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News Background

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON KAROLY OLT, NEW PRESIDENT OF HUNGARIAN  
STATE OFFICE FOR CHURCH AFFAIRS

Budapest, June 3 (Hungarian Evaluation & Research) — Radio Budapest yesterday announced the appointment of Karoly Olt as president of the State Office for Church Affairs, replacing János Horvath who has been transferred to another sphere of activity (no details yet given).

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According to an official biography in "Eszaki Új" of 23 September 1947 on Olt's appointment as Minister of National Welfare in the cabinet of Imre Nagy, Olt was born in Szeged in 1904 into a civil servant's family, spent his early youth in southern Transylvania (which at that time belonged to Hungary) and already at the tender age of 14 published an appeal demanding that government power should be turned over to Mihaly Karolyi, the left-wing leader of the autumn 1918 revolution. Because of his progressive thinking Olt clashed with his fellow students and narrowly escaped expulsion from the school.

In 1920 he came to Budapest and in 1923 entered the faculty of fine arts of the university to study classical philology.

As a leader of the left-wing Christian Federation of Lutheran Students he attended congresses in Bulgaria, Rumania, Austria and Czechoslovakia and became acquainted with democratic student movements abroad. Financial difficulties compelled him to interrupt his studies and to find a job as clerical assistant to a lawyer. In 1929 he read the "Communist Manifesto" and discovered the "truth of Marxism."

In 1930 Olt got in touch with the underground Communist Party and organized an "East European Seminary" in which university students translated into Hungarian the works of Lenin among others. Olt recruited young people working in the seminary into the Federation of Young Communist Workers. In 1932 he was arrested, tried and sentenced to a mild prison term.

Report for Role in Underground

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In 1933 the police arrested and interrogated him at length because he was suspect as a result of receiving Communist literature and letters from abroad. Afterwards he worked as one of the leaders of the opposition in the Trade Union of Private Employees.

For his participation in the underground movement during World War II Olt was awarded the "Freedom Order" after Hungary's "liberation" by the Red Army.

In February 1945 Olt became president of the Insurance Company of Private Employees (MAGI). That year he was elected to Parliament and has ever since remained a member, representing a constituency of County Fejer. His first high government office was -- as mentioned above -- Minister of National Welfare, which he held until June 1949 when he was elected Speaker of Parliament. He remained in that post until August 1949 when he was appointed Secretary of the Presidency.

In February 1950 Olt returned to the Cabinet as Minister of Finance and maintained that position in all the subsequent cabinets until 27 October 1954 when he was omitted from the government of János Nagy.

No Party Position

After the revolution, in May 1957, Olt was elected to the Presidency and some time in the course of that year was appointed head of the Secretariat of the Council of Ministers. He was mentioned in that capacity in a Radio Budapest broadcast on 5 November 1957.

As to his position in the Party, he was member of the Central Committee from 1945 to October 1956 when the former Hungarian Communist Party (NKP) was dissolved. He was not elected in the Central Committee of the new Communist Party (RNEP) and therefore he has no Party job at present.

Olt is the third president of the State Office for Church Affairs which was set up by the law 1/51. The first, from May 1951 to summer 1953, was Istvan Kossa (at present Minister of Communications and Posts and a member of the Central Committee), and second - János Horváth (whose official biography has never

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been disclosed, but who, according to EFE information, was brought to the State Office for Church Affairs from the Hungarian Railroads where he acted as chief of the political section.]

On 31 December 1956 the State Office for Church Affairs ceased to be an independent organization and continued its activity as a section of the Ministry of Education.

Emphasizing Tougher Line

As far as the significance of this change in the leadership of the State Office for Church Affairs is concerned it can be tentatively assessed that, by appointing such a well-known Communist personality as Olt, the regime wants to underline the present harder course toward the churches. This is apparent both from decree No. 18/56 which requires the consent of the government for the filling of certain ecclesiastical posts, and from the pushing into the foreground of anti-religious propaganda.

The importance attached by the regime to relations with the churches may well be demonstrated also by the eventual detachment of the State Office for Church Affairs from the Ministry of Culture and its restoration to its former independent status.

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