

The Demographic Impact of the 1848-1849 Revolution in Transylvania

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FROM MANY points of view, this revolution could be seen as the dividing line between the new and the old, marking the abolishment of some feudal institutions and mentalities. At the same time, around the middle of the 19th century, there appeared new institutions, adapted to the dynamics of the period and to the European innovating tendencies, and the modernisation of the Transylvanian society began. The older or the more recent historiography has dedicated numerous and valuable pages to Transylvania's economic, social, political and cultural development, not only in the years before the revolution, but also during the time of neo-absolutism or liberalism. Naturally, the revolution itself enjoyed an increased interest from the Romanian, Hungarian and German historians, so that the informational basis is now extremely rich and the interpretations—sometimes contradictory—offer an overall image of what happened in Transylvania in 1848-1849.

Nevertheless, the revolution still offers enough subjects of historical analysis as some aspects have been neglected or, in the best case, barely stated in the general or specialised studies dealing with the moments of the revolution. Today, no one doubts that the revolution of 1848 had a complex impact upon the development of the province in the second half of the last century. But there are a few questions which have to be answered by the demographic historians, like, for instance, which were the demographic effects of the revolution, to what extent did the years 1848-1849 influence the demographic status, or whether one can speak of a “demographic revolution” in the middle of the 19th century. Considered from this angle, the present chapter intends to analyse the demographic impact of the 1848-1849 revolution in Transylvania (we must point out that we shall be dealing only with the territory of the former Great Principality of Transylvania).

Any attempts to reconstitute the demographic dimensions of the 1848 revolution in Transylvania must deal first with the factors that may have had an impact upon the population of the province in those years. One of these factors is the cholera epidemic that struck the province in 1848. The relationship between society and epidemics has been constantly in the attention of contemporary historiography. And this not only due to an exclusively biological or demographic concern, for an epidemic all by itself could affect the existence of a population only for a relatively limited time. "It would take a relatively short period of time to make up for the lost lives,"¹ usually through an increase in the number of marriages and childbirths and through a temporary decrease in the death rate. The investigation of the epidemic and of its impact upon everyday life contributes to a better knowledge of historical phenomena, to the explanation and proper understanding of some political, military events, etc. Thus, in the summer, for instance, in Moldavia the development of the revolution was to a great extent hindered by the threat of the cholera, by the devastation this disease caused in the Moldavian society. It is considered that prince Mihai Sturdza was saved precisely by the outbreak of the epidemic.² Similar considerations were made by the contemporaries of those events as well. George Bariț, one of the thorough observers of social-political realities, wrote in the summer of 1848: "Had it not been for the cholera and for the Russians that came in spite of the treaties, Moldavia would have experienced by now great changes."³ The 1848 epidemic of cholera had a certain impact upon the pace of the revolutionary events in Wallachia as well. The emissaries of the revolution faced many difficulties in their propaganda activity, due to the exodus of the population. Also, the disease that struck in the summer the Tsarist army camped in Moldavia delayed the intervention against the revolution in Wallachia.⁴

In the present chapter we shall not insist upon the outbreak and the development of the epidemic of cholera in Transylvania in the year 1848, as these matters, as well as the behavioural manifestations, have been the object of a previous approach.⁵ In July-August, the authorities systematically dealt with the spreading of the disease and organised the anti-epidemic fight, carefully recording the number of those affected or killed by cholera. As the revolution developed and turned into a civil war, neither the doctors nor the county authorities kept a thorough record of the disease and of its evolution in the affected areas. Therefore, on 14 September 1848, the Cluj Gubernium sent the local authorities a circular letter sharply criticising the doctors and the authorities in the administration for not having sent regular detailed reports on the state of the cholera.⁶ The Gubernium made such appeals later in the fall as well. But it would seem that by then the cholera was no longer important enough to receive the attention of the authorities. Several cases of cholera were signaled in October in

north-western Transylvania as well, in the Sătmar, but the most affected areas were those in north-eastern and central Hungary,⁷ where the cholera was still active in the spring of 1849.

The analysis of the existing data shows the much lower intensity of the 1848 cholera in Transylvania, as compared to the other Romanian territories from beyond the Carpathians or to Hungary. The number of victims was no larger than 1,000, to which we might add several hundred cases not reported in the autumn of 1848. As to the age of the victims, those affected were the adults and the elderly persons, while the children were the least exposed. Thus, from the total number of people killed by the cholera in the villages of Gledin and Mijlocenii Bârgăului, 25% were under the age of 15, 6.3% were between 16 and 25 years of age, 15.7% were between 16 and 40, 21.8% were between 41 and 60 and 31.2% were over 60 years of age.⁸ Consequently, the demographic effects were moderate, even if we add the deaths caused by the consequences of the cholera in the next period (malaria, typhoid fever etc.). At certain times, the cholera caused fear in the contaminated areas, contributing to the persistent feelings of anxiety and panic. The same reactions were recorded in other geographical areas, the attitude in front of death causing almost identical reactions.⁹

2. A matter immanent to our topic is that of the material and especially of the human losses of the years 1848-1849, caused by the repression of the peasant revolts in the first months of the revolution and especially by the military activities during the civil war. Under such circumstances, the death rate surpassed the average for the other years, creating an obvious demographic unbalance (see diagram no. 2 representing a number of 20 parishes). As George Bariț said “the lives lost in Transylvania during the Hungarian revolution could not have been more than 50,000, and this includes the regular army soldiers who died in battle or in the hospitals.”¹⁰ The latest investigations of this matter confirm G. Bariț’s estimation, pointing out the fact that, of the about 50,000 Transylvanians reported missing during the tragic events of 1848–1849, the great majority (about 40,000) were Romanian nationals.¹¹

A proper evaluation of what the Transylvanian revolution of 1848-1849 meant from a demographic point of view makes it necessary for us to place this essential moment of the middle of the last century in a wider context. Thus, we have reconstituted the demographic status of Transylvania for the decade prior to the revolution as well as for the one following it. Also, on the basis of the parish civil status records we have selected an illustrative sample, composed of several ethnic communities from Feldru, Mijlocenii Bârgăului, Susenii Bârgăului, Gledin, Orșova, Lăureni, Chinari, Sântana de Mureș, Suseni, Aciliu, Ciceu,

Leliceni, Jigodin, Aluniș, Izvorul Crișului, Nicula, Cheia, Batin, Arghișu, Jichișu de Jos, Așchileu Mic.

The first important issue is that of the number of inhabitants for the investigated period. For the period that followed the revolution, the size and structure of the Transylvanian population can be outlined by analysing the overall data of the 1850–1851 and 1857 censuses. Thus, the 1850–1851 census indicated a total population of the principality amounting to 2,061,645 inhabitants,¹² and in 1857 2,172,748 inhabitants were recorded.¹³ Between 1851 and 1857, the population of the principality increased every year by an average 20,000 people, a value pretty close to the average annual growth of the decades prior to the revolution: 23,000 between 1818 and 1830 and 22,000 in 1846–1847.¹⁴ For the previous period we see a reduction in the growth rate of the population, an observation not without significance for the future computations. It is very difficult to determine the number of people inhabiting Transylvania before the revolution, that is to say in 1847, as no conscription or census was performed. The statisticians of the time developed a few hypotheses on the demographic dimension of the province in the last year before the revolution, using various criteria and obtaining thus various figures. In general, the demographic potential of Transylvania in 1847 is estimated either to 2,215,000 inhabitants,¹⁵ or to 2,088,000 inhabitants.¹⁶ In our opinion, the latter figure is closer to the Transylvanian demographic realities of the year 1847, and the results of the following demonstration also point in this direction.

If we accepted the first estimation of the number of Transylvanian inhabitants in 1847 (that is to say 2,215,000 people), in order to determine the evolution of the population until the 1850–1851 census, we would have to add about 65,000 new inhabitants to cover for the average annual growth for three years: 1848, 1849, 1850. But from the result thus obtained we would have to subtract a maximum of 55,000 people reported dead during the cholera epidemic of 1848 and the bloody events of the revolution. Therefore, the 1850–1851 census should have recorded a number of 2,225,000 inhabitants. The difference between the actual figure (2,061,645) and the one estimated above cannot be completely accounted for by taking into consideration the lack of experience of the census takers or the people's refusal to be officially recorded. It is difficult to believe that the Habsburg authorities skipped about 165,000 inhabitants at a time when Vienna was extremely interested in a precise estimation of the monarchy's material and human assets after the upheavals of 1848–1849. We do not reject the idea that some heads of families avoided to declare all the family members (or animals) fearing either taxes or recruitments, as G. Bariț himself said.¹⁷ But, no matter what, those who eluded the recording could not have been so many (165,000) as to represent about 8% of the entire population. Conse-

quently, we have to accept that the number of Transylvanian inhabitants in 1847 was closer to the other figure, that is 2,088,000 inhabitants. To it we add the 65,000 that would have been the average annual growth for the period 1848–1850, and from this total we subtract the victims of the years of the revolution: 55,000 people. Under such circumstances, the census performed in 1850–1851 should have recorded 2,098,000 inhabitants. The difference between the official figure (2,061,645) and the one estimated above is not considerable—36,000 people. Therefore, it can be accounted for by the phenomenon of under-recording, caused by the inhabitants, mainly from the rural areas, who did not declare the real number of family members.

3. Interesting conclusions are also reached through the analysis of the demographic behaviour of the observation sample formed by the 20 parishes, in the period between 1839 and 1858. As we can see in diagram no. 2, the natural movement of the population had in the 20 communities a relatively constant dynamics. We shall deal first with the birth rate, as it is the phenomenon which ensures the development and the evolution of the society. In the first decade (1839–1848), 5,019 children were born in the 20 parishes. 546 children were born in 1848, a figure surpassed only in 1843, when 561 children were born. At a first glance we could be surprised by such an increased birth rate in a year as tormented as 1848. If we take into account the nine months between conception and delivery, then we can easily see that many of the children born in 1848 had been conceived in the last months of 1847 and only a smaller number in the first three months of 1848, when the revolts had not yet erupted. Thus, in terms of the birth rate, the year 1848 was not very different from the previous ones, being slightly over the average of the respective decade (of about 501 births/year).

But the revolutionary unrest, the political and social tensions in the Transylvania of 1848 and of the first decades of 1849 will be completely felt during the entire year 1849, when only 449 children were born in the 20 parishes. This value is the lowest recorded between 1849 and 1858—see diagram no. 2—being below the average annual birth rate of the respective decade (502 births/year). The observation sample, the 20 communities located in various areas of Transylvania (closer or more isolated from the revolutionary centers), properly reflected the demographic impact of the events of 1848–1849. Similar reactions could be encountered beyond the mountains as well, in Moldavia, the birth rate in Fălcui being in 1849 the lowest as compared to the previous years.¹⁸ After the demographic shock caused by the events of 1848, the population of the province suffered a process of regeneration. Just like on other similar occasions (natural disasters, epidemics, wars etc.), the internal mechanism of demographic self-reg-

ulation worked as predicted and made up for the losses of the previous years. A suggestive example in this respect is the evolution of the birth rate in 1851–1852, which reached a level situated above the values recorded over the entire period under investigation (see diagram no. 2).

The existing data on other micro-zones—mixed Romanian-Saxon-Hungarian villages of the Lechința area¹⁹—outline the “explosive” birth rate in the first years after the revolution, thus illustrating a remarkable constancy in terms of demographic behaviour at the level of the entire Transylvania (see diagram no. 1). In the years of the Crimean War, the birth rate decreased once again (1853–1856), to be restored towards the end of the sixth decade.

The evolution of the death rate in the 20 parishes during 1839–1858 is again highly relevant for the demographic impact of the revolution (see diagram no. 2). We first notice the very high number of deaths recorded in 1848–1849 (502 and 921), figures that were not surpassed in the two decades we have analysed. Also interesting is the increased death rate for the 1849–1858 decade (4,525) as compared to the previous one, for 1839–1848 (3,419). Several elements contributed to this, and we mention: the famine caused in the first years after the revolution by the devastations, the temporary agricultural chaos that followed the liberation of the serfs and naturally the Crimean War (in 1853–1855, the death rate once again surpassed the average one of the other years of the decade or of the previous decade). We also have to mention here the negative effects of the cholera epidemic of the year 1855. This made 1,049 victims in the entire population, but in certain villages the deaths caused by the epidemic represented about 50% of all those deceased in that year.²⁰

As to the dynamics of marriages in the period 1839–1858, we can see a relatively balanced distribution over the two decades. Thus, in the decade prior to the revolution, 1,253 marriages took place and 1,218 in the following one. Yet, significant for some mental structures is the great number of marriages concluded in 1848–1849. 159 marriages took place in 1848, more than in any year of the analysed period, and 133 marriages in 1849, figure anyway above the average of the two decades (see diagram no. 2). A similar matrimonial behaviour could also be seen in the case of similar historical moments in Western Europe, for instance during the French Revolution of 1789. All this entitled Albert Mathiez to call the phenomenon a “marriage fever.”²¹ A great number of marriages (154) was also recorded in 1856, at the end of the Crimean War, confirming thus the internal mechanism of demographic self-regulation.

After these brief considerations we can say that, from many points of view, the 1848–1849 revolution reveal new demographic aspects as compared to the previous decade or to the one that followed it. We are mainly talking about the

spectacular increase in the death rate, caused in those years by the military events, the cholera epidemic, the destructions caused by the military manoeuvres etc. There also existed a certain “rush” to conclude as many marriages as possible, a phenomenon highly illustrating from a behavioural point of view. In spite of the human losses of 1848-1849, in the sixth decade the population managed to recover, as showed by the data of the 1857 census.



Notes

- * Study conducted in the framework of the project CNCISIS no. 487.
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Abstract

The Demographic Impact of the 1848–1849 Revolution in Transylvania

It goes without saying that the revolution of 1848–1849 had a complex impact upon the development of the Transylvania in the second half of the 19th century. We will deal with few questions, like, for instance, which were the demographic effects of the revolution, to what extent did the years 1848-1849 influence the demographic status, or whether one can speak of a "demographic revolution" in the middle of the 19th century. The 1848 epidemic of cholera had a certain impact upon the pace of the revolutionary events in Transylvania. The analysis of the existing data shows the much lower intensity of the 1848 cholera in Transylvania, as compared to the other Romanian territories from beyond the Carpathians or to Hungary. We can say that, from many points of view, the 1848-1849 revolution revealed new demographic aspects as compared to the previous decade or to the one that followed it. We are mainly talking about the spectacular increase in the death rate, caused in those years by the military events, the cholera epidemic, the destructions caused by the military manoeuvres etc. There also existed a certain "rush" to conclude as many marriages as possible, a phenomenon highly illustrating from a behavioural point of view. In spite of the human losses of 1848-1849, in the sixth decade the population managed to recover, as showed by the data of the 1857 census.

Keywords

Transylvania, 1848-1849 Revolution, demographic consequences

ANNEX

