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Particular Features of the Relationship between the Communist Party-State and the Churches in Hungary between 1945 and 1990

Cechy szczególne relacji między komunistycznym państwem partyjnym a Kościołami na Węgrzech w latach 1945–1990

Abstract: The article highlights particular features of the relationship between the Communist party-state and the churches in Hungary between 1945 and 1990, based on archival sources. It examines official policies and agreements, including the 1964 partial agreement with the Holy See, the role of the State Office for Church Affairs (*Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal*, ÁEH), and the emergence of clerical peace movements. These movements, designed to weaken church hierarchies and mobilize loyal clergy, contrasted with grassroots ecclesial communities that embodied resistance. The study also explores the cooperation of Internal Affairs and state security bodies in controlling religion, as well as Hungary's participation in international cooperation among socialist countries. The Hungarian case illustrates how Communist authorities sought to restrict and instrumentalise religious life while facing the persistence of transnational church structures and local communities.

Keywords: Hungary, Communism, Catholic Church, State Office for Church Affairs, Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal, ÁEH, clerical peace movement, religious policy, state security

Streszczenie: Artykuł na podstawie źródeł archiwalnych pokazuje cechy szczególne relacji między komunistycznym państwem partyjnym a Kościołami na Węgrzech w latach 1945–1990. Przedstawia oficjalną politykę państwową i zawierane umowy, w tym częstkowe porozumienie zawarte w 1964 r. ze Stolicą Apostolską, rolę Państwowego Urzędu do spraw Kościelnych (*Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal*, ÁEH) oraz pojawienie się inspirowanych przez komunistów pacyfistycznych ruchów księży, mających na celu osłabienie hierarchii kościelnej i mobilizację lojalnego duchowieństwa. Kontrastowały one wyrażnie z oddol-

nymi wspólnotami kościelnymi, będącymi bastionem oporu. Autor analizuje również współpracę organów spraw wewnętrznych i bezpieczeństwa państwowego w zakresie kontroli wyznań, a także udział Węgier w międzynarodowej współpracy między krajami socjalistycznymi. Przypadek Węgier ilustruje, w jaki sposób władze komunistyczne starały się ograniczyć i zinstytucjonalizować życie religijne, choć ponadnarodowe struktury kościelne i lokalne społeczności przeciwstawiały się temu.

Słowa kluczowe: Węgry, komunizm, Kościół katolicki, Państwowy Urząd do spraw Kościelnych, Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal, ÁEH, pacyfistyczny ruch księży, polityka wyznaniowa, bezpieczeństwo państwowe

I would like to highlight in this study the main characteristics of the relationship between the Communist state and the churches in Hungary of the period to familiarize the English-speaking reader who cannot benefit from the extensive literature in the field published in Hungarian, complementing it with examples of archival sources. I will give a comprehensive picture of the activities of the Hungarian Communist party-state concerning churches, including the various methods of repression demonstrated in interesting cases and examples. The examples and cases are based on archival sources. I focused in this study on the following matters: the official policy of the Hungarian Communist party-state in relation to the churches including the agreements signed by the state and the churches after the communist takeover and the agreement concluded between the Hungarian state and the Holy See in 1964, the responsibilities and activities of the Hungarian State Office for Church Affairs (*Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal*, ÁEH), the peace movements of clergy, and the participation of the churches in this movement, and international cooperation in church policy in the Communist Bloc.

The Hungarian archives keep a wealth of documents available for detailed, exploratory research into the relations between the party-state/state party and the Hungarian churches. The examples presented here show us only a fragment or a segment of these matters, giving a good impression of the depth and complexity of the topic at the same time.

The party-state officially considered the question of religion a private matter, and this was also reflected in state propaganda. At the same time, the fight against churches and religious life was constantly on the agenda in the party-state ideology. Moreover, in fact the party-state leadership wanted to gain space for atheism and materialism.¹ The means of this would be the propaganda, the peace movements of clergy created and practically controlled by the party-state through the national state administrative body, the State Office for Church Affairs, and the activities of

¹ Z. Rajki, „Az állam és az egyház kapcsolatának jellemző vonásai a Kádár korszakban,” *Egyháztörténelmi Szemle* 3 (2) (2002), pp. 74–86.

agents of the Internal Affairs and state security bodies.² The Communist party-state leadership considered that in addition to the official Catholic church hierarchy a parallel secret hierarchy existed and operated, controlled from behind the scenes by the Vatican.³ This idea practically determined the relationship of the Communist party and the state to the churches throughout the existence of the regime.⁴

Official Agreements with the Churches

Agreements between the State and Churches after the Communist Takeover

The Government of the Hungarian People's Republic concluded an agreement with the major churches in Hungary⁵. By separating state and church and nationalizing church-operated schools, the state forced the Reformed, Unitarian and Lutheran churches, as well as the Israelite denomination, to sign agreements in the fall of 1948. The Catholic Church resisted, as such an agreement would remain under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Holy See. Catholic bishops refused to swear allegiance to the constitution and forbade priests to join the "peace movement." The state increased the pressure on church leaders by interning members of religious orders in night raids in 1950. The state referred to the fact that on 14 April 1950, the Polish bishops also signed an agreement with the state. Between 1948 and 1950, the Hungarian Communist state party (at the time it was called *Magyar Dolgozók Pártja* – "Hungarian Working People's Party"⁶, MDP) and the Polish United Workers' Party, PZPR, corresponded intensively on church matters, shared examples and models, exchanged experiences, and observed various events in both Hungary and Poland⁷.

² According to the Rules of Procedure of Directorate III/I of the Ministry of the Interior, by organizational structure, the competent unit was the Directorate III/I, Department III/I-4 (Intelligence against the Vatican and Zionist organizations, clerical emigration). See *A Belügyminisztérium III/I. Csoportfőnökség Ügyrendje. 1972 május 30* at the Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára (ABTL) website. https://www.abtl.hu/files/forrasok/ugyrend_1.pdf (accessed 18 November 2025).

³ V.A. Soós, *Az Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal archontológiája – Az ÁEH szervezeti felépítése, nemzetközi kapcsolatai és dolgozóinak hivatali pályaképe*, PhD thesis, Eötvös Loránd University of Science, Budapest, 2014, p. 158 <https://doktori.btk.elte.hu/hist/soosviktorattila/diss.pdf> (accessed 24 May 2024).

⁴ This attitude is well characterized by the following statement: "The cooperation with the progressive forces of the churches does not mean that we have given up the fight against the reactionary forces still present in the churches. We do not cooperate with those who are enemies of our people, enemies of peace. For crimes committed against the socialist state, for the violation of the laws, whether the perpetrator is a believer or a non-believer, everyone must take responsibility." See I. Miklós, "Az egyházak Magyarországon," *Képes Újság* 15 (51) (1974), p. 6.

⁵ According to the census data of 1949, the denominational composition of Hungary was as follows: Latin rite Catholic: 67.8%, Greek rite Catholic: 2.7%, Calvinist: 21.9%, Lutheran: 5.2%, Israelite: 1.5%, Orthodox: 0.14%, Unitarian: 0.1%. M. Balogh and J. Gergely, *Egyházak az újkori Magyarországon, 1790–1992. Kronológia*, Budapest: História: MTA Törtud. Int., 1993, p. 288.

⁶ After crushing the 1956 Revolution, the Communist party leaders founded a new party called *Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt*, i.e. "Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party," abbreviated MSZMP.

⁷ Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár (National Archives of Hungary) in Budapest, Hungary (hereinafter: MNL-OL), HU-MNL-OLM-KS 276-65, Secretarial papers of Mátyás Rákosi, 1948–1956; HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-65-210 (Poland).

Finally, the agreement was also concluded with the Catholic Church. According to the agreement with the Catholic Church (1950–1990), the church recognized the Communist state, stood for the preservation of peace and against the use of nuclear weapons and agreed to encourage its followers to actively participate in the building work led by the government and to stand up against those who opposed it. On the other hand, the government of the Hungarian People's Republic agreed to ensure the freedom of religion and the pastoral functioning of the church – which was already formally enshrined in the constitution – and returned eight previously nationalized church-operated secondary schools, allowing them to have the “adequate number of teaching orders for men and women” necessary for those schools. In the agreement, the state pledged to continue to provide support for Catholic Church purposes from the state budget for 18 years in a continuously decreasing amount, however, it should be noted that the Decree-Law⁸ No. 34 of 1950 revoked the operating licenses of 13 men's and 41 women's religious orders on 7 September – leaving only four teaching orders with limited numbers as mentioned in the Agreement.⁹

International Agreement between the Hungarian People's Republic and the Vatican in 1964

The international agreement concluded with the Vatican was of particular importance. After World War II, Hungary fell into the Soviet sphere of interest, and all relations between Hungary and the Holy See were severed. Restoring the relations became impossible with the sentencing József Mindszenty, Archbishop and Primate of Esztergom to life imprisonment in 1949.

Decree-Law 20 of 1951 and Decree-Law 22 of 1957 required the prior consent of the Presidential Council to fill higher church positions, which is why the Holy See could not appoint new leaders to head the dioceses.

Until the Communist restoration after the 1956 Revolution, the Vatican did not expect that the Communist systems would survive in the longer term, so it tried to solve the problems only in the short or medium term, with temporary strategies.¹⁰

With the easing of the Cold War and in the atmosphere of the Second Vatican Council, negotiations between the two states began in 1963, which resulted in the

⁸ The Hungarian People's Republic had a Presidential Council instead of a president. When Parliament was not in session, the Presidential Council had the power to enact the laws in substitution for the Parliament, its decrees had the same force as laws passed by the Parliament and were called decree-laws. Act XX of 1949, The Constitution of the Hungarian People's Republic, 21 (4)–(5).

⁹ A. Fejérdy, „Itt a döntés egyoldalúan történik” – az 1950-es megállapodás és a szerzetesrendek működési engedélyének megvonása, blog entry at *ELTE Humán Tudományok Kutatóközpontja* website, 30 August 2020, <https://www.abtk.hu/ismerettar/blog/itt-a-dontes-egyoldaluan-tortenik-az-1950-es-megallapodas-es-a-szerzetesrendek-mukodesi-engedelyenek-megvonasa> (accessed 28 September 2025).

¹⁰ A. Fejérdy, “Szentszéki stratégiák a püspöki székek betöltésére,” *Történelmi Szemle* 55 (2) (2013), p. 292, https://tti.abtk.hu/images/kiadvanyok/folyoiratok/tsz/tsz2013_2/291-306_fejerd.pdf (accessed 18 November 2025).

conclusion of the partial agreement between Hungarian authorities and the Holy See on 15 September 1964,¹¹ which was initially declared secret for a period of 70 years (the classification was lifted in 2006 and 2013). The agreement consisted of a document, a protocol and two annexes. The document settled the issue of the appointment of bishops, the oath of Hungarian church officials to the People's Republic and the constitution, and the operation of the Pontifical Hungarian Institute in Rome. Annex 1 laid down the procedure, which formally did not violate the papal right of appointment, but in practice the Holy See agreed to either choose a candidate from a list presented by the bishops' conference agreed in advance with the government or ascertain that the government had no objections to the appointment by direct negotiations or through the chairman of the bishops' conference.¹²

The negotiations then became regular; between 1963 and 1988, the *Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal* (State Office for Church Affairs, ÁEH), the state body responsible for the church relations, held regular negotiations with the Vatican in Budapest and Rome. Appointments of church leaders (bishops and archbishops) were also discussed during the meetings. The accounts and reports can be found in the National Archives of Hungary. The ÁEH regularly reported on these negotiations to the Agitation and Propaganda Department operating under the Central Committee of the state party (at this time it was called the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, *Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt*, MSZMP). Among the remaining records of the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the MSZMP from 1986¹³ are the reports and detailed transcripts sent by the ÁEH about the discussions with the Vatican delegations. These documents illustrate well how these negotiations took place from the perspective of the state and the party, so I will present an example in more detail below.¹⁴

On the 9 July 1986, Imre Miklós, the chairman of ÁEH, received a delegation from the Vatican coming to the funeral of Cardinal Dr. László Lékai, Archbishop of Esztergom. The delegation was led by titular archbishop Francesco Colasuonno, nuncio with special duties, who had represented the Vatican in Eastern European countries since 1986. During the meeting, in addition to mutual introductions, it was discussed that the nuncio would like to stay longer in the country and visit some sick bishops. Although the ÁEH Chairman said that they would not prevent this, he

¹¹ M. Balogh, A. Fejérdy, and Cs. Szabó, "Az 1964-es magyar–szentszéki részleges megállapodás," *ArchívNet* 18 (6) (2018), <https://www.archivnet.hu/az-1964-es-magyar-szentszeki-reszleges-megallapodas> (accessed 28 September 2025).

¹² A. Fejérdy, "Szentszéki stratégiák a püspöki székek betöltésére," p. 303.

¹³ MNL OL M-KS 288-22. Agitációs és Propaganda Osztály (Társadalompolitikai Osztály), 1986 Az Agitációs és Propaganda Osztály 1986. évi iratai, 22. ó. e.

¹⁴ The documents have been published: Zs. Pétsy, "Az Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal jelentései a Vatikán képviselőivel folytatott tárgyalásokról az MSZMP KB Agitációs és Propaganda Osztály számára (1986–1987)," *ArchívNet* 24 (3) (2024), <https://www.archivnet.hu/az-allami-egyhazugyi-hivatal-jelentesei-a-vatikan-kepviseloivel-folytatott-targyalasokrol-az-mszmp> (accessed 18 November 2025).

also pointed out that it could create an unpleasant impression if they moved around more widely during the unofficial visit or if it seemed like they were looking for the deceased cardinal's successor. He recommended that succession negotiations be scheduled for November of that year and the following spring.

Between 1 and 10 May 1987, Francesco Colasuonno was again in Hungary heading a delegation and, in addition to the consecration of Dankó László, titular bishop of Kalocsa and the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the consecration of the basilica in Eger, official negotiations were held with the ÁEH in Budapest. These included proposals for the appointment of István Konkoly, István Seregély, and Endre Gyulai as archbishops and bishops. In the letter attached to the report to Ernő Lakatos, the chairman of the ÁEH requests that the report be presented to János Kádár, the general secretary of the MSZMP. He also highlighted the changes proposed during the negotiations; he accepted the choice of persons, but considered the personal qualities of István Konkoly more suitable for the appointment as archbishop of Eger, whom the Vatican recommended as the bishop of Szombathely, and in order to avoid the appearance of discrimination, he also proposed that László Dankó, who had just been appointed temporary assigned titular bishop of Kalocsa should be appointed Archbishop of Kalocsa. Imre Miklós presented the nominations in such a way that he left it open that the proposal of the Vatican or the ÁEH would prevail regarding the above two dioceses and if the assignments should be temporary or permanent. The typewritten report shows handwritten markings added after being received by the party that show the final decision, which are the same as the actual appointments made in 1987. At the bottom of the page there are also notes with names related to Lutheran episcopal appointments. In the end, the appointments followed the proposal of the Vatican, but László Dankó was also given the final appointment as archbishop of Kalocsa as proposed by the ÁEH.

The documents show that even in the second half of the eighties, the consent of the top party leadership was required to fill leadership positions in the church, and the consent of the presidential council required by law was not just a mere formality.

Base Ecclesial Communities as a Form of the Resistance

The primary goal of the Holy See with the agreement was to be able to appoint bishops again to Hungary, and this goal was reached. However, by agreeing to appoint bishops accepted by the Communist party, the church leadership was effectively captured by the Communist state and the activity of the Church remained closely monitored, limited and controlled by the state through the ÁEH.

A form of the resistance was the founding of small, dispersed grassroots ecclesial communities, for example the *Bokor* ("bush") movement, or the *Regnum Marianum* movement, which took religion out from the walls of the churches where the state tolerated the religious activities. Their activities started very early after the Soviet occupation. These communities met regularly and secretly, so the members and

organizers were often arrested, charged with conspiring to overturn the people's democracy and sentenced to several years in the 1950s and 1960s. When more than 120 priests, nuns and lay people were sentenced in 1961, even the Catholic Bishops' Conference condemned the arrested members in a circular letter and distanced itself from "the actions of such irresponsible church figures."

The methods of the state changed in the 1970s; instead of launching criminal proceedings, the state tried to suppress the movements by discouraging community members. The police or the security services collected data about the communities. Lay people were threatened by their employers with dismissal from their jobs or menaced directly by the police or the security services. For clerics, the state used the official church itself: ÁEH informed their bishop who had to take care of the matter. Those who resisted, faced suspension or transfer to a different place of service.

Arrests came back into the practice when some members of the *Bokor* movement refused to perform mandatory military service for reasons of conscience. The first such case happened in 1979 and it was followed by successive ones.¹⁵

The State Office for Church Affairs (*Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal*, ÁEH)

The State Office for Church Affairs, which was closely supervised and influenced by the Communist party-state, played a special role in the state structures. The institution existed and operated between 15 May 1951 and 1 July 1989¹⁶. Essentially, the ÁEH was a body set up to implement agreements between the Hungarian state and religious denominations, as well as to carry out the administrative functions of the state related to churches. It was under the direct supervision of the Council of Ministers (i.e. government), headed by the Chairman. The affairs of specific denominations were handled by separate departments within the Office. It could be observed that before the 1956 Revolution and also after its suppression by the Soviet forces, huge effort was put into breaking the official Church hierarchy in practical terms. ÁEH was given a central administrative and management role and tasks in this regard.

Not only the party but also the relevant internal affairs bodies benefited from the reports of the ÁEH. State security also infiltrated the organization of the ÁEH under the codename "Világosság" (Light) Rezidentúra (i.e. covert unit – editor's remark)¹⁷, and the information about the surveillance of priests was ultimately used to achieve

¹⁵ Á. Zsummera, "A Bokor kisközösségi mozgalom és a pártállam," *Valóság* 41 (8) (1998), pp. 55–57.

¹⁶ E. Köpeczi Bócz, *Az Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal tevékenysége*, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2004; V.A. Soós: *Az Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal archontológiája*.

¹⁷ Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára in Budapest, Hungary (Historical Archives of the State Security Services, hereinafter: ÁBTL), HU-ÁBTL-3.2.6-8-69/1, HU-ÁBTL-3.2.6-8-70/1, HU-ÁBTL-3.2.6-8-70/III, "Világosság" Belső rezidentúra szervezési dosszié. The authors of the work (Cs. Szabó and V.A. Soós, „Világosság.” *Az Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal és a hírszerzés tevékenysége a katolikus egyház ellen*, Budapest: Új Ember: Lénárd Ö. Közhasznú Alapítvány, 2006) have studied and processed these documents.

the goals of the party-state in relation to the churches. The Office had active contacts with the internal affairs bodies and security services, exchanging information about priests and parishioners.

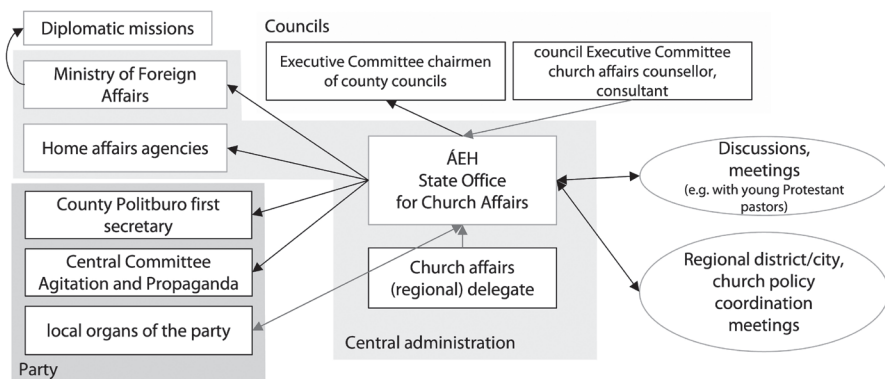
In an oral history interview I conducted in 2023 with the widow of a former priest, she recalled that according to her late husband, in the late 1960s, after he left the priesthood following repeated attempts by state security to recruit him, the church affairs officer responsible for the county – a civil servant working for the public administration at the county level – almost immediately contacted him and asked him personally whether he would be willing to return to the priesthood.

The Office continuously provided information to the party central units (for example to the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee) and also to the foreign missions through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The ÁEH placed special emphasis on foreign affairs relations; the office also regularly monitored foreign events and received information from other institutions, including institutions responsible for foreign affairs. It is also important to mention in this context that in 1964 Hungary and the Vatican signed an agreement on the procedure for appointing bishops, and from that time on, the ÁEH was also responsible for the related negotiations. The agreement will be discussed in more detail below. Concerning appointments of church officials, the Office also received continuous reports and character descriptions from regional party bodies and councils, including (but not limited) to the activities of the peace movement of clergy (“peace priests”) organized by the party-state. About the “peace priests,” detailed feedback was continuously given, the level and results of the “struggle against the reaction” were measured, and the methods of action against the Church were developed, including the continuous strengthening of the peace movement (which will be presented in more detail below), and the level and extent of the agitation for the “peace struggle.” In addition to the organization and management of the ÁEH, territorial coordination meetings also took place regularly, where the specific tasks were determined down to the county, district¹⁸ and town levels. They also held discussions and meetings with young priests, where the role and importance of the “peace movement” were always highlighted. According to the direction set by the party, the organization and strengthening of the clerical peace movement was primarily a territorial task. Church affairs delegates also worked in the organization of the county councils, who practically took part in the implementation of the church-related central policies and were included in the organizational structure of the ÁEH as its regional referents.

¹⁸ District (in Hungarian: *járás*) was (and is today) the second-level administrative division in Hungary, after county (*megye*).

Territorial organization and coverage were important because according to the state power's idea, which can be supported by archival sources, parishioners and priests¹⁹ were to be dealt with locally, where they lived.

The ÁEH was in contact with the state administration, the councils, and the party regularly, both at the central and the territorial level. In this diagram, I show the connections, based on correspondence, reports and interviews found in the archival sources.²⁰



The Political Committee of the MSZMP passed a resolution on church policy on 4 March 1968.²¹ The resolution gave priority to political cooperation with loyal church circles, striving to further develop this, and in parallel, it set the suppression of “reactionary church aspirations” as a priority goal. According to its statement, “In the fight against church reaction, political action is primarily necessary, and sometimes administrative means. More effective steps are needed to overcome the uncertainty arising in the more complex fight against the deceptive behaviour of church reaction.” In line with this, the PB set as a task that “The work of the Catholic clerical peace movement must be adapted to current circumstances.”

A document, summarizing the results of the church policy coordination meetings held in Pest County in 1976²², which also refers to the resolution of 1968, is an interesting source showing the priorities, methods and results of the activities of the

¹⁹ “The church policy approach and activities of the leaders of regional state bodies. The heads of district offices and city councils are well aware of the guidelines of the party’s church policy, the documents indicated in the introduction, and the social, political, and ideological connections of church policy.” MNL-OL, HU-MNL-OL XIX-A-21-c-000.1, Information about district-city church political coordination meetings, 11 October 1975, p. 8.

²⁰ MNL-OL, HU-MNL-OL-XIX-A-21-c, Data Repository.

²¹ MNL-OL, HU-MNL-OL M-KS 288. f. 5/448. ő. e., pp. 95 r. – 99 v.

²² The document was archived in the ÁEH records, and is available in the Hungarian National Archives, MNL-OL, under ref. no. HU-MNL-OL, XIX-A-21-c-000.1, Tájékoztató a járási-városi egyházpolitikai koordinációs értekezletekről, 11 October 1975.

authorities in order to control the churches. The document was signed by the church affairs secretary of Pest County, who worked as part of the county state administration but also reported to the ÁEH. The main findings of the briefing are as follows.

A meeting was held in each district of the county and in four larger towns separately. The meetings were moderated by the chairman of the local committee of the Communist party, and the local public administration, the police, the Patriotic National Front, the Communist Youth League etc. were represented.

The source divides the priests and pastors into three categories, also indicating their territorial and denominational distribution: a smaller group is loyal to the political system (mostly protestants), a second, largest group is characterized by “passive loyalty” (the largest part of Catholics), and the third, smallest group is that of the “reactionaries,” which cause most of the problems (mostly Catholics).

The secretary provides a long list of “reactionary activities,” including respecting the memory of József Mindszenty²³, any critique of church related policies (“e.g. criticizing the timing of events counterbalancing religious life.”), collecting money, organizing excursions, free time activities, advertising religious education on the church door or contacting pupils or parents directly, or trying to integrate better into the school teaching staff. All of the “reactionary activities” have been retaliated against through “strongly condemning conversation, administrative proceedings, obtaining a bishop’s reprimand, requesting a transfer, refusing permission for construction or renovation.”

The performance of the clerical peace movement in the county is considered weaker than the expectations, analysing the possible reasons and the steps required for improvement.

The Pest County church affairs secretary positively assessed the gradual decline in religious life, church religious education, and participation in Easter and Feast of *Corpus Christi* processions, which he also supported with precise numbers and percentages. Life cycle rituals like baptism, marriage and funerals are ceremonies traditionally provided by the church, so it was an important for the Communists to substitute them with secular ceremonies of similar emotional value. The document compared the rate of use of each ceremony in 1974 to the historical data of 1965, against the background of the nation-wide data. “The most dynamic development

²³ Archbishop Cardinal József Mindszenty (Pehm until 1942) (1892–1975) was a Prince-Primate of Hungary. In 1949 he was sentenced to life imprisonment under false charges. Mindszenty was released during the 1956 Revolution, and after its suppression, he was given refuge at the United States embassy in Budapest, which he did not leave until 1971. He wrote his memoirs during his stay at the embassy. The Hungarian government only agreed to his departure for Rome after the Vatican agreed to ensure that Mindszenty would not make any statements about his conviction, his imprisonment, the political situation in Hungary, the situation of the Hungarian Catholic Church, and that he would resign from his archbishopric. After a short stay in the Vatican, he lived in Vienna until his death. See entry *Mindszenty József*, in *Magyar Katolikus Lexikon*, ed. I. Diós and J. Viczián, Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 1993–2014, <https://lexikon.katolikus.hu/M/Mindszenty.html> (accessed 28 September 2025).

is seen in weddings,” the document reads, meaning that the percentage of church weddings decreased from 79.6% to 41%, while funerals stagnated around 80%, and baptisms even rose.

The author also analysed the competence and proactivity of the officials towards church policy, which he found to be better in the district administration leaders and town council leaders, however varied among the village council leaders.

The document also mentioned that the small denominations would need more attention, and especially the Jehovah’s Witnesses, against which the authorities, including the police hardly made decisive steps. The opinion of the author of the report is that a county action plan should be forged to be able to suppress them more effectively.

The Peace Movements of the Clergy

The relationship between the state and the churches in Hungary cannot be understood without comprehending the role and activities of the clerical peace movements. Clergy who engaged in these movements were commonly referred to as “peace priests,” a term that carried a distinctly pejorative connotation in both contemporary and later usage. Although the label originally emerged in a Catholic context, it was likewise applied to Protestant pastors who participated in such initiatives. The designation thus broadly encompassed members of the clergy who either actively collaborated with, or demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with the Communist political authorities.

The peace movement was organized as part of the international movement started with the World Congress of Intellectuals in Defense of Peace in Wrocław in 1948, which later led to the founding of the World Peace Council in the next year. Officially, the clerical peace movement was a mass organization of priests and pastors, promoting the importance of peace and nuclear disarmament; in fact, the activities of the “peace priests” served the purposes of exercising power in the party-state. The clerical peace movement, planned and initiated by the Communist party-state and promoted by the party from behind the scenes,²⁴ was actually meant to achieve the political and ruling goals that the party believed to be correct. Based on its name and publicly stated aims, such a movement could have been considered “progressive” by the outsider – from an ideological point of view. The Communist government wanted to use “peace priests” for ideological purposes, specifically in its fight against the people defined as “clerical reactionary elements.” The interest of the Communist party in exerting power over and influence the church and the lay faithful motivated the establishment of the clerical peace movement by those exercising power, which were ideologically backed by the party-state. The participation and

²⁴ See entry *Békemozgalom* in *Magyar Katolikus Lexikon*, <https://lexikon.katolikus.hu/B/békemozgalom.html> (accessed 28 September 2025).

role of the priests in the peace movement was specifically designed and shaped by the Communist party in Hungary for its own purposes, thus following the ideological line of the party and the Soviet model.

The “peace priests” had to publicly support the “peace struggle” voiced by the party, standing up for the “socialist peace camp,” promoting the vision of a war-free, ideal world that only “socialist democracies” can achieve, against the imperialist powers, mobilizing broad social masses and at the same time turning them to their own side. Although the peace movements were present in other churches in Hungary, too, the most important one was that within the Catholic Church, being the dominant church in Hungary. In 1950, the dictatorship established the National Peace Committee of Catholic Priests in Hungary (*Katolikus Papok Országos Békebizottsága*, KPOB), based on international peace movements, specifically on the Soviet model, guided by its own power goals and party interests.²⁵ The direct motivation for creating the organization at that time was to exert additional pressure on the Catholic bishops to negotiate a comprehensive agreement between the Communist state and the Catholic Church – rather than negotiating only about the religious orders the state wanted to dissolve – by showing mass support for such an agreement within the clergy.²⁶ Since the bishops resisted the calls for involving the Church in the peace movement²⁷, organizing it against the Church hierarchy was in itself challenging the authority of the bishops over the lower clergy. In the case of the church peace movements that developed at the national and regional levels and the peace committees that organized their activities by county, the essence of the underlying Soviet model was clear; the real aim was to suppress the non-progressive and “reactionary” religious elements of society, to force the cooperation of Church leaders with the Communist dictatorship, and essentially, to break up and disrupt the internal hierarchical structure of the churches.

The most important structural change in the clerical peace movement is related to the 1956 Revolution and war of independence, when the movement fell apart, and after the suppression of the Revolution the party restarted it within the framework of the Patriotic People’s Front (in Hungarian: *Hazafias Népfront*, HNF). Not only Catholics, but also other Christian churches participated in the international and domestic peace movements. The direct link to the Catholic Church, however, was a newly created entity, called *Opus Pacis* (Latin “work of peace”), which was founded by the Hungarian Catholic bishops under party leadership pressure, as a body within the Catholic Church to promote the peace ideas of the National Peace Council among the clergy and the laymen, with the Catholic Committee of the National Peace

²⁵ V.R. Rapali, “Harc a „klerikális reakció” ellen,” in *Ma demokráciát, holnap szocializmust. A diktatúra kiépülése és működése, 1944–1956*, ed. B. Házi et al., Budapest: Retörki, 2022, pp. 237–240.

²⁶ J. Pál, *Békepapok. Katolikus békepapok Magyarországon, 1950–1889*, Budapest: Egyházfórum, 1995, p. 19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–12.

Council, (*Országos Békemozgalom Katolikus Bizottsága*, OBKB) acting as a link between the *Opus Pacis* and the National Peace Council.

The idea of the party-state, based on an ideological, Marxist basis, was that religious people could be politically driven towards the party ideology, and that church organizations could be controlled by the party-state. The essence of the state measures was to force the party's control over the members of the Church. In 1970, György Lukács²⁸, the internationally known philosopher and Marxist thinker, expressed his opinion on the relationship between Marxism and Christianity: "Today, when the crisis of religion affects the majority of religious people, they become more sensitive to Marxism, and I don't consider their contribution to political and social life insignificant at all."²⁹ As Lukács stated, the relationship between the church and society in various periods of history shows a series of adaptations, and the nature of the relationship, which he called dialogue, is vividly and clearly expressed in the following quote: "And if the church sometimes supports the position of the Marxists, I see no reason why the Marxists should not support the church."³⁰

Hungary was one of the countries of the Communist Bloc in which the clerical peace movement was able to operate and prevail for the longest period; however, as time passed, the weight and role of the "peace priests," keeping the same underlying ideological and power goals – in interaction with social and political changes, and as a result of them – gradually decreased. Among the other ex-Communist countries, we could mention Czechoslovakia as an example (where such a movement was first established), or Poland, where a similar organization also existed and functioned for a period, (in Poland such clergymen were called "patriotic priests").³¹

The public instrument of the Communist party-state for the fight against the churches was the ideology and its appearance in the press and media; the covert one was the action of the internal affairs and state security agencies. In the reports of a priest recruited as an agent by a political investigative unit of the police, the most educational opinion is the one he noted based on what one of his fellow priests said, according to which anyone who does not go to "peace meetings" is either a very decent person or an informant.³² The priest recruited as an agent made reports about his fellow priests, including those who encouraged the contempt of "peace priests"

²⁸ György Lukács (1885–1971), philosopher, esthete, university professor, member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, also took on a political role during the Hungarian Republic of Councils (1919) and after the Communist takeover. "Lukács György," Tudástár, Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága website, <https://neb.hu/asset/phpJcokTj.pdf> (accessed 24 May 2024); Lukács was an internationally renowned Marxist philosopher of the 20th c., who also studied the relationship between religion and Marxism.

²⁹ B. Hegyi, "Lukács György nézetei," *Vigilia* 35 (6) (1970), p. 401. https://vigilia.hu/pdfs/Vigilia_1970_06_facsimile.pdf#page=43 (accessed 28 September 2025)

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ J. Mackiewicz, *A Vatikán a vörös csillag árnyékában*, Máriabesnyő: Attraktor, 2012, p. 34.

³² ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M-21795, Political Department of the Fejér County Police Headquarters of the Ministry of the Interior, 1961–1964, "Zoltán Kárpáthy" fn. ügynök.

everywhere, those who were the most determined opponents of the priest peace movement, or those who tried to persuade him to go to a peace meeting, and also about those who watched and noted who goes to the peace meeting and who doesn't. The central element of the specific activity plan for the agent was the mapping of the behaviour of the priests, including who could be considered a reactionary element, their attitude to the "peace priests," whether a particular priest was an enemy of the peace movement, and what kind of foreign relations each person had.

Based on the documents studied in the National Archives of Hungary between 1950 and 1989, the ideas and management of the party-state regarding the activities of the "peace priests" appear to be clearly visible – even in a literal way. The political goals of the party-state in relation to the clerical peace movement were therefore the following:

- the movement in the fight against "church reaction" should be strengthened and encouraged,
- "peace priests" must carry out regular political influencing activities, primarily among the clergy,
- as many young people should be involved in the movement as possible,
- there should be a steady development of the movement, especially in areas where its achievements are modest.

Another important tool of the party-state's control over the churches was the State Office for Church Affairs (ÁEH), which preferred the appointment of "peace priests" to various positions in the diocesan leadership. The party-state also wanted to achieve through the "peace priests" the confrontation of the lower clergy with the high clergy.

One of the means of social influence was the press; since it was also possible for the authorities to spread the desired ideas and thoughts in relation to the social role of the churches in printed form. *A Kereszt (The Cross)*, published in Budapest, played the role of the official mouthpiece of the "peace priest" movement.³³ The paper was put on the index by the Vatican in 1956, so the movement had to cancel it and found a new paper controlled by an episcopal censor: the *Katolikus Szó (Catholic Word)*.³⁴ Between 1956 and 1989, *Katolikus Szó* was the newspaper of the National Peace Committee of the Catholic Priests, and some of its social messages related to "peace priests" deserve to be mentioned here³⁵: "The state must not be

³³ P.S. Sulák, "„Adjátok meg a császárnak, ami a császáré...” A békepapi mozgalom létrejötte, szervezete és szerepe a Magyar Népköztársaság egyházpolitikájában (1950–1956)," *Újkor* 1 August 2022, [ujkor.hu](https://ujkor.hu/content/adjatok-meg-a-csaszarnak-ami-a-csaszare-a-bekepapi-mozgalom-letrejotte-szervezete-es-szerepe-a-magyar-nepkoztarsasag-egyhazpolitikajaban-1950-1956) website, 2022, <https://ujkor.hu/content/adjatok-meg-a-csaszarnak-ami-a-csaszare-a-bekepapi-mozgalom-letrejotte-szervezete-es-szerepe-a-magyar-nepkoztarsasag-egyhazpolitikajaban-1950-1956> (accessed 7 July 2024).

³⁴ P.P. Kálmán, *A Magyar Katolikus Egyház helyzete a kádári egyházpolitika első éveiben a teológiai összefüggések tükrében*, PhD thesis, Budapest, 2014, p. 75. http://real-phd.mtak.hu/123/19/Kálmán%20Péter%20Peregrin_disszertáció.pdf (accessed 7 July 2024).

³⁵ Press coverage of articles related to "peace priests" can be found in the press archive of Radio Free Europe's Hungarian unit in the Blinken OSA Archive (hereinafter HU OSA). The examples listed here can be found under the following notations: Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University,

attacked”³⁶ (1956), “Peace priests should watch over the behaviour of their fellow priests”³⁷ (1958), “The peace priests do not seek to occupy hierarchical positions,”³⁸ “Christians can calmly and courageously support the cause of building socialism!”³⁹ (1959), “The clerical peace movement is a significant factor in the good relationship between the state and the church”⁴⁰, “The peace movement is not a Soviet organization, the Catholic Church also wants peace”⁴¹ (1961), “Our movement is on the right path” (1968), “Twenty years in the service of peace” (1970), “We are moving upward!” (1970), “To serve earthly life and eternity with greater consciousness” (1970), “Twenty-five years in the service of the good relations between church and state” (1976). Naturally, the tone of the headlines changed over the years. Similar articles appeared in the papers of other churches; in 1959, the newspaper of the Reformed Church, *Reformátusok Lapja* reports on Lajos Vető’s⁴² speech at the joint meeting of the Reformed and Evangelical Church Committees of the National Peace Council: “For the peace, members of the church can work together with communists who follow a different worldview. [...] Wars are the consequence of the essence of the capitalist social order, but peace belongs to the essence of socialism.”⁴³ These

Budapest, HU OSA, 300-40-1:208/6 – 210/3, Egyház: Békepapok, Subject Files, Hungarian Unit, Records of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty Research Institute.

³⁶ “It would be incalculably harmful to our Catholic life if, in the new atmosphere that has developed, the idea, expressed by some, that everything is now allowed, even anti-state statements, were to spread.” From the speech of Károly Oláh, parish priest of Kiskunfélegyháza, at the National Committee meeting of the clerical peace movement, “Katolikus Szó,” 23 September 1956. Károly Oláh also served as the chairman of the clerical peace movement. Oláh found, however, when he spoke about this in another church in the city, that “this voice was unusual there, some of the people expressed their disapproval in anonymous letters, because he used expressions contrary to the will of God in the pulpit, and urged his followers to ruin.” R. Rigó, “Pártállami „szociográfia” a hatvanas évek vallási életéről,” *Forrás* 54 (2) (2022), pp. 28–64.

³⁷ “In the work of the Patriotic People’s Front, the clergy who undertook the service of peace and have sworn loyalty to their people cannot of course also live a life without politics, because they are not party members, but they are a constituent element of our national existence. In the field of political activity, within the bounds of conscience, there are many opportunities for all of us, and it is the task of the county Catholic peace committees to provide guidance in this regard.” Miklós Beresztóczy spoke in his report at the national meeting of Catholic Peace Committees on 23 October 1958, *Katolikus Szó*, 2 November 1958, p. 3. Miklós Beresztóczy (1905–1973), titular provost, politician. He participated in the organization of the National Peace Committee of Catholic Priests in 1950, was its chairman in 1950–1956, and from 1957 he was the chairman of the Catholic Committee of the National Peace Committee; Member of Parliament (1953–1973), Deputy Speaker of the Parliament (1961–1963). *Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon*, ed. Á. Kenyeres, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1994, <https://mek.oszk.hu/00300/00355/html/index.html> (accessed 24 May 2024).

³⁸ “We do not want to interpret our relationship with the hierarchy as trying to occupy hierarchical positions. We are neither power, job, title, nor income seekers.” *Katolikus Szó* 2 November 1958, p. 2.

³⁹ *Katolikus Szó*, 18 October 1959, p. 2.

⁴⁰ “Feladatainkról,” *Katolikus Szó*, 23 August 1959, p. 1.

⁴¹ *Katolikus Szó*, 31 May 1959, p. 3.

⁴² Lajos Vető (1904–1989), Lutheran bishop, obtained a doctorate in religious studies in 1935. Member of the presidency of the National Peace Council, member of the Presidential Council of the Patriotic People’s Front, member of parliament 1953–1971. See entry *Vető Lajos* in *Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon*.

⁴³ *Reformátusok Lapja*, 24 May 1959, p. 1, based on the press coverage of Radio Free Europe. Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest, HU OSA 300-40-1, Records of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty Research Institute, Hungarian Unit, Subject Files.

messages covertly carry an underlying content, they also make the reality behind the appearance perceptible. The catchphrases quoted above have been taken from the headlines and articles in the press monitoring archives of the Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute, Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

The presence and activities of the “peace priests” also put the official church organization in such a situation that it had to establish a position towards the “priest peace” movement and its various actors. For example, some members of the Church who assumed a political role in connection with the movement were punished by the Church leadership, and several persons were excommunicated in 1958 because of their parliamentary activities and their role in the peace movement. Those penal provisions were lifted by the Holy See in 1971.⁴⁴

The conclusion of the confidential agreement between Hungary and the Holy See in 1964 enabled the Hungarian state to influence the appointments of bishops, thus diminishing the importance of the Catholic peace movement. Since one of the principal aims of the state in handling the Catholic peace movement was weakening of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the role of the movement changed. Its activities increasingly shifted toward the mobilization of the masses for political purposes, as well as to general agitation and propaganda functions. This conclusion is drawn from an analysis of the internal reports of the ÁEH pertaining to the period.

In May 1989, the Archbishop of Esztergom, László Paskai⁴⁵, held negotiations with the National Peace Council about the possible renewal of the “peace movement.” Finally, on 20 November 1989, Paskai⁴⁶ officially dissolved the peace movement of Catholic priests (he dismissed the director of *Opus Pacis* and the general secretary of the OBKB, the Catholic Committee of the National Peace Committee).⁴⁷ On the eve of the regime change, the preparation of the law on freedom of conscience and religion⁴⁸ laid the foundation for the dissolution of the ÁEH⁴⁹, and then brought about the end of the activities of the peace priests generally associated with the Communist era: the activities of the peace priests were no longer compatible with the new spirit of regulation of the new times.

⁴⁴ Cs. Szabó, *A Szentek és a Magyar Népköztársaság kapcsolatai a hatvanas években a legújabb kutatások tükrében*, Budapest: Szent István Társulatnál, 2006, pp. 16–17.

⁴⁵ László Paskai (1927–2015), Franciscan friar, bishop of Veszprém from 1979, archbishop-coadjutor of Kalocsa from 1986, chairman of the Hungarian Catholic Bishops’ Conference in 1986–1990, archbishop of Esztergom from 1987, cardinal from 1988. See entry Paskai in *Magyar Katolikus Lexikon*, <https://lexikon.katolikus.hu/P/Paskai.html> (accessed 22 November 2025).

⁴⁶ “A Katolikus Papok Országos Békebizottságának megalakítása,” *Múlt-kor történelmi portál*, 3 August 2004, <https://mult-kor.hu/cikk.php?id=6372> (accessed 28 September 2025).

⁴⁷ J. Pál, *Békepapok*, pp. 247–253.

⁴⁸ Act IV of 1990, Law on freedom of conscience and religion, and on churches.

⁴⁹ The ÁEH was abolished without a legal successor on 30 June 1989 by the Decree-Law No. 14 of 1989.

In line with the party-state's political and power goals, and the ideological aims in their background, the "peace priests" were specifically encouraged to act in their own interests, aligning with the fight against Church members and faithful, who were defined as "clerical reactionary elements." The underlying ideology behind the clerical peace movement was actually an effort of the party to fight against the churches.

The differences between the activities of the state-led clerical peace movement and the officially published peace goals are also tangible in the archival records.⁵⁰ Research on the influence of peace priests on society and believers could provide an important aspect to a more detailed examination of the national organizational system of the "peace movement" and the functioning of the peace committees at the local level. The mentioned ideological background and contradiction should also be taken into account in course of proposed research.

International Cooperation

Cooperation of Church Affairs Offices

According to the findings presented in a volume⁵¹ edited by the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), synthesising research on the bilateral and multilateral relations maintained by the Polish Communist Office for Religious Affairs (*Urząd do spraw Wyznań*) with analogous institutions in the Soviet Bloc the origins of international meetings of Communist religious-affairs offices can be traced back to May 1957, when Czechoslovakia initiated efforts to strengthen institutional cooperation among the ecclesiastical-administrative bodies of the Soviet Bloc states. In the assessment of the author of this volume, this initiative was undertaken in coordination with the Soviet Union, with the explicit aim of fostering sustained contacts between Czechoslovak institutions of this kind and their counterparts through recurring meetings. The undertaking was likely stimulated by the tightening of Soviet religious policy under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Within this framework, the instrumentalization of non-Catholic – primarily Protestant – churches, as well as of the global peace movement, aligned with the broader political and power interests of the Soviet Union. The subjects placed on the agendas and debated at these gatherings of religious-affairs offices substantiate this interpretation.

Representatives of the church offices of the Communist countries held regular consultative meetings, e.g. representatives of the Hungarian, Czechoslovak, Polish, GDR, Soviet, Vietnamese, and Cuban ecclesiastical offices held consultations in

⁵⁰ MNL-OL, Mátyás Rákosi's secretarial papers, HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-65; Database, HU-MNL-OL-XIX-A-21-c.

⁵¹ B. Noszczak, *Międzynarodówka antykościelna. Współpraca polskiego Urzędu do spraw Wyznań z jego odpowiednikami w państwach komunistycznych (1954–1989) – preliminaria badawcze*, Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2020, p. 194.

Budapest in January 1986. This consultative meeting was initiated by the Hungarian ÁEH⁵² at a previous meeting of the heads of church offices in Prague in 1984, to analyse the Vatican's policy regarding Communist countries and develop proposals for practical steps. In my research I could not find any additional documents related to the topic from 1986 or later in the archives of the ÁEH or the MSZMP.

At this meeting, the delegations from the abovementioned countries accepted a memo for the meeting of the leaders of the Communist church affairs offices to be held in Budapest in March 1986 which contained the proposals of all parties. Based on the memo, the ÁEH prepared a summary report and sent both documents directly to the MSZMP Agitation and Propaganda Department (abbreviated: Agit. Prop. Department). I found the records in the Hungarian National Archives, in the collection of the Agit. Prop. Department; the report was seen by the Agit. Prop. Department. It should also be emphasized that the discussion concluded that a more in-depth and differentiated analysis of Vatican's policy was needed, and that a multilateral discussion on practical and political tasks would be also necessary. Specific proposals for the main directions of the further development of cooperation and practical tasks were also formulated.

The memo – as it is also contained in the report and the cover letter – included the proposals of all parties involved. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the list of participating countries was opened by the description of the Soviet position, and the direction it formulated in the text of the source. The aspects defined in the imposed guidelines can also be interpreted as expectations and objectives to be achieved, and these will be echoed in all further contributions. It stated as a principle that the policies of John Paul II, who ascended the papal throne in 1978, were essentially reactionary⁵³ and served the interests of imperialism.

The primary objective, long expressed by the Communist party-states, was to expose the “reactionary nature” of Vatican policy and to help involve the Catholic masses in the so-called “peace struggle,” which had been ongoing for decades. Furthermore, an internal opposition had to be formed in the Catholic Church, through which a counter-influence had to be exerted on the reactionary elements, on the Pope himself, and, ultimately, on the Vatican's church policy. The division of church personalities – in addition to the division of them into reactionary and progressive persons and groups – was the underlying ideology of the peace movements⁵⁴ in itself,

⁵² See V.A. Soós, “Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal,” Tudástár, Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága website, Budapest, 2016, <https://neb.hu/hu/allami-egyhazugyi-hivatal> (accessed 19 April 2024).

⁵³ The Marxist terminology pejoratively refers to the effort to suppress “progressive” – i.e. Marxist – forces and to restore the ‘outdated’ system and institutions with the word “reactionary,” within which the ecclesiastical, i.e. clerical reaction has a distinguished role, see entry *Reakció*, in *A magyar nyelv értelmező szótára*, ed. G. Bárczi and L. Országh, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1959–1962, <https://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Lexikonok-a-magyar-nyelv-ertelmezo-szotara-1BE8B/r-46B74/reakcio-47536/> (accessed 2 June 2024).

⁵⁴ See entry *Békemozgalom*, in *Magyar Katolikus Lexikon*, <https://lexikon.katolikus.hu/B/bekemozgalom.html>, (accessed 19 April 2024).

its specific driving element. Moreover, every opportunity in the various international church organizations had to be noted and used to criticize Vatican policy.

It was also necessary to take decisive action in the Third World, to counteract the Vatican's perceived reactionary policy, through activities with representatives of liberation theology.⁵⁵ The latter wanted to use the social shaping role of Christianity to liberate the oppressed social elements as widely as possible.

To achieve the abovementioned aims, methodological goals and expectations were formulated, which primarily meant the regular exchange of information on church policy, meetings, sharing of experiences, and the strengthening of relations with pro-peace, progressive church forces.

The central element of the "peace struggle" revolved around the nuclear disarmament. The reminder itself refers to the Geneva meeting held the previous year, in 1985, where Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan, the top-level leaders of the two opposing nuclear superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States of America, met in person for the first time in a long time. In the mid-1980s, disarmament negotiations were a daily topic and issue in world politics, and they were accompanied by practical progress during the decade.⁵⁶

Poland's position was that action should be taken against the Vatican's interference in the internal affairs of Communist countries. The Polish party-state leadership saw the intervention of church "reactionary elements" behind the development of domestic political events in Poland⁵⁷ at the time.

⁵⁵ See I. Cselényi, entry *Főlszabadítás teológiája*, in *Magyar Katolikus Lexikon*, https://lexikon.katolikus.hu/F/főlszabadítás_teológiája.html (accessed 19 April 2024).

⁵⁶ G. Nagy, "A genfi csúcstalálkozó sikertelenségének sikere," *30 éve szabadon* 2021. <https://www.30eveszabaddon.hu/a-genfi-csucstalalkozo-sikertelensegenek-sikere> (accessed 28 September 2025).

⁵⁷ In Poland, on 13 December 1981, the party-state introduced martial law to retain political power and strengthen itself, with the aim of stopping complex social resistance processes. As a result of the continuously and drastically deteriorating economic situation and the resulting strikes, the Polish Communist leadership allowed the establishment of trade union movements independent of the Communist party. As a result, the Solidarity movement ("Solidarity" Independent Self-Governing Trade Union) was organized. The movement was joined by opposition groups and even party members, and which enjoyed the support of the Polish Catholic Church and John Paul II, who was of Polish origin. During martial law in 1982, Solidarity was banned by the Polish party-state leadership, and martial law was only lifted on 22 July 1983. Until the change of regime, many legal restrictions prevailed, but despite the banning of Solidarity, it did not cease to exist, the social and international processes leading to the end of the Polish socialist party-state system could no longer be stopped; see M. Mitrovits, "Gdańskban kezdődött a lengyel rendszerváltás," *Múlt-kor történelmi portál* 6 February 2009, https://mult-kor.hu/20090206_gdanskban_kezdodott_a_lengyel_rendszervaltas_ (accessed 19 April 2024); J. Tischler, "Az MSZMP és a lengyelországi válság, 1980–1981," *ArchivNet* 2 (1) (2002), https://www.archivnet.hu/politika/az_mszmp_es_a_lengyelorszagi_valsas_19801981.html (accessed 19 April 2024). July 22, the Day of the Rebirth of Poland, was an official holiday until 1989, commemorating the establishment of the Polish National Liberation Committee, a provisional government supported by the Soviet leadership, in 22 July 1944, and its proclamation. "Ul. PKWN," Institute of National Remembrance website, <https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/upamietnianie/dekomunizacja/zmiany-nazw-ulic/nazwy-ulic/nazwy-do-zmiany/38480,ul-PKWN.html> (accessed 24 April 2024); Ustawa z dnia 22 lipca 1945 r. o ustanowieniu Narodowego Święta Odrodzenia Polski, *Dziennik Ustaw KRN* 1945, no. 32, item 194. <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=wdu19450320194> (accessed 18 November 2024); "Fragment Manifestu Polskiego Komitetu Wyzwo-

Through the agreement with Vatican, and regular negotiations, Hungary gained experience in the area of bilateral relations with the Holy See. According to the Hungarian point of view, during the ongoing bilateral negotiations between AEH and the Vatican, a firm stand was necessary against the positions of the Holy See which were directed against the socialist and progressive systems in general.⁵⁸

Cooperation of Internal Affairs Bodies of Communist Countries

The Soviet pattern is not only visible in the cooperation and coordination of organisations dealing with churches. The fourth multilateral meeting of delegations from the internal affairs (state security) agencies of the Communist countries was held in 1983 in Sofia, and concerned the “ideological diversion.” The role of believers and churches was also a major topic.⁵⁹

The Soviet Union was represented by KGB (State Security Committee), according to which the system’s enemies, since faithful and atheists are supposed to have different worldviews, set themselves the task of directing the ideological opposition of a certain part of faithful to the level of political confrontation.

According to the Ministry of the Interior of the Hungarian People’s Republic, in September 1981 President Reagan issued a presidential decree called the “Truth Program”⁶⁰, which called for the escalation of ideologically subversive activities against the Soviet Union and other Communist countries. The Ministry’s position warned that the fact that nationalism and nationalist incitement were coming to the fore in the activities of almost all hostile groups indicated a shift to the right.

Specifically, it was emphasized that, in addition to joint consultation, joint actions, and the exchange of information, the implementation of coordinated activities was increasingly becoming a daily practice. Close cooperation was established, for example, with the Soviet, GDR, Polish, and Bulgarian state security services. Together with the Poles, Hungarians organized action that were to discredit the attacks of “Western diversion centres” against Poland; the cooperation encompassed the reconnaissance work and help in organisation of network and travels. The aim of joint

lenia Narodowego z 22 lipca 1944 roku,” Institute of National Remembrance website, <https://warszawa.ipn.gov.pl/download/88/52321/zRoDIA.pdf> (accessed 24 April 2024).

⁵⁸ Zs.B. Pétsy, “Jelentés a szocialista országok egyházügyi hivatalai képviselőinek konzultatív tanácskozásáról (1986),” *KRE-Di* 7 (1) (2024), <https://www.kre-dit.hu/tortenelemtudomany/petsy-zsolt-balazs-jelentes-a-szocialista-oroszagok-egyhazugyi-hivatalai-kepviseloinek-konzultativ-tanacskozasarol-1986/> (accessed 18 November 2025).

⁵⁹ ÁBTL, 4.1, A-3200/a, A szocialista országok belügyi (állambiztonsági) szervei delegációinak negyedik sokoldalú tanácskozása az ideológiai diverzió tárgykörében. Szófia, 1983. 14–18 November 1983.

⁶⁰ No presidential decree can be found from September 1981 in the *Federal Register* (<https://www.federalregister.gov/presidential-documents/executive-orders/ronald-reagan/1981>), however, on September 22, Ronald Reagan issued a Presidential Order EO 12323 to establish a commission to make plans for radio broadcasting to Cuba to provide the Cuban people with accurate information about their country, see “Presidential Commission on Broadcasting to Cuba”, 25 September 1981 https://archives.federalregister.gov/issue_slice/1981/9/25/47207-47208.pdf (accessed 28 September 2025).

action was to hinder the unity and cooperation of Polish and Hungarian “hostile persons,” i.e. the opposition. Furthermore, it was established as a fact that the activities of the Christian Peace Conference have developed significantly. At the same time, the number of “reactionary elements” in the churches increased, as opposed to the “pro-peace” church members, this was also essentially seen as the effect of the “Western reaction,” and it was deemed necessary to be counteracted, and such counteractions were otherwise considered successful.

The Ministry of the Interior of the Polish People’s Republic also mentioned interesting motives and aspects, which can be summarized as follows: Poland is the object of special attention and attack by Western diversion centres. It is necessary to emphasize the strong position of the Catholic Church, which claims to have the right to the role of the main defender of the Polish character and the continuation of national cultural traditions. Under the Polish conditions, the church is a factor that particularly strongly holds back the change in social consciousness. (Other circumstances, which distinguish it from other Communist countries, primarily appeared in the form of a private ownership of the means of production in agriculture.) The “Western diversion” aims, among other things, to promote the belief that faith and the Church represent an alternative and opposition to the socialist form of social life and socialist construction, while at the same time impressing upon Polish Catholics and the Church itself the duty to crusade against Communism and to defend national traditions. The position was formulated according to which a model of this type of activity was developed in Western Sovietology centres. This model is based on the old model of the “free trade union movement.” At the initiative of the Workers’ Defence Committee (*Komitet Obrony Robotników*, KOR),⁶¹ several “Founding Free Trade Union Committees” (*Wolne Związki Zawodowe*, WZZ) were created. In the initial period of the strike, in June 1980, the KOR created a centre that collected, analysed and forwarded strike-related information to the West. Using these data, the Western diversion and propaganda centres expected that the events in Gdańsk would turn out to be unfavourable for the authorities.

The examination of Hungarian–Polish relations lays the foundation for further research in the field of political and regulatory relations related to churches.

Conclusions

The Communist ideology viewed the churches and religion as remnants of the feudal past, the “opium of the people” which had no place in their vision of an ideal future. The long-term goal was a completely secular society, in the shorter term, Communists

⁶¹ “Jan Lityński, a member of the anti-communist opposition, politician and social activist passed away on 21 February, 2021,” Institute of National Remembrance website, 22 February 2021, <https://eng.ipn.gov.pl/en/news/7100,Jan-Litynski-a-member-of-the-anti-communist-opposition-politician-and-social-act.html> (accessed 28 September 2025).

wanted to limit and control churches' resources, activities, especially in forming the worldview of the youth. Formally the Hungarian constitution guaranteed the freedom of conscience even in the Communist era, and the agreements forced onto the churches allowed them to operate, however, in a very limited way and under the close supervision of the ÁEH and the state security services. The Roman Catholic Church was the largest denomination in the country, and the fact that the hierarchy was led from Rome and bishops were appointed by the pope formed an additional complication. The pope was regarded as a foreign reactionary influence; thus a problem of sovereignty emerged, which Communists tried to solve, by requiring consent of the state for each appointment, which the Holy See refused to accept at first.

The clerical peace movement was one of the tools the Hungarian Communists could use successfully against the church hierarchy. Using the issue of peace as an excuse, they built an organization of priests to support regime's agenda, i.e. in promoting the collectivisation, the acceptance of the political system and the necessity of cooperation between the Communist state and the Church, forging a division between the lower clergy and the bishops.

In the changing international political climate and during the Second Vatican Council, the Holy See finally solved the problem of the appointments by concluding the 1964 Agreement with the Hungarian state, but this helped the Communist state to entangle the higher hierarchy. Consequently, the authorities could also use the Church itself to reprimand or control the activities of priests they categorized as "reactionary."

The Communist Bloc countries followed the Soviet example and guidelines, and regularly held consultations, and exchanged experiences between themselves, however, the unique characteristics of each country also meant differences in their approach to the churches, which I tried to demonstrate above using the examples from Hungarian sources.

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Pełni funkcję redaktora naczelnego i redaktora działu historycznego „KRE-DIt” – czasopisma naukowego Rady Doktorantów KRE. Jego badania koncentrują się na porównawczej historii Węgier i Polski, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem spraw wewnętrznych i stosunków bezpieczeństwa państwowego, zwłaszcza działań komunistycznego państwa partyjnego i polityki państwa wobec Kościołów. Wydał kilka publikacji źródłowych związanych z międzynarodową działalnością byłego węgierskiego Urzędu do spraw Kościelnych, a kolejne są w przygotowaniu.