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**The life of the Reformed Church during the Hungarian  
Soviet Republic. The Hungarian Calvinists in a Time of  
Crisis.**

**Thesis summary**

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## **1. Dissertation topic and structure**

My doctoral dissertation offers an insight into a turbulent era of the Hungarian history. The short, 133-day period of the Hungarian Soviet Republic is exciting, academically unexplored, and highlights many new theological questions.

My choice of subject came about almost organically. I started examining the events of 1919 as an introduction to post-1945 church history. I realised that, in terms of church history, especially the history of the Reformed church, the scholarly view of the era has many shortcomings.

Thus the topic of my dissertation is the life of the Reformed Church under the Bolshevik-type dictatorship which existed between March 21 and August 1, 1919. My dissertation touches upon the other denominations as well, since, in order to form a coherent picture, it was necessary to examine them. However, my thesis does not attempt to encompass the entire era.

The length of the era prompted a thematic examination of the events instead of a chronological one. Focusing on the peculiarity of the era, I attempt to analyse and interpret bigger themes; at the same time, neither do I exclude the examination of special cases or particular persons from my approach.

While I examine the events leading up to the era, I turn to the theoretical and applied church policy of the state, as well as the place and role of the Reformed Church in this disorder. The extremely fast secularization of institutions and personal property shook the established church. I survey the educational institutions, as well as the consequences of the land issue on the church, the parsonages, church buildings and other, even then unlawfully confiscated properties, and the given reactions.

The confiscation of institutions is followed by even more sensitive topics: the actual terror, and how the atheist dictatorship interfered with the workings of the congregations and the Church. Terror became a common practice, the number of incidents rose high.<sup>1</sup> Also, even during this short-lived system, there were collaborators. I devoted a separate sub-chapter to Roland Kiss, who later held church office and who was a defining figure of the administration at the time.

I was unable to end the dissertation with August 1, 1919. Thus I examined the events that followed, and I also discussed the disciplinary cases in detail. How could the Church recover, through disciplinary procedures? Detailed information shows that the rules of procedure have

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<sup>1</sup> Konrád Salamon, “Vörösteror – fehérterror. Okok és következmények.” [Red terror – white terror. Reasons and consequences] In Cecília Szederjesi (ed.) *Megtorlások évszázada. Politikai terror és erőszak a huszadik századi Magyarországon.* [The century of reprisals. Political terror and violence in Hungary in the 20<sup>th</sup> century] Nógrád Megyei Levéltár – 1956-os Intézet, Salgótarján – Budapest, 2008, 11–15.

not been nearly as strict as it was portrayed later, or as the degree of collaboration would have called for. The dissertation reveals how the Hungarian Soviet Republic appeared in the Reformed Church's remembrance. The proletarian dictatorship was recalled on a daily basis in the Hungarian political life of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but a lot less so within the Reformed Church. Thus, both in terms of commemoration and remembrance, as well as heroisation-deheroisation, we were significantly lacking behind secular practices.

I have attached several contemporary documents in the Appendix, and I compiled a list of pastors, teachers, and members of the clergy, who have suffered some kind of atrocity by the hand of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. Next to it is the list of the "opposite side", the names of collaborators and those who held government office.

## **2. Sources, literature**

In my doctoral dissertation, I aimed to rely on primary sources. There was an abundance of archived sources at my disposal.

The Hungarian Soviet Republic and its era do not come up frequently in the works of Hungarian historical studies. Our primary sources are short. The historical reason is that they did not want to write everything down for their own safety, while the practical reason is that during this period, there was a shortage of paper in Hungary, the railway

and the postal service were struggling. In 1956, the documents on church affairs from between 1867 and 1944, belonging to the Ministry of Religion and Public Education and kept at the National Archives of Hungary, were destroyed. These included most of the documents belonging to the Religious Liquidation Office (“*Vallásügyi Likvidáló Hivatal*”) as well. The memoirs hardly mention this period<sup>2</sup>, after March 21, 1919, religious papers were banned, and before that, financial difficulties and the aforementioned paper-shortage influenced the regularity of publication. I could no longer rely on personal accounts. A significant percentage of parish archives were destroyed in 1945.<sup>3</sup>

I used the texts from after 1945 critically, some of which proved academically valuable. After 1990, the Hungarian Soviet Republic did not play a significant part in historical research, neither in universal nor in church history.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “[E]ras of revolutions which involve terror are almost unknown in terms of personal memories and experiences.” Péter Dominkovits: “Kutatottság, aktualitás, lehetőségek – szempontok a Tanácsköztársaság helyi forrásbázisának feltárásához.” [Researchedness, actuality, possibilities – approaches to the exploration of the local sources of the Hungarian Soviet Republic] In Péter Dominkovits – Ildikó Németh: *Forradalmak sodrában. A Tanácsköztársaság Sopronban és Sopron vármegyében a kortársak szemével. (1920-1921)*. [In the drift of revolutions. The Hungarian Soviet Republic in Sopron and Sopron county according to contemporaries.] The National Archives of Hungary Győr-Moson- Sopron Megyei Levéltár, Soproni Városi Levéltára, Sopron, 2014. 15.

<sup>3</sup> András Jakab Csűrös: *Református egyházi élet a Tanácsköztársaság idején*. Bachelor thesis. ELTE Faculty of Humanities, 2010. 6.

<sup>4</sup> For research on the period of the Aster revolution, Adrienn Tengely’s book was important: Adrienn Tengely: *A magyar egyházak a forradalmak korában*. [Hungarian churches in the age of revolutions.] Líceum, Eger, 2011.

### 3. Theses, new insight

The dissertation attempts to offer a comprehensive view of the religious life of the Reformed Church during the era of the Hungarian Soviet Republic.

As an interdisciplinary digression, I evaluate the system in terms of the phenomenology of religion. The ideological communism of the Hungarian Soviet Republic does not become an independent religion; instead it remains on a philosophical level in which religious phenomena and attitudes are present. It is religion-replacement which tries to become a religion and seeks to create an “institutionalised church”, but remains unsuccessful. Its form of government, in terms of religion, is “inverted theocracy”.<sup>5</sup>

In my dissertation, I describe in detail the degree and process of “liquidation”. The main role of the Religious Liquidation Office was the secularization of church property, that is, personal property and real estate. These were carried out very quickly, as it was characteristic of the system. Schools, other institutions of public affairs, libraries, archives, and lands were confiscated in this way. Moreover, the cash and foundations of the church were taken away as well. It is important to add that the widespread view of history, according to which the parsonages

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<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev: *Az orosz kommunizmus értelme és eredete*. [The origin of Russian communism] Századvég Füzetek 5. Századvég, Bp., 1989. 154.

were not secularization, is proven false by our sources. In several places pastors were evicted, or forced to pay rent.<sup>6</sup> In practice, this was rarely implemented, but it can be found in the legislation as well as in some actual cases.

During the “liquidation”, abusive proceedings occurred as well, such as the confiscation of churches<sup>7</sup> and the private property of pastors. Besides the loss of their housing, provincial pastors were financially impacted by the land law, since the rest of their livelihood was taken away as well.

Socialist reading apologetically argued that pastors and priests still received governmental aids. This is only partially true. On the one hand, significantly more money was taken away from religious communities on a national level; on the other hand, the payment of the government aid (*kongrua*) would have been terminated after August 1.<sup>8</sup>

In connection with the decisions restricting the life of congregations Roland Kiss has to be mentioned. He was a member of the

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<sup>6</sup> “Az egyházi vagyonok átvétele.” [Taking over the properties of churches.] In Jenő Pongrácz (ed.): *Tanácsköztársasági Törvénytar.* [Code of the Hungarian Soviet Republic] II. kötet. Magyarországi Szocialista Párt kiadása, Bp., 1919. 137. The National Archives of Hungary K 802. VKM Elnöki iratok A. Iratok. II. Az Elnöki Osztály regisztraturájából megmaradt iratok, 1874–1949. 78. box. Egyházi ügyek 4813/1919.

<sup>7</sup> “The churches were frequently made use of by the local directorates in ways far from their original functions” Lelkészegyesület, XII. évf. 14. sz. Debrecen, 1919. április 5. 120.

<sup>8</sup> The National Archives of Hungary K-46 PTI-606. f. 1/36. unit 1–2.

parliament after 1945 and was elected as the main minister<sup>9</sup> of the Danubian district among scandalous circumstances in 1948-1949. At the time of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, he was the head of the Szabolcs county directorate.<sup>10</sup> Using his position, he banned religious services on March 26, 1919. Although this was barely carried out, and even withdrawn two weeks later<sup>11</sup>, the decree still existed. Moreover, it is an interesting fact that 30 years before Roland Kiss became the lay president of the Hungarian Reformed Church's Convent, he legalised cohabitation in a decree<sup>12</sup>.

Roland Kiss's decree, which banned religious services, was obviously a misinterpretation of the regulation on curfew ("*kijárási tilalom*"). As far as I know, besides Szabolcs county, there was only one

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<sup>9</sup> Sándor Ladányi: "Őrségváltás – háttérzenével. Adalékok egyházunk legújabbkori történetének alakulásához." [Gourd mounting – with background music. Additions to the modern-age-history of our Church.] In Sándor Ladányi: *A magyarországi református egyház 1956 tükrében. Egyház történeti tanulmányok.* [The Hungarian Reformed Church in the mirror of 1956. Essays in the history of religion.] Mundus, Bp., 2006, 89–123.; also Sándor Ladányi: *Ecsetvonások egy főgondnok arcképehez.* [Some brushstrokes to the portrait of a main minister.] 132–141.

<sup>10</sup> The Archives of Political History and of Trade Unions VI. 762. f. 47. 5.

<sup>11</sup> The Archives of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County Szab. dir. ir. 73/1919. (Eredeti, fogalmazvány.) Dóra Dikán (ed.): Dokumentumok a Tanácsköztársaság Szabolcs megyei történetéből. [Documents from the history of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in Szabolcs county] Jónás András Múzeum Évkönyve, 1968. Nyíregyháza, 1969, 125.

<sup>12</sup> The Archives of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County XVI. 11. Szabolcs vármegyei direktóriumának iratai. 3. box n/ 1919. 4.

other case like this.<sup>13</sup> However, in Fejér county, “only” preaching was banned<sup>14</sup>, not the event itself.

As an excursus, I present the life of Zoltán Tildy in 1919. Zoltán Tildy was a young pastor from Somogy county who founded the Somogy Pastor Union, with the approval of the party.<sup>15</sup> Zoltán Tildy’s later political career was certainly influenced by the fact that his father-in-law, Antal Gyenis was executed during the White Terror as a functionary of the Hungarian Soviet Republic.

In my dissertation, I highlight a document from the Fejér County Archives, written by the Parish of the Kápolnásnyék Reformed Church to Sándor Garbai, the – Calvinist – head of the Revolutionary Governing Council. The letter is well-structured, logical, seeking the future of the church and the end of uncertainty. Unfortunately, similarly bold statements on the part of the Church’s leadership were missing, even though those were very much needed. To their defence, three out of the five episcopal seats were under military occupation until the end, and Debrecen was taken in April 1919. The struggles of the postal service and the railway did not facilitate effective lobbying. It would have been

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<sup>13</sup> Archives of the Danubian District of the Reformed Church of Hungary A/1 b. 201. box. 1919. évi iratok 634/1919.

<sup>14</sup> Another factor of uncertainty for the religious services and sacred events was the Hungarian Soviet Republic’s strict alcohol prohibition.

<sup>15</sup> Archives of the Transdanubian Reformed Church District I. Egyházkerület iratai 1. b. Ügyviteli iratok, 1919. 404. box. Belsősomogyi lelkészek igazolása. 1360/1919.

indeed difficult to give guidance in an era when the state leadership itself could hardly make sense of the process of legislation.

The most known Calvinist statement of the era – which perhaps owes its fame to the scandal it caused – came from the Debrecen Reformed College.<sup>16</sup> The offer of cooperation has been examined among the events of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, but it is better to place the statement in the contemporary theological framework. This way, we can find coherence between the collaboration and liberal theology. The scandalous statement caused huge outrage. A disciplinary procedure began at the university, while Jen Sebestyén’s group led a continuous attack on Debrecen regarding the statement.<sup>17</sup> Thus the argument grew out of proportion, and became the cause of tension between liberal and historical Calvinist theology. After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, the positive theological response to the birth of the “utopia”

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<sup>16</sup> The joining of the Faculty of Theology on the 26th March. From the Archives of the Theology of Debrecen: Faculty of Theology jkv. IV. 1917–19. 254–255. In György Komoróczy (ed.): *A Tanácsköztársaság Hajdú-Biharban. 1919.* [The Hungarian Soviet Republic. 1919.] Dokumentumgyűjtemény. MSZMP Hajdú-Bihar Megyei Bizottsága, Debrecen, 1959.134.

<sup>17</sup> The detailed examination of the statement from Debrecen can be found in Endre Tóth’s manuscript: Endre Tóth: *A debreceni egyetem református hittudományi karának a Tanácsköztársaság elnökét és közoktatásügyi népbiztosát üdvözlő határozata, – és ennek következményei.* [The Debrecen Faculty of Theology’s letter welcoming the president and the people’s commissar for education of the Hungarian Soviet Republic – and its consequences] Debrecen Reformed Theological University Centre for the Research of the History of Reformation and Protestantism in Central-Europe, Collection of handwritings. Debrecen, [after 1945].

became the parody of liberal theology, and posterity saw it as ugly, pointless collaboration instead of a commendable gesture.

#### 4. Conclusions

The church policy of the Hungarian Soviet Republic was rather about tactical solutions than strategic ones. The communists were fighting the Social Democrats and their own ideological ignorance at the same time.<sup>18</sup> One thing they were sure of: the churches needed to be abolished. They had no detailed plan as to how to carry this out. The Religious Liquidation Office was mainly concerned with seizing church property, but behind this intent was the communist ideology's conviction that, without government aid, the churches will decline and disappear.<sup>19</sup>

The confiscation of institutions and property was often unlawful, sometimes positively (that is, not everything was taken)<sup>20</sup>, at other times with negative consequences (they took more than they should have)<sup>21</sup>. At

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<sup>18</sup> György Lukács: *Marxista fejlődésem: 1918–1930*. [My development into Marxist.] In: *Curriculum vitae*. Magvető, Bp., 1982. 286-318. Tibor Erényi: 1919. *Világosság*, 1979. (March) 20/3. 134.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Marx: "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right." In Karl Marx – Friedrich Engels: *On Religion*. Selection of Works. arranged by Wolfgang Eggers. [http://ciml.250x.com/archive/5classics/english/5\\_classics\\_of\\_marxism-leninism\\_on\\_religion.pdf](http://ciml.250x.com/archive/5classics/english/5_classics_of_marxism-leninism_on_religion.pdf) 2017-04-19

<sup>20</sup> The National Archives of Hungary K 46 –PTI - 605. f. 12. box. II/34. unit 2.

<sup>21</sup> They even took devotional articles from Nyíregyháza and Nagykálló. The National Archives of Hungary K 46 –PTI - 605. f. 12. box. II/30. unit Nyíregyházáról. 4.

times, the congregation and the Church recognised the *status confessionis*.<sup>22</sup>

The dictatorship actively interfered with the life of the Church on a national, a regionally and a local level. It limited their financial and economic situation, as well as their holidays and everyday life. The indecisive religious persecution of the Hungarian Soviet Republic resulted in a restricted religious-congregational life, since people could not practise their religion as freely as before.<sup>23</sup> The government's aim was a cultural separation between the Hungarian society and the churches.

Looking at the church policy of Béla Kun and his associates, we can see that the terror was not about conceptualised persecution but instead about anticlerical sentiments getting out of hand. This must have caused a serious factor of uncertainty, and must have been frightening in itself. The unpredictability, the fact that anyone could be the next victim, generated fear.<sup>24</sup> An essential quality of dictatorships is the atmosphere where everyone knows that anyone could become a victim at any time.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Archives of the Transdanubian Reformed Church District I. Egyházkerület iratai 1. b. Ügyviteli iratok, 1919. 404. doboz. 114/1919.

<sup>23</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Ethics*. Exit Kiadó, New York, New Jersey USA, 1965. 301.

<sup>24</sup> András Jakab Csűrös: *Református egyházi élet a Tanácsköztársaság idején*. Bachelor thesis. ELTE Faculty of Humanities, 2010. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Hannah Arendt: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Harvest Book Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego – New York – London, 1979. 432.

[https://monoskop.org/images/7/7e/Arendt\\_Hannah\\_The\\_Origins\\_of\\_Totalitarianism\\_1979.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/7/7e/Arendt_Hannah_The_Origins_of_Totalitarianism_1979.pdf) 2017-04-19

The powerful presence of terror and atrocities evokes the thoughts of Alain Badiou: “The reason is that once the category of crime is linked to the state, it designates mass murder.”<sup>26</sup> The system of the Hungarian Soviet Republic allowed a limited religious freedom. The limited religious freedom also meant limited religious persecution.<sup>27</sup> It is actually pointless to look for religious freedom during the dictatorship of an atheist ideology anyway, since, based on the ideology, the foreign example, and the tendency, the system of the Hungarian Soviet Republic was inevitably predisposed towards active religious persecution.

During the time of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, a prophetic voice was still missing, which appeared in the Calvinist society only a quarter of a century later, after 1945. For the Hungarian Reformed Church, 1919 was a confessional state, a *status confessionis*, which it could not utilise. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the Reformed Church did not completely succumb to the dictatorship, an achievement which is not to be underrated.

The regime could not unfold the same way in 1919 as it did after 1945. The proletarian dictatorship made Hungarians face the difficulties of communism, while the Church eased suffering. The Hungarian Soviet Republic traumatised the Hungarian population. The lost war, the

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<sup>26</sup> Alain Badiou: *The Century*. (translated by Alberto Toscano) Polity Press. Cambridge, 2007 <http://libgen.io/ads.php?md5=CE79666F7008875478E6B84C0E8824F4> 2017-04-19

<sup>27</sup> Bennett Kovrig: *Communism in Hungary. From Kunt to Kádár*. Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, Stanford, California, USA, 1979. 50.

dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the revolutions, including the atheist dictatorship, followed by the catastrophe of Trianon afflicted our nation all at once. As a consequence, there was greater emphasis on the education of youth after 1920, which resulted in the Christian movements. The atheist dictatorship was followed by a “Christian course”, the results of which are the Calvinist church buildings of Budapest.<sup>28</sup> As concerning the Church, the mission activity was strengthened, and they were trying to find solutions to social issues. The Calvinist awakening rose came from these ideas, some 20 years later.

In the end, it becomes clear that the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer prove true once again, according to whom the atheist rule is in the service of God as well, since “it serves the testimony of the name of Christ through the suffering of the congregations.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The large numbers of Calvinists arriving from the occupied territories contributed greatly to the church-constructions and the strengthening of Calvinism in Budapest.

<sup>29</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Ethics. Macmillan, New York, New Jersey USA, 1965. 297.

## 5. Relevant academic works

### Publications

1. “Túszedés a Tanácsköztársaság idején.” [Hostage taking in the Hungarian Soviet Republic.] In *horthykorszak.blog.hu*  
[http://horthykorszak.blog.hu/2016/03/21/tuszszedes\\_a\\_tanacskozarsasaga\\_idejen](http://horthykorszak.blog.hu/2016/03/21/tuszszedes_a_tanacskozarsasaga_idejen) (2016)
2. “Úrvacsora és szesztilalom 1919.” [Lord’s Supper and alcohol prohibition.] *Protestáns Téka*, 2015. 1. sz. 29-40.
3. “Tanácsköztársaság és Messiás.” [The Hungarian Soviet Republic and the Messiah] In *Vidimus enim stellam eius*. L’Harmattan Kiadó. Bp., 2012. 74-83.
4. “A Berinkey-kormány egyházpolitikája.” [The ecclesiastic policy of the Berinkey-government] In *DOSZ. Tavaszi Szél 2011*. Piliscsaba, 2011. 77-81.
5. “»Végidőben.« Református egyházi élet Wekerle Sándor III. kormányzása idején (1917-1918).” [“At the end of times,” Calvinist ecclesial life under the governance of the third Wekerle government (1917-1918).] In *DOSZ Tavaszi Szél 2010*. Pécs, 2010. 90–95.

## Lectures

6. “Úrvacsora és szesztilalom.” [Lord’s Supper and alcohol prohibition.] *Fiatal Kutatók és Doktoranduszok III. Nemzetközi Teológuskonferenciája*. DOSZ Teológiai Tudomány Osztály, Budapest, 2012. 11. 03.
7. “Tanácsköztársaság és egyház; Tanácsköztársaság, mint egyház.” [The Hungarian Soviet Republic and the church; the Hungarian Soviet Republic as a church] *Akkreditált Lelkésztovábbképzés, Budapest-Déli Református Egyházmegye, Budapest*. 2012. 02. 23.
8. “Tanácsköztársaság és Messiás.” [The Hungarian Soviet Republic and the Messiah] *Fiatal Kutatók és Doktoranduszok II. Nemzetközi Teológuskonferenciája*. DOSZ Teológiai Tudomány Osztály, Budapest. 2011. 10. 15.
9. “A Berinkey-kormány egyházpolitikája.” [The ecclesiastic policy of the Berinkey-government] *DOSZ. Tavaszi Szél Nemzetközi Konferencia. Piliscsaba, 2011*.
10. “»Likvidálni!« A Tanácsköztársaság egyházpolitikája.” [“Liquidate!” The ecclesiastic policy of the Hungarian Soviet Republic.] *Fiatal Kutatók és Doktoranduszok I. Nemzetközi Teológuskonferenciája*. DOSZ Teológiai Tudomány Osztály, Budapest. 2010. 10. 09.
11. “»Végidőben.« Református egyházi élet Wekerle Sándor III. kormányzása idején (1917-1918).” [“At the end of times,” Calvinist ecclesial life under the governance of the third Wekerle government (1917-1918).] *DOSZ Tavaszi Szél Nemzetközi Konferencia. Pécs, 2010*.