

CATHOLIC CHURCH PROPAGANDA AND MOBILIZATION IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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Considered the “mother of all catastrophes” and a major tectonic line of the 20th century, World War I is one of the central subjects of European historiography. Research focused on this cataclysm has adopted novel approaches in the past decades. In addition to exploring the culture of war or the impacts modifying mentalities, ways of life, and patterns of everyday existence, today it is imperative to look into the individual and collective experience people accumulated in the years between 1914 and 1918. To give voice to potentially adequate sources, the publication and processing of diaries, memoirs, and items of family correspondence have come to the fore. The latter have provided opportunities to examine “folk” mentalities, the various events and activities of rural life as well as textual structures, linguistic formulas, stereotypes and the influence of possible models (e.g. letter-writers). The war must have fostered the proliferation of peasant literacy by engaging in regular correspondence even those people who had had no use for such activities before. This study, however, will not sample the booming letter-writing scene¹ but selected pieces from a series titled *Tábori levelek* [Letters from Camp] published in 1914 by the Catholically affiliated Élet Press. These model letters were meant to help combat soldiers (mainly “peasant grunts”) correspond with loved ones, but they actually provided little practical advice. They were rather devices of propaganda deployed by the Catholic Church and its clergymen² to communicate mandatory cultural (conscience- and emotion-related) forms of identity. The texts cited in the paper mirror this purpose as well as the interpretations and meanings attributed to war.

¹ Hanák 1988: 222–274; Kokó 1999: 240–266; Csóti 2000: 115–123; Oláh 2006: 152–166.

² The series of 16 booklets was edited (Ed. István Toma) and mainly authored by Catholic clergymen or chaplains. Each letter concluded with an express order to help the material to be delivered “to the theater of war and field hospitals to provide solace and moral support for our men in uniform.”

The first letter is a fictional account written by a warrior to his wife at home which expresses clear moral principles and tries to convince her of the proper notions of decorum: “But hark! What is the truly patriotic Hungarian woman like? She is a worthy companion for the truly patriotic Hungarian man. With body and heart, she fully grasps the sacred majesty of Hungary’s assigned duty of defending Motherland and Christendom. She helps and assists the Hungarian warrior hero to the best of her abilities. Far from complaining and mourning over war losses, she, indeed, enthuses about this war because she knows that never has a juster war been waged by any nation. Far from constantly seeking ways of helping her man dodge the draft, she encourages him to valiantly engage in this sacred combat. Should her husband not have been conscripted, she urges him to join the volunteer force. Far from secretly cursing the lords steering the country’s ship, or whispering why on earth they started a war in the first place, she rejoices to see the nation stick to her guns. Far from wailing pusillanimously like a coward over her fate and that of her children, she gathers her faith and sets out to deftly run the farm in the absence of his man.”³ This rhetoric implies that the letter-writer has accurate knowledge of the natural human reactions and emotions generated by war (this is what he writes about accusingly in the opening clauses). In contrast to them, not only does he expect the woman to display dutiful support for the war effort, but also enthusiasm and unquestioning obedience in taking over the role of the breadwinner from the husband serving on a faraway front.

To that end, he sets “glorious examples” to the wife. They are either folklorized or fictitious heroines of Hungarian history (Cicelle Rozgonyi, who distinguished herself in combat against the Ottoman Turks; the lady fighters of Eger led by

³ Kertész 1914: 8–9. Parish priest Kálmán Kertész served as a chaplain at the Serbian and Italian fronts. He also penned short stories, tales, and popular folk plays.

Katica Dobó; Ilona Zrínyi) or the martyrs who have overcome their anguish over the loss of spouse or offspring with “unimaginable fortitude” and faith in God (the wife of martyr St. Alexander; St. Symphorosa; St. Felicity; but first and foremost “Queen of Martyrs,” the Virgin Mother⁴).

But why is self-sacrifice a necessity on the part of Hungarian wives? How does the warrior explain the nation’s role in the war effort, and how does he address that of our enemies? Hungary and its ally were forced to join the battle and the dark menace overhead had assumed near-mythical proportions: “They are advancing upon us from the north and south, east and west to smother and divide us. They want to wipe the millennium-old Hungarian Motherland from the face of the Earth for good and reduce a justice-seeking nation to slavery. Surely you do understand now that this is about the survival of our dear homeland?” Furthermore, existential struggle is not self-serving because Hungary, by the Grace of God, having served as a “bastion” of Christendom for centuries, is now performing this selfsame “sacred duty:” “She defends herself as well as Christian culture against Slavic barbarity and Orthodox schism, which are about to deluge Central European Christian culture by the hands of the Serbians and Russians. It is shameful, indeed, that the once so purely Catholic France and, although heretic, but Christian English Country have allied themselves with this Slavic barbarity. On second thought, it is no wonder, though, because they form quite a gang: the anticlerical Frenchman, the English usurer, the Serbian bomber, and the knout-wielding Russian.”⁵ This reasoning combines the topos of the bastion of Christianity, the Romantic vision (propagated in the Reform Era) of the Hungarian nation’s destruction, and the defense of Catholicism and the Church to constitute and effective mobilization force. The latter, however, also defines a rather naive approach to characterizing nations (the French: “anticlerical;” the English: “heretic;” the Serbs and Russians: “Orthodox schismatic”).

The wife left behind at home has a further all-important duty: blind faith and confidence in God, who orders his people to fight, protects his soldiers and listens to their prayers: “The King is endowed with power by God so the King’s call to arms carries the voice of God. If, indeed, it was God

who instructed me to serve, you and our children are also in His thoughts... To pray! O Lord, how many people have taken up praying again in this war, folks who never used to pray in peacetime? How many are making confessions, even though they have never confessed since childhood? Were it to be the wife and child left home who would neglect to say their prayers? What utter madness would that be? Indeed, they must pray with twice, a hundred times as much fervor!”⁶ The order of the sovereign ruler enforcing God’s will makes participation in the war effort a non-negotiable duty, which, in turn, breathes new life into religious faith and everyday worship.

The warrior then details at length what it is you have to pray for (victory and peace; fallen soldiers and other casualties; POWs; King and homeland) and what are the eventualities you must never beg God to intervene for (an end to hostilities by whatever means, e.g. a humiliating peace treaty). And there is something else for which prayer is “the most necessary” remedy. Although our Heavenly Father saves “thousands and hundreds of thousands” from death, He also “allows, indeed, wishes that scores of others sacrifice their lives for the nation.” It is a recurring motif in the text which is meant to remind the wife that she always needs to be prepared for her husband’s getting killed in action and she can bear the pain by relying on her “strong Christian spirit:” “If it was to be the wish of the Lord of the Warrior Host that this be my last piece of writing, and if I was to be placed in my grave far away from my dear Motherland and you, Dearest, I would still accept death happily, peacefully, and proudly because I know that this would be the most beautiful death and I also know that my last sigh would come to unite with the sigh of that strong soul of yours.”⁷ In other words, a combat soldier has to perform a prescribed pattern of behavior even in his very last act of duty. This is what gives him and his wife assurance that after the final call of duty he will die a heroic (sacralized and estheticized) as opposed to ordinary death.

The next model letter is addressed to the warrior’s mother. First, he gently admonishes her not to worry and lament as these would not be worthy of her. The proper and expected behavior is to take over and conscientiously manage the farm at home. He goes on offering vignettes of peaceful

⁴ Kertész 1914: 9–10.

⁵ Kertész 1914: 5–8.

⁶ Kertész 1914: 11–12.

⁷ Kertész 1914: 12–15.

life at the front. On quiet evenings the troops gather and their Lieutenant tells stories about Hungarian history: “Chieftain Árpád sporting his leopard’s skin, Botond wielding his mace, and Lehel blowing his horn bugle are galloping past in the mist of the night. King László, Scourge of Cumanians, János Hunyadi, Conqueror of Ottomans, Pál Kinizsi, Miklós Zrínyi and all the other heroes: They might as well be sitting here with us... I don’t feel exhausted any longer and I don’t care we haven’t been issued with hot food today. *I can feel but one thing: I’ve become a hero among the heroes*⁸ and I’ve been roused by the same patriotic fervor that inspired Titusz Dugovics as he was combatting on the ramparts of Nándorféhegyvár... And we’ll be part of history, too. Yes, Dear Mother, I may have been grabbing the plow-stock a few weeks back, but now I’m grabbing my rifle with such noble thoughts!”⁹ It is not plausible that in their trenches combat troops would have been chatting about Árpád in his leopard’s skin, or Titusz Dugovics grabbing the Turk standard-bearer and plunging them both to their deaths from the fortress’ walls. Nor is it likely that it would necessarily have encouraged the GIs very much. However, the text itself is a testament to the spirit of an educational program implanting national identity and patriotism in the mind. The author makes use of stock characters readily recognizable from frequent recurrences in fairy tales, legends, and almanacs. There is no significant difference between these characters inasmuch as they all – from Chieftain Botond to Miklós Toldi to Pál Kinizsi – distinguished themselves through their physical strength, valor, and gallantry.¹⁰ These traits are typical of heroic societies in which the individual does not have “hidden depths” and he is identical to his deeds.¹¹ Holding his ground in the Great War ensures that he becomes a soulmate of mythical heroes and, at the same time, claims fame and glory.

Further components of a naively historized national identity can also be grasped in the text. The warrior, summoned to serve in the war by the Heavenly Father again, does not only defend the

Motherland but also his home and smallholding: “[I’m defending] our small whitewashed house, the charming little flower garden in front, the backyard bustling with fowl, my bay horse and cattle, my plot and silky meadow – but first and foremost my dear parents, wife, and little boy.” This idyllic scene is identical to the microworld of village folk, the threatened status of which mobilizes for the epic fight. The various images of land, family, and nation are intertwined to create an awareness of community. In this context, war is not a “deluge of blood” nor a scene of suffering. It strengthens the feeling of belonging and interdependence, individual and public morals, and helps humankind get closer to God.¹²

The next letter is written to the warrior’s home village, which is addressed in an intimate, loving voice: “My fair village, good folks of my home! Believe me, I’m not lying when I’m saying that our serene little place with the surrounding beauty of meadows and fields have been transformed into a church in my soul. You are the people worshipping there who have just sent me to fight as a bridegroom, my hat emblazoned with the tricolor – dear folks of my home, brethren, my own flesh and blood!”¹³ These lines clearly express the notion of *Gemeinschaft*. Village community is identical to kinship which is defended by the warrior. He marches to the front line as a bridegroom sent by his settlement (and not as an individual forced by authority) and his joining up assumes the role of a “nuptial feast.” In order to establish a deep spiritual relationship with the community, he calls his people at home to keep a vigil and pray together. (“Do you understand what the phrase ‘keep a vigil’ means? It means exactly what the Lord told you: »keep close watch and pray!«”)¹⁴

The Christian faith is not only a means of mobilizing troops and the hinterland but also that of escalating the conflict into a full-scale war which gets transubstantiated and represented in this spirit. The text is ruled by religious symbolism and usage as well as Biblical references. The theater of war is the “Sacred Grand Church of God,” the guns will be “festooned with rosaries,”

⁸ Line highlighted in the original text.

⁹ Radványi 1914: 4–5. Kálmán Radványi, who taught at the Catholic High School of the Budapest Archdiocese, wrote young adult novels in the style displayed here.

¹⁰ The list over-represents historical figures who distinguished themselves in defense of the Christian homeland against the pagan Turks. Mikos 2010: 118–120.

¹¹ Macintyre 1999: 168–169.

¹² Radványi 1914: 5, 7, 11, 13–14.

¹³ Domonkos 1914: 3. István Domonkos was the parish priest of Nyúlfalu and regional supervisor of the educational district of Pér. He authored popular folk poems and stories. He had been a member of Department 3 (Literary History, Linguistics, Esthetics & Literature) of St. Stephen Academy since 1915.

¹⁴ Domonkos 1914: 4–5, 9.

and armed combat is Purgatory, which will deliver us from evil. The Passion of Christ will be the example to be followed by the combatants, while death “the shining majesty itself.” “Dear Village, have you learned about Purgatory? Have you heard the divine principle that only the pure-hearted can see God, and those who wish to live together with the impeccably magnificent Lord forever, will have to bathe in the sweetness of suffering?... The great and sweetly true God is getting nigh in the brightly-lit flames of Purgatory, and we can see Heaven’s golden gates ajar, and we can hear the seven Choirs of Angels and the Choir of Heroes and Martyrs crowned with garlands – those who have died for the sacred supreme justice – sing close by.”¹⁵ To put it in other words, in war, religion is never generated by fear or a simple “lightning-rod effect.” It is identical to the meaning of Christ’s Passion and sacrifice, the constant possibility and sacralization of death and, ultimately, humankind’s salvation.¹⁶

The series *Tábori levelek* does not only contain “messages” from the warrior. The conscripted priest writes to his flock at home. His colleague serving in the front line addresses the fallen hero’s wife.¹⁷ Probably expressing real communication situations, these pieces make liberal use of the motifs of encouragement and consolation described above. The text titled *A Haza levele a Magyar néphez* [The Motherland’s Letter to the Hungarian Nation], however, establishes different versions of spiritual/symbolic identification, the notion of homeland as well as the various interpretations and historical contexts of war. Furthermore, it makes room for the country’s peasantry in its vision of the future.¹⁸

The introduction is an apocalyptic vision of the war followed by the history of European nations, which were born to go through the ages of childhood, youth, flowering and, eventually, decline. In the first millennium AD, “strong and barbaric tribes... were trying to conquer and settle down [in Europe].” This period was followed by the establishment of the second millennium’s Christian culture by the Kingdom of France and

the Holy Roman Empire. “At long last, forty-three years ago, the Germanic race established a closely-knit union of states and races to replace the previous loose union. The Anglo-Saxon race has been elevated to the top position in the ranks of leading powers by utilizing the benefits of isolationism and ruthless politics of interest, but mostly through its colonies..., the majority of Slavic peoples in the eastern part of Europe have built up the gigantic Russian Empire... It is absolutely certain that these two races [Germanic and Slavic] will wield the most enormous power in Europe through the third millennium.”¹⁹ This projects an organic image of history based on thousand-year-long cycles, which allows establishing and empowering nations by means of ethnic/cultural as opposed to biological/racial unity. The train of thought ends with the conclusion that the war is “the great global fight of races.” The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian throne, is only a pretext. What Russia really wants is a union with the South Slavs, while England wishes to do away with the “ever developing, hard-working Germanic race.” To put it in another way, what is at stake at the beginning of the next millennium-long historical era is “a new geographical arrangement” of peoples and races.²⁰

What is Hungary’s likely role in this gigantic showdown? How can one fit our own past in this schema of interpretations? Although the Hungarians lack close relatives in Europe, the nation’s geographical, racial, and religious (up to the Reformation, anyway) unity was a firm basis of continuous development. It was a defender of Western culture for centuries and it has no ambition of becoming a major power: “We do not want to conquer peoples. We want to develop in peace to realize our national ideals. We strive to establish friendly relations with all ethnicities living on the land of Hungary. The only thing we demand of them is that they become loyal, patriotic, and hard-working citizens of the Hungarian state.” Our ally is Germany, the “Germanic race,” which is close to us in spirit, culture, and religion,²¹ but we are separated from the Russians by a deep civilization gap (their

¹⁵ Domonkos 1914: 6–8.

¹⁶ Audoin-Rouzeau–Becker 2006: 94–95; Becker 2010: 235.

¹⁷ Toma 1914; Tóth 1914.

¹⁸ The author, József Vass, parish priest and professor of theology, had been principal of St. Imre College since 1911. In the 1920s he also served as Minister of Religious Affairs & Education and Minister of Welfare & Labor Affairs (Vass 1914a: 3–18).

¹⁹ Vass 1914a: 5–6.

²⁰ Vass 1914a: 8–9.

²¹ In the name of “historical fidelity,” Vass adds that today Germans are “mostly” Protestant, “whereas we are Catholic.” (Vass 1914a: 10).

“daydreaming, lazy souls are no relative to the sharp and nimble Hungarian spirit, and their religion is a mortal enemy of ours”). The mission of the Hungarians, at the same time, is uniquely special: As in the past thousand years, they will be a buffer “island” in Europe separating and balancing between the Germanic and Slavic races.²²

The lines of reasoning and usage of the previous letters were ruled by a Romantic approach to the past combining patriotism and heroic virtues (best represented by examples from the Ottoman era), but ethnic references had no role in the text. The intellectual orientation of József Vass, who pursued his theological studies in the Collegium Germanicum-Hungaricum in Rome at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, was a lot broader than that. In addition to the notions of Austrian and German Christian socialism, he was well versed in the teachings of Stewart Chamberlain, ardent fan of Germanic culture, who interpreted the history of humankind as a struggle of races. Vass also read the works of Ernest Renan, who interpreted the concept of nation as a soul, “spiritual principle,” and a fusion of races (i.e. peoples).²³ On the basis of these sources and moving beyond the traditions of domestic discourse of characterology, he defined the substance of belonging to a nation as an awareness of common historical roots and identification with the spirit of the Hungarian race. It is spirituality that connects us to our ally, the Germanic race, and it is the same spirituality that alienates us from the Russians. Racial identity, however, is neither superior nor ostracizing, because members of Slavic ethnic groups, including Serbs, living on Hungarian land are also honored citizens of the Hungarian state. At the same time, a blend of historicism and traditionalism is also present in the text. The “Nation” has a thousand-year-long past and its history fits perfectly in a symbolic chronology as well as geographical space. The firm self-identity stemming from them and the need to maintain a balance between the Germanic and Slavic races are the main factors that set the nation’s mission for the next thousand years, and they are also what justify its independence. The war, therefore, becomes an existential struggle

with symbolic significance in the life of the Hungarians, too, and it is destined to provide the nation with a spiritual and moral challenge as well as a strengthening force.²⁴

The spiritual character of the Hungarians has further attributes which also differentiate us from our enemies: “The soul of the Hungarian nation is serious, virtuous, and confident. Why do you let this spirit be contaminated with sordid French depravity and frivolity in literature, press and on stage? Gaudiness, indolence, driveling nonsense, recklessness, wastefulness, and impurity are all alien sins. Why is it the sins of foreign nations that a lot of you ape?... What business does a mirror wardrobe have in a beetle-backed Hungarian house? Isn’t a chest painted with tulips that has served in a family for centuries worth more than shabby new types of furniture? What are your girls and women doing wearing fashionable trunk-breeches? Have they forgotten their beaded headdresses and the majestically simple clothes of mothers of bygone eras? What right do dime novels and frivolous magazines have to share space with our ancestors’ prayer books all printed nicely with capital letters?”²⁵ In other words, if the text titled *A Haza levele a Magyar néphez* is considered as a tool of national identification besides that of spiritual mobilization, it reveals deeper layers of themes such as chastising Antimodernism and depraved city morals, the preservation of the religious faith of ancestors, and the protection of “sacred and old” traditions threatened by the enemy and identified with folk culture and rural ways of life.

This may be an essential precondition of the survival of the Hungarians, which is complemented by definite sociopolitical goals. As József Vass put it, the most important post-war task is for us to “strengthen into” our country as much as possible. “The majority of the Hungarian nation is employed in agriculture. The labor of this multitude gives us our daily bread, and their sons provide the biggest number of our ablest soldiers, the most clear-headed citizens, and the brightest students. Therefore, it is the nation-sustaining farming community that will have to be uplifted in the first place. Its members need to be supported in buying their own plots of land, protected by clever laws, their debts need to be forgiven. A prosperous, independent class of farmers will be

²² Vass 1914a: 7, 10.

²³ *Die Grundlagen des Neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* was published in 1899, *Qu’est-a qu’une nation?* (originally a lecture) in 1887. The latter cited in Bretter–Deák (ed.) 1995: 171–187.

²⁴ Vass 1914a: 17–18.

²⁵ Vass 1914a: 15–16.

the backbone of the Hungarian nation. If its young generation is supported in getting an education, it will also yield the leading classes in a decade or two. Thus, the Hungarian nation will produce its own doctors, engineers, teachers, merchants, authors, and artists. The Hungarian nation will keep furthering its great historical traditions.”²⁶ In the previous letters, the individual is subordinate to the community, suffering and death are transcendent values and the narrative is dominated by turning toward the past. József Vass, who also had political ambitions, looked into the future instead. As early as the outbreak of hostilities, probably not irrespective of the social composition of the ranks of draftees and the appreciation of agricultural production, he argued for the emancipation of peasants as well as the nation-sustaining power of the “agrarian class” of ancient stock.

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I have explored four booklets of the series titled *Tábori levelek*. It is worth mentioning that they provided combat troops with some practical advice (e.g. military postal services often fail to deliver mail on time or instructions on how to address postcards to the front).²⁷ What is more important, though, is the various interpretations the texts assigned to the war and Hungary’s participation. The linguistic devices and imagery used to express acceptance, emotional identification and proposed patterns of behavior are also noteworthy.

The defense of the nation and the threat looming over our thousand-year-long existence are intertwined and placed into symbolic geographical and historical space. “Hordes of unschooled and savage enemies” are in arms in the north and south. “Eastern paganism” or “Slavic barbarity” threaten to enslave our nation. Protecting Christian European culture is associated with the centuries-old struggle with the Ottoman Turks.²⁸ True, this notion is simplified when projected on the naive hero worship of oral folk tradition (as shaped by novelists, poets, and pulp-fiction writers). The theme of the nation’s destruction is supplemented with the threat against home, family, and local community, which may thus encapsulate more aptly the brutality and barbarism of the enemy.

²⁶ Vass 1914a: 10–11.

²⁷ Kertész 1914: 3.

²⁸ Kertész 1914: 7–8; Vass 1914b: 5–6.

The 15th-century battle against the Ottomans was associated with theological and eschatological arguments. This feature is also present in the texts examined in this paper. The clergyman authors gave voice to these opinions in the published letters “authorized by the Church,” but they must have done the same in their sermons in Mass services held in the front line. It is not likely to be a sign of profane enthusiasm. The more probable cause is that the Church’s support for the war shifted into a universally Christian or sacral field, and it requires a deeper religiosity. It is faith that mobilizes and builds spiritual unity between the front lines and the hinterland. “Christ’s soldiers” battle to gain victory, martyrs give strength to help them withstand pain and suffering, the battlefield becomes “a place of worship” where confession and Holy Communion assume especially significant roles. Following Christ means self-sacrifice for the Nation and also salvation. At the same time, the letters give rise to a cult of the fallen heroes and commemorative projects.²⁹ Religious faith and the great Christian symbols and myths generate patriotic fervor and pathos as well as shape identification with the nation. All this hinders the war’s rationalization and – as a mandatory form of identification – prescribes that individual interests and earthly existence be totally subordinated to this sacral community.

The ultimate questions of whether the notions developed in *Tábori levelek* really became a mobilization force and how national/religious fervor got incorporated into everyday life can only be answered on the basis of a thorough examination of the soldiers’ actual letters.

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²⁹ Vass 1914b: 10–11, 15–16.

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