

Theses of the Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Szabolcs Kovács

Catholicism – Socialism – Disillusionment

László Bányai (1907-1981)

Dissertation Supervisor:

Prof. Dr. János M. Rainer

ESZTERHÁZY KÁROLY UNIVERSITY

Doctoral School of History

Eger, 2022

1. Antecedents of the research

László Bányai is one of the key figures of the 20th century Hungarian leftist movement in Romania. In the period between the two world wars and during the Second World War, as an illegal communist and secretary general of MADOSZ, he was considered a second-rate politician. In the autumn of 1944, he became a key player in the socialist integration of Hungarians in Romania and remained a leading politician until the late 1950s. He was one of the vice-presidents of the Hungarian People's Union from 1944 to 1952, with a brief interruption, and was appointed deputy minister of education for national education from 1950 to 1952 and from 1956 to 1959, and rector of Bolyai University, one of the country's Hungarian-language higher education institutions, from 1952 to 1956. Although he never came into open conflict with the official line of the Romanian Communist Party during his career, he was also disgraced in 1959 as the Hungarian educational network gradually withered away. He was first vice-president of the Institute of History in Bucharest, and later worked as a lecturer in history at the C. I. Parhon University. He died in Bucharest.

László Bányai's career traced the entire history of the communist movement in Romania. However, he was only rarely the subject of specific historical studies. He has been the subject of only very limited attention in historiography, although, he appears regularly in publications about the period. The exploration of the history of the Romanian communist movement before 1945, with particular reference to the Hungarian aspects, began in Hungary. In his 1968 work entitled *Forgószélben*, Dániel Csatári dealt in more detail with the activities of the former MADOSZ members, and then with the establishment of the Hungarian People's Alliance, in which he also touched on the person of László Bányai, whose work he assessed positively.

In the summer of 1989, Bányai's person was interpreted in a completely different way. In the same year, Péter Domokos Pál published in Budapest a rather subjective biography of the Transylvanian bishop Áron Márton, entitled *Rendületlenül*. In this work, Bányai appeared mainly in the context of the negotiations for border adjustments between Romania and Hungary after 1945. In Domokos's book, Bányai and other Hungarian communist leaders, among whom he singled out József Méliusz and János Demeter, are portrayed as models of treason against the homeland. After the fall of communism, Hungarian historiography in Romania began to address a number of topics that had been taboo before 1989. Thus, the history of the Hungarian People's Alliance has been reassessed, but it is also worth mentioning that the history of the National Association of Hungarian Workers (MADOSZ) has been reassessed more recently.

Ferenc Sz. Horváth in his work presented a group of young intellectuals who first grouped around the paper *Erdélyi Fiatalok*, then set out on their own and founded the marxist newslet:

Falvak Népe, and soon joined the *Korunk* and the illegal communist movement. In Horváth's work, Bányai's career is described in detail. János Főcze was the first to deal specifically with the young Bányai in a study. In his work, Főcze tried to describe Bányai's ideological "transformation", the process that led the young man, who had previously been Catholic, into the communist movement. It was Bányai's arrest in 1933 that led to his final commitment to the communist movement. In a later essay and book, he placed Bányai in his own generational group, presenting his life before 1935 and his activities primarily as general secretary of the MADOSZ, including his illegalist career during the Second World War. The novelty of Főcze's analysis is that he treated the activities of Bányai and the other leaders of MADOSZ empathetically, describing their social backgrounds and trying to find answers to the motivations behind their decisions, such as the most important question of how they became activists in the communist movement.

In the post-1990 literature on the Hungarian People's Alliance, there are controversial questions about the history and function of the organisation, but there is a general consensus about Bányai's person. László Bányai was the representative of the South Transylvanian faction within the organisation. There is unanimous agreement in the literature that he was a prominent representative of the left wing of the organisation and one of the main propagators of the official line of the RKP. In her work, Magdolna Tötössi has somewhat nuanced the role of László Bányai within the organisation, pointing out that in the period following Kurkó's removal, the 'pliable' policy of the "Bányai-Takács" party leadership resulted in a number of cultural concessions, such as the establishment of the Romanian State Theatre and the Romanian State Book Publishing House. While Ildikó Lipcsey did not deal with his role in any meaningful way, Tamás Lönhárt, Zoltán Mihály Nagy and Gábor Vincze unanimously outlined Bányai's outstanding role in the liquidation of the MNSZ and thus the independent Hungarian representation of interests in Romania. In his study, Gábor Vincze was somewhat biased towards the politician, describing him as "*the most unpopular member of the organisation's leadership*".

From the Hungarian side, only Gábor Vincze dealt with Bányai's activities in the 1950s in more detail, in his book *Illusions and Disappointments*, where he described Bányai's activities as Deputy Minister of Education and Rector of Bolyai University. In Vincze's work, Bányai was presented as an uncritical executor of the current party line. From the Romanian side, Liviu Pleșa also dealt with the same period, but his main focus was on Bányai's activities as a science politician and the investigations conducted against him by the Securitate. On the one hand, the author presented Bányai as an uncritical servant of the party line of the day, who played an active role in ensuring party influence over the scientific world. On the other hand, he also described in detail the interaction between the Securitate and Bányai, including the investigations and "overthrows" of Bányai, which suggest that Bányai was sometimes explicitly forced to make decisions.

2. Research aims

Bányai's life and activities can be seen as a specific minority adaptation strategy. As a member of a national minority, he tried to develop a strategy of coexistence with the majority nation within the constantly changing political framework. Bányai's career was far from ordinary. Although the line he followed, failed after 1989, there is no doubt that for several decades Bányai held positions in which he was to some extent a builder of Romanian nationality policy, although he was only able to act within the framework of the party-state system. Tracking his activities is also essential for a better understanding of the period. Bányai's political career can also be seen as a case study, providing an insight into the evolution of Romanian national politics.

I considered it a cardinal question to track Bányai's ideological transformation. In my view, the young Bányai's thinking was first deeply influenced by his social environment, elements of which accompanied him throughout his life. For example, the fact that he came from a sporadic region in southern Transylvania was a decisive factor in the fact that Bányai's thinking was completely devoid of nationalism and that living with the Romanian majority was natural for him until the end of his life. His upbringing was also the source of his Catholic convictions in his youth. The following milestones mark the course of Bányai's career: Catholicism - Transylvanianism - Popular Front (during his activities in the MADOSZ) - Stalinism - Reform Communism. It is also peculiar to follow Bányai's career from the point of view of his attitude to the state power. Bányai was essentially the only one who survived the communist persecutions between the two world wars and during the Second World War, and the internal party showdowns after 1945, without serious consequences. However, the epilogue of his life is that, before his death, he became completely disillusioned with the system he had helped to build.

His career, which spanned the greater part of the 20th century, took him through the most important milestones in the history of the era, to which Bányai tried to adapt as circumstances and opportunities allowed. But his life and his journey are also a failure: a failure of a particular attempt to adapt.

3. Research methods and sources

The primary source base used in my work was the personal legacy of László Bányai. To the best of my knowledge, this can be found in four places. The backbone of the legacy is kept in the archives of the Csíki Székely Múzeum. It is supplemented by a collection of documents in the Ráday Archives of the Dunamelléki Reformed Church District, the Archives of the Institute of Political History and the National Archives of the Hungarian National Archives (all three in

Budapest). It is worth mentioning that there is very little overlap between the four parts of the legacy, as they contain documents from different periods of his life. In order to make an objective interpretation of the material found in the estate, it was of course necessary to use control sources. In doing so, I carried out research in Csíkszereda, Kolozsvár and Bucharest, using primarily the material of the institutions where Bányai worked during his life. Thus, at the Harghita County branch of the Romanian State Archives, I searched the records of the Roman Catholic High School in Csíkszereda, where Bányai was a teacher between 1930 and 1933. In the Central Historical Archives in Bucharest, I looked through two groups of sources: the records of the court proceedings against him between 1933 and 1937 and the fonds of the Hungarian People's Association. These sources were supplemented by the collection of the Romanian State Archives in the Cluj County branch, which includes the records of the People's Court in Cluj and the records of the Bolyai University. Bányai was the rector of the latter institution from 1952 to 1956. Finally, the last group of sources are the surveillance files on László Bányai, most of which date back to the 1950s and are currently kept by the Securitate Archives Investigation Committee.

In my dissertation, I considered the examination of László Bányai's ideological development to be a central issue. I saw this as feasible primarily through an examination of his own writings. Bányai left a particularly rich legacy of publicistic activity. In the period between the two world wars and after 1945 he published a great deal in various newspapers. While before his commitment to socialism he published mainly in religious periodicals, poems and religious treatises, from the 1930s he became increasingly involved in public life. One of the stages of this was his approach to the *Erdélyi Fiatalok* and, following his radicalisation, his journalistic work in the now openly Marxist journals *Falvak Népe* and *Korunk*. After 1945, he published first in the official press organs of the Hungarian People's Alliance, *Világosság* and *Népi Egység*, then, after the dissolution of the MNSZ, in *Előre*, *Utunk* and, from its re-foundation in 1957, *Korunk*. The press is supplemented by periodicals, mainly related to MADOSZ, MNSZ and, in the second half of the 1950s, Bolyai University. I also include in this group of sources Bányai's own books: a collection of essays, three treatises intended as academic papers, and his two-volume biography.

In the course of my work I used the letters of Bányai, the most of them is preserved in the Csíki Székely Múzeum and the Ráday Archives, supplemented by the bequests of József Méliusz and Lajos Áprily, preserved in the Petőfi Literary Museum, which also contained letters from Bányai. Finally, the last large group of sources was an oral history collection. These interviews were conducted in the second half of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s by Gusztáv Molnár with political figures of the post-World War II period. Of these, I used in my dissertation the interviews with László Bányai, Nándor and Lőrinc Czikó, József Méliusz, Edgár Balogh, Ernő Gáll and István Lakatos. The interviews with people of the period were complemented by my own interview with

László Sándor Bányai on 24 September 2020 (via Skype), which provided valuable insights into Bányai's private life and thinking.

I must highlight in particular the problem of sources in relation to his educational activities. The main problem I have identified in this area is the fact that I have so far been unable to locate the records of the Ministry of Education. According to László Murvai himself, the records of the Ministry of Education, which were kept in the basement of the Ministry's building, were largely destroyed in the 1977 Bucharest earthquake. He also identified as a problem the fact that after 1977 staff without the necessary expertise worked in the archives of the institution. For this reason, I was able to make use of the documents that survived in his estate and, in part, his writings in various periodicals, for the purposes of Bányai's work as deputy minister. The Bányai legacy in the Archives of the Institute of Political History was particularly rich in this respect, but I also found related documents in the Bányai legacy in the Csíki Székely Múzeum and in the Ráday Archives of the Reformed Church District of Dunamellék. I have had more luck in tracking Bányai's activities as a rector, as the documents of Bolyai University have survived — more or less — and Bányai also preserved documents in his own estate, which are in the Ráday Archives and the Csíki Székely Múzeum, I also tried to examine Bányai's political activities during the period. To do this, I tried to look primarily at the documents of the party organisation in Cluj County, since Bányai was mainly active in Cluj until November 1956. However, here too I ran into obstacles. The archives of the Cluj county party organisation currently only contain documents from the period 1948-1950, and during this period Bányai's name is not mentioned once. However, the post-1950 records are completely missing, despite the fact that Stefano Bottoni's 2006 source publication still contains documents from this group of sources, which, moreover, including Bányai.

4. New scientific results

My thesis has enriched our knowledge in several ways. As far as I know, no comprehensive biography of the Hungarian party functionaries of the state socialist era in Romania has been written so far, the only exception being the biography of Lajos Jordáky by Róbert-István Antal, which he defended earlier this year.

Bányai's life and activities can be seen as a specific minority adaptation strategy. As a minority, he tried to develop a strategy of coexistence with the majority nation within the constantly changing political framework. Bányai's career was far from ordinary. Although the line he followed failed after 1989, there is no doubt that for several decades Bányai held positions in which he was to some extent a shaper of Romanian nationality policy, although he was only able to act within the framework of the party-state system. Mapping his activities is also essential for a better

understanding of the period. Bányai's political career can also be seen as a case study, providing an insight into the evolution of Romanian national politics.

5. List of publications

1. Kovács, Szabolcs: Bányai László közvádloi tevékenysége a kolozsvári népbíróságnál In: Rózsa, Sándor (szerk.) *Doktorandusz hallgatók VII. és VIII. Konferenciájának tanulmányai*, Eger, Magyarország, Líceum Kiadó, 2020. 209-226.
2. Kovács, Szabolcs: Bányai László és az impériumváltás értelmezése. *Múltunk*, Budapest, 2020. 67-101.
3. Kovács, Szabolcs: Bányai László a Magyar Népi Szövetségben. *Regio: Kisebbség, Kultúra, Politika, Társadalom*. Budapest, 2020. 103-142.
4. Kovács, Szabolcs: Erdélyi magyar értelmiségi a romániai elitben, 1951-1959: Bányai László a Közoktatásügyi Minisztériumban. In: Rainer, M. János (szerk.) *Elit és szubelit a Kádár-korszakban – közelítések: Magyarország a jelenkorban*. Pécs, Kronosz Kiadó, 2021. 278-317.