

# The Ravages of Ceaușescu's Securitate: Watched from the Grave

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*Nicolae Ceausescu meeting with Shanghai Shipyard workers in 1971, in The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu © Mandragora/Film Desk*

There are many stories from Bucharest's past that still circulate quietly: Journalists were said to enter the city with phone numbers hidden in their shoes. Years after Ceaușescu's death, a helicopter pilot renovating his home reportedly uncovered cables and microphones buried in the walls. One hotel, in particular, became known for hosting spies from Western Europe. Though these events belong to another time, they are still repeated today in whispers, almost always preceded by the phrase, *"I didn't tell you this."*

The dictatorship of Nicolai Ceaușescu, and more specifically his intelligence service, the Securitate, left a permanent scar on Romanian society. It was a brutal dictatorial regime with a relentless intelligence service. Its very name still sows terror among Romanians today.

The Romanian Securitate was founded in 1948 and dissolved — though only on paper — after the end of the dictatorship. It was the intelligence service with the largest network of members and informers in the Eastern Bloc, its operatives widely feared, often described by contemporaries as party apparatchiks. Everyone lowers their voice when their mouths form the

words Ceaușescu, Securitate, or revolution. Romanian people feel as watched as before as if Ceaușescu were still watching from the grave.

“Censorship was institutionalized,” declared M. Octavian, whose father served his military duty in a Securitate prison for political prisoners: “Including students, intellectuals, priests, former leaders and members of historical political parties, industrialists, wealthy peasants labeled exploiters...” The power of The Securitate increased alongside the terror it instilled: “Violence, arrests in the middle of the night, beatings, tortures, rape of girls and women, and arrests continued after the 1960s as part of the Securitate’s practices.”

“Those who believed that after the revolution they would eliminate The Securitate were mistaken,” asserted Octavian, who lived through the 1989 revolutions as a member of the anti-tank artillery unit. “Securitate officers are now divided into three categories: the political ones, those who advanced in rank in the news structures of power, and those who have retired.”

The Romanian government declassified Securitate files in 2009, twenty years after the revolution. These files included names, addresses, telephone numbers, and transcripts of private conversations.

The trauma and the wound caused by the censorship and repression experienced during the regime still linger in the memories of older generations of Romanians. The ghost of Ceaușescu continues to haunt the country, depriving it of the freedom of expression that many believed would come after the regime. Even today, some instinctively block their window with sheets and blankets upon the headline of *Vocea Americii*.

“It still felt surreal (...) My father still covered his windows and doors when listening to *Vocea Americii*,” affirmed Elizabetha, who lived through the regime’s rise and fall, listening to *Vocea Americii*—one of the few media outlets beyond the regime’s reach, but that according to Octavian, the simple fact of listening to it could be “a reason for blackmail.”

Many may think Romanians are traumatized just by some memories, by the ghosts of the past alone. These recriminations are disproved when those memories become tangible with discoveries of hidden microphones, tapped phones, and other espionage devices.

Ceaușescu’s communism, in addition to being a jailer of individual freedoms, was an Eye of Horus that transformed the country’s borders into a surveillance state—a relentless Truman Show where ‘targets’ were monitored by Security operatives and spied by walls that truly had ears.

"I can tell you that we were constantly being listened to on the phone. My brother-in-law was an aviation officer, one of the Ceaușescu helicopter pilots from 1984 to 1989. When changing the wallpaper in the house, microphones were found hidden in the wall," said Octavian.

According to Octavian's statements, no less than seven secret services operate in Romania today. The members of the Securitate have been merely reassigned, and although today those who have not lived through it remember the times of communism with melancholy, "far from being milk and honey," it was a regime full of violence, brutality, and abuses. Its echoes still haunt the country today.

The ghost of Securitate and its cruelty have not been resurrected, because one cannot resurrect something that has never been dead.