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## Romanian Village Halls in the Early 1950s: Between Cultural and Political Propaganda

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## ROMANIAN VILLAGE HALLS IN THE EARLY 1950S: BETWEEN CULTURAL AND POLITICAL PROPAGANDA\*

*Sorin Radu*

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**ABSTRACT:** Village halls [Romanian: *cămine culturale*] appeared in many European countries and elsewhere as early as the nineteenth century and multiplied in the twentieth. The presence of these institutions in the rural world, despite obvious differences in their goals and activities, demonstrates a general interest in the cultural development of villages, as well as the emergence and growth of leisure practices amongst peasants. This essay is not a study of the history of village halls; rather, it focuses on the changes that this institution underwent in the early years of the communist regime in Romania. It analyses how communists transformed the village hall into a place of propaganda under the guise of “cultural work”. The study starts from the premise that communist propaganda deliberately did not distinguish between “political work” and “cultural work”. At the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, the village hall became the communist regime’s central venue for disseminating political and cultural propaganda.

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### *Introduction*

Community and village halls appeared in many European countries and elsewhere as early as the nineteenth century and multiplied in the twentieth. Known under various names – for example, the village or community hall (UK), rural civic center (US), *foyer culturel* (France), *Volksheim* (Austria), *Halkevleri* (Turkey) and *cămin cultural* (Romania) – these:

[...] new institutions of village life were part of a global process of rural transformation aimed at integrating peasants into the modern world whilst preserving local cultures and traditions. Often founded by urban or rural elites, the state, voluntary associations or religious organizations, these institutions aimed to refocus rural life around new practices and moral values that were often exogenous to the rural community itself.<sup>1</sup>

The presence of these institutions in the rural world, despite obvious differences in their goals and activities, demonstrates a general interest in

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<sup>1</sup> Raluca Mușat, “Transforming Village Culture: Village Halls and Cultural Centres in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century”, *Rural History 2013: International Conference of*

the cultural development of villages, as well as the emergence and growth of leisure practices amongst peasants.

The study of village halls is a new subject in the academic literature of Romania,<sup>2</sup> as well as abroad to a great extent.<sup>3</sup> The village hall represents a meeting point amongst local, regional and international history. Furthermore, it is important to research certain aspects that aim at understanding the social, cultural and sometimes political impact that these cultural institutions had in rural areas. This essay is not a study of the history of village halls; rather, it focuses on the changes that this institution underwent in the early years of the communist regime in Romania. It analyses how communists transformed the village hall into a place of propaganda under the guise of "cultural work". The study starts from the premise that communist propaganda deliberately did not distinguish between "political work" and "cultural work". The propaganda and "agitation" apparatus was constantly preaching the need to elevate the cultural level of peasants, but in fact it was conducting "a work of political persuasion" in order to disseminate the Soviet model, as well as the image of the "New Man" and of a "new world" in Romanian villages. The village hall became the communist regime's central venue for disseminating political and cultural propaganda at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s. The research is based on archival sources, the newspapers of the day and the current historiography.

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*the European Rural History Organisation: Conference Programme: Abstracts of all Panels and Papers*, University of Bern, UniS, 19-22 August 2013, Zurich 2013, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> Two almost unique cases within the specialized literature are Raluca Mușat, "Cultural Politics in the Heart of the Village: The Institutionalisation of the 'Cămin Cultural' in Interwar Romania", *New Europe College Ștefan Odobleja Program Yearbook* (2012-2013), pp. 149-180, and Antonio Momoc's book *Capcanele politice ale sociologiei interbelice. Școala gustiană între carlism și legionarism* [The political snares of interwar sociology: The Gusti school between Carlism and legionarism], Bucharest: Curtea Veche, 2012, which discusses, briefly, Dimitrie Gusti's efforts to establish village halls (pp. 150-165).

<sup>3</sup> The significance of the topic is also emphasized by the organization of a panel at the second international scientific conference of EURHO (August 2013), organized by Raluca Mușat and presided over by Prof. Jeremy Burchardt from the University of Reading (see <http://www.ruralhistory2013.org/rh2013/>). See also Jeremy Burchardt, "Reconstructing the Rural Community: Village Halls and the National Council of Social Service", *Rural History* 10/2 (1999), pp. 193-216; Brian Donahoe and Joachim Otto Habeck, *Reconstructing the House of Culture: Community, Self and the Makings of Culture in Russia and Beyond*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2011; Anne White, *De-Stalinisation and the House of Culture: Declining State Control over Leisure in the USSR, Poland and Hungary, 1953-1989*, London: Routledge, 1990.

*The Institution of the Village Hall in Romania*

Village halls were created in Romania as a result of the efforts of Professor Dimitrie Gusti, supported by Prince Carol (later Carol II), who was involved in a vast programme of social, economic and cultural change in Romanian villages at the beginning of the 1920s. In 1922 Gusti was appointed director of the newly established House of People's Culture [*Casa Culturii Poporului*], the purpose of which was to "oversee the culturalization of villages". One of the specific tasks of this new institution was to establish village halls according to the Austrian model. Gusti argued that the existence of such halls would enable the implementation of the government's programme for the culturalization of the people through cooperation between villagers and local élites.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, the House of People's Culture did not become a reality, but the idea of creating village halls was later included on the agenda of the "Prince Carol" Royal Cultural Foundation.<sup>5</sup> Its founders argued that for peasants the village hall had to act as "an establishment for spiritual construction", meant to complement the activity of schools, churches and the administration.<sup>6</sup>

Village halls were regulated in April 1927, when the law on the reorganization of the "Prince Carol" Royal Cultural Foundation was published. According to Article 8, the Foundation would establish one or more village halls in each commune for the people's education and cultural development. Village halls had the rights of a legal body and were run by a cultural council.<sup>7</sup>

Upon being appointed minister of public education and arts in 1933, Gusti became more involved in the cultural development of villages. He made considerable efforts to promote culture in rural areas by establishing libraries, village halls and peasant schools.<sup>8</sup> Student and technical teams, guided by cultural inspectors, were sent to villages with the task of elevating the cultural level of villages and to advise the peasants in order to improve their living conditions. Guidance work took place in parallel with practical work in various aspects of everyday life, such as health (medical tests, treatments, prescriptions, etc.), household works (practical lessons on household management and animal husbandry, as well as buildings, wells, bridge-mending, etc.), social

<sup>4</sup> Momoc, *Capcanele politice ale sociologiei interbelice*, pp. 150-151, 154; Dimitrie Gusti, *Opere* [Works], Vol. III, Bucharest 1970, pp. 230-231.

<sup>5</sup> Andrei Pippidi, *România regilor* [The Romania of kings], Bucharest 1994, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> *Fundația Culturală Prințipele Carol, 1922-1925* [The "Prince Carol" Cultural Foundation, 1922-1925], Bucharest 1926, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Momoc, *Capcanele politice ale sociologiei interbelice*, p. 156.

<sup>8</sup> Dimitrie Gusti, *Opere* [Works], Vol. I, Bucharest 1968, pp. 479-480.

life (organization of social events, festivities, theatre performances, etc.) and religious life (distribution of icons, restoration of roadside crucifixes, buildings and churches).<sup>9</sup> All these activities were either conducted inside the village hall or were organized by it somewhere else in the village.<sup>10</sup>

In 1934, the *Căminul cultural. Revista pentru cultura poporului* [The village hall: Magazine for the people's culture] began to be published under the aegis of the Royal Cultural Foundation. Gusti made a distinction between "high culture" and "mass culture", justifying the need for the latter. He encouraged teachers to become actively involved in the establishment of village halls.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond the drive to culturalize the rural world, Carol II was also pursuing another goal, namely that of drawing peasants, particularly the youth, away from the propaganda of radical political movements, the Legionary Movement in particular. He was also attempting to make them loyal to the monarchy, especially given that he was paving the way for creating his personality cult and was increasingly moving towards authoritarian rule.<sup>12</sup>

The advent of the communist regime in Romania led to major changes in the organization and purpose of village halls. Thus, in March 1950, the Committee for Cultural Establishments [*Comitetul pentru Așezăminte Culturale*] was created and was attached to the Council of Ministers. From a political point of view, this institution was subordinated to the Propaganda and Agitation Section of the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers' Party [RWP]. According to Decree no. 63 of the Grand National Assembly,<sup>13</sup> its aim was to "intensify the

<sup>9</sup> Traian Herseni, "Expoziția de lucru a echipelor regale studențești" [The exhibition of the royal student teams], *Sociologie Românească* I/1 (January 1936), p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> Henry H. Stahl, "Metoda de lucru a echipelor cu satul și căminul" [The working method of teams with the villagers and the village hall], *Sociologie Românească* I/12 (December 1936); Dimitrie Gusti, "Principiile culturii poporului" [The principles of people's culture], *Cultura poporului. Revista asociației învățătorilor din județul Cetatea - Albă* V/3-4 (March-April 1934), pp. 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> V. Lovinescu-Rădășeni, "Învățătorul în slujba satului" [The teacher in the service of the village], *Satul* 95 (October 1938), p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> In this context, Carol II created the organization *Straja Țării* [The country's sentinel] in 1934. Its purpose was to engage Romanian youth politically and ideologically, to provide an alternative to the propaganda of the extreme right – mainly the Legionary Movement, which was very attractive to youngsters – and to garner support for the king's autocratic regime, thus playing a major role in the propaganda and construction of his personality cult. See Sorin Radu, "Forms of Political and Para-Military Youth Enrollment [sic] in Romania: Case Survey: The Country's Sentinel (*Straja Țării*), 1934-1940", *Estudios humanísticos. Historia* 10 (2011), pp. 209-227.

<sup>13</sup> Published in the *Buletinul Oficial*, no. 25 (17 March 1950).

work of elevating the cultural level of the working masses in cities and villages”,<sup>14</sup> as well as to coordinate the activity of state institutions for mass culture, such as village halls, libraries, museums and reading houses [*case de citit*].<sup>15</sup> Moreover, it coordinated the educational institutions that trained “cadres for mass cultural work”.<sup>16</sup> The Committee was headed by a president, assisted by two vice-presidents and between four to six members appointed by decision of the Council of Ministers.<sup>17</sup> It published three magazines: *Îndrumătorul cultural* [The cultural mentor], *Albina* [The bee] and *Călăuza bibliotecarului* [The librarian’s guide], to which they added *Cultura poporului* [People’s culture] in 1951. The institution was financed directly from the state budget.<sup>18</sup>

Due to the importance that the communists assigned to spreading political propaganda amongst peasants, in December 1951 special legislation was passed to regulate the activity of the Committee for Cultural Establishments. The stated aim was to “strengthen and develop the activity of village halls”. Several institutions were expected to contribute to this end, with support from each local commune’s People’s Council [*Sfatul Popular*]. The latter were legally bound to renovate village hall premises until 1 January 1952, to equip them with new furniture and necessary fixtures, to provide fuel for heating and lighting, to make sure that on village hall premises only cultural activities were conducted, to provide suitable premises to those village halls which did not have their own or which were operating in schools, and to provide technicians and materials for the building of new village halls.<sup>19</sup>

The propaganda purpose of village halls was also very clearly formulated:

[...] to elevate to the highest possible level the work of presenting and explaining to peasants the latest international political events; to contribute to the unmasking of American and English imperialists, of

<sup>14</sup> Cristina Diac, “Comitetul pentru Așezăminte Culturale” [The Committee for Cultural Establishments], in Dan Cătănuș (ed.), *România, 1945-1989. Encyclopedie regimului comunist. Instituții de partid, de stat, obștești și cooperatiste* [Romania, 1945-1989: Encyclopaedia of the communist regime: Party, state, public and cooperative institutions], Bucharest: Editura Institutului Național pentru Studiul Totalitarismului, 2012, p. 142.

<sup>15</sup> The *case de citit* were rural libraries.

<sup>16</sup> Diac, “Comitetul pentru Așezăminte Culturale”, p. 144.

<sup>17</sup> Its first president was Mihail Roșianu, a native of Vâlcea County, a teacher and former underground fighter. He was succeeded in this position by C. Nistor in March 1952.

<sup>18</sup> Diac, “Comitetul pentru Așezăminte Culturale”, pp. 143-144.

<sup>19</sup> Decision of the Council of Ministers, no. 1442 (9 October 1951), published in the *Buletinul Oficial*, no. 116 (9 December 1951); decision of the Council of Ministers, no. 1542 (20 December 1951), published in the *Buletinul Oficial*, no. 120 (20 December 1951).

their Titoist servants and their local agents; to intensify the work of encouraging working people to fulfil and exceed the five-year plan; to intensify the propagation of Soviet agricultural and animal husbandry methods amongst working peasants; to employ every form of cultural activity for the concrete popularization of the superiority of socialist agriculture and the successes attained at collective farms; to intensify the action of eradicating illiteracy and the work of disseminating science for a more active fight against mysticism, obscurantism and religious superstitions; to raise the artistic and political standard of events organized in village halls; to intensify local sports activities.<sup>20</sup>

Besides propaganda tasks, the Committee was also tasked with training the village hall managers recruited from amongst workers and peasants, as well as other cultural activists. In order to “raise the political and professional standard”, the Committee was required to organize short-term training courses; additionally, special attention was given to the management and development of village halls.<sup>21</sup>

In collaboration with the ministry of public education and the Society for the Dissemination of Science and Culture, the Committee had to draw up study plans, set subjects and prepare lessons for the science and artistic circles organized within village halls, and together with the ministry of agriculture it was tasked with the same for agricultural and animal husbandry circles. They emphasized the creation and development of libraries in village halls, as well as the organization of training courses for librarians.<sup>22</sup>

The Committee for Cultural Establishments operated under this name until October 1953, when it was restructured as a Directorate and transferred to the newly re-established ministry of culture.<sup>23</sup>

### *Political and Cultural Propaganda in the Countryside*

Communists understood that both man and society had to go through a reconstruction and remodelling process with a view to creating a favourable environment for the development of a new political regime. In order to achieve this, they chose to combine the damaging actions of persuading, manipulating and propagandizing. The Communist Party leadership would use propaganda as a “transmission belt” for communist ideology.<sup>24</sup> It was

<sup>20</sup> Diac, “Comitetul pentru Așezăminte Culturale”, p. 146.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

<sup>23</sup> Decree no. 462, published in the *Buletinul Oficial*, no. 44 (31 October 1953).

<sup>24</sup> In this regard, see David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination and Terror under Stalin, 1927-1941*, New Haven and London: Yale University

supposed to create a bridge between the avant-garde, represented by the Party, and the unified social categories of the proletariat, the peasantry and the intelligentsia. Throughout the five decades of Romanian communism, communications control, the rewriting of the past and of language, social exclusion and mystical manipulation through the sacralization of the leader remained constant instruments of support for the doctrinal control that became an absolute criterion, capable of turning people into “enemies of the people” in order to impose the “New Man” through terror.<sup>25</sup>

The Communist Party generated propaganda through specially created institutions, such as ministries, propaganda directorates and sections, but also through a series of front organizations founded to inoculate the masses with Marxism-Leninism. The most important of these was the Propaganda and Agitation Department [*Secția de Propagandă și Agitație*]. In the first years of communist rule, some of the most significant propaganda instruments were the “fellow travellers”, namely the parties allied to the communists under the umbrella of the National Democratic Front; such mass organizations as the Patriotic Defence [*Apărarea Patriotică*], the Union of Patriots [*Uniunea Patrioților*], the Ploughmen’s Front [*Frontul Plugarilor*] and the Romanian Association for Strengthening Ties with the Soviet Union [*Asociația Română pentru strângerea Legăturilor cu Uniunea Sovietică (ARLUS)*]; such youth organizations as the Union of Communist Youth [*Uniunea Tineretului Comunist*]; the pioneers and student organizations; women’s organizations; professional associations; as well as such scientific institutions as the Institute for Party History, the Romanian-Russian Museum, the Institute for Romanian-Soviet Studies and the Society for the Dissemination of Culture and Science. In addition, the communist regime made use of a series of personalities capable of exerting influence over the collective consciousness due to their status and fame. Some of them collaborated willingly, whilst others were coerced to do so.<sup>26</sup>

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Press, 2011; Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Day*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003; Carol S. Lilly, *Power and Persuasion: Ideology and Rhetoric in Communist Yugoslavia, 1944-1953*, Boulder: Westview Press, 2001; Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; Vladimir Reisky de Dubnic, *Communist Propaganda Methods: A Case Study on Czechoslovakia*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1960; Lindley Fraser, *Propaganda*, London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1957, esp. the chapter “Communism and Propaganda”, pp. 123-140.

<sup>25</sup> Brîndușa Armanca, “Propagandă și cenzură în România comunistă” [Propaganda and censorship in communist Romania], *Sfera Politicii*, nos 129-130 (accessible online: <http://www.sferapoliticii.ro/sfera/129-130/art11-armanca.html>, last accessed: 28 January 2015).

<sup>26</sup> For details, see Oana Ilie, *Propaganda politică. Tipologii și arii de manifestare (1945-1958)*

After the installation of the pro-Soviet government led by Petru Groza on 6 March 1945, communist propaganda became rife, because, apart from its own propaganda apparatus, the Communist Party was now able to make full use of the main means and state institutions that it now controlled completely. The propaganda machine, using a great number of propagandists and agitators, launched a full-scale assault on people's souls and minds in its attempt to transform them not only into obedient subjects – namely, people ready to accept the rules imposed by the communist power if not happily, at least passively or with complicit indifference – but also into active and loyal subjects of the new regime.

Communist propaganda and agitation, whether we are talking about the Communist Party or the satellite political organizations that joined its propaganda drive, attached great significance to the ideological training of their own cadres and activists, strengthening their feeling of belonging to an élite and ensuring their loyalty towards the Party through protection from external "devious influences". In this sense, communist propaganda and agitation had an overall offensive character, but it did not neglect the defensive elements of protection. The regime argued that the strengthening of base organizations and the consolidation of their leading role, in other words the Party's domination over society, largely depended on completing this task. Simultaneously, they believed that the quality of propaganda could be improved by means of a proper system of recruiting propagandists. Propaganda had to be convincing through its revelation of the "truth" (of the communist truth, that is) in the simplest and clearest form, so that it could be easily understood by the masses.<sup>27</sup> Theoretically, based on Leninist principles, communists distinguished between propaganda and agitation. If propaganda was considered a more complex activity, which disseminated more ideas to a narrower group of individuals, mostly Party members and sympathizers, agitation was regarded as the work of persuading the masses, the uneducated and the uncultivated.<sup>28</sup> Communist agitation, in the conception of its promoters, never lied and had to be carried out consistently, on a daily basis, on any occasion and everywhere, preferably in high-traffic or densely populated areas, such as railway stations, central squares, schools, universities, stadiums, factories and threshing areas in the countryside. Concretely, in the field they did not distinguish between agitation and propaganda, the two terms being generally considered synonymous.

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[Political propaganda: Typologies and areas of manifestation (1945-1958)], Târgoviște: Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27-63.

<sup>28</sup> Călin Hentea, *Noile haine ale propagandei* [The new clothes of propaganda], Bucharest: Editura Paralela 45, 2008, p. 101.

At the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s, the communists organized political propaganda in the rural world and mainly used a political front organization for this purpose, namely the Ploughmen's Front, led by Prime Minister Petru Groza. The tactic of using fellow travellers to disseminate communist ideas and the communist programme in Romanian villages had a reason: the Communist Party lacked credibility amongst the peasantry, the social category that constituted approximately 80% of the country's population.<sup>29</sup> From 1949 to 1953, the Ploughmen's Front had organizations in almost all Romanian villages and communes, and its main task was to disseminate the Communist Party's ideology amongst peasants, to explain to them the Party's plans for the socialist transformation of agriculture in simple terms, to persuade them of the Party's importance in the life of the peasantry and the modernization of villages and so on. To achieve this goal, they needed to train "cultural mentors" [*îndrumători culturali*] and "apparatchiks" (political activists) to disseminate communist ideas in peasant households. They also needed to organize the propaganda and to construct a simple and clearly understandable discourse – given that most peasants were illiterate, deeply religious and very suspicious of the communist ideology – to explain the "dictatorship of the proletariat", "people's democracy" and "collectivization".<sup>30</sup>

#### *"Cadres" – Cultural Mentors*

The propaganda and agitation of the Ploughmen's Front paid great attention to the ideological training of its own "cadre" (political staff) and activists. Besides strengthening their feeling of belonging to an élite, it ensured their loyalty to the Party by protecting them from external "evil influences". The propaganda of the RWP served as a model for the propaganda, organization and cadre training of the Ploughmen's Front. The purpose of Party education, conducted according to the Soviet model, was to train cadres so that, upon graduation, they were ready to take up positions of responsibility within the central and local structures of the RWP and in state institutions. Moreover, Party education also aimed at indoctrinating Party members in order to "enhance their ideological level".<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Sorin Radu, "Agrarianism in Romania: Political Evolution and Doctrine of Ploughmen's Front (1933-1953)", *Humanities and Social Sciences Review* 3/3 (2014), pp. 355-362.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*, "Communist Propaganda in the Romanian Countryside: Case Study – the Activity of the Cultural Guides of the Ploughmen's Front (1948-1953)", in Feng Tao (ed.), *Humanity and Social Sciences: International Proceedings of Economics Development and Research*, Vol. LXXX, Singapore: IACSIT Press, 2014, p. 32.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*, "Party Education in Communist Romania: Case Study: The Establishment and Organization of the Ploughmen's Front's Schools of Cadres (1948)", *Slovanský přehled* 1-2 (2012), pp. 65-79.

At the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s, a new type of propagandist emerged in communist Romania, namely “cultural mentors” [*îndrumători culturali*]. They were apparatchiks educated at cadre schools with the aim of organizing and supervising cultural propaganda activities in the countryside. Propaganda, cultural activities and education were not objectives in themselves, but included added political-ideological messages. Peasants had to be persuaded to attend cultural events, festivals and social functions. It was very important for the cadres responsible for propaganda to take advantage of such events from the life of villages and to maintain control over the strategies and methods by which they could capitalize on them. “Cultural teams” were specially instructed at cadre schools, where they learnt techniques of cultural propaganda, its special language and the main themes of Soviet propaganda. The principal mentors attended the “training” courses. These propagandists were mainly recruited from amongst the wealthier peasants. The recruitment of mentors or agitators was fundamental to the Ploughmen’s Front, and the selection of students for its cadre schools was based on a few essential criteria. Thus, they had to have a “healthy origin” [*origine sănătoasă*], meaning they should come from a peasant family, and a spotless political past, meaning they should not have been members of bourgeois or fascist parties. In addition, students should not have a hostile attitude towards the proletariat and the working peasantry, but should inspire their trust instead. The candidates’ past was rigorously checked by the leadership of the respective Ploughmen’s Front county organization. As for the prior education of candidates, they had to have at least elementary education, as well as “potential for political development”.<sup>32</sup>

The central leadership of the Ploughmen’s Front regularly transmitted, through the propaganda apparatus, guidance and:

[...] explanations to the working peasantry in villages on all political, economic and administrative issues to counter malicious rumours spread by the hostile reactionary forces of the peasantry with the aim of maintaining it in a state of uncertainty, thus preventing it from starting to implement all the measures that the government took for the improvement of their material and cultural situation [...] The proclamation of the People’s Republic of Romania set the Ploughmen’s Front Party, apart from other tasks, also that of intensifying the work of political persuasion amongst the ploughmen masses and that of [persuading] them of the importance of the proclamation of the People’s Republic in particular.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Radu, “Communist Propaganda in the Romanian Countryside”, p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale [Central National Historical Archives], Bucharest,

At the end of 1948, one of the main concerns of the propaganda apparatus was to recruit cultural mentors and village instructors who were to perform:

[...] guidance and propaganda activities from person to person in order to contribute to the mobilization of all ploughmen to fight for the consolidation and development of our People's Republic. Peasants must be persuaded that the People's Republic of Romania is also theirs and, as a result, it must be supported. The persuasion work must be conducted in plain language, easy to understand by the masses.<sup>34</sup>

Instructions related to the policy of recruiting village instructors were also very clear:

1. Instructors must be selected from amongst the most active, politically best-prepared and most dynamic elements; 2. They will be the permanent propagandists and persuaders in villages; 3. They should be selected from the ranks of the working peasantry, peasant men and women who work their own land; 4. They should be devoted to the popular cause, to be honest and hardworking elements able to understand and explain to ploughmen all political issues.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, the tasks of village instructors were assigned very explicitly in the instructions that the central leadership sent to local organizations of the Ploughmen's Front. They should read on a daily basis the newspapers *Frontul Plugarilor* [The Ploughmen's Front], *Scânteia* [The spark] and *Vestea Satelor* [Village news], as well as the agitation and propaganda brochures:

[...] to combat the malicious rumours spread by reactionaries and to reveal the goals they wish to achieve by this; to mobilize ploughmen and to be actively involved in village activities of public interest [the construction of a footbridge, the renovation of a school or a road, deliveries of compulsory quotas, capital enhancement of cooperatives, etc.].

They were expected to be the active correspondents of propaganda papers and to organize collective readings of propaganda newspapers and brochures. In particular, instructors:

[...] had to perform a constant work of persuasion concerning the importance of the People's Republic of Romania, [and] economic and

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Arhiva Comitetului Central al Partidului Comunist din România [Archive of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party], Fond Frontul Plugarilor [The Ploughmen's Front Fund], file 93, p. 42 [hereafter ANIC, Arhiva CC al PCR, Fond Frontul Plugarilor].

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

political issues, and will relentlessly combat reactionaries by unmasking the monarchy and by popularizing the achievements of the government of democratic Romania. [...] Instructors will persuade and stimulate peasants to prepare their tools in time for the spring agricultural works, to take good care of their cattle and to select the necessary seeds for the spring sowing.<sup>36</sup>

Drafting work plans and organizing the activity of village instructors was the task of political education departments within each county organization of the Ploughmen's Front.<sup>37</sup>

In reality, most agitators had a poor level of education. Archival documents shed light on a number of shortcomings faced by the political propaganda apparatus and particularly by cadre schools in the first years after World War II: reluctance towards involving the leaders of central and local organizations; the poor circulation of Party press and propaganda materials; the lack of understanding of the contents and messages, hence the weak dissemination of propaganda in rural areas; the course participants, the "students" of cadre schools, as well as the teaching staff were poorly prepared and uninvolved, many of them without the needed skills (they were semi-literate, lazy and did not understand the training purposes, etc.); instructors did not possess a coherent policy and could not coordinate political information activities in villages; and propagandists lacked the ability to organize political information, which would have allowed them to capitalize on Marxist ideas.<sup>38</sup>

### *"Cultural Work" in Village Halls*

The places where cultural teams and cultural mentors routinely organized "educational" activities were village halls and even schools. In addition, they frequently resorted to "person-to-person propaganda". As village halls were becoming important propaganda centres, one essential task of the Ploughmen's Front was to provide the necessary support to local authorities in building or planning them, in identifying the appropriate cadres for "agitation" activities and in coordinating propaganda activities. Village halls hosted theatre groups, folk dance ensembles, choirs and fanfares, as well as social evenings and festivities. Cultural activity reports submitted by activists contained many

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>38</sup> For details, see Vasile Ciobanu, Sorin Radu and Nicolae Georgescu (eds), *Frontul Plugarilor. Documente* [The Ploughmen's Front: Documents], Vol. II (1948-1951), Bucharest: Institutul Național pentru Studiul Totalitarismului, 2012.

grossly exaggerated figures of hundreds or even thousands of events organized in one county throughout a single year.<sup>39</sup>

The official slogan embraced by the propaganda apparatus was “No village without a village hall, no village hall without a library and its own premises”.<sup>40</sup> Village halls would democratize following the removal of kulaks [*chiaburi*] and of the exploitative bourgeois elements from the leadership of rural institutions and their replacement with peasants.<sup>41</sup> Many village halls were given names that were significant to the new regime, such as “23rd of August 1944”, “1st of May”, “30th of December 1947”, “Horea, Cloșca and Crișan”, “1907” and “Red Banner”. The official discourse tried to convince villagers not only of the importance of village halls, but also of the paradigm shift implemented by the new social order:

One of the means of cultural dissemination is the Village Hall. Initially founded on a bourgeois-landlord cultural basis, after 23 August 1944, it continued to promote kulaks to the leadership of villages, while the impoverished ploughmen were kept at a distance. The Village Hall, being under the patronage of the dynasty, attempted to transform into a reactionary instrument instead of being at the service of the masses, exploited by landlords and kulaks for ages. Village halls were run by people with reactionary views who were ultimately exposed. All across the country mass organizations started to purge the halls, removing people with outdated views and electing to leadership councils people from the ranks of the poor and enlightenment-loving rural proletariat. Steadily, the Village Hall took over its real role, namely that of enlightening and culturalizing the working peasant masses.<sup>42</sup>

Cultural mentors had manifold tasks, but one of the most important was to create artistic groups, folk dance ensembles or choirs and to organize regular “shows”. The topic of each “cultural” activity perfectly reflected the Stalinist dogma and platitudes on the “new world”, following the Soviet model. In many venues, apart from village halls, they also created artistic

<sup>39</sup> “Căminele culturale bănățene s-au luat la întrecere în munca de luminare a poporului” [Village halls in the Banat region are competing in the work of enlightening the people], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1039 (12 August 1948).

<sup>40</sup> “Niciun sat fără cămin cultural!” [No village without a village hall!], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1051 (26 August 1948).

<sup>41</sup> “Țărăniminea muncitoare în sfaturile de conducere ale căminelor culturale” [The working peasantry on the leadership councils of village halls], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1047 (21 August 1948).

<sup>42</sup> “Căminele culturale și viața satelor” [Village halls in the life of villages], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1048 (22 August 1948).

departments that organized various cultural events. The programmes of these shows included, for instance, the singing of *The International* hymn, sketches (*A Story for Miners* by Mayakovsky, *For a Better Life*),<sup>43</sup> the interpretation of revolutionary songs (*March of the Worker Youth, Partisan March*) and poetry readings (*We Want Land* by George Coșbuc, *The Boyars* by D. Corbea). They even created theatre groups in village halls, which mainly included teachers or civil servants working for the People's Council.

Beginning in 1950-1951, the central leadership assigned to cultural mentors ever-more precise tasks regarding the organization of educational-cultural work in the countryside. These so-called "cultural plans" were meant to organize cultural-political propaganda activities and stipulated measures for the improvement of the functioning of village halls. Cultural mentors and village instructors were hence expected to ensure the smooth operation of village halls; to guarantee their supply of newspapers, books and brochures; to create reading halls; and to deal with the organization of visual propaganda, the installation of notice boards and photograph boards in the street and so on.

One of their fundamental tasks, which was connected to their village hall activities, was the organization of conferences on various topics, as amongst others "the alliance between the proletariat and the working peasantry under the Party's leadership", "the struggle for the defence of peace and the popularization of the forces of peace headed by the USSR and her Brilliant Leader Comrade Stalin", "elevating the cultural level of peasants", "the delivery of compulsory quotas; the completion of the spring sowing campaign", "exposing class enemies, the kulaks and saboteurs", "exposing warmongers and their Titoist conspiracies", "enhancing love for the Party and its leaders by recognizing the leading role of the RWP", "the people's health", "collectivization" and "the help provided by the USSR" to Romania. They had to prepare artistic events, plays, choir performances, games and such.<sup>44</sup> They also drew up plans for sporting events: the organization of the 1 May 1951 cross-country race, the creation of football pitches, volleyball courts and athletics grounds, support for the purchase of sporting equipment and even the establishment of sport clubs with the aim of "training the masses for participation in sporting events".<sup>45</sup> The propaganda for the socialist

<sup>43</sup> "Căminele culturale sprijin activ în ridicarea culturală a satelor noastre" [Village halls actively support the cultural development of our villages], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1342 (10 August 1949).

<sup>44</sup> For details, see Ciobanu, Radu and Georgescu (eds), *Frontul Plugarilor. Documente*, pp. 145-148, 219-221, 298-299.

<sup>45</sup> Serviciul Județean Vâlcea al Arhivelor Naționale ale României [Vâlcea County

transformation of agriculture, meaning the establishment of collective farms, which was a fundamental task of cultural mentors, was mainly disseminated through village halls. We do not have access to exhaustive data, but certain documents indicate that in 1949-1950 the Ploughmen's Front used about 1200 mentors and instructors from the central and county level who had been specially trained for this purpose. This was meant to complement the propaganda effort of members who had received only modest training at "village organization meetings for training and popularization". At the village level, for instance, from 1 October to 31 December 1952, over 3700 village instructor teams, with more than 18,000 members in total, "conducted persuasion work amongst working peasants". Most instructors, mentors, members of educational collectives and cadres generally responsible for the collectivization propaganda were "removed from the production process", being very well paid by the ploughmen organization.<sup>46</sup>

Propaganda, "agitation work" or "persuasion work" mainly consisted of the following activities: "processing", namely explaining newspaper articles from *Scânteia* and *Frontul Plugarilor* to peasants, as well as brochures on the socialist transformation of agriculture, published by communists or the Central Committee of the Ploughmen's Front; organizing group visits of Front members to collective farms; and organizing "reading circle meetings", as well as "person-to-person" propaganda amongst Ploughmen's Front members. The central leadership instructed regional organizations that every village organization had to form one or two teams to "go from door to door and talk to people, [...] from person to person". People responsible for reading circles had to be trained individually or in groups by activists and members of education teams from the district in order to persuade Ploughmen's Front members of the importance of the campaign. The latter were also required to "commit themselves" to joining collective farms and associations [*întovărășiri*]. Moreover, organization members had to be "trained to uncover all kulak plots to sabotage the fulfilment of the collectivization plan". Another major task of cultural mentors was to fight the "class enemy" who spread rumours with the purpose of creating distrust amongst peasants with regard to government measures aimed at the socialist transformation of agriculture.<sup>47</sup>

Propaganda leaflets on the socialist transformation of agriculture according to the Soviet model – published by the Ploughmen's Front or the Communist

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DIRECTORATE OF THE ROMANIAN NATIONAL ARCHIVES; HEREAFTER SJVANR], FOND PRIMĂRIA orașului Călimănești [Călimănești Town Hall Fund], file 7/1951, p. 32.

<sup>46</sup> ANIC, Arhiva CC al PCR, Fond Frontul Plugarilor, roll 432, frames 71-79; roll 435, frames 526-545.

<sup>47</sup> For details, see Sorin Radu, Cosmin Budeancă and Flavius Solomon, "The 'Comrades',

Party and mainly distributed to ploughmen and “processed” during reading circles – exceeded one million copies in 1950. Amongst the most important titles were: *Statutul model al Gospodăriei Agricole Colective* [The model status of the collective farm], *Hotărârea privitoare la consolidarea G. A. C.* [The decision on the consolidation of collective farms], *Zece întrebări, zece răspunsuri* [Ten questions, ten answers], *Așa ne făurim o viață mai bună* [This is how we forge a better life for ourselves], *Întrebări și răspunsuri despre viața țărănimii sovietice* [Questions and answers about the life of Soviet peasants], *Scrisori din colhozul Budionâi pentru țărani români* [Letters from the Budyonny Kolkhoz to Romanian peasants], *Familia sovietică* [The Soviet family], *Răspunsurile țăraniilor sovietici din colhozul STALIN* [The answers of Soviet peasants from the STALIN Kolkhoz] and *Tractoriștii* [The tractor drivers].<sup>48</sup>

Contemporary documents present an interesting picture of village halls in the 1950s. For instance, reports on the activity of the village hall in Călimănești, Vâlcea County, for the years 1950 to 1957 reveal significant aspects of the manner in which communists used this institution in their “cultural-political work”. Thus, in 1951, their primary goals were “to educate and promote literacy amongst the masses, and to elevate their cultural level through village halls”, “to disseminate Soviet methods amongst the working peasantry” and “to intensify persuasion work regarding collective farms amongst the working peasantry”.<sup>49</sup> The institution’s entire activity was focused on implementing the “directives of the Second Congress of the Workers’ Party on the development of agriculture”. Furthermore, “it contributed to the mobilization of the entire people to the struggle for the defence of peace and the construction of socialism in the People’s Republic of Romania”. In order to ensure the success of the sowing campaign, they planned eleven cultural evenings to persuade the locals; they devised two slogans related to agricultural works; they held five conferences using the radio-relay station; and the theatre group was also prepared. As for the issue of collectivization, the village hall arranged two cultural evenings and three conferences, as well as social events in cooperation with the pupils. In addition, they organized conferences on various “international issues”, for instance on the

Propaganda and the Collectivization of Agriculture in Eastern Europe: The Ploughmen’s Front in Romania”, *Historický časopis* 63/1 (2015), pp. 113-135.

<sup>48</sup> ANIC, Arhiva CC al PCR, Fond Frontul Plugarilor, roll 435, frames 112-139; Serviciul Județean Hunedoara al Arhivelor Naționale [Hunedoara County Directorate of the Romanian National Archives; hereafter SJHANR], Fond Comitetul Regional al Partidului Muncitoresc Român [The Regional Committee of the Romanian Workers’ Party Fund], file 83/1950, p. 175.

<sup>49</sup> SJVANR, Fond Primăria orașului Călimănești, file 7/1951, pp. 6-12, 202-205.

18th anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution of the USSR in 1936. The report admitted the existence of problems in the sense that many of those involved in artistic and propaganda work refused to take part in rehearsals; it was mainly teachers who declined to participate in the work of cultural elevation. As for the preparation of the artistic programme, there were difficulties in “mobilizing the youth and the elderly for rehearsals”.<sup>50</sup> For local political officials, it was more serious that the manager turned the village hall premises into “a dance hall and an entertainment hall instead of caring for the culturalization of the masses”.<sup>51</sup> We encounter the same criticism in March 1956, citing the People’s Council deputies’ lack of interest in the activity of the village hall, which was turned into an “entertainment hall”.<sup>52</sup> It appears that a year later they managed to rectify the problem and reported that “a collective of conference speakers, a dance and a theatre group, a brigade, a choir and a library” were now operational there. This institution hosted conferences, Sunday socials, cultural evenings, radio listening clubs, chess games and preparations for the 1 May programme, as well as for the communal festival on 26 May, the intercommunal one on 16 June and the regional one on 23 June.<sup>53</sup>

Cultural propaganda activities were financed directly from the state budget, but later, as local Party and Ploughmen’s Front organizations grew in strength, they also created donation funds and collected dues from Party members. Within local organizations they created so-called “self-imposition funds” [*fonduri de autoimpunere*], to which ordinary citizens contributed “voluntarily”.<sup>54</sup> Ploughmen and Party organizations, which started to multiply in rural areas after 1949, made considerable efforts to persuade peasants to become voluntarily and actively involved in the building of village halls.<sup>55</sup> The official discourse conveyed inflated numbers of community halls built in villages and towns. In August 1948, their number was allegedly close to

<sup>50</sup> SJVANR, Fond Primăria orașului Călimănești, file 1/1954, pp. 28, 29.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>52</sup> SJVANR, Fond Primăria orașului Călimănești, file 5/1956, p. 61.

<sup>53</sup> SJVANR, Fond Primăria orașului Călimănești, file 3/1957, pp. 70, 71.

<sup>54</sup> SJHANR, Fond Frontul Plugarilor. Comitetul Județean Hunedoara [The Ploughmen’s Front: Hunedoara County Committee Fund], file 5/1947, p. 373; SJVANR, Fond Primăria orașului Călimănești, file 2/1951, p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> “Plugărimea muncitoare din Cher, jud. Arad a construit un local de cămin cultural” [Working ploughmen in Cher, Arad County, built premises for a village hall], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1042 (15 August 1948); “Țărani muncitori din comuna Iliușa – Someș au construit prin muncă voluntară un cămin cultural” [Working peasants in the commune of Iliușa – Someș built a village hall through voluntary work], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1308 (1 July 1949).

7000,<sup>56</sup> and by the end of 1949 it grew to over 10,000. In addition, the state plan for 1950 stipulated the construction of another 1400 across the country.<sup>57</sup> Beyond the propaganda discourse, there were numerous cases when village halls did not have their own premises, but were hosted on school grounds or in buildings assigned to them by local authorities, as evidenced in the contemporary press and especially in archival documents.<sup>58</sup>

Amongst the propaganda methods regularly employed by agitators and propagandists was the use of cinema caravans, which showed movies in village halls, as well as newsreels on the political achievements of the government and, obviously, of the Soviets under Stalin's leadership. They alternated between political content and musical pieces.<sup>59</sup> Certain village halls started to be equipped with film projectors and radios.<sup>60</sup> The propaganda discourse took full advantage of these technical improvements implemented by Party organizations. Relevant in this sense is an article published in the *Frontul Plugarilor* newspaper, entitled "Old Costache Ene from the commune of Corbul de Sus – Constanța listens to radio in the village hall".<sup>61</sup>

In village halls they also organized a significant number of so-called "reading circles" and "people's libraries".<sup>62</sup> Presidents of communist organizations and/or of the Ploughmen's Front in villages were tasked with overseeing and supporting the activity of reading circles, so that they operated as efficiently as possible. "We shall train all education collectives" – one document reveals – "and we shall go over the material together so that they are better informed and able to control and support reading circles in order for them to conduct their activities, and we shall schedule reading circles in close connection with village halls."<sup>63</sup> They encouraged the "collective reading" of newspapers<sup>64</sup> and propaganda materials.

<sup>56</sup> "Căminele culturale și viața satelor".

<sup>57</sup> "Căminele culturale să fie un factor tot mai activ în lupta pentru îndeplinirea Planului de Stat pe 1950" [May village halls become an ever-more active factor in the fight for the fulfilment of the state plan for 1950], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1463 (4 January 1950).

<sup>58</sup> "Căminele culturale bănățene s-au luat la întrecere în munca de luminare a poporului".

<sup>59</sup> SJHANR, Fond *Frontul Plugarilor*. Comitetul Județean Hunedoara, file 5/1947, pp. 375, 376.

<sup>60</sup> "Căminul Cultural de la Voinești – Muscel a primit în dar de la Ministerul Artelor un aparat de filmat" [The village hall in Voinești – Muscel received a camera as a present from the ministry of arts], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1295 (16 June 1949).

<sup>61</sup> *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1200 (21 February 1949).

<sup>62</sup> "Bibliotecile căminelor culturale capătă o mare dezvoltare" [Village hall libraries are developing quickly], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1166 (12 January 1949).

<sup>63</sup> SJHANR, Fond Comitetul Regional al PMR Hunedoara, file 83/1950, p. 176.

<sup>64</sup> *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1160 (2 January 1949).

As for peasants' participation in these circles and the efficiency of these cultural propaganda actions, contemporary documents disclose a profound discrepancy between the objectives established at the central level and the realities in the field.<sup>65</sup> Organization leaders frequently pinpointed that it was necessary for reading circle organizers to be trained in reading brochures and newspapers in order to attract new members. Similarly, each agitator had to be trained to have a responsible attitude towards the circle.<sup>66</sup>

The official image of the efficiency of "cultural work" in villages was extremely positive for the central political leaders, given that reports submitted by activists from local, county and central organizations were usually exaggerated and marked by an enthusiasm that was not grounded in reality. In this respect, we can mention the "official" impression of a propagandist working in the village of Pietroasele in Buzău County on the activity of village halls:

The library hall was filled with ploughmen and ploughwomen of all ages. One of them read a few articles and pieces of news from *Scânteia*, *Frontul Plugarilor* and *Albina* on current national and international political issues. Considerable interest was stirred by an article on the life of Soviet ploughmen, published in *Frontul Plugarilor*. Then, they all listened to the village hour on the radio and discussed what they heard. Afterwards, they discussed household issues. They shared what they learnt from their work and from reading books and newspapers. Then, they committed themselves to improve their work, so that they do not fall behind other villages. In the afternoon the working ploughmen in Pietroasele once again gathered in the village hall and attended a festivity organized by the village youth. The programme included recitals, folk dances and a wonderful choir made up exclusively of peasants.<sup>67</sup>

Everything seems taken out of the propagandist's manual. The practice of "self-commitments"<sup>68</sup> for work was routine amongst village instructors and

<sup>65</sup> For example, the organization in Orăştie, Hunedoara County, reported on 22 December 1950 that they had 75 reading circles, of which 46 were operational; SJHANR, Fond Comitetul Regional al PMR Hunedoara, file 83/1950, p. 194.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>67</sup> "Niciun sat fără cămin cultural!" [No village without a village hall!], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1128 (23 November 1948).

<sup>68</sup> "La consfătuirea care a avut loc la Huşi, directorii căminelor culturale şi bibliotecarii şi-au luat angajamente pentru îmbunătăţirea muncii" [At the meeting in Huşi village hall managers committed themselves to improving their work], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1402 (20 October 1949).

others as well. Consequently, their activity reports had to reflect the fulfilment of these commitments and implicitly the fulfilment of cultural work plans.

Another “cultural” activity constantly included on village hall agendas was the organization of celebrations to mark important events and dates for the Party, such the Great October Revolution, the celebration of which often caused bafflement amongst peasants since it occurred on 7 November,<sup>69</sup> as well as on 1 May, 23 August and 30 December.<sup>70</sup> The organization of tournaments and competitions amongst village halls at commune, district and county level can be similarly understood.<sup>71</sup>

A further important role that the propaganda apparatus assigned to village halls was their involvement in the “cultural development of villages”. For this, they singled out teachers, who were often appointed to lead cultural teams tasked with improving the image of the Ploughmen’s Front and implicitly that of communists. The village hall became the place where, under the guidance of teachers, they created literacy schools for peasants according to the Soviet model, which were operational mainly during the winter months.<sup>72</sup> In certain villages there were zealous activists who tried unsuccessfully to teach peasants the Russian language.<sup>73</sup> In general, teachers were determined to become involved in the literacy campaign,<sup>74</sup> to adopt teaching methods

<sup>69</sup> “Căminele culturale din întreaga țară au făcut mari pregătiri pentru cinstirea zilei Marii Revoluții Socialiste” [Village halls across the country have made intense preparations for the celebration of the Great Socialist Revolution], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1097 (18 October 1948).

<sup>70</sup> “Căminele culturale din județul Cluj se pregătesc pentru sărbătoarea de 23 august” [Village halls in Cluj County are preparing for the 23 August celebrations], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1351 (20 August 1949).

<sup>71</sup> “Întrecerea între căminele culturale din Plasa Broșteni, județul Mehedinți” [The competition between village halls in the rural district of Broșteni, Mehedinți County], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1073 (20 September 1948); “În județul Ciuc a avut loc a doua etapă a concursurilor între echipele căminelor culturale” [Ciuc County organized the second stage of the competition between village hall teams], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1299 (20 June 1949).

<sup>72</sup> “Învățătorii și actul de la 23 august” [Teachers and the events of 23 August], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 166 (24 August 1945); “Fiecare trebuie să pună umărul” [Everybody must contribute], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 551 (10 December 1946).

<sup>73</sup> “La căminul cultural din comuna Gugești – Fălcu s-au deschis cursuri pentru învățarea limbii ruse” [The village hall in the commune of Gugești – Fălcu organizes Russian language classes], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1344 (12 August 1949).

<sup>74</sup> “În lupta dusă împotriva neștiinței de carte să nu precupețim nicio sforțare” [We must not waste any effort in our fight against illiteracy], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1190 (10 February 1949); “Școlile de alfabetizare au desfășurat o muncă fără răgaz” [Literacy schools have worked without respite], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1249 (20 April 1949); “Pentru cuprinderea

from the USSR,<sup>75</sup> to combat superstitions<sup>76</sup> and to support the activities of village halls.<sup>77</sup>

As for the campaigns amongst peasants, activity reports clearly overstated the successes and achievements of village instructors and propaganda agents: “The activity of village halls in our villages,” reported an activist in 1949, “improved on a daily basis. The work of elevating the political and cultural level of the working peasantry is performed with ever-more zeal.”<sup>78</sup> “Guided and supported by the organizations of the RWP and of the Ploughmen’s Front, village halls became a living reality. [...] Artistic and cultural activities taking place at this institution allegedly contributed to unity amongst the nationalities and the elevation of their cultural level”,<sup>79</sup> as well. The propaganda press sent to rural areas regularly published articles maintaining the idea that village halls were meant to spread “the light” amongst peasants. The meaning of the concept was political: “Village halls in competition to spread the light in villages”,<sup>80</sup> “Working peasantry fighting for the cultural development of villages”;<sup>81</sup> “The cultural upheaval of the working peasantry”.<sup>82</sup>

Another cultural activity undertaken in village halls and encouraged by village instructors was the creation of choirs, which organized “performances” for villagers, usually on Sundays. Controls conducted by activists from the central leadership noted that the number of village choirs in village halls

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tuturor neștiutorilor de carte la cursurile de alfabetizare” [For the enrolment of all illiterate people in literacy courses], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1601 (8 February 1951); “Organizațiile Frontul Plugarilor trebuie să sprijine activ munca de alfabetizare” [Ploughmen’s Front organizations must actively support the work of promoting literacy], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1699 (21 December 1952).

<sup>75</sup> “Cum se duce munca culturală la sate în Uniunea Sovietică” [How cultural work is conducted in Soviet villages], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1230 (28 March 1949).

<sup>76</sup> “Să luptăm pentru luminarea plugărimii muncitoare combatând superstițiile” [Let us fight for the enlightenment of working ploughmen by combatting superstitions], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1215 (11 March 1949).

<sup>77</sup> “Învățătorii în sprijinul activității căminelor culturale” [Teachers support the activity of village halls], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1210 (5 March 1949).

<sup>78</sup> “Căminele Culturale sprijin activ în ridicarea cultural a satelor noastre” [Village halls actively support the cultural elevation of our villages], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1342 (10 August 1949).

<sup>79</sup> “Căminele culturale din județul Ciuc” [Village halls in Ciuc County], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1033 (5 August 1948).

<sup>80</sup> *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1174 (21 January 1949).

<sup>81</sup> *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1196 (17 February 1949).

<sup>82</sup> *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1197 (18 February 1949).

grew considerably, but admitted to “certain shortcomings”, especially to “[...] certain choir leaders’ lack of training and understanding of musical problems. The repertoire of our choirs still includes the old melancholic songs devoid of moral and educational value. These songs must be replaced by songs that convey the goals of working people from all areas of activity.” Another noted inadequacy was “the lack of songs from our neighbouring and friendly neighbours”. Activists argued that some of these deficiencies could be overcome by creating a cadre school for the training of village choir masters.<sup>83</sup>

The activity agenda of village halls also included the organization of exhibitions illustrating aspects from the life of Soviet workers and peasants, the achievements of collective farms or the sacrifices made by the Party in the construction of a “democratic” Romania. For instance, in August 1948, in the village hall in Strehiaia, ARLUS mounted an exhibition with the title *Soviet Workers Earned their Right to a Better Life*: “The exhibition is a glimpse into the country where exploitation of man by man has been abolished for good.” It was visited by “hundreds of peasants” on 31 July, when the weekly market was held at Strehiaia.<sup>84</sup>

As the influence of communists extended over the rural world, they assigned new meanings and ever-more complex tasks to village halls. Thus, “fighting against superstitions and prejudices”<sup>85</sup> became a major objective of this institution. Furthermore, the objective of propaganda and cultural activities had to be “the tightening of friendly relations between peasants and workers and between Romanians and the other nationalities”.<sup>86</sup> Not least, village hall managers had to organize “conferences” to disseminate science, especially the books published by the Cartea Rusă [The Russian book] publishing house: “Village halls had to conduct a serious activity, capable of contributing to the arming of working people in villages with one of the most powerful weapons against the class enemy, namely the weapon of science.”<sup>87</sup>

<sup>83</sup> “Corurile sătești ale căminelor culturale” [Village hall choirs], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1040 (13 August 1948).

<sup>84</sup> “Activitatea culturală în județul Mehedinți” [Cultural activity in Mehedinți County], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1038 (11 August 1948).

<sup>85</sup> “Căminul cultural din comuna Bozna – Sălaj în luptă pentru combaterea superstițiilor” [The village hall in the commune of Bozna – Sălaj is fighting against superstitions], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1347 (15 August 1949).

<sup>86</sup> “Căminele culturale trebuie să fie arme tot mai puternice împotriva neștiinței” [Village halls must be ever-more powerful weapons against ignorance], *Frontul Plugarilor*, no. 1299 (20 June 1949).

<sup>87</sup> Following the controls, it was noted that, “popular science brochures published by Cartea Rusă are not made available to working peasants in order to persuade them on these issues”; *ibid.*

### *Conclusions*

Communist propaganda understood the important role that village halls played in the life of local communities. Therefore, it is not fortuitous that, with the institutionalization of the communist regime, the propaganda apparatus intended to integrate these institutions into the political agitation machine. In an attempt to conceal the real motives behind the new propaganda campaigns in villages, apparatchiks, propaganda agents, and political and cultural instructors conducted their agitation and propaganda work under the guise of "cultural work" or "political-cultural work for the enlightenment of peasants". Peasants regarded these new persuasion methods with suspicion, especially given that most ideas and clichés that village instructors promoted by using various propaganda methods ran counter to their interests (such as the issues of delivery quotas and collectivization, the fight against superstitions, etc.), while others were foreign to their interests and mentality (the fight for peace, Stalin's personality cult, Soviet science, etc.). The introduction by the propaganda apparatus of certain new techniques into the propaganda mechanism, such as the creation of dance groups, choirs, libraries and literacy campaigns, had the aim of erasing peasants' reticence towards the new political order and of attracting them into the ensemble of political-cultural activities conducted in village halls. The formalism of peasants' participation in the activities of village halls in the 1950s can be understood from the perspective of their fears of staying away, especially given that the regime's hunt for and repression of "class enemies", rumour-mongers and such was fierce. In this context, the communists' use of the Ploughmen's Front for propaganda purposes in rural areas, in general, and the evolution of village hall activities, in particular, had a simple and obvious motive: the Ploughmen organization had greater credibility amongst peasants, many of them taking refuge in it in the hope of escaping the grip of the Communist Party.

At this stage of research, we still do not have a clear picture of the activity and especially the effectiveness of village halls and cultural mentors in the Romanian rural world. Nonetheless, we note that, beyond certain cadres' weak activity and the deputies' lack of involvement in People's Councils, in economically more developed localities with strong Ploughmen and communist organizations village halls managed to organize their work very efficiently. Thus, in the second half of the 1950s, village halls operated based on activity plans drawn up by the People's Councils, and, at least at the level of official reports, most village cultural institutions included reading circles, dance groups, choirs and libraries. The activity of village halls was

to be rigorously organized later, especially after 1965, when the regime organized the “political-cultural work” in villages more coherently and with greater impact amongst peasants, stirring their enthusiasm on more than one occasion, as happened in the case of the participation of village cultural teams at various festivals and competitions under the aegis of the *Cântarea României* [Song to Romania] festival in the 1970s and 1980s.

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