

Doctoral (PhD) theses

**„Jonah’s futile run” - The episcopal ministry of Imre
Révész Jr., with special focus on his political and
public role (1938-1949)**

Kinga Julianna Dezső

Supervisor: Dr. István Szabadi



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School of History and Ethnography

Debrecen, 2024

I. Objective of the Dissertation and Delimitation of the Topic

The process of narrowing down and precisely defining the topic of my doctoral dissertation has been a long journey, as engaging with the life's work of Imre Révész could serve as the subject of a researcher's entire career. The former church historian, church leader, and theologian-pastor left behind an outstanding and extensive body of work in every area of his activity, the entirety of which far exceeds the scope of a single doctoral dissertation. It was therefore necessary to identify the direction and the well-defined chronological period of his life's work that could serve as the topic of this dissertation.

Imre Révész held the position of church leader of the Reformed Church District of Tiszántúl between 1938 and 1949, a period that was marked by significant upheaval in terms of economic, political, and social changes. These developments naturally affected the functioning of the church district as well, and thus Imre Révész could not focus solely on the affairs of his church. During his episcopal ministry, he had to navigate several situations that required political involvement. As a historian lacking formal theological training, it was precisely this aspect of church history that captured my interest and helped in determining the specific topic. Therefore, the focus and goal of my dissertation was not simply to examine the functioning of the institution of church governance through the actions of Imre Révész, but to place greater emphasis on his political and public involvement. This is especially important because the examination of this topic has so far remained a gap in the history of the Reformed Church in Hungary. Révész himself expressed the significance of his episcopal work beyond church duties in his Confessions, where he stated that he was tasked with "intellectually and practically carrying the agonizing problem of the collapse of an old world and the slow construction of a new one, and representing the right conduct in this regard (...) with an attractive, exemplary force for others." This statement clearly refers to the trials and challenges he

faced during this transitional period. This is why I chose to research this segment of his life, as a detailed and comprehensive exploration of his episcopal work, as well as a thorough analysis and evaluation of his political and public roles—possibly through his personal documents—had not yet been conducted.

From 1938, Imre Révész had to perform his episcopal duties during the era marked by Governor Miklós Horthy, and it fell to him to reintegrate the dioceses of the reclaimed territories into the Reformed Church District of Tiszántúl. When the war front reached Debrecen, he provided assistance to the Jewish population during the deportations and to the civilian population during the bombings of Debrecen. Imre Révész was an active participant in this challenging period, and he was among the first to begin the rebuilding efforts. In late 1944, he offered the Oratorium of the Reformed College of Debrecen as a venue for the Provisional National Assembly, becoming not only its host but also a member. He also became part of the five-member city political committee and the committee responsible for proposing members of the Provisional National Government. Just as the transitional period of 1944-45 was a turning point in the governance and political organization of the country, it also marked a turning point in Imre Révész's episcopacy. From that point until the end of his episcopal service, he worked to find some form of balance between the church and the state and to bring the relationship between the two to a resting point. As a result of years of negotiations—following the resignation of László Ravasz—it ultimately fell to him, as the president-bishop of the Synod, to sign the agreement that defined the relationship between the Reformed Church in Hungary and the state until the regime change.

Numerous writings, both short and long (discussed in detail in the dissertation), have touched upon the aforementioned period and Révész's role in various matters, but none have comprehensively examined his episcopal work and various public roles. Earlier works are problematic because most followed the narrative of Marxist historiography in their assessments of Imre Révész's

episcopacy, either labeling him as a staunch believer in communist ideology or, conversely, positioning him on the far right due to his activities during the Horthy era (such as his possession of the Corvin Wreath or his participation in the burial of István Horthy). After the regime change, research began that aimed for greater objectivity, focusing on archival sources. However, some researchers who personally knew Révész lacked sufficient historical distance, and due to the sealed nature of some of the sources, no comprehensive analytical work covering his entire episcopal period could be produced.

Thus, the primary objective of my dissertation was to conduct this comprehensive analysis, primarily based on the sources that were sealed by Bishop Tibor Bartha for 50 years following Imre Révész's death in 1967. These sources became accessible for research in 2017, and my aim was also to analyze the documents within the estate that reflect on the public roles briefly outlined above and elaborated in detail in the dissertation, which have not been the subject of previous research. Among my goals was to shed light on his episcopal activity from the perspective through which he himself observed the events. Based on the documents in the estate, Imre Révész's lesser-known position on various roles and topics will likely emerge. The main goal of the dissertation was to reveal the complexity of Imre Révész's episcopal ministry and to find some explanation for the contradictions surrounding his character, with the aim of resolving these contradictions and producing a worthy analysis. Moreover, through my work, I wish to restore Imre Révész Jr. to the rightful place he deserves in Reformed church historiography, for it is no exaggeration to say that alongside László Ravasz—his mentor, colleague, and good friend—he was the other most significant Reformed bishop of the 20th century.

II. Methods used

The methodology of this dissertation, like most historical works, is primarily based on the analysis of primary sources. Using these sources, I aim to examine the various aspects of the bishop's activities, particularly those related to his involvement in public life, in chronological order and thematically.

The exploration of primary sources took place across several collections, and thus, in the initial phase of the work, the collection of archival and manuscript materials was the primary task. The main source base of the dissertation consists of a collection of documents placed under a 50-year embargo following the death of Imre Révész in 1967. Part of these documents is located in the Archives of the Reformed Church District of the Transibiscan Region (TtREL), and another part in the Manuscripts Collection of the Main Library of the Reformed Church District and College of the Transibiscan Region (TtREK). The materials found in the TtREL are labeled as "Confidential Documents of Imre Révész" and include records that Révész himself deemed important and confidential, documents he chose not to share publicly. The organized nature of his legacy reveals much about his personality: Révész himself grouped and filed the contents of these three boxes of materials according to issues he considered significant. Thus, his legacy reveals a systematic, precise scholar's mindset to the researcher. During my archival research, I had most of the documents related to his episcopal activities digitized, after which I created a detailed database to facilitate a systematic analysis. This database, structured on separate sheets, contains documents from both the TtREK and TtREL collections, listing three key pieces of information: reference number, a brief description of the document, and its date. The TtREK sheet contains 146 different documents, while the TtREL sheet lists 193, most of which consist of multiple pages, meaning the total volume of materials is at least double, if not triple, the recorded figures.

Beyond the legacy documents, which form the primary source base, I incorporated some additional control sources that are essential to illuminate various aspects of Révész's episcopacy. These include a few documents related to Révész Imre in the Hungarian National Archives (MNL OL) and the Gyula Ortutay papers found in the same archive, which offer valuable insights into the final years of Révész's life through their correspondence. Moreover, I utilized relevant documents from the Hungarian National Archives, Hajdú-Bihar County Archive (MNL HBVL), and the Manuscripts Collection of the University of Debrecen's University and National Library (DEENK Manuscripts Collection). I also requested all relevant documents from the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security Services that mention Révész Imre. However, very few of these proved useful for examining his time as bishop. A noteworthy primary source from his early years, although not directly relevant to his episcopacy, was a document I had digitized from the collection of the Bibliothèque Montpellier, Institut Protestant de Théologie. Imre Révész spent two semesters at the theological faculty of Montauban, a small town in southern France, during his theological studies. The successor institution is today's French Protestant Theological Institute, which has campuses in Paris and Montpellier, and it was in this latter location's collection that I found documents related to his enrollment.

As for secondary sources, I aimed to include as many relevant books, book chapters, and studies as possible that contain assessments of Révész's episcopacy. In addition, I collected all available press materials concerning Révész's time as bishop, which contain relevant information and are accessible via the Arcanum database.

Based on the gathered secondary sources, I primarily examined which aspects of previous research were lacking and what needed to be revised in light of the legacy and archival documents. Regarding press materials, I studied how the figure of the bishop was portrayed in contemporary media, and what news

appeared in various regional, national, and international Hungarian press outlets reflecting on his public life. During this analysis, I proceeded chronologically and did not rely on control sources, focusing solely on the published articles to trace Révész's 11-and-a-half-year tenure as bishop. The full examination covers not only the press's portrayal of his public and political roles but also all other mentions of him. However, as processing this involved around 1,000 articles, and not all were closely tied to his episcopacy, this chapter represents a summary of the complete collection, focusing primarily on aspects related to his public and political engagements, as aligned with the dissertation's topic.

In analyzing the primary sources, I aimed to draw conclusions that would provide a deeper understanding of Imre Révész's episcopal activities. The construction of the database during the initial phase of the research was crucial in this regard, making it easier to navigate the documents from his legacy.

Following an outline of the relevant literature and prior research, the dissertation presents the events related to Révész Imre's episcopal activities in a fundamentally chronological order. I considered it important to briefly discuss the period preceding his assumption of the bishopric, which highlights the influences he encountered as a child during his primary and secondary education, as a young adult in theology school, and later as a pastor in the Árpád Square congregation in Debrecen, where he first served as a parish pastor. The following chapter is dedicated to the process of his election as bishop, examining the anticipation leading up to the event, the circumstances of the election, and the "prophetic reluctance" that eventually gave way to accepting God's will. After the chapter on press representation, I divided the analysis of his episcopal activities into three major chronological periods: 1938-1944, 1944-1945, and 1945-1949, which each represent distinct phases of his time as bishop. Within these periods, I aimed to answer questions related to his public engagements through thematic analysis. The final chapter is dedicated to the documents of his resignation.

III. Scientific results of the dissertation

The first important result of this dissertation is that by collecting secondary sources that in some way discussed Imre Révész's episcopal activities, I was able to form a comprehensive picture of the directions previous research had taken. During the analysis, I identified three main groups: obituaries, primary source-type works, and writings from before and after the regime change. The subsection on obituaries reveals that although these writings are not analytical, they are significant because they provide insight into how Révész Imre was perceived by his contemporaries. The primary source-type works, consisting of his own memoirs and a war chronicle, offer reliable information about Révész Imre's role in post-war Hungary's reconstruction and the public and political aspects of his episcopal activities. There are notable differences in how Révész Imre is evaluated in pre- and post-regime change literature. Writings from the socialist period often approached the subject from a Marxist perspective, portraying the church leadership during the Horthy era negatively while idealizing the socialist system. In contrast, post-regime change research, especially the works of Zoltán Fürj and János Tibori, provides a more detailed and objective view of Révész's activities, relying on archival sources and historical context.

Another key outcome was the comprehensive outline of Révész's entire life up until his episcopacy, covering his family background, education, and early church career. These aspects helped understand the influences he encountered during his youth and how they shaped his later decisions as a bishop. After completing his studies, Révész Imre, during his teaching and pastoral career, produced scholarly works that remain significant sources for Hungarian church history. His intellectual legacy and scholarly contributions secure him a prominent place in the history of the Reformed Church in Hungary.

The next chapter aimed to examine in detail the circumstances surrounding Révész Imre's election as bishop, considering various aspects of the events (such as preliminary expectations, contemporaries' letters, Révész's position, etc.), which refine and in many cases supplement the previously known and published information. In July 1938, after the death of Károly Maklár, Révész Imre received numerous letters in which his contemporaries assured him of their support and often urged him to accept the bishopric. These letters provide important insights into the church and social relations of the time, especially as many contain confidential information and personal emotions, and these documents are part of the aforementioned Révész legacy.

Before analyzing the archival sources, I gathered press materials generated during Révész Imre's episcopal activities, and through their analysis, I sought to show how different press outlets portrayed his persona. According to the historical press context, in 1938, the Darányi government passed the first Jewish law, which also dealt with the regulation of the press. Censorship introduced under the Teleki government further restricted the functioning of newspapers, and during the German occupation, a significant part of the Hungarian press ceased to exist. In 1946, press freedom was declared, but state control continued to define media operations. Révész Imre's activities during the period attracted significant press attention, and his public roles were crucial, as evidenced by the newspaper analyses. Examining the press materials of the period, it seems clear that his political views shifted from right to left, making the analysis of the next three chapters particularly intriguing. Unlike the superficial nature of the press materials, the detailed examination of archival sources presents a much more nuanced picture of Révész's church governance and thinking.

The backbone and essential scientific contribution of the dissertation are the three chapters that, in chronological order and thematically, analyze Révész Imre's public and political roles during his episcopacy, using documents from

his legacy and supplementary sources. The first chapter scrutinizes the period between 1938 and 1944, which corresponds to the era of Horthy. The first topic discussed in this chapter is his relationship with the official political system and the Horthy family. The analysis clearly shows that while Révész formally aligned with the system as a bishop, he was privately more critical. The second major topic sheds light on his stance on the Jewish question. It is important to understand, in evaluating issues concerning Debrecen's Jewish community, that different secondary sources paint varying pictures of Révész Imre's role and position on the Jewish question. In light of this, it is necessary to examine primary sources, which reveal that Révész Imre's role in this matter cannot be simply categorized as positive or negative. Rather, it reflects the complex political and social situation of the time, in which he tried to navigate in a way that would minimize harm to the different societal and interest groups. His meeting with Szálasi, like the previously mentioned topics, was characterized by a certain naivety and incomprehension of the events of the era. The bishop's conflict-avoidant behavior and late realization of the true dangers of the era were typical of the period in question, an attitude that only changed with later events and personal experience.

The second major chronological section deals with the transitional period of 1944-45, which is referred to as a "turning point." This period not only marked the end of World War II and the beginning of a new political system but was also a pivotal moment in the bishop's personal and professional life. The chapter examines the impact of World War II, the events in the Tiszántúl region, and Révész's position regarding them, relying mainly on documents from his legacy. Additionally, the chapter provides a detailed analysis of Révész Imre's role in the Provisional National Assembly, where, in addition to hosting, he was a member of the body and other politically oriented committees. The third section of the chapter discusses the 1945 episcopal election. While the circumstances of this election are not unknown, with previous publications on

the topic, the novelty here lies in the additional insights provided by the documents from Révész's legacy. The analysis reveals that the 1945 episcopal election was not only an ecclesiastical event but also a political one, foreshadowing the later state interventions and anti-church attitudes. Although Révész retained his position, he already felt the signs of political pressure and intervention.

The third major chronological unit examines Révész Imre's ecclesiastical governance from the changes of 1945 until his resignation. His episcopal work in the new world order aimed to create a balance between the state and the church, but the Communist takeover and the land reform ended the church's financial independence, leading to a dependency on the state. This chapter also discusses the circumstances surrounding the signing of the 1948 Agreement between the state and the church, highlighting its historical significance through Révész Imre's actions and personal experiences. By the end of his ten-year service as bishop, Révész was physically and mentally exhausted. After the signing of the 1948 Agreement, he requested retirement, and although he initially sought church retirement, he eventually received a state pension. During the process of his retirement, he corresponded with Minister Gyula Ortutay, who supported his request. In April 1949, on the 100th anniversary of the dethronement of the Habsburgs, Révész offered the Great Church of Debrecen for the celebration, where he spoke positively about the Communist regime, which many interpreted as a commitment to the regime. However, Révész was in a difficult situation: while he was not convinced of the system's justice, he realized that peaceful and secure retirement years could only be achieved through cooperation with the regime. The letters in his legacy reveal that Révész, due to his family situation, particularly his daughters' problems, felt financially responsible, which led him to accept a quiet cooperation with the political system. Research suggests that Révész balanced political pressure and

personal convictions, taking on a role that ensured livelihood for himself and his family out of necessity.

The penultimate chapter deals with the circumstances of Révész Imre's departure from the bishopric, based on his personal documents. The first of these was his final report to the District Synod, followed by his farewell letter to the Faculty of Theology, his resignation letter to the Synod, and his "Farewell Speech" to the faithful of the Tiszántúl region. Thus, Révész Imre did not leave his church "without a word." He bid farewell appropriately to the District Synod, the Faculty of Theology, the Reformed Synod of Hungary, and all the Reformed people of Tiszántúl. His farewell letters explained his departure, primarily citing his deteriorating health, though public pressure and insecurity also played a role. His documents are not only official but also personal, reflecting his humility and commitment to his community.

The most significant scientific result of the dissertation is that Révész Imre's episcopal activities cannot be easily categorized but were far more nuanced than previous research had portrayed. This research highlights details previously unknown to historiography. His work shows that leadership can come with heavy burdens, and the intertwining of political and ecclesiastical life offers important lessons for the contemporary Reformed Church.



Registry number: DEENK/388/2024.PL
Subject: PhD Publication List

Candidate: Kinga Julianna Dezső
Doctoral School: Doctoral School of History and Ethnology
MTMT ID: 10073086

List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (2)

1. **Dezső, K. J.:** Ifj. Révész Imre közéleti és politikai szerepvállalása a korabeli sajtó tükrében.
In: Korszakokról korszerűen : A 2022. április 29/30-án megrendezett Modernkortörténeti Doktorandusz Konferencia tanulmányai I.. Szerk.: Püski Levente; Ónadi Sándor; Schrek Katalin; Sipos Nikoletta, Debreceni Egyetem Történelmi Intézete, Debrecen, 181-194, 2023.
ISBN: 9789634905608
2. **Dezső, K. J.:** Ifj. Révész Imre útja az egyházkormányzói szélig (1889-1938).
In: Hagyomány, Identitás, Történelem 2022. Szerk.: Kiss Réka; Lányi Gábor, Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem Hittudományi Kar Egyháztörténeti Kutatóintézet, Budapest, 517-532, 2023, (Reformáció Öröksége, ISSN 2676-9824 ; 10)

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (3)

3. **Dezső, K. J.:** "Évêque malgré lui." Révész Imre püspöki működése a Horthy-korszakban.
Korall. 2023 (94), 44-68, 2024. ISSN: 1586-2410.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52656/KORALL.2023.04>
4. **Dezső, K. J.:** Az őszinteség-realizmus-áttetszőség koncepciója Révész Imre vallomásaiban.
Új Nézőpont. 8 (4), 53-59, 2022. EISSN: 2064-7042.
5. **Dezső, K. J.:** Révész Imre "búcsúja" személyes forrásainak tükrében.
Tört. Tanulm. 28, 213-221, 2020. ISSN: 1217-4602.





List of other publications

Hungarian books (1)

6. Szerk. **Dezső, K. J.**: Absztraktkötet: Debreceni Egyetem Intézményi Konferencia 2020. június 15.
Debreceni Egyetem, Debrecen, 217 p., 2020. ISBN: 9789634902287

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (4)

7. **Dezső, K. J.**: A debreceni nagyerdei-egyetemi egyházközség kezdeti évei.
Debr. Szle. 31 (1), 59-70, 2023. ISSN: 1218-022X.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59424/debreceniszemle/2023/31/1/59-70>
8. **Dezső, K. J.**: Újfalvi Imre pere és műveltsége: Tanulmányok és szövegközlések.
Egyhört. Szle. 21 (1), 150-152, 2020. ISSN: 1585-7476.
9. **Dezső, K. J.**: A református templomépítészet és egyházművészet tendenciái és megjelenésük a Debreceni Református Egyetemi Templom építéstörténetében.
Egyhört. Szle. 20 (4), 49-72, 2019. ISSN: 1585-7476.
10. **Dezső, K. J.**: "Lássatok hozzá, és építsétek föl istennek, az úrnak szentélyét": A Debreceni Református Egyetemi Templom építésének története.
Gerundium. 8 (4), 52-70, 2017. ISSN: 2061-5132.

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

27 June, 2024

