

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE CONTRIBUTION OF ASTRA ASSOCIATION TO THE GREAT UNION (1914-1918)

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Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and Culture of Romanian People-ASTRA, founded in 1861, has played a special role from the very beginning in the development of Romanian culture, stimulation and cultivation of the national feeling. Regarded as „[...] *fortress of Romanian solidarity and spirituality*”,¹ in the context of the Austro-Hungarian compromise agreed on, in June 1867, and the limitation of Romanian representativeness, ASTRA Association was considered a „ *shadow government*” for Transylvanian Romanians.² Thanks to its efforts, both at central and local level (through the system of departments and circles, established after 1869),³ ASTRA Association succeeded the great performance of keeping and conserving the Romanian cultural inheritance (between the pages of „Transylvania” magazine, but also in other published volumes, including *Romanian Encyclopedia*, coordinated by Cornel Diaconovici, being considered the first masterpiece which discussed national unity).⁴ In addition, ASTRA Association was preoccupied with teenagers’ education, supporting them through scholarships, creating for them special institutions (like the Central Library, the ASTRA Museum or the Upper Civil School for Girls from Sibiu),⁵ but also informing Romanian peasantry through popular conferences, on agriculture and new machinery, how to obtain maximum productivity or the revaluation of their own work.⁶

Thus, through the action of outlining cultural unity of Romanian folk, ASTRA Association created a road for the national unity from the fall and winter of 1918. Even if over decades, a number of researchers had studied the activity of ASTRA Association, only a few succeeded to catch some details, political, social dimensions, human capital from behind this activity⁷ or the role played in the years of the First World War and in the period prior to the Great Union. Consequently, our approach analysed the principal directions of ASTRA

¹ Pop 2011, p. 7.

² Morariu 2018, p. 109.

³ Groza 2018, p. 364.

⁴ Niculescu 2012; Macavei 2011, pp. 64-67, 73-75.

⁵ Macavei 2011, pp. 13-63.

⁶ Morariu 2018, p. 110.

⁷ Popovici 2015, pp. 51-53.

Association's activity in the years of Great War, beginning with the efforts put in for survival, continuing with the support given to those fighting in the battle or those in suffering, to stop in the end over direct contributions to the act from 1st of December 1918.

The outbreak of the First World War affected the activity of ASTRA Association from various points of view. Because a great number of its members were enrolled in the Austro-Hungarian army and were sent to battlefields, the Central Committee of ASTRA Association, established in a special meeting on 5th of December 1914, decided to end the publishing of „People's Library” and „ASTRA's Library”. Moreover, they decided to reduce the maintenance costs of the library and ASTRA's museum, payment for teaching staff from Upper Civil School for Girls, but also removing the positions: literary secretary, agronomist associate professor, custodian of the museum, library manager.⁸

Between 1914 and 1920, the traditional itinerant general assemblies were suspended (the last general assembly, led by Andrei Bârseanu, took place in Orăștie, on 14th-15th of September 1913), the practice being resumed at the end of conflicts.⁹ Unfortunately, this situation had negative effects over ASTRA's departments which, with few exceptions, have suspended their general assemblies.

At the same time, under the pressure of events, but also because of increasing censorship, a number of ASTRA's publications have reduced their activity. For example, „Transylvania” magazine, the official of ASTRA Association, from 1913 with a monthly frequency, was affected by censorship. If in 1914 were published eight numbers, from 1915 to 1918 were published only two compressed numbers and in 1918 was published only one number, after the Great National Assembly from Alba-Iulia. Beside the activity restriction, what confused the editorial team of „Transylvania” magazine was the enrollment of the editor Octavian C. Tăslăuanu, on 29th of May 1915. Enrolled in the Austro-Hungarian army, he was sent on the Galician front; after three months, he deserted and crossed the mountains in the Romanian Kingdom, from where he returned only in 1919.¹⁰

However, „[...] *the illustrative devotion to the cultural and political cause of the Romanian nation*”,¹¹ was the one which, after the impact of the outbreak of the Great War, partially recovered the activity of ASTRA Association. At the central level, in 1915, Andrei Bârseanu proposed to create an album with all the portraits of Romanian soldiers from the Austro-Hungarian army, fallen on battlefields. In ASTRA's museum was organised a gallery dedicated to great

⁸ Racovițan, Matei 1993, p. 103.

⁹ Macavei 2011a, pp. 50-51.

¹⁰ Racovițan, Matei 1993, p. 228; Bucur 1996, p. 220.

¹¹ Matei 2005, p. 227.

Romanian personalities.¹² Moreover, the same museum (that, despite the hard moments, received a great number of donations) was administered by the cashier Ioan Banciu, with the help of a commission composed of Nicolae Togan, Gavril Precup, Ioan Lupaș and Nicolae Bălan.¹³

The period between 1916 and 1917 recorded a slight revival of cultural activity of ASTRA Association, by resuming its editorial activity of „Transylvania” magazine, appearance of „People’s Library” and „Association’s Calendar”. At the level of departments and circles of ASTRA Association were held 1459 conferences and 549 libraries resumed their activity.¹⁴ In the case of some departments, as Năsăud, were recorded some new registrations (two founding members: Ioan Belciug from Prislop, Octavian Bulbuc from Mintiul Român and two members for life: Iuliu Morariu from Salva and Octavian Mărcușiu from Mititei).¹⁵

The above ideas have provoked a change in ASTRA Association’s strategy, which, beginning with the fall of 1914, oriented to Transylvanian Romanians enrolled in the Austro-Hungarian army, especially to those in suffering. Throughout the conflict, ASTRA Association involved itself in the activity of supporting sick and injured soldiers, its headquarters being transformed into quarantine or care units.

Simultaneously, it was also under consideration the soldier’s spirit, an impressing quantity of Romanian books, booklets, newspapers and magazines were sent to many of the front’s sections or to the Military Hospital.¹⁶ For example, according to a statistic published in the magazine „Transylvania”, just in 1914 were collected 5520 books and Romanian magazines costing 1650 crowns, which were sent to Blaj, Cisnădie, Sibiu, Cluj, Cașovia, Făgăraș, Hațeg, Năsăud, Timișoara, Budapest, Szeged, Brunn, Vienna, Graz, Prague, Sarajevo, Zagreb etc.¹⁷ The quantity of Romanian books sent to the Romanian soldiers was growing continuously, so in 1916 were recorded 22.491 copies¹⁸ and in 1917, in the first half: 6959 copies,¹⁹ and in the second half: 9894 copies.²⁰

Likewise, the main lead of the ASTRA Association had initiated among the population an offertory (where had also participated Antoniu Mocioni, Gheorghe Pop of Băsești, Alexandru Leb, the Bank „Bihoreana” from Oradea),²¹

¹² Matei 1986, pp. 46-47.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 242-243; Morariu 2018, p. 111.

¹⁴ Macavei 2011a, p. 52.

¹⁵ Morariu 2016, p. 88; Morariu 2017, pp. 38-39.

¹⁶ Groza 1987-1988, pp. 352-353.

¹⁷ *Transylvania*, year XLV, no. 10-12, 1914, p. 509.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, year XLVII, no. 1-6, 1916, p. 81.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, year XLVIII, no. 1-6, 1917, p. 95.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, year XLVIII, no. 7-12, 1917, pp. 174-175.

²¹ *Ibidem*, year XLIX, no. 1-12, 1918, pp. 3-4.

and the money was used for editing a prayer book in 10.000 copies, freely given away to the Romanian soldiers from the Austro-Hungarian army.²²

Therefore, through the books, booklets, newspapers and magazines shared on the front or behind it, ASTRA Association had brought the Romanian soldiers relief, a letter from 1915 specifies the fact that „[...] *reading those books, written in an easy style, pleasing and easy to understand was and is for the vulnerable and dying soldiers a blessing and food for thought, not only they were reading, had good fun, so they forgot the suffering and pain acquired in the war, the troubles and the needs from home, but also started to grow in them the need to read more Romanian word*”.²³

An important role in helping the Romanian soldiers from the Austro-Hungarian army was played by the women's reunions, institutions that were gravitating around ASTRA Association. During the war, they organized a great number of events, theatre representations, parties, recitals and the funds collected from these were directed to the Romanian soldiers or to the Red Cross.²⁴ For example, the Reunion of the Women from Sibiu, besides the charity shows, with the money earned from donations, they organised a „nation's kitchen” for the poor citizens.²⁵ The Superior School of Girls of ASTRA Association held a series of lectures about the war's progress, the evolution of different parts of the front and damages caused by it, and the participation fee of one crown was donated to the philanthropic stock of the institution.²⁶

The elementary teachers, but also the Romanian Transylvanian chaplains, that have been in continuous correspondence ASTRA Association, took care of the spiritual growth of the soldiers. Besides officiating religious services, these also took care of sharing the books, the booklets, the newspapers and the magazines received, organized the small libraries in the hospitals where they were assigned and in some soldier's quarters and also implemented a true program of literacy (evidence, in this sense, are the many letters, which requested textbooks and primary books).²⁷

After the efforts of the leaders of Transylvanian Astra that took refuge in the Romanian Kingdom, from 1916, were created a series of national Romanian organizations out of the borders of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy: Octavian C. Tăslăuanu was in charge of organizing the first units of Romanian volunteers, ex-prisoners of Russian army;²⁸ Vasile Lucaciu was involved in the

²² Groza 1987-1988, p. 354; Zaharia 2016, pp. 93-102.

²³ Groza 1987-1988, p. 361.

²⁴ Soroștineanu 2016, p. 59.

²⁵ Soroștineanu 2018, p. 98.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 97-98.

²⁷ Groza 2014, pp. 537-541.

²⁸ Stan 1996, p. 223.

establishment and the organization of the Romanian Legion from Italy,²⁹ and then, as a member of the Romanian Patriotic Mission from the United States of America, he was involved in supporting of the Romanian cause, as well as the formation of a Romanian legion;³⁰ at Odessa, on 2nd of January 1918, was founded the National Committee of Subjugated Romanians from Austro-Hungary, led by Octavian Goga, seconded by Alexandru Lapedatu;³¹ in Paris, on 3rd of October 1918, was established the National Council of Romanian Unity, where Octavian Goga was a vice-president.³² All these organizations, during the last two years of the conflagration, contested maintaining the national integrity of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and sustained the national unity of the Romanians, establishing this way the public international opinion.³³

In the autumn of 1918, in the context of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and the organization of the first national Romanian bodies, even if ASTRA Association didn't resume, officially, the activity, its members were actively involved in the organization of the population, no less than 12 presidents of departments leading the national councils.³⁴ In the context of the convocation of the Great National Assembly in Alba-Iulia, to ASTRA Association were added a number of 12 delegates by right, and these were: Ioan Banciu, Corneliu Bardoși (from Sibiu), Ioan Ghișa (from department of Brad), Ioan Nossa, Petru Tulbure (from department of Bucium), Sever Sălăgean (from department of Ceica), Ioan Perenyi (from department of Crasna), Aurel Muntean, Ioan Irimieș (from department of Huedin), Savu Marta, Augustin Magyar (from department of Oradea), Nicolae Munthiu and Iuliu P. Mureșian (from department of Șimleul Silvaniei).³⁵ At first, the reader could think that after more than half of a century of activity, ASTRA Association was aggrieved, receiving just 12 mandates (representing 0,9 % from the total number of the delegates); but if we look carefully at the names written on the lists of the 1228 delegates (elementary teachers, priests, lawyers or simple peasants), we realize that most of the participants were also members of ASTRA Association.

After the key moment of 1st December 1918, numerous chief members of ASTRA Association found themselves taking part in the structures of the new Romanian national organizations. The president Andrei Bârseanu and the lawyer Teodor Mihali obtained two vice-president positions, and lawyers Caius Brediceanu and Ionel Pop obtained the notary positions in the Great Romanian

²⁹ Tomi 2010, p. 289, 291.

³⁰ Groza 2013, pp. 79-91.

³¹ Lapedatu 1998, p. 8; Șerban 1997, p. 109.

³² Borugă 1999, p. 42.

³³ Șerban 1997, p. 111.

³⁴ Moga 2003, p. 56; Tomoni 2016, p. 267.

³⁵ *Marea Unire*, p. 55; Petroman 2006, p. 55.

Advisory Committee, along with members such as Vasile Suciu, Nicolae Ivan, Nicolae Bălan, Ioan Lupaș, Octavian Goga and Octavian C. Tăslăuanu.³⁶ Within the Diligent Council, Vasile Goldiș, Aurel Vlad, Octavian Goga, Romul Boilă, Ioan Lupaș, Alexandru Rusu, Valer Moldovan, Vasile C. Osvadă, etc., were responsible for the chief president and secretary positions.³⁷ Moreover, members of the ASTRA Association (Vasile Goldiș, Caius Brediceanu) were sided with the delegation which was sent to Bucharest in order to present the decisions of the Great National Assembly from Alba-Iulia to King Ferdinand Ist and to the Romanian government.³⁸ Therefore, taking into account the double membership of these notable people (culture and politics),³⁹ we may draw the conclusion that in the fall and winter of 1918, ASTRA Association was indeed an active presence within the national movement, having made a substantial contribution to the realization of the Romanian national unity.

One detail less discussed by researchers who looked into ASTRA Association's activity is that, since its establishment, there has been a use of the democratic quintessence within its departments. By means of itinerant general assemblies (54 up to the First World War), were successfully created some debate platforms for cultural programs, documents and decisions. Due to these steps, from time to time (that is, once every three years, up until 1924) ASTRA Association's leading heads were chosen.⁴⁰ After that, this practice had been adopted by ASTRA Association's departments and circles. An excellent proof of its use is the collective action which occurred in the fall and winter of 1918, as regards the assigning of delegates for the Great National Assembly in Alba-Iulia (mostly through unanimous vote or through shouts).⁴¹

The last aspect which we would like to discuss is related to the investigation that ASTRA Association made for the quantification of the sacrifices brought by the Romanian population of Transylvania during the Great War. Initiated in 1915, by the president of the history section, Teodor V. Păcățian, based on a questionnaire composed of 50 questions, this was thought as a prove of Romanian loyalty toward the Habsburg Monarchy:⁴² „[...] *The purpose for this idea is to search in circumstances, as the war had begun, the fear was great that the final result would be the unwanted one, the overcoming of the Central Powers and our lives under the Hungarian dominance. We all wanted well, but we were afraid of evil! In the eventuality of these events, we*

³⁶ Iancu 1985, p. 16; Moga 2003, p. 57.

³⁷ Iancu 1985, p. 19; Moga 2003, p. 57.

³⁸ Iancu 1985, p. 16.

³⁹ Moga 2003, p. 57.

⁴⁰ Macavei 2011a, p. 15.

⁴¹ Moga 2012, p. 259.

⁴² Ineoan 2016, pp. 194-195.

wanted to be prepared, gathering all our arguments, all the evidence to show the political opponents in the struggles that we will have to carry with them. As we have done in the past and now, the duty to the homeland, bearing sacrifices for our country, the same way, it is important that our homeland give us national political rights which belong to us".⁴³ The entrance of the Romanian Kingdom in the Great War on the side of Entente, the failed campaign from Transylvania, the inauguration of the „cultural border”, the arrest and deportation of a part of Romanian intellectuals to the West of Hungary,⁴⁴ lead to the delay of the investigation, but also to the modification of the initial questionnaire.⁴⁵

In the summer of 1921, the history section of ASTRA Association resumed the investigation and the questionnaire was sent to prefects, sub-prefects, mayors and local secretaries. The review will be made „[...] by Romanian priests and elementary teachers from the village, but also by a head ploughman”.⁴⁶ Beside the information related to the involvement of Transylvanian Romanians in the Great War, the questionnaire addressed by Teodor V. Păcățian contained a set of mandatory questions related to the contributions of war („I. Which is the approximate value of the voluntary contribution, made by Romanians from the village in kind during the war? Namely, bed linen, socks, gloves, snow caps, sent to the front, free food given to the army at the beginning of the war etc.; II. Which is the sum of war damages in your village?”), but especially to the revolution from the fall of 1918 („III. In the fall of 1918 was a revolution in your village? How did it develop? Were there damages, bloodshed? Who was killed? How the revolution ended? Had a national guard been formed in the village? Who led it?) and the number of participants in the Great Assembly from Alba-Iulia from 1st of December 1918 („IV. How many people from your village took part in the Great Assembly from Alba Iulia, 1st of December 1918? Who had the idea and who led the group?”).⁴⁷

After two years from the moment of investigation resuming, in 1923, based on the gathered information, Teodor V. Păcățian published some partial results, on the counties, in the form of a brochure, entitled *The sacrifices of the Romanians from Transylvania, Banat, Crișana, Sătmar, Maramureș, during the World War between 1914-1918*. In accordance with data that came from this research, from 22 counties, with 40 towns and 4183 villages, in the years of the Great War were sent on the battlefield 449.796 Romanians. From them, died 41.729 on the battlefield, 11.275 in prisons, refuge or hospitals, 25.406 came back disabled, 37.898 injured or sick, 343.387 healthy and 29.839 missing.

⁴³ Păcățian 1923, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Groza 2015, pp. 43-61.

⁴⁵ Păcățian 1923, p. 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

Those fallen on the battlefield or missing are survived by 38.630 widows and 79.226 war orphans.⁴⁸ Besides these numbers, Teodor V. Păcățian also presented a statistics on the social structure of Romanians involved in the war (6547 intellectuals, 14.668 merchants and artisans and 468.329 peasants and workers), decorated soldiers (44.191), voluntary contributions (11.884.169 crowns) and war damages (285.598.471 crowns).⁴⁹ Unfortunately, the questionnaire addressed by Teodor V. Păcățian did not catch the researchers' attention for a long time, due to partial results, „[...] *reflex of suspicion*” and „[...] *underestimation attitude of documentary value of it*”.⁵⁰ In the last years, by commemorating the outbreak of the Great War and celebrating the Great Union, the researchers paid attention to this research, kept, in a great part, in the collections of the Sibiu County Service of Romanian National Archives, highlighting a huge number of precious information regarding the results of county and local investigations⁵¹ or events from the fall and winter of the year 1918.⁵²

Naturally, our undertaking does not pretend to be exhaustive, our research contains only a few sequences destined to highlight the important contribution of ASTRA Association to the Great Union. By the way that succeeded to take all the appropriate steps to ensure its survival, the care towards the Romanian soldiers, but also the quantification of material, human loss, through the pro-union propaganda disseminated by its members, ASTRA Association had a great contribution to the great event from 1st of December 1918. Thus, the activity from war years received a cultural and humane importance, of which, at the end of hostilities, developed the political one.⁵³ The realization of national unity of Romanians did not mean the stopping of ASTRA Association's activity, but another step to a new beginning; even if this happened step by step (the first national assembly after war taking place only in 1920), the inter-war period coincides with the extension of the activities outside the Carpathian Mountains, concluding new partnerships, launching of cultural programs, editing periodicals, but also bringing the lead of association under supervision of the sovereign of Great Romania,⁵⁴ actions which assured its survival in the context of cultural extension and foundation of Romanian cultural institutions in Transylvania.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

⁵⁰ Popa 2017, p. 221.

⁵¹ Bica 2014, pp. 112-138; Popa, Țichindelean 2018, pp. 81-90; Popa et alii 2018.

⁵² Ineoan 2014, pp. 230-240; Ineoan 2015, pp. 417-430.

⁵³ Groza 1987-1988, p. 361.

⁵⁴ Moga 2003, p. 57, 59.

**Considerații istorice privind contribuția Asociațiunii Astra la realizarea Marii Uniri
(1914-1918)
REZUMAT**

„Asociațiunea Transilvană pentru Literatura Română și Cultura Poporului Român” - ASTRA, înființată în anul 1861, a jucat, încă de la bun început, un rol aparte în dezvoltarea culturii românești, în stimularea și cultivarea sentimentului național. Utilizând informația furnizată de reviste precum „Transilvania”, editată de Asociația ASTRA, dar și de articole, studii și cărți, acest articol încearcă să prezinte contribuția instituției menționate anterior la evenimentul Marii Uniri. Sunt evidențiate acțiunile acesteia în timpul Primului Război Mondial, când a oferit cărți de rugăciune în limba română soldaților, a tipărit revista „Transilvania” în ciuda tuturor încercărilor autorităților maghiare de a o distruge, și a oferit spațiu de spitalizare pentru soldații răniți. De asemenea, sunt menționate deciziile unor membrii importanți ai Asociației Astra, precum Octavian C. Tăslăuanu, care a decis să părăsească Transilvania și armata imperială și să fugă în România, când aceasta a intrat în război și, la timpul potrivit, au contribuit la aspectele diplomatice ale Unirii sau au trimis mesaje fraților lor români din partea imperială, cerându-le să se alătore României. Contribuțiile ulterioare la Marea Unire, precum trimiterea de delegați, sublinierea relevanței momentului în cărți și ziare sau susținerea unor prelegeri ori vorbind despre cum se poate realiza unirea administrativă, sunt de asemenea evidențiate în lucrare, care atrage atenția asupra unei teme insuficient cercetată până acum, oferind o nouă abordare.

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