

The German Propaganda System as a War Tool. The Romanian Case (1916)

Claudiu Sachelarie*

Abstract: *World War I press can be approached from several points of view: journalistic discourse, military censorship analysis, internal and external propaganda and so on. The forms of propaganda were diverse, such as unofficial channels, newspapers, speeches, movies, photos, posters, books, pamphlets, periodicals and even cartoons (used for the first time by the British). The study proposes an analysis of the German propaganda employed by newspapers regarding Romania's declaration of war in 1916. Germany was the only country to consider propaganda as a tool of war even before 1914. At the beginning of the world conflict, a semi-official network disseminating information favorable to the country in other states already existed in Germany and the role of propaganda consisted in raising the morale of the population during the war. The National News Agency and the Wolff Telegraph Bureau (WTB) were financed and controlled by the state.*

Keywords: propaganda, censorship, Wolff Telegraph Bureau, Burgfriede, declaration of war.

Introduction

World War I press can be approached from several angles: journalistic discourse, qualitative and quantitative evolution (statistical method), military censorship analysis, internal and external propaganda,

* Claudiu Sachelarie is a Phd student at Faculty of History, Philosophy and Theology, "Lower Danube" University of Galați, Romania. Fields of interest: war archaeology, military history, heritage. Contact: claudiuth@yahoo.com.

and so on.¹ For each belligerent, the most important and most effective forms of propaganda were directed towards their own population and were based on consensus.² Germany had a coercive and unidirectional approach to propaganda that ended with being controlled by the military.³ The Great War is the first conflict in which belligerent governments have deliberately set up propaganda organizations to control the flow of information centered on their own people, to neutral countries and especially to adversaries. It is the first time propaganda became a very important battle tool for both conflicting parties.⁴

Propaganda forms are diverse, such as unofficial channels, newspapers, speeches, movies, photos, posters, books, pamphlets, periodicals and even cartoons (used for the first time by the British).⁵ The first form of government control used by the state was censorship, as it is the most empirical form of propaganda. In the early years of war, the propaganda apparatus of the states involved in the war was simple. The first censorship organizations were created next to the security institutions of the army, which shows that, from the beginning of the war, statesmen considered propaganda a weapon and that is why it had to be treated with all seriousness.

¹ Marian Petcu, *Presa "Anilor de foc": secvențe din jurnalismul primului război mondial*, in: *Revista Hiperboreea*, vol. 1, no. 2, decembrie 2014, p. 168.

² Stephen Badsey, "Propaganda: Media in War Politics", in: Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer and Bill Nasson (eds.), *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, Berlin, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, 2014, p. 1.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

German propaganda in 1914 - 1916

In Germany, newspapers were considered a key source of information for enemies.⁶ That is why censorship focused on removing all the information that could be useful to the enemy. They were forbidden from publishing blueprints or chess schemes. Advertisements were also censored (between 6,000 and 8,000 advertisements per day).⁷ These measures have been taken to ensure that encoded messages could not be transmitted via the press.

The historiography of this topic focused most on the study of propaganda and the media in Great Britain, Germany, the United States of America and France. Stephen Badsey believes that the most effective war propaganda apparatus, finally recognized by opponents (including Hitler), belonged to the British (“Wellington House”).⁸

Germany was the only country to consider propaganda as a tool of war even before 1914. At the beginning of the conflict, a semi-official network disseminating information favorable to the country in other states already existed in Germany and the role of propaganda was to raise the morale of the population during the war.⁹ The *Wolff Telegraph Bureau* (*WTB*, “National News Agency”) was funded and controlled by the state. All German newspapers took official news from the *WTB*. This has relieved

⁶ Florian Altenhöner, “Press/Journalism (Germany)”, in: Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer and Bill Nasson (eds.), *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, Berlin, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, 2014, p. 1.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

⁸ Stephen Badsey, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-6.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

the control of the German press, as the information passing through the *WTB* filter was validated, without the need for further control. Therefore, we find that German press articles on the domestic or foreign situation of the country start with the disclaimer that the following news is information taken from the *WTB*.¹⁰ Most of the time, they were repeated in all newspapers throughout the country. The only freedom of German journalists, if we can call it that, was the way they articulated the meaning of words to produce an empathic effect on the content of articles in order to strengthen the conclusions sent from the center. Due to this information flow management structure, there was no opposition or defeatist press in Germany.

In August 1914, “Section IIIb” or *Nachrichtenabteilung* (“News Section”), a censorship, public opinion and internal propaganda structure, was created. “Section IIIb” worked alongside the Military High Command. The role of “Section IIIb” grew in importance from 1917 when it was taken over by General Erich Ludendorff.¹¹ For a stricter control of public opinion in the country, Ludendorff even created an army press service (*Deutsche Kriegsnachrichtendienst*), which directly informed the population without using the already existing press. Ludendorff had the unfulfilled ambition to create a propaganda ministry.¹² In October 1914, a foreign agency headquarters was established, called the *Zentrallstelle für Auslandsdienst* or the “Erzberger Agency” (named after its director, Matthias Erzberger) and

¹⁰ Florian Altenhöner, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹¹ Stephen Badsey, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 9.

it was included within the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The role of this agency was to counter anti-German propaganda.¹³

The German general claimed that the population should be subordinated to the state and that the failure of this policy was an important factor in defeating Germany. The fundamental problem of the failure of German propaganda during the war was the discrepancy between reality and newspaper stories that had announced a defensive and short war. The longer the war, the more the population became aware that the authorities manipulated the information published in the newspaper. There was obviously a decline in credibility in the authorities, which had an important role in the collapse of the 1918 internal front.¹⁴ Erich Ludendorff claimed that the inner front was hypnotized by enemy propaganda like a rabbit by a snake. The hypothesis that propaganda was the enemy's decisive weapon and that the Germans did not use it so efficiently was a popular theme in the 1920s, contributing to the creation of “back-stabbing myth”.¹⁵

In 1914, the German press was the main source of information for the population. German newspapers numbered over 4,200 titles. The increasing number of newspapers in Germany reflects, on the one hand, the growing number of educated citizens and, on the other hand, the polarization of society¹⁶. The outbreak of the war was the end of the free press before 1914. On 31 July 1914, the Emperor of Germany, Wilhelm II decreed the state of war in the country. As a result, military commanders

¹³ Stephen Badsey, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹⁴ Florian Altenhöner, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

¹⁶ Florian Altenhöner, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

took over executive powers and the freedom of the word was suppressed.¹⁷ The central theme of German propaganda was the *Burgfriede* (“Internal Armistice”), which stated the idea that the enemies had triggered the war against them. That is why German society has to put aside internal disputes and fight in a just war.¹⁸

Romania’s declaration of war in the German press, August 1916

In the summer of 1916, the German press took over from *WTB* the news that Romania declared war on Austria-Hungary. On Sunday, 27 August 27 1916, at eight o'clock and fifty minutes in the evening, Romania declares war on the Austro-Hungarian state through a written note sent by the Romanian Foreign Minister. From the following day, numerous articles on the front page of German newspapers were published on this subject, including in *Coburger Zeitung*, *Flörsheimer Zeitung*, *Darmstädter Zeitung*, *Freiburger Zeitung*, *Jenaer Volksblatt*, *Jenaische Zeitung*, *Rhön Zeitung*, *Rosenheimer Anzeiger*, *Volkszeitung*, *Bonner Zeitung* and others.

Some newspapers in the Reich simply signaled out the moment of Romania's entry into war, but some of them revealed the country's political-military and social-economic situation, as observed by German journalists. In some articles, Romania's declaration of war against Austria-Hungary is treated in a singular manner and in others it is treated together with the Italian war declaration against Germany. Numerous daily newspapers

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

announce on the front page that Romania declared war against Austria-Hungary, taking over the official report of the *WTB*.¹⁹ Other newspapers, like the ones below, feature the event with more detailed information, thus creating the image of the new enemy.

In what follows, we present some samples of the impression left to the Germans on Romania's entry into war on the Entente side. *Freiburger Zeitung* newspaper provides the best analysis about the Romanian foreign policy:

*The Romanians provide, on the one hand, a Machiavellian policy, a model of Realpolitik of exemplary sobriety in the Balkans, and on the other hand, they present a mixture of Slav, Greek, and Romanic obedience, giving their politics an odd oriental charm.*²⁰

¹⁹ ***, *Kriegszustand zwischen Italien un Deutschland und Rumänien und Oesterreich. Rumäniens Kriegserklärung an Oesterreich-Ungarn*, in *Coburger Zeitung*, no. 202, Tuesday, 29 august 1916, year 55, p. 1 see also *Rumänien erklärt Oesterreich-Ungarn den Krieg! Italien erklärt Deutschland den Krieg! Deutschland erklärt Rumänien den Krieg! in Flörshheimer Zeitung*, no. 101, Tuesday, 29 august 1916, an 20, p.1; *Rumäniens Kriegserklärung an Oesterreich-Ungarn in Darmstädter Zeitung: amtliches Organ der Hessischen Landesregierung*, Darmstadt, No. 201, Monday, 28 August 1916, Year 140, p. 1372; *Kriegserklärung Italiens u. Rumäniens. Italien erklärt Deutschland, Rumänien Oesterreich-Ungarn den Krieg in Freiburger Zeitung*, no. 234, Morgenblatt, Year 133, Monday, 28. August 1916, p. 1; *Rumänien erklärt Oesterreich-Ungarn den Krieg in Hochheimer Stadtanzeiger, Amtliches Organ der Stadt Hochheim a. M.*, no. 101, Monday, den 28 August 1916, Year 10, p. 2; *Zwei neue Kriegserklärungen Rumänien gegen Oesterreich-Ungarn in Jenaer Volksblatt, Organ der Fortschrittlichen Volkspartei des 3. Weimerischen Reichstagsmahlkreises*, no. 202, Tuesday, 29. August 1916, Year 27, p. 1; *Neueste Nachricht (Amtlich.) in Rhön Zeitung*, no. 201, Monday 28 August 1916, Year 25, p. 3; *Rumänien erklärt Oesterreich-Ungarn den krieg in Volkszeitung, Organ zur Wahrung der Interessen des gesamten werktätigen Volkes*, no. 201, Monday, den 28 August 1916, Year 11, p. 1; *Kriegserklärung Rumäniens an Oesterreich-Ungarn Italiens an Deutschland in Bonner Zeitung*, no. 287, Monday 28 august 1916, year 25, p. 1.

²⁰ ***, *Zur Kriegserklärung Rumäniens*, in *Freiburger Zeitung*, no. 234, Abendblatt, Year 133, Monday, 28. August 1916, p. 1. [Die Rumänen sind die Machiavellisten des Balkans, Realpolitiker von vorbildlicher Nüchternheit, alglatt Liebenswürdig nach allen Seiten, dann wieder zugeknöpft und zurüchaltend nach der einen, am der anderen zu gefallen. Slawische

Bratianu's expectant policy and benevolent profit-making neutrality created the image of a Machiavellian strategy that was admired by the Germans, who were experts at this type of politics, for whom they even invented a term, *Realpolitik* (politics whose artisan had been Bismarck). But the Romanian policy recipe included some other ingredients, such as Balkan oblivion, which gave it an oriental specificity. The newspaper *Freiburger Zeitung* broadly analyzes the intentions of Romanians in the Great War, presenting to German readers the characteristics of the Romanian foreign policy in prewar years: the policy of "the ends justify the means" was successfully tested by Romania during the Balkan war; the German journalist accused the Entente that, through propaganda, finance and espionage, she managed to draw the country on her side, but kept from mentioning the efforts of Germany and Austria-Hungary, which used the same means for the same purpose.

When the world war erupted, Romania faced difficult decisions that it has postponed until now. The country has been relieved of the suffering caused by the war and is one of those neutral states that have gathered great profits from the war. The last Balkan wars meant important diplomatic training for Romania. Romanian politicians have learned to control their impatience and to use their forces at the right time. The army intervened in the Balkan conflict only when the Romanians were sure the balance would lean in their favor. Thus Romania acquired Southern Dobruja without losing a man. As a result, the confidence of Romanians in their own power increased extraordinarily. Now Romania is doing the same thing. The nation's leading statesmen have kept neutrality to observe the course of the war and will then make a decision on whose side they will enter the war, obviously on the winning side. During this time, Romania will earn millions and millions of

Unterwürsigkeit, griechische Schlaueit und romanisches Feuer geben ihrer Politik ein Gepräge von seltsamem orientalischen Reiz.].

profits. Premature intervention in the war would have affected the country that would have been treated as a simple object of compensation in the peace negotiations in case Romania would be in the camp of the defeated. The Entente attempts by Russian, English, French and Italian spies and with the help of rubles, pounds and francs attracted Romania on its side by creating an artificial state of mind against the Central Powers. This is not difficult to achieve because Romanians are mostly Francophiles. Romanians read the press in Paris, creating empathy for France; thus, the war is seen through the French glasses.

Just as in the case of Italy, foreign agents employed propaganda in Romania, by arguing that the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy would break up and that the former territories would each revert to the mother nations. The key to the door behind which the Romanian ideals are hidden is in the hands of Russia, alluding to the military operations in Galicia. The Russians being victorious on the Galician front, the Romanians are urged to enter the war on the Entente side. Romania has to defend a 1500 km front. Romania's military force is too small and soon will have the fate of the other two Balkan countries (Serbia and Montenegro, nn) who opposed the Central Powers. Romania's geo-strategic position at the border with Austria-Hungary is unfavorable to the former. It passes through the steep, wooded ridges, reaching 2500 m heights in some places. The Romanians, led by General Garescu, are aware that they cannot cope with such a front alone. That is why a concerted effort is needed: the continuation of the Russian offensive in Galicia, the initiation of action in Thessaloniki and Russian military support in Dobrogea. From an economic point of view, Romania is more dependent on the Central Powers since the Dardanelles belong to them.

The Romanian army can count on a force of 100,000 soldiers. The army is rested and fresh and undoubtedly represents an increase in the power of the Entente. If it will be effective remains to be seen. Romanians will have to show now what they can against us.²¹

The article also presents some statistical data on Romania: "the surface of the country expanded with 7726 square kilometers in 1913; 7.5 million inhabitants; The population lives predominantly in the rural area, 81.6%; it has four major cities, Bucharest, Iasi, Braila and Galati; Between 1914 and 1915 imports from Germany accounted for 7.08% and

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 1-3.

Austria-Hungary for 14% of the total; For the same period, exports to Germany accounted for 40.3% and for Austria-Hungary 23.42% of total exports"²².

The newspaper *Jenaische* produces as follows:

*Sunday evening, Romania lifted its veil and entered the war on the side of our enemies. Romania played a double game with great subtlety. A few days ago, the Sofia Declaration was made, stating that the Bulgarian-Romanian relations were not worrying. If the Romanians believe they surprised the Central Powers, they are wrong.*²³

Rosenheimer Anzeiger on Tuesday, 29 August, headlines:

*So even Romania needs to help the British and the Russians increase the number of our enemies. It is also not surprising. When Italy declared war, it was expected that Romania would go in the same direction. The money of the British and the Russians attracted Romania on their side. Now Russia will start the march through the Romanian territory. Bulgaria is ready, even against its enemies in the north.*²⁴

²² *Ibidem*, p.3.

²³ ***, *Kriegserklärung Italiens an Deutschland, Rumäniens an Oesterreich-Ungarn*, in *Jenaische Zeitung*, no. 202, Tuesday, 29 August, Year 243, p. 1. [Am Sonntag abend hat nun auch Rumänien die Schleier gelüftet und ist auf die Seite unserer Feinde getreten. Rumänien hat sein Doppelspiel mit grosser Verschlagenheit durchgeführt, das muss ihm neidlos zuerkannt werden, noch vor wenigen Tagen wurde in Sofia erklärt, die bulgarisch-rumänischen Beziehungen seien nicht besorgniserregend. Wenn aber die Rumänen glauben sollten, die Mittelmächte zu überraschen, so irren sie sich].

²⁴ ***, w.t., in *Rosenheimer Anzeiger*, no. 199, Tuesday, 29 August 1916, Year 62, p. 2. [Also auch Rumänien hat den Engländern und Russen zuliebe mithelfen müssen, die Zahl unserer Feinde zu vermehren. Wie seinerzeit Italien, so richtet jetzt auch Rumänien seine Kriegserklärung an Oesterreich-Ungarn. Wie sie gedacht ist, darüber kann kein Zweifel herrschen. Im Grunde genommen, kommt sie auch nicht besonders überraschen. Als die Kriegserklärung Italiens an Deutschland bekannt wurde, ist fast allgemein schon damit gerechnet worden, dass nunmehr auch Rumänien den gleichen Kriegspfad gehen werde. Die englische hetze, ads britische Geld und der russische Drud haben Rumänien für die Entente verpflichtet. Nun, wir können den Folgen dieses Schrittes ebenfalls mit Ruhe und Entschlossenheit entgegensehen. Russland wird den Durchmarsch durch das rumänische Gebiet beginnen; die Bulgaren werden sicherlich nicht zögern, den hieb mit Wucht und

Romania is accused by the *Jenaische* newspaper of having a duplicitous policy, but the declaration of war did not surprise the Central Powers because Bratianu's political conduct was well-known. *Rosenheimer Anzeiger* highlights the same idea of the Entente propaganda that managed to attract Romania on its side and on this occasion the whole region mobilizes for war. *Rosenheimer Anzeiger* on Wednesday, 30 August 1916, published the following content on Romania's entry into war:

Germany declared war on Romania following the attack on Austria-Hungary. Germany is determined to respond adequately to threats to its allies. After three decades of alliance, Romania shamefully broke the contract with the Central Powers. In the German Empire, there is unanimity about what must happen. Germany is on the side of its allies for good and for bad. Bulgarians and Turks will also do the same".²⁵ "The Entente made the most extensive promises to attract Romania on its side: part of Bessarabia, Transylvania, even parts of Banat. All this deserves a military ride!"²⁶

Rosenheimer Anzeiger emphasizes Romania's inexplicable attitude towards the Central Powers. After thirty years of military alliance with beneficial economic effects for Romania, the Bucharest government decides to break it as a result of the Entente's vain promises. Until yesterday, a reliable ally of Germany, Romania became a country that betrayed the trust of former friends and, worse, craved the territories of its most powerful ally. The Germans'

kraft zu parieren. Erst jüngst haben wir aus dem Munde des bulgarischen Ministerpräsidenten vernommen: Bulgarien ist gerüstet, auch gegen seine Feinde vom Norden.]

²⁵ ***, "Deutschland kriegserklärung an Rumänien. Zum krieg mit Rumänien", in: *Rosenheimer Anzeiger*, no. 200, Mittwoch, 30 August 1916, Year 62, p. 1.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 2. [...ist das nicht alles zusammen einen militärischen Spaziergang wert !]

frustration is evident in their encouragement for the punishment of the former ally.

It is expected that the first step of the opponents will be a Russian march through Dobruja against Bulgaria. The next goal is then to defeat Austria-Hungary with the help of the new mercenary. Therefore, the Romanians will feel the horrors of the war in their country. The King of the Romanians is a character that does not have to be envied. Now, on the Balkan Peninsula, a life-and-death battle begins.

The Central Powers (Mittelmächte) face a new military task, but have full confidence in our allies. If the Romanians think that they will only fight against Austria-Hungary, as was the case with Italy, they think wrong. We are loyal to our allies and we will engage with all our forces. The Romanian army is at the border and military events are expected to begin.

With Romania's entry into war, the Entente gained a new ally and additional power. The Romanian army can count on 500,000 soldiers, but the most efficient part consists of around 80,000 men. This increase in Entente strength should not be underestimated. The Romanian War Declaration against Austria-Hungary has no justification other than greed. It is an attempted robbery of the neighbouring Empire. The intention of the surprise attack is proved by the following fact: even from Saturday night to Sunday, Bratianu gave peace assurances to Austria. He says to Czernin: I can, I want and I will maintain neutrality, the Crown Council will demonstrate it.

As far as the reasons why Romania declared war on Austria-Hungary, they will be revealed shortly. Romania has recently complained about the oppression of Romanians in Hungary. How ridiculous and wrong this excuse is can be demonstrated by the total lack of rights of the Romanians in Bessarabia.

The Romanian government was more pernicious than the Italian one. Romania entered the war without prior notice, had an alliance with us for more than 30 years, and the last renewal took place in 1912 during the turbulence in the Balkans.²⁷

Propaganda had to build through various elements, whether true, unverified, or false, an enemy of a former friend. The criteria that make up

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

the image of a friendly Romania disappear and those who turn it into a country that must be punished are introduced. Elements such as the justification of a conflict through greed, the intent to steal from the neighbour, the lack of chivalry and even the cowardice of Romania when it declared war on Austria-Hungary make up the character of the classic enemy.

The *Volkszeitung* newspaper of August 29, 1916, continues to point out the new enemy, adding that Romania has started a war of conquest. With the country entering the war on the side of the Entente, the Central Powers lost access to her food and oil resources. It also added to the military force of Romania that could not be underestimated and which would require the Central Powers to allocate divisions from other theaters of operations.

Italy and Romania are in an open war of conquest".²⁸ "Both strive to expand their territory to the detriment of Austria-Hungary. Both would not need to enter the war, both are politically and militarily in the role of attacker. Romania's entry into war means the deployment of 500,000 soldiers at the border, the elimination of Romanian supplies of food and oil to the Central Powers. Bulgaria's declaration of war against Romania appears as a result of the behavior of the government in Bucharest."²⁹

The same daily published on August 30 the following article:

All the newspapers in Paris are enthusiastic about Romania's entry into the war. From a military point of view, the intervention of the Romanian army

²⁸ ***, "Die letzten kriegserklärungen", in: *Volkszeitung, Organ zur Wahrung der Interessen des gesamten werktätigen Volkes*, no. 202, Tuesday, den 29 August 1916, Year 11, p. 1. [Wie Italien, so führt auch Rumänien einen ausgesprochenen Eroberungskrieg.].

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p.1.

complicates the situation of the Central Powers, which is already disturbed by the allied offensive from Macedonia. Another blow to the Central Powers is the economic blockade set up by Romania by ceasing the export of cereals and oil. The Italian press agency Stefani reported on 29 August that a demonstration of sympathy is being held in front of the Romanian Embassy in Rome. A delegation of the Ginta Latina association and representatives of the press were received by the Romanian ambassador, Prince Ghika. There have been similar sympathy manifestations in other cities in Italy.³⁰

Conclusion

From German newspapers it appears that the Germans were surprised by Romania's act on 27 August, although other sources, even internal, contradict them. For example, Karl Helfferich (former delegate on financial matters from Germany at the international conference in Bucharest in 1913, then between 1916 - 1917 secretary of the German Treasury) mentions that as early as the middle of August 1916, rumours in Bucharest indicated the inclination of Romania towards the Entente.³¹ The attitude of the German media towards Romania is judicious and consistent with the German view of the Romanians, as evidenced by German memoirs as well. Romania was considered to be, on the one hand, an Oriental country because of corruption, disorder, dubious and indecisive policy and, on the other hand, it was a Western country due to modernization tendencies in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Press articles had to validate the Germans' expectations towards the new enemy and strengthen internal cohesion.

³⁰ ***, w.t., in *Volkszeitung, Organ zur Wahrung der Interessen des gesamten werktätigen Volkes*, no. 203, Tuesday, den 30 August 1916, Year 11, p. 1.

³¹ Karl Helfferich, *Der Weltkrieg. Vom Kriegsausbruch bis zum uneingeschränkten U-Bootkrieg*, vol. 2, Ullstein&Co, Berlin, 1919, pp. 104-105.

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