

The Red Childhood: Romanian Children's Magazines and the Leader Cult in the 1950s

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Abstract. *This study examines how Romanian children's magazines from the Stalinist era, *Cravata roşie*, *Pionierul*, *Licurici*, and *Pogonici*, contributed to the cult of personality surrounding Communist leaders. It explores how these publications depicted figures such as Stalin, Lenin, and Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej as virtuous, fatherly, and visionary builders of a just and egalitarian society. The research combines quantitative tracking of leader appearances with qualitative analysis of visual and textual strategies, including stylised biographies and idealised illustrations. The findings reveal that these magazines fostered emotional bonds between children and the authority figures, reinforced ideological loyalty, and promoted collective moral values. Formalised stories frequently blended fact and fiction in order to emphasise their modest origins and exceptional traits, while enhancing political legitimacy. By demonstrating how children's media shaped perceptions and identities, this study highlights the role of propaganda in targeting young audiences during a period of significant political and social change. It also serves as a historical warning for the present day, by drawing attention to the susceptibility of children's minds to influence and underscoring the importance of media literacy.*

Received: 15/12/2025. Accepted: 15/12/2026

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Keywords: *Communist propaganda; Socialist culture; ideological indoctrination; leader cult; childhood socialisation.*

Raudonoji vaikystė: Rumunijos žurnalai vaikams bei lyderio kultas XX amžiaus šeštajame dešimtmetyje

Santrauka. Šiame straipsnyje tiriama, kaip stalininio laikotarpio Rumunijos vaikams skirti žurnalai „Cravata roşie“ („Raudonasis kaklaraištis“), „Pionierul“ („Pionierius“), „Licurici“ („Jonvabalai“), and „Pogonici“ („Ežiukai“) prisidėjo prie asmenybės kulto, supusio komunistinius lyderius. Tyrinėjama, kaip šiuose leidiniuose buvo perteikiamos Stalino, Lenino ir Georgės Georgiu-Dežo (Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej) asmenybės. Šie lyderiai buvo vaizduojami kaip dorybingi, tėviški ir ypatingai išvargūs teisingos visuomenės, kurioje visi bus lygūs, kūrėjai. Tyrime kiekybinis lyderių paminėjimo ir vaizdinio perteikimo registravimas derinamas su kokybine analize, siekiančia atskleisti, kokių vaizdinių ir tekstinių strategijų yra laikomasi. Į tyrimo erdvę patenka stilizuotos biografijos bei idealizuotos lyderių iliustracijos. Atskleidžiama, kad šiuose žurnaluose buvo puoselėjami emociniai ryšiai tarp vaikų ir valdžios asmenybių, taip stiprinant ideologinę ištikimybę bei puoselėjant kolektyvines moralines vertybes. Formalizuotose istorijose neretai derinami faktai ir fikcija. Taip siekiama pabrėžti kuklių lyderių kilmę bei išskirtinius jų bruožus, ir šiuo pagrindu sustiprinti jų politinį legitimumą. Šiame tyrime, atskleidus, kaip vaikams skirtos masinės informacijos priemonės formavo suvokimą ir tapatybes, išryškinamas propagandos vaidmuo bei jos nukreipimas į jauną auditoriją esminių politinių bei socialinių pokyčių laikotarpiu. Šis tyrimas yra iš istorijos kylantis išspėjimas šiandienai, atkreipiant dėmesį, kad vaiko mąstymas yra lengvai pažeidžiamas, ir kad negalime ignoruoti medijų raštingumo svarbos.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: *Komunistinė propaganda; socialistinė kultūra; ideologinė indoktrinacija; lyderio kultas; socializacija vaikystėje.*

Introduction

After the Second World War, Eastern Europe entered an extensive process of Sovietisation, understood as a gradual alignment with the political, institutional and ideological model of the Soviet Union (Zsu,

2023, p. 26). These changes concerned not only power structures but also the organisation and ideological orientation of society, through extensive control over key institutions.

A central element of this period was the 'new man' concept, defined by loyalty to the collective, conformity and attachment to the political regime values, which culminated in the years 1950–1953, when the cult of personality surrounding Stalin reached its peak (Zsu, 2023, p. 26). This period also witnessed attempts by states under Soviet influence to imitate Soviet practices (Naimark, 2010). This was part of the broader process of Sovietisation, through which, the Soviet model became a reference point for the organisation of institutions and social life. In this context, the adopted elements influenced both the functioning of the political system and public communication mechanisms, including the mass media. An illustrative example is provided by Pristed (2019), who shows how wall newspapers were transformed into instruments of propaganda, and how this practice was replicated in other countries. From this perspective, political leaders such as Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej in Romania, Bolesław Bierut in Poland, Mátyás Rákosi in Hungary, and Valko Velyov Chervenkov in Bulgaria were required to contribute to the consolidation and implementation of the Soviet model.

Peter Kenez (1985) noted that the Bolshevik regime sought, through political, educational and propagandistic methods, to shape a new consciousness from which a state, built on indoctrination, would emerge. Research on propaganda (Ellul, 1965) highlights a range of recurring strategies, among which, the mass media occupies a central place, functioning as one of the most frequent vehicles for transmitting ideological messages. Within this framework, Communist propaganda influenced multiple areas of social life, with citizens in Eastern Europe subjected to various forms of indoctrination (Ramet, 2023). Under these conditions, the printed press functioned as a key instrument, as the propaganda apparatus used its control over the media content to present information in a manner favourable to the new regime. Although such practices were adopted across most states under Soviet influence, they were adapted to the specific context of each country.

Prior to the official establishment of Communist regimes, Soviet propaganda laid the groundwork for a political discourse that presented the Soviet Union as aligned with popular aspirations. In the case of Romania, despite the violent and repressive nature of the Soviet occupation, propaganda efforts emphasised the notion of 'liberation' from both internal and external exploitation. This rhetoric centred on exacerbating social divisions, portraying Romanian society as sharply divided between the *exploiter* class and the *exploited* masses. Landlords, the bourgeoisie, large foreign corporations, and previous governments were denounced as responsible for the widespread poverty and suffering of the people. Simultaneously, a heightened nationalist discourse was boosted, fuelling fears of foreign influence and a claimed fascist threat. Against this backdrop, the Soviet Union and the Romanian Communist Party emerged as the nation's saviours, champions of a new social order based on equality and social justice. A similar approach was adopted in other states, too. For example, in East Germany, propaganda exploited the sense of national humiliation generated by defeat in World War II and presented the Soviet Union as the liberator from the yoke of Nazism. In Poland, the nationalist and pan-Slavist dimensions of the discourse were accentuated, presenting the Soviet Union as the defender of Polish national interests in the face of the German threat. A constant element of Communist propaganda was the cult of the personality of the leader, often seen as a wise ruler and defender of peace, be it local or Soviet leaders (Apor, Behrend, Jones, & Rees, 2004). Public demonstrations, rituals and political symbols were meant to reinforce this image and strengthen loyalty to the regime.

Studies by Anne Applebaum (2012) highlight how Communist regimes were consolidated through similar mechanisms of political and social control across several states in the region. Nonetheless, the volume edited by Olle Mertelsmann (2003) demonstrates that the Sovietisation of the Baltic states involved comparable institutional and ideological transformations, including control over communication channels. Likewise, the volume edited by Marina Balina and Serguei Alex Oushakine (2021) is relevant to this research as it examines how Com-

munism was represented for children through various cultural forms. The contributions included in this volume provide a framework for interpreting children's magazines as instruments for transmitting ideological values to a young audience, by highlighting their role in political socialisation and in shaping attitudes aligned with the regime.

Given this, the mass media played a central role, alongside the educational system, in the formation of a new social identity compatible with regime values. The press no longer functioned as a space for information or debate, but, instead, became an instrument for transmitting official messages and consolidating a uniform perspective on reality. Through it, the political regime aimed not only to inform the public, but also to shape perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. The mass media thus became an essential channel for legitimising the new order and standardising the social discourse.

Starting from the role of the mass media as a vehicle of propaganda, it is relevant to examine specific forms of communication, among which, children's magazines occupy a distinct place. These do not limit themselves to an informative function but participate in the process of ideological formation by adapting their content to the intended audience's level of understanding.

Studies on the printed press in the states under Soviet influence highlighted how Soviet models were imposed on local periodicals. For instance, Angelova (2023) shows the use of heroes in Bulgarian children's press, designed as moral figures for reader identification. These heroic figures were closely associated with the Communist regime, embodying values such as sacrifice, struggle against enemies and commitment to the collective good. Similarly, studies on children's magazines in Poland (Król, 2024; Ungeheuer-Gołąb, 2021; Brodala, 2021) highlighted the integration of children's literature within the Soviet directives, as well as the orientation of the publications towards strongly ideologised content intended to align the readers' thinking with the Communist party's values. In the same vein, Somogyvári (2019; 2022) showed that, in Hungary, the Communist regime sought, through chil-

dren's press and pedagogical methods, to form a new social identity aligned with the Hungarian Communist Party.

Another valuable example is the case of children's literature in Ukraine, which was marked by the widespread use of Russification strategies. Zhygun (2022) highlights the implementation of Russification policies across the population, including children. Ideological content centred on the cult of personality surrounding Lenin and Stalin, the communist revolution, collectivisation and industrialisation, as well as stereotypical representations of gender roles, aimed to construct the Soviet 'new man' and diminish the local traditions. These same directions, marked by an emphasis on discipline, subordination to authority and the internalisation of the Soviet moral values, were also reflected in studies on children's literature in the Republic of Moldova (Dolghi, 2020).

In contrast, the Baltic states present certain particularities. Although the Soviet propaganda also acted here upon children's literature and education, transforming them into instruments of ideological influence, historiography (Satkauskytė, 2025; Klaus, 2025; Rahi-Tamm & Salēniece, 2016; Davoliūtė, 2016) indicates that forms of resistance to these practices existed, including within children's literature. This perspective is relevant for understanding both the mechanisms of indoctrination and the challenges involved in deconstructing ideological formation during the Communist period.

Furthermore, the comparative perspective allows the Romanian case to be situated within a broader context, suggesting that the mechanisms of representing Communism for children follow similar patterns across multiple spaces of the Communist world. These perspectives support the view that alignment with the Soviet model followed a relatively uniform regional pattern, enabling the interpretation of the Romanian press in the 1950s as part of a wider Eastern European context.

The research problem addressed in this study concerns the representation of political leaders in children's magazines in the early Communist Romania, with particular emphasis on how visual and textual

constructions contributed to the articulation of the cult of personality and to the consolidation of political legitimacy, as well as their role in shaping children's perceptions. The study is guided by the following research questions: how political leaders are represented in children's magazines in terms of their visual and textual content, which representational roles are assigned to these leaders, how these representations are associated with the key social themes such as school, work, politics and family, and what patterns emerge in the construction of ideological and moral models for children.

Consequently, this study aims to analyse the construction of the cult of personality in children's magazines in the early Communist Romania through the visual and textual representation of political leaders, and to interpret the findings within the broader framework of ideological communication in children's media. Of no lesser significance, the present study seeks to offer a perspective on the effects of propaganda upon young people's perceptions, in the context of the ongoing deconstruction of the totalitarian mindset and the widespread reticence towards democratic values within Romanian society. The objectives of the research are to identify and categorise the visual and textual representations of political leaders within the selected corpus, to examine the distribution of representational roles attributed to each leader, and to analyse the association between these representations and recurring social themes.

Literature Review

Research on Communist propaganda highlights the central role of political imagery and emotional mobilisation in consolidating authoritarian rule. Studies on Stalinism, including Plamper's *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (2012), Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (1995), and Groys's, *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1992), show that the leader cult functioned as a political religion, supported by specific iconography, ritualised performances, and manipulation strategies (Plamper, 2012; Kotkin, 1995; Groys, 1992). These

works provide a theoretical basis for analysing the dissemination and local adaptation of the Soviet visual and textual models across the Socialist bloc, particularly in Romania.

On the other hand, the specific studies carried out by Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890–1991* (2007), along with research by Susan E. Reid (2002) and Ben Eklof (1986), show that children were targeted as recipients of ideology and were included in the broader project of Socialist subject, the *new man*. This literature highlights the emotional dimension of Socialist pedagogy and reveals how media for children, such as stories, poems, illustrations, and photographs, created affective bonds between young readers and political leaders (Kelly, 2007; Reid, 2002; Eklof, 1986; Hellbeck, 2006).

Research on Romanian Communism (Tismăneanu, 2003; Deletant, 2020; Verdery, 1995) tried to clarify the ideological transformations and political structures, and therefore focused primarily on propaganda or on the later phases of the regime. The ways in which magazines shaped the cults of Stalin, Lenin, or Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej remain marginally explored (Chiș, n.d.; Enescu, 2016; Preda, 2012; Tudorache, 2017; Țăgșorean, 2015, 2017; Crihan, 2017).

Scholars like Jochen Hellbeck (2006) and Boris Groys (1992) have examined how Socialist regimes used visual pedagogy, emotional governance, and autobiographical modelling to shape subjectivity. These frameworks help explain how children's magazines functioned not simply as didactic devices but also as emotional technologies aimed at cultivating admiration, gratitude, and loyalty toward political leaders (Hellbeck, 2006; Groys, 1992; Enescu, 2016). Despite these contributions, the research gap regarding the Romanian children's magazines from the 1950s remains insufficiently addressed. Consequently, the present study addresses less explored issues and aims to fill a research gap represented by the systematic analysis of the presence of political leaders in magazines, as well as how they were constructed visually and textually, the types of representations associated with them, particularly as moral models, and their association with themes such as school, work, politics, and family.

Research Methodology

This study analyses the representation of the Soviet and Romanian leaders in the 1950s children's magazines with a specific focus on those issued between 1950 and 1955. The choice of this period was motivated by the fact that the peak of Stalin's personality cult was manifested during the above-mentioned timeline. Following Stalin's death, Romanian publications underwent an ideological reorganisation, caused by various editorial changes and by the process of de-Stalinisation, a development that deserves examination in a distinct study. The analysis included *Pogonici* (1950–1953, 96 issues), *Licurici* (1950–1952, 72 issues), *Cravata Roșie* (1953–1955, 48 issues), and *Pionierul* (1950–1955, 412 issues)¹, with these issues representing the entirety of children's magazines edited by the Communist Party during the first half of the 1950s, all of which were included in the present analysis. It should be noted that the analysis encompasses all issues published within the selected timeframe and therefore provides complete coverage of the available source material. The selected magazines covered a broad range of age groups, enabling analysis across diverse content. Thus, *Pogonici* was intended for preschool children, *Licurici* targeted pupils aged approximately 6 to 10 and had a predominantly general culture orientation, *Cravata roșie* was addressed to schoolchildren between 11 and 14 years of age and contained an ideological-educational profile, while *Pionierul* was aimed at children enrolled in the Pioneer organisation (9–14 years) (Petcu, 2012). The selected magazines emerged in the post-Second World War period and were fully coordinated by the Communist Party. Some of them ceased publication around the year 1955, either being replaced by other publications, or by adapting their content or names in response to the changes occurring at the social and institutional level. For example,

¹ The magazines *Licurici* (1947, *Firefly*), *Pogonici* (1949, *Little Hedgehogs*), *Pionierul* (1949, *The Pioneer*), and *Cravata Roșie* (1953, *The Red Tie*) were established and supervised by the Communist Party and aimed to familiarise children of all ages with the Communist ideology. In addition to moralising and propagandistic stories, they included games, entertainment, comics, and historical tales.

Licurici, launched in 1947, was transformed in 1953 into *Cravata Roșie*, which operated until 1967, when it was replaced as part of a broader restructuring of the youth press. At the same time, *Pionierul*, launched in 1949, had a short lifespan and was replaced in 1952 by *Scânteia Pionierului*.

The coding scheme was developed after a preliminary analysis of the available materials and aimed to identify the elements that constitute the cult of personality in both texts and images. In this respect, the following analytical categories were defined: the representation of the leader as a symbol, through his presence in intimate and domestic spaces or in school contexts; the leader as a teacher or ideological guide; strategist/military figure; unifier; loving father; architect or builder of the nation; martyr; and trailblazer.

For the purpose of constructing the corpus of analysis, references to Lenin, Stalin, and Dej were identified and quantified, both in a textual and visual form. Quantitative analysis examined the frequency, placement, and evolution of visual and textual references, tracing the shift from the omnipresent Soviet leaders, especially Stalin, to emerging Romanian national-Communist figures. Subsequently, the selection was limited to occurrences considered relevant to the study's objectives. In this regard, mentions that did not directly refer to the historical figures were excluded, such as place names (for example, cities named Stalin), as well as the names of schools, streets, factories, competitions or awards, and cases in which groups of workers adopted names such as 'Stalin' or 'Lenin'. References included in the magazines' mottos (such as "*Forward for the cause of Lenin and Stalin*") were also excluded.

Qualitative analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013) combined with purposive sampling (Sandelowski, 1995) explored symbolic, rhetorical, and ideological aspects, including visual depictions, the narrative tone, recurring themes, and explicit or implicit ideological messages. Situated within a multidisciplinary framework grounded on the Soviet propaganda (Fitzpatrick 1999), visual communication (Manovich 2001), and social psychology of collective memory (Moscovici 1984), the

study combines systematic measurement with in-depth interpretation to assess how leaders were integrated into the cultural consciousness of Communist childhood. Nevertheless, the analysis was grounded in the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis, as proposed by Fairclough (1988, 1992, 1995) and van Dijk (1998, 2008, 2009). The visual component of the research was approached through the model developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), which treats images as systems of meaning comparable to language.

Results and Discussions

Following this selection process, the data presented in *Table 1* were obtained. By applying the coding scheme, out of the total number of relevant occurrences, Stalin appeared as a symbol 65 times (his image appeared in bedrooms, homes and schools, and his name was mentioned in connection with key moments in children's lives, such as receiving the Red Scarf, school anniversaries, or the beginning and end of the school year, poems, short stories, etc.), as a teacher 25 times, as a strategist/military figure 20 times, as a unifier 34 times, as a loving/caring father 42 times, and as an architect/builder 31 times. Lenin appeared as a teacher and ideological leader (guide) 42 times, as a martyr 30 times, and as a trailblazer 17 times. The appearances of the national leader, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, are largely confined to political contexts, such as party anniversaries, Soviet celebrations, or visits to factories. Nevertheless, through the application of the coding scheme, 25 instances were identified in which he is portrayed as a builder and architect of the nation, most often in close association with Stalin's image.

Concerning Ana Pauker, her presence in children's magazines is extremely limited, on the one hand because this field was predominantly reserved for men, and on the other hand, as a result of her removal from the Party after 1952, despite her major contribution to the implementation of Stalinist Communism in Romania. Although the coding scheme was not applied in her case, her inclusion in the analysis is relevant as a particular instance; the image identified is that of a loving and protective mother.

The quantitative analysis of the corpus of documents revealed several relevant aspects for the present study. First, as can be seen in *Table 1*, references to Stalin were approximately twice as frequent as those to Lenin. At the same time, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej was mentioned less frequently than the other two leaders. One interpretation is that Romanian propaganda was integrated into a broader framework characteristic of Eastern European states in the 1950s (Apor, Behrend, Jones, & Rees, 2004), by boosting the cult of the Soviet leader to the detriment of the national leader. This strategy aimed to achieve the political, ideological and social uniformisation of states under Soviet influence, so that citizens would orient themselves towards a single common authority. The results also indicate that, in certain magazines, the representation of political leaders appears more frequently, as is the case with *Pionierul*. This fact is explained by the magazine's orientation towards children who were members of the Pioneer Organisation. Consequently, its content was more strongly ideological, with overtly political texts reflecting the structured ideological education of its readers through their participation in organised activities. On the other hand, *Pogonici* favours the use of images and short poems over more fully developed narrative texts, given that it was addressed to a target audience of preschool children, who engaged more easily with this type of representation. Meanwhile, *Licurici* and *Cravata Roşie* employed a combination of images, poems, short texts, entertaining and moralising stories.

Alongside qualitative analysis, we found that references to Lenin were almost entirely associated with the legitimisation of Stalin as his successor, and as the continuation of the path he had established. Research conducted within the same regional context (Apor, B., Apor, P., Rees, 2008) showed that Communist propaganda favoured the cult of personality of both Stalin and Lenin, and Romania also followed a similar pattern. This can be explained by the overemphasis on their images as the founding fathers and as representatives of the triumph of Communism over Capitalism and of proletarian emancipation.

Secondly, it is observed that, in those magazines which continued to be published after 1953 in the same format, the frequency of references to both Stalin and Lenin declined significantly, without a corresponding substantial increase in references to the national leader. This development may be interpreted as an indication of the process of de-Stalinisation of Romanian politics and society (Jones, 2006), which occurred following Stalin's death.

The propaganda narrative highlighted a bleak past contrasted with a prosperous present, crediting Communist leaders for the country's economic and social achievements as well as for safeguarding peace and security. Hyper-realistic magazine illustrations idealised the leaders, while exaggerating features for propagandistic effect (Somogyvári, 2019, p.11). Consequently, Stalin was often depicted as a protective father and wise ruler, associated with symbols like steel and the sun, while Lenin was portrayed as a profound thinker and brilliant revolutionary (Pisch, 2013, pp. 37–54; Pisch, 1995, p. 204).

Through these visual and narrative representations, Communist propaganda aimed to foster a sense of emotional attachment between children and their leaders. Rituals and festivities organised in schools and kindergartens strengthened this emotional bond, while creating an atmosphere of communion and solidarity (Pisch, 2013, p. 5). Another significant aspect of Communist propaganda was the output of a *moral economy* (Brooks, 2001, p. 84) built on gratitude to leaders and personal sacrifice. Children were taught to express their admiration and devotion to the leaders through various activities, such as writing letters, making drawings or participating in public demonstrations, thus supporting a true *politics of indebtedness* (Brooks, 2001). Therefore, a relationship of emotional dependence was created between citizens and the State, where Communist leaders became objects of veneration and adoration. This practice had long-term consequences for society, affecting national identity and social relations.

Children's literature during the Communist era played a significant role in disseminating official ideology and shaping the political and so-

cial consciousness of younger generations. These were instruments in translating the propagandistic discourse into a language accessible and appealing to young readers. Children's literature and magazines cultivated attachment to the Communist ideology by embedding values such as collectivism, respect for leaders, work, friendship, and patriotism through emotionally engaging narratives and imagery.

The custom of giving gifts to leaders, greetings, gestures of loyalty, and the symbolism of colours (red as a symbol of the revolution and the Communists) were elements integrated in the children's magazines along with the representation of the ethnic and social diversity of a Socialist society (Gill, 2011, p. 3). Although, in many cases, Stalin or Lenin benefited from a special cult of personality, children's literature contributed to the extension of this phenomenon to other representative figures of the regime. For that reason, local leaders, party members, labour heroes, artists, and even fictional characters were portrayed as role models embodying the values and ideals promoted by the regime (Pisch, 2016, p. 78).

Communist propaganda cultivated a cult of personality by prominently featuring leaders like Stalin, Lenin, and local figures, portraying them as symbols of equality and social justice through imagery and celebratory events.

Relevant mentions of Lenin (text and image)																	
Magazine name	Pogonici				Licurici			Cravata Rosie			Pionierul					TOTAL	
Year	1950	1951	1952	1953	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	
Number of mentions	10	10	12	8	10	8	12	28	23	14	20	17	20	19	5	2	211
Relevant mentions of Stalin (text and image)																	
Magazine name	Pogonici				Licurici			Cravata Rosie			Pionierul					TOTAL	
Year	1950	1951	1952	1953	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	
Number of mentions	30	27	32	20	20	24	34	39	28	20	55	50	53	29	8	3	461
Relevant mentions of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej (text and image)																	
Magazine name	Pogonici				Licurici			Cravata Rosie			Pionierul					TOTAL	
Year	1950	1951	1952	1953	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	
Number of mentions	2		11		2	3	3	4	5	2	15	13	16	10	3	8	86

Table 1. Quantitative analysis

From Humble Origins to Glory: Leader Biographies in Romanian Children's Magazines

The modest childhood conditions were a recurring theme in the biographies of Soviet leaders. Stalin's birthplace, for instance, was depicted as modest and austere, evoking a narrative of humble origins and a deep connection to the people. Highlighting their humble origins, Communist leaders' biographies emphasised a difficult past to reinforce authenticity, foster emotional bonds with the masses, and justify their drive for a just society.

In contrast to their challenging childhood circumstances, these leaders' later successes were portrayed as rewards for their efforts and dedication to the Communist cause. This is exemplified in the lyrics often accompanying images of the leaders' homes or hometowns: "Today in Gori the child played/ From here, from the eagle's nest he took flight/ in Communism when we will live and in song/ always listen to the roots" (*Pogonici*, 1951, p. 1). These lyrics depicted the leader's childhood as the time when the first aspirations for a better world took shape, and thus, his political rise was an inevitable fulfilment of destiny.

Readers were invited to imagine young Stalin walking Gori's cobblestone streets, radiating innocence and purity, an ideal nurturing place for the future revolutionary. Propaganda also highlighted hardships, such as his parents' poverty, while presenting his father, a respected shoemaker, as a paternal figure, and his mother as a devoted housewife who ultimately supported Stalin's political vocation. This narrative encouraged a social model of modest origins, hardworking parents, social virtues, and education as a path to improvement, reinforcing the regime's working-class archetype. Blending factual elements with idealisation, these accounts elevated Stalin as a figure of exemplary human virtues, almost beyond ordinary human experience (*Pionierul*, 1953, 10, p. 6).

The biographical narratives of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin often portrayed him as an individual with modest social origins endowed with exceptional intelligence from a young age. Excerpts from the *Memoirs*

of *Lenin's sister*, published in a children's magazine, attest to the intellectual precocity of the future Bolshevik leader. His ability to read at an early age, his passion for Russian history, and his early enrolment in high school support the image of a prodigy. The emphasis on his diligence and capacity for rapid information retention made him a model student, embodying the ideal of a dedicated and disciplined intellectual (*Pogonici*, 1951, 2, p. 1)

Soviet-era political biographies often exaggerated Lenin's intellect and early dedication to justice and equality to serve ideological purposes, while his middle-class background and access to education facilitated his social ascent, making his rise less dramatic than portrayed. The emphasis on Lenin's intellectual superiority served to reinforce his cult of personality and legitimise the Bolshevik Revolution as a movement guided by intellectual elites. Romanian children's literature presented Lenin's childhood and family life purposefully. His moral portrait centred on a man of action fully committed to the revolutionary cause, charismatic, uncompromising, and able to communicate effectively with the masses. He was depicted as possessing exceptional moral and intellectual qualities, from formulating complex political theories to undertaking clandestine activities and inspiring collective loyalty through his leadership (*Cravata roșie*, 1953, 8, p. 23). Readers were thus encouraged to admire Lenin as a national hero, a visionary who succeeded in radically altering Russia's destiny.

While Stalin's visual propaganda centred on virility, strength, and heroism, Lenin was defined through moral qualities. His image focused on modesty, wisdom, devotion to the cause, and the figure of a martyred leader.

The Leader as a Symbol

In a graphic depiction, we observe Stalin's portrait hanging above the beds of two sleeping children (*Pogonici*, 1950, 21, p. 1). Despite the blurred details, Stalin's severe and authoritative features remain visible, and his raised hand adds a protective tone which enhances the sacralisa-

tion of his image. The accompanying poem strengthened this message by presenting him as both a political leader and a paternal, omnipresent figure. In this way, the *Stalin icon* became part of the domestic space, offering children a sense of safety and protection that surpassed even that of their parents (Pisch, 2013, pp. 37–54). This political iconography, stressing themes of security and care, sought to legitimise totalitarian power and consolidate social order.

As a non-religious icon, Stalin's portrait became a central element of family life, often shown with his characteristic pipe. One illustration depicts a family gathered around a table, their attention drawn to Stalin's wall poster, while a young boy in a pioneer uniform addresses them with confident, ideologically charged gestures (*Licurici*, 1950, 155, cover). The admiring looks of the family highlight his role as a model of the new generation shaped by Stalin's cult of personality, embodying the *new man* defined by militant spirit and devotion to the cause. The domestic display of Stalin's portraits was intentional, portraying him as a secular icon of authority, wisdom, protection, and moral guidance.

Another expression of Stalin's portrait as a symbolic figure is found in artistic depictions of children's initiation into the *Pioneers*² organisation (*Licurici*, 1950, 15, cover). The cover of *Licurici* magazine captures the solemn moment of receiving the red tie, with Stalin's portrait overseeing the ceremony, giving it an aura of sanctity and faith in Communism. In this context, Stalin's portrait was used to bless children's transition to a new life and to highlight his role in shaping the youth (Pisch, 2013, p. 50).

A magazine illustration reveals the classroom's function as a site of indoctrination, depicting children engaged in activities designed to cul-

² The *Pioneer Organisation* was founded in the aftermath of the Second World War and functioned as an instrument for integrating young people into Socialist culture and institutional structures. Its primary distinguishing feature was a uniform bearing a red necktie. During the communist period in Romania, a range of youth organisations existed, differentiated according to the age group, each of which produced its own periodicals and organised activities of an ideological, political, social, and cultural nature.

tivate loyalty to the Soviet regime (*Licurici*, 1950, 152, cover). Studying maps of the USSR and corresponding with other Soviet children reinforced national belonging under Stalin. His portrait in military uniform underscored his role as supreme leader and guarantor of security, legitimising an education that promotes a one-sided view of history. This demonstrates how education served political control and ideological propaganda, exposing the distortions of a totalitarian system (Pisch, 2013, pp. 41–42).

In another publication (*Cravata roșie*, 1959, 11, pp. 2–4), Lenin is depicted in a story blending fantasy and autobiography, portraying him as sagacious and inspiring. Disguised as Uncle Kostia, he guides two children in planting an oak, unaware of his identity, inspiring trust through his wisdom and kindness. The oak symbolises a strong nation and a new era, instilling a desire to build a Socialist future. When the children learn his true identity, their pride in the tree grows, linking generations and history. The narrative reinforced Lenin's ability to forge personal connections and the role of education in shaping children's civic and moral values.

The Leader's Archetypes

Stalin's death sparked tributes in visual and literary art, portraying him as a teacher, sovereign, architect of the nation, protector, and icon of the Socialist state. In this context, the cover of *Pogonici* (*Pogonici*, 1953, 5, cover) displayed images of kindergarten children laying flowers near his portraits. The portraits depicted a gentle man with an embracing gesture, seated at his desk, surrounded by symbols of Soviet power and a wise teacher's expression.

Such scenes of leader adoration appeared repeatedly in children's magazines, both during the leader's lifetime and after his death. For example, a 1950-dated illustration (*Pogonici*, 1950, 24, p. 1, cover) of children carrying red flags and gazing adoringly at Stalin's statue is particularly revealing. In this context, Stalin was transformed into an almost divine figure, and the children were rendered into small followers of a

new religion. The presence of an adult in both scenes, in the role of a supervisor, emphasised the organised and directed nature of this cult of personality. Both illustrations reveal how Stalinist propaganda used sensitive imagery to shape the public opinion and cultivate his cult.

One of Stalin's archetypes, reinforced through iconography, was the moral and material *architect* of the Soviet nation. In the *Pogonici* magazine (1953, 5, pp. 7–8), a two-page drawing displayed him, accompanied by several young boys, as the architect of modernisation, wearing a military uniform, with a pipe in mouth, and holding a roll of paper, exuding confidence and strategic authority. The background, featuring cranes, construction sites, and electricity poles, associates him directly with the modernisation project supported by the official propaganda. This association between architecture and construction extends to the societal level, where Stalin, as the nation's architect, assumes responsibility for its reconstruction alongside its citizens, embodying the concept of a *pillar of society* (Pisch, 2016, pp. 212–215).

This representation portrayed Stalin as a mentor and role model for the youth, with the scene serving as an allegory for the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and values. The painting invited the viewer to read this image as a call to action. Stalin was presented as a leader who paved the way for a brighter future, characterised by technological advancement, economic prosperity, and international cooperation. Consequently, this illustration is not merely a simple depiction of an individual but an expression of a political ideology that promised a new dawn for humanity.

In another children's magazine, a whole page featured Stalin in military uniform, illustrating the *didactic archetype* which underscored his role as a national teacher. As was common in the Soviet propaganda, the image was reinforced by the quote "To build we must know and to know we must learn" (*Pogonici*, 1952, 20, p. 2), linking education to progress and Socialist development. Depicting Stalin as both a soldier and an educator suggested a social vision in which the army, school, and state worked together to modernise and strengthen national power. In

this context, Stalin's portrait symbolised an ambitious national project in which education was the key to success. Although this archetype was initially associated with Lenin's cult, Stalin was frequently represented as a teacher and as a sagacious figure guiding all spheres of life.

The literature paid particular attention to the concept of the *leader-teacher*, especially in the case of Stalin. He was often attributed the role of interpreter and successor of Lenin's ideas, the one who could reconfigure and adapt Leninism to new historical realities. The validation of Stalin as a model and teacher was not only grounded in the prodigious biographical references but also in his life experiences. Moreover, the Soviet propaganda consistently portrayed him as Lenin's most intelligent and devoted disciple, a legitimate successor (Pisch, 2016, pp. 246–260).

The *Licurici* magazine reinforced Stalin's archetype as *strategist and organiser* by frequently depicting him as a military commander. An official photograph (*Licurici*, 1950, 158, pp. 1–2) showing him in uniform and intently focused implied his direct involvement in military operations. Simultaneously, propaganda cast him as the world's most beloved friend of children, producing an ambivalent image which fused authoritarian power with paternal affection.

An image of children from various Communist-bloc nationalities, symbolising Soviet international brotherhood, presented their joy as the result of his wise and benevolent guidance, which was another way to boost the leader's personality cult. By depicting global harmony even without Stalin's presence, propaganda strengthened his archetype as a *unifier* of the worldwide Communist movement (*Pogonici*, 1950, 19, p. 1).

In an illustration (*Pogonici*, 1952, 23, p. 1), Stalin appears in a paternal pose, receiving flowers from two children on the tribune. The boy with a red necktie is affectionately embraced, their mutual gaze conveying warmth, while Stalin's discreet smile softens his authoritarian posture. The girl, partly hidden, supports the symbolic gesture of offering flowers. This highly symbolic image reinforced Stalin's cult of

personality by depicting him as a *loving protector*. Another recurring portrayal depicts Stalin in military uniform among flowers and children (*Pogonici*, 1951, 11, p. 10). Holding a child and surrounded by others in folk costumes, red ties, or uniforms, Stalin appears as a loving protector. His military attire underscores authority, while children and flowers symbolise peace, prosperity, and devotion. Diverse costumes highlight ethnic variety, and his affectionate gestures project paternal warmth, evoking loyalty and trust. The exchange of glances with the boy and the presence of a little girl emphasise intimacy, mutual understanding, and the universality of his care, thus showing Stalin's affection extended to all Soviet children.

The special edition of the *Pionierul* magazine, commemorating the 29th anniversary of Lenin's death, portrayed the Bolshevik leader in an idealised and hagiographic light. By employing highly positive terms such as the *founder*, *saviour*, and *trailblazer*, the texts published in children's magazines sought to reinforce Lenin's personality cult and the archetype of a true hero of the proletariat.

Illustrations and photographs frequently depicted Lenin engaged in contemplation or conversation with ordinary people, thus emphasising his intellectual capacity and ability to communicate effectively with the masses. The accompanying texts further exaggerated these qualities, transforming him into an overly knowledgeable and sagacious person. By combining various intellectual qualities, propaganda transformed the Bolshevik leader into a role model for the younger generation who became indebted to, and who ultimately identified with him: "the image of Lenin as a teacher is also evident in the endless citations of his thought in political academic texts. Nevertheless, to quote Lenin's opinion, in an article, book or other works, was to demonstrate the legitimacy of the work, mark its significance and emphasise the author's loyalty" (Velikanova, 1998, p. 27).

Depictions like this encouraged children to view Lenin as a spiritual and ideological guide, while photographs and drawings of him addressing young Communist groups reinforced his role as a leader shaping

the nation's destiny (*Pogonici*, 1951, 21, pp. 8–9). In Soviet society, the father figure became an intense propagandistic cult, replacing divinity through the manipulation of symbols and emotions. A central strategy was to portray the leader among children, receiving innocent poems or surrounded by young enthusiasts (Velikanova, 1998, pp. 21–24. In the Stalinist era, which was marked by repression and violence, Lenin's figure was instrumentalised politically to be seen as an infallible leader, sage, and moralist, almost akin to a saint.

Another key dimension of Lenin's personality cult is the archetype of the *martyred leader*. Endorsed through illustrations and texts (*Licurici*, 1950, 149, p. 1) showing him in hiding or when facing danger, these images emphasised his sacrifices and hardships. Metaphors like "the Leninist sun pointed the way to Socialism" (*Pogonici*, 1953, 3, p. 1) underscored his role as a political leader and spiritual guide for the worldwide proletariat, as well as his efforts in strengthening the Communist Party. Lenin's portrayal as a tireless fighter and martyr was designed to mobilise the masses and foster devotion to the revolutionary cause.

Lastly, the evolution of Soviet leaders' public image in official portraits revealed domestic political dynamics. As Catriona Kelly notes, Lenin was initially shown in the bourgeois attire, thus stressing his ties to the intelligentsia, while Stalin adopted an increasingly authoritarian look suited to a military-political ruler (Kelly, 2005, p. 116).

National Leaders – from Stalin to Ana Pauker and Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej

It is crucial to bear in mind that, before Stalin's death, the presence of local leaders within the Romanian official propaganda apparatus was systematically downplayed. While they were occasionally featured in publications aimed at younger audiences, such as *Pionierul*, their prominence in other media was particularly absent. This deliberate marginalisation of the local figures can be attributed to the excessive boost of the Soviet leader and propaganda. Consequently, the analysis of publi-

cations revealed a marked disparity between the representation of the local leaders and the extensive visibility of the Soviet elite. This imbalance mirrored the hierarchical structure of the Communist regime and its efforts to control information and shape the public perception.

The poems dedicated to Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej³ provide a vivid reflection of the cult of personality which characterised the period. Through their lyrical expressions, Dej's figure was elevated to that of a *builder of Romania*, a charismatic leader steering the nation towards a prosperous and industrialised future. Lyrics such as "See the whole country full of light/ See how the whole five-year period comes together / In the factories, in the fields" (*Pogonici*, 1952, 12, p. 3) explicitly illustrated this association. Dej was portrayed as the *architect of modernisation*, with the economic successes of the era directly attributed to his vision and efforts. Beyond their propagandistic intent, these poems sought to cultivate a sense of national unity and civic engagement.

However, it is crucial to analyse these poems within the historical and political context of the time. The idyllic image of a developing nation, depicted in the lyrics, conflicted with the harsh social and political realities of Communist Romania, marked by repression, censorship, and social inequality. Consequently, the poems dedicated to Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej can be interpreted as tools for mass manipulation, designed to validate an authoritarian regime and consolidate the power of a single individual. Simultaneously, they also served as evidence of the aspirations and ideals of a generation that believed in the promise of a brighter future based on equality and social justice.

This specific rhetoric can be found in numerous texts published in children's magazines, among which, the poem "*Letter to Comrade Dej*"

³ Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej was the first Communist leader of Romania, holding power until his death in 1965. He served as the General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, effectively acting as the country's *de facto* leader during this period. Under his leadership, Romania transitioned into a Socialist republic closely aligned with the Soviet Union, and significant political, economic, and social transformations were initiated in line with the Marxist-Leninist principles.

stands out (*Licurici*, 1952, 15, p. 3). This literary work, penned through the eyes of a child poet, sought to construct an idealised representation of the nation's leader. Therefore, the author highlighted qualities such as self-sacrifice, unwavering dedication to the cause, and an enduring concern for the common well-being. Nevertheless, the poem associates Dej's figure with modernity and the industrialisation process.

Most children's magazines' images displayed the national leader in active poses, engaged in social life, visiting schools, farms, factories, and cultural events, and stressing his concern for key sectors of development (*Pionierul*, 1952, 16, p. 1). He was often depicted addressing gatherings and visiting workplaces and communities (*Pionierul*, 1952, 26, p. 1). This cultivated the image of an approachable leader who listens to and values citizens' contributions. For example, the article "The most beautiful day of my vacation" (*Pogonici*, 1951, 21, p. 7) describes a deeply emotional encounter between third-grade children and Dej, highlighting his paternal and friendly nature. Propaganda also stressed the people's duty toward Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, promoting a cult of personality that portrayed him as a *compassionate father* and a national *role model*.

Political indebtedness was also expressed through visual pairings of current leaders with their predecessors, intended to underscore continuity, affirm legitimacy, and reinforce collective identity via shared symbols. A clear example is a photograph of Gheorghiu-Dej working at a desk covered with documents, while Stalin's portrait hangs behind him. Stalin's presence signals the debt owed to the Soviet mentor and his role in Romania's modernisation, while the association reinforces regime legitimacy and the imperative to continue the Socialist transformation (*Pogonici*, 1952, 16, p. 3). At a first glance, the presence of Stalin in the background may be interpreted as a supreme form of respect. However, a closer analysis suggests that it functions, in fact, as a symbolic shield and a mechanism of legitimisation for the national leader. In other words, Stalin's figure invested Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej with authority, facilitating its symbolic transfer.

Ana Pauker⁴, another Party leader, was portrayed as a *gentle and nurturing mother*, a portrayal intended to anchor the collective childhood imagination in the fundamental values of the Communist regime: work, sacrifice, education, and peace. In children's magazines, texts described joyful encounters between the children and leaders. Overall, these encounters were seen as moments of profound emotions and communion. Congratulations letters addressed to Pauker were meant to emphasise her efforts in the service of the Romanian people's happiness and peace. In this case, a particular situation can be observed, marked by the contrast between the often-severe image of Stalin and Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej versus the warm and protective representation of Ana Pauker. This contrast suggests that propaganda sought to draw on a familiar affective register, invoking recurring themes from social and family life. Thus, Moscow had an authoritative 'father', but a guarantor of order and security, while the 'mother' in Bucharest was always a gentle and caring presence.

Ana Pauker's moral traits mirrored those of other Communist leaders, such as Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej: devotion to the Party and tate, sacrifice, and altruism. Illustrations depicted her with a warm smile and gentle gaze, shaping an approachable figure for children and encouraging the emotional attachment that sustained her mythologisation. Texts in children's magazines favoured the epithets 'Ana' or 'Comrade Ana' over the full name 'Ana Pauker', a deliberate choice meant to create intimacy and present her as a maternal, protective, and benevolent figure.

Through poetry and other propagandistic media, her image was constructed as that of a flawless and tireless champion of the proleta-

⁴ In 1947, Ana Pauker was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister, becoming the first woman to hold such a high-ranking government position in Romania. A prominent figure in the early Communist regime, she appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1948, being regarded as one of the most influential women of her time. In 1952, she was removed from the party leadership amid internal political purges.

rian cause. The lyrics “fearlessly fighting/ You know you’re going to face the prison/ And the seeds today you plant/ We know today that where you work/ There’s the party” (*Pogonici*, 1951, 23, p. 7) are an eloquent example which suggests a total identification between the individual and the party, between work and political loyalty.

Conclusions

Children’s literature presented biographies of Communist leaders, including Stalin, Lenin and the local figures, through idealised narratives which emphasised humble origins, moral qualities and a historical purpose.

In Romanian children’s magazines, Stalin appeared as a protector and spiritual father, often placed in intimate settings to create emotional attachment, while Lenin embodied moral and collective ideals. Official imagery reinforced these roles, with Stalin as a modernising leader and Lenin as a spiritual guide and martyr. Local figures, such as Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, were similarly presented as models of unity and social equality, supporting a collective identity centred on loyalty to the Party.

The repetition of these narratives encouraged acceptance of the political system as natural, endorsing concepts like authority, conformity and devotion. By placing the leaders in familiar contexts, the magazines fostered emotional proximity and framed them as moral guides, shaping children’s perceptions while limiting critical interpretation through consistently ideological content.

The findings of this study highlight that Romanian children’s magazines did not merely promote the cult of personality in various forms, but also functioned as emotion-based propaganda supporting the construction of the ‘new man’. In this respect, the analysis demonstrates, through concrete examples, how propaganda sought to cultivate loyalty not only through coercion but also through affective mechanisms, drawing on techniques such as an emotional bond and solidarity (Pisch, 2013), gratitude and personal sacrifice (Brooks, 2003), and the fostering of unconditional admiration.

At the same time, the study shows that indoctrination was a calculated process, grounded in emotional support through archetypes such as the loving father or the wise teacher. Equally important is the context of the hybridisation of propaganda, as the research indicates that the use of Soviet leaders as sources of authority and trust prepared the ground for the subsequent legitimisation of the local leaders.

The study thus contributes to a relatively underexplored area, namely, that of systematic analysis of Romanian children's magazines from the first half of the 1950s. Nonetheless, the findings support the interpretations advanced by Plamper (2012) and Kotkin (1995) regarding children's manipulation. Furthermore, the analysis suggests that the internalisation of the Soviet moral values from an early age, such as subordination and obedience, through popular literature, had a significant impact on the subsequent generations. This aspect helps to explain the difficulties involved in deconstructing totalitarian mentalities after 1989, and provides a basis for further reflection on collective memory.

In the present day, these propagandistic practices are reflected in citizens' paternalistic expectations of the State, in the preference for authoritarian leaders perceived as protective figures, and in a degree of reluctance towards processes of democratisation. Contemporary political discourse often combines modern themes with elements from before 1989 to reactivate the older affinities. The findings of this study may be understood as a historical warning concerning the potential to manipulate young audiences through mass media, and as an argument for the importance of media literacy.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged: the analysis relies on interpretative methods, and, while quantitative tracking of leader appearances provides useful patterns, it can't capture the actual impact on young readers. It would be difficult to assess the psychological and social effects on children at the time and how they perceived propaganda, as direct data on their perceptions are not available. Finally, these limitations highlight the challenges of studying historical propaganda and suggest avenues for future research using complementary sources and methodologies.

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