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Press Representation of People's Teachers in the Horthy Era (1921-1938)

Summary of doctoral (PhD) thesis

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I. Reasons for the choice of topic

Thanks to the technical progress of the 19th century, the printed press, with its high circulation, not only made it possible to reach all social layers, but also was the dominant mass media in Hungary between the two world wars, with an undeniable power to shape society and attitudes. It is therefore not surprising that political and economic decision-makers quickly discovered the potential of the “penny press”: the media have become the fourth branch of power alongside the legislature, the judiciary and the executive, a great power that forges and breaks alliances, raises and topples dynasties and leaders, influences economic life, shapes the opinions, culture and tastes of millions, and serves their hunger for information, which they not only demand but also demand as a right.

It is obvious that the role of the press in shaping and influencing public opinion is particularly important in tense situations, in critical historical and economic periods, when different socio-political groups and trends use the press to express their views and goals and try to enforce them. This was and could not have been the case for the teachers of the vernacular schools: the newspapers' columns gave space to the difficulties of the teachers of the period, their living and working conditions, their demands, their role, or even their personal failures and dramas.

In the course of my research on the history of education, I attempted to explore the ethos of teachers, the professionalization and everyday life of the folk school teaching profession in the period between the two world wars (1921-1938) by using a previously unused source, the political newspapers, which was supplemented by the official organ of the Ministry of Religion and Public Education, the *Néptanítók Lapja* (*People's Teachers' Journal*). (People's teacher meant elementary school teacher in the period.)

In contrast to press research on the history of education in the period of the dualism, the analysis of political newspapers between the two world wars is not the subject of mainstream research, and political tabloids are almost absent from the domestic educational history scene. The difficulties of researching the Horthy Era may be explained by the difficulty of assessing the period in the present (Gyáni, 2009).

At the same time, the role of the current newspapers in shaping public opinion is indisputable (Lipták, 1997; Sipos, 2004). The expansion of the press in this historical period is certainly worth researching, since 934 periodicals were published in Hungary in 1926, 1,230 in 1930, 1,477 in 1934 and 1,934 in 1938 (Elekes, 1939). It is also important to expose the issue of periodical publications in the discourse on the history of education, because the study of

these forms and contents of communication can provide us with a picture of the attitudes, prejudices and views of the period (Löwenthal, 1973).

I consider the press research of the dualism and the Horthy Era as a research background, whereby in the case of the former the focus is on the exploration of the People's Teachers' Journal as a source (Nóbik, 2017, 2019; Szabolcs, 2001). The journal played a significant role in the process of canonisation of elementary school teachers' knowledge, so its use as a source seems to be evident. The period following the dualism era, up to the Second World War, was a period of significant change, both socially and politically. Nevertheless, in comparison with the dualist period, there is less research on the pedagogical press from an educational point of view.

In addition to the exploration of educational journals, a researcher's approach using the conceptual categories and frameworks of the discipline of educational history has also emerged. The analysis of live newspapers (Baska, 2018), the exploration of thematic journals (Rébay, 2020), the research of newspapers of religious denominations (Sárai Szabó, 2009) or the study of regional newspapers (Pető, 2017), as well as my previous exploratory work, the exploration of the popular political tabloids of the Horthy Era, nuance the existing knowledge (Frank, 2018).

My research draws heavily on the historical process of elementary school teachers' professionalization, the steps of teacher knowledge construction (Németh 2008, 2012), as well as on the statistical characterisation of elementary school teachers (Asztalos, 1923, 1928, 1937) and some (statistical) data on teacher education (Neszt, 2014; Donáth 2008).

The time span of the research needs justification: on the one hand, the interval is explained by the laws on press law and press regulation, mainly Act XV of 1938 and Act XVIII of 1938. The former, among other things, provided for the establishment of the Press Chamber, which essentially controlled and redrew the press life of the time. On the other hand, 1938 is considered by most historians to be the last year of peace (Horváth, 2014; Romsics, 2010). It was a research decision to exclude the war years from the scope of the study because, although it is endlessly interesting to see how, for example, the role of the teacher is articulated in the run-up to and during the war, the study of all this would require independent research.

II. Research methods, sources, structure of the thesis

The profession of historians and historical investigation raises many questions, not only about the approach, the technique of research, the explanation of the past, but also, among others,

about the need for or the avoidance of judgement by historians (Gyáni 2007). The criticisms of historical investigation and the “struggle” between the different tendencies that are in opposition to each other are not new (Noiriel 2001).

In my dissertation, I have outlined the theoretical framework of the theories concerning the challenges of historical research, including Hayden White (1973), George Duby (2000), Michael Foucault (1998) and Paul Ricoeur (2001), which concern the subjectivity of the historian in the exploration of the past. In my research, I have adopted Paul Ricoeur’s position that the subjectivity of the historian is in fact a subjectivity framed by objectivity and as such has good and bad qualities as well. The historian’s subjectivity is not to be understood as subjectivity but rather as incomplete objectivity and manifests itself in four areas: 1) the perception of significance, which implies the designation of the documents to be studied and has no exact criterion; 2) the everyday perception of causality, which in some cases implies psychological motivations, and thus the psychology of the use of reason, and thus becomes difficult to define in concrete terms; 3) historical distance, the treatment of time, by which is meant the problem of the difficulty of explaining the institutions of the past, the situations of the past in the present, and the separation of the past from the present: what makes the present different from the past and how can the past be explained in the present? Another aspect of dealing with historical distance is the need to separate the expectations of the people of the past about their own future from the future as we know it; and to separate their past as they know it from their past as we know it. To achieve this requires a strong expertise and imagination on the part of the historian; 4) historiography is an enterprise of explaining the human past, human events, human actions and as such, man explaining man, which is imbued with a sympathy that requires of the historian “the will to encounter and to explain”. These, then, are segments of the historian’s subjectivity that do not represent a kind of “drifting subjectivity” but the triumph of good subjectivity over bad subjectivity (Ricoeur, 2004, 187-206).

I conducted a qualitative thematic content analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006, 2012) and a descriptive statistical analysis in the quantitative research paradigm. I selected five years of the designated period of the Horthy Era (1921-1938): 1921, 1926, 1930, 1935 and 1938. In each of these years, three of the most-read political and tabloid newspapers were selected for the corpus. I took care to validate the heterogeneous press offerings of the Horthy Era in the corpus, as far as the newspaper circulation data allowed, thus strengthening the multifaceted exploration and approach (Sántha, 2015). The newspapers included in the study were *Az Est (The Night)*, *Friss Ujság (Fresh Newspaper)*, *Pesti Hírlap (Pest Newspaper)*, *Uj Nemzedék (New Generation)*, *Magyarság (Hungarians)* and *Esti Kurir (Night Courier)*. The newspaper *Az Est*

was launched in 1910 and, as a nationally popular American-type tabloid, it was an unavoidable player in the press market until the middle of the 1930s. The *Friss Ujság* also identified itself as a tabloid. The *Esti Kurir*, the political daily of liberal politician Károly Rassay, a member of the Parliament was critical of the government, while the *Pesti Hírlap* was a pro-government press product. The *Uj Nemzedék* was a Catholic-oriented daily paper that experienced several crises and booms. At the turn of the 1930s, a tabloidisation process resulted in an increase in readership. The newspaper titled *Magyarság* was a radical right-wing, nationalist paper edited by the notoriously far-rightist István Mílotay.

The dissertation follows the traditional structural principle. In the first chapter, a detailed justification of the choice of the topic is followed by an introduction to the theoretical framework of the research, and then the power of the domestic press to shape opinion and the question of political power are discussed in the context of the period under study. Then, as a background to the research, I will present the results of previous studies of the educational press, which have been conducted mainly in the period of dualism and to a lesser extent in the period between the two world wars. It is followed by the research questions section. The chapter on research methods focuses on content analysis and thematic analysis, and concludes with a presentation of the journals included in the research. The chapter introducing the historical background places the period in the context of political, economic and educational history in the light of recent findings.

The results of the research are presented in a chronological order. The five focal points are summarised in a single chapter, following a consistent theme. An attempt is made to compare the press organs quantitatively by year, followed by an analysis of the teachers' representation of the tabloids and political newspapers by topic, and then the analysis of the People's Teachers' Newspaper. To conclude the research, a quantitative comparison of the topics across the years will be carried out, which will make the topic dynamics of the selected period (17 years) visible. This section concludes with a statistical metrics-based comparison of the teaching content of the daily newspapers. Finally, the results of the exploration of the implicit content are presented and interpreted, and the conclusion sets out the findings and possible directions for further research.

The research questions were the following:

- What is the context in which being an elementary school teacher, the practice of teaching, is presented to journal readers?
- What are the contents of the professionalisation of teachers?

- What are the content characteristics of the everyday life of elementary school teachers?
- What is the context in which the question of power is presented in relation to the content about teachers?
- Does existential vulnerability appear?
- How and in what ways are the male and female teachers represented in the content?
- How does the choice of teacher themes in the papers under study vary from one paper to another, and do the papers show differences when compared with each other?
- What is the pattern of the dynamics of topics and content over time in the research?

The main aim of the research was to analyse tabloid and political newspapers, so the research questions were defined in connection with this:

- Does the content of the *People's Teacher's Journal* show parallels with the publication patterns of the periodical press?
- To what extent do the choice of topics reflect the approach and orientation of political and tabloid newspapers?

III. Summary of research results

The general result of the research is that the content of the press products has revealed the era: everyday life, the opinions of national and local politicians, the lives of teachers have become visible, almost tangible. The history of education, cultural history and political history have been brought to life and filled with content. It gave us an insight into the driving forces behind sociological changes in education, and political intentions in the guise of education.

Teachership was presented to readers of political newspapers along clearly identifiable themes. Existential/financial sphere was the most prominent segment in living and working conditions. Also, working skills and methodological information (praxis) appeared in the newspapers, and the criminalisation in which teachers were involved was observable in each year. In addition, the content relating to their training and qualifications was a recurrent element, as was the issue of teachers' political involvement. There was, of course, other contents, including the professional and political challenge facing the Ministry of Religion and Public Education when the Felvidék (Highlands) earlier annexed to Czechoslovakia were returned, which required a systemic solution from the ministry.

Reading the articles in the press, it is a slight exaggeration to say that the image presented to the readers of the press was that elementary school teachers were only really interested in one issue: the settlement of incomes, the increase of salaries independently of the maintainer. The situation of denominational teachers, cantor teachers and substitute teachers was most prominently reported in the newspapers. In addition, other aspects of living and working conditions were also covered, to varying degrees from year to year: remuneration, the valorisation of the income from crops, the so-called boletta system, the income of cantor teachers, the abolition of rail discounts, the differential nature of the allowances, the differences between denominational and state teachers, the differential pension calculation, the problem of substitute and assistant teachers. It is fair to say that there is no aspect of this subject which has not been dealt with to varying degrees. Their working conditions, especially from today's point of view, may appear to be very unfortunate. Both ministers had to face up to the problems which fundamentally affected the work of teachers and their state of mind and well-being. The growing dissatisfaction of teachers was an agent that required a solution from the Government, especially in view of the fact that the educational policy of the period had a significant role for the teaching profession. The quantification of the contents also shows that the state of the economy is reflected in the quantity and proportion of articles exposing teachers, since the publications of the 1930s mirror the economic recession of the 1930s: the existential theme reaches its maximum in a five-year comparison.

The issue of teachers' professionalization is a very exciting area of exploratory work, as it is not a mainstream segment of the subject choices of the political dailies and tabloids included in the corpus. This is due to the size and heterogeneity of the readership, their level of education and training, and the fact that the content is subject to specialised knowledge, which required the editorial staff to be competent or at least well informed. Nevertheless, although there is little specific information in the papers, the presence of a teaching methodology can be identified. It is mainly the question of the balance between teaching and education, so characteristic of the period, and the implementation of popular education that is the subject of this paper. The content analysis also revealed that from the 1920s until the end of the period under study, the professional knowledge, educational and teaching methodology culture expected of primary school teachers changed. In the first half of the period, the importance of the possession of professional skills and the priority of progress in methodological culture were revealed, while in the 1930s, the effectiveness of education and the outstanding cultivation of educational work became more pronounced and a leading expectation.

The everyday life of teachers outside working hours can best be approached through episodes of press articles. There were no articles or content focusing specifically on this, but the analysis of the reports and one or two longer reports or reports reveals this area, which is also linked to the existential theme, to the practice and to some extent to the criminalisation of teachers. It becomes apparent that the extra-occupational activities of urban teachers are an almost invisible area. In contrast, the life outside work of rural, farm and village teachers is transparent to the readers of the organs.

The qualitative exploration and analysis of the year rounds clearly showed that there were manifest and latent messages of power affecting teachers. Manifest expressions of power clearly mark out teachers' latitude, their existential possibilities and their vulnerability due to low financial esteem. The latent contents carry the influences which, seeing the contents, affect elementary school teachers' lives in an almost systemic way. It may be less obvious to newspaper readers, but it is clearly present for members of the professional community concerned. These include the legislative environment, the 'hidden curriculum' which puts pressure on elementary school teachers, or the micro-societal environment or even the expectations of big politics. It is worth emphasising that the chronological exploration has made it possible to identify, through explicit and implicit themes, the extent to which the various forms and degrees of power are able to influence teachers' attitudes, life choices and social and economic mobility. Minister Kunó Klebelsberg's public threats can be seen as an extremely blatant event. From the (repressive) measures taken against individual elementary school teachers, even if we cannot draw conclusions that apply to everyone, we can also draw conclusions about the protocol of practice, the expectations of teachers, the hierarchical system and institutional processes, and the institutional process that regulates and limits the degree of freedom of teachers. Finally, the communication technique between teachers' organisations and the ministry in the event of a conflict could be seen, revealing the dynamics of the current power relations.

Another aspect of power is the use of power by elementary school teachers, the use of personal power, the abuse of power. One particularly serious form of this is sexual harassment and indecent assault. Teachers abused the vulnerability of their pupils, their physical superiority and their social status. In the years that followed, although few press articles were published on the subject, the extreme violation of standards led to newspaper reports of police proceedings or cases that reached the court stage, which eroded the public image of elementary school teachers, especially that of male teachers.

Another aspect of teaching power is the use of corporal punishment in schools, which has undergone significant changes over the period under review. By this period, it had become accepted in international legislative practice (Boreczky, 1999) and in the domestic educational theory canon that corporal punishment should not be used. The *People's Teacher Journal* illustrated the counter-productivity of corporal punishment mainly with Western European examples and professional content, but also published content in the foreign review columns that could be interpreted as supportive information on corporal punishment in schools.

Political engagement is a unique area of press representation of the teachership. It was present in four out of five years, 1921, 1926, 1935 and 1938, but almost absent in 1930. The theme that is clearly visible in four of the five year ranges raises the question of what might have caused the lack of relevant content in 1930. Analysing the press coverage of the 1930s concerning the elementary school teachers' profession, and knowing the situation in the country at the time of the Great Depression, a major economic downturn began in the country which, on the one hand, could have overshadowed topics that had been sufficiently covered previously or were considered less interesting. On the other hand, precisely because of the economic situation, the restrictive state policy had the effect of placing a large number of elementary school teachers in existential circumstances that did not allow them to express themselves on a political basis. In the event of unemployment, they would have faced even more serious difficulties in making a living, so that for elementary school teachers, political involvement and political activity could entail serious risks.

The analysis of the pattern of political engagement, beyond the missing year range, also yielded a further noteworthy result. In 1921, in contrast to the other years, the proportion of political participation was particularly high, while in the other years it was much lower. It is legitimate to ask what might account for the change in the pattern of the subject. One explanation is that another pattern is broken in 1921, but with negative results. The theme of criminality affecting teachers seems almost invisible at this time, whereas it was constant and higher in the other years. Among the range of explanations, it is reasonable to assume that in 1921 the new political system was not yet considered solid and that the teaching profession could see some of the achievements of October 1918 and March 1919 as defensible objectives. In this case, the political involvement of elementary school teachers in 1921 can be seen more as a rearguard action to preserve a more democratic school and social system.

I also consider the exploration of criminalisation of teachers to be a success of the research. This occupational group is no exception: among elementary school teachers we also find perpetrators, accomplices, people prone to violent behaviour or victims who have been

victimised by chance or by their way of life. The “pattern” of crimes committed in the public sector is no different from that of crimes committed outside the teaching profession: murder, robbery, embezzlement, corruption and forgery are also found. The latter, since it demands resources, raises the issue of the investigation of underlying accomplices who avoid detection, as well as the presence of a political thread (Berkes, Kántás, Szabó and Szerényi, 2020). The relationship of elementary school teachers who were public offenders or administrative rule-breakers with politics was more strongly articulated during the elections, but while the politicisation of the classroom, the expression of political opinions in the classroom, became less prevalent in the 1920s, it became more prevalent from the mid-1930s onwards, and acceptance, rejection or ignoring of this phenomenon became part of the political discourse.

The average proportion of male teachers in the period under review was around 60%. Primary school teachers were generally referred to in the press as “tanító” (male teacher) and “tanítónő” (female teacher), indicating that the two sexes within the profession were equivalent. A frequently used journalistic formula was the term “tanítóság” (roughly: the group of primary school teachers), which universally designated teachers for readers, regardless of gender. The gender of teachers appeared in an explicitly dichotomous form when the content specifically required it. Distinctly differentiated content can be found for the gender of teachers in relation to the following themes: over-qualification of teachers, which essentially affected female teachers; the dismissal of certain groups of married teachers in times of crisis; and the gender of the perpetrator can always be identified when naming crimes affecting elementary school teachers. In the case of teachers working in the rural community, some employers would have preferred to employ male teachers and requested legal support from the Ministry of Religion and Education. Another way of approaching the issue was to allow only male teachers to speak in the press, so that the reading public could hear the views of men whether they were male or female teachers. The political spokespeople and the leaders of teachers’ organisations were all men.

The statistical analysis also allowed for a comparison of the papers. The different genres had different publication start-up times, and there were also marked differences in political orientation when comparing newspapers. In addition, changes in education policy and the legislative environment have also had an impact on the publication patterns of the newspapers.

The *Új Nemzedék* and *Magyarság* were the most active in representing the living and working conditions of elementary school teachers. When examining the publication activity of the latter newspaper in 1926, the question of political interest arose, since the 1925 scandal of the forgery of French francs continued until June 1926 and threatened the position of Prime

Minister István Bethlen. The newspaper and the political circles behind it, I assume, wanted to weaken the position of the Head of Government by attacking Minister for Education Kunó Klebelsberg and making the controversial teacher status settlement issue a theme. The topic of the political role of elementary school teachers was mostly discussed in the newspaper *Az Est*, the explanation for which was the world view of the owner of the newspaper, Andor Miklós. Its owner, who represented bourgeois-liberal values, regularly reported on discrimination against elementary school teachers on the basis of religion, similar to the *Esti Kurir*, owned by Károly Rassay. The criminalisation of teachers was a genre-specific issue, as it was mostly represented by tabloids (*Az Est*, *Friss Ujság*). The publication patterns of political newspapers show similarity for topics related to the professional activities of teachers. All of these papers had similar proportions of readers who could see the challenges of professional work.

It is clear that there is almost no overlap between the content of the *People's Teachers' Newspaper* and that of political newspapers. There is no political involvement of elementary school teachers, no criminalisation concerning them, minimal and normative existential content. This can be explained by the nature of the two types of newspaper, and the identity of the editorial office and publisher, as well as the professional-political ties of the publisher cannot be avoided, since the publisher of *the People's Teachers' Journal* was the Ministry of Religion and Public Education itself, and thus also fulfilled a normative function through the content that it published. If we feel compelled to formulate the subject area where the intersection of content can be seen, then the teaching and educational work of elementary school teachers and teacher training teachers can be highlighted most prominently.

In terms of press research history, there is continuity for some topics and discontinuity for others. The areas of school health and teacher training, the role of elementary school teachers and the different segments of the profession can be considered as continuous content. In exploring school health, it became clear how little attention was paid to the health of teachers, the risk posed by working conditions (condition of classrooms, student numbers), the presence of student-borne infections in the classroom, the hygiene of students, which also affected the health of elementary school teachers. The physical and mental well-being of teachers also had an impact on the success of the frequently mentioned fight against illiteracy. The maintenance of teachers' mental and physical health was very problematic. Between the two world wars, the number of suicides in Hungary was extremely high, and many elementary school teachers chose this escape route as well. The importance of education, discipline and family life education also appeared.

The theory of reform pedagogy was not continued, or barely appeared in the newspapers, and readers were only informed about the reform of life in a few reports and reports. However, the importance of the education of the whole nation, which had to permeate the teaching practice, was a new element.

In conclusion, the research questions of the thesis have been answered: the representation of people's teachers, along the thematic lines, in political and tabloid newspapers is well detectable. A comparison of the publications shows a strong polarisation, which is also associated with a different intensity of topics: a clear link to political orientation and format can be detected in the preference for the topics chosen by the newspapers. The choice of topics in the People's Teachers' Journal shows few parallels with political newspapers, and some topics do not appear at all (political involvement and the criminalisation of teachers), which can be explained by the orientation of the professional paper's maintainer and its specific genre.

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