

MEMORIAL YEARS, ANNIVERSARIES

2015

PROPAGANDA IN WORLD WAR I – RESEARCH PROJECT, EXHIBITION, CONFERENCE, PUBLICATIONS, ACCOMPANYING EVENTS



The series of events of the national library entitled *Propaganda in World War I* became one of the largest museum and academic endeavors of the past years. The almost 200 borrowed artworks and of course NSZL's own documents exhibited on nearly 600 square meters, together with the accompanying events, were dedicated to present the process of the Great War that led from the initial enthusiasm of the hinterland to the total deception at the end.

The exhibition of great success, inaugurated in October 2015, was open for six months. It occupied the 5th and 6th floors of our library, extending to the most important galleries: the Corvina Galleries, the Ars Librorum Exhibition Space, and the Relic Space. (The exhibition space was designed and built by Stáb Stúdió under the management of Olga Imre.) During this time, more than 5000 tickets were sold, but that is only an indicative number, as our registered readers could visit considerable part of the exhibition free of charge. The exhibition was complemented by various events as well as a bilingual catalogue and an individual volume with the contributions of the related conference.

Preparation and research

We started to make the preparations for the exhibition at the Directorate of Research of NSZL as early as 2012, in view of the nearing centenary year of World War I. Simultaneously, we carried out a comprehensive research for an itemized reconstruction of the one-time World War I collection of NSZL. What makes that collection unique is that it came into being at the very outbreak of the Great War after a decision of the NSZL management to gather all the material related to the war in Hungary and abroad into one single thematic collection. The size of the huge material is reflected by the fact that in 1922, when the campaign was over,

and the collection was dissolved, it consisted of 176.751 library items. Our goal was to realize the itemized reconstruction of this treasure to have a bibliography of the items distributed ever since in various collections and include it in one single volume. We published the results in Zoltán Oszkár Szóts's work, *The one-time World War I collection of National Széchényi Library*, jointly with Gondolat Publishing House, within the *National Collection* series. The volume was presented to the public on several occasions, including the Festival of Museums in May 2014. For the exhibition, we selected the items belonging to NSZL from this rich and colorful list and our nation-wide unparalleled collection of posters and small prints. Then we added some valuable relics to be borrowed from partner institutions. This phase of the work was concluded by the summer of 2015, when we started to build the exhibition with the sponsorship of the First World War Centenary Memorial Committee.

Exhibition

The choice of the topic for the First World War centenary exhibition was not accidental. The Great War (1914-1918) that ushered in the cruel 20th century of the European history was also a field for the making of the modern propaganda of the new era. This phenomenon can be explained by that propaganda proved to be a



surprisingly novel and efficient weapon during the war, although it was not orchestrated or strongly centralized by the governments, let alone unchanged from 1914 to 1918. Our exhibition explored from various aspects the nature and development of the stirring war propaganda in Hungary. Propaganda, in the words of Richard Alan Nelson, is “a systematic form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, opinions, and actions of specified target audiences”, executed always by the conveying of controlled unilateral messages. Our exhibition studied the support and approval of the war in the hinterland society and the opposing attitudes of the intelligentsia, emphasizing that First World War propaganda can only be interpreted as a complex societal phenomenon. As we offered three approaches of the role of mobilization, censorship and the commitment and possible resistance of the intelligentsia including writers and artists during the war, gap-filling observations of art and literary history were also given room in addition to

the analysis of historians. The commissioned chief curator of the exhibition was historian Iván Bertényi Jr., specialized in World War I, while the art history approach was represented by Anikó Katona, and the literary and press history aspects were added by Zsuzsanna Rózsafalvi and the author of this article.

The inauguration ceremony was held in the autumn of 2015, attended by a great number of experts. After the greeting words of Gergely Pröhle, Deputy





State Secretary of International and European Union Affairs, a performance of Béla Fesztbaum took place, and then the audience could get acquainted with the items exhibited in the galleries. During the six months of the exhibition, many guided tours and lectures were held, designed especially for high school students who participated with interest and pleasure. We had special gifts manufactured for the exhibition, with the explicit purpose of targeting all the visitors, including experts,

the youngest generations and tourists. All the captions of the exhibition were bilingual to offer a valuable and comprehensive experience to the tourists visiting the Buda Castle from around the world. The closing ceremony took place in the spring of 2016. On this occasion, we held a roundtable discussion with the specialists on the results of the exhibition and presented the bilingual (Hungarian and English) catalogue. The participants of the event, in addition to the curators,



were idea historian Tamás Gusztáv Filep and historian Miklós Zeidler. The colored hardbound catalogue of nearly 400 pages (edited by László Boka and Iván Bertényi Jr.), with three large essays and 24 thematic blocs, later won the Antall József Memorial Award of the Beautiful Hungarian Book contest of 2016 (the graphic designer of the book, including graphic layout and text formatting was Judit Vincze).

Accompanying events

In January 2016, we held a prestigious two-day interdisciplinary conference with the title *Propaganda – History, Art and Media in World War I*, with 34 guest lecturers including Ignác Romsics and Géza Buzinkay who gave plenary lectures. The conference of three sections was inaugurated by Gáspár Gróh, Director of the Office of the President of the Republic. The edited and selected material of the conference was



published in the autumn of 2016, by the NSZL Publishing House.

While the main exhibition concept focused on the so-called “domestic” propaganda by presenting the various segments of the everyday life in the Hungarian hinterland, we also set up an accompanying chamber exhibition at our Map Collection to offer a glimpse into WWI propaganda worldwide. The chamber exhibition presented the principles of propaganda used by the warring nations, and the image they wanted to depict of themselves. There were political and caricature maps, flyers and posters on display, as during World War I, maps were not only used to show the growing number of extending front lines, but also to make fun of the enemy, and illustrate economical hegemony and imperial endeavors. British, French, German and American maps of propaganda show excellently how slogans, allegories, real or forged stories were used by the warring nations to convince their own hinterland and the neutral states.

The complete “Propaganda Series” of National Széchényi Library – as referred to sometimes by the press – also offered a comprehensive overview of the entire 20th century. With the help of additional finan-

cial support offered primarily by the National Cultural Fund of Hungary, we set up several accompanying activities, including the 5th season of our monthly literary and cultural dissemination series, Library Salon, with the main theme *Propaganda in the 20th century*. There was great media interest around several parts of the project. A row of reports and interviews was made, including live television and radio broadcasts of Hungarian and international stations. Prestigious weekly and daily periodicals covered our news regularly. As we considered important to present the complex topic of the exhibition throughout Hungary, one week after the closing day several items were already on display in our *In Plural* travelling exhibition. This project, executed jointly with the Hungarian National Museum, started in Székesfehérvár on the 14th of April 2016, and continued also in the year 2017.

Details of the main exhibition can be found at:

http://nemzetikonyvtar.blog.hu/2015/10/17/a_lelkedestol_a_kiabrandulasig_az_elso_vilagaboru_propagandaja

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