

Regent Miklós Horthy and the Catholic Church in Hungary



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The evaluation and interpretation of the role that the Catholic Church had in Horthy's Hungary (1919–1944) changed more than once in the last 70 years of Hungarian historiography. In the Rákosi-era, anticlerical and Marxist arguments were supposed to prove that the Horthy-system had been a fascism and that the historically established Christian churches, primarily the Catholic denomination, had been representatives of the “clerical reaction”, obediently serving the “fascist dictatorship” led by Horthy.¹ By 1990 and later on the literature on the subject had grown to fill a library, and two major directions could be distinguished. The first regards the history of the Catholic Church as a special subfield of public and cultural history, and researches it with similar methods and on the basis of more or less identical sources.² The other direction, commonly referred to as ‘clerical’, considers ecclesiastic history to be a part of theology; it has a quasi-apologetic rhetoric in discussing historical events, interpreting data and drawing its conclusions.³ Only recently (in the last two decades) has it been possible to publish professional works of historical objectivity and of sufficient source criticism⁴ that are free of ideological and religious ballasts.

The Catholic Church was much more present in the jurisdiction, administration and state representation of the Horthy-era than it had been during the years of the Dualism. The causes include the conservative turn that followed the defeat in the First World War and the collapse of the 1918–1919 revolutionary systems (and with them, the collapse of historical Hungary), and the spiritual and physical expansion of the Christian-nationalist ideology. The latter had several factions, each addressing and mobilizing different social-political groups.

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- 1 B. BALÁZS, *The Role of the Clerical Reaction in the Ascension and Consolidation of Horthy's Fascism*, Budapest 1954.
 - 2 An example is J. GERGELY, *A katolikus egyház története Magyarországon: 1919–1945*, Budapest 1999.
 - 3 An example is the work of a church historian Catholic priest living on the American continent, published first in English, then in Hungarian: L. T. LÁSZLÓ, *Church and State in Hungary: 1919–1945*, Budapest 2005.
 - 4 Based on the published literature and sources, an outstanding summary is N. SPANNENBERG, *Die katholische Kirche in Ungarn: 1918–1939: Positionierung in politischen System und „Katholische Renaissance“*, Stuttgart 2006.



During Miklós Horthy's regency, the aforementioned Christian nationalist idea was the determining factor in the ideological background of the Hungarian political discourse. The largest and most influential branch, the "clerical neoconservative faction" had two Catholic priests as leading ideologists. Proponents of this ideology based their views, theories and their practical political standpoint on the work *Culture and Terror* (1918) by Ottokár Prohászka, Bishop of Székesfehérvár, and on the pamphlet *Hungary's Rebuilding and Christianity* (1919) by Jesuit monk Béla Bangha. Therefore the moral, social and socio-political teachings of the Catholic Church were indeed a (perhaps indirect) factor that founded and formed the official ideology of Horthy's Hungary.

Having much less influence and predominantly popular with intellectuals, "anti-liberal neo-conservatism", or "status quo conservatism", also had Catholic roots and was based on *Three Generations* (1920), an essay of idea history and philosophy of history by historian professor Gyula Szekfű. Professor Szekfű had a role (though rather symbolic and less practical organizational work) in the creation and operation of organizations striving to manifest the social teachings of the Catholic Church in politics: the Catholic Social People's Movement (1943) and the People's Party of Christian Democrats (1944). The least articulated and seemingly most marginal, but quite popular branch of the Christian nationalist ideology, the racist "Szeged thought" was founded on Dezső Szabó's novel *Az elsodort falu* (*The Swept-Away Village*) (1919). They did criticize the Catholic higher clergy, but their problems were about the personnel and not the church itself as an institution system. The racists accused the clergy of anti-patriotism: the reasons were their well-known and apparently unyielding loyalty to the Habsburgs and the German and Slovak nationalities being overrepresented in the hierarchy.

The political influence of Catholicism was perceptible in the Hungarian army as well. The autonomous Hungarian field diocese was organized in 1920, with the Franciscan monk István Zadavecsek as the first bishop. Field priests lived in the barracks and were given officer ranks, thus becoming members of the officer's board. They often held masses or other liturgical acts in the quarters. On the Sunday or holiday mass held at the church outside the barracks, the Catholic officers often attended together and military leaders sat next to each other, demonstrating the military's loyalty to the Church. In the more liberal atmosphere of the preceding Dualist era, the distinction and separation of state and churches, military and religions had been intended to manifest; the just described events and practices had been practically unimaginable.

Beside the regent being Protestant, the Hungarian prime minister was non-Catholic in the better part of the Horthy-era: István Bethlen (1921–1931) and Kálmán Darányi (1936–1938) were Protestant, Gyula Gömbös (1932–1936) was Evangelical. Though the Protestant denomination was over-represented in the political elite, the regent and his prime ministers did mind the religious status of the officials in several ministries of the state. Accordingly, a relevant practice was to fill the ministerial position of religion and public education with a Catholic politician, with respect to the Catholic Church being the most numerous. The first (Catholic) office was always led by a Catholic priest, but the department of public education was also often managed by a Catholic friar. Both ministers of the seat of public welfare and employment, József Vass and Sándor Ernst, were Catholic priests (and notably Christian politicians as well).

Between the two World Wars, the Catholic Church was also present in the everyday life of the people in Hungary. A major manifestation of this was its role in the educational system: the subject of religious and moral studies was listed as compulsory in public and higher education, and among the historically established churches, according to the religious proportions of the populace, the religious-moral teachings of the Catholic Church were taught in most schools. Traditionally, scenes of social contact, (local) community feeling and that of social or group coherence included the rites of the Catholic Church (Saint's day fairs, processions, spiritual practices). The Church of Rome, similarly to the other historically established denominations, maintained healthcare institutions, orphanages and charity homes, and thus contributed to and in social politics (and functions of the state). Due to self-organizing communities and Catholic associations, the Church had a significant role in the civic sphere as well. Catholic social groups of missionary and charity functions were under the organization that also provided their continuous ecclesiastic control, the *Actio Catholica*.

Hungary had a one-chamber legislation system, the National Diet, between 1920 and 1927. However, the Act XXII/1926 established the upper house of parliament, of which the archbishops of the Catholic Church also became members, “based on and for the duration of their ranks or offices”. These included “the inaugurated Roman Catholic bishops of Latin or Greek liturgy, including the Prince-Primate of Hungary, the Archbishops of Kalocsa and Eger, the bishops of the dioceses of Csanád, Győr, Hajdúdorog, Pécs, Székesfehérvár, Szombathely, Vác and Veszprém, the [Benedictine] abbot of Pannonhalma, the leaders of the two Premontre monastic orders in Hungary [the praeposts of Jászó and Csorna], the [Cistercian] abbot of Zirc, the Hungarian head of the teaching order [the Piarist order] and the praeposts of the major chapterhouses” and seven more elected persons. After the territorial growth, the number of those joining the upper house due to their ecclesiastic offices increased to twenty-two, and the number of the elected grew to ten.

Thus the Catholic high clergy became an important contributor — and partial factor — in the legislative processes. Via the four monastic orders with the most estates and property, not only the secular clergy, but the monastic church (living with a stricter code) also gained political representation. Apart from national-level legislation, the establishment of local decrees and administration also featured priests of the Catholic Church. By the Act XXX/1929 (on the settling of administrative matters), priests of the most populous denomination in a given town were granted membership in the local legal committees. Mostly Catholic priests were enabled to participate in local politics, as in 1930, 67.1% of the country's population belonged to the denomination.

When Miklós Horthy was elected regent of the Kingdom of Hungary on March 1, 1920, his powers as the head of the state were less than what the monarch had previously had. For example, he could not act on the supreme patronal right, granted until 1918 upon the Apostolic Kings of Hungary. The *ius supremæ patronatus* enabled the head of the Hungarian state to grant Catholic ecclesiastic offices, with actual and titular assets in Hungary. The king filled the offices of high priests, and as Hungarian civil right recognized the appointment of the new bishop, he had to be inaugurated into his offices in episcopal management and into his new assets as higher clergy,





regardless of any confirmation (*preconisatio*) from the Pope. After 1921, members of the higher clergy were appointed again by the Pope, though mostly in accordance with the political will of the Hungarian government and considering the recommendations of the ecclesiastic principals.

As his memoirs demonstrate, Horthy's reason to consider it unfortunate that he, as regent did not have the supreme feudal appointment rights was that the bishops held overtly great political influence and great wealth. "[...] *Taking the supreme patronal rights could be objectionable, as a power that had been granted to Hungarian kings since St. Stephen was now transferred to the Pope. Appointing the bishops actually means the granting of the involved membership in the parliament and the access to considerable wealth, which quite much justifies that this right should be practiced by the regent as well. There was a solution for the case when the regent happens to be Protestant: involving the Prince-Primate in the decision.*"⁵

In the August of 1919, Miklós Horthy was the military minister of the counter-revolutionary government and had his quarters up in a first-floor section of the notable hotel Kass Szálló in Szeged.⁶ One of his major supporters was the already mentioned conservative pater Zadravecz — and the peasant citizens of the Lower Town behind him. The future regent visited Szeged-Lower Town almost daily, where he discussed ideology, political tendencies and perspectives with István Zadravecz.⁷ A powerful rhetor, Zadravecz often drew parallels between governor János Hunyadi, who was in charge of Hungary between 1446 and 1453, and Miklós Horthy. His parallels were based on the motif of starting from Szeged and also involved, with little modesty, himself and the Franciscan friar St John of Capistrano, who contributed to the victory over the Turks at the siege of Belgrade (1456). In one of his booklets of prayer and meditation, he wrote about the struggles of the Hungarian nation on the Hungarian soil, being "bereaved of thirteen provinces": "*The fight was about survival, and how many times. The survival of Hungary, Regnum Marianum [...] in times when the raids of the Tartar and the Turk came, when other dangers loomed. Especially during the one-and-half-century struggle with the Turks. [...] Then we witnessed the Hunyadis fight with rosaries on their swords, then Capistrano's armies marched from Buda, from Szeged from the lands of the Danube and Tisza...*"⁸

This analogy, complete with a long enumeration of the achievements of the 15th-century dynasty, was often articulated in the late thirties and early forties, intending to create a historical foundation to Horthy's dynastic attempts. The good relation between István Zadravecz and Horthy was signified by the fact that the re-

5 M. HORTHY, *Emlékirataim*, Budapest 1990, p. 140.

6 For details on Horthy's stay in Szeged and the diplomacy of the first counter-revolutionary governments, see L. GULYÁS, *A Horthy-korszak külpolitikája: Az első évek. 1919–1924*, Vol. 1, Gödöllő-Máriabesnyő 2012, pp. 12–32.

7 C. M. SARNYAI, *Az autonómiáról — nézetei egy papnak, 1919. március*: Páter Zadravecz István, az ellenforradalom "Kapisztrán"-ja a katolikus autonómiáról, in: A. DÖBÖR — G. F. KISS (Eds.), *Magyarország és Európa: 1919–1939*, Szeged 2001, pp. 107–122; I. ZOMBORI, *Horthy, Zadravecz és Szeged (1919)*, in: Ed. P. MIKLÓS (Ed.), *Újragondolt negyedszázad: Tanulmányok a Horthy-korszakról*, Szeged 2010.

8 I. ZADRAVECZ, *Szeráfi szárnyakon: Ima- és elmélkedőkönyv*, Budapest 1931, pp. 84–85.

gent later appointed his ally to the seat of the field bishop.⁹ “*The Hunyadis were the last clan that gave as much service to the nation, to whom we could be as much thankful as to them. There was no other family that grew so close to us, that could be so truly blood from our blood and soul from our soul, our solace, our pride and our hope*”¹⁰ — a pamphlet from October, 1942 reads, proposing that the grandson of the regent should be crowned Stephen VI. It is not known whether this idea came from the regent’s circle (to “measure” the public opinion), or his opponents intended to defame Horthy, to erode the trust toward him and thus generate political instability in the war-waging country.

It is popular knowledge that Horthy was a practicing Protestant. Despite that, he intended to acculturate (on the level of state and regency representation, and of symbolic acts) to the religious custom and ritual system of Catholicism, which encompassed most Hungarians. A good example is the series of events in 1938, a threefold holy year. The Hungarian state and the Catholic Church jointly celebrated the 900th anniversary of the passing of the state-founder king Stephen I, along with a grand holiday of the global Catholic Church, the Eucharistic Congress, and also Hungarian Catholics commemorated the 900-year-old act of offering the kingdom in the grace of the Virgin Mary. “*It was a very high privilege granted to us — the regent writes in his memoirs — and one we duly honored. The Cardinal Secretary of State [Eugenio Pacelli] took the effort to learn, beside the many languages that he had mastered, our language as well. Those attending the grand mass held in front of the millennial monument on Heroes Square, those observing the afternoon procession on the Danube, as the most venerable consecrated Host was being brought forth on a lit ship escorted by many other vessels, lined by the light-flooded riverbanks, they will never forget these profoundly moving experiences.*”¹¹

The above lines give the impression that beyond the obligatory protocol attendance, he could indeed empathize with the multi-million Hungarian Catholic congregation and with the sacred event providing an enormous spiritual nourishment and power to these people. This was in spite of the unfavorable foreign relations (Hitler had forbidden the Catholics of Germany, now adjacent to Hungary, to attend the Congress) and in spite of the distressing home political tendencies (social groups radicalizing, political gains of national-socialists and the Arrow Cross party). On the evening of May 25, 1938, Horthy said a toast to honor the already mentioned Papal Legate Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pope Pius XII. In this, he explained about the good relationship between the Hungarian state and the Apostolic Holy See at the head of the Church, also including the historical foundations of the relation.¹²

Although the Protestant regent followed the Calvinist theology and probably dismissed the public and celebrant veneration of the Virgin Mary and the Saints or that of the Host, he did attend the 1938 August celebratory session of the Hungarian Diet at

9 A recent discussion of the history of the Franc counterfeit scandal and its aftermath. L. GULYÁS, *A Horthy-korszak külpolitikája: A húszas évek második fele: 1924–1931*, Vol. 2, Gödöllő-Máriabesnyő 2013, pp. 23–35.

10 Pamphlet by Zoltán Bánó and László Szabó, favoring the coronation of regent Horthy’s grandchild (Budapest, 1942 October). Cited in: J. SERÉDI, *The Journals of Prince-Prime Minister Jusztinián Serédi, 1941–1944*, Budapest 1990, pp. 153–154.

11 HORTHY, pp. 205–206.

12 *Journals of the XXXIV International Eucharistic Congress*, Budapest 1938, p. 125.





Székesfehérvár, when the Act XXXIII/1938 was passed. With the bill, the Hungarian legislation declared that it “commemorates with the utmost respect the first king of the nation, the saint, the state-founder, the monarch and the general, his glorious deeds whose effects last up until today, and his enduring historical achievements”. This way the Protestants in Hungary could also join in the anniversary celebration of the state-founder monarch.

The memoirs also witness that, possibly due to the Holy-Crown-dogma being a legitimating factor in the regency and also observed by himself (as well), he respected the Holy Crown of Hungary, in which the territorial, legal, and ideological integrity of the Hungarian state was manifested. “*The Holy Crown is not a spectacle to us, but a consecrated relic embodying all the majestic rights of the country, the possessor of the Hungarian royal state law. Its significance was understood likewise by Cardinal Secretary of State Pacelli, the later Pope Pius XII, as well, when he knelt in prayer in front of it in 1938, at the international Eucharistic congress in Budapest.*”¹³

Ambivalence was also present in the relationship between Miklós Horthy and the Catholic Church. There was no other political answer to the Hungarian revolutions of 1918–1919 but the conservative (Christian nationalist) turn, the ideology of which was a fusion of the religious-moral and social teachings of the historically established Christian churches, and the first proponents of this ideology were also linked to Catholicism. Therefore, an intention of cooperation was dominant in the interrelation of church and regent, defined by mutual acceptance and solidarity. This necessary cooperation, however, was not without tensions. The greatest conflict was about the traditional (and in its historical context, reasonable) Habsburg-affinity of the Catholic higher clergy, and their anti-Protestantism. Most of the higher clergy regarded the Protestant head of the state with suspicion and distance, at the same time fearing for their influence in (ecclesiastic) politics and envying Protestant bishops.

Despite the well-working cooperation and mutual support, the Hungarian Catholic Church never officially legitimated Horthy’s rule *expressis verbis*. At the beginning of the era, Hungarian bishops hoped, with the exception of Ottokár Prohászka and István Zadravecz, for the return of the Habsburg-dynasty and they also supported efforts to this end. But even in the thirties and forties, the Hungarian Catholic high priests mistrusted the regent’s efforts to extend his powers and to found his dynasty.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the “Catholic Renaissance” was a result of the financial and infrastructural support from the state and the spreading of the Christian-nationalist ideology, and the Catholic elite was pleased by the growing numbers of priests and friars, just as by the Church’s increasing social and of political influence.

It can be concluded that the relation of Horthy and Catholicism was defined by a network of conflicts with a confessional and historical background, and also by a solidarity formed along reasonable political interests; a solidarity that was nevertheless obviously based on ideological values.

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¹³ HORTHY, p. 169.

¹⁴ Cf. SERÉDI, pp. 70–73, 134–136.