CHAPTER 3

Transylvania in German Newspapers

Systems of Reporting and the News Stories of György II Rákóczi,
1657–1658

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Following the end of the Thirty Years’ War, the continent of Europe did not fall into a settled peace, and one of the largest and longest-lasting conflicts was the series of military and political struggles now known as the Northern Wars. The rotating cast included Sweden, Denmark, the Cossacks, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Russia, Prussia, and, for one year, György II Rákóczi, Prince of Transylvania. Though Rákóczi entered the war in January 1657 with the dream of a Transylvanian wearing the crown of Poland, by December he was fleeing from the Tartars to a diet that awaited his resignation. The year 1658 only saw further decline for Transylvania, as Ottoman forces marched through the principality, reasserting their control.

The stories of Transylvania during this two-year period offer an interesting example of many of the topics that appear in seventeenth-century news. A country which invades its neighbour is then subject to an invasion itself; a prince claims authority in a foreign land and then has his own power taken from him in his home country; Calvinists fight Catholics, then Tartars and Turks; and all the while Transylvania is rarely the author of its own news, but rather the subject of reporting by regions which are often less than friendly. This dynamic affects both how news is covered, and even what news is considered worthy of attention.

The news of Transylvania came not only via the nearest news centre in Vienna with ties to Hungary, but also through the Polish-Prussian system in the north, with each system concentrating on those events which most affected the reporting region, rather than demonstrating any more general interest in Transylvania. As a result, the two waves of events – the invasion of Poland by Rákóczi in 1657 and the invasion of Transylvania by the Ottomans in 1658 – are told from different perspectives. This paper will first explore these two reporting systems, defining which cities report news of Transylvania, and further, which locations are cited as a source of the information conveyed. Afterwards, the subjects of politics, religion, and violence will be examined, and distinctions drawn about the selection of events covered and patterns in language usage for each reporting location. From the Prussia-Poland system comes news of Rákóczi’s march, littered with words describing acts of violence, prayers to
God for protection, and accompanied by promises to preserve the rights of the population. From the Vienna-Hungary system comes news of the struggle for authority within the principality, conveyed with fewer words of violence, but more references to the participants’ religious affiliation and the need to preserve Christendom. The reporting location of news of Transylvania determines not only what political news is related, but also how religion is incorporated into the story, and how frequently violent words are employed.

Systems of Reporting

The principality of Transylvania and its leaders are the subjects of 577 different news reports during the years 1657–1658, but only rarely do these reports come from the region itself. Rather, news of Transylvania is reported chiefly by two different reporting systems. These systems are defined here by the locations cited both in the reports’ datelines and any references made to a source of news within the text. (Map 3.1).¹

The most frequent reporting location is the city of Vienna, which offers 178 news reports, or 31% of the total number of reports.² While no other single city generates anywhere near that number, if neighbouring cities are considered together as a reporting region rather than individually, the numbers of reports in each grouping are more equal (see Table 3.1). With this reorganization, the cities of Polish Prussia – including Elbing (50), Thorn (48), Marienburg (33), and Danzig (23) – rival the contribution of Vienna. Furthermore, the reports from the Habsburg Hereditary Lands outside of Vienna – including Silesia (31), Prague (27), and Breslau (23) – have a much more significant presence.³ The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the German lands, and the allied Swedish and Brandenburg Baltic territories (including Königsberg (17)), are roughly comparable, while the combined region of Hungary and Transylvania is nearly equal to that of the cities linked by the Mediterranean Sea.⁴

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¹ This is not to deny the systems’ infrastructural basis, but rather to note that this aspect will not be a subject of this paper. For more on the postal system, which is of obvious importance to the communication of news, see Wolfgang Behringer, *Im Zeichen des Merkur: Reichspost und Kommunikationsrevolution in der Frühen Zezeit* (Göttingen: Vanerhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003).

² A full list of the extant newspapers in the German language, their publication information, and the surviving issues from 1657–1658 is given at the end of the chapter (see p. 75).

³ In order to preserve continuity with the German-language newspapers, the names of all cities are given in German.

⁴ For the purposes of brevity and clarity, this paper will concentrate on the news from the major reporting centers of Vienna, Prussia, and the Hereditary Lands, as well as those