

THE EDUCATIONAL ROLE OF THE ROMANIAN NEWSPAPER LIBERTATEA DURING WWI

Carmen Țăgșorean, PhD Student, "Babeș-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: Romanian newspapers in Transylvania played a very important role, being not only a valuable source of information, but also a means of education. Many of the publications assumed this role, including Liberty (Libertatea), in whose pages we discover significant details regarding the cultural life, publishing trends, and the importance Transylvanians gave to education. The purpose of this study is to identify and present the categories of cultural-educational information that were published during World War I in the pages of the Libertatea (The Liberty). The presence of these types of articles during the military conflict demonstrates the important place it occupied in everyday life.

Key words: *Transylvania, Romanian press, education, WWI, culture*

World War One was the most difficult time in the history of Transylvania, not only because of the draconic legislation imposed by the Hungarian authorities, but also for the context that the military conflict generated. For the first time in history there was a real chance for the national unification of all Romanians in a single state, "the hope that something great will come out of this war for the Romanian people" (Pușcariu, 1978, 9). Among the first institutions hit hard were the mass media, especially newspapers, subjected to a drastic control and censorship, which, in many cases, ended up in shutdowns. A crucial role in keeping the population informed and the national pride high was played by newspapers, which, during the Hungarian occupation and administration, were inexpensive to print and distribute throughout the province. Under these circumstances, the contribution of the journalists can be considered as important as the soldiers' on the frontlines: "Because besides the hecatombs of our heroes, whose holly blood was spilled all over the Romanian land, [...] in the foundation of our unified homeland rest the sacrifices of the long-lasting minds [...] that the Romanian made full-heartedly for more than a century. Without their uninterrupted struggle, offensive and defensive, daily and hourly, the national soul couldn't have been prepared for the great war" (Lupaș, 1926, 24-25). Notable personalities of Romanian culture underlined the crucial role the periodicals played in the life of the people of Transylvania. The major task of the press in Transylvania was not "to teach Romanians that they are Romanians", but to teach the peasants "how big and old this nation is, how many acts of bravery and what work of culture it has accomplished" (Iorga, 2008, 197). With a heavy emphasis on education, these newspapers had their pages generously opened to opinions on language and cultural debates: "With high standards of morality and patriotism, with a profound Romanian spirit, the press sustained the Romanians' cultural achievements, and became, at the same time, a political tribune, informative and ready for debates of utmost importance." The cultural-educational objectives

of all publications of Romanian language in Transylvania were met due to the contribution “of some valuable personalities of the time” whose target was especially the rural population. Through the published articles, “the Romanian nation learned in her troubled history to value her native language” (Vasiliu, 2001, 110-117). Looking closely to the press in Romanian of the time, Luca Manciu concludes that the primary objective of the press people was to raise the level of education of the population (Manciu, 2001, 18). The same opinion is shared by Constantin Antip who noticed the development of the press leaning on culture, science and economics (Antip, 1964, 37).

The objective of this study is to bring to the reader the directions set by *Liberty (Libertatea)*, which contributed to the education of the Romanian population in Transylvania during WWI.

A biweekly, *Liberty (Libertatea)*, “national political leaflet [...] read by large circles”, was one of the few publications in Romanian that lasted throughout the war years publishing news that “concerned all readers” (*Libertatea*, no. 30, 1914, 5). Originally based in Orăștie, the newspaper changed address twice, first to Bucharest, then to Cleveland, Ohio, USA, and back to Orăștie in 1918. Another change was in 1916 when to the name *Libertatea “of Ardeal”* was added. The change was due to the appearance in Bucharest of another newspaper with the same name. This way there was no room left for confusion (*Libertatea din Ardeal*, no. 4, 1916, 7). As a publication that targeted educated Romanians, but especially the rural population, it had a great responsibility, especially a moral one: “Nobody has a greater responsibility than anyone who writes for the popular newspapers!” because when “it comes down to people’s press, the written one for peasants, large majority of good, but simple people, without much education, and who, from a newspaper or a book they get on their table expect a piece of advice for the wise ways to go about one thing or another when called upon” (*Libertatea din Ardeal*, no. 7, 1916, 1). Such a statement confirms how low the level of literacy was in rural Transylvania at the time. The newspaper and its flyer, *The Interesting Leaflet (Foaia interesantă)* were full of “poems, short stories, popular rumor, and attractive faces!” (*Libertatea*, no. 35, 1914, 7).

Once the war broke out, it became urgent that the newspaper intensify the educational campaign due to the fact that teachers were drafted and sent to the frontlines “as if they were marked for extinction”, as many of them were killed or seriously wounded. To get a real picture, by 1915, 65% of the Romanian teachers had been sent to the front. Only those over 50 were exempt and continued to teach. In these conditions, communities scrambled to find replacements quickly and contain the damage. For that purpose, priests stepped right in for education to go on (*Libertatea din Ardeal*, no. 20, 1916, 3) or, if there were extra teachers somewhere else, they were moved to fill the void. It should be mentioned that at the outbreak of the war there were 2,655 Romanian schools in Transylvania whose main mission was to keep the culture and traditions alive (Ghibu, 1912, 165), “and the national conscience, which, at the same time, was a menace to the Hungarian state” (Păcurariu, 1986, 164). For the Romanian population access to education in its native language in schools was vital for the preservation of national identity. This aspect was well known by the Hungarian authorities who thought that having control over languages spoken there they would be able to manipulate easily all mentalities and hamper freedom of expression. As a result, one measure was to limit access to sources of informative or educational materials in Romanian language.

In this sense, it's really relevant the case of a man in Gherla, a subscriber to *Liberty (Libertatea)*, who logged a complaint in the newspaper about the attempt by authorities to make him give up reading it (*Libertatea din Ardeal*, no. 23, 1916, 4). In these conditions, the role of the Romanian newspapers changed from information materials to education materials. To handle the present one should know the past. In Ardeal, history had always played an important and constant role for intellectuals. Only by mastering history the national spirit and the drive for unification could be kept alive. For this purpose, some publications started columns of history in their pages. Each article was so thought out that it could be a history lesson that the teacher or the priest could easily pass on to their students and on to entire communities. These came with teaching instructions, including the questions for the feedback. The author of this project was Teodor Petrișor with the column "The beginning and the history of Romanians treated for Romanian people as a dialog" printed in *The Books of the Romanian Peasant (Cărțile săteanului român)*. This idea can be found, although in a different format and structure, in the pages of *Liberty (Libertatea)* where a lot of educational materials can be identified, some even containing classified military information. For example, observations about the fortress Przemyśl that was situated into a strategic position for the defense of Galicia from the Russians. Unfortunately, the article is misinforming the population with its detailed description. It gives away information regarding troops stationed there during both war and peace times, data on fortifications and access roads coming from Hungary (*Libertatea*, no. 55, 1914, 5). The article is an interdisciplinary lesson which contains information on geography, history, and strategy.

Looking closely at the published articles, we can see that most information presented as educational material is related to war, as the conflict was at that time the most important topic of the day in all communities.

War has always been a time of inventions and technological progress which later on mankind would benefit from. In this idea, the newspapers carried articles to inform the population of the newest advances in military technology. Thus, the readers got to know new military terminology and the advantages for those who owned the new weaponry. These inventions were simply spectacular. Some of them had the origin in Europe, while some others were coming from America, a very inventive country, but very little known to readers, a country "which will not rest until it can hold her head higher over the rest of the nations and countries of the world". The competition to produce new weapons among the warring countries was heating up and so was people's need to learn as much as they could about it. And the press complied. The message here is that the imagination turned loose and put to work for a cause can create wonders for society's progress and life betterment. All those inventions belonged to free counties that encouraged their citizens to be creative and bring their contribution to the progress of their peoples. Thus, freedom of thought and expression were essential in free countries and those fundamental civil rights were worth fighting for, even with war for national liberation. Many articles about military technology contained remarks about the free nation of Americans and their ambition to be powerful and that should serve as an example for Romanians in Transylvania, who, isolated and overwhelmed by their daily routine to survive were completely ignorant to innovation, research, or basic information about other countries and their cultures, like the Americans. The strength of character and Americans' determination were examples that had to be followed. All these were based on

education and this was what the press was hinting at. The mankind's dream of flying was taking shape in those days in countries like USA, Britain, and Germany. While Americans had invented a triplane that had an increased safety "to glide on the waves of air" (*Libertatea din Ardeal*, no. 10, 1916, 3), the British hydroplanes, which the newspaper calls "wonders [...] machines that fly at will over the seas and whenever they want, they can bring them back down to land on the water where they float like boats and run driven by the same engine that propelled them through the air!" (*Libertatea din Ardeal*, # 13, 1916, 4). All these wonders of a new era enable those who owned them to cover distances never thought possible before. The German technology was not sitting idle either. A big flying machine, with a crew of four and two machine guns as standard equipment could tip the balance of war in their favor. It was possible that this new airplane to guarantee an edge for the Germans because "with it, the enemy planes could be successfully chased and destroyed by those two machine guns, compared to just one that the others had" (*Libertatea din Ardeal*, # 18, 1916, 5). And because the daring ones dream of doing the impossible, scientists turned their attention to traveling under water. Ample space in the newspaper is reserved to the submarine, a machine that most people never heard of, a ship that traveled the world undetected. The description in simple and exact words, with no picture or drawing, made anyone able to imagine how a submarine looked like, "a ship that has to float hidden under the surf to be able to close in unnoticed by enemy ships and shoot a deadly blow into their belly". It is also described how mariners lived aboard the submarine and how strict the rules were "as each man was supposed to go strictly by the book in carrying out his duties and during the mission nobody could leave his post" (*Libertatea din Ardeal*, # 24, 1916, 4-5.) These technological marvels would remain in the patrimony of mankind after the war and would change the life as we knew it forever. Moreover, they were meant to stimulate children's imagination and make them dream of a better life for themselves through education. Some of these new discoveries were so innovative that even experienced and well informed journalists called them "chilling". In a society where crises were so frequent (military, economic, religious, social) this kind of information was well received because it ignited the imagination of many, bringing a glimmer of hope that the world is still moving ahead and mankind is still creative. Creation depended on imagination in a free world.

Technology also produced new vocabulary and even new professions that journalists rushed to disseminate and explain in their columns. For example, the machine gun was "a machine to shoot" (*Libertatea din Ardeal*, # 18, 1916, 5), or volunteer "serving at free will" (*Libertatea din Ardeal*, # 24, 1916, 4-5). This kind of lessons became very common in their articles about military technology.

Another category of educational activities were those set up by different associations. These drew large crowds from rural areas who expressed their gratitude towards the organizers, in the pages of *Liberty (Libertății)* of Baia-Mare who attended the conferences and lectures of the "Association" on different topics. Through these events, the journalists were driving home the message that Romanians should never surrender using their language and preserving their culture, a patriotic duty for those who were fighting for national identity and unification with the motherland: "Everything we do with unflinching determination is for our language to rule in our life-clean, beautiful, and unsurpassed" (*Libertatea*, # 30, 1914, 3). The activities of the "Association" were taking place in different villages. In one of them, called

Zam, a large audience “listened very carefully” to lectures on the new legislation on pastures, luxury and waste, destitution caused by alcoholism and the benefits of writing and reading (*Libertatea*, # 30, 1914, 4). These conferences had both economic and cultural topics. Glancing over these articles it becomes obvious that those on culture and education were really attractive to the rural population. People were urged “to welcome them with open arms” as they were “sowers of culture” (*Libertatea*, # 31, 1914, 5). This way, the organizers delivered both practical advice on every-day matters and a cultural message on national identity and how to preserve it through language. It also fought against illiteracy and alcoholism, both widespread.

Popular in the life of Transylvanians because of their works, not because of their cooperation with the press, the intellectuals represented the teachers from afar. Their new works were publicized as summaries or ads in the newspapers. For example, *The Most Beautiful (Cele mai frumoase)*, a book of “people’s poetry”, well loved “for their inner charm!” (*Libertatea*, # 41, 1914, 7). A work of great impact had at the time *Three Months on the War Front! (Trei luni pe câmpul de războiu!)* by Octavian C. Tăslăuanu, in whose pages we can find “a very interesting description of the state of the soul of the Romanian from Transylvania who saw himself drawn into this war that nobody wanted” or the work of I. Rusu Abrudeanu and Vasile Stoica *The Habsburgs, The Hungarians, and the Romanians (Habsburgii, ungerii și românii)*, an “up-to-date reading. Written with wit and warmth [...] [the book] pictures the hapless past and present of the Romanians in Transylvania and Hungary” (*Libertatea din Ardeal*, # 4, 1916, 8). In these trying times vol. I of *The History of Romanians in Transylvania and Hungary* by Nicolae Iorga is published. It’s a monumental piece of reference that should be on every shelf because it “opens a new file on the appreciation of the Romanians from the other side of the Carpathians, too little and too superficially known here, in the country. Reading *The History* by Mr. Iorga, who makes the right observation for every turn and event of our history, makes you understand it a lot more clearly than ever before” (*Libertatea din Ardeal*, # 28, 1916, 3). The introductions of these types of books were meant to induce the awakening of the national conscience and the necessity to unite all Romanians into one country. These books were also able to dodge the censorship because they were always presented into the advertising section of the papers. In these presentations, the authors use carefully selected words with a great communication impact to bypass censorship, like “a clean and honest pen” (about the author), “the hapless present of the Romanians in Transylvania”, “the hard, trying moments of our history”, “national unity of all Romanians”.

Besides the top writers’ and historians’ works, special attention was given to the folk art, hinting “the great admiration and appreciation” of the editors for this category of culture. With great talent and wit, the Transylvanian peasants expressed openly their feelings of joy or bitterness caused by different moments of their existence. The dramatic experience of the war is passed on to the reader through the expressive verses of the folk poetry. Turning emotions, dreams, and desires into poems is one way of the Romanian soldiers to escape from the gruesome reality of war and find emotional comfort, but also to preserve a vivid memory of the events they were dragged into. The press of the time hosted in its pages a lot of these folk works that represent a real treasure. Still, the number of those unpublished is far greater than those which made into the pages. The explanation of the paper *Liberty (Libertatea)* for this

discrepancy is somehow surprising: the rule was “first come, first served” or, that the selection was made “by sheer luck” (*Libertatea*, # 63, 1914, 5). In spite of this criterion, the poetry published is pretty good art, proving the sincerity and talent of the authors. The beauty of these poems demonstrates the sensitivity and zest for life of these farmers who were forced into a terrifying reality they never wanted to be in. Most of the poems reveal the hope to unite with the motherland and their longing for homes and families. With such an emotional and mobilizing load, these poems saw publication especially in the second half of 1918, when the Romanians and Transylvanians won their independence from Hungary and kicked off the drive for unification. One of the published poems, written by an army flag bearer, is about the strong desire of liberation from the oppressors who “shackled our sons” and about the fulfillment of the unification dream. Proving that they were familiar to the famous poets’ works, the folk poets used to carry some of their topics. One of the topics is the fraternity of the man and nature in which he finds relief and consolation in hard times, a very popular motif in the Romanian literature of all time. The forces of nature are called upon to help in the battle with the oppressors. “You, Mureş gather your waters/Into a great wave/ And raze all the bridges!” (*Libertatea*, # 7, 1918, 1). Along with the folk poets, the nationally recognized writers rallied the idea of national unity and patriotic fervor in their works: “Poetry that reflects the sorrow and the anxiety of a soul shaken by the fear that the Romanian nation may miss the great hour of history to become one nation”. [...] These are the most powerful patriotic poems of the time which will ignite and set into motion all the Romanian souls towards the glorious moment that awaits us” – a brief statement for the book *Songs without a Country (Căntece fără țară)* by Octavian Goga (*Libertatea din Ardeal*, # 28, 1916, 3). The topics and the themes of the folk poems follow the course of events of the military conflict that changed everything with the entrance of The Old Kingdom into the war, adding a tone of optimism to them, announcing a bright future for the Romanian nation. – “Carpathians won’t be/Hungarian prisons/Our petition/Will take us to Bucharest”. People will live under Romanian law – “The Romanian law/Will protect us from now/No more chains/And always on the road” (*Libertatea*, # 5, 1918, 3). Publishing these poems written by ordinary people of rural origin made a great impact on the readers as parents, husbands, children and kin were fighting a war for a great cause.

Religious holidays had always played an important role in the life of the Transylvanian village, a magical atmosphere with century-old traditions, mythology, songs and processions and the press cultivated them in their pages. It was not only a way of comparison among scientists but also a way of sharing culture among villages that knew little of each others’ traditions. A merry holiday – Christmas – was celebrated with a lot of joy throughout the villages of Transylvania before the war. All homes were full of traditional foods waiting for the visitors singing carols and religious themes while children, “eyes shining with anticipation for the feast that followed the ceremonies, when mom finally put the food on the table after the long days of fasting”. The little ones then enjoyed the fairy tales told by mothers or grandmothers. “What a beautiful and happy night!” The war changed all this. These magic moments became memories and “children don’t keep their shining eyes on the pot with stuffed cabbage on the stove anymore, as there was no hog this Christmas and from the pot comes out only the aroma of cabbage without pork”. The carolers are gone too as

they had to go to the front and the tables are empty as the war only brought poverty and famine (*Libertatea din Ardeal*, # 1, 1916, 1). It was one extra reason to fight for a better life.

The low level of education of rural masses justified entirely the publication of informative materials in the pages of *Liberty (Libertatea)*. Take, for example, the columns on public health meant to teach the basics of a clean and healthy living from personal hygiene to food preparation: “Our people should not worry that here and there is a case of cholera”. Readers were taught how to stay healthy in times when contagious diseases were rampant due to lack of hygiene, medical care, and medication (*Libertatea*, # 51, 1914, 5). The journalists of *Liberty (Libertatea)* also warn their readers of the impact of a long war on the food supplies. The population is advised to use money and food wisely “as long as food is still available within the country”. The problem may arise when it will have to be imported from countries that were at war (*Libertatea*, # 35, 1914, 4).

For the purpose of the present study we had selected just some samples of the educational articles published by *Liberty (Libertatea)* during the World War I coming to support our claim on the newspaper's educational role.

Conclusions

A newspaper of large circulation, *Liberty (Libertatea)* targeted population of rural areas with the purpose of information but also education. For the latter, samples of articles were selected from among folk poetry, books of poems, history books, articles on military technology, the important role of cultural associations, and of practical advice regarding war (economy and disease). The content of these articles represents a mirror of the Romanian society during WW I and describes the hopes and hardships of a nation waiting for the crack of a new dawn in her troubled history.

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