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Anniversary of Eastern Europe's bloodiest Revolution reminds of the duty to unearth secrets of the past

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AURA SABADUS, DEC 20 2009

Twenty years ago this week Romania was making international headlines. The bloody Revolution that started in the western city of Timisoara and quickly spread throughout the country was to mark the end of modern history's (perhaps) 50 darkest years. Iron Curtain Communism breathed its last breath on the streets of one of Europe's poorest and isolated countries. Or so we thought, the youngsters of my age, who joined the crowds, defying the tanks and the bullets in search of freedom.

Twenty years on, the same streets teem with oblivious shoppers gawping at the glittering Christmas lights, occasionally trudging past a pockmarked building still bearing witness to the violent reprisals of December '89. 'Such is life', some would say, finding comfort in the idea that whatever happened is a thing of the past and all that matters now is to look serenely ahead to the future. The simple truth is there cannot be a serene future for Romania unless it finds the courage to confront its past.

To this day, Romanians still wonder who were the mysterious 'terrorists' who killed and wounded thousands of men and women during the Revolution, reportedly obeying the orders of Nicolae Ceausescu, the country's dictator.

To this day Romanians still do not know why the slaughter continued even in the hours and days following the capture and execution of Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu when an allegedly democratic regime came to power.

To this day, Romanians still do not know on whose orders the presidential couple were given a slapdash trial and shot dead on Christmas day 1989.

To this day, Romanians still do not know who had been snooping on them all along those 50 dark years, passing their intimate details to the terrifying secret police, damaging their careers, breaking up families and destroying friendships.

And even worse, to this day, Romanians do not know the extent of the crimes perpetrated by communist henchmen and why a prosperous country which in the late 1940s seemed to have an encouraging future despite the depredations of the Second World War was reduced to terror, poverty and humiliation.

In fact this is a question that all eastern bloc countries which shared similar destinies should relentlessly ask, not to reawaken ghosts of the past and open up old wounds, but to clean them and so prepare for a fresh start. Unlike Nazism – the other great tragedy of the 20th century – Communism never had its Nuremberg trial. It did not even have a South African-style Truth and Reconciliation Commission where victims of gross human rights abuses bore witness to the suffering inflicted on them while the perpetrators apologised in public.

Some countries such as Poland were brave enough to declassify a large quantity of top-secret communist documents covering the 1945-1989 period and more recently passed a law which bans the display of any symbols that glorify Communism and Fascism[1]. Others, such as Romania, have taken a half-hearted approach, holding

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back thousands of files which allegedly involve ex-communist figures currently in key positions in politics, business or the media[2].

For the last 20 years governments in the former eastern bloc have been grappling with a conundrum whether to allow public access to the files held by the state on each individual and which might reveal the most unexpected and embarrassing secrets. It has been argued that declassifying the documents would create enormous social rifts, splitting communities and families apart and inflicting further pain. And yet plastering a festering wound without cleaning it first is even more painful and dangerous.

Twenty years ago thousands of oppressed men and women descended on the streets in search of freedom and happiness. But their victory was short lived. Ex-members of the communist party continue to hold important positions in most former eastern bloc countries, although admittedly under the hallowed banner of democracy and freedom.

So where in all this lies justice, one might ask?

Every crime has its retribution: thieves are disgraced, traitors are ostracised, murderers are jailed. And yet those who tortured, killed, humiliated continue to hold the power, abuse the law, and live opulent lives, often in properties which had been seized under duress from their lawful owners, without showing the slightest trace of guilt.

Where, again, lies justice in all this?

Those who hope that time and oblivion will assuage the scars of past are not healing them, but further spread the poison. Anniversaries such as these hold us responsible for finding the truth and restoring justice. No one wishes to mete out eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth punishment, but it is fair that those who committed atrocious crimes at least come out and apologise.

It is also fair that the powers which had turned a blind eye to the suffering of millions of people who had pinned their hopes on Western help also say sorry. Public apologies have rightly been made to the victims of Nazism, slavery and colonialism. And yet, the 100 million of men and women quoted by Stephane Courtois in the Black Book of Communism[3], who died horrific deaths in re-education camps from Eastern Europe to Siberia, Cambodia, Vietnam, China, North Korea, received nothing but a website commemorating their sacrifice...[4]

For countless people of my parents' and grandparents' generation the memory of Yalta 4-11 February 1945 when Eastern Europe was condemned to 50 years of terror still smarts.

It is right that those who played with the destinies of millions of people say sorry at long last.

[1] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/poland/5207669/Poland-to-ban-Che-Guevara-image.html>

[2] <http://www.cantonrep.com/world/x1801870551/Communist-era-files-haunt-the-old-East-Bloc>

[3] Courtois St., et al (1999) 'The Black Book of Communism', Harvard University Press

[4] <http://www.victimsofcommunism.org/>

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