

CEU Graceh conference

Counter-Reformation, Social Discipline and Modernization in the Habsburg Monarchy: The Catholic Feast and the Transylvanian Saxons

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The feast in Early Modern Europe played not only an important church-religious role, but a political, cultural, economic and social one as well. A clear distinction between the sacred and the profane time was established during the Reformation, and it became an important identity component in confessional churches. Considering that the feast during the Early Modern period played a multifunctional role, my main claims for the Transylvanian Saxon case in the 18th century are: the Catholic feast represented for the Habsburg archdukes in Transylvania a Counter-Reformation/catholicization instrument (1); it played an important role in the process of social discipline (2); and eventually, it represented a political instrument in the process of “modernizing” the Transylvanian Saxon society (3).

1. Counter-Reformation or Catholicization

The Habsburg confessional politics in Transylvania during the 18th century was deeply marked by baroque practices. The Habsburg Catholic feast represented an important component of the Counter-Reformation/Catholicization because it was meant to forcefully implement a “catholic piety” among the Lutherans. Thus, starting with the fourth decade in the 18th century, the archdukes of Vienna constantly claimed the observance of all Catholic imperial decreed feasts. As compared to the number of the Lutheran feasts, those of the Catholics were twice in number. Moreover, Catholic feasts represented a threat to the Lutherans because they were not accepted as “official” feast days¹ and, subsequently, the respective confessional identity was affected. The process started in 1731 when Charles VI emitted a rescript for Transylvania, claiming that non-

¹ The Lutheran Church of Transylvania established the number of feast days in the Agenda of 1547, and it remained the principal guide for the Saxons in Transylvania until the 18th century. The official feast days of the Church were the followings: Heiliger drei KoenigTag, The conversion of Paul, The Purification of Maria, the Holy Easter with the following two days, Philipp and Jacob, Ascension of Christ, the Pentecost with the successive two days, Ioan Botezătorul, Peter and Paul, Visitationis Mariae, Jakob, Bartolomeus, Mathias, Michael, Simon and Juda, Andre, Toma and the Holy Christmas with the successive two days.

Catholics had to observe the Catholic feasts as well. Maria Theresa continued this policy by issuing several orders in this sense (1751, 1752, 1753, 1757 and 1763). Consequently, Protestants were asked to attend the church during the Catholic feast days; to behave decently; and, in accordance with the imperial prerequisites, to abstain from any kind of commercial and lucrative activity. Thus, this policy questions the following: what was the main confessional target of Vienna; and what impact did it have on the Lutherans? Certainly, these measures were meant to familiarize Protestants with Catholicism and create a kind of confessional uniformity by the practice of a common piety. Secondly, these measures were to be assumed by the Lutherans in order “to live like Catholics;” their implementation signified the acceptance of Catholic ecclesiastic norms without being compelled to convert to Catholicism. In this way, the confessional transformation would have been gradual and only in practice, which probably would have facilitated a later conversion. In general, the attempt of Vienna to make Lutherans observe the Catholic feast encountered resistance at the local level. The latter instills the question: what kind of resistance was it? Confessional, social or economic? The official pretext had always been economic: the huge number of Catholic feasts represented an impediment for economic activities and for this reason the Saxons did not comply with the policy. Considering the fact that in many cases the Lutheran Saxons neglected the norms of their own church as well - most often by working and misbehaving - I claim that this argument may be accepted to a limited extent. Nevertheless, the confessional aspect should not be neglected. According to an imperial decree in 1746, the Protestant clergy had to announce the Catholic feasts in the church, in order to prevent the subjects from working during these days. Considering the numerous cases when Catholic priests complained about the Lutherans disregarding them, I incline to believe that the Lutheran clergy manifested a passive attitude which represented a “tacit” confessional resistance. Consequently, the politics of Vienna in this respect were a partial failure. By military support, Lutherans could be compelled to attend the Church during the Catholic feasts as many sources testify; however, this did not bring about an enduring confessional transformation or “acculturation” among the Lutherans.

2. Social discipline

The feast during the Early Modern Europe had an important role in the process of both ecclesiastic and social discipline. By issuing norms on feast days the state could control to a large extent the behaviors of the subjects. In praxis, this signified control on political, economic, social and confessional activity. Starting with the 16th century, the diet in Transylvania coupled with the Lutheran Church established the number of feast days and issued norms of behavior which people had to assume during this time of feast: a pious attitude, church attendance, and catechism, abstinence from work, descent behavior and especially to avoid scandalous parties. Similar requirements had been established by the archdukes of Vienna in order to prevent natural catastrophes, epidemics and wars in Transylvania as well (for eq.1737).

During the 18th century most of the Catholic states took up reforms in this field, and reduced the number of feasts in several waves. The reasons for these measures were both economic and moral. On the one hand, the Viennese cameralists targeted to increase the number of working days and on the other one, they aimed to avoid idleness and debauchment. In the Habsburg monarchy the reduction of feast days occurred in 1753 and in 1771. The norms - valid for all Catholics as well as for non-Catholics - prescribed the number of feast days. Notably, they regulated the work activity, in the sense that during certain feasts, work was permitted under a number of conditions from 11 o'clock a.m.

The question here is what impact did the Viennese politics have on the Lutheran Saxon society in Transylvania? To what extent the control mechanism of Vienna was a success among the Saxons? As many sources testify, at the local level, the norms Vienna required encountered resistance. The guardian of the Catholic feast was the local Catholic clergy and certainly, the Austrian soldiers. The numerous incidents between the Saxons and the soldiers may suggest that the implementation of the Viennese legislation failed. It was so because the number of feast days for the Saxons was still considerably high and consequently they ignored the norms in the field. The paradox in this case resides as well in the fact that the reforms carried out by Vienna served more as confessional pretext, in the sense that they were meant as well to "reconfessionalize" the Saxon population. For this reason the local "resistance" should be confessionally understood.

3. Modernization

A final issue - which I will approach here- is the “modernization” of the Saxon society. As in many other sectors of the political, social and cultural life, the Habsburgs substituted to the Saxon political and ecclesiastic authority. In praxis, this signified the transformation of the Saxon society, and more specific, the replacement of the old Saxon political tradition with the Habsburg one. A relevant example in this sense is the state overall control of feast time. Local particularities were subjected to a gradual transformation, so that the Habsburgs proclaimed a unique and uniform time -be it secular or sacred- for the whole territory.