

Transylvanian Romanians in the First World War. The church and religious sentiment

Keywords: Transylvania, church, religious sentiment, propaganda, press

Summary:

The Romanian clergy in Transylvania had played an important role in history in terms of the movement of political and social emancipation, culture, preservation of traditions and national identity. The First World War brought the clergy into a particularly difficult situation: some became military priests on the fronts, and those who remained at home had to support the war effort.

The first chapter presents the sociopolitical context of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, respectively the situation of the Romanians and the clergy in Transylvania. The two Romanian churches, Orthodox and Greek Catholic, through their hierarchies, were forced to fight politically for the rights of Romanians. At the same time, they tried to combat religious indifference among the parishioners, most of whom came from rural areas. The clergy was in a situation of dependence on the state because it provided them with a salary and could influence the choice of hierarchs.

The second chapter analyzes how the position of the clergy towards the events of the war evolved, using as main sources, press articles, church documents and pastorals or sermons. These messages did not always reflect the true position on the war, as they were influenced by censorship. Also, any stance against the authorities could be severely punished by arresting or deportation. As the war progressed, so did the persecutions against the Romanians, their loyalty "to the throne and the homeland" was replaced by that of the nation. The two Romanian churches also had a significant contribution in the last days of the war, when it mobilized the population to achieve the long-dreamed ideal, the Great Union of December 1, 1918.

The third chapter of this paper is called, "The activity of the Romanian clergy in Transylvania during the war" and does not intend to make an economic presentation of the activity of the clergy, but focuses more on religious activity. As for the military clergy, the demands were quite high: to have a recommendation, to know at least three foreign languages, to have theological knowledge. The morale of the soldiers was increased through: religious service, sermons, wound care, distribution of religious books and gifts. At the same time, their attributions include the funeral service of the soldiers, the completion of the documents of the deceased or the fulfillment of the last wish of the deceased.

Parish priests were overwhelmed by new tasks from the authorities, such as taking over the duties of teachers, professors and school leaders. Other duties included making lists of men who went to arms, with orphans and widows in the parish, cases of illness or childbirth. In addition to all this, the priests took care of the state of mind of the faithful, their education and information about the dangers of vices. A heavy blow came from the authorities, who mobilized some priests at the front or deported them to western Hungary.

The fourth chapter, the most voluminous of all, addressed the religiosity of the military and parishioners, a complex, multidisciplinary topic, analyzed from a psychological, historical and religious point of view. For the reconstruction of the religious feeling, we used as main source the collection of letters from the war, centralized at the National Archives, Cluj County Directorate, from where we extracted the messages regarding faith, prayer, religious expressions or every day situations. The second type of source used is military diaries and memoirs written and published during the war or in the following years. Reconstruction based on this type of source is limited, with the authors insisting on military issues, providing little detail about faith, personal prayer, or participation in the holy liturgy officiated at the front. Some press articles written by journalists or priests were also analyzed, but taking into account the censorship of the time and the perspective from which they were written.

In the case of the military, the uncertainty and imminence of death have left their mark, seeking a place of refuge in the irrational, in myths, superstitions, but also in God. Most testimonies about the religiosity of Romanian soldiers exist in the writings of Octavian Codru Tăslăuanu and in the articles of the military priest, Ioan Dăncilă. Both record the deep piety of some soldiers, but also the weak faith of others and superstitions.

The letters of 1914 and 1915 convey an optimistic state, reflected in the discussions with their relatives, friends, household, the weather or about the news in the village. In the successive years, 1916-1917, especially in 1918, a pessimistic aspect is highlighted by the content of the letters that are reduced only to the state of mind of the military because after long sufferings, they are still safe. The danger of death causes some soldiers to repent, confess their sins to the priest, or ask forgiveness from those at home to be reconciled. Others, becoming stronger in the faith, to go to the battlefield, no longer having the certainty that they would be victorious in the face of death. The religiosity of the soldiers can be deduced from the trust and hope in God, prayers, but also from the concern of marking important holidays, such as Easter and Christmas.

For those at home, the religious sentiment varies, as evidenced by the multitude of secular and church press articles. They describe actions, such as the mobilization of parishioners for various actions, attending church, seeking spiritual comfort obtained through the advice of the priest, repentance, the purchase of religious books. On the other hand, there are sad cases with parishioners who remain indifferent to the church or priests who do not live up to expectations.

The military authorities knew the religious sentiment of the soldiers, and with the help of propaganda they promoted Christian virtues, such as: courage, faith, hope, friendship, justice, diligence, love of country and emperor. Thus, various illustrated postcards with religious themes were published, which were later purchased by soldiers. Apart from propaganda, there are a number of writers and directors, both during and after the war, who promote an anti-war message, questioning the struggle for a homeland to which they are not emotionally attached. Some writers Karl Kraus and Jaroslav Hašek mock military priests, while others present them in a better light, recognizing their merits in raising the morale of the military.

The last chapter describes how the Austro-Hungarian propaganda worked and how it used religious sentiment to strengthen patriotism, loyalty to the emperor and support for the war effort. Propaganda published newspapers, magazines, illustrated postcards, manifestos, or released films and documentaries, organized war-related exhibitions. Of all these, we focused on illustrated postcards because they were accessible to the public, often containing scenes with images of Jesus Christ, the Mother of God, angels, or religious holidays. In the case of the inhabitants of Transylvania, including the Romanians, we noticed in the collection of letters from the National Archives, Cluj County Directorate, the use of such illustrated postcards. We have also included others, available on the Internet, which circulated in the correspondence of the inhabitants of the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the war, for a more comprehensive analysis. Also, the religious feeling can be reconstructed from some films and literary works, where military priests appear, their dialogues with the soldiers, or descriptions of the religious services officiated at the front. As the literary and cinematographic production of Austro-Hungarian propaganda contained few references to this aspect, the emphasis being on cultivating patriotism, we included works and films that bypassed propaganda and censorship. In the case of writers, they either published their works in another country during the war, such as Octavian C. Tăslăuanu or Iustin Sohorca, or after its completion, as happened in the case of the writer Jaroslav Hašek. We also included the works of writers who fought in the Entente camp such as Ernest Hemingway, Henri Barbusse or Roland Dorgelès, to see how religious sentiment manifested itself among soldiers in other armies or civilians. Similarly, we included some films that appeared after the war, from which we extracted images relevant to the characterization of the religious sentiment of the soldiers of the Great War.

Therefore, despite the vicissitudes of the times, the Romanian clergy in Transylvania rose to the level of expectations, having a complex role, exceeding their responsibilities, both on the front and in the parishes.