
CHURCH AND STATE IN WW 2

THE ORTHODOX PRIESTS IN TRANSYLVANIA AND THE LEGIONARY ‘REBELLION’

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Abstract

The paper deals with the membership to the ‘Legionary Movement’ of certain Orthodox priests in Transylvania and with their attitude during the revolutionary events in January 1941 (the Legionary ‘Rebellion’). The prompt reactions of the new military government imposed by Marshall Ion Antonescu were materialised in commands aimed at restoring order, but also at collecting information regarding the participation of the clergy in the activities of the Legionary organisation and the possible funding of the legionary programme by the Church. The unedited documents identified by us illustrate the general atmosphere after the Legionary ‘Rebellion’, and particularly that in the Alba Iulia Vicarage and in the Alba Iulia Deanery.

Keywords: legionary ‘rebellion’, vicarage, Alba Iulia, Transylvania, Orthodox priests

1. Introduction

The topic of this paper is the recovery of an unknown episode concerning the attitude of some orthodox priests in Transylvania in respect to the Legionary ‘Rebellion’ (on January 21st- 23rd 1941). Based on reports found in the archives, this research does not raise general issues concerning the ‘Legionary Movement’ or the circumstances in which the Legionary ‘Rebellion’ occurred, which we consider very well known, but it presents data undisclosed before within the Romanian Orthodox Vicarage in Alba Iulia and the Alba Iulia Deanery.

The Vicarage in Alba Iulia functioned during WWII as a temporary body for the administration of parishes in the southern half of the eparchy in Cluj, left without a hierarch after the Vienna Diktat, which practically split Transylvania in two, and, as a result, the eparchy of Cluj. Thus, 8 deaneries with 184 parishes remained in the territory conceded to Hungary, under the guidance of bishop Nicolae Colan and the other 10 deaneries (later 8, then 9), with 201-209 parishes, in Romania, for the latter being founded the Vicarage in Alba Iulia. This new administrative body, led by the archpriest of Alba Iulia, Alexandru Baba, lasted for 4 years and 7 months, from September 6th 1940 until April 1st

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1945 [1-3]. One may see also the Archives of the Archdiocese in Cluj (in this document marked as AAC), *Romanian Orthodox Vicarage of Alba Iulia* Fund (in this document marked as *ROVAI* Fund), doc. no. 1878/8 May 1942.

2. The Legionary ‘Rebellion’

The year 1941 started with the Legionary ‘Rebellion’ (January 21st- 23rd), prepared by some members of the government themselves – in order to gain the power “for unilateral purposes of ‘Legionary Movement’s” [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 146/January 1943], and the formation of a new military government under the presidency of Marshal Ion Antonescu (January 28th).

During the first part of the year 1941, after the Legionary ‘Rebellion’, the Romanian State leadership was busy collecting information regarding the initiators, collaborators and participants to the revolution. Such information was obtained from public institutions in the form of tables containing the names of those involved and the amounts collected on behalf of the ‘Legionary Movement’. Starting with the autumn of 1941 we notice a focus on the legislative component of this issue, on defining the status of those condemned for participating in the ‘Rebellion’ and on applying punitive measures against them.

Within the entire Alba Iulia Vicarage, the number of priests affiliated to the ‘Legionary Movement’ was 25, mostly from the Aiud, Turda and Alba Iulia Deaneries [4; AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, *Draft*, no. 1295/10 April 1941]. None of these, however, took part during the ‘Rebellion’ in any acts of abuse, in any hostile manifestations against the interests of the State, nor did they engage in actions of sabotage and disorder; and none was found guilty or condemned during the investigations ordered by the State authorities [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 972/11 March 1941; *Raportul despre activitatea Vicariatului de la înființarea lui (6 septembrie 1940), până la 30 iunie 1941*, 9]. In the reports addressed by the Vicarial leadership to the State authorities and to the Metropolitan of Transylvania, Nicolae Bălan, was stated that, after the days of January 21st-23rd, 1941, the priests who had been members of the Movement, becoming aware that they had been seduced into an organisation which had deceived them and whose intentions proved to be other than those they had hoped, withdrew from the Movement [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, *Draft*, no. 1295/10 April 1941].

As to the Vicarial leadership, headed by the Vicar Alexandru Baba, who was also the Dean of Alba Iulia, it had a reserved attitude in respect to the ‘Legionary Movement’, both before and after the dramatic events of January 21st-23rd, 1941. Its particular absence during the actual ‘Rebellion’ is proven by the reports drawn at that moment, while the general absence, the overall lack of involvement in the political programme of the Movement is proven by one incident December 24th, 1940, when the school Deputy Inspector Ier(onim?) Ciunganu, a legionary, was requesting the Quaestor of the Police in Alba Iulia to confiscate the Vicarial *Calendar*, the 1941 Edition, invoking several reasons: the

lack of any reference to the 'Legionary Movement' in the pages of that publication, but especially the lack of an "untarnished Romanian feeling" of those in the Vicarial leadership, which made them remain unengaged in the "heroic struggle of the 'Legionary Movement' for the salvation of our nation." [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, *Copy* from December 1940, unregistered].

Thus it was easy to anticipate the reaction of the Vicarial leadership after the 'Rebellion', manifested by a telegram addressed to the Marshal Ion Antonescu on January 26th, 1941, which expressed the admiration and gratitude for the "great good done for the Country and the Nation by saving them from an inevitable collapse" [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 300/28 January 1941]. As a gesture of adhesion, it offered the amount of 10,000 Lei (from the salaries of priests) for helping the families of soldiers who had died for saving the State order during the events on January 21st-23rd, 1941.

2.1. Reports of the Alba Iulia Vicarage and of the Alba Iulia Deanery

The following section presents chronologically the identified documents illustrating, albeit in a fragmentary fashion, the general atmosphere which set in after the Legionary 'Rebellion', but also referring to the Alba Iulia Vicarage and to the Alba Iulia Deanery, thus furnishing important information about the attitude of the clergy in this region during the turbulent events at the beginning of 1941, but also afterwards.

On January 29th, 1941, the Minister of Religious Affairs requested all cases of subversive action among priests and Church clerks to be reported. The Vicarial leadership responded by showing that no such situations had been recorded, excepting the case of the legionary priests Dragotă of Decea, Groza of Gârbova, and Oțoiu of Mesentea, who had urged the faithful to gather in the sub-district centres, but without knowing the exact purpose of the meetings. No case of attempted undermining of the state order in the Alba Iulia Deanery was reported [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 345/30 January 1941; no. 851/6 March 1941; no. 1083/18 March 1941]. At the same time, by a circular letter, the Vicarial Council was requesting all priests to fully cooperate with the authorities for the restoration of order in villages.

At the beginning of February, Marshall Ion Antonescu ordered the civil servants who had participated in the 'Rebellion' to be removed from office (the circular letter was also published in the 'Renașterea' review), and on February 14th, 1941, the Royal Decree No. 314 forbade to the clergy of any denomination to join or be active in political organisations [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 528/12 February 1941; *Raportul despre activitatea Vicariatului de la înființarea lui...*, 9].

On February 11th, 1941, the Metropolitane Nicolae Bălan, in order to know the attitude of the priests during the 'Rebellion', asked the Vicarial leadership to provide information concerning the behaviour of priests in general, and of the members of the clergy who had formally joined the 'Legionary Movement', in particular. On February 17th, 1941, the Metropolitane in Sibiu sent a circular letter

in which, referring to the 'Legionary Movement', emphasized the danger of weakening the national unity through breaches 'among brothers of the same nation' and highlighted the role of priests as guides and teachers of the nation. Mentioning the deviation of some priests from that mission, the Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan urged them to ponder and repent, for the rehabilitation of the prestige of Orthodox clergy. Deans were instructed to organise conferences for the priests, to reemphasize the spiritual mission of priests [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 579/14 February 1941; no. 1177/24 March 1941].

On February 21st, 1941, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers requested tables to be drawn, with the persons who distinguished themselves by effective actions aimed at quenching the 'Rebellion'. The Vicarage answered that the priests had abstained from any involvement, generally acting for appeasing the opponents, without falling into any extremes [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 687-688/24 February 1941].

At the end of February 1941, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers requested statistics to be drawn, containing the amounts collected or retained by the Parishes from their budget for the now-dismantled political organisation 'The Legionary Aid'. Likewise, the Finance Ministry requested data concerning the amounts made available by the parishes to legionary organisations, as well as the correspondence generated by such relations. The intention was, therefore, to check whether the Church had financed the legionary programme.

The Vicarage answered there had been no such cases, no amounts having been retained from the budget and no fund-raising having been set up for the political organisation concerned [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 687/24 February 1941; no. 764/1 March 1941]. Even though certain priests had contributed to fund-raising initiated by leaders of the 'Legionary Movement', since the money was meant to be distributed to the poor in the communes, those priests had never organised any collection to that end themselves.

As to the Alba Iulia Deanery, on March 6th, 1941, the Dean Alexandru Baba submitted a list of donations made within the Parishes in his jurisdiction, on behalf of the organisation 'The Legionary Aid'. It mentioned the names of six priests who had personally contributed modest amounts of food and clothing within the collections organised by the legionary leaders, on the occasion of feasts with a legionary character, but with the precise purpose of helping the poor families: Sabin Răcățău (Ampoița) – 400 Lei; Ernest Ionescu (Blandiana) – 578 Lei, which was then donated by the legionaries to the Parish itself; Mircea Fodorean (Bucerdea Vînoasă) – 50 Lei; Nicolae Muntean (Cricău) – 250 Lei; Aurel Velea (Ighiel) – 500 Lei; Liviu Muntean (Meteș) – 100 Lei [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 929/8 March 1941; no. 972/11 March 1941].

The Parishes in which collections had taken place were the following: 1. Acmarium (1,100 Lei, to be used for purchasing coffins for two destitute gypsies, and for building a roadside crucifix at the margin of the village for the needs of religious processions); 2. Bucerdea Vînoasă II (2,350 Lei and cereals – 216 kilograms of wheat and 49 kilograms of corn – amounting to 2,200 Lei, for helping poverty-stricken families); 3. Cricău (14,764 Lei and cereals, amounting

to 2,180 Lei); 4. Ighiel (400 Lei, plus 500 Lei donated by the priest, for buying clothes for the needy); 5. Tăuți (600 Lei); 6. Ighiu (1,500 Lei, donated by the Church – it was the only case when the Parish contributed from its own budget) [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 1085/18 March 1941; no. 929/8 March 1941; Alba County Service of National Archives, *Parohia ortodoxă Bucerdea Vinoasă* Fund, dossier no. 1/1941, 16v].

On March 19th, 1941, the Ministry of Instruction, Education, Cults and Arts, by its letter No. 14,791, requested the control bodies of the Church to carefully supervise the activity of 'educators of the youth' carried out by priests. Doubtlessly, the order had no educational objective, but a political one, being aimed at avoiding in the near future any manifestations similar to those of January 1941. In fact, the purpose was to survey the state of mind of the population, particularly in schools, as other documents made more explicit. Thus, the deans were under obligation to submit monthly information reports to the Vicarial leadership, based on the information newsletters they received from the parishes, depicting the state of mind of the masses. The Vicarial Council, in its turn, was synthetically reporting the situation to the Ministry of Cults. The atmosphere was generally calm, the population being "satisfied with the State leadership", however there was a certain discontent linked to the invasion of the German Army, which had raised the prices of all necessities of life [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 1892/19 May 1941; no. 1047/17 March 1941; no. 2090/2 June 1941; no. 1484/25 April 1941].

The Dean of Alba Iulia, Alexandru Baba, on receiving the letter from the Ministry, of March 19th, 1941, reported promptly to the Vicarial leadership that the priests within his jurisdiction had devoutly fulfilled their educative mission, while manifesting at the same time their loyalty to the State: "the priests in our district have been ... loyal to the Throne and the King ..., while serving with all their soul the Country and the Nation, which was proven during the days of sad memory when all our priests stood watching, in their positions, faithful to their mission." [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 1265/31 March 1941]

Concerning the priests in the Alba Iulia Deanery who had formally joined the 'Legionary Movement', six in number, their names are recorded in the reports submitted by the Vicarial leadership to the Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan and the State authorities: Sabin Răcățău (Ampoița), Dumitru Bogdan (Bucerdea Vinoasă II), Aurel Velea (Ighiel), Petru Circo (Ighiu), Liviu Muntean (Meteș) and Savu Savu (Vurpăr). The priests of Ighiel, Ighiu and Meteș were later deleted from the draft report, probably not being included in the final list. We ignore the reason for this adjustment. Could they have been included by mistake in the first place? Quite unlikely. Had they withdrawn from the organisation before the 'Rebellion'? We have no knowledge of that. Anyway, we can exclude any subjectivity, since the Dean Alexandru Baba himself, as the leader of the Vicarage, was warning the other deans (archpriests) to be impartial in their reports, in order to avoid subsequent troubles [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 888/8 March 1941].

The case of ex-legionary priests was still 'on the agenda' half a year after the events of January 1941. Thus, in June 1941, the Ministry of Cults was issuing orders to the bishoprics regarding that particular topic, while in July 1941 the Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan requested Vicarage to provide additional and updated information, although during the investigations launched by the State institutions in the first months after the 'Rebellion' no priest within the Vicarage had appeared before the War Council or been found guilty or condemned. In the report submitted to the Metropolitan were presented the cases of priests who had been searched, interrogated and sent to court after the 'Rebellion', but who had all been acquitted, emphasizing that no cleric within the Vicarage had actively participated in the 'Rebellion', for which reason the Vicarage undertook no special investigation in that sense. Regarding the Alba Iulia Deanery, it specified that no case of priests' participation in the respective events, or being searched, sent to court, or condemned, subsequent to the events of January 1941, had been reported. Nonetheless, later, the priest Savu Savu of Vurpăr was sent to court to the Military Tribunal under the accusation of armed insurrection, yet on January 26th, 1942, he was acquitted, being found innocent [AAC, ROVAI Fund, doc. no. 2096/2 June 1941; no. 2260/20 June 1941; no. 2666/23 July 1941; no. 791/March 1942; no. 3037/30 August 1941; no. 2751/31 July 1941; *Raportul despre activitatea Vicariatului de la înființarea lui...*, 9].

In the summer of 1941, being informed of the legionaries' intention of celebrating the day of September 6th as "National Victory Day", the central authorities initiated a confidential correspondence with public institutions, in which they demanded their members to avoid any manifestations which might be considered an attempt on public order. The Vicarage sent these directives to the clergy, mentioning that on September 6th only the 'Reunification' heroes were to be remembered (the fight for the reunification of Romania's borders) [AAC, ROVAI Fund, doc. no. 3144/5 September 1941].

In September 1941, turmoil began. The Ministry of National Culture and Cults sent to the eparchies the notification of the Ministry's Legal Department, in which were mentioned the measures imposed on priests convicted for taking part in the 'Rebellion'. Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan protested, considering the notification "an inadmissible interference of the Ministry in the canonical jurisdiction of the Eparchies" and withheld the order. Until he intervened in this matter, he asked the Vicarage to adopt a similar attitude. If the Ministry was intransigent with the clerics who had taken part in the 'Rebellion', asking for their deposition, the Holy Synod, in the session which took place on October 24th 1941, showed more indulgence, suggesting a disciplinary transfer of the convicted priests. This time again the Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan made some remarks, showing that in the Metropolitanate of Transylvania this alternative was not applicable, because there the priests were appointed by the faithful [AAC, ROVAI Fund, doc. no. 3171/9 September 1941; no. 3554/11 October 1941; no. 4193/28 November 1941].

Despite all these, in November 1941, the Ministry asked the Vicarage the table of the priests which were referred to the Military Courts, which Dean Alexandru Baba sent with promptness. The list contained the names of only four priests in the entire Vicarage, who had been investigated and acquitted, not having been found guilty: Arghir Oprea from Rimetea, Victor Oțoiu from Mesentea, Ioan Roșca from Călata and Laurențiu Groza from Gârbova de Sus [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 4147/25 November 1941]. At the end of 1941, the Superior Council of public attorneys decided that the priests condemned definitively for crimes connected to the legionary agitations were to be relieved of their position and deposed from the clergy [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 344/3 February 1942].

This is the evidence regarding the absence of the priests in the Vicarage (including the ones in the Alba Iulia Deanery) from the revolutionary events in January 21st-23rd 1941, even if some clerics were supporters or even members of the ‘Legionary Movement’. As for the leadership of the Vicarage, starting with Dean Alexandru Baba, one notices not only the absence at the moment of the ‘Rebellion’, but also a lack of involvement, a general absence from the political programme of the movement, as it is explicitly proved by the incident in December 1940 regarding the confiscation of the Vicarage’s *Calendar*.

2.2. The case of the priest Savu Savu from Vurpăr

In an address of the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie to the Ministry of National Education, of Cults and Arts, dated February 16th 1941, are evoked two extreme cases, considered illustrative at a national level, which signalled the disapproval of the community as concerns the involvement of the priests in the ‘Rebellion’. Thus, as a protest against the pro-legionary attitude of the clergy, in the villages of the Iași county, the inhabitants intended to adhere to sects, and the villagers in Vurpăr – Vințu de Jos (near Alba Iulia) refused to enter the church until the church of the priest Savu Savu was consecrated again. Moreover, a few people had converted to Baptism [Newsletter no. 209/16 February 1941 of the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie sent to the Ministry of National Education, kept in AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, no. 675/1941].

In June-July 1942 the Council of the Vicarage in Alba Iulia asked the Ministry of Cults to cancel the sanction of ‘forced residence’ applied to some priests who were former members of the ‘Legionary Movement’, but who were not active members and who were not found guilty, motivating that the interdiction of leaving the parish affected their image and also their pastoral activity. The case of priest Savu Savu from Vurpăr was illustrative in this respect – having a forced residence, he was chicaned by the chief of the Gendarmerie unit. Appealing to the Prefecture in order to eliminate the restriction, the priest found opposition there, too. Eventually, the intervention of Metropolitane Nicolae Bălan was needed in order to solve the problem [AAC, *ROVAI* Fund, doc. no. 2881/22 July 1942; no. 2393/13 June 1942; no. 2807/17 July 1942].

The lack of trust in the priest Savu Savu seems to have lasted for a rather long time, as almost three years after the 'Rebellion' the priest himself complained of the parishioners' reticences, declaring his wish "to be suspected no more", because he had "no other feelings than the salvation and love of the Romanian nation and country, as well as the consolidation and preaching of the Saviour's teachings". Therefore, he wished to prove his good intentions, suggesting the building of a parish house and of Cultural Home "for the good of the Holy Church and for the education of all the parishioners, especially of the youth" [AAC, ROVAI Fund, doc. no. 568/11 October 1943].

3. The Cleansing Committees in 1944-1945

On October 7th 1944 was emitted the Law no. 485, through which was stipulated the foundation of some committees for cleansing the administrative staff. Their goal was to instrumentalise the cases of the former members of political and paramilitary organisations such as the Legionary, Fascist or Hitlerist ones. Without evidence from these Cleansing Committees, the Ministries did not acknowledge any personnel changes, and those who could be 'cleansed' were to be removed from their jobs [AAC, ROVAI Fund, doc. no. 4282/2 November 1944; no. 1893/2 April 1943].

Such a 'cleansing' unit, of the clerical personnel in this case, was founded in relation to the Vicarage in Alba Iulia, its members being appointed in two assemblies (November 2nd 1944 and November 11th 1944), in a tense atmosphere, caused by the conflict between the counsellor Nicolae VasIU and archpriest and vicar Alexandru Baba, the latter being accused by Nicolae VasIU of being one who could be 'cleansed'. The archpriest of Luduș, Romul Popa, was appointed President of the Committee and the members were priest Constantin Hașcău and archpriest Gheorghe Popescu from Zlatna. Archpriest Romul Popa could not be contacted, because the town of Luduș was isolated due to war operations, therefore, in the session of the Vicarage Council in November 14th 1944, Alexandru Baba took over the presidency of the cleansing committee. Counsellor Nicolae VasIU expressed his disagreement, objecting that he had filed a complaint against him, which did not allow him to occupy this position [AAC, ROVAI Fund, *Registrul de Procese verbale al Vicariatului Ortodox Român Alba Iulia, 20 aprilie 1944 – 8 (28) martie 1945*, vol. III, 141, 145-147, 150-151].

Several priests were summoned on January 15th 1945 by this committee. Two minutes of these hearings were preserved, concerning the clerics in the Alba Iulia Deanery: the case of Nicolae Ghișoiu (Inuri) and that of Savu Gh. Savu (Vurpăr), the latter being denounced to Court-Martial in the autumn of 1944 by the parishioner Petru Romoșan, the former mayor, and referred to the Military Court in Sibiu, then, in November 1944, to the triage committee at the Prefecture of the Alba county, being however acquitted after the hearings [AAC, ROVAI Fund, *Minutes of the Cleansing Committee of the Vicarage, 15 January 1945*].

No cleric from the Alba Iulia Deanery was recorded in the documents of the cleansing committee in relation to the Vicarage in Alba Iulia, but six clerics were recorded as members of the National Peasants' Party, and two as members of the National Liberal Party [AAC, ROVAI Fund, *Borderou despre fișele individuale și procesele verbale redactate de către Comisia de Epurație de pe lângă Vicariatului ort. rom. din Alba Iulia*, 19 January 1945, ad no. 4842/1944]. Nevertheless, in other documents were recorded the clerics who had been part of the 'Legionary Movement' in 1940-1941. Thus, in a table sent in January 1945 to the pursuance committee at the Police in Alba Iulia, we find Savu Savu from Vurpăr, Nicolae Ghișoiu from Inuri and Dumitru Bogdan from Bucerdea Vinoasă II, the last two being first recorded with a question mark and later expunged from the list, probably after their adherence to the organisation was infirmed. In the same table were also recorded the clerics in the administrative staff of the Vicarage, former members of the movement: Olimpiu Bucin, Iacob Panga, Virgil Guțiu and Ioan Popescu, the last two being expunged from the list later. In the rubric 'political activity' it was mentioned that they did not militate in favour of 'Legionary Movement', they only framed their social work activity in the movement, "with the purest Christian and Romanian (national) feelings". None of them was considered dangerous for the State or recorded on the cleansing list. Moreover, none of them had been convicted for taking part in the 'Rebellion', and after January 21st 1941 all of them had recanted the organisation and its politics [AAC, ROVAI Fund, doc. no. 163/18 January 1945; no. 416/5 May 1948; no. 163/18 January 1945 and 20 January 1945].

4. Conclusions

Referring to the affiliation of some Orthodox clerics in the Vicarage of Alba Iulia to the 'Legionary Movement', the present study inventories various unedited documents, which prove the absence of the priests from the Legionary 'Rebellion' (January 21st-23rd 1941), even if some clerics were supporters or even members of the organisation. At the level of the whole Vicarage, the number of priests who were members of the 'Legionary Movement' was 25 (out of 201-209 parishes), and at the level of the Alba Iulia Deanery it was 6 (out of 22 parishes). However, during the 'Rebellion', none of these took part in any abusive act, in manifestations which were hostile to the State's interests or indulged in sabotage or disorder actions. None of them was convicted in this respect, not then and not even later, in the 'cleansing' committees. It was mentioned that they did not militate in favour of 'Legionary Movement', but only framed their social work activity in the organisation, therefore after the events in January 21st-23rd 1941 they all left the movement.

As for the leadership of the Vicarage, starting with Dean Alexandru Baba, one notices not only the absence at the moment of the 'Rebellion', but also a lack of involvement, a general absence from the political programme of the movement.

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