

# The Catholic Church in Interwar and Wartime Hungary

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Leslie László. *Church and State in Hungary, 1919-1945*. Pannonhalma – Budapest: METEM, 2004. 400 pages. Paper.

**The role** of the Catholic Church in the evolution of Hungary during the Horthy era has been a neglected field of study among Western historians. Yet exploring the complicated relationship that clergy and Catholic intellectuals had with the country's conservative regime is central to understanding this period. Leslie László, a retired political science professor from Concordia University and currently an ordained priest in Ottawa, has tried to remedy this situation, by producing one of the most in-depth studies of Hungarian Catholic history ever to appear in the English language. A handful of Western historians and other academics have touched on the history of the Catholic Church in Hungary during this period, but most of these analyses were within the broader context of interwar European society and politics and, by their very nature, lacked the level of detail that characterizes Fr. László's study.<sup>1</sup> Although this work is based primarily on research conducted decades ago, as part of the author's PhD dissertation, the sheer lack of a similarly detailed English study on the subject means that the work has not lost its overall value as an informative survey of Hungarian church and state relations over a period spanning more than a quarter century.

The author argues that while the Church was essentially conservative in its politics during the period following the end of World War I, it was not outright reactionary and did not attempt to resist all reforms that aimed to undo the vestiges of feudalism, which persisted in this primarily agricultural society. Church officials made their voices heard on issues of social justice, as Hungary moved ever close towards more comprehensive industrialization. The clergy and Catholic politicians were occasionally at the forefront in terms of the introduction of progressive legislation, such as limited land reform, protection for the industrial working class and basic social security programs.<sup>2</sup>

Fr. László sees his book as a "case study" in the relationship between Church and state, in what he believes was an essentially "developing

country.”<sup>3</sup> Since Hungarian society during this period was primarily agrarian, it is not entirely surprising that the Church played such a key role. Church officials enjoyed a close relationship with most political leaders and the clergy’s position was strongest in the field of education, with the state providing parochial schools “lavish” financial support.<sup>4</sup>

The author appears to have written his work within a tense Cold War political context; one in which he felt that the Church had been unfairly treated by both Marxist historians in Eastern Europe, as well as by western academics who focused on the Church’s conservative tendencies and its failure to condemn all forms of anti-Semitism. As such, Fr. László argues that these studies have been one sided and failed to pay attention to Catholic efforts aimed at rescuing Jews during the Second World War. Fr. László envisaged his work as an attempt to “set the record straight,” yet the danger inherent in this approach is that his book comes across as less critical and nuanced in its examination of the church’s relationship with the Hungarian state during this highly contentious period in history.<sup>5</sup>

This problem is perhaps most evident in Fr. László’s in-depth discussion of Bishop Ottokár Prohászka’s anti-Semitism. Fr. László recognizes that Prohászka was an anti-Semite, despite the bishop’s repeated claims to the contrary.<sup>6</sup> Prohászka had spoken in favour of the *numerus clausus* and restricting admission of Jewish students to universities. The bishop also believed that the apparent over-representation of Jews in key professions, as well as their alleged gravitation to liberalism was “harmful” to Hungarian society.<sup>7</sup> Fr. László observed that Prohászka was willing to jettison values of individual equality, if he believed that this served the collective good. Based on a reading of the bishop’s articles, Father László argues that Prohászka’s emphatic anti-Semitic statements were not the outcome of a “hatred” for Jews generally (even though the author recognizes that the bishop had a negative opinion of the majority of Hungarian Jews), but rather a “passionate love for his own Christian Hungarian people,” noting that Prohászka “pitied his well-meaning but unbusinesslike people and feared for their livelihood in the face of the shrewder and more resourceful Jews.”<sup>8</sup> The author appears to accept at face value that the driving force behind Prohászka’s anti-Semitism was this well-intentioned, though strongly paternalistic concern for the majority population, based upon prevailing stereotypes of Christians and Jews.

Yet if one were to read between the lines and take Prohászka’s own justification of his anti-Semitism with a grain a salt, it would be reasonable to suggest that the bishop was more concerned with upholding the existing social order in Hungary and resisting efforts to transform society into one based on liberal social and economic principles, such as meritocracy, free market and a more critical approach to institutions of authority. Liberalism seemed to propagate many of the values that Prohászka (and other authoritarian conservatives at the time) found both disturbing and potentially threatening.

These included the emphasis on individualism, secularism and the notion that one's social and economic status should be determined by personal achievement and professional success, rather than by one's family background, social class, or religious affiliation. Fr. László should have considered the possibility that the bishop's anti-Semitism was not necessarily out of a noble (if remarkably simplistic) concern for allegedly downtrodden Hungarians, but out of fear that liberalism — as represented by many urban elites, a section of the professional middle class and some Jewish Hungarians — was a threat to the Church's dominant position in society. The revolutions of 1918/19 represented a traumatic period for ecclesiastical leaders and the nobility. As such, it would not be overly cynical to suggest Prohászka's socioeconomic views, and his anti-Semitism, were likely informed not only out of a sense of benevolent paternalism, but at least as much out of fear for the direction that much of modern industrial society was taking.

Fr. László makes a valid point when he notes that even if Prohászka and probably many other Catholic leaders held anti-Semitic views, their anti-Semitism was starkly different from the genocidal variant adopted by Nazis during the Second World War. The key difference was that Jews who converted to Christianity and were baptized were essentially welcomed into the fold, whereas Nazis offered no such opportunity.<sup>9</sup> Fr. László also points out that this form of anti-Semitism hardly began and ended with the statements of Catholic Church leaders. Intellectuals such as Gyula Szekfü sometimes espoused a similarly fatalistic view of the alleged dominance of Jewish Hungarians vis-à-vis those of Christian origin.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, one may conclude that the verbal, non-violent form of anti-Semitism espoused by Prohászka and many others (which aimed to remove Jews from positions of influence through legislation) was only a few steps away from the annihilationist policies of Nazism.

While the legacy of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust certainly overshadows the history of the entire period, this theme is not the direct focus of Fr. László's examination of church and state relations. The Catholic Church has often been labelled as reactionary for its support of an anachronistic regime — especially from the perspective of a modern liberal democracy, where the separation of church and state is a rarely questioned ideal. Fr. László makes a thought-provoking point by observing that the sudden removal of the church from the centre of society would have created a "spiritual vacuum," which could then be filled by totalitarian ideologies.<sup>11</sup>

Although Fr. László was not able to consult material in Hungarian archives when he originally completed his research, his use of a wide array of published primary sources ensures that his work is well documented. In some cases, a greater degree of nuance would have strengthened his work, but the book remains valuable as a survey history of a topic barely touched by western scholars.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> One of the most comprehensive examinations of church-state relations in Eastern Europe was written by Sabrina Ramet, a political scientist. Sabrina P. Ramet, *Nihil Obstat: Religion, Politics and Social Change in East-Central Europe and Russia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Leslie László, *Church and State in Hungary, 1919-1945* (Pannonhalma–Budapest: METEM, 2004), 206-207.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-127.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 128-129.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-130.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.