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The Struggle of Hungarian Christian Democrats for a Democratic Hungary, 1944–1957

Introduction

The Christian Democratic People's Party (Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt, KDNP), later reformed as the Democratic People's Party (Demokrata Néppárt, DNP) was established in the autumn of 1944 in Hungary. Its representatives were present in parliament as early as the elections of 1945, but the DNP only gained true political significance during the 1947 elections, where the party managed to secure sixty-one parliamentary mandates out of 411. By the beginning of 1949, due to the "salami tactics" of the Hungarian Communist Party (Magyar Kommunista Párt, MKP), the democratic parties fighting for the preservation of parliamentary democracy were greatly weakened; nevertheless, until 1949, the DNP continued to function as the last bastion of the oppositional political forces, and as such was the last slice carved off by the MKP.¹

As early as 1946, the communist-leaning political police placed Christian democratic politicians under surveillance, and by 1948, they managed to compile a report of the representatives of the Democratic People's Party, which served as the basis for the public persecution and political sabotage of party leaders, parliamentary representatives, and local organizations, with the active assistance of the Hungarian state security bodies.²

Following the emigration of General Secretary István Barankovics³ in February 1949, the DNP crumbled completely. Eleven more Christian democrat MPs left the country one after the other, and those who remained in Hungary were facing permanent removal from the public sphere, as well as the threat of reprisals, political trials,

1 The DNP received 820,000 votes at the 1947 election. This election was infamous for the MKP's electoral fraud, which resulted in altogether 1,110,000 votes for them. The Smallholders' Party, which was the largest, non-communist party in the 1945 elections gained only 766,000 votes in 1947 due to communist crumbling efforts. Although the DNP was a smaller party with about 35,000 members, their extraordinarily good results in 1947 were the consequence of the Smallholder' Party's crisis, which directed many smallholder voters to the DNP.

2 *Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security* (Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történelmi Levéltára, hereafter referred to as ÁBTTL) 3. 1. 5. O-12145, Volt polgári pártok. Demokrata Néppárt (Former Bourgeois Parties: Democratic People's Party), 15. 9. 1950, pp. 89–127.

3 István Barankovics (1906–1974) was a journalist and editor of newspapers, as well as the general secretary of the Democratic People's Party. He hailed from an intellectual family in Polgár. In 1925, he graduated from the Cistercian High School in Eger, and enrolled in the University of Budapest to study law. There he joined a circle of young Catholic intellectuals, and participated in student move-

imprisonment, internment, forced labour service, supervision and constant harassment by the authorities, or surveillance by the Hungarian state security bodies.⁴

Consequently, following the parliamentary elections of 1949, the political representation of Christian democracy became virtually impossible in Hungary.

By 1949, the Hungarian communist regime seemed to have eliminated the Democratic People's Party. General Secretary Barankovics suspended the activity of the DNP in an announcement, which he made when emigrating to the West. The remaining parliamentary faction ceased its work in March 1949, although the party was not formally banned. The emerging communist dictatorship however banished its representatives to the margins of social and political life in Hungary through various political, policing, and judicial measures. Nevertheless until the late 1950s, party members secretly remained loyal to the ideals of the DNP and to the principles of parliamentary democracy, as evidenced by the fact that in 1956, the DNP was revived in a matter of days on account of the Hungarian Revolution. Following the suppression of the revolution, however, the reprisals triggered another wave of emigration while those who remained were facing further repercussions. Consequently, from the 1960s onwards, the increasingly isolated and scattered representatives of the former DNP had but one goal: to preserve the principles of modern Christian democracy, despite the continued surveillance of Hungarian state security, both in the country and abroad. Due to their perseverance, Christian democrats were pursued by the political police until the very end of the communist regime; as late as the 1980s, active members were continuously targeted by surveillance, smear campaigns, and recruitment attempts by state security operatives.

This study examines the trajectory of Democratic People's Party's activity from its beginnings after World War II, through the transitory democratic period of 1945–1949 until the suspension of its activity and finally its revival during and aftermath of the Revolution of 1956.

Towards a new Christian political representation

Similarly to its European counterparts, one of the reasons for the postwar rise of the Christian Democratic People's Party in Hungary was its political “blank slate”. While

ments urging for social reforms. In 1930, he started his political career as a journalist, and during the war, he participated in the Hungarian antifascist resistance movement. In 1944 Barankovics was forced into hiding in Buda due to being persecuted by the Gestapo for his activities in the antifascist resistance movement. In the autumn of 1944, Barankovics participated in establishing the Christian Democratic People's Party, and in May 1945, he became the general secretary of the DNP, a position he held until March 1949. In 1949 he was forced to leave Hungary. He emigrated to the United States and became a prominent emigrant Hungarian politician until his death in 1974.

4 For details, see TABAJDI, Gábor: *Kereszténydemokraták a politikai rendőrség célkeresztjében* (Christian Democrats Targeted by the Political Police), and *Egy tipikus jobboldali összeesküvő: Matheovits Ferenc és a pártállam* (A Typical Rightwing Collaborator: Ferenc Matheovits and the One-Party State). In: UNGVÁRY, Krisztián (ed.): *Búvópatakok. A jobboldal és az állambiztonság, 1945–1989* (Underground Rivers. The Rightwing and Hungarian State Security, 1945–1989). 1956-os Intézet – Jaffa Kiadó, Budapest 2013, pp. 183–220, 221–256.

other conservative and Christian parties had lost their credibility due to their interwar policies, the KDNP managed to distance itself from the interwar past. The establishment of the party was still followed by political, church-political, and personal conflicts, however, which ultimately led KDNP leadership to drop the “Christian” dominator and become the Democratic People’s Party to gain wider acceptance.⁵

Unfortunately, the debate surrounding the name and authorization of the party eventually resulted in the exacerbation of personal and political tensions within the party. At the 8 May 1945 session of the DNP, party leadership forcibly dismissed Chair József Pálffy, whose position was taken over by Barankovics, which caused the KDNP to split in half. Then, on 17 September 1945, the Hungarian National Committee, which was in charge of authorizing the participation of political parties in the upcoming elections, showed preference for the branch headed by Barankovics, which allowed the DNP to enter the elections of 1945 under his leadership.

On 4 November 1945, the Hungarian National Assembly held its first free elections, which became a turning point in the political history of postwar Hungary, for several reasons. All political parties participating in the elections had to be approved by the Allied Control Commission (ACC), which represented the expectations of the victors of World War II; however, the parties approved by the ACC were by no means representative of the political affiliation of potential Hungarian voters. Although the Independent Smallholders’ Party (Független Kisgazdapárt, FKGP) managed to secure an absolute majority by gaining fifty-seven percent of the votes, the victorious superpowers dictated that Hungary form a large antifascist government coalition with the participation of the Hungarian Communist Party. Consequently, the parties included in this antifascist government coalition had all but conquered the parliament by securing ninety-seven percent of the votes⁶, which gave the impression that the entire Hungarian government was made up of ruling parties, with virtually no political opposition to speak of.⁷

5 In the autumn of 1944, the party was established as the Christian Democratic People’s Party, and as such received a temporary operating license from Béla Miklós of Dálnok, Prime Minister of the interim national government of Hungary. On 6 February 1945, the KDNP did receive a temporary operating license, but it was limited to Budapest and its immediate area. On 27 April 1945, at the suggestion of General Secretary István Barankovics, KDNP leadership made a decision to continue to operate as the Democratic People’s Party in order to ensure their operation. They also declared that the DNP *condemns the political use of the sacred symbols of Christianity, as well as the use of Christianity in political slogans, or the monopolization of the prestige of Christianity by any political party*. See GERGELY, Jenő: A Demokrata Néppárt “igazolójelentése” a Mindszenty József bíboros hercegprímással keletkezett konfliktusról (The “Confirmation Report” of the Democratic People’s Party on the Conflict with Archbishop and Prince Primate József Mindszenty). In: *Századok*, 1993, No. 5–6, p. 761–780, citation is on p. 766. On Pálffy’s forced dismissal, see VARGA, László: “Kérem a vádlott felmentését!” (“I Plead for the Acquittal of the Defendant!”). Püski, New York 1981, pp. 43–56, and compare it to IZSÁK, Lajos: *A Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt és a Demokrata Néppárt 1944–1949* (The Christian Democratic People’s Party and the Democratic People’s Party, 1944–1949). Kossuth Kiadó, Budapest 1985, pp. 5–65.

6 The rest of the votes were scattered between Polgári Demokrata Párt (Bourgeois Democratic Party), DNP and Magyar Radikális Párt (Hungarian Radical Party).

7 GYARMATI, György: *A Rákosi-korszak. Rendszerváltó fordulatok évtizede Magyarországon, 1945–1956* (The Rákosi Era. A Decade of Regime-Changing Turns in Hungary, 1945–1956). ÁBTL – Rubicon, Budapest 2011, pp. 60–62.

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At the end of World War II, even Stalin himself claimed that the advent of Hungarian socialism was still ten to fifteen years away;⁸ however, after their perceived “failure” at the elections of 1945, the Hungarian Communist Party initiated a series of domestic political changes that suggested they would use any means possible to seize power, despite having joined the antifascist coalition. In the autumn of 1946, the new communist agenda became *Out with the enemies of the people from the coalition!*, which was clearly levelled at the Independent Smallholders’ Party, and followed by a series of smear campaigns and media attacks that led to increased tension within the coalition, and ultimately resulted in a political stalemate. Meanwhile, the communists also used extra-governmental means to “dismantle” the FKGP,⁹ which produced a growing number of state security files on prominent figures who went against the communist agenda, including public figures and politicians, and eventually, church figures and Christian democrats.

Due to the social integration of the churches in Hungary, countering the “clerical reaction” quickly became a crucial issue to the Hungarian Communist Party, and gave rise to church intelligence and counterintelligence by communist-governed law enforcement bodies. The Political Police Divisions (Politikai Rendészeti Osztály, PRO), established in 1945 at the Regional and Budapest Headquarters of the Hungarian State Police, were not in charge of monitoring the Hungarian churches at the time; however, in September 1946, when the two departments united to form the State Protection Division (Államvédelmi Osztály, ÁVO), church intelligence and counterintelligence began¹⁰ on the premise that *the majority of the enemies of the Hungarian people are hiding behind the churches, and especially behind the robes of the Roman Catholic Church.*¹¹

According to a report issued by the ÁVO on 6 July 1948, church counterintelligence was carried out by Department III, which was one of the smallest departments with twenty-nine employees. Its tasks were defined as follows: *collection of church information, information about episcopal conferences, etc., early intelligence on the intentions of the churches, and the submission of written reports on all fields of church activity. Beyond providing reliable information, [Department III] also engages in counterintelligence, especially against church espionage.*¹²

While the church-related activities of the political police quickly became crucial to communist party leadership, the Hungarian state security bodies of the 1940s did not have a sufficiently large network of informants to effectively carry out their

8 MEVIUS, Martin: *Agents of Moscow. The Hungarian Communist Party and the Origins of Socialist Patriotism 1941–1953*. Clarendon Press, Oxford 2005, p. 48.

9 GYARMATI, György: *A Rákosi-korszak*, pp. 97–103.

10 VÖRÖS, Géza: “A palotában lévő kapcsolatunk jelentette...” Mindszenty József megfigyelése 1945–1948 (“Our Contact in the Episcopal Palace Reported...” The Observation of József Mindszenty, 1945–1948). *Betekintő*, 2011, No. 3 – see http://betekinto.hu/2011_3_voros (quoted version dated 22. 11. 2020).

11 RÁKOSI, Mátyás: *Válogatott beszédek és cikkek* (Selected Speeches and Essays). Szikra Nyomda, Budapest 1951, p. 180.

12 *ÁBTL* 2. 1. XI/4, Az ÁVO munkájának és problémáinak ismertetése (An Introduction to the Tasks and Problems of the State Protection Division), 6. 7. 1948, p. 19.

tasks; therefore, the Hungarian Communist Party decided to take advantage of the general turmoil in domestic politics, and exploit the public debates and conflicts surrounding the establishment of the Christian Democratic People's Party to recruit informants and agents for their cause. One of their targets was Béla Kovrig, a Christian democrat, social politician, and professor of sociology.¹³

On 9 September 1946, Kovrig was interrogated at the Political Police Division of the Budapest Headquarters of the Hungarian State Police under Andrassy út (street) 60., where he was accused of *wartime activities and anti-popular activities committed against the Hungarian nation*. On the same day, Kovrig was pressured into signing a statement of cooperation, and filling out a form that confirmed his recruitment as an informant of the political police. For the next two years, until his immigration to the USA in November 1948, Kovrig regularly submitted written reports about church-political events and certain Catholic public figures under the code name "Bihari".¹⁴ His line of work primarily involved supporting the political opposition against Prince Primate József Mindszenty¹⁵, and the observation of István Barankovics and other Catholic politicians and clergy members involved in the Democratic People's Party.

By 1947, the state of continuous domestic political crisis brought about by the Hungarian Communist Party forced the Independent Smallholders' Party to yield to the pressure of its coalition partner on a growing number of issues. Attacks, such as the arrest and deportation of prominent smallholder politician Béla Kovács¹⁶, the removal of Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy¹⁷, and a political trial against the "Hungarian

13 Béla Kovrig (1900–1962) started his professional career in the 1920s at the National Social Insurance Institute. In 1927, he became vice president of the Institute, and participated in drafting Act XL of 1928 on Compulsory Insurance for the Old, the Disabled, Widows, and Orphans. From the second half of the 1930s, his political career was also on the rise. In 1938, Prime Minister Béla Imrédy appointed him as the head of the newly formed Social Political Department, or Department V. of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Kovrig submitted a draft law on agricultural insurance, which entered into force as Act XII of 1938 on Compulsory Insurance for Agricultural Laborers. Kovrig became the leader of the newly established national propaganda service under Prime Minister Pál Teleki. He was also a scholar, and a prolific and talented author who became a prominent representative of the Catholic intelligentsia. As such he actively participated in the establishment and development of the predecessor the Democratic People's Party in 1943 and as a founder of the DNP in 1944. He emigrated to the USA in 1949 and lectured at Marquette University, Milwaukee (WI) as a sociologist until his death in 1962. See PETRÁS, Éva: Kovrig Béla élete és pályája (The Life and Career of Béla Kovrig). In: KOVRIG, Béla: *Magyar társadalompolitika* (Hungarian Social Policy). Gondolat Kiadó, Budapest 2011, pp. 317–336.

14 ÁBTL 3. 2. 4. K-384/1 and 3. 2. 4. K-384/2. His induction was taken on 9 September 1946. ÁBTL 3. 2. 4. K-384/1, pp. 14–16. On this issue, see PETRÁS, Éva: Menekülés az emigrációba. Kovrig Béla kereszténydemokrata szociálpolitikus és az állambiztonság (Escape in Immigration: Christian Democrat and Social Politician Béla Kovrig, and the Hungarian State Security Bodies). In: GYARMATI, György – PALASIK, Mária (eds.): *A Nagy Testvér szatócsboltja. Tanulmányok a magyar titkosszolgálatok 1945 utáni történetéből* (Big Brother's Miserable Little Grocery Store. Studies on the History of the Hungarian Secret Services After World War II). ÁBTL – L'Harmattan Kiadó, Budapest 2012, pp. 245–262.

15 József Mindszenty (1892–1975) was the Prince Primate of Hungary, Archbishop of Esztergom, cardinal and the leader of the Hungarian Catholic church between 1945 and 1973.

16 Béla Kovács (1908–1959) was a Hungarian politician of the Smallholders' Party who served as a Minister of Agriculture in 1945–1946. During the Hungarian Communist Party's fight for political power, Kovács was arrested, charged with plotting against the Soviets. He was transported to Moscow and sentenced to life imprisonment. Due to the destalinization process he was released and returned to Hungary.

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Community¹⁸ all served to secure the reign of the MKP, which resulted in an absurd situation where the rule of law no longer applied to the Hungarian political system, yet for the next two years, General Secretary Mátyás Rákosi¹⁹ and the MKP continued to rely on the institutions of the rule of law to legitimate the monopolization of power by the Hungarian Communist Party, and later by the Hungarian Workers' Party (Magyar Dolgozók Pártja, MDP).²⁰ To put it differently, while politics was *de facto* governed by communist leadership, *de iure* the Hungarian government continued to function on a coalition basis.

In the summer of 1947, Mátyás Rákosi did everything in his power to organize new parliamentary elections in Hungary, which, similarly to the neighbouring states of Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, were supposed to legally grant greater power to the communist party by changing the composition of Parliament. In this regard, motions such as the modification of the electoral law and the majority of restrictive measures were all aimed at marginalizing and further dividing the non-coalition opposition,²¹ including the Democratic People's Party.

At the Hungarian parliamentary elections of 31 August 1947, the deposition of a large number of fake blue ballots ensured that the Hungarian Communist Party illegally secured the majority of mandates; however, their victory was still not decisive²², as most voters continued to support "the bourgeois lifestyle". Moreover, in certain regions, the Democratic People's Party seemed to have become the "successor" to the Independent Smallholders' Party, and as such received a number of protest votes against the MKP. Consequently, in 1947, the clearly successful DNP was able to attend the Hungarian National Assembly with sixty-one parliamentary representatives.²³

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- 17 Ferenc Nagy (1903–1979) was a Hungarian politician of the Smallholders' Party who served as a Prime Minister in 1946 and 1947, until the coup d'état of the communists which ended in his forced emigration. Until his death he lived in the USA and became a key figure of Hungarian emigrant politicians.
- 18 The Hungarian Community or Hungarian Fraternal Community was a secret society already in the 1930s in Hungary. They were anti-nazi and anti-communist activists who were organized and fought on a nationalist basis. In 1947 the communist leaning political police construed a huge imprisonment wave among them, which was followed by a show trial. The case of the Hungarian Community was on false reasons connected to some Smallholder politicians, which is why it contributed to the crisis of the Smallholders' Party. See: SZEKÉR, Nóra: *Titkos Társaság. A Magyar Testvéri Közösség története* (Secret Society. The History of the Hungarian Fraternal Community). Jaffa Kiadó, Budapest 2017.
- 19 Mátyás Rákosi (1892–1971) was the leader of Hungary's communist party from 1945 to 1956, first as a General Secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party (1945–1948), then holding the same post in the Hungarian Workers' Party (1948–1956). As such he was the *de facto* communist ruler of Hungary between 1949 and 1956.
- 20 PALASIK, Mária: *A jogállamiság megteremtésének kísérlete és kudarca Magyarországon 1944–1949* (A Failed Attempt at Establishing the Rule of Law in Hungary, 1944–1949). Napvilág Kiadó, Budapest 2000, p. 255.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 255–289.
- 22 The Hungarian Communist Party obtained 22.25% of the votes.
- 23 IZSÁK, Lajos: Az ellenzéki pártok a fordulat évében (Oppositional Parties in the Year of the Political Turn). In: FEITL, István – IZSÁK, Lajos – SZÉKELY, Gábor (eds.): *Fordulat a világban és Magyarországon: 1947/1949* (A Political Turn in the World and in Hungary, 1947/1949). Napvilág Kiadó, Budapest 2000, pp. 229–245. See also IZSÁK, Lajos: A parlamentarizmus veszített csatája. Az 1947. évi országgyűlési választások (The Lost Battle of Parliamentarism. The Parliamentary Elections of 1947). In: FÖLDES, György – HUBAI, László (eds.): *Parlamentari képviselőválasztások 1920–1990. Tanulmányok* (General Elections, 1920–1990. Case Studies). Politikatörténeti Alapítvány, Budapest 1994, pp. 243–267.

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Following the parliamentary elections, Hungarian Communist Party leadership reassessed the contemporary political situation, and concluded that in order to make further progress, they had to marginalize the churches and competing bourgeois parties. By the end of 1947, the coalition parties were internally rearranged, to the effect that the bourgeois parties had clipped their “right wings”, and leadership positions had been filled with prominent figures of the Hungarian left wing. In this manner, a significant amount of power had been seized by the forces of the MKP.

Before the parliamentary elections of 1947, members of the State Protection Division had already infiltrated the groups that went on to establish the majority of local DNP organizations, and following the elections, these operatives continued to observe the Democratic People’s Party, with particular focus on the sizeable group of parliamentary representatives. For instance, one state security report from 1948 compiled a list of the “anti-popular and anti-democratic” activities of the representatives of the DNP, and included compromising and incriminating information such as currency speculation, participation in the legitimist movement, and incitement against the democratic system, with certain accusations supported by verbatim and annotated excerpts from speeches delivered at the DNP headquarters.²⁴

In the spring of 1948, armed with incriminating “evidence”, false charges, and slander, the communists launched public attacks against several representatives of the Democratic People’s Party, which led to the withdrawal of the mandates of politicians like László Varga, József Ugrin, János Berkes, Sándor Keresztes, and Pál Szabados. These public atrocities levelled against representatives of the DNP were of course linked to the new religious and church-policy concepts of the Hungarian Communist Party, which were announced by Mátyás Rákosi at the 10 January 1948 session of the Politburo of the MKP. The policy concepts of the MKP included the “resolution” of the relationship between state and church, or as Rákosi put it, *the clerical reaction must be eliminated by the end of the year*.²⁵

From May 1948 onwards, representatives of the Democratic People’s Party openly opposed the secularization of religious educational institutions, both at their meetings and through their own printed media; however, in the increasingly combative Hungarian atmosphere, the political representation of Catholic interests had become exceedingly difficult. Under these circumstances, it was only a matter of time before the DNP was eliminated from the Hungarian political scene, and in this case, the final push came in the form of the escalation of the Mindszenty case, and the subsequent arrest of Prince Primate József Mindszenty at Christmas 1948.²⁶ After Mindszenty was arrested, Mátyás Rákosi attempted to intimidate István Barankovics into supporting the communist agenda, but Barankovics refused to yield, which sealed the

24 *ÁBTL* 3. 1. 5. O-12145, Volt polgári pártok (Former Bourgeois Parties), 1948 (not dated further), pp. 97–120.

25 RÁKOSI, Mátyás: *Válogatott beszédek és cikkek*, pp. 266–267.

26 József Mindszenty was arrested on 26 December 1948 and was accused of espionage and conspiracy against the Hungarian republic. His show trial was held on 3–5 February 1949 and the cardinal was sentenced to life imprisonment.

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fate of the DNP,²⁷ and left Barankovics no choice but to emigrate abroad to escape arrest and imprisonment. On 4 February 1949, just as the Mindszenty trials began, Barankovics and his wife left Hungary in one of the service cars of the US embassy, along with Jesuit priest József Jánosi, and writer Mária Blaskó. Upon their arrival to Vienna, Barankovics issued a statement in which he announced the termination of the activities of the Democratic People's Party, and for the next forty years, the political representation of Christian democracy in Hungary had become virtually impossible.

Underground streams

With the dissolution of the Democratic People's Party, and the establishment of the full power of the communists, the history of Hungarian Christian democracy split into two strands: emigrant activists operating from abroad, and representatives who remained in Hungary, where the general atmosphere of terror rendered institutional operation impossible, and threatened those associated with the DNP with brutal reprisals, including internment and imprisonment without trial. From 1949 onwards, the supporters and former voter base of the DNP, and all other religious citizens lived in constant political persecution, exacerbated by the forced dissolution of religious orders, the radical elimination of a great number of ecclesiastical educational institutions, and the everyday pressure of violent atheistic propaganda aimed at "reeducating" millions of religious Hungarian citizens.

In order to crush the last remnants of the Democratic People's Party, Hungarian communist leadership devised two large-scale political trials, both of which were linked to the case of József Mindszenty. Due to the fact that the members of the DNP refused to act against the prince primate, those who remained in Hungary were labelled the "followers of Mindszenty" and effectively used as scapegoats. In the ensuing political trials based on previously devised Soviet scripts, Hungary's communist leadership attempted to convince the general public that former Pécs-based lawyer Ferenc Matheovits²⁸ was the leader of the political wing of the Mindszenty conspiracy, and that Franciscan Superior Bernát Károlyi²⁹ was involved in a military organization related to the same conspiracy.³⁰

In fact, in the complex chain of subsequent political trials, Ferenc Matheovits had become a central figure, where a number of cases were painstakingly linked to him to give the illusion of a large-scale underground reactionary movement, such

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- 27 IZSÁK, Lajos: *Polgári pártok és programjaik Magyarországon 1944–1956* (Bourgeois Parties and Their Platforms in Hungary, 1944–1956). Pannonia Könyvek, Budapest 1994, pp. 125–130.
- 28 Ferenc Matheovits (1914–1995) was a Christian democrat politician and lawyer, who belonged to the group of the supporters of Cardinal Mindszenty within the Democratic People's Party. Thus he became a targeted person during the show trial of the cardinal and even after.
- 29 Bernát Károlyi OFM (1892–1954) was a Franciscan monk and member of Democratic People's Party who was arrested in 1949 and in a showtrial sentenced to prison. He died in the prison hospital in 1954.
- 30 TABAJDI, Gábor: Egy tipikus jobboldali összeesküvő: Matheovits Ferenc és a pártállam (A Typical Rightwing Collaborator: Ferenc Matheovits and the One-Party State). In: UNGVÁRY, Krisztián (ed.): *Bűvöpatatok. A jobboldal és az állambiztonság, 1945–1989*, pp. 221–256.

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as the case of Ferenc Fehér³¹ and associates, who were tried after the “exposure” of the organization of the DNP in Zala County, and the case of János Zomborszky³², who was arrested in Nyíregyháza after Stalin’s death. In this process, the successor of the State Protection Division, called the State Protection Authority (Államvédelmi Hatóság, ÁVH) not only used secret service methods to collect information, but also summoned and interrogated dozens of former representatives and activists. In the trials against Bernát Károlyi, which took place in 1950 during the escalation of Cold War hysteria, the persecutors projected an underground movement with several thousand members due to Károlyi’s involvement in the organization of the DNP, even though he had resigned his parliamentary mandate. Károlyi was sentenced to fifteen years of imprisonment, but he could not complete his sentence: four years later, on 2 March 1954, he died at the prison hospital in Budapest.

The political trials of persecuted Christian democrats were followed by a propaganda campaign, in which former members of the Democratic People’s Party were associated with other enemies of the system, and labelled “imperialist spies”, “treacherous informants”, and “the agents of the Vatican”. In 1950, Catholic sociologist Vid Mihelics³³, who became one of the central figures of the Christian democrats in Hungary, assessed the situation as follows: *Today, the only option available to Catholic politics is to depoliticize the press and the movement. Further experimentation is pointless against the system, because the present danger is disproportionate to any potential success. Current events have overtaken us, and now we must do everything in our power to preserve and transfer our heritage.*³⁴

As can be seen the Democratic People’s Party as a party could not continue its activity, as all of the so-called “bourgeois” parties suspended their works in the upcoming communist one-party political system. The MPs and party members of the DNP were either scattered and controlled by the political police, or emigrated. In the period between 1949 and 1956 no party activity could be realized, on an individual level the survival and adjustment to the circumstances remained the only significant goal. Christian democracy could exist only as an underground stream, which, however, came to the surface in the turbulent period of the revolution of 1956.

An attempt at revival – 1956

Despite the attempts of communist leadership to completely eliminate the Democratic People’s Party from Hungarian politics, during the Hungarian Revolution of

31 Ferenc Fehér (1911–1988), a craftsman and MP of the Democratic People’s Party who was arrested in 1954 and sentenced to six years.

32 János Zomborszky (1913–2001), a farmer and MP of the Democratic People’s Party who was arrested in 1954 and sentenced to two years.

33 Vid Mihelics (1899–1968) a sociologist, editor of several Catholic periodicals, Christian democrat politician.

34 FRENYÓ, Zoltán: A magyar kereszténydemokrácia a kommunizmus árnyékában. ÁVH-jelentések a Demokrata Néppárttól (Hungarian Christian Democracy in the Shadow of Communism. Reports of the State Protection Authority on the Democratic People’s Party). *Magyar Szemle*, 2000, No. 1–2, pp. 68–88.

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1956, the DNP resurrected both in Budapest and on the regional level, where the former representatives of the party joined the revolution independently of one another. On 31 October 1956, former members announced the revival of the DNP's activities in Budapest, and on 1 November, they broadcast their statement to the general public via Free Kossuth Radio. On the regional level, former members also joined the various locally formed revolutionary committees and workers' councils; however, due to the brevity of the revolution, the DNP had no time for further action.

Following the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution, Christian democratic politicians who actively participated in the self-organization of the Democratic People's Party and the regional organization of the revolution were punished during the reprisals, where the Kádarian regime used every instrument of revenge and long-term intimidation – including interrogations, internment, police supervision, military prosecution, and in one case, a death sentence – to crush all recent Christian democratic initiatives. However, in the early stage of the reprisals, the Christian democrats were not targeted specifically by the state security bodies and the sanctions of communist leadership, which meant that they simply shared the fate of other political parties and Hungarian society in general.

The first phase of the prolonged and cruel mass repression began in December 1956, and was characterized by merciless reprisals, and the violent crackdown of the Hungarian communist armed forces, or “pufajkások” (wearers of the uniform of the communist state security) as they were called after their Soviet quilted coats. At this stage, communist leadership had not yet determined its preferred targets, which meant that the Kádarian political police lashed out indiscriminately at Hungarian society, but the most common targets of this period were persons who could be directly linked to revolutionary actions. Following the elimination of the most threatening persons and groups, from the spring of 1957 onwards, the reprisals shifted towards the terrorization and subordination of Hungarian society, while communist leadership monopolized public administration and started the statewide reorganization of communist party and political police bodies – in other words, the systematic establishment of order after the revolution had completely shaken the state security bodies of the Rákosi regime.³⁵

Following the reorganization of Hungarian state security, the reestablished bodies assisted the courts in the apprehension and trial of the victims in a series of political trials aimed at the restoration of communism, and the consolidation of the new regime led by General Secretary János Kádár.³⁶ In April 1957, communist leadership established the Supreme People's Court Council, followed by the establishment of five additional people's courts in Budapest, and the following counties: Győr-Sopron,

35 TABAJDI, Gábor – UNGVÁRY, Krisztián: *Elballgatott múlt. A pártállam és a belügy. A politikai rendőrség működése Magyarországon 1956–1990* (Hushed Past. The One-Party State and Domestic Policy. The Operation of the Political Police in Hungary, 1956–1990). 1956-os Intézet – Corvina Kiadó, Budapest 2008, pp. 51–54.

36 János Kádár (1912–1989) was a Hungarian communist leader and the General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, presiding over the country from 1956 until his retirement in 1988.

Baranya, Csongrád, Pest, and Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén. These people's courts then served as platforms for politically motivated public trials that severely violated the independence and impartiality of the judiciary.

The successor of the MKP and MDP, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, MSZMP) needed to present the events of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 as a "counterrevolution"; therefore, they construed the emergence of the multi-party system as an attack against proletarian leadership, and contrived to define the representatives of these parties as groups seeking to restore the previous political system of Regent Miklós Horthy, which made it possible to link the organization of these parties to the 1956 activities of Prime Minister Imre Nagy³⁷, the "inside traitor" who had authorized their operation. The Hungarian state security bodies also assisted in the development, establishment, and implementation of this concept. For instance, a state security document on the "parties and organizations formed or reestablished during the counterrevolution" stated the following:

*The former leaders of the bourgeois parties played an active role in the preparation of the counterrevolution, and assisted in shifting Imre Nagy's government towards the right. After the armed suppression of the counterrevolution, they banded together to overthrow the revolutionary worker and peasant government, and to this end they contacted certain imperialist embassies and the immigrants. During the counterrevolution, the primary goal of the leaders of certain bourgeois parties was to put pressure on the government by organizing their own parties in order to gain a decisive role in social and state life. Their objective was to reclaim their old positions of power, from whence they would have facilitated the shift of the government to the right, and prepared for the restoration of capitalism.*³⁸

In order to criminalize participation in the Hungarian Revolution, the communist version divorced the actions of the revolutionaries from their original context, and recontextualized them as parts of an underground coalitional conspiracy against the Hungarian People's Republic. To this end, a decision issued on 15 June 1957 by the Political Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party³⁹ charged the reorganized state security bodies with the task of conducting a large-scale investigation, on the previously established premise that the social democrats, the smallholders, and the Christian democrats had all formed a wide-scale "underground coalition", which contacted the Hungarian Revolutionary Council formed at the beginning of January 1957 in Strasbourg.⁴⁰ In this fictional narrative, the 1956 activities of the Democratic People's Party were construed as a series of pre-planned, agreed, and political events, where the intention to participate in the "counterrevolutionary events"

37 Imre Nagy (1896–1958) was a Hungarian communist leader who served as Prime Minister between 1953 and 1955. In 1956 he became the leader of the revolution, for which activity he was executed in 1958.

38 *ÁBTL* 3. 1. 9. V-150357, Ellenforradalom idején megalakult, illetve újjáalakult pártok (Parties Established or Reestablished during the Counterrevolution), 1957 (not dated further), p. 3.

39 *National Archives of Hungary* (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára, MNL OL), 288. f. 5/33.

40 TABAJDI, Gábor: Kereszténydemokraták a pártállami diktatúra idején (Christian Democrats during the One-Party Dictatorship). In: PÁLFFY, József (ed.): *70 éves a Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt* (Seventy Years of the Christian Democratic People's Party). Barankovics István Alapítvány, Budapest 2014, p. 64.

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was dated from the increased activity of the DNP in the summer of 1956, with strong emphasis on the old-standing but recently renewed relationship of Ferenc Matheovits and Prince Primate József Mindszenty. Their relationship was first linked to certain Western contacts, and by extension to the currency speculations reported by the political police, and then to the restoration attempts tied to the Hungarian aristocracy, and finally, to the social democrats. In this manner, the fiction of the “clerical reaction”, the “imperialists”, the “Horthyist” restoration, and potential participation in the multi-party coalition were forged into a singular history of intertwined conspiracies.

After the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the political police compiled all information on the participants of the “counterrevolution” in national and regional “monographies”, and interpreted the data accordingly;⁴¹ however, despite their condemnation of the activism of oppositional political parties, the parties themselves did not become targets of the post-1956 reprisals. The distorted narrative of Hungarian state security documentation reveals that the Kádarian system decided to use more specific and manipulative actions against individual revolutionaries, such as Vid Mihelics or Ferenc Matheovits, who were among the primary targets of the post-1956 reprisals from Christian democratic side.

One of the most prominent targets of the reprisals was Vid Mihelics, chief editor of the newspaper *Hazánk* (Our Homeland). In 1957, on account of his essays,⁴² his political participation in 1956,⁴³ and his decision to publish the 1956 issue of the *Hazánk*, Mihelics was arrested for *the criminal act of engaging in organizations aimed at overthrowing the popular democratic state system*. From 6 October 1957, for two months, Mihelics was held in custody at the detention centre in Fő Street in remand,⁴⁴ on account of his potential role in the investigation against Károly Khuen-Héderváry⁴⁵ and associates. However, on 30 November 1957, the prosecution terminated the investi-

41 See *ÁBTL* 3. 1. 9. V-150374/1, Somogy megyei monográfia (Monography of Somogy County), 1957; *Ibid.*, V-140368/1, Fejér megyei monográfia (Monography of Fejér County), 1957; *Ibid.*, V-150365, Békés megyei monográfia (Monography of Békés County), 1957 and *Ibid.*, V-150369, Győr-Sopron megyei monográfia (Monography of Győr-Sopron County), 1957. See also *ÁBTL* 1. 6.-II/8, Országos monográfiák (Hungarian National Monographies), 1957.

42 “Az igazi forradalom” (“The Real Revolution”), published in *Új Ember*, 4. 11. 1956, and “A mi roppant felelősségünk” (“Our Enormous Responsibility”), published in *Hazánk*, 4. 11. 1956.

43 He signed the statement issued to Prime Minister Imre Nagy on the reorganization of the Democratic People’s Party. On 1 November 1956, he personally addressed a letter to Imre Nagy to request the reauthorization of the publication of *Hazánk* as a daily newspaper, and later assumed the position of chief editor. At the leadership election session of the DNP, Vid Mihelics was appointed as a leading member, and as such, he signed a statement dated 8 December 1956, in which he and others supported the proposal written by State Minister István Bibó and Kumara Padmanabha Sivasankara Menon, the Soviet ambassador of India, in which they urged for the resolution of the current political situation. Additionally, on 18 November 1956, he wrote a letter to journalist and politician Miklós Gimes, which could easily be construed as evidence of the “underground coalition”.

44 *ÁBTL* 3. 1. 9. V-143081/2, Határozat előzetes letartóztatásról és házkutatásról (Decision on Pre-Trial Detention and Search), 6. 10. 1957, pp. 15–16.

45 Károly Khuen-Héderváry (1888–1960) came from an aristocrat family, was a count and great landowner. Between the two world wars he held several political positions and was one of the leaders of the Hungarian scout movement. Due to his activity during the revolution of 1956 he was arrested.

gation, and Mihelics was released from custody. On 12 March 1958, Mihelics “only” received a severe reprimand for “the editing of the newspaper *Hazánk*”, but he was allowed to resume his work as a journalist, so in the 1960s, Mihelics continued to publish his essays in the newspapers *Új Ember* (New Man) and *Vigilia* (Vigil).⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Hungarian state security continued to observe Mihelics through various operatives, such as agent “Zoltán Berényi”, which meant that Mihelics carried the stigma of his participation in the events of 1956 for the rest of his life.

As mentioned previously, another important target of the reprisals was Ferenc Matheovits, who was released from prison on 24 September 1956 after completing his previous sentence. At the time of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, he was residing in Pécs, so on 25 July 1957, he was taken into custody, where he was charged with being present, and speaking out at the meeting held on Széchenyi Square in Pécs. At the time, the political police did not have enough evidence to incriminate Matheovits, but when he was interrogated about his activities in Budapest, he could not deny his visit to the recently freed József Mindszenty.⁴⁷ Based on the court documents of the first trial, Matheovits’s visit to Mindszenty was more than enough to connect the Democratic People’s Party to the “clerical reaction” embodied by Archbishop Mindszenty. However, it was not until 1964, a year after the amnesty of 1963 that the case of Ferenc Matheovits was revisited, which made it one of the most poignant examples of the prolonged reprisals. In fact, the court proceedings of his trial were turned into “textbook” material for the employees of the Hungarian state security bodies.⁴⁸ On the antecedents of the case, the text explains that: *In the days of the counterrevolution, the marginalized political reaction reactivated, and newly formed political parties were spreading like wildfire. Some of the former right wing politicians were trying to contact the clerical reaction, or revive their previous connections, but they also established a fair number of “Christian” parties, whose temporary leaders came from the same circle of former right wing politicians. With the suppression of the counterrevolution, these parties were annihilated, but some reactionary politicians never gave up on their plans of establishing even more parties.*⁴⁹

As the above quoted excerpt shows, the starting point of the case of Ferenc Matheovits was the presumed intention of establishing a potentially Christian political party. From the perspective of the political police, Matheovits seemed to be the most suitable candidate, because according to their vision, *during the counterrevolution, dr. Ferenc Matheovits sought out Mindszenty, who charged him with the task of founding a unified Christian Democratic Party (sic), and appointed him as general secretary.*⁵⁰ This meeting was then tied to other church officials, including Abbot Vendel Endrédy⁵¹ of Zirc,⁵²

46 FRENÝÓ, Zoltán: *A magyar kereszténydemokrácia a kommunizmus árnyékában. ÁVH-jelentések a Demokrata Néppártól*, pp. 85–86.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

48 *ÁBTL* 4. 1. A-3016/25, The “Bujtogatók” (“Agitators”) case. Description of the anti-state activities of Ferenc Matheovits and associates, overview of operative and processing methods, and summary of the conclusions of the case by Major Miklós Kőnig. BM Tanulmányi és Kiképzési Csoportfőnökség, Budapest 1964.

49 *ÁBTL* 4. 1. A-3016/25, The “Bujtogatók” (“Agitators”) case, p. 2.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

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and several members of the Hungarian Jesuit order.⁵³ At the same time, Major Miklós König, who compiled the background study for this case, noted that *processing, on the whole, presented serious difficulties, because the conspiracy initiated by dr. Ferenc Matheovits lacked the usual organizational framework, and the fact of their organization was difficult to establish beyond the constant and dominant presence of incitement...* Of course, he went on to add that the reason for these difficulties was not the absence of a conspiracy, but the fact that *the form and methods of these hostile activities were more deeply conspiratorial and nuanced (sic) than before. The hostile elements, especially those within intellectual circles, consciously endeavoured to make the legal documentation of their anti-state activities difficult.*⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the political police finally succeeded in initiating a trial, on the following grounds: *According to previous operative information, since 1958, dr. Ferenc Matheovits and associates had been engaging in hostile activities for the purpose of a conspiracy intended to change the current social order in accordance with legitimist and Christian social political conceptions, and had also committed various crimes. In the event of the withdrawal of the Soviet troops, they hoped to achieve their goals through political pressure, activism, and possibly a new counter-revolution. They also considered the possibility that the "Christian party" might achieve decisive victory and seize power at the "free elections" held under the supervision of the Western powers.*⁵⁵

Based on the assessment above, on 6 January 1964, Ferenc Matheovits and four associates were taken into police custody,⁵⁶ and on 8 October 1964, after prolonged negotiations and a convoluted evidentiary procedure, Matheovits was sentenced to ten years of imprisonment for initiating and leading a conspiracy, and for the preparation of treason. His four associates were also imprisoned for one to four years. Matheovits ended up serving his entire sentence, and on 6 January 1974, he was one of the last political prisoners to be released.

Finally, let us look at the most tragic case of a Christian democratic politician arrested and sentenced on account of their participation in the Hungarian Revolution:⁵⁷ the case of Catholic teacher Árpád Tihanyi⁵⁸, a former supporter of the 1947

51 Vendel Endrédy (1895–1981) O.Cist. was a Cistercian monk and abbot of Zirc abbey.

52 On the public persecution of Vendel Endrédy, see CÚTHNÉ GYÓNI, Eszter (ed.): *Egy fogoly apát feljegyzései. Endrédy Vendel zirci apát feljegyzései az ÁVH börtönében* (The Journal of a Captive Abbot. The Journal of Vendel Endrédy, Abbot of Zirc, Written in the Prison of the State Protection Authority). METEM, Budapest 2013.

53 On the post-1945 history of the Jesuit order, see BÁNKUTI, Gábor: *Jezsuiták a diktatúrában. A Jézus Társasága Magyarországi Rendtartománya története, 1945–1965* (Jesuits and the Dictatorship: History of the Hungarian Province of the Society of Jesus, 1945–1965). L'Harmattan – JTMR – ÁBTL, Budapest 2011.

54 ÁBTL 4. 1. A-3016/25, The "Bujtogatók" ("Agitators") case, pp. 30–31.

55 ÁBTL 3. 1. 9. V-149861/2, Dr. Matheovits Ferenc és tsai (Dr. Ferenc Matheovits and Associates), 16. 1. 1964, p. 39.

56 Ibid., p. 44. His four associates were Zoltán Teszár, Péter István Keleti, József Gerendás, and dr. János Kalmár. On 2 March 1964, the Ministry of the Interior submitted a decision for their arrest to the Chief Prosecutor of the Hungarian People's Republic. See ÁBTL 3. 1. 9. V-149861/1, pp. 13–14.

57 SZABÓ, Róbert: *A Demokrata Néppárt és 1956* (The Democratic People's Party and 1956). In: KISS, Mária Rita (ed.): *Magyar kereszténydemokraták és 1956* (The Hungarian Christian Democrats and 1956). Barankovics István Alapítvány, Budapest 2017, pp. 21–47.

58 Árpád Tihanyi (1916–1957) was a teacher and supporter of the Democratic People's Party, who was arrested and finally executed because of his activity during the revolution of 1956.

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election campaign of the Democratic People's Party, who joined the revolutionary events in Győr as a renowned intellectual. On 25 October 1956, at the request of his acquaintances and students, Tihanyi recited the patriotic poem *Nemzeti dal* (National Song) at a protest held at the bus station in Győr. The next day, when he received news of a volley fire in Mosonmagyaróvár, he became a member of the delegation that visited the site of the massacre in order to restore order, and prevent further bloodshed by speaking to the crowd, and announcing his resolve to hold the perpetrators to account under lawful proceedings. Afterwards, Tihanyi returned to Győr, where the next day, he attended the leadership election meeting of local teachers, then travelled to Budapest for further information on the state of the revolution. On 2 November, Tihanyi travelled to Austria as a member of the Trans-Danubian National Council to negotiate with the Austrian Peasants' Association. Two days later, on 4 November, he and his associates also visited the US embassy to request their support of the revolution. On 17 November, Tihanyi returned to Hungary, where he was arrested on 27 December 1956. Despite his reputation as a locally, even regionally renowned and respected teacher, Tihanyi was charged with inciting the revolutionaries to lynch three police officers after the volley fires of Mosonmagyaróvár. On 10 June 1957, *for the criminal acts of treason and leading a movement to overthrow the popular democratic state*, the County Court of Győr issued verdict No. B.009/1957 and sentenced Tihanyi to death by hanging. His case was then taken to an appeal court, the Supreme Court of Hungary, where on 21 December 1957, verdict No. Katf.kt. 0/56/1957 was issued to confirm the previous sentence.⁵⁹ At his appeal hearing, as his final words, Tihanyi recited the poem *Csák Máté földjén* (In the Land of Máté Csák) by Endre Ady.⁶⁰ Ten days later, on 31 December 1957, Tihanyi was executed by hanging. According to the execution records, *at 3 o'clock and 24 minutes, the executioner announced that he had carried out the sentence. Medical experts dr. Sándor Fogarasi and dr. Béla Tárkányi confirmed that the time of death was 3 o'clock and 39 minutes. At 4 o'clock and 40 minutes, following another medical inspection, the body was removed from the gallows.*⁶¹ Árpád Tihanyi's family was not informed of the sentence or the execution, and his remains were only found in 1990 in one of the mass graves of the prison cemetery in Sopronkőhida.

Conclusion

The Democratic People's Party (DNP), as a party of Christian democracy in Hungary, started its party organization and political activity in unfavourable circumstances at the end of World War II. After some theoretical antecedents and Catholic vocational movements in the 1930s, the new party that was founded in October 1944 distinguished itself from the Christian parties of the interwar period and established its

59 *ÁBTL* 3. 1. 9. V-141296, Cziffrik Lajos és tsai vizsgálati dossziéja (Examination Dossier of Lajos Cziffrik and Associates). The verdicts of the County Court of Győr and the Supreme Court are included as attachments.

60 Ady's poem is an ode to the Hungarian proletariat struggling against their tyrannical oppressors.

61 *ÁBTL* 3. 1. 9. V-141295, Gulyás Lajos és tsa (Lajos Gulyás and Associate), p. 6.

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party programme on a renewed Catholic social teaching and the support of parliamentary democracy. The participation of the party leaders in the anti-fascist resistance guaranteed the DNP a political “blank slate”, which means that in the emerging democracy of the coalition era (1945–1948) the DNP was accepted as one of the authorized political parties of the Hungarian multi-party system. However, as Hungarian parliamentary democracy fell into crisis due to communist power accumulating practices, the political activity and public representation of the DNP faced increasing difficulties. The so-called “salami tactics” of the Hungarian Communist Party also challenged the freshly founded Democratic People’s Party. In the political struggles of 1945–1949 the DNP fought as one of the last bastions of parliamentary democracy in Hungary; a fight which turned out to be unsuccessful in 1949 when party leaders and significant Christian democratic politicians finally had but one choice: emigration and suspension of the work of the party. Those party representatives who remained in Hungary could either survive the upcoming years in passive, internal exile, or became a target point of communist purges. Nonetheless, the party could be revitalized for a short period during the days of the revolution of 1956, which, however concluded in further persecutions. This study shed light on the history of the Hungarian Christian democratic party during the crucial and turbulent years between 1944/1945 and 1956/1957, and aimed at introducing the history of the DNP as a process of both self-identification as a progressive, democratic party and being overwhelmed in a fierce political struggle.