Thus, the two terms, *invasion* and *syndrome*, are connected regarding the same major events unfolding in various corners of the world.

In Timișoara a popular revolt was triggered against a communist totalitarian regime. In Panama there was a trace of civilian rights, the regime being one rather authoritarian, because several parties were functioning, even though poorly. Here, however, the problem was generated by corruption and drug trafficking, which endangered American citizens. According to Pérez (1999), in Panama communism was only an immaterial ghost, as Partido del Pueblo had very few supporters. In Panama there was actually an invasion of foreign military forces, going beyond the elements which define statehood, i.e. independence and sovereignty. In Romania, in spite of statements made by former president Nicolae Ceaușescu and, subsequently, by various persons, especially from the area of former communist structures (from the unique party, administration or the repressive secret service named *Securitate* (i.e. Security)), the agents of foreign powers had not existed. The agents of the Securitate went to extremely great lengths in this respect, but they didn't even manage to "produce" such an agent, because they never caught one! Some of the Securitate people would insist on the topic, even becoming ridiculous, as was the case of Filip Teodorescu (1992: 314), a person with an important function in the leadership of the Securitate, one of the heads of the bloody repression in Timișoara, incarcerated during the Timișoara Trial. Subsequently, he was "recovered" by Romania's new leadership, being promoted even to important functions, among which that of ambassador.

3. Who are the good and the bad guys?

The linking of the two cases, in Timișoara and Panama, has deep implications. The reason for this could possibly be to draw attention away from the American invasion in Panama and from the supposed murder of thousands of innocent people there. Two authors would even make this connection in a specialized paper: "The false deaths of Timisoara will eclipse the several thousands of genuine victims of the bombings of popular quarters in Panama" (A. and M. Mattelard 1993). In reality, the bombing of these populated quarters in the Panamanian capital city had not taken place and possibly not even the thousands of dead had existed. In 1993 the authors would have been aware of this, as they would have also been aware of the fact that

besides the false bodies in Timișoara there had been enough victims of the repression...

The comparison with the American invasion in Panama, an extremely powerful media topic, is also supported through the finding that, in this case, the journalists, especially the American ones, had much better access ways, as well as authorized sources of information. The sources in Panama had been, first of all, the official sources of the American army and administration, as access of journalists to war zones had been limited on grounds that their lives would have been endangered. The professionalism of the communicators was also shown by the directing of messages, so that to an overwhelming proportion, broadcasted official news was favorable to the invading troops. This also explains the death toll control in Panama. Initially there had been reported only six dead, and subsequently some sources spoke of tens or even thousands of dead. A British researcher would also underline the unconventional nature of the battle fought there: dictator Noriega was surrounded, and the American troops were „terrorizing” him with Guns N’Roses and Elvis Presley’s rock music (Keeble, 2010). The use of rock as a weapon in the operation of capturing Noriega would represent a theme for a possible diplomatic conflict between the USA and the Vatican. Noriega was sheltered by the Holy See (the Vatican’s Embassy) in the Panamanian capital city (Soderlung, Wagenberg and Pemberton 1994). Noriega would be demonized by the press, being accused of faking elections and dealing with drug trafficking. Under these conditions, Ceaușescu’s demonization would be even easier to accomplish, especially that in Romania none of the sources were credible. The new administration and the plain citizens had no control over what was happening, and they especially had no collaboration experience with the free press. These are aspects that western journalists had not taken into consideration.

The way the press had exaggerated the death toll in Timișoara would also be looked into by researcher Stephen P. Aubin. His analysis would comprise references to press accounts in those days, his attention being fixed on persons missing during the protests in Timișoara. The author’s intention to prove the flimsiness with which journalists and media institutions acted in this case would drive him to slightly push the argumentation, even to use an ironic tone:

“A few days later, Agence France-Presse stated, ‘Reports in Timisoara said only about 100 victims have been buried by their families, with thousands of bodies apparently still unrecovered. Various sources said the victims of the mass shootings by Ceaușescu’s troops downtown Timișoara were carried off by secret police-troops and not seen again’. Of course, these ‘thousands’ never were going to materialize because they never existed in the first place” (Aubin, 1998: 157).

The information is incorrect, but we cannot know whether the error lies with the France-Presse Agency, or it derives from Aubin’s quoting and placing into context, or both. In fact, in those days the families of the missing went to great lengths to find out information about them, some of them being buried without the families knowing in a mass grave in the Heroes’ Cemetery, December 27th-28th 1989.

4. Which are the real figures?

There is an interesting process of the death toll escalation in the whole foreign press. Here are a few examples: "The Yugoslav news agency, Tanjug, quotes witnesses as saying that people are still being taken by police to the central square of Timișoara, bayoneted and driven to destinations unknown" (*The Edmonton Journal*, Dec. 20th 1989). In Canada, the editors of *The Vancouver Sun*, taking over data from the East-German press agency ARD, were giving that same day higher figures, next to the one given by Tanjug: "East Berlin - Romanian forces killed 3,000 to 4,000 demonstrators in the city of Timișoara and had many buried in mass graves, East Germany's official ADN news agency said today. The death toll cited by ADN was much higher than figures reported earlier for Timisoara. The Yugoslav news agency Tanjug said earlier it had reports that up to 2,000 were killed". In the USA, as well, the figure would double quickly: "Sunday, according to one widely cited number, left more than 4,500 dead. At the large County Hospital, estimates varied wildly from official to official" (*New York Times*, Dec. 24th 1989).

Let us see how things evolved in the Italian press. Here, as well, there would be many references to the over 4,000 victims shot at Timișoara, the figure being circulated by the important newspapers. Already on December 19th "the dead are by the hundreds", quoting "concordant sources" (*L'eco de Bergamo*). Also at the time, *l'Unità*, the publication of the Italian communists, in disapproval of the repressive measures taken by the Romanian communist regime, would print: "Fire opened on the crowd in Romania". The newspaper would give William Totok's opinion, a German writer originally from Timișoara, who would centralize the information received and would speak of 300-400 dead. On December 20th *L'eco de Bergamo* published the figure of 2,000 dead, which proves that it was one that traveled around the world, being spread by press agencies and television stations. The quoted source are the Serbians of Tanjug. In its December 21st issue, *l'Unità* would present the figure of 3,000-4,000 dead circulated by ADN. However, *Corriere della sera* would show more circumspection, as well as that it had better information. It would underline that on December 20th 1989, the day Timișoara was freed, and the power was over by the revolutionary committee of the Romanian Democratic Front, one of the protesters' major demands would be to be given back their dead, for a Christian burial. The evolution is similar in the German language press. *Bild* published December 19th 1989 William Totok's position, who spoke on Radio Bremen of "up to 400 dead". Since that time there have been some question marks, noted that same day by the Hungarian publication *Népszabadság*: "There is no precise information on the dead and wounded, but some sources speak of 300-400 dead, information given by Radio Bremen, however the Romanian diaspora in Paris considers this to be an exaggerated figure" (Rado 2010: 110). December 21st, *Bild* brought forward the figure of 2,500 dead in Timișoara and came with a particularly interesting information: "The bodies were transported by the secret service in garbage bags and burnt" (Rado 2010: 118). In its issue of December 23rd 1989, the Hungarian daily *Magyar Hirlap* would indicate the figure of 4,700 dead in Timișoara. After two years from that fascinating December of 1989, John Feffer would have no reserve in repeating in an ample paper dedicated to

Eastern Europe that in Timișoara there were hundreds of people killed (Feffer, 1992: 10).

In Panama we can see a similar evolution, as a qualified source mentioned the following: "The U.S. lost 23 troops, 325 were wounded (WIA) and 3 American civilians were also killed. The U.S. Southern Command, at that time based on Quarry Heights in Panama, estimated the number of Panamanian military dead at 205, lower than its original estimate of 314" (Whidden and Wade 2010). However, Yao (2012) stands by the figure of 314 Panamanian military killed in the conflict. Donnelly (2000) had presented different figures, somewhat higher. The count was correct for the Americans: 23 of the troops and three of the civilians. Regarding the Panamanians, however, there is an estimation, i.e. somewhere between 500 and 600 people killed. The author would mention that many Panamanians had been killed, falling victim to the Panamanian military troops, who opened fire randomly. In 2008, the American military press would resume the discussion on the number of casualties, the count remaining unchanged for the Americans: "In total, the United States suffered a loss of twenty-three troops during Operation Just Cause; the PDF lost 314 killed, 124 wounded, and 5,800 captured; most of their aircraft and heavy military equipment was destroyed. Reliable estimates were about 200 civilians killed and 1,500 wounded during the operation" (Siler 2008). PDF stands for Panamanian Defense Forces.

As these positions came from American governmental circles, opposed to them are the investigations carried out by independent organizations or brave researchers, some even in connection with the US army. The controversy is underlined by William P. Head, historian of the United States Air Force. He would take over the death toll officially accepted by the American side for its own casualties, but would broaden the discussion regarding the losses among the Panamanian civilians: "Civilian casualty numbers continue to be a matter of controversy since the Pentagon reported 200 killed and about 2,500 displaced. Some human rights groups initially estimated that as many as 4,000 died and 15,000 were displaced, most by the structural fires in downtown Panama City" (Head 2011). There is a difference between the estimation of 200 dead Panamanian civilians and the 4,000 mentioned by Head. However, a Panamanian source (Yao 2012) speaks of over 7,000 people killed, quoting as source the former United States Attorney General, Ramsey Clark. In context there is also another note, which makes things even more unclear: common graves discovered after the leaving of the American troops and 15,000 people who would not be found again (Yao 2012).

Doing an analysis of the sources of 197 press releases on these events, Soderlung, Wagenberg and Pemberton (1994) would show that 215 were from American governmental and military circles or close to them, the news thus being either in favour of the invasion or neutral. Only 101 would be rather negative (the Panamanian governmental circle and voices of the street). All the less possible was an adequate media coverage in Timișoara 1989, as the state leadership of that time had been able to impose a relatively efficient embargo. The news, as we have seen, trickled with difficulty beyond the borders, where it was amplified. When he would speak of the different role played by television in the two events, Walter Goodman still believed in the thousands of dead in Timișoara. He would, however, explain for the readers of the American *St. Petersburg Times* the differences between the two ways of

presenting the facts. From Timișoara the images used would be those of decomposing bodies, unburied at the Cemetery of the Poor. For Panama the images used would be the ones presenting President Bush proclaiming victory. From the field there would be controlled material coming in: "The only pictures available to the networks at first came from Pentagon cameras. They showed no Americans or Panamanians being killed or wounded but did catch a couple of women apparently applauding the foreign troops" (Goodman 1989).

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