

Of World War I Horrors

Case study: Children from Bîrgău Valley

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Abstract: *Under the First World War, the Transylvanian village witnessed significant changes, mainly visible in social life, but also at the level of each family unit. The war horrors have impacted both nourishment, clothing and human interrelations, as well as the psychophysical development in numerous children and young people. Illiteracy has reached alarming rates. The case study that we conducted emphasized an abominable fact, since childhood became brutal and was irreversibly devastated by the horrors of war: children became instruments of the state, being used to influence parents, as participants to gatherings goods, attending parades, taking part in active work throughout the war; the growing chores and responsibilities they were forced to take due to the lack of men within families have permanently overloaded them. The harsh conditions caused both by the military front as well as the home front, including the period after the conflict was ended, and significantly increased the number of war orphans, thus turning children into war victims.*

Keywords: horrors, victim, war, conflict, children.

Introduction

The universe of childhood in the realm of the Transylvanian village, during the Great War, is little known, being one that was brutal and irreversibly devastated by the horrors of the conflict.

These children may be regarded, throughout this period, both as innocent victims and as active participants to the war effort or conflict witnesses. They are the mobilized and mobilizing social category, used by political and ecclesiastical authorities to support the front through various actions, therefore as active participants and as mobilizing forces for their fathers who were fighting for a better future for their offspring.

Children and families were among the reasons used by the war propaganda, meant to support mobilization and deployment of military forces on the battlefield. Thus, children were used as a strong argument in attempting to persuade fathers to go to war, whereas the mothers, left at home, were pressured to take over the entire household responsibilities.

Postcard images, carefully selected by the propaganda services and thoroughly checked by censorship services, would often use the picture of stay-at-home children and their families in an attempt to raise the soldiers' spirit, but also to stimulate their natural need to defend their families and children at any price.¹ Children's lives were influenced those days, as they are nowadays, by two important components, namely the family and the school.

¹ A. V. Sima, M. A. Popa, „Children during a time of War. A Transilvanian Perspective on World War I”, în *World War I. The Other Face of the War*, coord. I. Bolovan, R. Grăf, H. Heppner, O. M. Tămaş, Academia Română Publishing House. Center of Transylvanian Studies; University Press of Cluj-Napoca, 2016, p. 317.

The war effects influenced all areas of their lives, from formal education to church sanctity, from field work to household chores. The outbreak of the conflict suddenly shifted the natural flow of family life, giving way to various and numerous needs, chronic famine, cold, improper clothing, worries, anxiety and sadness, all these leading to the loss of childhood². From the files kept at the County Directorate of the National Archives in Bistrița, we have information about the consequences of the war, information about the way of life of the people of those times. They sometimes contain true family chronologies, and sometimes precious information on the financial state of men in the interwar period.³

Implications of war in the Transylvanian village world

Children, as conflict victims, suffered most of all in the territory behind the front. Poverty, famine and numerous other needs contributed to the status of children as direct victims of war. On the one hand, they could attend classes, as they needed to help their mothers with the fieldwork and at home, who were left at home with many children, and, on the other hand, together with the elderly, they were affected by the cholera epidemic or the Spanish flu, causing illnesses in the Bârgău villages of the days.

The precarious hygiene conditions, poor nourishment and famine all made it possible for the diseases and the cholera epidemic to be spread on the home front, as well as the cases of diphtheria, typhus, whooping cough and the Spanish flu, which increased the numbers of war victims.

This aspect of Bârgău rural life was observed in the clerical and laic correspondence. The state authorities took action in order to stop the distribution of these contagious diseases by printing fliers, "Guidelines", meant to inform the population about the symptoms of the disease in order to identify it and to isolate the one with such disease, about the medical treatment and a set of elementary hygiene measure to limit or prevent the effects of this illness. Such guidelines were drafted in all of the three languages spoken in the Bârgău villages, namely Romanian, Hungarian and German, and they encouraged the use of disinfectants and medical check-ups for accurate treatment, discouraging "old folk remedies". Those who were most affected by these illnesses were the children, who, according to prevention measures, had to be isolated from the school community and reported, in order to get treatment⁴.

² A. V. Sima, M. A. Popa, „Children during a time of War. A Transilvanian Perspective on World War I”, p. 315-316.

³ Maxim Morariu, “Consequences of the First World War in Salva, Bistrița-Năsăud County: Orphans and War Widows”, in *Astra Salvensis*, II (2014), no.4, p. 81.

⁴ National Archives, Bistrița-Năsăud County Service (A.N.S.J.B.N.), fund *Oficiul parohial greco-catolic Bistrița Bârgăului*, dos. 4, f. 21-26, 29-32.

It was also via these types of fliers that the Royal Hungarian Ministry of Affairs would inform people about the necessity of vaccinating children, the importance of this aspect, the manner of taking care of children in the post-vaccination period as well as the healing conditions of the vaccinated area. According to the law, parents were obligated to vaccinate their children twice, firstly, before the child reached the age of 1 year and secondly, to revaccinate them before their turning 12⁵.

Unfortunately however, the precarious living conditions as well as their lack of interest or mistrust led to the population ignoring the measures taken by the authorities. This is also one of the reasons for the rapid spread of these diseases that caused numerous victims. Therefore, in order to try and solve the given situation, the church authorities also became involved in the matter. Thus, the Memorandum no. 1866 in 1914 stresses the importance of following the measures taken by the authorities in view of fighting against childhood diseases, as, in many cases, parents used to hide their sick children whenever doctors would come to their villages, leading this way to an increase in child mortality. Another issue tackled in the same memorandum was the one regarding childbirth, with an emphasis on the dangers to which Romanian women exposed themselves by not being assisted during deliveries by professional midwives ("accoucheuse"), but rather by "other people without accurate skills". The effect of this practice was an increasing death toll among mothers, leaving thus their children orphans⁶. Based on the parochial records studied until the present, the number of these deaths was not very high.

In 1918, by the end of the Great War, the Bârgău villages witnessed the occurrence of the Spanish flu, the effects of which are rendered in the newspapers of the days and in Fr. Victor Lazar's accounts, who mentions that this epidemic made more victims than the war⁷. Information about the number of deaths in the area is given by the ledgers and the death record.

Family life was therefore severely shattered by the outbreak and the deployment of war throughout the four years. Consequently, in order to replace the lack of male workforce within rural households children would get various tasks demanding a considerable physical effort and higher responsibilities than the normal and suitable ones for their age. This contributed to their premature adulthood, with children taking on roles they were not prepared for, and which were not natural for many of their age, not to mention the fact that recruitment age kept dropping, until it reached the age of 18, even 17.

⁵ A.N.S.J.B.N., f.27, 28.

⁶ A.N.S.J.B.N., fund *Oficiul parohial ortodox român Prundu Bârgăului*, dos. 4, f. 278; fund *Oficiul parohial ortodox român Bistrița Bârgăului*, dos. 2, f. 95.

⁷ A.N.S.J.B.N., *Oficiul parohial greco-catolic Mureșeni Bârgăului*, reg.19, f. 27.

In school, timetables were affected during the conflict, and the school year was shortened, either due to the need of agricultural workforce or because of the epidemics, whereas at other times, schools were temporarily closed as they were occupied by the army or because there were no teachers available, since they were fighting on the front.

Illiteracy among the Romanian rural population remained at high levels, being the highest rate among the cohabiting nations, even if, prior to the war, the two Romanian churches tried to reduce illiteracy by organizing free winter classes, meant for priests and teachers in each village to train adults to read and write, this being considered their most sacred duty, so that, "in exchange of the sacrifices that people bring to strengthen the Church and confessional school, we, the leaders of the people, give our best to raise the people to the cultural level of the other nations" and to endow them with "the weapons of knowledge and light." The optimistic objective of these classes was that "in the commune where the people put them in charge, there would be none who cannot read or write". Classes were meant to be held particularly during the long winter evenings, when people finished working the fields and had more time available, and for the distinguished teachers in the process there would be remuneration, promised by the Consistory. The Bishopry sent special primers and books "at the lowest price". Protokesbyterial offices had to make reports to the Bishopry about the results of these classes, indicating the number of people who managed to learn how to read and write. The memoranda regulating the organization of these classes suggestively indicate the benefits of literacy, which would bring "a better fate to the people", because, "they are not given the same credit as the other nations are, who are literate," and get different attention from the state authorities⁸. Nonetheless, based on all studied documents, there were no such records for the communes on the Bîrgău Valley and most probably, the effects of these measures were reduced, since more memoranda were sent in this respect.

Another proof of the high rate of illiteracy among school-age children is the increased number of students aged 12-15, enrolled in the repetitive classes on the one hand, and the high rate of school drop-out on the other hand.

Besides, the decreased number of students who took their final examinations, particularly the graduation test for boys who completed the 6 grades of primary school, caused worries among the authorities of the two faiths. The reason was that this special examination, introduced during the school year 1914-1915 according to the Law XXXVII in 1913, "will ensure students, together with a certain right, *the right to vote* in the elections for

⁸ A.N.S.J.B.N., fund *Oficiul parohial ortodox român Bistrița Bîrgăului*, dos.2, f. 23, 91; fond *Oficiul parohial ortodox român Prundu Bîrgăului*, dos. 4, f. 38.

deputies diet.” This right was also shared by primary school graduates in previous years, but they had to indicate a special certificate to justify the granted right⁹.

One of the most painful consequences of war was the high number of orphans, children left without one or both parents, as the situation was as dramatical at home as it was in the war trenches, where all types of needs, tiresome labor and diseases caused almost as many victims as in the case of military operations. In order to support them, both political and ecclesiastical authorities tried to find solutions to deal with this stringent matter. Therefore, at the beginning of 1916, the Hungarian Ministry of Affairs encouraged the local authorities to establish orphanpatronages to protect the orphans’ interests¹⁰. The two Romanian churches in Transylvania initiated projects meant to establish orphanages and raised funds to start such institutions in Blaj, Sibiu or Braşov. It is interesting to note that the offertory lists were made public on a regular basis in the written press, both the ecclesiastical and the secular press: *Gazeta Transilvaniaîn Braşov*, *Telegraful Românin Sibiu*, to which the Orthodox parishes in Bârgău Valley subscribed even during the war, the price of the subscription being worth 8 crowns, *Foaia Diecezană* in Caransebeş, *Unireaîn Blaj* and others. The issue regarding orphans was therefore made public, especially related to the donations made for the orderly functioning of orphanages, the attempts to raise the public’s awareness to the orphans’ cause. But back then, the press put forth, even from 1916, the decisions of the two churches to found orphanages. The Orthodox Church, represented by Metropolitan Ioan Meşianu, decides to open a Romanian and Christian orphanage in Sibiu, a decision that was published in *Telegraful Român* no.2 in 1916, while the Greek-Catholic one made public at the same time, in the newspaper *Unirea*, the decision to start a Romanian orphanage in Blaj, which was communicated via a pastoral epistle from the Greek-Catholic Metropolitan of Alba Iulia and Făgăraş, Victor Mihalyi of Apşa, PhD¹¹. These decisions, together with the urge to collect money for this cause, were sent to parishes through Episcopalian letter. We strongly believe that the religious feeling is born spontaneously whenever there is a contact with death and with the difficulties of the front, inclusively in the case of the individuals that have not been aware of this feeling before.¹²

⁹ A.N.S.J.B.N.,fund *Oficiul parohial ortodox român Prundu Bârgăului*, dos. 4, f. 287.

¹⁰ I. Bolovan, *Primul război mondial și realități demografice din Transilvania. Familie, moralitate și raporturi de gen*, Cluj-Napoca, Școala Ardeleană Publishing House, 2015, p. 78.

¹¹ I. E. Ignat Kisanovici, *Participare și mobilizare, în Transilvania în Primul Război Mondial*, Academia Română Publishing House. Center of Transylvanian Studies

¹² Mihai Octavian Groza, „The religion of the Great war as reflected in the memoirs of the Romanians from Transylvania and Banat”, in Ion Albulescu, Adriana Denisa Manea, Iuliu-Marius Morariu (eds.), *Education, Religion, Family in the contemporary society*, Saarbrücken, Lambert Academic Publishing, 2017, p. 215.

Articles on this topic were also published by other newspapers, in which, for instance, a 1916 text from the magazine *Transilvania*, explained the decision to set up the two orphanages in Sibiu and Blaj, confessional and ethnic based, the former being Orthodox and the latter being Greek-Catholic. The same publication also pointed to the intention of establishing a boarding school for orphans in Braşov, a project supported by *Uniunea femeilor române din patrie* (*The Union of Romanian Women in the Country*). This institution was supposed to host „the children of those who fell on the battle field and were left without support and care”¹³. Such charity functions were also carried out in the Bîrgău parishes. For example, Fr. Pantelimon Zagrai was asked in a 1916 circular to make ”the most intense propaganda” in order to start the fundraising campaign meant to support the establishment of the Romanian Greek-Catholic orphanage in Blaj. By referring to ”the priest’s sense of Christian charity”, the hierarch asked the priest to contribute himself with 100 crowns. The priest began collecting the money and vows to send the gathered funds¹⁴.

The money raised as a result of these actions was declared by the hierarchs of the two churches was deemed sufficient even from the autumn of 1916, which testifies for the mobilization of both priests and parishioners.

However, because of the vicissitudes of war, the opening and functioning of orphanages was made possible only later. The Blaj orphanage opened its gates on October 1st 1918, initially with 50 places for boys, while in Sibiu the orphanage functioned in the buildings of the central school, until a new building was supposed to be acquired specially for this institution¹⁵. The documents we analyzed so far didn’t reveal any orphans from the Bîrgău communities living in the two institutions, but the research has only recently begun. We, however, know for sure that such requests to support the orphans were drafted in the Rodna vicarage, given that one orphan child from Rebrîşoara was accepted in the Blaj orphanage¹⁶.

Despite all efforts, the issue was far from being solved, because of the limited number of places in these institutions compared to the real needs, especially given the fact that both the military and the home front always increased the number of orphans, even after the ending of the conflict.

In spite of all the needs and difficulties, children were also active participants in the war fought on the home front, their contribution to support the conflict being undeniable.

¹³****Transilvania*, 1916, nr. 3, p. 5..

¹⁴ A.N.S.J.B.N., *fund Oficiul parohial greco-catolic Bistriţa Bîrgăului*, dos.2, f. 155, 156, 158.

¹⁵ A. V. Sima, M. A. Popa, „Children during a time of War. A Transilvanian Perspective on World War I, în *World War I. The Other Face of the War*”, p.328- 330; I. Bolovan, *Primul război mondial și realităţi demografice din Transilvania. Familie, moralitate și raporturi de gen*, p. 133.

¹⁶A.N.S.J.B.N., fund *Vicariatul Rodnei*, dos.1214/1918, f. 6.

To get to children, propaganda messages were sent hierarchically, top-down: from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Instructions in Budapest to the two Romanian Churches in Transylvania and from there to parishes and school institutions and eventually to those who were at home. This way, priests and teachers could become the main agents of war propaganda.

Children have thus become instruments of the state, being used to influence parents, to participate in the gathering of goods and produce, to attend parades and active war work. Their activity outside school and the one at school became work for their mother country and was considered proof of patriotism. They were made to feel that it was their duty not to complain about famine and needs, but rather to appreciate the great sacrifice that soldiers made for them, so that they could also do their best in order to be victorious. Using war propaganda, the authorities made children believe that their perseverance and loyalty to the country would bring forth a better world¹⁷.

It was also the case of fundraising campaigns carried out among students, especially those in confessional primary schools, for the soldiers who were on the battlefields, organized by state authorities, namely the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Instructions. For the area we are discussing, the funds were raised through the Royal School Inspectorate of Bistrița. The ecclesiastical authorities of the two Churches followed the orders, even if they were trying to sweeten the command, by insisting on the educative and moral roles linked to these gestures, and namely that students will understand and practice acts of kindness from early ages, and soldiers would gladly receive the gifts that were purchased using „the money of children at home”. The Metropolitan letter of August 7th 1915 informed people that the Society of Archduke Joseph Sanatorium initiated the act of raising money from students in order to buy two military barracks of 100 beds each for those suffering from tuberculosis, who had contracted the disease on the front¹⁸. According to another letter, this time one that was sent by the Vicar Alexandru Halița on November 26th 1915, the money raised from children and destined to soldiers had to be sent by cheque to the Soldiers' Aid Office in Budapest¹⁹.

Children were also constantly involved during the war in the harvesting of medicinal plants for the needs on the front. There were numerous letters sent those days by the two churches, which encouraged teachers to motivate and reward their students by means of incentives if they gathered medicinal plants such as: elderflowers, lime flowers, poppies, nettles,

¹⁷ I. Bolovan, *Primul război mondial și realități demografice din Transilvania. Familie, moralitate și raporturi de gen*, p. 103-105.

¹⁸ A.N.S.J.B.N., fund *Oficiul parohial ortodox român Prundu Bârgăului*, dos. 4, f. 369.

¹⁹ A.N.S.J.B.N., fond *Vicariatul Rodnei* dos. 1148/1915, f. 16.

blackberry leaves and others. Such an example is the letter to school headmasters, namely the priests in the case of confessional schools, which demanded them that schoolchildren, under the supervision of the teacher or parents, gather „blackberry leaves” and dry them according to instruction in order to prepare tea for the soldiers. Likewise, they were asked to pick the cocoons (*gubacs*) that are used in the textile industry to manufacture leather. The cocoons represented the „acorn shell or the chestnut shell”²⁰. Such letters were sent annually during the Great War, starting with 1914.

Conclusions

Beyond the trauma suffered during the Great War, children were affected by the deployment of the conflict both at educational and family level. The changes that occurred within families probably affected them most of all. The labor and increasing responsibilities they had to face as a result of the missing male figures within their families put them under tremendous pressure. The lack of proper food due to the growing prices and precarious food resources also had a say in their health status. All these aspects contributed to the premature adulthood of children living in those days. For the people behind the front, the years of conflict were years of sacrifice, marked by numerous requisitions and loans for war, censorship and bickering.²¹ The First World War was a tough and complex reality, which affected especially the inhabitants of the rural environment, which changed the secular rhythms of life, forcing them to accommodate new realities. For Transylvanian Romanians, its effect has been amplified by several factors: on the one hand, discrimination related to their ethnic identity and the impact of the rhythms of daily life and, on the other hand, on dynastic loyalty. and implicitly its intrinsic implications.²²

Through its multiple consequences, the war caused a profound change of the entire society, including the Transylvanian one. For the villages in the Bîrgău valley these changes were visible on all aspects. Under the social aspect, the Romanian society witnessed the urgent need to organize social care institutions by involving the Church, Female Societies, ”Astra”, but also the state authorities, both before 1918 and especially after this date, as the Romanian state showed great concern to the survivors of the heroes who died during the Great War.

²⁰ A.N.S.J.B.N., dos. 1148/1915, f. 12; fund *Oficiul parohial greco-catolic Bistrița Bîrgăului*, dos.2, f.128, 147, 157.

²¹ I. E. Ignat Kisanovici, Participare și mobilizare în Transilvania, în *Primul Război Mondial. Perspective socio-economice și demografice*, Cluj-Napoca, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2015.

²² Maxim (Iuliu-Marius) Morariu, ”Țara Năsăudului”, în *Primul Război Mondial*, vol. 1. Cluj-Napoca, Editura Argonaut, 2018, p. 15.