

*Emil Niederhauser*

## **The Bocskai Uprising and Europe**

It should not be a problem to revive these events, they are rather well-known. István Bocskai, a nobleman with properties in Transylvania was born in 1557 and became captain-in-chief of the Várad castle (Oradea) in the 1590s. In 1595, with respect to the war posterity would call the Fifteen Years' War, Emperor Rudolph, king of Hungary, concluded an agreement with Prince Zsigmond Báthori of Transylvania. Bocskai was enthusiastic about the agreement and won a battle against the Turks in the same year. He was also a staunch supporter of Habsburg rule in Hungary. Yet, Rudolph did not trust him (did he trust anyone?), and kept him in his court in Prague between 1602 and 1604.

In the meanwhile, the Fifteen Years' War, sparked by Ottoman provocations in the early 1590s, had already been going on. In Habsburg-Hungary, the population of which was mainly Protestant, Rudolph intensely promoted Counter-Reformation. The absolutism of Vienna caused considerable offence to the orders in Hungary (that is, Hungarian orders even according to our present views). The trial of István Illésházy at the Diet of 1604 was among the chief sources of antagonism. Illésházy, as the landlord of Bazin (Pezinok) and Szentgyörgy (Svätý Jur) market towns, was planning to allow his bondsmen to free themselves from servitude, which enraged the nobility. Later, Rudolph unfoundedly accused him of treason, and he could only escape to Polish territory with the help of his benefactors at the court. Furthermore, the government enacted, in addition to the acts adopted at the Diet, Act 22 aiming at curbing Reformation. All this, together with the ever more frequent confiscations of property, encouraged the opposition of the Hungarian orders. The outbreak of a feudal revolt was in the air.

Transylvania elected Bocskai prince (with respect to Transylvania, this needed the subsequent approval of the Ottoman sultan, otherwise the orders could elect anyone they pleased). Considering the prevailing circumstances in Hungary, Bocskai opted for leaving the Habsburg alliance and, instead, he concluded an agreement with the Ottomans (the confusion of the period is clearly seen in the fact that the castles in Bihar (Bihar) county under his rule were constrained to continue self-defence against the attacks of Turkish troops well into the autumn of 1604).

Bocskai made another alliance that year: with the Hajdú (Heyduck) in October. The Hajdú forces of several tens of thousands constituted mainly of fugitive bondsmen and others living at the periphery of the social structure. They raided the war-stricken areas and caused various injuries to landlords. Bocskai saw it clearly that this causes alarm among the nobility, so he launched the first of the reforms that would make his reign a unique experience. He did not try to force the Hajdú, who pursued fighting as an occupation, back among the bondsmen, but made them settle in market towns in the eastern Hungarian region that is still called "Hajdúság". They were granted the "freedom of the Hajdú", which meant

### Minorities History

that they did not belong under the jurisdiction of landlords but, in exchange, they were obliged to take up arms at the order of the prince. In the Europe of the age, where usually mercenary armies fought each other, Bocskai thus obtained an exceptional army of his own.

Due to the injuries it had endured at the hands of Rudolph, the discontented nobility sided with him. He regarded the role he played in the defence of Protestantism as true Biblical ardour: for him it was a struggle in defence of the freedom of religion against the Habsburgs. It was this heavenly mission he set out to accomplish subsequently. He arrived in Kassa (Kosice) in early November 1604 and managed the anti-Habsburg campaign from their practically throughout the duration of his reign. He entered into a large-scale, open battle with the armies of the emperor only once, at Edelény, but he lost. However, he could use the Hajdú perfectly to make the enemy uneasy in a kind of warfare that we would call guerilla warfare today. The alliance with the Hungarian orders made it possible for him to occupy much of Habsburg-Hungary, the territory of present-day Slovakia and Transcarpathia, in a short time. The Protestant orders even proposed that he be elected king of Hungary but Bocskai rejected the idea. However, he did concede to being elected prince of Hungary at the Diet assembled in Szerencs on 20 April 1605. With subsequent settlements, he managed to solve the Hajdú problem to the liking of the nobility.

He ruled for less than three years. He was seriously ill during the last months of his reign, his contemporaries suspected poisoning. This is unlikely but the true account of his death has not yet emerged. Towards the end of his life, he sought reconciliation with the Habsburg sovereign. After long negotiations this was achieved on 23 June 1606 when his delegates signed a peace treaty in Vienna that guaranteed freedom of religion for Protestants and the privileges of the orders (in effect, of the nobility and the aristocracy). He acted as mediator in peace negotiations with the Ottomans. This peace treaty was signed in the tents by the mouth of the Zsitva River on 11 November and it formally ensured peace for years to come – more exactly, until 1663 – between the two archenemies. The stock of properties occupied prior to the peace treaty remained practically unchanged.

The short reign of Bocskai fundamentally transformed the circumstances of Hungary and Transylvania, their bilateral relations and, as it will be revealed, their international relations as well. It was Suleyman the Magnificent who considered Transylvania his own creation and the contemporaries also regarded it as such. As opposed to this, Bocskai formulated the need for an independent Transylvania in his political will: “As long as the Hungarian crown is in the hands of a nation stronger than us, the Germans, and the Hungarian kingdom depends on the Germans, it is necessary and right to have a Hungarian prince in Transylvania for your protection and benefit. And, should God grant that the Hungarian crown fall in Hungary in the hands of a Hungarian who is to be crowned king, we urge the Transylvanians that instead of breaking from him or opposing him, help him according

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Minorities History

to their abilities and take up its service according to long-established rules.” For the next, nearly 300 years, this advice determined the fate of the country.

So far, we discussed Hungary and Transylvania. However, two other players have also been indicated who had a say in the Hungarian affairs of the age. One is the Habsburg Empire. It had reached the expansion it possessed in those times a century before but the roots of the empire went back to the 13th century. While in Europe absolutism had already gained ground as the most modern form of government, the Habsburg Empire had a peculiar structure: apart from the German-speaking territories which in effect it did not have in its power, it was still a vast state formation of countries and provinces. It had an absolutistic regime in Vienna but feudal structures lingered in other parts. Feudalism was rather strong in Hungary and stable in Bohemia – the Battle of White Mountain is still to come. Moreover, the Habsburg Empire had been in constant rivalry with the French monarchy, which sought hegemony in Europe.

Besides the constant French menace, the Empire also inherited the Ottoman burden with Hungary, since two thirds of the original Hungarian territory was, in one way or another, under the rule of the Ottomans. Accordingly, the Empire had to watch itself at two fronts. The Ottoman power seemed formidable and unshakable back in the early 17th century. Virtually none of the contemporaries realised that the Ottoman Empire entered a phase of decline with the death of Suleyman. It had made its living from the continuous conquests and the occupation of new countries that it could plunder. This, however, came to an end. The sources of revenue became scarcer and the internal relations grew confused. The central government lost its strength. Furthermore, similar to the Habsburgs, the Ottoman Empire also had to watch itself at two fronts, because at its eastern borders there lay the Persian Empire under the rule of the Safavid dynasty. Shiites had the power in Persia, while Sunnis ruled the Ottoman Empire. The Turks fought a long war against Persia between 1578 and 1590 and, in 1598, one of the many Jelali revolts in the Anatolian central areas reduced the power of the Ottomans. At the same time, Persia enjoyed one of its golden ages during the reign of Abbas I (1587–1629). This was the reason why the Empire was more than eager to make peace in 1606. The Ottomans managed to achieve the same with Persia only in 1612, and, before making that peace, they could not regain their full strength. However, neither Kassa nor Vienna could fathom this from the distance, so the alliance Bocskai made with the Turks seemed a rational step at the time.

Bocskai established his principality independent of the Habsburgs, defined its political duties in relation to the Habsburg Empire, and outlined the protection and the promotion of the feudal Hungarian world. Yet, he also had another vision. He was already an adult when István Báthori became king of Poland and it formed a union with Transylvania. When Bocskai turned to Poland, Sigismund III reigned in Poland, a member of the Vasa dynasty. He was originally king of Sweden but the Swedish deposed him in 1604 because of his devotion to the Catholic faith. He became entangled into war with Sweden for the same reason,

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Minorities History

with the hegemony over the Baltic Sea being at stake. The Polish nobility was not satisfied with him because of his attempts at introducing absolutism, of which they had gotten unused to. Bocskai contacted the Polish orders and supported them against the king in the hope of another potential Polish-Transylvanian union. However, this opportunity vanished with his death, because alliances, at a time when the feudalist orders were relegated into the background throughout Europe, were possible only on the basis of dynasties. Therefore, the Polish assistance that could have replaced that of the Turks, could not be obtained.

The more we travel to the West, the fewer chances arise as to potential alliances. The pushing out of the Ottoman Empire from Europe at the beginning of the Fifteen Years' War did manage to stir some support. However, in the long run, the powers on the shores of the Atlantic had more at stake in overseas conquests and the economic exploitation of the occupied territories. The Dutch East Indies Company was practically founded as a private enterprise in 1602 that received assistance from the state. Later on it became a model for other similar companies that could boast about considerable economic success. This preyed on the mind of the European powers that were not directly threatened by the Ottomans and, therefore, did not seek to force of the Ottomans out of Europe.

The internal strife within the Habsburg dynasty, the family discord, as put by Austrian poet Grillparzer in the 19th century, just made things worse, although did not bring considerable changes in the foreign relations of the Empire. The German states (they were in more than 300 at the time), the majority of which adopted the religion of Martin Luther, were naturally sympathetic to Bocskai even if he was a follower of Calvin, not Luther. However, their individual positions did not count much back then and a common position could not be expected from them at all. French foreign policy turned to the Easter-European region only decades later. No matter how we look at it, there was no chance to achieve more than the actual results of the 1606 Peace Treaty.

So far, we looked at the events from a Hungarian perspective only, considering the way they took place or, more exactly, as the contemporaries must have perceived them. However, there is another side to this coin: the events as perceived not from a Hungarian historical perspective but from that of other ethnic groups in concern and present-day nations.

As we shall see, these perspectives considerably differ from one another. With respect to the war of independence, it has been mentioned that it mostly took place in the territory of present-day Slovakia. Naturally, there is a given course of events. However, from the Slovak perspective, there is no reason to have any positive national significance attached to them. Their historians point out the massive financial and human losses caused by the warfare that lasted months. (How lucky that with the military equipment of the time the war could not go on in the winter and both sides got some rest.) Naturally, we must not forget about the German and Austrian perspectives either. In the case of the Germans, the denomination is the main factor, as the Protestants found the struggle for religious freedom justified and legitimate. Accordingly, in effect, they supported the Hungarian approach.

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## Minorities History

The Catholics, the Austrians first of all, sensed revolt against the legitimate power; in other words, the Hungarians turned against modern absolutism. Therefore, they rejected the Hungarian position and Austrian historiography only grasped an expression of Hungarian rebelliousness.

These were the nations directly involved in the conflict. There are other ethnic groups affected by it: the Romanians who conceive the events of these few years still in another light. For the events include also the actions of Mihai Viteazul (in Hungarian Vitéz Mihály) in Transylvania preceding those of Bocskai. He occupied Transylvania on the authority of Rudolph, which is merely an unpleasant episode for the Hungarians. On the other hand, for the Romanians it is the first and, for quite some time, the only successful attempt at creating a unified Romanian state comprising all Romanians. It is a different question that Mihai Viteazul did not aim at forming a truly unified Romanian state, as that idea was rather alien to those circumstances. Mihai was a very enthusiastic and keen crusader who, from a religious point of view, found it essential that the heathens be driven out from Europe. If he only had a chance for that as an ally of Rudolph, then was the solution he accepted.

There is still another Hungarian ethnic group that could have its own national perspective of these events: the Croatians. They had also lost great territories to the Ottomans and had assumed a clearly anti-Turk position by the time of these events. The perspective of the Serbs is less clear-cut. Most of them supported the anti-Turk position but they also had to remember that the Ottoman conquests had involved many Serb troops fighting on the Turks' side. Besides the Ottoman conquest, they also had the possibility of a future autonomous development within the Ottoman Empire to consider.

As regards the present-day Turkish perspective, one needs to understand that both modern Turkish historiography and, following its example, public opinion distance themselves from the history of the Ottoman Empire. Yet, they cannot pretend as if they had nothing to do with a period that lasted centuries. For this reason, though the disapproval of the Ottoman rule is basically obligatory, they do not reject the possibility of an alliance between the Turks and the Hungarians against the Habsburgs. The Habsburg Empire, similar to France, was a traditional enemy of the Ottoman Empire at the time. One could point out the hybrid and outdated character of the Habsburg state formation, against which the Ottoman Empire at least managed to represent something positive.

For Western European historiography and their national perspectives, these events make no more than an episode in the history of Europe. With respect to the traditional war against the Habsburgs, it did not occur at the time that Hungarians could receive assistance. It became timely a few decades later and then did play a role in the French national perspective. The historiography of western societies did not bother much to consider the question. Naturally, one could also look at a supranational historical perspective; however, it developed only subsequent to these events.

One last perspective to consider is that of the Polish. Independence and Polish autonomy dominates their view even today. Accordingly, Sigismund III, who toyed

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Minorities History

with the possibility of cooperation with the Habsburgs, does not receive a high mark according to the assessment by the Polish perspective. As opposed to this, they consider it positive that the Polish orders toyed with a possible relationship with Transylvania, the records of which had already proved effective. Furthermore, the Polish republic of nobles also had a few clashes with the Ottoman Empire, while the actions of the Protestants against the Catholic Habsburgs were not popular any more as Recatholicisation had already become a settled case.

Today's readers may find disillusioning the diverse national perspectives which may also entail a dangerous kind of relativism: if the same events can be considered according to various perspectives, how are we to make out the historical truth. Yet, the case here is that the historian, decades and centuries after the events, knows much more about their background and the motives behind them than even the most erudite and most well-informed statesmen of the age. However, the historian has his own problems: his possibilities are limited by the sources, since a new source can emerge at any time and make a completely new interpretation necessary. We have to accept the diversity of national perspectives. It is possible that this diversity will vanish in one or two centuries with the European Union but this is yet something we cannot take for granted.

Let's return to the Hungarian perspective: the beginning of the paper suggested that the 1606 Peace Treaty could be concluded as a result of the exhaustion or weariness of the enemies. Another hypothesis suggests it could happen because the Fifteen Years' War came to a deadlock. However, recent studies question this opinion: according to these, the Habsburg Empire achieved dominance and driving the Ottomans out of Europe became a real possibility. It was this possibility that the attack of Bocskai and the orders shattered. This hypothesis probably does not stand when formulated in such an extreme way, but there is no way we could test it as one cannot put history to the test.

This overall picture might seem a killjoy in a sense, but one will get used to the diversity of a unified Europe. All in all, the Hungarian perspective reveals certain episodes that can be appreciated and celebrated today. The uprising broke out because of the injuries suffered by the Hungarian orders. However, these were injuries that affected the entire population of the country through the constant presence of wars and destruction. The uprising marked a fundamental turning point in the political situation of the country (countries). Several measures of the previous reprehensible and bad policies could be eliminated – even if only temporarily in the majority of the cases. Furthermore, Bocskai solved an important social problem with the settlement of the Hajdú. Several problems would emerge again and again but some were settled permanently. Moreover, one cannot forget the international fame of Bocskai. Not only the fame he enjoyed back then but about the one he enjoys now. The statue of the statesman and sovereign who took up arms for the freedom of religion is still there at the Reformation Monument in Geneva. These few facts gathered above are in themselves enough to fully justify the Bocskai commemoration.