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*Moderate Politicians and Government Commissioners in the Hungarian Revolution of 1848*


The events of 1848 have been a favorite topic of Hungarian historical scholarship for over a century, but, as two recent publications prove, historians in Budapest still manage to say something new and interesting about the Hungarian revolution. In *A kormánybízoshi intézmény*, Sebestyén Szőcs, a young historian-archivist, deals with the creation and functioning of special government commissioners in 1848 and provides us with an informative study in the history of Hungarian public administration under extraordinary, revolutionary circumstances. Altogether, the work of more than fifty government commissioners is examined. They were special agents of the central authorities, often with plenipotentiary powers to carry out specific assignments. Some were charged with the maintenance of law and order in the countryside and were successfully preventing the recently liberated serfs from taking over the estates of the landowning nobility. Others were given the task of averting or settling labor disputes in the cities or protecting the lives and property of Jews from isolated anti-Semitic outbursts. The most important assignments, however, were aimed against the nationalistic movements of the non-Magyar inhabitants of Hungary. The activities of the commissioners against the Slovaks, Croats, Serbs, and Romanians are discussed in separate chapters and form the most interesting aspects of the book.

In the primarily Slovak-inhabited northern counties, the task of the commissioners was to prevent and counterbalance Pan-Slav propaganda, observe suspicious movements and individuals, and protect the people from the “temptations of the known Pan-Slav agitator L’udevít Stur” (p. 44). Commissioners who were sent to the south and Transylvania at first were instructed to work for a peaceful solution of the conflicts. Peter Csernovics, for instance, was appointed “to familiarize himself with the desires of the Serbian and Croatian inhabitants of the Military Frontier District” and inform them that “with warm sympathy the Hungarian government is ready to accept and grant all of their legal and fair wishes” (p. 84). Similarly, Baron Vay was sent to Transylvania to investigate and forestall hostile propaganda and rebellion, but specifically was told by the minister of interior to “avoid civil war at all cost” and to try to solve the problems with the nationalities through conciliation (pp. 145-46). Later, when, unfortunately for all, military conflicts began, the commissioners’ task became to supply the Hungarian troops with food, ammunition, transport, medical services, etc. and, in some instances, they were also charged with punishing the insurgents.
The author also shows how the character of the office of the commissioners changed together with their tasks. In the spring and early summer they were sent by the King's government, and following earlier historic precedents they were called "royal commissioners" and acted in the monarch's name. After the court broke with the Hungarians in September, Kossuth wished the commissioners to follow the example of "the French Convent's great representatives-on-mission," and at least in one important case secured plenipotentiary powers for a commissioner from both houses of the parliament.

Despite a considerable research effort, Dr. Szőcs leaves some important questions unanswered. Since he deals with over fifty individuals in a short book, he at times simply indicates that someone was given an important task, without informing the reader of the success or failure of the assignment. Thus, one gets the impression that possibly more could have been said about the commissioners if fewer of them had been examined and in greater depth.

The author also tends to avoid evaluating significant aspects of his evidence. In assessing the effectiveness of the commissioners, for example, he states that they received the support of the local authorities against the social movements of the peasants and against the nationalities, but in many instances they met with counter-revolutionary obstructionism from the county officials (p. 211). True as this may be, it certainly does not explain why the commissioners failed to avert armed conflict with the Croats, Serbs, or Romanians, which after all was their most important task.

It appears to this writer that they failed not because of any obstructionism from some reactionary county officials, but because as representatives of the Magyar nation-state idea they encountered similarly strongly-felt nationalistic sentiments of the non-Magyars in Hungary. The Slovaks, Croats, Serbs, and Romanians essentially wanted autonomy and the recognition of their national existence in 1848. The Hungarian government granted them the same civil liberties accorded the Magyars, but recognized only one political nation in Hungary. Since neither side would compromise in the realm of ideas, and the non-Magyars eventually also received the help of the Habsburg counter-revolution, the failure or success of the commissioners became largely a question of power. In terms of power, they failed because the government was not able to provide them with necessary military support to enforce its ideological position. It is likely, however, that the model of the French representatives-on-mission would not have been followed even if the Hungarians had the necessary military force. The commissioners did not belong to a revolutionary intelligentsia, but were liberal estate-owning nobles who would have lacked the determination and extremism of the Jacobin terrorists of the Convention under any circumstances.

Moderation and the desire to avoid any kind of excess also characterized István Széchenyi, the hero of Győrgy Spira's A Hungarian Count in the Revolution of 1848. Dr. Spira is a senior research scholar at the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and is one of Hungary's leading historians. This publication is the English translation of a study first published in Hungarian in 1964.