

THE MURDER OF PROFESSOR CULIANU

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This paper begins with some new facts in the case of the murder of Professor Culianu. I then give a fuller explanation of his activities before his killing on May 21, 1991 at the University of Chicago, and end with a look at the larger picture of the post cold war world that may help understand an extraordinarily tragic and apparently well-planned killing.

First, some background: our post cold war era has already resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of killings of academics and journalists – often of relatively obscure figures, for obscure motives, usually in crimes that are unsolved. In America, we have had in the last years some 13 unsolved murders of writers or journalists in various exile communities. The pattern is similar: threats first and privately expressed fears, followed by killings which police often try to term a suicide or personal affair – as they did with the Culianu murder.

Remember when Salman Rushdie was sentenced to death? He has survived; it was his relatively unknown Japanese translator who was killed. From the recent killing of the Turkish academics gathered for a conference, to the deaths of journalists in the Latino and Vietnamese exile communities in America, writers or scholars have become «*incredibly important in the struggle over national identities*», according to the Director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, a New York-based organization.

I give these statistics merely to offer a background that the murder of Ioan Culianu may fit a trend.

The facts of the murder are simple. May 21, 1991, was a brilliant spring day in Chicago. Ioan Culianu was tired but elated, having finished hosting his international scholarly conference with the haunting title *Other Realms: Death, Ecstasy and Afterlife Journeys in Recent Scholarship*. The University of Chicago Divinity School's annual book sale had attracted hundreds of strangers to his building that day. Ioan Culianu taught his regularly scheduled survey class called "Fundamentals of Comparative Religion" from 10 to 11:30 in the morning. His subject that day was gnosticism, the study of secret mystical sects and a specialty of his. The class met in Room 200 of Swift Hall. Afterward, Professor Culianu went up to his secretary's office on the third floor to pick up his mail. He proceeded to his office a short way down the hall, worked, went downstairs for a cup of coffee, and then returned to his office.

At around 1 pm, as was his custom, he went to the men's room next door to his office, and entered the stall second from the far window. The killer then entered the room, walked to the furthest stall, leapt on the toilet, reached over and fired one shot to the back of his head with a .25 caliber pistol. Though the gun was at least eighteen inches from the head, the shot was apparently expert. As the Cook County Medical Examiner reported, it's extremely difficult to kill with one shot from such a small gun. The bullet entered the left side of the head and exploded out a nostril. The killer was left-handed and he escaped unnoticed, despite the crowd in the building that day.

There is, however, an unconfirmed report he was stopped by a campus security officer on another pretext before escaping.

Why one shot? There was either a makeshift or no silencer on the gun. If there had been more than one shot, report people in the building, some would have come running. But no one did.

If every murder site is a text, then this one was spare, minimal. No money was stolen, nothing was disturbed, and no motive emerged in his personal or professional life to explain the murder, or its humiliating site.

Following the murder, in January or February, 1992, the far rightist newspaper *România Mare* – funded by and linked to the old Securitate organization – extolled the crime in vile and obscene language, calling the gentle scholar a «*piece of excrement over which not enough water was flushed in the toilet prepared for him as if by destiny*». The article focused on Culianu's unpublished reservations about the nineteenth century nationalist poet Mihai Eminescu, and couched its celebration of the crime in an attack on a prominent dissident at the time. *România Mare*, by the way, is sent to many East European Institute libraries in North America – none of whom order it.

Chicago police detectives and FBI agents focused on the gun in their investigation. It is not used much in America. Within a few months police caught two young Romanians committing a vicious crime with the same type of gun. One of the two men claimed they had been approached to commit the Culianu murder for \$10,000 each, offered by a Romanian in the transport business with Securitate connections. He turned the job down, the young man said, but his partner took it and bragged of it to a few others. «*Un cartuş după ureche*»«*Un cartuş după ureche*», is the expression he supposedly used: “One bullet behind the ear.”

A few shreds of evidence linked this man with the crime. One was that he was left-handed.

The Romanian community in Chicago has an identifiable group whose activities suggest they were, and are, agents of influence. It also has groups of young recent immigrants who hang out at certain night clubs and are involved in a variety of low level criminal activities – burglary, drug dealing, etc. There is also a large contingent of far rightists, old Iron Guardists, including the niece of its founder, Corneliu Codreanu. In the 1970s, just after his defection Ioan Culianu had taken a keen interest in the Iron Guard... to understand a history suppressed in his own country until the 1989 revolution and linked at one time with the career of his mentor, Mircea Eliade.

The strangest evidence about the crime came from a young couple in a Chicago exurb who knew nothing of Romania or Ioan Culianu. The twenty-six year old husband, owner of a recording studio, had the same birthday of Ioan Culianu: January 5. A few days after the killing he began speaking in his sleep, making prophecies about various events in the couple's lives. A day after their mutual birthday, January 5th, 1992, he began speaking of Ioan Culianu. His wife, a clerk with United Airlines, wrote down his comments without thinking that such a name existed. His comments about Culianu contained the following: he came from a «*far place, a very bad place, where it's not ok to think, so he ran away*», «*he taught at a big learning place and knew things*», about phenomena like this voice so it was «*important to read his books*», but it was «*dangerous to go downtown to the big learning place*». The wife became interested enough in to find the name in the phone book, to surmise Culianu taught at the University of Chicago and, eventually, to reach me through one of the secretaries at the school. She then asked her husband questions about the murder, and

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the replies were consistent with the evidence. The voice claimed four young men were involved and that the motive was that «*he talked bad about the old country*».

As many of his friends and family have suggested, ever since he was a child Ioan Culianu himself dabbled in prophecy and predicted he would be killed at a young age.

Turning to events in the weeks before the crime, we know that Ioan Culianu told friends, including the author Saul Bellow, and his sister, that he was receiving phone threats from the new far right that caused him to cancel his much-coveted first return to Romania three days before he was killed. He told his fiancé Hillary Wiesner that, perhaps, after the summer and after the Romanian American Academy conference he would come to Romania quietly, without her, because «*now it's just too dangerous*».

To his sister Ioan Culianu said the threats were vile, unprintable, and since his death other Romanian writers in America have received similar harassment. His publisher, the emigré newspaper *Free World* based in New York, also received threatening letters about Ioan Culianu's political column, *Scoptophilia*, cancelled shortly before his death.

Ioan Culianu was not a major dissident, though he was outspoken after the revolution. The month before his killing, almost by chance, he took on a new prominence as a speaker on issues in Romania. Though his articles appeared in *Free World*, though he did give talks on Radio Free Europe and the BBC, he became more prominent in April, 1991, when an interview appeared with him in the major Romanian opposition magazine, 22. In it he spoke out against the union of the far right with the Securitate. He called the revolution a waste of time, effort, money and lives, and his tone was as vicious as anything that had appeared in the press at the time. Later in April he hosted the King on the campus of the University of Chicago, and pledged his support for a figure who would shortly draw hundreds of thousands out onto the streets in Bucharest. These activities, coupled with his plans to return for the Romanian American Academy meeting, could have appeared to an observer as a motive to send a message to other more prominent dissidents in a very confused moment in post cold war Romania. Such an observer would not have known of his last second cancellation of the trip.

Though he was not a major dissident, he was in the first rank of Romanian intellectuals in exile. His revolutionary and controversial thinking on religion will be covered by the other papers in this volume. As Hebrew University professor Moshe Idel put it, «*He was changing the way we study religion; he was changing our definition of what religion is*».

Culianu was, more importantly, intimately linked by his family past and scholarship with the fundament of Romanian nationalism and culture, far older than Communism. His great grandfather founded and presided over the University of Iași, Romania's oldest, when the young Corneliu Codreanu, leader of the Iron Guard, was a student. He helped found the Junimea group, or Young Conservatives – crucial in the development of the Romanian nation – who numbered among them ironically, Mihai Eminescu. He also founded the Romanian Free Mason Society in one of several family estates, another westward-looking group key to the development of the nation state. As University rector he was succeeded by Culianu's grandfather who defended Iași's Jews during Romania's period of fascist alliance in the 1930s.

In a country obsessed with identity and “protochronism”, Ioan Culianu was as close to the real Romania as anyone in the talented Romanian diaspora.

He followed and worked with Romania's prominent twentieth century religion scholar, Mircea Eliade, who became a father figure and, after he died, the subject of

intense scrutiny for his role in their country's fascist past. As the executor of thousands of Eliade's unpublished papers, Culianu was plunged in his last years into a violent controversy over nationalist mythology far more real than the myths he studied. For years a staunch defender of Eliade, Culianu in his last months expressed the deepest reservations to his fiancé about his mentor, and wanted nothing more than to be rid of the whole task of editing his unpublished papers. At the same time, others close to the elder scholar criticized Culianu for using the relationship to further his own career.

In the 1970s Culianu himself became familiar with the Iron Guard's history. He explained in a short story that he became the object of Iron Guard recruitment while in Milan. In 1986, a Toronto killing of a Romanian journalist showed some similarity to that of Ioan Culianu; the journalist had attacked the Iron Guard in his newspaper sponsored by the Ceaușescu government. The FBI believes that killing was committed by the Iron Guard, but does not think Culianu's was. I agree.

In the years after he came to the United States as a professor assured of tenure, Ioan Culianu was drawn in opposing directions; he wanted to leave the past behind, but he also wanted to see his mother and sister and bring them out of Romania; his brother-in-law Dan Petrescu was one of the foremost dissidents in the nineteen eighties. This inner conflict intensified in the months before and after the 1989 revolution and helps explain his activities before his death. What no one can explain is the eerily prophetic nature of his political articles, stories and pronouncements.

In the fall of 1989, he first told students that something was about to happen in Romania. He published a short story predicting the overthrow of Ceaușescu. In September, his brother-in-law, Dan Petrescu, began a hunger strike protesting Ceaușescu's reinstatement. On October 9, Petrescu gave interviews for Radio Free Europe and the French magazine *Libération*. Telephone calls for him poured in from all over the world – a result of Ioan Culianu popularizing his plight.

Petrescu was placed under house arrest and high tech bugs were installed in the home's ancient stone walls. Guards stood out front. Their commander, in fatigues, spent hours beating the towering walnut tree Ioan loved as a child.

In Hyde Park, Ioan Culianu circulated a petition internationally for their release. On November 24, 1989 his Chicago apartment was robbed; a TV, computer, printer, silver cross, disks and bottles of wine stolen. It was an insecure building and to the police it seemed an inner city crime. But he insisted to friends it was Securitate.

In Iași on December 22, two thugs pounded on the front door, holding guns in a paper bag. They ordered Theresa Petrescu to leave. Almost at that exact moment the revolution caught fire. A crowd appeared at their home demanding Petrescu's release. The confused guards left as Dan Petrescu went to Bucharest to become Associate Culture Minister in the first post cold war government.

At Christmas at the Wiesner home in Amherst, Ioan Culianu conducted BBC and Radio Free Europe broadcasts over the phone, called friends in Paris, offered his ten-point plan for a new government. «*He was the best ambassador I knew for Romania*», noted his BBC editor. «*He could analyze, synthesize, and persuade like no one else, he had succeeded in the West, and he came from the deepest tradition of the country*».

Within days, though, he and others questioned the installation of well-placed Communists in key positions. In frustration, Culianu started a column for the New York-based emigré newspaper *Free World*, entitled "Sceptophilia". These articles will be the subject of a separate paper here but they can be summarized as the most polemical in a polemical emigré press. Even that summary does not capture their full power and anger that makes them truly startling documents even today.

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Many have commented on the controversial or hypocritical elements of Ioan Culianu's personality. He was an insular human being, fundamentally alone in the world. His personal kindness and warmth, coupled with his aggressive ambition and love/hate relation with his native land, make for a mystery of the self as great a mystery of his death. In his last years, with his position in the professional world secured, he underwent a transformation into a charismatic teacher loved by many at the University of Chicago. Despite the complexities of his story we must confront it with a single focus: *Killing is wrong*.

If a brilliant and popular scholar died on the campus of a renowned university for the rights of free speech and inquiry our age has come to value above all else, then his murder is a crime against our civilization.

The governments of two countries have a great many questions to answer.