

FAMINE, POVERTY, DROUGHT AND EPIDEMICS IN ROMANIA (1947). AN OUTLOOK OF THE NORWEGIAN PRESS

Marian-Alin Dudoï*

Keywords: Rädde Barnen, Red Cross, Ingegerd Galtung, Ragnar Kvam, Arnold Rörholt, Margrethe (Greta) Sturdza

(Abstract)

The study aims to investigate how the famine of 1947 manifested itself in Romania and what complications it produced. The sources represented three letters, one interview and one call for help which were published in the Norwegian press and found in Romanian translations in the Diplomatic Archives of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in Bucharest. The sources presented the famine as a consequence of the severe drought between 1946 and 1947, which, together with already-existed pellagra and tuberculosis (but both in a larger extent in 1947) determined an unfortunate amount of human casualties and a great number of refugees. The hospitals were not provided with enough food or medicine either. In the autumn of 1947, the spectre of famine was diminishing and the Romanian Government, obedient to the Soviet Union, decided to refuse the help from United States and Western Europe and started harassing the Western representatives dealing with aid distribution. The people expressed satisfaction for Norwegian fish oil and especially for the larger Swedish aid.

Introduction

In 1946 and 1947 Romania was affected by drought. The country was considered among the defeated countries of the World War II, although it fought for the United Nations in the last eight months and a half of the war. Occupied by the Red Army, obliged to pay huge war compensation to the Soviet Union, which imposed a puppet government lead by Petru Groza, the country had no possibility to overcome the famine and epidemics brought on by drought. An international aid campaign started and reduced somehow these needs. Among the countries which helped the most were the United States of America, Canada, Norway, Denmark, and especially Sweden.

The research was undertaken at the Diplomatic Archives of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Bucharest), where the Romanian Legation in Norway, which represented Romanian interests – as it was only formed of two people, translated any information from the Norwegian media, connected or somehow related to Romania. Actually, the Minister's deputy, Counsellor Grigore Cugler, married for a short period of time to a Swede while he had worked at the Romanian Legation in Stockholm, managed to translate, different documents and publications from Norwegian to Romanian, while in Bucharest, Paul Lahovary, then press secretary of the Nordic section within

the Ministry of Information, and former press secretary at the Romanian Legation in Sweden and married to a Swede, also performed the duty of translator or reviewer from Scandinavian languages in Bucharest, when necessary. The media news were sent at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which provided copies to the Ministry of Information.

As the Norway Minister in Poland represented formally his country's interests in Romania, the Swedish Legation in Bucharest dealt, when asked, with the Norwegian interests, citizens and associations in Romania.

Romanian-Norwegian relations constituted the subject of several historians, but mostly regarding the Interwar period, among them Paul Oprescu, Jardar Seim, Silviu Miloiu, Tănase Bujduveanu, Ana-Maria Despa, and Adrian Vițalaru¹.

* Middle School, No. 35 A Unirii Street, Segarcea; e-mail: marianalindudoï@yahoo.com.

¹ Paul Oprescu, Stockholm și Christiania (Oslo), *Reprezentanțele diplomatice ale României*, vol. II, 1911–1939, București, Ed. Politică (1971), 87–108; Jardar Seim *et alii*, *Romanian-Norwegian Diplomatic Relations. Documents, 1905–1947*, Bucharest, Romanian Cultural Institute (2007); Silviu Miloiu, *O istorie a Europei Baltice și Nordice*, vol. I, *De la epoca Naționalismului la Războiul Rece*, Târgoviște, Ed. Cetatea de Scaun (2005); Silviu Miloiu, *Fețele schimbătoare ale stângii norvegiene de la jumătatea anilor 1930: percepții și reacții românești*, *Politică, diplomație și război. Profesorul Gheorgh*

In recent years, Romanian historians have studied the Swedish involvement by downplaying the extent of the Great Famine, also remembered as the “Great Drought” or “when it was drought/famine in Moldova”. Vadim Guzun published an impressive volume about the Swedes’ aid from Rädde Barnen association, whose activity was harassed by the Romanian intelligence, then serving the pro-Soviet Government². Ramona Miron also dealt with Rädde Barnen help but only in the Vrancea county³. A short motion picture made by Swedish television presented Rädde Barnen activity in Romania during 1947⁴.

Ingegerd Galtung’s voyage to Romania in the spring and subsequent editorials

In the spring of 1947, Norway had already provided the Romanians 5000 tons of fish oil and 95 tons of food⁵. Because Ingegerd Galtung worked for “Aftenposten”, a highly Conservative newspaper and the most read in Norway, Romanian Minister in Oslo, Constantin Văllimărescu, proposed to deny her the visa, and the authorities took the decision accordingly, but somehow she managed to get the visa in Budapest and entered Romania legally – as latter Văllimărescu supposed.

She travelled Romania in the spring of 1947, especially Bucharest and the (Romanian) region of Moldova, in order to prepare a report to Norwegian Red Cross, in the matter of Norwegian aid for Moldova, deeply affected by famine. The Norwegian-born Margrethe (Greta) Sturdza, married to a Romanian prince who was the descendent of the ruling prince of the Principality of Moldova

Buzatu la 70 de ani (coord. Sorin-Liviu Damean, Marusia Cârstea), Craiova, Ed. Universitaria (2009), 396–404; Tănase Bujduveanu, *Relații româno-norvegiene. Prezența românilor în Norvegia. Prezența norvegienilor în România / Relationships between Romania and Norway. The Presence of Romanians in Norway. The presence of Norwegians in Romania*, Constanța, Ed. Ex Ponto (2013); Adrian Vițalariu, *Romanian Diplomats in the Scandinavian Countries (1918–1947)*, *The Romanian Journal for Nordic and Baltic Studies / Revista Română de Studii Baltice și Nordice*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2014), 147–167.

² *Rädde Barnen și Securitatea. Documente româno-suedeze, 1946–1949* (ed. Vadim Guzun), ed. II, revizuită, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Argonaut (2019).

³ Ramona Miron, *Activitatea societății suedeze Salvați Copiii în județul Putna (1947–1948)*, *Cronica Vrancei*, X (2011), 295–318.

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=save&v=2448789031983334> (accessed June 27, 2024).

⁵ Văllimărescu dispatch no. 841 of 30.05.1947 to Tătărescu, The Diplomatic Archives of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Norvegia (Norway) fonds*, box no.1 (Norvegia/Norway, 1945–1947), (hereafter DA RMFA, N), box no. 1, file no. 11 (Articole de presă / Articles in press issue), 67.

between 1834 and 1849, and driver Grigore represented her constant companions. Being offered a helping hand by the Swedish Legation at Bucharest and the Swedish Red Cross, Princess Sturdza took care of providing the Norwegian Red Cross aid to those in need⁶.

In the letter of May 1st, published in “Aftenposten”, Galtung wrote that words could not describe what she had seen, as, for her, the situation was somehow similar to Nazi concentration camps. Although Sweden and even Denmark provided much aid, people from Moldova always thanked for Norwegian aid.

She described the situation so worse that even after getting off Bucharest main railways station, she found people from Moldova staying there and hoping to find food in order to bring it to their homes, although the government forbade leaving regions affected by the famine.

In order to see more clearly the spectre of famine, she avoided travelling by plane or by train, and managed to travel in a big truck offered to the Romanian Red Cross by the Swedish Red Cross, as the initial plan of traveling in a car of the United States Red Cross suddenly changed, as the car was not working exactly the day when she was planning to leave Bucharest.

In southern Moldova the landscape seemed the one of a desert as there was no rain since the snow had melted and you could not find any forest, while the air became hardly breathable and the sand could be found everywhere as the third year of drought caught Moldova. People had clothes made from sacks and no shoes, they saw even a man who was eating leaves of acacia in a place that used to be a lake, the journalist and her friends offered him bread, the poor man took it, thanked and said he cannot remember since he had eaten bread⁷.

In other letter, dated June 1st, from Galtung published in “Aftenposten”, she presented the spectre of famine even in Bucharest, known as the Little Paris before World War Two, for richness, standard of living and extravagant social life – only the houses of rich people in the middle of the city (completely different of western Europe and United States cities) and still elegant women, with fancy dresses reminded of the glamorous past. All restaurants with terraces were closed, and the rest were only half populated with customers, mostly

⁶ Bujduveanu, *Relații româno-norvegiane...*, 151.

⁷ Through the country once called the granary of Europe (author’s translation of the headline), DA RMFA, N, box no. 1, file no. 11, 180–181.

diplomats and former journalists. There were beggars, people disabled in the war, Romanian refugees from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina (occupied again by the Soviet Union in 1944), recent starved refugees from Moldova and many Jews, including from Poland. Many of them slept on streets. The number of disabled people rose to thirty thousand only in Bucharest, while in the whole country reached to two hundred seventy-five thousand. The capital was overpopulated to almost one million people, as before the war had reached only eight hundred thousand.

Diseases had severely increased, especially venereal diseases and tuberculosis – only in Bucharest tuberculosis cases reached one hundred thousand patients. Some hospitals were closed, while the others lacked sheets, beds and medicines and you could not find a place unless emergency. This happened because all foreign aid had been directed to Moldova. The hospital personnel even suffered of malnutrition, as could not afford more than one thousand calories per day – completely insufficient for the hard work they endured every day⁸.

In the letter of Galtung dated as May, 1947, published in the “Aftenposten” in the issue of June 21st, we found that clerks did not receive their wages, the fact that one kilo of maize flour – the ingredient for the main Romanian course at that time called polenta – cost far more than financial aid offered by the Romanian Government for war widows. Almost everyone in Moldova traded a thing for another, even a thin and weak cow for one kilo of maize flour as the cows did not resemble to a normal one, being severely underfed.

Once in Moldovan trade fairs, one can find peasants in richly adorned folk suits, but then one could meet only starved and thin peasants, while their much praised suits were sold or used to make clothes for their children.

Because of the famine broke out racial tensions between Romanians and Roma people, as the latter were accused of stealing chickens. Also even more unfortunate Roma people, because of their nomadic way of living, spread contagious and infectious diseases and almost all of them had at least one illness.

In a village, they met a young woman nurse, who complained about not having food or any means of transporting patients, while the government did not pay her the salary, which represented only the eighth part for a new pair of boots, as

she really needed new ones. Right then, she came from a family for whom she cannot do anything, as when she visited them, she had found them dead of starvation. Tuberculosis was rising continuously, as healthy peasants lived in their only room of the house with their ill relatives, also in the entire region of Moldova people could be treated only in one hospital of tuberculosis with five hundred beds, while the other small hospitals were not provided with food or medicine either.

Pellagra represented another devastating disease, produced by eating polenta made from rotten maize flour – in 1946, 400 000 died of pellagra, and that year even more. In the third stage of the disease, patients became ill of dementia and could commit suicide.

In the issue of child mortality, the rate could rise to 80–100%. The pregnant women usually lost their pregnancy because they were very weak. While they were travelling, they saw a very small house in a field. They stopped the car, entered the house and saw two little children, lying on a kind of bench but used as bed – the only piece of furniture within the house. Their skin was white as they had tuberculosis, did not eat anything for two days as their parents had gone to find food⁹.

At Jassy, her friend, Princess Sturdza, took care of a Norwegian canteen for poor¹⁰. Jassy, the largest Moldovan city and the capital of Moldova when the region had the status of a small state (principality) under Ottoman sovereignty, where they found that 80% of people were destitute – a Medicine School student even told that without American and Swedish help, they had no clothes. The Medicine School did not have medical equipment, nor medicine, and students could not afford to buy books, a fact which obliged them to study in libraries – a totally inappropriate option during tuberculosis epidemics.

When they visited the biggest hospital of Jassy, they were shocked to see thirty pellagra patients in a big hall, many of them lying two or three in a bed, many having dementia and begging for food, while a nurse complained about having them lost even ten kilos in a month and told that only Rădda Barnen provided some food, mattresses and sheets, as the hospital was forced to send to the front's needs its equipment during the war, and the post-war patients had no sheets, no wool mattresses and slept on straw mattresses or the bed boards. The meal consisted of soup, almost only water, a small

⁸ Bucharest today (author's translation of the headline); *loc. cit.*, 172–174.

⁹ Not only the famine, but also diseases destroy Romania (author's translation of the headline); *loc. cit.*, 185–187.

¹⁰ *Rădda Barnen și Securitatea...*, 134.

piece of polenta, still every day patients, barely able to walk, were sent there, but the hospital decided to refuse their internment as it had no available space. They reached the Romanian-Soviet frontier, only 17 kilometers of Jassy, where people lived under the ground – a fact that intrigued Galtung in such way that she did not believe that there could be such a place in Europe! A peasant invited them in his underground place, where he was eating a bread made from mud and sunflower seeds and soup made from different plants¹¹.

Galtung was strictly conservative, nonetheless she proved fairness criticizing the inability of the Groza Government when dealing with the humanitarian crisis¹².

Later Norwegian aid

In the summer, Arnold Rörholt, the Secretary General of the Norwegian Red Cross, gave an interview to the newspaper “Aftenposten” in the issue of August 8th, in which he announced that the Norwegian section of “Europahjelpen” – the Program for Europe aid (acting under the Norwegian Red Cross), would begin a vast project of collecting and sending aid to European countries in need, first of them being Romania. Some aid had been already sent with the help of Swedish section of “Europahjelpen”. Pastor Magne Solheim, from a Bucharest Christian organization called Israel Mission which was destined to support Jews’ conversion to Christianity, accepted to watch over the Norwegian aid, but the deliveries would be made by the Romanian Red Cross. Rörholt pleaded for donations in money from Norwegians which can easily be made at the post offices¹³.

In the autumn, the Norwegian Red Cross aid was coordinated by its representative in Romania, Ragnar Kvam. Ragnar Kvam published a letter from Bucharest in the issue of “Dagbladet” of October 7th, in which he raised the alarm about child mortality reaching 70% in Moldova. He asked for help from the Norwegian people, criticizing for its ignorance towards the humanitarian crisis. In his desperate call for help, he expressed the point of view that the people from civilized world must accept to help the poor people from Moldova, Wallachia and Dobruja, as they did not

have any ideology and they did not pursue, even in their mind, any aggressive policy towards the West. He simply remained scared about the ill children he saw and was fully committed to do all possible to convince his fellow compatriots about the need to increase the aid. For him, Romanian Government had no possibility to end the crisis, as the roads were destroyed in Romania in a larger degree and the West refused to provide tyres for political reasons, making the ordeal even worse. Because of the insufficient foreign aid, the limited level of famine of 1946 Moldova – which changed into a humanitarian catastrophe in 1947 in this region – appeared in 1947 Wallachia, Dobruja and some parts of Transylvania. He also praised Swedish Red Cross, Danish Red Cross and Rätts Barnen, because they reached with aids in starving villages avoided by all, and offered the long-expected Norwegian fish oil, absolutely necessary for children in order to grow healthy. He once opposed to his compatriots who were saying that famine existed always in the Balkans, although Romania had exported cereals in the past, by arguing them that there was no such a degree of famine as in 1947. In an audience to the Romanian Minister of Health, he was told that the situation improved somehow because, in the summer child mortality was almost 100% in Moldova, but then in a timeframe from the birth of one child to another in a village, seven children and three adults still died. Unfortunately, rising mortality spread in Wallachia and Dobruja due to pellagra and epidemics – in one county, the tuberculosis reached a dramatic 40%. Ragnar Kvam continued to plead to Norwegians at least for the necessary fish oil. At the end of his call for help, he recalled a happy image, where people were gathering in a square, started to dance, threw their hats, got on trucks in order to embark in ships which would transport them to a happy place after they waited impatiently seven years. He did not tell more, but the words “seven years” and “ship” allow us to guess that he referred to Romanian Jews as the Romanian Government had accepted they could go in small groups by ship in British-mandated Palestine¹⁴.

The Groza Government reaction when dealing with Norwegians

To counterbalance the shaken image of the Groza Government, an article was published on a minor leftist newspaper called “Arbeidet” from

¹¹ Not only the famine, but also diseases destroy Romania, DA RMFA, N, box no. 1, file no. 11, 188–189.

¹² https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-16-4717-8_1 (accessed June 29, 2024).

¹³ DA RMFA, N, box no. 2 (Norvegia / Norway, 1947–1948), file no. 15 (Ajutorul acordat României de către Norvegia / Norway’s aid to Romania issue), 2–3.

¹⁴ Romania today (author’s translation of the headline); *loc. cit.*, box no. 1, file no. 11, 204–207.

Bergen, in the issue of September 27th, by Olav Ramsvik, accusing the United States of America and the Great Britain of provoking the collapse of Romanian economy by refusing to deliver industrial equipment used for the production of sunflower oil, the unnamed opposition parties were criticized for their allegation that the drought was God's punishment for the pro-Soviet rulers! The article praised the existing Romanian Government for the plan of revitalizing the economy without loans in dollars, for the refusal to join the Marshall plan and thanked the Soviet Union for relaxing the armistice deliveries, for offering seeds used when planting and reached the climax when he congratulated the Soviet Union for transforming the Balkans into the peaceful oasis of Europe¹⁵!

As a consequence of headlines related to the Romanian humanitarian crisis in the Norwegian press, the Norwegian Association for the United Nations proposed a group of orphan children to spend the 1947–1948 winter in Norway. The children should have accompanied by a nurse until Prague, where Norwegian representatives would take them, covering all expenses from Prague to Oslo, to Norway. Nonetheless, children from other countries were taken in Norway and some were even adopted. Voitinovici, Secretary General for the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, acting under new minister, Communist Anna Pauker, rejected the proposal by taking into consideration the improvement of the level of the food supplies, although Romania still needed help¹⁶.

Provided with such policies, one should not wonder why the Groza Government made pressure upon Sturdza family to end their desperate calls for Norwegian aid¹⁷.

Conclusions

The Norwegian press depicted the dramatic situation in Romania, where not only the famine represented a major issue, but also pellagra, malaria and tuberculosis. Princess Sturdza, a Norwegian born, managed to determine the Norwegian Red Cross and other Norwegian organizations to get more aid from the Nordic country. The most precious Norwegian aid consisted in fish oil, which helped children to develop a normal skeleton and also any comestible fat limited the extension of famine. Norwegian aid improved the image of the

Scandinavian country, although the Sweden got the most gratitude from the Romanian people due to the larger aid. In some cases, Romanian received help from both Sweden and Norway.

When asked, the Swedish Legation at Bucharest provided diplomatic and consular support when dealing with Norwegian aid, as Norway had no operational legation in Bucharest.

In the autumn, the Groza Government started harassing people and Western representatives in order to cut off the aid as its domestic and foreign policy related to that of the Soviet Union, being incompatible with the West as the Cold War was beginning.

¹⁵ Romania is recovering (author's translation of the headline); *loc. cit.*, 194–200.

¹⁶ Vălimărescu's dispatch no. 1266 of 06.11.1947 to Tătărescu; *loc. cit.*, box no. 2, file no. 15, 5–7.

¹⁷ Bujduveanu, *Relații româno-norvegiene...*, 152.

