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PRAYER IN THE TRENCHES

PRAYER BOOKS FOR SOLDIERS ON THE HUNGARIAN FRONTS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Abstract: The study analyses prayer books for Catholic soldiers published in Hungary during the First World War. We know of close to twenty such books that appeared in numerous editions. Prayer sheets and hand-copied prayer texts with magical functions (prayers against bullets) have also been found. Drawing on these and contemporary press materials it reconstructs religious life on the fronts and in particular the practice and function of prayer. The study also examines veneration of the Sacred Heart that played a big part in wartime pastoral activity, seeking an answer to the question of how that cult was able to become a source of spiritual strength for soldiers. In addition it looks at the opinion of the church on war and the Christian soldier as reflected in the books and prayers.

Keywords: First World War, Catholic Church, prayer book, Christian soldier, veneration of the Sacred Heart, prayers against bullets

In the first quarter of the 20th century the church had to provide guidance not only on the transformation of society but also in the global military events of the period. Amidst the difficulties of the First World War both soldiers serving at the fronts and those who stayed at home looked for consolation. The thematic prayer books, booklets and leaflets published at that time clearly confirm that the churches responded immediately to these challenges. The spread of the Sacred Heart cult that was undergoing a revival among Catholics also proved to be a good tool in wartime pastoral activity as all families had husbands, fathers, sons, relatives, loved ones in the army to worry about and the women waited for their return. Prayer was a common language that could be used to overcome the anxieties caused by the war. It could fill everyone with hope, whether they were Protestant, Catholic or Jewish. This was why in this difficult situation the representatives of all denominations strove to provide help and spiritual support with prayer texts for both those on the battlefields and those left at home. In this article

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I present a few characteristics of Hungarian Catholic prayer books published during the First World War.¹

The war and the church

Although almost no one in Hungary doubted the justness of the First World War,² the Hungarian Catholic Church nevertheless received it with anxiety. When Prince Primate János Csernoch at the head of the church learnt about the declaration of war he immediately offered his help to rescue the country from its difficulties.

“The heads of the other churches were no less enthusiastic in their patriotism and readiness to make sacrifices. Like everywhere else in Europe at war, the servants of God, priests, ministers, rabbis blessed the weapons that brought death, urged the soldiers to struggle heroically, and those who remained at home to resign themselves to sacrifices.”³

The clergy, who at that time still expected that the war would end swiftly, hoped that the heroic struggles would bring an end to immorality leading to anarchy and selfishness arising from disbelief.⁴ Ottokár Prohászka⁵, the greatest Hungarian church figure of the period also argued in a pastoral letter that the war would have the effect of ennobling morality, seeing in it a form of penance:

“[...] let us humble ourselves deeply under the hand of God and face these difficult times with great faith and without grumbling. After all He is the Lord; He sends the good and the bad, but he always sends

1 Using material I collected myself, library catalogues and the offers of second-hand book dealers I was able to identify 20 Hungarian-language prayer books published for Catholic soldiers. I was able to actually examine and analyse close to half of these.

2 In face of the circle of church leaders supporting the declaration of war, the only open supporter in Hungary of a position against the war was Canon Sándor Gieswein (1856–1923), well known as a linguist, philosopher, anthropologist and religious historian. As a member of the Christian Socialist Party he boldly condemned the bloodshed and struggled for peace throughout the war. In 1915 he joined the Permanent International Peace Bureau, a pacifist organisation based in Bern. For further details, see: László, T. László 2005. 65 and Magyar Katolikus Lexikon [Hungarian Catholic Lexicon] (Kat. Lex.) IV. 1998. 99–101.

3 LÁSZLÓ, T. László 2005. 64.

4 SCHNAITER 2007. 184.

5 Ottokár Prohászka (1858–1927) was the greatest Hungarian Catholic church writer and orator of the period. He was an apostle of social care, a reformer at the turn of the century, and also a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The inscription on his grave reads: “Hungary’s apostle and teacher.” KAT. LEX. XI. 2006. 289–293.

it to benefit us; He places us in the trials of war too, and he places us there to make us better, more faithful, more noble and more ready to make sacrifices. He sends the sufferings so that we will love Him and each other more; He sends them so that we will draw closer to Him and join together in one; He sends it to purify our souls and so that we can make sacrifices for Him and for our fellow men.”⁶

This heroic pathos attributed eschatological meaning to the ideal of war, in which the trials brought down by Providence served for the salvation of the individual’s own soul and the spiritual renewal of the entire nation.⁷

In their declarations in 1915 the churches still addressed their followers with hope-filled encouragement, painting a vision of the approaching country of God:

“He may have guided us on difficult, unmarked paths that lead to battles, trenches and unmarked graves, but those paths only lead that way, they do not end there, because they are actually leading to Him.”⁸

However, as the war dragged on, the situation in the hinterland deteriorated, and the horrors became widely known, opinions increasingly turned towards a stronger expression of the desire for peace.

Prayer books for the use of soldiers

“Faith, as well as religious piety and the practical Christian life arising from it, played a big part in easing the sufferings and strengthening souls.”⁹

To increase faith, the church held rousing sermons, sent out pastoral letters and organised extraordinary devotions. Frequent communion and temporary battle-field chapels served to intensify religious sentiments.¹⁰ All these devotional practices were led by the army chaplains who provided spiritual care for the soldiers. Their task was to hold religious services as often as possible and strengthen the soldiers with their sermons. Before battles they gave absolution (the formula for forgiveness of sins) to the soldiers lined up in battle order. During battles they

6 He wrote the pastoral letter on 3 August 1914. The full text of the letter can be read in Vol. 22 of his collected works: PROHÁSZKA 1929. 117–120.

7 LÁSZLÓ, T. László 2005. 67.

8 PROHÁSZKA 1915a 98.

9 SZÁNTÓ 1988. 572.

10 SZÁNTÓ 1988. 572.

were at the dressing stations and comforted the wounded. It was their duty to give the last rites to the dying on the battlefield and in case of death to accompany the soldier on his last journey. They also served in the military hospitals beside the trenches.¹¹ In addition to their tasks on the battlefield and in hospitals they played a key role in the distribution at the front of prayer books, booklets and leaflets published especially for soldiers.¹² These prayer books and other spiritual books also played a big part not only in keeping religious faith alive but also in humanising in the special circumstances of war.

Publication of the books began practically as soon as the outbreak of war.¹³ The first book they began to distribute was the 11th edition (1909) of “Imák és intelmek a magyar katolikus hadfiak számára” [Prayers and Admonitions for Hungarian Catholic Soldiers] a work written in the 19th century by the Capuchin army chaplain Bertalan Molnár Vid (1813–1898).¹⁴ It had been in print since 1861, the 1909 edition had been revised by the Lazarist¹⁵ Aladár Reviczky. He was also asked to prepare a new, more easily handled version of the 1909 edition. This appeared in 1915. Reviczky produced a number of other prayer books, not only and not exclusively for those serving on the battlefield, but also for the wounded and for those remaining at home. Having in mind also the needs of the ethnic minorities, the books were published in several languages.

Besides the Molnár Vid prayer book, three others deserve special attention. The first is “Háborús zsolnárok” [“Prayer book of psalms for time of war”] (Budapest 1915) by the Franciscan László Péri Bonaventura (1887–1934). We learn from the subtitle that it is a collection of prayers compiled from Scripture, from the 1793 work translated from Latin by Terencián Buberlée. It is in reality a collection of quotations. The prayers have been compiled from lines in the biblical psalms with war themes, linked to sentences in the Lord’s Prayer.¹⁶ This book was not the only translation among the Hungarian wartime prayer books. We know from contemporary data that Bernat Dühr’s prayer book: “Mit Gott für König und Vaterland” (1914, Regensburg/München) also appeared in Hungarian translation. The third

11 SCHROTT 1915. 561–581, DR. VARGA 2010. 66–70.

12 DR. VARGA 2010. 81.

13 The biggest Hungarian church publisher of the time, the Szent István Társulat (Saint Stephen Society) reports on this in the minutes of its meeting held on 18 March 1915. MACZÁK 2010, available at: http://www.mediakutato.hu/cikk/2010_01_tavas/09_elso_vilaghaboru_imakonyvek/ retrieved on: 21. 08. 2017.

14 Data of the earlier editions: 1st edition, Mantova, 1861; 5th, 7th edition, Pest, 1864; 8th edition Eger, Budapest 1882; 11th edition, Budapest, 1909; 12th edition, Budapest, 1915. (reissued 3 times, then in 1916 a further four reprints were produced); 13th edition, 1917. Source: SZINNYEI 1891–1914. available online at: <http://mek.oszk.hu/03600/03630/html/m/m16616.htm> Accessed on 21. 08. 2017.

15 The Lazarists were members of the Congregation of the Mission, an order devoted to spiritual care and missionary work both at home and abroad. It was founded by Saint Vincent de Paul (1589–1660).

16 MACZÁK 2010. http://www.mediakutato.hu/cikk/2010_01_tavas/09_elso_vilaghaboru_imakonyvek/ Accessed on 21. 08. 2017.

prayer book is Péter Pázmány:¹⁷ “Háborús idők imakönyve” “Book of prayers for time of war”] (1915, Budapest). This is actually a new edition with minor revisions of the archbishop’s prayer book published in 1606. It was published in two formats, one that could be taken to the battlefield and a version for the use of those who remained at home.

It can be seen that prayer books published during the First World War were not necessarily new works. Often old works were adapted to the historical situation and reissued, or foreign works (especially in German) were translated into Hungarian.

“It may surprise the minister of religion, the historian and the literary historian that the different church institutions responded almost immediately with the mass publication of targeted and varied prayer books, however the majority definitely did not consider it absolutely necessary to update the contents.”¹⁸

In part this was obviously due to lack of time, on the other hand it was perhaps because they were guided by the hope that the war would soon be over.

The books were published by the Saint Stephen Society, the official publisher of the Hungarian Catholic church. The Society distributed many free of charge to soldiers in the barracks, hospitals and on the battlefields.

1914	670,000
1915	625,000
1916	345,000
1917	183,000

Number of prayer books published by the Saint Stephen Society during the war years.¹⁹

In my research to date I have succeeded in collecting a total of 17 different Catholic prayer books for soldiers. They include one that reached 13 editions and numerous reprints. Single-sheet prayer leaflets were also very widespread. It can be said that the Catholic church devoted considerable material means to meet the spiritual needs of soldiers fighting on the fronts and those who remained at home in the hinterland.

17 Péter Pázmány (1570–1637) a Jesuit, was a key figure in the Hungarian Counter-reformation following the Council of Trent. With his conversions, polemical essays, the schools, seminaries and university he founded he played a leading role in 16th-17th century church life and culture. *KAT. LEX. X.* 2005. 712–718

18 MACZÁK 2010. http://www.mediakutato.hu/cikk/2010_01_tavas/09_elso_vilaghaboru_imakonyvek/ Accessed on: 21. 08. 2017.

19 MÉSZÁROS 1998. 137.

They counted mainly on the army chaplains, priests and the faithful for distribution of the books.²⁰ However at times even the women who remained behind took part in this missionary work. In its June 1916 issue the Hungarian-language Jewish weekly “Egyenlőség” [“Equality”] carried a report about two big-hearted and exemplary women. One, Mrs Miklós Zay, was the wife of a Catholic magnate, the other an anonymous Jewish lady. Recognising the need for spiritual consolation and strength of soldiers wounded in the war who had suffered physical and spiritual trials, the two women worked to send prayer books and prayer leaflets to their compatriots in the trenches.

“I made it my duty to give a small prayer book or booklet to every one of our brave fighting men (together with other small souvenirs) at the last farewell and so far I have distributed thousands of these here,”²¹

wrote Mrs Miklós Zay to the National Jewish Office and, with her Jewish compatriots in mind, she requested copies of the “Pajzs és Vért” [“Shield and Armour”] prayer book for the soldiers. Her Jewish compatriot thought similarly: among others she distributed Aladár Reviczky’s Catholic prayer book for soldiers.²² As we can read in the columns of *Egyenlőség*, the two women, “shining examples of freedom from any prejudice”, show that the tragedies of war had strengthened bonds between the denominations.

A few characteristics of the spirituality of the prayer books for soldiers

“May the Prayer Book for Soldiers be a precious treasure of the fighting man from which he draws strength, new enthusiasm and consolation,” wrote imperial and royal army bishop Imre Bjelik on 25 March 1917 in his foreword to Molnár Vid’s *Prayer Book for Soldiers*. The principal aim of the battlefield prayers was to

20 A circular letter from the Győr Bishopric, for example, reported on this: “The Saint Stephen Society has published a number of very useful occasional booklets for time of war that I warmly recommend to the attention of priests and for distribution among their parishioners. The booklets are the following: Uram irgalmazz nekünk [God have mercy on us] (10f), Imádkozzunk a hadbavonultakért [Let us pray for the men who have been mobilised] (20 f), Imák és intelmek katonák számára [Prayers and admonitions for soldiers] (20f), Bízál fiam, sebesült katonák részére [Trust my son, for wounded soldiers]. The latter booklet is sent by the Saint Stephen Society everywhere there are wounded soldiers. The author of the booklets is our esteemed church writer Aladár Reviczky. Győr, 9 October 1914.” Circular Letters of the Győr Bishopric, 1914. book recommendation No. 6115, available online at: http://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/GyoriPuspoksegKorlevelei_1914/?pg=179&layout=s, Accessed on : 21. 04. 2016.

21 Mrs Miklós Zay’s letter is cited in: *Egyenlőség* 24 June 1916, 10.

22 For the report on the Jewish lady, see: *Egyenlőség* 17 June 1916, 3.

give courage, consolation and enthusiasm: "Great enthusiasm is required for war, without it defeat is certain. Only the thought of the nation and religion can arouse such enthusiasm."²³ References to the nation, the wounds suffered by the nation, the defence of its rights and justice appear as a frequent element in the texts, in what could be considered justification of the just war. "The war that threatens the homeland has wounded the hearts of us all,"²⁴ or "This nation is struggling for its rights and justice."²⁵ According to Christian tradition the aim of this just war is not to exclude the possibility of war but to condemn its evil, limit its harmful effects and make the methods of warfare more humane. It can only be initiated for morally acceptable reasons (unjust attack, failure to respect rights).²⁶

Leafing through the books it can be seen that the majority followed one and the same subject matter: morning and evening prayers, prayers in time of war (for homeland, king, leaders), battlefield prayers, prayers for the wounded, prayers of those at home (all kinds of family members) for family members struggling on the battlefield, for a friend, etc. and finally in most books we find short compilations of biblical passages (one or two sentences) giving hope. The selection is thus understandably far more limited than in the customary general prayer books. These books do not contain the various devotional exercises and prayers linked to the feasts of the church year and to Mary. The individual texts are also brief and simple as these could be best used on the battlefield, as army bishop Imre Bjelik noted:

"If anyone has need of prayer it is above all the soldier; it gives him courage in danger, drips patience and cheer into his heart in the various difficulties of life, it brings him strength to perform his duty. Even if it is short, the soldier's prayer should be often and sincere!"²⁷

The most emphasised among the short prayer texts are prayers of blessing and confession. The characteristics of modern warfare also play a role in this. It was a new feature in the First World War that the time of clashes could not be known in advance. It was therefore not possible to prepare the soldiers in the morning of battles. Soldiers could confess and ask for absolution, and in case of a greater emergency general absolution was also possible, for the soldiers were in fact continuously exposed to danger. This situation was further aggravated by the appearance of aeroplanes, meaning that soldiers on the battlefield had to be prepared for death as any time. The short prayers could be of help in these minutes filled with fear.²⁸

23 MOLNÁR VID (revised by Reviczky), 1915. 4.

24 WÉBER 1915. 231.

25 REVICZKY 1914. 14.

26 SOMFAI 1991. 131–133, 186–189.

27 Imre Bjelik sermon cited in: PRÁGA 2015. 8.

28 WITTENBERG 2009. 231.

Religious zeal arising from faith and practical Christian life became more intense among the soldiers and the faithful who remained at home. Amidst the trials of the war years many people found their way back to God, in many places the numbers receiving communion and especially those observing the First Friday increased ten- and even twenty-fold compared to the figures for the beginning of the century and growing numbers took communion daily.²⁹ According to the Catholic paper *Religio* "this war is the dawn of a religious renaissance."³⁰ A few issues later we read that

"Who knows whether the dawn is now breaking when the apostles who have fished all night and caught nothing hear the word of the Saviour 'Cast your net again'."³¹

These hope-filled ideas reflect the longing of all mankind and especially of the Hungarians for their moral cleansing and a return to religion. However disenchantment soon followed and the idea of penance for sins gave way to a longing for peace.

"Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world ... take from us our sin, the hatred and its curse, the war and give us what You alone can give, give us what You wept for and won for us – give us Your peace – give us international, Christian love; then the fighting and the war will end and we will place beside the laurel the olive branch, without which the laurel withers!"³²

The prayer texts allow us to form a picture of the criteria for a good Christian soldier too.

"In the war do not be a tiger thirsting for blood. Avoid hardness of heart towards the poor, unfortunate inhabitants who live on the battlefield. Do not harm your unarmed fellow men. Spare their cattle. Show your nobility of heart. You too would appreciate it if your enemy treated you that way. Do not steal, do not rob, do not cause fire or harm. ... Be humane and helpful to the wounded, merciful to prisoners and God will show mercy to you too. Be obedient. If anywhere, this is the place for unconditional obedience. ... Fight with death-defying bravery. Be conscientiously obedient. Be merciful and wherever possible – and there will be a hundred chances for it – do

29 SALACZ 1974. 207.

30 MIHÁLYFI 1915. 13.

31 TÓTH 1915. 130.

32 Ottokár Prohászka's prayer below the nihil obstat permission number and date in Damján Vargha's prayer book. VARGHA 1917.

good to your fellow men. Comrades, into the battle! If you lose your earthly lives, you will win eternal life."³³

In the properties listed in the prayer we find a new element of the views on war held in Christian moral tradition. The aim of war is not to destroy the enemy, or revenge, but the means of ensuring a just peace as soon as possible: "I humbly beg You to ease the horrors of war and the sufferings of the fighters, prevent all cruelty, console the wounded [...]."³⁴ Another quality of the Christian, believing soldier is that he accepts his struggles, suffering and death as penance out of love for the Lord of Hosts because – as Ottokár Prohászka wrote in an article on the correct behaviour in war – with this he is serving a higher order of good, the salvation of others. To ensure that this service is indeed just and sincere, the prayer books placed great emphasis on confession, communion, blessing, receiving the last rites and naturally also on frequent prayer, even if only in the form of one or two short sentences:

"Trust in man and force does not console and does not encourage; we must find our way to the Lord and remain steadfast. We must look to Him, although with anxiety in our heart, but with the confidence of hope. The days of war, the long days of suffering are of no account when we do penance."³⁵

This appears in the texts as the reflection in human life of the sufferings of Christ.

"As the heavenly Father glorified the wounds of our Lord Jesus, so your wounds too bring only glory to our Hungarian homeland. Suffer and be consoled in this knowledge."³⁶

"In the dark hours of danger I remember Your bitter sufferings Lord Jesus that I had forgotten in the carefree days of my life. Your sufferings and blood are the proof of Your love for us. I look on Your bleeding wounds and cry for mercy."³⁷

To bear the sufferings of the battlefield the church focused on veneration of the Sacred Heart, in the hope that it would become a source of strength for the soldiers.

33 REVICZKY 1916. 4–6.

34 MOLNÁR VID (revised by Reviczky), 1915. 18.

35 WÉBER 1915. 231.

36 From the foreword by Cardinal Prince-Primate János Csernoch to the prayer book "Trust, my son!". REVICZKY 1914. 2.

37 TOMA 1914. 1.

Sacred Heart, the source of hope and penitence

It was not by chance that it was veneration of the Sacred Heart that became the cult offering the most hope during the war years. The Sacred Heart is the symbol of Christ's saving love in which the church saw the source of the obedience, patience, self-denial and meekness expected of the soldiers. It imagined that just as Jesus sacrificed his life for the sins of mankind, so all participants in the war must do penance and be reborn in the faith. Christ's suffering, sacrifice and death was a suitable symbol for a kind of *imitatio Christi* to be realised through it. There was a special need for this because in the opinion of the church: the war was a divine punishment for which penance had to be done.

"It was those human sins that we all committed that brought down the horrors of war on mankind. Let us wipe these sins from our hearts so that the colour of the earth can be renewed in justice and peace."³⁸

It was hoped that penance for sins and a return to faith would bring victory for the soldiers fighting for the just cause.³⁹ Thus, when at the beginning of the First World War the population realised the horrors of war and their consequences Francis Joseph, king of Hungary dedicated his crown, throne and peoples to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.⁴⁰ Later the Hungarian bishops also joined the king's dedication: they drew up a special prayer for 1 January 1915 that was read in the churches, in this way too recognising and reinforcing the king's intention. With this Hungary not only became the country of Mary, but also the country of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.⁴¹ A separate prayer book, "Jézus Szíve imakönyv katonák számára" ["Sacred Heart Prayer Book for Soldiers"] was also published in 1917 with a his foreword by army chaplain Imre Bjelik titled:

"Pray frequently and invoke the most sacred Heart of Jesus! Let the most sacred Heart of Jesus be your hope and the blessed virgin

38 TOMA 1914. 22.

39 BUSCH 1997. 96–104.

40 The dedication was made on 8 December 1914. MÜLLER 1944. 371–372.

41 It is known that a similar dedication was made by Germany and France, as well as by the Tyrolean bishops, so this is not an exclusively Hungarian characteristic. SCHLAGER 2005. 181; SCHNAITER 2007. 745. However the 20th century renaissance of the cult cannot be attributed solely to the influence of the war. Already in 1891 the famous "Rerum Novarum" encyclical of Pope Leo XIII drew attention to the tensions appearing and to be expected in the wake of industrialisation and capitalism. He wrote: "For, the happy results we all long for must be chiefly brought about by the plenteous outpouring of charity; of that true Christian charity which is the fulfilling of the whole Gospel law, which is always ready to sacrifice itself for others' sake, and is man's surest antidote against worldly pride and immoderate love of self." This guideline was fully in harmony with the basic ideal of the veneration of the Sacred Heart. In 1899 Pope Leo XIII dedicated the whole world to the Sacred Heart, it was then that he approved the Sacred Heart litany for the world. Since the Sacred Heart was regarded as the symbol of the saving love of God, this image proved well suited to counterbalance for the faithful the horrors of the wartime events. MÜLLER 1944. 371–372.

Mother be your saving star! Recommending you to their protection I
 bless you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.
 Amen. BI army chaplain, 1916, on the day of the Blessed Lady of
 Hungary."⁴²

But it was not only the emergency of the war that led to an upswing in the cult. The clergy saw it as a means through which "there is hope for the society and the Church to escape from the present catastrophic problems [...]." ⁴³ It is not so much the difficulties of the war that the author was referring to here, much rather to the symptoms of crisis in the years following the turn of the century, to the anomalies of bourgeois development, the political and economic tensions, the masses turning away from the church and religion. Penance had to be done for these sins too in the war.⁴⁴

Prayers against bullets

The collective fears and anxieties caused by the war also evoked prayer texts that activated ancient tradition and reached the soldiers in need not through the official church channels. These texts were used as amulets having special power. They included holy letters, prayers giving protection against bullets, and in cases even the prayer books themselves could function as amulets. There thus existed a kind of notion of war/soldiers in which beliefs related to religion and prayer occupied an important place.⁴⁵ This was not a new custom: prayers against bullets also appeared in mediaeval manuscripts and later also in prayer books, and from time to time were used in situations of armed conflict.⁴⁶ One such text that was frequently found was the *Prayer against enemy bullets*, a holy or heavenly

42 From the foreword by Imre Bjelik to the prayer book *Jézus Szíve imakönyve katonák számára* [*Sacred Heart Prayer Book for Soldiers*]. 1917.

43 BÍRÓ 1933. 4.

44 SZIGETI 2014. 53.

45 We know this, among others, from the material collected by Ákos Szendrey (1902–1965) a renowned Hungarian ethnological researcher of the time who in 1916 published in several parts a study on his field work concerning superstitions in the trenches. The inspiration came from an appeal issued by the Kisfaludy Society in 1915 for collection of war-related folklore. Szendrey 1916. 294. Similar research was also conducted in other countries. We know of the appeals for collecting made Adolf Spamer ethnological researcher in Germany, that inspired an article written by Karl Pümer in 1916. According to his report, the use of amulets, hearts, crosses, relics and holy letters was very popular also among German and Russian soldiers. BEIL – WINKLE 2005. 149-178.

46 The relevant entries in HdA give detailed information on the different types of heavenly letters protecting against bullets over the course of history: HdA IV. 1931/32, Himmelsbrief [Heavenly letters] 21–27, HdA VIII. 1936–37, Sonntagsbrief [Sunday letters] 99–104, III. 1930/31, Grafenamulett [Blessing text of Count Philip, blessing of weapons] 1111–1112, VII. 1935/36, Schutzbrief [Protecting letters] 1384–1385, VI. 1931–32, Ölbergspruch [Blessing of weapons] 1246–1247. The study by Emese Szojka drew my attention to the various entries. SZOJKA 1990. 178-191. See also: JUNG 1994. 4–17, 18-34.

letter, comparable in form to an ordinary letter. According to the instructions it contained it was “to be carried at all times”, so that it could stop bleeding, heal wounds, give protection against armed attacks:

“every Catholic in possession of this letter can boldly face any danger, is protected from all enemies, cannot be touched by anything, need have no fear of bullet or bayonet, of murderer or thief, in short it wards off all trouble and sickness. He must have no fear of death or fire or water, any pistol or bullet aimed at him misses its target at God’s command. I know that my words have been doubted, but believe! The immortal soul of Lord Jesus is found only in my words. In short every Catholic should test this on an animal: copy the letters and tie them around the neck of a dog and shoot at it from any distance. You will see that the bullet misses its target and every person who carries this letter will be protected in the same way.”⁴⁷

Almost certainly many soldiers grasped at the beliefs promised in the letter, the reason why many of them carried the letter or a copy of the combination of letters it contained folded up tightly in a pocket above the heart or around the neck.⁴⁸

Conclusion

“The war with its irrational violence and senseless destruction of life and values”⁴⁹ did not bring the expected purification with which the prayer texts encouraged those fighting on the battlefield. As Prohászka wrote in his article

“friend and foe are praying; the same cry rises to heaven from the opposing sides and those praying in the trenches want to destroy the enemy who are praying. They are all praying and all striving to ensure that the prayer of the other side is not answered. If the Lord hears one, he will allow the other side to be destroyed; if I can kill, then the same prayer that filled my soul with the longing for liberation and trust is frozen on the lips of the other. This request for protection by religiosity in wartime thus contains impossible things.”⁵⁰

47 The letter can be found in the Data Archive of the Department of Anthropology of Szeged University (SZENTA), it entered the collection a few years ago as a gift.

48 These letters did not disappear after the First World War either. They reappeared during the years of the Second World War, and even again in the 1990s when considerable numbers were found during the Serb wars. SZOJKA 1996. 178–191, JUNG 1994. 4–17, 18–34.

49 PROHÁSZKA 1915. 882.

50 PROHÁSZKA 1915. 882.

It is perhaps precisely these impossibilities that in the final years of the war led “masses of believers and people who have lost their faith to want something new.”⁵¹ They were no longer enthused by the realisation of God’s plan for the world; everyone was disillusioned by the death of millions and the misery that came in its wake. Only the longing for peace remained on the lips of those praying in the trenches: “Will You have mercy on us Lord of Heaven? Will the beautiful dawn break over the Hungarians, Will the star of Peace shine again over us?”⁵²

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