

## Abstract

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THE IMPACT OF THE WORLD WAR II ON THE REFORMED COMMUNITIES OF THE TRANSYLVANIAN REFORMED CHURCH DISTRICT, IN ECCLESIASTICAL ARCHIVES, 1944–1946.

The present thesis investigates the impact of the Second World War on the members and parishes of the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania during the years 1944–1945, as seen from the perspective of both the laity and the clergy. The analysis draws upon primary sources preserved in local, regional, and central church archives – materials that have, until now, remained largely unknown and unexamined. Under the communist regime, this subject was deemed politically sensitive and was excluded from public discourse, surviving only in private family narratives and closed community circles. Although post-1989 local historical studies have touched upon aspects of the war period, they do so only partially and lack a comprehensive approach – especially with regard to the experiences of Reformed communities. By bringing to light previously unexploited archival sources and adopting a community-centered perspective, this study contributes to filling a significant gap in the historiography of the Reformed Church in Transylvania.

It is all the more regrettable that the diocesan leaders of the time – such as Bishop János Vásárhelyi and Vice-Bishop István Tőkés – who, by virtue of their leadership roles, were active participants and key figures, and therefore direct witnesses to the events that affected, in various ways, all parishes and congregations within the diocese, did not leave behind more detailed records for posterity. The documentation that has survived consists primarily of materials concerning the routine, day-to-day administration of church affairs.

A common characteristic of works produced at the micro-community level is their intent to commemorate various anniversaries connected to the local history – both past and recent – and, in some cases, the history of the parish or community. However, with few exceptions, authors and editors – despite their commendable efforts and intentions – placed limited emphasis on rigorous research or systematic data analysis. Instead, they often relied on more readily accessible sources, such as personal recollections, eyewitness

accounts, and the testimonies of those who lived through those difficult times. Even when church documents were consulted, the sources were rarely cited according to academic standards, which has limited the possibilities for further scholarly investigation. This study is based on the identification and analysis of archival sources from church records. It does not aim to provide an exhaustive history of the Reformed Church as an institution in Transylvania, but rather focuses on reconstructing events, documenting human and material losses during the passage of the front (August – October 1944), and examining the immediate aftermath – effects that are both visible and verifiable through 1946 and, in some cases, even beyond. The work is organized into eight chapters, five of which form the core of the study. These examine, among other aspects, the civil and ecclesiastical administrative measures taken after August 23, 1944, and their consequences; the widespread displacement of pastors and, in many cases, parishioners; the return of some to their homes; and the situation of those who remained at home throughout the entire period. The study also explores the internment and arrest of parishioners – both civilian and military – the atrocities they endured, and the material losses sustained, which were, in some cases, considerable.

In this study, we examine the wartime period of the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania only with regard to the deaneries that became part of the diocese following the Second Vienna Award, dated August 30, 1940. We do not address the deaneries that, as a result of this decision, remained in Southern Transylvania – that is, within Romania – since the topic in question has already been treated by Reformed pastor Alpár Csaba Nagy in his work entitled *A dél-erdélyi református egyházkerületi rész története (1940–1945)* [translated as *The History of the Southern Transylvanian Reformed Diocese (1940–1945)*]. Nagy's dissertation was published in 2012 under the same title by L'Harmattan Publishing House in Budapest. Our aim has been to identify and make use of those ecclesiastical sources that have not yet been examined, and which record the wartime events of the period in question, with particular focus on the human and material losses sustained during the conflict. We seek, therefore, to explore what took place in the deaneries and parishes of the diocese starting in the autumn of 1944 – especially during and after the advance of the front – and what was recorded in the church sources of the time for posterity. For this reason, our research is based exclusively on Reformed ecclesiastical sources, and other sources – whether printed, manuscript, or archival – were

consulted only when required by the analysis. Consequently, this study reflects the perspective of the Reformed Church.

In the autumn of 1944, as the front advanced through Northern Transylvania, nearly one-third of the pastors in the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania – which, at the time, comprised 424,592 members – left their parishes. Some fled voluntarily out of fear of potential atrocities; others attempted to move their families to safer areas, only to find themselves unable to return to their congregations; and others were simply caught up in the turmoil of war. Under such circumstances, numerous communities were left without pastors and suffered significant human and material losses.

In the course of our investigation, we examined sources from all three hierarchical levels of church administration – diocesan (central), district (regional), and parish (local). Our goal was to locate reports, summaries, notes, correspondence, minutes, and other relevant documents of the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania and its districts: Beheciu/Bekecsalja, Dej/Dés, Pădureni/Erdővidék, Gurghiu/Görgény, Călata/Kalotaszeg (Kolozs-Kalota), Chezdi/Kézdi, Cluj/Kolozsvár, Mureș (Murăș)/Maros, Șieul-Mare/Nagysajó, Orbai/Orbai, Șepși/Sepsi, Sic/Szék, Sălaj-Solnoc/Szilágyszolnok, and Odorheiu/Udvarhely, as well as those of nearly 500 associated parishes. Some of these sources are preserved in their original locations, while others are housed in the Central Archive of the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania, in Cluj-Napoca. The latter repository holds documents produced by the higher levels of church administration – such as the archival collection of Bishop János Vásárhelyi and the Governing Council – as well as local records from several districts and parishes, deposited there over an extended period.

During the course of our research, we focused primarily on sources that provide information regarding the situation in 1944 and 1945. Since the events and consequences of the war – particularly the human losses, alongside the material damage – continued to weigh on the minds of parishioners for many years, despite the taboo imposed by the Soviet presence in Romania and the reintegration of churches under Romanian rule, we extended our investigation through 1946 and, in some cases, even as far as 1948, as far as the existence of archival material permitted.

Accordingly, we analyzed the complete correspondence of Bishop János Vásárhelyi, the documents of the Governing Council, the senior clergy from the 14 aforementioned districts, and the parish pastors. We examined their correspondence, meeting minutes, and reports produced at all administrative levels – local, regional, and central. We also consulted Bishop Vásárhelyi's personal memoirs, preserved as a manuscript in the Central Archive of the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania, which offer limited detail regarding the period and themes under investigation.

In parallel with our analysis of central archival sources, we also identified and processed relevant materials on-site, both in the archives of the 14 districts and at the local level. Unfortunately, field research was significantly hindered between 2020 and 2022 due to restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. An additional major obstacle was the disorganized state of the archives of the Reformed dioceses in the Székely Land – specifically those of Pădureni/Erdővidék, Chezdi/Kézdi, Orbai/Orbai, Șepși/Sepsi, and Odorheiu/Udvarhely – which made the identification and analysis of sources particularly challenging, despite the unquestionable goodwill of the pastors responsible for administering these protopresbyterial archives.

The content, volume, and documentary quality of the sources examined thus far are highly diverse and markedly eclectic. In general, the sources reviewed fall short of providing the data and detail needed to present a comprehensive and nuanced picture of the events. We encountered local archives that either lack relevant materials entirely, have preserved only fragmentary records, or contain only brief references to the period and subject investigated in this study. Some of these documents include no information at all regarding the most critical phase of the war: the passage of the front in the autumn of 1944. It is common to find an absence of pastoral reports concerning church life and conditions at the local level for the year 1944. Likewise, the minutes of parish meetings, women's associations, and the sessions of district and diocesan assemblies and councils, as well as the records of district- and diocese-level inquiries, are often devoid of references to the war.

It is understandable that in such turbulent and uncertain times, meeting minutes across all levels of church administration did not record everything that was discussed. In most cases, they contain no data or even allusions to the fate of parishioners caught in the chaos of war or, for example, taken as prisoners of war. It is highly likely that the

presence of Soviet and Romanian authorities in the region during the period under investigation fostered a sense of fear, restraint, or caution, leading to the deliberate omission of sensitive issues – such as the fate of those in captivity in Romania or the Soviet Union – from official records. Many of these minutes are limited to administrative matters necessary to keep the church functioning: the management of church property, adjustments to service fees, missionary activities, budgeting issues, and so forth.

There are, however, notable exceptions. Some meeting minutes record, in either concise or remarkably detailed fashion – and sometimes with thorough precision – the condition and fate of parishioners. These records include the names of those sent to the front, those fallen or missing, those taken prisoner, and those abused or killed during or after the front's passage. Such examples support our hypothesis that human and material losses were in fact discussed at parish, presbyterial, and diocesan meetings. This becomes even more plausible considering that, particularly in small, close-knit communities where people knew each other well, many of those still absent from their homes were likely close relatives of church leaders themselves. And yet, as mentioned above, such details were often not recorded in the minutes.

This assumption is supported by sources which make it quite clear that the pastor – and even Bishop János Vásárhelyi himself – was informed of the fate of certain parishioners through brief, often handwritten messages, sometimes scrawled on scraps of paper or notebook pages. Among these, we found messages listing the names and addresses of individuals who had been deported as prisoners, crammed into cattle wagons on their way to camps in Romania or the Soviet Union. We also found notes informing pastors about who was located where, if known – who had fallen in battle, where and when. Accordingly, we can reasonably state that, during various meetings, pastors shared such messages with members of the presbytery.

In many cases, annual reports – specifically in the section titled “Significant events worth mentioning,” which pastors were required to complete – contain superficial and brief summaries, consisting of only a few words or phrases, concerning the events that occurred during the front's advance through the locality and the resulting consequences. This brevity can be attributed only in part to the fact that some pastors were forced to flee during that confusing period. It is also notable that, in many of these annual reports – which serve as primary source material – pastors often limited themselves to recounting

their own experiences at the time, focusing primarily on their forced or “accidental” absence or departure. In many instances, however, they simply omit mention of the human and material losses suffered by their parishioners.

When compared with the large number of parishioners – men who were conscripted into the military, sent to the front, killed in action, reported missing, or taken prisoner by the enemy (i.e., as prisoners of war), as well as civilians who were removed from their homes, interned, or deported – it is striking how rarely pastors made the effort in their reports to “take inventory” and list by name those who had been wounded, killed, disappeared, or captured on the battlefield – in short, those still absent from the life of the congregation. Typically, these reports are limited to numerical statistics, such as how many were sent to war, how many returned, how many have not yet come home, and how many are known or presumed to have fallen, been taken prisoner, or gone missing.

In general, the content of the sources indicates that, both at the local level and at the higher levels of church administration, priority was given to issues and tasks related to the functioning and mission of the church, as well as to the fate of pastors and teachers, while the situation and fate of parishioners was relegated to the background.

Few pastors and few presbyteries – whether in 1945, when they drafted and adopted pastoral reports on the life and activity of their congregations for the previous year, or even later, during district-level inquiries or visitations in 1946 or 1948 – made the effort to record, by name, those parishioners who had perished in the hell of war or had been taken prisoner and had not yet returned home by the time of the inquiry or visitation.

As a result, it can be observed that the sources examined thus far generally refer only to the material losses of parishes and to the suffering endured by pastors and, to some extent, other church personnel (such as teachers or instructors), while information concerning the fate and hardship of ordinary parishioners remains vague and incomplete. This situation was addressed, at least in part, in the summer of 1946, when the Governing Council launched an inquiry through a questionnaire containing 71 questions, requesting that pastors from all parishes provide – separately and explicitly – the number of church members who had been taken prisoner as soldiers (i.e., prisoners of war) and those who, as civilians, had been interned or deported during the war.

Other questions in the survey addressed, for example, the damages sustained during the summer and autumn of 1944: whether church bells had been requisitioned; whether

parish registers, documents, treasures, and sacred objects had been destroyed or preserved; whether parish buildings – including the church, manse, and denominational school – had suffered damage; when and where the pastor had taken refuge, and when and from where he had returned to his place of service; and whether any interethnic or interconfessional conflicts had occurred in the locality. In other words, in 1946, this survey represented an effort at historical redress – an attempt to create a comprehensive inventory and a clearer picture of the condition of the church, one that also gave at least some attention to the fate of the parishioners, that is, ordinary individuals.

In this study, we have also drawn upon information and data from this highly valuable, though only partially processed, database.

Despite all these limitations, we consider this work to be primarily a piece of foundational research through which a fairly comprehensive and realistic picture can be formed of what took place within the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania in the period following the summer of 1944. We believe the sources reflect with fidelity the transitional period that the diocese and its congregations were undergoing. We can only hope that the sources discovered and analysed here will support – or perhaps even stimulate – further research into the history of the diocese, and, within it, of our congregations during the period under examination.

The present study is structured into eight chapters. Chapter 1, Introduction, addresses the choice of topic and its historiography. The regime change of 1989 in Central and Eastern European countries opened the way for research into subjects that had previously been considered taboo under the communist dictatorships. As mentioned earlier, after 1989, a number of local histories began to appear, offering limited insight into the subject and falling short of a comprehensive treatment of wartime events. Publications focusing on the micro-community level tend to deal exclusively with local events and rarely examine the specific aspects addressed in this study. More comprehensive works covering the general period do not deal with this subject in detail either, and certainly do not offer full coverage of this particular segment of the history of the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania. In such circumstances, it became evident that the first task was to identify and more extensively utilize archival sources relevant to the topic of this research.

In Chapter 2, Methodological Considerations, we explain the motivations behind the research and data analysis, and we discuss the nature, processing, and interpretation of the ecclesiastical sources. We also review several studies published after the 1989 regime change, highlighting both their strengths and their shortcomings – the latter often stemming from their general focus on local themes and only occasional engagement with the issues explored in the present study.

In the course of our analysis, priority was given to sources directly related to the period under examination. The objective was not to provide an exhaustive account, but rather to present the impact and consequences of the war on the 14 districts of the diocese, both at the central and local levels. We gave priority to archival documents that had long remained overlooked and largely unknown from the time they were produced. We consider this work a first step – just the beginning of a more thorough examination and publication of archival sources relevant to the history of the diocese during the period in question.

For sources originally written in Romanian, we used the Hungarian translations prepared at the time by diocesan staff, where such translations were available; where they were not, we provided our own translations into Hungarian.

Chapter 3, entitled Historical Context, presents the socio-political circumstances in which the events related to the subject of this study unfolded. This chapter outlines the structure and composition of the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania. It also examines the situation created after Romania's switch to the Allied side, the initial reports from the field, and the measures taken by the diocesan leadership, as well as the process of normalization following the reestablishment of Romanian administration in Northern Transylvania – all viewed through the lens of church sources.

These sources suggest that the Romanian armistice of August 23, 1944, and the events that followed created a new reality for the Reformed Church in Transylvania – one that required urgent and pragmatic solutions. With news of the approaching front – already in the early days of September – and the inevitable evacuation orders issued by civil and military authorities, pastors faced the dilemma of whether to stay with their congregations or leave their places of service, as well as how to safeguard or relocate church property to safer areas.



According to the sources, Bishop János Vásárhelyi and the diocesan leadership did not issue a mandatory order requiring pastors to remain with their congregations. Instead, they merely recommended that they stay alongside their parishioners, leaving the final decision to each individual's discretion. Pastors and teachers who, either deliberately or under duress, left their communities found themselves in extremely difficult circumstances. Many fled with nothing but the clothes on their backs, leaving behind all their possessions. Church sources show that – willingly or not – nearly 33% of pastors abandoned their congregations. Reasons for leaving included fear of potential abuses and atrocities (which in many places were later confirmed), as well as efforts to move their families to more remote or secure locations, often making it impossible to return to their communities.

During those tense and uncertain days, the diocesan leadership began receiving the initial reports and brief updates on the unfolding situation. In response, they sought to address the challenges as they arose, including those faced by displaced pastors and teachers. The church authorities attempted to provide at least modest financial support to help these individuals continue their journeys or simply survive. All of this unfolded against a backdrop of growing anti-Hungarian sentiment in Romania. The autumn of 1944 was marked by atrocities that, in some cases, escalated into acts of murder and even mass executions.

This particularly difficult period – spanning from September 1944 to March 1945 – officially came to an end, at least in terms of public declarations, when the Romanian administration returned to Northern Transylvania on March 13, 1945, during a ceremonial session held in Cluj.

The autumn of 1944 was also the period marked by mass internments and deportations in Transylvania. This topic is addressed in Chapter 4, titled *The Issue of Prisoners and the Persecuted in Reformed Sources from Transylvania*, with a focus on the fate of individuals – the parishioners. For instance, in the first days following August 23, the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie issued orders for the internment of ethnic German and Hungarian leaders. As a result, hundreds and even thousands of Hungarian intellectuals from Southern Transylvania were sent to the internment camp in Târgu Jiu.

In the second half of September, the Ministry of Internal Affairs clarified the interpretation of Article 2 of the Armistice Convention between the Soviet Union (on

behalf of the Allies) and Romania, signed in Moscow on September 12, 1944 – that is, the article under which Romania was obligated to intern German and Hungarian citizens residing on its territory.

By Circular Order No. 44.759 of September 29, 1944, the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie instructed regional inspectorates and legions as follows:

“Although, with the annulment of the Vienna Award, all residents of Northern Transylvania are now considered to have automatically and retroactively regained Romanian citizenship, those of Hungarian or German ethnic origin from Northern Transylvania, holding Hungarian passports and found within Romanian-administered territory, are to be interned in camps. (...) Romanians from Northern Transylvania, even if they are in the country with Hungarian passports, are not to be interned.”

Another punitive measure in the same spirit was Circular Order No. 578.832 issued by the Romanian Army General Staff on October 19, 1944, which stipulated that former Hungarian military personnel who had served in the Hungarian army and returned to their homes in Transylvania were to be treated as prisoners of war and interned in camps.

At the aforementioned ceremonial event held in Cluj on March 13, 1945, Bishop János Vásárhelyi called for the release of deported pastors and teachers, but not of the larger mass of parishioners taken as prisoners of war. The Reformed bishop did what was within his power to resolve the situation of prisoners and hostages – but without success. His efforts were futile even in the case of his own son-in-law, Colonel Tibor Vladár, who was transferred from transit camps in Romania (Braşov/Brassó, Focşani) to the Soviet Union.

The prisoners of war and civilian deportees remained in the camps, with many still en route to the Soviet Union. Bishop Vásárhelyi's efforts – and perhaps even the Romanian authorities' occasional willingness to alleviate the situation – were severely constrained by factors beyond their control. Chief among these were the presence of Soviet troops and, alongside them, the political police (NKVD) in the Carpathian Basin, including Romania, as well as the active role played by Romanian authorities in Transylvania in enforcing the terms of the Armistice Convention.

Under such conditions, neither the diocesan leadership nor Bishop Vásárhelyi himself were in a position to offer real assistance; their activity was largely limited to forwarding messages received from prisoners or hostages to their families or to the

relevant authorities. Indeed, this near-total inability to take meaningful action – particularly regarding the release of civilian internees and deportees – also applied to the Romanian Prime Minister. This was the case despite the fact that Dr. Petru Groza and the Reformed bishop shared fond memories from their youth, dating back to their student years.

The absence of any reference to the release of those in captivity in Bishop János Vásárhelyi's public statements and correspondence must be understood in the context of these circumstances – at least, this is what emerges from the sources identified and analysed thus far. The bishop appears to have addressed this difficult issue as a whole – including the fate of captured parishioners – only once, in a letter dated October 12, 1945, addressed to Gyárfás Kurkó, president of the Hungarian People's Union (Magyar Népi Szövetség).

Given these conditions, what could János Vásárhelyi realistically do? We can state with certainty that he supported initiatives aimed at improving the situation of prisoners to the extent that he could, receiving and forwarding – as previously noted – letters and messages from both small and larger groups of prisoners in transit to their families and to institutions from which some form of assistance might be hoped for. Beyond these efforts, the Reformed bishop focused his attention on his own family, using both his position and his official and unofficial relationships – including personal friendships with influential Hungarian figures of the time – in an attempt to secure the release of his son-in-law, Colonel Tibor Vladár, who was held in Soviet captivity, as mentioned earlier.

In our view, the issue of those held in captivity – those who had not yet returned to their homes – did not receive sufficient attention at any level of the diocese. Most of those who compiled the contemporary documents did not devote sufficient attention to the extent to which the war affected parishioners – particularly those sent to the front or caught in the conflict as civilians. Fortunately, there are clear examples that demonstrate that, where there was sufficient will, accurate and comprehensive documentation of events was indeed possible.

Such examples can be found in the parish of Chibed/Kibéd (Bekecsalja District), in the Pădureni/Erdővidék District (notably the parishes of Bodoș/Bodos, Bățanii Mici/Kisbacon, and Bățanii Mari/Nagybacon), in the Călata/Kalotaszeg District (in the parishes of Căpușu Mare/Magyarkapus, Căpușu Mic/Magyarkiskapus, and

Liteni/Magyarléta), as well as in the Mureș/Maros District (at the Păniceni/Mezőpanit parish). The pastors of these parishes – undoubtedly with the help of curators, presbyters, and parishioners – compiled statistics, lists of names, and records containing personal details on those who had spent time on the front lines or in captivity. They also documented those who had fallen or gone missing in action, leaving behind exceptionally valuable records for posterity.

Regarding human losses – described in the sources using the euphemism “changes in the numbers of individuals” – we encountered a complete lack of data for the more populous congregations, numbering several thousand members. For example, we found no such data in any of the sources – neither in pastoral reports, nor in those of the deans, nor in the responses submitted during the July–August 1946 inquiry – for the parishes of Târgu Mureș/Marosvásárhely, Sfântu Gheorghe/Sepsiszentgyörgy, Odorheiu Secuiesc/Székelyudvarhely, and Zalău/Zilah. Similarly, in Cluj, among the four major communities that made up the city's parish at the time, the only summary of human and material losses was found in the report of Pastor Mózes Bíró, parish priest of the Reformed community on today's Horea Street, i.e., the Hídelve Church. Although this report is fragmentary, we believe it is nonetheless an exceptionally valuable source, as the pastor made a genuine effort to thoroughly document – or at least comprehensively estimate – the material and human losses suffered by the community he served. Pastor Mózes Bíró succeeded in documenting both the material losses and damage sustained by his community during the American air raid on Cluj/Kolozsvár on June 2, 1944, as well as the direct and indirect human losses resulting from the attack. He recorded the names of those killed in the bombing, as well as those who chose to leave the community. He was also the only pastor in Cluj to compile what we believe to be a partial and fragmentary list of parishioners who were rounded up and deported to the Soviet Union by the occupying Soviet authorities in mid-October 1944. Apart from this congregation, no similar data was found for any of the other three churches in Cluj – namely, Upper Town (Felsőváros), Inner City (Belváros), and Lower Town (Alsóváros). A possible explanation is that in the more populous parishes, as life gradually returned to normal after the war, matters concerning church administration and operation took precedence. Consequently, the issue of human losses among parishioners – specifically, the status of

church members still in captivity – was relegated to a secondary concern and failed to capture the pastors' interest in terms of documentation.

However, while acknowledging the risk of error, we can conclude that in the parishes in question – and in others facing similar circumstances but not mentioned here – pastors, curators, and presbyters had access to a sufficient amount of information to enable as accurate documentation as possible. These pieces of information likely originated from family members, relatives, acquaintances, returning prisoners of war, letters and messages sent via the International Red Cross, women's committees of the church, and especially members of the Hungarian People's Union – an organisation directly involved in assisting prisoners in certain camps in Romania – Feldioara/Barcafdölvár, Arini/Lüget, Braşov/Brassó, Focşani, etc. – and also helping to transmit correspondence from those still in captivity to their families. Furthermore, the Hungarian press in Transylvania during this period, particularly between December 1944 and May 1945, regularly published detailed lists of individuals held in captivity within various camps across Romania, alongside personal correspondence authored by the prisoners themselves. After the end of the war in Europe – that is, May 9, 1945 – pastors could have compiled at least approximate lists of missing persons, notably during the inquiry conducted in July–August 1946 – something that, unfortunately, they omitted to do in many cases.

At the same time, documents compiled with greater thoroughness provide a picture of the tensions during the period in question, including anti-Hungarian atrocities that escalated to murder, such as those in Aghireş/Egeres and Petrinzel/Kispetri (Călata/Kalotaszeg Deanery) and in Aita Seacă/Szárazajta (Pădureni/Erdővidék Deanery). A series of less severe but humiliating anti-Hungarian actions were also documented in localities within the dioceses of Cluj/Kolozsvár, Gurghiu/Görgény, and Sic/Szék, alongside the looting of parishioners' homes, whether they stayed during the passage of the front or fled. Notably, there was even a case where a Hungarian Reformed pastor – namely, the pastor from Nearşova/Nyárszó (Călata/Kalotaszeg Diocese) – was robbed by his own parishioners.

We have also identified sources that reveal acts of humane, interethnic, and interconfessional cooperation during a turbulent period marked by widespread ethnic tension. For instance, in Sărmaş/Nagysármás (Mureş County), the Reformed pastor

Károly Gergely appealed to Bishop János Vásárhelyi to intervene with the Hungarian authorities for the release of Greek-Catholic Dean Dr. Liviu Stupineanu, Priest Alexandru Micu, and other Greek-Catholic clergy who had been taken hostage by retreating Hungarian troops. Bishop Vásárhelyi, in turn, contacted his colleague Bishop Imre Révész of the Reformed Diocese beyond the Tisa with the same request, urging the Hungarian authorities to abandon such futile measures and emphasizing that the release of Romanian hostages would greatly benefit the Hungarian community in Transylvania.

In the same vein and with a similar appeal, Bishop Vásárhelyi reached out to both the Reformed bishop of Transylvania and the Greek-Catholic bishop of Cluj/Kolozsvár and Gherla/Szamosújvár, Iuliu Hossu. The latter informed his Hungarian counterpart about the forcible requisition of food and other goods – including his personal automobile – by Hungarian soldiers during their retreat. He also requested that János Vásárhelyi petition the Hungarian authorities for the restitution of these belongings.

Other similar positive cases are recorded in various sources where – despite all the propagandistic **rumours** – commanders of the occupying Soviet troops who entered Transylvanian villages inhabited almost exclusively or predominantly by ethnic Hungarians issued orders that religious services be held, with the clear aim of maintaining order and calm behind the front lines. Such instances occurred, for example, in the village of Viștea/Magyarvista, within the Călata/Kalotaszeg Deanery, in the town of Dej/Dés, and also – as we will see – in the Székely region. We have also identified sources indicating that Soviet officers intervened to stop anti-Hungarian abuses perpetrated by certain Romanian inhabitants, for example, in Șomcuta Mare/Nagysomkút, within the Dej/Dés Diocese.

In Chapter 5, the most extensive chapter titled *The Situation of the Deaneries within the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania during 1944–1945*, we present, based on the sources found and **analysed**, the material and human losses suffered by the 14 deaneries that comprised the diocese in 1944. These deaneries were: the Becheciu/Bekecsalji Reformed Deanery, Dej/Dési Reformed Deanery, Pădureni/Erdővidéki Reformed Deanery, Gurghiu/Görgényi Reformed Deanery, Călata/Kalotaszegi (Kolozs-Kalotai) Reformed Deanery, Chezdi/Kézdi Reformed Deanery, Cluj/Kolozsvári Reformed Deanery, Mureș (Murăș)/Marosi Reformed Deanery, Șieul-Mare/Nagysajói Reformed Deanery, Orbai/Orbai Reformed Deanery, Șepși/Sepsi Reformed Deanery, Sic/Széki

Reformed Deanery, Sălaj-Solnoc/Szilágy-Szolnoki Reformed Deanery, and Odorheiu/Udvarhelyi Reformed Deanery.

As mentioned earlier, the sources from the deaneries of Chezdi/Kézdi, Orbai/Orbai, Șepși/Sepsi, and Odorheiu/Udvarhely for the period in question are rather sparse in detail and fragmented, and the archival collections of these deaneries are currently undergoing organization. Based on the documents discovered and examined so far, the overall picture remains approximate and partial, and the available data are still insufficient to form a complete and nuanced understanding of these four deaneries in the Székely region, especially concerning human losses, including the fate of parishioners taken into captivity.

We can generally state that in all 14 deaneries, the passage of the front created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, bringing significant material damage and destruction, as well as loss of human lives. There were localities where battles were fought between advancing Romanian and Soviet armies on one side and retreating Hungarian and German forces on the other. In the following, we will highlight just a few aspects of the events that took place in the 14 deaneries.

In the Becheciu/Bekecsalja deanery, 22 of the 43 pastors, willingly or unwillingly, abandoned their places of service. Nevertheless, God miraculously protected the deanery from even greater trials. However, many ecclesiastical documents were destroyed, and in numerous cases, the possessions of the refugee pastors were plundered or stolen. There were also several instances in which pastors who remained in their localities were interned by the Romanian gendarmerie.

In the Dej/Dés deanery, a particularly tense interethnic atmosphere prevailed, and many Hungarian families suffered mistreatment. Some parishes were devastated by passing soldiers, causing significant damage to both church properties and those of the parishioners. For example, several sacred objects and church treasures were stolen. In the village of Luna de Jos/Kendilóna, the widow of the former Reformed pastor Imre Nagy was fatally shot, as were the priest Dr. Arthur Tompa, his wife, and his two sisters-in-law.

In the Pădureni/Erdővidék deanery, only one Reformed pastor out of fourteen remained in his post. In the first half of August 1944, the Hungarian army requisitioned two church bells from the deanery. However, the heaviest losses were suffered by the parishioners of Aita Seacă commune, where a paramilitary group known as the "Iuliu

Maniu” Transylvanian Volunteer Battalion from Braşov, following a summary investigation, executed ten people by shooting and beheaded two others. The victims were accused of assisting the retreating Germans during a clash between them and Romanian soldiers near the village in early September 1944. As mentioned earlier, this deanery stands out for the valuable statistics and records compiled by the pastors from the parishes of Băţanii Mari/Nagybacon (pastor-protopope Elek Nagy), Băţanii Mici/Kisbacon (Zsigmond Tompa), and Bodoş/Bodos (Béla Adorján Fábán).

Regarding the Gurghiu/Görgény deanery, it is worth noting that nearly half of the total number of parishioners – due to measures imposed by the Hungarian authorities – fled their homes in the autumn of 1944. Most, however, made it no farther than Carei/Nagykároly. Exhausted, they eventually turned back, only to be robbed and mistreated along the way. Upon returning, they found their homes completely devastated and looted.

The greatest material loss was suffered by the parish of Izvorul Mureşului/Maroshévíz – which also included the Reformed communities of Gălăuţaş/Galócás, Borsec/Borszék, Tulgheş/Gyergyótölgyes, and Bilbor/Bélbor – where the Reformed church was burned to the ground. In many cases, parish archives, sacred objects, and other valuable possessions were also destroyed.

Within the Călata/Kalotaszeg diocese, the Reformed community of Aghireş/Egeres suffered a particularly tragic loss when a paramilitary group killed six of its parishioners. In the village of Petrinzel/Kispetri, Reformed pastor Géza Szabó and a parishioner named János Kőpál Úrfi were arrested by gendarmes; their mutilated bodies were found in a remote forest only in July 1945. Ecclesiastical sources clearly indicate that the atmosphere of hostility – even hatred – toward Hungarians, particularly the Reformed clergy in the region, was largely fuelled by the events of September 11, 1940. On that day, as Hungarian troops entered Huedin/Bánffyhunyard, several reckless local Hungarian men lynched the Orthodox archpriest Aurel Munteanu and the Romanian gendarme Gheorghe Nicula.

Apart from this, many Reformed churches sustained significant damage. There was also a reported incident in Jebucu/Zsobok, where Soviet soldiers raped several women. Moreover, tensions flared between Reformed congregants and their pastors in places such as Bicălatu/Magyarbikal and Nearşova/Nyárszó. As far as the former was concerned, a



small group of parishioners defied the will of the majority by blocking the return of Pastor József Kiss, even going so far as to threaten his life. In the latter, Pastor Sámuel Csog was robbed by members of his own congregation. On the other hand, within this diocese, the exemplary efforts of the pastors from Căpușu Mare/Magyarnagykapus and Căpușu Mic/Magyarkiskapus, László Adorjáni, as well as the pastor from Liteni/Magyarléta, István Mihályfalvi, truly stand out. With the support of a few elders, they compiled comprehensive records of all parishioners affected by the chaos of the war. The leadership of the pastor-protopope from Viștea/Magyarvista, Ferenc Daróczi, is also worth mentioning, as he managed to shield the entire village from the atrocities committed by Soviet troops temporarily stationed there.

In the Chezdi/Kézdi diocese, significant damage was also reported. Notably, Soviet soldiers looted everything they could in the village of Dalnic/Dálnok. A situation similar to that in Nearșova/Nyárszó occurred here as well: in Cernatul de Jos/Alsócsernáton, the belongings of the displaced pastor, Dénes Jákó, were plundered by some of his own Reformed parishioners. Another devastating blow was the loss of 90% of the parishioners' livestock.

Within the Cluj/Kolozsvár deanery, over 11,000 parishioners were displaced from their homes as a result of the war. A particularly tragic episode took place in Feiurdeni/Fejérd, where Romanian armed forces succeeded in occupying the village on October 12, 1944, but only after heavy fighting, during which two local civilians lost their lives to gunfire and shrapnel. What followed was yet another harrowing ordeal: first Romanian soldiers, then gendarmes, subjected the Hungarian Reformed population to continuous terror—demanding excessive taxes, abusing civilians, and even assaulting the local pastor, István Adorjáni. After enduring a month of such persecution, he fled with his family to Cluj in mid-November 1944.

Pastor István Köblös of Fizeșu Gherlii/Ördöngösfüzes faced a similar fate, seeking refuge in Cluj with his wife after suffering a week of beatings.

As mentioned earlier, the fact that 5,000 Hungarian civilians from Cluj/Kolozsvár and another 700 from Turda/Torda were rounded up by Soviet occupation forces is not documented in any of the available sources, with the sole exception of a single reference found in the records of the parish on Horea Street in Cluj/Kolozsvár.

The sources concerning the Mureș (Murăș)/Maros deanery are especially rich in detail. In this diocese, 26 of the 47 pastors fled upon hearing of the approaching front. Ecclesiastical and school libraries and archives suffered extensive damage, and numerous buildings and properties were vandalized or looted – either by Romanian civilians or as a result of shell and shrapnel fire. Two particularly striking cases stand out.

In the commune of Tirimia/Nagyteremi – according to archival sources – all parishioners between the ages of 14 and 60 were locked in cellars. While they were held captive, the church, school, and parish buildings were ransacked. In the area of Toldal/Toldalag, heavy fighting between Soviet and German troops raged for eleven days. During this time, the Reformed pastor, József Veress Győri, along with his wife and their five-month-old son, sought shelter in the parish cellar. One night, drunken Soviet soldiers brutally beat the pastor with rifle butts and raped his wife in front of him. Pastor Veress Győri was later interned in the Târgu Jiu camp, from which he successfully escaped on the night of December 31, 1944 – together with his colleague, Pastor György Szilveszter of Șilea Nirajului/Nyárádselye.

In the Șieul-Mare/Nagysajó deanery, 13 of the 17 Reformed pastors abandoned their posts. Similarly, as a result of the measures imposed, parishioners from the villages of Șieu/Nagysajó, Sărata/Sófalva, and Tonciu/Tacs also fled. Upon returning, like the pastors, they found their homes looted and, for months afterward, faced ongoing threats of property confiscation, internment, and deportation. According to diocesan sources, requisitions led to significant losses in livestock. Even so, the troops passing through generally treated the civilian population with humanity. In contrast, “chauvinistic elements arriving from other areas, along with the gendarmes brought in, caused significant suffering and abuse – particularly in Sărmașu/Nagysármás, where the atrocities also resulted in loss of life.”

In the Orbai/Orbai diocese, the period following August 23, 1944, was marked by widespread uncertainty. With the postal service no longer functioning, messages, letters, and directives sent from Cluj/Kolozsvár by the diocese’s central leadership failed to reach their destinations. As a result, pastors, curators, and parishioners in the region were left to make decisions independently – relying on their own judgment. Fortunately for them – and for the deanery as a whole – only 3 of the 22 pastors abandoned their posts, and Soviet troops passed through the area relatively quickly, without committing any acts of

violence. As in the case of the Viștea/Magyarvita community in the Călata/Kalotaszeg diocese, sources from the Orbai deanery also include notes indicating that – contrary to anti-Soviet propaganda – neither church buildings, nor pastors, nor parishioners suffered any harm throughout the diocese. Church services continued to be held regularly – except in those parishes where the pastors had fled. In three ethnically mixed localities – Covasna/Kovászna, Zăbala/Zabola, and Zagon/Zágon – isolated interethnic tensions and incidents of violence occurred, mainly concerning forest and agricultural property. These events were rooted in earlier conflicts dating back to the autumn of 1940, when members of the Hungarian community had mistreated their Romanian neighbours.

In the Șepși/Sepsi deanery, seven pastors abandoned their posts, while the majority of the clergy relocated only to nearby areas – places less exposed to the advancing front. Most parishioners remained in their homes, which helped prevent looting. Archival sources identified and processed so far indicate that a major issue arose from tensions and disagreements among some parishioners who opposed the return of pastors that had fled during the front's advance. Such cases are documented in the city of Sfântu Gheorghe/Sepsiszentgyörgy and in the villages of Fotos/Fotosmartonos and Micfalău/Mikóújfalu – tensions that were eventually settled, albeit with some difficulty. As for material losses, the sources indicate that the greatest damage occurred to agricultural products, as well as to the Reformed church in Dobolii de Jos/Aldoboly, which was struck by several projectiles during fighting in the area.

In the Sic/Szék deanery, the situation described in the sources was markedly different. Acting dean János Cseterky made exceptional efforts to document the events in meticulous detail. According to his records – along with those of other pastors – this diocese, situated in a mixed-ethnicity region with a Romanian majority, experienced a wave of anti-Hungarian atrocities. Sources state that during their passage, Soviet troops – with some exceptions – generally behaved in a humane manner. However, after their withdrawal, a wave of anti-Hungarian violence – carried out by the gendarmerie and segments of the Romanian population – subjected the Hungarian community to months of persecution, including beatings, looting, expulsions, arrests, killings, the confiscation and destruction of church and personal property, and the desecration of churches and other places of worship. In one of his reports, Dean János Cseterky did not overlook the cause behind the atrocities suffered by Reformed parishioners in the village of

Feldioara/Melegföldvár (Cluj County). In the autumn of 1944, the local Reformed pastor, accompanied by a group of young men, went to the neighbouring village of Cătina/Katona, where they assaulted the Orthodox priest. In retaliation, Romanian parishioners struck back some time later.

From the limited sources available for the Sălaj-Solnoc/Szilágyszolnok diocese, we learn that in the autumn of 1944, twelve Reformed pastors fled, and by the spring of 1945, six had returned. A few Reformed pastors were also interned for several months. While no significant material damage was reported, one case stands out – that of the Reformed pastor from Trăznea/Ördöggút. In the autumn of 1944, Pastor Lajos Kiss was serving in the Hungarian army, having been called up for military duty. After the war, however, the Romanian population of the village prevented him from returning to his parish. It is clear that the Romanian population of Treznea had not – and understandably could not – forgotten the massacre of September 9, 1940, when Hungarian soldiers (honvéd) killed 93 ethnic Romanians (or 86, according to other sources), including several Jews. With no other option, Pastor Lajos Kiss served for a few months in Zalău/Zilah before eventually emigrating to Hungary. The sources suggest that anti-Hungarian sentiment among Romanian parishioners remained so strong that Gyula Kalló, another pastor assigned to Treznea, was unable to take up his post. He was met with threats, including the warning: “No Hungarian priest should ever set foot here again – or he will be killed.”

In the Odorheiu/Udvarhely diocese, parishioners found themselves in a situation similar to that of communities in the eastern parts of the Székely region during the autumn of 1944 – marked by a lack of information, widespread uncertainty, confusion, and alarming rumours. On September 8, Hungarian authorities issued an evacuation order, prompting many parishioners to flee. Twenty-three pastors also left temporarily, leaving those who remained struggling to carry on with regular church services. Ecclesiastical sources also indicate that many of the parishioners who fled soon realized there was no point in continuing their journey – and returned home without having suffered significant losses. The same sources note that – as in the Călata/Kalotaszeg and Orbai/Orbai deaneries – there were also cases in this diocese where Soviet soldiers, contrary to widespread **rumours**, behaved humanely and even attended Reformed church services. Nevertheless, some parishes did experience material losses.

Regarding human losses, ecclesiastical sources indicate that, overall, the proportion of parishioners who were still missing from their homes in the first year after the war – that is, during 1946 – including prisoners of war, interned civilians, the disappeared, and those with unclear status, generally ranged from 3–6% of the total membership in each parish or congregation. Based on the total of 424,592 members recorded in the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania at the beginning of 1944, it can be estimated that by 1946, the number of those still unaccounted for at the diocesan level was approximately 13,000–26,000 individuals.

Chapter 6 of this study presents our conclusions. In the course of our research, we identified and partially **analysed** ecclesiastical sources documenting events within the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania, focusing specifically on the wartime period of 1944–1945 and its aftermath. Particular attention was given to the damage suffered by parishes and parishioners, with an emphasis on the broader impact these events had on both individual lives and community structures. The sources examined and analysed reflect the period from the autumn of 1944 through 1945 – a time when every parish across the diocese felt the impact of the war. During this challenging period, the ethnic tensions and atrocities of the autumn of 1940 – which had affected both Romanians in Northern Transylvania and Hungarians in Southern Transylvania – resurfaced and escalated. Starting in the autumn of 1944, the Hungarian population across Transylvania became the primary victims of these renewed hostilities.

The archival sources studied show that, at all levels – diocesan, deanery, and local – the focus of those who produced and signed these documents was primarily on matters concerning the Church's operation and mission, material losses, and the fate of pastors and teachers. By contrast, the experiences and fate of ordinary believers received significantly less attention.

Unfortunately, whether in 1945 – after the war had ended – or in the years that followed, when there was time to reflect on the human toll, few pastors and presbyteries took the initiative to conduct thorough investigations among their congregants. As a result, efforts to gain a clear understanding of what ordinary believers endured in the horrors of war remained limited.

Taking all of this into account, the sources uncovered and examined so far do not yet provide a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the war's impact on the

Reformed Diocese of Transylvania as a whole. To bring clarity to this still fragmented and incomplete picture, further foundational research is needed – covering every parish throughout the Székely region.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, some essential conclusions can be drawn. In the autumn of 1944, following the evacuation of Hungarian civil and military authorities from Northern Transylvania, the Hungarian community – along with their families and pastors – was left completely unprotected, becoming highly vulnerable to the advancing Hungarian, German, Soviet, and Romanian troops. Amid the chaos of war, parishioners were subjected to atrocities, military and civilian vandalism, looting, humiliation, abuse, arrests, rape, murder, internment, and deportation.

The ecclesiastical sources reviewed also reflect the evolution of relationships between clergy and parishioners, the interactions between the Hungarian and Romanian civilian populations, and the dynamics between the Hungarian community and both Romanian and Soviet military and civil authorities. Numerous parishes managed to navigate this period with minimal damage – largely due to pastors who remained by their congregations' side and handled the situation with wisdom and care. Conversely, many other parishes and communities that were temporarily left without pastoral leadership suffered significant material losses. There are also accounts of pastors who chose to stay, accepting the risks of humiliation, abuse, and looting, yet refusing to abandon their congregations.

Another important aspect is how church administrators and elders in communities left without a pastor sought to protect and preserve church property as best they could. In many cases, parishioners warmly welcomed pastors returning from refuge or captivity. However, there were also instances where congregants opposed the return of pastors who had fled in the autumn of 1944.

This study also highlights how Hungarian prisoners, transported through Transylvania on their way to camps in Romania and the Soviet Union, appealed for help – and the efforts made by Reformed Church officials at the central, regional, and local levels to support them, even if only by forwarding their messages.

Many of the archival sources studied include records and lists compiled by pastors, documenting the names of those sent to the front, those who died in combat, and those taken prisoner – valuable insights into the experiences of ordinary parishioners. In

numerous cases, the loss of archival materials and sacred objects is also recorded – whether destroyed or lost during the passage of the front or in its aftermath. At the same time, there are accounts of fortunate instances in which church property was successfully preserved. Taken together, this research provides a fairly comprehensive view of parish life, the experiences of pastors and parishioners, and the overall condition of the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania during the period examined.

Finally, Chapter 7 presents a selection of archival sources – 34 documents chosen from the hundreds that are set to be published for the first time in the near future. These include correspondence between parish priests, deans, bishops, curators, and family members of the missing, as well as annual reports from pastors, deaneries, and the episcopate.

Chapter 8 includes all the sources consulted in the preparation of this study. This work marks an initial effort to explore and utilize the archival materials of the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania covering the years 1944–1945 – an area that has remained largely untouched until now.