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“Keep Tightening the Noose!” Catholics and Protestants in Hungary, 1945-1956

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THE NAZI OCCUPATION of Hungary began in October 1944 as the result of an attempted armistice negotiation by Regent Horthy with Russia and the West. In the following year Hungary became a bloody battle-field and Budapest was largely destroyed by German and Russian troops. The horror of those days reduced the land to a state of prostration comparable to that of the Mongol destruction in the thirteenth century.¹ An armistice agreement was signed in Moscow on January 20, 1945.

The Russian occupation began with a sense of relief on the part of the Hungarian people. Conditions, they felt, could hardly be worse than under the Nazi regime, and confidence was felt that a just settlement would be reached with the Big Three. Before long, however, the sky had darkened even more; contrary to all official Russian accounts, the Soviet combat and occupation forces behaved like ruthless conquerors. They appeared to the average Hungarian as primitive and uncouth barbarians—in contrast with the equally ruthless but civilized and self-disciplined Germans.² With the Soviet troops came the agents of Communist propaganda, and the American and British delegations were too small and unequipped to be of much assistance to the Hungarian people.

For 950 years the Hungarian Kingdom had stood for Western Christendom as a bulwark—first, in the thirteenth century, against the Mongols, and then against the Turks. People with a knowledge of history asked themselves whether the presence of the Russians was to be a Tartar or a Turkish occupation—the first having lasted less than two years, the second a hundred and fifty.³

The result of the conversion of the first Hungarian king, Stephen I (997-1038), was the establishment of a kingdom that was to be known until 1945, not as the lands inhabited by the Magyar peoples, but rather as the lands of St. Stephen. The symbols of the kingdom were the holy crown and the sacred right hand of the first monarch. In Hungary, there has been a close association of the Kingdom and the Roman Catholic Church, which in our own time numbers 7,000,000 members. Since the

1. Cf. Ference A. Vali, *Rift and Revolt in Hungary* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), Ch. 2, p. 27; Ch. 3, p. 28.

2. Cf. *ibid.*, Ch. 3, p. 29.

3. Cf. *ibid.*

middle ages the Archbishop of Esztergom has carried the title of Prince-Primate, with a position second only to the Crown. Traditionally, the Prince-Primate was the king's deputy, entitled in his absence to wear the holy crown of St. Stephen and thus unite temporal and spiritual authority. Herein we see the motivation of Prince-Primate Cardinal Mindszenty, who in the face of Communist aggression feels that he is the nation's only legitimate ruler, destined to keep alive both Cross and Crown.⁴

The abolition of the Hungarian Kingdom and the establishment of the Republic of 1945 deprived the Cardinal of any position in affairs of state; and, in any case, he and his predecessors had not exercised their influence for a century and a half. But Mindszenty made it plain that, in recognizing the Republican Government, he was still the leader of the nation's religious majority and the protector of the freedoms of the Church,⁵ her lands, her schools, and her right to worship.

The situation that existed with the coming of the Russians in 1945 is graphically illustrated by the St. Stephen's Day celebrations on August 20 of that year. With the defeat of the Germans, the shrine containing the right hand of St. Stephen was taken by Hungarian Nazis to Salzburg. It was brought back to Budapest by American officers just eighteen hours before the solemnities were due to begin, and it became a symbol of restored Hungarian national tradition, acclaimed by over 500,000 people with demonstrations of religious fervour.⁶

Bishop Mindszenty recorded the event in these words:

On St. Stephen's Day the people of Budapest marched devoutly in the procession of the Holy Right Hand, joyful at the American Army's rescue of that precious relic. Yet—our pastors are clapped in jail for delivering St. Stephen's Day sermons, threatened with banishment if they won't recant—a member of the government used this occasion to inveigh against St. Stephen at a teachers' orientation course, where he threatened with official action such teachers as dared to disagree with him. One speaker proclaimed atheism as the guiding spirit of future schools.⁷

Clearly, the attack upon the Roman Catholic Church had begun. The Roman Church, however, was not alone in the struggle. In the sixteenth century the Reformation had gained a firm foothold in Hungary. The majority of the Magyar people associated themselves with Calvinism, and consequently with Hungarian nationalism. By tradition the Catholic and German magnates gravitated to Hapsburg Vienna, so that at the beginning of the seventeenth century not more than half a dozen of the great Magyar families remained in the Roman Catholic Church.⁸ Today, there are

4. Cf. T. Weyr, "The Mindszenty Tragedy," *Commonweal*, 17 January, 1964, p. 455.

5. Cf. *Cardinal Mindszenty Speaks: Authorized White Book* (London: Longmans, 1949), p. 8.

6. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 22.

7. József Mindszenty, *The World's Most Orphaned Nation* (New York: Julius Tarlo, 1962), p. 56.

8. Cf. art. "Hungary," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., Vol. XIII, pp. 900, 912.

2,800,000 Protestants in Hungary (two-thirds of these are Calvinists and of the rest the great majority are Lutherans).⁹

The city of Debrecen in East Hungary has for long been designated as the Calvinist Rome, a centre of resistance against any attacks on Magyar rights and privileges. Since World War II, the Catholic and Calvinist populations seem to have found a new sense of common identity in the face of foreign aggression. In 1946 the Calvinist Assembly of Pastors ordered its clergy in Budapest to participate in full regalia in the Catholic procession on St. Stephen's Feast—an unprecedented happening. When Cardinal Mindszenty went to Debrecen to consecrate his successor in the Diocese of Veszprém, the Calvinist Bishop with all his clergy and the lay leaders of the Protestant Church attended the ceremony in the Catholic Church.¹⁰ The provisional government set up in Debrecen after the war was hailed by Catholic and Protestant alike as the beginning of a new Hungary.¹¹

As long ago as the thirteenth century, settlers from Saxony began mining gold in Transylvania. With the German Reformation they adopted the Lutheran confession, subsequently becoming known as "the German Church."¹² It was no doubt partly the Turkish enforcement of toleration and partly the need for some solidarity in the face of the Turk that led to a measure of religious liberalism and to the toleration granted to Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Unitarians in Transylvania as early as 1645.¹³ But the hardly learned lessons are just beginning to bear fruit today in the face of Communist atheism.

Early in 1946, the newly enthroned Prince-Primate Cardinal Mindszenty, describing the Nazi attitude to his Church, said: "Keep tightening the noose! That was their motto; the idea being to blot out first, religion, then freedom."¹⁴ The Cardinal was expressing the inner questionings of Catholic and Protestant church leaders when he asked: "Are there plans to revive that hellish war on the freedom of the Church? Are there those who would continue Hitler's black campaign?"¹⁵ At this period, churches were filled to overflowing with worshippers; church schools were in operation; the Hungarian Parliament (January 30, 1946) had guaranteed for each citizen the charter of "man's natural, inalienable rights."¹⁶ We must determine the causes of the Cardinal's apprehension, and the part played by the Hungarian churches in their struggle for freedom between the end of World War II and the Revolution of 1956.

World War II marked a hiatus in any kind of atheist activity. The reason for this was that Russian Christians were active in support of their country's

9. Cf. Miklos Veto, "The Catholic Church," *Survey: A Journal of Soviet and East European Studies*, January 1962, p. 133.

10. Cf. *Cardinal Mindszenty Speaks*, p. 24.

11. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 20.

12. Cf. art. "Hungary," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. XIII, p. 900.

13. E.g. by the Peace of Linz (1645).

14. Mindszenty, *The World's Most Orphaned Nation*, p. 16.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

war effort. There was a general relaxation of the war against religion, and so after World War II the fight had to be begun anew.

Since the death of Stalin in 1953, Marxist theorists have been reformulating the "dogmas" essential for combating organized Christianity. The result may be expressed in some such way as this. Historical materialism is based on total rejection of supernatural powers, God or gods. The Christ of Christianity is a myth; there is no historical proof for his existence. The biblical narrative cannot be substantiated. The evangelists disagree and contradict one another. Therefore, the Christian religion is a form of social consciousness, in which the phenomena of the real world are reflected in a false and distorted way; embodied in the dogmas of the Church, it reflects the influence of the dominant class.

Catholicism (the story continues) believes in combining the Bible with tradition. It holds that the supreme authority in all fields is the Pope, who historically has been opposed to the Councils, to Russian Orthodoxy, and to political progress. Protestantism is but a limited protest against the excesses of Catholicism. Its main forms in Europe are Lutheranism and Calvinism, which are anti-mystical, anti-monastic, and bourgeois.

Ultimately, atheism is to religion as correct and scientific knowledge is to erroneous and fanciful imagining. Practical atheism has meant Marxist education in schools and universities, administrative elimination of the clergy, suppression of Christian journals and newspapers, and numerous other forms of persecution and suppression.¹⁷

The Communist approach to religion, everywhere the same, differs only in application from one country to another. The regime began in Hungary in 1945 with the curbing of religious education, which was followed by the abolition of church schools. It aims at reducing the churches to Party Front organizations, which is but a first step to their liquidation.

The Hungarian elections of 1945 brought to power a four-party government. As it was part of Soviet and Communist policy all over Europe to create popular fronts, the Communists were not content to build their own party. Other parties also had to be organized and a democratic coalition formed in which each was represented; but the key positions—the Ministry of the Interior, the political and economic sections of the police, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the reorganization of trade unions—were largely in the hands of Communists or their sympathizers.¹⁸

The immediate impact of this political development upon the Catholic and Protestant churches was the proposal to reform the land-holding system. In 1945 five per cent of Hungarian landholdings were in the hands of the Roman Catholic Church. The Calvinists held about two per cent. The redistribution was not opposed by fair-minded church leaders, for

17. For a full and clear account of this question, cf. Thomas J. Blakeley, "Scientific Atheism: An Introduction," *Studies in Soviet Thought*, Vol. 4 (Fribourg, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1964), pp. 281ff.

18. Cf. Hugh Seton-Watson, *The East European Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1962), p. 191.

Bishop Mindszenty, upon becoming Bishop of Veszprém in the summer of 1944, had applied to the Minister of Public Worship and Education for permission to distribute seven thousand acres of episcopal lands to the peasants. The request was denied by the Hungarian Nazi Government of the time.¹⁹

The church problem was summarized by the Catholic Bishops in their pastoral of May 1945:

Hitherto Seminaries and Churches have been supported out of the income of Ecclesiastical land holdings. Who is going to support them now? Ecclesiastical administration needs its administrative apparatus and its offices. Who is going to pay for them? Exactly the same problem arises with regard to our old and famous schools. Can all the congregations shoulder these burdens in our impoverished and ransacked country?²⁰

The Bishops' fears were soon justified, for despite promises of government recompense none was forthcoming. Between 1947 and 1954 Roman Catholic primary, secondary, and vocational schools were reduced from 3148 to 8; Calvinist Schools from 1057 to 4; and of 359 Lutheran Schools, only 1 was left.

In 1945 there were three Roman Catholic, one Calvinist, and one Lutheran institution of higher education. In 1954, not one remained.²¹ Between 1945 and 1948 parents sought to register twenty per cent more children in Catholic and Protestant Schools than could be accommodated. It is indicative of church school popularity that in 1945 the workers of Csepel, the biggest industrial district of Budapest, requested the establishment of a Benedictine high school, which was destined to last until the schools were closed in 1948. In March, 1947, a deputation of two hundred and fifty men from the same district, representing the Roman Catholic, Calvinist, and Lutheran churches, appeared at the office of the Prime Minister to protest the government motion for "optional" religious instruction in the schools and presented a memorandum signed by 10,000 parents.

The first speaker, a Catholic, declared "that the people willingly bore hunger and cold and much more in the interests of national reconstruction, but they would not tolerate that their children be deprived of their faith." The spokesman of the Evangelical community emphasized that they had come on their own initiative, and that the voice of the people was stronger in matters of faith than that of political parties.²²

Communist policy was not to be stopped. In 1949 and 1950 religious instruction was seriously hampered by a series of regulations which stressed that only those children could receive religious instruction whose parents requested it of the school authorities before the beginning of the academic year and until 1953 parents had to notify the local councils also.

19. Cf. *Cardinal Mindszenty Speaks*, p. 14.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

21. Cf. E. C. Helmreich (ed.): *East and Central Europe under the Communists* (New York: F. Praeger, 1956), p. 206.

22. Cf. *Magyar Kurir*, 26 March 1947 (*Cardinal Mindszenty Speaks*, p. 126).

Teachers of religion were not appointed by the church, but by government authorities on the recommendation of church officials. Such teachers were made liable to dismissal if, in government opinion, they showed antagonism to the People's Republic or its institutions. They were bound to submit their curriculum on the basis of approved texts, from which *no* deviation would be allowed. Classes of religion were to be held in school only after the last class, and teachers were forbidden to hold any gathering outside of official periods.²³ In 1948 the Protestant Churches signed an "agreement" by which they were allowed to keep five of their secondary schools, while the Roman Catholic "agreement" in 1951 permitted the retention of eight.

The first government in the post-war days had provided at least a semblance of respectability. The Small Farmers' Party had taken fifty-seven per cent of the votes (seventeen per cent each for Socialists and Communists and seven per cent for National Peasants).²⁴ Mgr. B. Varga was elected President of the National Assembly and Father I. Balogh was made a Minister of State. Pastor Zoltan Tildy, a Calvinist clergyman, became Prime Minister (1945), and then first President of the Republic (1946).²⁵

In 1946-47 Communist agitation against the Small Farmers' Party urged that it provided a refuge for Fascists and for reactionary urban middle-class elements. The Communist press meanwhile carried much anti-church propaganda, and attacks on Cardinal Mindszenty became more frequent and violent. There was Communist growth in the elections of August 31, 1947, and the eventual liquidation of opposition parties was destined to bring the church struggle to a head.²⁶

After the 1947 elections, the Cardinal was convinced that the secular power of the state rested on illegal foundations. With other religious leaders he had made strong representation on every subject affecting the common Christian welfare. Now he protested against the expulsion of a German-speaking minority that had lived in Hungary for many generations, in order to make room for Magyars from Czechoslovakia. He referred to the rights of minorities when describing a historic parade which he himself had witnessed in Montreal (June 1947), "where the French minority, in ancient garb, honored a shining past. It drove home a lesson to me as Prince-Primate of Hungary, where some would spurn our heritage."²⁷

By the end of 1947, the Communist regime had succeeded in breaking the resistance of the Lutheran and Calvinist churches by the simple expedient of splitting the Protestant camp into left and right wings. Calvinist Bishop Laszlo Ravasz and Lutheran Bishop Béla Kapy were replaced by fellow-traveller appointees. Mindszenty knew that his time was at hand: "Right from the start of the struggle, it was plain that unless I changed my

23. Cf. Helmreich, *East and Central Europe under the Communists*, p. 206.

24. Cf. Seton-Watson, *The East European Revolution*, p. 192.

25. Cf. Miklos Veto, "The Catholic Church," *Survey*, No. 40, January, 1962, p. 133.

26. Cf. *ibid.*

27. Mindszenty, *The World's Most Orphaned Nation*, p. 67.

stand, gave up my principles, the Communists would arrest me. So when my secretary Andrew Zakar, was snatched from the street just after saying mass at the Esztergom Cloister, I had no doubt that my time was running out."²⁸ Father Zakar disappeared into prison, to reappear as a witness for the prosecution at the Cardinal's trial. Mindszenty was arrested two days after Christmas, 1948.

The years 1948-51 saw a merciless attack on the churches, which had been crippled by the suppression of their newspapers²⁹ and radio; even the use of loud-speakers at church meetings was forbidden, leaving only the pulpits for the defence of their message. A pastoral letter dated May 29, 1948, sets forth six points on which atheist radio, press, and public meetings had attacked the Church: e.g. disagreements among the bishops; refusal of parish priests to read pastoral letters; congregational protests against the reading of pastorals; the enthusiasm of the teachers at the nationalization of schools.³⁰

Meanwhile, with the disappearance of church societies, Communist youth groups were set up to teach Marxism-Leninism. "The Pioneers" were formed for all children aged seven to fourteen, and the federation of working youth (KISZ), directed by the Hungarian workers' party, was established.

After the Cardinal's arrest many priests, pastors, and laymen were arrested. Many died in prison or were executed. The question has been asked whether the heavy persecution might have been avoided, if the Cardinal had chosen a more moderate line, and had shown more willingness to co-operate with the regime. In answer to this it should be said that until 1945 Hungary was a monarchy. In the provinces, the concept of government had scarcely changed since the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Cardinal himself, though recognizing the Republic of 1945, is a man of peasant stock, for whom the mitre is the counterpart of the Crown. Consecrated Archbishop of Esztergom, Prince-Primate of the Kingdom, a man lacking in suppleness of personality, jailed alike by Nazis and Communists, he stands as the symbol of the good old ways for the older and more conservative elements in the population, while to the urban intelligentsia and student population, he has meant increasingly little. It would seem, therefore, that he could not have acted other than he did.

The career of Archbishop Grosz, a more moderate man, who became chairman of the bench of bishops after Mindszenty's arrest, is instructive. He signed a compromise agreement with the government; a few weeks later he was arrested and sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment. He shared the Cardinal's confinement at a summer palace for some months (1955-56) and was eventually released, again becoming chairman for the bench of

28. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

29. Except for one Catholic periodical. Cf. Mindszenty's Pastoral, May 1948 (*Cardinal Mindszenty Speaks*, p. 165).

30. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 173f.

bishops until his death in 1961. Though the Archbishop sought to meet government requirements, he remained absolutely loyal to the Roman See and refused to admit that Christianity could ever be reconciled with Marxism.

There are two other aspects of church life that need to be mentioned: (a) the seminaries and (b) the Peace Priest Organizations.

In the period between World War II and the Revolt of 1956, Roman Catholic seminaries were reduced in number from twenty-two to seven; there is one Calvinist Department of Theology at Pécs University, and one Lutheran seminary (religious orders have been largely abolished, except for Benedictines and Franciscans, who operate on a limited scale). In order to reduce the supply of young clergy and control their training, the State required the teaching of dialectical materialism as part of the seminary course. The Ministry of Defence has claimed the right to exercise its discretion in granting exemptions from military service for members of the clergy and seminarians, and aims at obstructing their ministry and theological education. Archbishop Grosz, interviewed by *New York Times* correspondents on June 9, 1956, stated that seminaries were operating "in accordance with church regulations" and that the five hundred candidates now being educated "meet our needs under given conditions."³¹

The Peace Front organizations of Catholic and Protestant pastors are familiar in all Communist-dominated countries. In 1955-56 the government was making maximum use of its "patriotic priests" and sent several "loyal" Protestant churchman abroad.³² The Central Committee of the World Council of Churches met at a health resort in Hungary in April, 1956, and was shown the benefits of the Communist system.

The Office of Church Affairs "supervised" the bishops in their work; their mail was opened, and if they refused to sign any paper, it was signed by a government representative. These "vicars," nicknamed by the people "mustached bishops," were authorized to transfer priests and thoroughly regulate the lives of the clergy. By this means the churches suffered a considerable infiltration of poorly qualified government appointees. The situation was worse for Protestants than for Roman Catholics.³³ Meanwhile the Roman Catholic collaborationist paper, *A Kereszt* (until October, 1956, *Katolikus Szó*), was publishing the names of priests who had been released from prison through the efforts of the so-called peace committee of the Catholic clergy. (The paper was put on the Index by the Pope in August, 1956.) Clearly the government was expecting co-operation in return for its policy of "good will."

In revolutionary days, Cardinal Mindszenty dismissed many "peace priests" from their posts in his diocese. Changes in the Protestant churches were even more extensive, because they had suffered greater infiltration.

31. Helmreich, *Hungary, East and Central Europe under Communism*, pp. 207f.

32. Pastor Jonas Peter visited the Chinese People's Republic in the spring of 1956.

33. Cf. Vali, *Rift and Revolt in Hungary*, p. 66.

Protestant affairs were of local concern, whereas Roman Catholicism depended on the Vatican, despite the fact that all official contact had ended in 1947.

The period between 1953 and 1956 saw a lessening, but not a cessation, of persecution. The role of the Church in the October-November Revolution was cautious. While many of the younger clergy took part in the uprising, church leaders frequently cautioned the faithful to refrain from extremist activities. By far the most symbolic event for the Hungarian nation was the liberation of Cardinal Mindszenty by revolutionary soldiers. His radio broadcast, made on November 3 on behalf of the "struggle for freedom," in which he carefully abstained from explicit support of the Nagy régime, underlines the caution shown by other church leaders at that time.³⁴ The Cardinal's self-imposed exile in the American legation since November 4, 1956, has created a stumbling block on the road to "peace and co-existence," which will probably not be removed until he dies.

Hungarian nationalism and Christianity are two unremoved barriers to total Communist control. Every school child is taught loyalty, not only to his own country but also to Russia, the great Fatherland of all Socialist Republics. In 1940 the Soviet Union obtained release of the veteran Communist Béla Kun from sixteen years' detention in a Hungarian prison in return for Hungarian flags captured by the Czarist armies in 1849, when the Russian armies invaded the country and outnumbered the Hungarian forces, leaving Hungary at the mercy of Vienna. In 1959, Khrushchev explained the Russian intervention of 1956 to a Hungarian audience by asking "How could the Soviet Union have withheld such a help in 1956?"³⁵ when the Czar had not quibbled about intervening. The Revolution was a nationalist uprising, a fact that has evidently not been comprehended by the Russian masters. Social conservatism and nationalist aspirations have been trampled under foot by the invader, and as long as this is the case, there will be violence.

The marked revival of church activity in the post-revolt period may be taken as concrete proof that ten years of anti-religious propaganda have failed absolutely to destroy the basic religious beliefs of the Hungarian people. There are suggestions that the *modus vivendi* that Pope John XXIII hoped to reach with Hungary and all satellite countries in East Europe as a model for an accord with Red regimes in the far East is now being changed into a *modus non moriendi*—in order that the Church may not die! It is easier for Christians to arrange their church-going life from week to week than it is to handle the administration of the Church in the face of a hostile regime. Today in Hungary, many people go to Mass, not for love of God but for dislike of the Kadar government. Nevertheless, words written some years ago about the state of the Church in Russia are worthy of note. In

34. *East Europe*, "The Cross and the Party—I." A monthly Review of East European Affairs. Vol. 6, No. 12, December, 1957, pp. 8f.

35. Vali, *Rift and Revolt in Hungary*. Quotation from the *New York Times*, 3 December, 1959, p. 22.

granting "freedom in the exercise of religious worship," Soviet authority showed its failure to understand Christianity. "By taking away church property and by forcing the Christians [of Russia] to give up certain normal activities they made them concentrate on the most fundamental thing of all—the corporate assembly for worship and sacrifice, wherein the faithful meet their Lord face to face."³⁶

36. Donald Attwater, *Christian Churches of the East* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1961-62), p. 71.