

DANIIDE PAPERS DANUUL

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF HUNGARIAN CHRISTIAN
DEMOCRACY III. – TURBULENCES IN THE
“HAPPY TIMES OF PEACE” AND THE COLLAPSE

ÁDÁM DARABOS



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December 2022

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ABSTRACT

In our last articles, we investigated the [historical roots of Hungarian Christian democracy](#) and the appearance of the first Hungarian Christian party, the [Catholic People's Party](#). As the third article in this series, this paper examines a less analysed period, namely, the period between the formation of the first Christian political party and the consolidation of the Horthy regime, from 1895 to 1922. This is a decisive phase because the first genuine Hungarian Christian democratic initiatives were formed here.

Keywords: *Christian democracy, Christian socialism, Hungarian politics, Christian politics, Sándor Giesswein*

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Introduction – turbulences in Hungarian domestic politics

In 1905 a completely new event shook Hungarian political life. After thirty years of domination, the Liberal Party (also commonly called “the government party” for its lengthy reign) lost the elections. For the first time since 1875, the opposition, in the form of a coalition (it was called, among others, the “united opposition”), won the election by a majority of the votes. The political alliance was united mainly in one question, the Liberal Party must go. Implicitly, the coalition’s parties, and their different fractions, constituted a wide range in the political spectrum. Yet, the gravest question after the election was not the fragmentation but whether the replacement of the Liberal Party, which stood on the ground of so-called “compromise” (1867), the basis of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, would result in the elimination of the compromise, hence the disintegration of the Monarchy. It was further problematic that the coalition’s leading party was the Party of Independence and ’48, a radical civil political force with the most mandates (around 40%). In short, as their name suggested, they wished greater independence for Hungary (at least a personal union). Moreover, initially, the so-called “April laws” introduced in 1848 were the basis of negotiation for them. In conclusion, the situation was quite tense.

At that time, the question could not be answered since the Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary, Franz Joseph, overriding the election’s outcome appointed the loyal general and captain of the Hungarian Lifeguards, Géza Fejérváry as prime minister. His leadership was meant to be temporal and was aimed at finding a consensus with the opposition. Yet, the coalition, which was in the majority in the parliament, refused to cooperate with the government and organised resistance.

The constitutional conflict ended a year later with a secret pact between the Court and the Coalition (in which Coalition had to give up its initial program, for instance, the idea independent Hungarian army was rejected to be accepted as the governing party) and with a new election. The coalition reached a vast victory (the Party of Independence and ’48 alone gained around 62% of mandates). Still, the former prime minister of the Liberal Party, Sándor Wekerle, was asked to form a government, and most of the ministers were also from the National Constitutional Party (Wekerle’s party, which was

in the coalition gained around 17% of the mandates and were only the second in the elections).

What is relevant in our case is that the coalition included four other parties, one of which was the Catholic People's Party. In 1905 they finished fourth place and received the 6,05% of the mandates (25 members of the parliament). Meanwhile, in 1906, they were the third with 7,99% of the mandates (33 members). In the government, count Aladár Zichy (the president of the party from 1903 to its dissolution in 1918) was the representative of the People's Party as the Minister besides the King between 1906 and 1910.

As we concluded in our previous analysis, the People's Party aimed to invalidate the liberal Church laws, for instance, on administration and marriage. As Jenő Gergely argues, this kind of defensive politics could not be effective against the dominant wave of thinking, liberalism. The Catholic political attempts resulted in visible failures; the following Catholic political strategy remained defensive, and neither Christian socialism nor Christian democracy could prevail.¹ Róbert Szabó also underlines that the party lost its connection with the waves of Catholic renewal.²

Furthermore, after the resolution of the political crisis, the People's Party found itself in a situation where the governing coalition – partly because of its fragmentation – could not resolve any significant political issues. The final twist in the story was that the prime minister was Wekerle, who introduced the liberal Church reforms a decade earlier. In short, the electoral success was short-lived; in the next election in 1910 (which was the last before World War I, when no elections were held), the reorganised Liberal Party, in the form of the National Party of Work, led by István Tisza, won the election. The People's Party, which ran alone, received only 3,14% of the mandates, becoming a part of the opposition again.

It should also be emphasised that the question of compromise and its implications, also called the “public law dispute,” dominated Hungarian domestic political life. Several other political and social questions remained unresolved, such as the extension of political rights, the social question, and the nationalities. The excessive focus on the public law dispute and the lack of social attentiveness, hence the conservatism of the People's Party, resulted in the foundation National Christian Socialist Party.³

The National Christian Socialist Party and its first programme

The idea of a new Christian political party already occurred in 1903 and, based on the above-mentioned domestic political problems, finally resulted in its implementation. As Gábor Bánkúti concludes, until this point, Christian politics was determined by the aulic version of political Catholicism.⁴ The National Christian Socialist Party was founded on 10 November 1907 on the proposal of János Zichy⁵ and István Haller.⁶

The party's name indicates that it was socially oriented and indeed brought a new impulse to Hungarian Christian politics.⁷ The public law dispute did not determine its stance; instead, it was a party with a worldview whose ambition was to renew the Hungarian economic, social, and cultural life in a Christian spirit.⁸ The programme – in which the social teachings of the Church appeared – was accepted in 1907. Among others, it included:

(1) Domestic political reforms

- a. Universal suffrage (secret and direct vote)
- b. Right of association
- c. Freedom of the press
- d. Reform of local governments
- e. Judicial reform

(2) Welfare reforms

- a. Free public education
- b. Progressive tax system,
- c. Compulsory insurance
- d. Protection of the workers (ban of child and female night work, paid maternity leave, insurance for accidents), proper representation of the workers in the factories, housing campaigns for workers
- e. State support for small industry, the protection of agrarian workers, creation of land-renting associations (to reconcile the opposing interest of the high ecclesiastic and secular landholders and the workers)
- f. Fights against alcoholism

(3) Foreign policy reforms

- a. Independence of Hungary, including in foreign and military policy
- b. Reducing military expenditures and the resolution of war preparations through international agreements
- c. Supported the use of language and free education of nationalities.⁹

Looking at the programme of the National Christian Socialist Party, it was a clear break in terms of the former demands of the People's Party. Moreover, even though it was labelled "socialist" in its name, its programme can be treated as the first genuine Christian democratic political programme in Hungary. Why? And what does genuine mean? First, it represents the marks of the Rerum Novarum on social issues. Still, in itself, it would not be enough. Christian democratic parties must also meet the label "democratic." Although, until the end of the Second World War, several parties called "Christian democratic" could not fit this expectation, this party demanded universal suffrage and extensive political rights in 1907. It should also be mentioned that the party – again, in contrast to its name – was more social than socialist; it did not fight for a socialist revolution or communism, and they were not against the system.

Two statements also confirm the last statement. First, less significantly, they participated in the election in 1910, indicating the will to develop the system from the inside. Unfortunately, the result was disastrous; the party received only one mandate (the representative was called Sándor Giesswein). Second, the question of the party's membership, especially its leadership, should be considered. The idea of the National Christian Socialist Party as a new impulse for Hungarian Christian politics originated from the Christian social wing of the People's Party (including, for instance, István Haller), who did not join the new party.¹⁰ The most significant representative of this new wave of thought, who also joined the party and became its first president and leader, was Sándor Giesswein (1856-1923).

Giesswein was a politician (member of the parliament for nearly two decades), papal prelate, linguist¹¹ and scholar, and – beyond Ottokár Prohászka¹² – the first influential Christian democrat in Hungary. From 1896, he published several books on Christian social questions, including *The Social Mission of the Catholic Church* (1896), *Protection of Workers* (1901), *Social problems and Christian Worldview* (1907), *Christian Social Endeavours in Social and Economic Life* (1913) and *The Social Question and the Christian Socialism* (1914). One of the greatest Christian democrats

of Hungary, István Barankovics, also treated Giesswein as the forerunner for his party.¹³

In short, why was Giesswein crucial or unique? First, he consistently professed that social reforms could only be implemented in a democratic framework. Hence universal suffrage is necessary.¹⁴ Second, he was a man of theories (a well-learned and fertile philosopher and historian of religion) and a man of action (leader of several Christian social and political organisations). In addition, while Prohászka tried to convince the Church to follow Christian democracy, Giesswein was a representative in the public and political field.¹⁵ Third, as Gergely suggests, Giesswein's Christian socialism – contrary to many of his contemporaries – does not follow political Catholicism's nationalist or antisemite paths. He is instead connected to the tradition of French Catholic liberalism, Wilhelm Emmanuel Ketteler or Ferenc Deák and József Eötvös.¹⁶ Fourth, without falsifying the doctrines of his faith, he was also modern; he supported feminism but was also a representative of rigorous pacifism (or anti-militarism), which meant eliminating war and other kinds of violence. He spoke up against both red and white terror in Hungary.

Gergely summarises the two conflictual points in which Giesswein and the People's Party conflicted. The breaking up happened in 1910 in an open letter written by the politician to the People's Party; it was at this time that he joined the National Christian Socialist Party. One was universal suffrage, while the other was the question of Christian workers forming associations and going on strike. While Giesswein was consistent in these questions, so, in his attitude towards democracy, freedom of association and freedom of strike, the People's Party (which represented political Catholicism and was approved by the Church hierarchy) was neither open nor consistent with these questions.¹⁷ Szabó also underlines that the high priesthood was as mistrustful towards the social and reform Catholicism of Prohászka as the teachings of Giesswein.¹⁸

Turning to the overview, it should be underlined that from 1910 to 1918, neither the People's Party nor the National Christian Socialist Party was a decisive force in Hungarian political life. From 413 places in the Parliament, they had 14 combined (13+1). The beginnings of the Hungarian Christian socialist thought were more prevalent in social associations than politics.¹⁹

Two unsuccessful attempts to unite²⁰

Closing to the end of the Great War, the two peripheral Christian political parties, the Catholic People's Party and the National Christian Socialist Party – supported by Prince-primate János Csernoch – decided to unite. The new party was formed on 3 February 1918 and was called Christian Social People's Party. While its program was based on the 1907 program of the National Christian Socialist Party, the leaders were from the Christian social fraction of the People's Party, including István Haller, Károly Huszár,²¹ Sándor Ernszt²² (Giesswein was also a party member). Most Catholic social associations supported the party, which aimed to balance Marxism and defend the territorial integrity of Hungary at the end of the war. In February 1918, it joined the government coalition led by the Constitutional Party and was represented in the third Wekerle-government. Though it welcomed the democratic transition after the war, it was – rightly – afraid of radicalisation. The red terror of the proletariat dictatorship in Hungary targeted – among others – the Church and the religious people; many Christian political leaders, including Haller and Huszár, were imprisoned, and the party was banned.

After the regime's collapse, from two smaller Christian political organisations (Christian Social and Economic Party and Christian National Party), a new party, the Christian National Union Party, was formed on 24 October 1919. Among its leaders were István Friedrich,²³ Pál Teleki, Sándor Simonyi-Semadam,²⁴ Kunó Klebelsberg, Ottokár Prohászka, István Haller, and Károly Huszár; many of them became influential figures of the Horthy regime or were also prime ministers of Hungary for shorter periods until the stabilisation of the Horthy regime. The party ran only in one election (1920) but won around 38% of the mandates forming a government in coalition with the “smallholders.” For a short moment, it seemed that the new regime's decisive power would be a Christian party. Nevertheless – above the political, social, and economic crisis after the World War – the dispersive forces (for instance, the different perspectives in the form of government and stance towards King Charles IV) could not hold the party together; it dissolved in 1922. Finally, István Bethlen (also a former party member) formed the Unity Party, which became the “governing party” for the first half of the Horthy Regime.

As a closure, it can be mentioned that Giesswein did not join the Christian National Union Party since he feared that social thought would get lost. As the editor of the

Hungarian Catholic Encyclopaedia recalls, he was marginalised not just in political life but was also pushed out of Catholic public life because of condemning the latter. The Encyclopaedia also adds that Giesswein's failure indicated that political Catholicism did not manage to become an equal actor in political life in Hungary, and the Church was not interested in it either.²⁵ Since "political Catholicism" can be understood in several ways, we would not like to criticise this argument. Nonetheless, it probably should be added that it was not political Catholicism that did not succeed; it did because the Horthy regime, as our subsequent analysis will point to it, was a form of political Catholicism, namely Christian nationalism. What failed for two decades by, among others, the marginalisation of Giesswein was the significant political representation of genuine and modern Christian democracy.

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³ Here, the term 'national' in Hungarian indicates that it was rather nation-wide than nationalist (in Hungarian, it was 'Országos' and not 'Nemzeti'). It is equally relevant that a party was formed in 1919 in Czechoslovakia with the same name. The party's bases were in those parts which were separated from Hungary as a result of the war, and – among others – it aimed to protect Hungarians against the violations of the state.

⁴ Bánkuti Gábor: A keresztényszocializmus. In *Árkádia Folyóirat Website*. <http://arkadiafolyoirat.hu/index.php/5-eszmetortenet/79-a-keresztenyszocializmus-jo>, Accessed 4. November 2022.

⁵ János Zichy (1968-1944) was a leading Hungarian magnate, lawyer and politician who served as a Minister of Religion and Education from 1910-1913 and in 1918. He was the chairman of the Catholic People's Party but later joined the National Party of Work and formed the Christian Economic and Social Party. In political life, he shared legitimist views.

⁶ István Haller (1880-1964) was a Christian socialist journalist, politician, and organiser. After being imprisoned during the Hungarian Republic of Councils, as a minister of Religion and Education, he proposed the so-called numerus clausus, which maximised the ratio of the nationalities who enrolled on the most prestigious universities (law, medical, technical, economic, and scientific). Although the law did not mention the "Jews", they were the main ethnic group whose presence at the universities exceeded the rate of inhabitancy. He was the chosen leader of the Christian National Union Party in 1920.

⁷ The summary above is mainly based on the article of the Hungarian Catholic Encyclopaedia, see *Magyar Katolikus Lexikon: Országos Keresztényszocialista Párt*. Available at: <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/O/Orsz%C3%A1gos%20Kereszt%C3%A9nyszocialista%20P%C3%A1rt.html>, Accessed 3. November 2022.

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¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ He spoke nine languages (Hungarian, German, Latin, Greek, English, French, Spanish, Italian and Esperanto) and was a famous Esperantist, see Barankovics Alapítvány: 175 éve született Giesswein Sándor a modern magyar kereszténydemokrácia előfutára (*Múltunk jelene*). In Barankovics Alapítvány Website. <https://barankovics.hu/175-eve-szulett-giesswein-sandor-a-modern-magyar-keresztenydemokracia-elofutara/>, Accessed 4. November 2022.

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