The Rákóczi Insurrection and the Disruption of the Grand Alliance

Linda Frey and Marsha Frey

In June 1703 Hungarians rose against Emperor Leopold I of Austria and King of Hungary (1655–1705). The insurrection, led by Prince Ferenc II Rákóczi of Transylvania (1676–1735), lasted eight years and ended in a compromise settlement. Although Hungary had been devastated in the struggle and Habsburg power seemed triumphant in East Central Europe, the Rákóczi insurrection had grave consequences for Vienna's international ambitions during the general struggle raging in Europe during the War of Spanish Succession (1701–1714). The conflict helped to undermine the Anglo-Dutch-Habsburg Grand Alliance against the powerful and ambitious Louis XIV of France.

The alliance between the House of Habsburg and the so-called Maritime Powers, England and the United Provinces, had been forged to prevent the union of the Spanish and French realms under one dynasty. But the alliance was incohesive from the start. The allies' differing views concerning the Rákóczi insurrection enhanced the Grand Alliance's weakness, and the increasingly bitter quarrels over Habsburg policy in Hungary led to a steady erosion of confidence among its members. In particular, the Maritime Powers' attempts to intervene in the quarrels between the Habsburgs and their Hungarian subjects from 1703 to 1706 accelerated the deterioration of Austro-allied relations, and even caused the recall of England's ambassador from Vienna. As in any alliance, the misunderstandings and problems stemmed from its members' conflicting interests, goals, and strategies.

England entered the War of Spanish Succession neither primarily to champion Habsburg claims to the Spanish inheritance nor to support an abstract conception of the balance of power, but to protect its own Protestant Succession, and to ensure England's national security and trading concerns in Europe and overseas. The United Provinces entered the conflict to secure a "barrier" of fortresses in the Spanish Netherlands against France and to protect their commercial interests in the Spanish empire. Austria, however, joined the fray to secure the Spanish inheritance for Emperor Leopold's son, the Archduke Charles.

Throughout the war, England and the United Provinces consistently foiled Austria's policies and disregarded her strategic interests. The Maritime Powers ignored the Habsburgs' claim to inherit the entire Spanish empire, and they tried to barter away parts of the inheritance in Italy and in Spain to Bavaria, Savoy, and Portugal in order to gain more allies. They also begrudged Austria's preoccupation with Italy and refused to dispatch their fleet to assist the emperor's Italian campaign. More importantly, however, they transgressed the Habsburgs' vital interests by intervening in the Hungarian insurrection.

In 1703, Ferenc II Rákóczi urged Hungarians to fight for "God, Fatherland, and Freedom." The insurrection aimed to curtail Habsburg domination by restoring Hungarian estates constitutionalism. This conflict between the emperor-king and Rákóczi exemplified the struggle between the powerful absolutist Austrian realm and its member states, which tried to retain and/or recover their constitutional liberties and privileges. Rákóczi represented the particularistic interests of the Kingdom of Hungary, whereas Leopold strove to establish a centralized empire by increased absolutist control from Vienna. Leopold never intended to honour Hungarian constitutionalist demands; he negotiated with the insurrectionists only to gain time for a military solution. He never agreed to grant the Hungarians concessions which would diminish and/or endanger Habsburg power in the Danubian monarchy.

Leopold was indecisive, vacillating, monkish, typically Habsburg in appearance and action, a man with more faith in God than in himself. Trained for the clergy, Leopold had an unshakable conviction that God favoured the House of Habsburg. He had a keen sense of the imperial dignity and of his duty towards God, family, and empire.⁴ He would be abrogating that commitment if he agreed to the insurrectionists' conditions. Leopold had reconquered Hungary from the Turks, incorporated Transylvania into the Austrian realms, achieved recognition of the male Habsburg line in primogeniture as the Hungarian kings at the Diet of Pressburg (1687), and ended the Turkish threat to the Holy Roman Empire. These gains would be either lost or seriously endangered if Leopold acceded to the insurrectionists' demands.

Throughout his reign, Leopold I sought to consolidate Habsburg power by extirpating Protestantism, eliminating elective monarchy, and extending his central authority. Leopold's attempt to crush Hungarian constitutionalism and to amalgamate Hungary into the Austrian state system exemplified this policy. In the seventeenth century, Hungary had been a buffer state fought over by the emperor and the Turks, who had occupied most of Hungary since 1526 and even threatened Vienna in

the 1520's and 1680's. Thanks to imperial victories from 1683 onward, Leopold was able to terminate elective monarchy in Hungary and abolish the Hungarian nobles' ius resistendi, or their right to remedy grievances by resorting to arms (1687). By the Treaty of Karlowitz (1699) the Turks relinquished most of Hungary, along with Croatia and Transylvania. Thus Leopold held Hungary effectively under Habsburg rule; he quartered troops on the country, levied taxes, confiscated land, and persecuted Protestants. Many Hungarians became convinced that Leopold was trying to crush the Hungarian constitutional government and replace it with imperial absolutism, as an earlier Habsburg regime had done in Bohemia after the battle of the White Mountain. Leopold's subsequent attempts to amalgamate the Hungarian administration with that of Vienna only reinforced this fear. When the Hungarians finally revolted, they were exploiting Leopold's preoccupation with the struggle for the Spanish empire, the War of the Spanish Succession.

When the Hungarian insurrection began, the Maritime Powers were neutral. Allied sympathy for the rebels, anxiety that the emperor would withdraw troops from the war effort in order to suppress the uprising, and fear that the Turks would assist the Hungarians, however, prompted the Maritime Powers to intervene in their Habsburg ally's Hungarian affairs. Sympathizing with the Hungarians' loss of their constitutional and religious liberties, the Allies concurred with Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, that "a spirit of bigotry, tyranny, and of avarice" had caused the troubles in Hungary.⁵ The Whigs in particular denounced Leopold's alleged cruelty and his persecution of the Protestants. Even a far from impartial Tory, Jonathan Swift, indicted Leopold for choosing to "sacrifice the whole alliance to his private passion by entirely subduing and enslaving a Miserable People who had too much provocation to take up Arms to free themselves from the Oppression under which they were groaning."6 The English and the Dutch appreciated the growing strength of the insurrectionists, who mustered more than 30,000 men by the end of 1703, and they recognized the efficacy of France's diplomatic, military, and financial assistance to Rákóczi. They attempted to compel Leopold to accede to the Hungarians' demands and thereby end the insurrection.

The Allies feared that the emperor's dispatch of troops to Hungary would prolong the war with France. The Imperial circles of Swabia and Franconia complained vehemently that troop withdrawals left them defenseless against the French.⁷ The ease with which Maximilian II, the elector of Bavaria, seized Passau, strategically located at the confluence of the Danube, the Inn, and the Ilz (January 1704), seemed to substan-



tiate the Maritime Powers' view that Leopold could not wage war in Italy, the Rhineland, and Hungary simultaneously. Allied anxiety that the emperor would withdraw troops from the war effort in order to suppress the revolt, and fear that Turkish aid to the rebels might ignite another Austro-Turkish conflict prompted the Maritime Powers to intervene in Hungarian affairs.

Louis XIV believed that the Hungarian insurrection would create difficulties in the Habsburg realms and foment dissension among the Allies. Louis practiced "la diplomatie l'argent"; 9 he subsidized Rákóczi with funds (about 30,000 livres monthly for the first two years, later increased to 50,000), and even provided officers, but not troops. Louis also tried to dissuade Rákóczi from settling with or even negotiating with the Habsburgs. 10 Dependent on Louis XIV, Rákóczi ignored an imperial diplomat's warning about Louis' faithlessness to his allies: "Prince, you have confidence in the promises of France: France is the graveyard of princes; you will add to their number and finish your career there." 11

France also attempted to involve the Turks in the Hungarian conflagration. Louis did not accord formal recognition to the rebels, but he urged Turkey to do so. Although Ibrahim Effendi, the Turkish representative at Vienna, assured the emperor that the sultan wanted to keep the peace, Turkish involvement remained an everpresent threat. Though Robert Sutton, the English ambassador at Constantinople, maintained that the Turks would probably not overtly assist the insurgents, he feared that the Turkish military leaders wished to intervene. Continued Hungarian success might force the Turkish government to change its policy and help the Hungarians. 13

The Allies had good reason to persuade Leopold to end the Hungarian conflict. But the emperor's seeming vacillation was the result of conscious policy. The unquestionable superiority of the Maritime Powers made Leopold financially and militarily dependent on them. 14 He was, therefore, unable to influence allied policy decisions effectively. For the Habsburgs, this dependence often necessitated abandoning their strategic concerns. Leopold's only recourse was to vacillate or to

Illustration on opposite page: Prince Ferenc II Rákóczi. Medal designed by Dóra de Pédery-Hunt. Photographed by Elizabeth Frey of Toronto. Courtesy of the Rákóczi Association (Toronto, Canada).

procrastinate. By employing delaying tactics, Leopold hoped to safeguard Habsburg interests and defer accepting the unpalatable decisions which were often thrust on him, as in the Hungarian embroglio. Clearly, Leopold hoped to gain sufficient time to suppress the insurrection.

By late 1703, however, the Maritime Powers were urging Leopold to reach an agreement with Rákóczi. But the emperor wanted not mediation, but military and financial aid to terminate the uprising. Leopold's heir Joseph I (1676-1711) and Prince Eugene of Savoy (1663-1736), one of Leopold's most able commanders, had also decided to quell the insurrection by force. Notwithstanding their friendship with John Churchill, the duke of Marlborough, commander of the allied forces, they strongly resented Anglo-Dutch interference. Prince Eugene in particular regarded Rákóczi's behavior as treasonous. 15 Most of the imperial ministers advised energetically suppressing the insurrection. Count Peter Goes, the imperial representative at The Hague, expressed the consensus of the imperial court when he told Alexander Stanhope, the English representative, that the "interposition of any Protestant power" would make the rebels, whom he disparagingly termed mere "canaille." more obdurate than ever.16 Frederick, the Elector Palatine, one of Leopold's chief advisers, considered it dishonorable for the emperor to "condescend so low" as to even treat with the "rebels." He told George Stepney, England's envoy to Vienna, that once the danger from Bavaria was past, the emperor had every right to withdraw approximately 20,000 troops from the war effort in order to quell the insurrection.¹⁷ The outlook, however, was bleak; the emperor wanted to crush the uprising, but he had neither money nor troops to do so. Meanwhile, the insurrectionists' strength increased daily.18

Leopold and his ministers resented allied "meddling" in Hungarian affairs, convinced that the Maritime Powers were too partial to the insurrectionists. ¹⁹ Nevertheless, in February 1704 the emperor accepted the Maritime Powers' mediation offer because his financial and military dependence demanded it, and because the involvement of other powers, such as Poland, Prussia, or Sweden, was even less palatable. Throughout the negotiations, Leopold's belief that both Stepney and Hamel Bruynincx, the Dutch representative at Vienna, favored the rebels, obstructed progress. ²⁰ Ironically, neither Rákóczi nor his close friend, the proud arrogant Count Nicholas Bercsényi (1655–1725), wanted the mediation of the Maritime Powers, whom they distrusted as the Habsburgs' allies. Rákóczi, in fact, had advocated mediation by Sweden, Poland, Prussia, or Venice. ²¹

Under the auspices of the Maritime Powers, the Habsburgs negoti-

ated with the rebels intermittently from the spring of 1704 through Leopold's death to the summer of 1706. The Hungarians shrewdly guessed that Leopold only wanted a truce in order to rest his beleaguered garrisons and gather more troops.²² The ambiguous wording of the proposed armistice instrument only augmented Hungarian fears of possible imperial chicanery. The Austrians also doubted the rebels' sincerity, convinced that they were negotiating only in order to gain time.²³ The quibbling over various conference sites and the wording of the assorted terms and credentials further intensified mutual suspicions ²⁴

General Siegbert Heister, commander of the imperial army in Hungary, also impeded the negotiations. His policy of "sword, rope, and fire," and his allusion to the Hungarians' "perfidious crimes" and "detestable obstinacy" increased the insurrectionists' obduracy. His ruthless military actions, such as the destruction of the neutral city of Veszprém in May 1704, augmented Rákóczi's following and further diminished the possibility of a peaceful settlement. A worse selection as commander than Heister could hardly have been made. Although brave and energetic, he was also obstinate, cruel, and unable to cooperate with his subordinates or his fellow commanders. Heister had neither military nor diplomatic skills, and proved to be as great a scourge to his own troops as he was to the Hungarians.²⁵

Even allied victories, such as Blenheim (August 1704), which effectually dashed any Hungarian plans for a possible Bavaro-Hungarian invasion of the empire, only increased allied tension. Once the imminent danger had passed, Leopold broke off negotiations with the Hungarians at Selmecbánya (Schemnitz) and attempted to suppress the insurrection by force. Ironically, Marlborough's victories exacerbated Austro-allied relations by encouraging Leopold's chimerical hopes that the Maritime Powers would provide both military and financial assistance to quell the uprising. ²⁶

Under pressure from the Allies, Leopold and later Joseph empowered commissioners between 1703 and 1706 to negotiate with Rákóczi, and periodically to conclude truces. This stratagem enabled the emperor to gather more troops and supplies.²⁷ Leopold insisted on the abolition of elective monarchy and the right of resistance, but agreed that his heir would reside in Hungary; that triennial convocation of the Hungarian diet would be assured; that certain institutions, such as the Hungarian Chancellery would be maintained; that damages perpetrated by imperial troops would be redressed; and that salt taxes would be reduced. He also agreed to submit such questions as the expulsion of the Jesuits and

tax reduction to the diet, and he pledged that the independence of the Hungarian treasury would be subject to the Hungarian diet alone.

Rákóczi and Bercsényi wished to obtain an international guarantee of the agreement, to be secured by Poland, Sweden, Prussia, or Venice. They also wanted the various Hungarian abbeys and benefices illegally seized by the Jesuits returned, elective kingship and the right of resistance restored, all imperial troops evacuated, and Rákóczi's election as the Prince of Transylvania recognized.²⁸ Leopold thought the rebels' demands exorbitant. Rákóczi's insistence on a foreign guarantor remained the chief obstacle to a settlement.29 Whereas Rákóczi had a longstanding distrust of the Habsburgs and regarded the guarantee as a necessary safeguard for the preservation of Hungarian liberties, 30 Leopold regarded a foreign guarantee as an open invitation to foreign intervention in the Habsburg empire. Leopold would not accept the abolition of hereditary succession, and he refused to recognize Rákóczi's election as the Prince of Transylvania. Both concessions would threaten his own sovereignty in Hungary. Should the Hungarian throne become vacant, a new election would be held, and possibly the Habsburgs would not be re-elected.³¹ Leopold also adamantly refused to evacuate all imperial troops from Hungary, because the Habsburgs could not govern such a people who so strongly demanded constitutional government and forcefully opposed Habsburg absolutist policies. Rákóczi and Leopold castigated each other for the abortive negotiations.³² The Maritime Powers deplored the impasse, blaming both sides. The Maritime Powers' insistence that Leopold grant the Hungarians civil and religious liberties further deepened mutual animosities and threatened to disrupt the precarious alliance.

Leopold I died on 5 May 1705. Throughout his reign he had always placed the interests of the House of Habsburg above all else, including Hungary. Joseph I's succession to the imperial throne raised new hopes for a Hungarian settlement. Joseph advocated conciliation; he promised to grant the insurrectionists amnesty, to re-establish the Hungarian constitution, to recognize all Hungarian laws and privileges, to assure triennial convocation of the diet, and to relegate certain grievances to the next diet. He would not, however, countenance what he termed the "rebels'" exorbitant demands; he would not sanction a foreign guarantor of the agreement, nor would he abolish hereditary monarchy in Hungary, or evacuate all Habsburg troops. 33 The failure of both sides to moderate their demands stalemated the negotiations.

By the summer of 1706, the Maritime Powers saw little hope of persuading the emperor to reach an accommodation with the Hungarians.³⁴ The negotiations were broken off in July 1706, whereupon the emperor dispatched four regiments from the Rhine to Hungary in order to extinguish the insurrection. This action prompted a storm of protest from his allies. The Rhine front was already weak and the troop withdrawal would only give Prince Louis of Baden, the imperial commander, an excuse for lapsing into inactivity.³⁵ Count Wratislaw, an imperial minister, rather ingenuously told Marlborough that the Allies should not protest. The common cause would only be served if the Hungarian insurrection terminated abruptly.³⁶ Once the Habsburgs suppressed the Hungarians, imperial forces might concentrate their efforts against France.

The Maritime Powers' intervention only exacerbated their relations with the Habsburgs and resulted in George Stepney's recall from Vienna. From 1703 to 1706 Stepney had persistently begged to be summoned home from Vienna, "which is now the most disagreeable station we have in Europe." His attitude in 1706 contrasted sharply with his sentiments in 1701 when he said he "would not quit this post for any in Europe." Stepney's change of heart epitomized the gradual deterioration of the alliance. On 30 August 1706 Stepney received his letters of revocation, and on 22 and 23 September he took his audiences of congé. His recall was an ominous portent for Austro-allied relations. If any man could have united the Maritime Powers and the Habsburgs it would have been Stepney, who had an unrivalled understanding of German affairs. From September 1706 to June 1707, in the midst of a hard-fought war, England had no permanent representative in Vienna, the capital of her chief ally. September 1909 in the midst of the capital of her chief ally.

The insurrection dragged on until 1711. Although an able leader, Rákóczi ultimately failed. The Hungarians' inability to defeat the imperial army, and vice versa, paved the way for the Treaty of Szatmár (spring of 1711). By this settlement, Emperor Charles VI (Charles III of Hungary) ensured that Hungary would remain a Habsburg kingdom. But he did agree to grant amnesty to all rebels who swore an oath of allegiance within three weeks, to respect Hungary's religious and constitutional liberties as enunciated in the Diet of 1687, and to convoke a future diet to discuss other grievances. Rákóczi refused to accept the settlement, which had been arranged in his absence, and sought exile abroad. The insurrection left Hungary devastated and depopulated: 410,000 men died of the plague and another 85,000 in battle. By 1711 Hungary's population numbered only two and a half million, reduced by more than fifty percent since the fifteenth century.⁴⁰

The insurrection also fractured the already weakened Grand Alliance.

The Maritime Powers entertained unrealistic hopes by expecting the Habsburgs to accede to the insurgents' demands, and to relinquish their alleged rights in Hungary, for which they had fought many centuries. After 1706, the gradual erosion of confidence in the alliance continued. Eventually, Johann Wenzel, Count Gallas, Austria's representative in England was expelled from Queen Anne's court (autumn of 1711). The conclusion of separate peace treaties by England and the United Provinces (Utrecht — 11 April 1713) and Austria (Rastadt — 7 March 1714 and Baden — 7 September 1714), was the final blow to the fragile alliance.

NOTES

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- 6. Jonathan Swift, The Conduct of the Allies and of the Late Ministry in Beginning and Carrying on the Present War (London: John Morphew, 1711), p. 21. For the English and Dutch opinion of the rebellion consult the Journals of the House of Lords and Commons for the years 1703 and 1706 and the Algemeen Rijksarchief, Archief Staten Generaal, Lias Engeland 5928-5930, 6007-6008 and Lias Duitsland 6637-6638, hereafter cited as Alg. Rijks., Arch. Staten Generaal; Archief Anthonie Heinsius 72-90; Lady Mary Wortley Montague, Works, II (London: Richard Phillips, 1803), 62; Arthur Wellesley, Second ed., Defoe's Review, IX (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 10, 111.
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- 16. P.R.O., S.P. Holland, 80/226, Stanhope to Hedges, The Hague, 1 January 1704
- P.R.O., S.P. Germany, 80/23/348 and in S.P. Germany, 105/72/196, Stepney to Harley, Vienna, 25 July 1704.

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- 28. Alg. Rijks., Arch. Staten Generaal 6587, Bruyninx Report of 31 March 1704 and report of 14 April 1704; P.R.O., S.P. Germany, 105/71/325, Stepney to Hedges, Vienna, 12 March 1704 and S.P. Germany 80/22/194-195, Whitworth to Hedges, Vienna, 2 February 1704; B.M., Add. MSS. 37, 352, ff. 4-5, Whitworth to Hedges, Vienna, 2 February 1704, ff. 170-193, Letters and Observations on the Hungarian Negotiations, March 1704.
- 29. P.R.O., S.P. Military Expedition, 87/2, Marlborough to unknown official, Giengen, 29 June 1704.
- 30. P.R.O., S.P. Germany 80/25, Heinsius to Bruyninx, The Hague, 15 May 1705, Stepney to Harley, 16 May 1705; B.M., Add. MSS. 9098, ff. 58-60, Stepney to Marlborough, Vienna, 9 May 1705.
- 31. Redlich, Österreich, pp. 170 ff; P.R.O., S.P. Germany, 80/23/320, Stepney to Hedges, Vienna, 14 June 1704.
- 32. P.R.O., S.P. Germany, 80/24, Stepney to Harley, Schemnitz (Selmecbánya), 3 November 1704.
- 33. P.R.O., S.P. Germany, 80/25, Heinsius to Bruyninx, The Hague, 15 May 1705; B.M., Add. MSS. 9098. ff. 58-60, Stepney to Marlborough, Vienna, 9 May 1705; Alg. Rijks., Arch. Staten Generaal 6588, 27 June 1705; P.R.O., S.P. Germany, 80/25, Stepney to Harley, 16 May 1705.
- 34. B.M., Add. MSS. 9100, f. 76, Marlborough to Sunderland, Meldert, 7 July 1706, f. 16, Godolphin to Marlborough, 5 July 1707, f. 61, Marlborough to unknown official, Meldert, 27 July 1707.
- P.R.O., S.P. Germany, 104/73/120, Harley to Stepney, Whitehall, 14 June 1706; B.M., Add. MSS. 9096, ff. 174-5, Harley to Marlborough, 13 August 1706; Add. MSS. 7058, f. 58, Marlborough to Salms, Helchin, 26 July 1706.
- B.M., Add. MSS. 9096, f. 180. Halifax to Marlborough, The Hague, 18 August 1706. Also refer to B.M., Add. MSS. 9096, ff. 168-9, Salms to Marlborough, XI, 179; Öst. Staatsarchiv, England, Kart. 38-40, passim.
- B.M., Add. MSS. 7075, f. 59, Stepney to Raby, The Hague, 2 December 1706.
 Also refer to P.R.O., S.P. Germany, 80/18/28, passim. B.M., Add. MSS. 7058-9, 37, 155-6, passim.
- 38. P.R.O., S.P. Germany, 105/63, 214-5, Stepney to Halifax, Vienna, 17 August 1701.
- 39. Sir Philip Meadows subsequently replaced Stepney. He served as envoy extraordinary to the emperor from June 1707 to August 1709.
- 40. Béla K. Király, Hungary in the Late Eighteenth Century, The Decline of Enlightened Despotism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 5.