‘Splendid Isolation'? The Military Cooperation of the Principality of Transylvania with the Ottoman Empire (1571–1688) in the Mirror of the Hungarian Historiography’s Dilemmas

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Historiographic Introduction

One of the great paradoxes of modern Hungarian historiography is that it gives a prominent place in the discussions on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the Principality of Transylvania as an independent Hungarian state formation that seceded from the Kingdom of Hungary; at the same time for many decades it entirely neglected any other context for analyzing the frames of the Transylvanian state’s development.¹ One such context is the state’s contacts with the Ottoman Empire, a very seldom noted theme in historical overviews. The only Hungarian monograph concerning this issue was published in 1907, and in German the most recent short overview dates from 1923. In contrast, modern Romanian historiography dedicates considerable attention to the topic, including several monographs in the last two decades.² Indeed, it can be assumed that the


² Gyula Vajda, Erdély viszonya a Portához és a római császárhoz mint magyar királyhoz a nemzeti fejedelemség korszakában [The relationship of Transylvania to the Porte and the emperor as king of Hungary in the epoch of the national principality] (Kolozsvár, 1891); a shorter overview in Hungarian with comparative parts was published by Vencel Bíró, Erdély követei a Portán [Transylvanian envoys at the Porte] (Kolozsvár, 1921), 58–60, and “Erdély és a porta” [Transylvania and the Porte], Századok 57 (1923): 76–93. In German: Georg Müller, Türkenherrschaft in Siebenbürgen: Verfassungsrechtliches Verhältnis Siebenbürgens zur Pforte 1541–1688 (Hermannstadt-Sibiu, 1923); for a summary of the more recent literature, see Gerald Volkmer, Das Fürstentum Siebenbürgen: Aussenpolitik und
reason for this oversight and silence is the topic’s relevance and sensitive nature. In 1866 Sándor Szilágyi wrote the first modern synthesis on the principality’s history, in his foreword defining the perspectives that served as a guide for Hungarian historiography for more than a century:

It is true that recently historiographers from Hungary give adequate respect to the relevance of Transylvania, study and analyze the sources of its history and write about it much more widely and fairly than their predecessors (…) they have neither space nor opportunity to destroy the bulk of old prejudices and to show the full picture of the institutions of the small state, which were so functional, its struggles, in which they had shown so much persistence, and its sufferings, which in some cases are unique in universal history (…) Today, no one would deny that it [the Principality] had the mission of maintaining the Hungarian nation and its constitution, even in cases when it brought its weapons to the other shore of the river Tisza [that is, when it waged war in Hungary] (…) It is a futile endeavor to make these movements look small by labeling them as revolts and a vain ambition to degrade the princes to simple leaders of specific parties. There was a time when Transylvania played a part in European politics and the foreign powers saw it as a factor in their calculations; and [the fact] that it was so is not simply the work of one or two ambitious men, regardless of whether or not some people want the world believe it is the case.3

This work, like many contemporaneous ones, was a typical product of the anti-Habsburg Hungarian war for independence of 1848–1849, a war that brought about fierce attacks on the dynamic perspective of earlier historiography. Although the specific political situation changed with the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, the earlier situation was imprinted and over time affirmed by aspects of political debates from the period. It has had a large influence on historical thinking and the direction of research that has been sustained until the present time.4

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3 Sándor Szilágyi, Erdélyország története, tekintettel mévelôdésére [The history of Transylvania, with special attention to its culture] (Pest, 1866), v–vii.