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Books of Prayers, Bible and Military Romanian Priests Activity during the First World War

Abstract

An essential role for supporting the soldiers' moral condition on the fronts of the World War I was played by the military father confessors present in all the armies of the countries at war. The Romanian military priests were present in the Austro - Hungarian army on the fronts of Italy and Galicia. In Romania too the activity of the military father confessors contributed to strengthening the patriotic feelings and the soldiers' moral condition, most of them coming from the peasants devoted to the religious life of their villages. The activity of the military priests was facilitated by many books of prayers, Bibles, moralising bro-



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chures, little icons and crosses which came into the hands of the soldiers on the front, of the wounded in hospitals or of the prisoners in camps. This study presents some of the books of prayers and religious brochures, as well as the activity of the military priests for strengthening the religious feelings of the soldiers.

Keywords

Confessors, Books of Prayers, Bible, Divine Liturgy, Confession

1 Introduction

The World War I brought to all peoples the fear of death, violence, epidemics, and diseases which finally caused the death of millions of people. The quiet life and religious passivity that characterised the beginning of the 20th century have completely disappeared the moment the newspapers of the countries which joined the war in 1914 started publishing in their pages thousands names of dead. Soon the world has become aware that the new war was different from what the population of Europe had lived till that time. Although in the beginning the volunteers went to the front urged by patriotism and hoping that the war would not last more than a few months, in the course of time this patriotic enthusiasm disappeared, and the disappearance of their dear ones and the horrors of war brought about the feeling of incertitude, but which rekindled the hope in the help of God. The soldiers left for the fronts of war, while those who remained on “the front of home”, the parents, sisters, younger brothers and children went to the churches where they prayed for the help of God so that

their dear ones should come back safe. Thus, the Great War got the characteristics of a religious conflict in which the fighters were Christians. Historian Philip Jenkins thinks that the World War I was a modern crusade, to a great extent, in which religion played a major role. This war rekindled the religious experience at world level.¹ The hope in God spiritually strengthened those who went to war, as well as those who remained at home, who overcrowded the churches hoping that their prayers would help those who were fighting weapons in their hands. Before the war, the number of the faithful of the Roman Catholic Church was diminishing, and after the war, their number was growing. In France, where secularization removed the Church from the public life, after the war, the open manifestation of the religious faith became normal.

2 Books of Prayers and Chaplains Activity in Romanian Army during the First World War

The military priests went to the front at the same time with the soldiers, having been present in all the fighting armies. Their role was significant for the moral support of the soldiers, the majority of them coming from the rural environment and being much more attached to the religious life and used with the presence of the priests. There were soldiers who wrote to the priests of their parishes, from the front, asking for spiritual advice wherever the military units had no chaplains. This phenomenon was also present with the Romanian Orthodox soldiers. When Romania joined the war, in August 1916, the Romanian Orthodox Church had military clergy prepared for

¹ Philip Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade*, New York, 2014, pp. 4-5.

mobilisation. The military priests were headed by archpriest Constantin Nazare, who worked out the regulations of functioning of the military clergy. Priest Veniamin Pocitan has also been co-opted in the activity of control and guiding of the chaplains, assisted by two secretaries.

When the war broke out, 252 military priests were mobilised, out of whom 46 were substituted, and two worked full time. When the war ended, out of the 204 mobilised on the front, five died, six were wounded, and 19 were unaccounted for. In 1918, when the Romanian troops passed beyond the River Prut, to Bessarabia, 40 priests remained mobilised, with a crucial role in contacting the local people, as well as in promoting patriotism and the idea of national unity.

In 1915, Constantin Nazare succeeded in printing a brochure entitled *Speeches for soldiers and prayers for king, army, and people in war time*, very necessary for the military priests.² Most of the books of prayers and moralising brochures were lost when the Romanian troops retreated from Bucharest to Moldova in the autumn of 1916. At the outbreak of war, both Nazarie and P. Garboviceanu, administrator of the Church House, institution which administrated the ecclesiastic funds, decided to share to the soldiers either the booklet drafted by the Holy Synod, entitled *Daily Bread* or other useful brochures comprising patriotic speeches and prayers. The soldiers needed food not only for body but also for soul.³ Archpriest Nazarie and

² See Constantin Nazarie, *Cuvântări pentru ostași și rugăciuni pentru rege, oaste și popor în vreme de război* (Speeches for Soldiers and Prayers for King, Army and People in War Time), (Bucharest Printing Press of Church Books, 1915).

³ Gheorghe Nicolescu, Gheorghe Dobrescu, Andrei Nicolescu, *Preoți în lupta pentru Marea Unire 1916-1918* (Priests Fighting for the Great Union 1916-1918), (Bucharest: Europa Nova Publishing House, 2000), p. 50.

deputy Pocitan drafted the brochure entitled *Spiritual Arming of the Romanian Soldiers*, which was approved and printed in 1300 copies in the first edition. Fascinating is the fact that the majority of the prayers drafted on this occasion refer to the period of persecutions during the Christian antiquity.⁴ This book of prayers was found in the soldiers' pockets during the World War II. Bishop Nifon of Lower Danube, eparchy which also included the Dobrugea invaded by the German – Bulgarian troops, offered, through the Red Cross, 2000 books of prayers for the wounded soldiers. Nazarie proposed the Holy Synod of Bucharest to print a book of service to be used by the military priests to include the religious services that could have been celebrated on the front, an initiative that could have reduced their uncomfortable luggage. The military priests had to carry a wooden chest of religious objects and holy vessels, as well as the table on which to celebrate the Divine Liturgy. Sometimes the holy objects were lost while the troops were travelling.

Besides the books of prayers and Bibles, the soldiers on the front have also laid their hands on manifests and brochures that urged to cease the war. Archpriest Nazarie drew the attention of all the military units to the danger of the pacifist propaganda which could have affected the moral condition of the troops. The military father confessors had the duty to consolidate the patriotic feelings in the soldiers' souls. The father confessor of Regiment I Frontier Guards informed the military archpriest that:

“In February, scraps of paper were found in our regiment, slipped by our enemies, reading prayers which urged our

⁴ Constantin Nazarie, V. Pocitan, *Înarmarea sufletească a ostaşului roman* (Spiritual Arming of the Romanian Soldier), (Bârlad: C. D. Lupaşcu Printing, 1917), p. 12.

soldiers not to shoot the enemy when they were faced with him. The reason was that the Mother of God has descended in the middle of the fire in the first line of attack against the enemy and she sobbed and cried, urging to cease shooting”.⁵ Because the Adventist manifests reached the villagers close to the front, the father confessor, supported by the commander of the regiment, printed an anti-Adventist manifest in hundreds of copies, which he spread in the villages where the regiment was camping. Another father confessor mentions the prayer spread by the Adventists to the soldiers:

“Having availing of the fact that in such hard times people are easy inclined to everything that refers to faith, the Adventists spread to the soldiers of the regiments a prayer saying that the Mother of God descended from heaven and commanded not to hear guns or canons shooting – that everybody who received that prayer had to copy it and send it to other persons (9 persons), because otherwise he would die, or a great misfortune would happen to his family. Having used this method, the prayer could be spread and I do not think that I am wrong if I say that if we made some investigation we would find such prayers in several units, if not in all of them, because a soldier who has received such a prayer sent it to a special unit, and once there it was sent further.”⁶

To stop such a phenomenon, the chaplains began a series of spiritual conferences. One of the chaplains said: “I began the series of lectures in all units, explaining the soldiers where these prayers came from and what they were up to, giving the

⁵ Gheorghe Nicolescu, Gheorghe Dobrescu, Andrei Nicolescu, *Preoți în lupta...*, p 110.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 113.

soldier orientation not to have his moral feelings speculated”.⁷ The same priests asked the church authorities to spread the books of prayers and those with moral content to the soldiers. To benefit of these books, the same priest urged the priests not mobilized to give such books to those on the front in a view to stop the spreading of the brochures of the “foreign sects” and of the religious pacifist manifests. Some father confessors asked for the non-com’s cooperation and imposed a certain programme and theological discussions with the soldiers on the front.

3 Books of Prayers, Bible and Chaplains Activity in Austro - Hungarian Army during the First World War

The Romanian military priests served in the Austro - Hungarian Army too, both at the level of the divisions, regiments and battalions, and behind the front, in hospitals and even in camps of prisoners, where they took spiritual care of the Orthodox prisoners. About 30-40 Romanian Orthodox priests seem to have operated in Bucovina and about 60-70 priests in Hungary, Transylvania and Banat (about 90-110 Orthodox priests were in the Austro - Hungarian military service in the summer of 1916).⁸ According to the mobilisation lists, almost 340 Romanian Orthodox and Greek Catholics served more than 956,000 Romanians mobilised from Transylvania, Banat, and Bucovina. The Romanian Orthodox

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Grecu Dan Simion, „Aspecte ale vieții preoților militari români din armata Austro-Ungară, (1914-1918)” (Aspects of the life of the Romanian militaries in the Austro - Hungarian army, (1914-1918), in *Buletinul Cercului de studii ale istoriei poștale din Ardeal, Banat și Bucovina*, Year XII, Issue 3(46), 2003, pp. 26-27.

father confessors were recruited from among the Transylvanian priests, many of them coming from the rural parishes. Their duty was to celebrate the Divine Liturgy and communicate the soldiers. The Austro – Hungarian authorities considered the military service as a place of education, and spiritual edification for the soldiers, who once come back home would have become better citizens.⁹ Threatened by death, any soldier felt that his only help could come from God, who could save him.¹⁰ The recruitment of the Romanian military father confessors was difficult because the fear of death made many priests refuse enlisting. There were poor priests with large families who applied to be enlisted as military priests for the financial advantages which were substantial.¹¹

There were no regulations for the operation of the Romanian military clergy in the Austro – Hungarian army, as only a few short articles were published in “Telegraful Roman” (Romanian Telegraph) on the activity and behaviour of the military father

⁹ Aurel Pentelescu, Gavril Preda, „Justinian Teculescu- primul episcop al Armatei Române. Documente inedite” (Justinian Teculescu – first bishop of the Romanian Army. Original documents), in: *Angustia*, issue 10, 2006, p. 125.

¹⁰ Gheorghe Negustor, „A lupta, a muri, a te mântui - promisiunea vieții veșnice și credința soldaților: 1914-1918” (To fight, to die, to save yourself – promise of eternal life and the soldiers’ faith: 1914-1918), in: *Lucrările Sesiunii Naționale a Doctoranzilor în Istorie*, coordinators Mihai D. Drecin, Ioan Horga, Barbu Ștefănescu, (Oradea: Publishing house of the University of Oradea, 2009), p. 375.

¹¹ Mihai-Octavian Groza, „Despre activitatea preoților militari români transilvăneni în perioada Primului Război Mondial (1914-1919)” (On the activity of the Romanian Transylvanian military priests during the World War I (1914-1919)), in *Administrație românească arădeană. Studii și comunicări din Banat – Crișana 95 de ani*, vol. VIII, coordinators Doru Sinaci and Emil Arbonie, (Arad: University Press, 2014), p. 524.

confessors. The Orthodox military father confessor represented his Church, denomination, and nation, but he had to speak German and Hungarian too. The military priests had the duty to explain the soldiers the orders received, take good care of the spiritual needs of every one of them, get and give them books of prayers, to take good care of the wounded in hospitals and cultivate their confidence in the military hierarchy.¹² The military priest had the duty to give the soldiers and wounded presents on the occasion of various feasts, as well as to bless and be with them in difficult times.

The books of prayers had an essential role in supporting the moral condition of the Romanian soldiers on the fronts of Italy and Galicia.¹³ One of the father confessors asked, besides books of prayers, Romanian books, because: “almost every wounded and sick asked me, besides books of prayers, for a Romanian book for reading. I miss such books and this why I ask you to be so kind to send me 110 brochures of the admirable publication the association published last year, which you think most suitable. I shall pay for them with the greatest pleasure, because I see how much they miss the Romanian writings”.¹⁴ The great demand of religious books in the Romanian language made some of the Romanian Orthodox militaries accept the Baptist religious readings, a phenomenon denounced by one of the

¹² Mihai-Octavian Groza, „Despre activitatea preoților militari români transilvăneni...”, p. 530.

¹³ Mihai-Octavian Groza, „Preoții români transilvăneni pe fronturile Marelui Război” (Romanian Transylvanian priests on the fronts of the Great War), in *Scrieri pe alete. Lucrările Conferinței Naționale “O filă de istorie: om, societate, cultură în secolele XVII–XXI*, coordinated by Ana-Maria Macavei, Roxana Dorina Pop, (Cluj-Napoca: University Press of Cluj, 2012), pp. 375-376.

¹⁴ Mihai-Octavian Groza, „Despre activitatea preoților militari români transilvăneni...”, p. 532.

father confessors to the Orthodox Metropolitanate of Sibiu. As a result of this report, 500 books of prayers were distributed right away. The military priests succeeded in creating libraries of various books in the Romanian language, among which religious books too. They set up soldiers' hostels and even reading halls.¹⁵

In various military units, the priests organised a true programme for teaching the soldiers to read and write. This is why the military priests sent letters asking for primers and school books for the front. Such courses were taught especially in winter months, and for those hospitalised or in the rear all the year. Besides these actions, the military priests never forgot to celebrate the religious services, especially the Divine Liturgies. Sometimes these priests celebrated even in the trenches. In 1916, the military propaganda also mentioned the celebration of the religious services at Christmas and Epiphany, in the trenches.¹⁶ The same event was also presented by the "Telegraful Roman" (Romanian Telegraph) Orthodox newspaper:

"During this military occupation we see that the feast of the Nativity of the Lord is coming close! (...) The priest of our regiment prepared a pleasant surprise for us. (...) This priest, who knows our peasant so well, could not let such a festive time as the Christmas pass without making us some pleasant moments. He trained a few soldiers with whom he

¹⁵ Rodica Groza, „ASTRA și soldații români de pe front în Primul Război Mondial”, (ASTRA and the Romanian Soldiers on the Front of the World War I), in: *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie și Arheologie*, Cluj-Napoca, issue XXVIII, 1987-1988, pp. 351-361.

¹⁶ Eugenia Bârlea, *Perspectiva lumii rurale asupra Primului Război Mondial* (Perspective of the Rural World on the World War I – doctorate thesis), (Cluj-Napoca: Babes-Bolyai University, 2000), p. 127.

went all over the front of the regiment singing carols at all divisions, which were in the battle line. (...) So, we spent some pleasant time which reminded us the Christmas of our villages. (...) On the first Christmas day the Divine Liturgy was celebrated in a chapel made of fir tree branches, and our soldiers together with those from artillery who were in the district of our regiment were standing all around, their heads bare and bowed down, piously listening to the holy celebration".¹⁷

One of the Romanian father confessors of the Austro – Hungarian army spoke about the soldier's desire to have the Bible with him on the front:

“Ever since the beginning of the frightening world war (...) a considerable interest was manifested for the most outstanding book of humankind, for the Holy Scriptures, an interest that we can notice in all the classes of human society... the soldier who goes to war never forgets about the holy book, but puts it into his rucksack, besides many other heavy things and carries it cheerful, because he knows that while keeping it close to his tired breast it will bring him comfort. In hospitals, having deep wounds, he raises it to his lips dark with sorrow, shaking hands and tears in his eyes, and reads it in the sweet language of his mother”.¹⁸

Besides the Holy Scriptures, the Romanian soldiers also had books of prayers in their rucksacks: “Suddenly, I see a sentinel – a Romanian ordinary soldier – who, bare headed, the rifle in his

¹⁷ *** „Crăciunul și Boboteaza în tranșee” (Christmas and Epiphany in the Trenches), in *Telegraful Român*, issue 13, 6/19 February 1916.

¹⁸ Ioan Dăncilă, „Sfânta Scriptură în războiul mondial” (The Holy Scriptures in the World War), in: *Telegraful Român*, Year LXIII, issue 108, 15/28 Oct. 1915.

left hand, a book of prayers in his right hand, was reading with devotion. He seemed to be a martyr. I admired him for a few seconds, and then I went on my way. The next sentinel, the same ordinary soldier, was doing the same.”¹⁹

Life gets new dimensions for the peasant who has become a soldier. Obligated to kill a fellow being of his, this ordinary man, linked to God through faith, knows he has sinned: “Really, the soldier has a heart and has God. He trembles and sighs after he kills a human being, because it is terrible to know you have killed a man. He kneels down on the cold ground and prays crying”.²⁰ This is why attending the celebration comforts the soul of the peasant soldier, both on the front and in the prisoners’ camp. Attending the religious service was a must for the Romanian soldier. The same thing was valid for the Romanians taken prisoners:

“All detainees participated in the divine service celebrated in the open, about 500 men. The religious service was celebrated in Russian and Romanian. (...) It was an impressive view. I have the feeling that during the divine service the 500 prisoners forgot they were far from their dear ones, having been now war detainees in a hospitable foreign country. Having forgotten everything, what they suffered so far, at that time they were thinking only of Almighty God”.²¹

¹⁹ Coriolan Buracu, „Amintiri” (Memoirs), in *Marele Război în memoria bănăţeană (1914-1918)*, (Cluj-Napoca: University Press of Cluj, 2012), p. 552.

²⁰ *** „Cum se roagă ostaşii pe câmpul de luptă” (How the Soldiers Pray on the Battlefield), in: *Unirea*, Blaj, Year XXV, Issue 7, Tuesday, 26 January 1915, p. 4.

²¹ Coriolan Buracu, „Amintiri” (Memoirs), pp. 546-547.

During the years of war, the Romanian Orthodox Chapel of Vienna had a very important role for the Romanians of Vienna. The Romanian corps of army seated in Prague benefited of the spiritual support of chaplain Laurentiu Curea who asked Astra Romanian cultural foundation of Sibiu to send 100 primers and several books of prayers and literature for the soldiers hospitalized in Prague. 200 primers and 4 boxes of books were sent from Sibiu.

In 1915, the Orthodox Metropolitan Residence of Sibiu printed *The Book of Prayers for Soldiers* for the Romanian Orthodox soldiers. Another book of prayers was published at the initiative of the clergy of Caransebes city, approved by Bishop Miron Cristea, the future patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Thus, in 1916, *The Book of Prayers and religious chants by Petru Barbu* was published in Caransebes and distributed on the front too. The Romanian Orthodox soldiers of Vienna could find *The Book of Prayers for the Romanian Soldiers* from the Austro – Hungarian monarchy at the Romanian Orthodox chapel, printed with the blessing of the Metropolitan of Bucovina, Vladimir of Repta. A special book of prayers entitled *Spiritual Words* was published in Brasov with the blessing of Metropolitan Vasile Mangra of Transylvania, of which author was Queen Elisabeth of Romania. After Romania joined the war this book of prayers was forbidden and confiscated.

The book or prayer entitled *Dem Krieger zum Gebete (The Warrior at Prayer)* was distributed to the Austrian soldiers, and the Ukrainian soldiers received *The Book of Prayers for Ukrainians*, printed in 1917 with the approval of the Archiepiscopal Consistory, which had the portrait of Emperor Carol I on the first page. In 1917, the Austro – Hungarian army

decided to print books of prayers in all the languages of the empire for the soldiers who wanted them.²²

A series of measures have also been taken for the spiritual comfort of the soldiers on the front of Moldova, where the Romanian Army was retreated after the defeats suffered in the autumn of 1916. Books with religious and moralizing character were printed to be offered to the soldiers on the front, in trenches, and to the wounded in hospitals. Some of them were: *The Oath, Soldierly words, Spiritual preparations for high days* and the *Book of Prayers*. The priests of several parishes helped the military father confessors lending them vestments, books, and liturgical vessels, as well as sending them books of prayers with moral content and little icons.²³

They have also taken good care of the war orphans and worked for them, collected clothes and money for helping the soldiers wounded and those in great distress.²⁴ The prayers, icons, little crosses and various Christian symbols have become saving amulets in the minds of the soldiers faced with death.

4 Conclusions

Faced with death, hundreds of thousands of soldiers of the World War I found the hope to be saved in prayer, in the dialogue with God. This is why the presence of the books of

²² Ionela Zaharia, „Cărțile de rugăciuni pentru soldați-vademecum spiritual și cultural în timpul Marelui Război” (Books of Prayer for Soldiers – Spiritual and Cultural vademecum during the Great War), in *Arta Sabesiensis*, Issue 2, 2016, pp. 95-106.

²³ Gheorghe Nicolescu, Gheorghe Dobrescu, Andrei Nicolescu, *Preoți în lupta...*, p. 62.

²⁴ Archives of the Metropolitanate of Moldova and Bucovina, File no 81, War 1916-1918, vol I, documents no. 2330, 2604, 3611/1916.

prayers in trenches has become normal. The military father confessors have also contributed to strengthening their moral condition, as they shrived and communicated the soldiers and offered them books of prayers, little icons, and crosses which many of them considered saving. The celebration of the Divine Liturgy in places improvised and threatened by air raids or in churches gathered most times hundreds of soldiers. Unlike the Protestant confessors, the Orthodox priests benefited of the vast support of the Holy Communion that opens the way to the Kingdom of God. The majority of the Orthodox soldiers considered the Holy Communion as a guarantee for their immortality.