

# ALTERNATIVES IN HUNGARIAN HISTORY IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

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During the seventeenth century and at the beginning of the eighteenth century the Hungarian political elite, the Hungarian aristocracy and the Hungarian nobility, faced dramatic political choices and very important alternatives.

After the Battle of Mohács in 1526 and after the capture of Buda, the ancient capital of the Hungarian kingdom, in 1541 the territory of Hungary came to be divided into three – temporarily even four – parts. The middle of the medieval Hungarian kingdom, the region around Buda, fell directly under Ottoman direction. The Turkish authorities divided the area subject to their control into vilayets and sanjaks. The northern and western part of historic Hungary, or so-called royal Hungary, became a part of the Habsburg Empire. In the eastern part of the former Hungarian kingdom a new state, which had never existed before came into existence. This was the principedom of Transylvania, which – along with the two Roumanian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia and the republic of Ragussa – came to be considered as one of the sultan's Christian vassals.

However, this simplified view corresponded only in part to seventeenth-century realities and hardly at all to the image of Hungary, which contemporaries in the Carpathian Basin had fashioned. These previously mentioned states did not exist beside each other, they existed within each other. A letter of the Bey of Koppány from the year 1637 will help us to see this complicated situation more clearly. In his letter the Turkish officer wrote to Count Ádám Batthyány, a nearby Hungarian commander, about a matter concerning the peasants of Nagyegres, a village in the territory held by the Ottoman authorities. This village, as many other villages in Turkish territory, paid taxes to both sides, to their Turkish as well as to their Hungarian landlords. The existence of this system of double taxation revealed very clearly how different the occupation of Turkish Hungary was from the occupation of the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire.

The inhabitants of this village paid taxes to both sides, but then suddenly bandits had appeared and began to harass the villagers. Thus, the bandits were hindering the normal payment of taxes. Therefore, the Turkish commander wrote to the Hungarian count that they should join in a common effort against these ban-

dits because then the taxes would be paid peacefully to both sides, to the Turks and to the Hungarians. Even more interesting is the argumentation of the Turkish bey. The two captains, the Muslim and the Christian, should act together because, "The village of Nagyegres is in Turkey in my possession but it is in Hungary in the possession of your Lordship." At first sight this observation of the Turk appears to be completely nonsensical. But the words of the Turkish bey expressed better than many historians' monographs the almost schizophrenic situation of Turkish Hungary. It had become part of the Ottoman Empire without ever ceasing to be a part of Hungary. This situation was not simply a fiction maintained by seventeenth-century contemporaries but, as the taxes paid to both sides clearly showed, it also reflected hard realities.

The Hungarian nobility never ceased to consider the territory occupied by the Turks as its own. During the seventeenth century the history of the market town of Csongrád included family inheritance disputes, the sale of the town from one noble to another, the assignment of the town in pledge, and the imperial confiscation of this market town from a family, which had come to be considered as unfaithful. In considering these events we can easily forget that the market town of Csongrád lay far behind the Turkish lines and had, of course, Turkish landlords as well.

Transylvania was a vassal state of the sultan, but the Hungarians viewed the principality as a part of their country that had become provisionally detached. Even more interesting was the situation of northwestern Hungary, or the region around Kassa. Under Imre Thököly near the end of the seventeenth century this area became a vassal state of the sultan. Even before the time of Imre Thököly these lands, the so-called seven counties, were several times given by the Habsburg Kings of Hungary to the rulers of Transylvania, but each time only for the lifetime of a particular prince. Juridicially this region remained a part of the Habsburg Empire but was ruled by Transylvania and paid taxes to its prince. With one third of the country under Habsburg rule, a second third existing as a semi-independent vassal state of the sultan, and the final third constituting a joint Turkish-Hungarian dominium, the political situation of Hungary was more than a little complicated. In this situation the Hungarian nobles had to defend their interests and to balance themselves between the empires of two great emperors.

At the end of the Fifteen Years' War the Hungarian nobility had a serious political alternative for the first time since beginning of the Turkish occupation. By 1604 it had become clear that despite the enormous efforts of the imperial army and the Hungarian nobility and after a decade and a half of war Hungary had still not been liberated from the Turks. On the other hand the Turks had not been able to conquer Vienna and occupy the whole of Hungary. The Habsburg Emperor Rudolph II, whose behavior had become less and less rational, falsified a law on Protestantism and began to occupy Protestant churches by military force. For the

first time the Hungarian estates could revolt against the Habsburgs without endangering the potential liberation of the country from the Turks because after fifteen years of warfare this liberation had proven to be impossible.

The struggle against the Habsburgs was led by a formerly pro-Habsburg aristocrat István Bocskai. Over a decade earlier Bocskai had executed those Transylvanian aristocrats who had formed the Turkish party in Transylvania and who had wanted to break up the alliance with Emperor Rudolph II. Bocskai at that time had believed in the liberation of Hungary from the Turks, and he had also believed in the alliance with the emperor. However, later he reversed himself and carried out exactly the same policy that he had formerly considered treason and punished with death. The long war finally convinced Bocskai that the liberation of Hungary was not possible under the existing circumstances, and consequently the Hungarian nobility had to try to secure whatever advantages the situation offered. The nobility has to use the presence of Turkish power in Hungary and the existence of an independent Transylvania to assist in the preservation of their rights as estates against the emperor.

Bocskai was elected Prince of Transylvania, and thus he became a vassal of the sultan. After his military successes in the campaign against the emperor, the Hungarian nobility and the Hungarian estates elected Bocskai the Prince of Hungary. Since Hungary was a kingdom, this title was completely new, and Bocskai was neither a king nor a governor. Bocskai considered his position strong enough to ask the sultan for a crown. At first the Turks were surprised by Bocskai's request, but then they hastily fashioned a wonderful golden crown with precious stones. (Today the so-called "Bocskai Crown" is one of the treasures of the imperial treasury in Vienna.) But when Grand Vezir Lala Mehmet offered the crown to Bocskai as King of Hungary and vassal of the sultan Bocskai would not accept it as such. He did accept the crown as a gift of the sultan.

The explanation for Bocskai's change of heart can be found in the rapidly evolving military and political developments. During these months the military situation changed fundamentally. The imperial army had begun to reassert itself, and the behavior of the Turkish forces made clear to Bocskai that if he occupied additional forts from the imperial soldiers, then the Turks would soon take possession of them. Consequently the Hungarian prince would become a tool of Turkish expansion and help to return to Turkish hands important fortresses that had been liberated by the Christians from the Muslims. Bocskai responded by making peace with the emperor. He remained the Prince of Transylvania and the ruler of north-western Hungary, but he renounced the title of Prince of Hungary and acknowledged the rule of the new Hungarian king Matthias, the brother of the mad emperor Rudolph II. Thus, Bocskai had a crown but he never became a king. The rule of Bocskai, who was generally respected in Hungary, could have been very fruitful. In the peace that Bocskai had concluded with the emperor, he had made

dispositions for the future of his prospective sons. But he never even had the chance to marry. Six months after Bocskai concluded the peace with the emperor he died.

If the end of the Fifteen Years' War had provided the possibility of a political choice for the Hungarian nobility, the beginning of the Thirty Years' War supplied an even better opportunity to the nobility for shaping the political world in Hungary. After the success of his military campaign in Hungary Gábor Bethlen, Prince of Transylvania since 1613, was elected King of Hungary by the Hungarian estates at the diet of Besztercebánya in August 1620. The Hungarian nobles had cried, "Vivat rex Gabriel!" After having captured Pozsony, Bethlen had even gained possession of the Holy Crown of Hungary. However, he did not ask for a coronation. Why not? Perhaps religious considerations restrained him. All of the Hungarian kings had been Catholic, the crown was considered to be a holy relic attached to the person of a Roman Catholic saint and former king, and the Hungarian kings had traditionally been crowned by the Archbishop of Esztergom. At first sight these religious difficulties could have been the reason why the Calvinist Bethlen had felt compelled to renounce the very Catholic coronation ceremony. However, this could not be the real cause of Bethlen's refusal because at exactly the same time the equally Calvinist Frederick of the Palatinate was being crowned by the leaders of the various Protestant churches with the crown of Saint Venceslas as King of Bohemia. The religious and ceremonial problems did not hinder the coronation of Bethlen. On the other hand the rapidly changing military and political situation did. Even though he had successfully occupied royal Hungary, Bethlen had remained cautious in his policy. If we consider the fact that a few months later at the Battle of White Mountain an imperial army crushed the Bohemian estates and put an early end to the reign of Frederick, who would soon be ridiculed as the "Winter King," then Bethlen's cautious attitude was more than justified. The Turks had made it clear to Bethlen that they would never allow the unification of Hungary and Transylvania under his rule. They would have been more than satisfied if instead of their great enemy, the emperor, their ally Bethlen had become the Hungarian king. But the sultan insisted that if Bethlen became King of Hungary, he must abdicate in Transylvania because could not rule in both.

This policy of the Turks was in clear contradiction with Bethlen's hopes. He had wanted to unify the two territories under his own authority as the "raison d'être" of his rule in Hungary and in order to legitimate himself as king. The Turk's reluctance to permit the unification of Hungary and Transylvania under the rule of one man was understandable. They simply did not want any of their vassals to become too powerful. Nevertheless, it was true that during the second half of the sixteenth century, under the threat of a Habsburg gaining the Polish throne, the sultan had allowed Stephen Báthory, their vassal and the Prince of Transylvania, to accept the Polish crown. But as soon as the danger of a Habsburg ruler in

Poland disappeared, the Turks prohibited the unification of Poland and Transylvania under Stephen Báthory. When György II Rákóczi ignored the instructions of Grand Vezir Köprülü, who had prohibited Rákóczi's campaign in Poland and aspirations for the Polish throne, and went to Poland anyway, the Turks punished Transylvania with a brutal invasion.

Gábor Bethlen was elected King of Hungary, and he also had in his possession the Crown of St. Stephen but he never became a crowned King of Hungary. As Bocskai before him, Bethlen remained an effective ruler in Transylvania, held a portion of northern Hungary – the previously mentioned seven counties – and exerted a strong influence on politics in Royal Hungary. One of Bethlen's successors in Transylvania György II Rákóczi, however, overestimated the possibilities for independent action by this small state. When the Swedes invaded Poland, Rákóczi, as an ally of the Swedish king, also attacked the Polish kingdom. The Prince of Transylvania hoped to follow in the footsteps of Stephen Báthory and become King of Poland.

However the Polish adventure turned into a catastrophe. The Transylvanian troops occupied Krakow and Warsaw but soon afterwards fell into the hands of the Tartars, who took them to the Crimean peninsula and held them for ransom. These developments were made even worse for Transylvania by the complete political volte-face in Istanbul. The new Grand Vezir Köprülü was determined to pursue a more aggressive policy and introduced a period of expansion in an empire already on the brink of collapse. Köprülü came to Transylvania in person to punish his unfaithful vassal. Then the Turkish and Tartar troops devastated the flourishing small state, and tens of thousands of Christian prisoners were taken and sold as slaves. A civil war broke out between the followers of Rákóczi and those who favored a more pro-Turkish orientation.

The Viennese court was very much aware of the danger that the assertive grand vezir would put an end to the semi-autonomous status of Transylvania. The Habsburg advisers were convinced that the Turks would like to transform this principality into a directly ruled Turkish territory. The imperial court was determined to prevent – by military force if necessary – this transformation of a century old status quo. Nevertheless, when the Turks nominated Ákos Barcsay as their candidate for the Transylvanian throne, the imperial army withdrew from Transylvania. However, Mehmet Köprülü, the son of the former grand vezir, who had succeeded to his father's place, wanted to use the new strength of the Ottoman Empire for further conquests. He launched an attack in 1663 and in 1664 went after Vienna itself. He desired to finish the never completed project of Sultan Suleiman and to conquer the whole of Hungary. These Turkish plans, however, came to naught when at the Battle of Szentgotthárd the Turks suffered an annihilating defeat in 1664. Nevertheless, only ten days later the Viennese court concluded the Peace of Vasvár and conceded surprisingly lenient conditions to the

Turks. Vienna granted the favorable terms only because the emperor feared that the Spanish king could die at any moment and a war with France would break out over succession to the Spanish throne. Therefore, he wanted to end the eastern war as quickly as possible. After this shameful peace the Hungarian nobility fell into a state of complete despair. Many had hoped that the great campaign to liberate Hungary from the Turks was about to begin, and now with the Peace of Vasvár it seemed that all hopes for a liberation of the country by the Habsburgs had evaporated. Leading aristocrats, among them the palatine and the archbishop of Esztergom, began to conspire against the emperor. This constituted a complete about face. The conspirators decided that if it was not possible to expel the Turks, then all of Hungary should become a Turkish vassal kingdom. I think that this solution would have been a political catastrophe for Hungary. It would have prolonged the occupation by the Turks and would have led Hungary down a path similar to that of the Balkan countries. Fortunately for Hungary, but unfortunately for the conspirators, after such an advantageous peace with the emperor and in the middle of a prolonged war with Venice the Turks were not interested in what the conspirators had to offer. The conspiracy was discovered and the leaders were arrested, tried, and executed. However, the project of creating a Turkish vassal kingdom in Hungary did not disappear. In the years that followed Imre Thököly, a young Hungarian aristocrat and the son of one of the original conspirators, rallied the jobless soldiers and the persecuted noblemen to a series of military campaigns against the emperor. In 1682 he got the blessing of the sultan for the territory around Kassa [Košice] in northwestern Hungary. He wanted to hold it as a vassal principality. The Turks soon declared Thököly to be the Prince of Upper Hungary (in Turkish *Orta Madzar*, or Middle Hungary). The new territory together with the Transylvanian principality meant that there were now two Turkish vassal states in Hungary, and the territory of Hungary that did not depend directly, or indirectly, on Istanbul had diminished dramatically. The *raison d'être* of Thököly's state was the axiom that the liberation of Hungary from the Turks would be impossible for generations because of the impassivity of the imperial court. Therefore the Hungarian political class had to forge an arrangement with the Turks and derive whatever advantage it could from this situation. The emperor was interested in maintaining the status quo in Hungary and in preserving his army for the inevitable war over the Spanish succession. However, two decades after their campaign of 1663 the Turks overestimated again their power and directly attacked Vienna for the second time since 1529. It seemed to many that a new turning point had arrived in the history of central Europe, and the Ottoman Empire was once again as in the days of Suleiman the Great entering a period of conquest. With very few exceptions, the Hungarian aristocrats came to the camp of the Grand Vezir Kara Mustafa, when the Turks attacked Vienna, and the grand vezir promised them further Habsburg lands as vassal provinces, which they could hold in the same

way as Thököly held Upper Hungary. In this way, for example, Styria and Moravia were promised to new overlords. However, the Turks were decisively defeated at Vienna and a new era began. Thököly's state collapsed, when it became clear that there was a serious possibility for the liberation of Hungary. Entire regiments abandoned Thököly and went over to the imperial army to fight against the Ottoman Empire.

The situation of Transylvania also changed dramatically. As a Turkish vassal state, Transylvania was forced to fight against the emperor, a task that the state of the Prince Apafi fulfilled only with reluctance. However, it was evident that Transylvania could be a semi-independent state only as long as the castle of Buda was in Turkish hands. After the capture of Buda by the Christians in 1686 Transylvania could no longer remain independent; and under the pretext of looking for winter quarters the imperial army soon occupied it. In the next few years several treaties were concluded with Vienna. In these agreements the conditions, reflecting the changes in the military situation, became increasingly less favorable for the Transylvanians. During the great Turkish counterattack of 1690 Thököly came to Transylvania and had himself elected as the Turkish vassal prince. But only five weeks later, after the arrival of the imperial army, he felt compelled quickly to abandon his second Turkish vassal state. Ferenc II Rákóczi, the stepson of Thököly, would also lead a war of independence against the emperor from 1703 to 1711. At first sight this struggle appears to be a continuation of those led by Bocskai, Bethlen, György Rákóczi I and Thököly. Hungarian patriotic historians for a long time tried to portray these wars as a series of anti-Habsburg struggles for independence. In my opinion, however, there were very few common features between the movement led by Ferenc II Rákóczi and the seventeenth-century conflicts with the Habsburgs. Ferenc II Rákóczi was elected Prince of Transylvania but this title was for a semi-sovereign state that had just ceased to exist. Although Rákóczi's title was Prince of Transylvania, in direct contrast to the other wars against the Habsburgs, rule in Transylvania did not at all form the basis of Rákóczi's power. His base was Hungary. As a consequence Rákóczi quickly abandoned Transylvania, and the territory came to be occupied by the imperial army. All of the seventeenth-century struggles against the Habsburgs were supported by an ideology emphasizing the defense of Protestantism (generally Calvinism, but in the case of Thököly Lutheranism) against the aggressive Counter Reformation of the Viennese court. Ferenc II Rákóczi, however, was a staunch Catholic and the author of pious Catholic works. He never put the religious issues at the center of his political program. On the contrary he did everything to introduce the toleration of all the denominations in the territory he occupied. The real difference between Ferenc II Rákóczi's war and those of the seventeenth century was, however, the lack of Turkish support. Earlier Bocskai, Bethlen, György Rákóczi and Thököly all fought against the emperor with the help of the Turks. At

first sight the lack of Turkish support for Ferenc II Rákóczi against the Habsburgs seems to be completely irrational. The Turks had concluded with the emperor what for them must have been a catastrophic peace at Karlowitz in 1699. Within a few years the War of the Spanish Succession broke out. This would preoccupy Vienna for the next decade and a half, as the emperor fought with France in Belgium, Spain, Italy, and Germany and Ferenc II Rákóczi occupied Hungary. During this time the Turks did not try to attack the Habsburg Empire or attempt to recapture their lost Hungarian territories. After the collapse of the Rákóczi movement and after the end of the War of the Spanish Succession, the Turks began a new war with Austria, one that the Turks quickly lost. However, it was reasonable that the Turks, who were in a state of shock after their defeat in Hungary – and very much occupied on other fronts, for example, fighting with the Russian Tsar Peter the Great – did not want to break the peace with the emperor by helping Rákóczi. For his part Ferenc II Rákóczi was also more than reluctant to ask for Turkish help because he feared that Turkish assistance would discredit his movement in the eyes of the Hungarians, who had, after all, just been liberated from the Turks. The example of his stepfather Imre Thököly, who was abandoned by his soldiers, had to be a clear warning for him.

This short overview of Hungarian and Transylvanian history between 1604 and 1711 may perhaps convince us that for Hungarians not only the twentieth century was a period of dramatic changes and painful decisions, of repeated transitions between political regimes. However, I believe that it would be a great mistake to think that the Hungarian political elite had to choose between two equally bad solutions.

Later, the historians of the nineteenth century and even those of the twentieth century have often presented these alternatives as a choice for the Hungarian nobility between two equally dangerous enemies, between two equally bad alternatives. These works suggest that the Hungarians had to balance between the empires of two great emperors, and they often use a quote from a late seventeenth-century Kuruc [pro-Rákóczi] song, “Between two heathen enemies, for one fatherland we shed our blood.”

There can be little doubt that the Habsburg rulers were not at all respectful of the liberties or interests of the Hungarians. This was especially true for those who met Habsburg power in its worst form, in the form of its plundering army. On the other hand to believe that the two great empires constituted equal dangers for Hungarian interests would be a complete misunderstanding of the political alternatives of seventeenth-century Hungary. The basic question can be thus stated: Would Hungary remain a part of Latin Christian culture, a part of Europe, or would Hungary follow the fate of the Balkan lands, which would live for centuries under Ottoman rule and in continuous stagnation?



After the defeat of Ferenc II Rákóczi the Hungarian nobility forged a fruitful compromise with the Habsburg rulers. Rákóczi's manifestos and letters from his exile in Turkey remained without effect. Neither he nor his son proved able to remobilize his former followers. The durable solution emerged from the compromise between the Habsburg dynasty and the Hungarian nobility. The Hungarian nobility remained loyal even when the Habsburg dynasty faced its greatest crisis, when the dynasty died out in the male line and the young Queen Maria Theresa was attacked from all sides in 1741. The Hungarian political elite made a sound choice and supported the Habsburg Empire in its moment of crisis. The Hungarian noblemen who pledged their lives and their blood knew only too well the danger that still lurked on Hungary's southern frontier. The possibility that Hungary would follow the fate of the Balkans was still very near.

### Bibliography

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