

Transylvania in Hungarian History: An Introduction

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Few words arouse stronger emotions among Hungarians than the name *Erdély* or Transylvania. While for most people in the English-speaking world “Transylvania” conjures up the image of Dracula, for Hungarians it is associated with a proud and time-honoured national past, as well as a real and tangible present. This circumstance should not surprise anyone. Transylvania is home to the largest Hungarian community living outside of Hungary. In fact this community is one of the largest minorities existing in any country that is a member of the European Union. Transylvania is also the place where Hungarian presence had existed uninterruptedly for at least eleven centuries, and it is the place where Hungarian culture flourished even in times when in other Hungarian lands it languished because of Ottoman Turkish or Austrian Habsburg rule.

The geographic limits of the land known as Transylvania have changed with the passage of time. Before 1920 this term was used to designate an area of the Carpathian Basin that was smaller than what the word describes nowadays. For most Hungarians, the word *Erdély* today signifies the lands that had been transferred from Hungary to Romania as a result of the Treaty of Trianon of June 1920. Most of the time this rather inaccurate and unhistorical definition will be used in this volume. When it will not be used, the context and meaning will be explained.

Although Transylvania had always held a significant connotation for Hungarians, it is since 1920 that they think of this land with an especially heavy heart. It was in the post-World War I peace settlement, in particular in the above-mentioned Treaty of Trianon, that the transfer of this land to Romania was inscribed into international law. The background of this event is complex and is rooted in centuries of history.

Early in the second century a.d. the Romans added this land to their expanding empire and called it Dacia. Some fifteen decades later, in the early 270s a.d., they Romans evacuated the province. From that time on, and especially since the time of the barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire a century-and-a-half later, until the thirteenth century, there is little concrete evidence of peoples speaking a Romance language (similar to Latin, Italian, French, Spanish etc.) in what is now Transylvania. Romance-speaking peoples, in particular the Vlachs, did live in the central mountains of the Balkans. In fact, maps of this age place the putative ancestors of the Romanians south of the lands of the Bulgarians, exactly the opposite as we know the locations of Bulgaria and Romania in the Modern Age.¹

From their Balkan homeland the Vlachs began their migrations north in the thirteenth century, migrations that were accelerated no doubt by the beginning of Ottoman Turkish expansion into the Balkans. By the time of the following century, they established themselves as the dominant ethnic population in what became known as Wallachia, the land between the Transylvanian Alps and the Lower Danube River. Here they converted to the eastern branch of Orthodox Christianity. Their priests used Church Slavonic as the language of liturgy. Under various leaders they at times served as a client state of the Kingdom of Hungary, or acted as an independent principality.

One of the most famous, one might say infamous ruler of Wallachia was Vlad III “the Impaler” (ruled in 1448 and from 1456-62). Myths and legends about this man probably inspired the main character in the nineteenth century English author Bram Stoker's book *Dracula* (1897). This work, along with its Hollywood-produced film incarnations, did more than any other media to immortalize this notorious individual.

Prince Dracula's connections to Transylvania were tenuous, even though he was born there and grew up there.² Whether he was mentally deranged or only a ruthless ruler can be the subject of debate. According to one legend, after coming to power for the second time in 1456, he wished to impose order in a realm that had experienced much anarchy and rampant crime as a result of internecine fighting and foreign invasions. In doing this Vlad used cruel punishments, including the impaling of criminals — as well as the prisoners of war captured in his wars with Wallachia's enemies. The executions were public and gruesome, and instilled fear into the hearts of Wallachia's and especially, Vlad's opponents.³

Legend has it that Vlad's demise resulted from his raids against the prosperous and powerful Saxon (German) towns of Transylvania and, in particular, the impaling of many (some sources say a few dozen, others say thousands) of the residents of Kronstadt (Brassó in Magyar, Brasov in

Romanian). The good *burgers* of southern Transylvania's ethnic German community appealed to their overlord and protector King Mátyás Corvinus of Hungary. Vlad had also alienated many elements of his country's aristocracy. Their leader, Vlad's own brother Radu, also conspired with Mátyás. In the end Vlad was captured and was imprisoned in Hungary. While in prison, his supporters started a publicity campaign to have him released, while Vlad's enemies spread vile rumours about him to justify his continued incarceration.

During the mid-1470s Vlad was allowed to return to his Wallachia, where his brother had held the reigns of power till his death a few years earlier and where another enemy of Vlad, Basarab the Elder, had been installed by the Turks after Radu's death. Vlad, with the help of foreign support, was able to regain power, but his new reign was short-lived. The Turks were determined to restore Basarab to power, and few in Wallachia seem to have rallied around a man with Vlad's reputation. Several legends exist as to the circumstances of his death — or murder.⁴

Whether a demented madman or a protector of the Wallachian nation, the true story of Vlad has been obscured by relentless propaganda against him throughout much of his lifetime — as well as since the appearance of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* over eleven decades ago. His image in the West portrays him as a depraved man, while in his own country, as well as in other Orthodox lands, he is more likely to be seen as a national hero.⁵

The Germans of Transylvania, as mentioned above, had been Vlad's enemies and were probably the sources of the most strident of anti-Vlad propaganda. Their connection to Transylvania has not been explained and it should be for those who are not familiar with that land's history.

The ancestors of these German-speaking people immigrated to Hungary in the middle of the twelfth century and were settled by King Géza II in south-eastern Transylvania to bolster the region's ability to protect the south-eastern frontier-lands of the Carpathian Basin. Though most of them were not from Saxony but from the western parts of what today is Germany, in time they became known as Saxons, in Hungarian *Szászok*. Later more German-speaking immigrants came to this part of Transylvania. Eventually they gave rise to a coherent ethnic community that was prosperous and had a fair amount of economic and political clout. Some of their settlements including the already-mentioned Kronstadt, became affluent urban centres that are even today picturesque places with many distinguished buildings and a great deal of charm. They include Hermannstadt (Nagyszeben for Hungarians, Sibiu for Romanians) and Karlsburg (Gyulafehérvár or Alba Julia), to mention the most obvious and the most charming.

Transylvania's Saxon minority usually enjoyed a fair amount of autonomy within the Kingdom of Hungary. In Transylvania itself, they constituted one of the three of the region's "founding peoples", along with the Magyars, and the Magyar-speaking Székelys. They were Catholics, the vast majority of whom became Protestants by the middle of the sixteenth century. But by then they were not the only non-Hungarian ethnic group in Transylvania.

The immigration of Vlach tribesmen into Wallachia followed, and to some extent co-existed with their gradual migration further north, into Transylvania. The new arrivals were slow to achieve economic and political influence. Most of them were shepherds and lived in the most mountainous areas. The Vlachs were not admitted, were in fact in no position to demand admittance, to the ranks of the three "founding peoples" of the land. Their descendants became a major factor in the political affairs of Transylvania only in the modern era. However their influence very gradually grew, as their numbers grew, and their numbers increased in a manner disproportionate to the demographic growth of Transylvania's the other ethnic groups. Especially slow was the natural growth of the Székely population. To prevent the impoverishment of their families through the subdivision of their land-holdings with the passage of generations, they practiced birth control. So, while the Vlachs kept increasing in numbers due to continued immigration *and* a higher birth rate, the Székelys, and to a lesser extent Transylvania's Magyar and Saxon populations, experienced limited demographic growth. Wars and internal strife also affected these groups differently. The Magyars, Székelys and even Saxons were more likely to do military service in wartime and to suffer casualties. They also bore the brunt of invasions as dwellers of urban centres and of the valleys and other lowlands, while the Vlachs were more likely to escape destruction and death in their highland hideouts.

From the late sixteenth to the late seventeenth centuries, Transylvania witnessed the competition for influence of the two dominant empires of the day: the Ottoman Turkish and the Habsburg. In this struggle the princes of Transylvania often managed to play one side against the other with considerable success. Still, repeated military struggles cost the population, and especially the three privileged founding peoples, a great deal in terms of material losses and lives lost.

The Ottomans were expelled from much of the Carpathian Basin at the end of the seventeenth century. This victory of Christian Europe over the Ottoman Turks resulted in the establishment of Viennese rule over the whole of Hungary, including Transylvania. From this time to the nineteenth century Vienna administered Transylvania as a separate province of the Habsburg

Empire. More wars followed, including at least four wars of liberation fought by Hungarians (mainly from the eastern and northern regions of the Carpathian Basin) against Habsburg rule. Added to this was the fact that the Habsburgs, unlike the Ottomans before, wanted to control most aspects of Transylvania's politics, and tried to inflict military conscription on its people. This situation resulted in, among other things, the flight of tens of thousands of Székelys and other Transylvanians to the lands beyond Habsburg control, east of the Carpathian ranges.

Hungary emerged from Habsburg domination briefly in 1848-49, and in a more lasting manner in 1867, this time as a result of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise. From 1867 to the end of World War I, Transylvania became an integral part of Hungary and was ruled directly from Budapest. By this time, however, significant demographic shifts had taken place in the region as the Romanians had become the most populous ethnic group. In the meantime, to the south, Romania shook off the increasingly feeble tutelage of the Ottoman Empire and emerged as an independent nation. The stage was set for the growth of Romanian separatism in Transylvania that reached its zenith during World War I.

As is commonly known, during the first two years of this conflict Romania remained neutral. Both the Central Powers and the Allies hoped to attract Romania to their side, but it was the Allies who were in a better position to offer inducements to the government in Bucharest. They made a secret offer to Romania of Transylvania, on the condition that the country join the alliance against the Central Powers. The Romanians, encouraged by Russian successes against the German and Austro-Hungarian forces on the Eastern front, committed themselves. A few weeks later, in late August 1916, they declared war on Austria-Hungary and began the invasion of Transylvania. By then the Russian offensive had spent itself and some hastily assembled German and Austro-Hungarian forces defeated the invading Romanian armies.

The Central Powers collapsed in the fall of 1918. This provided Romania with a new opportunity to attack, which she did — a few days before the war's end. This time the Romanian armies were successful. They occupied Transylvania and, for a brief time in 1919, most of Hungary. In the following year, in the Treaty of Trianon between the victorious Allies and Hungary, the peacemakers awarded Transylvania to Romania, along with the eastern portions of the Hungarian Great Plain. In fact, more formerly Hungarian land was given to Romania than was left to Hungary. Transferred with these lands were about 1,700,000 ethnic Hungarians. Of all the territorial losses the Kingdom of Hungary suffered it was this loss that left the deepest wound on the

Hungarian psyche. There seemed little justification for detaching so much territory with so many Magyar residents from Hungary. Although in the transferred territories Romanians constituted the most populous ethnic group (they made up a little over half the total population), many predominantly by Magyar-populated cities and counties were included in the lands transferred.

The post-war peace settlement ushered in a new era for Transylvania's Magyar-speaking population. From being the politically dominant ethnic group, they became a reviled minority. Tens of thousands of them left and migrated to a Hungary impoverished by the war, post-war revolutions, and the economic devastation that the new territorial settlement brought for the country. For the Magyars left in Transylvania the decades of Romanian rule brought the loss of many of their rights and the beginning of relentless Romanization of their communities. During World War II for three years a part of Transylvania reverted to Hungarian rule, but with the war's end the pre-1940 borders were restored and the local Hungarian population once again became a disfavoured minority. Just as over two decades earlier, thousands of Hungarians left Transylvania. They fled their native towns and villages to escape the return of Romanian rule and the anticipated "settling of scores" as Soviet and Romanian armies advanced in pursuit of the retreating Axis forces. After the war the policies of Romanization resumed in Transylvania's Magyar-populated regions and continued with lesser and greater intensity until they reached a climax during the rule of dictator Nicolai Ceaușescu. One especially nefarious aspect of the new Romanization was the forced mixing of populations. Hungarians, especially professional people, were sent to work in predominantly Romanian regions of the country, while Romanians were relocated to work and live in Hungarian ethnic enclaves.

The end of communist rule two decades ago brought some relief for Transylvania's Magyar-speaking populations, although the decades of strident anti-Magyar propaganda and the vicious anti-Hungarian sentiments it engendered in the Romanian population persisted for years and often caused much grief. But with time conditions improved and at least the grinding poverty of the Ceaușescu years gradually disappeared. Romanization continued especially as the result of the re-emergence of the Orthodox Church as a powerful social and political force in the country. And the exodus of Hungarians continued, though never on the scale of the departure of Transylvania's Saxon population during the time of the Great Dictator. There is still a solid Hungarian presence in some areas of Transylvania, especially in the Székelyland, while German-speakers have all but disappeared from the beautiful Saxon cities and villages of south-eastern Transylvania. On the whole however, Transylvania has become a predominantly Romanian land.

The position of the majority population appears solid. Yet, there is a cloud on the horizon for the future of Romania and its predominant Romanian culture. It is posed by the same demographic processes which had caused the gradual rise of Romanian ascendancy over a period of seven centuries. That cloud is posed by Romania's rapidly growing Roma (Gypsy) population. It seems rather ironic that a nation whose political fortunes were largely due to its high fecundity compared to other peoples in the region, is now threatened by the rapid demographic growth of an ethnic group within its midst. The process also poses a threat to Transylvania's Hungarians — but only in the long term. In the near future this situation might help to ameliorate the problems of their minority status: it is becoming increasingly obvious to the majority Romanian population that the long term threat to their social and political dominance is posed not by the Hungarians but by another ethnic group, and this circumstance should reduce the scale and prevalence of anti-Magyar sentiments in Romania, sentiments that have, in the past, caused so much strife and grief.

The papers and review articles in this volume focus mainly on the history of Hungarians there in the past nine decades, as well as on the relationship between them and the people — and governments — of Hungary. With two of the papers and an excerpt from one Transylvanian's reminiscences dealing with the era of the Second World War, one might say that the years 1939 to 1945 constitute the real focus of the volume. This might be justified since these years were pivotal in the region's history. The war and its outcome sanctified the territorial settlement reached with regard to Transylvania after the First World War, while it contributed to the prolongation of bad relations between Hungarians and Romanians. It also further weakened the demographic position of the Magyars in that land as a result of the flight of still more thousands of people. We hope that discussions of these developments in our volume will contribute to the rise of a more thorough knowledge of the history of Transylvania and its peoples. One day perhaps in the English-speaking world the name Transylvania will not conjure up the image of “Count Dracula” but will elicit a desire for a greater knowledge of the troubled past and difficult present of this land and its peoples.

NOTES

¹ See for example map 3 in Magocsi, Paul R., ed., *Historical Atlas of East Central Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 9.

² The house that was his childhood home is in Sigishoara (to Hungarians, Segesvár), Transylvania. Vlad's parents lived in exile there at the time, a situation

that had often been the fate of Vlad's family. The building is a major tourist attraction today.

³ The actual process of impalement requires great skills on the part of the executioners, who were themselves punished, possibly impaled, if their victim died in the process, rather than after suffering unimaginable agonies over a period lasting sometimes days.

⁴ On Vlad's tempestuous life and times see the internet entry on him: http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Vlad_III_the_Impaler, accessed on 28 March 2009.

⁵ On the subject of Western stereotypes about East European history and historical figures see Piotr Wandycz, "Western Images and Stereotypes of Central and Eastern Europe," in *Vampires Unstaked: National Images, Stereotypes and Myths in East Central Europe* ed. André Gerrits and Nanci Adler (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1995), 5-23. Some of the other papers in this volume relate more directly to Vlad the Impaler and his image. See my review of this volume in *The International History Review*, vol. 18 (1996): 993f.