

CENSORSHIP IN TRANSYLVANIA DURING FIRST WORLD WAR: CORRESPONDENCE OVERVIEW*

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ABSTRACT: *WORLD WAR I LED TO THE FIRST STEPS TAKEN BY THE AUTHORITIES. ONE OF THEM WAS THE INTRODUCTION OF CENSORSHIP. WE CAN TALK ABOUT CENSORSHIP OF THE PRESS, TELEGRAPH ETC., BUT NOW WE'LL TALK ABOUT CENSORSHIP OF THE CORRESPONDENCE IN TRANSYLVANIA. ALTHOUGH WE'LL BE FOCUSING ON THE ORGANIZATION OF THE COMMISSIONS FOR CENSORSHIP, WE'LL ALSO TALK ABOUT CORRESPONDENCE AND ANALYSES HOW IT HAS AFFECTED COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THOSE WHO WERE AT HOME AND THOSE WHO WERE ON THE FRONT. EVEN IF A NECESSARY MEASURE IN WAR TIME, HOW WAS IMPOSED HAD LEFT AN IMPRINT ON THOSE WHO CORRESPONDED, INFLUENCING THE MENTALITY OF THE POPULATION.*

KEY WORDS: FIRST WORLD WAR, TRANSYLVANIA, CENSORSHIP, CORRESPONDENCE.

INTRODUCTION

First World War is a very present topic in historiography, approaching mainly military and political subjects, the economical, demographical and social being in expansion. Censorship is a topic that is present in some studies but mostly related to communism, the period after Second World War or contemporarily events. When it comes to combine censorship and First World War in the same research, there aren't so many writers that have stopped to analyses them together. That's one of the reasons I decided to make a short analyses of the way that censorship during First World War had influenced peoples life. I'll start with an overview of the organization of the Censorship Commissions then I'll continue with the analyses of some letters from the County Department of National Archives Cluj-Napoca. I choose correspondence as first step in analyses censorship during First World War, because it was the most direct way of communication between home and the front, between beloved ones, and censorship had contaminated it. Trough letters, both soldiers and those from home, were supposed to talk to each other about their problems, feelings, sadness or joy, but my conclusion was that in fact none of this had happened. As I'll show in this article, people weren't allowed to say the truth, although there could have been some situations in which the truth concurred the message what they supposed to transmitted, which was only good things and happiness.

Censorship is a negative form of propaganda and is always an instrument used by authorities. It is a process of banning the circulation of information, ideas or opinions that do

* This research was made possible through financial support provided by the "Minerva - Cooperation career elite doctoral and postdoctoral research" Contract Code: POSDRU / 159 / 1.5 / S / 137832, co-financed by the European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013.

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not agree auditor or the company represents that censor.¹ Originally censorship was created by the Church and didn't have a pejorative meaning, as nowadays.² Later has changed its meaning, receiving a negative value and sometimes came to be misused.

Wartime censorship was, and still is currently used to prevent the enemy to find out information about military operations, but also to prevent its own soldiers and citizens to find out news that could demoralize them. The morale is very important both for the army and the entire population to achieve victory.³

Once the outbreak of First World War, came into effect the press censorship, the control of post, telegraph and telephone communications.⁴ Now was the time when censorship became legitimate and, more than that, it becomes directly subordinate to the Army. Civil censorship turned into military censorship and thus became much tougher than before.

On 14 July 1914 was introduced censorship. Newspapers were forbidden to publish any information about the war and even less about the preparations which were made in the army.⁵ On 25 July 1914 it was gave the Order on restriction and supervision of telegraph and telephone communications, and established procedures for the creation of the Commission's censorship of telegrams in 12 cities, Budapest being the city responsible for Transylvania. Also now have been empowered the state institutions Police and Prefecture, with control of external postal correspondence.⁶ On 27 July 1914 the War Control Service was set up in Vienna, having as President Field Marshal Leopold Edler von Schleyer. This service has jurisdiction in the territory of the whole Empire.⁷

Management of the post and telegraph office from Cluj announce based on the Order of Minister of Commerce Nr. 59807 of August 4, 1914, that "camp post offices" had started work since that time, and that sending telegrams or telephone calls to soldiers who had left to the camp was strictly forbidden.⁸

One of the censorship's aims was preserving the positive morale of those at home, very important to ease the burden of State efforts to achieve victory.⁹ We must not forget that soldier's morale was very important to get the coveted victory in this war. Censorship helped for this purpose too. Press, letters and any information reached those who were fighting on the front was previously censored, to stop transmitting any demoralizing information which could lead to possible desertions or other actions contrary to the mission that soldiers had.

Since 17 September 1914, was allowed to send or receive parcels from Austria and from 1 October it was permitted the exchange of letters with Germany. From 13 October were

¹ Richard Shambert, *Propaganda* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1939); 120.

² Marian Petcu, „Cenzura în românia” in *Cenzura în spațiul cultural românesc*, ed.: Marian Petcu (Bucharest Comunicare.ro, 2005); 15.

³ Richard Shambert, *Propaganda*, 120.

⁴ Zoltan Szász, „L'époque des sociétés nationales bourgeoises” in *Histoire de la Transylvanie*, ed. Béla Köpeczi (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1992); 599; Paul Brusznowski, *Reforma constituțională din Biserica Ortodoxă a Transilvaniei între 1850-1925*(Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujană, 2007); 148; Ferenc Póloskei, „The Crisis Period of the Dual Monarchy (1890-1918)” in *The Hungarian State. Thousand Years in Europe*, ed. András Gergely, Gábor Máthé (Budapest: Korona, 2000); 246.

⁵ *Olteanul, foaie săptămânală, socială, culturală și economică*, Făgăraș, 1914, No. 29.

⁶ Dan-Simion Grecu, „Cenzura corespondenței poștale în spațiul românesc (1914-1946)” in *Cenzura în spațiul românesc*, 373.

⁷ Grecu, *Cenzura corespondenței poștale în spațiul românesc*, 373

⁸ *Olteanul*, 1914, No. 30.

⁹ Mark Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary. The Battle for Hearts and Minds* (London, New York: Macmillan, St. Martin's Press, 2000); 26.

received in the domestic traffic simple and parcel delivery, 20 kg, printed. As regards external traffic were allowed parcels to Romania, Switzerland, Bulgaria, Germany etc.¹⁰

Three days later, all letters for abroad had to be submitted open at the post offices for censorship, except official letters and letters addressed to the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which could be sent closed. These conditions were also valid for parcels, but in this case it was not allowed to contain any entry or any written statement and they were closing in the front of the postal office employees, like letters did.¹¹

Postal censorship offices were subordinate to headquarters from military regions of the Empire. Regarding Transylvania, Bureau of Sighetul Marmației belonged to Military Command VI Kassa and Bistrita, Brasov, Cluj, Năsăud, Prundu Bârgăului and Târgu Mureș belonged to military command XII Sibiu.¹²

Initially, Postal Censorship Bureaus were called "Military Commissions Censorship" (Militarzensurkommission) and since 8 November 1916 changed their name into "Offices or Posts of Censorship" (Zensurstellen). Their running time varied, some have worked throughout the war and others were active in the shorter term. Regarding the periods of operation of these offices in Transylvania, we have the following information: Bistrița censorship office functioned from November 1915 to October 1917, Cluj from January 1917 to August 1918, Năsăud from July 1915 to August 1917 at Târgu Mureș from December 1917 to October 1918. Brașov office of censorship began its operations in August 1914, working steadily until August 28 to 29, 1916 when the Romanian army entered and occupied the city. It has relocated to Cluj, where worked from September to November 1916 and censored correspondence for residents of Cluj, Târgu Mureș, and Abrud. Since December 1916 is reinstalled in Brașov, but for January to October 1917 this office lacks specific stamps, which led to the assumption of a suspension of activity. Information about the censorship office reappears in November 1917 then it has probably resumed and remained in operation until September 1918.¹³

In late summer of 1916 on August 14, it amended the decree on the state of curfew. Since that moment, police were empowered with searches including editorial and cinemas, have the right to "censor the press and any publications, [having the right to prevent any newspaper or publication, or only occurrence of certain news or articles]", and have the right to verify the correspondence, both the domestic and foreign, and have a duty to keep those telegrams or letters that they will see unfit to reach the recipient.¹⁴

During World War I Austro-Hungarian censorship was under military rule, as mentioned above, but was implemented by different bodies. From July to October 1914 postal censorship was carried out by police, after this period the police continued to censor the correspondence, random, especially people residing compulsory boarding or considered suspect under police surveillance. Transylvanian police dealt with censorship especially in the period 1916-1917.¹⁵ Probably deals especially with those suspected of collaborating with the enemy, with Romania.

Police censorship had carried out a high level of efficacy. Then was the establishment of the Verification Commission for mailing (Überprüfungskommissionen für Briefsendungen, UK). These commissions were created in 21 cities of the monarchy, Brașov and Timișoara being among them.¹⁶

¹⁰ Călin Marinescu, *Cenzura poștală militară în România 1914-1918 (Cenzura corespondenței civile)* (Bucharest: Medro, 2004); 242.

¹¹ Marinescu, *Cenzura poștală militară*, 243.

¹² Marinescu, *Cenzura poștală militară*, 244.

¹³ Marinescu, *Cenzura poștală militară*, 245- 246.

¹⁴ Marian Petcu, „Cenzura în România”, 46

¹⁵ Călin Marinescu, *Cenzura poștală militară*, 248.

¹⁶ Dan Simion Grecu, „Cenzura corespondenței poștale”, 373.

Then comes the censorship applied by the military authorities. In this case, there are several steps. The first began in October 1914 lasted until the end of February 1915 and was more a period of adjustment. The local military units were busy organizing military postal censorship office, equipping them with what was necessary and selection of military personnel, auditors etc. With the ending of this period, until the beginning of November 1916, the instructions related to censorship were very strict.¹⁷

The next stage begins on the date of November 8, 1916 when censorship of the internal correspondence was abolished, except in war zones and major postal centers in the vicinity of these areas, where censorship continued sporadically throughout 1917 and 1918, before the breakup of the Austro-Hungary. However, prior censorship of newspapers remained until November 1918.¹⁸

Regarding foreign postal censorship, on October 5, 1914, it was issued a decree which establishes 21 "verification commission for mailing (letters)" for the entire Empire. Correspondence addressed, arrived or just in transit through Transylvania was censored in Braşov, Timişoara, and Budapest. Braşov was censoring most of the correspondence between Austro-Hungary and Romania, between Bulgaria and Austria-Hungary, which transit through Romania; Timişoara was censoring some correspondence of Romania and Austria-Hungary with the Balkan countries and Turkey. Finally, in Budapest it was censored correspondence sent from the central areas of Hungary in Romania and arrived in Banat and Transylvania from Western European countries.¹⁹

On 7 November 1916 the Ministry of Commerce issued a decree to be censored correspondence with Germany and the occupied areas of Poland, Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania. On November 15 same year, it was established that all the correspondence with non-German countries to be censored in four centers: Vienna, Teschen, Budapest and Feldkirch; packages were controlled at Vienna, Bodenbach, and Feldkirch; and for censoring telegrams were established 12 committees throughout the empire, of which the Banat and Transylvania responsible for was located in Budapest.²⁰ External packages were censored in 16 offices in Austria and 4 in Hungary; the center responsible for the censorship in Transylvania was Braşov.²¹ As far as we know, the things remain the same till the end of the war.

Regarding the organization of the Censoring offices, these are the main information we have. Unfortunately, there is no information, or just didn't find them yet, about what exactly censors did. What kind of information they cut out from correspondence or media, we do not know. We have only some letters that get to their recipient and a few who were stopped by the Censoring Commissions to get to their final destination.

Getting to this point, after I've seen some of those letters, a couple of thousands, I can say that the information that is transmitted through them isn't that surprising. If we talk about the ones that were totally censored, meaning seized, then we can notice a predominating of the information from war prisoners, mainly from Russia and Italy. These men were writing about their situation in the camps they were detained. Some of them were saying that they are "alive and healthy"²² in Russia and advise them "not to be worried"²³ for them. Others were saying that are prisoners in Italy and they were healthy and very well there. They were describing what they had there "we are in barracks and we have beds and mattresses and clothes and food we

¹⁷ Călin Marinescu, *Cenzura poştală militară*, 248.

¹⁸ Marinescu, *Cenzura poştală militară*

¹⁹ Marinescu, *Cenzura poştală militară*

²⁰ Marinescu, *Cenzura poştală militară*, 249-250; Dan Simion Grecu, „Cenzura corespondenţei poştale, 374.

²¹ Marinescu, *Cenzura poştală militară*, 250.

²² Direcţia Judeţeană Cluj a Arhivelor Naţionale, Fond Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial. (National Archives Cluj County, Fond Letters from WWI.), 226.

²³ Direcţia Judeţeană Cluj a Arhivelor Naţionale, Fond Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial, 226.

acquire enough”²⁴. Others were talking about the fact that they were put to work but still are pretty well and do not lack anything.²⁵ These descriptions show that it wasn’t that bad to be a war prisoner, maybe even better than to be a soldier, at least for some of them. So, if this information gets to their families, most likely won’t stop there. People talk, and in those times war and loved ones were the main subjects they talked about. And if this kind of information spread among soldiers, they might choose to desert. First they’ll be demoralized thinking that their comrades are having a better life as being prisoners, meaning they didn’t have to fight anymore, to kill or waiting to be killed, suffering of cold, hunger different disease etc. I think, all those who were fighting unwillingly were waiting for any reason to desert and this could be one. Because authorities were afraid not to increase the number of desertions, they tried to stop any way of getting any information that could give the idea of a better life in prisoner camps than tranches.

There are some letters from families who were totally censored, meaning they were stopped to get to the destination. Usually those talk about how hard is life at home. Some of them say that are suffering a lot for the husband who had left for going to war,²⁶ that the corn is weak,²⁷ or that it’s cold and they are weak²⁸. This information might be considered dangerous by the censors because it may be understood as a subtle request of coming home. If those who are in tranches find out that their wife, children, parents are having a difficult life, a lot of problems etc. without them, it’s possible that their filings for the family to overcome the war duty or the loyalty to the Emperor. In this case probably they would be tempted to desert, or if they decided to remain in tranches they’ll lose their focus, become negligent and easier to defeat by the enemy. So, probably this could be a good enough reason to censor those letters. There’s always a “but”, and in this case it’s about why are some letters with similar content were allowed to get to the addressee. We have a letter in which the wife is complaining about how her father-in-law was asking her to pay for the help he give it to her with the household, and their son did not listen to her, doing only what he likes.²⁹ It’s clear that it’s nothing good about the life she has without her husband, and this might make him wanting coming back to her as soon as possible, but it seems that still get to destination without being censored. Unfortunately, we can’t explain this kind of situations, how decided censors what to stop and what not to stop.

There are a few letters that did pass through censorship but slipped unnoticed, I think. I say that because we have an example of a wounded soldier, who wrote home from a hospital saying that he saw lame and unhealed men going back to war, regretting that he couldn’t stay there any longer and transmitting to acquaintance not to rush leaving from there “as today nowhere is as good as there (meaning in hospital)”³⁰. So this is instigation to avoiding as much as possible, going back to war for those who can prolong their stay in the hospital. Another soldier wrote about some young men from Bistrița, a city from Transylvania, and some acquaintances which have desert to Romania, mentioning that it's not the first time he hears news about someone deserting.³¹ Again, I think it’s surprising that this information wasn’t cut out, or the letter destroyed, because it could increase the desertion among soldiers if and when they find out that there are many other men who succeeded escaping in Romania. But, as before, we don’t know how was possible that these letters to pass through censorship without being stopped.

²⁴ Direcția Județeană Cluj a Arhivelor Naționale, Fond Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial, 226.

²⁵ Direcția Județeană Cluj a Arhivelor Naționale, Fond Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial, 226.

²⁶ Direcția Județeană Cluj a Arhivelor Naționale, Fond Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial, 228

²⁷ Direcția Județeană Cluj a Arhivelor Naționale, Fond Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial, 548.

²⁸ Direcția Județeană Cluj a Arhivelor Naționale, Fond Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial, 228.

²⁹ Direcția Județeană Cluj a Arhivelor Naționale, Fond Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial, 551.

³⁰ Direcția Județeană Cluj a Arhivelor Naționale, Fond Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial, 245.

³¹ Direcția Județeană Cluj a Arhivelor Naționale, Fond Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial, 548.

The communication between soldiers and their families wasn't always easy. Some of the letters get to the addressee with missing words or phrases which have been cut out literally or just being blacken so couldn't be read.³² This happened when censors considered those words inappropriate because of their meaning. In this case, it's hard to give an example because there are much too many letters like that and unfortunately I can't guess what words were there so it's difficult to know why were censored. We know only that they were important, those words were considered a threat to the authorities, otherwise why had to be censored? Then there are the letters that never got to their destination. In this case, we have two situations. First, we have the letters that were censored; a couple of them still exist, kept in archives, as I mentioned a few earlier, but not all. And then are the ones that were lost for different reasons. Anyway, the main idea is that a lot of the letters exchanged between soldiers and beloved ones didn't get to their addressee. This affirmation it's supported by a lot of letters in which the sender mention that he, the soldier, or they, the family, send a lot of letters and didn't receive any answer, or that haven't receive any letter for a very long time, things that worries all of them.

Then we have the letters that did get to their addresses and transmitted a message. Mostly the messages were wrapped in short positive personal information. I think I'm not exaggerating if I'm saying that some of them were written after a template or just written by the same man. This affirmation is sustained by the letters I have seen till now. A lot of them started with "I'm healthy/we are healthy, wishing God gives you the same health"³³ or "I'm alive and fully healthy wishing you health"³⁴. Many other say the same thing using almost exactly the same words, probably 80-90%.³⁵ I think it's kind of difficult to be just a coincidence. It's hard that people that are miles away from each other, born in different places with different habits, to use the same words. Even people living in the same house usually do not use exactly the same type of words. I think that maybe in these cases the writers were told what to write by their superiors or priests, people who had a great influence on them, or there was a man who wrote the letters for most of his colleagues. When it come to the letters send from home, it might be the influence of the priests or the schoolteacher.

Information transmitted by this letters is related to the household, of course, written by the families of those who were left to war. Usually, they inform the householder how things were going in his absence. Some of them talk about how they mowing the rye or not mowing the wheat and about how they handle with the cattle.³⁶ Mostly they say they are fine, that they can handle by themselves and him, the soldier didn't need to worry about them. Related to this kind of letters, we can say that either is fake, meaning not telling the truth, either is real and those people are having a nice life. We can't ignore the first possibility because it's not impossible that some families care so much about their husband, son, brother, father that they feel the need to lie to him for his own good, without having to think about the problems that were at home. The other way around it's also possible, meaning the soldier felt the need to lie to his family because did not want to burden them with his dreadful life. In these cases, there was no need for the censors to apply their filter on the letters.

In conclusion, I think that censorship in First World War in Transylvania was harsh enough to create a situation of misinformed people regarding their beloved ones. Correspondence exchanged during this period was under a strict surveillance of the authorities through their Censorship Commissions and the authorized bodies. Although, during this war

³² Direcția Județeană Cluj a Arhivelor Naționale, Fond Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial, 260, 550.

³³ Direcția Județeană Cluj a Arhivelor Naționale, Fond Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial, 550.

³⁴ Direcția Județeană Cluj a Arhivelor Naționale, Fond Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial, 550

³⁵ Direcția Județeană Cluj a Arhivelor Naționale, Fond Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial, 245, 233, 548, 521.

³⁶ Direcția Județeană Cluj a Arhivelor Naționale, Fond Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial, 230.

November 2015

the organization wasn't constant and it fluctuated with changing the front line and with prolonging the war, censorship was always present everywhere. People learned to live with it and didn't have a choice but to accept it. This is just a small part of a research in progress, which intends to find out more about what have mean censorship in First World War in Transylvania. I hope this scrap of research made you became more interested in the subject.

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