

The Ravages of War Romanian Schools in Transylvania (1914–1919)

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The Romanian elite considered that schools had to provide not only knowledge, but also a religious and patriotic education, in the sense of love for the Romanian nation.

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GIVEN ITS magnitude and implications, it could be argued that the Great War was conducted not only in the trenches and on the battlefields. The life of those who remained at home was deeply disturbed in many ways. One such consequence concerns the activity of schools, which suffered many changes during the great conflagration.

This paper aims to present the situation of Romanian schools in Transylvania during World War I. As sources we used press articles, yearbooks, and memoirs.

Until the First World War, the Romanian schools in Transylvania were mostly denominational (primary and secondary), under the patronage of the Orthodox and Greek Catholic Church, respectively. Their activity was affected in several ways:

- the departure to the front of a significant number of teachers and professors, as well as of many students from the secondary schools—many of them never returned home, giving their lives on the battlefields;
- the conversion of school buildings into military hospitals or barracks for soldiers;
- the impoverishment of the population, which prevented many children from going to school;

- the increased pressure, from the Hungarian state authorities, towards Magyarization;
- the involvement of teachers and students in many charitable activities for the benefit of soldiers.

NATURALLY, DURING these times social life was dominated by a gloomy atmosphere. The general standard of living greatly declined due to disturbances in the economy: in addition to the costs of the war, the economy suffered from the departure of the men—the labor force—to the front. The price of food and commodities increased, causing the impoverishment of the population.

In this context, it became impossible for many families to keep the children in school. School authorities were seeking solutions to help students come to class and to limit, as much as they could, the damage caused to education by the war. For the benefit of students in secondary schools, wealthier people often organized public collections of money and other goods. They did not remain indifferent but, each according to his resources, sent food, clothes, firewood, etc., giving a beautiful example of solidarity in those hard times.¹

For a while, people were convinced that the war would not last much longer than two or three months, “until the leaves fall” or “until the first snowflakes.”² Gradually, they became aware that the event had become unpredictable, and that no one could know how long it would last, or what the damages might be.

Quite relevant, in this case, is the warning addressed to parents in 1918 by the headmaster of the Gymnasium of Blaj, during the enrollment in the new school year: parents were asked to consider carefully whether they were able to support their children for eight years in school, because the system of scholarships, which had helped hundreds of students to attend school for decades, was worth almost nothing those days. The amount of money that had once paid for a whole year of boarding for a student was presently sufficient for only one month. Parents were encouraged to direct their children towards more practical careers, such as crafts and trade, rather than towards the intellectual ones.³

Back then, society was dominated by the call to make savings and maximize the use of household resources, and also to show solidarity in farm work, to compensate for the absence of men.

One of the biggest problems the schools faced was the lack of teachers, who had gone to war. The total number of mobilized teachers is unknown, as there are only partial statistics available. For example, at the end of 1914, 63% of teachers from the Archdiocese of Alba Iulia and Făgăraș (Greek Catholic) were mobilized. Their number would grow in the following years. Orthodox schools were suffering to an equal extent. As reported by Roman Ciorogariu, the then headmaster of the Theological Institute in Arad, most villages were left without teachers, “prey to brutalization”; the local priests replaced them as best they could, but they could not cope with this big task.⁴

Already at the beginning of 1915 many schools were facing this issue, having been left without teachers. This created considerable concern for both the ecclesias-

tical authorities and those of the state, because of thousands of children no longer had access to education. This loss was felt especially in winter, normally the season with the highest school attendance (because the children's help with farm work was less necessary, their parents sent them to school more often than at other times of the year). To limit the long-term damage caused by this situation, the minister of education decided to grant exemptions wherever teachers could not be replaced. On the other hand, the priests, as school headmasters, were ordered by the ecclesiastical authorities to take over the duties of teachers. Gradually, as the war lengthened and the difficulties increased, these measures were only partially applied.⁵

The same applies to the Greek Catholic schools, where parish priests were urged, as school headmasters, to do everything possible for their schools, replacing the departed teachers themselves or turning to the retired ones. These priests also received the salaries of the teachers they were replacing.

Some teachers fulfilled their duties even on the battlefield, as shown by the example of a young teacher, Ilie Urs. He said: "It's been seven weeks since we've arrived on the battlefield, and God has been helping me to survive. For a long time, we were in a forest; there I had no work to do, so I looked for five illiterate people, I explained to them the alphabet, and now they thank me, very glad that they can read prayer books."⁶

Because of their training, teachers were, in a way, leaders even on the battlefield, where they acted as more than mere soldiers: "They have replaced the peaceful weapons of education with Mannlicher rifles, and their clothes with the military uniform. They are on the front. The trenches are the new school buildings for them, where they enthusiastically fulfill their duty. Through songs, poems, and speeches, they keep up the morale and the heroism of soldiers. They encourage their comrades in battles, and often die together with them."⁷

Some teachers and professors never returned home, giving their lives on the front. Just a few months after the beginning of the war, the Romanian high school in Braşov had lost three of its teachers.

Not only the teachers were mobilized, but also the students from higher classes (high schools). According to statistics from 1917, for example, 191 students from the Gymnasium and 149 students from the Pedagogical Institute had been conscripted since the beginning of the war.

This situation was worsened by the shortening of the courses, which ended earlier in summer and started later in autumn. Also, some of the holidays were eliminated. In the autumn of 1918, due to uncertainties created by the war, traffic disturbances caused by soldiers returning from the battlefield, and the outbreak of the Spanish flu, schools started classes late and in an erratic fashion.

Many schools were forced to give up their buildings, which were converted into military hospitals, warehouses, or barracks. Some examples in this respect are provided by the schools of Blaj, one of the most important centers of Romanian education in Transylvania. The first is the Gymnasium. During the first year of the war,

the school's gym and a large part of the schoolyard were taken over by "war workers" and building materials; although they left after a few months, the building was severely damaged, and could not be used throughout the 1915–1916 academic year. In the summer of 1917, the Gymnasium building itself was requisitioned in order to house a military hospital.

Because of the general price increase and shortages, living conditions became very difficult. A good example is the bread crisis of 1915, which made the Consistory (the high school ecclesiastical authority) provide all the students with free home-baked bread.

These events affected the students' state of mind: "Nervousness and concern were present, especially in the senior classes, and a lack of appetite for study."⁸

Due to the proximity of the front in September 1916, the management of the Gymnasium and the teachers fled to Oradea, together with the metropolitan bishop and his staff, and the Theological Seminary. The Gymnasium teachers returned to Blaj only in November, when they were able to start the courses.⁹

The situation of the Gymnasium worsened towards the end of the war, in the summer of 1918, when the minister of education, in exchange for the state financial aid, imposed very harsh conditions: teaching certain classes in Hungarian, the right to appoint five teachers, the partial Magyarization of the school administration and teaching in Hungarian for the Hungarian students of the school. The school board refused these conditions, accepting the loss of the state financial aid. The military and political events that followed put an end to this situation.¹⁰

Like all the other schools, the Pedagogical Institute of Blaj was also affected by the war: in the summer of 1917, the school building was occupied by a military hospital, restricting the space available for classes to a small building. The minister of education appointed a commissioner to the Károly Keszler Institute, the headmaster of the Pedagogical Institute in Sighet, to watch over the students' patriotism.¹¹ Commissioners were appointed to all the Romanian educational institutes. In Sibiu, for example, the official was Endre Barabás, headmaster of the State Pedagogical Institute in Deva, who said that "the minister of education gave me an important mission. I will be commissioner to the Romanian Pedagogical Institute of Sibiu. There I will live. Everyday I will visit the school and I will control the teaching. I speak Romanian well, and if I shall find abuses, by virtue of the authority invested in me by the government, I shall proceed with the utmost rigor. I have the right to suspend the unpatriotic teachers, and even to close the Institute." It must be mentioned here that the term "patriot" meant in this case devotion to the Hungarian state.

The girls' school in Blaj was also severely impacted by the Great War. In 1916, because of the refuge in Oradea, the classes began with a delay of almost two months. In addition, following the ministerial order, they had finished a month earlier in the summer. The girls also suffered because of the shortages affecting the entire society: continuously increasing prices, the difficulty in obtaining food and other necessary products, etc.¹²

In the summer of 1917, the school buildings housed a military hospital, which once again delayed the beginning of the school year (the school board had to rent other buildings and move the institution); many of the teachers were conscripted (Mihail Șerban and Aurel B. Gajia as military chaplain, Vasile Hâncu, professor of hygiene, as a military doctor); therefore, the school board was forced to reduce the number of classes. Because of the lack of fuel, the Christmas holiday was extended by one week, by ministerial order.

The situation of the schools was worsened, as we have already seen, by political pressure. For decades, a fierce battle was conducted between the leadership of the Romanian schools and the state authorities—the latter trying by all means to impose conditions to the non-Hungarian schools of Transylvania, conditions referring to the Hungarian language and the curricula. In 1917, this control over schools was tightened by the then minister of education, Count Albert Apponyi.

Thus, in July 1917, by his authority, a so-called Hungarian cultural zone was established, which included the counties of Caraș-Severin, Hunedoara, Sibiu, Făgăraș and Brașov, in order to “protect the citizens of Hungary from any hostile outside influence” (after the failed military offensive in Transylvania and Banat of the army of the Kingdom of Romania, in August–September 1916). All Romanian schools in this territory were nationalized as punishment, because some of the Romanian priests and teachers were not only disloyal to the Hungarian state, but had fraternized with the “enemy” when it crossed the mountains in August 1916. For this measure to be more effective, the state financial aid previously received by these schools was suspended, leaving their upkeep only at the expense of local communities, impoverished by war. Through these measures, the minister hoped that the state could take over those denominational schools that could not be supported (as a result, over 300 Romanian schools were closed).

These measures were complemented by the introduction of so-called patriotism classes, held in Cluj, for teachers of the denominational nationalized schools, who went there to learn loyalty to the state.

This situation lasted until the autumn of 1918, when these measures were canceled by the new minister of education, Martin Lovaszy, who, moreover, granted to the non-Hungarian schools the right to use their own language. These measures in favor of the rights of nationalities, for which the Romanian elite had fought for decades, came too late: the Austro-Hungarian monarchy was already on the verge of collapsing.

DESPITE THE difficult times, the teachers made great efforts to ensure a normal academic life for their students. Some schools organized regular trips, theater performances, and poetry recitals.¹³

Together with the people of Blaj, the students from the School for Girls were also involved in various charitable activities initiated by the state, meant to improve the lives not only of the soldiers on the front, but also of those directly impacted by

the war. Thus, during a fundraiser “at the commemoration of the heroes dead on the battlefield,” the girls raised 103.30 crowns (Austro-Hungarian currency). The money went to the “Office for the reconstruction of homes destroyed by the war”; on 17 December 1917, the local branch of the Red Cross Society held a charitable music performance in the school, attended by 136 pupils, during which 86 crowns were collected. In addition, on several occasions the girls made warm clothes for the soldiers on the frontline.

Despite the hardships of those times, the school board tried, wherever possible, to ensure its proper functioning, especially since the crisis years had not led to a decrease in the number of female students. Therefore, since the buildings in which classes were held did not offer conditions for physical education activities, the teachers organized walks around the city with the students (the hill above the “Volcano,” the Cross Hill in Berc). On this occasion, “gymnastics and social games” took place as well; also, the students benefited from lessons at the Natural History Museum and the Botanical Garden.¹⁴

The teachers who were left at home, sometimes together with the pupils from the Gymnasium, were constantly involved in actions meant to help the soldiers on the front. Through charitable organizations such as the one called The Sacrifice of the Romanian Teachers, they conducted public fundraisers, for clothing and prayer books. These actions were often initiated by the state, but had a wide echo among the teachers.

The situation of the Romanian schools in Transylvania was a delicate issue for decades on end. Being mostly denominational schools, they were closely associated with the church, Orthodox or Greek Catholic, respectively. The Romanian elite considered that schools had to provide not only knowledge, but also a religious and patriotic education, in the sense of love for the Romanian nation. Romanian schools, both primary and secondary, had been the target of a constant offensive by the Hungarian state, which conducted a policy of homogenization towards Magyarization. During the war, the Romanian elite had to declare their patriotism towards the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, hoping that, in return for the sacrifices made by the Romanian nation in Transylvania, it would be granted the right to freely administer the Romanian schools. However, the events occurred at the end of 1918 and the inclusion of Transylvania into Romania would change this situation.

As for the everyday activity of Romanian schools during the war, there was a constant concern from their leaders to keep them running. Despite the difficult times, they always sought to ensure that children received at least a minimum of primary education. These efforts paid off especially in the secondary schools: despite the material deprivations and the loss of some of the teachers and of the students, they were able to ensure the continuity of education. From a certain point of view, this can be considered a wartime victory, even if it was not obtained on the battlefield.



Notes

1. *Foia diecezană* (Caransebeș) 46 (1917): 1.
2. *Cosânzeana* (Orăștie) 3 (1915): 18.
3. *Unirea* (Blaj) 44 (1918): 3.
4. Roman Ciorogariu, *Zile trăite* (Oradea, 1994), 45.
5. *Unirea* 9 (1915): 1.
6. *Ibid.*, 3 (1915): 4.
7. *Ibid.*, 125 (1915): 3.
8. *Anuarul Institutelor de învățământ greco-catolice din Balázsfalva (Blaj) pe anul școlastic 1915-1916* (Balázsfalva/Blaj, 1916), 69–71.
9. *Anuarul Institutelor de învățământ greco-catolice din Balázsfalva (Blaj) pe anul școlastic 1916-1917* (Balázsfalva/Blaj, 1917): 47–50.
10. *Anuarul Institutelor de învățământ greco-catolice din Balázsfalva (Blaj) pe anul școlastic 1917-1918* (Balázsfalva/Blaj, 1918): 34–35.
11. *Anuarul Institutelor de învățământ greco-catolice din Balázsfalva (Blaj) pe anul școlastic 1917-1918* (Balázsfalva/Blaj, 1918): 31–32.
12. *Raport despre institutele de învățământ greco-catolice din Balázsfalva (Blaj) pe anul școlastic 1916-1917* (Balázsfalva/Blaj, 1917): 75–76.
13. *Raport despre institutele de învățământ greco-catolice din Balázsfalva (Blaj) pe anul școlastic 1917-1918* (Balázsfalva/Blaj, 1918): 55–59.
14. *Ibid.*

Abstract

The Ravages of War: Romanian Schools in Transylvania (1914–1919)

The scale of World War I profoundly affected, at all levels, the states involved. Social and cultural life suffered enormously. This paper analyzes the situation of Romanian school education in Transylvania during the Great War. It considers how the hardships of daily life affected school attendance by children and the very functioning of schools. It was obviously a time of great indigence, not only because of the enormous price increases for food and other products. The conscription of the men had a strong negative impact on society, affecting household functionality and hence the living standards. A major issue was the conscription of teachers and professors, creating an unstable situation with a strong impact on education. The sources used for this paper are the Romanian press in Transylvania, memoirs, and archival documents. This study aims to show how Romanian school authorities coped with these challenges in an attempt to keep the schools open, wherever possible.

Keywords

First World War, Romanian schools, Transylvania, Blaj, teachers, pupils