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Inter-religious relations in the Polish Armed Forces 1918-1939

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Abstract

The article describes inter-religious relations in the Polish Armed Forces between years 1918 and 1939. The Polish Constitution compelled Catholics and the representatives of all other religions to military service. The pastoral care was provided by the Bishop's Curia – the Field Bishop's Curia (for Catholics) or the Department of Non-Catholic Religions – the Bureau of Non-Catholic Religions of the Ministry of Military Affairs (for non-Catholics). At the end of the 1920s there were over 100 full-time and 30 auxiliary Catholic military chaplains, accompanied by 35 full-time and 20 auxiliary non-Catholic chaplains.

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1. Introduction

The military service of national and religious minorities (the Ukrainians, Jews, Belarusians, Germans, Lithuanians, Belarusians, Russians, and others) in the Polish Armed Forces has not been adequately examined yet. For a long time both Polish researchers and historians from other countries showed little interest in dealing with that topic. This situation started to change in the sixties, first in journalism, then in academic publications, but it must be stressed that, probably for practical reasons, most authors concentrated on the question of integration of national and religious minorities in the Polish armed forces. Other issues, such as the institutional structure of the pastoral service or the relations between the Catholic and Non-Catholic clergy in the army, have been largely ignored.

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2. Religious composition of the Armed Forces of the Second Republic of Poland

In autumn 1918 the problem of religion in the Polish Armed Forces was nonexistent because the divisions, which were being formed spontaneously, consisted of volunteers – the Poles, mainly Roman Catholics. Religion became an issue in January 1919, after the first enforced conscription. The legal basis for the conscription was established by the decree of the Head of State issued on 15 January, 1919 (Woszczyński, 1972). Nearly two months later (on 7 March, 1919) the Polish Sejm adopted the Provisional Statute on the Mandatory Military Service (Stawecki, 1978). In the years 1919-1920 over one million recruits were drafted (Stawecki, 1990). However, due to the fact that only 10% conscripts were not Roman Catholics, their enrollment did not have negative consequences for the integrity of the army.

After the fight for independence had terminated, the effort was made to establish the organizational structure of the army in the time of peace. The legal basis for the compulsory military service was given by the Constitution adopted on the 17th of March, 1921, which proclaimed: ‘all citizens shall be obliged to military service’ (Article 91). It stated also that ‘No one shall avoid the fulfillment of the public duties on grounds of their religious beliefs’ (Article 112) (Janowska and Jędruszczak, 1984). More detailed regulations were formulated in the Statute on the Military Service Duty adopted by the Sejm on 23 May, 1924. According to Article 5 of the Statute every Polish citizen who on the 1st January of a given year was aged 21 had to serve mandatory military service [A].

The first mass conscription of the Ukrainians, Belarusians, Jews and Russians living in the area of the former Russian Partition took place in December 1921. At that time local communist, monarchist and nationalist organizations, Ukrainian and Belarusian ones, launched a fairly big campaign with the aim to paralyze the draft, but the results of their agitation were insignificant.

As a result of the conscription in December 1921 the percentage of the Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Judaist and Evangelical soldiers in the Polish Armed Forces increased considerably. Among 188 184 soldiers who on the 1st of April, 1922 were undergoing the mandatory service there were 147 442 Poles (78,32% of all members of the army). Other soldiers came from national minorities. The Ukrainians were the most numerous group – 14 794. There were also Belarusians – 12 521, Jews – 8 965, Russians – 2 397, Germans – 1 841 and Czechs - 224 (Stawecki, 2001; Rezmer, 1999). These factors had to be taken into consideration while the organization and functioning of the pastoral care in the army were being planned.

3. Responsibilities and organization in the Polish Armed Forces

In peacetime the pastoral duties of the chaplains of all religions included: serving the religious needs of the army, co-operation aiming at the improvement of the ethical and moral quality of soldiers and the enhancement of their fitness for the service, keeping the register and exercising the functions of the registrar. During wartime the duties in question were bigger. The pastoral care involved not only serving religious needs of all soldiers, but also the management of the pastoral care in the tactical and operational units and divisions, keeping the register (records of death) with a precise (if possible) record of the location of fallen soldiers’ graves, the preparation of the lists of the soldiers killed in combat or deceased and the custody of the graves [B].

The pastoral care in the Polish Armed Forces was operating under the general direction of the Minister of Military Affairs, assisted by two professional and accountable executive bodies - the Field Bishop with reference to the Catholicism and the Head of the Department of Non-Catholic Religions with reference to other religions. The Field Bishop was appointed by the Pope in agreement with the Polish government. Being the chief Catholic chaplain in the armed forces, he had authority over all matters concerning the pastoral care and the Catholic clergy in the army. In the course of carrying out his duties he was guided by the ‘Statute of the military pastoral care’ approved by the nuncio of the Holy See in Poland in a decree issued on 27 February, 1926, and by the ‘Rules of the military pastoral care service’ approved by the Ministry of Military Affairs (Rezmer, 2010).

4. Military pastoral care for Catholic and Greek-Catholic soldiers

The first Field Bishop of the Polish Armed Forces was Fr Stanisław Gall, appointed by the Pope Benedict XV on 5 February, 1919. At the beginning of the 1930s he came into conflict with the military authorities and some

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