

PARTICIPATION OF MILITARY PRIESTS IN DAMBOVITA COUNTY ON THE FRONT IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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ABSTRACT

The history of our people is known for the devotion and the total involvement of the servants of the Church for the greater good of this nation and for the fulfillment of its secular aspirations, of unity and independence. There are documented cases where the priests have fought alongside with the other soldiers of the country, with their weapon in their hands. Romania's entry into the First World War has made the priests want to be alongside with the soldiers - their spiritual sons. We also know the names of the priests from Dâmbovița county who have done their duty, fighting for the country and for the greater good of the Romanian people. All the military priests have done their duty on the front, being appreciated by the commanders of our army. Many of them have been decorated or advanced. Therefore, we will not be wrong if we say that the priests have made a precious contribution to the creation of the unitary Romanian national state, through the patriotic activity they have carried out on the battlefields. Many of them have suffered to the point of sacrificing their lives, alongside with the soldiers, in the most difficult moments of the war. This study wants nothing more, but to bring our heroes out of the shadow of oblivion, highlighting their spirit of sacrifice, their heroism and, the most important of them all, their love for the country. Heroes never die!

Keywords: First World War; military priests; soldiers; battlefields; Church; national state;

INTRODUCTION

Romania's entry into the reunification war on 14/27 August 1916 was also greeted with great enthusiasm by the inhabitants of Dambovita County; the century dream of unifying all territories in only one state where people could speak Romanian and live the Romanian way was to come true by total mobilization. Furthermore, everybody was aware that only by fighting would Romanians have won their right to be a free and sovereign nation. Understanding the international context and anticipating the desire of the small states to free themselves from the influence of the large empires, both the king and the whole Romanian state felt that the Great War was the right time for them to unchain and affirm themselves on the European and international political arena, as brave and firm as an independent state .

Actually, as the historian Șerban Constantinescu stated, "the first world war did not represent for Romania a means or a way, but an occasion, an opportunity to affirm the national desideratum and achieve such desideratum in the context of some circumstances favorable to the war of the national liberation of the nations from under foreign occupation"¹.

¹ Șerban Constantinescu, *Romania in the War for State Unification (1916 - 1918). The Great Unification*, Publishing House of the National History Museum of Romania, Bucharest, 1998, p. 5.

Moreover, according to the testimony of a priest who activated in the battles of the great war, Cicerone Iordăchescu – confessor of 4th Regiment Mountain Group, most inhabitants of this country lived those moments under the tension of a wish which had to be fulfilled.

For Romanians, this was a “holy war”, as king Ferdinand himself called it in his *Message to Romanians* of 14/27 August 1917², one year after the country entered the dreadful conflagration which for the first time in history involved so many countries; in a Christian interpretation, this was the only chance granted by the Divine Providence to this disfavored people to have yet again the Unified Romania.

The servants of the holy altar could not overlook this holy calling and when the bells rang to announce the time of redemption, on the Assumption of the Virgin Mary night (15 August, old style calendar), the priests took everything they needed and headed for the borders, alongside the people they shepherded³, in order to see their brothers beyond the freed Carpathians.

The priests’ presence on the battlefield in order to support the soldiers was asked not only for pastoral and missionary reasons – many of them being their own parishioners, but also as a moral duty in relation to their country, state and king; the young men who were in process of attending a theological school were forced to do their military service.

In this respect, as early as the spring school of the Holy Synod of 01.09.1905, the letter of the Ministry of Culture, stating that the request of the graduates of Theology Schools and Seminars regarding their military exemption⁴ may not be approved, is taken into debate and accepted (and shortly after implemented). Therefore, we understand that the generation of the priests present on the battlefield of the war towards state reunification also had such military experience, shortly after completion of theological courses⁵.

Consequently, on the verge of the first world war, the priests mobilized in their dual capacity, both as servants of God, following completion of their bachelor’s theological studies, and as military representatives, by completion of their military service, demonstrated that they truly are “shepherds of souls” and that their place is near the ones they shepherded, even throughout difficult times like the times spent on the battlefield where they animated the spirit of the brave fighters and served as examples of sacrifice and devotion to the priceless values of the state: country, faith and motherland.

1. PRESENCE OF RELIGIOUS ASSISTANCE IN THE REGIMENTS OF DAMBOVITA (1870-1916)

The history of this garrison provided no references on the presence of military clergymen, although by decree 603/16 April 1870, promulgated by king Carol and entitled “*Regulation for the clergymen in the permanent army*”, the decision was made for every

²King Ferdinand’s *Message to Romanians one year after the country’s entry into the war*: 14 August 1917, in vol. *The Military Campaigns of 1917*, scientific coordinator Bianca Pîrvulescu, edited by the National Archives of Romania, Bucharest, 2017, p. 9.

³Following Jesus’s example, Who called Himself “the Good Shepherd” (In. 10, 14), the priest, in his priestly mission, feels like a shepherd looking after their herd, and this is the reason why it is considered that “where the herd is, the shepherd should be”, an expression which the Metropolitan Nestor Vornicescu will debate in his work: *Where the herd is, the shepherd is*, published by the Publishing House of the Metropolitan Church of Oltenia, Craiova, 1985.

⁴Acc to *Ecclesiastical Chronicle*, in “Romanian Orthodox Church”, No. 3/1906, p. 327.

⁵As stated in the Decision of the Holy Synod, the mobilized priests had to be bachelors of theology and between 35 and 45 of age.

regiment to have their own priest. This normative act was to be amended in 1876 and 1877⁶, in the sense that the priests assigned to military units were to be replaced by garrison priests who were expected to deliver religious services for all military units within the respective garrison⁷. Under such circumstances, we consider that the troops stationed in the garrison were not deprived of religious support which was provided by an officiating priest in one of Targoviste parishes.

To conclude, we cannot find a name of a confessor priest on the lists of the employees of Dambovita garrison prior to 13 August 1916, namely the day prior to the day on which Romania entered into the maelstrom of the first worldwide conflagration. Subsequent to this date, the military documents show priest Ion Șt. Popescu⁸, servant of “Sfântul Nicolae - Simuleasa” Church in Târgoviște, hence the second name assigned.

2. DAMBOVITA MILITARY PRIESTS MOBILIZED DURING CAMPAIGNS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR (1916-1918)

In the *Report* of archpriest Constantin Nazarie, head of the Army Religious Department, remitted to the Holy Synod in 1920, which elaborates on the activity of the priests mobilized in the 1916 – 1918 campaign, we find the following presentation in relation to their number: “... a total number of 252 priest were mobilized, among whom two were inactive. Of these 252, 46 were demobilized for different reasons, 25 were declared missing and prisoners and 5 dead”⁹.

It becomes obvious that, given the fairly large number of names and also numerous amendments to the lists, we find in the archives several tables including confessor priests mobilized in the first world war, drawn up by both the Church institutions and the Army institutons, at various moments in time (prior to Romania’s entry into the war, during the conflagration and after it); a variety which creates a much ampler general picture which priest Nazarie attempts to create, at the end of his *Report*, by categories: priests mobilized in the 1916 – 1918 campaign, dead and missing priests, decorated priests.

In view of the fact that in June 1916, father Constantin Nazarie carries out an intense activity towards getting to know and training the mobilized priests, we find out that on 20 and 21 June, by the decision of the Holy Synod, he will meet the priests of the Metropolitan Church of Muntenia, to which the priests of Dâmbovița belonged as well.

The *Full Account* remitted by the Army archpriest to the first metropolitan¹⁰, shows that of the total number of 49 mobilized priests, only one failed to attend these meetings, priest Lazăr M. Popescu, from “Sfântul Ilie” Church in Găești – Dambovita, who, upon the

⁶Cristina Constantin, *Aspects on the legislative framework of the military priests’ activity 1850 – 1924*, in “MISIUNEA”, No. 1/2014, p. 61.

⁷Mircea Păcurariu, *Army and Church in the past of our country*, in “Revista Teologică”, No. 1/2018, p. 22.

⁸Acc to *Table including names of priests in the garrison*, archived in the National Romanian Military Archives (hereinafter AMNR), collection of microfilms 4991, reel F.II. 4.1520, file 63, take 688.

⁹Constantin Nazarie, *cited works*, edition 2018, p. 75.

¹⁰Conon Arămescu Donici, first metropolitan between 14 February 1912 – 1 January 1919 (acc to Mircea Păcurariu, *History of the Romanian Orthodox Church*, vol. III, 3rd edition, Trinitas Publishing House, Iași, 2010, p. 124).

date of the document under discussion¹¹, had not provided explanations for his absence before his superiors.

In relation to the same event, we read about the dissatisfaction of some participating priests, who showed their resentment towards the attitude of some comrades who “took some back roads and absented themselves from their common duty”, bringing by their gesture “disregard and guilt” upon all priests, a gesture which was seen as the equivalent of “a reprehensible desertion from the most sacred duty imposed upon all citizens”¹².

Among the signatories of this memorandum there were four priests from Dambovită. If we add absentee priest Lazăr Popescu, there would be a total of 5 names on a list of 35 persons. Nevertheless, as we have already mentioned, 49 priests (48 present) were summoned, which means that from among the 13 priests non-signatories of the petition, the remaining priests summoned were from Dambovită.

Following analysis of the lists in the *Report* of the Army Archpriest, we will find 7 priests from Dambovită on the list of the 253, to whom another name is added on the list of missing priests – priest Rătescu Ioan, who passed away from exanthematic typhus, in the spring of 1917. Corroborating these lists with the other lists analyzed in the National Romanian Military Archives, the number of priests from Dambovită mobilized during the first world war amounts to 13:

1. Priest ALEXE Ghe. Vasile –Târgoviște parish – 62th Infantry Regiment / Ambulance 2nd Cavalry Division;
2. Priest DOLINESCU C. Alexandru – father confessor within Military High School of Dealu Monastery – Fortifications;
3. Priest MATEESCU Teodor – Titu parish – 22nd Infantry Regiment;
4. Priest NIȚESCU Constantin –Ghinești parish;
5. Priest OPRESCU I. Haralambie –Sturzeni parish – 5th Artillery Brigade / 82nd Infantry Regiment;
6. Priest RĂTESCU Ion –Serdanu parish – 2nd Brigade of Roșiori;
7. Priest POPESCU O. Alexandru – Hăbeni parish – Hospital 2 Infectious Diseases / Sanitary Train no. 12;
8. Priest POPESCU M. Ion –Mătășaru parish – Mobile Hospital no. 3;
9. Priest POPESCU N. Ioan – Bărbuleț – church of Stelea Monastery - Târgoviște - 22nd Infantry Regiment;
10. Priest POPESCU V. Lazăr –“Sfântul Ilie” parish Găești – 68th Infantry Regiment;
11. Priest POPESCU M. Mihai – Ghergani parish –2nd Brigade Călărași;
12. Priest POPESCU Nicolae - Țâța – “Mitropolia” Church - Târgoviște – 1st Brigade Roșiori / Ambulance 2nd Cavalry Division;
13. Priest POPESCU Șt. Ioan – Simuleasa – “Sfântul Nicolae” parish Simuleasa - Târgoviște - 51st/52nd Infantry Regiment.

In addition, there were other priests included on the lists of mobilized priests even though they did not fight on the front due to various reasons:

1. Priest CERCEL N. Ștefan – Church of Viforâta Monastery – 5th Artillery Brigade;
2. Priest POPESCU M. Constantin –Voinești parish;

¹¹Document dated 23 June 1916 (acc to Gheorghe Nicolescu, Gheorghe Dobrescu, Andrei Nicolescu, *Romanian Orthodox Church and the Great Union. Priests in Trenches 1916 – 1919*, vol. I, Basilica Publishing House, Bucharest, 2018, p. 159).

¹²*Ibidem*, p. 152.

3. Priest POPESCU Dumitru –Doicești parish;
4. Priest POPESCU I. Nicolae – Glodeni parish – declared “ill”, acc to document No. 18/1916.

For their activity conducted with a great amount of sacrifice as well as for “other worthy-of-reward actions”, as priest Constantin Nazarie¹³ used to affirm, some of the military priests from Dambovita were promoted, although they all deserved such reward. Gaining such rights involved hard work and a lot of perseverance, a journey that the Army archpriest started so that the military priests should gain the same status as reserve lieutenants, for their theological education, their prestige before the soldiers and also as a token of their effort. As mentioned in the report prepared in this respect¹⁴, the hope was that, by granting promotions, the brave ones should be rewarded while the others should be motivated towards a more intense activity.

In March 1917, the order no. 19001/9 was therefore issued, pinpointing the fact that “many priests showed abnegation and Christian love in fulfilling their tasks as moral leaders of soldiers and sometimes acted bravely towards serving as examples of courage and contempt of death”¹⁵. Acknowledging how important their presence among soldiers was, the military priests were also recognized their status of active officers, being seen as lieutenant ranked. The military priests who were to stand out for their “acts of courage and manhood”, would be certainly assimilated to the rank of captain, upon proposal of their superiors.

Another important aspect specified in the same order referred to the pay the military priests collected as remuneration, pay which matched the level of military ranks to which they were assimilated. Additionally, for the same reasons, point 3 of the order set forth that the priests “shall receive the respect worthy of such ranks”. And to ensure recognition of such regulations as well as their observance as such by the army representatives, the document ended with the mention that officers “should make arrangements in person and should provide their full support in complying with such provisions”¹⁶.

3. MILITARY PRIESTS FROM DAMBOVITA IN BASARABIA

The insecurity of the young Republic of Moldova in the autumn of 1917 and early 1918, when both revolutionaries from Ukraine and the Russian Bolsheviks reclaimed the territory from Prut to Nistru, or a part of this territory, determined the Council of the Country, the first parliament of Basarabia, “the highest ruling establishment of the country”, as stipulated in *The Project for Organizing Basarabia*¹⁷ read in the meeting of the Council of the Country on November 1917, to ask the Romanian Army for help so as to re-establish the order.

To calm things down, 11th Infantry Division under the command of brigade general Ernest Broșteanu was first sent to set Chișinău free. At that time, Chișinău was under the Bolshevik occupation and the revolutionary Russian troops were sent over Nistru. 11th Division would receive enforcements from: 9th Infantry Division, under the command of brigade general Constantin Scărișoreanu; 10th Infantry Division, led by brigade general

¹³Constantin Nazarie, *cited works*, p. 33.

¹⁴Document No. 473/12 February 1917, in Constantin Nazarie, *cited works.*, edition 1921, p. 33.

¹⁵Constantin Nazarie, *cited works*, p. 36.

¹⁶Ministry of Defense, C.A. Department, Collection Ministry of War, Religious Service, file 7, sheet 37.

¹⁷Document also edited in volume “Romanians in the *Great War – 1917. Documents, impressions, testimonies*”, coordinator general-major (r) Mihail E. Ionescu, Military Publishing House, Bucharest, 2018, pp. 394 – 395.

Enrich Cihoschy; 13th Infantry Division, under the command of brigade general Ioan Popescu; 1st Cavalry Division, under the command of brigade general Mihai Schina; 2nd Cavalry Division, under the command of brigade general Alexandru Constantinidi and 1st Division Mountain Group, under the command of general Aristide Leca, all troops forming 6th Army Corps, led by general Ion Istrati¹⁸.

These troops were accompanied by their 50 priests who stood out for the activities conducted prior to this time, at pastoral and liturgical level, on the one side, and cultural and health level, on the other side, and who were highly eulogized by their commanders. On this occasion, general Ioan Rășcanu stated that in Basarabia “we do not have priests, we have genuine pearls”¹⁹. The priests from Dambovită are among them:

- Haralambie Oprescu, confessor of 5th Artillery Brigade;
- Ioan Șt. Popescu, 51st/52nd Infantry Regiment;
- Vasile Gh. Alexe, Ambulance of 2nd Cavalry Division.

After demobilization, the only priest who remained on the territory of Basarabia was priest confessor Vasile Alexe, as shown in a *Table – Distribution of Priests to Troops Deployed Basarabia* of 15 May 1918, drawn up in line with the Report of the Religious Service of the General Headquarters no. 259/9 May 1918²⁰.

Many times in their activity carried out in Basarabia, the military priests will have missions completely different from what was provided in the *Instructions*, as they got involved in the process of re-romanization of the inhabitants who had almost forgotten their origins. In this respect, they opened schools in Romanian language, set up libraries or theater groups who played in Romanian.

It is worth mentioning that they were forced to face up to the hatred of the Russian priests, situation which finally entailed their removal from Romanian communities and their transfer to Russian churches²¹.

In addition to all these figures, we also mention the priests who stayed behind on territories under occupation and who had to endure alongside their parishioners the fury of the German soliders who “with the oppressive heel of the brutal and arrogant enemy pushed the mild, patient and obedient nape”²². We take into consideration here priest Iosif Popescu, from Gheboieni parish – shot on the battlefield, in the proximity of the village where he serviced in church and priest Gheorghe Diaconescu, from Vlădeni parish, on whose gravestone is written “died on duty in 1917”, which is during the occupation and needles to say, killed by Germans.

¹⁸Further details ref col. (r) Remus Macovei, *Romanian Military Priests and their Actions in Basarabia (1918 - 1919)*, in Magazine “Misiunea”, No. 1/2018, p. 41; also see col. (r) university professor Ion Giurcă PhD, *Military Priests in Basarabia – missions, activity, findings, proposals*, in Magazine “Misiunea”, No. 1/ 2017, pp. 160 - 164.

¹⁹Constantin Nazarie, *Priests’ Activity in the Army, cited works*, p. 65.

²⁰AMNR, collection of microfilms 4991, reel F.II. 4.1517, file 13, takes 577 – 578.

²¹We find such request in the Report of priest archimandrite Marțian Brezoianu, confessor of 40th “Călugăreni” Regiment, in Gheorghe Nicolescu, Gheorghe Dobrescu, Andrei Nicolescu, *Romanian Orthodox Church and the Great Union, Priests in Trenches (1916 - 1919)*, vol. II, Basilica Publishing House, Bucharest, 2018, p. 297; see Idem, *Priests in the Fight for the Great Union (1916 - 1919)*, EUROPA NOVA Publishing House, Bucharest, 2000, p. 365.

²²Paulina M. Tălăngescu, *Targoviste under German occupation (1916 - 1918). Testimonies*, Transversal Publishing House, Târgoviște, 2006, p. 25.

CONCLUSIONS

Similar to spiritual fathers, the military priests accompanied their sons on the battlefields, breathed life into them and served as true role models of courage and manhood. In all circumstances, both in the front line and behind it, they played an important role, in pastoral and liturgical terms, by saying prayers and uplifting encouraging words, and by washing and cleaning the wounds of the injured or giving medication or food to the soldiers suffering from typhus or courageously facing death in the trenches.

Among these heroes were also the military priests from Dambovită. They made their sacrificial contribution towards achieving the century dream of national reunification. With their achievements, “with time and without time”, they demonstrated that they are at the height of their call as sons and shepherds of the Church and of the Romanian state. Their memoirs and their superiors’ scoring sheets help us understand the cruel reality of the front and the turmoils of the soldiers and the people. Furthermore, we can learn (and we owe them such learning) how much harm the war and the hatred among their fellow human beings can cause.

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