

ROMANIAN PROPAGANDA FACING THE KOREAN WAR (1950–1953)

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During the Korean War (1950–1953) – one of the major crisis of the Cold War – , People’s Republic of Romania acted as an obedient member of the Soviet Bloc, strictly following Moscow’s actions, from the beginning of the war (the Communiqué issued on June 26th¹ by the PRR, was very similar to the Soviet one), and continuing with the actions taken until the signing of the Armistice and after. The Romanian approach on foreign policy at that time, a rather eclectic approach combining extreme dogmatism with a certain nationalism, was resting consistently on obedience to Moscow and cooperation with the socialist countries, being thus oriented towards supporting the revolutionary struggles of all the so called *oppressed peoples* around the World and certain degree of adversity towards the Western democracies. Thus, it is not surprising that when the Korean War broke out in 1950, Romanian authorities were already engaged in a process of restricting or containing the activities of the Western diplomatic representatives in Bucharest.

Later on, the reason for helping the North Koreans had to do with a “fraternal attitude” for another Communist entity (a *younger brother*-DPRK), subject of a military threat by US and the other members of the UN coalition. The support offered by PRR to DPRK was an expression of the “care and concern” for the fate of the DPRK, and the actions and re-actions conducted by the USSR, were assumed by other members of the Soviet Bloc. The support offered by Romania to North Korea can be categorized into four main areas: financial and material support as well as fund raising campaigns, North Korean children in the People’s Republic of Romania, the Romanian medical expeditionary missions in Korea, and lastly propaganda.

When it comes to Romanian propaganda regarding the Korean War, the main feature is that two camps were depicted in a blunt dichotomy, as a continuous confrontation between the good, represented by the so called “peace loving nations” namely the Soviet Union and the other members of the Soviet bloc, and the evil,

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¹ The Communiqué, issued on June 26, 1950, was broadcast by Radio Bucharest on the same day, at 6 30 PM. See the issue in Eugen Denize, Cezar Măță, *România comunistă. Statul și Propaganda (Communist Romania. The State and the Propaganda)*, Cetatea de Scaun Publishing House, Târgoviște, 2005.

represented by the Western coalition and especially by the United States. Ana Pauker, the Foreign Minister of Romania at that time, was stressing the importance of re-acting promptly, referring to the American intervention (in Korea) as being the first step to a bigger plan, the final goal being aggression against China in the near future.²

The most frequent theme in the propaganda was that of comparing the United States intervention in Korea to that of Nazi Germany during the World War II. Thus, the Romanian party officials were drawing parallels between Nazis and the Americans who were depicted as “successors of the maniacal megalomania of Hitler, who, most likely, will have the same fate as the German Fuhrer.”³

The propaganda apparatus went out of its way to portray the *just cause* of the Korean people in fighting the “American aggressors”. Romanian authorities organized various protest meetings (against the US “aggression” in Korea), principally with alleged labor groups in factories. One of the biggest protest meetings was the one organized in Bucharest in August 1950 where more than 40,000 Bucharest workers joined in the mass meeting.⁴

Moreover, the Party often organized fundraising campaigns (the first being organized in January 1951) in order to rally the Romanian population and collect money and products for the “victims of American aggression in Korea.”⁵ In order to prepare such campaigns, the entire political mechanism of the RWP (Romanian Workers Party) was fully involved. For instance, we should mention that for the fundraising event of January 1951, more than 2,300 teams participated with more than 4,500 “agitators” in Bucharest alone.⁶ All over Romania, more than 19,400 teams consisting of 50,000 “agitators” were involved in convincing the population to support North Korea’s war effort. Furthermore, hundreds of thousands of posters were printed, together with many other appeals, flyers, and cartoons.⁷

The situation in Korea played some part in promoting PRR’s own slogans referring to the rights to determine its future without external interference (it had to do with Western constant concern over Romania’s human rights abuses). It fitted well with the North Korean and Chinese slogans calling for the future of Asia to be

² Ana Pauker, *The Speech held during the Solemn Meeting dedicated to the 34th Anniversary of the Great Socialist Revolution of October*, published in “The Class Struggle” (Lupta de clasa), Series V, Year XXXI, No. 9–10, September-October 1951.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ US National Archives and Records Administration – NARA, Romania RG 59, 1950–1954, Box 3966, The Telegram no. 138, issued on August 11, 1950, from US Legation in Bucharest.

⁵ The article “*From our hearts, let’s help the brave Korean People*” (Să ajutăm din toată inima bravul popor coreean), in “Scânteia” (The Spark), Series III, Year XX, No. 1942, January 18, 1951, p. 1.

⁶ *Ibid.* Very soon, the example set by Bucharest was followed by other cities and even villages of Romania. “Apelul” (The Call) was stressing that all the teams were led by a “man in charge” (Responsabil împluternicit), and the donations were registered in catalogues, being used special receipts or/and “stamped forms”.

⁷ Article “*Hundreds of thousands of citizens involved in helping the Korean People*” (Sute de mii de cetățeni antrenați în acțiunea de ajutorare a poporului coreean) in “Scânteia” (The Spark), Series III, Year XX, No. 1943, January 19, 1951, pp. 1–2.

determined not by outside powers but by the peoples of Asia (in that particular case, by Korean people). All these aspects did play an important role within the fund raising campaigns (initiated and conducted by PRR) and not only, being often used by propaganda.

At the beginning of October 1951, the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers Party decided to conduct new fundraising activities with the help of the Permanent Committee of the Peace Defense of the PRR, the UTM (Uniunea Tineretului Muncitor-Union of the Working Youth), and the Red Cross. Apart from fundraising, the members of the teams were also told to accept in particular clothes, shoes, non-perishable provisions such as rice, bean, flour, sugar, cereals, and so on.⁸ There were three stages of the campaign: from October 21 to November 4 was „munca de lămurire și pregătirea organizatorică” (“explanation and persuasive work”), from November 3 to November 4 “colectă în orașele reședință de regiune și în centrele raionale” (collecting campaign in cities and region centers), and, finally, from November 10 to November 18 “colecta la sate” (“collecting campaign in the villages”).⁹ According to official sources, at the end of the above mentioned campaigns, over 600,000 items of clothes were collected, including coats, suits, hats, and gloves.¹⁰ They also mentioned collecting over 1,600 tons of cereals and large amounts of sugar, canned meat, and vegetables.¹¹ For cash donations, a special bank account called CEC 300, “The Fund for Helping the Korean People,” was created.¹²

The precipitating effects of the protest meetings consisted in resolutions from various entities, which were issued in order to develop impetus. The next stage had to do with information of so-called “proof” regarding bacteriological warfare, all of which were published in newspapers.

Not surprisingly, the main propaganda tools were the radio stations, party newspapers, and other publications, including *Scânteia* (The Spark), *România Liberă* (The Free Romania), *Scânteia Tineretului* (Youth Spark) and the *Lupta de clasă* (The Class Struggle). To a certain extent, the propaganda also used various posters and cartoons related to the war. Romanian authorities even invited North Korean delegations, who arrived in Bucharest and other major cities of Romania in order to participate in various “meetings of solidarity with the Korean people.”

⁸ National Archives of Romania, (ANIC), Fund Central Committee of the Romanian Workers Party, Foreign Relation Section, File no. 41/1951, pp. 1–2. The document entitled “Înștiințare privind hotărârea Secretariatului CC al PMR legată de acțiunea de strângerea de ajutoare pentru poporul coreean”, dated October 6, 1951.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁰ The article was published in “Scânteia” (The Spark), Year XXI, N0. 2216, Sunday, December 9, 1951.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² National Archives of Romania, (ANIC), Fund Central Committee of the Romanian Workers Party, Foreign Relation Section, File no. 41/1951, pp. 1–2. The document entitled “Înștiințare privind hotărârea Secretariatului CC al PMR legată de acțiunea de strângerea de ajutoare pentru poporul coreean”, dated October 6, 1951, p. 5.

That was the case with the delegation representing the North Korean government, composed by three members (Choe Changik, Pak Eun and Li Seong-eun), who visited Bucharest, Braşov, and the Danube-Black Sea Canal worksite in March 1951.¹³

A particular approach was to disseminate the experience of the Romanian delegations that visited North Korea to deliver “Romanian workers” gift to Korean labor unions. For instance, the speech delivered by one of the Romanian delegates at the airport when he returned to Romania was quite expressive, highlighting that the delegates have seen “what the war started by the American imperialists really has become” and that “wherever they have passed they have sown misery, unhappiness and destruction.”¹⁴ The Romanian delegations that returned from North Korea were often asked to share their views in meetings in Bucharest and other cities in order to give not only “first hand descriptions of what they witnessed in Korea,” but also to initiate and stimulate Korean relief funds.¹⁵

The pace of developments and the extent of hostilities on the Korean have stimulated a plethora of denigrating epithets, mostly targeting the USA, so that in many cases, the Americans were depicted as “cannibals,” “murderers,” “aggressors,” and “blood-thirsty butchers.” As a consequence of the above mentioned anti-American pattern, one of the U.S. diplomats in post-war Romania, although with his “skin thickened” by the previous service behind the Iron Curtain, faced a situation in which the American government and its citizens “were vituperated 24 hours a day, in terms of abuse for which dictionaries must have been combed to find the most repulsive words.”¹⁶

The widespread adversity towards the US opened the way for new propaganda techniques, so that very often, Romanian newspapers were publishing front-page photographs purporting to show American atrocities in Korea. For instance, in January 1951, a newspaper showed a row of eleven human heads in Korea being observed by number of military and civilian personnel under the heading, “This is what American barbarians are preparing for mankind.”¹⁷ The sentence written under the appalling photographs was meant to outrage the Romanian readers.¹⁸ The propaganda was even trying to underscore the kind of barbarity that “MacArthur’s cannibals” would impose on Europe too, “by fire and by blood.”¹⁹

The use of various photos purporting to be U.S. atrocities on the Korean soil was a long-standing strategy adopted by Romanian propaganda with photos being

¹³ NARA, Romania RG 59, 1950–1954, Box 3968, The US Legation’s despatch no. 343 of April 2, 1951, signed by James W. Gantenbein, p. 1.

¹⁴ NARA, Romania, RG 59, 1950–1954, Box 3966, The Telegram no. 303, September 30, 1950, signed J. Gantenbein.

¹⁵ NARA, Romania, RG 59, 1950–1954, Box 3966, The Telegram no. 335, of October 14, 1950, from US Legation in Bucharest, unsigned.

¹⁶ NARA, Romania 1950–1954, Box 2842, The Report no. 181, issued by the US Legation in Bucharest on December 12, 1952, signed Harold Shantz.

¹⁷ NARA, Romania 1950–1954, Box 2842, The Telegram no. 532 of the US Legation in Bucharest, issued on January 10, 1951, destined to the Secretary of State, signed Gantenbein.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* The words were: “Heads of executed patriots are exhibited in public square in Korea”.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* The message of the Romanian authorities, delivered by the propaganda, was: “We will not allow you to turn our countries into another Korea”.

shown in public exhibits, which were attended by workers and groups of school children, whose teachers explained all the details, pointing out the contrast between U.S. atrocities and Soviet benefits for North Korea.²⁰

Another characteristic of the anti-American propaganda (observed by U.S. diplomats in Bucharest) was the publication of “spontaneous and indignant” letters and articles purporting to come from various factory workers, peasants, students, and even mothers. All the above letters uniformly followed a standard pattern, which was “to convey the impression that the writer is a simple, honest individual who reasons things out logically and who is burning with indignation at some news which he has recently read concerning the United States.”²¹ The American Chargé d’Affaires *ad interim* in Bucharest at that time, James Gantenbein, was stressing that apart from their uniformity of technique and parrot-like repetition of the prescribed propaganda line, any reader would have to be “extremely unimaginative not to realize that the background knowledge of the [writers on] world politics and [their] ability to write like an editorial writer were manifestly unreal.”²²

In some other cases, the party officials in Bucharest were using the situation in Korea in order to underline the fact that “such international aggressors like [the] U.S.A cannot or should not talk about violations of human rights in Romania after what they did in Korea.” Regarding the same issue, a diplomatic report from U.S. legation in Bucharest referred to the strategy of using unsigned foreign editorials such as the one published on October 5, 1950, entitled, “Atomic cannibals attempt to interfere in our affairs must cease”, in which the author mentioned that the “American aggressors are ruthlessly killing mothers and innocent children in Korea, but dare to talk about violation of human rights in people’s republics.”²³

However, maybe one of the most acidic articles regarding the U.S. intervention in the Korean War was published in December 1952 in *Viața Sindicală* (The Union Life). The article stated, “It is by the burning alive of defenseless persons, by the gouging of eyes and machine-gunning of prisoners that the culture of those who shamelessly speak in all ways of their role in the progress of human civilization and the role of Yankee imperialism in the happiness of mankind manifests itself.”²⁴ According to American diplomats in Bucharest, the above mentioned propaganda campaigns did not have much effect on the non-communist citizens. Harold Shantz, U.S. diplomat in Bucharest, was convinced that “the majority of adults probably

²⁰ NARA, Romania, RG 59, 1950–1954, Box 3966, The Telegram no. 373, of October 27, 1950, from US Legation in Bucharest, p. 2, signed Gantenbein. The workers had to sign register attendance checks.

²¹ NARA, Romania 1950–1954, Box 2842, The Note of the US Legation in Bucharest (entitled “Anti-American Propaganda in Romania) destined to US Department of State, issued on December 1, 1951, signed by James Gantenbein.

²² *Ibid.* Most of these letters were published in “Scânteia” (The Spark).

²³ NARA, Romania 1950–1954, Box 2842, The Telegram no. 326, from US Legation in Bucharest, issued on October 10, 1950 and destined to the US Department of State.

²⁴ NARA, Romania 1950–1954, Box 2842, The Report of the US Legation in Bucharest (entitled “The Hate campaign Keeps Up”), issued on December 12, 1952, destined to the US Department of State, p. 1–2.

took it with large doses of salt as they do other propaganda.”²⁵ Following a logical reasoning, Shantz was stressing that if Romanians took the propaganda seriously, “one would expect some at least to shudder, if not to throw things at us, when they see Americans.”²⁶ However, the U.S. diplomat stressed that although the U.S. legation car carried an American flag, they were “consciously observed by less than half of the passersby” and many of those who stared at it kept “poker-faced”; if they were glad to see it, “they [would] not dare show it, but none have yet given it any looks of hatred.”²⁷

Romanian Literature and the Korean War: just Another Propaganda Tool?

In close connection with the propaganda, or, to some extent, a part of it, the theme of the Korean War was widely present in Romanian literature. Most of the works, especially poems, were published in newspapers or journals such as *Viața Românească* (The Romanian Life), *Scânteia Tineretului* (The Young People’s Spark), and even *Scânteia* (The Spark), which was the main newspaper of the Communist Party (Romanian Workers Party) of Romania.

Among the Romanian writers/authors, we should mention Eugen Jebeleanu, Veronica Porumbacu, Eugen Frunză and Dan Deșliu, all of whom depicted the fairness of the North Korean patriotic fight and the carnage generated by the “Imperialistic invaders.” The theme related to the alleged use of bacteriological weapons by the American forces in Korea was also present. This was the case with a poem written by Eugen Jebeleanu, entitled “Războiul bacteriologic” (The Bacteriological War), published in *Viața Românească* (Romanian Life):

<i>Unde-i mânuța pruncului plăpând/</i>	<i>Where is the little hand of the fragile child/</i>
<i>Și mama doborâtă unde-i oare/</i>	<i>Where is his collapsed mother/</i>
<i>Îi caută furtuna șuierând</i>	<i>The storm is looking for them</i>
<i>Sub cizmele yankeilor murdare...</i>	<i>Hissing under the Yankee’s boots...²⁸</i>

²⁵ *Ibid.* The US diplomat, who was contemplating the effects of the “hate campaign”, was almost convinced that despite the “nauseating campaigns” of the Communist propaganda, the effects were rather weak.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Eugen Jebeleanu, “Războiul bacteriologic” (The Bacteriological War), in *Viața Românească* (Romanian Life), Year V, No. 4, April 1952, pp. 110–111.

Another poem, by Veronica Porumbacu, was dedicated to a North Korean war hero named An-Sen-hi and depicted the dichotomy between the “peace loving North” and the “manipulated and corrupted south”:

Un dans al lumii,

A Dance of a World

În două ruptă de-un hotar

Broken in two pieces by a frontier

În Nord e tinerețea lumii

In North it is the World Youth

În Sud sunt temniți și dolari.

*While in the South there are only
prisons and dollars.²⁹*

Of course, it is difficult to say to what extent these poems were expressing personal beliefs of the authors or if they were just simply propaganda.

Later on, most of the above mentioned writers and journalists were decorated later by the Embassy of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in Bucharest, which expressed its gratitude to Romanian writers and journalists who “continuously” supported North Korea in their writings by unveiling the so-called “aggression of American and British Imperialists against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.”³⁰ The list was compiled by the Secția Propaganda și Agitație (Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Party) and forwarded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania to North Korean officials. On the other hand, the Department of Art and Literature of the Central Committee had forwarded its own list containing the names of the writers and composers who have depicted the theme of “heroic battle of the Korean people against the Imperialists” in their artistic work.³¹ Among those who were rewarded, we should mention Mihail Sadoveanu, a famous Romanian writer, Dan Deșliu, Eugen Frunză, Mauriciu Vescan, Dumitru Corbea, and Veronica Porumbacu.

Significant space was dedicated to Dan Deșliu, whose activity on the “literary front” twice earned him the “State Award” (Premiul de Stat) for poems such as: “Cuvânt către Coreea” (“A Word to Korea”), “Kociedo,” „Steagul” (“The Flag”), and “Cuvântul eroilor către Omenire” (“The Heroes Speech to Mankind”). Moreover,

²⁹ Veronica Porumbacu, An-Sen-Hi, poem published in *Viața Românească* (Romanian Life), Year III, No. 7, July 1950, pp. 160–162.

³⁰ ANIC, Fund Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party (RCP), External Relations Department, File 12/1952, The Note issued on February 28, 1953, pp. 1–2.

³¹ ANIC, Fund CC of the RCP, External Relations Department, File 12/1952, The Note of April 9, 1953, issued by the Department of Literature and Art of the Romanian Workers Party, p. 8.

Deșliu was the commentator (voice over) of the first two Romanian Cinematographic journals dedicated to the Korean War.³²

Veronica Porumbacu was another writer awarded for her merits regarding the message of the poems, including “An Sen Hi”, „Pe un mormânt de coreean” (“On a Korean Grave”), and Balada (“Ballad”). Her poems were all published in *Viața Românească* (Romanian Life), a periodical which noted that her poems were “full of confidence regarding the victory of the Heroic Korean People.”³³

Following the same path, Eugen Frunză was nominated for decoration due to the message of his poems and articles, including “Act de acuzare” (“Accusation Act”), “Încă un capitol la dosarul criminalilor de razboi” (“Another Chapter in the File of the War Criminals”), and „Semănătorii de ciumă” (“The Pest Sowers”).³⁴ Eugen Jebeleanu was awarded the State Award (Premiul de Stat) for his poems “Războiul bacteriologic” (“Bacteriological War”) and “Fântâna din Coreea” (“The Fountain of Korea”).³⁵

Among Romanian composers, two were singled out in particular for their work dedicated to the Korean War: Mauriciu Vescan and Dumitru Corbea. The former was praised for his song (music only) entitled “Oaste vitează – Popor Coreean” (“Brave Army, Korean People”), while the latter was nominated for decoration due to the lyrics for the same song.³⁶

All the above mentioned contributions can be considered, to some extent, as being part of the propaganda, being often used in order to rally significant social layers for backing the State efforts of helping the DPRK. The results were significant but, although to a certain extent the success could be attributed to Romanian propaganda, in our opinion, the reactions and the help offered by Romanian society to North Korea most likely had to do more with humanitarian reasons and not necessarily with political or ideological issues.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.* The “artistic work” of writers, painters, composers was often used by the Romanian authorities of that time as vectors of official propaganda.