

Nation Building and Religion

The Horthy Cult in Hungary between 1919 and 1944

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Received 6 October 2023 | Accepted 4 December 2023 | Published online 18 December 2023

Abstract. The leader cult built up around Miklós Horthy, the Regent of Hungary between 1920 and 1944, was one of the leader cults that appeared after World War I as a response to the critical social and political conditions. According to the main message of Horthy's selectively constructed image, he was the only one who could achieve the national goals and restore the lost national glory. In my paper, I analyze religion, primarily Christianity, as a domain from which the cult-makers selected, (mis)used, and manipulated symbols, elements, and concepts, such as 'resurrection', 'rebirth', 'salvation', 'the Passion of the Christ', 'selectness', 'the promised land', and references to the will of divine providence for justifying the leadership of Horthy. Religious symbols also shaped and strengthened the national identity. It is shown that the traditional churches, because of the cooperation between them and the state, made a significant contribution to strengthening the leader's legitimacy in this way. This is the reason why the term 'politicized religion', introduced by Juan J. Linz, seems appropriate in this context. Naturally, this was a wider phenomenon in Hungary, but the Horthy cult is its striking example.

Keywords: nation building, religion, leader cult, Miklós Horthy, Trianon, Horthy cult, irredentism

After World War I, leader cults appeared in conjunction with the critical social and political conditions in several European countries.¹ Notable instances of the phenomenon include the cults around Adolf Hitler, who was the chancellor of Germany (1933–1945), as well as Benito Mussolini, the Prime Minister of Italy (1922–1943), and Józef Piłsudski, the Marshal of Poland (1918–1935). In Hungary as well, a cult was built up around Regent Miklós Horthy between 1920 and 1944, incorporating political technologies that emulated and integrated religious practices of the era.

1 About the interwar leader cults, see e.g.: Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth*; von der Goltz, *Hindenburg*; Petrakis, *Metaxas Myth*; Paine, *The Franco Regime*; Hein, *Der Piłsudski-Kult*; Plamper, *The Stalin Cult*; Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*; Dreidemy, *Der Dollfuss-Mythos*; Iordachi, *Charisma, Politics and Violence*.

Every leader cult of the interwar period had religious elements, but the extent to which they determined the nature of this phenomenon varied, depending mainly, but not exclusively, on the character of the political regime. In this respect, the Horthy cult was one of the conservative and authoritarian types of interwar leader cults, with a greater prevalence of quasi-religious representations integrated into its symbolism.

A leader cult is a system of rituals of excessive admiration for a political and/or military leader depicted as the only one capable of solving a critical situation, of restoring the lost national glory and greatness.² The selectively constructed, simplified, and fictitious image of the leader, which nevertheless comprises multiple conjoined elements, is meant to explain his extraordinary qualities, personality, and so-called 'charisma'.³ Charisma, often analyzed in the relevant literature as a social construct, is a central notion for leaders seeking mass legitimation.⁴ In order to construct such charisma and justify the leaders' entitlement to their elevated positions, cult-makers often use religious symbols, motifs, and notions. As a result, such leaders are, at least partially, sacralized.⁵ Propagandists frequently depict them as national saviors, as well as the embodiment of the nation, who stand unwaveringly above party politics. One of the most frequent elements in the numerous glorifications is the notion of the unbreakable unity of leaders and their nation. This feature contributes to fulfilling the integratory function of leader cults, creating a feeling of community and belonging.⁶ With its help, propaganda has (re-)created imagined national communities around the imagined figure of the leader.⁷ As a result, leader cults have been important means of strengthening and reshaping national identity.

This paper analyzes Christianity as a domain and a pool of resources from which Miklós Horthy's cult-makers appropriated, used, and manipulated symbols, elements, and concepts.⁸ In doing so, the propagandists had two main goals: to

2 Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 280; Rees, "Leader Cults," 3–26; Kallis, "Fascism," 25–43; Apor, "Communist Leader Cults," 37–62.

3 Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 25–32; Turbucz, "Miklós Horthy in Poland," 291.

4 Plamper, "Modern Personality Cults," 35; Kallis, "Fascism"; Apor, "Communist Leader Cults," 37–8; Eatwell, "The Concept and Theory," 141–56.

5 About the sacralization of politics, see: Gentile, *Politics as Religion*; Maier, "Political Religions," 267–81; Maier, "Political Religion."

6 Goltz, *Hindenburg*, 6.

7 Hein, *Der Pilsudski-Kult*, 3. In this respect, although Benedict Anderson does not deal with these cults, his term 'imagined communities' is appropriate for analyzing the phenomenon of leader cults. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

8 Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power*, 42–6. As Kertzer argues, "[m]any of the most powerful symbols of legitimacy are of religious origin. It should come as no surprise, then, that new political forces eagerly rummage through the pre-existing body of religious rituals and symbols to find those that will enrich their own ritual forms." (p. 45).

justify Horthy's right to hold his position and the associated power and, indirectly, to strengthen the national identity and cohesion during a critical period in Hungarian history, i.e., after World War I and the collapse of the pre-war multiethnic state.⁹

The evolution of the cult of Miklós Horthy

The cult around Miklós Horthy was in many ways the consequence of the collapse of historic Hungary after World War I.¹⁰ Horthy, an ex-naval officer and successful commander in the Austro–Hungarian Navy,¹¹ was the symbolic and cultic leader of the Hungarian counter-revolution against the Communist dictatorship in 1919. Accordingly, the beginnings of the Horthy cult reach back to the autumn of 1919, the period before his election as Regent (on 1 March 1920). During that period, his cult resembled a 'dictator-cult' because his radical right (*fajvédő*) followers, who were the driving force behind the mythmaking around him and were trying to convert the Hungarian political system into a military dictatorship, fashioned him as an autocratic leader in most aspects.¹²

The 1921 appointment of the great conservative politician István Bethlen as prime minister and Hungary's stabilization made an important impact on Horthy's cult.¹³ During the first years of the 1920s, Horthy gradually, and slightly reluctantly, distanced himself from his former radical comrades, who had a large, if not exclusive, role in making him 'the leader of the nation'. Because of the demands of the ongoing political consolidation, some elements of his earlier image faded by the mid-twenties. This included several points of emphasis on militarism, autocracy, and the principle of undivided individual leadership. Nevertheless, the main message did not change: Horthy was positioned as the one person capable of leading the nation towards a 'brighter future', guiding Hungarians on the road to 'resurrection', meaning the revision of the Trianon Peace Treaty and the restoration of national greatness.

From 1925 onwards, the entire state apparatus in association with traditional churches, local authorities, and non-governmental organizations loyal to the regime, were joining forces in the construction of the Regent's cult. Horthy was extolled as the 'savior of the nation' who liberated the country in 1919 from both the Bolshevik

9 The author has explored aspects of the following arguments in previous publications, including Turbucz, "Átpolitizált vallásosság"; Turbucz, "A vezér két teste"; Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*; Turbucz, "Miklós Horthy in Poland."

10 On this period, see: Romsics, *Hungary*, 79–125.

11 On his naval career, see: Halpern, *The Battle of the Otranto Straits*; Turbucz, *Horthy Miklós, a haditengerésztiszt*.

12 Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, Chapter 3.

13 On the topic of political consolidation, see: Romsics, *István Bethlen*.

dictatorship and the Romanian occupation. After the stabilization, he thus received the 'rebuilder of Hungary' epithet. In these efforts, special attention was given to the anniversaries related to Horthy himself, such as his birthday (18 June) and name day (6 December), celebrated each year. Beyond these, the tenth, fifteenth, and twentieth jubilees of his entry into Budapest (16 November) and his election as Regent (1 March) were also regularly commemorated. Over time, his cult developed into an important source of the legitimacy of the entire political system.

The Horthy cult culminated between 1938 and 1943. During this period, Horthy became the 'enlarger of Hungary', as between 1938 and 1941 with the support of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, the country was regaining lost territories. The partial reversal of the Treaty of Trianon was in fact the main reason for his cult reaching its peak. Governmental propagandists also relied on the symbolic potential of the cult to counterbalance tendencies in society, which World War II had brought to the fore. Thereby, they intended to stabilize the political regime, threatened by the extreme right and its parties.¹⁴ In order to justify his larger-than-life image, the propaganda attributed the regime's every success and triumph to Horthy, regardless of his actual involvement.¹⁵ This was an almost inevitable outcome: if indeed the leader is expected to lead the nation to 'a brighter future', every step taken towards 'paradise' and the restoration of national glory had to be presented as his exclusive triumph.¹⁶

National 'salvation' and 'resurrection'

Miklós Horthy marched into Budapest at the head of the National Army on 16 November 1919. Even though his entry did not take place in the wake of a victorious war, it was an important stage in the construction of his cult. The Romanian Army, which had occupied much of the country, started to evacuate Hungary in October because of pressure from the victorious great powers. This meant that Horthy's National Army did not fight against either the invaders or the communist regime. Nevertheless, Horthy was made out to be the 'victorious' leader due to his triumphant entry into the capital.

According to the numerous commemorative speeches, Horthy's 'triumphal' entry into Budapest was a turning point in Hungarian history. Cécile Tormay, a novelist, journal editor, and one of the leading representatives of the so-called 'National-Christian idea', delivered a speech on 16 November. Already in this early phase of nascent cult-building, she emphasized the break with the past by using religious terms.

14 Romsics, *Hungary*, 91–126.

15 On the role of Horthy as Regent of Hungary, see: Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral*.

16 Rees, "Leader Cults," 14; Turbucz, "Miklós Horthy in Poland," 299–300.

“Today is the new dawn! You [the soldiers and the leader of the National Army—D. T.] have brought it with you, and we, the women, as it happened at the foot of the Golgotha 2000 years ago, have come here to welcome the resurrection. Your arrival is a Hungarian dawn and Christian resurrection after a bloody, unholy Passion, because the Hungarian Judas, Mihály Károlyi, and his demonic panders betrayed, tortured, and humiliated the Hungarian nation. It was the darkest hour of our history, but this morning is hopeful because you are here. Horthy became the name hope is called by [...] in Hungary”.¹⁷

Tormay appropriated the Passion of the Christ and the Christian tradition of resurrection to describe and interpret the events that had led to the collapse.¹⁸ She argued that Miklós Horthy was in fact the ‘savior’ and the ‘hope’ of the nation because he defeated the ‘demonic’ power and ‘death’, personified by Károlyi and his ‘demonic panders’. Hers was a manichean interpretation, structured around the struggle between the ‘good’ and ‘evil’ powers. Therefore, Horthy’s entry into Budapest may be interpreted as a turning point (‘morning’, ‘dawn’) in Hungarian history, marking both the promise of a brighter future and the beginning of an era of putative rejuvenation, which has since become known in Hungarian literature as the so-called Christian-national era, when the nation was victoriously ‘resurrected’.¹⁹ The event “symbolized a break with the liberal past and with everything that led to the revolutionary catastrophes. It also symbolized a nation reborn from an apocalyptic death.”²⁰ The parallels with Christianity are obvious in the ceremony, since the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the Christian tradition also marked the coming of something new and better, the promise of salvation and eternal life. However, as Tormay made it clear, national resurrection was not complete, because the lost territories had not been regained.²¹ Some reports about the ceremony commented that rectifying this wrong was Horthy’s mission. Apparently, his cult and irredentism had amalgamated by as early as 1919.²²

17 Her speech is cited by Pilch, *Horthy Miklós*, 279.

18 For the analysis of Tormay’s speech, see: Szabó, *Politikai idegen*, 18–21, 71–4, 85–8; Gerő, *Imagined History*, 260–63.

19 What is more, this speech was delivered in front of the Hungarian Parliament, where the people’s republic had been declared a year before (16 November 1918). In this context, Parliament Square became the ‘Hungarian Golgotha’ itself. See: Vörös, “Károlyi Mihály tér,” 144–72.

20 Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary*, 135.

21 Pilch, *Horthy Miklós*, 280.

22 The irredentism, the cult of historical Hungary, was also a reaction to the collapse of Hungary. For instance, Hungary was frequently symbolized as a crucified body. Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision*.

Those busy constructing the new cult continued to stress that the new leader of the Hungarian nation had brought along the promise of national resurrection and the restoration of national glory. The 1918–1919 period was blamed for the military defeat and the collapse of Hungary.²³ According to this interpretation, Horthy had indeed saved the nation from ‘destruction’. Thereafter, he supposedly was resolute and consistent in guiding the nation en route to a ‘brighter future’ while overcoming all obstacles. He was described as a ‘fixed and stable point’ on which the nation’s future rested. In the resulting mythic chronology, the recent past became identified with ‘death’, ‘passion’, ‘misery’, ‘the darkest hour’, ‘treason’, and ‘humiliation’. In comparison, the present and the future stood for ‘recovery’, ‘hope’, ‘healing’, and the promise of national ‘resurrection’.²⁴ On his sixtieth birthday, in 1928, one of the celebratory articles went as far as to state that “national rebirth and regeneration [had] started with him at the nadir of the national tragedy”.²⁵ On the twentieth anniversary of his entry into Budapest, in 1939, a journalist emphasized again that Horthy “had dragged the nation from a catastrophic abyss to the level of prosperous life”, as “he carefully and infallibly steered the ship of the state amongst dangerous whirlpools towards the harbor.”²⁶ Political consolidation and the territorial revision of the peace treaty were linked causally to Horthy’s entry into Budapest. This interpretation, emphasizing the break with the recent past, the notion of the symbolic beginning of a new era, and the struggle between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ were central components of the Regent’s cultic persona. Moreover, such references were increasing in frequency while, simultaneously, religious symbols beyond the idea of a symbolic new beginning were proliferating.²⁷

As Figure 1 clearly shows, the annual frequency of this element of his image was increasingly coming to the fore. The trend was similar for Horthy’s birthdays.²⁸ Naturally,

23 It is important to note that the scapegoating was not concrete. Thus, Károlyi or Kun were rarely mentioned in the articles published on the anniversaries concerning Horthy. The collapse of Hungary was usually expressed through images, such as crucifixion, slavery, humiliation, etc. Turbucz, “Anti-Bolschewismus,” 218–21.

24 Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 70–6, 146–54, 221–48.

25 *Nemzeti Újság*, 17 June 1928, 1.

26 *Esti Kurir*, 16 November 1939, 5.

27 Horthy was sometimes portrayed as a ‘national’, ‘political’ Messiah, but this was not an integral element of his image. It was especially frequent right after the collapse and less prominent following the period of consolidation during the 1920s. *Halasi Újság*, 3 March 1920, 1; *Szózat*, 2 March 1920, 4; *Új Nemzedék*, 18 November 1919, 2–3.

28 I analyzed the content of articles published on Horthy’s birthdays and namedays to identify the constituent elements of his image. I tried to select a representative sample of the dailies according to their political affiliations. For a full list of the publications studied, see the Sources at the end of the present article. As a result, right-wing extremist, national, conservative, liberal and socialdemocrat political dailies were analyzed. The number of articles gradually increased. On his birthdays, fifteen–twenty articles were published each year before 1934. The number rose

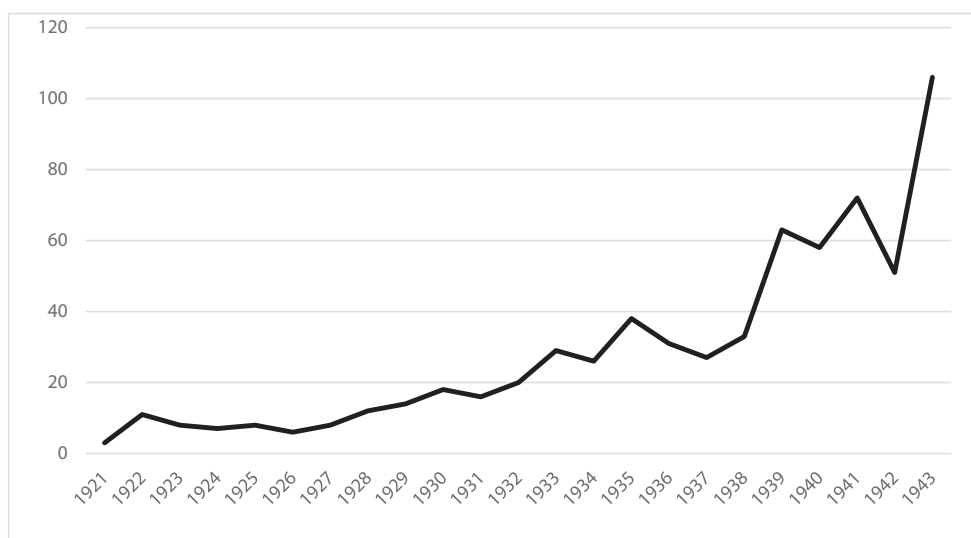


Figure 1 The number of mentions per annum of a new era's symbolic beginning in articles published on the occasion of Horthy's name-days

newsreels, propaganda films, radio programs, history textbooks, biographies, flyers, and other publications also disseminated the concept of 'national resurrection' and 'national salvation'.²⁹ The explanation for this tendency is the fact that the Horthy cult peaked during World War II, gaining dominance especially towards the last years of the regime named after his person. This trend was reflected in every aspect of how the cult was constructed: the number of biographies, paintings, portraits, and other representations was also increasing significantly.³⁰

The chosen leader

In order to bolster his leadership, Horthy was frequently depicted as a chosen leader, selected by God, blessed, and sent to lead the Hungarian nation towards 'a better future'. In these contexts, his 'deeds' appeared as the fulfilment of the will of divine providence, as is due to an envoy of God.³¹

from twenty-nine in 1935 to ninety in 1942. In 1943, when Miklós Horthy was seventy-five years old, onehundred and fifty-nine articles were published. The numbers showed a similarly increasing tendency on his namedays. Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 324–25, 347, 366; Turbucz, "Miklós Horthy in Poland," 294.

29 For a few examples, see: Turbucz, "Miklós Horthy in Poland", 295–96.

30 Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 215–61, 271–84, 341, 356–65.

31 On this phenomenon, see: Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, 40–94.

Providing an example for the above notion, a journalist in a pro-government daily stated in 1939 that “[e]very Hungarian person, the whole nation is grateful to the Almighty, because he gave us a providential Leader during the most critical years. The legendary Leader leads his nation riding his white horse, to justice, to resurrection.”³² This language recurs in publications, reaching new heights as in the following quote from 1943: “The Lord of the Creation [...] was generous with him, when the Lord entrusted him with a mission that merits a great, strong, extraordinary character. Horthy was selected as the new founder of the homeland. He rebuilt a destroyed country and created a home for Hungarians. And Providence was most generous in giving him to us in such a way as to fulfil this mission.”³³ Additionally, God was often depicted as a ‘national God’, ‘the God of the Hungarians’. The propaganda tended to emphasize, modelled on the relevant chapters of the Old Testament, that there was a particular relationship between the Hungarian nation and the God of the Hungarians.³⁴ This interpretation highlighted the chosen character of both the leader and the nation. In this light, the Hungarian nation was never definitively forsaken in the course of its history because ‘our’ God always took care of ‘us’. In this series of historical events, Horthy was chosen and sent to the Hungarians in 1919, in a moment of crisis, to save them and lead them towards a better future. Ferenc Szombathelyi, the chief of staff of the Hungarian Army, on 6 December 1943 in a solemn speech on the Regent’s name day went so far as to argue that “[h]is life is a message from God: do not fear! He is here, whom I sent to you in hard times. He is here, who has already led you from the desert. He will lead you through dangers a second time [a reference to World War II—D. T.]. You only have to hold on strongly to his blessed hand.”³⁵ The image of the providential leader remained connected with the concept of national ‘rebirth’ and ‘resurrection’. It strengthened the references to the ‘promised land’, which symbolized in mythical thought the ‘paradise’, the place without misery and disorder and was equated with a prosperous, national-Christian and enlarged—if not fully restituted—future Hungary.³⁶

References to Horthy as an envoy of God appeared only ten times between 1925 and 1936 in the articles in our sample published on his birthdays. After 1937, however, such references were more frequent. For instance, the sample contains thirty-eight instances in 1938 alone, and forty-seven in 1941. The tendency was fairly similar on the occasion of his name days.³⁷

32 *Esti Magyarország*, 5 December 1939, 1.

33 *8 Órai Újság*, 17 June 1943, 1.

34 Gerő, *Imagined History*, 260–63.

35 *Vitézek Lapja*, 11 December 1943, 1.

36 Szabó, *Politikai idegen*, 190–91; Turbucz, “Miklós Horthy in Poland,” 297.

37 Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 331–2, 335–6., 352–3, 355, 367–8.

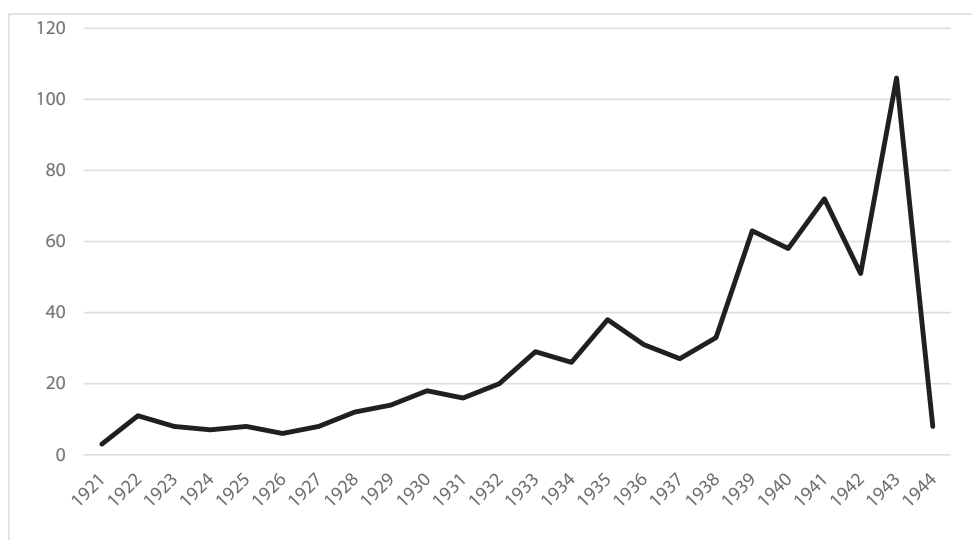


Figure 2 The frequency of the notion that Horthy is the envoy of God in articles published on his birthdays

The leader's two bodies

Ernst H. Kantorowicz's study about the medieval ruler's two bodies has been invoked also in the context of modern-day leader cults.³⁸ This helps fathom their mystical and religious character, less apparent in secular eras.³⁹ The mediaeval theory rooted in the Christian tradition proposed that rulers possessed not only their physical bodies but also a second one in the form of the realm as a whole, with their health directly connected to each other.⁴⁰

Similarly, modern political leaders were often depicted as personifications of their nations.⁴¹ In the case of Horthy's cult, there is evidence to suggest that the aforementioned Christian tradition did not disappear with secularization, but survived in a significantly changed context and with its content altered. The analysis of the relevant texts emphasizes that Horthy was seen as embodying eternal Hungarian virtues, such as valor, gallantry, patriotism, and Christianity. Thus, he constituted what could only be called a 'perfect' national leader, as the propagandists stressed.⁴²

38 Plamper, *The Stalin Cult*, xvii–xviii, 241.

39 Apor, "Communist Leader Cults," 60–1.

40 Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*.

41 Plamper, *The Stalin Cult*, xvii–xviii.

42 Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 31–2, 153–4.

In a festive album, edited by Ferenc Herczeg, a conservative author of the era, the key sentence concerning the leader's mystical body was that "[t]he people, if they see Miklós Horthy, see themselves in a golden mirror. They see their own national qualities in his face and they are proud of their nation."⁴³ The leader was thus equated with the nation, and the nation *was* in fact the leader, in whom "the community of the nation is visibly embodied".⁴⁴ The daily *Magyarország* exalted Horthy as the personification of the true national unity, the historical will, and the power of national life.⁴⁵ Similarly, Prime Minister Miklós Kállay (1942–1944) stated in a solemn speech delivered five years later, on 18 June 1943 that "the power and the soul of the eternal nation are embodied by Miklós Horthy, thus when we celebrate him we celebrate ourselves, when we greet him, we make a confession to the nation."⁴⁶ In this vein, the celebration of the nation and the leader were fused together through social practices.⁴⁷

The constituent element of his image, according to which Horthy was the personification of the nation, gradually gained salience between 1937 and 1944. Earlier, the sample of speeches and articles contained such hyperboles no more than ten times in any given year, but they were becoming increasingly more frequent in the final years of the regency. The trope appeared no less than thirty-five times in 1938, thirty-seven times in 1941 and an astounding eighty-three times in 1943. The trend was similar for pieces commemorating the Regent's name day.⁴⁸

The mystical second body attributed to Horthy represented the 'eternal' Hungarian nation, its timeless virtues, qualities, and its unbreakable historical continuity. This placed Horthy on a special pedestal due to the character of Hungarian nationalism: representing the unity of a fragmented nation. In the wake of the Trianon Peace Treaty, Hungarians were living disjointedly in several countries. Horthy's cultic figure carried the central message that the lost territories and thus the nation could be reunited. If Horthy had embodied only the state, in the mold of the kings and emperors of the Middle Ages, Hungarians who suddenly found themselves living outside the new borders would have been expelled from the nation. Horthy, however, did not personify the post-Trianon, rump territory of Hungary: his cult was structured around the vision of a 'brighter future', of national 'resurrection', rather than the grief and humiliation associated with the peace treaty. This was true notwithstanding the numerous references to the 'crucified' country, Hungary's

43 Herczeg, ed., *Horthy Miklós*, 10.

44 *Vitézek Lapja*, 1 December 1938, 1.

45 *Magyarország*, 18 June 1938, 2.

46 *Pesti Hírlap*, 19 June 1943, 1.

47 Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power*, 16.

48 Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 331–2, 335–6, 352–3, 355, 367–8.

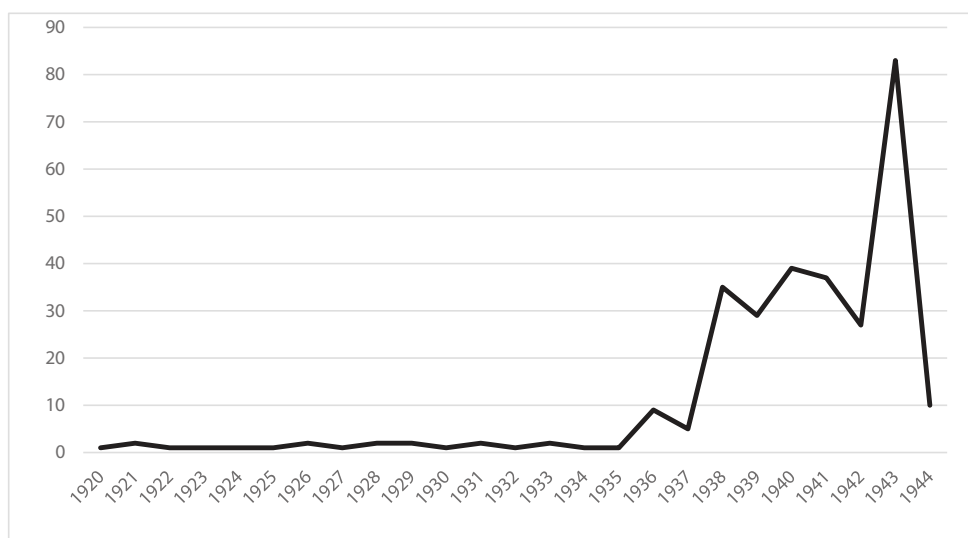


Figure 3 The frequency of the message that Horthy embodied the nation in the articles published on his birthdays

agony, and humiliation. These instances, however, were complemented by mentions of Horthy leading the nation from darkness to ‘salvation’. To emphasize this mythical dynamic, Horthy was always portrayed visually with the image of historical Hungary. There was no exception to this rule.⁴⁹ Associated with and representing national greatness, through Horthy every Hungarian became a member of this mystical body, as long as they confirmed their membership in the national body politic.⁵⁰ The mystical second body of Miklós Horthy thus represented an increasingly prominent aspect of his cult as a leader: strengthening its mystical, irrational, and religious character.⁵¹

The role of the churches in the construction of the leadership cult

The previous chapters analyzed Horthy’s cult from the perspective of the secular agents of mythmaking. Their group included political and military leaders, journalist, authors and others. At the same time, the spiritual elites of the established churches have not been discussed so far, though they were direct participants of numerous rituals around the person and the image of the Regent.

⁴⁹ Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, vii, xix.

⁵⁰ Apor, “Communist Leader Cults,” 60.

⁵¹ Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 31–2, 279–83.

The representatives of the churches regularly attended celebrations of anniversaries. The schools that the churches maintained also marked these days. From the mid-twenties onwards, camp services were held every year on the same occasions. On these days, the churches would send delegations to declare their loyalty to Horthy. The archbishops and bishops would even issue detailed instructions on how to celebrate. In their preaching, the priests used carefully selected symbols and motifs from core tenets of Christianity, such as the prophecies, the Passion of the Christ, etc., deploying them so as to strengthen the leader's legitimacy.⁵²

Representatives of the established churches also frequently emphasized the close relationship between God and Horthy. According to László Ravasz, a Calvinist bishop, Horthy was governing Hungary with the help of the Holy Spirit, referencing a biblical locus ("Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit", Zechariah 4:6). Ravasz stressed that God had sent the Holy Spirit, which is greater and stronger than empires, to the Regent to guide his decisions. Thereby, the Regent had become a 'blessed instrument' of the Holy Spirit.⁵³

The linkages with the Holy Spirit also highlighted the chosen character of the leader, but the "original" core concept according to which Horthy was chosen, blessed, and sent by God to save the nation, retained its prominence in the sacral imagery. As an envoy of God, the leader was seen as fulfilling the will of divine Providence. This implied a special relationship between the two parties. During the anniversaries, many priests, such as Lajos Baliko, Sándor Kiss, János Folba, István Hász, and Elemér Soltész, sanctified Horthy's leadership with reference to the divine will. As in other contexts, his mission was defined as leading the nation to the 'promised land'.⁵⁴ In 1932, for instance, Baliko argued that the Regent had been chosen with reference to verses 20–21 of Psalm 68.⁵⁵ The propaganda emphasized that Hungarians had a caring God, who attended to his chosen people. In 1930, Elemér Soltész, a Calvinist pastor, justified Horthy's supreme position by referring to verse 4 of Psalm 42. He added that his audience also had to recognize "in Horthy's mission the caring and blessing hands of God." God is on "our" side, so "if God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).⁵⁶ Naturally, Roman Catholics disseminated the same message. István Hász announced on 6 December

52 Turbucz, "Átpolitizált vallásosság."

53 *Dunamelléki Egyházkerületi Közlöny*, 1 March 1930, 9–10.

54 For instances of this, see: *8 Órai Újság*, 19 June 1936, 7; *Budapesti Hírlap*, 19 June 1934, 1, and 19 June 1935, 7; MNL OL, K 612, a) 1929–1944, 18 June 1930, 5; 19 June 1933, 10–13; 18 June 1934, 12–13; 18 June 1938, 4–7; 6 December 1939, 5–6; 19 June 1940, 5; 6 December 1940, 2–3; 18 June 1941, 2–3; 6 December 1941, 8–9, 18 June 1942, 5–7.

55 *8 Órai Újság*, 18 June 1932, 5.

56 MNL OL, K 612, a) 1929–1944, 6 December 1930, 2.

1936 that “God gave him, God sent him to you during the darkness of your life so that you have a guiding star.”⁵⁷

During World War II, the notion of the Regent as divinely chosen was intimately connected to the war propaganda.⁵⁸ In 1941, István Hász justified Hungary’s entry into the war in this way: “We have to turn to divine Providence with deep gratitude, which, after saving Hungary from communism in 1919 through our Regent, after regaining lost territories, [now] crowns our Regent with the triumph of the crusade.”⁵⁹ The following year, Hász asked God to bless ‘our crusade’ to protect Hungary, his homeland, Europe and Christianity.⁶⁰ On the tenth anniversary of Horthy’s ‘reign’, István Hász already lauded Horthy as a leader who would know the way to the ‘promised land’, implying, of course, the promise of regaining lost territories.

Horthy’s leadership cult had come full circle. On 22 February 1920, the radical Awakening Hungarians’ Association (*Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete* – ÉME) held a rally in Veszprém. Sándor Tihanyi Kiss, a Calvinist pastor, the local leader stated there, perhaps for the first time in a line that would grow ever longer, that Hungarians “are looking for a leader” who “will lead us to the promised land of glorious Hungary through wandering in the desert.”⁶¹ The idea that Miklós Horthy was chosen by God to save and lead the nation to the ‘promised future’ gained increasing prominence during the 1920s and 1930s and, eventually, became a central tenet of the cult.⁶²

A further frequently employed notion was that of the symbolic new beginning, the ‘resurrection’ or ‘rebirth’ of the nation. However, due to their sensitive connotations, religious personalities seldom used the words ‘resurrection’ and ‘rebirth’. Instead, they would refer to the ‘night’, followed by a new ‘dawn’ or ‘morning’. This preserved, but also rendered somewhat indirect the parallel between the Messiah and Horthy. In this vein, Henrik Geduly, a Lutheran bishop, declared in 1930 that in the wake of World War I ‘a great light’ had appeared—drawing a parallel with a biblical locus (Isaiah 9:12).⁶³ By referencing one of the prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, he emphasized that a new historical period had begun in Hungary in 1919. Retrospectively, the weeklies close to the Reformed Church also depicted 1919 as a symbolic beginning.⁶⁴ Horthy’s persona and his mission were thereby inserted into the mythotopoi about the struggle between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ or ‘life’ and

57 MNL OL, K 612, a) 1929–1944, 7 December 1936, 4.

58 Turbucz, “Anti-Bolschewismus,” 227–9.

59 *Nemzeti Újság*, 7 December 1941, 3.

60 *8 Órai Újság*, 18 June 1942, 6.

61 *Veszprémi Hírlap*, 24 February 1920, 1–2.

62 *Budapesti Hírlap*, 19 June 1935, 7.

63 *Pesti Hírlap*, 2 March 1930, 2; MNL OL, K 612, a) 1929–1944, 1 March 1930, 15–17.

64 For an example, see: *Reformátusok Lapja*, 2 March 1930, 49–50.

‘death’. Late in the period of the Regency, in 1940, Sándor Raffay, himself a Lutheran bishop, employed the most important elements of the official Horthy image in a concentrated and, therefore, representative passage. He positioned himself among the faithful, stating the following:

“We are praying for a man who stands above us, we are praying for a man whom God gave us in a moment of crisis. We are expressing our gratitude to him who reigns rightfully with the fear of God above the people. In the Hungarian night, his appearance was a morning light [...]. When Horthy entered our community, the forsaken nation awoke from both desolation and humiliation [...]. As the silence of the cloudless morning, so has trustful hope spread through the life and soul of the nation.”⁶⁵

There are no instances of the Regent being depicted as the ‘Messiah’ in the sermons reviewed for this paper. However, he was transformed into a political and national ‘savior’, who healed and saved the nation, achieving the sought-after ‘national resurrection’.

It is also important to highlight the role of Jewish Hungarian spiritual leaders. They did not refrain from contributing to the construction of the cult. On the tenth anniversary of Horthy’s ‘reign’, for instance, the Hungarian Jews expressed their “gratitude” for his “extraordinary deeds in saving and recovering our humiliated beloved homeland.”⁶⁶ In 1938, in sharp contrast to the first anti-Jewish Law, Rabbi Simon Hevesi underlined that the person of Miklós Horthy “was given to the Hungarian nation by God.” He depicted the Regent as the “supreme protector of the constitution” and the “liberator of the nation”, who had “created a new Hungary after the lost war.”⁶⁷ One of the Jewish weeklies, *Egyenlőség* [Equality] observed the promulgation of the first anti-Jewish Law, but portrayed the Regent as “the supreme patron of the nation”, whom the Jews ask to provide protection against anti-Semitism.⁶⁸ This demonstrates that the image of the Regent, who had an important role in legislation, was nevertheless separated from the anti-Semitic discourse.⁶⁹ Disenfranchised Jews celebrated Horthy during World War II. Sándor Büchler, a rabbi in Keszthely, praised him in 1942 as “the third founder of Hungary”, who “as an envoy of God is

65 8 *Órai Újság*, 1 March 1940, 2.

66 *Egyenlőség*, 1 March 1930, 8.

67 *Egyenlőség*, 23 June 1938, 1–2.

68 *Egyenlőség*, 15 June 1938, 3.

69 As Regent, Horthy had no absolute right of veto. Between 1920 and 1937, he had the authority to return a bill for consideration once only. Law XIX of 1937 expanded his prerogative. From then on, the Regent could return a bill to Parliament twice for reconsideration, and was allowed to delay its entry into effect by a period of up to twelve months. Romsics, *Hungary*, 186–7.

standing guard over a brighter Hungarian future.”⁷⁰ The main new Jewish religious weekly launched in the wake of anti-Semitic legislation still asserted that the Regent will would “take care of every member of the family of Hungarians.”⁷¹ On 1 March 1940, Rabbi Hevesi also continued to stress “the loyal devotion of Hungarian Jews to the Regent.”⁷²

What might be the explanation for these declarations of loyalty? One of the most important functions of a leader cult is to integrate society, which can be achieved only through an oversimplified image of the leader. By reducing complex processes to simple issues and by creating dichotomies, the entrepreneurs of the cult create a sense of community and belonging to promote the co-optation and integration of society.⁷³ In order to preserve this integrative potential in the context of the Hungarian nation, Horthy’s figure was not linked to the anti-Jewish laws. Thus, anti-Semitism did not become an integral element of his image. Nevertheless, Horthy considered himself an anti-Semite. He agreed that the ‘solution’ to the so-called ‘Jewish Question’ was extending the scope of discrimination (by passing anti-Jewish laws). However, he did not give voice to his anti-Semitic views in public speeches, which may have been another reason why his persona did not come to incorporate anti-Semitic components.⁷⁴

Conclusion

The Horthy cult was a symbolic response to the critical political conditions after World War I. According to its main message, the Regent had proven himself to be the only one capable of restoring national glory.

As the above analysis has demonstrated, the concept of the Hungarian nation in the context of the new cult was centered on the leader, positioned as the ‘father of the nation’. His imagined figure was the pillar of the imagined national community, a ‘great family’, whose members were subordinated to him. The chosen character of the caring leader emphasized that there was a close relationship between God and the leader, the envoy, whose mission was to fulfil the will of divine providence. In this setting, Hungarians (re-)emerged as a chosen people and historical Hungary, ever to be reconstituted, functioned as a kind of ‘promised land’. Religion thus contributed to the reinforcement of the national identity by depicting the nation as a

70 *Magyar Zsidók Lapja*, 25 June 1942, 2.

71 *Magyar Zsidók Lapja*, 17 June 1943, 1.

72 *Múlt és Jövő*, March 1940, 47.

73 Goltz, *Hindenburg*, 6; Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power*, 11, 69.

74 Sakmyster, *Hungary’s Admiral*, 209–10, 228–9, 250–1.

privileged community of the 'chosen people'.⁷⁵ Its history metamorphosed into a struggle between 'good' and 'evil' with the roles being predetermined by the eschatological outlook of the cult around the leader and the 'synoptic' nationalism with which it was fused. This fusion was all the easier as both Horthy's cult and irredentist nationalism sought to re-establish national pride and strengthen national identity.

The implicit explanation about the dissolution of historical Hungary, however, was not correct, since it refused to consider the deeper causes, and as a result "it could provide no cure, only a form of therapy."⁷⁶ The insufficient diagnosis led to an instance of magical thinking: an imagined figure, a public construct was expected to 'heal' the nation, restore national glory, and 'reconquer' lost territories. As a result, a gap opened up between the genuine role and personality of Horthy as Regent and his highly manufactured image. As Miklós Zeidler observes, "this attitude considered the situation created by the Treaty of Trianon to be unacceptable and that it would change because it had to change. The 'good people' would support Hungary in this providential manifestation of 'justice' while the 'bad people' would be enemies. Such simple and effective pronouncements of irredentism [and the religious motifs and symbols used in Horthy's image—D. T.] were suitable to influence public opinion but were unable to create a well-informed and thoughtful public."⁷⁷

Beyond establishing its role and function in Hungarian politics, Horthy's cult can be productively compared to other interwar instances of charismatic leadership. To what extent were these secular cults quasi-religious? How did religion, especially Christianity, influence these cults? Every leader cult appropriated religious elements in order to create the image of a charismatic leader, but the extent was not the same. It varied from cult to cult or, more precisely, from political system to political system. The nature of leader cults depends on a series of factors that contributors to the field mostly seem to agree on. They include the degree of political pluralism, the extent of media pluralism, the degree of political control over the media, (if it exists) the role of political ideology, and how much the ideology defines the leader's image, the scale of mass mobilization and the relative prevalence of the leader principle, the so-called *Führerprinzip*.⁷⁸ Democratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian regimes, not to mention hybrid political systems, offered different frameworks for leader cults. For instance, the cult of Masaryk in Czechoslovakia, a fairly democratic state, the cult of Hindenburg in the Weimar Republic, and Hitler's cult in Nazi Germany cannot be equated. An analysis of the images of these interwar leaders reveals, however, that despite real differences, the agents constructing the cults all

75 For an analysis of this phenomenon, see: Smith, *Chosen Peoples*.

76 Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision*, 254.

77 Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision*, 254.

78 Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 24–52, 308–15.

appropriated religious elements from Christianity. Notions such as ‘national salvation’, ‘national resurrection’, ‘national savior’, evocations of the chosen leader and the chosen nation, the struggle between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ were frequently incorporated into the representations of charismatic leaders.⁷⁹

Given these shared characteristics, how are we to understand the claim that the leader cults of interwar Europe cannot be equated? The listed religious elements of the leaders’ images existed in different political frameworks and appeared to different degrees. For instance, the term ‘political religion’ introduced by Emilio Gentile,⁸⁰ is especially productive in the analysis of totalitarian regimes, first and foremost, in the case of Nazi Germany and the national socialist ideology.⁸¹ ‘Political religion’, a secular system of symbols, myths, and rituals, assumed the functions of traditional religions in this instance. Hitler’s cult was an integrative element of this system. The central figure of Nazism was certainly Adolf Hitler, who as a chosen leader would ‘heal’ the German nation, lead them from ‘darkness’ to ‘paradise’, with all of these mystical allusions implying the restoration of ‘national glory’.⁸² Another type of ‘political religion’ was represented by Italian fascism, in which Mussolini took the place of the leader chosen by providence itself.⁸³ Such instances of ‘political religion’ represent an extreme form of relations between politics and religion (Christianity), because they are exclusive and hostile to traditional religion. Other types of the religion-politics linkage exhibit different, less exclusive characteristics.⁸⁴

In an important essay, Juan J. Linz described an alternative to the above, totalitarian variant as ‘politicized religion’.⁸⁵ He argued that the politicization of religion may, under certain circumstances, occur in authoritarian regimes. He observed that “[o]n the one side, there are some authoritarian regimes that reject individualism and the values of liberal society and, on the other, there are certain manifestations of cultural nationalism in the process of nation-building or the assertion of national identity.”⁸⁶ The traditional churches cooperate with the representatives of the politi-

79 As discussed in the introduction, see esp.: footnotes 1 and 5.

80 Gentile, “Politics as Religion,” xiv; Gentile, “Political Religion,” 30.

81 See, for instance: Gentile, “The Sacralisation of Politics,” 18–55; Gentile, “Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion,” 326–75; Gentile, “Political Religion,” 19–32; Babík, “Nazism as a Secular Religion,” 375–96; Steigmann-Gall, “Nazism and the Revival of Political Religion Theory”; Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*; Cattaruzza, “Introduction,” 1–18.

82 Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth*.

83 Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*; Melograni, “The Cult of the Duce.”

84 Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 29–31; Balogh, “Totalitarizmus és politikai vallások,” 75–85; Voegelin, “A politikai vallások,” 64–71.

85 Linz, “The Religious Use,” 104–13.

86 Linz, “The Religious Use,” 107.

cal power, and vice-versa. This makes it possible and even implies that the religious (Christian) symbols and motifs are used for political aims, for example, in the construction of a leader cult. In this case, the leader cult becomes based on 'politicized religion'. Francoist Spain and Poland during the regime of Piłsudski are characteristic instances of 'politicized religion'.⁸⁷ Linz's model seems to capture several important aspects of the Horthy era. Needless to say, cooperation between the state and the traditional churches was a more complex phenomenon in Hungary, of which only one layer, the leader cult around the person of Horthy is analyzed in this paper.⁸⁸ Yet, the religious symbolism surveyed here undoubtedly contributed to the justification of Horthy's leadership and played an important role in the construction of his cult. Between 1919 and 1944, there existed an 'intimate' relationship between politics and religion. The state sought to cooperate with the churches to gain legitimacy by relying on religion. Religious symbols and rites were appropriated for political aims. As a result, these symbols came to occupy a prominent place in public discourse, becoming dominant in several aspects.⁸⁹ For the churches, cooperating with the state appeared to hold advantages, because the state was granting them a privileged status in society. The memory of the atheistic and internationalist Bolshevik dictatorship of 1919 and the shock of Trianon, against the background of the collapse of historical Hungary, only facilitated this cooperation.⁹⁰

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87 Linz, "Church and State"; Callahan, "The Evangelization of Franco's »New Spain«," 491–503; Hein, *Der Piłsudski-Kult*.

88 Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 29–31; Turbucz, "Átpolitizált vallásosság."

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