

A Deheroization of a Hero of National Freedom. A Case Study of Competing Regimes of Memory

IVÁN ZOLTÁN DÉNES

Budapest, Hungary. E-mail: denes.ivan.zoltan@gmail.com

This case study concerns the analysis of a symbolic national grievance: the interpretation of a one-sided, unempathetic deheroization of a champion of national liberty, its historiographical and memory political contexts, and its outcome, strengthening the dichotomous conflicting systems of memory.

1. Deheroization: who by whom?

Rákóczi in Exile 1715–1735 is a monograph by the Vienna archivist and Hungarian historian Gyula Szekfű (1883–1955) published by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest in 1913. It is a hastily executed and insufficiently matured piece of work, suffering from overgeneralization and lacking an adequate inductive basis. Szekfű starts with the death of Louis XIV, a supporter of Ferenc Rákóczi II, the subject of the monograph, and limits the examination of Rákóczi's emigration period to the years after the French king's death, when international power relations had already petrified. Yet to reduce the émigré prince to an 'exile' is a simplification that cannot be extended to Rákóczi's entire career without excessive generalization.¹ Gyula Szekfű became the most influential historian in the interwar years in Hungary whose antiliberal, conservative, and ethnoprotectionist master narrative written in the 1920s and 1930s has exerted a great influence to the present day. His career shows three great political metamorphoses between 1913 and 1948. Amongst other things he served as the first ambassador of Hungary in Moscow after 1945.

In his 1913 monograph, Gyula Szekfű passed judgement not only on the prince in exile, but on the historical role, significance and impact of Ferenc Rákóczi II (1676–1735) in general, while at the same responding to the conclusion of the Rákóczi biography of his older colleague Sándor Márki (1853–1925). Charles VI, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, ruling as Charles III as king of Hungary (1685–1740), exiled Ferenc Rákóczi in 1715; Gyula Szekfű in 1913 expelled him from the Hungarian symbolic national pantheon.² Rákóczi was a prince of the Holy Roman

Empire of the German Nation, landlord in Northeastern Hungary, the chief of the Hungarian estates and the prince of Transylvania, the leader of the revolt favouring constitutionalism against Habsburg-absolutism (1703–1711), the Hungarian counterpart to William of Orange, the Silent (1533–1584), the leading figure of the Dutch revolt against the Spanish Habsburgs.³ Szekfű's work passed up a golden opportunity to resolve the dichotomic reflexes in public thought. The ambivalence of the level of scholarship and the simplifying concept would have required empathic, thoughtful and well-grounded editorial vetting, and professional and objective critical reviewing in the interest of both the thinking and orientation of the broader public on the one hand and of the creative development of the historian who testified to his professional qualities here, on the other. But that is precisely what was missing.

2. The Context

2.1. *The Context of Historiography: The Canon of National Liberal Historiography*

In 1898, in the eighth volume of the millennial *History of the Hungarian Nation*, Henrik Marczali (1856–1940), some years later professor and doctoral dissertation director to Gyula Szekfű, in evaluating Rákóczi's historical role, significance and influence, summed up the canon of national liberal historiography on the issue as follows:

The greatest figure of feudal Hungary fell out. The man who – never forgetting his parentage, titles, dignity – risked all this for his country and dedicated himself wholly to the cause of national liberty. He owed his successes and great European role less to his talents – a sharp-eyed critic like Saint Simon expressed his astonishment that he had managed to trigger off a movement at all – than to his character. He was every inch Hungarian; despite his foreign education he was composed, serious, dignified and benevolent and this characteristic was mainly accountable for his power over his compatriots and explains their unswerving loyalty to him and the perpetuation of his tradition in the folklore. A great merit of his is championing the freedom of religion just as much as constitutional freedom, despite his being a devout catholic. For over a century his name was the paramount or only catchword of Hungarian independence. When in the more democratic climate of a new age the old wounds, old struggles were revived, his name, his song were encouragement to the fighters again, and his and his adherents' emigration was an example for the exiled. When, however, Rákóczi was being buried and mourned for, a part of the Hungarians took up arms in his name, although the ideas were now different from the ones he had fought for. It was not in vain to have the country resounding with the word and song of freedom for so many years because even the serfs heard it. The serfs who were oppressed not only by their squires but also by the burden of the new tax and the pillaging and brutalities of foreign troops.⁴

In his *History of Hungary* published in 1911 in the series *Library of Culture*, Marczali assessed the independence movement led by Rákóczi (1703–1711), his historical role, the Treaty of Szatmár (1711) and Rákóczi's emigration (1711–1735) as follows, presumably based on his university lectures:

After a lengthy deliberation the prince refused to consent to the peace agreement. His historical role lies in his disregard for his personal interest 'to the benefit of his nation

and his own eternal glory' and in choosing the bitter bread of emigration instead of giving up the idea of independence. He made a wise decision: he could not be a simple subject again. There was no room for his personality or his influence based on his immense estates under the petty conditions of a new Hungary. Emperor Joseph's mother Eleonor Magdalene, the crowned queen of Hungary corroborated the treaty on behalf of the heir to the throne, her son Charles, upon the advice of Eugene of Savoy, and Charles himself also consented to it from Spain. However sadly the revolt ended, its process displayed strength and its outcome was largely to the benefit of the Hungarians. It put an end to the Kollonics regime, stopped the influx of German settlers and Serbian occupants, and thus ensured that in the areas taken back from the Ottomans the Hungarians remained in majority. Though it failed to detach Hungary from Austria and could not hinder the unlawful influence of the Vienna government based on the given power relations, it earned Hungary certain peace and moreover, it won her a constitutional position from which she had the possibility to take back a great part of what she had lost.⁵

In Henrik Marczali's interpretation the revolt prevented assimilation and thereby altered Hungary's subordinated and weightless position within the Habsburg Empire. Rákóczi's departure into emigration was an unselfish, dignified and wise act, in his opinion. He formulated this opinion after giving an empathic and objective review of the exile, its possibilities and special characteristics, of the exiled person's intentions, deeds and dilemmas, embedded in the international context.

What Gyula Szekfű questioned in 1913 was not only the cult of Rákóczi by Kálmán Thaly (1839–1909), politician and amateur historian, and the confessional closing passages of Sándor Márki's Rákóczi biography, but also the Whig interpretation of Hungarian history, the pertinent canon of liberal historiography. To this canon he came somewhat closer in his *Der Staat Ungarn* of 1918, the volume on the eighteenth century of his *Hungarian History* of 1931 and *Hungarian History in Brief* of 1939, as well as in his essay *The National Character in Our History*. However, his concept of Rákóczi was only modified in details and remained unchanged in the essence. Notably, contrary to the national liberal canon, he insisted that one could not do justice to Rákóczi who rejected the Treaty of Szatmár and to Sándor Károlyi who concluded it, at the same time. These – in his view – mutually cancelled each other out. In this either–or alternative, he took the side of Sándor Károlyi in opposition to Rákóczi.

2.2. *The Context and Parallels of Memory Politics*

The very successful Hungarian writer Mór Jókai (1825–1904) kept a picture above his bed of the execution of the 13 Hungarian generals hanged in Arad after the fall of the 1848/49 war of liberation. And he prayed for Francis Joseph I, emperor of Austria and king of Hungary, every day: the person in whose name the executions were carried out in Arad and Pest, and who was the reason why Lajos Kossuth had to die in exile. By Jókai's time, everything breathed fusion of irreconcilable figures, events and values torn from their historical context and desiccated into abstract schemes, such as Ferenc Rákóczi and Sándor Károlyi, the 13 martyrs of Arad and Francis Joseph, independence and compromise with foreign rule. It was Francis Joseph who

did not let the election-winning opposition form a government until they had given up the most important points of their programme. The independence-party opposition that formed the government in 1906 offset their political failure with symbolic politics. Its main achievements were bringing home and reburying the ashes of Rákóczi, Thököly and Ilona Zrínyi, as well as the codification of the historical merits of Ferenc Rákóczi II sanctioned by this very ruler. At the 1910 elections the one-time opposition – now governing – parties were defeated and the former governing party was given the chance to form a government.⁶

Ferenc Rákóczi II, together with Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894), stood as a symbol of Hungarian independence and was put to eternal rest in the crypt of Kassa's St Elisabeth Cathedral as hero of the nation. Rákóczi and his comrades now being buried in Kassa (Košice), the town joined the group of the sacred shrines of national piety, remembrance and identity. It came to stand on a par with national symbols such as the Parliament, Buda Castle, St Michael square and the Matthias Corvinus statue in Kolozsvár (Cluj), Mohács, Arad, Világos (Şiria), Segesvár (Sighişoara), Nagycenk, the Kossuth-, Deák- and Batthyány-mausoleums and the graves of the army officers of the 1848–1849 war of liberation in Kerepesi cemetery and elsewhere. All these together constituted the national pantheon, similar to Rome's Vittorio Emanuele memorial ('the great type-writer'), the Paris Pantheon, Westminster Abbey and St Paul's in London, the mass graves of the Spanish civil war, Monticello, the Capitol of Washington (together with the Jefferson, Washington and Lincoln memorials nearby and the monument of the Vietnam veterans), הכותל המערב (the western wall of the Jerusalem temple, the wailing wall), יד ושם (Yad Vashem), the graves of those buried on Mount Herzl, Katyn, and Auschwitz, all of which are *lieux de memoire*, places of national memory, halls of national identity. For the Americans the terrorist attacks against the twin towers of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 did not only mean the death of thousands. It also meant that a symbol of the United States was attacked. The dead are mourned individually and collectively every year. By tracking down and killing the mastermind behind the terror attack, Osama bin Laden, the Americans avenged the dead along with the damage done to their national dignity.

The construction of memory is not always unidirectional. There are innumerable examples of parallel memory constructions, rival, conflicting and often mutually denunciatory memories and victimologies. Such are the places of commemoration of Francoists and Republicans, including the mass graves explored upon civilian demand in Spain. Tensions and conflicts between Estonian and Russian memories surfaced in the spring of 2007 when the Soviet heroes' monument, the bronze statue of the Soldier of the Red Army in the main square of Tallinn, was dissembled, moved to a cemetery and re-installed there, triggering off a series of disturbances in Tallinn.⁷ Contesting republican and royalist *lieux de memoire* in Paris range from the Place de la Concorde through the Jeanne d'Arc monument to the Madeleine. An annually repeated instance of symbolic civil war is the protestant demonstrators' procession through the Catholic neighbourhoods of Belfast celebrating a victory won more than 400 years earlier. An epitome of the construction of parallel memories is the division

of the Leuven University library in Belgium: the library and the catalogue cards of the first half of the alphabet remained in the Flemish university and the second half of the cards went over to the newly founded Walloon University. The transformation of Breslau into Wrocław was served by the population resettlements just as much as by the transfer of statues and institutions from Lwow-turned-Lviv. In the cemetery of Lviv/Lwow/Lemberg, Polish teenage soldiers and the warriors of Bandera's Ukrainian army interred in iron-cross shaped graves lie side by side, as if continuing the hostilities. Rigómező/Kosovo (Косово Поље, Fushë Kosova) has different meanings for the Serbs and the Albanians. Mohács is 'the great cemetery of national greatness' for the Hungarians and a place of victory for the Ottomans. There is rivalry between the parallel Romanian and Hungarian main squares of Kolozsvár (Cluj). In what might be conceived of as a symbolic civil war, the rival Hungarian post-communist policies of memory pit Trianon, the Shoa and the Gulag against the one another.⁸ The parallel constructions of memory, the conflicts of policies of identity are the symbolic civil wars escalating into political hysterias between communities of memory from Ireland to Greece, from Ukraine to Spain, each declaring themselves victims, with hurt self-respect and seeking reparation at any cost.

In Hungary, István Bocskai (1557–1606), Gábor Bethlen (1580–1629), Imre Thököly (1657–1705), Ferenc Rákóczi II and Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894) were and still are symbols of Hungarian independence and self-government.⁹ Rákóczi's historical significance was codified by the Hungarian parliament seven years before the release of *Rákóczi in Exile*. In Austria, the freedom fighters of Rákóczi's age, called *kuruc*, were *krucitürks* or Christian Turks, havoc-wreaking auxiliary troops of the Ottoman Empire and not only in the eyes of the ruling dynasty. In and around Tarpa, Hungary, as well as in several villages along the river Leitha, *Kuruc Tage* were (and are still) held to remember that in days of yore the *kuruc* fighters set fire to their villages and to commemorate the villagers' survival. In the ideology of Hungarian independence it was a hard nut to crack how to reconcile the exemplary anti-Habsburg struggles with loyalty to the Habsburg monarch. On the other hand, the cult of the freedom fights was a source of grave tensions in the thinking of the ruling party in the Dualist period (1867–1918).

What Gyula Szekfű's book rejected was not only Kálmán Thaly's dilettantism and Sándor Márki's devotion, but also the positive evaluation of freedom fights (all of them, not only the revolt led by Rákóczi), which had an unquestionable weight in the Hungarian national liberal master narrative, from the *History of the Hungarian Nation* published for the millennium to Henrik Marczali's *History of Hungary* released in 1911. He depreciated them and banished them from the realm of symbolic politics. In this way, he resolved – but resolved at *this* cost – the contradictions between the uncritical and false acclamations for, and the flatly negative critiques against, the freedom fights. That, in turn, brought him closer to the anti-*kuruc* pamphlets and aulic historiography of earlier times, and to the position of diversely motivated advocates of Austrian centralization and anti-nationalist modernization including, among others, the circle of Franz Ferdinand (planning to federalize the

Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy). He certainly did not write his book upon commission from anyone. He wrote it by his own will and initiative, somewhat rashly. The political situation was such that some people sympathized with his book and some rejected it as unacceptable, particularly because its reception transgressed the boundaries of professional criticism. And it did transgress them, which made it extremely hard or almost impossible to elicit objective, convincing and authentic professional reviewing, although it would have been vitally important for the author.

3. Aftermath: Metamorphoses of the Rákóczi image (1913–1940)

Gyula Szekfű interpreted the historical role, significance and influence of Rákóczi in 1913, 1916, 1918, 1931, 1939 and 1940. The various interpretations display changing stresses and characteristics, and find themselves in different contexts, but their essence, their core is identical.¹⁰

In 1913, in *Rákóczi in Exile*, Szekfű discussed the prince in emigration, his efforts, his guiding motives and personality. He claimed that in the emigration (and obviously earlier, too) Rákóczi was preoccupied with the revival of Transylvania separated from Hungary. Marked off from Hungary, after the war that liberated the region from the Turks, Transylvania was in opposition to a territorially and politically re-unified Hungary. The central motive of Rákóczi's efforts being the restoration of independent Transylvania, this drive rendered the role of the émigré politician light-minded, weightless, anachronistic and harmful. That was why he did not – and could not – have any influence or import. Endowing him with the nimbus of national ideal was founded on a misunderstanding. A historic personage, whose ambition was to disrupt the unity of a country, could not symbolize in his time or later a unified and independent Hungary. This was an idealization that the promoters of his cult, first of all Kálmán Thaly, tried to disseminate but that did not withstand the critical test of the science of history.¹¹

In 1916, Szekfű opined that the result of the revolt was the peace of Szatmár, which put an end to the tragic division of the country. With that, the justification for an independent Transylvania ceased irrevocably and the protection of national independence was vested in new forces. Since in emigration Rákóczi tried to resuscitate the past, the final conclusion of *Rákóczi in Exile* was right and valid. Rákóczi's ideal was not the national ideal but a transitory and anachronistic form of it.¹²

According to his concept of Rákóczi in *Der Staat Ungarn* of 1918 (and its Hungarian translation, the *Biography of the Hungarian State*), all Hungary was united under Rákóczi's flag against the denationalizing intentions of the Vienna court. Louis XIV capitalized on this. He misled Rákóczi by making him believe that they were allies, whereas he never regarded him as a partner. The Szatmár Treaty restored the feudal constitution and the hereditary right of the Habsburg house. Rákóczi, however, insisted on the principality of Transylvania as the most powerful guarantee of the constitution in the seventeenth century, and that was why he went into exile.¹³

In the *Hungarian History* of 1931 Szekfű interpreted and described the uprising led by Rákóczi as a struggle of the estates with some result before the battle of Höchstädt

in 1704, that is to say, as long as the Austrian forces were engaged abroad. After that, the only question was the cost of the representatives of the revolt coming to an agreement with the delegates of the Habsburg ruler. The peace treaty signed at Szatmár was less favourable than what the envoys of the emperor had offered earlier, in 1704 and 1706, which were foiled by Rákóczi's intransigence.¹⁴

In the abridged and revised version of *Hungarian History* (1939, rewritten for the English and French translations), Szekfű took the position that the rebellion was a war of liberation that prevented the imposition of foreign absolutism upon the country. The experience of resistance was implanted upon Habsburg memory and therefore the Hungarian statesmen who were cooperative with Austria could ensure constitutional relations and peaceful creative work in Hungary in the eighteenth century.¹⁵

Szekfű's essay *The Hungarian Character in Our History* claims that out of the three qualities that fundamentally determine the Hungarian character – love of freedom, valiance, and shrewd politicizing (political wisdom) – Rákóczi represented the love of liberty and Sándor Károlyi stood for political realism.¹⁶

In the second half of the academic year 1939/40 Gyula Szekfű delivered a weekly series of three-hour lectures with the title *The Questions of the Rákóczi Age*, and he held several-term seminars on the questions of eighteenth-century Hungarian history at the university.¹⁷

When the Károlyi family commissioned Szekfű to write the biography of Sándor Károlyi, he collected relevant material for nearly a decade, starting in the 1930s, but eventually he only wrote two chapters of *Count Sándor Károlyi's Life and Times*, which was originally planned for two volumes.¹⁸ One of the extant chapters is an introduction to family history. The other was his academic inaugural address on 22 April 1940, entitled *Bercsényi and Károlyi Before the Treaty of Szatmár*. Here, Szekfű compared the option of the Szatmár peace with the threat of total and unconditional Habsburg occupation. Rákóczi and Bercsényi kept hindering the peace from abroad, although the *kuruc* army had almost wholly fallen apart, making a final military catastrophe unavoidable. To fend it off – through a compromise agreement – was the task taken on himself by Sándor Károlyi.¹⁹

Szekfű published his study *The Old Kossuth* in 1952. He judged the politics of Kossuth just as untimely and unrealistic as he had judged Rákóczi's earlier.²⁰ However, the figure of old Kossuth – unlike that of Rákóczi in 1913 – is described with great empathy and compassion. Perhaps Szekfű projected his own old-age human frailties upon his subject.

Gyula Szekfű's concept of Rákóczi changed considerably from 1913 to 1940: from complete rejection he arrived at the recognition of the war of liberation on the one hand, and at conceiving of Rákóczi as a paragon of morality, on the other. However, despite the shifts in emphases, themes and evaluation as well as changes in wording, the constant element of his Rákóczi interpretation remained unchanged: Rákóczi's efforts were anachronistic, unfounded and unrealistic.

The constant core of his changing image of Rákóczi was closely tied up with the scandal caused by his *Rákóczi in Exile*. During his defence he worked out a self-image and created a historiographic and historical construction which had a decisive impact

on his whole subsequent work. The scandal was a key experience for him that he never managed to elaborate and from which he inferred that he was a victim and the critical reviews of his work were attacks. Upon that inference he built a historiographic construction and laid his interpretations of Hungarian history. Seemingly, he resolved in them the political conflict between opposite systems of memory, but he did so at the cost of branding and precluding any other possible alternative interpretations.

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- (Athenaeum Irodalmi és Nyomdai Részvénytársulat, Budapest, A Műveltség Könyvtára), pp. 545–553.
15. G. Szekfű (2002) *Rövid magyar történet 1606–1939*. S. a. r. szerk. Soós István és Potó János (Budapest: Osiris), pp. 110–126.
 16. G. Szekfű (1939) A magyar jellem történetünkben. In: *Szekfű Gyula, szerk, 1939*. 489–556, p. 543.
 17. Tanrendek [university calendars]. EKL (*Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Egyetemi Könyvtár, Levéltár*, Budapest); A Rákóczi-kor kérdései [The Questions of the Rákóczi Age]; A 18. század problémái [The problems of the 18th century]. EKK (*Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Egyetemi Könyvtár, Kézirattár*, Budapest) G 629, 630. Cf. E. Mályusz (1935) A Rákóczi-kor társadalma. In: *Lukinich Imre, szerk, 1934/1935*. II. 23–68.
 18. MTAKK (*Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Könyvtára, Kézirattár*, Budapest) Ms 10204/1-4; J. Z. Nagy (1976) Szekfű Gyula monográfiaterve Károlyi Sándorról. In: M. Molnár Mátyás, szerk, *A Rákóczi-szabadságharc vitás kérdései. Tudományos emlékülés*, 1976. január 29–30. Tudományos Ismeretterjesztő Társulat Szabolcs-Szatmár Megyei Szervezete, Vaja–Nyíregyháza, 71–77; I. Czigány (1990) Szekfű Gyula: Bercsényi és Károlyi a szatmári béke előtt. Egy kiadatlan akadémiai székfoglaló. *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, 3, pp. 140–149.
 19. MTAKK (*Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Könyvtára, Kézirattár*, Budapest) Ms 10204/2. In print: G. Szekfű (2001), pp. 77–86.
 20. G. Szekfű (1952) Az öreg Kossuth, 1867–1894. In: *I. Tóth Zoltán szerk, 1952*. II. 341–433.

About the Author

Iván Zoltán Dénes is a historian of ideas, an independent scholar and tutor, initiating, among other things, research on liberal nationalisms (1988–2005) and on historical traumas and trauma management in Europe (2009–). He has authored 12 books, including seven monographs, edited three series of books (34 volumes) and 14 books besides these series. He served as researcher at the Institute of Philosophy, Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1973–1997) and distinguished scholar, professor, and Chair of Political Science at the University of Debrecen (1997–2011). He founded the István Bibó Center for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences in Budapest (1996) and served as its first Chair (1996–2012). He was awarded scholarships by the British Academy, the Fulbright Association, the International Exchange of Scholars, and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, and held visiting fellowships and lectureships at among others London, Cambridge, Paris X, Bologna, Amsterdam, Rome, Lisbon, Tel Aviv, Stanford, Johns Hopkins and Harvard. His most recent books in English include: *Liberty and the Search for Identity. Liberal Nationalisms and the Legacy of Empires* (editor and contributor, Central European University Press, Budapest/New York: 2006); *Conservative Ideology in the Making* (Budapest/New York: Central European University Press, 2009); *The Art of Peacemaking. Political Essays by István Bibó* (ed, intr.) (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT; London: 2015). He has published various essays in the *European Review*. He is a member of the Academia Europaea (1995–).