

FERENC RÁKÓCZI II: *MÉMOIRES*

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Prince of Transylvania Ferenc Rákóczi II's work *Mémoires sur la guerre de Hongrie depuis 1703 jusqu'à sa fin* is a political apologia in a theological-spiritual setting, and at the same time a source for the history of the period, a personal voice documenting historical thinking and an original piece of writing. Its subject is the history of the struggle for independence from Austria that was waged in Hungary and Transylvania from 1703 to 1711, during the War of Spanish Succession, led by Prince Ferenc Rákóczi with the financial support of Louis XIV. This war tied down significant imperial forces in the eastern part of the Habsburg Empire for years, prevented the creation of a line of fortresses planned in the west, and delayed the victory of the Grand Alliance over Louis XIV. At the same time, Rákóczi failed to realise that the War of Spanish Succession was not being fought over the balance of power in Europe but in order to defeat France and force its empire back in the interests of the other participants. He did not accept the offer of peace made in 1706 through the mediation of England and Holland, and in the following year the Hungarian National Assembly, sitting at Ónod, dethroned Emperor Joseph I as king of Hungary. In September 1709, after the strengthening of the situation of France, Louis XIV cut off his support for the now failing revolt, and in 1710 came a change in direction of English foreign policy. In the hopeless situation, Rákóczi went to Poland in early 1711; his abandoned forces suffered a decisive defeat some months later and peace was made without his involvement. In early 1713 Rákóczi went to France, calling in England on the way, and Louis XIV welcomed him at court; he did not, however, achieve

his aim of bringing his person and his dreams of independence to the attention of the international peace negotiators, and in 1715 the Hungarian National Assembly banished him. The immediate consequences of his political activity were not favourable to Hungary and Transylvania, while he himself did not become a person of standing in European history.

The work derives its value as a historical source primarily because it relates many facts, unobtainable from elsewhere, about events in the Freedom War, those taking part, and military, political and diplomatic relationships, to a significant extent based on Rákóczi's own experiences. He tries to observe himself, his actions and his surroundings critically, often weighing up reasons, circumstances and consequences. Compared with what was usual at the time he holds a modern view of, for example, questions of taxation and religious toleration, and his benevolence towards the common people goes far beyond the feudal-patriarchal norm. The critical view-point and the consciously adopted personal tone link the work closely to items of a similar nature in contemporary European memoir-literature.

For the most part, the account deals only with events in which Rákóczi took part, or which he followed attentively. He was usually present himself at scenes that he describes and knew personally most of the characters presented. Events, scenes and persons, however, are not depicted in consistent detail. In the diplomatic sphere, even concerning talks that he conducted himself, he is especially restrained. He remains silent about important events, and there is the occasional factual error. He is aware of these deficiencies: in the dedicatory letter to the *Eternal Truth* that was subsequently prefixed to the work, he excuses himself for them and indicates that posterity will be able to correct errors and the omissions of his memory by means of sources preserved in his archive.

Value as a historical source is limited by Rákóczi's subjective, often passionate, sometimes biased attitude and views on national independence. In the first place, he was better acquainted with the people that belonged to his immediate surroundings, while he was not always able to assess realistically the actions of officers and soldiers operating in remote theatres, or the events there. It happens

that in drawing certain characters he reflects later events and feelings, which actually leads to distortion. His judgements of others are sometimes merciless. Sometimes he lacks clarity of political vision, and he deals relatively rarely with the deeper aspects of the processes of foreign and domestic policy. He acknowledges openly that he has often acted thoughtlessly and without circumspection. His self-criticism is on the whole soundly based, but it is often excessive, and that exaggeration is to no small extent the outcome of defensive and penitent behaviour.

Rákóczi pays particular attention to military questions and to social concerns. He deals repeatedly with problems of preparedness, suitability and morale in the army, and on a number of occasions discusses questions of finance, weapons and lack of organisation. He analyses the situations, interests and political views of the various social groups. He exposes the shortcomings of the aristocracy, the clergy and the nobility, points out the consequences of the double taxation of the peasantry and sees clearly the conflicts in society. He is relatively little concerned over the economic situation of Hungary and Transylvania and shows it through the mirror of imperial plundering or the consequences of the war. He ascribes the failure of the Freedom War primarily to shortages of money and weapons, the modest level of assistance from France, the plague and his own extreme ambition. He explains his failure in diplomacy as resulting from the conditions of the times, and the disinterest shown by French foreign policy and the ill-will of certain of its officials. He over-rates the possibilities open to Hungarian foreign policy, the assistance to be expected from France and his own role, and misjudges the way in which international interests and balances of power are developing. He failed to acknowledge that from Hungary he could exert little if any influence on the policy of the great powers, and the development of this policy was more and more restrictive of the country's room for manoeuvre and his own opportunities. Nor did he realise that the Ottoman Empire had lost its military and technical superiority and had fallen significantly behind Europe.

His career as a writer essentially began with the Freedom War. At the time he wrote in a number of genres, principally political proc-

lamations and speeches, polemic, military notes, political dialogue, theorising and declaration, letters and devotional texts. *Mémoires* is a strangely hybrid work in terms of genre, occupying an intermediate position between classic political memoir and Augustinian *confessio*: a personal variant of the former, tinted in places with elements of the latter. Rákóczi is not an objective observer who conceals himself and is only to be recognised indirectly through the opinions that he forms of others; although he focuses throughout on his public activity he deliberately places his own personality in the foreground and reveals his most personal experiences and thoughts.

There are a number of reasons for believing that *Mémoires* is, in a sense, the continuation of the Freedom War with pen instead of sword. The literary interest of the work comes mainly from the perceptive, sensitive portrayals that Rákóczi gives of several of his contemporaries and his vivid descriptions of scenes from battles and talks; his depictions of regions and local areas testify to his powers of observation and ability to bring out significant features. The personal tone, the self-reflective gestures, the dynamic mode of narration and the way in which the Hungarian-speaking author attempts to adopt the style of French classicism make the work unique.

As a preliminary to composition, during the War Rákóczi systematically collected his notes on events and arranged them in chronological order. He began to write *Mémoires* in the spring of 1717, in exile in the Camaldulian monastery at Grosbois (now Yerres) near Paris, under the influence of his invitation to Turkey; this would mean interrupting work on Book I of *Confessio peccatoris*, the overarching account of his whole life which he had begun shortly before Christmas 1716. It seems likely, from a textual reference, that he completed the first draft of *Mémoires* before the August of that year, and then continued working on it while in Turkish exile at Rodostó (modern Tekirdağ). It was certainly finished in 1730, because the reader's report attached to the copy preserved in the Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères in Paris is dated in the December of that year. Rákóczi may have added the dedicatory letter to the Eternal Truth some time later, after 1720. Another manuscript, also corrected and amended by Rákóczi, is in the Österreichische Nation-

albibliothek, Vienna, to which it came from the library of the Swedish diplomat Carl Rudenschöld, chancellor of the University of Uppsala. Other roughly contemporary copies too have remained extant.

In *Confessio* Rákóczi avoided the account of the history of the Freedom War and deliberately separated the two works. Genre, language and purpose are different, while at the same time the two are closely connected in content and viewpoint and complement one another in terms of chronology too. Although in both works Rákóczi had posterity in mind as his audience, he intended *Mémoires* for the public of the day, for Western European public opinion, rather than *Confessio*. Whereas he chose Latin as the language of the latter, for the former he chose French. When the same event occurs in both works he takes at times a different view, gives a different emphasis, and characterisations do not always match. In Book II of *Confessio*, begun in February 1718, he had in mind the content of *Mémoires* and refers to it. His main purpose with *Mémoires* was to inform the European public of the causes of the Freedom War and his intentions, and to justify his actions. After the peace treaty that ended the War of Spanish Succession he wanted once more to bring the affair of Hungary and Transylvania before international public opinion and tried to counteract the propaganda activity of the Viennese court. Furthermore, he would have liked somehow to justify the lost war and the considerable price paid for a victory that was not achieved. It is not impossible that his plan for the joint publication of *Mémoires* and other documents to do with Hungary and the War was already formulated at Groisbois.

The principal source on which Rákóczi called was his own recollection, and he says nothing of any written sources – but with regard to these it should be considered that his letters and political writings before 1716 contain ideas which return in *Mémoires*. It may be supposed that he took with him into exile some of his most personal writings, the journals from the campaign and the court, the diplomatic and parliamentary diaries. In diplomatic correspondence arising during his time in Poland he referred to his writings of earlier years, at least some of which he may have taken to France and used in his work. After his death some of his papers were kept in the French

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embassy in Constantinople, and in 1711 were sent to France; all trace of them has, however, been lost in the Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères. An important secondary source was the *viva voce* accounts of others such as emissaries, generals and soldiers. In the events of 1711, for example, he relies on his conversation with the imperial General János Pálffy, from which he learnt further details of the previously described battles of Lipótvár (now Leopoldov) and Trencsén (now Trenčín).

In the letter prefixed to the work and separately addressed, Rákóczi lays out the dual purpose of self-apologia and self-criticism, declares the duality of the historical and eschatological point of view, explains his principles in using the genre, and draws up his creed as a writer. He addresses directly the Eternal Truth, that is to say, God the Creator, Providence. This is at the same time the writer's projected ideal, his guiding principle: he would like to relate, as he sees it, the "eternally" valid truth. His tone is correspondingly lofty, strongly rhetorical, reminiscent of the basic penitential, ascetic tone of *Confessio*, and differs sharply from the style of the work proper. Here too there arises self-accusation, the thought of his own sinfulness. He calls the greater part of the things that he describes the work of "sinful cupidity" and love of self. He chastises his own vanity, his pride and search for worldly glory, and admits that he has often acted thoughtlessly and arrogantly. Whereas in *Confessio* he reveals the "inside of his heart" and the motivation of his actions, here he declares his intention to speak of his "outward acts" and to tell the "naked truth". In the interpretation of his actions self-criticism is linked to the idea of predestination. He emphasises that he does not wish to go into every detail, and that his opinion does not always coincide with the judgement of others. He asks the reader to bear in mind, in judging the work, the complexity of the social and religious conditions and power structure of the time.

After the dedicatory letter the text of *Mémoires* is divided by paragraphs more or less into units of thought, and there is no further editorial division of the work. The description of the events of the Freedom War follows chronological order. The text indicates, on the whole, the beginnings and ends of years, and where it does not

the divisions are easily recognised. *Mémoires* opens with Rákóczi's patriotic profession, which shows a close connection with *Confessio* in terms of content, but there is no introduction of the preliminaries to the Freedom War at the start of the work, whereas in the final section there is reference to the discussions following the peace treaty that ended the War and other diplomatic activity. Before the events of 1704 Rákóczi reviews the Hungarian struggles for freedom over the preceding two centuries, which means something of a break in the narrative, and he fits the Freedom War in which he was leader into the history of national wars waged in defence of liberties. In this he introduces and criticises the social system of the Estates and analyses the situation of the rightless peasantry, while linking the idea of independence with the well-being of society.

The principal units of content are descriptions of the military actions, sieges, captures of castles and towns, movements of troops and peace talks, the assessment – not always free of emotion – of the reasons for victory and defeat, the discussion of tactical questions and the learning of lessons. The events of 1703 are Rákóczi's move from Poland to Hungary at his peasants' call, the organising of the insurrection, the joining in of the poorer nobility and the spread of the war to ever greater areas of the country. In the following year one may pick out the perceptive depiction of disagreements among the generals and their mutual distrust, the campaigns in western Hungary, and conflicts within the army and between the religious denominations, together with Rákóczi's election as prince of Transylvania. The year 1705 sees the account of the reception of the marquis Des Alleurs, Louis XIV's ambassador; Rákóczi is elected prince of the Confederate Estates of Hungary, and he gives an account of his attempt to prevent imperial forces entering Transylvania. Here he also sums up the parlous condition of the army.

Among the events of the following year he tells of the visits paid him, with imperial permission, by his wife and sister, the decisions of the Senate in session in Miskolc and the course taken by the peace talks at Nagyszombat (now Trnava). Worthy of mention in 1707 is his installation as prince of Transylvania, his description of the first signs of collapse and the reasons for it, the National Assembly

at Ónod that dethroned the Habsburgs and his diplomatic efforts. From 1708 onward the account becomes more and more terse and he remains deliberately silent over some of the things that happen, even though he had taken part in them. From this point on losses and the account of loss of ground by the insurrection receive more and more emphasis, as do the search for causes and the detailing of various difficulties. From the final year accounts of the circumstances of Rákóczi's taking refuge in Poland receive close attention. He accounts for his abandoning the country as complying with the wish of the part of the Senate that had remained in Hungary. His retention of the title of prince he justifies by the request of his Transylvanian councillors and his election by the Estates. Here too he points out that he remains silent about the talks that he carried on abroad in the course of the War.

The concept of history that is evident in the work is at the same time realist and theocentric in nature. It is linked to the view of history shown in the propaganda for the Freedom War and is substantially identical with the way in which affairs are seen in *Confessio*. In Rákóczi's eyes, a man's destiny – looking back on events with the benefit of hindsight – is determined by Divine Providence; he considers history – in keeping with the views of Bossuet, Fénelon and others, which were well known to him – to be the work of Providence. This concept of history provides the basis for his main political objective: the regaining of the lost liberty of Hungary and the Principality of Transylvania, and the proclamation of the rightfulness of the insurrection against the Habsburg rulers as infringers of Hungarian law. He would like to realise his purpose by uniting the various groups in society, ethnicities and denominations. His desire for liberty is linked to the tradition of independence in seventeenth-century Hungarian political thought, and above all within that to the ideals of Miklós Zrínyi. He repeatedly states that he regards the restoration of the independence of the country as his God-given duty and national mission. Thus *Mémoires* both transmits a political idea and betokens a moral stance.

Rákóczi's attitude to history and reality is characterised by his repeated statement that he has always put the national interests be-

fore his own. At the same time he fails to say that a not inconsiderable part of the political élite of Hungary and Transylvania remained aloof from the Freedom War, and he mentions either by inference or not at all the enormous losses that the War caused to Hungary and Transylvania.

Throughout, the figure and personality of Rákóczi are at the focus of the narration. He gives himself out as the main director of events, although in fact he was only partly that, and as time went by less and less so. He shows events, situations and people as seen through his own eyes, and all of it with great powers of presentation. In the first two years in particular he describes events in detail, principally those in which he revealed his persistence, courage and humanity, his military and political acumen, but he does not remain silent about those in which he suffered disaster. He depicts battles and negotiations from the viewpoint of military leader or diplomat respectively. From 1708 onward the presentation is uneven, and a presentiment of a bad outcome appears. In the final section he portrays in clear outline, not without feeling, his talks with Sándor Károlyi and János Pálffy as he prepares to make peace, and assesses his entire activity up to then. Here he excuses himself for the errors made on the grounds of youth and inexperience.

The rich variety of descriptions, character sketches, and social, political and diplomatic explanations produces a dynamic style of presentation. In factual, concise descriptions Rákóczi attends to minute detail and recalls situations, circumstances and conversations perceptively. In the depiction of battle scenes he tries hard to convey precisely technical problems and strategic situations and gives a sense of the condition of the army, the conduct and morale of officers and men. Sometimes he inserts brief details and descriptions of scenes that would not be out of place in a novel. In the portraits drawn from the life of the senior officers he concentrates on the motivation for their actions and their inner qualities; they are figures personally known to him and he endeavours to present nuanced accounts. He lists at some length, for examples, the shortcomings of Miklós Bercsényi, the generalissimo, at the same time coming to his defence against what he sees as unjust accusations. In his characteri-

sation of his stepfather, Imre Thököly, he puts an ironic judgement of Thököly's style of leadership and pro-Turkish policies into the mouths of Hungarians who have returned from Turkey. In presenting Sándor Károlyi, named in Book II of *Confessio* as a perfidious traitor for signing the treaty of Szatmár, he tries to be relatively objective. He takes particular care over the introduction of the foreign soldiers and diplomats, especially the French. He draws the minor characters neatly, often in few but factual words.

French was not Rákóczi's natural medium. It indicates the deliberate nature of his language and style that a couple of years before he died he called on the help of César de Saussure, who had come to the court in Rodostó, to improve his text. Even so, the style shows a degree of irregularity, but on the whole his contemporaries accepted it sympathetically. The prose of *Mémoires* is characterised by compact and yet vigorous drafting, relative poise, knowledge of the rules of rhetoric and moderate use of its devices. Further marks of style include logical sentence-structure, restrained sentimentality, rhetorical questions, deliberate omissions, irony and self-irony. There is a striking contrast between the lofty, pathetic style and theatricality of the dedicatory letter and the generally realistic, down-to-earth presentation of the body of the work.

According to de Saussure, Rákóczi gave one manuscript of *Mémoires* to Louis Molitard, a member of his bodyguard, in 1734; he took it to Paris at the end of that year, but the prince made him promise that it would not be published during his lifetime. The work was first published by the well known printer and bookseller Jean Neaulme in The Hague in 1739, four years after Rákóczi's death, in an anthology titled *Histoire des Révolutions de Hongrie*. Publication of the anthology was in two formats, and involved the collaboration of French and Dutch printers, engravers and booksellers. The first part covers the period from the establishment of the Kingdom of Hungary until 1699, when peace was declared between the Holy League and the Turkish Porte in the Treaty of Karlowitz. The second part deals with the conduct, events and consequences of the Hungarian Freedom War of 1703–11 and with Rákóczi's biography, and reproduces relevant documents. The two parts were presum-

ably compiled by Rákóczi's diplomat Domokos Brenner, Provost of Szepes. Rákóczi's *Mémoires* are to be found in the third part, that is, the second volume of the quarto edition and the fifth volume and the beginning of the sixth of the octavo edition. The final part contains a spurious autobiography of Miklós Bethlen, chancellor of Transylvania, compiled by Dominique Révérend, a French diplomat who had been in Transylvania in the 1670s; this had appeared three years earlier in Rouen. Detailed notes on the contents of the whole publication, together with an index of place- and personal names with comments for Rákóczi's work, are by Prosper Marchand, who edited the anthology.

Its publication and sale were announced in *Journal des Sçavans* and *Mémoires des Trévoux*. Longer accounts of it were given in vol. 19 (1739) of *Observations sur les écrits modernes*, edited by abbé Desfontaines, in the October 1739 and April 1740 numbers of abbé Prévost's *Le Pour et Contre*, and the March 1740 issue of *La Nouvelle Bibliothèque*. From then on, the anthology, and most of all Rákóczi's *Mémoires* that it contained, had a constant influence on French historical writing and political thought, and for decades coloured European ideas of Hungary, Hungarian history and the Hungarians.

Copies of *Histoire des Révolutions de Hongrie* containing *Mémoires* were frequently to be found in eighteenth-century libraries. Voltaire refers to it in one place in *Essai sur les mœurs*, and recalls Rákóczi in the conclusion of *Candide*. Claude Michel de Sacy uses *Mémoires* as a source, and *Histoire générale des Hongrois*, published in Paris in 1778 and dedicated to Maria Theresa, speaks appreciatively, but at the same time critically, of the figure of Rákóczi and the Freedom War. In Hungary sale of the anthology was banned by the censor, but it was present in numerous private libraries. In 1779 an opinion of the imperial censorship condemned it on account of expressions critical of the House of Habsburg, but found that reading it was profitable "to persons of learning". In the Hungary of the 1780s *Mémoires* encouraged opposition to the Habsburgs among the nobility, and some members of the Jacobin movement corresponded about the significance of *Histoire des Révolutions de Hongrie*. Hungarian historiography discovered *Mémoires* only at the turn of the

eighteenth-nineteenth centuries, when several complete or partial translations into Latin were made – those, however, remained in manuscript. The first complete translation into Hungarian was made in 1839–40, but was published only in 1861. Five years later a variant of this translation was published, revised by Kálmán Thaly, the leading figure in national Romantic historiography. The literary Hungarian translation in use today appeared in 1948, and its revised version for the critical edition in 1978. The translations are faithful reflections of the work and its interpretations of the political thought and moral stance that it projects.

Nevertheless, reading *Mémoires* and *Confessio* together is worthwhile, because – despite a huge amount of research and publication of source-material – the historiographic assessment of the Freedom War and the whole of the so-called Rákóczi age is not settled even today, numerous problems remain to be solved, and variously idealised myths and images of Rákóczi are in circulation. To this day there are – mainly but not exclusively in Hungary – countless cults, traditions, political enthusiasms and symbolic sentiments connected to the figure of Rákóczi and the Freedom War. A particularly intriguing question is that of the relationship between the different narrators in the two works. They can shed fresh light on the comparative study of works of literature produced in exile and stimulate the deeper understanding of such concepts and constructs as independence, autonomy, sovereignty, national kingdom and patriotism. New lessons can be learnt from their comparison with the journals and memoirs of foreign diplomats, reporters, travellers and officials that came to Hungary at the time of the Freedom War. The systematic critique of parallel passages in the two works may prompt further consideration, and the discovery and comparative analysis of hitherto unknown texts that were influential precursors to the writing of the works may lead to new perceptions.

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