The Kingdom of Hungary and Principality of Transylvania

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Four Paths of Reformation in Hungary

Following the Battle of Mohács in 1526, the territory of the Holy Crown of Hungary was divided. The subsequent development of Protestantism took four paths in the territories of Habsburg Hungary, Transylvania, Ottoman-occupied Hungary, and in Croatia.1

Croatia’s nobility, which had been affiliated with Hungary since the personal union of the 12th century, had been required to organize the defence of their country since the end of the 15th century. In conflicts against the Ottomans, Croatia did not receive support from Hungary’s Jagiellonian kings but from neighbouring Inner Austrian rulers. This resulted in Croat nobles becoming alienated from Hungary and turning instead for support to the Austrian Estates and to the Habsburg dynasty. On this basis, the Catholic church was able to establish authority over the parts of Croatia not occupied by the Ottomans. In resolutions agreed in 1567 and 1604 the Croatian diet threatened Protestants with banishment and with confiscation of their property. In 1606 the diet ultimately stripped Protestants of their right to exist in Croatia.2

The Reformation was able to develop freely in the part of the Hungarian kingdom that was occupied by the Ottomans. This was despite Sultan Suleiman’s 1532 express pronouncement that “my goal and desire is to uphold the words of Allah and to establish his pure and obviously sacred law in the entire earth”.3 The establishment of the Ottoman administration accordingly involved

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discrimination against Christians, including the transformation of church buildings into mosques and prohibitions on bell-ringing and on the construction of new places of Christian worship.\(^4\) However, the new Ottoman rulers were careful not to attempt to convert infidels by force, not least because of legal protections afforded to tax-paying non-Muslims. However, the situation in Hungary was different from that experienced elsewhere in the Balkans. In Hungary, the Ottomans had to deal with several confessions that stood in opposition to, and competition with, each other. Even if the Ottoman authorities regarded the Protestants with a degree of benevolence, they were primarily interested in the rapid pacification of their conquered territory which included establishing peaceful coexistence between Hungary’s rival confessions.\(^5\)

The Reformation also spread unhindered in the part of the kingdom of Hungary that was ruled by the Habsburgs, as well as in the principality of Transylvania as it evolved into a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire. This was despite the fact that these territories were ruled almost continuously by Catholics during the 16th century. However, the path of the Reformation differed in these two territories. In Habsburg Hungary, freedom of religion was not upheld by any formal guarantees, and was endangered by the anti-Protestant measures taken by Emperor Rudolf II in 1604. Meanwhile in Transylvania, the preservation of public peace was based upon legal confirmation of the advances made by Protestantism during the second half of the 16th century.

The rapid and peaceful spread of the Reformation can be ascribed to the collapse of the medieval Hungarian kingdom following Ottoman occupation and the accompanying collapse of Catholic church structures. As a result of being on the border between two superpowers, Hungary and Transylvania were in a politically unstable situation. However, both the Hungarian Estates and Transylvanian princes quickly learned how to manoeuvre between the Habsburgs and Ottomans, and the political and social significance of the nobility in this situation should not be underestimated.\(^6\) The non-violent regulation of confessional pluralism in Hungary and Transylvania was also founded upon medieval building blocks, including traditions of peaceful coexistence between 

