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# Busted by the Baby Boom

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Monday, Jan. 29, 1990

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The antiabortion measures imposed by Nicolae Ceausescu in the mid-1960s are typically viewed as an example of his repressive policies toward women. Yet the ironic fact is that the abortion restrictions inadvertently -- and literally -- sowed the seeds that helped topple Ceausescu's regime 23 years later.

In 1966 Ceausescu surveyed his country's falling birthrate with despair. The cause, he concluded, was a state decree in 1957 that legalized abortion and made it readily available for a fee of less than \$2. By 1965 abortion was the country's primary method of birth control, with four abortions performed for every child born.

But in October 1966 State Decree No. 770 was issued, in effect prohibiting abortion except under extraordinary circumstances. At the same time, import of oral contraceptives and IUDs was discontinued, and a package of other measures such as birth premiums and reduced taxes for couples with children was introduced. Rumania's mother heroines, as they have been called, responded vigorously. In September 1967 births totaled 63,183, more than triple the number from the previous December. The total number of births in 1967 was nearly twice that in 1966. Newspapers reported instances of three new mothers sharing a single hospital bed.

During the next few years, the birthrate gradually declined as women rediscovered other means of birth control. But the babies remained. From 1966 to 1976, Rumania produced nearly 40% more babies than might otherwise have been expected.

The result is a compressed baby boom -- one that interrupts charts of Rumania's age groups less like the metaphorical pig in a python of the U.S. baby boom but rather more like a giraffe in a python. In 1972 Rumania had twice as many children in kindergarten as the year before. In 1989 twice as many 22-year-olds were flooding into the labor force. But Ceausescu was unable to create jobs in the late 1980s as rapidly as mothers created babies in the late 1960s. Revolutions are carried on the backs of the young, and the sudden increase of the always volatile 18-to-22-year-old age group destabilized Rumania even more dramatically than a similar surge of baby boomers disrupted American society in the late 1960s.

Bucharest must still find a way to adjust to the social and economic dislocations brought about by Ceausescu's baby boom. Among the first will be an "echo boom" of children born in the next few years to mothers who were born in the late 1960s. For Rumanians, the aftershocks of State Decree No. 770 will be felt a long time after 1966 -- or 1989.

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