

A BOOK WITH PEOPLE AND ABOUT PEOPLE¹

Maria Alexandra Pantea, *Relatări din primul război mondial prezentate în presa ecleziastică din Banat (Tales from the First World War in the Banat Ecclesiastical Press)* (București: Tritonic, 2017), ISBN 978-606-749-218-7, 302 pp.

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First and foremost, before being a book, *Relatări din primul război mondial prezentate în presa ecleziastică din Banat (Tales from the First World War in the Banat Ecclesiastical Press)* approaches the intended context in a double manner: World War I and 100 years of modern Romania. Both events familiarized us with the *Great History*. Maria Pantea emerges as an individual author from the 'macro' celebratory strata, and she suggests an intended 'deflection' from the canons, a digression within the *Minor history*, perceives as vibrant and important as the History itself, written in capital letters, this time focusing on the *human side*, meaning on *individual destinies*. Maria Pantea *writes through individualization, implicitly using case studies*, extracting the details and the specifics, meaning the ordinary individual who can share his feelings and life experiences within the press, thus connecting the readers with his proper intimacy. The result is a collection, i.e. a group of testimonies extracted from the press, specifically from the Orthodox and Greek-catholic press, resulting a balanced and impartial vision. Therefore, at a first glance, the book presents two original features, furthermore including another characteristic: the author's favourite topic is the *historical Banat*. Focusing on there-enactment and a genuine *act of restitution in integrum*, Maria Pantea's volume lays its foundations on subjective grounds while the press reports are true confessions: 'Unlike others existing documents, the reports of the Banat's ecclesiastical press highlight the drama of the Great War. They bring into the present the emotion and the sufferings of the Romanian family and reflect the events that radically changed the society.' (p. 11)

Paradoxically, but maybe not unintentionally, Maria Pantea, History Ph. D., gets closer to the philological aspects than the historical features because the usage of the terms *report* and *narration* are genuine proofs reminding of the larger narration field. No matter what the nature of the press report, the *fictional aspect is missing*, meaning the narrative 'frame' lays its foundations on the *bare reality* as the main topic of the texts, as the reader of the Third Millennium, can discover now, at Centenary. The evocative tone is present throughout the volume. For Maria Pantea, *The First World War becomes a main character* that seizes, influence, breaks or ends destinies. It is a war created by

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people, with people and a rough and atrocious reality that makes human selections, seen as a matter of life or death. You either survive the war or you do not. Hence, the volume emphasizes an *anthropological aspect* too, focusing on the individual. The war confessions are the people's inner visions, their pains and their direct involvement, either they had fought on the frontline or suffered behind the lines. Like an octopus, the war grabbed all the people in its tentacles and turned them into captives. The confessions of this volume, perceived as a *small treaty of anthropology*, represent true confessions of the *written memory* that is imperative to be brought back to life and channelled through studies and analyzes. Therefore the research potential is extremely complex; the archives abound in documents waiting to be discovered and fully investigated: 'Last night we arrived in Przemysl, where we searched for a long-desired rest to escape the exhausting fatigue. Our clothes tore, and our beards were so long that we were ashamed to show our faces in the town, although we were so starving. True savages! I realize this is war, you can't deal with it. This is our fate now, I wonder if it's luck or bad luck, to remain in this famous fortress of the town, and defend it. It is a blessing for us to have found a roof to stay under, because we didn't have one till now, while wandering through the wild old forests, and we were so glad when an open plain showed in front of us because the enemy couldn't attack us by surprise. The cannon fire is terrific. A man's soul cannot get used to it. We mock at the rifle's fire, following the cannon's fire. [...] The corpses really touch your soul; the moans and groans truly terrify you, especially in the evenings, after the ceasefire; you can hear the screams and we are truly frightened. In the evenings, after the restlessness of the war, one can feel sympathy for the injured ones because we simply don't have time during the day to feel anything.' (pp. 29-30 – a frontline letter written by professor Avram Sădean to Roman Ciorogariu, principal of the Pedagogical-Theological Institute, dated September 21st, 1914, printed in "The Yearbook of the Orthodox Pedagogical-Theological Institute of Arad, 1914/1915 school year").

The foundations of Maria Pantea's volume, a *sum of voices*, rely on *truthfulness* and *authenticity*. The narrated war (some reports seem to be clipped from quality novels) is a brutal and cruel reality that tears apart or destroys paradigms, subsequently implementing a new foundation that deeply operates within the social corpus, beyond the linguistic artifices, the metaphors and the figures of speech. Some wounds never heal: 'Dear parents, dad and mum! You do remember the day I left. I can never forget it... The enlistment order has arrived at dawn on Saturday. I was past the vegetable gardens, mowing the meadow. The sun has just risen. The dewy grass spreads a sweet fragrance. The scythe's blade runs before me with a high pitch. I feel agile and happy. The morning breeze blows gently over my face, like a charmed rain. I was singing. A crested lark kept circling me, jumping over the furrows. The golden light of the sun floats over the village. Every now and then, at the end of the trail, I stop and sharpen the blade, grabbing with my left hand the scythe's snaith. That day, I don't know why, but the sound of the sharpening seemed so dear to me, so I said:

- My dearest scythe, you are a holly tool for me! You are both useful for my work and soothing for my soul. You work and sing at the same time. You bring me profit and you bring light into my soul, too. You are such a God's blessing tool! ... [...]

While resting on my scythe, I pricked up my ears to the village. It seemed that in Constantin Diacului's yard ten people died. Aunt Mary was choking in cries and hiccups. I could hear her loud and clear. She cried for John...

Then, dear mum, when I saw you coming to the meadow, I raised my back, wiped my scythe's blade and I came to meet you. You came to call me to the administration. You also cried, as if I were dead. You could barely say to me:

- Sandu, it came! ...

I knew what just came in: the letter from the emperor. The battle was going to begin.' (pp. 42-43) (The letter of corporal Alexander, dated September 10th, 1914, printed in 'The Calendar on Year 1915 after Christ').

Relatări din primul război mondial prezentate în presa ecleziastică din Banat (Tales from the First World War in the Banat Ecclesiastical Press) shows an authentic *coagulant-recovered feature*. Maria Pantea uses the opposite of the abstract and places history outside the dull patterns of textbook dates and numbers and out of the sterile area of reports and statistics. The book impresses and has a *strong emotionally impact*, with emphasis on emotions and on the voluptuousness of the individual or collective dramas. The volume's importance surpasses the history and is relevant for journalism, sociology, culture, philosophy, psychology, politics, military, etc.

To set up the whole war scene, Maria Pantea firstly presents some synthetic observations in the introductory part, followed by case studies extracted from the ecclesiastical press of those times, with a significant call to the written memory. First, the author emphasizes the war's drama that most people considers as fate (seen as an 'accident' on history's timeline, but also a destiny fracture), emerging as an endless topic of history, and consequently, she justifies the selected topic: the ecclesiastical press was less censored than the political press where the hostility against the political authorities was more present. The volume's context reveals the multiple role of the ecclesiastical press as a mirror reflecting the changes of the Romanian society, as the loudspeaker of the Church, both for the literati or commoners (hence the unity in diversity), as the communicational, informational and popularization vector and as the custodian of specific linguistic expressions or writing patterns (hence the philological significance), all aspects used for boosting the soldiers' spirit and the level of individual and collective consciousness. The idea of patriotism with all its features adds to the above-mentioned characteristics: 'Every man is a hero! We must weep 'cause many heroic deeds, paid with the life of those heroes, are forgotten, unseen or unremarked in the rush of the battle.' (pp. 58-59) (Excerpt printed in 'The Calendar on Year 1916 after Christ').

The author extracts several reports printed by various ecclesiastical periodicals: 'The Priests Magazine' [„Revista preoților”], 'The Bishopric's Paper' [„Foaia Diecezană”], 'Official Paper' [„Foaie Oficioasă”], 'The Life's Way' [„Calea Vieții”], 'The Church and the School' [„Biserica și Școala”], 'The Arad's Orthodox Pedagogical - Theological Institute Year Book' [„Anuarul Institutului Pedagogic-Teologic Ortodox din Arad”], 'Official Paper of Lugoj Diocese' [„Foaie Oficioasă a Diecezei Lugojului”], 'The Romanian's Calendar' [„Calendarul Românului”]. Also, the people's voice is present in year books and folk calendars. Either Orthodox or Greek-catholic, the periodicals state the official position of the

Church. The usage of the Romanian language proves the existence of the Romanian ecclesiastical press during the First World War, also known as the war of nations. Using the comparative style, balancing the facts (essential qualities of a true researcher) and offering a *panoramic view*, Maria Pantea observes and points out both the differences between the Orthodox and Greek-catholic press and the ratio between war and the social and political reality. At the beginning of the war, the two Churches disapproved the Romania's entry in conflict, later radically switching to a different opinion that fervently defended the national interest.

Relatări din primul război mondial prezentate în presa ecleziastică din Banat (Tales from the First World War in the Banat Ecclesiastical Press) reveals the dramatic changes of the world, compelled to face a major global CRISIS. An essential component of the press, the ecclesiastic press plays the role of a 'seismograph'. Both soldiers, as well as their families back home, completely trusted the ecclesiastical press with its lexical charm, the informative articles abundance and highlights on the people's way of being and thinking during the war. The World War I ecclesiastical press, both Orthodox and Greek-catholic, shaped the adequate state of mind to counterbalance the major inequities. Furthermore, the *religiousness* and the faith in God are constant ideas and constitute the irrefutable reality of those difficult times, when, both the combatants from the trenches and the afflicted civilians feel the need for a spiritual shelter more than ever: 'The prayer book is the soldier's dearest book in the front line. All the letters ask for prayer books and talk about the good and merciful God. The smallness of a human being in front of the Mighty God is emphasised especially during the great perils and dangers.' (p. 153) (Excerpt from 'The Church and the School', September 12th, 1915). The *solidarity of suffering* really touches our souls.

Relatări din primul război mondial prezentate în presa ecleziastică din Banat (Tales from the First World War in the Banat Ecclesiastical Press) has a double value: the classical *documentary meaning*, and an affective connotation reinforced by the *testamentary value* of some reports (we relate here to the last reports of those courageous soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice, reflected in the usage of the linguistic expression: 'he died as a hero'). Maria Pantea's volume includes two types of reports: the official reports (official releases, statistical reports, necrologies, the Church's donation lists for helping the soldiers, articles about brave decorated heroes, portraits of personalities) and personal 'informal' reports (including the war letters, the reflections and the narrations told and retold and finally published in the ecclesiastical press). It is a melange of narrative styles, where the literary language merges with the common folk language with its linguistic charm and attractive features. Alongside the war heroes, the toponyms are also included as places where History was written, where battles took place and where heroic deeds happened, altogether perceived as sacrifice-related toponyms, i.e. Ljig, Krakow, Olkus, Votbrom, Censtohovo, Galicia, Przemysl, Bieł, Antwerpen, Mitrovica, Prague, Ivangorod, Volhinia. It is extremely useful that the author evokes and maps the selected toponyms, thus achieving three objectives: firstly, to accomplish any researcher's moral duty; secondly, to mentally re-enact the battle scenes and finally, to bring back to life the war scenery. The main characters include both adults as well as children perceived as heroes because heroism do not

only apply to the grown-ups (i.e. *A Romanian Hero of 12 Years Old*), an attribute that increases faith in victory and the responsibility of a common cause. The importance of role models is undeniable.

Actually, *Relatări din primul război mondial prezentate în presa ecleziastică din Banat* is a textbook (*Tales from the First World War in the Banat Ecclesiastical Press*) with the following moral connotation: the historical connexions, the respect and appreciation for our ancestors make us who we are, it is our identity card. We own to our ancestors a part of our defined identity, meaning the individual and collective personality. It is not a coincidence that remarks about Thomas Carlyle, a well-known and famous writer, add more value to the volume: ‘The heroism, said the same Carlyle, is that divine bond that always links the great man with the common individual. In Christianity, God’s creation shapes the heroism that merges the great man with the others. It is not a divinization of the man, but a real divinization revealed by God-Christ in the souls of the believers.’ (p. 119)

Maria Pantea brings an original note by exploring a quite unknown territory, meaning the direct confessions. *Relatări din primul război mondial prezentate în presa ecleziastică din Banat* (*Tales from the First World War in the Banat Ecclesiastical Press*) is a book with people and about people, a book about winners and losers, about broken or fulfilled destinies. The book touches people’s consciousness. The volume links to the harsh war reality and underlines the role of the press, i.e. the ecclesiastical press, where information (i.e. accurate information favours the people’s interest or manipulative information that misleads them) can make a difference between to be or not to be: ‘The ecclesiastic press had an important role for the Romanians in Banat region because it presented war events.’ (p. 12) or ‘[...] during the war, the ecclesiastic press had an important role and reflected the changes of the Romanian society in the most accurate way. Reading the ecclesiastical press, one can identify the articles reflecting subjects’ loyalty for the emperor and for the politicians, as well as emotional articles emphasising the drama of the Romanian society. The Banat’s ecclesiastical press, with the printed periodicals in Arad, Caransebeş and Lugoj, reveals the official position of the Church and the Romanian literati, as well as the ordinary people’s attitude, including the drama of the Great War.’ (p. 13)

Sometimes, the reports’ picaresque or adventurous characteristics wrap the main characters in a legendary aura. The heroes bring and give life, awakening the reader from apathy and lethargy. Their heroic deeds play a mentor’s role. *Relatări din primul război mondial prezentate în presa ecleziastică din Banat* (*Tales from the First World War in the Banat Ecclesiastical Press*) is a *must-have* for including numerous aspects such as: the active role of the military priests, the praising reports regarding the bravery of the Romanian awarded soldiers, the religious sermons for the troops or the reports of the foreign press about the Romanian battle zones. The highly glorified profile of the peasant-soldier presents an equal importance: ‘I command a company in captain’s battalion... Most of the soldiers are Romanians. I’m happy to live among these men, who, by the way, show me the same enthusiasm, and I am not only their commander, but their doctor and friend, too. My goal was to reinforce the militant, patriotic and comradely spirit, and, at same time, to strengthen the good and peaceful relations and national harmony, and I fully accomplished my mission!

[...] Their behaviour is exemplary, and their patience and perseverance is really miraculous!' (Excerpt from 'The Priests Magazine', August 16th/29th, 1915).

The war is perceived as the *ultimate exam* and the supreme maturity test. The chosen people, men who pleased God, are the ones who pass such tests with flying colours, crowned with laurels, honoured by their heroic deeds and celebrated as true heroes. They and only they deserve our gratitude, respect and endless love. '[...] you go to war now, you have to pass an exam to prove your maturity 'cause you didn't study in vain till now, so go and do what you're trained for: defeat your enemy, defend your country, the women, the children, the disabled ones, your homes, the graves of your ancestors, the buildings, the churches, our crucifixes, defend all we cherish. This task is not for today or for tomorrow but is for the next decades or hundreds of years. Not only your leaders, your families left home, the children, the elders, and all the people who ask you to defend them, but also the future offspring, the ancestors from their graves, even angels and God look upon you... As the Apostle, you can say «We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings».

You are summoned to carry out this task now. It's a difficult task, not to mention its struggles. How can a man accomplish such a difficult task for himself, his home or his family, but accomplish it for next decades and hundreds of years? It is a hard work, but if you are worthy to accomplish it, you are also worthy to endure all the efforts. So, these pains must not trouble you and you must be proud for being amid the worthy ones whose names are written in the book of life, the book of future. You're amid the chosen ones and your name will be uttered till the end of our country and nation, as we utter the names of the Holy Apostles and the names of all God's chosen.' (p. 221) (Nicolae Brânzeu, Greek-Catholic priest, wrote this letter to his brother, printed in 'The Way of Life', no. 2, February 1st, 1916.) Inspiring words, enormous self-sacrifice!

¹ An earlier version of this material was published in *Învierrea*, Timișoara, XXIX/76 (610), (October 2018), pp. 9-12.