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Catholic Priests from the Diocese of Csanád in the Hungarian Revolution and the War of Independence (1848 – 1849)

Péter Zakar

Department of Modern History, University of Szeged
Gál Ferenc College, Faculty of Social Sciences, Szeged, Hungary
zakar@jgypk.u-szeged.hu

Abstract

The Church, mainly the local clergy, played an important, galvanising role in Hungary in 1848. In the spring of 1848 the possibility of a democratic transformation in the Catholic Church seemed to be a crucial point. The liberal priests started a strong movement in the heart of the Diocese of Csanád. Alajos Magyari, a teacher in the seminary of Temesvár wanted to abolish celibacy and to create a new democratic Catholic Church government. The supporters of Church modernisation adopted the philosophy and culture of Enlightenment, Liberalism, and Romanticism, creating an immanent theology on these bases. Ten priests from the Diocese of Csanád joined the Honvéd Army and took up weapons, while another ten priests served as army chaplains. The Revolution and War of Independence resulted in the formation of a unique revolutionary theology.

Keywords:

Church history; Diocese of Csanád; the Hungarian Revolution of 1848-1849; liberal clergymen in Hungary; priests in the National Guard; priests in the Honvéd Army; revolutionary theology; the liberal clerical interpretation of the Revolution.

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Introduction

In 1848, Hungary was part of the Habsburg Empire in Europe and had its own liberal government from April 11, when the Monarch sanctioned the new civil laws in the Parliament. As a consequence of the changes, the tithes (decima), the tax which had been paid to the Church for centuries, was abolished and a total equality of rights was ensured for the Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, Unitarian, and Orthodox Churches. In their sermons delivered at the urge of the state authorities in the spring of 1848, clergymen welcomed the changes and offered support to the new state. The new laws were explained to the illiterate population not only by Catholic priests but also by Protestant ministers.¹

Before the revolution in 1848, the position of the Catholic Church in Hungary was not independent of secular politics. On the one hand, the state, like anywhere else in Europe, intervened in the Church affairs quite strongly. As for the Protestant and the Orthodox Church, the freedom of religion was guaranteed by law, but they were also under the state's right of supervision. On the other hand, the Catholic Church wanted state support against the increasing worldliness. The educated population became more and more indifferent to religion. This new challenge provoked fundamentally different answers within the Church. There were those, who wanted liberal reforms to help solve this crisis while others insisted on the traditional ways of religious life.²

It was necessary to explain the laws when mistaken views spread among the populace, for instance to the effect that no one would have to pay taxes following the reforms. Similar misunderstandings had to be clarified in connection with the organisation of the National Guard, and later the Hungarian Army. As for legality, the reform took place lawfully, peacefully, and (relative to other changes in Europe) extremely rapidly. There may have been few revolutions whose leaders and participants laid as much emphasis on legitimacy (or its appearance) as the Hungarians did. The laws regulating the basic principles of the reforms were successfully passed and sanctioned quickly, and the Batthyány government was not regarded as a provisional government, as opposed to numerous other governments of the age on the way of reforms.³

I. The Diocese of Csanád in 1848

The Church, mainly the local clergy, played an important, galvanising role in Hungary as well as in Italy in 1848.⁴ In 1848, the Diocese of Csanád covered the whole territory of Csanád, Torontál, Temes, and Krassó counties along with the military frontiers and some parts of Csongrád County also belonged to it at that time. The number of Catholics was about to 450 000, whose spiritual care belonged to 188 parishes. There were two centres of the liberal clergymen in Hungary: one in Pest-Buda belonging to the Archbishopric of Esztergom and the other in Temesvár, the centre of the Diocese of Csanád. On March 22, 1848 four altars were set up on the main square of Temesvár: one for the Catholics, one for the Lutherans, one for the Orthodox, and one for the Jews. "Te Deum" for the new civil laws was said to the Catholics by Kristóf Adams, parish priest of Kleinbetschkerek who was later the recruiter of the Honvéd Lieutenant-General Josef Bem as well as a representative in the Hungarian national assembly. He was assisted by Péter Moor parish priest in Bruckenauf and György Nátl from Orcivalva.⁵

In the spring of 1848, the possibility of a democratic transformation in the Catholic Church seemed to be a crucial point. As for Temesvár, there were a lot of priests teaching in the seminary or in the lyceum and supporting liberal reforms, such as Kristóf Adams, János Arnold, Antal Bódy, Marcell

¹ Domokos Kosáry, *The Hungarian Revolution of 1848 in the Context of European History* (Budapest: Collegium Budapest Institute for Advanced Study, 2000), 4-10.

² Gábor Adriányi, *Die Stellung der ungarischen Kirche zum Österreichischen Konkordat von 1855* (Rome: Linotopia-Tipografia Dario Detti, 1963), 9-28.

³ *A Concise History of Hungary: The History of Hungary from the Early Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Tóth, István György (Budapest: Corvina, Osiris 2005), 383-392.

⁴ Mike Rapport, *1848, Year of the Revolution* (London: Little Brown, 2008), 109.

⁵ Jenő Szentkláray, *Temes vármegye története összefoglaló rövid előadásban a legrégebb kortól az 1867. évi alkotmányos kiegyezésig*. [The History of Temesvár County from the Ancient Times until 1867] (Budapest: Apolló Irodalmi Társaság, 1912, 382.

Dániel, Pál Hegedűs, Antall Krumm, József Róka and József Szabados. The clergymen with liberal convictions had a completely different view of history from the traditional clerical thinking of the age. While the latter was based on metaphysical foundations and built up from eschatological elements, the liberals regarded the European revolutions as proof of Providence and development.⁶

The liberal priests started a strong movement in the heart of the Diocese of Csanád. Alajos Magyarai, a teacher in the seminary of Temesvár, wanted to abolish celibacy and to create a new democratic Catholic Church government. The main point was to change the Church government in order to work as the liberal secular society did. Although bishop József Lonovics, who was also the leader of the Conservative Party in the Temes County, banned their meetings, József Pfeiffer, dean of the Arad-Hegyalja deanery asked two representatives of every deanery district to go to Temesvár. The Points of Csanád were published in Temesvár on 15 June 1848 demanding the introduction of a liberal election system in the Catholic Church, democratic synods, dissolving the indissolubility of priesthood, publicity of the processes at the ecclesiastical courts, the introduction civil law in marital cases, the wearing secular clothes, the introduction of Hungarian instead of Latin, and the abolition of monastic orders.⁷

Under the influence of the revolution, the political attitude of each denomination was reformed, and a relatively significant liberal stratum appeared on the scene, attaining even more political influence in the favourable social atmosphere. As a result, the denominations themselves became increasingly divided, and the role of nationalism in their awareness of identity became more marked. Supporters of modernisation of the Church, adopting the philosophy, emotional atmosphere and culture of Enlightenment, Liberalism and Romanticism, were creating an immanent theology on these bases. The tensions within the denominations became enhanced, and this led to an increasing temptation to settle the internal conflicts with “secular” aid. As a logical consequence of these changes, under the flag of national unity, such liberal clergymen not only condemned the denominational quarrels, but also took part in the War of Independence. The priests participated in the organisation of the National Guard as well. In the book written by Martin Roos, one can read about a lot of priests, who became militiamen: János Arnold from Temesújfalú, Lajos Mihálkovicz from Istvánföldi, István Lukácsévics from Angyalkút, Mihály Jerney from Bresztovác, József Brassay from Csatád, Jakab Nuszbaum from Csernya, Péter Kimmel from Párdány, Ferenc Schuszták from Bozovics, Ferenc Vuchhetich from Ruszkabánya, Antal Stein from Kis-Teremia, Ferenc Bezdány from Bogáros, Imre Berecz from Óbesenyő and Lajos Wittner from Detta.⁸

New historical researches have proved that some more priests served in the National Guard, for example, János Oszeczky from Perjámos or Béla Timáry from Szentanna. Timáry wrote to the vicar on July 10, 1848:

...as a militiaman myself, I wanted to set an example to the militiamen in Szent-Anna encouraging them to defend the country. So as to help the county authority in these difficult circumstances, I started out for Pécska together with the other militiamen.

In such miserable times when our sweet country is surrounded by enemy attacks from all directions, I think that it is the duty of every true patriot to take the sword and fight for the country and if it comes to die.⁹

Important changes took place in the Diocese of Csanád between 1848 and 1849 which led to a political diversity in its government. The former bishop József Lonovics became the Archbishop of Eger. He belonged to the Conservative party. The new bishop, Mihály Horváth, was the follower of

⁶ Sándor Kováts, *A Csanádi Papnevelde története. A mai papnevelde megnyitásának első évfordulója alkalmából. 1806 – 1906.* [The History of the Seminary of Csanád. 100th Anniversary of the Opening. 1806 – 1906.] (Temesvár: Csanádegyházmegyei Könyvnyomda, 1908), 359-361.

⁷ *Atyánkfiai, tisztelt paptársaink!* [Dearly Priests, our Colleagues!] (Temesvár: Beichel József Könyvnyomdája, 1848) Nyomtatvány [printed publication]. Temesvári Római Katolikus Egyházmegyei Levéltár [Church Archive of Temesvár] Horváth Mihály 1848-1849. 1848: 1143.

⁸ Martin Roos, *Die alte Diözese Csanád. Zwischen Grundlegung und Aufteilung 1030 bis 1923. [Band I.] Zwischen Grundlegung und Aufteilung 1030 bis 1923. Teil 2/b 1800-1850* (Timisoara: Im Selbstverlag der drei Bistümer Szeged-Csanád, Groß-Betschkerek, 2012) 294.

⁹ Temesvári Róm. Kat. Egyházmegyei Levéltár [Archive of the Catholic Diocese of Temesvár] Personalien Timáry Béla 1848: 1294.

Kossuth. One of the two vicars, Ignác Fábry in Temesvár, did not support the revolution, while József Róka, the other vicar in Makó, had a good relationship with the Hungarian revolutionary government. These circumstances facilitated the military service for liberal priests, which was strictly forbidden by ecclesiastical laws.¹⁰

II. Priests as soldiers

Ten priests from the Diocese of Csanád joined the Honvéd Army and took up weapons. All these priests had disciplinary matters. László Baross, who served as a sergeant in the 5th Honvéd Battalion, loved playing cards. He was not able to pay his debts, so he went to the army.¹¹ Some of them were living in very poor conditions and during their military service they could reach even the rank of officer in the army, such as István Kovács, Roman Catholic administrator from Bocsár, major of the Hungarian Army, organiser and commander of the “Battalion of Torontál.”¹²

Those who became army chaplains did not fight with guns, but continued their activities as priests. Another ten priests also served as army chaplains from the Diocese of Csanád in the Honvéd Army and three of them were Germans (Paul Rosen, Florian Lukesch und Anton Schaeffer). They nursed and comforted the wounded and were the guardians of humanity in the army. One of them (Alajos Magyar) protested against the compulsory celibacy, others (József Brassoványi, Xaver Ferenc Tóth) had a conflict with the bishop and the parish priest. Some of them were converted to the Lutheran or Calvinist Church (Flórián Lukesch, Jakab Varjasi) and married. A lot of priests (József Kornis, Frigyes Kerényi, Béla Krix, Anton Schaeffer etc.) fled from the Serbian rebels fighting against the Hungarian troops and later joined the Hungarian Army. János Brandisz, a Catholic chaplain from Rékás was rejected as army chaplain in June 1849, because there were not any free army chaplain positions.¹³

An important effect of the War of Independence was the nationalist ideology that emerged increasingly in all denominations. In addition to this, an even larger number of clergymen became more actively interested in secular politics. The preaching of liberal priests and ministers also reflected the strengthening of the Left in Hungarian politics. In the spring of 1849, political legitimacy was no longer embodied by the king, but by the notion of liberty, the constitution, and faithfulness to the Hungarian nation, independence from the Habsburg Empire, and the existence of Hungary as a sovereign state with Lajos Kossuth as governor. The clergy in Hungary played an important role in the process of social communication. Their contribution to strengthening the idea of an independent nation had been preserved by phrases such as “the God of the Hungarians,” “the altar of the country” or “Moses of the Hungarians.”¹⁴

Thus, the Revolution and War of Independence resulted in the formation of a unique revolutionary theology. The Jewish-Hungarian parallel originated in Protestant sources, formed a common treasure of preaching, crossing the borders of the different denominations as early as the nineteenth century. In a speech to students in Debrecen on March 22, 1848, Calvinist Professor Bálint Révész explained that God put “the magic wand of Moses” in the hand of Kossuth “to guide our nation.”¹⁵ Similar

¹⁰ Péter Zakar, *A Csanádi egyházmegye kormányzata 1848 – 1849-ben* [The Governance of the Diocese of Csanád in 1848 – 1849], *Aetas* 26/4 (2011): 82-101.

¹¹ Baross László – Tisztelt püspök atya {Lonoviv József}! [Brief of László Baross to Bishop József Lonovics] Komárom, 1848. július 31-én. Temesvári Róm. Kat. Egyházmegyei levéltár [Archive of the Catholic Diocese of Temesvár] Personalien Baross László 1848: 1404.

¹² Gábor Bona, *Tábornokok és törzstisztek az 1848/49. évi szabadságharcban* [Generals and Field Officers in the 1848/49 Hungarian War of Independence] (Budapest: Heraldika Kiadó, 2000), 458-459.

¹³ Péter Zakar *Csanádi egyházmegyei paphonvédek a szabadságharcban II. Csanádi egyházmegyei tábori lelkészek 1848/49-ben* [Priest-soldiers from the Diocese of Csanád in the Hungarian War of Independence in 1848-49. II. Army Chaplains from the Diocese of Csanád], *Századok* 147 (2013): 585-622.

¹⁴ *A szabadság szent igéi. A tiszántúli református egyházi vezetés és a Debreceni Kollégium 1848/49-ben* [The Saint Words of Freedom. East-Hungarian Leadership of the Hungarian Reformed Church and College of Debrecen in 1848/49.], ed. Botond Gáborjáni Szabó, (Debrecen: Tiszántúli Református Egyházkerületi Gyűjtemények, 1999), 21-24..

¹⁵ *A szabadság szent igéi. A tiszántúli református egyházi vezetés és a Debreceni Kollégium 1848/49-ben* [The Saint Words of Freedom. East-Hungarian Leadership of the Hungarian Reformed Church and College of

expressions are to be found in the preaching of Catholic priests, for example in Arad, on April 23, 1848, when a Catholic priest asked for eternal life for Lajos Kossuth, who led the Hungarians to Canaan like Moses led the Jews.¹⁶

Preaching incorporating a political content had been usual to some degree before the revolution, but priests and ministers subsequently began to place greater emphasis on analyses of worldly events. For example, Alajos Magyari celebrated a mass to the 5th Honvéd Corps in Új-Arad on April 22, 1849:

Today we have come together with great thankfulness to God. Even during this time of fighting, we offer our country's affairs to the Almighty and dedicate this day to His glory. We say grateful thanks to the Lord for the new victories on the battlefield.

Thanks to God, the Hungarian national matters win everywhere because they are on the way of righteousness and righteousness should not fail.

Dearly loved Brethren! I do not need to detail the state of our country as you are aware of the events of the recent days.

A man can be kept in shackles for a while but the feelings of the heart cannot be destroyed. As we have a constitution, we cannot even be repressed by the king.

On April 14 this year, something happened, which made this day a remarkable date in history forever. On this special day, the representatives of the Hungarian nation gathered to decide that Hungary shall be free and independent.

At last our Parliament stated peace towards the neighbouring nations and there is a hope that with the consent of these nations we can face our enemies.

All these resolutions stated to the Parliament by Lajos Kossuth were accepted by common consent. Kossuth, the founder of our freedom was introduced to be the Governor-President of Hungary.¹⁷

III. Enemies of the Revolution

At the same time, there were a few enemies of the revolution in the Diocese of Csanád. For example, József Arleth in the village of Csanád, who was arrested by Hungarian soldiers on April 24, 1849, and Josef Novak in Bogáros who sent József Brassay, parish priest of Csátád to prison after the revolution. Novak was the author of the so-called "Petition of Bogáros," in which he detailed the Schwabian national claims in the autumn of 1849.¹⁸ There was also Alexander Bonnaz, parish priest of Triebswetter, who escaped from the Hungarian National Guard in the autumn of 1848, when they attacked his parish. In 1850 he was appointed to be the supervisor of the German and Hungarian schools in the Serbian Voivodina and the Banat of Temes. He became the bishop of the Diocese of Csanád in 1860.¹⁹

Antal Kreminger, a provost from Szeged, was a conservative clergyman following the spirit of Josephinism. Since the Emperor sanctioned the April Laws, Kreminger supported the changes in the spring and summer of 1848, which can be proved by several source materials in connection with the consecration of the 6th Honvéd Battalion's flag. However, he soon realized that the transformation was against the interests of the Emperor and the Government of Vienna. From autumn his opposition to the defensive warfare became more and more definite. He did not send the circulars which supported the revolution, except for one. He also censored the Hungarian Government's decrees, and tried to turn the congregation against the War of Independence. Szeged was under the control of the Hungarian Honvéds until August 1st 1849. The Hungarian authorities examined Kreminger's three cases. As a result, The Ecclesiastical Court of Csanád, with its seat in Makó at that time, restored him to his benefice. Later, on July 27, 1849 Mihály Horváth, Minister of Religion and Culture removed him, but

Debrecen in 1848/49.], ed. Botond Gáborjáni Szabó, (Debrecen: Tiszántúli Református Egyházkerületi Gyűjtemények, 1999), 24-25.

¹⁶ Complexul Muzeal Arad, Aradi Ereklýmúzeum [Museum of Arad, Relics Museum Arad], Nyomtatványok [printed publications] MR 2864.

¹⁷ Ottó Lakatos, *Arad története* [History of Arad] Vol. I. (Arad: Gyulai István nyomása, 1881) 190-191.

¹⁸ Anton Peter Petri, *Biographisches Lexikon der Banater Deutschtums*, (Marquartstein: Th. Breit Druck + Verlag GmbH, 1992), 1374-1375.

¹⁹ *Lyceum Temesvariense*. ed. Stevan Bugarski (Timișoara: Fundația DIASPORA, 2008), 537-539.

finally, The Ecclesiastical Court of Csanád, with its seat in Temesvár, restored him again to his former benefice. Antal Kreminger did not support the War of Independence, but when the Emperor turned back to the Constitution in 1860 and 1867 Kreminger willingly followed his example.²⁰

Conclusion

A large-scale reprisal was carried out against priests by the Austrian authorities because of their activities during the War of Independence. On these occasions, the liberal or radical priests had to suffer mainly because of their political activities. Their contribution to the organisation of the Hungarian Army, the vilification of the monarch or the dynasty, as well as the announcement of the Declaration of Independence were all regarded as extremely serious offences. A lot of priests from the Diocese of Csanád were investigated by the military tribunal, but the majority of them were released. Some of them were removed by the consistory from their office, and sent to a cloister for penitence. In the meanwhile, in the spring of 1851, there were still four priests from the diocese in prison: József Róka vicar, József Mihalovics canon, József Pfeiffer dean of the Arad-Hegyalja deanery, and János Stverteczky (Szittyá) parish priest from Rékás.²¹

The real importance of the liberal clerical interpretation of the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848-1849 lies in the fact that the population of the Diocese of Csanád that had previously never engaged or was only weakly engaged in politics, was won over to the cause of transition into a civil society.

²⁰ János Reizner, *A régi Szeged. I. A negyvenes évek és a forradalom napjai Szegeden* [The Old Szeged. The 1840s and the Days of Revolution in Szeged] (Szeged: Burger Gusztáv és társa, 1884), 227-231, 289-290.

²¹ Haus-, Hof-, und Staatsarchiv (Wien), Kabinetsarchiv, Geheimakten Nachlass Schwarzenberg Kt. 10. Fasc. IV. Nr. 245.