

“AT WAR WITH BOLSHEVISM” – THE MEMOIRS OF MILITARY CHAPLAIN IOAN DĂNCILĂ ABOUT THE ROMANIAN ARMY’S CAMPAIGN IN HUNGARY

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Abstract: The Union of Transylvania, Banat, Crișana and Maramureș with the Kingdom of Romania, adopted on 1 December 1918, enshrined the sincere and freely expressed desire of the Romanians in these lands to be part of Greater Romania. Embraced by the entire Romanian nation, the Alba Iulia decision was rejected by the Hungarian Government led by Mihály Károlyi and militarily opposed by the Bolshevik Government of Béla Kun, installed in Budapest in March 1919. This led to a Romanian-Hungarian military confrontation that culminated in the occupation of Budapest by the Romanian Army on August 4, 1919 and the removal of the Hungarian communist regime. The Romanian troops were accompanied, in their campaign to Hungary, by seventy military chaplains, a part of them came from Transylvania. Some of them wrote campaign journals, others later recounted their experiences by having them published anthumously and posthumously. Ioan Dăncilă was such a priest. In the interwar period, he became archpriest of the Romanian Army with the rank of lieutenant-colonel. He left to posterity an important theological, historiographical and memoirist work, which is far too little known. In the first part of this study, the life and work of Ioan Dăncilă is briefly described, while in the second part, we present his memoirs of the spring of 1919, when he joined the 90th Infantry Regiment Sibiu in the campaign of the Romanian Army in Hungary.

Keywords: World War I, Hungarian Bolshevik regime, Béla Kun, Transylvania, Greater Romania

Rezumat: Unirea Transilvaniei, Banatului, Crișanei și Maramureșului cu Regatul României, adoptată la 1 Decembrie 1918, a consfințit dorința sinceră și liberă a românilor din aceste ținuturi de a face parte din România Mare. Îmbrățișată de întreaga națiune română, decizia de la Alba Iulia a fost respinsă de guvernul maghiar Mihály Károlyi și combătută militar de guvernul bolșevic al lui Bela Kun, instalat la Budapesta în martie 1919. În acest fel s-a ajuns la o confruntare militară româno-maghiară finalizată cu ocuparea Budapestei de către armata română în 4 august 1919 și înlăturarea regimului comunist ungar. Trupele române au fost însoțite în campania din Ungaria de zece preoți militari, trei fiind originari din Transilvania. Unii dintre ei au scris jurnale de campanie, alții și-au redactat ulterior experiențele trăite, publicându-le antum și postum. Un asemenea preot a fost Ioan Dăncilă, ajuns în perioada interbelică protoiereu al armatei române cu grad de locotenent-colonel, care a lăsat posterității o operă teologică, istoriografică și memorialistică importantă, însă mult prea puțin cunoscută. În prima parte a acestui studiu este descrisă pe scurt viața și activitatea lui Ioan Dăncilă, iar în a doua parte sunt prezentate amintirile sale din primăvara anului 1919, când a participat alături de Regimentul 90 Infanterie Sibiu în campania armatei române din Ungaria.

Cuvinte cheie: Primul Război Mondial, regimul bolșevic maghiar, Béla Kun, Transilvania, România Mare

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Preliminary remarks

The decision to unite Transylvania, Banat, Crișana and Maramureș with Romania, adopted on 18 November / 1 December 1918 by the Great National Assembly in Alba Iulia, confirmed the sincere and freely expressed desire of the Romanians in these lands to be part of the great national project of Greater Romania. Embraced and festively celebrated by the whole nation, the Resolution of Alba Iulia was rejected by the Hungarian Government led by Károlyi and militarily opposed by the Bolshevik Government of Bela Kun, which had been installed in Budapest in March 1919. Thus, in the first part of 1919, a Romanian-Hungarian military confrontation culminated in the occupation of Budapest by the Romanian Army on August 4, 1919 and the removal of the Hungarian communist regime, which had intended to spread the Bolshevik social revolution throughout Central-Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The Romanian troops were accompanied by military chaplains in the Hungarian campaign, as it happened during the entire period of the Great War for restoring the country's unity. In addition to the monthly reports submitted to the Religious Service affiliated to the General Headquarters, some priests kept campaign diaries. Others wrote down their experiences at a later time, publishing their memoirs during their lifetime. Ioan Dăncilă was such a priest. In the interwar period, he became archpriest of the Romanian Army with the rank of lieutenant-colonel. He left to posterity an important theological, historiographical and memoirist work, which is, however, far too little known.² Now, one century after the Romanian Army's campaign to Hungary, we wish to dedicate this study to him. His biography will be briefly overviewed and then the study will focus on the way in which he remembered the time he spent, in the spring of 1919, with the 90th Infantry Regiment, Sibiu, during the campaign of the Romanian Army to the north-western part of Transylvania, the Tisa Plain and Central Hungary.

Ioan Dăncilă – a biographical cameo

Ioan Dăncilă was born in the village of Manderău, Hunedoara, on June 2/14, 1889, in the family of the Orthodox priest Constantin Dăncilă (1860–1942)³ and of his wife Maria Dăncilă. He attended primary school in the Orthodox confessional school in his native village, then those of the Hungarian State Gymnasium in Deva between 1899 and 1907. In the autumn of the same year, he enrolled in the Andreian Theological Seminary in Sibiu, which he graduated in 1910. In the same year he married Maria, the daughter of Fr. Victor Cioară of Geoagiu de Sus. She gave him three little „darlings,” as he affectionately wrote on the reverse side of a photo sent from the front on 10 November 1916. Their names were: Ioan-Marius, Ștefan and Mioara. On 20 September 1910 he was ordained a priest by Metropolitan Ioan Mețianu for the parish of the Monastery Râpa Râmețului in the Trascău Mountains.⁴ He published a well-documented study about it in 1925.⁵ Between 1911 and 1916 he continued his studies at the Faculty of Law of Ferencz Joska University in Cluj.

² Păcurariu 2014, 205–206; Păcurariu 2015, 560–568; Păcurariu 2018, 486–487; Pentelescu, Petcu 2016 a, 99–104, 255–258; Pentelescu, Petcu 2016 b, 105–110.

³ Petrescu 2012, 44–52.

⁴ Petrescu, Goțiu 2006, 295–297.

⁵ Dăncilă 1925, 65–93.

On June 2, 1915, he was mobilized as a military chaplain in the imperial-royal army of the 31st Orăștie Regiment.⁶ Along with this military unit which largely comprised Romanians, he fought on the fronts of Galicia and Italy until 1 November 1918, when he was demobilized. During the three and a half years he spent as a military chaplain in the Great War, Ioan Dăncilă carried out an exceptional pastoral activity. He captured the meanings of the military clergy's mission in an extremely valuable study published in the 1917 editions of „Telegraful Român” (“The Romanian Telegraph”) and later resumed in the volume entitled „În slujba neamului prin Evanghelie. Îndrumări morale și naționale” (“In Service of the Nation through the Gospel. Moral and National Guidance”) published in Sibiu in 1925.⁷ Fr. Dăncilă's work is a worthy one, being in fact the only comprehensive study of military pastorate published by a Romanian Orthodox clergyman during World War I. Other experiences that he had on the front were recollected in the form of sketches, memories and evocations published in his books that appeared in Sibiu during the interwar period. At the same time, Ioan Dăncilă supported the efforts of the Archdiocese of Transylvania to set up an orphanage for war orphans⁸ by organizing, during the summer of 1916, a fundraising campaign among the soldiers of the 31st Regiment, to which he contributed personally with the sum of 7,000 kroner.⁹ Like the other military chaplains, he was extremely attentive to the spiritual needs of the soldiers in those difficult moments of distress and anguish generated by the experiences of the front, by the scourge of death and suffering. He sent several requests to the Metropolitan Consistory of Sibiu to supplement the number of printed prayer books and to dispatch them to the soldiers on the front.¹⁰ His fruitful military pastoral activity was not overlooked by his superiors. On September 29, 1917, Archpriest Pavel Boldea, the superior of the Orthodox military clergy of the Austro-Hungarian army, proposed, to the Metropolitan Consistory of Sibiu that the red sash distinction should be awarded to Ioan Dăncilă.¹¹

Like many Transylvanians, the brother of the military chaplain Ioan Dăncilă, Constantin Dăncilă, born on August 2, 1897, crossed the border into Romania after the war declaration of August 15/28, 1916, voluntarily joining the Romanian Army and being promoted to the rank of Second Lieutenant.¹² Having remained at home, the father of the two combatants kept the flame of Romanian national sentiment ablaze and became actively involved in the events of the autumn of 1918. Thus, in the people's assembly held in the parish church of Mănerău on 10 November, 1918, Fr. Constantin Dăncilă was elected president of the Romanian National Council in the village, while Sergeant Ilie Cuș became commander of the National Guard. Cuș and George Pogea were the representatives of the community in the Great National Assembly held in Alba Iulia.¹³

⁶ *Arhiva Mitropoliei Ardealului*, doc. 7785 of 18.08.1915.

⁷ Dăncilă 1925, 29–64.

⁸ For details, see Mârza 2007, 93–100; Stan 2016, 251–263.

⁹ *Arhiva Mitropoliei Ardealului*, doc. 4776 of 07.05.1916, doc. 7728 of 19.07.1915; Petresc, Goțiu 2006, 297. For details about the charitable actions of the Romanians in Transylvania during the war, see Bolovan 2015, 125–137.

¹⁰ *Arhiva Mitropoliei Ardealului*, doc. 7320 of 06.10.1917.

¹¹ *Arhiva Mitropoliei Ardealului*, doc. 7075 of 29.09.1917.

¹² Petresc, Goțiu 2006, 299–300.

¹³ Petresc, Goțiu 2006, 287; Popa 2018, 125.

After he was demobilized, Ioan Dăncilă returned to the parish of Râpa Râmețului Monastery and officially resumed his ministry as a parish priest in January 1919.¹⁴ His discharge would not last long, however. On 8 April 1919 he was again mobilized, this time in the Romanian Army, as a confessor priest of the 90th Infantry Regiment P.O. Sibiu, on the front of North-Western Transylvania and Hungary. After the end of the war and the pacification of the region, he was demobilized together with the entire Romanian Army on April 1, 1921. Because of his pastoral qualities, he remained in the active troops of the Romanian Army up to 1 September 1947, when he was honourably discharged. His pastoral care activity in the army had lasted 36 years, 11 months and 23 days.

Like the vast majority of Romanians, Ioan Dăncilă never forgot his ancestry and his brethren from his native village. As confessor of the 7th Army Corps Sibiu, Fr. Dăncilă supported his fellow villagers incorporated in the Sibiu Garrison and he was held in high regard by his soldiers. Pogea Vintilă of Mănerău, born in 1931, confessed that „many of us were conscripted in Sibiu and he helped them. During the week he did military service, as a colonel, and on Sundays he served in the Great Cathedral of Sibiu, as a priest. He took the whole regiment to church on Sunday.”¹⁵ His manifold activity was not limited to military and civil pastoral duties, but also took into account the social, cultural and associationist environment in Transylvania. Like many Transylvanian priests, Fr. Ioan Dăncilă was involved in the activity of the ASTRA Association, in the cultural, administrative and social pedagogy field.

He was also a member of the Central Committee of the „Andrei Șaguna Association of the Orthodox Clergy in Transylvania, Crișana and Maramureș,” the secretary of the Transylvania Regional Committee of the „Hero Worship” Society, and was often a speaker at the meetings of the „Romanian Craftsmen’s Association” in Sibiu. His practical spirit stood out especially in 1921, when he organized a fundraising campaign in the military schools of Sibiu for the restoration of the old church of Râmeț Monastery, managing to collect the amount of 29,874 lei.¹⁶

The service military chaplain Ioan Dăncilă brought to the nation, the army and the church was rewarded by the Romanian Army, the Romanian state and the Romanian Orthodox Church, with the following military grades, civilian homers, and ecclesiastical distinctions: major (1920), lieutenant-colonel (1929), colonel (1940); the „Crown of Romania” Knight’s Order (1920); the Reward of Work for the Church, first grade (1923); the War Memorial Cross, 1916–1919 (1923); the „Star of Romania” Order, fifth class (1927); the „Crown of Romania” Order in rank of Officer (1931); the Cultural Merit Medal, second class (in 1932); the red sash (1932), archbishop of the military clergy, and vicar of the Army’s Diocese (1940).¹⁷

After being honourably discharged, he re-entered the ranks of the civilian clergy, serving in Geoagiu de Sus, his wife’s home village, for three decades (1947–1979). Upon her death, which occurred on September 13, 1979, he retired to Aiud, staying

¹⁴ *Arhiva Mitropoliei Ardealului*, doc. 442 of 31.01.1919.

¹⁵ Petresc, Goțiu 2006, 298–299.

¹⁶ Petresc, Goțiu 2006, 299–300; Moga 2003, 327.

¹⁷ Pentelescu, Petcu 2016, 100–101.

with the family of his daughter Mioara. There he passed away on June 20, 1983, at the venerable age of 94.¹⁸

Ioan Dăncilă's memoirs about the campaign in Transylvania and Hungary

At the beginning of December 1918, the Romanian Army crossed the Carpathians again, entering Transylvania. The advance of the Romanian troops complied with the stages established by the Allied Command, in accordance with the provisions of the Belgrade Military Armistice convention of 13 November 1918. The first stage had as limit the Mureș River, operations taking place in November-December 1918, when the Romanian troops occupied, one by one, Brașov, Făgăraș, Sibiu, Sighișoara, TârguMureș, Alba Iulia, Deva, Hunedoara, Aiud, Turda, Dej and, finally, Cluj, on Christmas Eve „new style.“ Sidonia Docan, Secretary of the Romanian National Senate in Cluj, wrote in her diary on December 24, 1918

“Young and old, everyone is running to Matthias Square to welcome the Romanian Army in Cluj. Is this not a dream? [...] The entry of the army, headed by Generals Neculcea and Gherescu, with a martial appearance, produces an indescribable emotion. Men are crying, women are crying, children, too, all are shaken by a holy emotion. Then they dance a hora around the square, around Matthias.”¹⁹

Some people today might find such confessions rather pathetic, but they should be read and understood in the extremely difficult socio-political and national context of those times. Terrifying news about the persecution and massacres of the Romanians after the Great National Assembly held in Alba-Iulia was coming from all corners of Transylvania, which was yet to come under the protection of the Romanian Army.²⁰ Therefore, overcoming the Mureș alignment was due to the summons of the Romanians from Northern and North-Western Transylvania, who requested the swift intervention of the Romanian Army in order to put an end to the terror inflicted by the Hungarian troops and Szekler gangs, to ensure the security of people and goods, and to pacify the regions.²¹

In this new campaign from Transylvania and Hungary, the Romanian troops were accompanied by seventy military chaplains, among them were: Fr. Mircea Brăescu in the 10th Putna Regiment; Constantin Cărlanin the 11th Siret Infantry Regiment; Fr. Captain Iosif Comănescu, „a native of Transylvania, a good preacher, committed heart and soul to the Romanian Army, which he served with devotion, very well-read and a patriot,”²² in the „Queen Elizabeth“ 2nd Huntsmen Regiment; Fr. Gheorghe Ciosu in the 14th Infantry Regiment; Fr. Ioan Dăncilă in the Sibiu Garrison; Fr. Ilarion Dodu in the 6th Tecuci Regiment no. 24; Fr. Ioan Nanu in the 3rd Huntsmen Regiment, a parish priest in Râșnov before the war;²³ Fr. Ioan Partenie, originally from Bukovina, in the 15th Războieni Regiment, a

¹⁸ Păcurariu 2015, 568.

¹⁹ Muntean 2018, 80.

²⁰ For details on these anti-Romanian actions, see Vaida 2018, 213–233; Bădescu 2018; Gociman 1995; Mezea 1935.

²¹ Out 2017, 92–127.

²² Nicolescu et alii, III 2018, 256.

²³ Nicolescu et alii, I 2018, 325.

prisoner of the Hungarian Bolsheviks for 56 days; Archimandrite Iustin Șerbănescu in the 2nd Huntsmen Division; and Fr. Nicolae Vasilescu in Ploiești in the Mountain Huntsmen Regiment.²⁴ It should be noted that three of the ten priests were from Transylvania. Their participation in this campaign proved that the Transylvanian clergy supported the „liberation of Transylvania“ not only morally and spiritually, but also directly and personally, through the mobilization of the three aforementioned priests in this campaign. Speaking about the war, when 244 Orthodox priests and 80 Greek-Catholic priests from Transylvania, Banat and Bukovina²⁵ had been forced to fight alongside their countrymen in „a foreign army,“ Fr. Ioan Dăncilă confessed, in retrospect, that the priesthood had „dutifully fulfilled its call,“ because every Romanian priest had considered himself „a representative of the Romanian nation and of the Orthodox Romanian Church, elected by divine providence to fight for alleviating the sufferings of his wretched brethren, who also contributed by sacrificing their lives to the happiness of today.”²⁶ Writing about the mission and the role of the military chaplains in the Great War, without drawing inspiration from the scientific literature, but making reference to his own experience, Fr. Major Dăncilă pointed out that

“The chaplain of the regiment, and especially the chaplain on the front, is not only a shepherd of souls and a comforter of the weak, but also a faithful and devoted comrade, who shares with the soldiers their fatigue, lack, and the danger of death. He is a counsellor and an advisor, for he strengthens the soldier’s soul with his words, and eases the hardships of those around him through deeds that deserve to be emulated. The chaplain of the unit is both the humble servant of the Heavenly Father and a hero that looks down on death when the interest of the troop requires it, setting an example by putting his life at risk and, thus, bringing life and new strength to the arms and hearts of the weary soldiers.”²⁷

The comments of Ioan Dăncilă are fully confirmed by the military chaplains’ activity during World War I. Both their reports to the General Headquarters and the assessments of the General Staff and of the regiment commanders attested the positive role of the clergy in support of the soldiers’ military effort.²⁸

In January 1919, a new demarcation line was negotiated between the territories controlled by the Romanian and Hungarian governments. This time, the Sighet – Baia Mare - the western part of the Apuseni Mountains was established and, on March 23, 1919 - the line of the Arad – Oradea – Carei – Satu Mare railway. At this stage, the first open military confrontations occurred between the Romanian troops, on the one hand, and the Hungarian civilians and the Hungarian Bolshevik troops in retreat, on the other hand. The atmosphere was heated and tense because of the refusal of the Károlyi Hungarian Government to recognize the Union proclaimed by the National Assembly of Alba Iulia. A direct, eloquent testimony regarding the situation in North-Western Transylvania was

²⁴ Păcurariu 2018, 361; for a brief overview of their activity during the war, see Nicolescu et alii, III, doc. 309, 202–270; Nazarie 2018, 75–195.

²⁵ Zaharia 2016, 279–314.

²⁶ Dăncilă 1925, 29.

²⁷ Dăncilă 1925, 62.

²⁸ Nazarie 2018; Nicolescu et alii, I-II-III 2018; Cotan 2018.

provided by military chaplain Ioan Partenie of the 15th Infantry Regiment Războieni. Partenie reported to the General Headquarters on May 5, 1919, that he had been taken prisoner by Hungarian soldiers in Zalău on February 23, 1919. The humiliations he was subjected to revealed the interethnic tension in the area, generated by the spirit of retaliation exhibited by the Hungarian troops and some Hungarian civilians, following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the disintegration of the Hungarian Kingdom

"I was taken prisoner by the Hungarian soldiers. My hands were tied behind my back and I was taken with some others to prison. In the town square I almost got shot twice by the civilian population. I was badly beaten with the rifles. I and all the officers were taken to another market where we were to be executed. We all escaped, except for a Transylvanian lieutenant, as if by miracle. The civilians took my money, my watch and my entire luggage and all my priestly and clerical things. (...). Zalău was attacked by over 2,000 Hungarian soldiers and 1,000 armed civilians."

At the same time, Fr. Partenie explained the Hungarians' bitter aversion against him not so much in terms of his Romanian military uniform, but especially because he belonged to the clergy, stating that

"the Hungarians' hatred against the Romanian priests in Transylvania is pouring over me. In Tuşnad, I was held in a cell in the freezing cold of February. In Sătmar, I was the object of all the curses proffered by the Szeklers. The most absurd accusations were brought against us and the refugee population in Zalău demanded that we should be handed over to them to tear us to pieces. I had to destroy my priestly clothes, shave and trim my hair with the machine and dress as a soldier to escape being hanged. No money, one shirt, in jail, without going out and forever threatened by death that was my experience as a prisoner."²⁹

This testimony certifies the fact that the Hungarians perceived the priests as an important part of the Romanian elites, who had nourished the national sentiment and had brought a major contribution to the national liberation movement of the Romanians in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In other words, they had made a major contribution to the Romanians' disavowal of Budapest and their collective embrace of the idea of the united nation-state that the Transylvanian Romanians had built together with their brothers from the Old Kingdom, Bessarabia and Bukovina, through the proclamation of Alba-Iulia. In fact, this idea was not an isolated one, but was a common one in the era. Fr. Dr. Sebastian Stanca, who was himself, imprisoned by the Hungarian government for his uncompromising Romanian ideas from 1916 to 1918, gathered in a book, published in Cluj in 1925, the testimonies of hundreds of priests who had been arrested, imprisoned, and banished by the Hungarian authorities after Romania's entry in the war.³⁰ The reason for the Hungarian reprisals against the clergy was clear for Sebastian Stanca and his contemporaries

²⁹ Nicolescu et alii, II 2018, 464–466.

³⁰ Stanca 2015.

“the Hungarian rulers understood too well that the priests were the vestals who had kept alive the flame of national faith in the Romanian people’s hearts and their fury pounced especially on the priests, deluded by the vain belief that „if I beat the shepherd, the flock will be scattered.“ They beat the shepherds, but the flocks did not scatter because they had planted, in the soul of their flocks, strong faith, reinforced through suffering in the hope for godly justice.”³¹

The Romanian-Hungarian relations worsened after 21 March 1919, when the Soviet Republic of Councils was proclaimed in Budapest under the leadership of Béla Kun, a Hungarian of Jewish origin from Transylvania. Soon the Hungarian Army was Bolshevized and began to sow anarchy and violence. The military chaplain Ioan Partenie described the atmosphere as follows

“The Bolsheviks do not admit officers or grades, they are against religion and especially against priests. Our situation, the officers’ situation, and especially mine, was terrifying. We expected, at every moment, to be killed by those scumbags. They could easily have done it because there was no authority, no rule, no justice. Everyone did what they wished and they could also kill us without liability. We could see that we had no choice but to be liberated by the Romanian Army or join the Red Guard, but we, the officers and the soldiers, refused all their proposals. We told them to shoot us, but we would never join the Red Guard. Racovschi’s Romanian propagandists came to us in prison to urge and threaten us to join the Red Guard.”³²

On the night of 15 to 16 April 1919, Hungarian troops and Szekler units attacked the Romanian Army stationed on the Someș Valley and in the Ciucea area of the Apuseni Mountains. The Romanian Army immediately launched a counteroffensive and, within five days, it occupied the Satu Mare, Carei, Oradea and Salonta. On May 1, 1919 it reached the Tisa River, meeting the Czechoslovak troops to the north and the French-Serbian troops to the south. Facing the approximately 60,000 Hungarian soldiers there were 6 Romanian infantry divisions and 3 cavalry brigades, a total of about 64,000 soldiers.³³

Along with the troops that were massively attacked in the Apuseni Mountains by the Hungarian Army but that managed to drive the Hungarian units into a speedy retreat was Fr. Ioan Dăncilă, remobilized on April 8, 1919, this time under the Romanian banner, with the 90th Infantry Regiment Sibiu, the operative section. Some of Ioan Dăncilă’s experiences in this campaign „against the Hungarians“ on the Tisa were recollected in two texts, which belong to the genre of memoirs, published at a distance of three and six years after the events. In the first, entitled „Landscapes of Ciucea,“ edited in the volume of sketches „Man and Character“ (first edition, 1922 and second edition, 1924)³⁴ dedicated to the students

³¹ Stanca 2015, 42.

³² Nicolescu et alii, II 2018, 466–467. For another extended report of Fr. Partenie sent to Metropolitan Pimen Georgescu on May 14, 1919, about the situation in Transylvania, see Cotan 2018, 844–850.

³³ There is a substantial literature on the Romanian Army’s campaign to Hungary, occupation of Budapest and removal of Béla Kun’s Bolshevik regime, including editions of sources and scholarly studies. See Kirițescu 2017, 385–502; Mărdăresu 2009; Moșoiu 2012; Ciubotă, Nicolescu, Țucă 1998; Preda et alii 1994.

³⁴ Dăncilă 1922, 48–52; Dăncilă 1924, 46–50.

of the „Prince Carol“ Infantry Military School of Sibiu, the military chaplain recounted the moments he had experienced in „the picturesque mountain village of Ciucea“ in the Apuseni Mountains, which had acquired „historic importance“ at the time of the Romanian-Hungarian military confrontations. The urge to write down on paper these experiences came from his conviction that he was writing history, leaving for posterity a first-hand testimony about the „suffering of the people there and everywhere,“ about the heroism and sacrifice of the Romanian soldiers, as well as the horrors committed by the Hungarian Bolshevik gangs against the Romanian civilian population and army.

The 90th Infantry Regiment Sibiu reached Ciucea after marching on foot for a gruelling eight hours on the first day of Easter in 1919, being welcomed with „joy“ and „love“ by the villagers, who returned to their homes as soon as the Bolsheviks had retreated. The landscape that lay before their eyes was a desolate one, the disaster left behind by Béla Kun’s troops prompting Fr. Dăncilă to describe the Hungarians through a series of negative, extremely harsh phrases and epithets, such as „executioners,“ „bandits with sideburns“ and „dogs from the steppes of Asia.“ The gruesome experience from the next day, occasioned by the funeral of five soldiers of the 11th Siret Regiment, vilely abused by the enemy, and his visit to the Romanian church in Ciucea, desecrated by the Hungarian Bolshevik troops who had shot the icons and frescoes, made Father Dăncilă resort to an even more bitter rhetoric when writing about this „eternally painful memory.“ His comrades had become „holy martyrs“ sacrificed by „ferocious wild beasts, escaped from prison chains,“ the church that had been defiled in a „vile and diabolical“ manner rendering the Bolsheviks as „pagans,“ „blood-hungry hyenas craving Christian holiness“ and even „devils with human faces.“ What he saw awakened in his heart and in that of his comrades a thirst for revenge that found its „just satisfaction“ at the time of the conquest of Hungary’s capital, when the Romanian tricolour was hoisted on the „proud dome of the Budapest Parliament that had defied a whole world.”³⁵

Ioan Dăncilă was not the only military chaplain who passed with the regiment through the Ciucea region, around Easter 1919, noting the devastation left behind by the Hungarian troops. Fr. M. Brăescu, chaplain of the 10th Infantry Regiment, reported to the General Staff, on April 3, 1919, that he had been forced to hold „unpaid daily service for three villages located in the operation and the neutral areas, that is: Bologa, Poeni, and Sebeșul Mare (today, Valea Drăganului, in the county of Cluj, *our note*), whose priests had taken refuge because of the army operations.”³⁶ One of the three priests was the martyr archpriest Aurel Munteanu (1882–10 September 1940), who later reported that in those days he had lost his „nine-month-old child (...), killed by the Hungarians.”³⁷

The second text signed by Fr. Ioan Dăncilă about the Tisa campaign is entitled “At War with Bolshevism” and was published in 1925 and 1930 in his volumes of „Moral and National Guidance“ for the Romanian soldiers.³⁸ Written at a greater distance from the respective events, the tone is no longer as harsh against the Hungarians as in the previous text about Ciucea. Fr. Dăncilă aimed this time to engage in a general retrospective on the

³⁵ Dăncilă 1924, 41–62.

³⁶ Nicolescu et alii, II 2018, 429–430.

³⁷ Stanca 2015, 144–145.

³⁸ Dăncilă 1925, 115–128; Dăncilă 1930, 129–142.

Romanian military campaign against the „sticky and dangerous ideas of Bolshevism,“ in the desire to extract moral and national lessons for the cadets of the Sibiu military schools, but also to provide a „historical document“ about those events for posterity. From the very beginning, the author testifies that his main mission in the 90th Infantry Regiment Sibiu was to combat the „infectious and perilous ideas and currents of Bolshevism“ at a time when the social-political and military context in Transylvania fostered their spread.³⁹ The four years of the war, with its horrors and terrors, had largely drained the resources of the Romanian soldiers. In the revolutionary chaos triggered by the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, they could be contaminated with the anarchic ideas promoted by the communists: „We don't need rulers, or control, or priests, or church, or army, or kings, the men with sideburns clamoured everywhere! We don't need God either, we want a new world! Throw away your weapons, for only the priests and the officers, paid specifically for it, only they wish to lengthen the war!”⁴⁰ Fr. Dăncilă captured the essence of the Bolshevik message propagated by the followers of Lenin and Kun, writing the following

“Above all, they wanted internationalisation, hence, the separation of the Romanians from the holy land of their country, the ground soaked with the blood and the suffering of their ancestors, the land defended with so much bravery and over the course of so many centuries by our glorious nation.”⁴¹

Therefore, the military chaplain understood that if the enemy wanted to „destroy the Romanians' love for their country,“ then they had to „strengthen this love,“ fortifying it through every possible means.⁴²

Confronted with this Bolshevik dialectics, the strategy of Fr. Dăncilă was a well-thought out one, focused on the national sensitivities of the soldiers and on their strong connections with the motherland. He appealed to these feelings at some key moments of the campaign, such as their presence on the „historical plain of Turda, next to the grave of the martyr prince,“ Michael the Brave. Here, Ioan Dăncilă describes a memorable moment, which is identical with the one illustrated by Liviu Rebreanu in volume I, „The Voice of the Earth“ of his celebrated novel, „Ion,“ namely, the soldiers' kissing of the earth, just like the peasant Ion al Glanetaşului in the Năşăud village of Pripas

“In a gentle sunset, I urged them to kiss the country's earth, in a gesture of faith that sanctioned the union of our soul with the holy ground of Michael the martyr's blood. Only then and there did we all feel, for the first time in our lives, the blessing of all the martyrs who lie in the bosom of the Romanian land, for whose defence we were preparing at that time, priests and soldiers alike.”⁴³

³⁹ Dăncilă 1925, 115.

⁴⁰ Dăncilă 1925, 122.

⁴¹ Dăncilă 1925, 120.

⁴² Dăncilă 1925, 120.

⁴³ Dăncilă 1925, 120–121.

The second direction of Fr. Dăncilă's actions was the complete replacement of the Transylvanian soldiers' loyalty towards the Habsburg dynasty with loyalty for the Romanian dynasty, Ferdinand and Maria, the „King and Queen of our dreams,” who travelled through Transylvania showing their most noble feelings towards the values of the Romanian nation, as no Habsburg had ever done

“When I described to my soldiers the hora in Câmpeni and the dinner in Alba-Iulia, where the King and Queen had danced and dined with the people, when I told them about the King and Queen hugging the elders and the children of Transylvania, when I painted to them, in parallel with these scenes, the betrayals of the Habsburgs against Horia and Iancu, I believe that, from that moment on, anyone who would have dared to utter a single word against our dynasty was doomed to perdition. For three days in a row, I spoke to my soldiers about nothing but the glorious war commanded by His Majesty the King, the sufferings of the reigning House during the war, the pain alleviated by our August Queen and their permanent help to the disabled, orphans and widows. When, at the end of my counsel, I invited all of them to cheer for our king and queen, I remember, there was such excitement and frenzy that all the streets around the high school in whose yard we had gathered filled with people who were curious to see what was the cause of all that endless cheering, voiced by sincere soldiers, yearning to defend the throne and the dynasty, whatever the circumstances.”⁴⁴

The texts of Fr. Ioan Dăncilă concerning the campaign of the Romanian Army in Hungary, which culminated in the overthrow of the Bolshevik government and the removal of the danger of communism in Central Europe, complete the picture of the Romanian military campaign, illustrating, at the same time, the multifaceted mission assumed by the chaplain in the Romanian regiments in the period between World War I and the struggle for the defense of Greater Romania, birthed by the democratic decisions reached in Chişinău, Cernăuţi and Alba Iulia.

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⁴⁴ Dăncilă 1925, 123–124.

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Figure no. 1: Fr. Captain Ioan Dăncilă, November 10, 1916, Rifenberg-Germany, Personal Collection of Aurel Pentelescu, Bucharest (Courtesy of Aurel Pentelescu).



Figure no. 2: Captain Ioan Dăncilă, army chaplain, carrying out mass on the front of Galicia, Easter, April 11, 1916, Personal Collection of Aurel Pentelescu, Bucharest (Courtesy of Aurel Pentelescu).