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The Peasant Revolt of Bábolna 1437–1438

On April 24, 1445, János Vitéz of Zredna, a well-known Hungarian humanist bishop, wrote to a friend about conditions existing in his homeland:

The sword is now the destroyer of every right . . . hence, Liberty is in the grip of Hatred, and pillage and looting are the providers of luxury. . . . No one gives mercy to another and everyone knows fear. . . .¹

This was not merely humanist rhetoric; Vitéz's perceptions accurately described the Hungarian situation, where the powerful barons had become the controllers of the machinery of the state.

The Hungarian province of Transylvania (see p. 26), "the Land beyond the Forests," in which the drama of 1437–38 was enacted,² experienced a parallel development. During the fourteenth century, the barons in that province (as in the rest of Hungary) established seigniorial control over the peasant population. A system of feudal dues and obligations was imposed on the peasantry, and free movement from one estate to another was effectively curtailed. The tensions that this situation created in Transylvania were heightened by conflicts that were peculiarly Transylvanian in character.

Four ethnic groups, the Saxons, Székelys (or Szeklers), Magyars, and Wlachs (or Wallachians, the later Rumanians), lived in the Transylvanian province. By the early fifteenth century, the first three of these ethnic groups practiced settled agriculture or were involved in trade, and lived mainly in villages and towns. In contrast, many of the Wlachs were shepherds who migrated between the slopes of the Carpathian Mountains and the lowlands of the Danube according to the needs of their flocks. Some Wlachs were refugees escaping the Turks in the Balkans.

The leaders of the Wlachs, the *kniazi*, were "contractors" of Slavic or Wlach origin who recruited settlers for unpopulated lands controlled by the king,

1. Joannes Georgius Schwandtner, *Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum Veteres ac genuini*, 2 vols. (Vienna, 1746), 2:10.

2. Transylvania in the fifteenth century was a geographic, not a political concept. It was part of the Hungarian state, and it consisted of seven counties and the autonomous territories of Saxons and Székelys. The counties were under the jurisdiction of the *vajda* (or voivode) who was an appointee of the Hungarian king. The counties contained a mixed population; Magyars and Wlachs lived there side by side. (Substantial Wlach settlements also existed outside the counties.) The size of the Transylvanian province was about 79,000 square

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TRANSYLVANIA

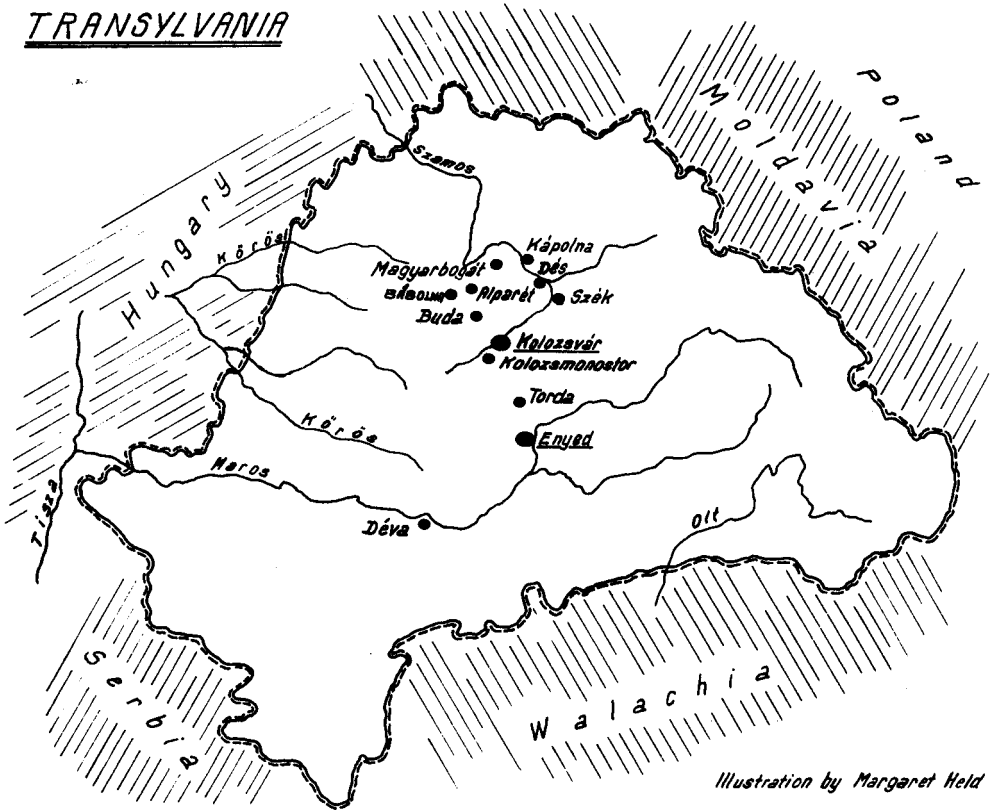


Illustration by Margaret Held

the barons, or the church. Many of the *kniazi* acquired estates in Transylvania as part of their contracts, although they frequently harbored grievances against the Hungarian state. The *kniazi* were usually Orthodox Christians, but Louis I (1342–82) ordered their conversion to Roman Christianity in the 1350s (the first Hungarian king to do so), and King Sigismund (1387–1437) renewed this order in 1428. Many—but not all—of the Orthodox *kniazi* resisted these orders in an effort to preserve their own religion.³ Because the *kniazi* were in conflict with the Wlach population which they led, some of them were willing to convert to Roman Christianity to become part of the ruling elite. The converted *kniazi* were in a better position to control the Wlach population.

Tensions also existed between the Transylvanian Saxons and Székelys. The Saxons were originally Rhineland Germans (thus their name is a misnomer), who were recruited by various Hungarian kings to settle in Transylvania in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. By the early fifteenth century, the Saxons had developed an urban civilization of seven prosperous towns (hence the German name for Transylvania is *Siebenbürgen*). The Saxons enjoyed various privileges granted them by the Hungarian kings and were instrumental in the commerce between Hungary, Poland, and the lands of the Lower Danube.⁴

The Székelys were probably a Turkic tribe that joined the Magyars before the conquest of Hungary. They spoke a Hungarian dialect and preserved many of their ancient traditions in their social life. The Székelys were border guards

kilometers; its population amounted to about 330,000 people, distributed in the fifteenth century as follows: 260,000 Magyars and Székelys, 100,000 Wlachs, and about 70,000 Saxons. There will be further references in the text concerning the nature and ethnic composition of the population. Though it would be impossible to list all the important sources dealing with the late medieval history of Transylvania here, a few of them are given below: Miklós Endes, *Erdély három nemzete és négy vallása autonómiájának története* [History of the Autonomy of the Three Nations and Four Religions of Transylvania] (Budapest, 1935); Miklós Asztalos, ed., *A történeti Erdély* [Historical Transylvania] (Budapest, 1939); Jenő Horváth, *Erdély története* [The History of Transylvania] (Budapest, 1944); Emerico Lukinich and Ladislao Gáldi, eds., *Documente Valachorum in Hungaria illustrantia* (Budapest, 1941); I. Lupas, *Historic Realities in the Principality of Transylvania in the Twelfth–Sixteenth Centuries* (Bucharest, 1938); Elemér Mályusz, *A magyarság a középkori Erdélyben* [The Hungarians in Medieval Transylvania] (Kolozsvár, 1943); László Makkai, *Erdély története* [The History of Transylvania] (Budapest, 1944); Henrik Marczali, *Erdély története* (Budapest, 1935); Constantin Daicovicu et al., eds., *Erdély története*, 2 vols. (Bucharest, 1964).

3. Georgius Fejér, *Codex Diplomaticus Hungariae Ecclesiasticus ac Civilis*, series 10, 42 vols. (Buda, 1844), 8:370, 493 and 6:796 (hereafter cited as Fejér, *CDH*). See also Elemér Mályusz, “A középkori magyar nemzetiségi politika” [Medieval Hungarian Nationality Policies], *Szászadok*, 73 (1939): 257–94, 385–448; and Elemér Mályusz, “A magyarság és a nemzetiségek Mohács előtt” [The Hungarians and the Nationalities before Mohács], in Sándor Domanovszky, *Magyar művelődéstörténet* [A History of Hungarian Culture], vol. 2 (Budapest, n.d.), pp. 105–23.

4. For the history of the Transylvanian Saxons, see Karl K. Klein, *Saxonica Septem-castrisia* (Marburg, 1971). Of the earlier works, the following are still useful: Friedrich Teutsch, *Die siebenbürger Sachsen in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Leipzig, 1916); Franz Zimmermann and Carl Werner, eds., *Urkundenbuch zur Geschichte der Deutschen in Siebenbürgen*, 3 vols. (Hermaunstadt, 1892–1902); R. F. Kaindl, *Geschichte der Deutschen in Ungarn* (Vienna, 1912); Georg Keintzel, *Über die Herkunft der siebenbürger Sachsen* (Budapest, 1887).

whose warlike qualities served the Hungarian kings well. Together with the Saxons they were free men, jealous of their privileges and resentful of the privileges of others. Consequently, the Székelys were not on good terms with the Saxons, and they frequently conducted raids against the Saxon towns, sometimes in alliance with the Wlachs.⁵ But these conflicts were small and insignificant in comparison with those that surrounded the dispute over the payment of the tithe in Transylvania.

The struggle over this ecclesiastic tax did not originate in the fifteenth century; it had its roots in the exemptions granted to the Saxons during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The Saxon towns were exempt from paying the tithe to the bishop of Transylvania because their settlements were directly subordinated in religious matters to the archbishop of Esztergom, the primate of Hungary. They did pay a tax to the archbishop, but this was assessed in one lump sum and was usually less than the amount of the tithe collected by the Transylvanian bishop in his diocese. Consequently, a long line of bishops contested the Saxon exemption. The problem came to the fore in 1415 when, at the Council of Constance, Antipope John XXIII exempted the lesser nobility of Hungary⁶ from the tithe in anticipation of their services against the Czech Hussites. The bishop of Transylvania, György Lépes, was reluctant to accept this papal exemption, particularly because John XXIII was soon replaced by Martin V. King Sigismund himself did not take the exemption of the lesser nobility very seriously.⁷

Lesser noblemen in Transylvania and Hungary resented the bishop's pressure for the tithe, and many of them simply refused to pay the church. Encouraged by the nobles' resistance, some peasant communities followed suit.⁸ Peasants of

5. The origin and history of the Székelys attracted wide attention among historians. See Bálint Hóman, "A székelyek eredete" [Origin of the Székelys], in Bálint Hóman, *Magyar Középkor* [Hungarian Middle Ages] (Budapest, 1938), pp. 37–62; Pál Hunfalvy, "A székely kérdéshez" [About the Problem of the Székelys], *Szásadok*, 15 (1888): 97–114, 193–206; László Szilágyi, *A székely nemesi rendi társadalom* [Society and Noble Orders among the Székelys] (Budapest, 1937); János Connert, *A székelyek intézményei a legrégibb időktől az 1562-i átalakulásig* [Institutions of the Székelys from the Earliest Times to the Transformation in 1562] (Kolozsvár, 1901); György Gyórfy, "A székely társadalom" [The Székely Society], in György Székely, *Tanulmányok a parasztság történetéhez Magyarországon a XIV. században* [Studies in the History of the Peasantry in Hungary in the Fourteenth Century] (Budapest, 1953), pp. 104–16; Benedek Jancsó, *Die Székler: Historische und ethnographische Studien* (Budapest, 1922); and László Makkai, "Erdély népei a középkorban" [The Peoples of Transylvania in the Middle Ages], in József Deér et al., eds., *Magyarok és Románok* [Hungarians and Rumanians], vol. 1 (Budapest, 1943), pp. 314–440.

6. Legally, two types of lesser noblemen existed in Hungary in the fifteenth century: those who contracted with a baron to become his retainers (*familiars*), and those who remained free of baronial service. The latter are often referred to as county-nobility, meaning that this group of noblemen acted in judicial matters in the county assemblies. See Gyula Szekfű, *Szerviensek és familiárisok* (Budapest, 1912); Imre Szentpétery, "Nemesi és polgári életforma" [The Way of Life of Nobles and Burghers], in Domanovszky, *Magyar művelődéstörténet*, 2:309–43; Ferenc Lehman, *Változások a magyar nemesség történetében* [Changes in the History of Hungarian Nobility] (Budapest, 1903); and Tibor Kardos, *A virtuális Magyarország* (Budapest, 1934).

7. Fejér, *CDH*, 7:815.

8. Even when peasant communities complied with the bishop's demands, they did so with

all ethnic groups in Transylvania were involved in this conflict. The Wlachs who were living on church-owned estates were also pressured for the tithe, despite the exemption granted on account of their Orthodox religion. The bishop, sometimes in collusion with converted *kniazi*, pressed the Wlachs to convert and then to pay the tithe.⁹

The reality of a Turkish threat in the southern Transylvanian districts also contributed to heightened tensions. The first Turkish raids began in the 1420s and had a devastating effect on the population. Many of the peasants felt that the barons and their retainers were not meeting the commitment to protect the peasant communities against the recurring raids. The peasants regarded this as a breach of faith, because the *subsídium*, a tax collected mercilessly for the ostensible purpose of defense of the state, was obviously not buying security for the villages.¹⁰

Pressed by Bishop Lépes and the barons for the tithe and other feudal dues and obligations, restricted in their ability to move to estates where they could better themselves, and periodically looted, murdered, and enslaved by marauding Turkish troops, the Transylvanian peasantry was in a restless mood in the early fifteenth century. In 1433, Bishop Lépes added further strain to this already tense situation by suspending the collection of the tithe in the entire territory of his bishopric, but not for altruistic reasons. Spending most of his time at the royal court in Buda, the wily and avaricious bishop had firsthand information about the planned fiscal measures of the king. These measures included a temporary debasement of the currency in order to pay for the impending coronation of King Sigismund as Holy Roman Emperor. The new denarius was called a "quartling" by the people and for good reason; it contained only one-fourth of the precious metal content of the previous currency. Soon even this exchange rate deteriorated and the gold florin, formerly worth 100 denarii, was being exchanged for between 1,000 and 6,000 quartlings.¹¹ The "old money" rapidly disappeared from circulation. This directly affected the peasants, who were asked to pay part of their obligations in cash and who acquired their money by selling their surplus produce in rural towns, where only the quartling circulated. In 1436, when a new currency was issued with a value close to that of the pre-1433 coins, Bishop Lépes renewed the collection of the tithe and demanded that it be paid retroactively and only in the "old money." Because the Transylvanian peasants paid a sum between 200 and 240 denarii a year as tithe, the bishop's demand meant

great reluctance, as the report by Fejér shows. In some communities the peasants murdered the ecclesiastical tax collectors. See Fejér, *CDH*, 7:423–26 and 11:504.

9. Josephus C. Eder, *Observationes criticae et pragmaticae ad historiam Transylvaniae sub regibus Arpadianae et mixtae propaginis* (Nagyszében, 1803). See also György Székely, "Magyar parasztháborúk" [Hungarian Peasant Wars], in László Geréb, ed., *A magyar parasztháborúk irodalma* [Literature of the Hungarian Peasant Wars] (Budapest, 1950), p. 10; and György Székely, "Az erdélyi románok feudalizálódása," in Székely, *Tanulmányok*, pp. 240–47.

10. Fejér, *CDH*, 11:504.

11. Ferenc Kováts, "Zsigmond király quartling-ja" [The Quartling of King Sigismund], *Magyar Gazdaságtörténeti Szemle* (Budapest), 3 (1901): 126. See also László Fejérpataky, *Magyarországi városok számadáskönyvei* [The Accounting Books of Hungarian Cities] (Budapest, 1885), pp. 371–72.

that they would be required to pay six or seven gold florins as retroactive dues. Compared to the average value of a serf lot (estimated at forty gold florins in the early fifteenth century¹²), this was an amount beyond the ability of most peasant households to pay, especially because the peasants also had to satisfy the customary dues and obligations levied by their secular lords.

When the peasants refused to pay the sum demanded, the bishop placed the ban of the church on entire communities. Peasants who were in arrears were then penalized by the bishop in the amount of three marks (twelve gold florins). These exorbitant demands also affected the lesser nobility in Transylvania because the bishop continued to refuse to recognize their exemption from the tithe. In 1437, resentment became a temporary bond cementing a tentative alliance between rebellious peasants and grumbling lesser noblemen, but this alliance was fragile. As we shall see, the peasants were to progress from demands for the adjustment of the tithe to demands for the reorganization of the entire social structure, and the lesser nobility was unwilling to participate in such far-reaching reforms.

As the year 1437 progressed, excommunicated villages and individual peasants (together with lesser noblemen sharing their fate) faced a serious situation. The ban of the church stopped, among other things, dignified burials in the communal cemeteries. The dead of these communities had to be dumped into ditches formerly used for the burial of criminals. Marriages were no longer performed by local priests, and newly born infants were no longer being baptized. Life seemed to come to a halt in the Transylvanian countryside.

During the early 1430s, peasant unrest already had been manifested in local disturbances. These disturbances included the looting and burning of rural towns by small bands of peasants and attacks on the retainers and supervisors of baronial estates. During the spring of 1437, the disturbances intensified in the southwestern areas of Alsó-Fehér county in Transylvania and around the market town (*mezőváros*) of Déva. Here peasants roamed the countryside in small groups, murdering baronial servants and pillaging their properties. In Szatmár county in Hungary proper the situation of the peasantry differed somewhat from that of southern and central Transylvania because they were not being burdened by demands for the retroactive tithe. But the peasants in this area of eastern Hungary did feel the pressure of the barons and the church for increased feudal dues and obligations.¹³

The response of the peasants in all these areas was similar. They refused to pay and, when pressed harder, they openly revolted against their oppressors. From the very beginning, therefore, the peasant movement of 1437–38 had more than one geographic focus; yet, it was not a nationwide phenomenon.

12. Lajos Demény, *Az 1437–38-as bábolnai népi felkelés* [The Popular Uprising of Bábolna in 1437–1438] (Bucharest, 1960), pp. 179–80.

13. See the letter of Palatine Lőrinc Daruvári discussing the peasant revolt in Szatmár county in Kálmán Géresi, *A nagy-károlyi Gróf Károlyi család oklevéltára* [Archive of the Count Károlyi Family], vol. 2 (Budapest, 1883), pp. 193–94. See also the letter of the voivode to the citizens of the town of Brassó [Braşov], ordering them to exterminate the rebellious Wlach peasants of Fogaras—"to kill all the men and bring back the women and children"—in Károly Szabó, *Székely oklevéltár* [Székely Archive], 3 vols. (Kolozsvár, 1872), 3:47–49.

At first, the barons paid little attention to the rebellious peasants in Transylvania. When the peasants attributed their uprising to the exactions of Bishop Lépes, the barons felt that the bishop was getting only what he so richly deserved. Of course, the bishop's loss could easily have become the barons' gain. By not paying the tithe to the church, the peasants would have more goods left for their landlords.

Bishop Lépes himself was unable to stop the spread of the rebellion. Unrest in the northern regions of Transylvania began early in the spring and it spread throughout the province. The entire Maros River valley, the peasant settlements in the Szamos River area, and the people of the county of Kolozs were soon involved.

In Szabolcs and Szatmár counties, the peasant revolt was short-lived. It was led in this area by a village judge, *iudex* Márton, whose followers looted the rural towns, causing particularly great devastation in Nyiregyháza. But these peasants were easily dispersed by baronial troops, and *iudex* Márton was caught and executed.¹⁴ The ease with which the peasants were dispersed in this area, as contrasted to the difficulties experienced by the barons in Transylvania, points to the essential difference between the two uprisings, namely, the involvement of the lesser nobility in the revolt in Transylvania.

The Transylvanian peasants, led by peasant and lesser noble captains, were soon organized into a genuine army and, during May and June 1437, they moved toward the village of Alparét. They established a camp near this village on the summit of Bábolna Mountain. At first, only the villagers of Alparét, Magyarbogát, Buda, and Diósd joined the rebellion, but soon peasants were arriving in the camp from as far away as the cities of Kolozsvár and Szék. The sympathetic citizens of Kolozsvár even sent a detachment under the leadership of János, son of Jakab of Kolozsvár.¹⁵ The hastily collected troops of the Transylvanian barons, by now alerted to the widespread nature of the peasant movement, followed the peasants to Alparét. The baronial troops were led by the provincial administrator, the voivode László Csáki. The chief retainer of the voivode was Lóránt Lépes, brother of the Transylvanian bishop, and he also participated in the campaign.

The peasants began to have second thoughts about their cause at this point. It was one thing to confront surprised villages and the frightened minions of barons in out-of-the-way places, but quite another to face down the baronial armies that were battle-tested and well-armed. The peasants decided, therefore, to send envoys to the opposing camp inquiring about possible conditions for settlement of the dispute. Bishop Lépes would have been quite willing to make a deal with the insurgents, but, by now, the voivode regarded the rebellion as a dangerous attempt to overturn the existing social order and refused to meet with the envoys. He ordered the torture and murder of the peasant representatives visiting his camp.¹⁶ The peasants had no alternative but to fight.

14. Joannis de Thurócz, *Chronica Hungarorum*, in Schwandtner, *Rerum Hungaricarum Scriptores*, 1:385; and Antonius Bonfini, *Rerum Hungaricarum decades* (Pozsony, 1744), dec. 3, liber 3, pp. 8–27, 401.

15. Demény, *Az 1437–38-as bábolnai népi felkelés*, pp. 230–31.

16. József Pataki, "Az 1437-es felkelés kiöbbranasának történetéhez" [About the History

The first battle was fought in early July on the slopes of Bábolna Mountain. The peasants gave a good account of themselves and achieved a notable victory. Their leaders included Antal Budai Nagy, Pál Kendi, Mihály the Wlach of Virágosberek, Tamás Zeéki (or Széki), János, son of Jakab of Kolozsvár, and Pál Vajdaházi Nagy, "the flag bearer of the Magyars and Wlachs."¹⁷ Some of these were lesser noblemen; János of Kolozsvár was the son of a burgher. The immediate fortification of their camp (which included surrounding it with ditches) and the organized movement of their troops indicated that the leaders—and perhaps a few of the peasant soldiers—had seen battle previously, probably in the Hussite wars of King Sigismund in the 1420s.¹⁸

Bábolna Mountain was an excellent choice for the battle site, giving strategic and tactical advantages to the peasants. It was heavily forested on all sides, preventing the feared cavalry charge of the baronial troops and, at the same time, providing advantages for the foot soldiers of the peasant army. The summit of the mountain was flat, and it offered a large open area of about forty-two acres, thus providing ample room for the shifting of defensive troops according to the needs of the battle. The contempt of the barons for the peasant army undoubtedly contributed to their undoing. Because of this contempt, the barons, although the fortifications were not yet complete, delayed the attack on the Bábolna camp. When they finally attacked, they were decisively repulsed. Their pride humbled, the barons withdrew to prepare for another engagement.

The peasants were, on the other hand, unable to take full advantage of victory. Their customary caution prevented them from pursuing the withdrawing baronial troops and eliminating them altogether. Instead, the peasants offered terms for a peaceful settlement of the conflict, providing the barons with time to regain their balance. The barons were only too willing to cooperate; discussions of a settlement began at the monastery of Kolozsmonostor and were concluded on July 6.

of the Outbreak of the Uprising of 1437], *Studia Universitatum Victor Babes et Bolyai* (Cluj), 3 (1958): 62–63.

17. The document listing the names of the peasant leaders was recorded by the monastery of Kolozsmonostor and it will be discussed in detail below. It was first published by József Teleki in *Hunyadiak kora Magyarországon* [The Age of Hunyadis in Hungary], vol. 10 (Buda, 1852), pp. 3–10. The original copy of the document is now in the Hungarian National Archive (Budapest), D1.36972. It was also published by Geréb, *A magyar parasztháborúk*, pp. 63–71, and Demény, *Az 1437–38-as bábolnai népi felkelés*, pp. 259–66.

18. Hussitism in Hungary is a subject which cannot be discussed here in detail. Indeed, the subject is still awaiting its modern historian. For works that describe the movement but which are now outdated, see Pál Tóth-Szabó, *A cseh-huszi mozgalom és uralom története Magyarországon* [Czech-Hussite Movements and Rule in Hungary] (Budapest, 1917); Étienne Barta, "L'Université Charles de Prague et la Hongrie," *Revue d'Histoire Comparée* (Paris), 7 (1948): 221–59; Cyrill Horváth, "Huszi emlékeink" [Our Hussite Memories], *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* (Budapest), 6 (1896): 1–12; Pál Hunfalvy, "A magyar huszitákról" [About Hungarian Hussites], *Budapesti Szemle*, 45 (1886): 460–71; Károly Mollay, "Sopron ismerkedése a Huszitizmussal" [Sopron's Acquaintance with Hussitism], *Soproni Szemle*, 18 (1964): 333–35; György Székely, "A huszitizmus és a magyar nép" [Hussitism and the Hungarian People], *Századok*, 90 (1956): 331–67; György Székely, "Eretnekmozgalmak" [Heretical Movements], in Székely, *Tanulmányok*, pp. 127–36; and Jenő Szücs, *A magyarországi huszi mozgalom és a magyar nép* [The Hungarian Hussite Movement and the Magyar People] (Budapest, 1954).

“After due deliberations and the softening of the hearts of the combatants,” the representatives of the opposing camps signed the first agreement of Kolozsmonostor, and it was duly recorded by the notary public of the monastery.¹⁹ In the agreement the peasants stated that, “because of the unjust method of collecting the tithe and other unreasonable demands of Bishop Lépes, they felt compelled to assert their ancient rights.” They also declared that the barons’ curtailment of one of these ancient rights, freedom of movement, “granted them by the Holy Kings of Hungary (St. Stephen and St. Ladislaus),” compelled them to seek justice in their own way. They further explained, however, that

the people did not want to rise up against God, His Truths and His church, nor did they want to oppose the Holy Crown of His Highness, the King Sigismund. . . . What they wanted was to regain their freedoms granted them by the ancient kings, freedoms that had been suppressed by all sorts of subterfuges. . . .²⁰

The notable lack of belligerence in this statement is positive proof of the moderate nature of the peasant movement in 1437. Other provisions of the agreement, namely, the peasants’ promise to pay the tithe to the bishop in “good money” (including the arrears), offer further proof. The peasants, however, did stress that the actual value of the tithe should be half of what the bishop demanded, and that the reduction in the value of the tithe would have to be the basis of all future assessments. A further stipulation forbade the landlords or the royal tax collector to gather any taxes or dues while the tithe was being collected. But the peasants did not renounce these taxes altogether.

An important part of the agreement abolished the *nona pars*, the ninth of all harvests, collected by the landlords for their own use. The peasants agreed only that the lords should receive payments for lands leased from them by individual peasants. These peasants should pay the usual rent—*census*, *terragium*—“according to their agreement with their lords.”²¹

This provision had important implications. First, it signalled the peasants’ desire to free themselves of the heaviest burden of feudal bondage, the *nona pars*, established on a country-wide basis less than a century before.²² Second, this provision strengthened the village communities by making it more expensive for enterprising individual peasants to acquire land outside the villages.

The two sides agreed that the peasants should have the right of free movement from one estate to another, and that this right should be curtailed only by the nonpayment of obligations to the lords. The amount of *terragium* that the peasants agreed to pay was fixed at 10 denarii per year. This was an important point, for the peasants had been paying between 150 and 180 denarii as rent before the uprising.²³ Because the reduced tithe amounted to between 100 and

19. See note 17.

20. Demény, *Az 1437–38-as bábolnai népi felkelés*, p. 259. The original document is published as an appendix to this volume.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

22. For regulations establishing baronial rights to one-ninth of the harvest see István Szabó, “Az 1351. évi jobbágytörvények,” [The Laws of Serfdom of 1351], *Századok*, 88 (1954): 497–524. See also László Erdélyi, “Az első adó elméletéhez” [About the Theory of the First Tax], *Századok*, 47 (1913): 281–89.

23. Demény, *Az 1437–38-as bábolnai népi felkelés*, p. 196.

120 denarii per year per household, and the obligations paid to the landlords came to less than 60 denarii, the first peace agreement of Kolozsmonostor would have contributed greatly to easing the burden on the Transylvanian peasantry. Apart from financial obligations, the peasants agreed to serve one day per year per family by working on the lands of the lords. The agreement also stipulated that the combatants were to receive unconditional amnesty, and the persecution of their leaders was forbidden.

In order to insure the compliance of both sides with the agreement, the peasants were to meet every year on the anniversary of signing the agreement to review the situation. These meetings were to be held at Bábolna Mountain, and if the peasants found that some barons had broken the agreement, they were entitled to punish these barons without interference from the other lords.

The provisions of the agreement clearly imply that the peasants were reluctant to propose new, alternative social and political institutions (although some historians have argued²⁴ that the last point of the agreement could have created a peasant "parliament" by which the Transylvanian peasantry might have developed into an autonomous order within Hungarian feudal society). The peasants were obviously appealing for reestablishment of the "olden days," before the "injurious innovations of the lords" existed.

The conservative stance of the Transylvanian peasant movement was similar to late medieval peasant movements elsewhere in Europe. As R. Hilton points out in his study of such movements:

although a heavy tax, or a requisition order . . . might not in itself precipitate a rising, it might do so in the context of strained social relationships. . . . This strain is seen by the peasants from an apparently conservative standpoint. They cannot accept the abandonment of traditional roles by any one of the orders of society—whose basic structure they do not, to begin with, challenge. . . .²⁵

In the Transylvanian case, the basic strain in society was induced by the imposition of seigneurial rule and the burden of new taxes levied on the peasants beginning in the mid-fourteenth century. The general social crisis that resulted

24. Marxist historians in Hungary and Rumania have argued that the various agreements of Kolozsmonostor were not true reflections of the mood of the Transylvanian peasantry, that the peasant movement was a great deal more radical than the agreements indicate (see Béla Karácsonyi's review of Geréb, *A magyar parasztháborúk irodalma*, in *Századok*, 84 [1950]: 415–19; and Demény, *Az 1437–38-as bábolnai népi felkelés*, p. 249). In asserting that such agreements necessarily represent compromises between lords and peasants, however, the Marxist historians failed to distinguish between the first and second agreements. While the second agreement does show an increase in baronial influence, the first, in my opinion, includes the major demands of the peasantry. The reduction of the tithe, the abolition of seigneurial dues, and the creation of a yearly peasant assembly were ideas that could not possibly have been originated by the lords. On the other hand, these ideas were not sufficiently revolutionary to create a new society in Transylvania. The very fact that the peasants were willing to negotiate with the barons both *before* and after the battle of Bábolna Mountain is an indication of the truly moderate nature of the movement.

25. Rodney H. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (London, 1973), pp. 118–19.

was similar in nature to the social crises which produced the movements of the French Tuchin and the Czech Hussites during the later Middle Ages.²⁶

The Transylvanian peasant movement clearly lacked many of the criteria for success. First, it was limited in scope. Second, it was not coordinated with other peasant movements, especially the one in Bohemia. Finally, and most important, the peasants had only vague notions about the shape of the society which they wanted to establish. They lacked a coherent ideology which could have been their instrument in the formulation of broader social aims.

Some historians have contended that Hungarian Hussitism could have provided the ideology for the developing Transylvanian peasant movement,²⁷ but Hussitism in Hungary did not reach the peasant masses to the same extent that it did in Bohemia. Although Hussite influence was evident in the methods of warfare employed by the peasants at Bábolna Mountain and elsewhere, thus making a contribution to the prolongation of the peasants' struggle, this influence was not strong enough to help the peasants in the formulation of specific social aims.²⁸

The peasant movement originally centered on the Szamos River valley, in the counties of Alsó-Fehér, Torda, Kolozs and, especially, Szolnok-Doboka. Because these areas were populated mainly by Magyar peasants and some Wlach settlers, Hungarian historians frequently have claimed that the peasant movement was basically a Hungarian affair, and that the Wlachs remained aloof, since they did not share the problems of the Magyar peasantry. This view has been somewhat, but not entirely, rectified in recent works by Hungarian and Rumanian historians.²⁹

The evidence indicates, however, that the Wlach peasants, in the areas where the disturbances occurred, were just as involved in the movement as the Magyars. On the other hand, their motivations were probably different. The Wlachs faced their own *kniazi*, while the Magyar peasants' antagonism was directed against the church and the barons. It also seems certain that Orthodox Wlachs who lived outside the bishopric of Lépes were not as strongly attracted to the peasant movement as were those who lived under his jurisdiction. The ban of the church did not affect the Wlachs who were Orthodox Christians. Thus, the Wlachs of the counties of Hunyad and Máramaros, where they were the largest ethnic group, remained calm during 1437–38.³⁰ When the Wlach peasants did join their Magyar brethren in the rebellion, it was undoubtedly the result of their grievances against their own *kniazi*. National hatreds, alleged by some Rumanian historians, did not play a role in the uprising at all.³¹

26. Ibid., especially pp. 109–15.

27. See especially Székely, "Magyar parasztháborúk," pp. 12–13, 18–21.

28. István Szabó, *Tanulmányok a magyar parasztság történetéből* [Studies about the History of the Hungarian Peasantry] (Budapest, 1948), p. 50.

29. See, for example, Jenő Berlász, "A románság az erdélyi paraszttársadalomban" [Rumanians in the Peasant Society of Transylvania], in Deér et al., *Magyarok és Románok*, pp. 582–83; Daicovicu et al., *Erdély története*, 1:347; Ștefan Pascu, *Bobîlna* (Bucharest, 1957).

30. Tóth-Szabó, *A cseh-hussita mozgalmak*, p. 121.

31. The peasants negotiating with the barons included both Wlachs and Magyars. Mihály of Virágosberek was a Wlach; Pál Vajdaházi Nagy was the "flagbearer of the Magyars and Wlachs."

The first agreement of Kolozsmonostor was not acceptable to the barons as a permanent solution because its provisions weakened their hold on the peasantry. For the peasants, the immediate task was to safeguard the agreement against baronial chicanery. For the barons, however, the agreement provided time for gaining new allies and attempting to separate the disgruntled lesser nobility from the peasants.

The baronial army moved to the rural town of Kápolna after its defeat at Bábolna Mountain. Here the barons and the representatives of the Székelys and the Saxons met and agreed to support each other against their common enemies. By this so-called "Union of Kápolna" (uniting the three ethnic groups calling themselves the "three Transylvanian nations"), the barons achieved their first aim—to gain new allies.³² Next they turned to Bishop Lépes, whom they regarded as the main cause of the revolt, and convinced him that he, too, should contribute to the elimination of the common danger. The bishop eventually agreed to exempt the lesser nobility in his diocese from the tithe.

The bishop's decision was a serious blow to the peasants' cause. Their major grievance satisfied, most lesser noblemen soon left the peasant camp. The barons, on the other hand, could now proceed against the weakened army of their opponents with greater confidence.

Although the peasant troops continued to spread terror in the countryside among the unarmed population, it was hardly sufficient to advance their aims. They began to show signs of exhaustion, and inexperience also was catching up with them. Instead of remaining in their fortified camp on the mountain, where the terrain and the friendly population of the surrounding villages provided temporary advantages, they moved toward the town of Dés. (L. Demény suggests that the peasants were compelled to follow this course because they needed provisions.³³) By the end of September, the peasants established a new camp on the banks of the Szamos River near Dés, one that lacked the strategic and tactical advantages of their former stronghold.

The barons soon attacked this camp and caused serious casualties among the peasants. But the defenders were still able to hold their own in this encounter and they, too, inflicted casualties in the ranks of their enemies. The outcome of this engagement was the signing of the second peace agreement of Kolozsmonostor on October 6.

The second agreement reflected the diminishing power of the peasant movement. It forced the peasants to accept an increased land rent amounting to as much as they had paid before the uprising and it reestablished the full jurisdiction of the lords over their subjects. Thus, even though the agreement also granted to the peasants the right of appeal from their lords' decisions to the county authorities, a right that had not been recognized before,³⁴ the brief period

32. See the letter of Lóránt Lépes, vice voivode, to the Hungarian nobles, Saxons, and Székelys confirming the union, in Fejér, *CDH*, 7:912–15. See also Károly Szabó, *Székely oklevéltár*, 1:134–37.

33. Demény, *Az 1437–38-as bábolnai népi felkelés*, p. 211.

34. For an accurate text of this agreement see *ibid.*, pp. 269–73, and *Szöveggyűjtemény Magyarország történetének tanulmányozásához* [Collection of Texts for the Study of the History of Hungary], vol. 1 (Budapest, 1967), pp. 289–91.

of the peasants' ascendancy was over. The peasants participating in the rebellion lost hope of reorganizing society and wanted only to salvage whatever they could for themselves. They agreed, therefore, to send a joint baronial-peasant delegation to King Sigismund (living at that time in Prague) requesting the surrender of "ancient letters of the rights and privileges of the peasantry, granted them by the Holy Kings of Hungary." If such documents were found, the second peace agreement of Kolozsmonostor would be null and void. Its clauses would be replaced by the provisions contained in the documents in question.³⁵ There is no record that such a delegation was assembled or that it ever reached Prague.

The peasants sensed that the location of their camp on the Szamos River provided dangerous temptations for their enemies, and they slowly began to move toward the friendly city of Kolozsvár. Kolozsvár had been the center of peasant migrations for a considerable time, and many of its citizens sympathized with the peasant movement. Accordingly, the city opened its gates when the peasant army arrived at the walls. The peasants established their camp outside the walls and sent some of their troops to guard the city's citadel. The last decisive battles of the revolt were fought at Kolozsvár.

The baronial army arrived at Kolozsvár during the first part of December and immediately attacked the camp. Some of the most important peasant leaders, among them Antal Budai Nagy, were killed and the entire peasant army was annihilated.

The baronial army now proceeded to besiege the city so that "not one soul could come out or go in."³⁶ A separate baronial detachment attacked the rural town of Enyed where remnants of the peasant army took refuge. By December 15, Enyed was captured and the victorious troops wreaked revenge on the peasants and the town population.

Kolozsvár, however, was another story. It held out against the siege, with the citizens helping the peasant defenders. Their combined resistance was so effective that the barons were compelled to ask for help from their allies, especially Saxon artillerymen for their siege-guns.³⁷ But the siege did take its toll. By mid-January 1438 food was scarce in the city, and the defenders were eventually forced to surrender. Some of the captured peasants were mutilated, the city itself was thoroughly sacked, and its corporation was deprived of all the privileges granted to it by previous Hungarian kings. The captured peasant leaders—nine of them altogether—were taken to the rural town of Torda, where they were tortured and put on the stake. At a meeting held at Torda on February 2, 1438, the "three Transylvanian nations" confirmed the Union of Kápolna, directing their agreement explicitly against rebellious peasants and, incidentally, against Turkish raiders (about whom everyone seemed to have

35. Demény, *Az 1437–38-as bábolnai népi felkelés*, p. 219.

36. The letter of Mihály Kusaly Jakcs to the Saxons reported this siege (see Elek Jakab, *Kolozsvár története: Oklevéltár* [The History of Kolozsvár: Archive], 2 vols. (Buda, 1870–88), 1:177.

37. See the letter of Jakcs, Dezső Losonci, and "some nobles from Hungary" to the Saxons asking for help against the peasants, in Károly Szabó, *Székely oklevéltár*, 3:53–54.

forgotten during the previous months). Taking advantage of victory, the barons proceeded to punish their personal enemies under the guise of eliminating the allies of the peasantry.³⁸

But the Transylvanian barons, especially the new voivode, Dezső Losonci (Csáki may have died in the battle at Bábolna Mountain³⁹), knew that brutal force alone would not keep the peasantry quiet forever. They did restore, therefore, a partial freedom of movement to the peasants in Transylvania.

Thus ended the great peasant rebellion of 1437–38. Although the barons were satisfied that they had taught a lesson to the peasantry, the effects of the lesson were not long-lasting. During the next eighty years, several local disturbances and minor revolts indicated that many of the issues of 1437–38 were not yet dead and that the peasants had not given up hope for the reduction or elimination of their feudal burdens.

38. A letter of the widowed Queen Elisabeth, former wife of King Albert I, expressed her displeasure at the actions of the voivode in confiscating some properties of the Báthoris following the peasant rebellion (*Handschrift Weiss*, no. 160/3, p. 284 in the Haus-, Hof-, und Staatsarchiv, Vienna, Austria).

39. Demény, *Az 1437–38-as bábolnai népi felkelés*, p. 292.