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## **Christian religious experiences within the Austro-Hungarian Army during the Great War**

**Abstract:** The author studies journals and memories of Austro-Hungarian military personnel in order to understand the soldiers' spiritual ordeal. Personal stories provide an insight into the religious and supernatural experiences on the part of the authors of the source material. The text attempts to provide fuller understanding of the personal impact of past historical events.

Joy, sadness, anger, elation, jealousy, envy, despair, anguish, grief – all these feelings are partly social.

They are influenced by cultural ideas and images, are refracted through roles and relationships.

Hopkins, et al. 2009, p. 30

Over the last few years, many studies have addressed the effects that the Great War had on moral, religious and cultural matters. It is now widely acknowledged that factors such as an awareness of death, the longing to see loved ones again, sorrow, state and church propaganda either reawakened religious feelings or intensified already existing ones. For Christians, these feelings manifested themselves as a mixture of practices enhanced by church and superstition. The aim of this article is to investigate the journals and memories of former Austro-Hungarian army personnel that served during the Great War, to identify their religious experiences during the war, and discover the associated feelings and how they were adjusted to the new circumstances.

As Austria-Hungary was a multinational empire, and describing the religious feelings of all the nationalities within the army is beyond the scope of this paper, the focus of this study has been restricted to the experiences of two Austrian and two Romanian officers, one soldier and one military priest, all belonging to different denominations.

The first part of the paper will present the religious attendance in the Austro-Hungarian Army to better understand the importance of religion and religiosity within the army and society at the time. The next part will focus on the personal histories that influenced the religiosity of the subjects: their place of birth, the denomination in which had been baptised in, the social status of their family, the

relationship with church, their studies and any other special events that may have influenced their faith before the war. The final part will identify how the subjects portray their religious or supernatural experiences and what influenced them during the war. The paper will try to depict the differences and the similarities between the subjects, the tendency towards ecumenism, the perception of God's involvement in the war and the role of the authorities. This analysis casts light on other facets of the Great War and on the religious experiences of individuals. It facilitates a fuller understanding of the impact of the past and present historical events on people and their feelings, but also shows how these feelings influence history through their manifestations.

### **Religious Assistance in the Austro-Hungarian Army**

Religious assistance had a long tradition in the Imperial and Royal Austrian Army. The first mention of a military chaplain, on what is today Austrian territory, dates back to the Fifth Century<sup>1</sup>, but only after the 30 Years War was a dedicated institution established to provide permanent religious assistance to soldiers. In 1773, with the approval of the Vatican, the Apostolic Field Vicariate of the Imperial Army was founded in the Wiener Neustadt Diocese. The institution was based on modern bureaucratic principals, as was most of the state apparatus of the monarchy, and functioned until the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire<sup>2</sup>.

The Apostolic Field Vicariate of the Army had under his jurisdiction only Catholic subjects, for whom it was compulsory to attend the weekly religious services provided by the military chaplains. Following the Patent of Tolerance issued in 1781, soldiers baptised in other denominations were also allowed to publicly follow their beliefs, but only outside military establishments. During wartime, the rules were changed, especially for the Border Regiments, where most of the soldiers were Orthodox or Greek-Catholic. After 1758, an imperial decree ordered that during wartime, an Orthodox military chaplain had to be assigned to such regiments in order to minister to religious needs. This decision was enabled by means of a joint intercession of the Metropolitan from Karlowitz (Sremski Karlovci, Serbia), Pavle Nenadović, and the Emperor Joseph II. In 1779, after another imperial decree also the first military chaplains were appointed to serve the spiritual needs of Greek-Catholic soldiers. The situation for religious

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1 Gröger, Roman Hans/ Ham, Claudia/ Sammer, Alfred: *Zwischen Himmel und Erde. Militärseelsorge in Österreich*. Styria Verlag: Graz 2001.

2 Legler, Johannes: *Dissertation: Militärseelsorge in der Österreichisch-Ungarischen Armee von 1867 bis 1918*. Wiener Katholische Akademie: Wien 1979, pp. 3–15.

minorities improved gradually over the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In 1834 for example, it also became compulsory for soldiers belonging to other denominations to attend the Holy Liturgy in their own language at least once a year, to confess and to receive the Holy Communion. Since that moment, Orthodox and Greek-Catholic military chaplains were constantly present in the Army High Administration staff, throughout both war and peace<sup>3</sup>.

The duty of the military clergy, regardless of denomination, was to assist the spiritual needs of the soldiers, officers and students within military establishments. Their responsibilities included celebrating the Holy Liturgy on Sundays and Holidays, giving military personnel the possibility to confess and receive the Holy Communion and facilitating the religious education of students from military schools and academies<sup>4</sup>.

During wartime, the duties of the military chaplain included attending the wounded soldiers from their own Army in the hospitals, holding the Holy Liturgy on Sundays and Holidays, offering the possibility for confession when possible and administering the Last Rites, if possible, to moribunds. They also had to complete reports and papers concerning their activities, keep the Death Register, perform funerals, and sometimes teach religion for the recruits and the students studying in the military schools and academies. Other clerical duties included work at the censorship office, translating for the authorities and wounded soldiers who did not know German or Hungarian and attending prisoners of war<sup>5</sup>. The range of tasks depended on their skills and the orders that came from the military authorities, and were divided among military chaplains belonging to all religions and denomination, according to the laws of supply and demand.

While there were around 300 military chaplains, rabbis and imams in the Religious Service of the Imperial and Royal Army before the war started, this number rose to around 3077 at its end<sup>6</sup>, demonstrating the rising importance of the degree of religious assistance and need for priests during the war. The matter of religious assistance was, however, much more complex due to several reasons. First of all, the Church still had a significant influence upon the majority of Austro-Hungarian society. This was perhaps unsurprising as most of the

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3 Bielik, Emerich: *Geschichte der k.u.k. Militärseelsorge und des Apostolischen Feldvikariates*. Verlag des Apostolischen Feldvikariat: Wien 1901, pp. 289–291.

4 Kriegsministerium, k.u.k. *Dienstvorschrift für die Militärgeistlichkeit*. Kaiserlich-Königliche Hof- und Staatsdruckerei: Wien 1904, pp. 19–21.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 62–74.

6 *Katholische Militärseelsorge Österreich*. 1999. [http://www.mildioz.at/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=57&Itemid=8](http://www.mildioz.at/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=57&Itemid=8) (accessed 03 08, 2013).

population was living in rural areas and were very attached to tradition. It must also be borne in mind that priests also represented one of the highest authorities for moral and religious matters in this area. They gained even more importance as the promoters of national and imperial values and were guiding the manifestation of national and religious identity<sup>7</sup>. Their ideas were disseminated through confessional schools, reunions, associations supported by church, sermons, and a certain cultural policy of the hierarchs and priests.

In such circumstances, the state authorities regarded not only the soldiers' right to manifest their religious belief as important, but also the use of the priests' influence to perpetuate civil loyalty, obedience and the image of a pious monarch. Hence, the duties, policy and message of the church and military chaplains required the duty, policy and speech of the church and military chaplain to be very flexible and enabled them and the state to rule over good Christian civilians: obedient, brave and ready to sacrifice themselves and act as *good soldiers* on the battlefield.

## Religious Feelings and their Expression

The ego-documents are one of the most important sources in the research of religious experiences and the emotions they release. This study is not only based on journals and memories, but also on pastoral reports belonging to the military priest and other documents from the War Archives in Vienna, which offer information about the religious assistance provided for the soldiers, its purpose and effects. Special attention is given to analysing ego-documents such as journals or memoirs, because in journals, feelings and experiences are described shortly after they were experienced, when they were still fresh in the memory of the author; in memoirs, by contrast, feelings and images can be distorted and blurred by other events that took place since the actual, memorised event. They nevertheless offer valuable clues important for the reconstruction of the facts.

The first selected ego-documents were the memoirs which belonged to Edmund Glaise Horstenau, a General, staff officer, historian, politician and diplomat. He wrote his memoirs at the end of World War II, when he was in prison, and finished them shortly before he chose to commit suicide in 1946. He was born in Brunau am Inn, in Tirol, to a family in which serving in the army was a tradition. It seems that as a young boy he aspired to become a priest but the financial

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7 Bârlea, Eugenia: *PhD Thesis: Perspectiva lumii rurale asupra Primului Război Mondial*. Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai: Cluj Napoca 2000, pp. 23–25, 73.

problems of the family forced him to choose a military career<sup>8</sup>. After his studies at the military school in Sankt Pölten and Theresian Military Academy in Wiener Neustadt, von Horstenau attended some classes to work as an officer in the general staff of the army. This brought him close to historical writing and enabled him to work in the War Archives in Vienna.

One of the first records concerning religious practice which may have influenced the life of Horstenau and his way of feeling is the funeral of his father, who died when he was still a child. He does not mention the feelings experienced during the ceremony but mentions crying, a sign of mourning. His attachment towards the Church and his mother can be seen from this early stage of life: the former manifesting as the desire to become a priest and the latter as jealousy towards a possible stepfather<sup>9</sup>. The memories are not based on inner feelings, but on facts, describing people and actions. An important entry appears on the occasion of the beginning of the War. He remembers that the whole city was filled with enthusiasm, a feeling that he did not personally embrace. What he remembers is that the news that he must serve in Lemberg, far away from his mother, who was left in his care, triggered a great sadness. He also mentions that when he realised that the war was to be a world war, he started crying, another sign of mourning<sup>10</sup>.

For the whole period of the war, he does not write about any other significant feelings that may have caused him to address any special prayers to God, the Saints or other intercessor Saints. However, one can sense in him the compassion for those who lost dear people, for the loss of a hero or terrible events that took place during wartime. He also writes about attending Holy Liturgies held by Greek-Catholic, Orthodox and Catholic military priests, and asserts that in the years before the war, religious indulgence was a distinctive characteristic of the Imperial and Royal Austrian Army. The promoter of this policy was the Emperor Franz Joseph himself<sup>11</sup>, which indicates the influence of the image of the Emperor upon von Horstenau.

It must be noted that even though he does not insist on recording his feelings, it is still clear that he manifested religious indulgence, sorrow and compassion for the tragedies caused by the fighting. This did not suggest that he was particularly pious or pleaded more for God's intercession and this may arguably

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8 Broucek, Peter: *Ein General im Zwieliect. Die erinnerungen Edmund Glaises von Horstenau k.u.k. Generalstaboffizier und Historiker*. Vol. 1. Herman Bohlau Verlag: Wien, Koln, Graz 1980, pp. 7–10.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 80–91.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 283–284.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 290, 291, 313.

be related to at least two different aspects. Firstly, he personally admits that his memory was already suffering from oblivion, while secondly, his studies and connections indicate that he was not close to the front line for very long, and he was never on the first front line: he worked mainly for the staff of the army on the Russian Front, in an office, and then in Vienna where he had to prepare reports for the Emperor. This kept him away from the fear, anguish, longing, cold, famine and sorrow after seeing comrades killed in action; feelings that soldiers on the front line usually experienced, and caused them to be more pious and appeal to God or superstition for help.

The second experience is that of Erich Mayr. He was born in Brixen, Tirol, to a modest family. At the age of seven he became an orphan and was placed in the custody of his step mother, his aunt and his grandmother. He attended a private Catholic secondary school in Brixen. The loss of his parents and his studies in an environment dominated by the teachings of the Catholic Church may have influenced Mayr in being a religious person. Afterwards, he graduated from a pedagogical institute with the aim of becoming a teacher, but following the protests of his step mother, he chose to study Accounting and Taxation. These qualifications enabled him to be a public worker at the Finances Office of the County in Innsbruck, until his retirement in 1955. The outbreak of the war surprised Mayr as he was preparing to be engaged to a young lady who came from a modest and pious family<sup>12</sup>.

The first pages of his journal suggest that he was close to the practices of the church, attached to his step mother, passionate towards his fiancé, and ready to sacrifice his life for the country, a sacrifice which he saw as a duty towards God. During the war, Mayr was a soldier in the III. Kaiserschützenregiment, and served in Galicia, the Carpathian mountains, Isonzo and Tirol. His notes are highly detailed, and he writes in a melancholy, critical manner, from the perspective of an artist, public worker and soldier, as well as that of a man passionate about nature. He regards all the things that happened in the world to be decided by God for a reason, a reason that he did not question. In addition, he often thanks God for all the good things and prays for protection for him and his loved ones. Another sign of his piety is his eagerness to attend the Holy Liturgy and regret when the duties of a soldier hindered him from attending. For him, both the collective and individual manifestation of his faith were important and necessary to receive the

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12 Brandauer, Isabelle: "Der Krieg kennt keine Erbarmen". In: *Die Tagebücher des Kaiserschützen Erich Mayr (1913–1920)*. Universitätsverlag Wagner: Innsbruck 2013, pp. 11–31.

intercession of God and the Holy Mother. Before he departed to the front line, he wrote that he attended the Holy Liturgy and received the Holy Communion together with his fiancé<sup>13</sup>.

Unlike Edmund Glaise von Horstenau, Mayr had to serve during the war both on and behind the front line. In the trenches, his most common manifestation of faith was thanking God and praying with great passion. He also recounts collective manifestations, one instance of which being his attendance at Holy Liturgy, where a military priest gave a motivational sermon<sup>14</sup>.

On the day of his departure by train from Ampezzo, he captures the farewell, the enthusiasm of the crowd and their faith in God: girls with flowers, music, the trains covered with patriotic quotes, flowers, flags, Heart of Jesus images, a cross, a rosary and portraits of the Emperor. He also writes how they were singing traditional songs that evoked memories of their brave ancestors fighting for their Emperor<sup>15</sup>.

Other important moments of intense inner experiences manifested in prayer were the important Christian Holidays. On the occasion of his first New Year during the war, while he was still far away from the front line, he thanks God for his mercy and prays for the future<sup>16</sup>. On the occasion of Easter 1915, he was already on the Russian front line. The effect on his feelings and wishes evoked by life on the front line are visible here. His praying intensifies, he asks God for an end to the slaughter<sup>17</sup>, and to return home. Some of Mayr's remarks indicate his inner turmoil: On 3 April 1915, during a night in his hiding place, he writes "[...] if only under such a peaceful sky also the people would be peaceful [...]"<sup>18</sup>; "[...] It is peculiar grieving to see how people treat each other with hostility. How you do to me, this is how I do to you... Awful, how the men transforms into a wild animal during war [...]"<sup>19</sup>.

In his journal, he also exemplifies other feelings and experiences triggered by the war. After the death of his lieutenant, he tries to fulfil the last wish of the deceased: to have a proper Christian funeral, conducted by a priest. Because the body remained between the two lines of the front, Mayr prays again to God and the Holy Mother for help. After several days of intense searching while he risked

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13 *Ibid.*, pp. 46–61.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 63–68.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

18 These passages of Erich Mayr have been translated by the author. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

his life, and much praying, he found the body and organised the funeral<sup>20</sup>. This episode points to the importance of funeral rites and adaptability of the human being in times of distress. Mayr, as well as his lieutenant, and others that had to serve on the front line, were aware of the possibility of premature death. To cope with this, they moved closer to the Church, its practices and what needed to be done in order to obtain salvation for eternal life. Evidence of the rising importance of a proper funeral during wartime can be found in a range of sources including memoirs, journals, the press, military cemeteries and museums. It is important to underline that during the fighting, great significance was assigned not only to the funeral but to all things related to the church which could help to survive or gain salvation, such as prayer books, icons and amulets such as coins with the Heart of Jesus on them.

The war was not as short as Mayr firstly imagined, and in 1916, Mayr experiences its hopelessness for the first time<sup>21</sup>. After he is taken prisoner and transported to France in 1918, his hope seems to return and intensify when he finds out that the war ended<sup>22</sup>. Journals like that of Erich Mayr are a very valuable, accurate source for reconstructing the palette of emotions, spirituality and everyday life.

The third person I would like to focus on is Petru Talpeş, First Prosecutor in Timiș County, which today is in Romania. He wrote his memoirs in 1967 as a testimony to his grandchildren. His family was a humble peasant family from Cornereva, a village in Banat. Since childhood it seems that he was close both to the Church, occult beliefs, superstition and soothsayers<sup>23</sup>. He started attending school in the nearby village, later in Orșova, and then Caransebeș. In the dormitories and the host families where he lived during his studies, he learned military discipline and developed a closer connection to the Orthodox Church. This proximity to the church prompted him to embrace a monastic life and go to Holy Mount Athos; a desire that he abandoned after a while. His family did not have sufficient finances to support his studies, but because he was a diligent pupil he was able to obtain a special scholarship from the “Emanuil Gojdu” Foundation, with help from the sister of Miron Cristea, Bishop of Caransabeș at that time<sup>24</sup>.

Although he was still a high school student when the war began, he reached the legal age for conscription in 1915. After he attended a preparation course for

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20 Ibid., pp. 143–145.

21 Ibid., p. 266.

22 Ibid., pp. 423–425.

23 Talpeş, Petru: *Amintiri*. Eds. Vasile Dudaș and Vali Corduneanu. Editura Mirton: Timișoara 2008, pp. 9–26.

24 Ibid., pp. 26–32.

officers, he was sent to the front line in Italy. The first time he had to fight on the front line, he mentions seeing a large cemetery, an image that without a doubt affected him greatly and inspired him to think more closely about what he could do to preserve his life. On the occasion of his first battle, he remembers a magic spell that his grandfather's brother told him when he was 12 years old. This spell seems to have protected the old man when he was sent to fight at Königrätz in 1868. Fear of death, and the idea that anything that can be useful should be used, prompted Petru Talpeş to utter the spell<sup>25</sup>. The battle ended with a victory and no casualties, which strengthened his belief in magic and superstitions.

Talpeş did not remain on the battlefield for long. After a short while, he was decorated for capturing some Italian soldiers and received permission to go home. Later he was sent back to the front line, but this time to fight against Romania. He refused to fight and decided to desert. After crossing to the Romanian side, he had not very much to do with the front line, even if he volunteered to enter the Romanian Army. His religiosity and belief in God's intercession manifested until the end of the war through praying and attending the Holy Liturgy. As with Erich Mayr, Petru Talpeş thought that everything in the world is done with a purpose. An important part of his memories is his acknowledgment of being attracted to occult practices, and his belief in God, and His Son, who sacrificed for us; he also acknowledges the existence of destiny and that of a protective spirit, which he described as being similar to an angel<sup>26</sup>.

Like Edmond Glaise von Horstenau, Petru Talpeş did not describe his feelings in his memories, choosing more to focus on remembering important facts and details. What is very conspicuous from his memories is the importance of both the cultural surroundings in which he grew up and the influence of his war experience in shaping his spirituality and behaviour for the rest of his life.

The fourth person selected for analysis is Coriolan Buracu, who left both memories and journal notes. He was born in Prigor, today in Romania, in a middle-class family with good connections to the Romanian elite from Banat. He attended school in Budapest, Viena, Blaj, and the Theological Institute in Caransebeş. After finishing his studies, he married and was ordained priest in Mehadia. Before the war started, he conducted numerous projects associated with Romanian culture in the area and so was suspected of a lack of loyalty towards the monarchy and imprisoned. His connections to the Romanian elite and the fact that he was the nephew of the first military Orthodox priest from Austria-Hungary, Pavel Boldea,

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25 *Ibid.*, pp. 39–44.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 71–72.

helped him out of prison in order to be appointed military priest on the front line in Galicia. During the war, he performed his duty, not only on the front line but also in hospitals and a prisoner-of-war camp in Debrecen, today in Hungary<sup>27</sup>.

In his case, his belief and faith in God was unquestionable. Since the beginning of his records, Buracu underlines that when sorrow and death become part of daily life, those who had doubts about God's existence changed their opinion. Sorrow, death and a longing to return home were the feelings that drove the soldiers and officers to attend the Holy Liturgies that he celebrated and in which they prayed to win the war and return to their homes. Of course, Buracu shared the feelings of the soldiers, but for him the battles, the sound of explosions, death and funerals became bearable sooner. Still, from time to time, he confesses that despite being blessed with a different education based on seeing death as a transition event which lead to eternal life, he found the situation so hard that he cried at the thought that he would not survive the battle<sup>28</sup>. This highlights two important feelings that were augmented by war and shared by everybody: hoplessness and helplessness.

Another interesting record in Buracu's notes describes his admiration for the piety of the Russian prisoners-of-war he attended in Debrecen, who attended the Liturgy, prayed, sang religious songs, built chapels, and had various religious items. In the prisoner-of-war camp, he describes how compassion was another one of the feelings that influenced people during wartime. In the case of father Buracu, this manifested in his attempt to learn a little Russian to be able to hear the confession of prisoners and give them the Holy Communion, to provide books and newspapers for the wounded and arranging cultural establishments for soldiers. All these responsibilities formed a part of the religious, pastoral and philanthropical duty of all military chaplains, no matter if those they attended were their own soldiers or the enemy. However, his style of writing also suggests this was a manifestation of his faith and compassion<sup>29</sup>.

His records, especially his journal notes published in the newspaper "Drapelul" during the war, show the impact that the war had on a man of God. They are a very good third-person source, from the point of view of a specialist in religiosity, on the collective manifestation of faith.

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27 Leu, Valeriu/ Bocşan, Nicolae: *Marele Război în memoria bănăţeană 1914–1919*. Presa Universitară Clujeană: Cluj-Napoca 2012, pp. 515–518.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 528–540.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 544–560.

## Conclusion

Other documents, such as the reports that the military priests had to send to the War Ministry in Vienna, record also the manifestation of religious feelings<sup>30</sup>. They point to an increasing number of soldiers and officers that attended Holy Liturgies, and the increasing demand for prayer books. Priests encouraged and supported this behaviour, because most of them saw the war as a punishment from God<sup>31</sup>. All the practices they promoted, such as Holy Liturgies and prayer, were intended to help remind humanity about love, morality, sacrifice and the virtues of a true Christian.

Both the Austrian and Romanians whose memories and journals are analysed herein were prepared to sacrifice themselves and to go to war: some with greater enthusiasm than others. Indeed, going to war and dying for one's country was considered an act of honor. But the war pushed these people to their limits, which sometimes became bearable through faith in God, supernatural powers and the belief in the existence of an afterlife and Heaven.

Feelings like fear, sorrow or hope drove them to pray, attend Holy Liturgies or help those in need. The way they decided to act was influenced not only by the war but also by their past history and the cultural environment in which they grew up. The beliefs and practices that intensified during the war significantly and irreversibly influenced the spirituality of those who experienced the Great War.

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30 Austrian War Archives (Osterreichisches Staatsarchiv (Kriegsarchiv) Wien subsequently referred to as KA, Apostolisches Feldvikariat, Pastoralberichte, 1914–1919.

31 KA, Kriegsministerium, Hauptreihe, 8244.

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