

The Hungarian Historical Review. Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae – New Series, ii, 4 (2013): Teréz Oborni (ed.), *Bethlen: The Prince of Transylvania*, 233 pp.

It has already become customary in the Hungarian-speaking scholarship that research on the outstanding personalities from the Hungarian and Transylvanian history is presented on the occasion of anniversaries. Among recent examples, there are publications on Francis II Rákóczi (2003), Stephen Bocskai (2006), Mathias Corvinus (2008) and Gabriel Báthory (2009). Following this pattern, in 2013 the historians concentrated on the figure of Gabriel Bethlen (1580–1629), prince of Transylvania (1613–29) and elected king of Hungary (1620–1). An excuse for that was the 400. anniversary of his accession to the Transylvanian throne. A previous similar accumulation of the studies on Bethlen occurred in early 1980s, due to the 400. birth anniversary.¹ Like the predominant majority of the earlier publications, the 2013 contributions took the form of special issues of periodicals and edited volumes with a considerable role of published conference papers.² As far as the recent scholarship is concerned, of special importance for the international audience have been the thematic issues of *The Hungarian Historical Review*, a journal re-established in 2012 (formerly as *Acta Historica Academiae*

¹ Kálmán Kovács (ed.), *Bethlen Gábor állama és kora* (Budapest, 1980) (includes the bibliography of works on Bethlen till 1980 by László Mihály Hernadi, available at <<http://mek.oszk.hu/03900/03971/>> [Accessed March 31, 2014]; László Makkai (ed.), *Bethlen Gábor emlékezete* (Budapest, 1980); László Makkai (ed.), *Bethlen Gábor kronikásai* (Budapest, 1980); Lajos Demény, *Bethlen Gábor és kora* (Bukarest, 1982); see also the issues of *Századok*, cxv (1981), cxvii (1983).

² An exception is the monograph by Dénes Hárαι, *Gabriel Bethlen, prince de Transylvanie et roi élu de Hongrie (1580–1629)* (Histoire Hongroise, Paris, 2013). The main conferences on Bethlen were held in Miskolc (May 2–3, 2012) and Cluj-Napoca (Oct. 24–26, 2013), with further events in Budapest (smaller conferences and exhibitions in the Hungarian National Archive and Hungarian National Museum); the papers of the first conference have already been published: Klára Papp and Judit Balogh (eds.), *Bethlen Gábor képmása* (Speculum Historiae Debreceniense, 15, Debrecen, 2013), several papers were released in a more extended form in the volume: Gábor Kármán and Kees Teszelszky (eds.), *Bethlen Gábor és Európa* (Budapest, 2013). Recent editions of the primary sources related to Bethlen's policy and intellectual history of the age: Kees Teszelszky, *Szenci Molnár Albert elveszettnek hitt 'Igaz Vallás Portréja' (1606) avagy holland – flamand – magyar szellemi kapcsolatok a kora újkorban / True Religion: A Lost Portrait by Albert Szenci Molnár (1606) or Dutch – Flemish – Hungarian Intellectual Relations in the Early Modern Period* (Budapest, 2014); Gábor Almási, *A Secretissima Instructio (1620). A kora újkori politikai paradigmaváltás egy Bethlen-kori röpirat tükrében* (Budapest, 2014).

Scientiarum Hungaricae, 1951–89) and published by the Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of History, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

The volume consists of eight papers by Hungarian historians, all devoted to various aspects of Bethlen's reign (1613–29) and five book reviews, supplemented by a list of variants of geographical names and a map. Some of the papers have previously or simultaneously been published in Hungarian.³ The introductory paper by Ágnes R. Várkonyi provides an outline of the main events of Bethlen's rule. Based predominantly on Hungarian scholarship and source editions, it gives an overview of the reference literature, with a useful historical background (concerning topics as Bethlen's family, origin, stages of his political career). Várkonyi focused on Bethlen's place in the contemporary European politics and the concept of his 'presence' in Europe. The general character of the paper has only allowed to point out some aspects of the reign which Várkonyi consequently handled in the context of broader European phenomena (information flow and propaganda, new political science and its impact on political practice, princely cultural policy). A separate section focuses on the alliance between Hungarian, Bohemian, Moravian and Transylvanian estates on the eve of the Thirty Years' War ('Confederation' of 1620). This political project, although unsuccessful – primarily because of the defeat of the Bohemian uprising in the battle of White Mountain – helped Bethlen sign a satisfactory treaty with Ferdinand II in Nikolsburg two years later. In general, the paper provides a good introductory overview. However, the reader can feel somewhat misguided, as the text concludes quite abruptly at the events of 1626, with no coverage of the last years of Bethlen's reign.

A much more detailed analysis can be found in the extended form of this paper in Hungarian.⁴ In the volume discussed here, a deeper study on the image of Bethlen in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hungarian historiography is further offered in the paper by Péter Erdősi, researcher of the Báthory period in Transylvania. He compared the established image of the prince with that of his predecessor on the Transylvanian throne, Sigismund Báthory, and focused on the themes of their youth and characteristics of princely courts, in order to point out the differences between the 'weak' Sigismund and the 'wise' Bethlen. As Erdősi states, the historiographic narratives rooted in a polarising approach to history, trace back to the early seventeenth-century authors. This is how similar aspects of the two biographies served to develop different interpretations, inspired by religious and political motives.

³ *Századok*, cxliv, 4 (2011) – papers by T. Oborni, I. Horn (journal issue with 5 papers on Bethlen's reign); Kármán and Tészelszky (eds.), *Bethlen Gábor és Európa* – extended version of paper by Á.R. Várkonyi.

⁴ Ágnes R. Várkonyi, 'Bethlen Gábor jelenléte Európában', in Kármán and Tészelszky (eds.), *Bethlen Gábor és Európa*, 9–75.

It has also been the case for historiographic images of other Transylvanian princes of the period, such as Gabriel Báthory, contrasted with Bethlen and Stephen Bocskai.

Three papers in the issue concern Bethlen's diplomacy and foreign policy. No doubt the reason was the intended international readership, but the choice reflects the perspectives of current research as well. In the 1610s and 1620s Transylvania caught attention in Europe and the country's participation in the Thirty Years' War made its European presence more important than ever before in the short history of the principality. For this reason Bethlen's diplomacy, although of long lasting research traditions, still proves to be a likely matter of study and can be approached anew. In the issue Teréz Oborni investigates the diplomatic manoeuvres of the prince in the relations with the Habsburg sovereign of Hungary, Mathias II, at the beginning of Bethlen's rule. Due to secure his power, Bethlen had to get it recognised also by the Emperor, which was eventually brought along in 1615 by means of the Treaty of Nagyszombat (Trnava). The Oborni paper is a study of diplomatic pragmatism; it tracks the stages of the diplomatic task to stay loyal to the Ottomans and to gain peace from the Emperor at once – a game Bethlen had to play in just like his predecessors, but which he undoubtedly further mastered. In 1615 he recognised the Habsburg suzerainty and a plan of a joint anti-Ottoman war (in a secret section of the treaty). The laboriously negotiated and fragile agreement became a rather tactic step, as it survived only four years, when Bethlen entered the Thirty Years' War on the Bohemian side.

Géza Pálffy described the events of 1619–22 from the point of view of the Hungarian estates and in context of the crisis of the Habsburg Monarchy. Therefore, he stressed the international perspective. The paper offers then an inspiring parallel to an important recent study of Sándor Papp⁵, who analysed the Transylvanian-Hungarian/Habsburg relations in the context of Ottoman policy. In 1619–21, following the Bethlen's military successes, only a small group of the political elite remained loyal to Ferdinand II, some were forced to join the Transylvanian prince. Remarkably, among Bethlen's adherents in the Kingdom of Hungary, there were many aristocrats who did not support Stephen Bocskai in 1604–6. Ferdinand II faced a critical situation: the crisis reached its peak by the fall of 1620. In spite of acquiring the royal insignia

⁵ Sándor Papp, 'Friedensoptionen und Friedensstrategien des Fürsten Gábor Bethlen zwischen den Habsburger- und Osmanenreich (1619–1621)', in Arno Strohmeyer and Norbert Spannenberger (eds.), *Frieden und Konfliktmanagement in interkulturellen Räumen. Das Osmanische Reich und die Habsburgermonarchie in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart, 2013), 109–28. Cf. *idem*, 'Bethlen Gábor, a Magyar királyság és a Porta (1619–1621)', *Századok*, cxlv, 4 (2011), 915–73; *idem*, 'Bethlen Gábor ismeretlen hadjárati terve II. Ferdinánd és a katolikus Európa ellen', in Kármán and Teszelszky (eds.), *Bethlen Gábor és Európa*, 103–27.

with the Holy Crown of Hungary, Bethlen resigned of coronation – a decision characterised by Pálffy as a step of a self-limited “ruler of great consequence” and a “true *Realpolitiker*”, but (as the author argued, in contrast with the predominant and well-established judgements of Hungarian historiography) a decision clearly taken not with the intention to unify the country (nor in a spirit of Hungarian patriotism Bethlen was often considered to follow). Pálffy concentrated on the meaning of the often neglected compromise between Ferdinand II and the Hungarian estates, which was reached in the summer of 1622, at the Diet in Sopron (Ódenburg), following the peace treaty with Bethlen in Nikolsburg. The agreement involved a solution that remained in custom till the nineteenth century, namely the enactment into law of the privileges of the estates from 1608, as part of the coronation diploma of 1618. The paper deals thoroughly with the negotiations, methods to handle the crisis, and its results for the political balance of power in the kingdom, also in the symbolic and ceremonial dimension (coronation of Queen Eleonora Anna Gonzaga in July 1622). An interesting case was the career of Szaniszló Thurzó, a Lutheran and follower of Bethlen elected palatine in 1622, who largely benefited from the compromise the Habsburg ruler decided to bring about; by the way, the latter is shown here as much more flexible a ruler than usually portrayed. Thurzó’s advance marked the strengthened position of the estates. Another significant career that resulted from the redistribution of power was that of Miklós Esterházy. Bethlen’s wars against the Habsburg Monarchy brought, therefore, interesting results for the political elite in the Kingdom of Hungary. The other outcome was the fatal devastation of Hungary before it could recover from the consequences of the Long Turkish War (1591/3–1606). However, the compromise of 1622 proved to be durable, as in the following years Bethlen didn’t find support among the Hungarian estates any more.

The third paper on political and diplomatic history in the volume is Gábor Kármán’s study of Bethlen’s diplomats in the missions to the Protestant courts of Europe. In contrast to the older scholarship, Kármán rated the performance of the corps in a much more nuanced manner. Failures of the diplomats (like insufficient language skills, lack of required documents), as the author argued, not necessarily informed the European image of the prince. The paper has a thematic construction: the author divided the diplomatic corps into groups: main were the ‘Czech/Palatinate’ (post-1620 emigrants with Matthias Quadt as main figure, mostly serving also other Protestant rulers) and the ‘Silesian’ group (diplomats in Bethlen service). They received different tasks, what allowed the author to argue for a dual and specialised character of Bethlen’s diplomatic activity. Separate categories were ‘wandering diplomats’ and adventurers, like Jacques Roussel or a Polish nobleman Zygmunt Zaklika, whose awkward behaviour caused critical judgements of the prince’s diplomacy among the historians. As Kármán stated, most of

Bethlen's diplomats to Protestant courts were of foreign origin (but less than 30 per cent in total number) and served more than one ruler during their career: both features were common practice. In Transylvania, the number of foreigners in diplomatic service was falling from the 1640s onwards. Like during the reign of Bethlen, they were still occasionally appointed to long-distance missions, but not to fulfill tasks in the neighbouring countries. The author explained the change by the end of the migratory wave of experts of the 1620s and not by the structural change in the principality's system of foreign policy, significantly improved by Gabriel Bethlen.

Although the papers on Bethlen's foreign policy, diplomacy and European presence seem to prevail in the issue, the volume contains also three papers on internal matters of Transylvania – a fact particularly valuable to international reader with limited access to original recent research published in Hungarian or Romanian. Ildikó Horn offered an in-depth analysis of the princely council in the period of Bethlen. The reign, often simply labelled as of 'absolutist' character, lacked a more concrete approach to the means and effects of the Prince's policy towards the elite. The paper, full of numeric data, diagrams and charts, delivers evidence for his methods. The council, briefly and skilfully reshaped by the prince, became in fact a kind of government, consisting of specialised councillors who were commissioned tasks in their respective areas of expertise. This allowed Bethlen to make use of the council as a tool for achieving his political agenda and handling the socially complex Transylvanian elite. Horn analyses the group of councillors from multiple points of view, like social and ethnic origin, confession, their rank in the hierarchy, offices and duties. Remarkable is the relatively big number of Catholic councillors (13 of total number of 32 councillors in the years 1613–29, compared to 9 Calvinists, 6 Unitarian, 3 Lutheran and 1 Sabbatarian), a proof that, as Horn states, "from the mid-1620s on the Catholicism and Habsburg orientation could no longer be automatically linked in Transylvania", but also for the ongoing religious changes in the Transylvanian elite, the effects of which (strengthened representation of Calvinists) were to be seen only later.

Two authors deal with Bethlen's policy toward towns. Art historian András Kovács describes the efforts of the prince to create a new centre of power and representation in Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár) after the crisis and fall of the town at the beginning of the seventeenth century. This involved the construction of fortifications, depicted here more comprehensively also as a project of social and economical consequences. The plan partly failed due to low defensibility of the castle, which forced George Rákóczi II to consider other places for this purpose (Fogaras/Făgăraș, Szeben/Sibiu). On the contrary, Bethlen did not abandon his plans to develop a princely palace and cathedral in Alba Iulia as well as to revive the town, not least with the academic college. It succeeded, but the wide-ranging plan of the prince to transform the capital into an ideal representative town with topographically

ordered seat of the estates not surprisingly proved to be unrealistic. Kovács gathered interesting and scattered data from a variety of sources, however, the paper apparently lacks conclusion and the illustrations are of uneven quality and therefore not always clear enough.

The second study on towns concerns the relation between Gabriel Bethlen and the town of Brassó (Kronstadt/Braşov), one of the wealthiest towns of the principality. Zsuzsanna Cziráki has based her research on the precise account books of Brassó. Thus, the study is part of recent intensive research on the Saxon towns, possibly because of their preserved extensive archives, whose importance and scale make them important not only to local history but to the history of Transylvania and the region as well. Recently, Cziráki has published a monograph on this subject.⁶ The princely visits to the Saxon town, made on the basis of an old privilege, help clarify the image of the political relations between the central power and town self-government. Again, the inner tension of Transylvanian politics comes to the fore, which also comes out at once as a local example of some aspects of the premodern statebuilding. Hosting the court and princely household – an undertaking financed by the town also when they stayed in the vicinity of Brassó – cost really a lot (approx. 1,000–1,600 forints, including the gifts, compared to 1,300–1,500 forints spent by the town on a single military campaign of the prince) and therefore became a matter of discussion, and was at times resisted. The number of guests was negotiated, as the hosts had in mind the oppressive policy of Prince Gabriel Báthory. Bethlen fixed the relations with the Saxons and forced them to compromise, as he intended to increase his influence over the significant political and economic player, the privileged Saxon *Universitas*. In any case, as numerous cases show, both sides managed to build the relationship on deals and measured decisions. The core of the paper and its most valuable part is a detailed description of food supply, accommodation and court, which gives an insight into the culture of everyday life (even if hosting a prince was quite rare event), court history, urban history and commerce.

The issue of *The Hungarian Historical Review* on Gabriel Bethlen is not a comprehensive volume on the prince and his reign, but nor it was intended to fulfil this task. Therefore, the narrow character of some papers is not a disadvantage. They provide evidence of the research currently undertaken. It seems that editors have made a good choice in concentrating on political and diplomatic issues, whilst the issue of princely propaganda and image has been investigated quite intensively in the last years and dominated some of the anniversary publications as well. Seemingly, there is a gap in papers based on Ottoman sources in the issue, but a balance for that gap are papers

⁶ Zsuzsanna Cziráki, *Autonom közösség és központi hatalom. Udvar, fejedelem és város viszonya a Bethlen-kori Brassóban* (Budapest, 2011).

published recently elsewhere, also in English.⁷ Most of the papers were basically intended for use of experts in the field, but, as a result, the editors avoided producing just yet another anniversary publication for the general reader. The issue delivers a set of papers which deal with the period from diverse angles and on various types of sources: from local to international. The texts are well-documented and no doubt essentially contribute to the international research. What is perhaps most striking regarding the historical research on Bethlen and his era presented in this volume and in other recent Hungarian publications on Bethlen, is that despite a long-studied subject, in this case political and diplomatic-service history can still provide us with new findings.

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⁷ Balázs Sudár, 'Iskender and Gábor Bethlen: The Pasha and the Prince', in Gábor Kármán and Radu G. Păun (eds.), *Europe and the 'Ottoman World': Exchanges and conflicts (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries)* (Istanbul, 2013), 141–69; Gábor Kármán and Lovro Kunčević (eds.), *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Leiden and Boston, 2013) (papers by Gábor Kármán, János B. Szabó); Sándor Papp, 'Friedensoptionen'; for Hungarian-language references, cf. *idem*, 'Bethlen Gábor, a Magyar királyság'.