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Army chaplains in the first World War Monarchy army

Pastoral service in the army is not the characteristic of modern times. There have been people in the army dealing with soldier's spiritual life from time immemorial.

Now I would like to make the readers acquainted with the history of army chaplain service and the work of priests serving in the army of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

Historians studying this field have referred to the topic.¹ There are also numerous studies about priests' work in peacetime² and besides the regulation of army chaplain service³ is at our disposal, too.

In my study I make attempts to reveal frontline army chaplains' service and the difficulties they faced with.

Antecedents

„...When thou out goest to battle against thine enemies , and seest horses and chariots , and people more than thou, be not afraid of them: for the Lord thy God is with thee, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. 2 And it shall be, when ye are come nigh unto the battle, that the priest shall approach and speak unto people. 3 and shall say unto them, Hear , O Israel, ye approach this day unto battle against your enemies: let not your hearst faint, fear not, and do not tremble, neither be ye terrified because of them; 4 For the Lord your God is he that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies to save you....”⁴ This law of Moses is from about 1200 B.C. which regulates war preparations both from military and spiritual aspect for the ancient Jewish soldiers.

Naturally the pagan people also had their rituals which helped them to take courage before a fight. For instance the well-known ‘haruspexes’ or augurs in ancient Roman Legions prophesied the success of battles from the migration and intestines of birds⁵.

¹ Dr. Varga József „Magyar Tábori lelkészek tevékenysége 1900-1950” Bp.1994 Kandidátusi értekezés (József Varga The Hungarian Army Chaplains 1900-1950 Candidate dissertation)

Borovi József A magyar táborig lelkészet története Zrínyi Kiadó Budapest 1992 (József Borovi History of Army Chaplain Service)

In the following: Borovi

² Dr. Melichár Kálmán A katonai lelkészet – Az Osztrák –Magyar Monarchia közös hadseregében (haditengerészetnél) és a magyar királyi honvédségnél- Budapest,1899. (Kálmán Melichár – Army Chaplain Service in the Joint Army of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and in the Hungarian Royal Army) In the following lásd Melichár

³ A-19/1913 – Szolgálati utasítás a magyar királyi honvédség lelkészei számára (Regulation of Army Chaplain Service) In the following. Lásd: Regulation of Army Chaplain Service 26§

⁴ In : Hole Bible Old Testaments, Deuteronomy chapter 20,, ...*Ha ellenséged ellen harcba indulsz s a lovakat, harci szekereket s magadnál népesebb hadinépet látsz, ne rettenj meg tőlük. Mert a veled van az Úr, a te Istened, aki kivezetett Egyiptom földjéről. Mielőtt a csata megkezdődne, lépjen elő a pap a sereg elé és szóljon a harcosokhoz: Halljad Izrael!Ma harcba szálltok ellenségeitekkel. De ne csüggedjen szívetek!Mert az Úr, a Ti Istenetek kivonul veletek küzdeni ellenségeitek ellen és győzelemre segít benneteket ...”*

⁵ In: Borovi pp.7-12.

With the spread of Christianity there was a greater demand among army men on practicing religion in wartime as well. In the Early Middle Ages we can always find outstanding churchmen, monks who were present in the armies but this was not an organized network then.

Archbishop Boniface, who was an excellent member of the German Catholic Church, summoned the „Concilium germanicum” in 741 A.D. Its second canon dealt with army chaplains : „...it is strictly forbidden for priests to be in arms and go to war, except for these who are sent to armies to celebrate mass and take care of relics...every head of army must have a priest who is entitled to judge the sins of the penitents and to determine the penance...”⁶

Crusades, which were announced in the name of the Church by II. Pope Urban in the Clermont convocation, brought an enormous change in army chaplain history. It became common then for chaplains to accompany the army in war.

On the Holy Land as a result of victorious fights they succeeded in establishing Christian countries, which unfortunately did not prove to be long lasting. Then knighthood was established to which such fighters joined who considered the defence of religion of primary importance.⁷

In the fights against the Ottoman Empire also many chaplains took part to raise soldiers fighting spirit and help them to worship their religion. When the Ottomans were defeated in Hungary the Habsburgs ascended the throne, who had already had orders that gave soldiers the possibility of practicing their religion in wartime as well. I. Ferdinand pointed Antal Brus Generalis Vicarius. The regiment’s chaplains celebrated mass in tents which were set up exclusively for this purpose. Soldiers had the possibility of confession and the holy commune at Easter. In 1614 Marenzi Antal published his comprehensive work „A tábori lelkészek szervezeti szabályzata” about the organizational regulation of army chaplains. Two years later a papal breve gave the leading of army chaplain service to the Jesuit order in the Habsburg Empire until the dissolution of the order in 1773.⁸

Following this the apostolic army board of vicars (tábori helynökség) was established, which first belonged to the bishopric of Bécsújhely and later to St. Pölten until 1826.

The law issued in April, 1848 orders to set up an independent national army in Hungary. The army chaplains had a great role in this. Many chaplains earned distinction in the fight for freedom: after the breakthrough in Branyiszko in February, 1849 chaplain Imre Erdösi seeing that the attack had come to standstill, threw a one meter long wooden cross that he was holding into the snow and shouted at the soldiers: “Would you leave God to these pagans”⁹. Hearing this they continued the fight with renewed strength and managed to go through the mountain pass.

After the compromise of 1867 the Royal Army was established. They garrisoned locally so they belonged to the local church whose priest dealt with soldiers’ spiritual life and the delivery of the sacrament. According to an order, issued in 1869, army chaplain service was only organised in case of mobilization. In 1883 the first army chaplain was pointed in peacetime who worked as a teacher in the Hungarian Royal Military Academy (Magyar

⁶ In: Borovi p.12. or Hefele K. Konziliengeschichte 9. Bd. Freiburg 1850-1890:”...szigorúan megtiltjuk a papoknak, hogy fegyvert hordozzanak és háborúba vonuljanak, kivéve azokat, akik szentmise végzésére és az ereklyék gondozása céljából vannak kirendelve a hadsereg kíséretére...minden seregszereplőnek rendelkeznie egy áldozópappal, aki jogosult a bűnbánó bűneit megítélni, és azokra megfelelő vezeklést kiróni...”

⁷ Further reading in Bozsóky Pál Gerő Keresztes hadjáratok Agapé Kiadó 1995 (Pál Gerő Bozsóky Crusages)
⁸ In Borovi pp.13-52.

⁹ ”Otthagynátok az Úristent ezeknek a pogányoknak” In: Hermann Róbert 1848/49 A szabadságharc története Korona Kiadó Budapest, 2001 (Róbert Hermann Fight for Freedom in 1848/49). pp.209.

Királyi Honvéd Ludovika Akadémia). Later we can find army chaplains in garrison hospitals in the capital city.

The mobilization

After the declaration of war in August, 1914 the Hungarian Royal Army and the Austrian landwehr formations with the joint regiments gave the Monarchy Army. The army chaplain service was reorganised so that the authority of the apostolic army board of vicars was extended to the whole army but in wartime a separate Hungarian Royal and Austrian Imperial army chaplain service had to be set up. Army chaplains both at the Hungarian and at the joint regiments received their commission from the apostolic army board of vicars.

In the process of mobilization not only soldiers were called up but also army chaplains. If somebody wanted to join the army one had to comply with strict requirements. Besides physical fitness there were other important criteria such as proficiency in theology.¹⁰ The clergymen serving in the joint regiments had to be citizens of the Monarchy and have immaculate past. Moreover the average age of the priests was not over forty. Those who served in the Royal Hungarian Army had to be Hungarian citizens and be fluent in a language that was spoken in the Monarchy. It was an advantage if this language was German. It was essential in this multicultural society as very often the soldier asking for help, confession or the extreme unction had other nationality.

A minimum of three years of civil service¹¹ was another indispensable condition that the applicant had to have.¹²

We also have to mention the question of the clothes the chaplains wore. They were bound to keep themselves to the regulations of the Church but naturally certain allowances were made for the special conditions they worked in. They belonged to the officers but did not wear sword which was part of the officers' garment.

During mobilization chaplains were temporarily dismissed from their parish. The county bishop presented them a certification with which they reported at the army superior. Then they joined the board led by the vicar apostolic but they were still listed in the register of their original diocese and were in contact with the ecclesiastical leader. As Melichar wrote, in case of mobilization the army chaplains are not under the episcopal county administration but put under the jurisdiction of the apostolic army board of vicars.¹³

As the unexpected events the army chaplains met were always unforeseen, they were ordered to carry a stole, a cross, a box for the holy unction as well as the book of church services in a leather handbag every time.¹⁴

Front service

¹⁰In: Melichár p.80

¹¹ In: Melichár p. 82., „legalább három évi polgári lelkeszeti tevékenységnek”

¹² Further reading in: Melichár pp.80-87

¹³ In. Melichár p 125. In: „, már egészen ki van véve a rendes püspök megyei igazgatás alól és a közös hadsereg részére szervezett apostoli tábori vicariatusnak jurisdictiója alá helyeztetik...”

¹⁴ In: Regulation of Army Chaplain Service 26§

In the war that broke out both soldiers and chaplains had to live under extraordinary circumstances. Advance in technology resulted in more destructive weapons than ever before and a new, unknown war took shape, which caused huge losses and a great number of casualties. The presence of army chaplains meant real support for the soldiers who were fighting in the midst of inhuman circumstances.

They tried to send an army chaplain to every regiment who spent all of his time with the soldiers.

Chaplains' most valuable work was possibly with injured soldiers. They gave spiritual comfort, absolved after confession and delivered the sacrament to desperate and many times to seriously injured people. According to the regulation¹⁵ meanwhile fights were taking place chaplains had to always be at the place where first aid was given and they had to be the last to leave.¹⁶

Because of the incredibly great losses funerals went on almost continuously. Graves were dug beforehand and common soldiers were often buried into common graves. Identifying the dead and filling out death certifications was the chaplains' duty. It was not always possible for them to bury everybody – especially after a military operation with a great number of casualties – but in this case they blessed the graves later.

Losing a comrade meant real inner struggle for soldiers. A reserve officer wrote about it and underlined that seeing the chaplain above a fellow-soldier's grave made them extremely sad. They were sorry for two reasons: firstly because they buried a friend and secondly because a funeral always made them think about the fact that they might be the next one. Moreover the ceremonies were short and held in bad circumstances.¹⁷ It was a real challenge for army chaplains to ease soldiers' pain in such situations.

Officers were always buried separately in wooden coffins and a chaplain was present every time. Sometimes the dead hero was put in a grave in a temporary cemetery behind the frontline and following a later exhumation the mortal remains were transported home and buried with military ceremony to a final grave.

A sad duty was to let the family know about their relative's death. This task was performed by the squadron writer but army chaplains also took their share of it. In exceptional cases the chaplain instead of an official notice wrote an informal one. So did Pál Hoitsy, the priest of the 17th infantry regiment of Székesfehérvár when he informed Emil Csokonay about his son's, László's death. He mentioned that the hero was his friend and was beloved by the regiment and his men.¹⁸

Soldiers did not forget about their dead comrades not even in the middle of the greatest battles. They always commemorated the day of the dead on 1 November. A soldier wrote in his memoirs that they scraped together candle pieces to decorate the graves and the wire used in barricades then served a more pious aim and formed pine tree branches into wreaths.¹⁹

¹⁵ In: Regulation of Army Chaplain Service 27§

¹⁶ First aid place was signed by two flags – white with red cross and yellow-black- by day, and red cross lamp at night.

¹⁷ Székesfehérvári Friss Újság XVI. évfolyam (newspaper) 1915. április 25-., ... *Nagyon elszomorul az arcunk, ha egy bajtársunk sírja felett áll a pap. Harangzúgás, ágyuk üvöltése, koporsó: egy szürkévé fagyott katonakabát s a bajtárs máris megy a föld alatti lakásába. A pap szentbeszéde ilyenkor kétszeresen fáj: a pap búcsúztat minket egy barátától, de emlékeztet arra, hogy mi is meghalunk. S ki szeret még a harctéren is arra gondolni, hogy meg fog halni...*

¹⁸ Székesfehérvári Friss Újság (newspaper) XVII. évfolyam 1916., ... *a hősz fiú nekem jó barátom, az ezrednek szeretett tagja, kiválóan teljesítette mindvégig kötelességét. Katonái rajongva szerették. Nagyon fáj a csapás, ami Önöket érte, így hát el tudjuk képzelni az Önök nagy fájdalmát. De reméljük, hogy a Mindenható Isten ki ezt a keresztet vállunkra helyezte erőt fog adni annak elviselésére. Ő adta, ő vette el...*

¹⁹ In: A cs. és kir. 23. gyalogezred hadialbuma – emlékkönyv írásban és képekben Szerk: Kun József Jenő Bp. 1916 (József Jenő Kun War Album of the 23th Imperial and Royal Infantry Regiment)

Spending feasts far away from the beloved family was a strange and heart-rending feeling for soldiers. An officer in his memoirs described us how they celebrated the holy day of Christmas.²⁰ They put up Christmas trees and even a crèche, played the Nativity and sang Christmas carols. They also made presents for each other for which the available materials were used. They manufactured different kinds of knick-knacks from shell splinters that the Russians shot at them. Some of the presents were real masterpieces. There was a great variety of aluminium rings, watch-chains, ink-stands and candlesticks.

Army chaplains also had to deal with spiritual preparation and try to create intimate atmosphere and to prepare soldiers for big events. They continuously confessed soldiers and together with the officers they tried to give the possibility of attending masses.

The body of officers was willing to give the possibility to religious soldiers to live a life according to the rules of the Church not only at Christmas but also on weekdays. Army masses were regular to which all the soldiers were free to go if their service made it possible. On these occasions they were able to confess and receive the sacrament. These masses were often celebrated outside and thus many times interrupted by the attacks of the enemy, which meant real danger to the people attending.

Masses were frequently in undamaged churches in the villages behind the frontlines but some special scenes occurred, too. Gallant Doromby describes a mass that was touching and elicited great emotions in a salt mine in Désakna. It was held on 17 June, 1917 by army chaplain Ferenc Mike and his assistant, István Rónai. For this very special event the salt mine was illuminated and among the giant salt columns a hand-made altar was erected by the soldiers which they surrounded with pompous wreathes and beautiful bunches of flowers.²¹

Since circumstances were really special, time and time again the mass was ecumenical. Army chaplains saw that now it was a need for changes and they knew that deviation from the Church regulations was needed. They thought giving real support and spiritual aid to soldiers -regardless of their denomination- was more important than asking about the sect they belonged to.

Once in Galicia after suffering great losses at the foot of the Gay height the 34th regulation from Kassa celebrated the mass together. After that they always desired to do so.²²

„...az összekuporgatott gyertyákkal díszítették a sírokat és az akadályoknál használt drótok most az egyszer sokkal kegyesebb célt szolgáltak:messziről hozott fenyőgallyakat formálták koszorúkká...”

²⁰ In: Egy tiszt naplójából – Laky Imre BP. 1920. (Imre Laky – From an officer's diary) „...*Karácsony is elmúlt, karácsonyfákat is állítottunk mindenfelé. Még betlehem járás is volt, s a kis Jézuska sem feledkezett meg rólunk. Az oroszok által belőtt gránátok, srpnerek darabjaiból mindenféle csecsebecséket készítettek a katonák. Némelyek darab az iparművészet magaslatára emelkedik. Alumíniumgyűrűk pazar változatosságából, óraláncokból, tintatartókból, gyertyatartókból kiállítás lehetett rendezni...*”-

²¹ In: A volt cs. és kir 38-as gyalogezred története és emlékalbuma Írta: vitéz Doromby József Bp. 1936 – (József Doromby History and War album of the 38th Imperial and Royal Infarty Regiment) p.341.

„...*Meghatóan szép, mély ihletet kiváltó tábori misét tartott 1917.június 17-én Mike Ferenc tábori lelkész és Rónai István segédkezése mellett a désaknai sóbányában a katonák számára. A sóbánya ebből az alkalomból fényesen ki lett világítva, a magas sósoszlopok között a katonák által faragott remekművű oltár emelkedett, elhalmozva pompásabbnál pompásabb koszorúkkal és virágcsokrokkal...*”

²²Vitéz Pávai Mátyás Sándor A Máramaros és Ugocsa megyei 85. gyalogezred története (Mátyás Sándor Pávai The History of the 85th Infantry regiment of Máramaros and Ugocsa counties) p.721.

„...a nem szigorú értelemben vett felekezeti lelkészi szolgálatot végeztünk, az embert csal mint harcost tekintettük, kinek lelke szomjuhozza az onnan felülről jövő enyhülést. Így elkerültük az átkos felekezeti kérdést és ezeknek a feszegetését. Az olyan nagyon szükséges lelki együttműködés csak így volt lehetséges. 1914-ben Galíciában a szomorú emlékü Gay nevű magaslat lábánál a kassai 34-esek római katolikus lelkészével Szöllősy

As it was wartime the army chaplain now and then found himself in strange situations. One day squadron commander László Illés died, first lieutenant Ember got a serious injury, a shot in the stomach. The two squadrons were left without officers so army chaplain Lajos Kun took over the command and only after defeating the enemy three times did he draw back at 9 p.m. The 218 people marched all night and arrived at the regiment at 10 a.m. on 31 August, 1915 as we can read it in the memoirs of the 17th infantry regiment of Székesfehérvár.²³ The chaplain got Signum Laudis medal for his bravery.²⁴

It is obvious from this short summery how varied army chaplains' work was in the frontlines of the First World War. They often risked their lives and many of them died while fulfilling their duty.

What army chaplains' presence meant for the soldiers is described by gallant Sándor Mátyás Pávai, retired tieutenant-general: "... the good old army chaplains were there everywhere to strengthen soldiers' spirit, before and during the fights, in the trenches, in the attacks, to encourage, to hearten, to inspire soldiers to traditional Hungarian prowess, gallantry and bravery, without noticing exertion they helped soldiers every time..."²⁵

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Istvánnal együtt tartottunk istentiszteletet az egész ezrednek s kölcsönösen részt vettünk egymás szertartásán. Ez a tény olyan jó hatással volt a jelenvoltakra, hogy ennek ismétlését óhajtották..."

²³ Mákosfalvi Sipos Gyula 17-esek a világháborúban (Gyula Mákosfakvi Sipos The 17th Regiment in the First Word War) p. 21.

"...a századparancsnokok közül Illés László elesik, Ember főhadnagy súlyosan megsebesül (haslövés). A tiszttel nélkül maradt két századnyi legénység fölött Kun Lajos tábori lelkész veszi át a parancsnokságot, s még három rohamot visszaverve, csak 21h-kor vonul vissza. Egész éjjel menetelve, augusztus 31-én délelőtt 10 h-kor érkezik az ezredhez 218 emberrel..."

²⁴ Székesfehérvári Friss Újság XVI. évfolyam 1915. július 21.

²⁵ Vitéz Pávai Mátyás Sándor A Máramaros és Ugocsa megyei 85. gyalogezred története (Mátyás Sándor Pávai The History of the 85th Infantry regiment of Máramaros and Ugocsa counties) p.722.

"...ott voltak a derék tábori lelkészek mindenütt a katonák lelkének erősítésére az ütközetek kezdetekor, a harcok tartama alatt a lövészárkokban és a rohamokban, bátorítva, buzdítva lelkesítve a hagyományos magyar virtusra, bátorságra s vitézségre a fáradságot nem ismervé, minden körülmények között segítségükre siettek a katonáknak..."

Bp.1913 –(Regulation of Army Chaplain Service)

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