

Romanian Military Priests from Austria-Hungary on the Italian Front during World War I

IONELA ZAHARIA

*In hospitals, garrisons or
POW camps, military priests
had similar duties: to offer
comfort, perform the
religious service, and preach
about right and wrong,
hope, endurance, love
towards monarch and
fatherland.*

VARIOUS ASPECTS of the Great War have been analyzed in countless studies and books ever since 1915. At the beginning they were mostly concerned with the political and military aspects, and with who was mainly responsible for the tragedy. The historical writing on the topic developed during the last century, and came to explore more and more the mentalities and the cultural aspects of the war. The following article tries to uncover another facet of the war that has not been extensively researched and analyzed: the activity of the Romanian military clergy from Austria-Hungary on the Italian front during World War I.

We have chosen to try to identify and analyze the military chaplains because, in their pursuit of their duty, they helped in developing a different kind of spirituality on the front during World War I. They tried to increase religiosity among the troops, to offer comfort to the soldiers gripped by fear and despair, to the wounded and the sick, to handle the problem of death. At the same time, as subjects of the emperor, they had to try

Ionela Zaharia

Ph.D. candidate at Babeş-Bolyai University, holder of a Bishop Johann Weber Scholarship, awarded by the Diocese of Graz-Seckau, Austria.

to keep the soldiers faithful to emperor and fatherland. In their work, some tried to highlight additional meanings of the fighting and underlined the messianic nature of military service, by pointing to the soldier the importance of his duty, as a good Christian, for his country, and thus the importance of his sacrifice.¹

Another important aspect that the article will try to analyze it is how the particularities of the Italian front affected the soldiers and the military priests. There they were not caught in the deadlock of trench warfare, as on other fronts, but had to face high, sharp-ridged mountains, where human resistance was pushed to the limit and soldiers were forced to adapt to the appalling terrain.

In order to illustrate these points we will try to see in the first place what was the situation of the Romanian military priests in Austria-Hungary at the beginning of the war. Then, we will try to see what changed in the duties of the military priests after the outbreak of the war, and especially what novelties the war on the Italian front brought. Other key aspects that we shall seek to investigate will be the situation on the front after Romania's entry in the war, how the military priests were involved in propaganda activities, and what happened at the end of the war.

The Beginning of the War

IN THE Religious Service of the imperial and royal Army of Austria-Hungary were, at the beginning of the 1914, twenty-eight Romanian military priests, Orthodox and Greek-Catholic, serving mostly in Transylvania and Bukovina, but also in Budapest, Sarajevo, Vienna, Kassa (today Košice in Slovakia) and Ragusa.² The rules for these priests were very strict and the service was very well organized. The main tasks of the military priests were to fulfill the religious necessities of officers and soldiers within the army, in the hospitals of the army, but also to teach them and the students of the military learning establishments the qualities of a good Christian and soldier: obedience, duty, a moral and Christian life. According to the regulations all military priests were mostly under the age of 40 and possessed good knowledge of German or Hungarian³ as well as of Romanian, Russian, Serbian, or Ruthenian, which enabled them to communicate not only with the soldiers but also with the officers, who were mostly Austrian or Hungarian. These priests were subordinated, in military matters, to the commander of the units to which they were assigned. In religious matters they were accountable to the head military priest (after 1896), to the bishops and the apostolic vicar of the Army (the Greek-Catholics).⁴

The oath that each military priest had to take before beginning his duty pledged obedience and loyalty to the emperor of Austria-Hungary and his followers on

the throne. This oath forbade the military priests to join any kind of association or engage in any conflict which could have affected the public order, collaborate with the enemy in case of war, or establish any kind of suspicious connections outside the monarchy's borders. At the same time, they pledged to protect the country from outside dangers, and observe professional secrecy.⁵ A violation of this oath meant disrespect for the word of the Bible and was to be counted as treason and punished. The punishment was to affect the priest himself and also his family.

Order and tranquility were replaced at the end of the summer of 1914 by the sound of guns and cannons. After Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, almost the whole continent was dragged into total war. This meant the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of officers, soldiers, and implicitly of military priests. The tasks of the military priests remained in theory the same but practically they changed dramatically. They had to handle the ever increasing problem of the dead and wounded, and then to try to comfort those who survived.

In the spring of 1915 the soldiers of Austria-Hungary were fighting on multiple fronts in the east and south-east. The conflict did not end before the Christmas of 1914, as many would have hoped and, instead of peace, each day brought more tense situations. Each state had to find the reasons that would give legitimacy to their action and mobilize the troops. Italy found her arguments in May 1915 and declared war on her former ally. The aim was to finish the unification of the country with the support of the Allies. The new front, almost 600 km long, required new troops from Austria-Hungary which were mostly brought from Galicia and from the Balkans. These troops had already experienced the *novelties* of the Great War.⁶ Among the troops that were sent on the Italian front were also numerous Romanian soldiers, officers and military priests.

Romanian Military Priests on the Italian Front

THE MILITARY records kept in Vienna recorded at the beginning of 1916 almost eighty-four Romanian military priests that were detached on the eastern front, on the Serbian front, on the Italian front, on the front line, in hospitals or in POW camps. One request sent at the beginning of 1916 by the Command of the 32nd Infantry Division to Department Nine of the War Ministry in Vienna, responsible for the religious matters, reveals the importance of the military priests for the authorities. The request was for at least one more Orthodox military chaplain to be sent to Infantry Brigade No. 64, because the division had only one that was assigned to Infantry Regiment No. 70. The

motivations for the request were the high number of Orthodox soldiers in this brigade, and the fact that the sermons of the military priest would have helped to prevent desertions.⁷ In this request we also find additional information: the morale and the discipline of the Austro-Hungarian soldiers had started to sink, the number of Romanian military priests on the front was insufficient, and the authorities were considering propaganda activities to keep the soldiers fighting.

Using the military priests for keeping the soldiers obedient was one of the few tools that the Austro-Hungarian authorities could have used, if we consider that most of the soldiers came from rural areas. As the researcher Eugenia Bârlea contended, for the Romanian soldiers the priest still represented one of the highest religious, moral and political authorities.⁸ This could mean that the sermons and teachings of the military priests had a big influence on the Romanian soldiers.

The duties on the front meant not only keeping the soldiers' morale high, but differed according to the place where the military priests were sent. On the front they were bound to move with the troops. During attacks they had to stay with the medical personnel in the first aid tent, marked with the red cross against a white background, in order to provide the wounded with comfort, help, and give the last Holy Communion to the severely wounded of either side. After each fight they also had the duty to perform the funeral rite for those fallen in combat. According to the Geneva Convention they, just like the medical personnel from the first aid tent, were considered neutrals. Their duties also included the celebration of the Holy Liturgy, on Sundays and holy days, in keeping with the usual regulations applicable during peacetime, sermons on the respect for the law, obedience, love of the monarch and fatherland, on the consequences of indiscipline, support for the soldiers in time of distress and a bolstering of their courage, serving as a role model for them through both words and deeds. They were also to encourage the soldiers to receive the Holy Confession and the Holy Communion during fasts and pay special attention to the recruits. The Holy Liturgy could be postponed or cancelled in case of battle.⁹

In hospitals, garrisons or POW camps, military priests had similar duties: to offer comfort, perform the religious service, and preach about right and wrong, hope, endurance, love towards monarch and fatherland. No matter where they were, they had to keep records of those who died within their jurisdiction and send monthly reports to the apostolic vicar of the Army—the Catholics and Greek-Catholics—and to the Army High Command—the Greek-Orthodox, the Evangelicals (AB and HB), the Jews and the Muslims.

These reports also indicate the interest of the authorities when it came to the duties of the military priests. According to such a report, when it came to the priests that were sent with the troops on the front line, the authorities wanted

to know when and where the priests held the religious service, for whom, what had been the title of the sermon, in which language, how many soldiers assisted, how many confessed and took the Holy Communion, if the priests were visiting, encouraging and offering the possibility for a confession and Holy Communion to soldiers between battles, what was done for the religious comfort and morale of those who returned to the front, if the wounded were helped, if the dead soldiers were buried in a military cemetery, if the cemetery was properly laid out, if the priests had something special to report etc.¹⁰ In this way the authorities checked whether the priests were doing their duty, what problems the priests had on the front, how many soldiers turned to the priests for comfort and how important the priests were for keeping the soldiers' motivation high. At the same time we notice how important were the funeral and a proper burial. Many traditional folk poems and songs¹¹ dating from the Great War show how important it was to receive a proper burial when dying far away from home, on the battlefield.

For example, the Greek-Catholic military priest Simon Coman was responsible in June 1916 for the Romanian and Hungarian Greek-Catholic soldiers belonging to the First Battalion of the 51st Infantry Regiment stationed close to Roncegno, a village in South Tyrol. According to his report, life on the front depended very much on the battles. Sometimes he had to start very early in the morning and hold the Holy Liturgy twice in one day. Another problem was that the soldiers were scattered and were deployed in various locations, and he was not able to celebrate a Holy Liturgy very often but succeeded in visiting most of the soldiers in their shelters and give them short sermons. Because this also meant climbing the mountains, at the end of the month the priest reported that for a while he had stopped visiting the soldiers because of exhaustion.¹² Father Coman resumed visiting the soldiers and kept doing it until 15 December 1916, when he was killed by an avalanche in Persen, South Tyrol. He was one of the two Romanian military priests who died in the winter of 1916 on the Italian front.¹³

Other important aspects revealed by the reports sent by the priests are the atmosphere on the front and the mood of the soldiers. The topics of the sermons offered to the soldiers by the military priests indicate that the priest had to try to raise the spirits of the soldiers gripped by fear and despair. Most of the sermons were trying to teach the soldiers how to endure the life on the front, to overcome the necessities of the body and focus on the importance of the soul and of love.¹⁴ Others were trying to remind to the soldiers that God always helps a good Christian.¹⁵ Another problem that started to appear on the front was the problem of desertions.¹⁶

Romania's Entry in the Great War

ANOTHER CRITICAL point for the Romanian soldiers and priests of Austria-Hungary during the war was the entry of Romania in the war as an enemy of the Dual Monarchy. The pastoral report of the First Military Priest Paul Boldea, sent in October 1916 to the High Command of the 5th Army illustrates very well the situation on the Italian front. In his report he mentions that most of the Romanian soldiers of Austria-Hungary were fighting in 1916 on the Italian front and praised them and the priests attending them for their bravery and courage.¹⁷ The bravery of the Romanians on the Italian front was also noticed by other observers.¹⁸ Another piece of information in his report shows that the authorities were increasingly suspicious towards the Romanians, and ordered to the priests to preach more about the importance of loyalty to the oath that they had taken on the flag, to emperor and fatherland. As subjects of the emperor, on the occasion of his birthday the priests were expected to hold a special Liturgy and sermon, in which to underline the connection between monarch and subjects. Father Boldea indicates that he did precisely that, both in Romanian and Serbian, for the soldiers on the front. The Bishops Miron Cristea, Ioan I. Papp and the Metropolitan Vasile Mangra also advised in their sermons sent to the front, on the occasion of Christmas and Easter, that the soldiers had to keep on fighting for Austria-Hungary because at the end of the war they would be rewarded by the monarch and by the Kingdom of Hungary. At the same time, they stressed that the Romanians in Austria-Hungary did not want a war with their Romanian brethren, that the leaders of Romania, misled by the Russians, had declared war on Austria-Hungary, and prayed for peace.¹⁹ Most of the Romanian bishops and military priests continued to do their duty for Austria-Hungary also after 1916, some because of loyalty and some because they did not believe in the possibility of a collapse of Austria-Hungary and feared the consequences.

Propaganda Activities after 1917

AFTER 1917 most of the Romanian military priests continued to do their duty on all fronts. The sermons kept encouraging the soldiers to give more attention to the soul, to salvation, to Christian humility, to the saints and to God, who were able to help them. This once again indicates that the struggle to offer comfort to the soldiers continued. At the same time they started preaching more about the danger of desertion and the significance of the oath.²⁰ This may be considered a form of propaganda, but not a very well organized one.

All the states involved in the Great War used frontline propaganda in an organized manner (for the first time), conducted by official institutions, seeking to weaken the enemy, to give comfort to the population at home, and keep the motivation of the soldiers high.²¹ At the beginning of the war, the Austro-Hungarian military authorities did not use the priests as propaganda agents. They were only carefully monitored to ensure that they were doing their duty. A very well organized propaganda involving military priests started to be planned beginning with 1917, in the context of a severe demoralization that started to affect the people back home and on the frontlines, due to the long war, famine, and the propaganda actions directed by the Allied states. The major problem was that they no longer had the necessary funds for a war propaganda.²² Still, they succeed to create the Enemy Propaganda Defense Agency (EAST—Feindespropaganda Abwehrstelle), an official institution meant especially for propaganda actions under the military control of the Army High Command and the War Ministry.²³

One of the measures taken by this new office was holding patriotism classes (*Vaterländischer Unterricht*), special lectures held on the front, in the hinterland and in prisons, with the purpose of supporting the Habsburg family, of trying to explain why the war was raging on, who were the enemies and what were their ideas. They emphasized the fact that the enemy felt unable to defeat them on the front and had thus decided to defeat them by taking advantage of the tension growing in the minds of the people because of the lengthy war—in other words, by creating discord. The propaganda had to be carried out by officers trained in this activity and by military priests, reflecting *the ancient joyful courage* of the Austro-Hungarian Army. Commanders were also strongly encouraged to listen more attentively to the needs of the soldiers and to reward the meritorious ones, as well as punish the disobedient. The lectures had to be convincing as well as exciting, not boring and doctrinal. Among the things that the officers and priests had to say were that peace with Italy was to come once they renounced their claim to Trieste and Trent, the long duration of the war had been forced upon them, they had not wanted a great war, but desired only peace etc.²⁴ We must also point out that between 1916 and the beginning of 1918 the number of Romanian military priests on all the fronts was approximately 256.²⁵ Unfortunately it is difficult to find out exactly how many of them were on the Italian front. Still, we can estimate that their number was certainly higher than 50.

The Pastoral Reports were also adapted to this new task and better illustrated the duties given to the military priests. If in 1916 the priests had to answer 14 questions, in 1918 the number had reached 44. The authorities wanted to know more about: what personnel changes had taken place in the last months, what special concerns and difficulties they had with the soldiers returning from the war camps in Russia, whether the papers and stamps were kept in safe places,

what religious books they had, whether they obeyed the Army High Command's instructions concerning the patriotic lessons, the relationship with the officers in charge of patriotic lessons, etc.²⁶ Priests in particular were strongly encouraged to preach about: *The Lord God and the world war*, *The soldiers' oath*, *Bolshevism and its destruction*, *The causes of the war*, *Our war situation*, *Consequences for defectors*.²⁷

The authorities also started to be more preoccupied with reading activities and with different kinds of leisure activities, for the few moments of free time, that were to be offered to the soldiers in hospitals, in the trenches, or in POW camps to give them comfort. This task was handled by the Central Office for Soldier Reading, and mostly left in the charge of military priests. The books and newspapers selected for the soldiers were rich in topics concerning the moral and religious aspects of life, as well as patriotism. Priests on the front sent countless letters to newspapers and associations to ask for help in providing the necessary reading materials. Many associations started to collect funds in order to support the acquisition of recommended readings for soldiers. The Red Cross also got involved in providing books, especially for those in war camps. The Catholic Church succeeded in sending around 2,200,000 books and newspapers to the front,²⁸ until the fall of 1917. The Orthodox Church and the ASTRA Association also supported book donations for the Romanian soldiers. Among the books and newspapers thus sent were: *Transilvania* (magazine), *Calendarul Asociațiunii*, *Mângâierea sufletească*, books from the "Biblioteca populară" series, elementary books for teaching reading and writing, prayer books and magazines with a religious and moral content.²⁹ The most widely-distributed books were still the prayer books, which were also very popular. Since the beginning of the war, a multitude of different types of prayer books for soldiers had been conceived in all the languages spoken in the empire. They included everything that was considered necessary on the front: prayers for the comfort of the soul, patriotic songs and texts meant to highlight the importance of loyalty, as well as basic hygiene instructions. According to the records kept by the Apostolic Vicar of the Army and to the continuing appeals in press, there was a constant need of prayer books on the front, which shows that the soldiers found more and more comfort in prayer and in God.³⁰

The End of the Great War

IN NOVEMBER 1918 it was clear to everybody that the Dual Monarchy was on the brink of collapse. Given the circumstances and taking into account the self-determination principle, the representatives of the Romanian people from Austria-Hungary decided to part from the monarchy, declare the

independence of the Romanian provinces and unite with the Kingdom of Romania. After receiving the news most of the military priests decided to help in bringing the soldiers safely home and held special ceremonies in which they released them from the oath to the emperor and from the House of Habsburg.³¹

Conclusion

AT THE beginning of the conflict no one had expected a Great War, that the mobilization would reach such magnitude and that after four years the world would be completely changed. The mobilization also took the Romanian soldiers and military priests from Austria-Hungary to the various fronts and faced them with the horrors of total war. On the Italian front, the hard conditions and harsh weather caused the soldiers' morale to sink continuously. The military priests were seen as one of the solutions for helping them, given that most of them came from rural areas and had a high respect for Church, God and priests. Romanian military priests tried to offer comfort to the soldiers and succeeded in some ways, but sometimes, as Annette Becker mentioned in one of her books, in the case of the French military priests, they tried to bring the religious matters of the war to the surface,³² either out of loyalty, either because of the oath they had taken, or because they feared the consequences of disobedience. Even if the authorities saw in the military priests only a tool, the battle for the hearts and minds within Austria-Hungary was already lost in 1917 and 1918, due to the unpreparedness for such a war and to bad policies, as the historian Mark Cornwall indicates.



Notes

1. Annette Becker, "Faith, Ideology and the Cultures of War," in *A Companion to World War One*, ed. John Horne (West Sussex: Blackwell, 2010), 225.
2. *Schematismus für das k.u.k. Heer und für die k.u.k. Kriegsmarine für die 1914* (Vienna: Druck und Verlag der k.k. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1914), 1128–1138; *A Magyar Királyi Honvédség és Csendőrség névkönyve* (Budapest: Pallas Irodalmi és Nyomdai Részvénytársaság, 1918), 599–601.
3. *Dienstvorschrift für die Militärgeistlichkeit A 16-c* (Vienna: Kaiserliche-königlichen Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1904), 2–3.
4. Emerich Bielik, *Geschichte der k.u.k. Militärseelsorge und des apostolischen Feldvikariates* (Vienna: Im Selbstverlage des Apostolischen Feldvikariates, 1901), 204–215.
5. *Dienstvorschrift*, 80–81.

6. Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie* (Vienna–Cologne–Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2013), 427–428.
7. Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Kriegsarchiv (Austrian State Archives, War Archives Vienna; hereafter cited as AT-OeStA, KA), Feldakten, Neue Feldakten, Höhere Heereskommandos, Etappengruppenkommandos und selbständige Quartiermeisterabteilungen, Quartiermeisterabteilung 9, 269.
8. Eugenia Bârlea, “Perspectiva lumii rurale asupra primului război mondial,” Ph.D. thesis, Babeş-Bolyai University (Cluj-Napoca, 2000), 23–25.
9. *Dienstvorschrift*, 63–68.
10. AT-OeStA, KA, Mittelbehörden, Apostolisches Feldvikariat, 220 Pastoralberichte (V) 1916.
11. See Bârlea, 111.
12. AT-OeStA, KA, Mittelbehörden, Apostolisches Feldvikariat, 221 Pastoralberichte (VI–VII) 1916.
13. Viktor Lipusch, *Österreich-Ungarns katholische Militärseelsorge im Weltkriege* (Graz: Verlag Berger, 1938), 81.
14. AT-OeStA, KA, Mittelbehörden, Apostolisches Feldvikariat, 222 Pastoralberichte (VIII–IX) 1916.
15. *Ibid.*, 231 Pastoralberichte (VII) 1917.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, 223 Pastoralberichte (X–XI) 1916.
18. John Macdonald and Zeljko Cimpric, *Caporetto & the Isonzo Campaign: The Italian Front 1915–1918* (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2011).
19. AT-OeStA, KA, KM, Abt 9, 982 Akten, 1916.
20. OeStA, KA, Mittelbehörden, Apostolisches Feldvikariat, 232 Pastoralberichte (VIII) 1917.
21. Mark Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary: The Battle for Hearts and Minds* (London–New York: Macmillan Press, 2000), 1–2.
22. Barbara Ahammer, “‘Lubok’-Blätter und ‘Vaterländischer Unterricht’ Kriegspropaganda an der Ostfront unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Friedensoffensive 1917,” *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift* 46, 1 (January–February 2008): 23.
23. Anton Holzer, *Die andere Front: Fotografie und Propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2007), 19–22.
24. AT-OeStA, KA, Mittelbehörden, Apostolisches Feldvikariat, 177 Dienstvorschriften und Erlässe 1876–1919.
25. *Ranglisten für das k.u.k. Heer und für die k.u.k. Kriegsmarine für die 1918* (Vienna: Druck und Verlag der k.k. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1918), 1621–1664; *A Magyar Királyi Honvédség és Csendőrség névkönyve*, 599–601.
26. AT-OeStA, KA, Mittelbehörden, Apostolisches Feldvikariat, 180 Geschichte der Militärseelsorge.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Lipusch, 104–108.
29. *Transilvania* (Sibiu), no. 1–6, 1915: 92; no. 7–12, 1915: 107.

30. AT-OeStA, KA, Mittelbehörden, Apostolisches Feldvikariat, 202 Gebetsbücher.
31. *Timpul nou* (Vienna), no. 2, 17 November 1918: 2.
32. Annette Becker, *War and Faith: The Religious Imagination in France 1914–1930* (Oxford–New York: Berg Publishers, 1998), 7–17.

Abstract

Romanian Military Priests from Austria-Hungary on the Italian Front during World War I

The article tries to uncover a facet of the war that has not been extensively researched and analyzed so far, namely, the activity of the Romanian military clergy from Austria-Hungary on the Italian front during World War I, focusing on those who helped in developing a different kind of spirituality on the battlefield. Also, it seeks to highlight the manner in which the particularities of the Italian front affected the soldiers and the military priests, considering that here we are not dealing with trench warfare, but rather with fighting on mountainous terrain.

Keywords

military priests, Italian front, wartime propaganda, Romanians from Austria-Hungary