

***Determined, Brave and Loving Her Job:
A Female War Correspondent in the First World War***

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Abstract

In wartime, communication is of most importance, especially when it comes to shaping public opinion. In fact, journalists play an indisputable role in deciding what information, in what form, and with what content reaches the readers. This significance was even more crucial at the turn of the century, during the birth of journalism. Throughout the First World War, the media became the highly acclaimed fourth branch of power, capable of exerting a fundamental influence on the course of historical events. In my presentation, I will follow the journey of a war correspondent who visited 14 countries during the four years of the war. This Hungarian journalist was also a woman, taking on this perilous job in a world where women's social roles were primarily limited to the triad of housewife, wife, and mother. However, Margit Vészi was among the first to go to the frontlines as the only female war correspondent from the Faculty of War Correspondents of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (on the Hungarian side), representing the daily newspaper, *Az Est*. How did she endure the horrors of war? How did she present the events? Whom did she meet at the front, and how did she manage to conduct interviews and gather information? Where did she find the courage to fulfill her duties? Margit Vészi had more than a hundred articles published in the Hungarian-language press, and her reports were also picked up by Italian newspapers, for example. She wrote two volumes of reports about her experiences in the war.

Keywords: Journalism, Media, Correspondent, History, Articles, Communication

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Introduction

The journalism profession has a long history and has undergone many significant changes. The first practitioners used pamphlets and manuscripts to disseminate information, but industrialisation and advances in newspaper technology allowed cheaper and faster printing, which revolutionised the work of journalists. At the turn of the 20th century, journalists were able to increase their influence by spreading the news faster and reaching a wider readership. In this era, their role increasingly became one of disseminating information, maintaining objectivity, and critically assessing society. However, it is important to note that the journalistic profession has been constantly changed and transformed by new technologies and social changes in the media, facing challenges and opportunities, both now and in the future.¹

During the First World War, journalists played a major role in covering events and spreading the news. However, content producers faced numerous challenges in a wartime environment, made more difficult by technological limitations and fragmented political, economic, and cultural interests. Journalists encountered censorship, dangerous working environments, physical difficulties, communication barriers, psychological burdens, propaganda, manipulation, language and cultural challenges, difficulties in accessing information. In this paper, I also explore the gatekeeping role of journalists at the turn of the century, who faced unprecedented responsibilities during the outbreak of the First World War. This period coincided with a peak in propaganda and manipulation, and a significant shift in the public's communication arena.

The turn of the 19th and 20th centuries also marked the beginning of another important change: the first women journalists and war correspondents emerged, breaking out of traditional social roles such as wife, mother, and housewife. During this period, women in Europe had limited opportunities to become involved in public life. They were mainly employed as factory workers, and there were 'typically' female professions such as lecturer, nanny, and governess, etc. It seemed impossible for them to have any role in the male-dominated bourgeois labour market. However, a few bold women, resistant to conventions but capable of creating financial independence or security, recognized the potential of literature, drama, visual arts, and later journalism from the second half of the 19th century. Women who aspired to the public sphere also discovered that the press was one of the best and most important platforms for expressing their opinions, presenting and discussing issues affecting society.

In this study, I focus on Margit Vészi, a female war correspondent for *Az Est* newspaper, who served as the on-the-spot war correspondent at the Austro-Hungarian War Correspondents' Corps (known as the *Kriegspressehauptquartier*²) during World War I (1914-1918). As the only Hungarian female war correspondent in this role, Vészi challenged prevailing views of the time and fought for information alongside men on the battlefield. Over the course of the war, she traveled to fourteen countries, wrote more than a hundred articles, and created visual content such as photographs and caricatures. Her professional career and personal biography provide valuable insights, offering a previously unexplored perspective on understanding the challenges faced by women war correspondents of her time. This includes their emotional

¹ Lippmann, Walter (1920): *Liberty and the News*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe.

² Balla Tibor (2016). Az osztrák-magyar Sajtóhadiszállás szervezete és tevékenysége a Nagy Háborúban. In Bertényi Iván, & Boka László, & Katona Anikó (Eds.): *Propaganda – politika, hétköznapi és magas kultúra, művészet és média a Nagy Háborúban* (pp. 273–286). Budapest: Országos Széchényi Könyvtár.

experiences, information-gathering methods, and professional challenges, shedding light on their methods of informing the public.

The Role of Journalists: Changes at the Turn-of-the-Century

Between 1870 and 1910, the population of Hungary increased one and a half times (from 5 million to 7.5 million), while the number of periodical press products continued to rise year by year. Indeed, the growth in the population has brought with it a growing readership, particularly as literacy has increased. This was not by chance: The Hungarian education system in the 19th century adapted to the trends in international educational development: compulsory schooling was introduced for the 6-12 age group, which was later extended to the regular schooling of the 10-14 age group, justified for social and economic reasons.³ This led to the introduction of compulsory, free, eight-grade primary education at the turn of the century, which in turn led to the development of literacy skills. By 1896, 79 percent of children were attending school, a number that increased to 93 per cent by 1913. This successive process helped to expand the ranks of journalistic readers, and more narrowly, the emergence of journalism as a specific profession and thus the number of journalists.

During the turn of the century, there was an explosion in communications and technical infrastructure, while printing became more widespread. Press products became increasingly diversified, road networks and postal systems were built, settlements developed, and the demand for information grew, significantly contributing to the development of public spirit and the rebirth of the concept of the public sphere. The role of press and of journalists changed and was valorised, and they were given a perhaps unprecedented social responsibility. Newspapers could now reach every corner of the country, thanks to economic and social development mentioned above. Journalists played a crucial role in providing valuable and informative content, facilitating the transformation of individual opinions into public opinion.⁴ This shift in journalism was closely linked to historical events, particularly the First World War, leading journalists to assume a significant social responsibility during this period.

The devices that are now taken for granted and are part of everyday life, such as the telephone, the camera, the copier printer, as well as revolutionary modes of transportation like the car and the aeroplane, were a novelty for the public. The rapid development of technology fundamentally transformed the daily lives of individuals and communities, who became increasingly interested in world and national events, happenings. The power of media has always rested in its ability to raise public spirits to national and international levels.⁵ During this period, the press emerged as the most influential information tool, shaping public and political opinion and, more specifically, public taste.⁶ Journalists played a pivotal role, transitioning from mere editorial storytellers to history-makers, who with enormous responsibility, willingly or unwillingly took on a social role, especially during the First World War.

With the outbreak of the First World War, some of the journalists who had previously worked on editorial staff, perhaps travelling the countryside, were sent to the front lines. A new and

³ Kelemen Elemér (2002). Fordulópont a magyar oktatás történetében. In Kelemen Elemér (Eds.): *Hagyomány és korszerűség. Oktatáspolitikai a 19-20. századi Magyarországon* (pp. 17-70). Budapest: Új Mandátum.

⁴ "A nyilvánosság politikai színterei" by Szak Andrea: http://real.mtak.hu/82574/1/ht2018_2_120_127_u.pdf

⁵ Róka Jolán (2002): *Kommunikációtan*. Budapest: Századvég Kiadó

⁶ Tarde, Gabriel (1906): *Essay in Sociological Theory*. New York: Michael Marks Davis Books.

unprecedented period of change for the profession was about to begin. Their roles have changed rapidly, and they faced many more challenges in their daily lives than before. These journalists, later known as war correspondents, had to clearly distinguish between fact and opinion, find a balance, focus on thoroughness and the principles of objectivity.⁷

Challenges and Opportunities for Women Journalists

The women journalists who emerged in the second half of the 19th century, at the turn of the century, including Margit Vészi mentioned in the introduction, often had to contend with the social expectations and prejudices of the time, but their diligence and talent (determination and perhaps daring) eventually brought about a major breakthrough not only in the journalistic profession but also in the perception of women. They were soon able to write on subjects that had previously been the exclusive domain of men: first on cultural and artistic issues, then on politics or social problems.⁸ In any case, the role and importance of women journalists gradually increased alongside women writers at the turn of the century, greatly increasing the diversity of cultural and press life. The road to this was therefore often fraught with difficulties during this very traumatic period in history.

Women were already reporting on the war in the mid-19th century, albeit in a very restrained and modest style, in keeping with the historical narrative.⁹ Among the first to do so were American journalist Jane Cazneau,¹⁰ who covered the Mexican-American conflict in 1846, and Margaret Fuller,¹¹ who reported from the front lines of the first Italian War of Independence in 1848-49. Although a member of the next generation, Martha Gellhorn,¹² who covered almost every major conflict of the 20th century, from the Spanish Civil War to the Vietnam and Arab-Israeli wars, should also be mentioned.

Although women's war reporting as a relatively accepted profession and concept may only have been around since the late 1930s, by the time of the First World War there were already some brave and determined women who volunteered to report from the front line (or its environs). Very few of them were accredited to press headquarters under the direct command of the army. In addition, the Allied and Central Powers strictly limited the access of

⁷ Deuze, Mark (2005): What is journalism? Professional identity and ideology of journalists reconsidered. *Journalism*, 6., 442–463.

⁸ Kérchy Anna (2015). Hebrencs kisleányból kötelességtudó honleány. Nőképváltozások a Magyar Lányok hetilap első világháború alatti lapszámaiban. *Médiakutató*, 2015 Summer. XVI.2, 81-95.

⁹ Seul, Stephanie (2019): Women War Reporters. In Ute Daniel, & Peter Gatrell, & Oliver Janz, & Heather Jones, & Jennifer Keene, & Alan Kramer, & Bill Nasson (Eds.), *1914-1918 Online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin

¹⁰ Jane Cazneau (1807-1878) was a prominent American journalist, editor, and diplomat known for her influential contributions during the 19th century. With a fearless and outspoken demeanor, she became a trailblazer in the world of journalism, covering topics ranging from politics to women's rights. Cazneau's impactful writings and diplomatic endeavors left a lasting legacy, marking her as a significant figure in American history.

¹¹ Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) was a pioneering American journalist, critic, and women's rights advocate in the 19th century. An influential transcendentalist thinker, she served as the first female editor of the literary magazine "The Dial" and was known for her insightful essays and literary criticism. Fuller's groundbreaking work, including her book "Woman in the Nineteenth Century," challenged societal norms and contributed significantly to the early feminist movement in the United States. She remains a celebrated figure in American literature and feminist history.

¹² Martha Gellhorn (1908-1998) was a pioneering American journalist and novelist, celebrated for her courageous reporting from major 20th-century conflicts, including the Spanish Civil War and World War II. As one of the first female war correspondents, her powerful narratives and insightful observations made her a respected figure in journalism and literature, leaving a lasting impact on both fields.

journalists to the war zones, yet a significant number of women managed to gain entry to or around the front lines. This is why the life of Margit Vészi is particularly remarkable, as she not only worked as a journalist at the turn of the century, but was one of the first to be accredited by the Austro-Hungarian Press Headquarters¹³ as a war correspondent.

Margit Vészi: The Pioneering Female War Correspondent

In order to better understand Margit Vészi's work as a journalist and later as a war correspondent, we first need to know more about her life. She was born on 27 April 1885 in Budapest, the eldest of six children of József Vészi and Franciska Keményfi. Her father – known at the time as the press Caesar – was a major influence on her thinking about journalism and gathering information. At that time, young women like Margit – who rejected the traditional female roles of wife, housewife, and mother – often pursued artistic endeavours and explored various possibilities available to them. As Mátyás Sárközi¹⁴ – Margit Vészi's grandson – recalls, this led József Vészi's daughter to enter the Schola Cantorum Music Academy in Paris and later New York, where she sang in the choir. Taking advantage of her father's influence and connections, Margit travelled with him for example to Switzerland and northern Italy, which would later play an important role in her travels as a war correspondent. In the meantime, she turned to painting, but her pictures were nor an unqualified success. She then turned to draw caricatures and also tried her hands to write short stories.



Figure 1: Margit Vészi (credit: Sándor Strelisky, Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum)

Margit Vészi married in 1906 (to Ferenc Molnár, a successful writer and journalist at the time) and had a daughter. However, in 1910, a divorce was filed, and she - regaining her independence - returned to work. She painted and drew caricatures, exhibited her work in several places, and sometimes even sold one. Then she became more closely involved in journalism, sending her reports to Károly Lyka's magazine *Művészet* (Art), which covered

¹³ At the onset of the First World War on July 28, 1914, the Imperial and Royal War Press Headquarters, known as "Das Kaiserliche und königliche Kriegspressequartier" (KPQ) in German, was established as a division of the Austro-Hungarian Army High Command. The primary role of the KPQ was to oversee and organize all press-related information and propaganda efforts, utilizing the various mass media platforms available during that period.

¹⁴ Mátyás Sárközi (Budapest, 19 July 1937 -) Kossuth Prize-winning Hungarian writer, critic, literary translator, editor. In addition to his newspaper articles and magazines, he also wrote short stories, short stories and novels, and chronicled the lives of his famous ancestors in many of his writings.

cultural events in Berlin.¹⁵ In the meantime, she travelled extensively, lived in two places (Berlin and Budapest), and spoke French, Italian, and German. In 1911, by her own admission, she was involved in an 'innocent affair' with Giacomo Puccini when she was covering a theatre performance in Paris (*The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*), leading to a scandal. At the reception that followed, she was seated next to the fifty-four-year-old Puccini, who then began courting the twenty-seven-year-old woman: he invited her to London for the premiere of his new work, to his villa in Torre del Lago, and even to Berlin, where he wrote her countless letters.¹⁶

In the meantime, Margit Vészi had started working as a journalist for *Az Est*,¹⁷ which had sent her to Berlin as a correspondent because of her excellent German language skills and her established network of contacts. She was already sending her articles home from there when the First World War broke out. The period was one of great uncertainty and tension, with the press chief regularly summoning correspondents to brief them on the latest news. A solemn ritual took place every day when a paper was taped to the door of the War Office.¹⁸ The list grew as the conflict spread to almost the whole world.



Figure 2: Az Est, 1th Junius 1915. (credit: Árkánium)

¹⁵ Vészi Margit (1912). Negyedik Henrik Reinhardt rendezésében. Nyugat. 22.

<https://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00022/00116/03714.htm>

¹⁶ Egy igazi világpolgár by Ayhan Gökhan: <https://kultura.hu/egy-igazi-vilagpolgar/>

¹⁷ "Az Est" was published between 1910 and 1938, owned and edited by Andor Miklós. One of the most successful press organs at the turn of the century, its daily circulation reached half a million copies during the First World War. As a bold, progressive and independent daily, it was independent of any political party, while maintaining a reliable news service and employing foreign correspondents.

¹⁸ Sárközi Mátyás (2019): *Margit*. Budapest: Kortárs Könyvkiadó.

Margit Vészi did not stay long in Berlin, and as soon as she received information, she rushed to the theatre of war – first to Cattaro in Montenegro, today's Cotori Bay. She made interviews, reports and field reports, often from the battlefield, which she published not only in newspaper articles. She reported her own and her interviewees' memories and impressions in two books, *Az Égő Európa* (in English *The Burning Europe*),¹⁹ published in 1915, and *Útközben* (in English *The Road Between*),²⁰ published in 1918, in which she also conveyed her feelings. In them, she reflected on the terrible, devastating senselessness of war, while trying to help readers come to terms with the trauma.

Reports From the Front Line: Vészi's Reporting Odyssey

In the year preceding the outbreak of the First World War, *Az Est* newspaper had a daily circulation of 200,000 copies.²¹ However, by the middle of the war, it was approaching half a million copies. This figure serves as an excellent benchmark against which to evaluate Margit Vészi's work. The ambitions of the paper, which was published between 1910 and 1938, both in the narrower and broader sense, were developed during the First World War. It is not an exaggeration to say that it became one of the most significant press powers of that historic period.²² The newspaper employed six thousand five hundred people, acquired two more major daily newspapers (*Magyarország* and *Pesti Napló*), and at the time, it owned an entire block of buildings for its editorial staff.²³ The daily had an extensive network of correspondents, including Margit Vészi. As the World War I, war correspondent put it, '*I also photographed many of the horrors of the First World War, including the trenches, the wounded, and the villages blown to ruins.*'



Figure 3: Photo of Margit Vészi from the Italian front. Text on the photo: 'Our war correspondent on the Italian front.' - Lunch at 1800 metres. (credit: dka.oszk.hu)

¹⁹ Vészi Margit (1915): *Az égő Európa*. Budapest, Dick Manó.

²⁰ Vészi Margit (1918): *Útközben*. Budapest: Singer és Wolfner.

²¹ Romsics Ignác (2023): *Magyarország története a XX. században*. Budapest: Helikon Kiadó.

²² Márkus László (1997): *A magyar sajtó története*. Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó.

²³ Dezsényi Béla (1954): *A magyar sajtó 250 éve*. Budapest: Művelt Nép

However, Margit Vészi not only wrote, but also took photographs: her photos were also published in the 1916 war photo exhibition, which predominantly featured trenches and villages that had been destroyed as places of memory. Her articles can also be found in Italian newspapers: the Bologna newspaper *Resto del Carlino*, for example, published a lengthy study of Hungary in 1919, based on the memories of a Hungarian war correspondent.

According to my research, Margit Vészi visited a total of fourteen countries (Albania, Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Montenegro, Netherland, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine) between 1914 and 1918 as a war correspondent for the newspaper *Az Est* during the First World War. According to the table I have compiled, Vészi wrote over a hundred articles during this period, including numerous front-page stories and exceptional editorials. She conducted interviews, gathered information at press headquarters, travelled extensively, talked to locals, but also wrote about her impressions and feelings.

She covered a wide range of topics, including the first birthday celebration of King Charles of Romania, the Italian earthquakes of 1914, conditions in neutral Rome, the Tsar's trip to Lemberg, 'mob rule' in Milan, the failure of war loans, the fall and abandonment of Warsaw, the appearance of submarines in the Mediterranean, the occupation of Riga, the 'disintegration' of the Balkans, the battle of Lavarone, the situation in conquered Belgrade, the Dutch-German 'border idyll', epidemics among Italians in Albania, the return of prisoners, and even wartime Munich.

Vészi interviewed notable figures such as the Papal Secretary of State about the war, the President of the Swiss Republic about neutrality, the Bulgarian Ambassador about Ghenadiev's mission, the Figaro military expert about the defence of Kovno, the Bishop of Frakno about peace initiatives, and King Gustav V of Sweden about the war situation. She attended a reception with Pope Benedict XV, participated in the 'spy market' in Lugano, and even convinced a pilot to fly her over the Gulf of Cattaro for an article.

As Margit Vészi wrote in the *Égő Európa*:

Wandering alone on a grey evening in the sandy, crawling, treacherous hovels of Belgrade, where even traitors hide, my thoughts drift back to the story of five quarters of a year – the history of five quarters of a year of which I was a silent, wondering witness. This book, my first book, became a quiet, diary-like commentary. Today, I find myself in Belgrade, on home soil. But on that unforgettable morning, the morning of the first day of the world war, as I pressed my fevered brow against the window of the last scheduled train, I had no idea how far the path I was about to take would wind its way out into burning Europe. Yet, I knew, I felt without words: this train would take me back to the greatest of times, back to the days of the past, with a child's longing in my heart.²⁴

The Art of Reporting: The Narrative of Margit Vészi

By her own admission, both in her articles and in her book of reports, she was constantly 'contemplating the terrible, destructive senselessness of war.' She reflects this mood in all her writings, which are both subjective and reportorial in nature, but also imbued with emotion

²⁴ Vészi Margit (1915): *Az égő Európa*. Budapest, Dick Manó.

while recreating the mood of the time and place, providing a real-time experience of contemporary events, but not neglecting the specificity of the female narrative. These writings reveal the mind of the war correspondent Margit Vészi, focusing on her attention, her techniques of information gathering, her journalistic attitudes, and both the difficulties and the beauty of her work. They also present the views and dominant ideas of the time, the political and social ideals that guided them. We can read about the soldiers' initial expectations, enthusiasm, and optimism entering into the First World War. We can observe the clear belief in victory held by the Central Powers initially. Moreover, we can gain insights into the emergence of propaganda tools and the way the press managed. Bad language said “she rode the front line where the bullets whizzed by, yet he wrote boring reports”.²⁵

It is evident that the multilingual war correspondent skilfully immersed herself in the social and political milieu she was reporting from. Thanks to her, we can meet real people, experience the daily life of the time, sometimes devastating, sometimes more peaceful, follow the historical events of the war, and observe the ever-changing narrative.

Margit Vészi used numerous adjectives, literary descriptions, and dialogues in her reports. However, these literary formulations are often almost entirely interspersed with the sounds of machine guns in action, the devastation caused by shells, the failure of peace negotiations, and the horror of bombing. Her writings capture the prevailing mood of the times, enabling readers to witness the different perspectives on the war expressed by belligerents, politicians, diplomats, soldiers, the wounded, prisoners, and journalists.

Conclusion

Life stories, such as Margit Vészi's, not only portray individual destinies but also provide a deeper insight into the social, cultural, and political context of a particular era. Through a deeper understanding of the life of Margit Vészi, we can see how individual experiences and historical events are intertwined, and how people become a part of or even victims of them.

Through the story of Margit Vészi, we gain insight into the turn of the century and the First World War, as well as the social changes that influenced her life and destiny. This narrative allows us to come closer to understanding a period whose impact is still felt today. Margit Vészi's life story is not just an individual narrative; it is part of a broader historical mosaic that helps us see the era from a more comprehensive perspective.

As my study shows, the transformation of women's roles and the evolving journalistic profession were closely linked in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In fact, studies on women war correspondents are rare, although there were many women, alongside Margaret Vészi, who took it upon themselves to confront and report on the horrors of the First World War near the battlefields.

But who were these women war correspondents who did extensive work in the First World War? I will mention, but not exhaustively, Sofia Casanova from neutral Spain, who reported from the Eastern Front for the Spanish newspaper ABC; and American journalists Nellie Bly, Peggy Hull, Louise Bryant, Bessie Beatty, Rheta Childe Dorr, and Helen Johns Kirtland, who covered events in Russia and sent news back home from the Western Front. On the Allied

²⁵ “Molnár Ferenc élvezettel verte, Ady Endre halhatatlanná tette a világhíró magyar múzsát” by Székely Ilona: <https://168.hu/kultura/veszi-margit-ady-endre-irodalom-utazas-molnar-ferenc-muzsa-172146>

side, Louise Mack reported on the German invasion of Belgium for the British newspapers, while Flavia Steno wrote war stories in Italy for *Il Secolo XIX*. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, much mentioned in my study, was unique in granting official accreditation to women war correspondents. During the First World War, in addition to a total of 271 male journalists, seven women were accredited by the central army propaganda organization, the Imperial and Royal Press Headquarters (*Kriegspressequartier*), which was directly subordinate to the Chief of Staff of all armed forces of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and had the statutory responsibility for the management and supply of the entire military press service. Among the female war correspondents, the Austrian Alice Schalek, the German Maria Magda Rumbold, the German Thea von Puttkamer, and the Hungarian Margit Vészi, introduced here, stand out.

Women war correspondents can provide a new, female perspective on the interpretation of historical events, which is not only interesting from a historical but also from an interdisciplinary point of view. They can represent the changing role of women in this challenging period while offering a broader framework for understanding a particular historical era. I believe that it will be worthwhile in the future to further explore the life histories of women who covered the First World War and the diversity of their writings, even from a comparative and transnational perspective.

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