National Identity Among the Ethnic Hungarian Non-Noble Population of Hungary During the Ottoman Period

Theses of the Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation
written by László Kövecses

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Sándor Őze, DSc

Pázmány Péter Catholic University
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Doctoral School of History

Budapest
2026

Part I: Summary of the Research Objectives

The doctoral dissertation examines a relatively under-researched aspect of Hungarian national consciousness in the 16th and 17th centuries: the national identity of social groups without estate privileges, primarily the peasantry and, to a lesser extent, the burgher population. It is important to note that at the beginning of the period under investigation, approximately 80 per cent of the population of Hungary still belonged to the Hungarian ethnic group. To quote the social historian István Szabó, "peasantry and Hungarianness were inextricably intertwined in the course of history". The central question of the research is whether, in Ottoman-period Hungary, only the nobility, as the group possessing political rights, can be regarded as the bearer of the national community, or whether an awareness of belonging to the Hungarian nation can also be identified among the non-noble population, which constituted the overwhelming majority of society.

The theoretical framework of the dissertation is provided by an overview of the principal schools of thought in the study of nationalism: primordialism, perennialism, modernism and ethno-symbolism. Anglo-American scholarship has defined the field of nationalism studies since the 1980's and described the view which regards the nation primarily as a product of the Enlightenment, brought into being through the extension of political rights, as modernist. By contrast, the perennialist approach recognises the existence of nations in the medieval and even ancient periods, while ethno-symbolism draws no sharp boundary between the pre-national

era and the age of nationalism, emphasising organic development and gradual transitions between the various stages of ethnic group formation instead. The concept of the nation adopted in this dissertation draws primarily on István Szabó's notion of the "people's nation" (or "popular nation") and Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolist theory. I regard a shared language and a shared notion of common descent as the principal factors determining national belonging. This approach makes it possible to understand national consciousness not merely as the sentiment of a particular estate or political group, but as an awareness of cultural community extending across social strata.

The dissertation also rejects a rigid distinction between elite and popular culture, emphasising the importance of the shared historical and economic experiences of different social groups. Accordingly, it takes as its point of departure the unifying force of the agrarian way of life, characteristic of 75 per cent of Hungary's population, which cut across differences in legal status. A strict separation of high culture and popular culture—and of the intellectual currents associated with them—is also problematic because this differentiation only began to emerge in the Carpathian Basin from the 18th century onwards, as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution and wider social changes.

The dissertation investigates national consciousness through such aspects as awareness of the Hungarian language, the idea of common descent, a military way of life, manifestations of patriotism, and the drawing of boundaries vis-à-vis other peoples (binary

opposition). Particular emphasis is placed on peasant uprisings of the period, including the crusader's revolt led by György Dózsa (1514), the uprising led by György Karácsony (1570), and the movement associated with Péter Császár (1631–32), as well as Miklós Zrínyi's reflections on the peasantry in his political treatise Áfium. The surviving sources relating to these events offer insight into the mentality of the non-noble strata, including their awareness of belonging to the nation.

Part II: Sources and Methodology

The study of the national consciousness and identity of the commoners (serfs, burghers of market towns, soldiers serving in the border fortresses, etc.) of the 16th and 17th centuries presents a particularly complex methodological challenge. Since the social groups under investigation left virtually no narrative or self-reflexive sources of their own—such as memoirs or diaries—I have had to rely largely on an indirect body of evidence. The dissertation does not focus on a single source group, but draws on a varied range of materials in order to explore the identity of the non-noble strata. The primary sources for the research are contemporary letters written by serfs and letters associated with fugitives (bujdosók). In addition, I make use of legal texts, political pamphlets, sermons, witness testimonies and other ego-documents, as well as early modern settlement plans based on ethnicity.

Early modern narrative sources, such as historical works, memoirs, treatises and the writings of humanist authors, also provide

valuable evidence of contemporary mentalities, even when they are not always historically reliable. In the context of peasant uprisings, it is particularly instructive to examine the attitudes of contemporary intellectuals towards the rebels' ideas. Legal compilations and records of the Diets (national assembly) must also be taken into account, since they contain numerous references to the outlook and national sentiments of the burgher population.

The methodology is primarily hermeneutic, involving historical source analysis and comparison, and is complemented by approaches drawn from social history, the history of mentalities and intellectual history. The joint interpretation of different types of sources is particularly important; given that so few written statements by the commoners have survived, their national consciousness can often be reconstructed only indirectly. The relevance of the primary sources examined lies above all in their significance for the history of mentalities, rather than necessarily in their authenticity or objectivity. In other words, from the perspective of identity studies, there are no "bad" sources: what matters is not the factual accuracy of the statements contained in a source, but the outlook of the person who produced it.

Even if source criticism were to lead us to conclude, for example, that a military treatise was already unsuitable in the 16th century as a basis for formulating military strategy, for intellectual history it might nevertheless contain extremely valuable bits of knowledge for a better understanding of (national) community consciousness. The same applies to certain 17th century political

manifestos. Rather than emphasising estate, confessional or regional affiliations, their authors may have indeed treated the stirring of national sentiment as a means of mobilising their intended audience (see: instrumentalism). Nevertheless, a sense of national belonging must have been present in the minds of the intended audience; otherwise, the author could not have achieved the desired effect.

Part III: Scholarly Findings and Original Contributions

Although the study of national consciousness is not unknown in Hungarian historiography, scholarly attention to date has focused largely on the nobility and has been directed predominantly towards understanding national thought in the 19th and 20th centuries. It is undeniable that the serfs, who made up approximately 90 per cent of early modern Hungarian society, left considerably fewer written sources than the privileged strata. This does not, however, mean that relevant conclusions about the national identity of the peasantry cannot be drawn by indirect means. With regards to the early modern period specifically, the national consciousness of certain social groups has been examined in detail by scholars—for example, that of the frontier garrison soldiers (Sándor Őze) and that of the burghers of market towns (Gergely Fazekas)—but no comprehensive study has yet been produced on the phenomena of "popular patriotism" or "early national consciousness".

The principal conclusion of the research is that awareness of belonging to the Hungarian ethnic community was not the exclusive preserve of the nobility: significant elements of national identity can

also be identified among the peasantry and the burgher population. The persistence of estate distinctions did not preclude, among Hungarians, a sense of kinship and of belonging to a common homeland and nation. For this reason, early modern communal consciousness cannot be equated with the medieval-origin concept of Hungarus identity—which was a territorially based self-identification of the subjects of the King of Hungary—since it rested on cultural rather than legal bonds.

The dissertation's principal original contribution is to reinterpret the history of Hungarian national consciousness by moving beyond earlier approaches centred primarily on the nobility and bringing wider sections of society into the analysis. By comparing different types of sources, it demonstrates that the social foundations of early modern Hungarian national consciousness extended considerably beyond the legal framework of the estate-based political nation. Recognition of societal estate divisions did not necessarily entail an absence of national communal consciousness. On the contrary, numerous sources examined proceed from the premise that nobles and non-nobles alike belonged to the same historical community: although their social and legal status differed, they were united by descent, language and homeland.

One of the dissertation's important conclusions is that the Ottoman presence transformed Hungary's political and military structures and also proved decisive in the history of identity. The struggle against the Turks and the Germans contributed significantly to the recognition of a community of interests and sentiments between

nobles and peasants, which ultimately fostered a sense of shared destiny. The national bond between lord and servant was on occasion explicitly preached by clergymen, demonstrating that national and religious identities were not mutually exclusive but could, in many cases, reinforce one another.

Another important finding is that several of the leading aristocratic thinkers of the period moved beyond the exclusivity of the estate-based concept of the nation. Miklós Zrínyi's intellectual legacy is particularly noteworthy in this respect. In my analysis of Áfium, I argue that the assertion that nobles and non-nobles were "woven from the same cloth" was not merely a rhetorical embellishment, but carried a deliberate political meaning. By emphasising the common origins of nobles and non-nobles, and by referring to the peasantry as an estate, Zrínyi expressed the view that social differences did not override the unity of the national community.

The findings of the research also contribute to a reassessment of certain questions in the history of the Hungarian nation. The coexistence of estate-based and cultural-ethnic forms of national consciousness demonstrates that the configurations of identity in the early modern period were far more complex than earlier historiographical models often assumed. It is clear that the non-noble strata were not merely passive recipients of national thought. In connection, for example, with the Bocskai uprising and the wars against the Ottomans, they repeatedly invoked the unity of the Hungarian nation at their own initiative out of self-employed political and patriotic conviction. From the perspective of research into

national identity, it is no longer tenable to emphasise the exclusive role of political elites in shaping Hungarian national consciousness during the 16th and 17th centuries.

Part IV: Publications Related to the Dissertation

- Magyarságtudat és hadviselés kapcsolata a török kori Magyarországon *(The Relationship of Hungariannes and Warfare in Turkic Era Hungary)*, *AXIS*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 51–66, 2026.
- Magyar várakozások – nyugati reakciók *(Hungarian Expectations – Western Reactions)*, *VALÓSÁG: TÁRSADALOMTUDOMÁNYI KÖZLÖNY*, vol. 67, no. 6, pp. 17–26, 2024.
- Jenő Szűcs, The Historical Construction of National Consciousness. Selected Writings. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022, 354 pp. £75.00 (hbk), *NATIONS AND NATIONALISM*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 388–390, 2023.
- Hungarian Nationhood in the Light of the Ethnosymbolist Theory, *EPHEMERIS HUNGAROLOGICA*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 48–68, 2023.
- Nem-nemesi nemzettudat a törökkori Magyarországon *(Non-Noble National Consciousness in Turkic Era Hungary)*, in Bank, Barbara; Millei, Mónika; Kovács, Bálint; Medgyesi S., Norbert (Eds.): *A Kaukázustól a Lajtáig: Apokaliptika, identitás, történelem és művelődés Közép- és Kelet-Európában II.* Budapest, Erdélyi Szalon Könyvkiadó. pp. 12–26, 2023.

- Nemzetépítő felekezetek Közép-Európában *(Nation-Building Denominations in Central Europe)*, *VALÓSÁG: TÁRSADALOMTUDOMÁNYI KÖZLÖNY*, vol. 65, no. 6, pp. 18–23, 2022.
- Nation Building in Central Europe, *HUNGARIAN REVIEW*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 44–52, 2022.