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Mircea Munteanu. "Over the Hills and Far Away: Romania's Attempts to Mediate the Start of U.S.-North Vietnamese Negotiations, 1967-1868." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14:3

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Review by **Wallace J. Thies**, Catholic University of America

Mircea Munteanu's article fills an important gap in the scholarly literature on the diplomacy of the Vietnam War—namely, the role played by some of the East European states, especially Poland and Romania, as mediators between Washington and Hanoi. James Hershberg's monumental study of the Polish initiative, codenamed MARIGOLD, discusses Poland's role in one of these contacts in exhaustive detail.¹ Drawing on recently opened archives in Bucharest and elsewhere, Munteanu gives us an authoritative and comprehensive view of the Vietnam War peace initiative known as PACKERS, which was the code name used by the Lyndon Johnson administration to refer to Romanian efforts to open peace negotiations between the United States and North Vietnam.

What made the Poles and the Romanians think they could succeed where so many other would-be mediators had failed? As explained by Munteanu, the Soviets believed that a negotiated solution was not out of reach. The Soviets, however, preferred not to become too deeply involved themselves, so as not to provide the Chinese with ammunition that the latter could use to support their claims that the Soviets really were revisionists and collaborators with the United States. So the Soviets encouraged the East Europeans to mediate between Washington and Hanoi. This was a role that the Poles and the Romanians were eager to fill, spurred on, as they were, by dreams of the accolades that would surely accompany success on their part—legitimacy for their regimes, and Nobel Peace Prizes for themselves.

¹ James Hershberg, *Marigold: The Lost Chance for Peace in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012).

Munteanu is a very conscientious historian. He has combed through the available archival materials with patience and determination. He is scrupulously fair in his recapitulation of the facts of the case. He tells us a great deal about the background to the PACKERS case and about the ways that Romanian officials went about trying to make themselves indispensable intermediaries between Washington and Hanoi. Anyone who wants to understand Romanian diplomacy during the Cold War will find it imperative to read what Munteanu has to say.

That said, I have four issues to raise regarding Munteanu's account. First, Munteanu tells us a lot about how the PACKERS channel began and how the Romanians managed to sustain it for roughly six months, but he has little to say about how PACKERS ended and why. As recounted by Munteanu, PACKERS began in the fall of 1967 and ended on February 24, 1968, but he offers no explanation for why the latter date was chosen as opposed to some other date. He also tells us next to nothing about three other peace initiatives that were available to the parties at roughly the same time as the PACKERS channel: OHIO (Norway), ASPEN (Sweden), and KILLY (Italy and Czechoslovakia).

Second, these omissions in Munteanu's account are important because of the momentous events that followed soon after the PACKERS initiative was shut down. On March 31, President Johnson announced that the U.S. air war against North Vietnam would be scaled back and limited to targets south of the 19th Parallel. On April 3, Radio Hanoi announced that North Vietnam was at last ready to open peace negotiations with the United States. On April 4, President Johnson accepted this North Vietnamese offer, and on May 10 U.S. and North Vietnamese representatives held their first meeting in Paris. In effect, roughly ten weeks after the PACKERS channel ended, the U.S. and North Vietnam held the first session of the peace talks that the Romanians had been seeking but had been unable to deliver. Why did events turn out this way? Was it just a coincidence that formal peace talks began shortly after the Romanians were relegated to the diplomatic sidelines?

Third, Munteanu's account neglects potentially interesting interactions between these ongoing peace initiatives, especially OHIO (Norway) and PACKERS (Romania). The first contact as part of the OHIO initiative took the form of a conversation in Beijing on June 1, 1967, between the Norwegian Ambassador to China, Ole Algard, and his North Vietnamese counterpart, Ngo Loan.² Between June 1 and August 21, Algard and Loan met three times, during which time enough progress was made that the Americans asked if Algard could return to Oslo for talks with an American representative (Chester Cooper). Loan also inquired if Algard would be interested in visiting Hanoi.³

While the matter of a visit to Hanoi by Algard was being discussed both within and between the governments of Norway and the United States, the U.S. State Department announced on September 12 that it wanted to hold off on any further messages via the

² Wallace J. Thies, *When Governments Collide: Coercion and Diplomacy in the Vietnam Conflict* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), p. 179)

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 180, 183-184, 187, 193.

Norwegian channel, so as to concentrate instead on yet another peace initiative code-named PENNSYLVANIA, which involved two French citizens and Harvard professor Henry Kissinger.

With the OHIO channel temporarily out of service, opportunity knocked for the Romanians, although Munteanu's account leaves unclear how much, if anything, the Romanians knew about these other peace initiatives. In any event, after first meeting with the American ambassador to Romania, Richard H. Davis, and then Averell Harriman, President Johnson's personal envoy for the Vietnam peace negotiations, Romanian diplomats made two trips to Hanoi—one in December 1967 and the other in January 1968. During these two trips, the Romanians tried to persuade the North Vietnamese that the Americans were indeed ready to stop the bombing if only the North Vietnamese would allow peace talks to begin.

The Romanians were not successful in this regard, and the Romanian channel had for all practical purposes ceased to operate during February 1968. Munteanu's explanation for these events apports the blame more or less evenly between the North Vietnamese and the Americans. As seen by Munteanu, Romania's attempted mediation failed because the Americans and the North Vietnamese continued to stumble on the issue of a bombing halt as a prerequisite to the start of peace talks. The North Vietnamese insisted on a complete bombing halt before they would talk directly to the Americans. The Americans wanted to know what kind of reciprocity they could expect if and when the bombing stopped. The North Vietnamese stated that peace talks would begin only after a suitable interval had elapsed that would allow them to judge the sincerity of the American side. The Americans wanted to know exactly when the peace talks would begin once the bombing had stopped.

Munteanu's judgment is, once again, eminently fair, but it also leaves an important issue un-addressed. Was it the Romanians who dropped out of the mediation business, or were they dropped by the targets of their entreaties—namely, the North Vietnamese and the Americans? Munteanu ignores this question, saying only that, "the Romanian channel had failed to live up to its promise, and it fizzled out entirely by the end of February 1968" (94). But while the Romanian channel may have "fizzled out," there were other would-be mediators eager to take Romania's place. In the aftermath of the Tet offensive, the North Vietnamese renewed contacts with the Norwegians, the Swedes, and the Italians, but not the Romanians.⁴

Was it again just a coincidence that, in the aftermath of the failure of the Romanians' two missions to Hanoi in December 1967 and January 1968, the North Vietnamese resumed contact with their previous interlocutors? Or was it something the Romanians said or did that led the North Vietnamese to look to the Norwegians, the Swedes, and the Italians as more promising mediators? And why did the Americans seemingly give up on the Romanian channel too?

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 200-205.

Fourth, like many of his predecessors, Munteanu's argument does not appear to acknowledge the fact that there is a difference—indeed, an enormous difference—between starting peace talks and ending a war. Students of the diplomacy of the Vietnam war have often seemed to suggest that the biggest obstacle to peace was finding a way to lure American and North Vietnamese representatives into the same conference room at the same time and then let them work out their differences. Munteanu's article is no exception.

It wasn't any lack of contacts between the Americans and the North Vietnamese that held up agreement on an end to the war. There were at least eleven major peace initiatives between 1964 and 1968, including at least three in which American and North Vietnamese diplomats spoke directly to each other, either in person or over the telephone.⁵ The problem facing the Americans and the North Vietnamese was not finding a way to talk to each other. It was instead that they had very different views on how the war should end. Until 1968, both sides preferred to fight on rather than accept a settlement that did not conform to their own ideas on who should rule in South Vietnam once the fighting had stopped.

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⁵ These included missions to Hanoi by Canadian diplomats J. Blair Seaborn (1964) and Chester Ronning (1966); the 1965 bombing pause (MAYFLOWER); the XYZ contact in Paris (1965) and the PINTA contact in Rangoon (1965-1966); MARIGOLD (the Polish channel); the SUNFLOWER contacts in Moscow and London) OHIO (Norway); ASPEN (Sweden); PENNSYLVANIA (1967); PACKERS (Romania). XYZ, PINTA, and SUNFLOWER all included direct contacts between American and North Vietnamese diplomats. For more on this point, see Thies, *When Governments Collide*, p. 144n.