

Networks of Care Women's Solidarity, Emotional Economies, and War Relief on the Transylvanian Home Front (1914–1916)

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RED CROSS NURSES HANDING OUT FOOD
cca 1915

ACROSS EUROPE, the First World War was not only a military conflict on an unprecedented scale, but also a process of total mobilization of the population. In recent decades, historiography has shifted its focus from the exclusively military experience to an analysis of the home front, highlighting the decisive role of women in providing material, social, and emotional support to communities at war. Women's networks of charity, assistance, and care have thus become a privileged field of research, being interpreted as forms of civic mobilization and of the moral economy of care (Grayzel¹, Alacevich, Pescarolo², Ermacora³).

In Transylvania, these processes unfolded within a particular political and identity-based context. In 1914, the Romanians, as subjects of Dualist Hungary, responded to orders for military mobilization despite suspicions regarding their political loyalty, fighting in the imperial army alongside Hungarians and Saxons. On the home front, Romanian communities were

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progressively drawn into the war effort, and women played a central role in organizing community solidarity through fundraising and by collecting goods, caring for the wounded as charity nurses, and managing welfare institutions for vulnerable populations.

This article analyzes the care networks established and run by associations of Romanian women in Transylvania, proposing a perspective that goes beyond a purely descriptive account of charitable activities. Methodologically, the study focuses on the period 1914–1916, when these organizations operated within the legal and institutional framework of Dualist Hungary and actively participated in the war effort of the Central Powers. This delimitation is essential, as from the autumn of 1916, with Romania's entry into the war on the side of the Entente, the context changed radically: the withdrawal of the Romanian army across the Carpathians was followed by exceptional measures of surveillance and repression against the Romanian population, and numerous women's associations ceased their activity or were forced to operate in severely restricted forms. In this climate, some members of women's associations took refuge across the Carpathians, continuing their humanitarian work outside Transylvania.

From the perspective of Romanian historiography, the subject of women during the Great War remains insufficiently explored. Existing research has focused either on women's associations prior to the conflict (Simona Stiger),⁴ on the activities of specific groups (Soroștineanu,⁵ Băjenaru⁶), or on the portrayal of women's mobilization in the press of the time (Barna).⁷ However, there is a lack of studies treating women's associations as functional networks of care capable of connecting urban and rural spaces, institutions and the community, material aid and emotional mobilization. By explicitly referencing the major strands of international historiography concerning the female experience of the Great War, the article proposes an interpretative approach that analyses the associations of Romanian women in Transylvania not as mere charitable extensions of society, but as essential structures of social solidarity in a context of total war.

August 1914: A Female Voice and a Call to Mobilization

ONLY A few days after the proclamation of general mobilization in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, *Gazeta Transilvaniei* (The gazette of Transylvania) published, on 6 August 1914, an inspiring appeal addressed to Romanian women.⁸ It was signed by Maria Baiulescu, president of

the General Union of Romanian Women in Hungary.⁹ She was a respected voice in her native Braşov and in the intellectual circles of Transylvania. What had prompted her to speak out publicly was, on the one hand, a sense of clear civic responsibility towards the thousands of women, elderly people, and children left alone on the home front, and on the other, the conviction that women could provide moral and material support to all those called to arms. No less important was the need to state clearly and unequivocally the dynastic loyalty of the Romanian community, which was suspected and accused in those days, more than ever, of treason and hostile feelings towards the Hungarian authorities.¹⁰ It was time to prove that women could be not only mothers and wives, but also nurses, a support for orphans and the elderly, civil servants, and agricultural workers. In a word, citizens loyal to the state. “To work, then,” was the motto of her rallying call.¹¹ She addressed, above all, the Romanian women’s associations, calling on them to initiate and organize local charitable actions in close collaboration with the civil administration and the Red Cross.¹² In the tense atmosphere of early August 1914, when mobilization orders were arriving incessantly and waves of recruits were heading daily towards the front lines in Serbia and Galicia, Maria Baiulescu understood that she had to be a clear, warm, and encouraging voice, capable of providing direction and meaning to women’s solidarity. Her appeal outlined a model of collective engagement which would prove essential in the months and years that followed.

Both the Romanian press and, in particular, the network of women’s associations—which, by 1914, comprised no fewer than 103 organizations¹³ across Transylvania—contributed substantially to the dissemination of this appeal. Among the Romanian newspapers that immediately picked up Maria Baiulescu’s appeal were *Olteanul* (The journal of Olt) (Făgăraş),¹⁴ *Românul* (The Romanian) (Arad),¹⁵ *Drapelul* (The flag) (Lugoj),¹⁶ *Unirea* (The union) (Blaj),¹⁷ ensuring a concerted reception both in the central regions and in the most remote areas of Transylvania, as well as across the broadest possible social strata. The first reactions came from women’s associations in Braşov, Sibiu, Deva, Lugoj, and Turda, which urged their members to show solidarity with the cause of all those afflicted by the war. Before long, their initiative was taken up and replicated in every city, town, and village, where the example set by priests and teachers was followed by ordinary people, each contributing as best they could to provide support for the war’s wounded, widows, and orphans.¹⁸

From August 1914 onwards, women’s groups saw a substantial increase in their membership, either through the recruitment of new members or by encouraging existing ones to become more active, with community mobilization reaching unprecedented levels. Committees and support groups were set up for

the families of those who had gone to the front, whose main task was to organize collections of money, food, clothing, and other essential goods. In urban centers such as Braşov, Sibiu, and Cluj, soup kitchens were set up to provide a hot meal every day to the most vulnerable groups. It was here too that the first forms of institutionalized involvement by young Romanian women emerged, as they enlisted as charity nurses with the Red Cross in field hospitals. Others were employed in services dedicated to identifying and assigning new jobs.

These initiatives highlight the organizational capacity of the Romanian women's movement in a crisis context. At the same time, they indicate the gradual expansion of the women's sphere of action, as they found themselves for the first time in an active, visible, and publicly recognized position in support of a society under the pressure of war. Their exemplary mobilization was made possible by women's associations which enabled the creation of genuine mutual aid networks, whose nodes—large and small—contributed substantially to the war effort.

Network, Nodes, and Socio-Professional Profile, or When a Women's Association Functions as a Relational Mechanism

A PARTICULARLY ILLUSTRATIVE example is provided by the Association of Romanian Women in Sibiu,¹⁹ whose yearbooks from the war years²⁰ allow for the reconstruction of both the geographical area in which it operated and the socio-professional profile of its members. The visual representation of this data via the map created in QGIS (fig. 1) merely confirms, in a concise and evocative manner, what the documents already suggest—the existence of a coherent network, comprising both men and women, with a radial structure, operating around a dynamic and recognized center: Sibiu.

In this figure, the city appears not merely as a geographical point, but also as a point of institutional, religious, and cultural convergence, from which initiatives originated and to which responses, resources, and connections with other women's associations returned.²¹ It was the place with the largest number of members (95), whose social standing ensured multiple political and cultural connections and economic resources, which they utilized to support the projects carried out by the association.

The group's outreach to towns located around Sibiu, such as Răşinari, Orlat, Sălişte, Ocna Sibiului, Mediaş, and Făgăraş, demonstrates the existence of a sphere of proximity, constantly animated by clergymen, lawyers, civil servants,

and teachers. This closeness was not merely physical but also social, involving entities and groups integrated into a shared economic and cultural space. The coherent functioning of the women's network in the area bordering Sibiu is closely linked to the density of an associative life that already existed in some of these localities.²² The women's association in Sibiu was not an isolated case, being part of a broader associative landscape in which, under the influence of the nearby *Saxon Vereine* (Saxon associations) model, Romanian communities had gradually developed various forms of collective organization.²³ In this context, the presence of women's associations alongside other economic, cultural, and religious associations fostered the circulation of ideas and initiatives, as well as cooperation and the strengthening of social solidarity in this region. It is not without significance that many members of the Sibiu women's association were, at the same time, founders or coordinators of similar associations in their own localities. The case of Maria Șerban, president of the Orthodox Women's Association in Făgăraș, is emblematic in this regard. She was active in both the Făgăraș and Sibiu associations, where we find her alongside her husband, the lawyer Nicolae Șerban. Also from Făgăraș were Elisaveta Pop, the widow of a doctor and vice-president of the local Greek Catholic Romanian Women's Association,²⁴ as well as Lucreția Peia. Agnes Măcelariu, the wife of a lawyer and president of the Romanian Women's Association in Miercurea Sibiului, also came from this network.²⁵

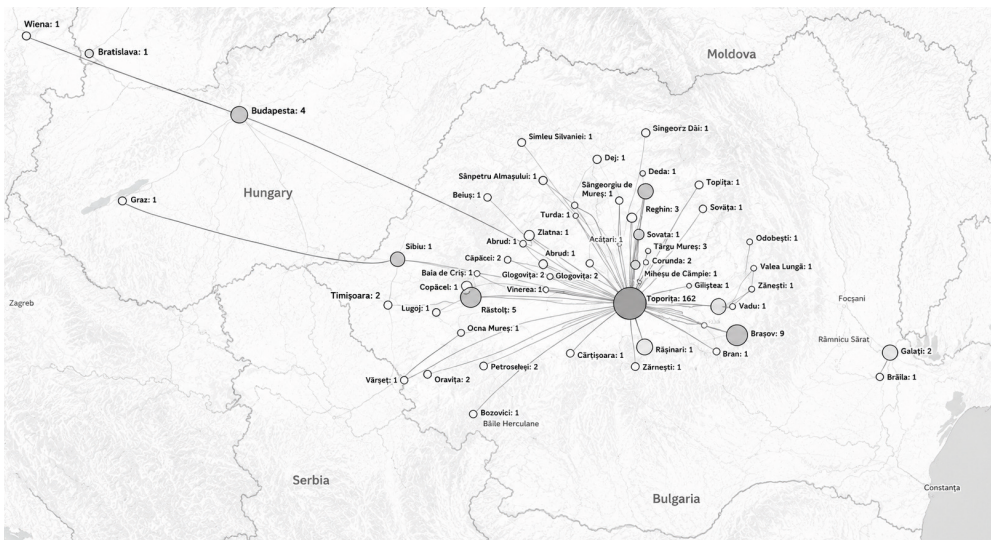


FIG. 1. GEOGRAPHICAL ORIGIN OF THE MEMBERS
OF THE SIBIU ROMANIAN WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION, 1914-1919

Beyond the core represented by the settlements around Sibiu, the diagram above highlights the network's expansion in two main directions, giving its structure a more complex dynamic than that of simple concentric circles. A first direction, situated on the south-eastern axis, linked Sibiu to Braşov, Târgu Mureş, and Reghin, centers where Romanian communities were also active. Of all these, Braşov occupied a distinct position, both due to the long-standing nature of the local association, founded in 1850,²⁶ and due to the coordinating role assumed under the presidency of Maria Baiulescu, who in 1913 had succeeded in unifying the Romanian women's associations into a single structure, known as the Union of Romanian Women in Hungary.²⁷ The presence of women and men from Braşov within the ranks of the Sibiu association reflects the existence of a collaborative and permeable relationship between two centers with complementary functions.

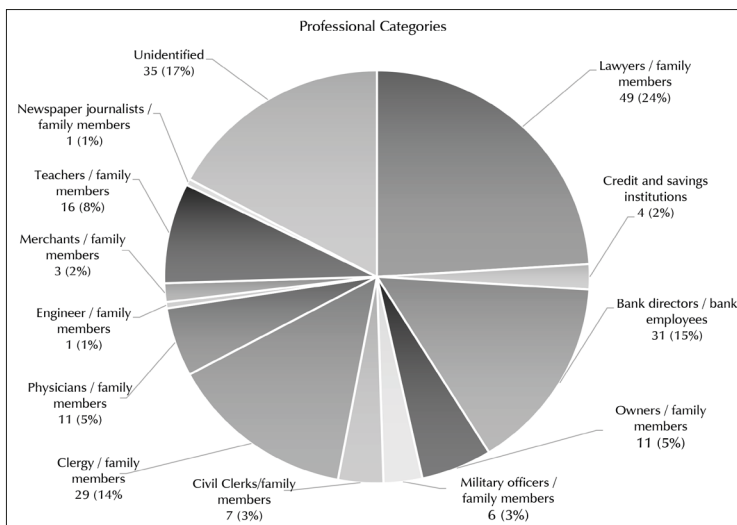
A second direction of expansion, centered on a western axis, encompassed Banat and Crişana. Arad, Timişoara, Lugoj, Caransebeş, Beiuş, and Făget appear in this network as more distant nodes, yet very well connected to the initiatives and projects of the Sibiu center. The presence of members from these areas reflects the mobility of lawyers, bankers, civil servants, teachers, and clergymen. And, from this perspective, it was the women's network that capitalized on these connections, harnessing them and transforming them into avenues of solidarity and cooperation. In these areas, the Association took on the character of an interregional platform, which crossed county borders and connected Romanian centers with one another.

A final, much more restricted circle consists of nodes situated at a great distance from Sibiu, such as Budapest, Vienna, and Graz. Although limited in number, these concentrated significant political and symbolic capital, indicating the network's ability to anchor itself within the imperial sphere and to legitimize, even at this level, the mobilization and mutual aid efforts carried out locally. The presence of figures such as Anton, Eugen, and Alexandru Mocsony, known as politicians and great landowners, alongside the wives of former officers such as Ella Popovici and Blanca Lupu,²⁸ reinforces this dimension of representativeness and social anchoring of the Sibiu network.

The professional background of the members provides a more detailed picture of how this network operated. In Sibiu, the center of the association, no fewer than eighteen of its members were bank managers, clerks, and accountants, or were related to people in such positions. This is hardly surprising in a city which, four decades earlier, had become the headquarters of the first Romanian bank, Albina. This circle included Maria and Partenie Cosma, the director of the Albina Bank in Sibiu,²⁹ as well as Veturia Lepădatu, a teacher and the wife

of Alexandru Lepădatu, the then director of the Ardeleana Bank in Orăștie.³⁰ They were joined, in roughly equal numbers, by fifteen Orthodox clergymen, representing the entire hierarchy: a metropolitan bishop, archpriests, consistorial assessors, archivists, priests, and priest wives. Notable figures in this regard include Ioan Meșianu, the Orthodox Metropolitan of Transylvania; Nicolae Ivan, then an assessor of the Orthodox Consistory in Sibiu; and Ilarion Pușcariu, an archimandrite.³¹ Next came the lawyers and barristers, alongside the wives and daughters of some of them, followed by teachers, civil servants, doctors, officers, landowners, and merchants. There existed thus a coherent social milieu, well-connected institutionally and capable of supporting large-scale initiatives. Notable figures included Eugenia Tordășianu, a teacher at the Civil School for Girls in Sibiu, and her husband, Victor Tordășianu, president of the city's Association of Romanian Craftsmen, or Catinca Bârseanu, a teacher at that same School for Girls and the wife of Andrei Bârseanu, president of the ASTRA (The Association for Romanian Literature and Culture).³² Together, these groups formed a social core capable of maintaining links with both the community and the local institutions. Their presence explains the success of the association's initiatives and its ability to intervene where the need was felt most acutely.

GRAPH 1. PROFESSIONS OF THE MEMBERS OF THE SIBIU ROMANIAN WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION (1914–1919)



The area surrounding Sibiu proved to be a transitional social space, in which professions with symbolic and institutional capital were well represented. This

explains the substantial number of clergymen and/or their wives, lawyers, merchants, landowners, doctors, and civil servants. The constant presence of priests or their family members explains the communities' capacity for rapid mobilization, whilst lawyers, teachers, and doctors ensured institutional mediation and the organization of activities. Without replicating the density of banks or medical facilities found in the center of Sibiu, these localities benefited from their own social and financial resources, functioning as points of contact between initiatives launched at the center and the responsiveness of rural and small-town communities. This explains the presence, within the Romanian Women's Association of Sibiu, of figures connected to its broader social and familial milieu, such as Anastasiu Boiu, a bank manager in Mediaș; Nicolae Comșa, a physician in Sălișteța Sibiului; Magdalena Dancăș, the wife of a landowner in Rășinari; Agnes Măcelariu, the wife of a lawyer from Miercurea Sibiului; Ana Popa Isaia, a priest's wife in Ocna Sibiului, and others.³³

On the south-eastern axis, linking Sibiu to Brașov and Târgu-Mureș, the professional profile took on a different hue. There, one found mainly people connected to the legal, commercial, and cultural spheres, but also women with organizational experience, attached to older, well-established associations. Notable names here include Eugenia Vecerdea and her husband Nicolae Vecerdea, a lawyer in Brașov; Lucia Bologa, the widow of a bank manager, Brașov; Maria Dima and her husband George Dima, a music teacher, Brașov; Eugenia Barbu, the wife of a bank clerk in Reghin, etc.³⁴ This area emerges as a space for the coordination and circulation of associative models, where initiatives are multiplied and heavily publicized through the local press. *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, based in Brașov, played a decisive role during the war years in mobilizing women's associations and civil society as a whole.

The western axis, extending towards Banat and Crișana, is characterized by a higher concentration of lawyers, bankers, and civil servants with high professional mobility. Notable figures here include Petru Truța, a lawyer in Arad; Filaret Musta, an archimandrite in Caransebeș; Mărioara Monția, the wife of a lawyer in Șiria; Letiția Oncu, the wife of a bank manager in Arad, as well as others.³⁵ In this case, the women's network does not create the links, but capitalizes on them, transforming professional connections into concrete resources to support joint initiatives. Arad and the surrounding towns thus emerge as operational hubs, capable of ensuring the expansion and logistical support of the actions initiated in Sibiu. In general terms, socio-professional diversity does not fragment the network, but rather lends it coherence and flexibility. Each area mobilizes its own resources, and the Sibiu Women's Meeting functioned as a space for coordinating these skills, in a collective effort of solidarity and social support.

It is worth noting that these collaborations were not limited exclusively to Romanian associations, even though these were, naturally, given priority. From the very moment many of them were established, in the second half of the 19th century, Romanian women's associations operated within a predominantly urban and associative sphere characterized by ethnic and religious diversity. This meant that, from time to time, on the occasion of festivals, fundraisers, or philanthropic initiatives, they accepted invitations to support common causes alongside similar associations of Hungarians and Saxons.³⁶ These sporadic and circumstantial contacts were not accidental, but were part of a more widespread practice of urban sociability. Transylvania's mixed cities favored such rapprochements, and philanthropy proved to be a relatively neutral ground where confessional or ethnic differences could often be overcome. Against this pre-existing backdrop, the war years intensified such collaborations. All the more so as the state's civil authorities called for everyone's participation, regardless of denomination or ethnic affiliation, in the general war effort. In this context, Romanian women's groups found themselves involved in joint actions alongside Hungarian and Saxon organizations, whether in fundraising campaigns organized under the auspices of the Red Cross or in local social welfare initiatives. It is true that interethnic solidarity was not a permanent rule, but it occurred frequently enough to build bridges of cooperation between Romanians, Hungarians, and Saxons.

Against this backdrop of an already established urban social fabric, the war years made such collaborations more visible and frequent. A prime example is provided by Braşov, where, in August 1914, under the coordination of Countess Sofia Mikes, wife of the Count of Braşov and president of the local Red Cross, courses were organized to train charity nurses. The initiative was aimed primarily at young Hungarian and German women, but was also open to Romanian women, reflecting a practice of cooperation that transcended confessional or ethnic boundaries. Among those who attended these courses were young women from Braşov's Romanian high society, such as Virgila Branişte,³⁷ Tullia Găvruş, and Maria Oncioiu.³⁸ Another significant moment in this interethnic collaboration was the Christmas of 1914, the first to be celebrated under wartime conditions. At that time, in Braşov, Countess Sofia Mikes took part in decorating the Christmas trees in the city's hospitals, alongside women from Romanian, Hungarian, and German associations, as well as nurses of various denominations. Gifts were distributed to all the wounded, without distinction,³⁹ in a collective effort in which ethnic and religious differences faded away, and the shared experience of war created a foundation for practical solidarity. These initiatives continued in the following years, taking on more organized forms. In December 1915, on the occasion of the "Christmas for the Wounded," a

large-scale public fundraising campaign brought together contributions from the Hungarian and German high society in Braşov, local women's associations, as well as Romanian representatives, including Maria Baiulescu, president of the Union of Romanian Women in Hungary. The sum raised, over 3,600 crowns, was distributed to all the city's hospitals for the wounded, to purchase symbolic gifts intended to alleviate the suffering of those hospitalized, regardless of nationality.⁴⁰ In Făgăraş, on the occasion of Christmas 1914, the Augusta Relief Society brought together all the local women's associations to provide winter clothing for all the needy children in the town. The initiative was also joined by the Association of Romanian Greek Catholic Women, which contributed clothing and food for children whose fathers had been conscripted to the front. Such episodes are intended to show that, in times of crisis, interethnic cooperation became an increasingly common reality. Referring to this, Széll Jozsefné, president of the Augusta Society, said at the time: "The school of war has taught us to feel all pains together, to share all suffering, to strive to wipe away all tears, and to brighten the furrowed brows."⁴¹ No less significant is the case of the Association of Romanian Women in Miercurea Sibiului, which, as early as August 1914, was working closely with the local Association of German Women to organize collections of clothing and food for the wounded in the local hospital.⁴² Although fragile, these collaborations forged functional links between Romanians, Hungarians, and Saxons. Within this framework, women's associations established themselves not merely as distinct ethnic organizations, but as social actors capable of mobilizing the resources of Transylvanian society when circumstances demanded it.

Managing Suffering: Food, Labor, and Care in the Cities of Transylvania

DURING THE years of the Great War, of the nearly one hundred associations of Romanian women in Transylvania, the most visible and active were those in urban and religious centers such as Braşov, Sibiu, Hunedoara, Lugoj, Turda, or Blaj.⁴³ Their activities were constantly encouraged and publicized by the newspapers of the time, which gave them greater visibility in the public consciousness. The initiatives and projects undertaken were adapted to the pace of the war and its progression, taking shape across several complementary directions, closely linked to the social and emotional transformations brought about by the conflict.

In an initial phase, limited to the summer and autumn of 1914, the mobilization aimed to replace the male workforce sent to the front. Women's associations responded to this pressure through public appeals for community solidarity. A relevant model was provided by the German communities, which, benefiting from a pre-existing network of associations and an experience already accumulated in the past, had rapidly mobilized schoolchildren, students, and intellectuals for agricultural work within their own communities. Inspired by this example, the Romanian women's groups sought to mobilize similar resources, adapting them to their own social contexts. For example, the newspaper *Olteanul*, published in Făgăraș, ran a series of appeals in the autumn of 1914 under the title "How to Help Ourselves," explicitly inspired by the initiatives and measures of the Transylvanian Saxon communities. The appeals were aimed particularly at the women, children, and elderly left on the home front, urging them to support one another in harvesting the crops and to exercise prudence in managing their resources.⁴⁴

Support was not limited to farm work alone; they also backed the initiatives of local authorities. For instance, young Romanian women worked alongside Hungarian and Saxon women in labor distribution centers, helping to integrate those left at home into a war economy undergoing constant reorganization. A telling example is the appeal launched by Maria Baiulescu, president of the Union of Romanian Women in Hungary, on 15 August 1914, announcing the establishment in Brașov, by the city authorities, of a multiethnic women's committee. Its aim was to facilitate access to employment in a context marked by limited supply and a rapid increase in demand.⁴⁵ The significance of this initiative is highlighted by statistics from the committee's first days of operation, which reveal that 92 people were seeking work, the majority of whom were women. Ethnically, 44 were Hungarian, 27 German, 10 Romanian, 10 Jewish, and one of Polish origin. The social profile of the applicants was equally diverse: young people with no professional experience, schoolchildren forced by family hardship to work, as well as skilled workers who had lost their jobs—from commerce, administration, construction, or the services. Beyond the numbers, these data accurately capture the early social restructuring of the home front and the pressure exerted by the war economy on the urban population.

At the same time, women's participation in charity courses contributed to the professionalization of the aid provided and to the consolidation of a public female identity associated with competence, care, and social utility. Zoița Preda, Maria Hermel, Virgilia Braniște, and Countess Grete of Reigersberg remained enduring figures in the memory of the wounded hospitalized in Brașov during the war.⁴⁶

From the autumn of 1914, women's groups were also actively involved in running the soup kitchens, organized by the city authorities and intended for those most affected by the food shortages that had gradually set in, particularly in the cities. Soup kitchens were not a phenomenon exclusive to the war years. In some urban centers, they were already in operation before 1914, as part of a wider range of philanthropic initiatives dedicated to disadvantaged social groups. The case of Sibiu is illustrative in this regard. Here, the Romanian Women's Association had been running, even in peacetime, social welfare schemes such as the students' canteen and the "people's kitchen," intended for the city's poor, particularly during the winter. With the outbreak of the war, these institutions were adapted to the new realities. Despite the pressures of mobilization and the food shortages, the "people's kitchen" continued to operate during the winters of 1914–1915 and 1915–1916, providing food to all those in need, regardless of their ethnic background.⁴⁷ The direct involvement of members of the Romanian Women's Association of Sibiu in the daily running of the kitchen demonstrates the continuity of a practice of care, transformed and intensified in the context of the war, but grounded in previous experiences of organization and social solidarity.

As already indicated, the organization of urban soup kitchens was not confined to Sibiu, but can be identified, from the very first months of the war, in other towns across Transylvania as well. In centers such as Braşov, Bistriţa, and other towns, such food aid institutions were rapidly organized in the context of the general mobilization, building on existing charitable practices and solidarity networks. In the case of Braşov, the operation of municipal soup kitchens can be traced back to the autumn of 1914.⁴⁸ There, following a collection organized by the city's Romanian Women's Association, 24,000 crowns were raised, with which the city council established two soup kitchens and a nursery.⁴⁹ Initially planned as a response to the social difficulties caused by mobilization, these soon became permanent food distribution centers,⁵⁰ supported by the municipal authorities and supplied by donations from the local population.⁵¹ They provided hot meals and basic provisions to families in need, regardless of religion or ethnicity, which transformed the soup kitchens into tangible spaces of social co-existence at a time of profound crisis, such as the war. A provisional assessment carried out in mid-1915 indicated that, in the space of a single year, over 300 Romanian families had received a hot meal every day through these soup kitchens.⁵² The continued donations in the following years, including 1916, suggest that these initiatives were not short-lived, but rather part of a sustained effort at urban social protection.⁵³ A comparable initiative is also reported in the autumn of 1914 in Bistriţa. There, the local Association of Romanian Women played a key role in organizing aid for the families of those who had been called up.

Alongside the distribution of financial support, the opening of a soup kitchen was seen as a practical solution to ensure affordable food for the destitute. Collaboration with the town authorities and the direct involvement of women from the community demonstrate the existence of a form of local crisis management, in which every day solidarity and women's organizational skills were put in the service of urban survival.⁵⁴ Viewed as a whole, these examples show that the soup kitchens in Transylvania were not merely improvised reactions to the outbreak of the war, but adaptations of already functioning support mechanisms. In the context of the war economy, they became institutions of social continuity, in which women's care, invisible labor, and organizational capacity played a fundamental role in managing urban vulnerability.

Some women's associations went further, ceding or even selling properties under their administration for the needs of the war. The case of the Association of Romanian Women in Sibiu is emblematic in this regard, illustrating how the associations' assets were put in the service of the collective emergency. In the autumn of 1914, the building of the School of Home Economics and Domestic Industry, owned by the Association, was ceded to the local branch of the Red Cross to be converted into a reserve hospital for the care of the wounded. Two years later, another building in the city, belonging to the Romanian Women's Association, was handed over to the Orthodox Archdiocesan Consistory, with the aim of establishing an orphanage for children left without support.⁵⁵ These spaces, whose purpose was altered during the war—successively transformed into a hospital and an orphanage—illustrate how women's associative heritage became a direct instrument of social intervention in times of crisis. The same occurred in other towns. As the number of wounded rose, cities underwent a visible transformation of their urban space. Civilian buildings, meeting places, and community spaces were converted into war hospitals. This rapid and comprehensive process directly involved the women's organizations, particularly in centers such as Braşov, Sibiu, Cluj, Blaj, and many others. For example, in Blaj, St. George's Hospital, inaugurated just a few months before the outbreak of the war as the first permanent Romanian hospital in Transylvania, was rapidly adapted to the new medical requirements and provided care to the war wounded. Although it operated under the direction of its founder, Archdiocesan Doctor Hâncu, the hospital's day-to-day running was decisively supported by the Blaj Association of Romanian Women. The local women's organization provided not only material support but also a constant presence in the administration and operation of the hospital, taking on essential tasks related to food, hygiene, record-keeping, and care.⁵⁶ This mobilization of women illustrates how domestic and charitable skills were transferred into the institutional sphere of wartime medicine.



FIG. 3. ST. GEORGE'S HOSPITAL IN BLAJ.
NURSES ASSISTING DR. HÂNCU IN DRESSING A WOUNDED MAN
SOURCE: *Cozincana* 5, 4 (31 January 1915): 32.

Whilst in Blaj the mobilization of women centered on a newly established hospital, which was rapidly integrated into the wartime medical network, other urban centers saw more complex forms of organization, resulting from the interplay of charitable, institutional, and financial initiatives. In these contexts, the war hospital was no longer merely a space adapted to the emergency situation, but the result of a cooperation between various structures of the Romanian urban society. Cluj offers such an example, where women's involvement took place within a framework that was both denser and more fragile, marked by inter-institutional coordination, the specialization of charitable work, and severe economic constraints. Here, the Greek Catholic Society of St. Mary played a central role in the establishment and operation of a Romanian hospital known as the Petran Ambulance. The initiative stood at the intersection of several charitable and institutional efforts, bringing together the support of cultural organizations, the Romanian financial sector,⁵⁷ and local medical authorities. The premises for the hospital were made available through the donation of private properties, while medical management was provided by the Romanian doctor, Dr. B. Bașiotă, closely assisted by members of the Greek Catholic Society of St. Mary.⁵⁸ The involvement of women was not limited to an auxiliary role, but was organized into distinct departments—for the care of the wounded, for hygiene, and for housekeeping—each coordinated by members of the society, which indicates a high degree of professionalization of charitable work in a wartime context.

Although the Petran Ambulance was conceived as a small-scale medical unit, intended to provide free treatment and dressings to the wounded, the activities of Saint Mary's Society extended beyond the confines of this hospital, spreading to other medical facilities in the city. However, the hospital's operation was fragile and heavily dependent on the financial resources of the time. Rising food prices, high maintenance costs, and the limitations of public fundraising led, in the autumn of 1915, to the closure of the Petran Ambulance, despite the support received from the Red Cross.⁵⁹ Although short-lived, the Cluj experience thus illustrates not only the capacity of women's organizations to make a decisive contribution to the wartime medical effort, but also the vulnerability of such initiatives in an economy marked by imbalances and scarcity.

The three cases discussed so far are part of a broader process through which almost all the towns of Transylvania were drawn into the wartime medical effort. This confirms the widespread presence of war hospitals in Transylvania and the significant role played by women involved in caring for the wounded.

War Relief and the Economy of Care: Collections, Orphans, and the Wounded

THE RESHAPING of urban space, through the conversion of buildings into military hospitals and orphanages, was accompanied by a profound reconfiguration of the community's social functions, with women becoming central figures in the management of public suffering. In this context, one of the main foci of Romanian women's mobilization was the material and financial support of those affected by the war: the poor, the orphans, and the wounded. Collections of money, clothing, and food became regular practices, integrated both into daily life and into the symbolic and religious rhythms of the community. The experience of Braşov illustrates how this form of solidarity was organized and adapted from the very first months of the war. The Association of Romanian Women in the city consistently supported poor schoolgirls through material donations, which regularly intensified around major religious holidays.⁶⁰ Christmas and Easter became special occasions for community mobilization, during which helping children took on a public and ritualized character, through the distribution of clothes and shoes. These events took place in prominent venues across the city, attended by representatives of the Association, the Church, and the local elite. A second major category targeted by collections was that of orphans. In this case, women's involvement went beyond occasional assistance and took on institutionalized forms, through the integration of children left without family support into educational and care facilities adminis-

tered by women's associations. In Braşov, the boarding school of the Romanian Women's Association became a key venue for this policy of care, adapting its operations to the new realities imposed by the conflict. For example, during the war years, girls orphaned by the war were explicitly admitted to the boarding school, where they were provided with schooling and upkeep in the medium and long term.⁶¹

Fundraising campaigns for the wounded, however, were the most widespread, consistent, and visible form of women's charity during the Great War. Such collections were organized, without exception, in all the towns of Transylvania where women's groups were active. An analysis of the sources indicates that these collections were not sporadic initiatives, but rather organized, recurring, and coordinated efforts, carried out through well-structured women's networks, in collaboration with the Red Cross and local religious institutions.⁶² Support for the wounded consistently centered on major religious festivals, when aid took on a ritualized, public, and ceremonial character. The collections organized in Braşov for the city's entire hospital network and the distribution of gifts through women's committees responsible for each medical unit were replicated in numerous other Transylvanian centers such as Sibiu, Cluj, Făgăraş,⁶³ Turda, Aiud, and Bistriţa.⁶⁴ Wherever there were military or reserve hospitals, women's meetings were also involved, confirming the widespread and almost standardized nature of this form of mobilization.

Women's associations did not limit themselves to the actual collection of donations, but also organized distribution centers, managed the flow of goods and funds, ensured the transparency of contributions, and maintained functional links between towns and villages.⁶⁵ From this perspective, collections for the wounded can be interpreted as the backbone of women's charitable mobilization and the primary language of solidarity in wartime, through which individual suffering was integrated into a framework of collective responsibility, and women became essential mediators between the front and civil society.

The collections also functioned as public rituals of donation and recognition. The lists of names published in the press, detailing the sums and items donated,⁶⁶ created forms of positive pressure and a sense of community belonging. The praise of female donors as moral role models played an educational role, transforming individual examples into a collective norm. As noted above, the main beneficiaries were orphans, widows, and the wounded in hospitals. For the latter, not only food and clothing were collected, but also items with a strong symbolic significance: prayer books, clean linen, stockings, gloves, sweets, or small gifts. These items offered physical protection, comfort, and spiritual consolation. They embodied empathy and transformed care into a tangible presence. Much of this mobilization relied on domestic work, transformed into

civic action. Spinning, sewing, and knitting became forms of “home industry” intended for the front and hospitals. Homes were transformed into community workshops, and the boundary between private and public space became permeable. Through this invisible yet essential work, women provided both logistical and symbolic support for the war effort. The movement of goods followed well-established routes: village—parish or community center—town—hospital or military unit. Packing, inventorying, and transport required an infrastructure of care, often coordinated by priests’ wives, schoolteachers, and women from the local elite.⁶⁷ They acted as links between the community, institutions, and beneficiaries. In all these activities, the women’s associations in Transylvania operated in different ways, depending on their organizational capacity and available resources. What united them, however, was their role as moral agents of the community. In the absence of the mobilized men, they managed collective empathy and maintained social cohesion. Compassion, care, and duty were transformed into coherent social practices. In this sense, women’s associations can be understood as central actors in an economy of emotions, in which material aid and emotional mobilization supported one another.

Conclusions

THIS ANALYSIS has highlighted how associations of Romanian women in Transylvania became, in the early years of the Great War, central actors in the social and emotional management of the crisis, articulating coherent responses to the profound transformations generated by the conflict. Their actions and initiatives were supported by a pre-existing associative infrastructure, adapted to the new demands of the war and intensified through public mobilization, the press, and institutional cooperation.

A preliminary finding of the research shows that women’s associations functioned as complex relational networks, with a radial organization and strong urban nodes, capable of connecting the centers (Sibiu, Braşov, Cluj) with smaller towns and rural areas. The case study on the Romanian Women’s Association in Sibiu reveals a well-structured organization, in which the members’ social, professional, and religious capital was transformed into effective resources for action. This networked functioning enabled not only the circulation of goods and funds, but also of information, models of intervention, and charitable practices.

Secondly, this analysis shows that women’s mobilization was part of a broader process of reshaping the urban space and its social functions. The conversion of buildings into military hospitals, orphanages, and welfare centers was accom-

panied by a reconfiguration of the community's emotional functions. Women became essential mediators of public suffering, transferring skills traditionally associated with the domestic sphere—care, the organization of daily life, invisible labor—into the institutional frameworks of medicine, social welfare, and the war economy.

A central focus of this mobilization was the war relief effort, chiefly consisting of collections for the poor, orphans, and the wounded. Carried out systematically in many towns and villages across Transylvania, these collections functioned not only as mechanisms for providing material aid, but also as public rituals of solidarity, integrated into the religious calendar and the spiritual life of the community. By ensuring the transparency of donations, publishing lists of contributors, and promoting moral examples, women's associations created frameworks for collective participation and social responsibility. The results also show that these practices were not ad hoc improvisations, but adaptations of assistance mechanisms that already existed prior to 1914. Soup kitchens, boarding schools for girls, nursing classes, and the work of the Sisters of Charity demonstrate the continuity of a culture of care, intensified and professionalized in the context of the war.

Another relevant aspect highlighted by this analysis is the interethnic cooperation facilitated by the relatively neutral nature of philanthropy and the pressure exerted by the war on all urban communities. Although it did not operate as a general rule, the collaboration between associations of Romanian, Hungarian, and German women became more frequent during the years of the conflict, particularly around healthcare institutions and the collections for the wounded. These episodes indicate the existence of spaces for social coexistence and practical solidarity, in which ethnic differences were temporarily suspended.

Overall, this study proposes an approach that analyses women's associations as central actors in an economy of care and emotions, in which material aid and emotional mobilization mutually reinforced one another. In the absence of the men mobilized to the front, women managed collective empathy, maintained community cohesion, and gave meaning to the everyday experience of the war. This analysis shows that the Transylvanian experience fits into a broader European pattern of female mobilization during the Great War, but also exhibits local specificities: the density of associative networks, the role of religion, the multiethnic character of the towns, and the mediating function of women. In this sense, women's associations can be understood not merely as auxiliaries to the war effort, but as active historical agents who contributed decisively to the management of the social crisis and the redefinition of the boundaries between the private and the public spheres in a Europe of total war.



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65. See the activities of the Association of Romanian Women in Deva during the first year of the war, *AUFPU* 2, 1 (1915): 13; *Gazeta Transilvaniei* 77, 275 (14/27 December 1914): 3.
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Abstract

Networks of Care: Women’s Solidarity, Emotional Economies, and War Relief on the Transylvanian Home Front (1914–1916)

This article examines the networks of care and solidarity mobilized by Romanian women’s associations in Transylvania during the first years of the First World War (1914–1916), situating their activities within the broader framework of total war and the social transformations it entailed on the home front. Moving beyond a descriptive account of charitable practices, the study proposes an interpretative approach that conceptualizes women’s associations as functional networks of care, capable of connecting urban centers and rural communities, institutions and households, material relief and emotional mobilization. Drawing on a wide range of primary sources, such as association yearbooks, the contemporary press, institutional reports, and archive documents, the analysis focuses on the organizational structures, social profiles, and geographic reach of these women’s networks, with particular attention given to the Romanian Women’s Association of Sibiu. Methodologically, the article is deliberately confined to the period preceding Romania’s entry into the war, when Romanian women’s organizations operated within the legal and institutional framework of Dualist Hungary and actively participated in the war effort of the Central Powers. The study demonstrates that women’s associations played a crucial role in managing the social consequences of mobilization by organizing fundraising campaigns, soup kitchens, relief for the wounded and orphans, and by supporting wartime medical institutions. These practices relied on pre-existing cultures of philanthropy and associational life, yet were intensified, professionalized, and reconfigured under the pressure of the war. Women emerged as key mediators of public suffering, transferring skills traditionally associated with the domestic sphere into the institutional domains of welfare, medicine, and urban governance. By engaging explicitly with major strands

of international historiography on women, war, humanitarianism, and the moral economy of care, this article argues that Romanian women's associations in Transylvania functioned not merely as auxiliary charitable bodies, but as essential structures of social solidarity. Their actions contributed decisively to maintaining community cohesion, managing collective emotions, and redefining the boundaries between private and public spheres in a multi-ethnic society subjected to the strain of total war.

Keywords

women's associations, war relief, economy of care, home front, Transylvania during the First World War