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Pathfinding and Connections in the Life of Small Reformed Communities in Budapest. The Contexts of the 1967 YMCA Trial²

Abstract.

In July 1967, the communist political police arrested five members of *Keresztény Ifjúsági Egyesület* (the Hungarian equivalent of the YMCA), which had been dissolved in 1950, on charges of conspiracy against the state. Among those arrested were pastors, elders, and a former deacon. The trial is considered to be the last politically motivated trial against the Reformed Church and the most significant of all state security actions against the Reformed in Hungary. In order to understand the background of the trial and the changing considerations of church policy and state security surrounding it, it is necessary to look at how the image and political approach of the decisive actors of church policy had evolved by the 1960s. On the other hand, the documents produced by the party-state can be examined not only from the perspective of power but also from that of communities in action: what were the individual and collective strategies for active

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Christianity in the first decades of the Kádár regime? What were the individual and collective aspirations, adaptation techniques, and patterns of value transmission that can be discerned among different groups, congregations, youth communities, and their leaders in Reformed Christianity? Which forms of church or religious behaviours were considered dangerous by the party-state, and how did it set forth for the church policy enforcement bodies the activities it considered to be within the category of church or religious resistance and opposition?

Keywords: communist church policy, Hungarian Reformed Church, political trial, religious resistance, YMCA

In July 1967, the Communist political police arrested five members of *Keresztyén Ifjúsági Egyesület* (the Hungarian equivalent of the YMCA), which had been dissolved in 1950, on charges of conspiracy against the state. Among those arrested were pastors, elders, and a former deacon.³ The trial is considered to be the last politically motivated trial against the Reformed Church and the most significant of all state security actions against the Reformed in Hungary. The preparation of the so-called second YMCA trial was preceded by a secret state intelligence investigation lasting half a year and involved a wide range of operational tools on behalf of the political police. The people concerned had their home phones tapped, their homes secretly searched, their letters opened and were monitored by thirteen agents. Eighty-eight people were involved in the two-day operation planned to complete the case: twenty-four investigators, forty-four operations officers, and twenty drivers. The conspiracy arrests took place over two days, along with some 25 simultaneous house searches and 30 witness interviews. The arrested churchmen were tried on charges of initiating prohibited youth work, organizing unauthorized

³ Among the defendants were Dénes Batiz, a retired doctor, formerly elder of the Budapest-Baross Square Reformed Congregation, formerly YMCA leader, Rev. Bálint Kovács, former pastor of Budapest-Salétrom Street Reformed Congregation, formerly YMCA secretary, Rev. Károly Dobos, a former youth pastor, YMCA secretary, pastor in Pesthidegkút, Mátyás Bugárszky, formerly elder of the Budapest–Buda Reformed Congregation, former warehouse keeper, and Imre Tisza, a former deacon.

meetings and ultimately the preparation of a conspiracy against the people's democratic state order.⁴ As one state security report summarized it:

Over the time, we have established that a YMCA movement has been developing under the direction of the Swiss headquarters, which differs from the pre-1950 movement in that *it gives a religious nature to its activities and wants to carry out its plans covertly, under the auspices of the Church (...)* Their tactic is to *use state-approved youth Bible study groups within the church* for spiritual-excursions (sic!) to train according to the spiritual-physical and religious-ethical YMCA programme, to contrast it with Marxism.⁵

State intelligence kept the case files under the code name *The Campers*. The proceedings are relatively well documented: not only the State Security files but also the correspondence between the State Office for Church Affairs (ÁEH) and the church leadership and other documents on the case are still available.⁶

In many respects, the twists and turns of “The Campers” case can provide important lessons for understanding the post-1956 Hungarian communist regime's techniques of domination under János Kádár as well as the church policy of the 1960s

⁴ Despite the large-scale state security preparations, the current political intentions to exploit the churches' expanding international diplomatic room for manoeuvre in church diplomacy did not make the party-state interested in conducting a trial against the Reformed that would also make waves abroad, so the Supreme Court of Appeal changed the previous classification of the facts and reclassified the YMCA case as an abuse of the right of association instead of preparation for a conspiracy against the state. This is also referred to in the passages of the 1968 Church Policy Decision referring to the YMCA case, which was the subject of the church-policy-related stocktaking report of the late 1960s. MNL OL 288. f. 5/488, archived units, 4 March 1968.

⁵ Summary report on “The Campers” case – fn /KIE/ July 20, 1966 Historical Archives of the State Security Services (hereafter referred to as ÁBTL) 3.1.5. O-13142/1 21–24.

⁶ On the subject, see: KISS, Réka (2019): *Legális–illegális–féllegális*. In: Kiss, Réka – Lányi, Gábor (eds.): *HIT 2018: Hagyomány, Identitás, Történelem*. Budapest. 239–271. KISS, Réka (2023): *Útkeresések és kapcsolódások a budapesti református kisközösségek életében. Az 1968-es KIE-per kontextusai*. In: Tabajdi, Gábor – Szuly, Rita – Erdős, Kristóf – Wirthné Diera, Bernadett (eds.): *Küzdelem a lelkekért. Pártállam és egyházak a hosszú hatvanas években*. Budapest: Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottságának Hivatala. 309–360.

within. In my article, I will outline the broader church policy and church community contexts in addition to the more narrowly defined state security vs. church policy combinations. I seek to answer the question about the processes that led to the 1967 YMCA trial and how these five men ended up being accused. In order to understand the background of the trial and the changing considerations of church policy and state intelligence surrounding it, it is necessary to look at how the image and political approach of the party-state about the Reformed Church evolved by the 1960s. How did the decisive actors of church policy, the party leadership, the State Office for Church Affairs, and the staff of the Ministry of Interior apparatus responsible for Protestant affairs describe the situation and internal relations of the Reformed Church? In other words, what kind of a “problem map” could have been drawn in the eyes of the party-state church policy’s leaders and executives in the 1960s with regard to the Reformed Church?

The reports produced almost routinely by the political police can, of course, be read as an imprint of the state security logic of compulsive enemy seeking. On the one hand, they are good examples of the perpetuation of the 1950s habits, of a body socialized to constantly devise criminal proceedings and expose conspiracies, and of the self-justification of the indispensability of state intelligence work. On the other hand, they also adapted to the political shift, which, after the repression following the 1956 revolution and the campaign of forced collectivization, aimed at dismantling the autonomous peasant society and identified new circles of enemies in the revival of religious communities and patriotic affiliations, which were generally labelled as nationalism. It would be a mistake, however, to interpret these reports merely in terms of the logic of state security. For, despite the extremely uneven sources (sometimes disturbingly short or incomplete, sometimes unexpectedly abundant) in the party-state documents that have come down to us, there are some tangible nodes that can open the door to hitherto little-known levels of social action. While it is true that the tendentious interpretations and disproportionate exaggerations of the political police have left us with a highly distorted picture, the party-state apparatus does, after all, preserve the growing activity of Christian communities – both large and small – and the autonomous efforts to expand the scope of religious practice and thus the traces of real social action. For this reason, the resources produced by the party-state can be examined not only from the perspective of power but also from that of communities in action: what were the individual and collective strategies for active

Christianity in the first decades of the Kádár regime? What means, possibilities, and freedom were there available for the Christian communities to perpetuate their own system of values and norms? What are the individual and collective aspirations, adaptation techniques, and patterns of value transmission that can be discerned among different groups, congregations, youth communities, and their leaders in Reformed Christianity?

In particular, I would like to draw attention to a special aspect of the everyday practice of chess games in church politics, the problem of “legality”. Indeed, the state security report quoted in the introduction, which is a summary of meetings of former YMCA members, written in the peculiar wording of the political police, reflected the recurring dilemma of Janus-faced party-state church politics in the 1960s: What is considered hostile church activity, church resistance from the point of view of the regime and whether and by what means can religious activities that are permitted (i.e. legal) but still labelled hostile by the power players be countered? The same dilemma had been summed up succinctly in a report on a Reformed theological self-study group two years earlier, which the intelligence service for church affairs had described as an anti-state crime: the participants had “used the legal possibilities of the church for illegal hostile activities”.⁷ Finally, from the perspective of power: how did the holders of power react to the various forms of religious activity – to use the party jargon of the time –, to individual and communal manifestations of the “religious worldview”, and to religious activity categorized in the coordinate system of “illegal” vs. “legal”, “hostile” vs. “loyal”? In order to answer the question of what counted as risk taking that stretched the limits of tolerance in the changing conditions of the system’s exercise of power, we need to understand the logic of power. In other words, which forms of church or religious behaviours were considered dangerous by the party-state, and how did it set forth for the church policy enforcement bodies the activities it considered to be within the category of church or religious resistance and opposition?

⁷ ÁBTL 3.1.5. O13586/1 86. For more details on the state security operation against the group under the pseudonym *The Fighters*, see more in the case study by László Kósa. KÓSA, László (2010): Református ifjúsági körök bomlasztása Budapesten az 1960-as évek első felében, Egyházüldözés és egyházüldözők a Kádár-korszakban. In: Soós, Viktor Attila – Szabó, Csaba – Szigeti, László (eds.): *Egyházüldözők és egyházüldözés a Kádár-korszakban*. Budapest, Szent István-Társulat. 270–288.

The Framework of Power: The Beginnings of the Kádár Era's Church and Religion Policy

Research on the development of illegal and legal religious practice after '56, as well as on the forms of resistance that can be grasped among Christian communities, can be based on an understanding of the perspective of power. How did the church and religious policy of the new Kádár regime evolve? What were the risky and illegal activities that stretched the tolerance of the church policy enforcers in terms of religious practice and the living and transmission of Christian values?

The basic principles of the communist church policy towards the historical Protestant denominations, and more narrowly towards the Reformed Church, were essentially established by the first years of the Sovietization of Hungary, between 1945 and 1948.⁸ The party leadership led by Mátyás Rákosi, recognizing and exploiting the historical fault lines that actually existed among the churches, adopted different tactics towards the Catholic and Protestant churches from the very beginning, consciously seeking to deepen the antagonism and distrust between the denominations, applying the principle of *divide et impera*. While in the discursive space surrounding church politics the Catholic Church and its leader, Cardinal József Mindszenty, were identified with church reactionism, the Reformed Church, which was more dominant in terms of numbers and social weight among all the Protestant denominations, was assigned the role of the exemplary cooperating “progressive” church. For this division of roles, it was first necessary to find new church leaders with whom to demonstrate that the Communist Party was ready to cooperate with the churches, provided that they supported progress and the agenda of socialist change. As the Protestant churches feature national organization and the church leaders are elected, it became much easier for the Communist Party to force the necessary

⁸ See also: KISS, Réka (2021): “I Was Allowed to Say No”: The Lessons of One “Dropped” and One “Actual” Court Case Involving the Reformed Church during the Sovietization of Hungary. In: Fejérdy, András – Wirthné, Diera Bernadett (eds.): *The Trial of Cardinal József Mindszenty from the Perspective of Seventy Years: The Fate of Church Leaders in Central and Eastern Europe*. Vatican, Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 461–480; LÁNYI, Gábor (2024): The Impacts of Ideologies in the History of the Reformed Church in Hungary. In: Kovács, Ábrahám – Jaeshik, Shin (eds.): *Church and Society: Biblical, Theological and Missiological Approaches by Korean and Hungarian Protestants*. Debrecen–Gwangju (Debreceni Református Hittudományi Egyetem – Honam Theological University and Seminary. 243–257.

changes in the leadership. The tools used ranged from political blackmail and intimidation to outright fraud in church elections and to the organization of show trials. By 1948/1949, the forced replacements in the top church leadership positions had taken place in both the Reformed and Lutheran churches: László Ravasz, Bishop of the Danubian Reformed Church District and Pastoral President of the Synod, was forced to resign through open political blackmail; Andor Lázár, the lay leader of the Danubian church district, was abducted by the communist political police and held for a short time – for intimidation purposes – in the dreaded state security centre at 60 Andrásy út; János Kardos, who was his appointed successor, was prevented from taking office by obvious electoral fraud; Bishop Lajos Ordass and Albert Radvánszky, the universal supervisor of the Lutheran Church, were sentenced to prison in a show trial on apparently false charges of financial abuse, among others. By the end of 1948, both the new Bishop of the Danubian district (Budapest), Albert Bereczky, and the new Bishop of the Tibiscan Reformed Church District (Debrecen), János Péter, were placed at the head of the church by the will of the Communist Party leadership, and personally of the party leader, Mátyás Rákosi. Nevertheless, the approach to the situation from the internal perspective of the church public was not unanimous. The party not only tried to take advantage of the distrust among the denominations but also carefully mapped the political and social fault lines within the churches. After all, the social composition of the churches was far from homogeneous: political fault lines, the relationship with the Christian conservative political system and its elites between the two world wars and after 1945, the relationship with the Communist Party, social and generational tensions within the church, conflicts within the hierarchy and differences among theological and religious trends, all made the internal structure of the democratically organized churches many times more layered and fragile. In any case, the Communist Party, by sharpening and exploiting the existing internal divisions, easily found a dynamic, critical, and politically impressionable generation of young pastors who, either through their goodwill and naivety or through their careerism, or even their susceptibility to blackmail, could be seen as compatible with Communist church politics and willing to cooperate. Several consequences arose from this church-related strategy: 1.) In Rákosi's policy of the 1950s, which embodied Hungarian Stalinism, the new Reformed Church leadership, ready to cooperate with the communist power, was given the role of the "battering ram". The first task of the new church leadership was to separate church and state according to the communist model and to nationalize church schools.

This became the basis for the forced agreement between the Reformed Church and the state, signed on 7 October 1948, which, in addition to serving as a model for the Agreement forced on the other Protestant churches and the Jewish denomination, regulated the life of the church with minor amendments until 1990. Contrary to its declared principles, the Agreement, severely restricting the church's activities, did not lead to the separation of church and state but rather to the loss of church self-determination, the extension of party-state control, and the complete financial dependence of the church, thus keeping its dependence on the state. In addition, the real church policy practice did not even allow the missionary and pastoral room for manoeuvre left free in the Agreement to be filled. Yet the Agreement was hailed by the new church leadership as the fruit of cooperation between church and state.⁹ 2.) The party-state sought to use not only the new leadership of the churches but also church teaching for its own political and propaganda purposes. As a result, a new theological construct was developed to justify the socialist system, known as the theology of the "narrow way" or the theology of the "serving church".¹⁰ This was accompanied by a new ecclesiastical language: on the one hand, the official ecclesiastical discourse tried to support current political goals and aspirations by using religious language, and, on the other hand, it tried to introduce political concepts and power discourse borrowed from the Communist Party into the public discourse of the church. 3.) As a result of this process, the internal theological and organizational issues of the churches became politicized. Key topical issues such as critical confrontation with the past and "repentance", church renewal, as well as current theological, organizational, and personal issues were placed in a political context and thus in the service of the Communist Party's ambitions. By the 1950s, the narratives that sought to theologially justify the Communist

⁹ See: BOGÁRDI SZABÓ, István (1995): *Egyházvezetés és teológia a Magyarországi Református Egyházban 1948 és 1989 között*. In: *Societas et ecclesia*. 3. Debrecen.

¹⁰ See Károly Zsolt Nagy's latest articles: NAGY, Károly Zsolt (2017): „Amit az evangelium ígér, azt váltsa valóra a demokrácia.” A társadalmi változások teológiai reflexiói és a belső nyilvánosság nyelvének átalakulása a Magyarországi Református Egyházban 1945 és 1948 között. In: Csikós, Gábor – Kiss, Réka – O. Kovacs, József (eds.): *Váltóállítás. Diktatúrák a vidéki Magyarországon 1945-ben*. Budapest, MTA BTK – Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága. Nagy, Károly Zsolt (2021): „Valami félelem szorongat...” A „szocialista lelkésztípus” kialakítása 2. A kulturális ellenállás formálódása egy református lelkészi csoportban az 1960-as években. In: Csikós, Gábor – Horváth, Gergely Krisztián (eds.): *Lefojtva. Uralom, alávetettség és autonómia a pártállamban (1957–1980)*. Budapest, Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont – Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága. 457–495.

Party's socially damaging measures (e.g. collectivization, kulakization) and sometimes even the daily political changes had become almost exclusive in official church discourse. In the critical words of László Ravasz, the former bishop, who was forced to resign, noted in his memoirs, "The church has become a paid employee of the state to fulfil its own state-political objectives. The state has discovered in it the best propaganda tool, as the Church has got credit from the past and has reached into parts of the soul that the state could not reach."¹¹ 4.) By contrast to the practice of Catholic church politics in the 1950s, in the case of Protestants, the party leadership primarily entrusted church leadership with the control of church life and thus the suppression of potential critical voices, the sidelining of charismatic leaders, and the prevention of autonomous religious activity.¹² Although the repressive apparatus of the party-state controlled the Reformed Church in the same way and during the persecution of the church many pastors and lay church members suffered severe retaliation and imprisonment for political reasons, the church policy against Protestants did not entail numerous arrests and mass trials as was the case of the anti-Catholic campaigns. The tactic against the Protestants was based on the principle of "ruining the church from within",¹³ the application of *divide et impera* within the church. This led to the establishment of a rather complex system of internal church relations, as the mechanisms of dictatorship were ultimately incorporated into the internal functioning of the church. A typical form of this was the forced relocation of pastors (often elderly or with young children) to congregations in small villages without public transport, schools, or doctors, to congregations in poor condition, accompanied by official administrative measures such as rendering the pastors' families financially unable to support themselves, the withdrawal of the state salary supplement, the so-called *congrua*, or the discriminatory prevention of ministers' children from continuing their education. Although in more than one case the political police and the State Office for Church Affairs were documented to have been involved in the background of personnel-related decisions, formally the church

¹¹ KISS, Réka (ed., introd.) (2007): *Kelt mint fent. Iratok a református Megújulási Mozgalom történetéből. (1956–1957)*. Budapest, Dunamelléki Református Egyházkerület. 425.

¹² LÁNYI, Gábor (2023): Church Disciplinary Procedures in the Early 1950s as Tools of Political Sidelining. In: Bárth, Dániel (ed.): *Lower Clergy and Local Religion in 16th–20th-Century Europe*. Budapest, MTA – ELTE Lendület Történeti Folklorisztikai Kutatócsoport. 345–366.

¹³ See László Ravasz's famous statement in BOGÁRDI SZABÓ 1995, 25; RAVASZ, László (1992): *Emlékezéseim*. Budapest. 372.

bodies made the decisions. All of these processes have clearly reinforced distrust within the church and weakened the solidarity among the pastors within the bodies, forcing the church into an operating mechanism that inevitably pitted the church leadership against the pastors and the faithful. On the other hand, however, by actively involving the church leadership in the implementation of the party-state's church-related policy, they ultimately left them with a certain, rather limited margin of manoeuvre that could have had both negative and positive effects and could have resulted in different individual leadership strategies, as the church leadership was far from homogeneous in its approach to party-state expectations. There are examples that show that some church leaders not only served the party-state church policy but also took the initiative according to their own interests, for example towards the political police to crush their internal opposition and rivals. At the same time, in other cases, church leaders sought to provide protection, to facilitate camouflage, while in some cases forced measures and forced relocations were an alternative to open physical violence or imprisonment.¹⁴

In any case, the Protestant church policy model of the early 1950s, whereby the party-state enforced its repressive church policy through the church leadership as a rule, proved successful for the system – with minor corrections –, as János Horváth, President of the State Office for Church Affairs, worded it in his 1953 synthesis: “The leaders of the Reformed Church are complying with the wishes of the Office, whether this concerns internal church life or activity in international church politics.” And although “the position of a large part of the clergy in the Protestant churches does not coincide with the attitude of their top leaders (...) upon the request of the Office, both churches [Lutheran and Reformed] have taken action against reactionary priests, and several priests have been disciplined”. The most serious task on the “problem map” of the State Office for Church Affairs in the 1950s, apart from the “reactionary clergy”, was the

¹⁴ See the contradictions in the assessment of Albert Bereczky's episcopate and, as an example, Imre Szabó's own reflections on the circumstances of his forced relocation in 1951. SZABÓ, Imre (2001): *Ég, de még nem emésztetik. Naplók 1914–1954*. Budapest. See also: LÁNYI, Gábor (2019): Bishop Albert Bereczky (1893–1966). A Life Full of Questions. In: Kovács, Ábrahám – Shin, Jaeshik (eds.): *Nationalism, Communism and Christian Identity: Protestant Theological Reflections from Korea and Hungary*. Debrecen – Gwangju, Debreceni Református Hittudományi Egyetem – Honam Theological University and Seminary. 123–140.; in more detail: LÁNYI, Gábor (2020): *Méltatlanul. Háttérbe szorított dunamelléki református lelkészek az 1950-es években*. Budapest, Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem.

smallholders' class, which was the social basis of the Reformed Church, namely that "the sessions of the Protestant churches were packed with reactionary kulaks", who "should be gradually expelled from the sessions".¹⁵

After the suppression of the 1956 Revolution and War of Independence, the newly established power under János Kádár obviously referred back to Rákosi's legacy on church matters. As Gyula Kállai, the Ideological Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party [MSZMP] and Minister of Education, put it at a meeting of the MSZMP's Interim Institutional Committee in March 1957:

I think the time has come to take action against the reaction of the churches. (...) Another thing is that not all churches have to be dealt with in the same way, on the same basis, under the same circumstances. We remember that when the situation with the churches escalated in 1947-48, we made a distinction and did not tackle them with the same means. First, we tried to reach an agreement with one and then used the agreement against the other. We must follow the same method now as well. (...) The Catholic Church used to be the most crucial as well as the strongest nest of ecclesiastical reaction in Hungary. So, this is what we must fight against first and foremost, and with the other churches [sic!] we must try to come to an agreement on the former grounds and use them against the Catholic Church.¹⁶

The consequence of this was that no concerted, large-scale show trials were organized against the Protestant churches. This did not, of course, exclude mass but rather unorganized actions against both clergy and laity. The most tragic chapter of the reprisals against the Reformed after '56 was the show trial of Rev. Lajos Gulyás, a Reformed pastor in Levél, sentenced to death and then executed as a third co-defendant.¹⁷

¹⁵ MNL OL 276. f. 89/276, archived units. 16 May 1953, 320. l. Report on the activity of the State Office for Church Affairs.

¹⁶ MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 5. cs. 17 archived unit 13. The minutes of the meeting of the MSZMP Administrative Committee held on 5 March 1957. Comment by Gyula Kállai. At the same time, he added that action must be taken against the reactionary priests.

¹⁷ The most shocking chapter for the Reformed Church was the execution of Rev. Lajos Gulyás, the pastor of Levél. See ERDŐS, Kristóf (2018): The „Clerical Reaction” in Court: The Only Convicted Clerical Victim of Kádár Reprisals. In: Kiss, Réka – Horváth, Zsolt (eds.): NEB Yearbook 2016–2017. Budapest, Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága (NEB) – Országház Könyvkiadó. 253–273.

Kádár's church policy, established after the intensive church retaliation that accompanied the suppression of the revolution, continued to operate the framework related to the policy of the Reformed Church essentially without any major changes, building on the collective social experience of the resistance and intimidation that had been forcibly suppressed after '56, as well as on the policy of temporary concessions and relaxations given to Protestants.

Two of the most influential church leaders of the 1950s, Bishop Albert Bereczky of the Danubian and Bishop János Péter of the Tibiscan districts, were succeeded in the episcopate by István Szamosközi and Tibor Bartha respectively. While Szamosközi, also acting as an agent of state security under the codename "Szatmári", had a recurring problem being considered a "double agent", "wanting to be on good terms with progressive priests and with the so-called Bethanists, who were considered oppositionists",¹⁸ Tibor Bartha, who also held the position of Pastoral President of the Synod and played a key role in international church politics, was considered an absolute pillar of the system. According to the description made about the latter, "in his church activity he strives with all his strength to support the building of socialism in our country through his service in the church". His authoritarian leadership style was euphemistically described by an official of the State Office for Church Affairs as follows: "He strives with excessive energy to bring the entire Reformed Church under his leadership, to achieve democratic unity excluding reaction."¹⁹ In the 1960s, the Reformed Church was managed by a necessarily counter-selected leadership chosen by the State Office for Church Affairs and the Ministry of Interior. An almost schematically recurring motif in church policy reports was "that the leaders of the Protestant churches were the most successful in gaining political support for our system."²⁰

Historical research tends to regard the two party resolutions on church policy adopted by the MSZMP leaders in the summer of 1958 as the basic documents defining the cornerstones of church policy in the Kádár era. By 1958, the post-revolutionary reprisals had reached all strata of society, the crackdown culminated in the execution of

¹⁸ MNL OL XIX-A-21-d, 10.d, 007-03/1961. The quarterly report of Istvan Turai, Rapporteur-General for Church Affairs in Budapest, 19 April 1961. 6.

¹⁹ MNL OL XIX-A-21-d, 11. d., 0018/1961. Károly Olt's note on the leaders of the Reformed Church to Gyula Kállai, 18 January 1961.

²⁰ ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-13586/5. 198.

Imre Nagy, the prime minister during the revolution, in June 1958, and the party centre felt that the time had come to settle the strategic and tactical issues of policy towards religion and the churches comprehensively. The essence of the Kádár church policy lay in the simultaneous enforcement of two competing considerations. On the one hand, the authorities defined religion as a rival ideology to be defeated and a source of danger to the party's ideological monopoly and the churches as the only institutions that were legally active, alien to the system and hostile to it. As János Horváth, President of the State Office for Church Affairs put it in May 1958: "Under the present conditions of socialist construction, the churches are the greatest *legal opponent* of our people's democratic system."²¹ At the same time, the real political recognition of the churches' fading but still existing social embeddedness – which in the language of party directives was "in the era of building socialism, the churches will survive for a long time" – forced the established Kádár system to change its previous church policy tactics. While in essence restoring the most important church policy institutions of the Rákosi age, the party leadership was not interested in frontal attacks but sought to outline a policy in which it could use the churches for its own purposes while preserving the long-term goal of their slow erosion. The institutional framework of persecution thus remained, but the practice was partially modified. To use Gábor Tabajdi's pertinent synthesis: "The cooperation of the church policy institutions (the State Office for Church Affairs, the Party apparatus, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, the Patriotic Front, etc.) after 1956 was aimed at camouflaging the discriminatory policy affecting the churches and the delayed, sophisticated, and targeted persecution of the churches."²²

Kádár described the pragmatic relationship with the churches in the dialectic of cooperation and struggle: "Our relationship with the church implies cooperation with it (...), but at the same time there is a struggle between us for social influence. Here there is cooperation, and there is struggle." Against the "clerical reaction", which the party leader defined simply as "political reaction in a religious robe", following the patterns of

²¹ Report on the state of church policy and proposals for improving the situation. 5 May 1958. MNL OL XIX-A-21-d-002-4/1958. 8.

²² TABAJDI, Gábor (2018): Újratervezett egyháztörténetek. A fővárosi keresztény ifjúsági közösségek és a kádárizmus. In: Keller, Márkus – Tabajdi, Gábor (eds.): Évkönyv XXIII. Újrakezdés. Budapest, OSZK – 1956-os Intézet. 132.

the 1950s, he considered it permissible to use “all means of political and administrative struggle”. From this, he distinguished the fight against the religious worldview, which he argued that “it must be achieved by enlightening and educating the religious masses”.²³

Like the doctrines of cultural policy, the “three T’s of church policy”, which could be interpreted as a specific church version of the famous three T’s of the Kádár-era cultural policy, were based on the lessons learned from the oppressive experience of the ‘56 Revolution – above all, the realization that the prerequisite for the long-term retention of power is the abandonment of the permanent state of war against society, the narrowing of the circle of groups defined as enemies, and the simultaneous internal division of certain social groups, the “disruption”, in the parlance of state intelligence. As part of this, a refined tactic of playing off the different church circles against each other was formulated, which now not only interpreted the relationship between the churches and the party-state in the dichotomous opposition of a narrow circle of “loyal” church groups supporting the regime and the masses of religious “reaction” but also attempted to delimit the primary targets of the struggle against the “greatest legal opponent” by opposing the religious groups tagged as so-called “clerical reactionaries” with the “religious masses.” But, obviously, it still depended on the judgment of the various actors of power as to which category a specific church activity fell into, i.e. who was considered an enemy of the system, against whom it was possible to act not only by indirect methods but also by “all the means of political and administrative struggle”. In the shadow of the declarative proclamation of religious freedom and the spectacular proclamation of the so-called new type of federal policy, the party resolutions continued to leave a rather wide ideological loophole for the use of indirect and direct methods of religious persecution. The Church Policy Programme of ‘58 spoke not only of the differential treatment of believers but also of “the clerical reaction” trying to bring believers under reactionary political influence through their religious worldview and “using both legal and illegal means”. According to the party decision, any legal church work within the

²³ Az MSZMP PB 1958. július 22-én hozott határozata. Közli: VASS, Henrik (1973): *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt határozatai és dokumentumai 1956–1962*. Budapest, Kossuth Kiadó. 237; [no author] (1997): *Jegyzőkönyv az MSZMP KB 1958. július 25-i üléséről*. In: Némethné Vágyi, Karola et al. (ed.): *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt Központi Bizottságának 1957–1958. évi jegyzőkönyvei*. Budapest, MNL. 424.

narrow margin of the churches could be considered as clerical reactionary activity. Thus, the central party directive, which set the direction for local church policy practices, essentially offered an unlimited opportunity to take administrative action against any religious activity if the interests of the powers dictated so. There were therefore no clearly defined boundaries and rules, which rendered the daily life of the church policy of the Kádár regime both situational and unpredictable.

An important contribution to understanding where the boundaries between “tolerated” and “forbidden” forms of religious practice actually lay from the regime’s point of view is a state security elaboration of the mid-1960s, which provides a categorization and characterization of Protestant clergy by state security. The document titled *The Struggle, Direction, Influence, and Further Tasks of the Illegal Forces within the Protestant Church* (sic!) is about 15 pages long and classifies the clergy into four categories based on their political attitude towards the party-state: 1.) loyal, progressive powers; 2.) unsteady, passive forces; 3.) opposition forces; 4.) hostile forces. According to the summary, the number of opposition or hostile forces is very high, about 200 in the Reformed Church and about 75 in the Lutheran Church.

These individuals are not an organized opposition force but represent various hostile oppositional and political views and maintain *an organization-like life of faith*. They have a harmful influence on the work of the church leadership and the struggle of progressive forces. The reactionary church figures abroad rely mainly on them and see in them the base which must be broadened in order to achieve their aims and with their help to maintain the oppositional strength of the Protestant church in a people’s democratic Hungary. (...) *An assessment of the operational situation shows that the main activity of the church reaction is currently concentrated on winning over young people and intellectuals.*²⁴

One noteworthy finding of the synthesis is that the political police, according to their own definition, considered those who were church opponents to be *church builders* or “engaged in maintaining an organized life of faith”, i.e. they included in the “church opposition” not only possible oppositional political behaviour but also active organizers of religious and church community life. Thus, while the Kádár regime was fond of

²⁴ Synthesis. *The Struggle, Direction, Impact, and Further Tasks of the Illegal Forces within the Protestant Church*. [n. d.]. ÁBTL 3.1.5 O-13586/1.

presenting itself in its messages to the public as the proclaimer of a popular front policy offering a new *modus vivendi*, offering cooperation to “religiously inclined” citizens, in practice the highly active pastoral existence did not fit into the framework of cooperation dictated by the party-state.

This unpredictability of church politics also meant that what a community of believers experienced as a permitted religious activity could be classified as illegal, semi-legal, or even oppositional activity and ultimately criminalized by the enforcers of church politics. “Quite independently of the intentions and viewpoints of the community concerned, any church-religious activity that served to preserve an autonomous way of life that was not in line with the logic of the system could become a fictitious resistance activity, sometimes merely a means of enabling the authorities to act.”²⁵ But this was far from being automatic. The deliberate blurring of clear boundaries between tolerated and prohibited forms of religious practice was also facilitated by the opacity of the legislation and jurisprudence governing the operation of churches. There was little real legislation, no public instructions, decisions, or measures, however narrow, which could have provided a clear legal framework for the local activities of the churches.²⁶

This is the situational technique of the exercise of power, which also characterized the entire Kádár regime²⁷ prevailing during the 1960s, particularly in the restricting activating religious activities targeted at young people. It is no coincidence that the conflicts over the boundaries between tolerated and prohibited religious practice have culminated precisely in the area of youth and elite education. For both sides clearly perceived that the most important “battles” in the ideological struggle were being fought for the young generations by those in power and by church communities confronted with radical changes in mentality and lifestyle.

²⁵ FEJÉRDY, András (2018): Vallási ellenállás Magyarországon a kommunista rendszerrel szemben. Források és gyűjtemények. In: Apor, Péter – Bódi, Lóránt – Horváth, Sándor – Huhák, Heléna – Scheibner, Tamás (eds.): *Kulturális ellenállás a Kádár-korszakban*. Gyűjtemények története. Budapest, MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet. 143–150.

²⁶ KÖBEL, Szilvia (2015): *„Oszd meg és uralkodj!” A pártállam és az egyházak*. Budapest, Rejtjel Kiadó.

²⁷ For the concept and characteristics of the Kádár regime, see: RAINER M., János (2011): *Bevezetés a kádárizmusba*. Budapest, L'Harmattan – 1956-os Intézet.

The concerted struggle to win the younger generations over was understood from the perspective of the established Kádár regime, primarily from the perspective of the revolution of 1956. After all, one of the most shocking experiences of the revolution was the overwhelming activism of these very strata. In particular, the broad participation of students, who formed the base of the intellectuals' offspring, in the revolution forced those in power to radically rethink youth policy since, due to the strict class-based and ideological contrast selection that had been in place, university students were already recruited from among the beneficiaries of the new political system. The young generation that rebelled against the system in the largest numbers was therefore the generation that the system saw as its most reliable pillar. This was accompanied by a sharp increase in the number of enrolments to religion classes in 1956–1957, which not only indicated the continuing social demand for religious socialization but could also be interpreted as one of the last phenomena of the desire for freedom and social resistance that had exploded with elemental force in the revolution and at the same time as a striking manifestation of the social reserves of the churches.

But the 1960s also brought unprecedented challenges for church actors. The general processes of modernization, the accelerating secularization, the spread of mass culture, and the spectacular changes in lifestyle that accompanied it would have required a radical rethinking of the social role of the churches and the invention of new forms of religious activities, while the violent anti-church measures of the Rákosi age had succeeded in practically completely excluding the churches from the public arena of social life. Their role of initiative towards society faded, and a rigid church structure was preserved, which became more and more outdated and vulnerable to the system, and the maintenance and support of which was now one of the tactical goals of the party-state church policy. Moreover, the challenges facing the churches were exacerbated by the fact that, continuing the momentum of the repression of the Revolution of 1956, the party successfully forced the last autonomous large social group, the landowning peasantry, into cooperatives by violent means. The forced collectivization of the Hungarian society during peacetime, which social scientists consider to be the greatest wave of violence in time of peace, orchestrated by the state but also using civil actors, simultaneously disrupted the two remaining “counter-political bases”, the individual agricultural farms and the congregations

that had interwoven the rural milieus,²⁸ sometimes pitting the concerned strata against each other.²⁹ The liquidation of independent peasant existences based on private property not only shattered the social (and economic) foundations of peasant-based congregations but also expanded the tools of religious persecution through the direct, everyday intrusion of the party-state into traditional peasant life. A series of church reports noted a sudden and dramatic drop in Sunday worship attendance, a spectacular weakening of the traditional folk church framework due to a combination of radical lifestyle changes, the impact of modern mass media, the introduction of television into households, and the “Sunday community work and Sunday cultivation of the backyard”. But beyond this, coded or less coded references to intimidation and administrative action to render the practice of public religion impossible can also be read in contemporary church reports reflecting on the new situation.

Further complicating the tasks facing the churches was the fact that the disintegration of traditional rural communities was accompanied by mass emigration from the countryside. And reaching out to the uprooted urban population, especially in newly built housing estates, was an unknown and hitherto forbidden, or at least tightly controlled, area for the churches. The effects of the accelerating loss of tradition as a result of forced urbanization and the obstacles to the church’s search for a new way forward were also consciously anticipated by the church policy planners of the party-state. As a report of the State Office for Religious Affairs at the time clearly summarized: “The large housing developments brought a new reorganization of the churches. In new housing estates, contact with the churches is rarely sought. The reactivation of disaffected believers is a problem.”³⁰ Power was thus in a much more favourable position than before to set itself the programme of

²⁸ Ö. KOVÁCS, József – CSIKÓS, Gábor – HORVÁTH, Gergely Krisztián (eds.) (2023): *The Sovietization of Rural Hungary, 1945–1980: Subjugation in the Name of Equality*. London, Routledge.

²⁹ On the different patterns of church involvement, the coercion of pastors into the role of agitators and its consequences, see: RIGÓ, Róbert (2024): Egyházak a kényszerkollektívizálás után. Példák Bács-Kiskun megyéből egy 1962-es pártvizsgálat tükrében. In: Tabajdi, Gábor – Szuly, Rita – Erdős, Kristóf – Wirthné Diera, Bernadett (eds.): *Küzdelem a lelkekért. Pártállam és egyházak a hosszú hatvanas években*. 417–444.

³⁰ GRNÁK, Károly (1972): *Feljegyzés a nem katolikus egyházak budapesti helyzetéről, működéséről*. 12 January 1972. 12. MNL- OL XIX-A-21-d-0032-3-1972 70. db.

bringing up a new generation, the majority of whom had not received any religious socialization.

The relationship between the church and youth was treated as a fundamental issue both in the internal forums of the church public and in the internal communication of the church policy leaders of the party-state, as the parallel assessments of the situation, formulated for different media and with opposite goals, clearly show. “The experience of recent years has shown that churches increasingly see the problem of attracting young people as a vital issue... Priests, in most cases, commit acts in violation of state laws conducting illegal activities with youth.”³¹ – summarized István Turai his experiences and most important tasks concerning the church life in Budapest.

From his own perspective, the Head of the State Office for Church Affairs in Budapest perceived the “vital question” of the churches, their focus on youth, and their efforts to broaden the scope of their activities as accurately as many of the pastors working among the Reformed in Budapest. At the same time, the series of church reports emphasizing the growing role of Sunday schools, children’s missionary work, and youth Bible classes can be read as a forced adaptation to the church-political situation that was developing by the 1960s, as a search for a way forward that calculated on the practical elimination of all forms of religious education in schools, as a cautious formulation of new church strategies (outlined in forums within the church but under party-state control).

The “Vital Issue of the Churches”: Youth Education. Religious Education and Alternatives

It is no coincidence, therefore, that after 1956, the established Kádár regime treated the control and further restriction of legal forms of religious socialization, above all the impossibility of religious education in schools, as a top strategic task – to such an extent that the party leadership not only dealt with the suppression of religious education and the regulation of forbidden and tolerated forms of religious involvement

³¹ Report on the church policy in Budapest, 16 April 1965. Budapest Archives [hereinafter referred to as: BFL]. XXXV. 1.c. 128, archived units, 6 March.

with young people at the highest level but also gave the apparatus a handbook-like, itemized internal list of prohibitions.

Following the nationalization of schools (1948) and the elimination of compulsory religious education (1949), a new series of concerted administrative measures against the remaining form of religious education in the state system, the optional religious education in schools, was launched in the spring of 1957. As part of this, a government decree, or ministerial order, was issued, which legally regulated the framework of optional religious education in schools until the fall of the communist regime. The specific Kádár double discourse enshrined the principle of free exercise of religion and that parents “must ensure that their underage children in primary schools and general secondary schools may or may not participate in religious education (!)”; on the other hand, following tactical gestures promising religious freedom, he made a thinly veiled threat of a strict law against all those who use religious education for political purposes against the “state, social, or economic order of the Hungarian People’s Republic or who influence citizens to participate in religious education by violence, threats, or fallacy”. The decree, which listed a whole series of technical obstacles, declared, among other things, that religious education could only take place in the school building. Outside the school building (i.e. in churches, places of worship, or other church premises), religious education could be held only in special cases and with special permission. The control of such religious instruction in a religious setting was left to the school principals.³²

The party, council, school, and workplace actions aimed at making enrolment and education impossible – documents recording various forms of pressure – not only provide a local example of the planned impossibility of religious education, but – by collecting different types of sources – we can gain a richer picture of the everyday life of the diverse techniques of the Kádár regime’s domination of dictatorship. The various obstacles to faith education, smear campaigns, and intimidation of clergy and parents had made religious education in schools virtually impossible in most places by the

³² Gyula Gyombolai gives a good overview of the changes in regulations on religious education: GYOMBOLAI, Gyula (2017): A magyar katolikus egyház ifjúságnevelési és hitoktatási lehetőségei 1957 és 1978 között az ÁEH titkosan kezelt iratainak tükrében. In: Ballabás, Dániel (ed.): *Mozaikok a 18–20. századi magyar és egyetemes történelemből. PhD-hallgatók V. konferenciája*. 2016. május 6. Eger, Eszterházy Károly Egyetem – Líceum Kiadó. 143–155.

1960s. However, far from putting an end to the unequal struggle for the education of young people, this was a change in the terrain, as it was pointed out by the leaders of the State Office for Church Affairs in Budapest: “I need to point out that the influence of the churches on young people is not reliably reflected in the evolution of our figures regarding the teaching of religion in schools.”³³

While the authorities tried to stifle faith education in schools through a concerted series of actions and Christian communities sought alternatives, the party made illegal any form of church contact with young people, and faith education that did not fit strictly within the authorized framework. The task to be carried out by the church policy bodies was emphasized by the party at the highest level in the June 1958 Resolution of the Politburo of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP PB) on faith education, when it listed in detail the forbidden forms of church work with youth: “Churches may only reach out to young people in the context of religious education in schools, as provided for in the relevant Council of Ministers’ decision and in the context of first communion, Catholic and Protestant confirmation. All other activities (sports, movies, choirs, extracurricular religious education, etc.) are prohibited.”³⁴

Tightrope Walking on the Edge between the Tolerated and the Forbidden

“There is also a great deal of youth activity in the Reformed Church. This is facilitated by the possibilities they have as a result of the convention /to hold services in churches or in other suitable public buildings, family homes and open-air places, to hold Bible studies in family homes/” [underlined in the original].³⁵

In his annual report, the Head of the Budapest State Office for Church Affairs touched again on important points in his analysis on the path seeking of the Reformed Church. The 1948 forced Agreement, which was in fact an ultimatum for the Church, forced it to make serious compromises, including a declaration that the Church accepted

³³ Report on the church policy in Budapest. 16 April 1965. 12. BFL XXXV. 1.c. 128, archived units.

³⁴ Information on the decision of the MSZMP PB of 10 June 1958 on the relations between the state and the churches. MNL OL XIX-A-21-d-002-11/1958. 10.

³⁵ Report on the church policy in Budapest, 10 September 1964. BFL XXXV 1.c. 114, archived units.

the new socialist order and acknowledged the nationalization of schools. At the same time, however, in order to facilitate the acceptance of the Agreement by the religious public at the time, the text listed certain permitted religious activities. Among other things, in addition to the provision of compulsory religious education in schools, the state continued to regard the holding of religious services as “within the free exercise of church life (...) in family homes and open spaces, Bible classes in churches, schools, family homes, congregation houses; Bible and scripture distribution, congregational and national church conferences and evangelistic meetings, compulsory religious education and charity work in schools.”³⁶

The Stalinist terror and open persecution of the Church in the 1950s did not allow any room for local Reformed communities or pastors to legally use the forms of worship allowed by the Agreement. In the early 1960s, however, the most important area for efforts to broaden the scope of religious practice seemed to be the strengthening of congregational life and the utilizing of the possibilities granted by the Agreement. The seemingly defensive programme of retreat into the congregations and the declarative recognition of the Agreement in many cases actually promoted a hidden strategy of community rebuilding, a programme targeted at maximizing the Church’s potential within the legal framework, which could not be expressed in public church discourse.

Thus, paradoxically, the reference to the Agreement concluded between the socialist state and the Church could also become a tool for attempts to widen the Church’s playing field. One of the directions taken by Reformed pastors in the ’60s was to revive and strengthen the forms of faith guaranteed by the Agreement, to expand the framework of legality and thus to move everyday religious practice from the forbidden to the tolerated zone.

Meanwhile, by the early 1960s, the number of attendees of Reformed Bible classes had fallen dramatically in Budapest. While in 1956/57, the year of the revolution, more than 4,500 students formally enrolled in Reformed faith education in the capital, this number had almost completely faded by the early 1960s. According to the available

³⁶ Agreement between the Republic of Hungary and the Hungarian Reformed Church, 7 October 1948. Text published by LADÁNYI, Sándor – KERESZTES, Dániel – HAMARKAY, Ede (2006): [sic!] *Válogatott kövek a református egyház és az állam kapcsolatának medréből*. Budapest, Exodus. 313–314.

reports, 61 students in the Budapest-North Reformed Church County attended Bible classes regularly in 1963, this number being as low as 31 in 1965, while in Budapest-South only 12 out of the 42 students fell into this category in the year 1966.³⁷ In addition to rendering religious education completely impossible, the legal framework for dealing with youth was further narrowed by the radical limitation of the duration of confirmation preparation, which from 1962 onwards restricted the duration of preparation at three months instead of the previous several semesters. In a typical example of the subversive technique of manipulative persecution of the Church,³⁸ the State Office for Church Affairs even ordered that the restriction, which was seriously damaging to the interests of the Church, should be imposed on pastors not by decree of the State Office for Church Affairs but by a decision of the Church leadership in a “bishop’s circular”.³⁹ The provision, while causing a great uproar, prompted church communities to look for new alternative ways.

“The youth activity of the Reformed Church is also noteworthy. Here we should think in particular of the Bible classes that are allowed and of the pre-confirmation education. In this area, the work is being carried out with much greater vigour than in the Roman Catholic Church.”⁴⁰ A well-prepared agent wrote a similar report about the youth organization methods of Rev. Károly Dobos, a pastor in the Budapest area, one of the defendants in the later YMCA trial: “today, a process of revival has begun in the Reformed Church (...) now they want to serve the revival in a partisan way, by holing up in congregations. They want to do this, for example, by addressing primarily the youth (...) They are using every means that seems legal to win the youth over to the revival.”

³⁷ KISS, Réka (2006): Fejezetek a budapesti reformátusság 1945 utáni történetéből. In: Kósa, László (ed.): *Reformátusok Budapesten. Tanulmányok a magyar főváros reformátusságáról*. Budapest, ELTE BTK Művelődéstörténeti Tanszék. 1393.

³⁸ For techniques of manipulative persecution and disruption, see: TABAJDI, Gábor (2018): Újratervezett egyháztörténetek. A fővárosi keresztény ifjúsági közösségek és a kádárizmus. In: Keller, Márkus – Tabajdi, Gábor (eds.): *Évkönyv XXIII. Újrakezdés*. Budapest, OSZK – 1956-os Intézet. 132; TABAJDI, Gábor (2019): *Bomlasztás. Kádár János és a III/III*. Jaffa Kiadó.

³⁹ Proposal for the organization of pre-confirmation classes. Spt. 3, 1962. Deputy Head of Department Károly Grnák. MOL ÁEH XIX-A-21-a-R-10-17/1962.

⁴⁰ 1963 Evaluation Report 9. BFL XXXV. 1.c. 114, archived units.

This attitude was in fact a typical form of self-protective adaptation to the conditions of Kádár's ecclesiastical policy,⁴¹ the essence of which was to avoid confrontation with power as far as possible in order to carefully expand the framework of legality and thus the points of contact with society. However, this boundary was extremely fluid and depended on the sometimes changing perception of power. The documents of the time present many other creative and unique ways of alternative Bible teaching and reaching out to young people. The local examples also draw attention to the pastors and careers of those who were outside the scope of ecclesiastical historiography, who "represented the interests of the Church in the quiet work of everyday life".⁴²

In metropolitan areas in particular, the role of family visits has become increasingly important as the most effective, legal way of maintaining a network of contacts around the church. Church sources of the time provide a number of examples where considerable energy was devoted to this form of direct contact. To indicate the order of magnitude, a 1961 mission report noted, "There is a congregation with a higher number of family visits now than at any other time in the entire church county."⁴³ The effective church-organizing potential of family visits was also noticed by the State Office for Church Affairs, and, as a denominational specificity, it was considered a particular Reformed pastoral technique: "As in previous years, home visits have had a very important place in the activities of the Reformed Church. In my experience, the home visits of Reformed pastors in Budapest are much more intensive than that of Catholic priests. The constant home visits result in a very lively relationship between the Reformed pastors and their

⁴¹ For the concept of self-protective adaptation and resilience, see: BÖGRE, Zsuzsanna (2023): Hétköznapi ellenállástól a vallási rezilienciáig. Egy szerzetesrend túlélési stratégiájának erőforrásai az 1960-as években. In: Tabajdi, Gábor – Szuly, Rita – Erdős, Kristóf – Wirthné Diera, Bernadett (eds.): *Küzdelem a lelkekért. Pártállam és egyházak a hosszú hatvanas években*. Budapest, Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottságának Hivatala. 902–936.; Majtényi, György (2015): „*De elmehet a Kádár Jani a piczába!*” *Reziliencia az államszocializmusban*. Replika. 95–112.

⁴² HORVÁTH, Gergely Krisztián (2018): *Szovjetizálás és ellenállás a Veszprémi Egyházmegyében. Dr. Kögl Lénárd pályája az 1940–1960-as években*. Budapest, MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet. 182.

⁴³ 1961 and 1965 Mission Report on Budapest-South Church County. RL Missziói jelentések 1502/1961. 2; 480/1965. 4.

faithful. In addition, as in the past year, some congregations involve members of their sessions in visits.”⁴⁴

This time, too, the experienced official supervisor over the churches was to the point when he highlighted the role of lay church officials, the elders, in addition to home visits, which provided direct contact as a source of danger for the party-state. Internal church bodies also regularly mentioned the old-new possibilities resting in activating lay officials as a positive method of effective church community organization.⁴⁵ A church report on a congregation in Buda says, “youth work is a significant factor in the life of the congregation, and many of the presbyters are involved in it. The good relationship between the older and younger generations explains the practice of occasional gatherings of brethren who were involved in youth work 30-40 years ago.”⁴⁶ In the still tolerable, veiled wording, this was essentially an attempt to have the efforts of Mátyás Bugárszky, a well-known elder of the Budapest-Buda Reformed Congregation at the Szilágyi Dezső Square, a former member of the Christian Youth Association, to activate and transfer intergenerational community organizing skills comply with the accepted church activities. However, this was beyond the tolerance of the authorities. Soon the state security would also notice that the former members of the youth association were using “the state-authorized youth Bible groups within the church” to spread the spirit of the Christian Youth Association and that their groups – mainly youth and intellectuals – “continued to organize themselves under the aegis of legitimacy. In these, alongside devotional work, the former mass church organizational framework is increasingly asserted.”⁴⁷ As a result, Bugárszky, who later became the fourth defendant in the YMCA trial, spent six months in pre-trial detention.

The authorities were particularly sensitive to the activation of lay leaders and elders, who could be considered the local elite of the Reformed Church, and to the building of generational bridges. For it saw in them the danger of accumulating a network of contacts

⁴⁴ 1963 Evaluation Report, 15 January 1964. 8–9. BFL XXV. 1.c. 114, archived units.

⁴⁵ Report of Péter Hajdú, Dean of the Reformed Church County of Southern Budapest, at the General Assembly of the Reformed Church County of Southern Budapest, 21 June 1964, RL Dean’s Reports 891/1964. 28.

⁴⁶ Op. cit. 22.

⁴⁷ ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-13142/1 21–24. O-13586/5 307–309.

and knowledge that could also form the basis for the organization of autonomous social forms potentially opposed to the system. Thus, in fact, it followed from the logic of the system itself that when Dean Gyula Mády submitted a request to the State Office for Church Affairs for the elders of the congregations of Budapest to organize a joint conference, the communist power apparatus reflexively recommended the rejection of the request, stating, “It is a well-known fact that not only the sessions in Budapest but also those in the provinces contain many elements which oppose our system.”⁴⁸

The intensive church- and community-organizing activity – the risk-taking autonomous personalities actively involved with youth, intellectuals, and elite education – was always kept under close control by the bodies enforcing church policy. A power structure contemplating a homogeneous, easily controllable, more hierarchical church structure had an elementary interest in countering the emergence of a more diverse, more inclusive, more stratified congregational operational model that would offer more contact points. It is no coincidence that the most important conclusion of the report on the activities of Protestant churches and sects in the youth field, prepared by the State Office for Church Affairs Head Vilmos Lóránt, was that “it is imperative to make bishops and deans aware that only priests can deal with young people. Elders, deaconesses, and seniors should be excluded from youth work.” “They can only deal with matters of faith, within the allowed limits. The personal interests of young people should be separated from their religious life. Controls should be tightened, including preventing the organization of excursions, movies (...) organized holidays.”⁴⁹

The party-state documents, like the church reports, reflected ambivalent processes. On the one hand, they registered a radical change in the social milieu, the combined effects of the discriminatory world of the socialist regime and the double squeeze of modernization, and the rapid weakening of the churches’ social presence; on the other hand, from the mid-1960s onwards, they reported an increasing number of church-community initiatives that tried to break out of their confinement in the congregation, adapting to the changed environment and opportunities. The channels for this could be both legal and illegal.

⁴⁸ Report on the evaluation of the 4th quarter of 1964, 30 December 1964. 13. BFL XXXV. 1. c. 128, archived units.

⁴⁹ MNL OL XIX-A-21-d-0049-8/1962 17. db. 13.

A further attempt to widen the scope of the movement was the search for former members of the youth associations that had been disrupted in the 1950s and attempts to recall the memory of the associations under the guise of congregational fellowships, family outings, and memorial evenings. The direct cause of the second YMCA trial can be found in this process. At the same time, one of the remarkable features of the 1967 proceedings is that none of the five persons on trial were actually the focus of interest of either the state security services or the State Office for Church Affairs in the 1960s in the sense that they were neither on the list of the “highly reactionary” Reformed faithful in Budapest nor in the reports on the most active religious organizing “pastors”. What did attract the attention of the church authorities, however, was that they were all active members of the former Christian Youth Association.⁵⁰

Leafing through the personal documents seized during the searches, it is striking how the arrested former members of YMCA, especially Dénes Batiz, a retired doctor, and Mátyás Bugárszky, had extensive and intensive correspondence with former YMCA members, participants of events, personally accounting for the commitment of the invited individuals. An important dimension of the communication and information flow between the participants was the distribution of documents on Christian themes through private channels. There were many typed sermons, longer and shorter brochures, religious documents, Western theological works translated into Hungarian and distributed as manuscripts, church samizdats as well as other documents that were caught up in the sieve of the officials dealing with church matters. Among the items found during the raid were the famous Memorandum of the retired Bishop László Ravasz – written in the summer of 1956 and secretly distributed – on the state of the church and the copied sermons of the most popular community-organizing pastors in Budapest such as Sándor Joó, Endre Gyökössi, and József Farkas, lectures, the manuscript of the book *Fear and Concealment* by Theodor Bovet, a significant author of contemporary Christian spiritual literature after World War II, already translated into Hungarian, or the German-language manuscript by Ernst Sartorius, former international secretary of YMCA, which is still waiting to be

⁵⁰ State security sources directly related to the YMCA trial: ÁBTL 3. 1. 5. O–12.049/1–10. “The Confessors”, ÁBTL 3. 1. 5. O–13142/1. “The Campers”, ÁBTL 3. 1. 9. V–73196/fund, 1–2. Ferenc Végh and others, ÁBTL 3. 1. 9. V–167042. Dénes Batiz and others, ÁBTL 4. 1. A–1328. Documents acquired in the case of Dr Dénes Batiz and others.

translated. Perhaps the most remarkable, however, is that Bugárszky (although not a university graduate) himself wrote 2-3-page-long essays and discussion papers on current church and religious issues, which he distributed among the members and speakers of the so-called Elders' Prayer Group, which he had established semi-legally.

The private letters seized not only confirmed his leadership role but also provided evidence that the relationship of trust between former YMCA members had continued after the dissolution of the association and the 1951 lawsuit against the former leaders. The young generation of leaders who had socialized in the dynamic youth association life before 1948 were able to continue their activities after the dissolution of the associations, in good cases by joining local congregations and essentially transforming the community-organizing skills and activities they had acquired in YMCA. Paradoxically, this provided a new reserve of strength for local communities, and in many places a skilled, active middle generation, proficient in leadership training and youth work, became the religious organizers of local churches. Their extensive correspondence provides an insight not only into their network of contacts but also into the manner in which a religious community tried to preserve its alternative values to the discourses of power to maintain its own language and cultural codes. For example, one of the features of religious identity was that Dénes Batiz typed the reference of the biblical verse of the day instead of the date on each letter. The letters touched on many areas of everyday and family life, community building in the spirit of YMCA and religious references, but not on political issues. The only exceptions were reflections on the 1956 revolution. In the latter letters, there is a latent but conscious reflection on the counterpoint to the official counter-revolutionary narrative, an awareness of an alternative memory and narrative based on personal experience.

In addition to regular correspondence, they, along with another YMCA senior, made pre-arranged "tours" from family to family in the countryside, lasting up to more than a week, to visit their most important rural contacts. It seems they managed to preserve a significant part of the informal network of contacts surrounding the former association. Thus, Bálint Kovács, a former member of YMCA and pastor in Budapest, described a real process in his interrogation when he said, "YMCA lived on not in the old associational framework but in certain social forms and relationships". "Living on" meant contacts, community-organizing methods, and the desire to pass on the spirit of YMCA.

It was clearly not possible to formally reach out to the younger generations for youth training. The most obvious and safest form of informal channels for generational knowledge transfer was to involve the children of former YMCA members who had since raised a family. Dénes Batiz, together with another former YMCA leader, regularly organized family gatherings, trips with a pre-set agenda, Bible studies and religious discussions. In one of his letters, he wrote, “Eighty people attended, and nearly half of them were our children (...) Even though there was a big age difference, we had separate Bible classes for boys and girls, as well as for men and women. What a joy it was to testify in front of a small group from YMCA.”⁵¹

Amidst the malleable, situational power relations of the 60s, the possibility of further widening the scope of action, based on a more flexible interpretation of the association framework, also arose: former members of youth organizations that had been forcibly disbanded in the 50s were reconvened in the parish framework, as so-called senior meetings. The occasion was the commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the death of Béla Megyericsy, the legendary founding pastor of the first Budapest scout troop and YMCA. Dénes Batiz praised the novelty of the occasion, its community-building power and religious weight in contrast to formal church occasions in a long letter to Bálint Kovács. “My heart is still filled with joy and happiness over [the event]. Blessed be God for having inspired us all with His Holy Spirit to organize this event, for having made it possible to carry it out and for having surrounded us in that joyful communion with such a thick cloud of testimonies. We were all enriched that evening with so much value that it will be abundantly shared not only by our families but also by our Church and our people.”⁵² The success of the event was confirmed by the many letters received by the host. The meetings and the high number of participants (over a hundred) made the event significant in itself. At the same time, as Dénes Batiz and Bálint Kovács have repeatedly and variously reflected on it, the real psychological crossing of boundaries was the fact of public, communal remembrance. In fact, the commemorative evening was intended to open the door to the retelling of the falsified and silenced history of YMCA, which was stigmatized as a so-called “reactionary-fascist” association after 1945.

⁵¹ ABTL 3.1.9. V-155460. 75. Denes Batiz’s interrogation interview, 29 August 1967.

⁵² ABTL 4.1. A-1328/50. Letter of Dénes Batiz to Bálint Kovács, 20 December 1967.

They tried to create their own alternative culture of memory. In a materialized manner, too. In preparation for the evening, Bálint Kovács and his family announced the creation of a small YMCA museum, a collection of memorabilia, photos, prints, and publications. In addition to YMCA and scout relics, the call also included the collection of memorabilia related to former association leaders criminalized in the 1951 show trial, including István Pógyor, who died in prison. At stake was essentially a symbolic struggle over history and memory, a symbolic reclaiming of the past. As the note on Dénes Batiz's speech, drafted and distributed in shorthand, put it: "The features of YMCA, what it meant, what its impact was, what it was that we should not be ashamed of being YMCA members, it was a great gain for our people and for us." The motivation of getting rid of shame was also brought up in Bálint Kovács's interrogation:

We didn't want to be ashamed before our children and each other of the decades we has spent working in YMCA, so we and others could see there were many good and useful things in our work. We were aware that YMCA was closed in 1949 as an undesirable association, but it would have been nice to hear from somewhere that we had received in YMCA the kind of encouragement that prepared us to accept and integrate into the democratic order. This is what we expected from both secular and church leaders.⁵³

The circumvention of party-state control over memory and the moral rehabilitation of an organization condemned as reactionary, less than ten years after the suppression of the '56 revolution, was a line that the authorities could not afford to cross.

Despite the extensive preparation, the proceedings against the former leaders of YMCA ended in failure from the point of view of state security, as the Supreme Court – changing the previous classification of the facts – classified the case as an abuse of the right of association instead of preparation for a conspiracy against the state. Dénes Batiz's sentence was reduced to 6-month imprisonment, Bálint Kovács's to 5 months, and Imre Tisza's to 3 months; Károly Dobos was given a warning, and Mátyás Bugárszky was acquitted. According to the report, the investigation department had serious problems with the lack of legally valid evidence of illegal activity. The main obstacle, however, was that the 1967 trial, causing protests from abroad, annoyingly affected both the

⁵³ ABTL 3.1.9. V-155460. 223. Bálint Kovács's interrogation, 6 September 1967.

Reformed Church leadership, as it was gradually widening its diplomatic space in the international church, and the Kádár regime's church policy, which was building a tolerant and cooperative state image.⁵⁴ Thus, Bishop Tibor Bartha himself (changing his initial opinion) eventually interceded with the leaders of the State Office for Church Affairs in favour of a more moderate sentence for the defendants.

The case of Bálint Kovács and his peers cast an obvious shadow over the church leadership celebrating the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Reformed Church in Hungary in the presence of a large international attendance. However, this did not prevent the church leaders from adopting new Bylaws, essentially codifying the practices of the 1950s, in a symbolic appropriation of history, on the occasion of the jubilee of the first constitutional Council of Debrecen, completely overturning the principle of congregational autonomy, allowing bishops to transfer pastors from one place of ministry to another at any time in the "public interest of the church" without consulting the parish and the sessions. This opens a new chapter in the administrative repression of church life and in the search for a path for communities struggling to live their faith actively.

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⁵⁴ Used archival sources: ÁBTL 3. 1. 5. O–12.049/1–10. "The Confessors", ÁBTL 3. 1. 5. O–13586/1–8. Repelling hostile individuals in the Reformed Church reaction, ÁBTL 3. 1. 5. O–13142/1. "The Campers", ÁBTL 3. 1. 9. V–73196/fund, 1–2. Ferenc Végh and others, ÁBTL 3. 1. 9. V–167042. Dénes Batiz and others, ÁBTL 4. 1. A–1328. Documents acquired in the case of Dr Dénes Batiz and others, BFL XXV. 4. f. B001277/1951.

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