

THE GERMAN-LANGUAGE SOCIALIST PRESS IN BANAT IN THE INTERWAR YEARS. CASE STUDY: *VOLKSWILLE* (THE PEOPLE'S WILL) AND *BANATER ARBEITER-PRESSE* (BANAT WORKERS' PRESS)¹

VERONICA CÂMPIAN²

ABSTRACT. *The German-language Socialist Press in Banat in the Interwar Years; Case Study: Volkswille (the People's Will) and Banater Arbeiter-Presse (Banat Workers' Press).* This study analyses the development and characteristics of these two socialist newspapers from Banat in a period when the number of German publications was at its peak and the German minority press played a very important role for its readers. The text focuses on the content particularities of the publications with an emphasis on the dedication and commitment of the editors and journalists to inform, educate and support the readership through their articles.

Keywords: *Banat, German minority, socialist press, Volkswille (People's Will), Banater Arbeiter-Presse (Banat Workers' Press)*

REZUMAT. *Presa socialistă de limbă germană din Banat în anii interbelici; Studiu de caz: Volkswille (Voința Poporului) și Banater Arbeiter-Presse (Presa Muncitorească din Banat).* Studiul de față urmărește evoluția și caracteristicile acestor două ziare socialiste din Banat într-o perioadă în care presa minoritară germană era bine răspândită și juca un rol foarte important pentru cititorii săi. Textul se concentrează asupra particularităților de conținut ale publicațiilor, punând accentul pe dedicarea și angajamentul editorilor și jurnaliștilor de a informa, educa și sprijini cititorii prin articolele lor.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Banat, minoritate germană, presă socialistă, Volkswille (Voința Poporului), Banater Arbeiter-Presse (Presa Muncitorească din Banat)*

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² Lecturer **VERONICA CÂMPIAN** Ph.D. is a member of the Department of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising (German language section) within the Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences of the Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. She teaches Verbal and Non-verbal Communication courses to first-year students, Intercultural Communication to second-year students and MA courses, such as Communication theories and Media Systems. Her main areas of interest are verbal and non-verbal communication, media language and political communication. Email: veronica.campian@ubbcluj.ro

Motto: *When Banat workers look with pride at their empowerment, they must not forget the valuable contribution of the printed word* (Marin, Josef Gabriel 1).

Introduction

The end of the First World War and the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution shook the European political scene and the new situation gave a boost to the left-oriented press. Since its beginning, the press has been an effective means of expressing a nation's ethnic identity and at the same time a barometer of its cultural level. The German newspapers in interwar Romania also fulfilled this function. At the same time, they accomplished their task of contributing to the formation and affirmation of cultural identity, providing their readers with information and ideas that played an essential role in the formation of a strong group identity (Ciobanu 2007, 133).

In the history of the German press in Romania, the interwar period was one of the most important after the stagnation during the years of the First World War. According to the Institute for Germans Abroad, in 1928 there were 62 newspapers and periodicals for the 750,000 Germans in Romania. The freedom of the press was stipulated in the constitutions of 1923 and 1938 (Ciobanu 2007, 134). The 1923 Constitution already proclaimed equal rights for all cohabiting nationalities (Marin 1974, 161).

The number and quality of German publications in Romania show, as Franz Riedl states, that "the full freedom of the press guaranteed by the Constitution was well used by the Germans in Romania" (Ciobanu 2007, 135, quoted in Riedl 50). As far as the content of the German periodicals of the interwar period is concerned, it should be underlined that people's education was at the forefront of the entire press (Ciobanu 2007, 135).

In the German-language publications of the time from Banat, most of the articles and statements were moderate, and the content of the publications aimed at ethnic Germans was politically neutral and focused more on cultural, economic issues (Panu 2011, 43).

Despite the extensive strategies used by Nazi propaganda, there were German-language media institutions in Banat that did not reproduce the Nazi ideological message, rather adopting a neutral, informative tone. There were some German-language publications in Banat that were not only immune to Nazi propaganda, but they also played an active role against the extreme right, and opposed Nazism. Such newspapers were the *Temeswarer Arbeiterzeitung* (Timișoara Workers' Newspaper), *Banater Arbeiter-Presse* (Banat Workers' Press), *Volkswille* (The People's Will), *Das freie Wort* (The Free Word) in Reșița and *Neue*

Zeitung (New Newspaper). They constantly opposed propaganda and at the same time they enjoyed the support and appreciation of a broad segment of society, including peasants, workers and intellectuals alike (Panu 2011, 48).

The Germans in Banat had a rich journalistic tradition in the interwar period. The most important publication was the *Schwäbische Volkspresse* (Swabian People's Press), which appeared in 1889 (Ciobanu 2007, 141). There was also a left-wing, workers' and social democratic press in Banat due to the large number of workers, who were generally more receptive to left-wing ideas. Thus, in the 1920s, the *Arbeiter Zeitung* (Workers' Newspaper) (1919-1929), the central organ of the Socialist Party in Banat, was published in Timișoara, followed by the publication *Volkswille* (The People's Will) (1932-1933) and *Neue Zeitung* (New Newspaper) (1933-1940). In Reșița the social democratic newspaper *Das freie Wort* (The Free Word) appeared from 1932 to 1933, and in Jimbolia the *Banater Arbeiter- Presse* (Banat Workers' Press) was issued between 1925 and 1927. These newspapers fought the National Socialist ideas disseminated in the press and in the public opinion among the Germans in Romania, but their target audience was rather small (Ciobanu 2007, 142).

Through their "militant attitude" (Marin 1980, 169), these publications called German workers, peasants, craftsmen, but also civil servants and intellectuals of Banat to an "active struggle and kept them away from the harmful influences of Nazism" (ibid. 169). In addition to the Romanian democratic forces, Saxon (a German minority group from Transylvania) and Swabian intellectuals also participated in the battle against the right-wing extremist and fascist movements. One example is the writer Heinrich Simonis from Timișoara, who stood out with his militant, anti-fascist writing (Marin 1980, 168-169).

The oldest German-language daily newspaper in Banat, the *Temeswarer Zeitung* (Timișoara Newspaper), was also published in the interwar period and tried to maintain its political independence. It should be pointed out that a number of German publications were issued in the most important towns in Banat. In Reșița, for example, the *Reschitzaer Zeitung* (Reșița Newspaper) appeared with the subtitle *Organ for the Social and Cultural Interests of the People*³ and Heinrich Anwender published the *Lugoscher Zeitung* (Lugoj Newspaper) in Lugoj (Ciobanu 2007, 142).

Volkswille (The People's Will)

At the beginning of the last decade of the 19th century, the local organization of the Social Democratic Party from Timișoara experienced a strong development. In 1892 the upholstery assistant Julius Hoffman emerged as the head of the Timișoara Workers' Club, and quickly recognized that a

³ Original title: Organ für soziale und kulturelle Interessen des Volkes

press organ was very important in order to promote the party. Brochures were no longer a sufficient means of communicating their demands; a workers' newspaper was necessary (Marin 1988, 40). As most of the members of this organisation spoke German at the time, it was decided that this publication should be written in this language.

Although the authorities immediately reacted strongly and expelled Hofmann from the city, they could not avoid the publication of the first issue of the weekly *Volkswille* on May 1st, 1893 (Marin and Luncan 1984, 31).

Volkswille (Social Democratic Organ of Southern Hungary), later renamed *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (subtitle: *Central German Organ of the Social Democratic Party of Banat*⁴), was published in Timișoara between 1893 and 1933. It was the main organ of the German-speaking workers' movement in Banat and the only long-lasting German-language socialist newspaper in the region⁵.

The newspaper had Wilhelm Paul, a shoemaker, as editor in charge, but the actual direction was entrusted to Josef Gabriel, who had quite a lot of publishing experience at the time. *Volkswille* existed for almost 40 years, most of the time under very difficult conditions and through the unpaid work of the editors (Marin and Luncan 1984, 31).

Josef Gabriel was the co-founder of this publication and helped to prepare the first issue. He remained a close collaborator of this newspaper for the next decades and he made "an unpaid contribution to the design of the paper, which accurately reflected the development of the workers' movement" (Marin 1988, 41). This publication was both "an organ of information and a weapon in the workers' struggle" (Marin 1988, 41), but also an organ of the Social Democratic Party.

In the autumn of 1897, Josef Gabriel, who was the editor of *Volkswille*, wrote an article in which he expressed the need to publish a Romanian-language party newspaper. This idea caused much enthusiasm among the Romanian proletariat. Josef Gabriel explained the importance of establishing a press organ in Romanian. Although the proposal was supported by the party, the publication was slow to emerge. Encouraged by the socialist Atanase Voichescu, he started a fundraising campaign for issuing a newspaper in Romanian. (Marin 1988, 32)

The first issue of *Votul poporului* (The People's Choice), the name given to the Romanian-language party newspaper, was published at the beginning of 1903. Its appearance was the achievement of the Timișoara Social Democratic

⁴ Original title: Deutsches Zentralorgan der Sozialdemokratischen Partei des Banats

⁵ Further information on the period of publication and the profile of the publications in: Krischan, Alexander: *Die deutsche periodische Literatur des Banats: Zeitungen-Zeitschriften-Kalender 1771-1971 Bibliographie*, Munich: Verlag des Süddeutschen Kulturwerkes, 1987, pp: 16-44 and in: Șeulean, Paul: *Die deutsche Presse in der Zwischenkriegszeit*. In: *Forschungen zur Volks- und Landeskunde*, vol. 51/2008, pp.: 78-85.

Party organisation and the publication not only had readers from Banat, but it also had subscribers in Transylvania.

Volkswille militated against acts of intimidation, abuse and repression of any kind, fought for the “regulation of labour relations” (Marin 1988, 43), and demanded universal voting rights. Many of those who contributed to this political workers’ newspaper suffered prison sentences or threats for publishing courageous articles which criticised the government. The publication, edited at great sacrifice by the workers, therefore played an extremely important role in the development of class awareness for the proletarians of Timișoara (Marin and Luncan 1984, 31).

Volkswille gained increasingly more influence on the development of the workers’ movement in Banat and on the 10th anniversary of the newspaper (May 1st, 1903) a commemorative number with a distribution of 5000 issues was published. In this special issue Josef Gabriel outlined the development of the newspaper. Despite the difficult times the publication experienced – the persecution of the newspaper and the terrible treatment of its editors – it remained influential among the workforce (Marin, 1988, 44).

Under the direction of Josef Gabriel, the publication fought against the Hungarian government’s Magyarization policy, whose aim was to denationalise the non-Hungarian population in the country. During 1911, the newspaper also published numerous editorials expressing opposition to the Austro-Hungarian militarism, and reported on the great danger of an imminent world war. Gabriel showed a lot of “courage and determination” (Marin 1988, 45) in his writing on these subjects and took advantage of every opportunity to present these realities to the working class.

After the outbreak of the First World War, *Volkswille* reported on the difficult situation in the families of the conscripted workers and generally on the great misery of the war. It wrote about the everyday needs of the population, the lack of supplies and the price increases. However, these texts were subject to censorship, so it was often the case that there were white columns in the pages of the newspaper. An example is the issue from September 12th, 1914. (Marin 1988, 47). During the war years, *Volkswille* tried to give an accurate picture of the situation on the front line. The editor Gabriel was supported in this process by those workers who were close to the battlefield. The latter sent “field correspondence” (Marin 1988, 47), which was published in the pages of the publication.

At the beginning of 1916, several editorials expressed the workers’ desire for peace. In opposition to the opportunist official policy from Budapest, the socialist publication *Volkswille* did not advocate war, expressing instead the desire for peace of the working masses (Marin and Luncan 1984, 36). This idea was also reinforced by the publication of some pacifist poems.

At the meeting of the Timișoara Workers' Council on November 30th, 1918 it was announced that all arrangements had been made for *Volkswille* to be published as a daily newspaper from December 1st of the same year. Josef Gabriel devoted himself entirely to the publication as editor-in-chief and was assisted by the editors Bernath Kohn and Michael Schmidt. In the year 1919, the newspaper reached a distribution of 4800 copies (Marin 1988, 49). The end of 1919 brought new changes for the publication: the Royal Romanian Command decided to change the name of the newspaper. Thus, from November 1st, 1919 the newspaper was called *Arbeiter Zeitung* (Workers' Newspaper) and it only regained its old name on December 11th, 1930 (Gabriel 1928, 109). The eleven years during which the publication appeared under this new name were difficult in many respects: not only did it struggle with serious financial problems, but it also had to make changes in the editorial team (Marin 1988, 50-51). The reason for the financial difficulties also lay in the fact that the publication did not have enough subscribers. It was thus decided to increase the press fund with contributions from all party members.

Under the guidance of the experienced journalist Zoltan Franyó, the newspaper was published again under the original name *Volkswille* (People's Will) from December 1930. The economic crisis, which reached its peak in 1932, caused high unemployment, which led to a sharp drop in the number of subscribers. From that moment on, the publication could only afford to appear on a weekly basis. Until its closing down in the middle of 1933, the newspaper fought fascist ideology and National Socialism through all means (Marin 1988, 52).

Banater Arbeiter-Presse (Banat Workers' Press)

The appearance of a socialist publication in a relatively small town with a few modest industrial factories would be an almost inexplicable phenomenon if people were not aware of the old fighting spirit of the workers' movement in Jimbolia (Marin 1974, 118).

A strong local Social Democratic Party organisation and several trade unions were founded in Jimbolia in the first decade of the 20th century. In the local elections of 1922, the Social Democratic list obtained 920 votes, reflecting the clear influence of this party (Marin 1974, 119).

The *Banat Workers' Press* (with the subtitle *Social Democratic Organ for the Protection of the Interests of the Working People in Romania*⁶) appeared at a time when the workers' movement throughout the country was facing great difficulties, as the bourgeois-landlord regime was intensifying the exploitation of labourers and the trade union movement was also weakening. The aim of this

⁶ Original title: Sozialdemokratisches Organ zur Wahrnehmung der Interessen des werktätigen Volks in Rumänien

publication was to defend the interests of the workers and to strengthen the party organisations (Marin 1974, 120). It was the second workers' newspaper to appear in Jimbolia after the weekly *Vorwärts* (Forward)⁷.

The program of the new publication was presented in the editorial of July 18th, 1925. The article stated that the new publication was to continue the struggle begun by the newspaper *Vorwärts* (Forward), stating that "what the fathers and brothers of the social democratic organisation in Jimbolia have created, we, sons and successors, want to preserve, promote and defend in spite of all adversities"⁸. The newspaper was a great support to the socialist movement in Jimbolia and helped the party win the 1926 local elections.

The newspaper was published weekly and consisted of 4 pages in large format. The first page usually contained the editorial and articles on general topics, pages two and three had news, commentary, the sport column and poetry. The last page consisted mainly of advertisements and advertising copy (Marin 1974, 122).

In its pages, the publication reported on the work of the Social Democratic organisation in Jimbolia, while being equally concerned with the education of the workers and presented the problems and fears of the working class. The *Banater Arbeiter-Presse* dealt with domestic politics and reported on the bourgeois parties, but it also dedicated space to foreign issues and focused on the struggles of workers in other countries, thus trying to reveal the anti-communist, especially fascist terror.

From a linguistic point of view, the publication was written in a literary language free of any of the workers' jargon, but still accessible to them.

A large space in the newspaper was taken up by reports on the problems of the workers' lives (for example, massive dismissals), but also on their ongoing fight against the exploiters.

Another topic that was much discussed was the workers' strikes. The newspaper informed its readers about the workers' strike from Reșița on August 17th, 1925, but there were also many news items and comments about strikes in other cities, such as Timișoara, Arad or Cluj-Napoca (Marin 1974, 124). The permanent theme of workers' strikes was also discussed in an international context, with references to the major strike movements in England, France and Germany (Marin 1974, 129)

The literary part of the publication played an important role in the education of the workers. Poems or prose texts by important authors such as Maxim Gorky, Henri Barbusse, Stefan Zweig or Robert Grötsch were published

⁷ The newspaper *Vorwärts* was considered the Central Organ of the German Section of the Yugoslav Social Democratic Party.

⁸ *Banater Arbeiter-Presse* (July 18th, 1925 issue)

in the pages of the newspaper. At the same time, the *Banater Arbeiter-Presse* drew its readers' attention to works of famous Romanian authors, such as those of the poet Mihai Eminescu (Marin 1974, 131).

Although it had a rather short publication period (it was published for two and a half years and had 130 issues), the *Banater Arbeiter-Presse* played an important role for the workers in Jimbolia, but also in other localities in the western part of Banat.

Because of the progressive and socialist ideas promoted by the newspaper and its struggle against fascist policies, the publication was particularly important for the "development of the class awareness of the working people" (Marin 1974, 133).

Conclusion

The German-speaking community enjoyed a significant number of publications in their mother language during the interwar period. These were wide-ranging, focusing on political, educational, cultural and economic issues. Through its contents, the press was a reliable support for both intellectuals and the working class, contributing to the development and consolidation of the cultural and ethnic identity of the German minority.

In addition to the more general periodicals, a number of socialist, workers' newspapers played a fundamental role for the working class in those years of hardship. These include the publications *Volkswille* and *Banater Arbeiter-Presse* from the Banat region. Edited and coordinated by prominent figures of the time - such as Josef Gabriel or Zoltan Franyó - the newspapers faced censorship and the journalists were fined and risked their freedom to serve the interests of their readers.

The publications reported on the tragedies at the battlefield during the First World War, on the harsh and deprived lives of those left at home and dissociated themselves from the Nazi regime that had taken control over Germany. At the same time, using a literary language accessible to the readers, the newspapers also focused on the process of educating the public by publishing prose and poems written by ethnic German authors, but also by Romanian and universal writers.

Thus, by combining social, political and cultural themes, the publications were a guiding light for many readers of that time, and for us now, they are proof of the dedication of some journalists and editors, who got involved in the creation and consolidation of a collective, class identity through their texts.

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