When the Habsburgs Almost Lost Royal Hungary due to Fear of Ottoman Invasion

Since the Ottomans’ initial conquest of the larger part of Hungary during the reign of Kanuni Sultan Süleyman (1520–66), the former kingdom was a contact zone between the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, Europe’s two most powerful dynastic states. The effectively tripartite division of the former kingdom between the areas ruled directly by the Ottomans, the Ottoman vassal principality of Transylvania, and the relatively small territory that fell to the Habsburgs after the death of Louis II during the Battle of Mohács (1526) meant that Hungary remained contested between these three parties for roughly two centuries, leading to repeated full-scale military campaigns and, perhaps more importantly, constant raids and skirmishes by fighters on all sides of the political divide. Pragmatic arrangements between the Ottomans and the Habsburgs designated certain regions as a condominium in which both empires levied taxes on the population. Peace agreements since the sixteenth century failed to provide definitive solutions to border conflicts, and the balance between the two states therefore always remained tenuous. The stakes of tilting this balance were high, since, depending on the point of view, Royal Hungary was either the gateway to or the buffer protecting Vienna and the Austrian hereditary lands.

In The Habsburg Empire under Siege, Georg Michels directs our attention to the particularly troublesome period from 1670 to 1672. In these years, a series of massive revolts in Royal Hungary brought Habsburg rule closer to collapse than it had ever been. And even though events in those years sparked a forty-year period of revolts in the kingdom, scholarship of the region has only rarely paid attention to this pivotal moment, focusing instead on the earlier revolts sparked by the invasions of the Transylvanian princes István Bocskai (1604), Gábor Bethlen (1619), and Györgi I Rákóczi (1644). Michels’s monograph sets out to fill this gap and correct what he considers to be the misassumptions at the heart of the current scholarly consensus. In doing so, he makes a particular effort to place events in Royal Hungary into wider developments in this region, arguing that the Ottoman Empire played a pivotal role at every turn. In fact, the centrality of Grand Vizier Köprülü Fazil Ahmed Pasha (in office 1661–76) is reflected in the
book title and his term of office consequently provides the study’s time brackets.

The Ottomans figure so prominently in this story not only because of the support given to those who rebelled against Habsburg rule, but also because the fear of Ottoman intervention and the renewal of warfare with the Habsburgs’ “hereditary enemy” after the Vasvár Treaty (1664) led Habsburg decision-makers to impose desperately violent measures. Such measures further fueled discontent, especially as they were aimed at Catholicizing both the local elites and the local population (see esp. chapters 2 and 5). In this sense, the revolts of this period have much in common with other uprisings in Habsburg history, particularly the Bohemian revolts earlier in the same century and the peasants’ wars of the sixteenth century, as Michels himself notes (e.g., pp. 7, 295).

The monograph draws on an extensive corpus of manuscript sources from archives in Hungary and Austria, including the records of trials, interrogations, administrative documents, diplomatic letters, the official correspondence of military officers, spy reports, and Jesuit letters. In addition, Michels uses Dutch archival records primarily for the diplomatic dispatches from Vienna. These are supplemented by an extensive list of printed primary sources in multiple regional as well as other European languages. Published Ottoman sources in translation also figure in the analysis, though the author acknowledges that much more research needs to be done on the Ottoman side. The book is thus also a call to Ottomanists to supply the—certainly not missing but so far only rudimentarily examined—Ottoman dimension of this story using the records of the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi and other pertinent collections (p. 224).

Michels’s impressively meticulous source work is carefully inserted into the historiography, notably including both classic and more recent publications in Turkish. Ottomanists and Europeanists alike will be pleased by the detailed discussions of scholarship in Hungarian and Slavic languages, which are not readily accessible to those who are not specialists in the region. The presentation of the state of the field in the introduction (pp. 8–18) is therefore well worth reading for anyone who is new to the history of Hungary and Habsburg–Ottoman relations. It says much about the state of scholarship that the author frequently finds occasion to praise the work of historians such as Lászlo Benczédi, Tibor Fainy, Sándor Ladnányi, Georg Wagner, and even Ahmed Muhtar Pasha, who all wrote relatively (and in one case very) early in the twentieth century. For complex reasons, the interpretations put forward by these scholars about the rebellions, Ottoman–Hungarian coexistence and interaction, and Ottoman–Habsburg relations did not enter the scholarly consensus. Their findings, however, accord well with more recent work which has demonstrated that previous assertions of fundamental European–Ottoman enmity and Ottoman military decline long before 1683 are no longer tenable. In fact, recent work has demonstrated that the Ottoman army remained a force to be reckoned with well into the eighteenth century.[1]

Michels criticizes the existing scholarship primarily on three grounds: First, because of a focus on the second siege of Vienna in 1683 and its aftermath, previous historians largely failed to recognize the significance of the events of the 1670s and the precariousness of the Habsburg position following the Ottoman–Habsburg War of 1663–4. Second, Michels highlights “the complex entanglements of the Hungarian borderlands” (p. 6) to join in the rejection of the pernicious “clash of civilization” thesis. In fact, the brutal actions of the Habsburgs evident from the sources as well as the extent to which Hungarians turned to the Ottomans for support in the 1670s seriously call into question the narrative of Habsburg “liberation” of the Ottoman-ruled territories in east-central and southeast Europe after 1683 (pp. 5–6). Third, the book seeks to redress the focus on elites that dominates histories of the revolts by aiming to pay at-
tention to the “actions of ordinary people,” taking inspiration from classical works of microhistory (p. 7).

The book is divided into eight chapters that combine chronological progression with thematic foci. Each chapter draws on a wealth of case studies taken from all over Royal Hungary to substantiate Michels’s identification of larger patterns. In all cases, the author conveys the credible impression that his interpretations are derived from a significant collection of individual cases rather than being generalizations based purely on the concrete examples chosen for presentation. This is testimony to Michels’s impressive knowledge of the sources, and as a reader, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that he could have chosen any number of cases to illustrate his points.

Chapter 1 establishes the immediate geopolitical context for the developments examined in the rest of the work by introducing readers to the conflicts between the two dynasties over Transylvania that, in 1663, led to war in Hungary. Analyzing the military developments, Michels contradicts the view that the Habsburg victory at Szentgotthárd (August 1, 1664) was decisive and turned the military balance in the Habsburgs’ favor. On the contrary, the brief war significantly eroded the Habsburgs’ ability to defend Royal Hungary. Many fortresses had been destroyed, leaving gaps in the defense system, while those that survived the war were in a pitiful state. Moreover, the Habsburg border forces lacked money for repairs, provisions, and pay, while the Ottomans often successfully blocked all attempts to rebuild even smaller outposts. With the end of the Cretan War (1645–69) expected any day, a new attack on Hungary seemed likely. This sense of impending doom was fueled not least by the continued incursions of Ottoman border forces and the aggressive extension of Ottoman protection and taxation rights by commanders like the pasha of Uyvar into Habsburg-rulled territory in contravention of the Vasvár Treaty, which had ended the war in 1664. Because

the Habsburgs troops were at such a disadvantage, they were under instructions to avoid provoking their Ottoman counterparts at all costs.

As a result, large sections of the Hungarian population—and especially the Hungarian nobility—felt abandoned by the emperor, who failed to respond to their pleas for protection. As chapter 2 shows, the kingdom’s population suffered from the extensive pillaging of ill-supplied, underfinanced, and unpaid Habsburg troops as much as from Ottoman incursions, leading to a general erosion of security. In addition, Lutherans and Calvinists were subject to religious persecutions, often at the hands of Catholic magnates like the particularly zealous Zsófia Báthori, in the wake of renewed Counter-Reformation efforts. Because of Vienna’s apparent indifference, many Hungarian nobles (mostly, but not exclusively Protestants) became “tribute-paying nobles” who accepted the sultan as their lord and paid taxes to the Ottomans. In return, they received Ottoman protection over their religion, their estates, and the serfs living on them. Nevertheless, a no-less-significant number of people of all ranks preferred relocating to the Ottoman provinces and Transylvania entirely. In this situation, Protestant nobles from Upper Hungary in particular built networks of correspondence that were key to organizing the revolts of 1670 and 1672–3 (chapters 3 and 6).

Upper Hungary indeed was the hotbed of unrest, and it was above all Protestant nobles from this region who plotted the uprisings. They appealed for help to the Transylvanian court, the Hungarian pashas, and Köprülü Ahmed Pasha to procure Ottoman support for their undertaking. Chapter 3 provides a meticulous reconstruction of the origins of the 1670 revolts, which also involved the ban of Croatia, Péter Zrínyi, despite the “major analytical challenge” provided by “a high level of ambiguity” in the primary sources (p. 101). Although the Ottomans did not actively participate in the fighting, the revolt which had been in preparation since at least 1666 and aimed at estab-
lishing an independent Hungary with its own king under Ottoman protection, was a spectacular success. “Habsburg power,” Michels observes, “had crumbled within days without much resistance” (p. 136), as the population took up arms and the unpaid border garrisons joined the rebel cause, while Habsburg officials, fearing that Ottoman troops would join the attack, fled in large numbers.

The revolt soon collapsed, however, and the Habsburgs quickly moved in to reestablish control, meting out harsh punishments to the alleged leaders and supporters of the rebellion. In a Counter-Reformation spirit, the estates of numerous Protestant nobles were confiscated and assigned to “loyal” Catholics, while Protestant priests were expelled and replaced with Catholic prelates. Rejecting the common claim that such measures, as well as efforts to centralize power in the kingdom, emanated from a Habsburg policy of absolutism that took advantage of a newly found position of power, chapter 4 argues that this harsh treatment was the result of fear: “the court [in Vienna] was scrambling with ad hoc measures to retain control over Hungary” (p. 159) and thus protect the Habsburg hereditary lands from Ottoman attacks. The threat of the latter was taken very seriously in Vienna, which was gripped by several invasion scares in 1671 and 1672. When the Ottoman army under Köprülü went to war in Poland to aid the Cossack hetman Petro Doroshenko in 1672, the threat of war in Hungary seemed at best postponed but by no means averted. The violent reprisals against the rebels (and many who probably had not participated in the rebellion) therefore were conducted from a position of weakness and fear—fear of Ottoman attack and fear of a Hungarian–Ottoman conspiracy that would compromise Habsburg control of the kingdom. In this climate, “the Hungarian rebels assumed an outsized importance—just as ‘terrorists’ do in today’s world or in late nineteenth-century Russia after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II” (p. 161).

Yet these repressive measures were counterproductive since they only served to further alienate Hungarian subjects at all levels of society. Although ordinary subjects suffered considerably from the burden of taxation and from the terror created by the occupation army, their violent resistance was triggered especially when the Habsburgs targeted their Protestant pastors and attempted to replace them with Catholic clergy. The examples cited in this chapter indicate that there is a treasure trove of material that easily sustains several microhistorical studies of how individual towns fared during the 1670s while allowing major insights into crowd violence as well as the role of women in popular resistance.

Ever since the collapse of the 1670 revolt, those leaders who had fled into exile worked ceaselessly to organize a new uprising. Throughout this period, there was “an intense cross-border traffic of secret communications” (p. 225). The Habsburg authorities, despite their efforts, failed to stop the close contact between the exiles and those who had remained in Hungary. At the heart of chapter 6 is an investigation of the trans-imperial networks which linked potential rebels in Hungary, Hungarian exiles, and Ottoman decision-makers. A faction of exiles led by the Calvinist nobleman Pál Szepessy appears to have been particularly effective in soliciting support from local Ottoman commanders and Köprülü Ahmed Pasha. Michels indicates that the Ottoman commanders in Hungary plausibly had a personal interest in going to war. That the border pashas, notably İbrahim Pasha of Buda, themselves lobbied the Sublime Porte to go to war in Hungary using manipulated information both before and during the uprising (pp. 219–220, 222, 292–293) is consistent with Emrah Safa Gürkan’s observations on the activities of kapudan paşas like Kılıç Ali Pasha in the sixteenth century. When the kapudan paşas had lobbied for war in the Mediterranean, they had also represented the interests of North African corsairs who required booty to sustain themselves.[2] The situation was essentially similar
along the Ottoman Empire’s border with the Austrian Habsburgs, as the raids conducted after 1664 indicate. It is far from clear, though, if Köprülü fully condoned the rebellion in Hungary. While he sent encouraging signals to Szepessy, he never committed to officially supporting Szepessy’s schemes, leaving both the rebels and the Habsburgs in the dark about his intentions.

Nevertheless, the belief and rumors of the impending support of the Ottoman army for the revolt, very likely transmitted in Royal Hungary by “the invisible networks of the Hungarian exiles” (p. 249), were crucial for the outbreak and quick success of the 1672 revolt, whose course is examined in chapter 7. And although the initial invasion force led by Pál Szepessy, Mátýás Szuhay, and others that entered Upper Hungary in August 1672 was accompanied by Agha Huszein of Varad (presumably Hüseyin Agha, but Michels decided to retain the spelling he found in the sources for lower-level actors) and a modest number of Ottoman soldiers, the Ottoman army never intervened in force. Even though the ranks of the rebels quickly swelled as discontented Hungarians flocked to the rebels’ banners and they won major victories against the Habsburg forces stationed in Upper Hungary, they were no match for the reinforcements that reached the kingdom in October.

Why Köprülü did not mobilize the Ottoman army to take advantage of the Habsburgs’ weakness is not entirely clear. Michels concludes, as one plausible explanation, that it was “Ottoman enmeshment in the Polish and Ukrainian quagmires [that] saved the Habsburg Empire from Ottoman invasion” (p. 300). But this outcome was by no means a foregone conclusion. The emperor and the Aulic War Council fully expected Ottoman intervention in Hungary, and it was only with Köprülü’s death and the appointment of Kara Mustafa Pasha as grand vizier in 1676 that the threat of war with the Ottomans was removed (p. 338).

Chapter 8 details how, in the meantime, the Habsburgs, who despite winning on the battlefield had been powerless to prevent the escape of most of the rebel army to Ottoman Hungary, struggled to reassert their authority. They continued to be challenged by local resistance as well as the cross-border raids of rebels who did not give up their goal of overthrowing the Habsburgs and liberating Hungary from the “Habsburg yoke” (p. 311)—a phrase that provides an important counterpoint to the idea of the “Turkish yoke” more frequently found in the literature on Ottoman Hungary. Even in 1676, the emperor’s hold on Upper Hungary remained tenuous despite a combination of punitive actions and concessions. Most importantly, in the medium run, however, more military resources were committed to this crucial border region to shore up defenses against the Ottomans. Michels concludes that the “Habsburg rule in Hungary would likely not have survived” had the Ottomans attacked any time between 1672 and 1677 (p. 339). Thereafter, however, the heavy Habsburg investments began to make a noticeable difference.

In addition to summarizing the book’s main arguments, the conclusion points at a number of areas in which additional research is required: “the trans-imperial actors who connected Hungarian rebels with the Ottoman world” (p. 343), the connections between the 1670s revolts and those that followed it until the early eighteenth century (pp. 343–344), Köprülü Fazıl Ahmed Pasha’s designs and intentions in light of Ottoman archival sources as well as Ottoman intelligence reports (pp. 345–346), and, finally, the broader entanglements of the Hungarian crisis with other theaters in which the Ottomans were involved (p. 346). There is indeed considerable scope for further research that will certainly refine—but perhaps not overturn—Michels’s conclusions.

The Habsburgs under Siege is a thoroughly rewarding read and an important revisionist contribution to the history of Hungary, the Habsburg Empire, and Habsburg–Ottoman relations. Its con-
clusions, formed on the basis of meticulous work with primary sources, are convincing, even though they are unlikely to be the last word on the revolts of the 1670s. Nor are they intended as such, as the conclusion makes clear.

Although the study’s main limitation concerns the limited insights into Ottoman decision-making, this gap is openly addressed throughout. Even without access to the Ottoman archives, it should have been possible to discover more by drawing more extensively on the reports of the Venetian, French, and English ambassadors at the Porte in an attempt to triangulate the Ottoman position, just as Michels has done with his rich primary sources (p. 20). Yet making this additional leap would have made an already enormous task even more challenging. This criticism should therefore in no way detract from Michels’s tremendous achievement.

In fact, the study’s particular strength lies precisely in bringing together multiple perspectives in a deep analysis. It pays attention to local Hungarian contexts on both sides of the border and takes into account the various views from Vienna (with certain distinctions between the court and the Aulic War Council as the institution of military coordination). Despite the lack of access to Ottoman sources, the narrative remains sensitive to Ottoman perspectives throughout, drawing an important distinction between the interests of actors at the imperial center and the Ottoman commanders deployed along the border, which tallies well with what we know about the interplay between “center” and “periphery” more generally in the Ottoman Empire.[3]

As a work of political history—and the book is so much more than that—*The Habsburgs under Siege* is also refreshing for paying attention to the field of intelligence, processes of decision-making, and the question of the availability and unavailability of information to decision-makers at specific points in time. These sensitivities underpin what should be the main takeaway of this study, which must enter standard accounts of this period: The Habsburgs almost lost control over Royal Hungary in the 1670s. The main reason for this was that their awareness of their military weakness vis-à-vis the Ottoman Empire at this time gave rise to an acute and persistent fear of invasion. Because of this fear, the emperor, his advisers, and his representatives and supporters in Hungary adopted policies that drove their subjects to seek Ottoman support. Although the Ottomans did play an important role in encouraging rebellion in Hungary and thus took advantage of the opportunity to destabilize one of their main adversaries, they were too occupied elsewhere (first on Crete, then in Poland and Ukraine) to turn the Habsburgs’ troubles into territorial conquest. It is now up to Ottomanists to investigate the reasons for these strategic priorities. Experts on Hungary and the Habsburg Empire more generally, however, will find in Michels’s monograph much inspiration for further research that will continue to improve our understanding of Habsburg governance as well as the complex relations between the dynasty, its subjects, and the Ottoman “hereditary enemy.”

Notes


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