

THE COMMUNIST VILLAGE HALL BETWEEN POLITICAL PROPAGANDA AND CULTURAL WORK. RESEARCH PROJECT

Răzvan POPA¹

Abstract: *This article aims at presenting the research theme of a doctoral thesis, based on the study of communist propaganda in the Romanian rural environment, realized through the main instrument (but also place) of the communist ideology in the rural world, at least theoretically, the village hall (in Romanian language, “cămin cultural”) had a well-thought-out role by the Communists in the propaganda mechanisms used at national level, a role stipulated by law.*

Keywords: *village hall, propaganda, cultural work, political work.*

1. The Importance of Propaganda for Totalitarian Regimes

Propaganda is one of the key issues in totalitarianism, regardless of the political doctrine assumed by a certain regime, because it offers the population an official ideology to adhere to. Propaganda has the ultimate goal of indoctrinating the population so that it can assimilate its official state policy, with any form of opposition being denied and removed (Arendt, 2014, pp. 424-480). Totalitarian regimes have used propaganda, giving it a special role because it has seen the power of influence of the propaganda act on the masses. Politologists and theorists of the study of totalitarianism considered that propaganda is a valuable tool, because a totalitarian political regime wants the total membership of the population to official ideology without any form of opposition (Raportul Final, 2006, pp. 16-17).

2. The Current State of Village Hall Research

Propaganda is a very broad theme in the bibliography, being among the historians, but also by sociologists or psychologists, a reference theme especially for the second half of the 20th century. Jaques Ellul, a sociologist and political scientist, is the starting point in any study on propaganda with *Propagandes*, published in Paris in 1962, a work that depicts the social impact of propaganda.

From a historical point of view, we have to relate to a classic work for the study of propaganda in general and the propaganda of the communist regime in particular, *The*

¹ „Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, razvan.popa@ulbsibiu.ro

Birth of Propaganda State. Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization 1917-1925 (Routledge, London, 1985), in which Peter Kenez presents the basis of Bolshevik propaganda during the early years of the communist regime, a fundamental stage in the construction of the new Soviet society. In view of the fact that the Soviet model was largely applied in Eastern Europe, Kenez's work became a landmark for the entire communist space.

In Romanian historiography appeared, especially after 2000, a series of papers that investigated propaganda from Romania in the light of the information available at that time. The works are of a general nature, trying to portray propaganda without entering much in a certain aspect of the propaganda act. One of the first papers on the study of communist propaganda in Romania, with an overview of the propaganda action in Romania for the first years of the regime, is Eugen Denize. Tiberiu Troncotă tried to focus on the side adjacent to propaganda, censorship, while Cristian Vasile investigated the policies pursued by the communist regime, presenting the costs, the human and material involvement of the regime in the attempt to make official propaganda and culture, costly and long effort for the Romanian Communists. Last but not least, Oana Ilie approached the propaganda focusing on her classification, realizing a qualitative approach to propaganda as a social-political phenomenon by trying to present her real impact on the Romanian people.

The village hall as part of propaganda is a topic little researched at this time. It is worth mentioning Anne White with the work *De-stalinization and the House of Culture*, (1990, Routledge, London). The author presents the evolution of cultural homes in the USSR, Poland and Hungary, crossing a long period from Stalin to the perestroika of the years 1985-1990. In Romania, the village hall as an institution was studied especially for the interwar period by studies such as those of Raluca Muşat (Muşat, in *New Europe College-Yearbook 2012-2013*, 2013, pp.149-180) or Antonio Momoc. The communist propaganda within the village halls was partly studied by Cristina Diac, who presented a series of articles on the theoretical organization of the village halls supervisor organisations within the local and central party structures.

3. The Village Hall: Concept, Appearance and Role

The village halls appeared in Europe at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Especially in central and eastern Europe, these institutions “founded by local elites have attempted to transform the peasant village as a whole” (Muşat, in *International Conference of the European Rural History Organisation. Conference Programme. Abstracts of all Panels and Papers*, 2013, p.96).

The village hall has been developing in the Romanian space since the third decade of the 20th century, from the need to raise the cultural and intellectual level of the rural world. The promoter of the Romanian village hall (in Romanian language, *cămin cultural*) in interwar Romania was the sociologist Dimitrie Gusti, who can be considered founder and even theoretician of village hall institution in Romania. The village hall tried to raise the level of the world of villages by focusing on “four cultures”: health, work, mind and soul. It was obvious the role Gusti wanted. The activity was diverse, ranging from literacy courses to technical courses in the field of agriculture to artistic activities, songs and dances, but at the same time the image of King Carol II was increasingly highlighted, a positive image of the king, under the guise of a so-called “national education for the king, nation and homeland” (Momoc, 2012, p. 156).

We will not insist on the propaganda made for Carol II, but we will focus on the role of the village halls within the communist dictatorship, formally established since 1948.

4. The Communist Village Hall

Propaganda has been a particularly important element for the Communists since the seizure of full power since August 23, 1944, but especially after the establishment of the government of Petru Groza on March 6, 1945, because the Communists came to power on an unpopular fund, their party having a very small popularity (Boia, 2016, pp. 22-38). The Party has tried as much as possible to attract popular masses, so they have set in motion a complex propaganda apparatus that has gradually developed its force of impact with society with the Communists seizing power. If, in 1944, the main propaganda instrument and the cheapest was the press, with the spearhead of the *Scântea* daily paper, after taking full power, propaganda was acting in a complex way, on multiple channels, general press, a press dedicated to a segment of the population, radio, field work of party activists, publishers, publications, friendship associations, but also cultural homes, all transformed into instruments of communist propaganda, all following a model already applied in the Soviet Union (Denize, 2009, pp. 37-51).

In 1948, Romania was a predominantly rural country. In this situation, the Communists tried to use the village halls as a tool of approach, manipulation and indoctrination of the peasant masses. Thus, the village hall has found a well-established place in the communist institutional apparatus and also in the propaganda.

5. Institutional Framing of the Village Hall in Communist Regime

Legal, the Village Halls were incorporated into the Ministry of the Arts and Information, organized in June 1948 (Official Bulletin no. 131, Law 62, 1948) and reorganized since 1949, renamed the Ministry of the Arts, consisting of a number of departments such as the Press Department, the Theater and Music Department, the Radio Broadcasting Directorate Department, etc. The village hall as an institution was subordinated to the Department of Cultural Settlements. In 1949 there were at the Ministry of the Arts, after reorganization a total of 10 departments (Ilie, 2014, p. 73). These directions-departments were responsible for overseeing cultural forms of any kind, facilitating propaganda, and overseeing excessive use of censorship on any form of cultural and artistic expression, eliminating anything that did not match with the construction of realistic socialism.

The department that hierarchically controlled the village hall had an extensive role stipulated clearly in the Ministry of the Arts and Information's organizational decree: "The Department of Cultural Settlements has as its object of activity:

1. Coordination and guidance of actions to remove fascist and chauvinistic ideology and propaganda in public and cultural life;
2. Coordination and guidance of the information and documentation activities on the achievements of the popular democracy;
3. Guiding and conducting the activities of cultural associations, foundations, athenians and cultural homes;
4. organizing and coordinating the action of clarifying the achievements of the popular masses through competitions and cultural activities;

5. the guidance and organization of popular libraries" (Ilie, 2014. p. 71)

The Department of Cultural Settlements was responsible for: „Guiding and conducting the activities of cultural associations, foundations, athenaeums and cultural homes from entire contry”.

Among the prerogatives of the Ministry of the Arts, we mention some tasks such as: control, guidance and coordination of cultural societies, cultural establishments and foundations, publishing houses and libraries.

Thus, the clear line of legal organization of the institution of the cultural center within the ministerial structures is observed, by its assignment to the prerogatives of the Department of Cultural Settlements (Official Bulletin no. 131, Law 62, 1948).

The official attributions of the Department of Cultural Settlements show that the regime sought to have a tutelary position in this direction for any form of cultural manifestation, for increased control and active propaganda. The cultural home becomes a well-established element in the long chain of the communist propaganda apparatus.

6. Control Organizations for the Village Halls

The Communists made a habit of doubling the state apparatus and the party apparatus, so that the village hall area was not only controlled by the Department of Cultural Settlements, but also by The Propaganda and Agitation Section from the Party.

The Propaganda and Agitation Section (SPA) was created in August 28, 1944 and reorganized successively in the years to come. The section had since January 1945 a country-level conference where its organization was organized at national and regional level, but also at county and local level. The territorial structure of the SPA respects the sectoral template at national level. The SPA's sections were run by committees that were responsible for the section, the Central Committee of the Party. In 1950 the SPA had the following sectors: 1. Party propaganda; 2. Mass political agitation; 3. Public education; 4. Central Press; 5. Local media; 6. Mass cultural work; 7. Literature and art; 8. Editorials; 9. Sports; 10. Radio; 11. Records of cadres; 12. Technical. From an organizational point of view, the village hall as an institution enters in the duties of the 6th sector, that of the mass cultural work, which received the clear directive "to control the execution of the party's decisions in the activity of cultural homes, libraries and artistic cultural teams" (Ilie, 2014, pp. 75-78).

The obsessive word „control” that appears in many attributions of the SPA sectors or in the Directions (Departments) of the Ministry of the Arts shows the factual situation and the total control of the communists in the field of cultural and artistic activity.

Locally, the home was hierarchically subordinated to People's Council. The standard management of a village hall was provided by the director (usually a representative of the local party organization), a delegate of the People's Council, representatives from party mass organizations such as pioneers, youth or women's organizations, and last but not least representatives of the cultural, scientific and technical institutions in the locality. The managers of the village halls were, at least theoretically, prepared for the position. They had to take a 12-day training course where they were trained on specific topics that the Communists assumed at national level. The party could not leave the village hall at the head of a person who did not understand the class struggle and the social transformations made on the road to building socialism (Denize, 2009, p. 77).

From an organizational point of view, the village hall is at a local level subjected to the People's Council. At the national level, the village hall was integrated into the Department of Cultural Settlements of the Ministry of the Arts and within the SPA through the control of the Mass cultural work sector. As a result of the first national congress dedicated to village halls problems, in March 1950, the SPA organizes a committee dedicated to cultural homes. As the party line was more important than the ministerial line, the Committee of Cultural Settlements within the SPA controlled all the organizational hierarchy of cultural homes. The Committee aimed to „intensify the struggle for the cultural rise of the working class in towns and villages” (Diac, 2012, p. 142). This committee had to supervise the observance of the role of the village hall and its functional characteristics established according to the regulation of the organization of village hall, regulation with a national status.

7. Activities in the Village Hall Portfolio

The Congress dedicate to the village halls from 1950 laid down a regulation setting out the institutional features of the communist village hall: "1. village hall and reading houses are cultural and educational institutions of People's Council that aim to raise the political level of the masses; 2. village hall and reading homes are institutions for the development of education started in schools; 3. village hall and reading houses are addressed to poor and middle-class peasants, progressive workers and intellectuals; 4. village hall have the task to clarify and popularize the work of the government, to educate the masses in the spirit of love for the USSR, to popularize science, technology, sport and competitions and competitions of any kind" (Ilie, 2014, pp. 96-97).

Starting from the characteristics of the institution of the rural village hall, the regime set the fundamental roles of this cultural institution exposed by a pompous definition which implied that the primary purpose of the village hall was the development of culture in villages areas: "village halls are those cultural institutions meant to carry on the work started in the school for raising the cultural level and for the realization of a new concept, actively contributing to the building of a new society, the socialist society ". In order to emphasize that the institution of the village hall has a role in cultural upheaval, the regulation of the organization of village hall from all contry establishes four fundamental roles for the institution of village hall, starting from the above definition.

In the vision of the regulation "the village hall should have the following roles: 1. centre of organizing the cultural-educational work; 2. a propagator of the USSR's achievements with ARLUS (*Romanian Association for Ties with the Soviet Union*), in order to use the given example of the experience of Soviet comrades at a high cultural level; 3. the active factor of agitation in the villages, in the spirit of the class struggle and in the spirit of the revolutionary momentum; 4. element of scientific lifting of the popular progressive masses" (Ilie, 2014, p. 94).

A dual aspect of the village hall has emerged. It contributed to raising the artistic and intellectual level of the villages, but at the same time it became an instrument of propaganda. Why the Communists needed to use the village hall as a propaganda tool? The answer comes from the country's demographic and economic situation since the beginning of the communist regime. Romania was still an agrarian country with a low intellectual level, many peasants being even illiterate. The Romanian peasant was a major topic of communist propaganda, especially in the early years of the regime. From this

point of view the village hall has fallen very well in the communists' plans to propaganda in rural areas, at least at the level of planning, as the Romanian village hall became a first-rate instrument of communist propaganda in a rural and backward Romania, far from the communist ideal of the socialism with emancipated and collectivist peasant. Starting from the four roles described above, the village hall had to combine through its activities the political work and propagandistic purpose of the Communists, with the cultural and scientific work that wanted to raise the cultural level of the villages in order to put the shoulder to the construction of a new socialist peasantry. Thus, in the village hall there are so-called "cultural plans" (Radu, 2015, pp. 229-252) that organize activities with a distinct themes, such as artistic cultural programs, dance evenings or songs, but also activities with technical-cooperative purpose. At the same time, the village hall within the cultural plan had to perform a sustained political work while respecting the role of popularizing the work of the government, the party and educating the masses in the spirit of love for the USSR. This will result in a mix between political work and cultural work. This trend is given by a high level, since in the SPA, the main body of propaganda will be reached from 1955 to a shift between the sectors of political work and the mass cultural sectors. This sector was particularly important in the SPA and was driven by top nomenclatureists (Ionescu Gura, 2006, pp. 9-12). The emergence of a common sector within the SPA clearly shows the Party's tendency to bring both political work and mass cultural work in parallel. This new sector of political and cultural mass work receives an attribution with a direct impact on the role of the culture, that of "implementing the party and government's decisions in the field of club activities, red corners, cultural homes, culture houses, artistic teams and libraries" (Ilie, 2014, p.84). The village hall was transformed into a place of intersection of political work and cultural work carried out by the party in parallel, despite of the aspect inclined towards culture, the main purpose of the activities were political, a propagandistic purpose.

8. Venues of Village Hall Instituion and Cadres

The cultural home had as a milestone the Sunday program and the evening sessions that could take place during the week with a variety of activities, especially in the political field. Ideally, the Communists wanted to reach the notion of „No village without a village hall”, the title even of an article published by the paper *Frontul Plugarilor* in November 1948. The Communists plan to have a village hall in every rural area was hampered by some obstacles. Some counties had fewer villages halls, and in other counties, where existed village halls in each rural area village, the village halls were often poor or not at all, being organized only with names, without any cultural work. There were only 15 counties in the country with village hall in every rural locality (Ilie, 2014, p. 95).

One problem was the permanent logistics and the lack of a well-equipped. The village hall has often been based either in schools or in libraries, even in the city hall. Besides the lack of a proper venues, a big problem was the lack of material for the cultural act. Books were few in libraries, the daily press did not arrive on time in all localities, and radio apparatuses and film projectors were a rarity, although the propaganda discourse displayed a very solid situation for cultural homes throughout the country, *Scântea* and *Frontul Plugarilor* papers, publishing numerous articles (*Frontul Plugarilor*, August 22, 1948) presenting the home as an institution with strong material resources (*Frontul Plugarilor*, January 4, 1950). It is worth mentioning that all the materials used, from

posters to books and from press to movies, were carefully censored by a severe control tool without which it could not be published and produced absolutely nothing during that period, a true censorship institution, the General Directorate of Press and Prints created by decree in 1949 (Official Bulletin, Law 214, 1949). A very interesting aspect that can give rise to a whole research thesis is the study of the staff used by the Communists for the cultural and political work done in the cultural homes.

Certainly the regime used party activists and sympathizers in various doctrinal and political ideology courses. The Communist regime has organized a powerful party education system from its higher forms represented by Ștefan Gheorghiu Academy and Jdanov Higher School, to short courses at local or regional level, with different durations from 6 months to 3 weeks, some of them were organized with evening character. At this point, it is difficult to say what training personnel were sent to work in the village halls, but it is quite difficult to believe that in the village halls, people with superior political training worked, because they had another career to follow in the top structures the party, but rather activists with a minimal degree of training that they often deserved. However, especially for the rural environment, the agitator activist is the standard pattern of the party tasked men with delivering the party's message.

Until now, the research of party education has not entered very deeply into the subject, was studied especially the higher education of the party most popular party activist in the rural areas was a graduate of a three-week school about 20 fundamental themes for the history, ideology, culture and economy of Romania and the party (Ilie, 2014, pp. 137-160). From the research of the training of the cadres there are two large profiles of the party activist, the propagandist and the agitator. Some scholars have found that the propagandist is seen as a party framework with more experience and knowledge than the agitator, which can convey a more complex ideological message.

The Propaganda is associated with those who were training novice activists, becoming agitators, people with little experience and information were used by propaganda only to convey a brief, short message to the public. The agitator was mainly used in areas where the audience culture was low, especially in rural areas. The agitator is channeled according to the situation on a single theme, seeking immediate impact on the public (Ulam, 1998, pp. 120-121). From the point of view of the village halls, the agitator fits better on the propaganda activities in which the village halls was used. Addressing an audience with a limited intellectual but numerous degree, the agitator becomes a primary tool of the rural world (Denize, 2009, p. 59) through his singular, steep message, especially as the propagandist was associated with a narrow circle with a higher degree of education using a complex set of ideas and messages, being at the same time a formative factor in the party education system (Strat, 1999, p. 219).

In relation to the village halls, an unclear role was played by representatives of the SPA's Mass and Cultural Work sector, called cultural mentors (in Romanian language, *îndrumători culturali*). They should have the role of coordinating and supervising the activity within the cultural area, their ultimate goal being to help the cultural rise of the masses, in fact a cultural lifting aiming at the indoctrination and attraction of the masses from the rural world. At this moment, the exact role of the cultural mentors remains an open question that will be elucidated by future research.

9. Message, Techniques and Methods of Propaganda

The village hall becoming the instrument of official party and state propaganda, had to permanently propagate party themes from the top. The agitators have had many propaganda topics, the individual study of those being a subject for ample research theses. Depending on the period and the political, social and economic interests of the regime, they exposed to the public many themes, some of them well-known, such as the war, the 1946 elections, collectivization, the class enemy, but also, national projects such as the Danube - Black Sea canal (Ilie, 2014, p 96).

The message of the activist was transposed by what is called the *wood language*, a standard language used and taken over from the Soviets (Mitea, 2008, p. 12). Wood language is a language that aims to impregnate propaganda in the collective subconscious, with the ultimate goal of manipulating the auditor (Thom, translate, 2014, p.19). However, this language grew hard in a rural environment where there was a population "largely illiterate and less willing to show patience for propagandist work" (Radu, 2016, p. 76).

The techniques and methods of propaganda used on a general level have also been used as a template in the particular case of the village hall. The research of propaganda techniques and methods is particularly extensive and our research will not be able to fully include this area, but we will have to relate to the main means and techniques used in the propaganda act and we will go from a standard classification used by other authors who studied propaganda (see Jaques Ellul, *Propagandes*, A.Colin, Paris, 1962, (translation), *Propaganda: The formation of Mens Attitudes*, Knops, New York 1965, presents the feedback that civil society offers to the political after propaganda. Research is complex, being more a work in the field of sociology and psychology than a historical treatise, is a reference for understanding the propaganda mechanisms that underlie the manipulation of the population by a political regime. The author also proposes a first classification of propaganda. See also Jean Marie Domenach, *Political Propaganda*, (translation), European Institute, Iaşi, 2004, an overall paper about political propaganda as a social mechanism).

After the audience, propaganda can be individual or by group, and by the means used it can be written, visual, audible or mixed using modern audiovisual techniques. Classification may be different depending on the views of those who have studied the propaganda phenomenon in general terms regardless of the regime.

What were the main means and techniques used by the Communists in propaganda within the village halls activities is another question that topic research will seek to answer.

10. Research Perspectives

This review of the role that the Communists expect from the village hall as a propaganda tool is a diverse theme with special perspectives of study. The research aims at answering a series of questions regarding the village hall as an ensemble, institution, human and material resources: What was the cultural home as an institution?; What was the purpose of the village halls in the communist regime at various historical stages of the regime's evolution?; Is there any difference between cultural work and political propaganda work?; What were the methods through which the propaganda message

reached the rural world ?; What were the main messages sent by Communists to the rural world through village halls?; Is there a formal standardized speech or was it adapted from case to case?; Who were the people working in the cultural homes?; What training did have the people working in the village halls?; What material conditions and what were the locations where village halls were operating? Researching these questions will lead to a portrait of the village hall within the communist propaganda.

The study will be based on the research of the existing bibliography, general papers on communist propaganda, written press, and archive research. A very important aspect of the research plan is based on the oral investigation. It will try to use the questionnaire and the interview of persons directly involved in the activity of village halls in the communist period.

The research area was established in the counties forming the Oltenia province. Because the geographic area is large enough, a clear selection of the sample is required. It will consist of exploring the situation of village halls in the most representative 6-8 localities in each of the 5 counties of the historical province, resulting in a number of approximately 30-40 researched localities that can give us an overview of the situation of village halls.

The human sample used for interviews and questionnaires is estimated to be about 3-5 people in these representative communities. Thus, for interviews and questionnaires, we rely on a hypothetical figure of approximately 120-150 people, a sample selected from on-site research in landmarks, interviews that can give us an overview of the role played by the village halls in the communist propaganda apparatus.

The choice of Oltenia is not accidental, because I considered that this region was representative of the rural environment in the communist period, and the ultimate goal is to observe the real influence that the village halls actions had on the population.

The result of this doctoral research, which focuses on the role of the Romanian village halls in the communist propaganda, will be able to contribute with answers to a more complex question about the success or failure of communist propaganda in Romania and its real impact on the Romanian people.

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