

Ceausescu, the maniararch

In happier days, Romania used to be called the France of East Europe and its once lovely, carefree capital, Bucharest, the Paris of the East. No more. Today, under the misrule of President Nicolae Ceausescu, Romania looks much more like an East European version of Haiti or Panama than la belle France.

Ceausescu has managed to transform a poor Balkan nation into a wretched mess. First came Ceausescu's great leap forward in which he tried to turn agricultural Romania into the Ruhr of East Europe. This was an enormous fiasco. Up to his ears in foreign debt, Ceausescu next imposed a devastating deflation on the nation that has left Romanians living in abject misery.

Thanks to Ceausescu, it's now illegal in Romania to have more than one 40-watt bulb per room and concrete is still being mixed into bread to increase its weight. As if all this were not bad enough, Ceausescu has created a horrid police state and the communist world's only other political dynasty after North Korea.

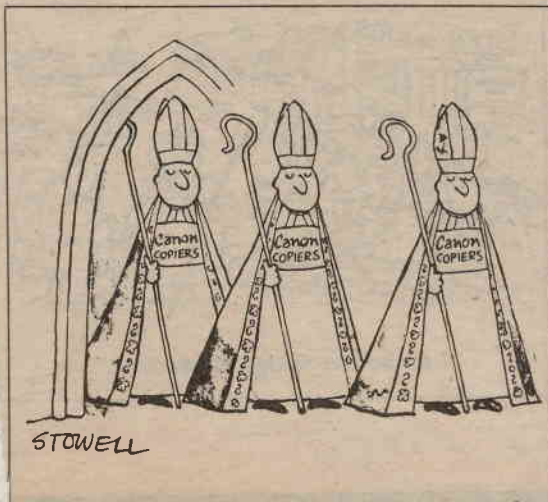
In an outburst of egoism befitting a mad pharaoh, Ceausescu decided to tear down Bucharest's beautiful turn-of-the-century buildings and replace them with a monstrous pile of neo-Stalinist, Art Ceausescu government buildings. Attila the Hun at least had the decency to merely destroy. He did not then deface the ruins with Hun Baroque. Not so for Ceausescu who has managed to tear the heart out of one of East Europe's most beautiful cities, turning it into a megalomaniapolis.

Now, Ceausescu has turned his energies to an even more grandiose project, a sort of Mount Killimanjaro of megalomania. He just announced plans to destroy more than 50% of Romania's villages, 8,000 out of 15,000. The razed villages are to be replaced by 500 agricultural-industrial complexes.

The reason? Romania, says Ceausescu, has run out of agricultural land; its villages are in the way. So off with their heads!

Romania is one of Europe's larger nations and it has only 23.5 million people. I remember it as a beautiful, green land of forests, hills and pastures,

Punch



ERIC MARGOLIS



a bucolic image right out of the 19th century. And I recall its lovely little villages with their whitewashed walls and thatched roofs. Romania has one of Europe's lower population densities and could, if run properly, become a very well-to-do nation.

Just by sheer coincidence, many of the 8,000 villages slated for destruction happen to be in Transylvania, that portion of Hungary annexed by Romania at the end of World War I. There are two million ethnic Hungarians in Romania and they have been objects of even more severe repression than Romania's other unfortunate peoples. We seem to be looking at Comrade Ceausescu's final solution to the problem of his problem Hungarian minority.

Not surprisingly, Hungarians are on the war-path. Last week the largest public demonstrations since the 1956 uprising broke out in Budapest against Ceausescu's mad scheme. It was also the first time that people in one East European nation had spontaneously demonstrated against the government of another.

Very interesting, this. As the Soviet hold on East Europe begins to slowly relax, old tribal, territorial and ethnic tensions are beginning to raise their long-dormant heads.

Serbs are glaring at Bulgars over Macedonia. Serbs, Montenegrans and Albanians are feuding in Kossova. Greeks are mad at the Bulgars and the Yugos. In short, business as usual in the Balkans, once known as Europe's powder keg.

Old animosities could flare into new conflicts. It's not unthinkable that a Hungarian army might march into Romania to save that nation's hard-done-by Hungarians. A lot of long-suffering Romanians might welcome the Hungarians as liberators from the much unloved Ceausescu.

Or, one could even imagine a fed-up Mikhail Gorbachev finally sending in the Red Army to boot out Ceausescu before he utterly destroyed what is left of Romania. Of course, the last time the Soviets sent their army into Romania, the Romanians ended up losing a chunk of their country to the Russians.

Canada, always eager to blast Chile or South Africa, has had little to say about this.

Perhaps trade prospects with Romania are curbing our moral outrage. It seems to me that plans to raze more than half of Romania's villages and stick their wretched former inhabitants into Maoist-style communes—or will they be forced labor camps?—demands a response from Ottawa. Canada ought to protest mistreatment of all Romania's peoples.

Ceausescu's plan is nothing short of a monstrous violation of human rights as well as a cultural and esthetic outrage.