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“The Apologetics of the Accused:
Fascism, Communism and the Catholic Church of Hungary,
1945-1949.”

by

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A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts.

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Abstract

This essay examines the conflict between the Catholic Church of Hungary and the Hungarian Communist Party, from 1945 to 1949. The immediate postwar period represented a cultural struggle between a conservative Catholic Church and the nascent Communist Party. Both institutions competed for power in the reconstructed Hungary and proposed vastly different and mutually exclusive visions for the future of the country. The conflict began as a debate in the Church and Party press over the World War II past and the Church's alleged collusion with fascist and authoritarian elements of the interwar regime. These rhetorical attacks were also accompanied by force, as Communist leaders saw the Catholic Church and its affiliated youth and educational institutions as the fledgling Party's greatest rivals and obstacles to power in the postwar period.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii.
Acknowledgements	iii.
Introduction	1.
Chapter 1: Conflicting Histories—Salvaging the Past	17.
Chapter 2: The Collaborationists—The Church's Liabilities	51.
Chapter 3: Youth, Church and the Cultural Conflict, 1946	71.
Chapter 4: Securing the Future	106.
Conclusion	141.
Appendix I: Glossary of Names	153.
Appendix II: Religions in Hungary	158.
Appendix III: The Structure of the Church	159.
Appendix IV: Postwar Elections	160.
Appendix V: Map of Hungary	161.
Bibliography	162.

*In memory of my father,
Peter Adam,
and for my grandparents,
Margaret and † Frank Oszlászky
and
† Mária Borsai and † Béla Ádám.*

Introduction

The end of each world war brought with it a radical reorganization of society, with institutions seen as responsible for the conflict held to account and their authority and position in society called into question. With the end of World War II, Europe faced a significant turning point, although unlike in the First World War, the stunning collapse of a new brand of twentieth century dictatorships, Fascism and National Socialism, rather than the demise of teetering monarchies, proved to be the order of the day. The end of the war in Hungary, however, represented not only the end of German occupation and the short-lived rule of the Hungarian Nazis, but also the total collapse of the interwar regime, an order frozen in an aristocratic, Christian-conservative worldview. In addition to the regime, institutions perceived to have been associated with the old order found themselves discredited and tainted by the legacy of Nazism after the end of the war. In 1945 the Catholic Church of Hungary, which had served as an ideological pillar of the old regime and had enjoyed significant privileges during this period, remained the most explicit reminder of Christian-Conservative interwar Hungary.

Hungary's Communists, arising from hiding and returning from exile, proved most critical of the Church's role in the old regime and its activities during Ferenc Szálasi's Arrow Cross, Nazi-style rule in 1944-45. Victims of the old order and victors of the new, Hungarian Communist politicians returned from the Soviet Union behind the Red Army and prepared to resurrect their once-banned organizations and newspapers. They had reason to castigate an organization whose high clergy stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the landed aristocracy, industrialists and the military and who appeared all too willing to associate with the anti-Bolshevist radical, fascist right. The Communists

held the Roman Catholic Church—in contrast to Protestant and Orthodox communities—in particular disdain, due to the Vatican’s historic opposition to Communism and the national Church’s connection to a foreign, supra-national authority. Consequently, a policy of limiting the national Church’s communication with the Holy See, in part by removing the Church’s highest ecclesiastic leaders, developed into the preferred form of action on the part of Communist governments throughout Eastern Europe.¹ In Hungary, the Communist Party engaged first in a nation-wide press campaign to discredit the Church, following which they used force to dissolve the Church’s network of schools and youth organizations; only after accomplishing this did they remove members of the High Clergy.

Early postwar Hungary proved to be a battleground not only of ideologies, but of interpretations of the past and how the two together would shape the future of the country. This struggle for Hungarian society and culture, informed by conflicting interpretations of the recent past, characterized the period between 1945 and 1949. This period became a cultural struggle between the Church and the Communist Party, both of which vied for power in postwar Hungary. The Catholic press found itself at the centre of this conflict. At first, accusations in the Communist press forced the Church to re-examine and offer an *apologia* for its relationship with the autocratic interwar regime. It was only partly able to fend off these attacks, as a small number of priests found guilty of collaborating with the Nazis provided further ammunition for the Communist press. These accusations made the Church vulnerable to further claims that Catholic institutions—including schools and youth associations—conspired to overthrow the state

¹ H.M. Waddams, “Communism and the Churches,” *International Affairs*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Vol. 24, no. 3 (July 1949): 303.

and replace postwar democracy with fascist rule. Once the Communist-controlled political police dissolved Church youth associations and completed its arrests and investigations in Catholic schools, it still faced a religious institution with a loyal base of support and with considerable sway throughout rural Hungary. The Church's leadership now faced persecution.

Although the Communist press did not attack the Catholic faith itself, the party's effort to bury the notion of political Catholicism and ensure that the Church would never again wield such powers as it did during the interwar regime meant that the Church's understanding of itself and its place in society would have to undergo a radical reorganization. The conservative ecclesia as well as the more 'progressive' elements of the Church realized that an end to the Church's influence in the circles of government and in society would leave it as little more than a network of faith-based communities and prayer groups, removed from the stream of public discourse and devoid of any real influence in society. Catholicism in Hungary had been about more than merely the tenets of the Catholic faith and an adherence to a set of religious beliefs—it encompassed a specific understanding of society, the Church's role in that society and close Church and State cooperation, especially in the field of education.

Historical works on postwar Hungary and the gradual establishment of Communist hegemony tend to focus almost exclusively on party politics. This is the major weakness of the few English-language works on this period by western historians. Two such historians are Hugh Seton-Watson and C.A. Macartney. In both cases, the Communist conflict with the Church is either relegated to the sidelines of the historical narrative and replaced with an exclusive focus on party politics, or else only afforded

importance in light of Cardinal Mindszenty's arrest. Macartney's work is an example of the latter. While Macartney is correct in arguing that "after the fall of the parties, the chief surviving ideological opposition to Communism had been in the churches," he is mistaken in asserting that the conflict between the Church and the Communist Party only began in 1948.² The period between 1945 and 1948 saw the greatest tensions between the Church and the Communist authorities, especially during the 1946 investigations against confessional schools and the dissolution of the Catholic youth movement. Seton-Watson affords even less importance to the Church. He argues that "by terror, threats, bribery or intrigue, the Communists divided or destroyed first the peasant parties and then the social democratic parties."³ The postwar conflict, according to Seton-Watson, occurred almost exclusively at the level of high politics and the Communist parties of Eastern Europe enjoyed the upper hand in a struggle whose outcome had been largely predetermined by the presence of the Red Army.

An examination of the Communist conflict with the Hungarian Catholic Church demonstrates that Hungary's Communists felt vulnerable and weak for much of the early postwar period and it is precisely this "threat perception" that motivated their campaign against the Church. An exclusive focus on party politics in the case of Hungary downplays the role of the Church as the only institution of continuity with the past and a source of consistent opposition to the Communists, during the interwar regime and throughout the early postwar years. The conflict between the Church and the Communist

² Carlile Aylmer Macartney, *Hungary, A Short History*, (Chicago: Aldine. Pub. Co., 1962) 238-239.

³ Hugh, Seton-Watson, "Differences in the Communist Parties," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 317. The Satellites in Eastern Europe. (May 1958), 3.

Party resonated throughout society, permeating the press, parishes, community organizations, schools and colleges.

When the Church's conflict with the Communist Party *is* addressed, such as in Macartney's work, most attention is paid to József Cardinal Mindszenty's arrest and subsequent trial in 1948-49. Yet the most important Church-State conflicts occurred in the years prior, during the debate over the World War II past, the investigations against Catholic youth movements and educational institutions and the nationalization of confessional schools. This essay examines a facet of Hungary's postwar development often relegated to the sidelines of history texts. Without the dissolution of the Catholic youth movement—which boasted a membership of over half a million—and without the radical restructuring of a public education system heavily under Church influence, the Hungarian Communist Party would have been unable to establish its political hegemony. Therefore, an examination of Church-State relations is necessary in understanding Hungary's postwar development.

Similarly to Seton-Watson, Bennett Kovrig also examines postwar Hungary through the lense of party politics. Kovrig argues that Hungary's transformation from multi-party rule to Communist hegemony followed a more cautious and gradual pattern, as per the directives of both the Soviet and Hungarian Communist leadership.⁴ Kovrig's analysis is a traditional piece of political history focusing primarily on the relationship between the non-Marxist parties and the nascent Hungarian Communist Party. Kovrig treats Church-State relations only in passing and focuses on the gradual solidification of Communist hegemony within the sphere of party politics. When he *does* address the

⁴ Bennett Kovrig, *Communism in Hungary, From Kun to Kádár*, (California: Stanford University, 1979) 151.

regime's conflict with the Church, only the period following Cardinal Mindszenty's 1948 arrest is covered.⁵ By focusing exclusively on the high politics of the period, Kovrig fails to examine some of the most important developments that led up to Communist hegemony—namely, the dissolution of Catholic youth organizations, the debate over the nationalization of confessional schools and the media campaign aimed at discrediting the Church leadership over its World War II past.

The ultimate pacification of the Catholic hierarchy and the dismemberment of influential institutions affiliated with the Church by Communist politicians proved a gradual process highlighted by often impassioned dialogue that took place between the Communists and the Church leadership on the country's interwar past. I will argue that this dialogue manifested itself in four forms. Firstly, the Communists portrayed the entire interwar regime as the natural precursor to, and foundation of, Hungarian fascism. In this sense, the Communist press saw Admiral Miklós Horthy as the “father” of both fascism and Nazism. The Church quickly realized the implications of this summary condemnation of an entire regime, under which they had enjoyed such privileges, and thus differentiated between the Horthy regime and National Socialism, asserting that at least part of the interwar past was salvageable and could be used as a basis upon which to build postwar Hungary.

While the first aspect of the debate was primarily historical in nature—focusing on the overall legacy of the previous regime—the second aimed at pointing to specific instances of wartime collaboration among the clergy. Accusations of collusion with the more radical right wing of the Horthy regime and in some cases, even with Szálasi's Nazi government discredited and compromised the Catholic leadership. This alleged

⁵ *Ibid.*, 250-252.

collaboration took different forms. Most importantly, a handful of widely publicized and highly scandalous cases detailed how members of the clergy and Catholic youth had allegedly collaborated with the Nazis during the War. By early 1946, when all those convicted of war crimes had been sentenced and executed, left wing newspapers and Communist politicians turned to uncovering alleged fascist plots and conspiracies in postwar Hungary. In each case, the Communist press made a direct link between the given conspiracy and the Church.

The Catholic response to these accusations of collaboration also assumed several forms. The Church asserted that the handful of World War II collaborators were exceptions to the rule and were thus not representative of the Church as a whole. The Catholic Church also argued that it too had fallen victim to the anti-Christian and “pagan” excesses of National Socialism. The cases of conspiracy and alleged fascist activity after the War, however, proved more troubling. Nonetheless, rarely did the Church speak to the anti-Catholic nature of Nazism in Hungary under the Arrow Cross. Rather, it turned the attention to the way in which Hitler’s Germany discriminated against the Church and German Catholics, and how the *German* model of national socialism was “pagan” in nature and thus diametrically opposed to Christendom. The religious leadership, perhaps out of fear, proved most circumspect in criticising the decisions and investigations of the political police (PRO) and the Communist-administered interior ministry.

The third facet of the debate was based on two competing visions of the future, founded firmly on the Church’s and the Communist Party’s respective understanding of the past. Toward the second half of 1946, the Communists had more or less exhausted the issue of alleged collaborators and fascists within the Church, with most of these

individuals having already been sentenced. The investigations regarding underground fascist cells and conspiracies resulted in the disbanding of Catholic youth organizations. As a consequence of this new situation, the debate between the Church and the Communists also began to change, both in its substance as well as in the rhetoric employed by the Communists. “Fascists” were now largely replaced by “forces of clerical reaction,” which happened to be bent on restoring the *ancien regime* and undermining the foundations of democracy.

The fourth stage in the debate between the Church and the Communists represented the most significant shift in the structure of the discourse. The Communist Party made clear that rooting out “reactionary” elements within the Church meant not only disbanding various Catholic associations, but targeting the highest offices of Church leadership. In this final stage, which began in 1948 and ended with Mindszenty’s arrest on December 26, 1948, the Communist Party no longer sought to continue any type of dialogue with the Church through the mass media, but rather focused on convincing the population that they had a mandate and could justify their decision to remove the head of the Hungarian Catholic Church. The Communist Party’s attempts at legitimization signaled that despite their control of most government ministries and the police force, they were still concerned of potentially earning the wrath of a sizeable rural Catholic population.

Despite rhetoric on both sides claiming that they wished to resolve the debate and avoid a larger cultural struggle, the two sides advocated such different visions for the future of Hungary, based on widely varying interpretations of the interwar past, that a compromise seemed unlikely. They also generally maintained that the two visions were

mutually exclusive and utterly irreconcilable. The systematic disbanding of religious organizations, the secularization of church schools and a general separation between Church and State served as a death knell to a religious leadership accustomed to a certain degree of political preponderance and significant influence on national culture. Yet the unwillingness on the part of bishops to relinquish the Church's role in public life, and its powerful position in society, was seen as a threat to a still fledgling Communist Party bent on making gains in rural Hungary and, indeed, among Catholic voters.

By 1948-49, the debate between the Church and the Party had gravitated noticeably toward a discourse on the future of Hungary, but always in relation to the past. The pinnacle of the Communist attack against the Church proved to be the arrest of the outspoken, anti-Communist and deeply conservative Cardinal Mindszenty on December 25, 1948. The way had been prepared during the preceding two months, at which time the Communist press was ripe with accusations of reactionary treachery regarding the cardinal as well as reports from various civic organizations, including certain allegedly Catholic groups, calling on the government to bring Mindszenty to justice. When the political police finally charged the cardinal, the accusations reflected a shift from the innuendos of 1945-46, when the Communist press simply hinted at Mindszenty's alleged collusion with the radical right. During the 1949 Mindszenty trial, the charges levied against the cardinal revolved around his apparent conspiracy to undermine the new, democratic order as well as the illegal use of foreign currency. Rather than relying solely on elusive references to a treacherous past, the authorities based Mindszenty's trial on much more concrete allegations.

In the first half of 1945 the Communists did not directly censure the Church. Even later, Soviet-educated Communist politicians demonstrated circumspection in excoriating Catholicism, as a conservative, anachronistic *institution*, rather than condemning the Catholic *faith* itself. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to conclude from this evidence that the Communist intention was simply to ‘modernize,’ or secularize Hungarian government and society, as Communist attacks against Church institutions did not end following radical land reform through which the Church lost most its large estates, after the dissolution of Catholic youth organizations and even after the nationalization of confessional schools. Merely creating a secular state and weakening the Church’s position would still allow the clergy to agitate against the regime on the periphery. The Communist Party’s intention was to completely discredit the Church and to make it dependent on the regime to such an extent that it no longer has the resources, the ability, nor the will to oppose the regime in any way.

Jenő Gergely, perhaps the most prolific historian of the Catholic Church in twentieth century Hungary, seems to argue that the concept of a cultural struggle was little more than the fabrication of a conservative ecclesia. According to Gergely, the period after 1945 “cannot be interpreted as a *kulturkampf*—albeit, the Constantine-style Church, which insisted on keeping its positions of power, understood it as this.”⁶ Gergely argues that rather than being a cultural struggle, this period merely represented the modernization and secularization of Hungary. Nevertheless, what becomes apparent from the anti-Catholic rhetoric is that the Communists themselves did, in fact, see

⁶ “Ez a korszak nem interpretálható kultúrharcként—jóllehet az addigi hatalmi állásához ragaszkodó konstantinusi egyház úgy értelmezte...”
Jenő Gergely, *A politikai katolicizmus Magyarországon, 1890-1950*, (Political Catholicism in Hungary, 1890-1950), (Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 1977) 10.

themselves as partaking in a struggle against Catholicism in Hungary, which they criticized as being reactionary, not concurring with the concept of the separation of the political life from the religious, the separation of the Church and State, or the national culture from Catholicism. The way in which the Church understood itself and Hungarian culture and society as a whole, had been deeply shaped by the policies of the interwar regime. Therefore by 1945, the issue of the Church's place in society was *not* solely an administrative matter, but one deeply intertwined with the Catholic faith. Consequently, the Communist program of demolishing the vestiges of Church's influence in the public domain and curtailing the Catholic hierarchy *can* be seen as a type of *kulturkampf* in its own right. Although Communist leaders were cautious not to alienate rural Catholic voters by directly attacking the tenets of the Catholic faith, the promotion and expression of this faith and its role in the affairs of the state were curtailed at every turn, signaling a truly radical departure from the practice of the interwar period.

While Gergely downplays the extent of the conflict between the Church and the Communist Party during the early postwar period, Sabrina Ramet—in an examination Church-State relations in Communist countries—argues that “system destruction” characterized the initial phase of establishing one-party hegemony in all Communist societies. According to Ramet, the “revolutionary party, not yet secure, must defend its position against internal and external foes, and it seeks to uproot traditional culture and traditional elites as a preliminary to constructing a new society.”⁷

In the case of East European states, “system destruction” unfolded between 1944 and 1953. Ramet argues that the removal of religious elites characterized this initial

⁷ Sabrina P. Ramet, *Nihil Obstat: Religion, Politics and Social Change in East-Central Europe and Russia*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998) 13.

period in all Communist countries, from Buddhists in China to the Catholic Church in Cuba. In Poland, actions against the Catholic Church followed a somewhat different and more gradual pattern than elsewhere in Eastern Europe. For example, a significant contingent of priests organized the pro-regime PAX movement as early as 1945, whereas in Hungary such a movement only became an important force in the Church in 1949, after the disbanding of Church organizations, the nationalization of confessional schools and after Mindszenty's arrest. As in Hungary, the Polish Catholic press lost its independence by 1948, but as opposed to the rest of the region, the Polish Catholic Church maintained many of its confessional schools. In contrast to Gergely's view that a 'normal' process of modernization characterized Church-State relations after 1945, Ramet argues that throughout the region "Church and state confronted each other as independent actors with divergent preferences. Given the uncertainty that surrounds the establishment of a new political order, conflict was almost foreordained."⁸ While Ramet's regional assessment is also accurate in the case of Hungarian Church-State relations, Ramet offers little analysis on the "system destruction" phase in Hungary and focuses more on post-1949 collaboration between the Hungarian Catholic Church and the Communist regime.

The concept of a struggle between ideologies is at the centre of both the interwar period and the early postwar years. The struggle can be understood as the conflict arising from the relationship of three ideologies: the Christian-conservatism of the aristocracy, the fascism of some middle-class intellectuals, the petty-bourgeoisie and the lower classes, and Communist sentiments among the proletariat. The Hungarian High Clergy identified with the conservatism of the upper classes. As part of their postwar *apologia*,

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

ecclesiastical authorities strained to show that anti-Catholicism characterized both Nazism and Bolshevism and that the two positioned themselves in diametric opposition to the conservatism of the Church. The clergy employed this logic in an effort to distance itself from the Communist allegation that the Church had subscribed to fascist sympathies.

A number of historians have examined the relationship of these worldviews in interwar Europe and their respective quests for hegemony. Ernst Nolte's *Three Faces of Fascism* argues that churches and other members of the Conservative establishment consistently criticized the National Socialist 'variant' of Fascism, but proved more encouraging of the Mussolini-style Fascist rule. "A Christian confrontation of uncompromising severity existed only toward National Socialism and this showed itself less in theoretical works than in testimonies from the death cell and the concentration camps. National Socialism was merely cited as an example of the dangers threatening from secularization."⁹ Like Bolsheviks, Nazis sought to define the state as separate, independent and of an authority higher than the Church. As such, they would not tolerate the high clergy, aligned with the landed aristocracy, dictating the national culture.

While secularism was an unacceptable facet of Nazism for the Catholic Church, Italian-style fascism proved to be a different experience. According to Nolte, "the fact that in most European countries Churches encouraged fascism to a sometimes very considerable degree is something which their adversaries have repeatedly emphasized and which it is hard to deny. Yet it would probably be fairer to speak of an early ambivalence."¹⁰ Nevertheless, as S.J. Woolf points out, fascism—like National Socialism

⁹ Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966) 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

and Bolshevism—was also a revolutionary movement from the very beginning and as such boasted both republicanism and anti-clericalism.¹¹ Fascism's antagonism towards the Church, however, was nowhere near as pronounced as in Hitler's Germany. Although the revolutionary nature of Mussolini's movement may have disturbed Hungarian Catholic leaders who, after the 1919 experience with radical change, were quite content with maintaining the conservative status quo, fascism's fervent anti-Communism proved to be inviting.

During the interwar period, the Church in Hungary found itself in a conundrum. Catholicism was faced with two ideologies, both of which were revolutionary in character, and as such posed a threat to the High Clergy's position in society. Ultimately, the Church allied itself with the aristocratic, conservative forces, which also happened to be anticommunist and were willing to associate with fascist elements in meeting their common goal, namely the eradication of Bolshevism. According to George Barany, "the traditionalist conservative and the liberal interpretation of fascism tend to regard both fascism, and National Socialism, as revolutionary trends dangerously close to Bolshevism."¹² Yet the government still sought contact with radical right-wing elements, in order to help it in its struggle with Bolshevism. After 1945, Communists pointed to this unholy alliance for which the only surviving institution and element of the interwar regime, the Catholic Church, had to answer.

Both the Communists and the leaders of the Catholic Church found daily and weekly newspapers to be the most effective way of promoting their visions of postwar Hungary. Much of the conflict between the Church and the Communist Party unfolded in

¹¹ S.J. Woolf (ed.), *Fascism in Europe* (London: Methuen, 1981), 46.

¹² George Barany, "The Dragon's Teeth: The Roots of Hungarian Fascism," in Peter F. Sugar (ed.) *Native Fascism in the Successor States, 1918-1945*, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-Clio, 1971), 75-76.

the press. For the Communists, the official party morning paper, *Szabad Nép*, served as their main tool of communication with the population and the forum where criticism of the Catholic Church and allegations against Church institutions would first appear. For the Church, the weekly *Új Ember*, founded on August 16, 1946 and published by the Hungarian branch of *Actio Catholica*, had been seen as the Church's semi-official voice and the forum wherein Catholic leaders and the paper's editors would respond to Communist allegations against the Church.

The Communists appreciated the importance of the written press in the dissemination of ideas and in their offensive against the Church. During early 1945, the Red Army would allocate all newsprint to newspapers published in areas under its control. Later, the Communist Party of Hungary assumed these responsibilities and would divide newsprint, control the limited stocks of papers available for printing and dispense, or revoke publication licenses to new publications.¹³

Catholic leaders and writers used the press, as well as parish newsletters, circulars and pastoral letters to communicate with their faithful and counter Communist allegations. The media remained the preferred forum for a Catholic defense. The Church realized that its interwar heritage would prove a vulnerability in postwar Hungary. Consequently, Catholic elites, including conservative politicians, bishops, parish priests, journalists and authors, engaged in a public debate on the pages of Hungary's main Catholic weekly, *Új Ember*, as well as in other smaller publications. This debate developed into a full-fledged confrontation with the Communist Party on the compromised interwar past, on the role of that past in postwar Hungary and whether any

¹³ Stephen D. Kertesz, "The Methods of Communist Conquest: Hungary 1944-1947," *World Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (October 1950): 35-36.

of the values, traditions and institutions of the former conservative regime should be permitted to form a part of the country's postwar, democratic future.

Chapter 1: Conflicting Histories--Salvaging the Past

Within twenty-five years, Hungary experienced two, major turning points. The involvement of the Catholic Church leadership and Communist politicians and their hostility toward each other proved to be the common uniting characteristic of these two milestones in twentieth century Hungary.

On August 22, 1919, perhaps as an epilogue to Béla Kun's short-lived Communist experiment and as an introduction to Admiral Miklós Horthy's ascension to power, the Conference of Hungarian Catholic Bishops offered the following words to the Catholic faithful.

The Prince Primate remembers with pain the destruction wrought by the Hungarian soviet republic...(and) emphasizes that the Catholic Church stood strong against Communism. The priesthood, with few exceptions, indeed, stood its ground during the difficult challenge....The horrid menace of Bolshevism disturbed the conscience and awakened Christian self-consciousness. Christian organization is continuing in massive proportions, because only on Christian moral foundations can one hope for the stabilization of order in the state....¹⁴

The statement by the Hungarian bishops emphasizes the historical baggage and ideological divide that likely fomented the hostility between the Church and the Communists, but also reflects upon the Catholic leadership's ideas on the state. Christianity, and by extension the Catholic Church helped to provide the foundation and moral legitimacy for the post-1919 Hungarian state. A similar Catholic vision of Hungary after World War II and new historical baggage—namely, the interwar fascist experience— further embittered the relationship between the Church and Communist politicians.

¹⁴Minutes of meeting of August 22, 1919.

Jenő Gergely (ed.) *A püspöki kar tanácskozásai, A magyar katolikus konferenciának jegyzőkönyveiből, 1919-1944.* (The Meetings of the Council of Bishops—From the Minutes of the Hungarian Catholic Conference), (Budapest: Gondolat, 1984), 73-74.

After having been silenced by the chaos and devastation wrought by Ferenc Szálasi's Arrow Cross regime in 1944 and early 1945, the second "turning-point" was now at hand, and as in 1919, the Council of Bishops spoke officially and in unison for the first time to Catholics on May 24, 1945 following the end of the war.

Amidst the great suffering we prayed constantly for you and our nation... We will not stop to pray even now, so that the effects of mindless hate, and its dark and bloody remains, would disappear and be replaced by peace, order and work, pleasing to God, and thus give back to our beloved homeland the possibility of calm development... We are working on clearing the ruins. Nevertheless, we must realize that moral ruins present within souls are even sadder than the material ruins... Over is the respect for superiors, for experience, for the sciences and for customs. Shaken is the faith in our historic past and in our traditions. Yet we experienced the many misfortunes precisely because the forces reaching into our destiny stood opposed to the past and, breaking with the ancient faith, aimed to reach their boundless goals on the basis of neo-pagan principles.... It is precisely the failure of this experiment that should make us ponder and return us to our God.¹⁵

As in the letter from 1919, the bishops in 1945 pointed out that the failed "experiment," in this case Nazism, was diametrically opposed to the tenets of the Christian faith. Just as the Church stood firm in its opposition to Communism during the Kun days, the religious leadership had not been swayed by the "neo-paganism" of Nazism. Interestingly enough, the letter asserted that it was precisely Hungary's falling away from the teachings of the Church that ushered in the Arrow Cross regime. Above all, this served as a thinly veiled warning of what was to come in postwar Hungary, should it also not heed Catholic teachings.

Although the bishops distanced themselves from the radical right of the previous regime, a key element of their first postwar message to the Catholic faithful was that despite the disastrous Szálasi days, Hungary's recent past was still salvageable.

¹⁵ A Magyar Püspöki Kar, "Körlevél," (The Pastoral Letter of the Hungarian Council of Bishops), May 24, 1945, in 1945—Közigazgatás, Mchívók, Vallás (1945—Administration, Invitations, Religion) Fond 620, Small Prints Collections, National Széchenyi Library.

Bemoaning the alleged lack of respect for “history” and traditions, the pastoral letter served as an implicit reminder to Hungarian Catholics not to accept the idea of a summary condemnation of the *entire* prior regime. Nevertheless, that is precisely what was to happen in but a few short months.

In light of the 1919 statement, twenty-five years of anticommunism and general hostility between the conservative Catholic establishment and Communists, one may reasonably expect that the Church would comment on the prospect of a resurgent Communist Party in occupied Hungary. Nevertheless, any negative mention of the Communist Party had been conspicuously missing from the pastoral letter of May 24. If anything, the Church struck a surprisingly positive note in its assessment of the Soviet occupation. According to the bishops “the circulating news regarding the intention of the Russian armies to liquidate the Church has proven false. Instead, we have experienced much attention on the part of the commanders in relation to the life of the Church.”¹⁶ The signs of the coming conflict between the Communists and the Church were hardly visible.

While the pastoral letter made no explicit mention of any potential conflicts with the Communists, some high-ranking Catholic leaders were already suspicious of the Hungarian Muscovites that made their way back into the country in 1945 behind the Soviet lines. During the interwar regime, when a policy of anti-Communism forced the Communist Party underground and landed its leaders into prison, Hungarian Communists found refuge in the Soviet Union and formed an exiled community in Moscow. They only returned to Hungary in 1945, behind the Soviet troops.

¹⁶ May 24 Pastoral Letter.

József Mindszenty, then Bishop of Veszprém, proved the most strident of anticommunists. Mindszenty, who on October 7, 1945 replaced his deceased predecessor, Cardinal Jusztinián Serédi, had been critical, on occasion, even of the Horthy regime for its lenient treatment of Communists. For instance, Mindszenty exercised a degree of disapprobation during the premiership of István Bethlen, when state-sanctioned active anticommunism took a backseat to a set of more pragmatic politics, namely improved trade relations with the Soviet Union in the late 1920s.¹⁷ Therefore, the fact that Mindszenty, credited with writing the pastoral letter, offered a fairly encouraging assessment of the Red Army's behaviour *vis-a-vis* the Church proved a curious turn of events. Nevertheless, his memoirs indicate that he may not have been entirely comfortable with the content and that he exercised considerable diplomatic restraint when composing the statement. Mindszenty recorded in his memoirs that he "forbore to mention the frightful devastation being wrought by the Soviet troops, and tried to show some flexibility of the ordinances of the provisional government."¹⁸ He also implied that the ominous statement was to serve "as a warning to the faithful, something of the equivocal nature of the Communists' conduct."¹⁹ These words of caution, however, were penned retrospectively, nearly three decades following the end of the war. At the time, the Red Army's initial lack of open hostility toward the Church proved somewhat of a pleasant surprise for most ecclesiastic authorities.

If Mindszenty had been concerned about Communism during the conservative interwar period, he felt even more distraught over the potential ascendancy of the Communist Party in Soviet-occupied Hungary. Mindszenty noted that having had the

¹⁷ József Mindszenty, *Memoirs*, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1974) 22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

opportunity to examine Marxist literature, he was better able to decipher “what kind of enemy the Church was confronting, what sort of terrorism awaited us.”²⁰ Mindszenty had been most profoundly disturbed by what he felt undiluted Marxist ideology had in store for religion in general and he seemed quite convinced that the Communists saw the Church as one of the major obstacles in their ascension to power.

Despite the Church’s troublesome past and the Catholic establishment’s record of anti-Communism, most evidence indicates that overtly anti-Catholic and anti-religious tendencies within the Communist Party were limited in the months following the end of the War. During the elections of October 1945, the Communists sought to mobilize the Catholic vote in their favour, and thus emphasized the possibility of reconciliation between the Catholic and Communist worldviews and aimed to make the latter a more acceptable political option for a population just arising from the near quarter-century ‘National Christian’ regime. Nevertheless, the staunchly anti-Communist Bishop, and later Cardinal, József Mindszenty viewed this as none other than a political stunt aimed at acculturating Communism with what the cardinal saw as the inherent catholicity of Hungary. According to Mindszenty, Hungary’s Communist Party leaders, “these Soviet emissaries, succeeded in misleading even religious people. They masked communism as a genuine democratic party. Their speeches and writings made it seem that even strict Catholics might cooperate with the Communists and vote for them without the slightest pangs of conscience.”²¹ Mindszenty’s bitter observation serves as evidence of the Church’s concern that the Communists would prove successful in courting the Catholic vote.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

Mindszenty had not been alone among Catholic leaders in his uncompromising stance towards Communism. Among the Cardinal's most ardent supporters was Margit Slachta, the founder of the Sisters of Social Service and the Christian Women's Camp, a Catholic political party, as well as the first female member of parliament in 1921. Slachta, a nun, a parliamentarian and leading political figure both during the interwar regime and in the postwar period, had been referred to, with a degree of irony, as "the only real man in parliament" for her unwavering convictions, her outspokenness and deep sense of conservatism. Mindszenty certainly had an ally in Slachta when some members of the Catholic elite wondered whether it were not more pragmatic to approach the Communists in a spirit of compromise. As late as 1948, Slachta still called on the Church leadership to shun any calls for cooperation with Communist politicians and praised Mindszenty for "not being frightened, having no trepidation, not compromising, not looking at the benefits... Many people hint, or whisper to him that this will lead to confrontation, that it will result in conflict. But we already know and live this and we realize that these shall be such struggles, such blood-lettings from which the Church will arise victorious."²²

While the uncompromising anti-communism of both Mindszenty and Slachta never wavered, in 1945 the Communist Party had been cautious in its criticism of the Church, and emphasized the compatibility of Christianity with Communism, rather than hurl accusations at the Church. This formed part of the Communist election strategy before the party's autumn electoral campaign of 1945, which aimed to court the Catholic vote. Nevertheless, at the same time the Communist Party press had begun to open up the historical debate that would bring Horthy's "Christian National" regime into direct

²² Margit Slachta as quoted in Ilona Mona, *Slachta Margit*, (Budapest: Corvinus Kiadó, 1997), 185.

communion with fascism, and thus implicitly strike at the link between the radical right and the Church.

The Communist Party needed the rural, Catholic vote for it to perform well in the first postwar elections of November 1945 and of this the party leadership was keenly aware. A few weeks before the elections, the front page of *Szabad Nép*, the Communist Party's morning daily, ran an article in which the author bemoaned an unnamed priest's alleged declaration that the Church supported wholeheartedly a "specific party," most likely the Smallholders, a hybrid political formation comprising conservative elements, as well as a peasant-based left-wing. "Voting for those parties or alliances, which proclaim the fast-paced reconstruction of the country, and which have enough power and decisiveness to realize their program is compatible with the Catholic or Reformed faith."²³ *Szabad Nép* referred implicitly to the Communist Party, as opposed to the Smallholders' Party, which they portrayed as less effective in reconstruction. Moreover, not only was Communism compatible with the tenets of Christianity, but for "many Christians indeed, it is precisely their faith that dictates their support for...the Communist Party."²⁴ Communists pledged on numerous occasions to uphold the freedom of religion and rarely attacked the Catholic faith itself. Nevertheless, the calls for land reform, a secular state, modernization and people's democracy served as a grave threat to a Church accustomed to political and cultural Catholicism, which had ascended to such dominance during the previous regime and which had served as a guiding worldview for much of the

²³ "A hívők szavazata," ("The Religious Vote ") *Szabad Nép*, September 29, 1945, 1.

²⁴ "...Igen sok kereszténynek éppen hite diktálja annak a pártnak, a Kommunista Pártnak, a támogatását..."
Ibid., 1.

conservative Church leadership. The Communists signified a radical change from this status quo, as did Béla Kun in 1919 and Ferenc Szálasi in 1944.

The basis for the Communist Party's radical reengineering of postwar societal power structures rested on reinterpreting and discrediting that past. This proved crucial primarily because a generally positive assessment of the Horthy period legitimized and provided inspiration for conservative politics. The most effective way of bringing this entire conservative period into disrepute was by linking the whole interwar regime to Nazism in the press. Subsequently, this linkage would implicate the Church as well, which had been among the most avid supporters of the former regime.

On August 26, 1945 *Szabad Nép* published the testimony of László Magasházy, a high-ranking commander of the Horthyist military, who claimed that Horthy had met Hitler as early as 1923 and that the Hungarian regent served as a type of paternal figure to the fledgling Nazi and fascist movements. According to the central organ of the Communist Party, "the other great fascist evil-doer also turned with pleasure to Horthy for advice."²⁵ According to the article, Mussolini even sent the manuscript of his book, *The Ideology of Fascism*, to Horthy for editing, which the Hungarian regent subsequently returned with his corrections and comments. Horthy and his regime inspired fascism and Nazism throughout Europe. "Here are the facts, which prove that the Horthy regime was not only a fascist regime from beginning, but also served as a model for European fascism...Hitler, who at the time was only feeling his way, knew well that at the start of his movement he could turn with confidence to Miklós Horthy for financial and

²⁵ "Fábián Ferenc, "Horthy és Hitler első találkozója: 1923!" ("Horthy and Hitler's first meeting: 1923!") *Szabad Nép*, August 26, 1945, 3.

ideological support.”²⁶ Despite the implausibility of Horthy having financed Hitler in the Nazi leader’s early days, *Szabad Nép* embraced readily the theme of Horthy as “the father” of European fascism.

Two days after the article recounting Magasházy’s testimony appeared in *Szabad Nép*, Horthy’s Nazi ‘credentials’ were further elaborated upon on August 28, with the completion of the prosecution’s documents for former Arrow Cross leader Ferenc Szálasi’s forthcoming trial by the People’s Tribunal. According to the Communist daily, this trial would “place before the country and public opinion the reaction’s twenty-five year-long reign of terror....the prosecution aims to demonstrate that that which happened in Hungary during the last few years is the direct and natural consequence of the events of 1919.”²⁷ The anti-communist, and sometimes anti-Semitic, pogroms of Horthy’s “white terror”—which included a nation-wide purge of people suspected of being Communists in 1919-1920--were seen as the precursors of the genocidal and collaborationist regime of Döme Sztójay from March 18, 1944 and the chaotic Arrow Cross rule of 1944-45.

After several days spent with uncovering Horthy’s ominous connections to Nazism, *Szabad Nép* issued its most blatant and acrimonious condemnation of the interwar regime on August 31. Interwar Hungary not only paved the way for fascism, but had served as the *guardian* of European fascism, during its infant days.

We have written and stated innumerable times that the Arrow Cross men and the Germans are not solely responsible for the country’s catastrophe. We have shown that Horthyite reaction, whose oppressive and treasonous character showed itself from the very first minute, is *de facto* responsible for the nation’s tragedy. Only since the liberation have

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁷ “A reakció 25 éves uralmát leplezik le a Szálasi-perben.” (“The 25 Years of Reaction are uncovered in the Szálasi Trial”), *Szabad Nép*, August 28, 1945, 3.

documents come to light....that uncover the Horthy regime as the parent and guardian of German and Hungarian fascism.²⁸

According to the Communist Party, the Horthy regime was not simply another old-fashioned autocratic dictatorship, modeled from, and harkening back to, the nineteenth century. Instead, it was a seasoned, proto-fascist leadership, which gave rise to European fascism and helped nurture it to power. This was an interpretation of the interwar period that the Secretary General of the Communist Party, Mátyás Rákosi, could find wholly agreeable. Yet Rákosi also expressed his frustration over the fact that the most dubious elements of the interwar period used the democratic elections of 1945 in an attempt to resurrect the autocratic *ancien regime*. As Rákosi bitterly noted on October 9, after a dismal performance by the Communists in Hungary's first postwar election, "those who only last year swore on Horthy or Szálasi now used their suffrage rights, afforded generously by the young democracy," and voted *en masse* for the Smallholders.²⁹

Horthy and Szálasi were now presented by the Communist press as having shared a single ideological background, with the latter seen as the direct consequence of Horthy's proto-fascism. The Arrow Cross leader's trial by the people's tribunal in October 1945 gave further justification for the Communist Party in its exposé of the interwar period on the pages of its newspaper. On October 3 Szálasi, László Endre, a leading figure of the Szálasi government, and former prime ministers Béla Imrédy and László Bárdossy were among a group of about ten leaders of the former regime, who had been arrested by the PRO and brought to the former Arrow Cross headquarters in Budapest, the so-called "House of Loyalty," for questioning. *Szabad Nép* reported that

²⁸ "Horthy Miklós és a Magyar fajvédők a hitlerizmus bölcsőjénél," ("Miklós Horthy and Hungarian Racialists at the Crib of Hitlerism," *Szabad Nép*, August 31, 1945, 3.

²⁹ Mátyás Rákosi, "Választások után," (After the Elections) *Szabad Nép*, October 9, 1945, 1.

Szálasi and his “nation-killing partners” had deep and long-lasting connections with Horthy.³⁰

Continuing along the usual theme of extending the Nazi experience and responsibility for the Arrow Cross regime to the entire interwar period, *Szabad Nép* recounted that *all* of Horthy’s political leaders had ties with Szálasi. “Horthy, Gömbös, Darányi, Imrédy and the other infamous politicians’ names come up constantly, showing the path that led the way unstoppably from 1919 to the country’s devastation.”³¹ Not only were political leaders appointed by Horthy passively promoting Hungary’s radical right by the government’s inability, and perhaps unwillingness, to control fascist groups, but most interwar leaders actually sympathized with Szálasi’s Nazi ideology.³² Thus, the Communist Party attempted to bring the former Horthy regime into disrepute both on the domestic and foreign front. Horthy, the veteran admiral of the Austro-Hungarian fleet, the defender of the old order, the respected leader of Christian-Conservative Hungary and redeemer of an aristocracy beleaguered and much maligned after its bout with Kun’s regime, now sat at Nuremberg with his legacy being brought into ever greater disgrace by the confessions of the Hungarian radical right and the regular historiographical musing of the Communist daily. After being interned to Germany following Szálasi’s coup of October 15, 1944, Allied soldiers captured Horthy and brought him to Nuremberg. The old admiral never actually stood trial, but served only as a witness, providing written testimony, during the cases against German war criminals.

³⁰ “Szálasi: Horthyval való előzetes megbeszélés alapján akartam átvenni a hatalmat.” (“Szálasi: I wanted to Take Power Based on a Previous Agreement with Horthy”) *Szabad Nép*, October 5, 1945, 2.

³¹ “A 25 éves reakció bűneire derül fény Szálasiék kihallgatásánál.” (“Szálasi’s Interrogation Sheds Light on 25 Years of Reaction.”) *Szabad Nép*, October 7, 1945, 2.

³² *Ibid.*, 2.

Although the Communists' primary target in 1945 was the leadership of the old regime and the right-wing political elite of the interwar period, the Catholic elite felt clearly that with the entire Christian National regime under fire, the flames would soon be stoking the Church. This consideration appears to have been a key motivating factor in establishing a new Catholic weekly, *Új Ember*, which could serve as a legitimate Catholic voice among postwar Hungarian newspapers, not weighed down by a disgraced and untenable interwar past.

When Zsigmond Mihalovics, leader of *Actio Catholica* in Hungary decided to form the editorial board of *Új Ember* along with priest and poet Sándor Sík, Benedictine monks Polikárp Radó and Balduin Péntzes and publisher Ernő Takács, it was precisely the past--which they so wished to bypass--that led to the first major conflict within the editorial board. Sík felt it necessary for the first issue to run an apology in the name of all Christians for the massive deportation of 600,000 Hungarian Jews in 1944. Mihalovics and the two Benedictines found this both unnecessary and ultimately harmful, as such an apology could be interpreted as a *de facto* expression of culpability on the part of the Church and thus raise potentially problematic questions about the Church's activities and role during 1944-45.³³

Although Sík's apology was conspicuously missing from the pages of the August 9 inaugural issue of *Új Ember*, Péntzes's front page article did elaborate on *Actio Catholica's* view of the past and its role in postwar Hungary. According to Péntzes,

While building the future, we cannot lose sight of the foundations laid down by the past. And if we begin building without taking into consideration

³³ Elemér Szeghalmi, "A katolikus sajtó 1945 után," ("The Catholic Press After 1945"), *A magyar katolikus egyház 1945-től 1965-ig*. (The Hungarian Catholic Church, 1945-1965) Budapest: Márton Áron Kiadó, 2001, 49.

this foundation, the future will collapse, like a palace built upon sand, or a castle made of cards. And it will hardly be of any use, if we then condemn the sand for being reactionary. We honour the values of the past, but we do not associate with that, which is sin.³⁴

Pénzes's view of the past--which had also been largely subscribed to by Church leaders--as being partly salvageable and useable in laying the foundations of postwar Hungary, sought to refute the Communist Party, where the last 25 years of Hungarian history were condemned as one long, inevitable march to fascism and to eventual catastrophe. It is hardly surprising that Communist leaders such as Rákosi would find little comfort in an interwar heritage that in 1921 forced his party underground and landed him in prison in 1926. On the other hand, in light of the revolutionary fervour and anticlericalism of 1919, it was natural that the Catholic elite would find the Horthy regime's reverence for the Church soothing and, with the unpleasant Arrow Cross episode excised, would retain fond memories of this period.

Although Pénzes expressed a fairly "standard" Catholic view, similar to that of Mindszenty and the other bishops, concerning the continued importance of values conveyed through history as well as the belief that there can be no progress without conservatism, the Benedictine monk proved critical of not only the interwar radical right, but also the regressive elements of political Catholicism and demonstrated a keen awareness for the consequences of the Church's association with the old regime.

In the seats of (Catholic) authority sat worthy, once brave and militant people, who had grown old and powerless over the years. Moreover, it was in vain when new people came with the tune of a new era, because the mummified and yellowed authority scared them away, or plunged them into opposition after a brief period of cooperation...or else sucked them in, but as spiritually castrated vassals. Since this political Catholicism was poorly organized and weak, it was willing to ally itself with an apparently greater power, cliques and parties.

³⁴ Balduin Pénzes, "Új Ember," ("New Man,"), *Új Ember*, August 9, 1945, 1.

However, it accepted the fate that its protector's fall should also push it into the abyss. Yet its suffering remains, as it outlives its protector, because it is to it that they turn to collect the bankrupt protector's dues along with the customary denunciations and hatred felt towards a fallen giant.³⁵

The new Catholic weekly's candid recognition of the Church's precarious image as the last standing pillar and beneficiary of interwar Hungary served as an acute observation of the consequences to come. Moreover, Péntzes's words also illustrate the divisions within the Church and show that open criticism of the interwar Church leadership was not anathema, even on the pages of a Catholic paper. Péntzes portrays the image of a Church divided into two opposing factions—one represented by a conservative, elderly leadership, and the other by a more moderate, younger generation. Péntzes represented the more “progressive” wing of the Church, in that he realized the negative effects of being associated with a discredited former regime and the danger of being seen as the last pillar of interwar Hungary.

Péntzes was not the only one to publish articles critical of the Church's connections with the old regime. In a feature article entitled “Catholicism and Democracy” also appearing in the inaugural August 9 issue of *Új Ember*, well-known author and journalist György Parragi argued that the “shameful death of the *ancien regime*” has brought Hungarian Catholicism to a crossroads. Using language similar to the left-wing press, Parragi asserted that the Church cannot stand idly by without condemning reactionary activities and the erroneous ways of the old regime. “As a practicing Catholic, whose Catholicism has only strengthened and purified in the fires of fourteen months of suffering at German concentration camps, I declare openly that

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

Hungarian Catholicism would not only commit a sin against the teachings of Christ, but would cause irreparable damage to itself,” should Church leaders demonstrate nostalgia toward the old regime.³⁶

Parragi’s words served as a warning from a voice afforded credibility as a result of his own suffering at the hands of the Nazis, yet persisting faithfulness to the Church. Borrowing from the terminology of the Communist Party, he openly proclaimed that Catholicism must relinquish all sympathies to the Horthy era and stake its place in democratic post-war Hungary.

The alliance of certain Catholics and their interests with feudalism and great-capitalism was unnatural. After all, the Catholic masses did not fit into this alliance. These included the workers, the servants, the smallholders, the bureaucrats, the intelligentsia, who the *ancien* regime did not consider human, whose political rights it nullified and whose most basic rights to bread, work, land and freedom it essentially did not grant.³⁷

Parragi’s rhetoric is indistinguishable from that found most often in *Szabad Nép*, with the exception that for the author, his Catholic faith and his experiences in concentration camps is what leads him to believe that if the Church detaches itself from the past, it may stand to benefit from the new era of postwar democracy. “As a loyal son of my church, I request that Catholicism use wholeheartedly the great historical opportunity offered by democracy.”³⁸ Rather than fearing a transformation, which portended a radical restructuring of the Church’s role in society and its relationship between the Church and state, Parragi advised the Church to embrace the looming change in a bid to modernize Hungarian Catholicism.

³⁶ “György Parragi, “Katolicizmus és demokrácia,” *Új Ember*, August 9, 1945, 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

Új Ember began as a fresh and critical voice formed largely by the more problematic aspects of the interwar experience. Progressive and provocative articles in the weekly's first few issues provided much needed legitimacy for the Church in the postwar era and harvested a spirit of conciliation between Catholicism and the old rivals of the Church. Nevertheless, *Új Ember* remained loyal to the Church leadership. It limited criticism of the hierarchy to the "old" leadership of the interwar period, rather than postwar bishops.

To argue that *Új Ember* was a "progressive," or left-wing weekly, however, would be an inaccurate assessment of a paper which frequently featured the writings of high-ranking bishops such as József Grösz of Kalocsa and József Mindszenty and which fervently defended the Council of Bishops when they came under attack by the Communist press. Nevertheless, it can be argued that as part of its mission to offer a new, untainted forum for postwar Hungarian Catholicism, it allowed for some competing views and opinions to appear on its pages.

The key representative characteristics of the Catholic approach, both to the past and to the impending challenges of the postwar era, are evident in a headline article appearing in *Új Ember* on September 30, following Mindszenty's appointment as prince primate. Written by József Antall, a secretary of state for the interim government, Mindszenty was showered with praise for proving himself a "man of steel" when faced with both Nazis as well newer, unnamed adversaries. According to Antall, Mindszenty's "very first characteristic is his seriousness of spirit and unwavering, manly strength."³⁹ Antall asserts that precisely this unparalleled strength ultimately lent Mindszenty the

³⁹ József Antall, "Az új hercegprímás arcképe: Az acélember," ("The Profile of the New Prince Primate: The Man of Steel), *Új Ember*, September 30, 1945, 1.

determination to oppose Hitler and the menace that the Führer represented at a time when the world had yet to even see him as a potential threat. “Toward the latter half of the 1920s the new prince primate saw the breakdown of the spiritual fabric of Hungarian society. This was why the words he directed to this country were so often harsh: he knew and he also stated that this breakdown would propel the country toward the whirlwinds of Hitlerism.”⁴⁰ In Antall’s presentation of Mindszenty, the new prince primate had not only proven himself a brave bishop who had opposed the Nazis, but also a visionary who was able to shed light on the shortcomings of Christian-Conservative Hungary and predict the fatal consequences of these failures.

The Church had two ways in which to explain its relationship to Nazism during the interwar period. Firstly, the Church could demonstrate how the Catholic leadership had opposed the Nazis toward the end of the War. Nevertheless, this line of reasoning did not address the Communist accusation that the radical right of the 1920s was the precursor of Nazism. The second method of explaining the Catholic establishment’s relationship with Nazi politics more directly countered the core of Communist allegations. According to this explanation, the Church had been concerned with the burgeoning fascist movements throughout the interwar regime, and their increasing proximity to the levers of power. Although Antall does not elaborate on the specific social ills of Hungary in the late 1920s, which caused Mindszenty to worry about the direction of Hungarian society, the bishop’s concerns did coincide with the ascension to the position of prime minister of Gyula Gömbös, a leading figure of the radical right who mimicked Mussolini and gravitated openly to fascist Italy and Germany. Before becoming the head of government in 1932, Gömbös had been accused in parliament of

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 1.

hiding Nazi criminals at his rural estate, who had been sought by German police for various politically-motivated assassinations.⁴¹ During his four years in power, Gömbös made clear his foreign policy was “rooted on the one hand in Berlin and on the other in Rome.”⁴² It would not suffice for the Catholic press to simply point to its protests against the Szálasi government, which were so obviously morally objectionable, but papers like *Új Ember* would have to demonstrate that Mindszenty’s opposition to fascism and Nazism had been consistent throughout the interwar regime and not simply in the final moments. This is what Antall tried to accomplish upon Mindszenty’s appointment to the cardinalship. In light of the Cardinal’s unabashed conservatism, this type of vindication was crucial, in that it demonstrated that the postwar leader of the Hungarian Catholic Church distanced himself from fascist and Nazi politics throughout the interwar period, and not only in the dying days of the war. Rather than seeming like opportunism, Mindszenty’s opposition to fascism appeared genuine and consistent throughout a longer period of time.

When it came to the Church’s activities in 1944, the task of explaining the position of the Catholic leadership proved more straightforward. Memoranda, letters and other documents clearly demonstrated the position of Catholic bishops *vis-à-vis* the genocidal activities of the pro-Nazi Sztojay administration and finally the Arrow-Cross government. Jusztinián Cardinal Serédi’s pastoral letter of June 29, 1944, in which the old cardinal condemned the massive deportation of Jews from the countryside was often

⁴¹ Historian and former monarchist politician Gusztáv Gratz was an active participant in the early years of the Horthy regime. Nevertheless, his work on the period, which contains both historical research and personal, memoir-style reflections, was published 55 years after his death in 2001.

Gusztáv Gratz, *Magyarország a két háború között*, (Hungary Between the Two Wars), (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2001), 263.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 263.

referred to after the war by Catholics seeking provide moral legitimacy for the Church. A number of other documents were equally unequivocal. In a memorandum to Szálasi dated October 31, 1944, from the Catholic bishops of western Hungary, including Mindszenty, the High Clergy called on the government in no uncertain terms to end the war. “An individual may sacrifice himself for the nation. Tens of thousands of our nation even in this World War died for their fatherland...but to push a whole nation to suicide just for your ideas is impossible. A sense of responsibility and conscience will not allow this.”⁴³

Despite the critical and apparently progressive approach on the part of several of *Új Ember*'s contributors in regards to their interpretation of the past and their views on postwar Hungarian politics, the Church elite remained in large part suspicious of the Communists and their interpretation of the past, as well as their policy of social change in postwar Hungary. Among the earliest voices of dissatisfaction came from Margit Slachta's Camp of Christian Women. Slachta, founder of the Sisters of Social Service and first woman to take a seat in the Hungarian parliament in the early 1920s, had been among the most visible representatives of political Catholicism. In the postwar period, Slachta's Catholic women's organization had been formed as a platform within the Civic Democratic Party and it aimed to field candidates in the 1945 elections. Yet when as early as February 12, 1945 Slachta attempted to register her movement and obtain permission to print her newspaper, *A Lélek Szava*, the license was denied by the interim government.⁴⁴

⁴³ “Memorandum to Premier Ferenc Szálasi, October 31, 1944, as included in the appendix of József Mindszenty, *Memoirs*, 253.

⁴⁴ *A Lélek Szava*— Transl.: *The Word of the Spirit*. Slachta's paper was eventually published in the form a newsletter, though its issues appeared only at irregular intervals.

The Camp of Christian Women's initial difficulties with official recognition led the movement to ponder publicly its fate and draw on historic parallels. "In 1944 our paper was among the first to be banned by the Arrow Cross government, in collaboration with the occupying Germans, while under the current democratic government it has not even been among the last to be granted a license."⁴⁵ A victim of both regimes, Slachta's group entered the November elections somewhat embittered and frustrated. "Why did the paper receive such treatment? And why was this the fate of the Camp? Was it not Democratic? Was it not patriotic? Can it be accused of corruption, jealousy or dishonesty? Or did it perhaps suffer this fate because it was religious?"⁴⁶ The Camp's comments shed light on three key aspects of the Church's strategic use of the past. First, the Catholic women's group's legacy of being in opposition to fascism portrays the image of a Church that had struggled and suffered under Nazism. Second, Slachta's association hinted somewhat vaguely at the similarities between early postwar Hungary's treatment of the Church to its treatment under the Arrow Cross. Third, the Camp of Christian Women made a thinly veiled accusation that Soviet-occupied postwar Hungary, in which Communist politicians played a fairly prominent role, may be anti-religious and anti-Catholic.

Yet Slachta was hardly one to passively accept the fate prescribed to her by Hungary's postwar authorities. As a token of defiance and an example of her views on church and politics, Slachta's newsletter presented a type of religious-political mantra to Catholic voters. "In accordance with my religious obligation, I will vote early in the

⁴⁵"A Lélek Szava szól," ("The Word of the Spirit Speaks") Camp of Christian Women's Newsletter, Szeged, Fond: *1945 Választás* (1945 Elections), Small Prints Collection, National Széchenyi Library: Budapest.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

morning!”⁴⁷ It may, however, also have been this same defiance that made Slachta among the favoured targets of the Communist press. Her image was that of a severely strict nun and an ultra-conservative, bigoted interwar politician with reactionary sympathies and connected to the passing of the *numerous clausus* laws of 1921-22, as well as legislation legalizing canings.⁴⁸ Slachta was seen as a holdover of the detested interwar period, a reincarnation of the past and the epitome of all that was amiss with the conservative Catholic establishment.

While Slachta earned the wrath of the Communist press for her record as a veteran, conservative interwar politician, the Communists criticized even the more progressive and conciliatory Péntzes and *Új Ember* for the Catholic establishment’s role in the Horthy era and its allegedly oppressive politics. As much as Péntzes saw it as beneficial for the Church to no longer have to maintain what he felt was a generally unnatural alliance with the former regime, he could hardly accept the Communist rhetoric calling for a complete purge of a criminally oppressive past and the subsequent cesura between interwar and postwar Hungary. Responding to the Communist Party’s criticism of Mindszenty, regarding the cardinal’s alleged habit of meddling in politics before the 1945 elections, Péntzes noted the following: “Let not only he be deemed a hero who represented his truth against the great ones of yesterday, but also he who is brave enough to represent this truth in the face of today’s leaders too.”⁴⁹

Despite the voices of a few in *Új Ember*, the Church had to embrace and vindicate the past on some level, in order to legitimate its place in postwar society. A

⁴⁷ “Vallási kötelességemnek eleget téve, korán reggel megyek szavazni.”

Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ilona Mona, *Slachta Margit*, 214.

⁴⁹ Balduin Péntzes, “Két nyilatkozat a Herceg-prímás pásztorleveléről,” (Two Statements Regarding the Prince Primate’s Pastoral Letter), *Új Ember*, November 11, 1945, 2.

complete dismissal of the interwar period as reactionary would undermine the Church and would serve as a *de facto* admission of culpability on the part of the an organization, which had been so visible under the former regime. This is precisely why painting Nazis as “pagan” was an important part of the Catholic *apologia* as well the concept of separating and isolating Nazism from the rest of the interwar regime.

Yet finding something salvageable from the previous regime proved elusive. This is perhaps why Church leaders remained vague in this regard, and spoke frequently about upholding revered traditions and customs. This is precisely what Mindszenty saw as the key differentiating factor between the way the Church and the Communists viewed the past. “Both Nazism and Bolshevism insisted that they had to penetrate our country in order to replace a faulty past by a happy new world. The Communists, in keeping with their doctrine, announced that the past had to be uncompromisingly liquidated.”⁵⁰ The fact that Mindszenty chose his installation as prince primate—a time when most people were paying close attention—as the opportune occasion to contrast the Catholic and Communist approaches to history, demonstrates the importance he placed on the conflicting interpretations of the past in the postwar debate between the Party and the Church.

On October 7, 1945 Mindszenty became the Cardinal of the Catholic Church of Hungary. Crowds of onlookers, many of whom trekked from every corner of the country, watched Mindszenty’s installation at the Basilica, in the war-battered northern town of Esztergom. Here Mindszenty gave voice to the Church’s view of the past. “Contrary to the errors that are now springing up, I proclaim to my people and my nation the eternal truths. I want to resurrect the sanctified tradition of our people. Individuals, perhaps, can

⁵⁰ Mindszenty, *Memoirs*, 65.

live without it, but never the whole nation.”⁵¹ The concept of tradition—referring to the conservative values arising from the country’s Christian faith—was to be protected from those who called for radical change and who envisioned a future fully detached from any reverence of the past. “Your archbishop is a *pontifex* indeed—that is, literally a ‘bridge builder.’ He will join with his people in building a bridge across the abyss of the past.”⁵²

As the “keeper” of the past and the binding tie with Hungary’s history, Mindszenty appropriated the country’s heritage for the Church. Nowhere is there even a trace of an apology from the Catholic establishment for having allied itself with regressive and compromised political forces during the interwar years. By taking ‘possession’ of national history and emphasizing the positive role of the country’s Christian traditions, whilst isolating the brief Nazi episode as diametrically opposed to this tradition, the past may no longer prove a liability, but a potential asset for the Church.

Mindszenty advocated being loyal to Hungary’s history. Nevertheless, in order for the cardinal, and the ecclesiastical office itself, to be seen as a credible protector of the past, he had to show an untainted, uncompromised record during the ominous Nazi experience, not only on his part, but also on the part of his predecessor, Jusztinián Serédi, Hungary’s cardinal during the War and the interwar regime. “Throughout his life (Serédi) never ceased to point us toward the right path....But the insane delusions of our leaders and the devastating violence of their followers prevented many of us from obeying the admonitions of our good archbishop. His was the voice of one crying in the

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 259.

wilderness...”⁵³ The Church aimed to gather moral capital for the postwar period by virtue of the two, stalwart cardinals: Serédi, who was a voice of reason amidst the chaos of Nazism and Mindszenty who, as the *Új Ember* correspondent at the Esztergom installment wrote, represented an “energy made of steel, power never frightened, but at the same time the warmth of a deep heart.”⁵⁴ From one cardinal’s lonely, but persistent calls for morality in a time of trouble, to another cardinal’s unparalleled strength, resolve and compassion, the Church was covering all the important ground six months following the end of the War.

Nevertheless, the Catholic elite knew well that the Church was not only comprised of Serédi and Mindszenty. Vindicating the two cardinals was only the beginning. The Church had to demonstrate that Catholicism, both as an institution and as an ideology, was diametrically opposed to Nazism. This approach would not necessarily seek to explain the Church’s relationship with the deeply conservative Horthy regime, nor would it try to rehabilitate the values or policies of National Christian Hungary. Instead, by attacking Nazism and by demonstrating the deep-rooted animosity between Catholicism and National Socialism, the High Clergy could attempt to portray itself as the former’s polar opposite. By doing this, the Catholic Church as an entity becomes the aggrieved party and thus appropriates the turf typically occupied by the Communists and left-wing elites, both of which Nazi regimes sought to eradicate.

If Nazism was an archenemy of the Church, the Catholic press needed to show that an active, religious resistance to Hitler’s Hungarian followers existed during the

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁵⁴ “...vas energia, megfélemlíthetetlen erő, de egyben a mélyen érző szív melege...”

“Róma és hazám, ti lesztek életem útmutató csillagzatai,” (Rome and my Homeland, You Will be the Guiding Stars of My Life) *Új Ember*, October 14, 1945, 1.

previous regime. *Új Ember* used an English publication entitled *Christian Counterattack*, to convince the Hungarian public that the Church opposed the radical right.⁵⁵ The newspaper published a translated and abridged version of the section of the book, which focused on Hungary. *Új Ember* quoted the work as crediting Hungary's tradition of Catholicism as having been a decisive factor in resistance, and in the country's eventual 'rejection' of Nazi ideals. "The resistance took on an entirely unique form. It was not only the Church and the priesthood that fought against them in this strongly Catholic country, but also political and societal leaders."⁵⁶ The Church's prominent role in society apparently had a positive affect on Hungary's secular leaders and their politics.

Hungarians were perfectly aware of the dire consequences of embracing Nazism. According to the book, this suspicion of Nazi ideology is precisely why Hungarians "fought bravely against the paganism, which originated from Germany, but (also) because they had an uncompromising leader in Cardinal Serédi."⁵⁷ *Új Ember* highlighted the inherently foreign nature of Nazism, not just in its publication of parts of *Christian Counterattack*, but also in all other articles examining World War II. Interwar Hungary may have been a breeding ground of deeply regressive politics, but Nazism was based on a German neo-paganism superimposed unnaturally on Hungarian society.

A series of articles appearing regularly in the Catholic weekly during early 1946 highlighted the Catholic Church's struggle against Nazism, with an exclusive emphasis

⁵⁵ *Christian Counterattack, Europe's Churches Against Nazism* was published in 1943 by a British association, entitled Student Christian Movement. Since the book was published well before Hungary fell into Nazi hands, *Új Ember* was able to use the relevant sections in order to provide evidence for a pattern of Catholic resistance to the radical right, that had not only been limited to the short-lived Arrow-Cross regime, or even Sztójay's collaborationist government of 1944.

⁵⁶ "Angol könyv a Magyar katolikus ellenállásról," (English Book on the Hungarian Catholic Resistance) *Új Ember*, March 24, 1946., 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid* 3.

on anti-Catholic discrimination and persecution in the Third Reich. The aim was to demonstrate unequivocally that the ideological birthplace of Nazism was also the site of the most brutal repression of the Church, thus reinforcing the theme of National Socialism having been anti-Catholic at its very core.

The recounting of the Church's struggle against Nazism in Germany was based on two strategies. Firstly, the Church sought to protect itself and ensure its survival in a deeply hostile environment. Secondly, Catholicism fought to safeguard what the religious elite saw as traditional, Christian morals and values, under attack by a Nazi regime, which aimed at corrupting the country's population and veering them away from their faith in Christianity. An article published in *Új Ember* by journalist József Sas argued precisely this. Sas was particularly concerned with what he saw as Nazism's disregard for the most basic of Christian ethics, such as the Third Reich's position on euthanasia as well as its alleged condoning of rampant homosexual behaviour in Nazi youth organizations.⁵⁸

According to Sas, public nudity was all too common in German youth organizations, including the *Hitler Jugend*, and this resulted in 'deviancy' and helped lead to a rejection of Christian morals. The testimony of a Hungarian who was a guest in a Nazi youth camp only underpinned this opinion. "After going to bed, once everyone was silent and the lights had been turned off, strange noises could be heard from a corner.

⁵⁸ The Catholic paper's indignant claim that homosexuality flourished within Nazi organizations is not without merit. A number of historians, such as Harry Oosterhuis, have examined the issue of homosexuality in the Third Reich's male, youth organizations. According to Oosterhuis, it was precisely the "glorification of masculinity, youth and physical prowess and beauty" that may have made Nazi organizations inviting for homosexuals. Moreover, with women excluded from many assets of Nazi public life and with the concept of the *Mannerbund*—the idea of a state based on, and run by a close association of men—Oosterhuis argues that homoerotic tendencies formed a major part of German nationalism. Harry Oosterhuis, "Medicine, Male Bonding and Homosexuality in Nazi Germany," *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 32, no. 2 (April 1997), 203.

With the rays of the street light streaming in through the window, a naked boy could be seen standing up and walking over to his friend's bed who was awaiting him... These and similar incidents were routine occurrences in the camps."⁵⁹ Though no one claimed that the Nazis officially condoned homosexual behaviour, the impression remains that they allowed it to occur under their watch and, perhaps unconsciously, encouraged it in their youth organizations under the banner of *Mannerbund* and 'male bonding.'

The Church's main concern with Nazism, however, was what it saw as the blatant persecution of Catholic institutions and symbols. According to Sas, the Nazis aimed to "eradicate" all Christian symbols from German culture and society and replace these with "neo-pagan" ideals.⁶⁰ These efforts included creating a new, official calendar in which the names of saints are replaced by "gods of the mythical ancient Germanic world," and a "German Bible," in which the believer is taught to have faith in "God's other dear son, who was born in the land between the Alps and the sea, and who was tortured under the Papists."⁶¹ In the first of a series of articles in *Új Ember*, Sas presents the image of a Germany divested entirely of its Christian heritage and replaced by a new order in which the Catholic leaders and organizations suffer constant persecution on all fronts. From priests forced to attend show trials wearing their ceremonial garbs, to the removal of Christian symbols from society, the Church was a major victim of Nazism, yet one which resisted nobly and withstood. Drawing on the concept of history guided by a divine force, Sas concludes that just as the Catholic Church defeated the Roman Empire, the Reformation and the Enlightenment, the "dramatic collapse of one of its greatest enemies

⁵⁹ József Sas, "Az Egyház harca az emberért," (The Church's Struggle for Man), *Új Ember*, February 17, 1946, 8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 8

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

of the twentieth century provides historical justification that the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”⁶² By employing a Rankean approach to history, the Church could identify the continuity in Catholicism’s resistance to what it felt to be corruptive and anti-Christian forces and movements throughout history. Furthermore, by invoking Christ’s words from the New Testament, which proclaimed that “the gates of Hades” will never claim victorious over the Church, Sas warned the Communists that their anti-Catholic attack will also be in vain.

Individual Catholics also resisted Nazism, trying to remain faithful to their religion in the most difficult of times. Nazi activists appearing at parish meetings to proclaim that in their Germany, the non-Aryan Christ “could not even work as a chaplain,” failed to persuade the faithful to reject Catholicism.⁶³ In another article in his series, Sas notes that the “brave, courageous Austrian Catholic people did not easily allow itself to be driven from the Catholic faith of their ancestors.”⁶⁴ Sas was not the only one to state that the more Catholic a country’s population, the greater the resistance to Nazism. Other writers and journalists, including József Cavallier, claimed much the same thing. Cavallier, for example, pointed to the declining rate of baptisms and the rise in mixed marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics as having been in direct correlation with Germany’s newfound “barbaric wildness.”⁶⁵ “By 1933, a third of the German people can, with self-assurance, be declared pagan. Additionally, as time passed, so grew their religious indifference.”⁶⁶ According to Cavallier, the higher the proportion

⁶² *Ibid.* 8.

⁶³ “Ezért Krisztus a mi Németországunkban még mint káplán sem működhetne.”

József Sas, “An én igém el nem múlnak,” (My Word will Last Forever,) *Új Ember*, January 27, 1946, 8.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 8.

⁶⁵ József Cavallier, “A német nép útja a barbár elvadulásba,” (The German People’s Path to Barbaric Wildness), *Új Ember*, February 24, 1946, 4.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 4

of Catholics in a country, the less likely the society will accept Nazism. By labeling Nazism as inherently pagan, Cavallier claimed that Hitler's Germany positioned itself in direct opposition to Catholicism.

Conspicuously missing from the series of articles dealing with the animosity between the Church and National Socialism and the irreconcilability of the two ideologies, is any detailed discussion of *Hungarian* fascism and Nazism. There is scant mention of Szálasi, the Arrow Cross or the rise of Hungarian Nazi groups in the late 1930s and *their* anti-Catholic bias. With the exception of the usual assertions regarding Cardinal Serédi's protest against the deportations of the rural Jews in June 1944 and the role played by various Catholic orders in coming to the aid of the persecuted, there is hardly any mention of Szálasi's and the Arrow Cross's opinion of the Church.

The most compelling reason for this may be that it was simply much easier to demonstrate Hitler's disdain for Christianity than that of Szálasi or any other Hungarian radical right-wing leader. In their views on Christianity and the role of the Church in society, Hitler and Szálasi could not have been more different. Most telling of the Führer's views on the concept of secularization is a statement that he made in November 1941. "The Church must be made to understand that her kingdom is not of this world. What an example Frederick the Great set when he reacted against the Church's claim to be allowed to interfere in matters of State!"⁶⁷ This philosophy is in stark contrast to Szálasi's 1939 Arrow Cross program, in which their "three pillars" included a "fear of God, love of one's country and discipline," as well as a "classless society standing on

⁶⁷ *Hitler's Table Talk, 1941-44, His Private Conversations*, November 11, 1941, (London: Wiendenfeld and Nicolson, 1953), 124.

Christian foundations.”⁶⁸ Despite Szálasi’s fairly public opposition to the Eucharistic Congress, which convened in Budapest in 1938, as well as some later calls to more formally separate Church and State, Christianity as an ideology—if not as an institution—formed an important part of Arrow Cross rhetoric. Moreover, even Cardinal Serédi had noted in his journal that he “did not doubt (Szálasi’s) Catholicity and his good intentions, because from his words (he) could see that he was a believer who, nonetheless, lived in the Hungarist, alias National Socialist, world to such an extent...that could understand and accept nothing outside of this.”⁶⁹

Unlike Szálasi, Hitler and German Nazism was suspicious not only of Catholic institutions, but of Christianity as whole. When Hungarian Catholic authors condemned Nazism for having been diametrically opposed to Christianity and hostile to the Catholic Church, they relied on an abundance of documentary evidence to support this claim. Hitler was frequently quite candid in regards to his opinion of Christianity, which he believed was originally “merely an incarnation of Bolshevism, the destroyer.”⁷⁰ Not mincing his words, Hitler noted that “the reason why the ancient world was so pure, light and serene was that it knew nothing of the two great scourges: the pox and Christianity.”⁷¹ With Hitler’s overt gravitation to the values of the Roman Empire and his interest in their pre-Christian cultures, it is hardly surprising that Hungarian Catholic elites would label Nazism as pagan. Hitler gave them good reason. Apparently criticizing Mussolini’s “soft” approach to the Catholic Church, Hitler noted that “Rome today allows itself to reproach Bolshevism with having destroyed the Christian Churches! As if

⁶⁸ Miklós Lackó, *Arrow Cross Men, National Socialists, 1935-1944*, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1969).

⁶⁹ Jusztinián Serédi, *Visszaemlékezéseim*, (Budapest: Zrínyi, 1991) 114.

⁷⁰ *Hitler's Table Talk*, October 21, 1941, 76.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, October 19, 1941, 75.

Christianity hadn't behaved in the same way towards the pagan temples."⁷² Hitler was certainly no ally of the Church, and despite not having had the opportunity to read the Führer's more private thoughts, as recorded in his *Table Talks*, the writers of *Új Ember* were aware of Nazi Germany's distaste for Christianity.

Communism was at the centre of both Nazi and Catholic fears and it was precisely the signs of the Bolshevik demon that they see in each other. For Hitler, Christianity was, indeed, an enemy that had to be conquered. His overt allusions to Bolshevism, however, are ironic in light of the fact that it was precisely the Church that often drew comparisons between Communism and Nazism, in regard to their mutual disdain of religion. While the Church felt that the Communists and Nazis were one and the same when it came to the persecution of Catholicism, Hitler, on the other hand, was convinced that Christians and Bolsheviks enjoyed a type of special spiritual alliance in their disregard for authority. The irony is stinging. While Hungary's Catholic leaders joined the Conservative, landowning and aristocratic politicians of the interwar regime out of their aversion to revolutionary change of the status quo--both on the part of the 1919 Bolsheviks as well as the burgeoning radical right--Hitler bemoaned Christianity's historic and inherently rebellious nature as proving to be a tiresome irritancy for the Roman Empire.

Despite these efforts to reinforce the credibility of the Church in postwar Hungary, Catholic leaders and institutions were continuously dogged by the Communists for their role in a past, which had as its most visible and persistent monument, the unparalleled physical devastation of the country. The Catholic elite isolated Nazism from the rest of the interwar period, labeled Hitlerism as pagan, asserted that the Church stood

⁷² *Ibid.*, 76.

opposed to the Nazis and propagated a ‘new,’ postwar Catholicism disassociated with the past. Yet it could not quell the direct and indirect Communist assaults at the Church. A more confrontational approach remained in the Church’s rhetoric. This sought to explicitly show the similarities between the Nazis and the Communists in their disdain for Catholicism and, more generally, for religion.

An element of thinly veiled revenge also accompanied the exposition of the commonalities between the two ideologies. The past not only testified to the values of Christian traditions in Hungary, but also ‘proved’ that the Church would always ultimately prevail over its opponents. A Franciscan priest employed this logic in a letter addressed to his parishioners.

In a letter, written before he committed suicide, German minister Ley proclaimed to the world the great truth: “We have left God and because of this God has also left us to our own devices.” Moreover, former foreign minister Ribbentrop openly admitted, that the reason they had to lose, was because they persecuted the Church....If only the world would realize after the German testimony, that he who struggles against the Church dishonours himself and plunges himself into misfortune.⁷³

The implication is evident. Written in April 1946, at a time when the Communist press was rife with accusations about reactionary, fascist conspiracies linked to Catholic institutions, this priest tried to reassure his flock and forewarn his opponents that the Church would prevail. In this interpretation, the real victor following the defeat of Nazism is the Catholic Church. This interpretation reinforces the notion of a victimized, suffering Catholic establishment and one which also helped defeat Nazism.

This theme of final judgment and the complete vindication of the Church, illustrated by historical examples and parallels, frequently found its way into papers and

⁷³ Kelemen Király, “Kedves Jó híveim,” (“My Dear Faithful”), Csongrád, April 2, 1946 in: 1946—Egyházak, Vallás, Fond no. 631, Small Prints Collection, National Széchényi Library.

parish newsletters. Iván Gellért, a theologian, forcefully expressed this opinion in a parish bulletin:

Against the tide: this is the current Catholic program. It is with this that we defeated the Roman Empire, the revolutions, the Japanese persecution of the Church, Cromwell, Bismarck and Hitler. A true man is not he who can hit, but he who can withstand. Time will justify and work for us. We are a city built on a hill...We are without arms and without strength, but it is in our weakness that our power becomes complete....And he who stood opposed to us was destroyed even if he was huge...God tends to choose the weak in order to humiliate the strong.⁷⁴

This concept of a triumphant Church and the hopes of future justification appeared not only in parish circulars, but also extended to the mainstream press. *Új Ember* also joined the chorus of thinly-veiled warnings directed at the Communists when Sas noted in his January 27, 1946 piece that “there still exist forces, individuals and groups, which also prepare to topple the eternal Rock. Following the collapse of the apparently undefeatable neo-paganism, which operated with such demonic results, they too will only prove the Lord Christ’s victorious dictum: ‘Heaven and Earth will come to pass, but my word shall live forever!’”⁷⁵ Sas, as well as most members of the Catholic elite and intelligentsia had by now placed most of their hope in posterity. Having exhausted their efforts at salvaging parts of the interwar past, having demonstrated the incompatibility of Nazism with Catholicism and the victimization of the Church under Nazi regimes, the Catholic elite now had to turn their defense in a different direction, namely accounting

⁷⁴ “Szemben az árral: ez ma a katolikus program. Ezzel győztük le a római birodalmat, az eretnkségeket, a forradalmakat, a japán egyházüldözést, Cromwellt, Bismarckot és Hitlert. Nem az a legény, aki üti, hanem aki állja...A idő minket igazol és nekünk dolgozik. Hegyre épített város vagyunk....A mi erőnk éppen az erőtlenségben lesz teljessé....Aki pedig szembeszállt velünk, akkor is elpusztult ha hatalmas volt...Az Isten a gyengéket szokta kiválasztani, hogy megszégyenítse velük az erőseket.”

Iván Gellért,

⁷⁵ “Az Én Igéim el nem múlnak,” (“My Word Shall Last Forever”), *Új Ember*, 8.

for the instances of concrete collaboration between religious leaders and the Arrow Cross.

In 1945, the Catholic Church faced the task of accounting for its prominent position during the discredited previous regime and refuting the accusation that the Church had broken bread with Nazis. Catholic leaders and intellectuals accomplished this by positioning the Church in diametric opposition to Nazism on an ideological level. At the same time, the Church's more progressive elements—especially members of *Új Ember's* editorial team—viewed the past as a liability for the Church and vowed to opt for a 'fresh start' in postwar Hungary. Despite *Új Ember's* efforts, the Communists portrayed the Church as the last standing pillar of reactionary, fascistic interwar Hungary. There remained little room for compromise between the Church leadership and the Communists. The Communist press and party leadership portrayed the entire interwar period as wholly objectionable and irreparably tainted by Nazism, while the Catholic Church argued against dismissing the past in its entirety and saw some aspects of the Horthy era as salvageable.

The months following the end of the war represented a debate over history between the Church and the Communist Party over rival interpretations of the past. Catholic leaders and Communist politicians realized that their credibility depended on their actions during the previous regime. Both sides engaged in a fierce debate in the press, believing that securing their own interpretation of the past also meant securing their share of power and authority in postwar Hungary.

Chapter 2: The Collaborationists—The Church's Liabilities

Catholicism's postwar troubles stemmed not only from Communist criticism of the Church's role in the interwar regime and allegations of Catholic sympathies with Nazism and fascism, but also certain concrete instances of collaboration between priests and various native fascist movements. The cases of priestly involvement in the radical right wing or else found guilty of war crimes were ultimately few, yet the allegations were highly sensational and coincided with war crimes trials of a number of Hungary's interwar political figures, including that of the Arrow Cross leader, Ferenc Szálasi himself. The cases of Nazi priests gave credence to Communist accusations of postwar fascist conspiracies within Catholic organizations. The cases of the indicted priests also illuminated the issue of why fascism, despite its revolutionary character and potential threat to Catholicism's conservatism, would have appealed to certain layers of the clergy during the interwar period.

The rise of a "new" right wing characterized the interwar period in much of continental Europe. While World War I and the subsequent social unrest swept away aristocrats, conservatives and legitimists, new rightist movements, represented by leaders of Bourgeois origins, sought to radically alter power relations in their respective countries, by infusing the previously disenfranchised with a sense of class identity and a new-found interest in the affairs of the nation. According to historian Mark Mazower, "one kind of Right defended the old order against the forces of mass politics, the other used those forces in a revolutionary attempt to reshape society itself."⁷⁶ During the twenties and thirties, Hungary followed this same trend. Members of the High Clergy, traditionally of upper-class origins, supported the restoration of the Habsburg monarchy,

⁷⁶ Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent, Europe's Twentieth Century*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1998) 32.

and when by the late 1920s this no longer seemed likely, they gravitated towards the aristocrats and various counts who assumed the highest roles in Horthy Christian-Conservative regime. In contrast, some members of the lower clergy, frequently of middle-class origins, found the empowering, socially revolutionary politics of various fascist groups more inviting.

The actions of two members of the clergy helped the Communists in their efforts to create a link between the fascists and the Church in 1945. István Zadravecz, a former military chaplain from 1921 to 1926, and András Kun, a former member of the Hungarian province of Minorites – an order founded by Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century—both stood accused of collaborating with Nazi and fascist movements. During the interwar period, the Hungarian province of Minorites operated four monasteries in Hungary, in the towns of Eger, Miskólc, Nyírátorbágy and Szeged. By 1946, the number of Minorites in Hungary proper had decreased to 41, with the remaining 24 monks operating in Romanian-controlled Transylvania.⁷⁷ While Kun sullied the name of the Minorites by joining forces with Nazis in 1944 and participating in genocidal acts, Zadravecz did the same for the Franciscans through his association with fascists and hence provided the Church's primary link to fascist and Nazi politics. Zadravecz was particularly key in linking the Church leadership with a shadowy, fascist group, referred to as the "Etelköz Alliance," more commonly called "EX," from as early as 1921.

Zadravecz not only cast doubt over the Church's alleged disdain for the radical right, but he also lent legitimacy to the assertions in the Communist daily, *Szabad Nép*, that Hungary had served as a type of 'spiritual birthplace' of European fascism and

⁷⁷ "A Konvektuális Ferences Minorita Rend magyarországi tartománya," (The Hungarian Province of the Cloistered Franciscan Minorite Order," Magyar Katolikus Egyház, (The Catholic Church of Hungary), Electronic source: <http://www.katolikus.hu/rendek/ffi14.html>, Accessed on: February 13, 2005.

Nazism. This concept is most apparent in the bishop's discussion on Hungarian racialism and anti-Semitism in 1921. More than a decade before Hitler's ascension to power and at a time when the Führer's Nazi organization was still in its infant years, the leaders of EX had adopted a system of racial classification no less developed than that employed in Germany several years later. Speaking approvingly of EX stalwart and mayor of Kecskemét, Miklós Majthényi, and "Uncle" Árpád Gáloczy, another prominent leader of EX, Zdravec noted approvingly that the two propagated the most radical form of anti-Semitism. According to their schema, everyone could be divided into racial categories and identified with a specific symbol. There were those who were "liberal Jews," those marked with an upright triangle were "suspected of having Jewish origins," an upturned triangle denoted one "suspected of having a Jewish wife," a black triangle stood for anyone of "definite" Jewish origin, a "dangerous Jew" was marked by a black star of David, a Communist by a triangle and a "dangerous Communist" by a black triangle.⁷⁸ Zdravec approved wholeheartedly of this racial, proto-Nazi classification and even expressed concern when Majthényi had been offered employment in the government that this "upright, open-spirited, Hungarian irredentist's...well-intentioned EX activities would become silenced" and fall by the wayside in light of his new, well-paying state position.⁷⁹ If anything, Zdravec had been concerned that EX's radical antisemitism—more akin to Nazism than to Mussolini's fascism—might have been in danger as the once secret society gravitated ever closer to the levers of power and as its leaders made their way into the government. With his presence and membership in EX, at whose meetings

⁷⁸István Zdravec, *Páter Zdravec titkos naplója*, (The Secret Journal of Father Zdravec), (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1967), 150.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 150.

he appeared dressed in his Franciscan robes, Zadravecz lent a type of unofficial Church sanction to one of the earliest fascist organizations in Hungary.

The two most prominent trials of member of the clergy facing war crimes charges in 1945 were Kun and Zadravecz. The trials of both priests took place between September 12 and September 20, 1945—the same time when *Szabad Nép* also reported extensively on the charges raised against various members of the Arrow Cross government and the Horthy regime. With Kun and Zadravecz, the Communist press added two Catholic priests to the parade of disgraced interwar leaders found guilty of the most heinous war crimes.

Szabad Nép reported on the preliminary proceedings of the two priests on September 12 and on the same day the paper ran a front-page story on an alleged underground fascist conspiracy bent on overthrowing the postwar government. It cannot be known for certain whether it had been simply a coincidence that the paper reported on the arrest of these alleged fascist conspirators--which took place five days prior--on September 7, the same day that an article appeared about the Nazi priests, or if the news releases had been coordinated to appear on the same day and only a page apart by the editors. Nevertheless, the implicit association created in the minds of the readership between past fascists and potential fascist terrorists of the present and future lent an urgency and legitimacy to the Communist-dominated political police's mission of rooting out conspiracies and terrorist cells in 1945-1946.⁸⁰

While the Communist Party used *Szabad Nép* to justify charging the two priests, its control of the political police and the interior ministry allowed it to supplement its invectives with action. The Department of Political Order, the PRO, and later the

⁸⁰ Gábor Kiszely, *ÁVH*, (Budapest: Korona Kiadó, 2001) 102-103.

Department of State Security, the ÁVÓ-ÁVH, had been heavily under Communist Party influence. The PRO's sharing of quarters with the Communist Party, in the latter's Budapest headquarters after the police unit's founding in January 1945, is perhaps most telling of the close association between the two organizations. The PRO changed locations in the autumn of 1945 and occupied Szálasi's former Arrow Cross headquarters at 60 Andrassy boulevard, in downtown Budapest. The Nazi prison cells and torture chambers beneath the building were used during the arrests of political prisoners from 1945.

The September 1945 trial and execution of András Kun had offered to the Communist press the most repellent and infamous instance of a priest who had part taken in the most ghastly atrocities of the war. Kun, a former monk of the Minorite order, had been responsible for the summary execution of over 500 Jews in the Budapest ghetto from October 1944 to January 1945. He had also taken part in raids on Jews living in so-called "safe-houses." Those captured had been tied together in groups of three and thrown into the Danube to drown. Kun had also been implicated in participating in the torturous and sadistic interrogations of 300 Jews in the Arrow Cross's party headquarters.⁸¹

Kun's genocidal activities proved even more problematic for the Church after war, since the Minorite monk directly identified himself, his actions, and the Arrow-Cross with the Catholic Church. Kun always wore his priestly robes and vestments issued by the Minorites, supplemented by a rifle and an Arrow Cross armband. He had been keen to demonstrate that his participation in Arrow Cross activities was in his capacity as a priest.

⁸¹ Randolph Braham, *The Politics of Genocide, vol. 2*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 1049.

The Social Democratic daily, *Népszava*, reported in a September 5, 1945 article, that on January 11 Kun had taken part in a massacre of patients and nurses in Budapest's Jewish Hospital. His one brief command to the officers, in which he ordered them to shoot indiscriminately everyone in the hospital, linked the atrocity directly to the Church. "In the holy name of Christ, fire!"⁸² Although Kun had long before fallen out of favour with the Church leadership, these words created the impression that Kun had been acting as an agent of the Church.

The allegations against Kun had proven largely indisputable and the prosecution had not faced a particularly arduous task in convicting the genocidal former monk. Tibor Ferencz, the vice-president of the prosecution, prepared the case within only two days. According to *Szabad Nép's* report, "the former monk gone wild admitted that he had taken part in the mass murders of Maros Street, Városmajor Street and on the territory of the ghetto, through which more than a thousand people were killed."⁸³ Within a period of less than two weeks, Kun had been tried, found guilty and executed. *Szabad Nép* reported on Kun's hanging in its September 20 issue, placing a special emphasis on the alleged cynicism, stubbornness and lack of any remorse on the defendant's part. "The audience listened with revulsion, and amidst protests, to the account of these sadistic activities, of which certain episodes are not even fit to print."⁸⁴ Kun had remained an unrepentant Nazi and a common criminal, defiant and convinced of his beliefs long after the regime under which he had appointed himself as mass executioner came to pass. "Father Kun," as the

⁸² János Erdődy, "Krisztus szent nevében: tűz!", (In the Holy Name of Christ: Fire!) *Népszava*, (People's Voice), September 5, 1945, 1.

⁸³ "Zadravecz püspök ellen súlyos vádak hangzottak el, Több mint ezer ember kivégzéséért felelős Kun páter." (Serious Accusations Have been Levied Against Bishop Zadravecz, Father Kun is Responsible for the Execution of More than a 1000 People), *Szabad Nép*, September 12, 1945, 1.

⁸⁴ "Felakasztották a tömeggyilkos nyilas Kun pátert." (The Mass Murderer, Arrow-Cross Father Kun, Has Been Hanged.), *Szabad Nép*, September 20, 1945, 2.

Communist press most commonly referred to him, offered to the Communists the most blatant synthesis of Catholicism and Nazism. From his Minorite robe—adorned with his Arrow-Cross armband and his rifle—to his oratorical amalgamation of Catholic piety with Nazism during his most brutal killings, all the sorrowful details had been in place for a trial in which the Church stood accused.

Yet the Kun case had hardly been simply about a single priest's war crimes. The Communist press used the opportunity to draw greater conclusions about the interwar regime, World War II, and the Church's role in this period. "That a priest has been found among the Nazi bandits is not the sad infamy exclusive to Hungarians, but rather that there existed a state, whose head sanctioned the gravest of crimes with his priestly blessing."⁸⁵ Following Kun's hanging, *Szabad Nép* emphasized two aspects of its view on the Church's role within the fascist regime. Firstly, the paper noted that Nazi priests had existed in other European countries. The Communist daily, in fact, did report on instances of Catholic collaboration with fascists elsewhere, such as in France under Marshall Pétain.⁸⁶ Secondly, *Szabad Nép* asserted that what had distinguished Hungary from the other fascist states, had been the extent to which elements of the Catholic faith were invoked as a justification of Nazi activities.

The provincial leadership of the Minorites had been swift to preempt any criticism and accusations levelled at the order in light of the Kun case, by sending a letter and press release to *Új Ember's* editorial board. *Új Ember* published the original type written letter and statement in its September 16 issue without any commentary. In the letter, László Ladányi, the provincial head of the Minorites, stated that a clarification from the order

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸⁶ "A francia katolikus párt jobbszárnya Pétain volt híveinek menedéke." (The French Catholic Party's Right-Wing is a Refuge for Pétain's former followers.) *Szabad Nép*, October 27, 1945, 1.

was necessary as Hungarian “newspapers will, in the near future, discuss *per longum et latum* the former father’s case.”⁸⁷ Ladányi claimed to have received word of Kun’s capture and the charges levied against him from *Szabad Nép*. He emphasized that the 35 year old Kun had actually left the Minorites on December 1, 1943 and that he resided in Budapest as an exclaustrated priest.⁸⁸ Kun resumed wearing his Minorite robes a year after his exclaustation, at the commencement of his Arrow Cross activities. According to Ladányi, Kun wore these vestments “purely for propaganda purposes, which scandalized the faithful to a not insignificant extent.”⁸⁹ Ladányi contended that Kun had had no connection with the order at the time of his murderous actions, having been defrocked by the cardinal in mid-November 1944, and forbidden from wearing any religious attire that may be associated with the Church.

The Church could not have further distanced itself from Kun and certainly no one came to the disgraced priest’s defense. Nevertheless, discussion about Kun’s atrocities continued, especially as a method of discrediting the Church on its record during the war. On October 13, 1946, more than a year following Kun’s execution, the case of the Arrow Cross had not yet subsided. After renewed accusations surfaced in the Communist press, *Új Ember*’s Balduin Péntes published a lengthy article on the front page of *Actio Catholica*’s paper entitled “What We Must Tell the Jews.” In his work, Péntes dealt primarily with reports on alleged anti-Semitism in the religion class of a school, where students who had been baptized only recently were made to stand up and identify

⁸⁷ László Ladányi, “Nyilatkozat ‘Kun Páter’ ügyében,” (Statement Regarding the ‘Father Kun’ case) in *Új Ember*, September 16, 1945, 2.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

themselves by their religion teacher.⁹⁰ The Benedictine monk also wrote at length about the prevailing negative image of priests in the left-wing press. Speaking about the so-called “shooting fathers,” a term used to refer primarily to Kun, Péntzes noted that there was

no such thing. How many were there accused of this crime? There was but one: Father Kun. We already reported that at the time he was no longer a father, nor a monk, he had no right to celebrate mass and he could not proclaim the Gospel. For his deeds, which history shall judge, he has already received his sentence. But where are the other shooting priests? And if someone may have gone astray--as did Szigetvár's Jewish priest (sic), Béla Berend--it would just the same have not brought indignity over the entire Catholic priesthood, as it would not have done so to the whole Jewish priesthood.”⁹¹

Péntzes's reference to Berend, a rabbi who had collaborated with the Arrow Cross and the Germans in late 1944 through his position on the Jewish Council, served the purpose of drawing a parallel between Kun, as a liability and unwelcome name to the Church, and the rabbi, as a *persona non grata* among Jews. Yet Péntzes asserts that both of these men proved to be the exception to the rule in their respective establishments and thus their deeds must be understood precisely in this light.

Péntzes appeared particularly frustrated in this article, likely a consequence of being exhausted of having to constantly rebuke Communist allegations of Catholic collusion with the Nazis more than a year and half after the war. It was here that Péntzes gave his most impassioned opinion on the allegations directed at the Church, and the

⁹⁰ A significant number of Jews were baptized in 1944 in order to avoid Nazi persecution. According to Péntzes, the religion teacher had a duty to identify those children who may not have had a proper baptism, or else who had fake baptismal certificates in order to ensure that they not participate in the sacraments and—due to government regulations—did not illegally participate in Catholic religious education.

⁹¹ Balduin Péntzes, “Amit a Zsidóknak el kell mondanunk,” (What We Must Tell to the Jews) *Új Ember*, October 13, 1946, 1.

most fervent *apologia* of the priesthood's activities during the final, tragic days of the war.

The Catholic Church did not close its doors before the Jews, but rather opened them wide even when this bred slander, resulted in prison and when this meant that the Catholic priesthood was mentioned immediately after the Jews on the list of hatred, for its Christian and humanitarian behaviour. It is a pity if we forget how many persecuted Jews found hiding places among priests, how many priests and bishops were among the only ones to bring solace during visits to the marked (safe) houses, how many priests acquired documents and letters for the persecuted from embassies and especially from the Nunciature. I too could recount those hopeless, dreary November mornings, when after school, amidst the shrill cry of the air raid sirens and during the bombings, I ran to the Nunciature so that, with my personal connections, I may help the poor, persecuted people.⁹²

In his article, which covered *Új Ember's* entire first page, Péntzes displayed his dismay over what he felt were frivolous allegations aimed to discredit the clergy. He countered them by pointing to the selfless actions of priests and charitable organizations in Budapest under the Arrow Cross. This had been the Church's strongest defense, as it could refer to concrete instances of the clergy and laity assisting Jews through various charitable organizations, one of which had helped Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg in hiding Jews and in issuing them forged passports and other documents.

Despite the heroic actions of some in the Church in order to save the Jews, Péntzes strains to address the priesthood's relative silence in recounting its role in the resistance to the Arrow Cross and the German occupiers.

There were hundreds, thousands among the members of the priesthood who did much more and yet they do not speak. They find it inappropriate to profit from the fact that they were simply Christians and humans, even when the police was watching them, when Christian and humane life came with dangers. Yet even they are silent--these priests who never joined the "resistance blocks" of the coffee houses—are, as I am, somewhat

⁹² *Ibid.*, 1.

saddened, because they never thought that this would be the reward for all that they have done.⁹³

By October 1946, Péntzes appeared discouraged and fatigued by the endless allegations directed against the Church regarding its record during the war. Péntzes, however, also implicitly took aim at the leftist groups traditionally credited for assuming a central role in the resistance movement, for not having been as humble and genuine as the many priests who worked tirelessly to save the Jewish population, yet found it inappropriate to boast about their efforts after the war.

Despite this relative “silence” on the part of individual priests, the Church did not leave Communist allegations concerning the priesthood unanswered. *Magyar Kurir*, a publication of the Council of Bishops, found itself having to explain its interwar past as late as 1947. On March 19, *Magyar Kurir* observed that “the Catholic clergy are being attacked...on the ground that they betrayed Christ and his teaching by their failure to come forward as champions of the rights of man and Christian love.”⁹⁴ To counter this, the High Clergy maintained that the very fact that most priests did not flee the country in 1944, but rather remained in their parishes and continued their pastoral work had served as a positive, moral force at a time of utter ethical decay. Hungarian priests were ordered to “stay at their posts. Owing to this fact the Hungarian people did not allow themselves to be deceived by the lies of the Nazi propaganda.”⁹⁵ The very presence of the priests was argued to have been a type of intellectual and spiritual force against the Nazis. According

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹⁴ “The Losses of the Church in Hungary under Nazi Rule,” *Magyar Kurir*, March 19, 1947 as published in: *Cardinal Mindszenty Speaks—Authorized White Book*, (New York: Longmans, 1949) 37.

⁹⁵ “Reply to Attack in Népszava,” *Magyar Kurir*, February 23, 1947, as published in: *Cardinal Mindszenty Speaks*, 34.

to *Magyar Kurir*, only twelve out of the more than one thousand priests in parishes throughout eastern Hungary fled the country in 1944-45.

Magyar Kurir also asserted that seventy-six parish priests and religious had been persecuted by the Nazis “precisely for their loyal observance of Catholic principles.”⁹⁶ The Church bemoaned that instead of emphasizing *this* aspect of the Church’s war record, “there is talk of the one single priest (András Kun) whom Cardinal Serédi had to suspend for his conduct.”⁹⁷

The scandalous case of Father Kun overshadowed the Church’s efforts to rescue Budapest’s Jewish population in the winter of 1944. Nevertheless, despite the appalling nature of Kun’s activities, he did not prove to be the Church’s only liability following the war. István Zadravecz, the former military bishop, had been a familiar name to many who were old enough to recall the founding years of the Horthy regime and the anticommunist pogroms of 1919-1921. Zadravecz had seen himself--and indeed acted as-- Catholicism’s self-appointed delegate to the parties, associations and secret societies of Hungary’s radical right. Once he had withdrawn from active politics and returned to the quieter life of a parish priest, he possessed perhaps the most first-hand knowledge of early Hungarian interwar fascism. Referring to the fascist *EX*, Zadravecz noted in his memoirs that “if anyone, I am the best qualified to write about them.”⁹⁸ Zadravecz’s connections with fascist organizations and leaders in Hungary far surpassed those of his contemporaries, including the other bishops of the Church as well as most politicians of the Horthy regime. This record of involvement in various fascist associations, of course, had hardly

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁹⁸ István Zadravecz, *Páter Zadravecz titkos naplója*, (The Secret Journal of Father Zadravecz), (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1967), 130.

proved to be a boasting matter in postwar Hungary and, therefore Zadravec, like Kun, remained a liability for a Church leadership adamant in demonstrating its history of opposition to fascism.⁹⁹

Yet it would be inaccurate to portray EX as a Catholic organization, or one close to the Church. The Communist press also did not refer to the group in this regard. If anything, EX had been more suspicious than supportive of Catholicism and this relationship of distrust proved mutual between the Church and the secret society. Zadravec recounted how a number of concerned priests approached him, wondering why the military bishop had joined a *Protestant* organization bent on silencing Catholic voices.¹⁰⁰ In general, Protestant politicians and organizations were far more prevalent and active on the radical right than their Catholics counterparts.

Zadravec ultimately brought a small entourage of Catholic priests into communion with a group that was led primarily by Protestants and which regularly made reference to the association's inclusive, non-denominational character when it came to the various Christian churches.¹⁰¹ In one instance, Zadravec had even been ordered to refrain from employing Catholic terminology in his nationalist rhetoric, such as the

⁹⁹ Zadravec wrote his journal in the late 1920s, once he had been removed from his position of power and after he had fallen out of favour with the Horthy regime. His journal, however, was published posthumously. Zadravec's main purpose during his appointment as military bishop (1920-1926) had been to improve Hungary's relationship with the Vatican, which in the beginning had been uncomfortable with Hungary's new Horthy regime. Preferring to re-establish the Catholic Habsburg dynasty in Hungary, the Holy See was at first unenthusiastic about the prospect of Horthy's government, where most of the prominent leaders were protestants. Zadravec, who had made himself known to radical right-wing circles close to Horthy in the city of Szeged during the counterrevolution of 1919, appeared to be the most qualified to mediate between the Church and the new regime. Nevertheless, once Catholic leaders in both Hungary and in the Vatican had come to the realization that Horthy's regime was a staunch opponent of Communism and that it allowed for the Church to enjoy a prominent place in society, the position of mediator had become obsolete since there remained no longer any need for Zadravec's services. Zadravec also managed to alienate himself from the regime, when as a witness at a May 1926 criminal trial regarding the forgery of Swiss Francs in Hungary, the bishop implicated the prime minister, István Bethlen, by stating that the forgers were merely following the head of government's orders.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

Regnum Marium, the “apostolic kingdom” and the “Holy Crown” of Saint Stephen, as that was thought to have been offensive to non-Catholics. There had even been an effort on the part of some leaders to devise an all-inclusive “Hungarian religion,” which Zadravec had criticized as being essentially pagan.¹⁰²

In addition to his role in EX, Zadravec had not refrained from blessing the military unit of Pál Prónay, the radical and most infamous military leader of the White Terror of 1919-1921, which rounded up and summarily executed hundreds of suspected Communists. On July 15, 1919 Zadravec blessed Prónay’s detachment, named the “Back Legions of Death,” in a ceremony which he had described as warm and friendly.¹⁰³ The military bishop had been full of praise for Prónay, to whom he observed “the Hungarian national renewal owes much—very much—gratitude. Amidst the chaotic and Communist-infiltrated events in Szeged, it had been enough to simply proclaim Prónay’s name, and all of a sudden there would be peace and quiet.”¹⁰⁴ Prónay, a symbol of the excesses during the early days of the Horthy regime, had remained Zadravec’s best insurance against what he felt had been the Communist menace, lurking in every corner of post-1919 Hungary, as well as one of the most determined and radical irredentists.

A prominent member of the Catholic clergy, Zadravec had chosen to break bread with a radical, fascist movement. One may wonder how a Catholic bishop could be so ideologically drawn to fascism if—as Mindszenty, Serédi, Slachta, Péntes and the contributors of *Új Ember* had gone to such great lengths to demonstrate-- Catholicism

¹⁰² Although echoing some of the later Catholic critiques of fascism, Zadravec did seem overly concerned by EX’s “pagan” character. Instead, the Catholic bishop allegedly ‘mocked’ this idea which he saw as more foolish than threatening, and which ultimately never came to fruition.

Ibid., 145.

¹⁰³ Zadravec, 120.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 120

was inherently incompatible with that radical ideology? Zadravec's strong sense of irredentism after Trianon, his anticommunism and his radical anti-Semitism either took precedence over his Catholic faith, or else this faith itself acculturated the values most fervently propagated by the various radical right-wing groups. The latter option is the most likely, as the Franciscan priest never lost sight of his place in the Church and, in fact, maintained significant disdain for Protestantism. The activities of priests such as Zadravec and Kun confirmed that fascism and Catholicism had not been mutually exclusive ideologies during the interwar period.

Zadravec and Kun had been compromising characters within the Church. Nevertheless, the religious leadership seemed disinclined to debate the activities of these men with the Communists. Kun had consistently been portrayed as a *former* priest with no connection to the Church when he committed his atrocities against Budapest's Jews. As such, he was given no mention whatsoever by Mindszenty. Moreover, Mindszenty barely mentioned former bishop Zadravec, who in 1945 was being held as a war criminal. The only reference to the fascist priest had been in regards to one of Mindszenty's visits to the prison, at which time he pitifully noted that the elderly Zadravec had been forced to live in "deplorable conditions."¹⁰⁵

The Church made little effort to explain Zadravec's past, nor Kun's involvement in anti-Semitic pogroms. Zadravec's affinity to fascist organizations elicited little response from the postwar church and Catholic press, despite mention of the former military bishop by *Szabad Nép* during the war crimes trials of September 1945. In the case of Father Kun, a condemnation of his genocidal activities had been issued by Catholic organizations, including the Minorites. Nevertheless, the Catholic defense, as

¹⁰⁵ Mindszenty, *Memoirs*, 52.

expressed in *Új Ember*, had been comprised of consistent appeals for the public to remember that Kun had committed his pogroms as an ex-priest, one who had been defrocked by the Church leadership.

The Church never admitted that Nazi activity had been a problem among the ranks of the lower clergy. Kun's case truly was an exception among priests. Nevertheless, in the case of Zdravec's role in fascist organizations, an explanation of how the military bishop could join an organization so steeped in anti-Semitism, racialism and how the priest had maintained a reverence for the radical right may have been in order. More problematic was the fact that Zdravec had not only been an avid participant in a local, native right-wing movement, but rather he had affiliated with one, which had antedated Nazism and fascism, yet had still been founded on many of the same ideological pillars that would only *later* characterize their German and Italian counterparts.¹⁰⁶ In fact, the leaders of these movements were themselves often well aware of this and they were quite proud of having served as the 'forerunners' of European fascism.¹⁰⁷ Left without an explanation, this simply provided evidence to the Communists that interwar Hungary had been the 'birth-place' of Nazism and also that the Church had been satisfied with this state of affairs.

Yet the problem of Nazi and fascist priests proved to be more complicated. If, at least on an ideological level, Catholicism had remained a polar opposite of fascism and Nazism during the interwar period--as the Church had repeatedly claimed-- then how was it then that some clergy still found the latter ideologies appealing? Though never

¹⁰⁶ Randolph L. Braham, "The Uniqueness of the Holocaust in Hungary," in *The Holocaust in Hungary, Forty Years Later*, East European Monographs, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 180.

¹⁰⁷ Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide, The Holocaust in Hungary*, Vol. 1, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) 18.

expressed in quite these terms, Catholicism, like the rest of the Hungarian conservative interwar establishment, had been willing to break bread with the radical right when the expression of mutually shared values--anti-Semitism, irredentism and, most of all, anti-Communism--had been the order of the day. An explicit recognition of this, however, never found its way into the Catholic postwar interpretation of the recent past.¹⁰⁸

Although a fervent sense of anticommunism within the Catholic Church in 1919 may have propelled Zadravec to bestow his blessing over the genocidal activities of Prónay's so-called "Black Legions of Death"—and muted any potential opposition on the part of the Church to the widespread killings—one may ask whether an inherent anti-Semitism in the Church may have also left the clergy largely unmoved by the plight of the Jews during the mass deportations of 1944? Nevertheless, Father Kun's activities were regarded as criminal after the War and the Church had been quick to distance itself from the defrocked monk. Moreover, the Church could refer to Serédi's protests and the opinion of the High Clergy in regards to the deportations in their postwar apologia. This is precisely what *Új Ember* attempted to accomplish by regularly publishing extracts from Serédi's journal in the paper.

The most concrete example of active opposition to the deportations also came from the ranks of the Church leadership, namely from Vilmos Apor--Bishop of the western city of Győr—who had been relentless in his criticism of the deportations. In his Whitsunday sermon of 1944, Apor asserted that anyone who condoned hatred against any

¹⁰⁸ When authors such as Péntzes or Parragi criticized the Church in *Új Ember* for having allied itself with the regressive powers of the previous regime, this alliance always referred to the Conservative, aristocratic right, rather than the various fascist, radical groups. Indeed, the Church did not ally itself with fascist groups—partly because the latter's views on issues such as land reform and its frequent advocacy of the interests of the peasantry proved untenable for the Church—yet it did share essentially the same position on issues such as anticommunism and revision of Hungary's borders after the Treaty of Trianon.

group is not Christian, but “is in fact a pagan and clearly guilty.”¹⁰⁹ Apor also petitioned Cardinal Serédi, who proved somewhat more reticent in his opposition, to condemn more unequivocally the actions of Sztójay’s collaborationist officers and the occupying Germans.

The bishop of Győr had not been the only voice of protest and dissent among the Church’s high clergy. Áron Márton, the bishop of the Transylvanian diocese had been equally unequivocal in his condemnation of the deportations. In his May 18 address, Márton observed that “he who sins against his fellow man endangers one of the greatest achievements of the 2000-year work of Christianity—the idea of the brotherhood of man. He proceeds not in a Christian, but in pagan spirit...”¹¹⁰ Similarly to the authors of *Új Ember*, who had emphasized the pagan nature of fascism, and Apor’s insinuation that Nazis involved in the deportations were pagan in spirit, Márton also positioned Christianity in diametric opposition to Nazism, by making reference to the latter’s latent “pre-Christian” character.

After the War, the Church recalled the courageous stand of a handful of bishops, such as that of Apor and Márton, to bolster its *apologia* at one of the darkest and more devastating periods of Hungarian history. Yet what actually proved more problematic was the cardinal’s *own* record in 1944. Mindszenty, though imprisoned by the Arrow Cross in December 1944 for his opposition to the Szálasi government, still could not avoid all allegations of collusion with the Nazis, as his own sympathies during the German occupation were not as clearly delineated as those of Apor and Márton. This was due primarily to a controversial decision he had taken as head of the bishopric of

¹⁰⁹ Vilmos Apor from his Whitsunday Address, 1944, as quoted in *The Politics of Genocide*, vol. 2., 1045.

¹¹⁰ Áron Márton’s May 18, 1944 speech as quoted in *The Politics of Genocide*, vol.2, 1047.

Veszprém. Once the deportation of Veszprém's Jewish population had been completed, a local leader of the Arrow Cross requested that the Franciscans hold a mass in order to celebrate their removal. Although Mindszenty had originally refused to grant this request, he succumbed to the Arrow-Cross demand after a threat, which warned that the Nazis would distribute a flyer outlining the bishop's opposition. Mindszenty finally yielded to the request for a mass, though he ordered that members of the Arrow Cross not appear in uniform and that the priest refrain from ending the mass with a *Te Deum*.¹¹¹

Nevertheless, after 1945 the Church—with the noteworthy exception of the accounts of some members of the religious orders in Budapest during late 1944—had remained conspicuously silent as to the views of parish priests and their responses to the suffering of Hungary's Jews before Szálasi's ascension to power. This is likely due to the fact that there is little record that could provide evidence of concrete efforts on the part of the majority of parishes and of most local, rural priests to halt the deportations or come to the assistance of the Jewish population in other ways. The most common reaction to the deportations on the part of priests—and indeed, on the part of Hungarian society as a whole—had been indifference and passivity.¹¹²

The case of András Kun and István Zadravecz were two instances of when the Church had come into direct communion with fascism. Both men had explicitly linked their compromising activities to the Church; while Zadravecz wore proudly his

¹¹¹ The *Te Deum* is a hymn sung as an expression of thanksgiving to God for a special blessing received. In this case, it would have occurred after mass had been celebrated. Mindszenty, no doubt, must have been concerned about portraying the deportations as an act of God. This is probably why his condition for allowing the mass was not to include any hymn or prayer of praise.

Ibid., 1047.

¹¹² According to historian Bela Vago, "quite a few priests" expressed their verbal support regarding both the establishment of ghettos as well as deportations. Nevertheless, most were simply "passive onlookers" unwilling and uninterested in involving themselves in the unfolding situation.

Bela Vago, "The Hungarian Factor," *The Holocaust in Hungary – Forty Years Later*, East European Monographs (New York: Columbia University Press 1985) 100.

Franciscan robes, Kun never failed to wear his Minorite attire whilst participating in numerous summary executions. Kun's genocidal activities and his leadership of Arrow-Cross terror groups in besieged Budapest provided fodder for the Communist press and cast a shadow over the record of the Catholic Church during the war. Zadravec, on the other hand, provided evidence to bolster the Communist contention that Hungary had been the birthplace of European fascism immediately after 1919 and that the Church had gravitated ideologically to this nascent worldview. Together, the two priests appeared to provide concrete proof of Catholic collaboration with fascist and Nazi elements and thus challenged the Church's assertions that Catholicism had been incompatible with the 'pagan' ideology of the radical right. Nevertheless, the Catholic defense remained consistent, and though there had been scarce discussion of Zadravec's affinity with fascism, general accounts of the clergy's moral resolve and heroism during the war, the Church's commitment to the ideals of Christianity in light of challenges from the radical right and the insistence that Kun had been but an exception to this rule and utterly out of favour with the Church leadership, comprised a crucial part of the Church's *apologia* following the war.

Chapter 3: Youth, Church and the Cultural Conflict, 1946

The Communist Party's discrediting of the interwar past, the questioning of the Catholic Church's role during the autocratic Miklós Horthy era and the media attention afforded concrete instances of collaboration between the clergy and Nazis during the war formed a substantial part of the debate between the Communist Party and the Church on the country's recent history. While this aspect of their dialogue had focused ostensibly on the past, the considerations that motivated this debate and fuelled it for the years to come revolved around postwar political considerations and a power struggle involving the construction of a 'new' Hungary, especially in light of the interwar 'debacle' and a devastating war. As such, merely discrediting the Church's past record would not suffice; the Communist Party had to demonstrate that this past was on the verge of returning, as a consequence of reactionary and fascist values within Catholic institutions. This approach resulted in a concerted effort by the Communist Party, the political police and Communist press to uncover alleged fascist conspiracies and sensational terrorist plots within confessional schools and youth organizations throughout 1946. This destruction of Catholic institutions, frantic attempts to 'reeducate' the country's youth and the sense of urgency that accompanied the Church's response in light of Communist allegations plunged Hungary into a cultural struggle over the values that would define the postwar period.

Mátyás Rákosi, General Secretary of the Communist Party, set the tone for the ensuing purge of Catholic institutions in a speech to a group of miners on March 5, 1946. Rákosi noted that behind the "right-wing reactionary elements stands the entire

Hungarian reactionary clergy.”¹¹³ Rákosi’s primary target had been the largest coalition partner, the Smallholders, who had won a decisive victory in the general elections less than six months prior.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, the Church had been seen as an at least tacit supporter of the right wing. The avowedly conservative and anticommunist Cardinal József Mindszenty could not escape the wrath of the Communist general secretary. Rákosi observed that Mindszenty had been “the first to take a stand against land reform, in support of the reactionary counts, against the people’s republic and for the Habsburg monarchy. In 1941, he also urged Prime Minister László Bárdossy, since then executed for treason, to demand even more from Yugoslavia’s body at the time of the robbery of its corpse.”¹¹⁵ In its full-page publication of Rákosi’s speech, the Communist Party’s daily newspaper, *Szabad Nép*, had been careful to play up the audience’s reaction in order to imply a widespread consensus against Mindszenty and the Church. According to the paper, “the very mention of Mindszenty’s name enraged, to their very core, all those present at the meeting.”¹¹⁶ Yet Rákosi had been clear that Mindszenty was not the only adversary of his vision for postwar Hungary, but rather the Catholic priesthood as a whole.

¹¹³ “Rákosi: A Kisgazdapárt jobbszárnya mögött ott áll a népi köztársaság minden ellensége,” (Rákosi: Behind the Right-Wing of the Smallholders Party stand all the enemies of the people’s republic), *Szabad Nép*, March 5, 1946, 1.

¹¹⁴ The Smallholders, a hybrid political entity comprised of both right-wing and left-wing politicians, led by Ferenc Nagy, had garnered 57% of the vote in October 1945. They were, nevertheless, required to form a coalition government with the Communists and Social Democrats, despite their comfortable majority in parliament.

¹¹⁵ Bárdossy unilaterally declared Hungary to be at war in 1941, without any prior consultation with parliament. The invasion of Yugoslavia, however, occurred before Bárdossy’s premiership, under the government of Count Pál Teleki. After Hungary had signed a concordat with Yugoslavia, the government decided to participate in the German invasion of the country. Teleki, who saw Hungary’s actions as dishonourable and who found himself without any other political options, committed suicide. Once Horthy replaced him with Bárdossy, the latter decided to use the situation in order to reclaim Vojvodina, the northern part of Serbia, which had belonged to Hungary prior to the Treaty of Trianon.

Ibid., 1.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

The Communist offensive against Church institutions, on the grounds that they supported fascist and terrorist plots against the postwar state, required that the Church be seen as guilty in the past, in order to support the concept that it is, or would be, found guilty in the present. Rákosi's linking of Mindszenty's activities during the War to his present-day 'reactionary' views served to demonstrate a continuity within the Church regarding its embrace of regressive and fascist forces.

This concept of past activities and views predetermining future plans and allegations continued in early April when *Szabad Nép* reporters visited the Budapest convent of Margit Slachta's Sisters of Social Service, an order more commonly known as the Grey Nuns. Slachta, a close ally of conservative Cardinal Mindszenty and a politician who had attempted to form a Catholic party in 1945, had been infamous among Communist politicians who could remember her deep sense of conservatism and anticommunism whilst a parliamentarian in the 1920s.

Szabad Nép's reporters arrived at the convent, prepared to gather information for their *exposé* of one of the most influential members of the Church. After speaking with Slachta and one of her assistants, the reporters noted the nun's opposition to Nazism, but her alleged verbal condoning of fascism. Slachta had been quoted in an article appearing on April 4, in which she responded to a question on whether the order had been equally vocal in denouncing Italian fascism by affirming that the "Italians did not disturb many waters" and that they are "such very nice people."¹¹⁷ The reporter noted acidly that "Italian workers would probably not have responded in this vein were we to ask them about Italian fascism, however we do know how nicely the pope had arrived at an

¹¹⁷ "Munkában a papi reakció," (Priestly Reaction At Work), *Szabad Nép*, April 4, 1946, 5.

agreement with Mussolini.”¹¹⁸ Yet the reporters were aware that questioning or criticizing Slachta’s response might render her less willing to answer their other questions and could spell the end of their interview. Thus, they made a concerted effort to appear understanding and in agreement with the nuns in order to divulge as much information as possible and pose an array of rhetorical questions on a wide range of issues. These included how the order had sufficient finances to purchase their Budapest headquarters and whether it “serves the public good” when members of religious orders bring food “by the baskets to the Arrow Cross members held in internment camps,” instead of helping the “victims who are suffering by the thousands.”¹¹⁹ The implications were evident: the Church had been an explicit supporter of fascism during the war, and even afterwards consciously chose not to distance itself from Nazism. Moreover, as a force in society, the Church had been more interested in securing its own comfort and enjoying living standards higher than that of the average Hungarian, rather than contributing to the welfare of the downtrodden masses, the victims of both the devastation wrought by the war and the oppression of the former aristocratic, reactionary interwar regime.

In an effort at producing ‘investigative journalism,’ *Szabad Nép* attempted to further research the past and present activities of Slachta’s order. According to their findings, its main purpose had been to agitate against socialism and the postwar state, as a direct continuation of Mindszenty’s politics. “If Mindszenty is to give a speech in the town of Kőbánya, the Grey Nuns will go from house to house to inform all interested parties that they must go to the Church of Eternal Adoration, because that is where the

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

Flag-bearer shall speak.”¹²⁰ According to the paper’s portrayal, the Grey Nuns served as a front for a political collective of activists bent on loyally following the cardinal and preparing the path for a regime based on his brand of conservatism. The only male member of the Order’s governing council, Benedictine monk and teacher, Placid Oloffson, and the majority of nuns were presented as “followers of the most anti-democratic politics.”¹²¹ *Szabad Nép* asserted that the sisters “frequently expressed their deep sorrow over the execution of former prime ministers Bárdossy and Imrédy, as well as the other war criminals.”¹²² Moreover, as an addendum, the paper also observed that as part of the Church’s sympathy towards accused war criminals and fascists, the convent of the Sacred Heart served regularly as a meeting place for family members of several of the most infamous and accused fascist politicians of the interwar period.¹²³ If *Szabad Nép*’s readers had any doubts regarding the extensiveness of the Church’s alliance with fascist elements, these would have been dispelled by the seemingly abundant evidence of postwar antidemocratic mischief within the institutions of the Catholic establishment.

By the beginning of April 1946 the desire to purge the Church of reactionary elements had become far more intense, and the situation appeared to be moving toward a more direct confrontation between the Communists and the Church.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, the Communists first created the legislative framework for their operations against Catholic institutions. Less than a month earlier, on March 12, the Communists and Social Democrats, under Soviet pressure, joined forces to pass legislation in parliament entitled

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²⁴ Elemér Szeghalmi, *Keresztény küzdelmek és megtorpanások, 1945-1956.* (Christian Struggles and Defeats, 1945-1956). (Budapest: Új Ember Kiadó, 2000) 6-7.

the “Defence of the Republic Act.” This legislation gave interior minister László Rajk and his political police a legal framework within which to conduct intrusive police searches and investigations.¹²⁵ Yet the prospect of a strengthened political police force failed to deter Mindszenty from making ever more public appearances and travelling throughout the country. The intimidation of force did not dissuade the cardinal and the Catholic press reported on increasing church attendance and renewed interest in religion. By all accounts, the Church appeared to be prospering, despite its recent financial losses following the land reform of 1945. In 1946 the Church appeared strong, despite the Communist press’s attempts to discredit the Church by referring to its role during the interwar regime.

At a women’s meeting calling for the political and economic equality of the sexes, members of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarian Women (MNDSZ) voiced their concerns that in the town of Zalaegerszeg, residents who chose not to partake in the parish community were treated as outcasts from society. The MNDSZ’s delegates from the town of Eger and Mezőkövesd complained that parents of children attending confessional schools had been forced to attend mandatory religious instruction, failing which the children were punished for their parents’ negligence.¹²⁶ The Church had been consistently portrayed in the Communist press as brutal, unconciliatory and rife with animosity towards the left. A consensus developed that the Church would have to be purged of these negative elements. This had been precisely what the MNDSZ had in mind in an ominous battle cry appearing on the front page of the party’s central organ:

¹²⁵ Mindszenty, *Memoirs*, 54.

¹²⁶ MNDSZ: Magyar Nők Demokratikus Szövetsége.

“Nem pártpolitikát folytatunk de kiméletlenül irtjuk a reakciót,” (We Do Not Engage in Party Politics, But We Exterminate Reaction Mercilessly) *Szabad Nép*, April 9, 1946, 1.

“We will not tolerate reaction creeping its way into the churches!”¹²⁷ With the MNDSZ’s ‘call to arms,’ the debate over the past was shifting noticeably to a debate about present and future power relations in Hungary, yet one still founded on a dark interpretation of the Church’s role in the interwar period. When some of the most high-profile members of the alliance—such as Júlia Rajk, wife of interior minister László Rajk—made their way to the podium, they asserted that fascism lurked beneath the surface of Hungarian society, within the walls of the most influential organizations and that these forces were conspiring against the new order. This appealed to the basest of fears among the general population—namely that the most devastating elements of the country’s recent past might be resurrected-- less than a year after the end of a most calamitous war.

Less than a week after the MNDSZ pledged to eradicate reactionary behaviour everywhere, a scandal in the Budapest confessional boarding school of the Piarist Fathers confirmed the view that the Church had been willing to serve as the loyal bastion of fascism. On April 16, *Szabad Nép* reported that the political police had determined that “instead of collecting stamps, the students accumulated hand grenades” and that behind the amassing of weaponry stood a former military officer.¹²⁸ Two sixteen year old students, Endre Dulácska and László Reményfy were charged with plotting to destroy Soviet monuments, upon which they were to escape to Croatia and join ranks with the Cetniks. Two other students were also charged with collaborating in the conspiracy, as well as nineteen year old Iván Salkovszky, the leader of the student group who allegedly

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹²⁸ “A piarista konviktusban egy nyugatos tiszt vezetésével kézigránátos merényletekre szervezkedtek a diákok.” (With the Leadership of a Westward Officer, the Students of the Piarist Boarding School Were Preparing for grenade attacks) *Szabad Nép*, April 16, 1946., 3.

convinced several more students to collect hand grenades, for which they were promised monetary reimbursement.¹²⁹

Despite the scandalous nature of a group of students stockpiling weaponry in confessional schools—allegedly, with the full knowledge of their Piarist teachers—this would not have been enough to sustain weeks of controversy in the Communist press, had it not been supplemented with the compromising comments of some of the school’s instructors. When interrogated by the political police, Salkovszky recounted how constant “anti-democratic” agitation had been representative of the learning environment in the institution. The lesson of seventh grade teacher, László Papp, on the counterrevolution and the communist purges of 1919 provoked several student interruptions, noting that “shortly the Communist members of the current government will meet the same fate.”¹³⁰ Rather than steering their students in the right direction—away from their criminal plots—the Piarists reminded them to remain quiet about their political views, at once infusing them with anti-Communist notions during solemn walks with the students. *Szabad Nép* had been rife with indignation regarding the activities in the boarding school and used this sensational case of an underground conspiracy against the state to confirm their decidedly dark view of Catholic institutions. “It is no surprise that with such instruction in Church administered schools, the criminal alliance of fascist students prepared the way for fascist attacks.”¹³¹ With students openly praising the interwar autocratic regent Miklós Horthy in the classroom, with explicit threats directed at the Communists and with teachers passively endorsing these views, the scandal in the Piarist

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

institution was used to cast suspicion over all Catholic educational institutions and youth groups.

The uncovered “conspiracy” galvanized the left-wing press for the days following the discovery. On April 17, an article entitled “Hand-grenade in lieu of a textbook” found Mindszenty implicitly at fault, for “wanting to exile democratic textbooks from Church schools.”¹³² Not only was the case of the Piarist school at stake, but all of Hungary’s Catholic institutions of learning, where their continued ‘allegiance’ to the former regime jeopardized the postwar transformation of the country. *Szabad Nép* laid responsibility for the impending threat of fascism directly with the Church. “When it comes to reactionary incitement, Catholic schools and the priest-teachers take the prize.”¹³³ The paper reported that the students of the Premonstratensian order’s secondary school in the western town of Keszthely held a protest march on the day of the execution of Ferenc Szálasi, the leader of Hungary’s collaborationist, Nazi regime, while the religion teacher in a girl’s school in Budapest explained to his students that Father Kun, “the mass-murderer priest, basically did not commit any type of sin and that it should not be permissible to arrest and execute priests.”¹³⁴ Moreover, *Szabad Nép* also reported that anti-Semitic rhetoric had reached such heights in Catholic schools that on occasion it had even incited brawls among the students.

Szabad Nép’s solution to the problems in Catholic schools had been to include these institutions, as well as all religion teachers employed in public schools, into the government’s planned administrative reforms, which would see the public service

¹³² “Kézigránát tankönyv helyett, úszítás a középiskolákban,” (Hand Grenade in Lieu of Textbook, Agitation in Middle Schools), *Szabad Nép*, April, 17, 1946. 3.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

‘cleansed’ of ‘reactionary’ elements by June 30, 1946. That the paper’s recommendations would be heeded had been assured by the fact that *Szabad Nép*’s editor, József Révai, remained among the most influential leaders in the Communist Party, working in close cooperation with Rákosi.

The interrogation of the students and teachers at the Piarist school continued for several days and the findings indicated that the priests had been in full knowledge of the activities in their school, which in short time had turned into “an actual weapons depot.”¹³⁵ According to the teacher István Gál’s testimony during his interrogation, the school “incited hate against the Soviet Union,” while the investigation concluded that the Piarist teachers had been entirely culpable for the events in their school.¹³⁶ Yet the accusations leveled at Gál and his Piarist brothers portended a much greater significance and were clearly employed to discredit the Church as a whole and to instill in the readership the concept of a Catholic-fascist plot. On occasion, this required unorthodox editorial practices. For instance, immediately after discussing Gál’s interrogation, and in the same article which reported on the case against the Piarist school, the editors included an entirely unrelated piece of news, regarding the death sentence of former Arrow Cross leader Csaba Gál—whether the latter had had any relation to István Gál is not mentioned—with which they concluded the section on the Piarists.

The Piarist incident was used to augment the climate of fear that the days of the fascist Arrow Cross rule might be on the return as a result of a new generation of young Hungarians being raised on the Church’s nostalgia for the former regime. The ‘terrorists,’ almost without exception, were young Hungarians in their teen years, or early twenties,

¹³⁵ “A piarista tanárok súlyos felelőssége a diákok kézigránátos összeesküvésében,” (The Grave Responsibility of Teachers in the Students’ Hand Grenade Conspiracy), *Szabad Nép*, April 18, 1946, 3.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

with connections to Catholic schools, or various Catholic youth movements. Nonetheless, the figures behind these youth were the veteran leaders and members of Catholic institutions. This was only confirmed on April 27, when *Szabad Nép* reported on an investigation by head of the political police, Gábor Péter, which concluded that 27 year old Gábor Folly, leader of the Smallholder's youth wing in Budapest's second district and former member of the defunct National Socialist Party, had organized a cell in order to overthrow the regime, whose symbol had been the Holy Crown adorned with a skull and an arrow cross on a red background.¹³⁷ Not only had Folly's group been comprised of legitimists bent on restoring a monarchy but, incredibly, they had also espoused Nazi views at the same. The PRO arrested 70 alleged members of Folly's Nazi cell and through the interrogations 'discovered' that not only had they been in alliance with the grenade-collectors of the Piarist school, but that Folly had planned to hold training sessions for his armed militia on Mindszenty's estate in western Hungary.¹³⁸ Folly, who had been in close contact with former prime minister and executed war criminal Béla Imrédy's son, had planned to join the Cetniks in Yugoslavia and ultimately combine forces in order to penetrate the Hungarian border and attack the vestiges of the new regime. The Nazi conspiracy, which at first encircled but the Piarist boarding school, had now developed to potentially engulf the cardinal of the Catholic Church.

With the Communists' disproportionate preoccupation with fascism, Nazism and a plethora of conspiracies within the Church, one may have arrived at the conclusion that the paper and the party had an anti-Catholic bias. Júlia Rajk, a speaker at a gathering of

¹³⁷ "Királypárti nyilas puccisták fegyveres összeesküvését leplezte le a politikai rendőrség," (The Political Police Has Uncovered the Armed Conspiracy of Legitimist Arrow-Cross Putschists), *Szabad Nép*, April 27, 1946, 1.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

women in Budapest's industrial suburb of Csepel, sought to dispel any such notions, while reinforcing the party's commitment to fighting reactionary and terrorist activity at all costs. "We fight against reaction, even if it hides behind the protective wings of the Church, but before us religion is holy, just as peace is holy and democracy is the holiest..."¹³⁹

Nonetheless, most unholy had been the clergy's allegiance with the reactionary forces of the past, and the Communist press had proved relentless in pointing this out following the Piarist conspiracy. The reach of 'anti-democratic' priests extended far beyond the confines of their convents, and well into the youth organization of the Smallholder's Party, the Alliance of Independent Youth (FISZ).¹⁴⁰ *Szabad Nép* observed that FISZ never spoke out against clerical reaction and remained a place "where to this very day people applaud the very mention of Mindszenty's name."¹⁴¹ The paper asserted that clergy's grip, though perhaps concealed, kept FISZ on a tight leash and that this "clerical, reactionary, fascist breeding ground became the pool from which all antidemocratic, terrorist plots originated."¹⁴²

The Communist press did not have to wait long for the next Catholic fascist conspiracy to come to light. Since September 1945, a series of murders, targeting Soviet troops, had baffled the police. On September 4, 1945, a Soviet soldier had been shot dead in the town of Gyöngyös, while the following month another was killed in the same manner and, allegedly, by the same elusive culprit. After a two-month respite, five armed

¹³⁹ "A reakció ellen harcolunk, még ha az egyház védőszárnya mögé menekül is, lelkes asszony-nagygyűlés Csepelen," (We fight against reaction, even if it hides behind the protective wings of the Church, Spirited Women's Assembly in Csepel," *Szabad Nép*, April 26, 1946, 2.

¹⁴⁰ FISZ: Független Ifjúság Szövetsége

¹⁴¹ "Független-e a Független Ifjúság?," (Is the Independent Youth Independent?), *Szabad Nép*, April 28, 1946, 7.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 7.

men stormed a village police station, held the workers hostage and robbed them of their personal effects. On December 14, the same group of masked criminals attacked the police station in the village of Gyöngyössolymos, armed with grenades, where they again robbed the station, whilst “hollering fascist slogans.”¹⁴³ On January 5, 1946, the armed bandits struck again, killing another Soviet soldier in Gyöngyös, as well as on January 10, once more targeting the Red Army.

The police finally identified the group of criminals when on April 14 a letter arrived at the Gyöngyös police station warning that should the authorities continue their investigation of the group, the head of the local police force would become the next victim. After the murders continued even following the letter—with the murder of yet another Soviet soldier on April 16—the authorities traced the message back to Gyöngyös’s priest, Szaléz Kiss. *Szabad Nép* had been consistent in continually identifying Kiss as a “Catholic pastor” and referring to him as “the father” lest anyone lose sight of where this newest conspiracy originated.¹⁴⁴

Yet *Népszava*, the Social Democratic daily, proved even more critical of the Church and its institutions than the central organ of the Communist Party, and its articles were more alarmist in tone. In the Gyöngyös case, *Népszava* asserted on its front page that Hungary was in desperate straits in the light of the fact that much of the youth harboured an explicitly fascist worldview. “Let us not even for a minute delude ourselves in the fantasy that our youth are enthusiastic about democracy, or about the left. They were born in counter-revolutionary, fascist Hungary, where they never heard anything

¹⁴³ “Gyilkosságok sorozatát elkövető fasiszta merénylőket tett ártalmatlanná a rendőrség, Egy katolikus lelkész szervezte a gyilkolásra az ifjakat,” (The Police Has Halted the Fascist Attackers Who Had Committed a Series of Murders, A Catholic Pastor organized the Youth for the Murders), *Szabad Nép*, May 3, 1946, 3.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

save such political speeches that had been comprised of the ideas and plans of Gömbös, Imrédy and Szálasi.”¹⁴⁵ *Népszava*’s proposed solution to remedy these woes had been to “firmly take the youth by the hand and not allow a single moment for them to further develop their corrupted political intuition.”¹⁴⁶ This required that children be removed from under the care of the Catholic Church. *Népszava* only saw this position confirmed in the fact that even Imrédy had been a Piarist student and that he always “maintained a warm connection” with the order.¹⁴⁷

Kiss’s interrogation revealed him as a type of ‘spiritual’ leader of the movement and he regularly chaired the secret meetings of the group, comprised of about 30 young men. Crucially, under questioning Kiss claimed that during each meeting he confirmed to those present that their plots aimed at restoring the kingdom of Hungary occurred with Mindszenty’s “full knowledge and approval.”¹⁴⁸

The father even had time to give guidelines on how to obtain weapons, hand grenades, ammunition and other explosives...Father Kiss kept the conspirators entirely under his control...The father had been the one to order Gyula Szabó, one of the gang’s main murderers, to do away with the head of Gyöngyös’s political police. For the purposes of greater emphasis, he added that ‘after the murder, my dear Gyuszika, I will—as a priest--absolve you.’¹⁴⁹

The Father Szaléz-Kiss affair had been hauntingly similar to the “Father Kun” case only six months prior, when the Communist press regularly made passive references to the convicted priests’ position in the Church and his affiliation with the clergy. In the spring and summer of 1946, the preponderance of alleged fascist conspiracies and their ever-

¹⁴⁵ “Háziügy,” (Internal Affair), *Népszava*, April 16, 1946, 1.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴⁸ Despite this claim, there is no specific mention of Szaléz Kiss or his group in Mindszenty’s memoirs. *Szabad Nép*, 3.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*,

present ties to the Church, as well as the extensive coverage that these cases received in both *Szabad Nép* and *Népszava* had been most likely motivated by the aim to render the Church's vision for the future of Hungary suspect, especially in light of its already discredited past.

On May 6, the police uncovered the weapons depot of Kiss's group in an abandoned and partly destroyed estate on the outskirts of Gyöngyös. Rendering the Nazi connection even more explicit, *Szabad Nép* noted that this area had already been used by Arrow Cross fighters in the previous year, when they stockpiled weapons and large quantities of food as part of their resistance to the approaching Soviet forces. Father Kiss ultimately allied himself with a former Arrow-Cross member, József Ondrik, who had been held at an internment camp near Gyöngyös but who was allowed to visit his family for Easter. It was then, during the Christian holiday, that Ondik and Kiss plotted a country-wide uprising for May 15.¹⁵⁰ *Szabad Nép* bitterly noted that the "father expected that with the weapons and ammunition, the spiritually and physically corrupted and led astray members of the Smallholders' youth-wing, high school students, former Arrow Cross gangs and armed university students all under his influence... he could begin his uprising" in order to rid not just Hungary, but the world of Communism.¹⁵¹ The Father Szaléz Kiss scandal not only solidified the long-trumpeted link between the Church and the Nazis, but also demonstrated how priests were corrupting the country's youth and leading them down the treacherous path of terrorist Nazi activity. Since the Church no longer proved suitable to instruct the youth, within the context of confessional schools and Catholic youth movements, the alternative that remained was for the state to assume

¹⁵⁰ "Páter Kiss Szaléz május tizenötre tervezte az 'általános felkelést,'" (It was for May 15 that Father Szaléz Kiss planned the 'General Uprising'), *Szabad Nép*, May 8, 1946, 3.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

the lead role in the education and development of the country's youth. Coincidentally, the reform of Hungary's educational system had been the subject of heated discussion in parliament during the preceding months and a bill aimed at secularizing state education was being drafted.

The developments of June and July 1946 only served to confirm to the Communists that the Church had been guilty of plotting against the state and participating in Nazi agitation. On June 13, *Szabad Nép* reported that Benedictine monk Placid Olafsson, a leader of Slachta's movement and member of *Új Ember's* staff, with assistance from József Vágh, a Jesuit priest, had participated in the training and organization of a group of young terrorists in the Bakony mountains, as part of their mission of murdering Russian soldiers. Under Olafsson's and Vágh's guidance, the group printed 600 flyers addressed to the "Anonymous Hungarian." According to the Communist daily, the flyer informed Hungarians that "the spirit of Hungarian kings and Hungarian saints speaks to you" and the publication ordered the reader to resist the Soviet occupiers because "Hungarians are being dragged to Siberia."¹⁵² *Szabad Nép*, however, noted acidly that the "message of the 'Hungarian kings and Hungarian saints' is suspiciously similar to Szálasi's and Hitler's propaganda."¹⁵³

Olafsson taught the members of his 'brigade' not to feel any remorse for killing Russian soldiers. Moreover, it had been recorded that Olafsson's spiritual guidance included counseling the group's members that "not only was stealing from Russians not a

¹⁵² "Papok és diákok újabb gyilkos összeesküvését leplezte le a politikai rendőrség, Olafsson Placid atya és Páter Vágh jezsuita áldozópap felbujtására orosz katonát ölt és merényletekre készült a diákok fasiszta brigádja," (The Political Police has Uncovered the Newest Murderous Conspiracy of Priests and Students, With the Agitation of Father Placid Olafsson and Jesuit priest, Father Vágh, the Fascist Brigade of Students Killed a Russian Soldier and Prepared for further Attacks) *Szabad Nép*, June 13, 1946, 1.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1.

sin, but rather it was a strength” and virtue, while when asked about killing Russians, the monk questioned the very pragmatism behind simply killing individual soldiers. Should they be murdered “just so there would be one less of them? This is a rather slow method.”¹⁵⁴ If anything, Olafsson actually aimed to expedite the process of murdering Russian soldiers. The case against the Church’s corruptive influence over youth had taken a much clearer form. *Szabad Nép* never shied away from observing in the most explicit manner, that the culprits and the vanguard of the murderous conspirators had been comprised of priests and a group of submissive, Catholic students. This, no doubt, stood behind the editorial practice of regularly referring to the convicted by their clerical title of “Father.”

One June 12, two young students involved in the Olafsson conspiracy, Miklós Uden and László Dietzl, were taken from the ominous prison cells of the political police in downtown Budapest to the scene of the crime, where the Russian soldier had been shot dead. Gábor Péter summoned representatives of the Hungarian press to see the crime scene. *Szabad Nép*’s reporter observed that the two students showed no remorse and that they were ‘obviously’ guilty. “Father Placid was the teacher and they were the students, who put into practice what they had learned from their master. If Fathers Olafsson and Vágh do not label the murder of Russian as a patriotic act, they would not have gotten here.”¹⁵⁵ The responsibility of the murder had been squarely with the two priests and, by extension, the Church. The article in *Szabad Nép* observed that Olafsson had been the only male member of Slachta’s order and that he took part in her association “as a leader of the Catholic Church,” where on February 3, 1946 he had given a speech about

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁵⁵ “Fasiszta diákok orvgyilkossága,” (The Fascist Students’ Assassination), *Szabad Nép*, June 14, 1946, 1.

Bárdossy's "martyrdom" and warned the Communists about what awaited them. "Those who celebrated the republic paraded a coffin with the words: 'We are burying the monarchy.' These imbeciles, however, forgot what was written above the gates of the cemetery: 'we shall resurrect.'"¹⁵⁶ Olafsson's interpretation of the past led him to contemplate taking action against the Hungarian state and the Soviet occupiers, both through his encouraging of Dietzl and Uden, as well as in involving himself in Folly's conspiracy, as *Szabad Nép* reported on June 14. The investigation's aim had been to demonstrate that the series of attacks in 1946 were not merely isolated incidents, but rather coordinated plots, and part of a larger, more sinister desire to destroy fledgling postwar Hungary and summon back the spirits of the interwar past.

The case against Catholic schools and the clergy had now become complete. Scores of priests were involved in corrupting Hungarian youth and encouraging them to plot against the state and engage in terrorist activity in postwar Hungary. They accepted and taught a version of the interwar past and the Second World War which had been wholly incompatible with that professed by the Communist Party. The numerous uncovered plots and investigations against the clergy, the orders and confessional schools symbolized the point of convergence between the past and present—a point when the values and political views held in the preceding years return to both verbally and physically threaten the stability of the new order. The editors of *Szabad Nép* and *Népszava* sought to impress their readers and cause them to worry about the sheer scale of the fascist threat posed by members of the clergy and their army of loyal students. The extent of coverage of these 'conspiracies' in both the Communist and Social Democratic daily lead one to the conclusion that the resurrection of the past was imminent, unless the

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

PRO and the government employed appropriate firmness in stamping out fascist element from the Churches, and ultimately curbing the influence of the Church in society, especially when it came to the upbringing and education of the country's youth.

Mindszenty had not issued individual public responses and statements regarding various ongoing PRO investigations and subsequent arrests in Catholic institutions. He did, however, employ noticeably sharper rhetoric and adopted a much less subtle form of criticism than that used in the months following the end of the war. Mindszenty staunchly denied all allegations in the Communist press that he had been informed of, or indirectly implicated in, various 'conspiracies.' The ecclesiastical office issued a statement in light of the explosive Gyöngyös events on May 9, which asserted that "the Primate had no connection whatsoever with the men mentioned in this affair nor did he know them or any one of them. The suggestion of a connection of the Primate with this affair lacks any foundation."¹⁵⁷ *Szabad Nép* never substantiated its claim that Mindszenty had knowledge of the various cells and that the plotters had plans to use the cardinal's rural estate to conduct their terrorist training. Nonetheless, substantiated claims were perhaps not quite as important as simply casting further doubt over the conservative cardinal's activities and devises in the minds of the readership.

On May 11, two days following Mindszenty's press release, the Catholic Board of Education issued a letter to all confessional schools in order to instruct them on how to correctly approach the atmosphere of anxiety in their schools over the ever-expanding network of police investigations and arrests. The letter also outlined the official Catholic position on the charges levied against orders and their respective institutions such as the

¹⁵⁷ Statement in *Magyar Kurir*, as published in: *Four Years Struggle of the Church in Hungary, Facts and Evidence Published by the Order of Josef (sic), Cardinal Mindszenty, Prince Primate of Hungary* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949) 54.

Benedictines, the Premonstratensians in Keszthely, the Piarists in Budapest, as well as the Cistercians and Franciscans.

It can now, however, be stated that the accusations were precipitate and exaggerated. Nevertheless, emphasizing our responsibility, we call upon all headmasters of Catholic schools to increase their vigilance over the youth entrusted to their care in these times of insecurity so that the conduct of youth inside and outside the schools shows perfect order and tranquility—ever the creditable distinction of Catholic schools—so that there may be no occasion for interference from outside quarters.¹⁵⁸

The Church leadership sought to discredit summarily the investigations and reports appearing in the left-wing press, rather than individually address each allegation. The policy of quietly resolving problems within the confines of the affected institutions—rather than reporting them readily to the officers at the PRO—remained the Church's approach to their problems, despite harsh criticism of this insular, or 'secretive' policy on the part of both *Szabad Nép* and *Népszava*.

In addition to the directives sent to Catholic schools on how to approach the issue of alleged fascist activity among students, the primary response to Communist criticism directed at Catholic schools had been to employ history, and the historic role of the Church in the education of the country's youth, as a form of justification and legitimization of confessional schools and the role of the Church in the upbringing of Hungarian youth in postwar Hungary. This approach demonstrates the Church's awareness of the fact that the purpose behind the series of investigations against Catholic schools had been to prepare the groundwork for the secularization of education in Hungary.

The Council of Bishops proposed the Church's primary justifications for maintaining religious education in Hungary in a pastoral letter dated May 20, 1946 and

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 55.

addressed to the parents of children enrolled in confessional schools. In this letter, Mindszenty elaborates on three justifications for maintaining Catholic schools in Hungary. First, he cites the historical ‘right’ of the Church to establish schools, noting that in the eighteenth century, the Church proved more progressive than the state in establishing schools and in augmenting the level of education among the population.¹⁵⁹ This argument responded to Communist allegations regarding the regressive nature of confessional schools and the need to allow a progressive state the prerogative of reforming and modernizing education in Hungary.

Mindszenty’s second justification for Catholic education is based upon the right to ensure Christian instruction as bestowed by God. The Church’s “educational mission springs from God Himself. Perhaps this right is not acknowledged by those who do not believe in God and do not accept Christ and his Gospel. For you Catholics, however, it is an irrefutable law.”¹⁶⁰ Evidently, this line of reasoning was a method of reinforcing Catholics in their convictions. Nonetheless, as Mindszenty himself implied, divine justification for Catholic schools may prove significantly less effective when confronting the allegations of the Communist press.

The third justification for Catholic schools appealed to affected parents as well as opponents of religious instruction. Mindszenty presented a legal argument for Catholic instruction by which he asserted that “parents are superior to the State, and their rights were always, and still are, acknowledged by the Church. The prerogative of parents to educate their children cannot be disputed by the State...hence it is their right to demand

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

that their children are educated according to their faith and their religious outlook.”¹⁶¹

According to Mindszenty, the state enjoyed no right to dispute a parent’s desire to enroll their children in confessional schools. His pastoral message called upon parents to defend more confidently and vigorously Catholic education in Hungary. The primate, addressing his primary audience in the first person, warned that “you Hungarian parents will likewise feel a violation of your fundamental rights if your children can no longer attend the Catholic schools solely because the dictatorial State closes down our schools by a brutal edict or renders their work impossible.”¹⁶² Mindszenty’s prediction would prove hauntingly accurate in the months to come. Nevertheless, the cardinal’s words may have also bore the intent of reminding their critics in the Communist Party of the size and dedication of the country’s Catholic parents enraged at state sanctioned discrimination directed at their faith.

Mindszenty had been more explicitly critical of the Communist allegations and plans for the restructuring of the educational system than ever before. Posing a rhetorical question of whether freedom and democracy is compatible with the closure of Catholic schools and the sanction of only secular instruction, “where a small minority wants to impose its masterful will upon the majority of the people,” the cardinal offered his most impassioned response:

No! and a thousand times No! This is not democracy. This is not freedom. Certain people like to depict the Church as the ‘hot-bed of reaction.’ Those people, however, for whom everything Catholic spells reaction had better look for reaction in those quarters in which all freedom is suppressed.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 61.

Though not specifically naming his opponents, Mindszenty's reference to the Communists and their allies in the Social Democratic Party was evident.

The tone of Communist allegations and subsequent Catholic refutations had intensified in their shrillness and sense of urgency. This is detectable in Mindszenty's call to action, directed at Church members, which adopts a particularly dim view of the future should the faithful not actively oppose the secularizing efforts of the Communist Party and rebuke the dastardly claims leveled against religious communities engaged in education.

“Watch and pray! It is your right that is at stake. The souls of your children and your grandchildren are at stake and our whole future. It is a great consolation to me to witness your faith and your zeal here in this Church. These churches, however, will be empty and the holy sacrifice will be offered between four naked walls if you fail to stand up for the religious instruction and for the religious education of your children and allow them to grow up without religion....But there is another picture of the future which we can imagine and which is not as sad as the former one. It is that of world-wide Catholic rebirth which is vigorously and boldly taking shape everywhere forecasting a renewal of the world.¹⁶⁴

The prospect of their children and future generations of their family standing condemned simply as a consequence of their parent's unwillingness to fervently and steadfastly defend the Church against the onslaught of Communist allegations is, indeed, a daunting glimpse of the future for faithful Catholics. Mindszenty had been well aware of this when he wrote his pastoral letter. The cardinal's words starkly contrast the world of barren churches with one which sees a Catholic revival on a global scale. In his Manichean allegory, Mindszenty ultimately dismissed the idea of reconciliation between two dominating visions for the future of Hungary and displayed an understanding of the Communist-controlled interior ministry's preoccupation with smoking out alleged cases

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

of fascism from Catholic institutions as part of this cultural struggle between two competing prospects for the future of the country.

Mindszenty, however, had certainly not been the only one to predict a cultural war on the horizon. In fact, his pastoral letter had merely reflected the cataclysmic nature of the struggle between the Church and the Communists, which he saw as already taking place. On May 7, four days prior to the pastoral letter, the Social Democratic organ, *Népszava*, presented the concept of an apocalyptic struggle between the Church and the forces of 'democracy,' namely the two Marxist parties.

Counter-revolution is being organized before our very eyes and at the head of this organization are the men of the Catholic Church...If Hungarian democracy does not wish to commit suicide—and it most certainly does not—then it is our immediate duty to oppose the increasingly shameless and provocative criminal acts. Until now, we have been rather patient with the Church and with churches....The eminencies and the lordships have erred. Our patience is over and it is their sin than leads us to send to them a public ultimatum. Either they stop this provocation and remain faith-based organizations, or we will see to it that they stay within the boundaries intended for them. A few weeks before, we were the ones who protected the churches of Budapest in the face of the working class's fury. Those fists, which were then raised in the air are still clenched today and prepared and their strength has not waned...We know no mercy on this issue and our fist of steel will strike upon he who endangers the foundations of democracy and who yearns to poison our youth. And if our fist has struck, then many ancient illusions will turn to dust. This is our final and ultimate warning.¹⁶⁵

The Social Democratic daily, by this time aligned with the politics of the Communist Party, provided the most blatant warning of its willingness to engage in a cultural war with the Church. This life and death struggle for Hungarian democracy found expression in terms of a Manichean allegory, featuring the dark forces of the Church pitted against the light of progress and democratic ideals.

¹⁶⁵ *Népszava*, May 7, 1946, 1.

Népszava had not been the only source to indicate its intent to foment a cultural war against the Church, and the allegedly dark forces of the interwar period lurking in its midst. József Révai, Communist minister of culture in the coalition government and editor of *Szabad Nép*, took the fact that a cultural war was raging in Hungary between his party and the Church for granted. Referring to the Catholic establishment as the last refuge of fascists, imperialists and capitalists, Révai wrote that “the battle is not yet over, the enemy has not yet disarmed, the differences have not yet been erased, but are only becoming stronger and more evident.”¹⁶⁶ In Révai’s view, the Communists and Social Democrats were merely assuming a defensive position against a belligerent and hostile Church leadership.

The fact that the Communist Party and Social Democrats, as well as Mindszenty and Catholic papers sensed an impending cultural struggle on the horizon, appears to dispute the arguments of Jenő Gergely, one of the only historians of twentieth-century Hungarian church history. Gergely asserts that the period between 1945 and 1949 “cannot be interpreted as a *kulturkampf*—albeit, the Constantine-style Church, which insisted on keeping its positions of power, understood it as this.”¹⁶⁷ Yet what Gergely fails to explore is that the Communists were equally inclined to see themselves involved in a cultural struggle with the Church. This becomes evident from the statements of leaders such as Rákosi and Révai, and the reports in *Szabad Nép* and *Népszava*. The sheer scope of police investigations against Catholic institutions, the involvement of high-ranking political leaders, the legislative efforts underway to curb the power of the Church

¹⁶⁶ József Révai, “Élni tudtunk a szabadsággal, *válogatott cikkek és beszédek (1945-1949)*. (We Were Able to Live with Freedom: Selected Articles and Speeches (1945-1949). Szikra Kiadás. Budapest. 1949. 305.

¹⁶⁷ Jenő Gergely, *A politikai katolicizmus Magyarországon, 1890-1950*, (Political Catholicism in Hungary, 1890-1950), (Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 1977) 10.

and the frenzied rhetoric regularly employed in both the Communist and Catholic press all indicate the existence of a veritable *Kulturkampf*, of which all involved parties were equally conscious.

Hungary's largest Catholic weekly, *Új Ember*, published by the Hungarian branch of the Vatican's *Actio Catholica*, also entered the debate. The weekly answered *Népszava*'s unconcealed threat of a cultural war between 'progress,' as represented by the Communists and Social Democrats and 'reaction,' as maintained by the Church. Although Árpád Szakasits, the SDP leader, noted in a speech that he did not intend to wage a *Kulturkampf* against the clergy, or the Church, *Új Ember* observed that the anti-Catholic rhetoric employed in the left-wing press refuted this view. "We can assure (Szakasits) that neither Hungarian Catholicism, nor Hungarian Christianity would have been pleased by a cultural war and it has done everything on its part to avoid this. All the while, that same party's press has, for months, been rife with the open threat of cultural war and employed this very term."¹⁶⁸ *Új Ember*, still more conciliatory than Mindszenty, or other more conservative elements in the Church, had been confounded over why the Marxist press in France or Italy has demonstrated nowhere near the same degree of anti-Catholicism as their counterparts in Hungary. *Actio Catholica*'s weekly ultimately offered its own interpretation of this conundrum. "The leaders and spokesmen of both Marxist parties are the children of pre-World War I Marxism and they still carry in their bones the anticlericalism of the time. To this very day they cannot imagine that national

¹⁶⁸ "Az idejétmult vulgárpropaganda, Nyílt válasz és nyílt kérdés a két marxista párthoz," (Old-Fashioned Vulgar Propaganda, Public Response and Public Question to the Two Marxist Parties) *Új Ember*, July 14, 1946, 1.

and international politics can take a different form than that expressed in pre-World War I Marxism's anti-religious, vulgar propaganda..."¹⁶⁹

In responding to *Népszava's* allegations, *Új Ember* adopted a parallel approach to that used in the SDP daily. The Catholic weekly asserted that the 'problem' was not Marxism itself, but the historical baggage that Hungarian Marxists carried with them from a regressive, bygone era. While the left claimed that Hungarian Catholicism had remained feudal, reactionary, fascist and unreformed during and following the interwar period, *Új Ember* made a similar claim to the backwards nature of Marxism in Hungary. At the same time, it altered the nature of the debate, in that rather than assuming a constantly defensive position in responding to allegations against the Church, the weekly took aim at what it understood as the regressive elements of Hungarian Marxists.

The intensity of the rhetoric between the Church and the Communist Party augmented with a series of increasingly intrusive investigations against Catholic organizations and individuals. This even compelled papers that had not traditionally addressed political concerns to participate in the political discourse. The most prominent such example is *A Sziv*, a faith-based weekly published by the Jesuits.¹⁷⁰ On June 1 Zsigmond Mihalovics, the national director of the *Actio Catholica*, felt compelled to publish an article on the "gathering clouds over Catholicism. (The Communists) want to separate the believer from their bishops and archbishop. The priesthood is, in significant part, labeled reactionary. In Catholic organizations and associations they attempt to find the hiding place of fascism and our confessional schools and teaching power is, in its

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁷⁰ *A Sziv: The Heart*. The Jesuit weekly had existed during the interwar period and was among the only major Catholic papers to continue publishing in the postwar period. As a publication concentrated primarily on religious and faith-based issues, the paper did come under some criticism in the postwar period for not having spoken out strongly and frequently against Nazism and fascism.

entirety, seen as the secret enemy of democracy.”¹⁷¹ Having summarized all the charges and allegations against the Church, Mihalovics argued that Catholics could expect even worse treatment, but that this had to be understood as a sacrifice and suffering not unknown in Christian history. “The old dictum, the blood of Christians is their harvest proved true not only in the time of Nero, but for anytime, when they wanted to kill them. This has been demonstrated in Nazism and in the recent past, and it will be proven again in the future.”¹⁷² Mihalovics’s ominous prediction of the future also hinted at the Church’s resilience when faced with enemies.

The Jesuit weekly hoped that the critics of Catholicism would eventually disappear, just as the anticlericalism of the Nazis could not outlive the Church. “We do not deceive ourselves that in the future *A Sziv* and Christianity, as expressed in the paper, will not come across enemies. Yet while the Nazi regime could not tolerate differences of opinion, but rather dragged to prison our outspoken bishops and priests, our secular leaders, in true democracy the opponent will also be treated with respect.”¹⁷³ The weekly used the Nazi experience—and the Church’s suffering during this period—to contrast it with ‘true’ democracy as a place where the Church is not discriminated against and hindered in its work. When *A Sziv* elaborated upon the form of Nazi persecution used against Catholicism, they bore a stunning resemblance to the postwar woes of the Church at the hands of the Communist-controlled political police and interior ministry. *A Sziv* mentioned five forms of Nazi persecution: the discrediting of the priesthood; the slander of parties with a Christian, or Catholic orientation; the distancing of the clergy from the

¹⁷¹ Zsigmond Mihalovics, “Szervezés – Egyházközségi munka,” (Organization – Parish Work), *A Sziv*, June 1, 1946, 1.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 1.

youth; the banning of religious education from schools; and the dissolving of Catholic associations.¹⁷⁴

Confessional schools and religious communities were not the only Church institutions to come under suspicion and police investigations. Catholic associations also faced dissolution at the hands of Interior Minister László Rajk. KALOT, Hungary's largest Catholic youth movement, numbered nearly 4 million members throughout Hungary, and had been of great concern to the Communists, despite the fact that its Jesuit leaders—Töhötöm Nagy and Jenő Kerkai—aimed to find a *modus vivendi* with the Communists even when the consequences included falling out of favour with Mindszenty and most Catholic leaders.¹⁷⁵ Yet, KALOT also earned the Communist Party's wrath, as its extensive network of associations and institutions throughout the country, proved to be a major source of competition for the fledgling Communist and all left-wing youth movements.

KALOT served as a source of major competition for the Communist-friendly Hungarian Alliance of Democratic Youth (MADISZ). Therefore, the Communist youth movement actively contributed to the Party's harangues against their Catholic counterpart. In a letter addressed to MADISZ members and the country's youth, the alliance's leadership sent out a shrill warning about fascist elements lurking behind the

¹⁷³ "Az Egyház a viharban," (The Church in the Storm), *A Szív*, May 19, 1946, 2.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷⁵ KALOT: Katolikus Agrárlegények Országos Tanácsa. (National Council of Catholic Agrarian Youth) Mindszenty had not been the only one to find KALOT's gravitation to the Communists problematic, especially its new-found membership into MIOT—the National Council of Hungarian Youth—an umbrella organization comprised of mainly left-wing youth groups. The women's associations on Actio Catholica's youth committee, for example, felt that KALOT had stepped out of line by conciliating with Communist youth and they called upon the AC leadership to expel them from the organization. In the end, Mindszenty wrote Kerkai a letter in which he charged KALOT with "deeply wounding Catholic unity." In his response, Kerkai reassured Mindszenty that as part of the agreement between KALOT and MIOT, Kerkai and Nagy had requested that the Communist press put a halt to its denunciations of the Church.

Margit Balogh, *A KALOT és a katolikus társadalompolitika 1935-1946*, (KALOT and Catholic Social Politics, 1935-1946), MTA Történettudományi Intézete, Budapest: 1998, 175.

protective wings of the church. “Reaction is on the rise and even dares to openly present itself. It is trying to snatch you up into its net by using Christ’s name. Be careful not to inadvertently cause your own demise!”¹⁷⁶

KALOT’s demise was foreshadowed by the murder of a Soviet soldier in Budapest on June 17, 1946. In fact, the soldier’s murder justified the Communists in disbanding the Catholic youth movement. *Szabad Nép* and *Népszava* both reported the murder in their June 19 issue. The preliminary investigation showed that a patrolling Soviet soldier had been killed from shots that came from the window of a third story apartment on Teréz Road in downtown Budapest. A Russian commander and a pedestrian were also among the victims. In its headline, *Szabad Nép* reported that the teenaged culprit, by the name of István Péntzes, had been a either “member of KALOT or a boy scout.”¹⁷⁷ There had been no evidence to suggest that the culprit, who apparently committed suicide after the attack by drenching his clothing in gasoline and set himself on fire, had been a member of KALOT. *Szabad Nép*, however, used his jacket to allege that he had been a member of the Catholic youth movement. *Népszava* simply reported that the young man had been a scout, based upon his uniform.¹⁷⁸

The Communist press had been swept up in fury during the day following the assassination as they glanced indignantly at the five-hundred thousand-strong KALOT. By June 4, however, the dissolution of KALOT had begun. By the end of the month, Rajk

¹⁷⁶ “A Magyar Demokratikus Ifjúsági Szövetség mohácsi csoportja,” (The Mohács branch of the Alliance of Hungarian Democratic Youth), in: *MADISZ—1946*, Fond 629, Small Prints Collection, National Széchenyi Library, Budapest.

¹⁷⁷ The cover story in *Szabad Nép* also included a gruesome close-up picture of the alleged assassin’s severely charred face.

“Felhárító fasiszta orvgyilkosság a Teréz Köruton,” (Disturbing Fascist Assassination on Teréz Ring-Road), *Szabad Nép*, June 19, 1946.

¹⁷⁸ “A miniszterelnök elhatározta: intézkedéseket tesz a fasiszta gaztettek megismétlődése ellen,” (The Prime Minister has Decided that he Will Take Steps Against the Repetition of Fascist Criminal Acts), *Népszava*, June 19, 1946, 1.

had dissolved more than a thousand Catholic-affiliated organizations. A Catholic student movement entitled *Emericana*, which *Szabad Nép* asserted had been reminiscent of the Klu Klux Klan, was banned, along with all of KALOT's local associations.¹⁷⁹ In addition, according to the predictions in *Szabad Nép*, the Catholic Student Alliance, which had yet to be dissolved on July 24, would soon also be granted its "well deserved ban" for its relationship with Szent László College, found guilty of harbouring a fascist conspiracy.¹⁸⁰

All the while, Rajk claimed that he had not dissolved a single faith-based Catholic movement and that Mindszenty's allegations regarding the government's anti-Catholic bias were unfounded. *Szabad Nép* concurred wholeheartedly with the interior minister. "The interior minister's statement is clear. Hungarian democracy will be attentive to ensure that no one will be able to halt the legislation enacted against reactionary behaviour under the guise of religious freedom."¹⁸¹

The dissolution of Church organizations continued with a ban imposed on the Hungarian Scouting Alliance, as reported in the Communist daily on July 20. In the same issue, the paper's editorial board also further justified the dissolution of KALOT. "Every honest democrat can only say "finally" to the disbanding of KALOT. In light of both its past and present activities, KALOT did not deserve democracy to grant it the right to organize. In the past, it fought for the fascist Catholic leadership and after liberation it has become one of the gathering-grounds of rural reaction."¹⁸² The largest Catholic youth movement, which had sacrificed its relationship with the Church leadership and with the

¹⁷⁹ "Befejezték dicstelen pályafutásukat a fasiszta diákszervezetek," (The Fascist Student Associations have terminated their Unholy Activities), *Szabad Nép*, July 24, 1946, 3.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸¹ "Reakciós egyesületek feloszlása nem sérti a vallásszabadságot," (The Dissolution of Reactionary Associations does not Inhibit Religious Freedom), *Szabad Nép*, July 24, 1946, 3.

¹⁸² "A KALOT", (KALOT), *Szabad Nép*, July 20, 3.

organizations of *Actio Catholica* in order to conciliate with the left, had been banned by the Communist-controlled interior ministry for being a bastion of fascism.

The bitter irony surrounding KALOT's dissolution had not been lost on the Church. On July 28, *Új Ember*'s editorial board wrote a lengthy story on the "lessons" to be learned from KALOT's fate. Specifically, the weekly observed that the most conciliatory Catholic organization had been among the first to be disbanded. Referring to KALOT's membership in the leftist youth movement, MIOT, *Új Ember* wondered how it could it have happened that "the endless attacks against KALOT and its spectacular dissolution came from the same side, from the left wing, essentially from among its own allies?"¹⁸³ *Szabad Nép*'s previous response to this conundrum, however, had been to observe that simply because for the "extreme reaction" of the Church leadership, "KALOT was not reactionary enough, does not imply that democracy would have acknowledged it as democratic enough."¹⁸⁴ According to *Új Ember*, the 'real' reason behind the ban had been the Communist fear of KALOT's synthesis of social justice, Christianity and Hungarian identity, and the appropriation of many of the left-wing policies, such as land reform, most commonly held by the Communists and the left-wing of the Social Democrats.

Was KALOT's crime the movement's very purpose: the synthesis of socially-oriented Christianity and the real concept of being Hungarian within the framework of democracy? Because if this is the case, then many people will conclude that the present-day parties of Hungarian democracy do not want Catholicism, even in those formations in which they are the most sincere in their participation in the programs of democracy...¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ "A KALOT sorsa és tanulságai," (KALOT's Fate and its Lessons), *Új Ember*, July 28, 1946, 1.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

The real lesson learned following the dissolution of KALOT, had been the failure of conciliatory politics when it came to the Church's relationship with the left. In the end, Mindszenty's conservatism proved itself the only viable option for the Church in postwar Hungary. This was especially true since the Communist Party showed itself unwilling to accept the existence of even of those Catholic organization most inclined to cooperate.

Mindszenty himself vocally protested the dissolution of KALOT and other Catholic organizations—despite his tense relationship with the former. After summoning an emergency meeting of the Council of Bishops, he sent an open letter to Smallholder prime minister, Ferenc Nagy.¹⁸⁶ In this letter, also made public in *Új Ember's* July 28 issue, the cardinal made clear his conviction that the investigations and allegations against Church institutions lacked any evidence and had been completely false. “The situation, in which Catholic educational institutions were brought under the cloak of suspicion before the public by certain sides...must render, and does render, Catholic public opinion, in its entirety, very nervous...”¹⁸⁷ After asserting the frivolous nature of the claims, Mindszenty noted that the Church “shall protest ceremoniously the situation that our associations, or if one of their members, are accused or are seen as suspect without any evidence...We will not be silent on this issue, not even before the general public.”¹⁸⁸ The potential of any conciliation between the Communists and the Church had now ended, after hundreds of arrests, investigations and the dissolution of youth organizations, which left the Catholic youth movement in disarray.

¹⁸⁶ Despite the fact that less than a year prior, the Smallholders had won a resounding victory in the elections, and had enjoyed the de facto, or muted support of most Church officials, the fact that the interior ministry and the political police fell under the control of the Communists meant that Nagy's hands were tied when addressing the issue of persecution of the Church.

¹⁸⁷ “A Magyar püspökök rendkívüli tanácskozása,” (The Emergency Meeting of the Hungarian Council of Bishops), *Új Ember*, July 28, 1946, 3.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

The Catholic establishment, including those who had demonstrated some willingness to cooperate with the left, understood that the Church, in its current state, was barely tolerated by the interior ministry and PRO officials. Balduin Péntzes observed that “those who think that Hungarian Catholicism is a type of carpetbagger institution, and tolerated only out of mercy should note...that Hungarian Catholicism is not comprised of carpetbaggers nor is it simply tolerated here, but for 500 years it has been the entire the way of life of the entire country, and for 400 years the way of life for most of the country.”¹⁸⁹

Like that of Péntzes, most of the Church’s response to the actions against Catholic organizations in 1946 included the idea of a historical justification for the Church’s continued survival in postwar Hungary. Nevertheless, the intensified atmosphere of 1946 also altered the Church’s responses to Communist allegations, rendering them more overtly critical of the latter’s charges and increasingly belligerent as the Church saw itself preparing for a cataclysmic cultural struggle with the Communists.

By 1946, the war crimes trials and allegations of Nazi sympathies within the Catholic Church had run their course. Merely relying on historical debate to discredit and dissolve the Church’s power would not suffice. In 1946, the Church boasted a devoted following and a determined, uncompromising leader as well as an impressive network of youth organizations numbering more than half a million members.

The Catholic establishment maintained its most important sphere of influence and power-- the educational system. In 1946, this is where the Communist Party sought to weaken the Church. The Communist Party and the Catholic Church both realized that the

¹⁸⁹ Balduin Péntzes, “Hát jöttmentek és csak megtűrtek vagyunk?” (So are we Merely Carpetbaggers and only Tolerated?), *Új Ember*, November 10, 1946, 1.

country's youth represented the future of Hungary and each side proved eager to assume the instruction of younger generations. The Church was the Communist Party's primary rival in the field of education. The Communists engaged in a coordinated campaign to dismember Catholic educational institutions and youth movements, as they saw this as key in securing their power in postwar Hungary. By compromising confessional schools in the party press and by invoking the help of the PRO to launch investigations and arrests in Catholic educational institutions, the Communist Party demonstrated its willingness to engage in a cultural struggle with the Church. This campaign aimed to remove the Church from the field of education entirely and hence destroy the Catholic establishment's last bastion of power.

Chapter 4: Securing the Future

By the end of 1946, the schools, religious communities and youth organizations of the Catholic Church had found themselves at the centre of police investigations. Charged with terrorism, espionage, fascism and conspiracies to overthrow the state, the Church now faced a chorus of achrimony for its alleged plot to restore the dreaded former regime. The purpose behind the series of alleged conspiracies uncovered by the political police and examined extensively by the Communist press had been to discredit the Church in the field of education.

The arrests and investigations of 1946 served as a prelude to not only the nationalization of confessional schools in 1948, but also to the final Communist confrontation with the Catholic leadership and with Mindszenty himself. The Communist Party's attacks became increasingly threatening, leading the Church leadership to confront its adversaries, rather than subscribe to a policy of appeasement. The Church continued to express its vision for the future of Hungary in terms diametrically opposed to that proposed by the Communists. The Communist Party's arsenal, however, included a continued onslaught of illicit investigations, charges against the Church aimed at discrediting the high clergy and also the use of mass media as a weapon in legitimizing and justifying its actions against the Church.

The series of investigations against Catholic establishments and the disbanding of KALOT were not isolated incidents targeting individual institutions, but rather an all-encompassing expression of the desire to rein in a conservative and animous Church. The alleged treacherous acts on the part of people connected to Catholic institutions served as the evidenciary basis and justification for the curtailing of the Church in society. The

animosity between the Communists and the Church found expression during an extended debate which ensued in the press on the future of confessional schools and the future of the Hungarian educational system.

The outcome of the 1947 elections demonstrated that the Church-sponsored conservative vision of Hungary actually gained popularity. The Communists soon realized that with the possibility of changing power relations, the position of the Communist Party may, in fact, rest on precarious grounds. Despite the apparent strength of the Communist Party—which controlled the interior ministry, held convincing majorities on municipal councils and enjoyed direct influence over the political police—party leaders were careful not to alienate a more than 6 million strong Catholic population. The need for the Communist Party to legitimize itself before skeptical Catholic voters, became especially evident during the August 1947 parliamentary elections, where the Church featured prominently in the Communist campaign. The Communists need to gain credibility among Catholics became even more urgent after voting results showed an upstart opposition formation—the Democratic Peoples' Party, which promoted itself as the party of choice for Catholic voters—ascended from nowhere to second place with over 16 percent of the popular vote and 60 seats in the new parliament, trailing the Communist Party by only four percent.¹⁹⁰

The Democratic Peoples' Party (DNP), led by István Barankovics, placed Catholic voters at the centre of the election campaign and forced not only the Communists, but also the Smallholders, the winner of the 1945 elections—on the defensive. The DNP focused a significant part of its campaign on rural women voters, whom it tried to convince to vote for a party that would support impoverished families

¹⁹⁰ Please see Appendix IV.

within the context of traditional Christian values. In one election flyer addressing female voters, the DNP urged mothers and young women to flock in large numbers to the polls. “When you step up to the polling booth, you are entering into a battle for what you find holy...morals, honesty, propriety, love, goodness and a willingness to sacrifice—more directly, the Ten Commandments, the Gospel and the Christian way of life, which rests on these values.”¹⁹¹ The DNP adopted the same rhetoric of a looming cultural war that marked the dialogue between the Church and the Communist Party and parachuted it into an election campaign in a way not seen during the 1945 elections, when no major party portended to represent Christian Hungary.

The DNP remained unapologetic in its claim that “above all” the party is one firmly grounded in a Christian worldview.¹⁹² “We can confidently proclaim that the Hungarian people cannot live without Christianity. We would oppose any attempt to remove Christianity from public education, economic, societal and public life. For us, Christianity is not only a private matter, but the most sacred of public affairs.”¹⁹³ The DNP essentially promoted verbatim the views of Mindszenty and the conservatives of the Catholic Church in their opposition to the secularization of the country.

Despite the DNP’s open gravitation to the Church’s conservative views on the state and public life, Mindszenty stopped short of officially supporting the DNP in his pastoral letters and other communications. In fact, on July 25 the cardinal noted in a statement that “Catholic bishops regretfully declare that we cannot support any particular party in the coming elections” and registered his displeasure with unnamed changes to

¹⁹¹ “Magyar Nők!” (“Hungarian Women!”) Fond: *1947 Választás* (1947 Elections), Small Prints Collection, National Széchenyi Library: Budapest.

¹⁹² “Indul a Demokrata Néppárt” (The Democratic Peoples’ Party is Running), Fond: *1947 Választás* (1947 Elections), Small Prints Collection, National Széchenyi Library: Budapest.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.* 1.

voting regulations which he felt would disenfranchise many voters.¹⁹⁴ Mindszenty's reasoning behind his equal distancing from all sides had been based on what he believed was the deliberate splintering of the opposition by the Communist Party and Soviet commanders in charge of deciding which party lists would be permitted to run in the election.¹⁹⁵ Mindszenty, and the Catholic establishment as a whole, also had relatively low expectations of the DNP and certainly would not have imagined that it would become the country's second largest political force.

Allying itself with the DNP, Margit Slachta's Camp of Christian Women also ran in a few constituencies and gravitated to political views identical to those of the DNP. Referring to Slachta's thirty years of politics, the nun's party presented itself in campaign material as one led by a leader well-versed in Hungarian public life. "In the spirit of the Gospels, Slachta has proven that she would rise to the defense of the Hungarian people at anytime and she that can battle anyone."¹⁹⁶ The Church now had two political formations—allied with each other—openly professing to represent its interests in the Hungarian parliament.

The sudden entry of Christian values and the Church into the campaign meant that the Communists had to prove to the electorate that rather than being anticlerical, it deeply respected religion. As such, the series of accusations against Church leaders that characterized the Party's relationship with the high clergy in the years prior, as well as the hunt for "reactionaries" within the Church assumed secondary importance in the campaign.

¹⁹⁴ Mindszenty, *Memoirs*, 302.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁹⁶ "Katolikus Testvérünk!" (Our Catholic Brothers and Sisters), Fond: 1947 Választás (1947 Elections), Small Prints Collection, National Széchenyi Library: Budapest.

The priority was now to demonstrate that the Communist Party was welcoming to Catholics, and Communist politicians were willing to go to great lengths to prove this. Anna Kováts, one of about a hundred female candidates fielded by the Communist Party, borrowed liberally from the language of Christian-Conservative politics. In an open letter addressed primarily to women whose husbands and fiancés were still being held as prisoners of war in the Soviet Union, Kováts reminded Hungarian women about the horrid consequences of the war and bemoaned that fact that “several hundred thousand Hungarian women are living their lives alone and are hence forced to resign from their most sacred calling in life: from being a wife and a loving mother.”¹⁹⁷ Slachta, Mindszenty and the politicians in the DNP could hardly have concurred more with these words.

The Communist Party aimed to ensure that voters were made aware of all that the Party had done for the Church and for religious Hungarians. In one open letter, addressed by the Communist Party to “the men and women of villages,” voters there were reminded that the Communists “restored almost 50 churches and renovated numerous convents and vicarages.”¹⁹⁸ In the town of Tatabánya, Communist Party campaign material proclaimed that the Party repaired a local church tower and in yet another flyer the party took credit for initiating the restoration of a damaged building belonging to the Reformed Church.¹⁹⁹

Despite their efforts to enlist Catholic and religious voters, the Communist campaign to win the confidence of this electorate proved a complete failure. With DNP

¹⁹⁷ “Kedves Nőtársaim!” (My Dear Female Peers), Anna Kováts’s open letter, Fond: *1947 Választás* (1947 Elections), Small Prints Collection, National Széchenyi Library: Budapest.

¹⁹⁸ “Falusi emberek és asszonyok!” (Men and Women of villages), Open letter of the Communist Party, Fond: *1947 Választás* (1947 Elections), Small Prints Collection, National Széchenyi Library: Budapest.

¹⁹⁹ “Mi Tett a tatabányai Magyar Kommunista Párt szervezete a lakosságért,” (“What Did the Communist Party of Tatabánya do for the Population?”) Fond: *1947 Választás* (1947 Elections), Small Prints Collection, National Széchenyi Library: Budapest.

garnering 16% of the votes and 60 seats in parliament, not only had the Communist campaign failed, but so had many of their efforts to significantly alter the result of the elections through electoral fraud. On August 31, 1947 Communist Party arranged for thousands of party sympathizers to travel from one riding to another where they were told to cast multiple ballots and hence rigged the outcome of the election. Yet even these events failed to provide the Communists with more than one-fifth of the popular vote and stem the rise of the DNP. In fact, the DNP's success proved that despite the disbanding of thousands of Catholic youth organizations only one year prior, the investigations against confessional schools and the series of arrests and even in spite of the Party's control of the interior ministry and the police, the Party was still vulnerable. The DNP demonstrated that organizations affiliated with the Church were still capable of mobilizing and rallying the population and thus could give their opponents a run for their money, in spite of the difficult odds.

In comparison to its size, the DNP proved particularly successful in their campaign. In several counties—including Zala, Győr and Veszprém—the DNP held as many as 150 meetings and rallies and these were often organized by members of the disbanded KALOT and other Catholic organizations.²⁰⁰ The election's final results, which were made public on September 5, 1947, and specifically the DNP's meteoric rise caught the Communists off-guard, surpassed the expectations of the party's own leaders, the Catholic press and the Church leadership.²⁰¹ In fact, *Új Ember*, *Actio Catholica* and *Mindszenty* explained DNP's electoral success as the victory of Christian politics in

²⁰⁰ Lajos, Izsák, *A Keresztény Demokrata Néppárt és a Demokrata Néppárt, 1944-1949*, (The Christian Democratic Peoples' Party and the Democratic Peoples' Party), Kossuth Könyvkiadó, Budapest: 1985, 106.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

Hungary, rather than the population's confidence in the fledgling party.²⁰² In fact, Mindszenty had been positively suspicious of the party's leader, Barankovics, whom he believed may after all join the Communists, Smallholders and Social Democrats in their coalition government.

The differences between Barankovics and Mindszenty lay not in the question of anti-Communism, as both men saw the Communist Party as their primary rival. Barankovics, however, had proven more willing to conciliate with the Marxist Parties and with the occupying Red Army than Mindszenty.

Mindszenty's views represented a more unwavering and forceful form of hostility towards the Communists. Mátyás Rákosi's—and, by extension—the Communist Party's concern regarding Mindszenty's anticommunism was not without reason, since the cardinal's harangues included impassioned rhetoric and calls for active resistance against the Communists. Furthermore, he aimed to convince his own flock, as well as influential foreign leaders and diplomats of the threat posed by Hungarian Communists and the precarious position of the Church in Hungary. In December 1946, six months following the dissolution of KALOT and the plethora of investigations against Catholic orders and institutions, Mindszenty addressed two letters to the American ambassador in Budapest, Arthur Schoenfeld, in which explained his reservations about Hungary's Communist leaders and framed the state of Hungarian democracy in no uncertain terms. In his first letter, dated December 12, Mindszenty insinuated that a recent reform of the civil service—by which 120,000 government employees were dismissed from their positions—amounted to a political purge. “The leaders of the government are terrorizing the entire nation. No one any longer has power to resist them. All over the country,

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 119.

patriotic, nonpartisan devout Hungarians are becoming victims of tyranny...Crimes are being committed against the people in the name of the Republic.”²⁰³

While in his first letter Mindszenty spoke in general terms of government-sponsored terror, a follow-up letter addressed to Schoenfeld on December 16, specifically named the guilty parties.

Hungary is not a true democracy. There is no room in the country for anything but a Marxist police force, a Marxist press, and innumerable prisons and concentration camps. The country is ruled by Soviet adherents, Rákosi (foreign minister), Rajk (minister of the interior), Gerő (minister of trade), and Révai, the party ideologue, in league with party-controlled courts...As long as the Soviet army of occupation remains in Hungary, the power of the Communists will go unchallenged. Armed squads go about the country terrorizing government employees who have already been fired from their jobs and forcing them to join the Communist Party. The party continues to enlarge the lists of the disenfranchised. It is gradually robbing the Catholic Church of all its rights.²⁰⁴

Mindszenty, referring to himself in his letter as the “shepherd of the Hungarian people” demonstrated his willingness to step into the political arena and also proved that he would be willing to take his feuds and forays with the Communist Party to the international stage. Even prior to the August 1947 parliamentary elections—where widespread corruption by Communist officials led to a tainted result—Mindszenty rejected the idea that Hungary was a democratic state. In his warning to the US ambassador regarding the Hungary’s descent into total tyranny, Mindszenty even offered to “recommend various courses of action” that the United States may pursue in its efforts to remove Soviet troops—and by extension, the Hungarian Communist leaders—from power.²⁰⁵ Through his communications with Schoenfeld, Mindszenty consciously stepped into the Cold War,

²⁰³ “Letters to the American Ambassador, Arthur Schoenfeld, December 1946,” Mindszenty, *Memoirs*, 322.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 324-325.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 325.

even before tensions between the US and the USSR had reached their peak. He fueled Communist charges, which were to be levied against the cardinal two years later, that he actively sought to undermine the regime and attempted to foment an international conspiracy against the state.

Although Rákosi's disdain for Mindszenty and the Catholic leadership was hardly a secret, he did sympathize with at least one Catholic bishop, namely Gyula Czapik of Eger, whom he placed in stark contrast to the cardinal. Beginning from his Slovak, peasant origins, to his apparent willingness in 1947-48 to conciliate with the Communist Party, Czapik—who had experienced oppression as a result of his minority background--proved to be a much more savoury character from the perspective of the Communist leadership than Mindszenty, the son of ethnic Germans. On a number of occasions, the Communist press referred implicitly to the cardinal's ethnicity as a possible reason for his reactionary views, and even his alleged support of the Arrow Cross. No such accusation could be brought up against Czapik who, as Rákosi noted, had been "the child of poor Slovaks and (who) had made his way up to this high ecclesiastical position by virtue of his own strength...As the Communist Party and peoples' democracy strengthened, so changed Czapik's position, and at one point he blatantly told me that he would be pleased to cooperate in order to bring about some sort of *modus vivendi*" with the Communists.²⁰⁶ In fact, Rákosi's connection with Czapik had its roots in the early interwar period, when as a political prisoner the Communist leader had subscribed to the faith-based Jesuit paper, *A Szív*—once edited by Czapik—which he used as his a

²⁰⁶ Rákosi, 514.

clandestine source of news and current events, until the prison director realized that the Catholic paper served this illicit purpose.²⁰⁷

Yet Czapiak was an exception to the rule in the eyes of Communist leaders. Most Church leaders and parish priests were looked upon with animosity and were seen as suspect in agitating against the regime. The bizarre series of events in a small, isolated village named Pócspetri on June 3, 1948 only confirmed these views and provided fodder to the Communist press for continued anti-Catholic invectives.

Pócspetri, a village of 2200 residents in the eastern county of Szabolcs, was home to some of Hungary's poorest peasants—those who had least benefited from the land reform of 1945. On the evening of June 3, 1948, before the street lights had been turned on and under the cover of darkness, a group of protesters gathered around the town hall in order to denounce the government's plans to secularize Hungary's confessional schools. Meanwhile, the municipal council convened inside the building and debated a request from Communist Party headquarters for the municipality to send a letter to the national government calling on authorities to secularize the local Catholic school. When disorder broke out among the protesters, Gábor Takács, a police officer sent out to quell the disturbance, began beating those present with his pistol. During his intervention, Takács's pistol accidentally went off, leading to his own death.

The Communist press, however, recounted an entirely different version of the story, and claimed that Miklós Királyfalvi, the village clerk, murdered the police officer.²⁰⁸ Under interrogation, Királyfalvi confessed that the local parish priest, János

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 513.

²⁰⁸ In its report on the Pócspetri affair, *Szabad Nép* referred to the accused as Miklós (Kremper) Királyfalvi, thus reminding its readership of his German origins. This method of ethnic identification was regular

Asztalos, had encouraged him to kill the officer. Both Királyfalvi and Asztalos were put on trial on June 11, where the judge summarily sentenced Királyfalvi to death by hanging and Asztalos to a life sentence in prison.²⁰⁹

As in 1946, when a series of scandals thrust Catholic institutions into the press and brought to light various “terrorist acts” connected to Catholic youth groups, the main player in the Pócspetri affair was not Királyfalvi, but the parish priest who coached his congregation to partake in criminal activity. Furthermore, the scandal’s reach extended far beyond the walls of this rural, backwater parish. At his sentencing, Asztalos admitted his own culpability and claimed that Mindszenty’s pastoral letters, which had been consistently critical of the government plans to secularize the school system, provoked him to take action against the regime.

On June 6, 1948, József Révai, the editor of *Szabad Nép* and a high ranking Communist Party official, published a lengthy piece on the alleged June 3 reactionary riot in the eastern Hungarian village, which had broken out three days prior. Révai noted that the women of Pócspetri were among the most incensed protesters on that faithful night as they ran frantically from the litany and “broke into” the town hall. Chanting “we do not want to become pagans, we do not need a school, we do not want to be little misses—it is enough if we can just till the soil,” Révai saw these peasant women as the embodiment of the “darkness and ignorance used and saddled up by black reaction.”²¹⁰ The “uninformed” protesters and to a certain extent even the Asztalos himself were not the

editorial practice at the Communist Party’s central organ, as it helped to imply another fascist-nazi conspiracy.

Gábor Kiszely, *ÁVH, Egy terrorszervezet története* (ÁVH, The History of a Terror Organization), Korona Kiadó, Budapest: 2000, 105.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

²¹⁰ József Révai, *Élni tudunk a szabadsággal, válogatott cikkek és beszédek, 1945-1949*, (We Were Able to Live With Freedom, Selected Articles and Speeches), Szikra Kiadás, Budapest: 1949, 307.

real culprits, but rather the victims of the high clergy's scheme to undermine the republic by taking advantage of the uneducated peasantry.

Black reaction, relying on darkness and mindlessness, organized a riot in Pócspetri and even stooped to murder...They rely on darkness and ignorance, but we turn to the light and to knowledge. Pócspetri is not the rule, but the exception. There are few villages in this country, where the people can be incited against culture, civilization, schools and where they can be led to believe that education and civilization are creations of "godlessness" and "paganism."...They will not be able to plunge the country into Pócspetri's darkness, but on the contrary: we will bring the light of the democratic country to Pócspetri. We will not allow them to set fire to the country, but will instead destroy the riot-inciting black reaction and when faced with the evil forces of darkness, we will unite the power of the democratic state with the momentum of our state-building, civilizing efforts.²¹¹

Révai's call for a nation-wide cultural struggle against the Church is identical to the apocalyptic, Manichean rhetoric employed by the Communist press during the investigations of 1946. Using biblical allusions to portray a struggle between "light" and "darkness," Révai's language and missionary zeal appear to be rather ironically borrowed from the dictionary of imperialists, as he fervently insists on spreading civilization to the darkest reaches of Catholic Hungary. Révai's language also indicates that as late as June 1948, the Communist Party still felt threatened by the Catholic Church, despite having successfully disbanded its network of youth organizations through its control of the interior ministry and the political police and even though the government was preparing legislation to close confessional schools.

The implications are evident: the purpose behind the investigations, closures and court cases was not to dismantle the church piecemeal, or throw into prison relatively powerless village priests, but rather to deal a fatal blow at the most ardent anti-

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 311-312.

Communist, Cardinal Mindszenty, and thus end the primary source of resistance within the Church. The trusted method of accomplishing this goal was to implicate the Cardinal and the Church leadership in every alleged conspiracy.

Révai made clear that the Party held Mindszenty responsible for the events in Pócspetri. “Do we lay blame with the people, the backwards, poor, uncultured peasants of Pócspetri? No! The instigators are the real culprits—regardless of whether their headquarters are in Esztergom, or Pócspetri...The blood of the murdered police officer indicts not only the priest of Szabolcs county, but also the Archbishop of Esztergom.”²¹²

If Mindszenty was, indeed, personally responsible and if his pastoral letters were the source of incitement that ultimately led to the Pócspetri riot and subsequent murder, then one must wonder why the political police did not issue a warrant for the Cardinal’s arrest. Mindszenty remained free for another six months, before being finally arrested on entirely unrelated charges. The Party’s unwillingness to take direct action against a bishop that so infuriated them and posed such a threat to the stability of the new regime, implies that the Party still lacked total hegemony and sought to legitimize its actions before a potentially skeptical population.

There appears to have been significant popular support for confessional schools throughout the country and many of these supporters were willing to actively protest government plans to nationalize the education system. On June 13, *Új Ember* reported that various petitions from parents’ associations, with signatures ranging from the hundreds to the tens of thousands poured into the government from 1884 municipalities throughout Hungary.²¹³

²¹² *Ibid.*, 306-307.

²¹³ “Újabb állásfoglalások,” (Subsequent Expressions of Opinion), *Új Ember*, June 13, 1948, 3.

These protests, however, failed to stop Communist plans to nationalize confessional schools. By late June 1948, it had become evident that the Communists would proceed with their secularization. In a pastoral letter dated June 19, Mindszenty pledged to resist the Communists in their plans. “As a result of our pastoral obligation, we cannot give up our rights to run our own schools. Using all legal means at our disposal we will constantly demand that these institutions be returned to us.”²¹⁴

Despite protests from Catholic quarters, the nationalization of schools went ahead as planned. The Communist Party leaders interpreted the Pócspetri events as part of a wider conspiracy—at the centre of which stood the Church’s educational system--and which also happened to include one of their rivals from the 1947 election, István Barankovics of the Democratic Peoples’ Party, as well as the high clergy.²¹⁵ Similarly to Révai, Rákosi also recounts an impoverished, uneducated and primitive peasantry abused and lead astray by the cynical and regressive forces of the Catholic Church.

Before the incident, the parish priest had held a meeting with the parents, where he agitated strongly against democracy. „We must stop the secularization of church schools...If this happens, the Church itself will also be destroyed. We cannot allow this and we must halt it with all our power and by all means. If you do not act in this manner, you will not only lose your bread, but you will be excommunicated from the Church and they will not even bury you in a Catholic cemetery.” We made public the details about how the women stormed the town hall after the litany....We made public that the priest of Pócspetri had been supported by a few Smallholders, former Horthyist officers, and other similar people²¹⁶

Rákosi was keen to portray a religious institution so backwards and ignorant, that it was entirely unfit to play a role in the country’s educational system. Moreover, Rákosi—in

²¹⁴ Körlevél, 1948. június 19. (Pastoral Letter) in: *1948—Vallás, Egyházak*, fond. 661, Small Prints Collection, National Széchényi Library, Budapest.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 308.

²¹⁶ Rákosi, 517.

perfect tandem with Révai-- also projected a local scandal onto the nation political stage, by asserting that regressive religious leaders formed only part of a vast conspiracy including his political adversaries, the Smallholders, and other rogue elements from the interwar past and—perhaps most crucially—the Cardinal himself, who Rákosi saw as the “uneducated, dark, devourer of workers,” much like Asztalos himself.²¹⁷

Despite the acrimony which characterized Révai’s response in the press to the Pócspetri affair, Communist Minister of Religion and Education Gyula Ortutay employed less invective in a letter addressed to Mindszenty on June 4, the day following the unrest. Ortutay established that Pócspetri is “a serious warning to the Church...I scarcely think that Roman Catholic bishops wish to assume the responsibility for further bloodshed...”²¹⁸ In his response, also dated June 4, Mindszenty noted that he had no knowledge of the events in Pócspetri prior to receiving Ortutay’s letter and thus declined to comment on the situation.²¹⁹ The cardinal did, however, appreciate the significance of Pócspetri in the government’s proposals for the nationalization of confessional schools.

I know that the projected secularization of the parochial schools has aroused a storm of protest in this land. Only one thing would reassure the Catholic people: The government must strike from the agenda all debate on the subject of the secularization of parochial schools.... You imply that your government is under attack by an organized subversive movement. There is no foundation to this charge.²²⁰

While Mindszenty flatly denied any knowledge or involvement in the Pócspetri affair, his warning to the government on ending any further efforts to nationalize Catholic schools fell on deaf ears. On June 14 the cabinet came to a decision to pursue the nationalization

²¹⁷ Rakosi, 516.

²¹⁸ Ortutay’s letter as quoted in Mindszenty’s *Memoirs*, 79.

²¹⁹ Mindszenty’s Reply of June 4, 1948 to the Minister of Religion and Education, in “Documents,” Mindszenty, 312.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 312.

of schools and on June 16 the bill was voted on and passed in parliament.²²¹ The sudden urgency with which the bill was submitted to parliament—less than two weeks after the Pócspetri affair implies that the government saw it necessary to act while the riot, murder and the subsequent harangues in the Communist press were still fresh in the people’s memory.

By late 1948, the time had arrived to remove the very incarnation of Christian-Conservative Hungary, Cardinal Mindszenty himself. As with the disbanding of the schools, the cardinal’s arrest on December 26, 1948 had been preceded by weeks of press coverage in *Szabad Nép* and *Népszava*, which served as a justification for action against Mindszenty. In this case, the constant appeals of *Catholic* groups calling for the government to take a firmer approach in bringing to justice the belligerent and renegade cardinal served precisely this purpose. The reports of widespread condemnations directed at Mindszenty from a plethora of civic groups afforded the government a type of popular mandate to prosecute the cardinal.

On November 13, *Szabad Nép* published an article under the heading “The Country Opposes Mindszentyism,” in which the Communist daily’s readership was informed that telegrams were arriving en masse to the prime minister’s office, from a lengthy list of municipalities, calling for Mindszenty’s “removal”.²²² According to the petitioners, Mindszenty was the reason that the Church had been unable to arrive at an accord with the new regime. Immediately before his arrest, the term “Mindszentyism” became popular in the press and partly replaced “clerical reaction,” “fascist” and other

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

²²² “Az ország a mindszentyzmus ellen: ‘Az esztergomi érsek akadályozta meg a békés megegyezést,’” (The Country Opposes Mindszentyism—‘The Archbishop of Esztergom Onstructed Peaceful Accord), *Szabad Nép*, November 13, 1948, 3.

pejoratives used to describe the Church and the cardinal's attitude. By using this new omnibus term, the Party reinforced the notion that all fascism and reaction originated personally from the cardinal. Mindszenty became the embodiment of everything the regime found objectionable and the party's vocabulary reflected this. The new term, emphasizing the cardinal's personal responsibility, also served to justify his removal.

On November 16, Lajos Dinnyés, Communist prime minister of Hungary gave a speech that later appeared in the party's daily in which the head of government addressed a stern warning to Mindszenty.

We respect the Church's high priests, but only as long as they remain high priests. However, those who partake in counterrevolutionary activity must also accept all the risks that arise from anti-democratic agitation... The Hungarian government has both the strength and the courage to protect democracy against anyone, if necessary, by employing the harshest of regulatory measures.²²³

Dinnyés clearly referred to the separation of Church and State and warned that bishops should avoid meddling behaviour and involving themselves in the political struggles of the day—instead, they should occupy themselves strictly with their faith-based, religious duties.

On November 17, one day following *Szabad Nép's* publication of Dinnyés's speech, the paper published a letter from György Várhegyi, secretary general for the national student alliance, recounting the newest scandals to arise in a Catholic institution. In the city of Zalaegerszeg's state-run lyceum, formerly known as the Notre Dame Institute and once "Mindszenty's favourite school," a group of 70 nuns and religion teachers tried to incite the students to reject "democracy, education and the student

²²³ "A Magyar kormány szükség esetén a legkeményebb rendszabályokkal fogja megvédeni a demokráciát," (If necessary, the Hungarian Government will Safeguard Democracy Using the Harshest Regulatory Measures), *Szabad Nép*, November 16, 1948, 7.

alliance.”²²⁴ The situation ultimately led to a student strike in the school. Várhegyi noted that this was not an isolated incident, but representative of the agitation in most Catholic institutions. In the southern city of Pécs, members of the Marian congregation burned an issue of the student association’s paper, which carried the printed version of Révai’s most recent speech. Várhegyi noted acidly that “apparently Mindszenty’s torch-bearing, book-burning followers are also present in Pécs.”²²⁵

Yet not all Marian congregations shared the same opinion on the relationship between the Church and State. On November, *Szabad Nép* published an open letter addressed to the Council of Bishops and signed by 81 members of a Catholic workers’ group in Kispest, a working-class suburb of Budapest, condemning Mindszenty as “the main agent of the crisis within the Church.”²²⁶ “Intervene, so that our Church will no longer be the political party of dark, anti-popular forces.”²²⁷

The workers of Kispest were not the only Catholic groups profiled in *Szabad Nép* for their condemnation of the Catholic leadership. On November 21 an open letter written by a group of Catholic students from the towns of Szeged and Zalaegerszeg also condemned the Church leadership, while a group from Kőbánya, another Budapest suburb, joined forces with the youth of Kispest to protest against Mindszenty. “Our Church’s leader has different goals than we, simple believers. He desires to win us over to his dark designs. We are concerned: will not our treacherous leader plunge our Church

²²⁴ “Az iskola és a rendbontók,” (The School and the Trouble-Makers,” *Szabad Nép*, November 17, 1948,

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²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

²²⁶ “Kispesti katolikus kongregisták nyílt level a püspöki karhoz,” (The Open Letter of the Kispest Congregation to the Council of Bishops), *Szabad Nép*, November 19, 1948, 5.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

into perdition? ... We too raise our voice and ask all parish groups to help save our Church's organizations and turn against Mindszenty, while it is not too late."²²⁸

In a speech on November 23 given during the opening of a new bridge in Szeged, Ernő Gerő, minister of trade, was perhaps most explicit in promising a crowd of incensed workers—who apparently chanted “Down with Mindszenty” during points in his speech—that the government would soon remove the cardinal from office.

It is not our habit to utter threats. We know that millions of practicing Catholics think the same way as we do on this issue. We also know that if Hungarian peoples' democracy sets out a goal on its agenda, it will also address it. Hungarian peoples' democracy has now placed on its agenda the restraint and liquidation of Mindszentyist reaction...²²⁹

Gerő, like the editor of *Szabad Nép* and other Communist leaders, had been intent on creating the impression that a whole chorus of faithful Catholics opposed and condemned Mindszenty's uncompromising policy towards the Communists. This demonstrated that despite enjoying near complete power of all aspects of government, the Communist Party still sought to legitimize itself before Catholic voters, which even the rigged 1947 election demonstrated had the power and unity to send the fledgling and pro-Catholic Democratic Peoples' Party to parliament with over 16 percent of the vote. The Communist Party's efforts to project the image of a Catholic populace largely supportive and even encouraging of Communist policies regarding Mindszenty's removal also served to prepare popular opinion for Mindszenty's looming arrest and take the wind out of the sails of any resistance.

²²⁸ “A zalaegerszegi és szegedi katolikus fiatalok elítélik Mindszenty uszító politikáját,” (The Catholic Youth of Zalaegerszeg and Szeged Condemn Mindszenty's War-mongering Politics), *Szabad Nép*, November 21, 1948, 6.

²²⁹ “A Magyar demokrácia a Mindszenty-reakció megfékezésének és felszámolásának feladatát is megoldja,” (Hungarian Democracy Will Solve the Task of Restraining and Liquidating Mindszenty-style reaction), *Szabad Nép*, November 23, 1948, 3.

In a lengthy speech given to leaders of the Hungarian Workers' Party and printed in *Szabad Nép* on November 28, Rákosi confirmed what Gerő had declared only four days prior in Szeged.

The politics of patience, which treated the spies, traitors, foreign currency smugglers, Habsburg sympathizers, fascists and the followers of the old, reactionary regime, all dressed up in priestly robes, with leniency is over. And over are the days when laws only struck down on the lower-level clerical criminals and did not touch the ones in higher offices... The disturbances to reconstruction and stability, as caused by such an organization of fascism and reaction as that, which queues up behind Mindszenty is incompatible with today's circumstances.²³⁰

All the charges brought up in Rákosi's speech—including espionage, crimes related to foreign currencies, a festering Habsburg conspiracy and treason—were identical to the charges levied against Mindszenty almost precisely a month later at the time of his arrest. Rákosi appeared to be preparing the population for what was to come.

The press was a central tool in the Communist campaign to remove Mindszenty from office, just as it had played a crucial role during the long series of uncovered conspiracies and investigations related to Catholic institutions during the spring and summer of 1946. The Communists employed a three-fold media strategy. Firstly, the readers were shown evidence of growing division within the Church and the existence of numerous Catholic groups adamantly opposed to Mindszenty and his anticommunist bias. Secondly, the party launched a campaign to “bring to light” evidence of criminal activities and conspiracies within those corners of the Church that most people would least suspect of harbouring such treacherous designs. Finally, the Communist Party had to demonstrate how tolerant it had been with Mindszenty and his allies, how much the

²³⁰ “Vége a türelemnek a Mindszenty-fasisztákkal szemben,” (Our Patience towards the Mindszenty-Fascists is Over), *Szabad Nép*, November 28, 1948, 4.

cardinal abused the Party's leniency and that Hungarian Communists fully respected the Catholic faith, but wished only to cleanse it of its "criminal" elements.

A report on December 3, only a few days after the *Szabad Nép* issue, which devoted its first four pages in their entirety to Rákosi's speech, discussed at once both a treasonous conspiracy within a rosary-prayer circle and provided information on yet another grassroots organization vocally opposed to Mindszenty. The two articles appeared immediately next to each other, thus demonstrating two of the three strategies the Communist Party employed in its media coverage of relations between the Church and State. *Szabad Nép* reported on how in Csepel, a lower-class, industrial district of Budapest, rosary prayer circles became venues for agitation, with the very knowledge of the local parish priests.²³¹ Repeating verbatim Rákosi's warning, the paper declared that "our patience is over."²³²

Yet Mindszenty's patience also seemed to be coming to an end. In a pastoral letter of November 18, the cardinal not only flatly denied all allegations, but also declared that the so-called resolutions against the Church leadership, allegedly obtained from various Catholic groups, were fraudulent.

For many weeks attempts have been made to stage "resolutions" directed against me in all the townships and village communities of Hungary. I am blamed for counter-revolutionary plots and activities hostile to the people, because of the Marian celebrations in 1947-1948...As to the legal aspect of these "resolutions," it should be noted...the signatures on them have been wrung from people under threats of loss of bread and liberty. The country is condemned to silence and public opinion is made a mere frivolous jest...I look on calmly at this artificial whipping up of the waves.²³³

²³¹ 'Rózsafüzér ajtatóságok,' vagy uszító összejövetelek (Pious Rosary Gatherings, or Meetings Aimed at Agitation), *Szabad Nép*, December 3, 1948, 9.

²³² *Ibid.*, 9.

²³³ Statement of November 18, 1948, Mindszenty, 319.

Mindszenty's claims regarding the false nature of the protests from various quarters regarding the Church leadership did not end the Communist allegations, but further fuelled them instead. On December 10, *Szabad Nép* reported that the arts students of Pázmány Péter (Catholic) University of Sciences, the Catholic youth of a state-run secondary school, the representative of the workers at the state railway company, the staff at a hospital in Budapest as well as an exhaustive list of other companies, schools, factories and Catholic youth groups all called on the government to take concrete action against Mindszenty.²³⁴

Despite this attempt to frame the situation as to demonstrate that the state had merely acted on the popular will by removing Mindszenty, these efforts to prove that the state had received a mandate from the people were perfunctory and formed part of a larger process of legitimization. This was especially important in light of the existence of a still significant religious voting block, as proved by the 1947 elections. The party had acted out of a long-held conviction that Mindszenty represented the most serious threat to Communist hegemony in postwar Hungary. Rákosi noted in his memoirs that Hungarian Communists had been familiar with the infamous cardinal even when he had been but a parish priest under his original ethnic German name of József Pehm.

Mindszenty was an old acquaintance of ours. We first heard of him in the early 1920s, when he had harassed the Communists of the internment camps then as Zalaegerszeg's parish priest, by the name of József Pehm. Before the First World War, the men of the movement had become familiar with his type of chaplain—the uneducated, dark, devourer of workers, hater of socialism, the young, argumentative village and small town parish priest.²³⁵

²³⁴ "Mindszenty eltávolítását követelték az érseki helynöknél járt munkásküldöttségek," (Workers' Delegations Demanded Mindszenty's Removal), *Szabad Nép*, December 10, 1948, 3.

²³⁵ Rákosi, 516.

Even in the 1920s, Pehm represented to the Communists the worst characteristics of the Catholic Church and the embodiment of the intransigent, primitive and renegade behaviour that they associated with both the Catholic youth of the time and—as demonstrated in the events of 1946—a generation of Catholic teenagers coming of age in the fledgling days of postwar Hungary.

While in the interwar period Pehm had been the enthusiastic supporter of the regime and among the most fervent opponents of the Communists, in the postwar period the cardinal proved to be the point of convergence between an ominous past and a potentially treacherous future. Mindszenty, the most blatant symbol of the past, had to be removed as there remained no place for anyone in postwar Hungary who, as Rákosi asserted, carried the burden, of a “reactionary, fascist friendly past,” especially if appointed by the “reactionary” Pope Pius XII.²³⁶

A persistent media campaign—with the aim of preparing the population for the impending action to be taken by the Communist Party—appears to be the favoured way by which the Party sought to quell any public protest. The Communist Party used this method during the investigations against Catholic youth organizations in 1946. This strategy also served as the purpose behind the onslaught of articles in *Szabad Nép* focusing on the alleged popular demands by various groups—many of them Catholic—calling on the government to take swift action against Mindszenty, while other reports detailed subversive activities within Church organizations. Among those who publically condemned Mindszenty were respected intellectuals, namely composer Zoltán Kodály, historian Gyula Szekfű and author József Cavallier.²³⁷ All three were known as practicing

²³⁶ Rákosi, 201.

²³⁷ Mindszenty, 84.

Catholics and Cavallier had actually been the editor of a Catholic periodical during the interwar period. Yet on December 8, 1948, the three travelled to Mindszenty's residence in Esztergom where Cavallier acted as the spokesperson for the small delegation. Szekfü attempted to convince the cardinal that the Church must come to appreciate the new power-relations in postwar Hungary and should hence be more willing to cooperate with the Communists. He also pointed to the end of religious persecution in the Soviet Union and to the example of cordial relations between the Orthodox Church and the CPSU.²³⁸ Mindszenty, unmoved by their efforts to convince him of adopting a more conciliatory approach insinuated that "excommunication also follows for participating in an intrigue against a cardinal of the Catholic Church."²³⁹

What was occurring proved to be more than mere intrigue, but rather a well laid out plan ready to arrest Mindszenty. Already on November 18, the political police swept up the cardinal's secretary, András Zakar, while on his way home from mass and took him into custody at ÁVO headquarters on Andrásy Boulevard in Budapest. On December 16, during a meeting of the Council of Bishops, officers were stationed along the road leading up to the Episcopal palace. When the bishops departed following a lunch with the cardinal, the police officers individually stopped and searched their cars. By this time, Mindszenty saw his impending arrest as inevitable and urged the council to refrain from signing any concordat with the Hungarian government and to ensure that all priests reject any salaries or other benefits offered by to them by the state.²⁴⁰

The final step before the cardinal's arrest was the search of the Episcopal palace by officers of the secret police on December 23. Police Colonel Gyula Décsi led and

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

coordinated the search. With him came Zakár, who led the police through the building and down to the cellar where the police uncovered a long, metal cylinder buried beneath the basement. The cylinder formed the centre of the investigation against Mindszenty and proved to be one of the most convenient visuals employed by the Communist press to provide their readership with evidence of the conspiratorial and subversive activities of the Church leadership. Yet, as Mindszenty later wrote, such cylinders contained the deeds of sale for the archiepiscopal residences, blueprints of Catholic buildings and official documentation of real estates belonging to the Church and these were kept in metal containers in order to protect and preserve these irreplaceable documents.²⁴¹ In fact, such cylinders were the standard method of archiving material in the palace and there were many of them, some empty, being stored on the second floor.

Three days after Mindszenty's arrest on December 26, the ominous cylinder appeared on the front-page of *Szabad Nép*. The photo showed Zakár and archivist János Fábrián, one of two priests arrested during the search on December 23, standing on either side of the cylinder. Both men, dressed in identical black overcoats and black hats, stared expressionlessly into the camera. The paper, which published verbatim the interior ministry's press release, claimed that upon opening the cylinder, police had uncovered Mindszenty's "secret document collection" which provided evidence of the cardinal's legitimist plans to restore the Habsburg monarchy in Hungary. The cylinder apparently contained documents confirming that as early as 1945, Mindszenty sought to make contact with Otto von Habsburg, whom he finally met in person during a visit to Chicago on June 21, 1947. Here Mindszenty and Otto discussed their plans to restore the monarchy and the cardinal detailed his efforts to date regarding the preparations for the

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

legitimist coup.²⁴² According to the interior ministry, Otto von Habsburg and Mindszenty's plans were rather intricate and even included a proposal for the United States to create a multi-ethnic and federative Central European kingdom, under the leadership of the Habsburg dynasty, following a third world war, which both men agreed was inevitable.²⁴³

After his meeting with Otto, Mindszenty traveled to New York where he discussed his ideas with Francis Cardinal Spellman and allegedly signed a hand-written document stating that Otto von Habsburg would be "authorized to represent Hungarian Catholics living abroad and especially here in the United States."²⁴⁴ Also involved in the legitimist conspiracy and subsequently arrested and charged was Miklós Beresztócy, director of Actio Catholica's Budapest branch, pastor Béla Ispánky, Miklós Nagy, secretary for Actio Catholica, János Várady, Jesuit monk, Pál Eszterházy, landowner, university professor Jusztin Baranyai as well János Fábián and priest Imre Bóka, who had been arrested at the Episcopal palace on December 23.

In addition to the charge of organizing a legitimist conspiracy and treason, Mindszenty and his "accomplices" were also charged with selling foreign currency on the black market.²⁴⁵ Curiously, the charges against the cardinal never mentioned fascism, or fascist connections, despite the fact that since the end of the war this had been the primary allegation against the cardinal. Nowhere was there a lurking fascist conspiracy—which is what the Communist Party had been most concerned about in regards to the Catholic Church--but the cardinal *was* found to be at the very centre of an impending

²⁴² "Mindszenty beismerő vallomást tett," (Mindszenty Has Confessed), *Szabad Nép*, December 29, 1948,

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²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

legitimist coup and—even more peculiarly—a money laundering scandal. The Communists had never before accused Mindszenty of engaging in fraud. After years of accusing the cardinal of being reactionary and a fascist sympathizer—leaving most to assume that these charges would one day form the basis of his indictment--the Communist Party ultimately had him arrested on largely unrelated grounds. One is led to wonder whether party leaders—who had prepared the population for Mindszenty’s arrest by virtue of their speeches and articles—felt that they had to justify the cardinal’s arrest and that simply indicting him on the grounds of the legitimist conspiracy would, on its own, not suffice. This would appear to be the logic behind the money-laundering charge, which appears rather out of place.

Mindszenty’s trial took place from February 3 to 9, though even before the trial, the government alleged that the cardinal had confessed to committing all the crimes for which he had been charged. In a letter—later found to have been fabricated—ostensibly written and signed by Mindszenty and addressed to István Riesz, minister of justice, the cardinal acknowledged the charges against him and petitioned the minister for leniency. “I voluntarily confess that I did in fact commit the offenses with which I am charged. In the future I promise to exercise greater restraint in commenting on the internal and foreign affairs of this nation. I promise to respect the sovereignty of the Republic of Hungary.”²⁴⁶ Mindszenty later recounted in his memoirs that the letter had been a forgery and was used in order to off set the effects of a brief, handwritten statement that Mindszenty wrote at the Episcopal palace only hours before his arrest. “I will not renounce my archiepiscopal see. I have nothing to confess, and I will sign nothing. If

²⁴⁶ *Mindszenty a népbíróság előtt*, (Mindszenty before the Peoples’ Tribunal), Pannon Kiadó, Budapest: 1989, 83-84.

nevertheless I should some day do so, that will only be a consequence of the human body's weakness, and I declare it in advance null and void."²⁴⁷

Mindszenty did, in fact, concede to having succumbed to the frequent beatings and sleep deprivation that characterized Commander Gábor Péter's prison, torture chambers and ÁVO headquarters at the ominous building located at 60 Andrassy Boulevard. At the trial, Mindszenty had no energy to defend himself and most of what he said during the hearings could be construed as confessions, even if he never quoted the contents of his alleged letter of January 29. His state-appointed defense attorney, Kálmán Kiczko, entered a guilty plea for his client. Kiczko argued that Mindszenty should be shown clemency since he had been "a victim of the Vatican...the defendant lived in an ivory tower and therefore failed to observe the great progress and reconstruction of the country...he was an inexperienced cleric who rose to the highest office in the church...he confirms what the prosecutor has frequently stressed: there is no religious persecution in Hungary."²⁴⁸ Kiczko's "defense" of Mindszenty and his calls for leniency did not save his client from a life sentence in a penitentiary. His work did, however, contribute to the overall impression among some foreign journalists and in the western press that the Mindszenty affair amounted to a show trial.

Yet when on December 26, 1948 the political police arrested Mindszenty, an eerie silence fell over the Hungarian Catholic press. After nearly four years of offering explicit critiques of Communist policies towards the Church and fervently denying all allegations levied against the Church leadership, and Catholicity more generally, *Új Ember's* coverage of the cardinal's arrest and the accusations of his involvement in various

²⁴⁷ Mindszenty *Memoirs*, 127.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 134-135.

schemes to overthrow the new regime amounted to a two-sentence news brief in the weekly's January 2, 1949 issue.

The surprising news had aired first in the 10 o'clock radio news program on Monday, December 27. Following this, the Interior Ministry's press release-- which noted that the charges included 'treason, criminal acts aimed at overthrowing the republic, espionage and having illicitly used foreign currency'-- was made available in the morning daily, *Világosság*.²⁴⁹

The largest Catholic weekly stated dispassionately the most basic facts of Mindszenty's arrest and refrained from commenting on the allegations in any form. Moreover, *Új Ember* abstained from elaborating on whether news of the cardinal's arrest would have been "surprising" due to the incredulous nature of the allegations against Mindszenty, or else because they were shocked to hear that the spiritual leader of the Hungarian Catholic Church could possibly be at the centre of such corruption and criminal activity. In either case, for *Új Ember* to remain silent during the imprisonment of the highest authority of the Catholic Church in Hungary on such incredible grounds, when the paper had been consistently bellicose on other issues regarding relations between the Church and the Communists, is a peculiar turn of events. The weekly's decision not to comment on the events may also be attributed to the fact that Mihalovich, president of Actio Catholica, the same organization that published *Új Ember*, had only recently fled Hungary and taken refuge in western Europe.

Új Ember's first 1949 issue and its handling of Mindszenty's arrest reflects a noticeable change in tone towards the Communist Party, which was by then solidly in control of the government and the police and had removed its primary political

²⁴⁹ "Őrizetben vették Mindszenty hercegprímást," (Cardinal Mindszenty has been Taken into Custody) *Új Ember*, January 2, 1949, 1.

opponents, including the Smallholders and centrists within the by then defunct Social Democratic Party. The paper's front-page article was an uncharacteristically ambiguous piece, elusively examining the future of Hungarian Catholicism in light of recent difficulties, and the appropriate way in which members of the Church should respond to these challenges.

Amidst the trials and tribulations, the new face of Hungarian Catholicism is being formed; not simply in a few exceptional cases, but among the great masses... We, Hungarian Catholics, have no time to stop, ponder, start counting and weighing. The fast pace of the events will catch up with us to a such an extent in the new year that we will have no time to philosophize. Without the use of any predictions or horoscopes, we can see that the coming months will not prove pleasant for us. Yet one thing we do know: all the trappings of a deeper, more valuable Catholic society are in the making, among both the priesthood and the laity... Many thought—and still maintain today—if the Hungarian Catholic Church loses this or that institution, it would fall apart. Yet after we take a hit, after a scandal rises to the surface and when we are challenged, it becomes evident that the Church's power does not wane at all.²⁵⁰

Yet by 1949, the Church's power *had* waned and this was most evident in the fact that the largest Catholic periodical proved unwilling and unable to offer any meaningful critique of the government's anticlericalism and demonstrate even a glimmer of skepticism regarding the spectacular allegations levied against the Cardinal. *Új Ember* greeted its readership on the threshold of a new year with vague hints of difficulties to come, but the ultimate image of a triumphant Church, even whilst the highest authority of Hungarian Catholicism sat in prison awaiting a trial of potentially damning nature for the entire Catholic establishment.

Unlike the Communist dailies, *Új Ember* offered no editorial critique of Mindszenty's trial and the allegations against the Cardinal. Instead, the paper called upon its readers to remain calm and to await for the official word of the Council of Bishops.

²⁵⁰ "Ez új esztendőben," (In This New Year), *Új Ember*, January 2, 1949, 1.

There has hardly been an event in Hungarian history that called for greater tranquility and composure from Catholic public opinion than this. This tranquility and demure has been characteristic of Catholic public opinion up until now. We cannot doubt that it will maintain this same approach in the future, despite the fact, that deep down in the Catholic soul, there is great pain, since the Church's cardinal, the prince primate, hence the Church's highest pastor, finds himself at the centre of a criminal case. Loyalty to the Church, in fact, demands this calmness from us, because only the Council of Bishops is authorized to speak in the name of the Church.²⁵¹

Új Ember ceded the right to comment on the Mindszenty affair to the bishops, even though it had been far less circumspect in the past when publishing editorial pieces rebutting Communist allegations against the Church. The paper's reasoning—that only the Council of Bishops had the authority to speak in the name of the Church—is misplaced, since *Új Ember* was not the official organ of the Church, and therefore the writings appearing therein represented, at most, the views of Actio Catholica, the weekly's publisher, and not those of the Church hierarchy. The editors, however, feared that its reputation as the Catholic weekly, would mean that any editorials on its part could be misconstrued to imply precisely this official sanction.²⁵²

Yet the weekly's stance reflected the weakened status of an editorial board, which operated under the looming prospect of being shut down by the political police. Péntes Balduin noted that in 1949, *Új Ember's* editors were summoned on a weekly basis to the local Budapest branch of the ÁVO, Hungary's restructured secret police, and were told to publish specific, government-friendly articles—failing this, the police would revoke, or suspend, the paper's license.²⁵³

²⁵¹ "Fájdalommal és nyugalommal," (*With Pain and Composure*), *Új Ember*, January 9, 1949, 1.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁵³ Elemér Szeghalmi, *Keresztény küzdelmek és megtorpanások, 1945-1956*, (*Christian Struggles and Failures, 1946-1956*), *Új Ember Kiadó*, Budapest: 2000, 71-72.

Új Ember waited for the Council of Bishops to speak out on Mindszenty's arrest, rather than drawing its own conclusions on the newest attempt by the Communists to strike a lethal blow at the remaining authority and credibility of the Church. Hungary's bishops, however, led by Bishop Grósz—who had been the most willing of Catholic leaders to arrive at a *modus vivendi* with the Communists—offered little guidance on this issue. Their approach can be characterized as passive resistance, which at once declared that it would not cede the Church's basic rights and that the faithful should “maintain their Christian tranquility when faced with the circumstances of all challenges.”²⁵⁴ The Bishops' message was essentially identical to that found in *Új Ember*, while the non-confrontational tone of the declaration provided a striking contrast to the furious, unapologetic tone of letters written under Mindszenty's tenure as head of the Council of Bishops.

The DNP's paper, *Hazánk*, also refused to comment on Mindszenty's arrest. In the January 7, 1949 issue, the DNP declared that “it is not for the party to pass judgment” on the charges levied against the cardinal, even though the news of Mindszenty's arrest “filled the party with sadness.”²⁵⁵

The Hungarian bishops proved nearly as unwilling to comment unfavourably, and in an explicit manner, on the way in which the arrest, investigation and trial were conducted, and on the nature of the allegations, as the country's pro-Catholic press. Nevertheless, Pope Pius XII and the Vatican seemed far more prepared to offer a summary condemnation of Hungary's justice system. On December 28, 1948, two days

²⁵⁴ *Circulares Dioecesanac* 1, 1949. január 10, in: *1949—Vallás, Egyházak* (1949-Religion, Churches), Small Prints Collection, National Széchenyi Library, Budapest.

Jenő Gergely, *A politikai katolicizmus Magyarországon, 1890-1950*, (Political Catholicism in Hungary, 1890-1950), Kossuth Kiadó, Budapest: 1977, 273.

²⁵⁵ “Egyház és állam,” (Church and State), *Hazánk*, January 7, 1949, 1.

following Mindszenty's arrest, the Vatican issued a brief declaration, in which it asserted that "all those who dared to raise their hand against the Bishop of Esztergom in an aggressive and sacrilegious manner and who thus hindered his authority bestowed upon him by the Church, have brought upon themselves excommunication by the Holy See."²⁵⁶ The excommunication was reiterated on February 9, the day following Mindszenty's conviction. The list of those to be summarily cast out of the Church included all who took part, or would in the future take part—in any capacity—in carrying out Mindszenty's sentence, which the Vatican saw as no less than a criminal act.²⁵⁷ The Church cast a wide net in terms of who it would consider guilty in being an accessory to Mindszenty's detention, in the hope that some Hungarian Catholics involved in the prison administration, or other facets of Hungarian justice would prove uncooperative with the higher authorities.

Pius XII commented on the Mindszenty trial on February 14, 1949 during a secret consistorium, shortly after the tribunal reached a guilty verdict against Mindszenty and his co-defendants.

A grievous crime has been committed against your illustrious college, the Roman Catholic Church, and all defenders of the freedom and dignity of man....József Mindszenty, archbishop of Esztergom, has been wantonly thrown into prison... You all know that somewhere behind closed doors his captors determined the fate of this prince of the Church, who struggled so nobly to restore the Christian faith and Christian morals to the land of Hungary...The proceedings are being conducted with great haste, and the arguments of the prosecution appear specious and sophistical...Clearly the authorities are conducting this trial in order to confuse and disarm Hungarian Catholics. They are pursuing the policy described in Holy

²⁵⁶ "Sacra Congregatio Consistorialis," *Mindszenty József, Biboros, Esztergomi Érsek, Magyarország Hercegségének pere*, (The Trial of József Mindszenty, Bishop, Archbishop of Esztergom, Hungary's Prince Primate's Trial), Vic. Gen. Civitatis Vaticanae, Rome: 1949, (Electronic Edition) <http://www.katolikus.hu/mjpere.html#m2>, Published on: July 24, 2004.

²⁵⁷ "10. Sacra Congregatio Consistorialis," *Ibid.*

Scripture, “I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad” (Mt 26: 31).²⁵⁸

Pius XII, who in turn supported the conciliatory policies of some Catholic organizations, such as KALOT and the agrarian youth movement, as well as Mindszenty’s more steadfast opposition to the Communists, now found himself at the very centre of the Cold War. He staked his ground clearly on the side of the West.

The Vatican remained unmoved by attempts on the part of Hungary’s Communist government to put a damper on international criticism of the Mindszenty trial—and perhaps also in order not to risk completely alienating rural Catholics—by asserting that the Hungarian government would have been willing to release Mindszenty and send him off to Rome had the Vatican explicitly demanded this route of action.²⁵⁹ The Communist Party’s alleged offer—made public by József Révai, editor of *Szabad Nép*, at a mass meeting—indicates that despite the obvious weakness of the Church, which had just lost its leader, its land, much of its source of income and its youth organizations, the Communists still did not enjoy total hegemony and a completely free hand, even as late as 1949. Révai still felt that he and his party may yet be held accountable for its actions against the Catholic Church. The *L’Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican’s daily, mused that Révai’s words provide key evidence that the government desired nothing else other than to remove Mindszenty from power through any means—including imprisonment, or exile

²⁵⁸ Pronouncement of Pius XII, February 14, 1919 in “Documents,” József Cardinal Mindszenty, *Memoirs*, MacMillan Publishing Co.: New York, 1974, 327-28.

²⁵⁹ “Válasz egy támadásra,” (Response to an Attack), *L’Osservatore Romano*, February 16, 1949, as printed in: *Mindszenty József, Biboros, Esztergomi Érsek, Magyarország Hercegprímásának pere*, (The Trial of József Mindszenty, Bishop, Archbishop of Esztergom, Hungary’s Prince Primate’s Trial).

to Rome--hence undermining the credibility of the actual allegations levied against the cardinal.²⁶⁰

In spite of the Communist Party's efforts to avoid alienating the country's Catholic population by regularly justifying their actions against the Church leadership in 1948, the Church had been severely weakened. With the threat of force and an increasingly powerful political police, formulators of Catholic public opinion, such as *Új Ember*, increasingly fell silent. After Mindszenty's arrest, even the Council of Bishops ceded all willingness to resist the new regime. Yet the threat of force was only one of the methods employed by the Communist Party to bring the Church in line with the new regime. The Communist Party's keen awareness of how to employ the press in an offensive aimed at building on existing divisions within the Church, as well as its efforts at preemptively quelling any popular resistance to its dismantling of clerical authority, proved equally crucial in ensuring the passivity of a population that may otherwise have been inclined to actively protest the government's actions against the Catholic Church. Hence, the Communist Party successfully used a combination of force and an effective media campaign in silencing Catholic opposition and hindering any defense on the part of Church.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, "Válasz egy támadásra," (Response to an Attack), *L'Osservatore Romano*, February 16, 1949.

Conclusion

A cultural and political struggle characterized the period between 1945 and 1949. The conservative Church leadership and affiliated Catholic organizations spent these years on the defensive, countering the attacks of a nascent Communist Party bent on securing its power in postwar Hungary. Communist politicians, arising from hiding and returning from exile in the Soviet Union following the end of the autocratic Horthy regime, had been bolstered by the presence of the Red Army and by the Party's use of both an extensive party press and its control of the political police and interior ministry. With their party press and the control of key ministries in the coalition governments following the 1945 and 1947 elections, the Communist Party promoted its campaign of removing its opponents, which it justified as a necessary step in the denazification of Hungary. Communist leaders were also able to implement investigations and arrests against the party's opponents by eliciting the support of the country's police force and local administrations.

In 1945, the onslaught of accusations in the Communist press concerning the Church's past and its relationship with the autocratic, right-wing Horthy regime, as well the more severe allegations of the Church's alleged gravitation to fascist and Nazi elements during the war, set the framework and created the context in which the Communist Party first discredited and then gradually dissolved the Catholic establishment. The party's widely publicized campaign to eliminate "reactionary elements" from society—a catch-all phrased used to describe anyone with suspected sympathies to any aspect of the previous regime, including alleged fascists, Nazis, legitimists and, indeed, all opponents of the Communist Party—regularly found the

Church to be among its primary targets. The amount of press coverage dedicated to exposing Church-led “conspiracies” against the State and discrediting religious leaders indicates that the Party saw the Catholic Church as a major opponent in postwar Hungary.

The dissolution of the Church’s power in Hungary occurred incrementally. Nevertheless, the conflict between the Catholic Church and the Communist Party, as well as the latter’s gradual dismemberment of the Catholic establishment followed a discernable pattern. First, Communist allegations of fascist sympathies within the Church and news of Catholic participation in dubious, “terrorist” activities, aimed to discredit the Church and ecclesiastical leaders. These scandalous reports also served to justify the Party’s impending action against the Church, before a population not yet won over by the Communist Party, as demonstrated in both the 1945 and 1947 elections. Second, the Communist Party used its control of the interior ministry and the political police to launch intimidating and intrusive investigations against Catholics and Church institutions. The first aspect of the conflict represented the rhetorical, verbal attack. The second aspect relied not on words, but on concrete force and power to attain the desired goal.

The Catholic Church vigorously defended itself when faced with Communist attacks. It did this by outlining its own interpretation of the interwar past and distancing itself from the fascist elements of the previous regime. The Church strained to show that the Church stood diametrically opposed to Nazism, which it painted as pagan and entirely un-Christian in its morals, and anti-Catholic in its actions. Moreover, the Church promoted a view of history that saw the interwar past as *partly* salvageable, with some of its traditions of instructive value for the postwar period. This is the point that rendered

any compromise between the Party and the Church unlikely. For the Communists, the past—and all values and institutions associated with it—had to be discarded and rejected in its entirety, if the Party wished to maintain its view that the postwar period meant a radical and revolutionary reorganization of a society. For the Church, the interwar regime's reverence of Christian symbols and its respect for ecclesiastic authorities—especially in the field of education—were all positive aspects of the recent past, upon which to construct Hungary's postwar future. Without this interpretation of the past, Catholic leaders lacked the solid foundation afforded by a historical precedent, upon which they could build their case for the Church's continued influence in society.

Most of the debate between the Church and the Communists took place in the Catholic and Party press. Although the Party did not enjoy a political hegemony during much of the period under discussion, it did enter into the conflict with the Church at a distinct advantage. The Party's control of the interior ministry meant that Communists would enjoy a significant degree of influence in regulating the publishing licenses of the country's periodicals, as well as rationing the amount of paper each journal would receive for the purposes of publication. In the case of *Új Ember* and the Jesuit weekly, *A Szív*, both the paper shortage and the looming possibility of having their publication license suspended hindered their respective responses to Communist attacks against Catholic institutions and also placed them at a disadvantage in the promotion of Catholic political and social ideals and an alternative vision for postwar Hungary.

Despite the difficulties, the Church leadership did not shirk from defending itself when faced with Communist allegations and it did so primarily through its remaining organs as well as through speeches and addresses during commemorations, ceremonies

and other Church events. For the most part, the Church remained on the defensive throughout the entire period, though it also implicitly offered critiques of the Communist Party and of the Marxist ideology.

Immediately following the war, the Church found itself as the last standing pillar of the old regime. More “progressive” elements within the Church—namely, the writers and editors of *Új Ember*—realized the negative implications of being associated with a discredited and badly tainted regime. These writers and intellectuals sought to start afresh at the end of the War and even reflected this desire in the name of their fledgling publication, *Új Ember*, or *New Man*. Yet the editors of *Actio Catholica*’s weekly soon realized that they could hardly avoid engaging in a debate on the Church’s role in the past.

The end of the War may have been a watershed, but it certainly did not offer a *tabula rasa* to the Church. The Communist press projected the devastation wrought by the genocidal Arrow Cross government of 1944-45 onto the entire preceding quarter-century. The Horthy regime and its most enthusiastic supporters were now directly responsible for the rise of Nazism in Hungary and, in effect, for its ascendancy throughout continental Europe. The last of these enthusiastic supporters still standing in 1945 was the Catholic Church.

The Communist charges and the Catholic rebuttals need not have necessarily constituted a *Kulturkampf*—they could have instead remained at the level of a dialogue or discourse about the past. Nevertheless, the respective views of history held by both the Church and the Communists meant that conciliation was impossible. While the Church’s central argument stated that some of the values during the interwar period could serve as

guideposts during the construction of postwar Hungary, the Communists felt that Hungary's most recent history had to be dismissed in its entirety, repudiated without condition and that institutions associated with the Horthy regime had to be purged of all elements in any way nostalgic of the interwar past. As it so happened, the Church truly was the last standing "pillar" of the old regime and the authors and editors of the largest Catholic weekly, *Új Ember*, recognized this as a major liability.

When by 1946 the war crimes trials had come to an end, the Communist Party shifted focus and launched what bore the characteristics of a coordinated campaign against confessional schools and Catholic youth organizations. News of fascist conspiracies and uncovered terrorist plots against the new democratic regime surfaced daily in the Communist press. The public discourse on Hungary's interwar past was supplemented with the fear that the most dangerous elements of this period were on the verge of returning, as a result of the Church's 'renegade' activities. In 1946 both the Church leadership and Communist politicians saw themselves as engaging in a cultural struggle, which would prove critical in defining postwar power relations in Hungary.

Both Mindszenty and his primary Communist opponents—Rákosi and Révai—realized the importance of controlling the country's youth. Therefore, the Communist allegations that fascism and terrorism lurked within Catholic youth associations and confessional schools formed a seminal part of the conflict between the Communists and the Church. The Communists used these allegations to justify its dissolution of the Catholic youth movement. By disbanding KALOT, the Communist Party aimed to remove a major competitor of its own youth wing, MADISZ, while the Church realized that ceding its authority in the field of education and the general upbringing of Hungarian

youth meant the loss of its last vestiges of power in postwar Hungarian society. The possibility of compromise eluded both sides.

By late 1948, KALOT had been dissolved, confessional schools nationalized and, in the eyes of the Communists, Mindszenty became the embodiment of all opposition to the regime. The newly crafted term “Mindszentyism” attached a face to the charges of fascism and clerical reaction within the Church. The Party press attempted to enlist the support of the population—or at least ensure their passivity and indifference—so that the regime would have a free hand in removing the cardinal from his office. The Party’s efforts at convincing the population and seeking legitimization showed that as late as 1948, the Party still felt vulnerable. This was especially true following the August 1947 elections, which demonstrated the popularity of Catholicism and conservatism among rural voters. This Communist vulnerability, combined with the perceived strength of Hungarian Catholicism, even after three years of relentless attacks aimed at weakening the Church, meant that the Cardinal’s removal was now necessary.

Only a few months after Mindszenty’s imprisonment, the Catholic Church also lost Margit Slachta, one of the most vocal opponents of the regime, and the cardinal’s close, conservative ally. When Slachta attempted to run in the May 15, 1949 elections, her candidacy was rejected by government officials. In the early morning hours of June 23, Slachta escaped across the Austrian border along with two other members of the Sisters of Social Service and finally immigrated to the United States on September 16 under the pseudonym Etelka Tóth. Slachta remained active in politics during the first years of her immigrant life and took part in the work of Radio Free Europe under the pseudonym Borbála Nemes. By the late fifties, however, the Hungarian government no

longer saw her as a threat to the regime and in 1958 the interior ministry discarded the sizable collection of documents on the activities of the nun and Catholic parliamentarian, leaving little information for the archives on the police investigations and government reports concerning Slachta and her Camp of Christian Women.²⁶¹ In the last years of her life, Slachta removed herself from politics and died in Buffalo, New York, on January 6 1974.

Following Mindszenty's arrest, the Church was headed by Bishop József Grösz and the Council of Bishops followed a much more conciliatory approach with a Communist Party further strengthened by the Peoples' Front elections of May 1949. The elections served as the standard for the single-party elections to come during the subsequent 40 years and the Church's complete withdrawal from all political debate during the campaign set the stage for the Catholic passivity to the regime that characterized much of the period to come.

During the years of Mindszenty's imprisonment, the Catholic Church of Hungary had changed immeasurably in its relationship to the regime and in its political rhetoric. On November 3, 1956, after Mindszenty's release from prison by revolutionaries during the 1956 uprising, Hungarians were reminded of the difficult relationship between the Church and the Communist Party less than a decade ago, as the cardinal addressed the country in a speech broadcast on radio. "I need not break with my past—by the grace of God I am the same I as I was before my imprisonment...a regime was forced upon us which is now being branded with the red-hot iron of contempt, condemnation and

²⁶¹ Margit Balogh, "A 'Keresztény' feminizmus, Margit Slachta (1884-1974)," ("Christian" Feminism, the Life of Margit Slachta, (1884-1974) *História*, May-June 2000, Electronic version: <http://www.historia.hu/archivum/2000/000506balogh.htm> . Accessed on: February 9, 2005.

renegation (sic.) by its heirs.”²⁶² In contrast to 1945, when the Communists positioned themselves as the accuser against all who had been associated with interwar Hungary, now the cardinal was the one promoting the condemnation of yet another fallen regime. While Mindszenty called for a truly “new start,” including the restoration of the Church’s institutions and its press, he also demanded the bringing to justice of all who had been involved in the Stalinist Rákosi regime.

The cardinal’s escape from prison and his overt support of the revolutionaries meant that he would likely yet again be faced with prison following the establishment of Soviet-bolstered János Kádár government on November 4, 1956. Kádár devoted the four years following the revolution to purging the country of the former rebels and all who had been involved in the brief revolutionary period. On November 4, once Mindszenty had realized that the Soviet troops had once again resumed their positions in Hungary, the cardinal took refuge in the American embassy, located only a few blocks from the Hungarian parliament in Budapest. Once Mindszenty arrived, the US ambassador telephoned Washington and within 15 minutes the Eisenhower administration granted the refugee cardinal political asylum. It is on the fourth floor of this building that Mindszenty would spend the next 15 years of his life, writing his memoirs and regularly saying mass for the US diplomats and the other embassy staff. The cardinal was forbidden from receiving any guests—save his elderly and frail mother, who received permission to visit her son six times during the course of his first four years in the embassy—and he could not send any mail.²⁶³

²⁶² Mindszenty’s Radio Address of November 3, 1956 in: *Memoirs*, 331-332.

²⁶³ Joseph Vecsey and Phyllis Schlafly, *Mindszenty, the Man*, Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation, St. Louis: 1972, 198.

Only on September 29, 1971 was he guaranteed safe passage to Austria and then finally to Rome, where he was at first greeted with both hospitality by cardinals, bishops and, indeed, Pope Paul IV himself. Nevertheless, Mindszenty later noted that he experienced “general indifference” to his cause on the part of the Vatican.²⁶⁴ While Paul IV’s insistence that Mindszenty will “always remain archbishop of Esztergom and Primate of Hungary” may have offered some consolation to the aging cardinal, the Vatican’s refusal to allow him to name suffragan bishops who would tend to the needs of Hungarian Catholics living in the West signaled to him that the Holy See had no desire to “vex the regime in Budapest.”²⁶⁵

While the Vatican carefully avoided unnecessary conflict with the Hungarian government, the Hungarian Catholic Church proved even more wary of enlisting the wrath of the regime. Even in the 1970s, Mindszenty remained a *persona non grata* for the leaders of the Church in Hungary, who feared that the elderly cardinal’s continued vocal opposition to the regime during tours, conferences and various public appearances in Western Europe and North America would provoke government reprisals against the Church. On October 10, 1972, after a series of protests from Hungarian bishops, the papal nuncio in Vienna informed Mindszenty that he must exercise restraint in commenting on the Hungarian regime. Mindszenty, however, refused to curtail his invectives against Hungary’s Communist leaders. The Vatican had by then begun to censor the printed versions of some of the cardinal’s speeches, such as one given in

²⁶⁴ *Memoirs*, 238.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 239- 240.

Portugal during his visit to Fatima, where the nuncio in Lisbon removed a passage in which Mindszenty condemned the state of the Church in Warsaw Pact countries.²⁶⁶

Although Mindszenty continued to visit Hungarian immigrant communities and parishes throughout Canada, the US and Western Europe until his death in 1975, the cardinal whose fervent anti-Communism once elicited the attention of the western press and political leaders now found that his words increasingly fell on deaf ears, as Cold War political realities gravitated towards *détente* and *rapprochement*.

Although beyond the scope of *this* paper, a scholarly examination of how foreign powers viewed Mindszenty in relation to the changing dynamics of the Cold War is a field in need of further development. An examination of the international realities and the case of Cardinal Mindszenty, rather than only Hungarian domestic developments, is one which calls for further analysis, precisely because following his 1949 trial, the cardinal was no longer simply of national importance, but became one who elicited the attention of the international community. Mindszenty's 15 year-long political asylum in downtown Budapest's American Embassy spanned four US administrations, including that of Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Nixon. The fact that such a polarizing figure and emblem of US-Soviet hostilities from the height of the Cold War was granted such an unusually lengthy stay at the embassy in Budapest made for rather strained relations between the American and the Hungarian government. US Department of State documents may provide valuable information on discussions, conversations and debates in Washington regarding Mindszenty's position under American protection and how this situation may influence the changing relationship between the US and the Soviet Union.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 242.

Similarly to the US, the Vatican also appreciated that Mindszenty and his vocal anti-Communism as well as his regular invectives against the Hungarian regime could well become an explosive issue and may have ramifications for Catholic Churches throughout Eastern Europe. As such, an examination of the Vatican's relationship to Mindszenty following his departure from the US embassy may shed light on the way in which the Holy See ultimately accepted a policy of conciliation with Communist regimes.

While Mindszenty may have been a difficult and possibly divisive element for governments keen on ensuring improved relations with Communist states, immigrant Hungarian communities were often seen to have been more unconditional in their reception of the cardinal during his various travels in the 1970s. Hungarian newspapers in North America, as well as local Church bulletins and newsletters remain valuable sources, untouched by researchers interested in what immigrant Hungarians thought of Mindszenty, the self-appointed leader of 1.5 million Hungarian Catholics abroad.

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the Communist Party of Hungary during 1945 and 1949 represented more than a mere historical discourse over the past, a temporary and bridgeable conflict over the future direction of Hungary, or else the process of modernization and secularization in a country arising from a clerical, authoritarian regime. Moreover, it would also be incorrect to see this period as the Communist Party's single-handed and largely unchallenged quest for hegemony. Both sides in the conflict recognized that the future power relations in Hungary, for generations to come, rested on the outcome of a conflict involving opposing views on history and the past, the role of the Church in educating the youth and the place of

Catholic institutions in postwar Hungary. While both sides asserted that they wished to avoid an outright *Kulturkampf*, they also accused the other side of engaging in precisely this and hence both Communist and Catholic leaders took it for granted that a cultural struggle was on the horizon. Indeed, one was, and the Catholic Church found itself faced with difficult odds as the Party systematically discredited its past, chipped away at the credibility of its leaders and institutions, sought to take full use of divisions within the Church and ultimately resorted to force in its deconstruction of the Church. Yet what characterized both sides, were attempts on the part of the Church as well as the Communist Party to justify their positions to the population by filling the pages of their respective papers with the rhetoric of their discourse. Both sides sought legitimization and justification through popular support and hence aimed to “rally their troops” in a conflict whose outcome they knew perfectly well portended magnanimous consequences for their respective futures in postwar Hungary.

Appendix I: Glossary of Names

Apor, Vilmos: Martyred bishop of Győr. During the war, Apor protested the deportation of the city's Jews. Apor was shot dead by Soviet soldiers on Good Friday in 1945, when he tried to save a group of young women hiding in the episcopal residence's cellar from being raped by a band of drunken Soviet soldiers.

Asztalos, János: Pócspetri's parish priest who had been charged with involvement in the Pócspetri riot.

Barankovics, István: Leader of the (Christian) Democratic Peoples' Party (K)DNP.

Baranyai, Jusztinián: University professor and co-defendant at the Mindszenty trial.

Bárdossy, László: Prime minister who, without consulting parliament, declared that Hungary had entered the war in 1942. Bárdossy was executed in 1946 by the Peoples' Tribunal.

Bethlen, István: Conservative prime minister of Hungary, 1921-1931

Berend, Iván: Rabbi, participated in the Jewish Council, which negotiated with the Arrow Cross on ghettoization in 1944.

Beresztócy, Miklós: Director of *Actio Catholica's* Budapest branch and co-defendant during the Mindszenty trial.

Bóka, Imre: Priest, arrested at the Archbishop's palace and co-defendant at the Mindszenty trial.

Cavallier, József: Author, editor of Catholic periodical during the interwar period, who visited Mindszenty prior to his arrest to convince him to conciliate with the Communists.

Czapik, Gyula: Bishop of Eger, later President of the Council of Bishops. Czapik sought to promote a *modus vivendi* with the Communists.

Darvas, József: Communist minister of religion and education

Décsi, Gyula: Police colonel responsible for coordinating the search of the Episcopal Palace prior to Mindszenty's arrest.

Dietzl, László: Student, co-conspirator in the Olafsson 'plot.'

Dinnyés, László: Communist prime minister of Hungary.

Dulácska Endre: Sixteen year-old student charged with amassing hand-grenades at the Piarist School in Budapest, as part of a conspiracy against the new regime.

Eszterházy, Pál: Aristocratic landowner and co-defendant during the Mindszenty trial.

Fábián, János: Episcopal archivist and co-defendant at the Mindszenty trial.

Ferencz, Tibor: The prosecutor Ferenc Szálasi's trial at the People's Tribunal.

Folly, Gábor: Leader of the youth wing of the Smallholders' Party in Budapest's second district and accused of conspiring to overthrow the regime.

Gál, Csaba: Former leader of the Arrow-Cross, executed in 1946.

Gál, István: Teacher at the Piarist School in Budapest who confession during interrogations had been used in an investigation against the order.

Gerő, Ernő: Communist minister of trade.

Grósz, József: Archbishop of Győr and later president of the Council of Bishops.

Kováts, Anna: Communist Party candidate in the 1947 elections.

Habsburg, Otto: The son of King Charles I of Austria (Charles IV of Hungary). Author and intellectual, Otto's name came up during the Mindszenty Trial, where the cardinal was charged with fomenting a legitimist conspiracy during secret meetings with Otto von Habsburg.

Hamvas, Endre: Archbishop of Kalocsa and Bishop of Csanád.

Horthy, Miklós: Authoritarian and conservative Regent of Hungary, 1920-1944.

Imrédy, Béla: Hungarian prime minister and later leader of the radical right executed in 1945 by the peoples' tribunal.

Ispánky, Béla: Catholic pastor and co-defendant during the Mindszenty Trial.

Kerkai Jenő: Jesuit priest, leader of KALOT

Kiczkó, Kálmán: Mindszenty's state-appointed defence attorney.

Kiss Szaléz: Parish priest in Gyöngyös, accused of having participated in a series of assassinations of Soviet soldiers in 1945-1946.

Királyfalvi, Miklós: Pócspetri's village clerk, who was charged with murdering a police officer and was eventually sentenced to death.

Kodály, Zoltán: Composer, Catholic intellectual who visited Mindszenty prior to his arrest.

Kun András: “Father Kun.” A defrocked Minorite priest found guilty of war crimes.

Kun Béla: Communist leader of the short-lived Soviet Republic of 1919.

Ladányi, László: Provincial superior of the Hungarian Minorite Order.

Magasházy, László: Commander of Horthy’s military. Magasházy’s testimony on Horthy’s relationship with Hitler appeared in *Szabad Nép*.

Márton, Áron: Bishop of Transylvania and fierce opponent of Nazism. Protested the deportation of Hungary’s Jews.

Mihalovics, Zsigmond: Director of *Actio Catholica*’s Hungarian chapter.

Mindszenty, József (Pehm): Bishop of Veszprém, then cardinal of the Catholic Church of Hungary after 1945.

Nagy, Ferenc: Smallholder Prime Minister of Hungary, 1945-47.

Nagy, Miklós: Secretary for *Actio Catholica* and co-defendant at the Mindszenty trial.

Nagy, Töhötöm: Jesuit priest, leader of KALOT. Fled Communist persecution and immigrated to South America, where he later stepped out of the Jesuit Order and joined the Free Masons.

Ondik, József: Former Arrow Cross leader held at an internment camp in 1946, who allegedly helped plot Szaléz Kiss’s conspiracy.

Olafsson, Placid: Benedictine monk and teacher.

Ortutay, Gyula: Communist minister of religion and culture.

Papp, László: Seventh-grade teacher at the Piarist School.

Pénzes, Balduin: Benedictine monk, journalist and an editor of *Új Ember*.

Pénzes, István: Eighteen year-old alleged assassin of two members of the Soviet army and believed to have been associated with Catholic youth organizations.

Péter Gábor: Head of the the political police (PRO) and later the ÁVH.

Pius XII (Pacelli): Pope, appointed Mindszenty as Cardinal of Hungary.

Polikarp, Radó: Benedictine monk and journalist for *Új Ember*.

Prónay Pál: Military commander of the “Black Legions of Death” during the White Terror (1919-1921).

Rajk Júlia: Leading figure of Communist women’s associations and wife of the Communist interior minister.

Rajk László: Communist interior minister.

Rákosi, Mátyás: Secretary General of the Hungarian Communist Party

Reményfy László: Sixteen year-old student at the Piarist school in Budapest charged with collecting hand-grenades in a plot against the state.

Riesz, István: Communist minister of justice.

Salkovszky, Iván: Nineteen year old Catholic, accused of leading the conspiracy at the Piarist School.

Schoenfeld, Arthur: U.S. Ambassador to Hungary, the addressee of Mindszenty’s various letters protesting the Communist-led persecution of the Church.

Serédi, Jusztinián: Cardinal of the Catholic Church during World War II.

Shvoy, László: Bishop of Székesfehérvár.

Sík, Sándor: Priest and poet. A founding member of *Új Ember*.

Slachta Margit: Founder of the Sisters of Social Service and the Christian Women’s Camp. First female parliamentarian during the 1920s.

Szálasi, Ferenc: Arrow Cross, Nazi leader of Hungary, 1944-45.

Szakasits Árpád: Leader of the Social Democratic Party. Szakasits cooperated with the Communists.

Szekfű, Gyula: Prolific, left-leaning Catholic historian who, along with other Catholic intellectuals, visited Mindszenty prior to his arrest.

Takács, Gábor: Police officer killed during the Pócspetri riot.

Unden, Miklós: Student, co-conspirator in the Olafsson ‘plot.’

Vágh, József: Jesuit priest accused of conspiring with Olafsson and training terrorists in the Bakony Mountains.

Várady, János: Jesuit monk and co-defendant during the Mindszenty trial.

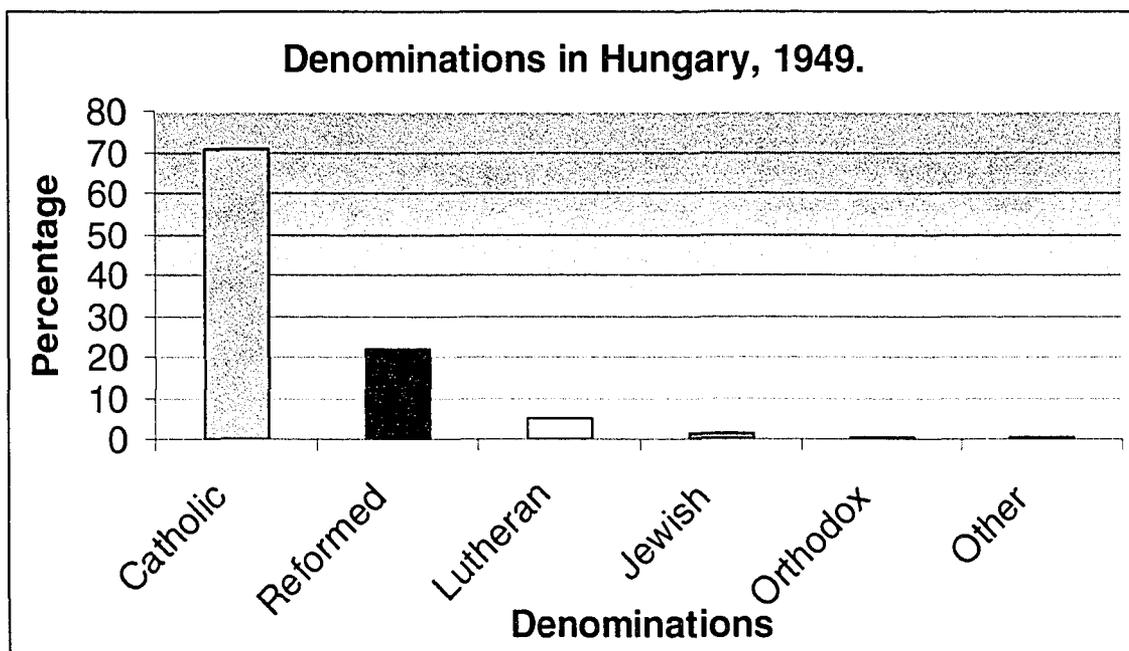
Várhegyi, György: Secretary-General of the (Communist) National Student Alliance.

Wallenberg, Raoul: Swedish diplomat who is credited with saving the lives of thousands of Jews in Budapest during 1944-45, by issuing them forged passports.

Zadravec, István: Proto-fascist, anti-Semitic military bishop, 1920-1926.

Zakár, András: Cardinal Mindszenty's secretary, who was arrested on November 17, 1948 and participated in the police investigation against the cardinal.

Appendix II: Religions in Hungary, 1949*



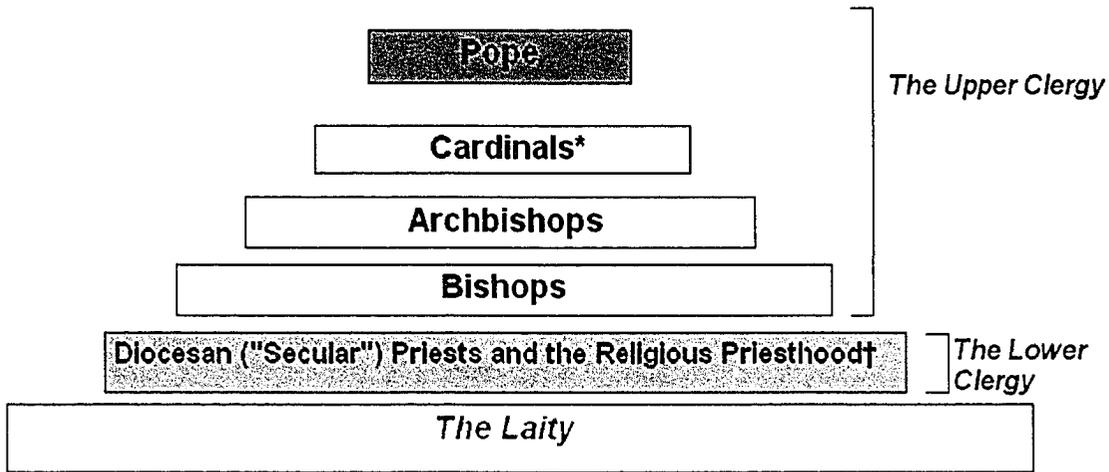
Denomination	Population	Percentage
Catholic (Latin and Greek rites)	6 488 782	70.5%
Reformed (Calvinist)	2 014 707	21.9%
Lutheran	482 152	5.2%
Jewish	133 862	1.5%
Greek Orthodox	36 010	0.4%
Other (Unitarian, Baptist, etc.)	49 286	0.5%

Source: "The Historical Churches in Hungary," Fact Sheets on Hungary 3, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Budapest: 1999.

*The census conducted beginning January 1, 1949, was the last time Hungary's Central Office of Statistics examined the religious break-down of the population. These figures were only updated in 2001, when the office once again began measuring religious affiliation, for the first time after more than 50 years.

Appendix III: The Structure of the Catholic Church

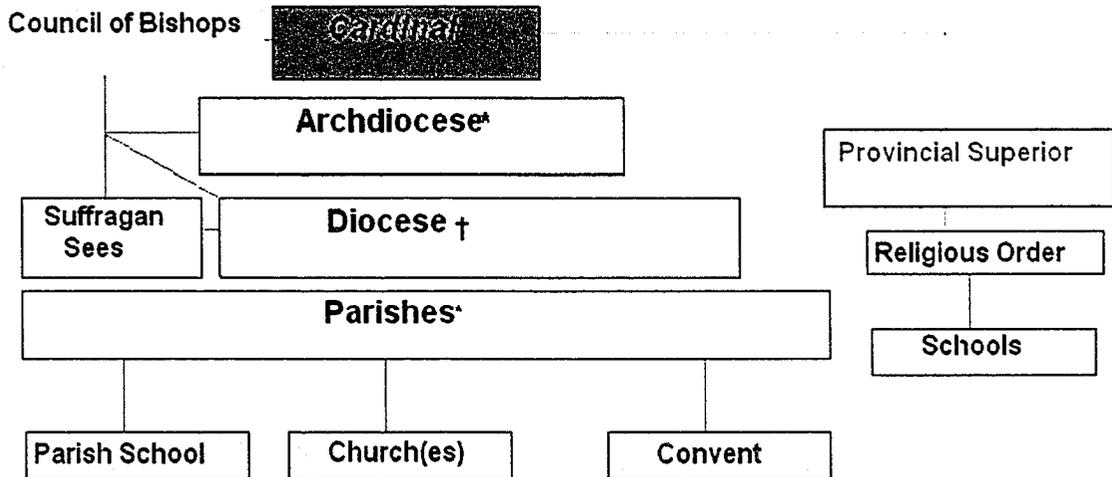
Hierarchical Structure



* A Cardinal may also be referred to as the Prince Primate.

† The “secular” priesthood includes parish priests, while the “religious” priesthood consists of members of religious orders who assume more kerygmatic roles.

Administrative / Territorial Structure of National Churches



*An archdiocese may also be referred to as an Archbishopric.

† A diocese also be referred to as the Bishopric. A “Suffragan See,” or a “Subsidiary See” is a diocese attached to a nearby archdiocese, which is in turn then referred to as the “Metropolitan See.”

Appendix IV: Postwar Parliamentary Elections in 1945 and 1947

Elections 1945

Party	Orientation	Popular Vote	Mandates
Smallholders	Hybrid, Agrarian	57.03	245
Social Democrats	Marxist	17.41	69
Communist Party	Marxist	16.96	70
Peasant Party	Left-wing, Agrarian	6.87	23
Civic Democratic	Conservative	1.62	2
Radical Party	Left-wing	0.12	0

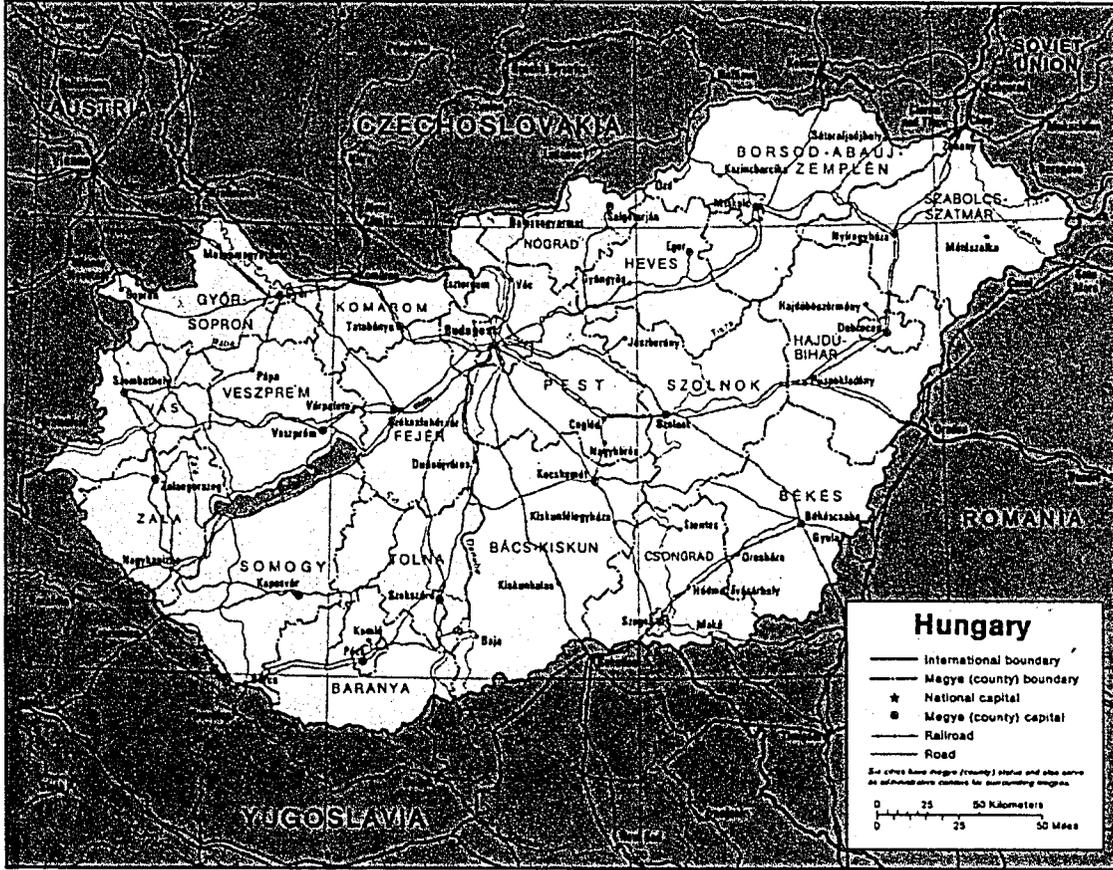
Elections 1947

Party	Orientation	Popular Vote	Mandates
Communist Party	Marxist	22.25	100
Democratic Peoples' Party	Christian-Conservative	16.50	60
Smallholders	Agrarian, Left-wing	15.34	68
Social Democrats	Marxist	14.86	67
Independence Party	Conservative	13.43	49
Peasant Party	Left-wing, Agrarian	8.28	36
Independent Democratic Party	Hybrid, Centre-Left	5.25	18
Radical Party	Left-wing	1.71	6
Christian Women's Camp†	Conservative (Margit Slachta)	1.39	4
Civic Democratic	Conservative	1.00	3

Source: László Hubai, "Választástörténet 1945, 1947" (Electoral History, 1945, 1947), Electronic Database: <http://www.vokscentrum.hu/vtort45.htm> and <http://www.vokscentrum.hu/vtort47.htm> .

† Slachta's Christian Women's Camp fielded candidates in only two constituencies, where it enjoyed the support of the Democratic Peoples' Party.

Appendix V : Postwar Map of Hungary with County Boundaries



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