 CHAPTER SEVEN
THE RULE OF GÁBOR BETHLEN

Preliminary Remarks

In Gábor Bethlen a staunch opponent of the Habsburgs came to the Transylvanian throne who, like his successor György I Rákóczi, took an active part in the Thirty Years’ War on the Protestant side. In order to achieve his goal of uniting the Hungarian territories under Ottoman protection, without however completely subjecting himself to the political will of the Sublime Porte, he relied at first on the support of the alliance that Bocskai had already arranged between the Principality and a corporatist, anti-Habsburg confederation of Austrian, Hungarian, Czech, and Moravian nobles. After the devastating defeat of the Czechs at the Battle of White Mountain, Bethlen searched elsewhere for allies, looking especially to England and the Netherlands. His search was not successful, however, nor did he live to see the formation of a great anti-Habsburg coalition. Even the Hungarian unity that he strove for failed, the estates in Upper Hungary being cowed by the Habsburgs. Bethlen was more effective in domestic politics, where he succeeded in consolidating the Transylvanian state apparatus and in strengthening the economy of his country.¹

The prince also devoted particular interest to educational policy. At his urging, the Diet decreed the founding of a “normal academy” (“közönséges akadémia,” collegium academicum), which opened its doors in Gyulafehérvár in 1622 with three faculties (theology, philosophy, and law). Such eminent personalities as Martin Opitz, Johann Heinrich Alsted, Johann Heinrich Bisterfeld, and Ludwig Philip Piscator accepted Bethlen’s invitation to come to Transylvania and teach at

the academy. Through generous endowments the prince ensured that the institution would continue in operation after his death. Bethlen adapted his policy on religions to the multidenominational system that had been established in Transylvania for several decades, but he also worked with determination to improve the position of the Reformed Church. He exerted some pressure on the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church, but moderated his policies through a number of liberal decrees and the selective granting of favors.

**Bethlen and the Orthodox Church**

In 1614 Bethlen reconfirmed the Orthodox clergy’s privilege of exemption from levies, which Gábor Báthori had decreed. Bethlen also named an Orthodox hierarch for the northern and western parts of Transylvania (Maramureș and Bihar) in the person of Teofil, who was head of the monastery at Prislop. The formation of regional hierarchies with carefully selected leaders improved the prospects of Bethlen’s efforts to educate Transylvania’s Orthodox Romanians and convert them to Calvinism over the long term. Contemporary sources tell of another Orthodox church authority in Transylvania at this time as well; the metropolitan Teoctist had been leading the church since March 1606 from his residence in Gyulafehérvár (“vlădica din Bălgrad”). In 1615 Teoctist arbitrated disputes among priests of St. Nicholas Church in Kronstadt, but nothing more is known about his tenure or about his interaction with the (predominantly Calvinist) political leaders of the country.

Teoctist was succeeded as metropolitan by Dosoftei (1623/1624–1627), who in all probability was not the princely court’s preferred

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2 Bethlen’s original intention was actually to found a university, but his early death prevented further development of the institution. Both Bisterfeld (who arrived in Gyulafehérvár shortly after Bethlen’s death) and Alsted remained in Transylvania for the rest of their lives, periods of 25 and almost ten years, respectively. Piscator left the Principality after staying for 18 years (1629–1647), Opitz after only one year. Later, Johann Crispinus (1649–1655) and Isaak Basire (1655–1658) would live and work in Transylvania. The academy’s buildings were destroyed during the hostilities of 1658. In 1662 Apafi moved the academy to Nagyenye.


4 At Christmas 1623, Teoctist is still the metropolitan, as attested by the inscription on a grave in Gyulafehérvár. On this and the tenure of metropolitan Dosoftei, see Păcurariu, *Istoria bisericii ortodoxe române*, vol. 2, 62.