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Abstract: After the resignation of Charles IV, a particular public law situation, the so-called "kingdom without a king," came about in interwar Hungary, which persisted through the whole period. The "king question" that developed around taking the vacant throne aroused a keen interest not only in internal politics, but also abroad. The study gives a short account about who could emerge as a possible Hungarian king and why they could do so, and how the issue was presented to the international public. The author analyses the rumours, both in the press and in diplomatic documents, which are rather under-exploited as sources in historical research. The article first outlines the general socio-political situation in post-Great War Hungary and then shows how the problem of the "king question" divided Hungarian public life into several camps. It then, without claiming completeness, examines the motivations and realities of combinations for some of the individuals who most frequently appeared as candidates for king in the various rumours. In terms of the timing of the rumours, the study highlights the domestic and international events and circumstances in which interest in the issue of Hungary's "kingless kingdom" was heightened in public discourse, and how such combinations influenced the image of contemporary Hungary. It also sheds light on the reasons that have prevented the kingdom issue from being settled. Finally, the author attempts to outline what the "ideal" new Hungarian king, acceptable both abroad and at home, should have been like under the given circumstances.

Keywords: Interwar Hungary, kingdom without a king, legitimism, "free king-electors," pretenders and candidates to the throne

The form of state and the head of state had been a particular issue throughout the entire interwar history of the Kingdom of Hungary. Although there were also occasions in the preceding centuries when there was no legally crowned monarch on the throne of Hungary, the kingless state had never lasted for such a long period, i.e. for more than twenty-five years. This peculiar interregnum came about and existed in the time of modernisation when the development of the press increased its readership and widened the demand for news. The almost thousand-year history and certain exotic features of the Hungarian "kingdom without a king" generated a particular reputation in Western Europe and overseas, while, at the same time, many rumours and gossip about who would ascend the Hungarian throne further increased interest in the country. In principle, nothing is surprising concerning the latter interest since the elite of the day, especially aristocrats and members of ruling dynasties, have always been a target of such rumours.

A further peculiarity of the Hungarian "kingdom without a king" was that it provided a recurrent topic of discourse in the era of the modernisation of information services in such a way that it was never directed exclusively towards one person, but rather delivered various alternatives and "combinations," i.e. supplied a whole series of rumours. In this series of rumours, the group of persons mentioned as possible kings constitute a separate category since, so far, in our survey, we have found a total of twenty-eight [!] persons in various sources—contemporary press,

diplomatic documents, diaries—who were mentioned at least once during the period as a possible Hungarian king. Already this number alone is remarkable, but even more so is the diversity of the nationalities of the candidates: seven Habsburg archdukes—including Charles IV and his son Otto, who would have been in line to be the legal heirs to the throne—five Hungarian nobles and aristocrats, five English, three Italian, two German, one Belgian, and a further five from one of the Balkan countries—two contemporary Romanian kings, one Serbian, one Croatian monarch, and one Bulgarian prince. Based on this list, it is obvious to ask what could have motivated these candidates, or their nominators, to try to take the vacant Hungarian throne.

Some Methodological Considerations

Due to the many candidates and their diverse motivations, answering this simple question would go far beyond the allowable scope of this paper. For this reason, here and now—without the intention of a comprehensive press review—we will attempt to illustrate by examples how some of the international, mainly British and American, press presented the Hungarian "king question," and refer to certain opinions from international diplomatic circles to establish a set of criteria in fulfilment which would have enabled a person eligible to bear the crown of St. Stephen. Of course, such a study cannot aim to investigate the background of all the candidates and compare their chances. Instead, it focuses on capturing some of the main issues related to the Hungarian "kingdom without a king" that have been of concern to the international press, diplomatic relations, and public opinion. Among these, we first examine when and why the fate of the Hungarian throne generated greater international interest and what events might have triggered the more frequent appearance of rumours and combinations. The study also seeks to answer whether particular issues of that status affected Hungary's international image and, if so, how.

The rumours or gossip mentioned in the introduction constitute a type of source that many historians often ignore or underestimate and consider too hypothetical. But rumours can play an important role in diplomatic work—as Molly M. Wood has shown, for example, in the case of the US State Department[1]—and can even have a decisive influence on the fate of entire states, as Mark Cornwall has convincingly demonstrated in the case of Austria-Hungary in the "Great War."[2] Through rumours, we can examine not primarily concrete "facts," events, and consequences with a fact-finding approach of causality, but rather the alternatives to a given situation—the Hungarian "kingdom without a king," in our case—that appeared in the press and public discourse. Although none of the alternatives presented here could be realised, not least because the leaders of Hungarian political life did not seek to end the kingless state (for several reasons), it is possible to outline why none of the "candidates" was suitable to fill the vacant throne. This approach can be a useful way of showing the complexity, intricacy, and even the contradictory features of the circumstances of the time. That is why rumours are an exciting possibility in such cases, since the source value of speculations and combinations is not their reflection of "reality" and facticity, but the fact that they present alternative scenarios that reflect certain peculiarities of the thinking of the time. That is precisely the reason why, of the twenty-eight persons identified so far, this study presents only those candidates in a shorter or longer context, who not only allow for conclusions

[1] Molly M. Wood, "Diplomacy and Gossip: Information Gathering in the US Foreign Service, 1900–1940," in *When Private Talk Goes Public. Gossip in American History*, ed. Kathleen A. Feeley and Jennifer Frost (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 139–159.

[2] Mark Cornwall, "News, Rumour and the Control of Information in Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918," *History* 77, no. 249 (1992): 50–64.

about the general situation—given that their names often appeared in public discourse as possible Hungarian kings as well—but also shed light on the background and motivations of the rumours that Charles IV of Habsburg and his son Otto were the most eligible candidates for the Hungarian throne. Their careers, however, have been extensively processed by the literature; so, here and now, though we frequently mention their names, they receive less space in this work.

This study examines the candidates and the rumours about them based mainly on foreign sources—newspapers, diplomatic documents, and diaries. From such sources, it is clear that the combinations related to the succession to the Hungarian royal throne constituted a permanent topic of discussion not only in the press but also in diplomatic circles, though with varying intensity, but essentially from 1919 until the end of World War II. This approach may also shed light on hitherto little-known correlations, in particular by listing and surveying different "candidates," because the vast majority of the literature to date, mainly in Hungarian, deals with the two return attempts to the throne[3] of the legitimate monarch Charles IV and the activity of political circles—the so-called "legitimists"—supporting the claim to the throne of Archduke Otto,[4] or the legal-historical aspects of the "kingdom without a king." There are only a few works published that also name other candidates for the throne, but none of these attempt to give an overall view about a larger group of candidates for the throne and few of them draw information from the international press, with almost unlimited sources.[5] However, the current study is not concerned with presenting a solution for the quarter-century-old Hungarian "king question," but with offering instead a general presentation of the whole situation generated by the "kingless kingdom."

General Socio-Political Context in Interwar Hungary

After fifty-three months of brutal fighting and millions of senseless deaths, the Armistice Agreement signed on 11 November 1918 ended the Great War in Europe. It also meant that three powers with a long history—the Ottoman Empire, the German Empire, and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy—disappeared permanently from the map of Europe. The dualist Austria-Hungary, created by the Compromise of 1867, fell to pieces. That would have been the case even regardless of the known outcome of the war, as perhaps no other place in the world would have

[3] Miklós Zeidler, "Charles IV's Attempted Returns to the Hungarian Throne," in *Karl I. (IV.), der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Donaumonarchie*, ed. Andreas Gottsmann (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), 269–284; Ignác Romsics, *István Bethlen: A Great Conservative Statesman of Hungary, 1874-1946* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 139–140, 153–167; Balázs Ablonczy, *Pál Teleki (1879-1941). The Life of a Controversial Hungarian Politician* (New York: Center for Hungarian Studies and Publications, Inc., Columbia University Press, 2006), 70–90. For Charles and his post-war perception, see Christopher Brennan, "Sinner, Saint – or Cipher? The Austrian Republic and the Death of Emperor Karl I," in *Embers of Empire. Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918*, ed. Paul Miller and Claire Morelon (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2019), 229–257.

[4] Márton Békés, "A legitimisták és a legitimizmus," in *A magyar jobboldali hagyomány*, 1900-1948, ed. Ignác Romsics (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2009), 214–242; József Kardos, *A Szent Korona-tan és a legitimizmus* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 2012), 63–95; Róbert Fiziker, "'A legközelebbi ünnepnapra' várva. Királykérdés Magyarországon és Ausztriában, 1922-1938," *Pro Publico Bono* 6 (2018): 58–75; Róbert Fiziker, "Egy fiókban maradt alternatíva. Királykérdés a Külügyminisztériumi Levéltár fennmaradt irataiban (1922-1938)," *Századok* 155, no. 5 (2021): 959–978.

[5] Andrea Bern, "Connaught hercege és Szent István koronája: Az angol szabadkőműves nagymester, mint magyar királyjelölt," *Napi Történelmi Forrás* (blog), 2017, accessed 12 May 2022, https://ntf.hu/index.php/2017/12/08/connaught-hercege-es-szent-istvan-koronaja-az-angol-szabadkomuves-nagymester-mint-magyar-kiralyjelolt/; Andrea Bern, "A frankhamisítás és a magyar királykérdés 1925/1926," *Napi Történelmi Forrás* (blog), 2017, accessed 12 May 2022, http://ntf.hu/index.php/2017/12/23/a-frankhamisitas-es-a-magyar-kiralykerdes-19251926/.

given a home to so many nationalities of different cultures, languages, and levels of development as Central Europe. These nationalities, eager for autonomy, formed their national councils first, then their governments later on, which declared their secession from the monarchy in the autumn of 1918. In the process of disintegration, the declarations—including the so-called Eckartsau Statement—of Charles of Habsburg-Lorraine, Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary, proved to be decisive. According to these documents of November 1918, Charles withdrew from the management of state affairs, leaving the peoples of his empire to independently decide what form of state they wanted for their new countries. The document also allowed the Kingdom of Hungary to regain its independence lost in the sixteenth century and decide its future alone.

The ruler's statement of Eckartsau and the two Hungarian revolutions resulted in a temporary break in the history of the almost thousand-year-old Kingdom of Hungary. Namely, during a period shorter than ten months, two state forms followed each other in quick succession that had been unknown to the Hungarian society. Already shortly before the ruler's statement, the so-called "Aster Revolution" gained a victory in Hungary, and a brand-new state form—based on bourgeois-democratic principles, a "people's republic" with the term used at that time—was established. Partly because of international circumstances and internal turmoil, Mihály Károlyi's government proved unable to cope with the situation and consequently became compelled to hand over power to the Communists led by Béla Kun, who proclaimed the Soviet Republic. Due to the fundamental establishment of these systems, the question of the head of state did not generate political conflict. Nevertheless, the victorious powers of the Great War refused to recognise the legitimacy of these new governments.

However, the so-called "counterrevolutionary" events of 1919 and 1920, not opposed even by the Entente, brought about another regime change. On 1 March 1920 the National Assembly declared the restoration of the kingdom and, by appointing a temporary regent, given the international circumstances and the disordered domestic political situation, found a specific solution to the issue of filling the position of head of state. Politically Regent Miklós Horthy had been the substitute for the king, but more commonly he was called "Governor" in the public discourse. This solution put a person in the head of state's position whom also the victorious powers accepted. So, from now on Hungary could be represented by a legitimate government in the Paris peace negotiations that ended the Great War. In 1921 the exiled King Charles IV attempted to return to Hungary on two occasions, but, after these failed, the National Assembly declared the dethronement, leaving the royal throne permanently vacant.[6]

This had two significant consequences. The first was that this situation divided the actors in Hungarian domestic politics into two decisive camps, which continued to engage in fierce public debates throughout the entire interwar period. One side included the legitimists supporting Charles IV's claim to the throne and then that of his son Otto after Charles' death. The other side consisted of considerably socially mixed groups that rejected both Charles and Otto and had a great variety of potential candidates.[7] We name the latter group "free king-electors" in what follows. From 1919 onwards—i.e. from the time well before the dethronement—another significant consequence

[6] For Miklós Horthy's carrier and the contemporary constitutional aspects, see Thomas Sakmyster, *Admiral on Horseback. Miklós Horthy, 1918-1944* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 1–57; Andrej Tóth, "Survey of Important Internal Moments of the Process of Birth of the Specific Political System of Interwar Hungary (1919-1922)," *West Bohemian Historical Review* 1, no. 2 (2011): 102–135; István Szabó, "Law I of 1920 and the Historical Constitution," in *A History of the Hungarian Constitution. Law, Government and Political Culture in Central Europe*, ed. Francis Hörcher and Thomas Lorman (New York and London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 159–182.
[7] Zeidler, "Charles IV's Attempted Returns," 271–273.

included those frequently returning speculations and rumours of the time, namely, who would ascend to the throne of the Kingdom of Hungary after the Soviet Republic.

The fact that a kingdom without a crowned ruler existed in the heart of contemporary Europe was a permanent topic of interest for both the domestic and foreign press, and a subject of earnest attention in diplomatic circles of many countries on the continent. But the issue of possessing the Hungarian throne did not escape the attention of the European aristocracy either. That was important even if the Hungarian crown, which had once seen better days, was not necessarily the most attractive perspective for any dynasty to rule in that era. In late January 1932, one of Britain's leading daily newspapers, *The Times*, described the Hungarian situation as follows:

> It seems that Hungarians are loyal to the monarchial idea without having any idea about a particular monarch. The question of the vacant Throne has no immediate importance. … A Habsburg restoration would not be a national, but an international question, and in view of the attitude of other countries could only take place in circumstances different from those obtaining in Europe today.[8]

The journalist's statement is correct, but an examination of the contemporary sources has revealed that the controversial Hungarian "kingdom without a king" had given rise to several surprising ideas. By saying that the solution to the king's issue was not timely, the official Hungarian government policy tried to forestall the rumours and combinations aimed at filling the throne. With this attitude, the government wanted to have understood that they would not get involved in reckless plans, not even if prime ministers, ambitious diplomats, and politicians hatching great plans "behind the scenes" had never let the question "get cool" throughout the entire period. The government's position is, however, well reflected in the recollection of Salvatore Contarini, Italian State Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, of his conversation with Prime Minister Count István Bethlen in 1923:

> the affair is not topical today, but [Bethlen] as a monarchist, he places emphasis on two aspects of the issue: first that Hungary become truly a kingdom, second, that Hungary's independence be preserved, because if she shared a ruler with Austria, the king of Hungary would once again reside in Vienna.

However, the Hungarian Prime Minister considered that:

> it would be hard to imagine anyone but a Habsburg because a non-Habsburg would find himself confronting not only the legitimists but also that segment of Hungarian society which insists on traditions; he would be subject to strong criticism on the part of the aristocracy.[9]

By the 1930s, during the premiership of a former leader of the "free king-electors," Gyula Gömbös, the official governmental position became even more rigid regarding the rejection of the Habsburgs. According to a German diplomatic document dating from the summer of 1933,

[8] "The Hungarian Scene," *The Times*, 26 January 1932, 13–14.
[9] Cited by Romsics, *István Bethlen*, 166.

for Adolf Hitler, who was appointed chancellor shortly before, Gömbös' statement that Hungary did not desire the restoration of the Habsburgs was especially gratifying. He declared:

> The question of the King of Hungary was a strictly Hungarian affair and would always be treated by Hungary as such. A Restoration of the Hapsburg monarchy in Hungary and simultaneously in Austria was out of the question.[10]

In addition, Regent Horthy made similar statements in different diplomatic circles on several occasions.[11] These clear positions also meant that the coronation of Otto Habsburg became impossible.

People Had Been Divided by the Issue of the New King

Nevertheless, completely ignoring the Habsburgs was not so easy. In the thousand-year history of the Kingdom of Hungary, the crown had been held by several dynasties. After the foundation of the state and with the accession of István I (St. Stephen) to the throne started a 300-year reign of kings from the Árpád House, followed by the so-called "mixed house kings" from 1301. At this time, the Hungarian Holy Crown was possessed by several European—the Angevins (Anjous), Luxemburgs, Jagiellons, Habsburgs—and Hungarian—Hunyadi and Szapolyai—families right up to the time of the Ottoman invasion in 1526, when, after the death of King Louis II in the battle of Mohács, some of the Hungarian decision-makers offered it to the House of Habsburg. The reign of this dynasty started with the accession of Ferdinand I to the throne and, despite numerous Austro-Hungarian conflicts, it lasted for nearly 400 years. In 1918 and afterwards, it was the very reason why many people—despite the Eckartsau Statement—considered the Habsburg family to be the rightful holder of the Hungarian crown and hoped that this family would also preserve the territorial unity of historical Hungary. This Habsburg-friendly layer of society included the vast majority of the Hungarian aristocracy and the leadership of the Catholic Church. Until his sudden death in 1922, they consistently supported Charles IV and his son Otto later on. The leader of this group—the legitimists,[12] as mentioned above—was Count Albert Apponyi, who also led the Hungarian delegation at the negotiations of the Trianon Peace Treaty.[13]

However, to have the ruler they considered legitimate access the throne was hindered by several factors. Among these, the international resistance proved to be insurmountable. The neighbouring Little Entente countries—Romania, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia—with some other

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[10] "Memorandum by the Director of Department II," Berlin, 22 June 1933, in *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945. Series C (1933-1937), Volume I: The Third Reich: First Phase. January 30-October 14, 1933* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1957), 589.

[11] See for example "Unsigned Memorandum," Berlin, 25 September 1936, in *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945. Series C (1933-1937), Volume V: The Third Reich: First Phase. March 5-October 31, 1936* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1966), 1006–1007.

[12] On the political mentality and activities of the contemporary Hungarian aristocracy, see Ignác Romsics, "The Hungarian Aristocracy and Its Politics," in *European Aristocracies and the Radical Right 1918–1939*, ed. Karina Urbach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 187–200; Béla Bodó, "Hungarian Aristocracy and the White Terror," *Journal of Contemporary History* 45, no. 4 (2010): 703–724; Levente Püski, "The Long Farewell. Aristocracy in Hungary in the 20th Century," *The Hungarian Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (2008): 115–132.

[13] József Kardos, "Fordulat a legitimista törekvésekben. Gróf Apponyi Albert legitimizmusa," in *Történelem, régió, politika*, ed. Pál Koudela, Irén Simándi (Székesfehérvár: Kodolányi János Egyetem – Alba Civitas Történeti Alapítvány, 2020), 65–72. Apponyi's and the legitimists' position was not unknown to the contemporary international public opinion. See for example "The Hungarian Monarchists. Claimants to the Throne," *The Times*, 8 December 1925, 15; "Predicts Young Hapsburg will Rule Hungary," *Chicago Tribune*, 29 September 1925, 15.

European powers, especially France—frequently declared that they would not tolerate the return of the Habsburgs and were even ready to take military actions against them. They most strongly emphasised this latter position mainly on the occasion of the two return attempts of Charles IV in 1921.[14] The return attempts did not even gain Italy's approval, as reflected in the telegram of 14 December 1920 sent by Albert Nemes, Hungary's ambassador to Rome, to Prime Minister Pál Teleki about his discussion with an Italian diplomat Mario Lago. Among other things, he wrote:

> As far as the restoration of a Habsburg to the Hungarian throne is concerned, Signor Lago said that he knows Count Sforza's [the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Italy] attitude sufficiently well to be able to assure me that Sforza would take, in view of Italian public opinion, a decisive stand against the return of King Charles. This would be regarded as the first step toward the re-establishment of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The same position would be taken, though perhaps less decisively, in case another member of the Habsburg dynasty were elected as King of Hungary. But, according to Lago, Count Sforza has no objection to the monarchical form of government in Hungary.

This shows the Hungarian "king question" had become, to a certain extent, rather a problem that threatened European peace, especially in the case of Habsburg restoration.[15]

However, it is worth noting that there were also supporters, not only opponents, regarding the return of Habsburgs to European politics. Queen Zita, Charles IV's widow, tried to leave no stone unturned to have her son Otto crowned and visited European dynasties and powers one after the other throughout the period.[16] These actions of the dowager queen always generated keen interest from the international press and public, while rumours related to the possible marriage of Otto attracted special attention.[17] As has been demonstrated previously, by the middle of the 1930s, besides the Little Entente countries, Nazi Germany was already also against the Habsburg restoration in Hungary, i.e. the Hungarian political circles had to take even this fact into account.[18]

In addition to the international circumstances, the internal conditions were also not conducive to the realisation of legitimist goals. On the one hand, although the Hungarian aristocracy was considered the main base and leaders of the legitimist movement and still

[14] The contemporary newspapers also followed Charles' attempts to return to power with great interest. See for example "Another Hapsburg Putsch," *The Times*, 24 October 1921, 11.

[15] "The Representative of the Hungarian Government in Rome, Count Nemes, to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Count Teleki," Rome, 14 December 1920, in *Papers and Documents Relating to the Foreign Relations of Hungary*, Volume I, ed. Dezső Ujváry (Budapest: Hungarian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 1939), 816–817. To further support this it seems enough to recall only a few headlines. See e.g. "Europe Worried Who will be New King of Hungary," *Chicago Tribune*, 21 October 1928, 4; "Little Entente and Hungary. Fears of Hapsburg Restoration," *The Times*, 25 June 1930, 15; "Vacant Throne of Hungary Stirs Intrigues Threatening Balkans," *New Britain Daily Herald*, 11 July 1930, 18.

[16] For Zita's activity, see Gordon Brook-Shepherd, *Uncrowned Emperor. The Life and Times of Otto von Habsburg* (London and New York: Hambledon & London, 2004), 79–93.

[17] For example, "Hapsburg Coup Seen as Regent Prepares to Yield Up Hungary," *New York Evening Post*, 16 December 1924, 13; "Royalists to Discuss Mating of King Otto," *The New York Times*, 17 June 1931, 37; "Zita Declares She'll Fight to Make Son King," *Chicago Tribune*, 4 June 1922, 3; Emil Lengyel, "Ex-Empress Zita's Plans to Restore Habsburg Monarchy," *Current History* 28, no. 3 (1928): 386–389; John Gunther, "Hapsburgs Again?," *Foreign Affairs* 12, no. 4 (1934): 579–591.

[18] "Erdmannsdorff budapesti követ levele Weizsäcker külügyminisztériumi osztályvezetőhöz," Budapest, 1 December 1937, in *A Wilhelmstrasse és Magyarország. Német diplomáciai iratok Magyarországról 1933–1944*, ed. György Ránki, Ervin Pamlényi, Loránt Tilkovszky, and Gyula Juhász (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1968), 247.

possessed considerable material wealth, it had lost much of its former social prestige.[19] Another factor was that the ruling elite of interwar regimes was in opposition to legitimists. Though the legitimist parties and organisations were not banned, the authorities regularly and strictly controlled them, citing them as being dangerous to the existing political order.

Although the other political camp, the "free king-electors," was a much larger group, it was by no means as consistent as the supporters of Charles IV and Otto. The reason for this could be that this much more pliable and heterogeneous group included individuals confronting and competing with one another who did not have a coherent set of arguments and goals like the legitimists. They agreed on two things only, one of which was that the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy annulled the so-called Pragmatica Sanctio, adopted in 1722 and extended in 1723.[20] Consequently, as free king-electors argued, the right to elect the king reverted to the Hungarian nation, which, when the time came, would be free to choose a new ruler. The other common aspect was that the new king should be someone who could use his connections and authority to help Hungary achieve her most important foreign policy goals and create internal political stability with economic prosperity.[21] While legitimists consistently favoured their candidates, there was no consensus among the "free king-electors" as to whom they could accept as an ideal new king. They mentioned several names in their circles as possible candidates, most often related to a foreign dynasty. Of course, there were also groups against the restoration of the kingdom (republicans, social democrats, communists), but these groups, due to the negative experiences of the earlier two revolutions, were mainly marginalised in political life by the counterrevolutionary wave and, consequently, carried little weight during almost the entire interwar period.

A Popular Topic in the Press and Public Discourse

In March 1920 *Le Monde Illustré*, one of France's leading weekly papers, listed the candidates for the Hungarian crown in an illustrated half-page article. According to this source, sixteen [!] persons appeared altogether as possible Hungarian rulers during the short time between the withdrawal of Charles IV and the beginning of 1920. There were three Habsburg archdukes—including Charles IV—five Hungarians, two English and two Italians, then one each of the German, Bulgarian, Danish and Saxe-Coburg aristocrats or nobles.[22] The article is a curiosity, as no other one has been found yet in the contemporary international press setting up such a comprehensive list of candidates for the Hungarian throne—especially if we also take the historically short time into account. The other reason for missing another similar review could be that foreign journalists could have found it difficult to make their way around Hungarian affairs, and, consequently, could get only limited information. However, this still did not prevent journalists of various countries from analysing and speculating on the possible future of the Hungarian "kingdom without a king." For example, it is worth referring again to Britain's leading daily newspaper, *The Times*, which, in the 1920s and 1930s, often published articles and reports with such headlines as "The Throne of

[19] See in detail Levente Püski, "Between Unity and Division. The Aristocracy in the Legislature of the Horthy Era," *Annales Historici Presovienses* 15, no. 1 (2015): 88–102.

[20] An imperial decree (Pragmatic Sanction) with the force of law. It defined, among others, that Austrian provinces of the Habsburg Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary must be governed "indivisibly and inseparably." However, the peace settlement after the Great War annulled this principle.

[21] For an overview of interwar Hungary's foreign policy, see Pál Pritz, "Hungarian Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period," *Hungarian Studies* 17, 1 (2003): 13–32.

[22] "Les Prétendants au Trone de Hongrie," *Le Monde Illustré*, 6 March 1920, 139.

Hungary" or "The Hungarian Throne," with some topics of interest in subheads.[23] Moreover, in 1924, *The Times* published a series of articles entitled "A Bid for a Throne,"[24] based on the memoirs of Baron Aladár Boroviczény,[25] the last head of Charles IV's cabinet office. These articles also described the two return attempts of 1921 to the throne from the view of the former ruler.

Of course, not only the sensationalist newspapers were preoccupied with the problem of the "vacant throne" and the "aspirations" associated with it, but neither had official political nor diplomatic circles been left without interest. That is clearly shown, for example, by the conversation of the already quoted diplomat Count Nemes with the Italian Foreign Minister Count Sforza, regarding which he sent the following information to Prime Minister Teleki in early January 1921:

> In his [Sforza's] opinion the desire to re-establish the former monarchy was so strong a tradition of the Habsburg family that renunciation thereof could not be expected from any Habsburg. I did not discuss this point but called his attention to the dangers of a civil war which might result if Hungary were forced to elect a Hungarian to the throne, excluding the Habsburgs. I also pointed out that the invitation of a foreign prince to the Hungarian throne is inconceivable. My arguments obviously had some effect on Count Sforza; as far as the last point is concerned, he remarked that if the crown of Hungary was offered to an Italian prince, he himself would oppose its acceptance. Count Sforza did not bring forward any argument in refutation of my analysis of the situation, and he concluded our conversation by the suggestion that I myself had made to him repeatedly, namely, that the question is not acute. He expressed the belief that the Hungarian Government was acting wisely in adopting a position of watchful waiting.[26]

This quotation also shows that diplomatic and political circles tried to handle the issue with caution despite the fact that it was precisely the consequence of continuous postponement and "watchful waiting" that the problem of the "vacant Hungarian throne" regularly recurred in official statements and in the unofficial public discourse of the time. Moreover, sometimes it even gave rise to pejorative commentaries, which made the Hungarian "kingdom without a king" appear as an outdated and outmoded state to the foreign public, especially to that overseas, as was written, for instance, in a Washington newspaper in July 1923:

> The government of Hungary is in a most anomalous condition. It may fairly be said to be a kingdom with the king lacking. All public institutions are designated by the term "royal". The Hungarian ministers are "royal" ministers, the Hungarian legations abroad are "royal"

[23] Such as "The Throne of Hungary. An Elected King Wanted," *The Times*, 6 December 1920, 12; "The Throne of Hungary. Charles and the Regent," *The Times*, 18 February 1924, 12; "The Hungarian Throne. Archduke Otto as Pretender," *The Times*, 20 November 1930, 15–16.
[24] "A Bid for a Throne. I–III," *The Times*, 18-20 February 1924, "A Bid for a Throne. King Charles and Hungary. The Regent's Case," *The Times*, 16 April 1924, 15–16.
[25] Aladár von Boroviczény, *Der König und sein Reichsverweser* (München: Verlag für Kulturpolitik, 1924).
[26] "The Representative of the Hungarian Government in Rome, Count Nemes, to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Count Teleki," Rome, 3 January 1921, in *Papers and Documents Relating to the Foreign Relations of Hungary*, Volume II, ed. Dezső Ujváry (Budapest: Hungarian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 1946), 11–12.

> legations, the Hungarian post offices are "royal" post offices. On the Hungarian vise [sic] on my passport are stamped the words "Royal Hungarian Legation."[27]

Later, the prestigious *Chicago Tribune* did not even predict much of a future for the kingdom form of state:

> Of course, it is not impossible that the monarchy will be restored in Hungary, but it is difficult to believe that, if it is, the kingdom will long endure as such. The forces of history are moving in the opposite direction. … It is scarcely credible, then, that the Hungarians, with centuries of struggle for human freedom in their history, will long submit themselves to it.[28]

The quote suggests an apparent contradiction arising from an outside observer's misunderstanding of some circumstances and factors. In fact, the Hungarian "love of freedom" was not coupled with a democratic tradition. The short-lived non-royal forms of state were soon rejected because of the "bad memory" of the 1918 and 1919 revolutionary experiments. These experiences reinforced the idea of the monarchy, which contributed to the spread of rumours surrounding the various royal candidates, including the other members of the Habsburg family.

The Habsburg Candidates

The Habsburgs who did not belong directly to the royal line were particularly affected and noteworthy actors in the set of candidates since their "candidacy" proved that certain groups of Hungarian "free king-electors" did not generally reject the Habsburg dynasty, only the former ruler and his legal descendant. The thinking of the "free king-electors" might have had several motives in this respect. On the one hand, the Habsburg family—especially some of its members—enjoyed considerable prestige and even relative popularity in Hungary. On the other hand, the "free king-electors" who supported other Habsburgs could also hope that the success of their "candidate" would promote their own progress and prosperity, too. Many followed this idea even though the Great War caused significant losses in the international prestige of the Habsburgs. The basis of this thought rested on the fact that they still enjoyed the advantages of the relationship network built over centuries which linked them to almost all the ruling dynasties and many other aristocratic families in Europe.

In the contemporary flow of rumours, the two most frequently discussed "candidates" from the Habsburg dynasty were, after Charles IV and his son Otto, Archduke Joseph August of Habsburg-Lorraine—addressed simply as Archduke Joseph in Hungary—and Archduke Albert Francis—simply Albrecht in public discourse—of Habsburg-Teschen. Neither of them belonged to the immediate family of the former monarch Charles IV. The elder of the two, Archduke Joseph, coming from the so-called Hungarian palatine line of the Habsburg-Lorraine house, born at Alcsút in 1872, was not unknown in Hungarian public life even at the beginning of the period.[29] He took an active part in the Great War and, as a "homo regius," he substituted and represented Charles IV in Budapest in autumn 1918. In August 1919, following the fall of the Soviet Republic

[27] "Hungary Still Kingdom, No King," *The Sunday Star* (Washington, D.C.), 8 July 1923, 5.
[28] "A Kingdom Without a King," *Chicago Tribune*, 28 April 1931, 14.
[29] Palatine Joseph, grandfather of Joseph August, was the brother of Emperor and King Francis.

and referring to his former position, he declared himself "governor," but due to international pressure and rejection, he could only hold this position for two weeks. Certain circles of society regarded Archduke Joseph as a relatively "popular" figure, upon which also he himself was convinced. Other sources, however, shaded the archduke's "popularity" along with his abilities and suitability. For example, General Bandholtz, a member of the American Entente mission stationed at Budapest from August 1919, did not speak, on the whole, in flattering terms of Joseph Habsburg. In one of his diaries, he wrote:

> The Archduke himself has shown that when it comes to diplomacy, political matters and the administration of a government, he is still a babe in swaddling clothes. … He is probably, when all is considered, quite popular in Hungary, but his popularity is neither so extensive nor so deeprooted as he seems to imagine. It is believed that he has been misled by his intimates, who have lured him into believing that he is the almost unanimous choice of the people of Hungary.[30]

The American general's diary also shows the ambition that fuelled the archduke. According to Bandholtz, at the end of August 1919, Joseph told the following to General Mombelli, an Italian member of the Entente mission:

> … he himself was personally very fond of his cousin Karl [Charles IV], but that he hardly thought that Karl could fill the bill. He then continued that he felt that he (the Archduke Joseph) was popular in all Hungary, that the people were clamoring [sic] for him, and that he should be invested with the royal dignity.[31]

According to the sources, Joseph Habsburg's "king candidacy" was the strongest just in the period of total uncertainty, i.e. between the spring of 1919 and the beginning of 1921, when some foreign press agencies had already expected his coronation.[32] Some news also generated considerable tensions in certain international political circles. An excellent example of this is the speech of a British politician delivered at the House of Commons in March 1920:

> After the fall of the Bela Kun Government the Allied representatives at Budapest met under the chairmanship of the British General Gorton, and proposed for election, as King of Hungary, the Archduke Joseph of Hapsburg, this without any election at all such as has been quoted against me by the hon. and gallant Member for Lanark. If there was any responsibility for the War to be fixed upon any Royal house in Europe, then it should be fixed on the Hapsburg Dynasty, whose guilt was of the deepest dye. The British representative took the chair at the meeting of the Allied representatives, and proposed for election as King the Archduke Joseph. Fortunately, the American Government protested.[33]

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[30] Harry Hill Bandholtz, *An Undiplomatic Diary by the American Member of the Inter-Allied Military Mission to Hungary, 1919-1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), 25. It says much about Joseph's judgement that towards the end of his mission, the American General, in his diary entries, referred simply to the Habsburg archduke as "Joe." Bandholtz, *An Undiplomatic Diary*, 273.

[31] Bandholtz, *An Undiplomatic Diary*, 48.

[32] See, for example, "Expect Hungary to Elect Archduke Joseph as King," *The New York Times*, 27 October 1919, 15.

[33] British Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Vol. 127, 25 March 1920. Orders of the Day, Foreign Affairs, Column 714, *Hansard*, accessed 22 November 2021, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1920-03-25/debates/2e5028ef-3013-4fec-927b-

The consistent American opposition to the Habsburg Restoration is also well illustrated in Bandholtz's diary. In November 1919, he declared emphatically to the then Hungarian Prime Minister István Friedrich "that the Entente certainly would not stand for the return of Karl or the immediate restoration of any Hapsburgs."[34]

As a consequence of international opposition, the appointment of Horthy as Regent, who was gaining increasing prestige, the two unsuccessful attempts to return by Charles IV in 1921, and the subsequent dethronement made Joseph retreat into the background, but he certainly did not give up his ambitions. That is why the combinations about him may have got into the press even later on, too. In the autumn of 1926, for example, a completely unfounded rumour was published that Horthy would soon renounce the Regency in favour of Joseph, who would accept this dignity on the condition that Otto would be crowned king of Hungary on the next favourable occasion.[35]

His ambitions also motivated the archduke to get close to the far right. In the autumn of 1944, after the failed exit attempt from the war, Horthy had to hand over power to Ferenc Szálasi, the leader of the Hungarian National Socialist [Arrow-Cross] Party. The born conservative Joseph Habsburg enthusiastically advocated the new dictatorship and the continuation of the war.[36] However, not even then did he receive the respect and position that he would have expected. At the end of the war, he emigrated and died in Germany in 1962.

Like Joseph, the other Habsburg aristocratic [self-chosen] candidate, Archduke Albrecht, born in Baden in Lower Austria in 1897, also hoped to realise his ambitions by the far right. Foreign newspapers have frequently reported that mainly the so-called racist radical right-wing circles supported him in Hungary.[37] According to different sources, his nomination emerged first as far back as spring 1919. Just as Queen Zita proceeded in the case of Otto, Albrecht's mother, Archduchess Isabella, also did her utmost for the sake of the realisation of the ambitions of her son, even by finding him a fiancée matching his ruling endeavours.[38] His king candidacy gathered more intense impetus in the mid-1920s. The fact that his mother descended from a family that traced its alleged origin back to the House of Árpád fired up the young archduke's desire, embedded in historical perspectives, for the Hungarian throne.

However, the archduke became discredited in public life very early. In addition to his far-right political orientation, his private life, being unworthy of a member of a ruling family, was also against him. In the mid-1920s, there were rumours yet about his planned marriage to the Romanian royal princess Ileana,[39] while later, one of the daughters of the Italian King Victor Emmanuel was also often mentioned as his potential fiancée.[40] Both marriages would have had promising political

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[34] Bandholtz, *An Undiplomatic Diary*, 218.

[35] "Hungarian Regent Clears Way for New King," *Chicago Tribune*, 1 September 1926, 2.

[36] Levente Püski, *A magyar Felsőház története 1927–1945* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2000), 149.

[37] "The Hungarian Monarchists. Claimants to the Throne," *The Times*, 8 December 1925, 15; Carlile A. Macartney, *October Fifteenth. A History of Modern Hungary 1929-1945*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1956), 455–456.

[38] See for example "Proposes Albrecht for King of Hungary," *The New York Times*, 15 October 1921, 12.

[39] "Tells of Marriage to Link 2 Thrones," *The New York Times*, 18 November 1926, 3; "Report Austrian Archduke Will Marry Ileana," *Chicago Tribune*, 18 November 1926, 4.

[40] "Hungary Seeks a Wife for a Monarch – Marriage of Archduke Albrecht and Princess Giovanna of Italy Is Proposed," *The New York Times*, 23 January 1927, 4.

perspectives. However, despite these prospects, he entered into two morganatic marriages in the 1930s. This caused general consternation not only in aristocratic circles but in other political groups, too, providing a constant subject of discussion in the press, which sometimes presented such rumours in a sarcastic tone to the readers.[41] His commitment to the far right forced him to emigrate at the end of World War II. He died in Buenos Aires in 1955.[42]

In addition to archdukes Joseph and Albrecht, albeit much less frequently than they were, three other members of the Habsburg dynasty were also mentioned as candidates for Hungarian king in the 1920s. In April 1922, after the death of Charles IV, the newspapers reported that the eldest son, Prince Maximilien Hohenberg, of Francis Ferdinand, murdered in Sarajevo, as well as the deceased ruler's younger brother, Archduke Eugen Maximilien of Habsburg-Lorrain, allegedly joined the race for the throne. Of the two, the former—and his supporters—proved to be the more active. In the mid-1920s there were several press reports about monarchist groups in Czechoslovakia aiming to turn their country into a kingdom, with Maximilien Hohenberg on the throne. At the same time, the son of Francis Ferdinand had also become a target person among Austrian royalists regarding the restoration of the reign of Habsburgs in Austria.

In the following decade, another Habsburg aristocrat—the seventh [!] in a row, including Charles IV and Otto—appeared as a candidate for the Hungarian throne. The background to this rumour was that Princess Ileana, daughter of the Romanian King Ferdinand I (already mentioned previously), had married Archduke Franz Antony, cousin of Charles IV, a member of the so-called Tuscan line of the Habsburg family. That gave rise to further speculation. Although the Hungarian press interviewed them only on the occasion of their honeymoon trip to Budapest, the *Chicago Tribune* of October 1932, with reference to British sources, introduced Francis Anthony already as a candidate for king, with the absurd justification that "His choice would be more acceptable to Rumania [sic], whose armies helped put down the soviet government of Bela Kuhn [sic], rulers in Hungary for nearly two years [!] at the close of the world war."[43] This quote clearly shows how the foreign press, especially Americans, sometimes misinterpreted the Hungarian circumstances and the feelings of the Hungarian people.

Illusory European Dynastic Relationships and Unrealistic Political Alternatives

Concerning the rumours about the other candidates, let us return to the very beginning of the interwar period. The chaotic aftermaths of the conflict and the subsequent two revolutions created and provided the best conditions for the emergence of many candidates. This is unsurprising: the political circumstances were unstable, consequently providing the possibility of numerous and sometimes even clandestine initiatives. Furthermore, certain political circles hoped to gain public advancement by "king-creation," while candidates expected the internationally appreciated respect for themselves.

It is characteristic—especially in the case of the two archdukes, but this could be related to other Habsburg candidates, too—that the motivation for the candidacy for the Hungarian king was the relative political and social embeddedness in Hungary and the ambition resulting from the

[41] The Catholic Albrecht married first a divorced Protestant woman, the mother of a teenage son, in Brighton in August 1930. Their marriage was dissolved in 1937. His second marriage to a schoolteacher was in May, the next year. "Archduke Albrecht," *Chicago Tribune*, 29 April 1930, 7; "A Throne Seeker Gets Rid of His Commoner Wife," *Chicago Tribune*, 3 June 1937, 24.

[42] "Archduke Albert of Hapsburg," *The Times*, 13 August 1955, 9.

[43] "Royalists Plot to Seat Pretender on Empty Throne," *Chicago Tribune*, 9 October 1932, 65.

family upbringing. In the case of other non-Hungarians, this was often based on certain dynastic connections already existing or to be established.

At the beginning of the period, a short-lived dynastic idea linked the solution of the Hungarian "king question" to a smaller European monarchy. Some sources already indicated at the very beginning of the 1920s that certain Hungarian aristocratic circles had been thinking about inviting the second-born son of the Belgian King Leopold II to the throne.[44] The idea, which would have met with the approval of the French, was reported in the foreign press, too. The basis of the idea was that the first wife of King Leopold II was Princess Maria Henriette, daughter of the former Hungarian Palatine Joseph Habsburg. This initiation was, however, made completely unrealistic by the fact that the second-born son of Leopold II was not born of this marriage.

In the months immediately after the world war there were many rumours linking the Hungarian throne to several states in the Central and Eastern European and Balkan regions. This is no coincidence, as the whole region underwent radical transformations during this period: new states were created, such as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes; some, like Romania, expanded significantly; and others, such as Hungary, were trying to find a way to regenerate themselves as losers of the war—Bulgaria, for example. In addition to their fragile conditions, these states had a feature in common: they were monarchical states, so it is not surprising that candidates from these countries also presented themselves for the vacant Hungarian throne.

One of the most frequent combinations was the creation of a personal union with neighbouring Romania during the reign of King Ferdinand. However, this had not been a new idea. In order to avoid a crushing defeat, during the course of the Great War there had already been reports in the press that Romania, on the Romanian initiative, should join Austria-Hungary, based on the Romanian imperial dream fed by the Dacian-Romanian theory.[45] The idea, however, was far from becoming reality. Towards the end of the war Romania re-entered the fight on the side of the Entente. After the armistice, the Romanian Army occupied the whole eastern part of Hungary, including the capital. According to some sources, the unification of the two countries was forced by the Romanian side.[46] However, general Hungarian public opinion was also against the realisation of the plan: after Romania had been an enemy in the world war and had plundered the eastern part of Hungary during the occupation, unification under a Romanian ruler was completely unimaginable—even though Ferdinand was not a Romanian, but a descendant of the Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen family.

Much less frequently than the plan for Romanian-Hungarian unification, but also in the months immediately after the war, news reports appeared claiming that Hungary would become part of the emerging South Slav state under the reign of the Serbian King Alexander. However, both the Hungarian and Serbian sides quickly refuted this rumour.[47] Another short-lived example from the Balkan Region is the one of the Bulgarian king's son, Prince Cyril, whose name appeared in the press at the turn of 1919 and 1920. He was related to Charles IV's family on his mother's side—his mother was the half-sister of Archduchess Zita—and had partly Hungarian ancestors

[44] Magda Ádám and Mária Ormos, ed., *Francia diplomáciai iratok a Kárpát-medence történetéről 1919-1920* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2004), 205.
[45] Mihály Réz, "Románia," *Budapesti Hírlap*, 11 September 1917, 1–2.
[46] Bandholtz, *An Undiplomatic Diary*, 3–4; "Hungary May Propose Union with Rumania," *The New York Times*, 10 September 1919, 15; Romsics, *István Bethlen*, 110–112, 115–116, 166.
[47] "Hír Szerbia közeledéséről," *Budapesti Hírlap*, 15 January 1919, 3.

on his father's side. Given that his career took a different direction, the idea of his candidacy was soon left out of further consideration.[48]

From the beginning of the era, the "free king-electors" had based their approach on the principle that if Hungary could not elect a national king, the crown, according to several historical examples, should be offered to one of the great European dynasties. The core of their views was that such a solution could have increased Hungary's weight in continental politics, helped preserve her territorial integrity, and later achieved her revisionist goals. These well-known and favoured arguments stood behind the reason why the "free king-electors" turned their attention to the royal family of Great Britain.[49] Hungarian political circles made no secret of this. A British diplomat recorded the following about a conversation he had with an unnamed government member of Mihály Károlyi in December 1918:

> When questioned by me on the point one of the members of the Károlyi Government frankly admitted that the main reason underlying the proposal which is still in an extremely vague state was that the offer of the crown to an Englishman and still more his acceptance of it would win the sympathies and support of the British Government for Hungary.[50]

At the turn of 1918 and 1919, the "free king-electors" focused attention on the Duke of Connaught and Strathearn, which surprised even the British diplomatic circles.[51] It was, however, probably due to the enormous chaos of the time that the Hungarians failed to consider the age of their candidate, since he was approaching seventy. Consequently, he would certainly not have been an ideal long-term aspirant to the Hungarian throne. The Anglican religion was another critical aspect. For the Hungarian Catholic Church, having the right of coronation, it would have been unimaginable putting the Holy Crown of István I on the head of a person of a religion practised by no one in the country but him. A further problem was the British foreign policy thinking. The acquisition of the Hungarian throne would have been an extremely bold step for British foreign policy, always cautious and striving for the status quo, because this would have provoked the countries surrounding Hungary and the other European powers, especially France and Italy. Nevertheless, there were rumours about other British "candidates" at the beginning of the period. In November 1919, articles appeared about the possibility that Prince Adolphus, Duke of Teck, the brother of King George V's wife, Princess Mary, might become the new king of Hungary.[52] The basis for this idea also could have been a Hungarian family connection because Adolphus'

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[48] "Say Bulgar Prince Wants Magyar Throne," *The New York Times*, 22 December 1919, 1.

[49] "T. Fullham's Answers to Questions in Two Questionnaires Prepared by M.I.3.b. (Extracts. Received in the Foreign Office on 24 March 1919). Questionnaire. M.I.3.b.," 10 March 1919, in *British Policy on Hungary 1918-1919. A Documentary Sourcebook*, ed. Miklós Lojkó (London: School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 1995), 88–89. It is worth noting that the dynastic relationship with the British monarchy was not only raised in Hungary during the period, but also in Poland, especially during the Second World War. See Marcin Michał Wiszowaty, "Shaken or Stirred? Polish Constitutional (Dis)continuity between 1917-2017," *Hungarian Journal of Legal Studies* 60, no. 1 (2019): 104.

[50] "Letter from 'G. 65.' (Geneva) for Military Intelligence, Political Section (War Office, London). The Political Situation in Hungary. Count Karolyi's Position" [PRO FO 371/4354 No. 161 (file 52)] Geneva, 17 December 1918, in *British Policy*, 42–43.

[51] "Letter from G.B. Beak (Zurich) to Sir H. Rumbold (Berne. Extracts)" [HDLM ACC 727/35] Zurich, 19 December 1918, in *British Policy*, 43.

[52] "Magyar Royalists Active. Some Talk of Duke of Teck or Duke d'Abruzzi for Throne," *The New York Times*, 17 November 1919, 17.

grandmother was Countess Klaudia Rhédey, a descendant of the former princely family of Transylvania.[53]

In the second half of the 1920s, another name from the British Isles became public as a new candidate. Its motivating circumstances were also typical of the thinking of "free king-electors," who were sometimes completely far beyond reality and rationality. In 1927, one of Britain's greatest press magnates and the third richest man of that time, Sidney Harold Harmsworth, better known as Lord Rothermere, published a lengthy article in the *Daily Mail* entitled "Hungary's Place in the Sun." In this article, he spoke out against the injustice of the Treaty of Trianon and argued for the need for territorial revision. Official circles responded moderately on both sides, but it was well received in other parts of public life and the broader society of Hungary. Even later, he continued to be an ardent supporter of the "Hungarian cause," which resulted in a veritable cult for Lord Rothermere in Hungary. He received hundreds of thanksgiving letters, streets bore his name, and a commemorative plaque was even unveiled in his honour on the tenth anniversary of the publication of his article. In the late 1920s, all this resulted in his or his son's nomination for the king of Hungary. However, the nomination of the English lord or his son, respectively, was neither in Hungary nor in the United Kingdom considered earnestly by official policy; what is more, the idea made Hungary ridiculous in front of European public opinion.[54]

At the same time, another great European dynasty was also associated with the Hungarian throne.[55] Particularly after 1927, when Fascist Italy and Hungary forged closer political ties, it was rumoured, not only in the press but in diplomatic circles, too, that the establishment of a future relationship with the ancient House of Savoy had also been taken into account. Most frequently, the coronation of the Duke of Aosta, Emanuele Filiberto, nephew of King Victor Emmanuel III and son of the King of Spain, came up. Although Hungarian government circles had consistently denied these Italian-Hungarian combinations, this dynastic relationship would have been mutually beneficial.[56] On the one hand, the Duke of Aosta might have had established dynastic relationships not only with the great power Italy but with Spain, too. Succession to the Hungarian throne would have also been attractive for the Italian side, as that would have enabled them to achieve one of their significant foreign policy goals, namely, to counterbalance the strong French influence in the Little Entente countries. The Italian dynastic solution came up again in diplomatic circles in the late 1930s and the first half of the Second World War to counterbalance the growing dependence on Nazi Germany. Several sources emphasised the importance of the Duke of Aosta's coronation, and even the invitation to the throne of Victor Emmanuel III himself came into question. These ideas are well reflected in the diary of the Italian Foreign Minister, Count Ciano, who also often mentioned his discussions with Hungarian politicians and diplomats. However, exactly his records

[53] "Hungarian Strain in British Royalty," *The New York Times*, 1 December 1929, 62.
[54] Miklós Zeidler, *A revíziós gondolat* (Budapest: Osiris, 2001), 97–119; Éva Mathey, "Lord Rothermere and Hungarian Revisionism," *Eger Journal of American Studies* 13 (2012); 243–251.
[55] This dynasty also appeared in rumours even at the beginning of the period. See "The Representative of the Hungarian Government in Rome, Count Nemes, to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Count Teleki," Rome, 3 January 1921, in *Papers and Documents*, Volume II, 11–12; Andrea Bern, "Az aostai herceg és magyar királysága – I. felvonás: 1921," *Napi Történelmi Forrás* (blog), 2017, accessed 12 May 2022, https://ntf.hu/index.php/2017/11/10/az-aostai-herceg-es-magyar-kiralysaga-i-felvonas-1921/.
[56] "Seek New Candidate for Hungarian Throne," *The New York Times*, 29 May 1930, 9.

refer clearly to the fact, as well, that already Germany had the final say regarding the fate of the region, and Hitler opposed the Italian plans for the solution to the Hungarian "king question."[57]

Hungarian Candidates

In the summer of 1927, when Lord Rothermere's son, Esmond Harmsworth, paid a visit to Hungary, he had a personal interview with a reporter for a daily newspaper. Naturally, the issue of the "kingdom without a king" came up. The young lord also expressed his views on the alternatives to the British royal family and the Romanian-Hungarian personal union. He said that the former would be "somewhat delicate and difficult to resolve," while the latter would be a "too Balkanic policy," which was also difficult to imagine, and added: "We think it would be most appropriate to elect an old Hungarian aristocratic family, more precisely, one of the members of the oldest one, as ruler. All the world would receive it with sympathy."[58]

The opinion of Harmsworth junior reflects the naivety of an outside observer who is unaware of the inner functions of the Hungarian aristocracy. Although, as a primary goal, the "free king-electors" also wanted to see a national ruler at the head of the state, such a solution would have automatically led to internal conflicts. That is why they began to orient primarily toward foreign ruling families as well, because it was unlikely that a Hungarian aristocrat would have been able to enforce the revisionist demands. Perhaps because of strict requirements, only a few candidates emerged, mainly unknown in public life. Most of them were quickly refused, or the candidates themselves shied away from the nomination.

During the whole interwar period, perhaps Miklós Horthy proved to be the most considerable candidate of the "free king-electors." Many people believed that he was the person best qualified to occupy the royal dignity in Hungary. In his memoirs written during his exile, the Regent mentioned that, as early as August 1922, shortly after the death of Charles IV, a delegation led by former Minister of Interior, Count Gedeon Ráday, offered him the crown of Stephen I "in the name of all classes of the people." However, Horthy, as he put down in his memoirs, refused the invitation:

> I thanked them for the confidence in me that their proposal showed, but said that I did not feel able to accede to their request. For what was it that gave me courage and strength to work at the reconstruction of our shattered Fatherland? Only the feeling that, in my status as Regent of the Realm, I could count on the confidence shown a trustworthy and honourable man. Were I to stretch my hand towards the crown, I should cease to be selfless and worthy of respect, and my own brothers would turn against me. Never, not even should a plebiscite be unanimous, would I accept the royal crown.[59]

In later years, though Horthy took a similar position also in other cases, there were several occasions when his person, or a member of his family, even despite their denominational affiliation—being Calvinists—had become associated with the solution of the "king question."

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[57] Hugh Gibson, ed., *The Ciano Diaries 1939-1943. The Complete, Unabridged Diaries of Count Galeazzo Ciano, Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, 1936-1943* (Safety Harbour: Simon Publications, 2001), 111–112, 124, 195, 226, 517–518; Macartney, *October Fifteenth*, Vol. 1, 361.

[58] Tibor Korda, "Trianonnak, a tévedések várának össze kell dőlnie…," *Újság*, 28 August 1927, 3–4.

[59] Nicholaus Horthy, *Memoirs*, 152, Corvinus Library, accessed 7 December 2021, http://www.hungarianhistory.com/lib/horthy/horthy.pdf

There had been two decisive factors behind this. One was the cult around the Regent, which started to develop from the beginning of his office period and gradually expanded by adding new elements over time and raised to the state level.[60] It contained several elements which compared Horthy to the Hungarian kings of bygone days. Symbolically, all these elements contributed to raising the Regent to the level of a constitutional ruler—he was only a step from nominating him as the king of Hungary. The other factor linked intrinsically to the cult was the sphere of authority of the Regent. Though in some respects this had never reached the level of previous "apostolic kings"—for example, regarding the right to confer the title of nobility or to appoint leaders of the Hungarian Catholic Church—the previously mentioned continuous extension of his rights strengthened Horthy's position as constitutional ruler at the head of the nation. It was no coincidence that ideas about his election for king arose most often either at events—also dominant for cult building, concerning his person, like his birthday, the anniversary of his appointment—or in connection with the extension of his powers.[61]

The most striking example of this was the extension of his authority in the summer of 1937, after which the Regent was also referred to in the foreign press as the "uncrowned king". An American newspaper summarised it thus:

> Hungary was a kingless kingdom until the end of June, when the Budapest Parliament invested the head of the state, Regent-Governor Nicholas Horthy de Nagybanya, with royal rights, which make him a king in all but the title. He is responsible to no one except himself, and only death can part him from his high office. The new law gives him sweeping veto rights over legislation and authority to recommend his successor. This arrangement is of importance not merely to Hungary but also to the whole of Central Europe. It means that the House of Hapsburg has lost whatever chances it may have had of recovering its throne in the Budapest royal palace. On August 20 Hungary's great national holiday, Horthy will appear as Hungary's uncrowned king for the first time. Then he will head a colorful [sic] procession, when tens of thousands pay homage to the Magyar Kingdom's founder, St. Stephen, whose withered hand, a religious relic, will be displayed to reverent visitors from all over the country. On that day Hungary will also pay homage to a new sovereign.[62]

The predominant part of the contemporary opposition received the extension of authority with hostility. They argued that the extension of the Regent's authority was nothing else but the conservation of the political system and acknowledgement of establishing a dynasty. In October 1937, in response to the increase of Horthy's power, the legitimist camp formed a coalition—with the participation of liberals, small landowners and social democrats that rejected it earlier—for the theoretical possibility of the Habsburg restoration.

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[60] About Horthy's cult see Dávid Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz 1919-1944* (Budapest: MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet, 2015). For some aspects of this topic in English, see Dávid Turbucz, "Miklós Horthy in Poland. Official Visit, Image of Charismatic Leader and his Leader Cult. The Hungarian Interpretation," *Hungarian Studies* 32, no. 2 (2018): 291–304.

[61] For details on the authority and status of the Hungarian Regent, refer to György Képes, "Regent without a King? Nicholas Horthy's Position as "Governor" in the Light of Hungarian Constitutional History," in *Medzi Trianonom a retribúciou Slovensko-maďarské vzťahy z právneho pohľadu. Between Trianon and Retribution Slovak-Hungarian Relations from Legal Point of View*, ed. Tomáš Gábriš, Dagmar Lantajová, and Martin Bulla (Trnava: Trnavská univerzita v Trnave, Právnická fakulta, 2021), 217–251.

[62] "Horthy – Uncrowned King," *The Sunday Star* (Washington, D.C.), 8 August 1937, 3.

That activated another political force, the Party of Hungarian National Socialists, which proclaimed the Regent as King "Miklós I" at their general assembly in Debrecen in November 1937. Consequent to this action, the far-right leaders hoped to increase their influence, even suppressing their political opponents. They had been in the belief that if Horthy accepted the crown from them, he would have legitimised them and even put them ahead of all other political movements. Of course, the "king-election" operation failed, and Horthy, in public, sharply rejected this gesture of the extreme right.[63] However, the royal plans with Horthy and his family did not sink into oblivion after these events either. The new planning wave had become rather intense following the death of Deputy Regent István Horthy in August 1942. Yet no more was the Regent the target person at this time, but his grandson, the barely one-year-old István Horthy Junior. Although Horthy stiffly rejected these plans, they seemed to be so earnest that even Prince Primate Justinian Serédi, the leader of the Hungarian Catholic Church, contacted Horthy to clarify the issue.[64] Afterwards, in the heat of the Second World War, the coronation was no longer seriously on the agenda, except for the rather fluid suggestion for a Hungarian-Croatian personal union mentioned below.

Conclusion

As discussed above, sometimes the even duly justified nomination of the best-known persons to the royal dignity failed. The fate of all the other ideas, some with extremely poor foundations and backgrounds, could not be different. The findings have shed light on both political and personal reasons that blocked a resolution to the issue of the kingless kingdom in interwar Hungary. At the same time, the source materials processed in the course of the research also provided an opportunity to outline certain features of an "ideal" new Hungarian king who, both in Hungary and abroad, would have been accepted under the given political and social circumstances of the time. Quite simply, such a person would have been required whose rise to power would have been based on sufficient domestic political consensus and approval of major European powers. A significant requirement of him was the Roman Catholic religion and unconditional respect for Hungarian traditions—since he would have worn the crown of a thousand-year-old state—but, at the same time, a modern approach and way of thinking for the times. In case the Hungarian decision-makers would have elected a foreign person, it was essential for him to be familiar with Hungarian circumstances and the characteristics of the "Hungarian folk-soul," should he be accepted by society. Finally and above all, there was the expectation that the new Hungarian king would have the international recognition and influence to take on and succeed in Hungary's most important foreign policy goal: the revision of the Trianon Peace Treaty.

Finding such a person was practically an unsolvable task, "Almost as complicated as Einstein's relatively [sic] theory is the monarchic question in Hungary—the kingdom without a King"—a very apt remark for the tangled Hungarian situation, used by, for example, the American *The Sunday Star* in August 1930.[65] We could also see that, sooner or later, all initiatives failed already at the first requirement, as none of the above-named candidates had reached domestic political consensus, simply because the legitimists had never been ready to deviate from their position,

[63] "Horthy Rejects Kingship," *The New York Times*, 21 December 1937, 17; "The Throne of Hungary. Regent on Constitutional Development," *The Times*, 22 December 1937, 11; Macartney, *October Fifteenth*, Vol. 1. 188.
[64] Balázs Csíky, *Serédi Jusztinián, Magyarország hercegprímása* (Budapest: MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet, MTA–PPKE Fraknói Vilmos Római Történeti Kutatócsoport, 2018), 353–367.
[65] "Boy Fights for a Throne," *The Sunday Star* (Washington, D.C.), 17 August 1930, 3.

constantly rejecting any compromise, and even treating the various concepts with detestation and contempt.

It is also evident that none of the emerging alternatives offered the possibility of consensus, but there can be other similarities noticed, as well. In fact, except for Charles and Otto, none of the candidates had publicly claimed the Hungarian crown. The other similarity was that each candidate would have only been a temporary solution to the current circumstances instead of a long one. It is reasonable to suspect that none of the alternatives would have brought lasting domestic political stability. Implicitly, this could be one of the reasons why the "kingdom without a king," which initially caused a constitutional stalemate, had been conserved. That was coupled with the fact that, in later years, the power of the head of state became more and more tailored to Horthy's person and dependent on him. These two facts suggest that the interwar system got into a constitutional and political trap set by those legislators and politicians who were only able to give ad hoc responses to the challenges of the time. This is another reason why the interwar political establishment had no chance to survive after World War II.

The emergence of various rumours also allows us to establish when the Hungarian "king question" became the focus of international interest. The quoted sources reveal that the appearance or re-intensification of the rumour was always in connection with certain events. We could see that most of the candidates emerged collectively at the beginning of a very eventful period, which is understandable, given the instability and volatility of the domestic and international political situation. Speculation about the "king question" has often been fuelled by events linked to the former monarch or his family members. These included, for example, the attempted return of Charles IV in 1921, followed by his death the following year, and Otto's coming of age as a monarch in the tradition of the Habsburgs, and then of his actual majority—1928 and 1930.[66] The ideas were also strongly induced by several domestic political events, among which occurrences related to Horthy's person or the institution of the Regent—anniversaries, extensions of powers, the election and death of the Deputy Regent—played a central role. Finally, certain international events may have triggered a revival of rumours about the "king question"—the strengthening of Italian-Hungarian relations or the action of Lord Rothermere in 1927. The many rumours, often accompanied by the opinion that the Hungarian "kingdom without a king" was an outdated and anachronistic form of state, precisely because of the numerous and often unrealistic combinations, sometimes became ridiculous to some extent. So this situation ultimately affected Hungary's international image, too. At the same time, the sensationalist press kept continuously maintaining the question of succession to the Hungarian throne.

But the Hungarian throne left vacant in the middle of Europe offered diplomats from other countries a gossip opportunity that they could use to achieve their political goals. An example from World War II illustrates this. In the spring of 1941, Croatia seceded from Yugoslavia and, with Italian-German support, became an independent kingdom, essentially a Nazi puppet state. The head of the new state was Aimone Roberto di Savoia, a member of the Italian royal family who became the fourth Duke of Aosta, named Tomislav II. According to a note by the German diplomat Ernst von Weizsäcker, he spoke about this with a Croatian minister who was unhappy with the way events were unfolding, and Weizsäcker said that he aimed to "create an anti-Italian mood" in him:

[66] "Otto's Age Revives Magyar King Issue," *The New York Times*, 18 November 1928, 3; "Otto Comes of Age – Hapsburgs at Fete," *The New York Times*, 20 November 1930, 7.

> for instance by peddling the rumour that the new King of Croatia had already been taken into consideration as a candidate for the Hungarian throne. A link with the old Croatian-Hungarian tradition was to be established thereby and the road prepared toward a new Rome-Zagreb-Budapest bloc.[67]

This example clearly shows that, despite the wartime circumstances, the problem of the vacant Hungarian throne remained a recurring theme in international public discourse throughout the period though in its second half, there were already fewer names mentioned in the rumours, and the circle of non-Hungarian "aspirants" significantly decreased.

The final chapter of the long and varied history of the Kingdom of Hungary ended with World War II. As one of the last allies of Nazi Germany, Hungary found itself again on the losers' side. After 1945, there were still some supporters—such as Cardinal Joseph Mindszenty, the leader of the Hungarian Catholic Church—of the kingdom as the state form and the coronation of the only remaining Otto, but the new power of state formed with Soviet assistance, and the new regime codified in 1946, definitively tied up the loose ends of the various "possibilities" for solving the "king question."

Finally, the question rightly arises as to why the conserved Hungarian "kingdom without a king" was the basis of so many international rumours. On the one hand, the Hungarian "king question" was an interesting exotic subject outside Hungary, which tempted many foreign journalists to write an exciting article with an attractive title. On the other hand, in Hungary, the issue of the king was a significant source of political conflict; any decision could have influenced the fate of the country, so the interest of journalists was not accidental. These different motivations prompted the appearance of the issue, both in the Hungarian and international press.

[67] "Memorandum by the State Secretary," Berlin, 20 May 1941, in *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918–1945. Series D (1937-1945), Volume XII: The War Years. February 1-June 22, 1941* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1962), 851–852.