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National Projects, Regional Identities, Everyday Compromises

Szeklerland in Greater Romania (1919–1940)¹

This article analyzes the social and cultural impact of the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy on the overwhelmingly Hungarian-inhabited Szekler region. Although the half-million strong Szekler community found itself in the geographical center of Greater Romania, most people considered the Versailles peace settlement temporary. This created a paradoxical situation, for as the Szekler minority began to develop separately from the culture of post-Trianon Hungary, Hungarian intellectuals and former civil servants living within the borders of post-1918 Romania started to promote a cult of a supposedly “pure” and untouched Szeklerness. The first part of the article places the question of Szekler identity-building in a general theoretical framework and briefly sketches the political, social and demographic background of the community. The second part will analyze specific strategies of identity building that were pursued from outside the Szeklerland (e.g. the Szekler renaissance under the Horthy regime in Hungary) and from above (e.g. the constructions of “Szeklerness” by the intelligentsias in both Hungary and the Szeklerland). Finally, I will assess the influence of early Transylvanism on the building of Szekler identities in the interwar period.

Keywords: Szekler, Greater Romania, local nationalism, ethnic identity, autonomy plans

After the end of World War I the creation of Greater Romania forced the most compact Hungarian-speaking Transylvanian community to find its place in the Romanian nation-state. Since the political history of the Hungarian minority in the interwar period and the Romanian–Hungarian conflict over Transylvania have been covered extensively in the historiography,² this paper will instead

1 This paper was originally presented at the conference “Greater Romania’s National Projects: Ideological Dilemmas, Ethnic Classification, and Political Instrumentalisation of Ethnic Identities,” held at Oxford Brookes University on April 10–12, 2008. I would like to thank R. Chris Davis and Eric B. Weaver for reading drafts and offering insightful feedback. The final version of this paper has been supported by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (OTKA), Tender K-104408.

2 Rogers Brubaker et al., *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Holly Case, *Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea During World War II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Béni L. Balogh, *The Second Vienna Award and the Hungarian–Romanian Relations 1940–1944* (Boulder, Colo.: Social Science Monographs, 2011). For an entangled approach to the Romanian/Hungarian conflict in a Central European perspective László Péter,

concentrate on the representation of the Szekler community by elites both inside and outside the Szeklerland. A peasant community at the periphery of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy enjoying a broad level of autonomy in the Middle Ages, the Szeklers faced the challenges of modernization and the centralization of Hungarian state-power from the nineteenth century onwards. When Transylvania was separated from Hungary after World War I, the Szeklers found themselves in the geographical center of another country, Greater Romania, but they remained a “majority minority” in their home counties. These unprecedented historical circumstances stimulated an intellectual debate on the long-term fate of this group, which could not be defined as a separate minority from the Transylvanian Hungarians, yet had its own specific social history and a different sense of belonging to the Hungarian nation.³

Following John Hutchinson’s model of cultural nationalism, one could argue that the Szekler modern *self* was constructed starting from the last decades of the nineteenth century against the centralizing tendencies of both the Hungarian and the Romanian elites, through a process of conscious isolation and “self-orientalization,” which resulted in a deeply interiorized and assumed remoteness.⁴ Recently, a new wave of interest has risen in the international scholarship regarding Szekler identity and competing Hungarian and Romanian nationalisms. Young students of the origins of modern Szekler identity point out that the very core of these identification codes could go back to widely-circulating nineteenth-century narratives regarding “remote borderlands”,⁵ while Eric B. Weaver analyses the

evolution of the national discourse on the Hungarian minority communities during the interwar period.⁶ Taking László Kürti’s book as their point of departure (a book which represented a potentially very valuable contribution, but which failed to identify clearly the perspective from which Transylvania constitutes a remote borderland—i.e. a Romanian, Hungarian, or European perspective—and also neglected to examine the impact of changing political context on the province’s imagery), these authors concentrate on the myth-producing role of Hungarian cultural elites, such as ethnographers, anthropologists, writers and artists—who envisioned the Szekler region as an ideal, isolated and “pure” land.⁷

The first part of the article places the question of Szekler identity-building in a general theoretical framework, and briefly sketches the political, social and demographic background of the community. The second part will analyze specific strategies of identity building that were pursued from outside the Szeklerland (e.g. the renaissance of myths related to the Szekler past under the Horthy regime in Hungary) and from above (e.g. the constructions of “Szeklerness” by the intelligentsias in both Hungary and the Szeklerland). Finally, I will assess the influence of early Transylvanism on the building of Szekler identities in the interwar period, and furthermore explain why plans for and conceptions of Szekler autonomy failed to arouse any significant public interest in either Romania or Hungary, leaving only one solution on which there was any consensus in Hungarian public: a border revision that would make Hungarian-inhabited areas of Transylvania part of Hungary.

The Szekler Question in a Historical Perspective

The Szekler question is a complicated and highly disputed issue. In a regional perspective, their massive presence in territorial Romania since 1918 was at the heart of a political and diplomatic battle with Hungary over the possession of Transylvania. The issue of identity is at least as crucial if one is to place the Szekler issue into the more general framework of competing nationalisms. Over the last century professional historians and archaeologists, ethnographers,

ed., *Historians and the History of Transylvania* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Balázs Trencsényi et al., eds., *Nation-Building and Contested Identities. Romanian and Hungarian Case Studies* (Budapest–Iași: Regio–Editura Polirom, 2001); Anders E. B. Blomqvist, Constantin Iordachi, Balázs Trencsényi, eds., *Hungary and Romania Beyond National Narratives. Comparisons and Entanglements* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013). For a micro-historical approach focused on a Szekler sub-region, see Gábor Egry, “A megértés határán. Nemzetiség és mindennapok a két világháború közti Háromszéken,” *Limes* 25, no. 2 (2012): 29–50.

3 Károly Kós, *Erdély – kultúrtörténeti vázlat* (Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Szépművészeti Céh, 1929); Béla Pomogáts, *A transzilvánizmus. Az Erdélyi Helikon ideológiája* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1983). A full text bibliography on Transylvanism and ideological debates on the specific features of the Transylvanian identity: Accessed October 3, 2013, <http://adatbank.transindex.ro/belso.php?alk=81&k=5>

4 According to Hutchinson, cultural nationalism seeks to “rediscover” a historically rooted way of life; cultural nationalists share communitarian concerns and act primarily as moral and social innovators. See his classical book *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London: Allen&Unwin, 1987) and the more recent article “Re-Interpreting Cultural Nationalism,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 45, no. 3 (1999): 392–409.

5 Several doctoral projects recently started at US universities are tackling this issue: Zsuzsanna Magdó (History Department at the University of Illinois), Petru Szedlacsek (Modern history Department at St. Andrews University), and Marc R. Loustau (Religion Department at Harvard University).

6 Eric B. Weaver, “‘More Hungarian Hungarians, More Human Humans’: Social and National Discourse on Hungarian Minorities in the Interwar Period,” in *Re-Contextualising East Central European History: Nation, Culture and Minority Groups*, ed. Robert Pyrah and Marius Turda (Leeds: Legenda, 2010), 36–54.

7 The outstanding role of Transylvania for Hungarian ethnography is underlined by László Kürti, *The Remote Borderland. Transylvania in the Hungarian Imagination* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 49–76.

novelists, journalists, and politicians have put forth a number of theories on the origins and ethnic belonging of the Szeklers.⁸ As with most public debates on Transylvania, as well as the case of the Hungarian-speaking Csángós of Moldavia, the issue of ethnic and national identity corresponded to concrete political aims pursued both by the Romanian and the Hungarian elites.⁹ Competing theories on the origins of the Szeklers could therefore be used to justify their administrative belonging to Hungary and then Romania. Although standard Hungarian accounts disagreed on the ancient ethnic origins of this population, these accounts maintained that the Szeklers belonged culturally and biologically to the Hungarian nation. Challenging this, many Romanian authors argued that the Szeklers had little or nothing to do with the Hungarians, as they were, in fact, denationalized Romanians who formed a separate ethnic group with longstanding economic ties to the Romanian Old Kingdom.¹⁰

Whatever the predominant ethnic background of the Szeklers might have been, their historical experience as a community did not entirely fit into either of the competing nation-buildings projects.¹¹ In the Middle Ages, Szekler identity had an egalitarian content, and the social pyramid was more democratic than in any other Transylvanian estate.¹² In the Middle Ages a considerable number of the Szeklers lost their personal freedoms and became servants.¹³ As a consequence of the progressive decline of their traditional institutions and the functional crisis of the ancient model of warrior society in the age of

empires and emerging nation-states, Szekler political identity dissolved into the Hungarian political identity.¹⁴

Unlike the German-speaking Saxons, who preserved very homogeneous, closed ethnic and religious communities, Szekler societies evolved from a privileges-based feudal nationalism to local identification codes, which did not conflict with the “standard” Hungarian identity narrative, but operated in growing symbiosis with it.¹⁵ With the Revolution of 1848/49 the Szeklers became part of the modern Hungarian nation: now they not only spoke the “reformed” literary Hungarian, but also made conscious use of Hungarian national symbols, such as the tricolor flag and the national anthem.

From an administrative and economic point of view, however, the Szeklerland could not keep up with the rapid economic development taking place in Budapest—and in the non-Hungarian areas of Transylvania and present-day Slovakia—and therefore remained an internal periphery within the Habsburg Monarchy. Around 1910, an overpopulation of almost 100,000 plagued this mostly rural region, where a cold climate limited the amount of arable land in comparison with forests and grazing grounds. Difficulties were worsened by structural contingencies such as delayed urbanization and the poor railway system, but also the economic crisis provoked by the customs war between Hungary and Romania (1891/93).¹⁶

The cultural level within the Szeklerland, measured in terms of literacy and school attendance, was higher than in other peripheries within the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. However, the political influence of the Szeklers was disproportionally lower because local voters tended to support the opposition parties struggling for greater independence and opposing the 1867 Compromise with Vienna. At the same time, its position as a borderland exposed the Szekler

8 (Turks, Huns, Avars, Scyths, Eszskils, Gepids, more simply Magyars or even Romanians). See the authoritative account of Gyula Kristó, *A székelyek eredete* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2005).

9 On Csángó identity building and the national (Hungarian and Romanian) representations of this archaic local identity see the doctoral dissertation of R. Chris Davis: *Narrating the Past: Constructing a National History of the Romanian Csangos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

10 An overview in Judit Pál, “Erdély népeinek eredetmítosza: a székelyek hun eredetének mítosza,” in *Hatalom és kultúra. Az V. Nemzetközi Hungarológiai Kongresszus (Jyväskylä, 2001. augusztus 6–10.) előadásai II*, ed. József Jankovics and Judit Nyerges (Budapest: Nemzetközi Magyarstudományi Társaság, 2004), 814–22; the historical debate has been summarized by Gusztáv Mihály Hermann, *Náció és nemzet. A székely rendi nacionalizmus és a magyar nemzettudat a XVIII–XIX. században* (Csíkszereda: Pro-Print, 2003), 5–18.

11 In the pre-1526 Hungarian Kingdom, Hungarian-speaking Szeklers lived in the eastern corner of Transylvania as a border guard warrior community, provided with full institutional and cultural autonomy. They were part of the *Unio Trium Nationum* (1438), a coalition of the three Transylvanian estates, along with the Hungarian nobility and the Saxon, ethnic German burghers.

12 Only in 1339 a new definition was mentioned in official documents (*Tria Genera Saxorum*) relating to a new social stratification between *seniores*, *primipili* and the *communitas*, which had broken up the previously egalitarian Szekler society, consisting primarily of free border guards.

13 Hermann, *Náció és nemzet*, 38–42.

14 When in the late seventeenth century Italian humanist Luigi Ferdinando Marsigli visited the semi-independent principality of Transylvania, he mentioned meetings with Hungarians, Saxons, Romanians, Greeks, Armenians, Anabaptists and Gypsies, but not Szeklers. Among the Hungarians he introduced a further distinction between the “true Hungarians” living in the plain along the main rivers, and those inhabiting the mountainous region of *Siculia*, speaking Hungarian with a different accent and the sporadic use of “scythian” words. Hermann, *Náció és nemzet*, 14.

15 The Szekler assimilation into a “national” Hungarian identity run parallel to trends in other European countries – Italian Lombards and Sicilians, French Bretons, or German Bavarians. See also the Transylvanian experience of the merging of the ancient Romanian *moș* identity of the Apușeni mountains into the Romanian national awakening.

16 Károly R. Nyárády, *Erdély népesedéstörténete* (Budapest: KSH Levéltára, 2003), 86. An overview of Szekler urbanization processes before World War I in Judit Pál: *Városfejlődés a Székelyföldön 1750–1914* (Csíkszereda: Pro-Print, 2003).

region to the economic and cultural influences exerted by the Romanian Old Kingdom. The “purest” Hungarians, as depicted by Hungarian official propaganda, were those geographically the furthest removed from Budapest. These outlying Hungarians could easily become a military target as well, as the 1916 Romanian offensive against Transylvania showed, which led to the short-lived occupation of the Szeklerland. But even in peacetime, as a political unit, the Szeklerland was negatively affected by its traditional micro-scale autonomy (the *szék* system), and conditions worsened because of the lack of a true political center. Although the largest Szekler town, Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureș, was overwhelmingly Hungarian (with an increasing Jewish presence), it was situated in the western corner of the Szeklerland. In addition, the Szeklerland’s western countryside (extending towards Kolozsvár/Cluj and the ancient Saxon Segesvár/Sighișoara/Schässburg was predominantly Romanian-inhabited.¹⁷

The popular dissatisfaction with the Hungarian political elite and the liberal economic policies it pursued found expression primarily in a massive wave of migration. Between 1880 and 1940 over 150,000 people left the Szeklerland. Half of them did so under Hungarian rule. Between 1901 and 1915, over 45,000 Szeklers emigrated, mainly to Romania (around 20,000 Hungarians lived in pre-World War I Bucharest) and the United States.¹⁸ In 1902 some 150 local politicians and scholars gathered in Tusnádfürdő/Băile Tușnad for a “Szekler Congress.” In an unusually open and lively debate, participants criticized the economic policies of the ruling Hungarian elite, called for the restoration of Székely autonomous institutions, and asked Budapest to pay more attention to this strategic region.¹⁹ However, their claims were in many ways contradictory: while they complained about centralization they also called for increased state intervention in the economic life of the region. This basic variance—being economically dependent on Budapest or Bucharest yet pursuing greater cultural and regional independence—would remain a feature of Szekler politics throughout the twentieth century.

The Szeklerland in Greater Romania: Demographic Trends and Social Grievances

The incorporation of the Szeklerland into Greater Romania produced a threefold crisis—demographic, political and cultural. According to the 1910 census, 637,000 persons lived the territory of the ancient *széks* in the south-eastern corner of Transylvania.²⁰ The exact number of Szeklers who came under Romanian rule after 1919 is not easy to assess because, in the decades preceding World War I an accelerated process of assimilation of ethnic Romanians into the Hungarian state and society had taken place in a number of Transylvanian counties. The unforeseen and contested territorial changes following World War I caused serious long-term demographic losses in Transylvania (around 200,000 persons up to 1924). The level of migration from the Szeklerland towards Hungary was high, particularly among teachers, civil servants, policemen and military staff. The loss of significant portions of the urban middle class had two major effects on the social structure of the Szekler population. The more immediate and dramatic one was a halting of the urbanization process. Sepsiszentgyörgy/Sfântu Gheorghe, an industrial center 30 km north of Brassó/Brașov/Kronstadt, had 9,000 inhabitants in 1910, and had gained only 1,000 more by 1930. Other small cities suffered even greater losses.²¹ The only city that increased in population, from 26,000 to over 38,000 thousands inhabitants, was the ancient Szekler capital, Marosvásárhely/Târgu Mureș, although several thousand of these newcomers were Romanian public officials replacing their Hungarian predecessors. During the 1920s and the 30s, the high birth rate and the impossibility of emigrating to countries other than Hungary contributed the demographic recovery of the Szeklerland’s total population, which reached 636,112 in 1930 and nearly 700,000 on the eve of the 1940 border revision. The total population fell slightly in Háromszék/Trei Scaune and Udvarhely/Odorhei counties, remained stable in Csík/Ciuc County, and increased in Maros/Mureș County, where significant Romanian immigration was occurring.²²

20 The Szeklerland was historically divided into administrative unities called sieges: Udvarhelyszék, Csíkszék, Háromszék, Marossszék, and the smaller and ethnically mixed Aranyossszék, detached from the proper Szekler territory.

21 Kézdivásárhely/Târgu Secuiesc fell from over 8,000 to 7,364; Székelyudvarhely/Odorheiu Secuiesc lost nearly 20 percent of its population, dropping from 10,244 to 8,518.

22 A demographic overview in Gyula Veress, “A Magyar Autonóm Tartomány népmozgalmáról,” *Korunk* 1, no. 8 (1957): 1476–83.

17 The historical capital of Szeklerland, Székelyudvarhely/Odorheiu Secuiesc was too small and peripheral: it had no direct railway connection to Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureș or Kolozsvár/Cluj, not to mention other major Szekler towns such as Sepsiszentgyörgy/Sfântu Gheorghe) and Gyergyószentmiklós/Gheorgheni.

18 E. Árpád Varga, *Fejezetek a jelenkori Erdély népesedéstörténetéből. Tanulmányok* (Budapest: Püski, 1998), 125.

19 The proceedings were published shortly after: Barna Buday, ed., *A Székely Kongresszus szervezete, tagjainak névsora, tárgyalásai és határozatai*. (Budapest: Pátria, 1902). State intervention during the following decade has been studied by Petra Balaton, “A székely akció története, 1902–1914. Állami szerepvállalás Székelyföld felzárkóztatására” (PhD diss., University of Debrecen, 2006).

Emigration, motivated more by social and economic needs than ethnic harassment, remained the only solution to chronic rural overpopulation. Throughout the interwar period almost 10 percent of the regional population was estimated to have left the Szeklerland, at least temporarily.²³ The majority of Szekler emigrants did not choose Hungary, as had the cultural élite in the early 1920s. Rather, they settled down in the capital, Bucharest, and other industrial centers. The 1930 census found 24,000 ethnic Hungarians living stably in Bucharest, but internal statistics issued by the Roman Catholic and Calvinist parishes showed nearly 50,000 Hungarian churchgoers out of a total population of 700,000 in the Romanian capital.²⁴ In the 1930s, Bucharest probably had the largest Szekler community in the country, while thanks to Szekler migration to the southern Transylvanian city of Brassó/Braşov, the Hungarians—who were traditionally marginalized by the dominant Saxons and the dynamically expanding Romanians—became by 1930 the largest ethnic group in the city, forming the bulk of the city's industrial population.

The strong tendency towards assimilation of minorities who had moved to Bucharest had psychological motivations: people coming from a mono-ethnic world, such as the Szeklers, were not provided with cultural mechanisms of “ethnic immunity.” Being Hungarian was for them *natural*, as the milieu in which they had grown up was exclusively Hungarian speaking, as opposed to the Hungarians living scattered in Southern Transylvania and the Banat, who were exposed to Romanians and Germans, among other ethnic and religious communities. Once these Szeklers settled in a foreign environment and lost contact with their home community, they tended to assimilate quickly and easily. Bucharest, the vibrant capital of an enlarged country, was to them alien and attractive at the same time. Relinquishing a weak national identity opened up channels for social mobility and personal affirmation.

After the creation of Greater Romania, many minorities who could claim some Romanian ancestry found it more convenient to declare themselves Romanian, or else were encouraged by the authorities to do so through the so-called “name analysis.”²⁵ A state-sponsored campaign was launched to win back

individuals who had Romanian-sounding names and belonged to the Orthodox or the Greek Catholic Churches. Under the influence of official Romanian propaganda, about 25,000 persons who supposedly belonged to the Romanian *neam* [race] but had been denationalized or “Szeklerized” over the course of the previous two centuries had their ethnic affiliation changed in the years in which the Romanian census was taken (1920 and 1930) and were subsequently registered as Romanians.²⁶

More important, the internal composition of Szekler society suddenly changed. The old political and economic élites almost disappeared. Unlike Körösvidek/Crişana and central Transylvania (Mezőség/Câmpia Transilvaniei), where Hungarians had been a powerful landowning class until Romania's radical land reform of 1921, most landowners in the Szeklerland were simple farmers participating in a system based on community property (*közbirtokosság*), which was in fact the only consistent remnant of the old feudal Szekler autonomy. The egalitarian and democratic-minded land reform carried out in Greater Romania aimed to strengthen the economic positions of the ethnic Romanian peasantry, especially in the newly acquired provinces.²⁷ Collective property belonging to the Szekler community was confiscated, such as nearly 35,000 acres of *Csíki Magánjavak* [Private Properties of Ciuc], depriving the relatively egalitarian society of its main economic resources.²⁸

Romanian Minority Policy: Failed Assimilation, Short-Lived Compromises

Throughout the interwar period the Szeklerland and the status of the Hungarian/Szekler community became a permanent source of tension between Romania and Hungary. The Szekler issue was frequently exploited for diplomatic purposes by the Budapest governments struggling for border revision. As will be explained in this section, the Hungarian authorities actively stimulated Szekler cultural identity-production but did not support plans for autonomy or independence.²⁹

26 Varga, *Fejezetek a jelenkori Erdély népesedéstörténetéből*, 25.

27 On the 1921 Romanian land reform the best account remains Dumitru Şandru, *Reforma agrară din 1921 în România* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 1975).

28 Lajos Kocsis, *A csíki magánjavak története, 1869–1923*. Erdély Történeti Könyvek 6 (Debrecen: Erdély-történeti Alapítvány, 2006).

29 The extensive financial support of Hungarian institutions by the homeland government has been disclosed by Nándor Bárdi's archival research, “A Keleti Akció – A romániai magyar intézmények anyaországi támogatása az 1920-as években,” in *Magyarságkutató 1995–96*, ed. László Diószegi (Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 1996), 143–90.

23 Stefano Bottoni, *Szétlén a székelyeknél. A Magyar Autonóm Tartomány története (1952–1960)* (Csíkszereda: Pro-Print, 2008), 209.

24 Ignác Romsics, ed., *Magyarok kisebbségben és szóróványban. A Magyar Miniszterelnökség Nemzetiségi és Kisebbségi Osztályának válogatott iratai, 1919–1944* (Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 1995), 276–78.

25 Sándor Bíró, *The Nationalities Problems in Transylvania 1867–1940* (Boulder, Colo.: Social Sciences Monographs, 1992), 420.

Furthermore, the integration of the Szeklerland was a major topic of debate within Romanian political forces. Along with the other new Central European nation-states, in December 1919 Greater Romania signed the Minority Protections Treaty, which provided linguistic rights in relation to education and the administration of towns and districts in which a considerable proportion of the population belonged to racial, religious or linguistic minority. The treaty also envisaged local cultural autonomy for the Saxon and Szekler communities in regard to matters of education and religion. However, failed implementation of this commitment embittered the international quarrel over the status of non-Romanians in Transylvania. Regarding their ethnic kin in Transylvania, Germany and Hungary repeatedly confronted Romania at the League of Nations. Between 1925 and 1938, Szekler representatives also took part in a supranational political organization, the European Congress of Nationalities.³⁰

Romanian policy toward the Szeklers in the interwar period was driven by a confused mixture of different approaches (cultural assimilation versus legal discrimination) that essentially explains the long-term failure to integrate the region and its population into the new Romanian national state. The administrative centralization that followed the dismantling of the Transylvanian provisional autonomous government, the *Consiliul Dirigent* in 1920 relied on the widely shared acknowledgment that it would be impossible to rule this region without making use of centrally planned nationalizing techniques and reordering the region's ethnic composition. All Romanian parties – except the Communists and (less vehemently) the Social Democrats, who saw the Paris peace settlement as an imperialist imposition by the Great Powers – were aware that the Szeklerland, a seemingly isolated area, would otherwise remain an “internal periphery,” mostly peaceful but deeply hostile to Greater Romania and committed to a return to Hungarian rule. Integration at all costs became therefore an imperative for the Romanian political elite. As Irina Livezeanu has noted, the initiatives that were undertaken with the intention of dealing with the Szeklers rested on the assumption that many Szeklers were actually “hidden” Romanians. In the early 1920s the Romanian demographer Sabin Manuilă suggested to the Minister of Education that what was needed was “not a policy of aggression, but one of peaceful assimilation. The sacrosanct dogma toward the Szeklers should be that of assimilation.”³¹

This “separation” approach – whereby Szeklers were culturally and ethnically dissociated from other Hungarians – was also employed to encourage the ethno-national dissimilation of other minorities living among Hungarians in Transylvania: this included promotion of the German-speaking Swabian identity among Magyarized communities living in the northwestern part of Transylvania and the cultivation of a competitive, loyal Romanian Jewish identity among the mostly Hungarian-speaking Transylvanian Jews.³² Romanian policy toward minorities in the 1920s also gave bureaucratic priority to these “cultural zones.” Better salaries, land and other benefits were granted to Romanian teachers willing to take jobs in the multilingual counties that formed an arc from one end of the country to the other: from Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare in northwest Romania, the Szeklerland in eastern Transylvania, and down to Dobrudja on the coast of the Black Sea.³³ However, unlike other small ethnic communities—including the Hungarians and Swabians living in the Banat, or the Russians of Bessarabia—the Szeklers did not live in the periphery of the country, but constituted an absolute majority of a quite large area situated in Romania's new geographical center. As a result, “Their compact presence over whole districts challenged the legitimacy of Romanian territorial claims.”³⁴

One of the very few common features of the conflicting policies carried out by the governments led by the National Liberal and the National Peasant parties between 1920 and 1938 was the attempt to unify the country. Methods and approaches to the Szekler questions of the Transylvanian Peasant Party (*Partidul Național Țărănesc* or PNT), led by Transylvanian-born personalities such as Iuliu Maniu and Alexandru Vaida-Voievod, who had both started their political careers in the late 1890s and had good personal relationships with members of the former Hungarian ruling class, differed only slightly from the explicitly centralizing Liberal Party elite of the capital. It is not surprising that while the Szeklers made up the majority within their own territory, they were always denied self-government on a municipal or county level in the interwar period. The centralization of Greater Romania was justified first and foremost by reasons of national security and the need for stability. The introduction of the French model based on the prefects, who were named by the ruling party and represented its interests, was part of a strategy to concentrate power in

30 Ferenc Eiler, *Kisebbségvédelem és revízió. Magyar törekvések az Európai Nemzetiségi Kongresszuson 1925–1939* (Budapest: MTA Kisebbségkutató Intézet–Gondolat Kiadó, 2007).

31 Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building and Ethnic Struggle, 1918–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 139.

32 Attila Gidó, *Úton. Erdélyi zsidó társadalom- és nemzetépítési kísérletek (1918–1940)* (Csíkszereda: Pro-Print, 2008).

33 Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*, 44–48.

34 Ibid., 138.

trustworthy hands (ethnic Romanians and those Szeklers who had declared themselves Romanian after 1919, the so-called “renegades”) and to prevent “aliens” from playing any significant role in political decision-making.

This policy, ruthlessly pursued by the Liberal governments of the 1920s, proved successful only in the short run. Micro-level ethnic tensions were frequent, but neither the ruling Romanian nor the defeated Hungarian governments were willing to escalate this to the level of street violence. Furthermore, the local population preferred to resort to political instruments (complaints to central authorities in Bucharest, reports to the Hungarian government and the League of Nations, support for international propaganda carried on the Transylvanian question).

Despite facing many forms of discrimination, a large number of Szeklers could, as Romanian citizens, take part in Romanian national elections. Szeklers voted overwhelmingly for the Hungarian National Party (HNP – *Országos Magyar Párt*), electing a remarkable number of Szekler-born MPs who battled their Romanian colleagues in order to defend their ethnic community.³⁵ Nevertheless, the HNP, representing a nationwide minority, was not committed to regional autonomy or special rights for the Szeklers. In the 1920s the Szeklers’ specific cultural and economic issues were sacrificed to the general interests of the Transylvanian Hungarians. The HNP signed a secret pact of understanding with the People’s Party (*Partidul Popular*),³⁶ led by General Averescu, in 1923, and also limited electoral cartels with the National Liberals (1926) and the German Party (1927), before turning back to its original strategy of independence once the royal dictatorship was decreed in 1938.

One consequence of Romanian centralization was a sacrifice of the principle of representation. Unlike the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy—where despite the fact that general elections could easily be manipulated, the real and lively center of local political life was in the city councils and the county assemblies—Greater Romania offered little possibility for settling local issues through institutional compromises. In the period between 1920 and 1938, local elections were held

only twice. In 1926 the HNP, which had formed a coalition with the ruling National Liberal Party, came first in 30 out of 49 Transylvanian towns and in all Szekler urban centers.³⁷ Most of the newly elected city councils, however, were dissolved after a short time and replaced by an executive body (*comisia interimară*) appointed by the central authorities, working side-by-side with the prefect. The successive attempts to mitigate this extreme centralization failed. In 1929 Iuliu Maniu’s “Transylvanian” cabinet introduced a decentralizing administrative reform inspired by the Austro–Hungarian pattern. This moderate measure allowed for the creation of many Hungarian-led local councils in Transylvania after the administrative elections in March 1930, in which the Hungarians were allied with the National Peasant Party.³⁸ However, immediately after Maniu’s government resigned in 1931, the new cabinet led by Nicolae Iorga repealed the reform and replaced all elected bodies.³⁹

While in the 1920s there had been a lively debate among Romanian political actors on decentralization, during the 1930s the issue of internal security prevailed. After the 1938 administrative and constitutional reform issued by King Carol II within the framework of a new, corporatist idea of state power, the older seventy-one counties were merged into ten macro-regions, regardless of ethnic and cultural borders. The four Szekler counties were divided into two regions in which Hungarians came to be a minority.⁴⁰ The royal dictatorship, facing revisionist waves across central Europe, tried to compensate the Hungarian minority by re-enforcing their citizenship rights (of which more than 225,000 Jews were deprived after 1938) and by granting them some collective rights through a minority statute. However, the belated reversal of previous discriminatory policies could not be regarded by Hungarians as an honest gesture.

Greater Romania alienated the Transylvanian Hungarians and the Szekler community because of discrimination, widespread corruption, legal inconsistency and bureaucratic chaos. As Hungarian authors privately recognized, smuggling and institutionalized bribing could help one “survive Romania,” but the harsh anti-Hungarian rhetoric of almost every Romanian government cabinet made it impossible for Szekler élites (with the exception of the so-called few “renegades,”

35 HNP was an underrepresented but stable force in interwar Romanian politics: 26 MPs in 1926, 9 in 1927, 22 in 1928, 12 in 1931, 17 in 1932, 12 in 1933, and 21 in 1937. Further details in Béla György, ed., *Iratok a romániai Országos Magyar Párt történetéhez 1. A vezető testületek jegyzőkönyvei* (Csíkszereda–Kolozsvár: ProPrint–EME, 2003).

36 According to political analyst Imre Mikó, the secret pact signed on October 23, 1923 at Csucsá/Ciucea with the People’s Party of General Averescu represented the most comprehensive attempt to settle the Hungarian question in Transylvania. Imre Mikó, *Huszonkét év. Az erdélyi magyarság politikai története 1918. december 1-től 1940. augusztus 30-ig* (Budapest: Stúdium, 1941), 49.

37 Nándor Bárdi, “A romániai magyarság kisebbségpolitikai stratégiái a két világháború között,” *Regio* 7, no. 2 (1997): 32–67.

38 Dr. László Fritz, “A közigazgatási választások eredményei,” *Magyar Kisebbség* 9, no. 7 (1930): 234–39, and idem, *Magyar Kisebbség* 9, no. 15–16 (1930): 554–64.

39 This point was underlined by Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe Between the Two World Wars* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974), 302.

40 Mikó, *Huszonkét év*, 214–15.

who ostensibly got full access to the political sphere) to accept their integration into the new, nationalizing Romanian state. When these Szekler elites tried to promote regional interests or reach consensus with Romanian political élites, Romanian authorities often made a purely instrumental, short-sighted use of these attempts.

Most of the discriminative measures had counterproductive effects. As a result of nation-building policies—for example the 1925 educational reform—the first Romanian-born generation from the Szeklerland grew up in a condition of almost complete illiteracy. This was due not to the lack of schools, which did affect literacy in Bessarabia and Moldavia, but to the perverse effect of poorly elaborated nationalism. Pupils taking part in the compulsory state-run school system were forced to pursue their studies in Romanian even if they did not understand the state's official language. The state was unwilling to acknowledge that so many of its citizens could not speak Romanian, and it made no real efforts to create the cultural basis for political loyalty.⁴¹

Autonomy Plans Versus Territorial Revisionism

In the first few years after the end of World War I, Szekler political elites who had not chosen to repatriate to Hungary followed the line of passive resistance suggested by the Hungarian government. Political boycott of Romanian institutions was motivated by the widespread illusion that belonging to Romania was a temporary condition. General hope for border revision unified people of quite different social, religious and political backgrounds and persuasions. Implicit support for Hungarian diplomatic efforts and internal resistance to Romanianization were the basis for the moderate policy followed by the Kolozsvár/Cluj-based HNP, an ideologically eclectic party formed in 1922 with the aim of representing the whole of Transylvanian Hungarian society despite having only narrow, albeit influential, social support.

Old aristocratic elites from Kolozsvár/Cluj, the Banat and the southern Transylvanian diaspora were overrepresented within the party and proved quite insensitive to the Szekler demands for autonomy. Social and cultural differences further deepened the internal cleavages within the Hungarian community. A

growing ideological polarization could be observed as of the early 1930s. Albeit the 1933 founded left-wing *Magyar Dolgozók Szövetsége* (MADOSZ) did not enjoy great popular support, atheism and involvement in the illegal Communist Party were not rare among members of the younger generation of Szekler, whose socialization was no longer inextricably linked to the old “Hungarian world,” despite the influence of religious cults, especially the Roman Catholic Church.⁴² Bolshevism promised not only a social but also a national revolution for minorities in Romania. Without any direct reference to the Szeklers, the Communist Party called for the people's rights of secession, and denounced the Treaty of Trianon (1920) as an imperialist peace. Among the first generation of communist activists and sympathizers, there were a significant number of Szekler-born individuals who had migrated to Bucharest, Brassó/Braşov and other industrial centers.⁴³ Vasile Luca, who became finance minister and a Politburo member after 1945, was a typical product of this new integrative pattern. Born in 1898 as László Luka in a small village, he did his political apprenticeship in Brassó/Braşov in the 1920s, first as a syndical leader and then a Communist boss. As a committed internationalist, he downplayed his ethnic identity, which manifested itself only occasionally in personal conflicts with ethnic Romanian Party members. Though he did not think of the Hungarian/Szekler community in “national” terms, he always helped his village and preserved human sympathy for local Szekler/Hungarian people.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the influence of communism (and more broadly, of the left-wing parties) on the Szekler community should not be overestimated. The class-based, supra-national integration offered by the communist project to Szeklers joining the Romanian workers' movement did not become a dominant feature among Szekler migrants and was strongly challenged in small traditionally-minded communities.

More influential was the claim for administrative and cultural autonomy coming from some radical left-wing intellectuals and politicians. In the early 1920s autonomy plans were issued only by the so-called *Transylvanianist* movement, and only for the Transylvanian region as a whole, as an alternative

42 Details in Ladislau Bányai, “Uniunea Oamenilor Muncii Maghiari din Romania (MADOSZ),” in *Organizații de masă legale și ilegale create, conduse sau influențate de P.C.R. 1921–1944*, ed. Ion Popescu-Puțuri et al. (Bucharest: Editura Politică, 1981), vol. 2, 36–79.

43 The interwar communist activity in the Szeklerland is documented by Simon Fuchs, *Munkásmozgalom a Maros völgyében. Válogatott írások* (Bucharest: Politikai Könyvkiadó, 1975).

44 On the political socialization and the issue of personal identity among the first generation Szekler communists, see Bottoni, *Székelyeknél*, 32–41.

41 On the nexus between the 1925 educational reform and the appearance of reformer circles among the Transylvanian Hungarian youth, Miklós Csapody, “Program és nemzedék. (Fejezet az Erdélyi Fiatalok előtörténetéből 1923–1929),” in *Az Országos Széchényi Könyvtár Évkönyve 1982–1983*, ed. Ilona Kovács et al. (Budapest: Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, 1984), 565–91.

to political passivity.⁴⁵ Defining Transylvania as the common land of three constituent peoples, Romanians, Germans and Hungarians, marked an attempt to break up the nation-state logic by emphasizing common roots and long-standing coexistence. It also helped the Hungarian intellectual elites to “define a life-strategy for the members of the community.”⁴⁶ But as prominent Hungarian writer János Székely was to admit in 1990, this call for a unity of Transylvanian peoples, who allegedly shared common values such as tolerance and goodwill, was no more than a compensatory ideology, echoing Aurel Popovici’s federal plans during the late Dual Monarchy, and it was met with the same negative reception among the respective ethnic majority.

Some intellectuals and politicians went further and imagined a new autonomous framework for the Szeklerland alone within the Romanian state. The HNP took, as starting point of Hungarian complaints, two non-binding legal texts, the December 1, 1918 Resolutions of Gyulafehérvár/Alba Iulia⁴⁷ and the Paris Minorities Treaty.⁴⁸ But a group of Szekler politicians attempted to go even further in 1918–22 by giving a modern political content to the Szekler identity for the first time. In November 1918 in both Budapest and Kolozsvár/Cluj, a Szekler National Council was created under the leadership of Benedek Jancsó, Dénes Sebes and Gábor Ugron. Although they declared their loyalty to the Hungarian state, they nevertheless showed a readiness for action in the name of a so-called “Szekler Independent Republic”, a new body modeled on the Wilsonian principles of self-determination, to be created after a mass rally in Marosvásárhely/Târgu Mureș. Their argument for an independent state was based on the political autonomy enjoyed before 1848 by the *székely natio* and on the cultural and social differences between them and the “standard” Hungarians.⁴⁹ Although Romanian authorities had prohibited the planned

meeting in Marosvásárhely/Târgu Mureș, the journalist and politician Árpád Paál from Székelyudvarhely/Odorheiu Secuiesc endeavored to give the Szekler independence plans a theoretical framework.⁵⁰ In a December 1918 edition of the newspaper *Székely Közélet*, he outlined his project for a Szekler Republic. After being arrested and kept under strict surveillance by the Romanian police, he issued a longer draft called *Emlékirat a semleges független államról* [Memorandum on the Neutral Independent State]. Paál, who was starting his long and controversial career as a fellow of radical democrats Oszkár Jászi and Mihály Károlyi, was at that time under the influence of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic (*Tanácsköztársaság*) in 1919. For Paál, the image of the Szekler state reflected the popular image of radical egalitarianism: a socialized economy, the increased role of the collective property and a universal social insurance system.⁵¹

After the fall of the Bolshevik Republic in Hungary and the beginning of conservative consolidation led by Admiral Miklós Horthy and Prime Minister István Bethlen, such radical political experiments lost popular support. In September 1920 Paál traveled throughout Szeklerland to organize a petition signed by 40 cities and villages addressed to the Romanian government and the League of Nations, but he had no adherents.⁵² Nevertheless, in 1921–22 Paál’s rejection of political passivism provoked a lively debate in the Hungarian press in Transylvania.⁵³ Although it was clear that his plans for Szekler autonomy did not have any chance of being realized within the framework of the Romanian nationalizing state, they became a good discursive source for others who supported the political activism of the Hungarian minority, such as Károly Kós and István Zágoni, who were trying to build up a new “democratic” ideology for the Hungarian minority. They officially refused the Hungarian–Romanian border revision and claimed cultural and territorial autonomy for the Szeklerland. However, plans for autonomy fell in the same trap as political Transylvanism: they rejected a commonly shared vision of the future (the hope for a return to Hungary) without being able to win any measure of support among the Romanian political élite.⁵⁴

50 On Paál’s political and intellectual activity during the transition see Nándor Bárdi, “Impériumváltás Udvarhelyen 1918–1920,” *Aetas* 8, no. 3 (1993): 76–118.

51 Bárdi, “A szupremácia és az önrendelkezés igénye,” 69.

52 Ibid., 70.

53 See for example Paál’s article on the Szekler question published in *Keleti Újság*, September 6, 1921, in which he argued for territorial autonomy.

54 On the internal debates among the Hungarian minorities in the interwar period, Nándor Bárdi: *Tény és való. A budapesti kormányzatok és a határon túli magyarság kapcsolattörténete* (Pozsony: Kalligram, 2004), 37–51.

45 Zsolt K. Lengyel: *A kompromisszum keresése. Tanulmányok a 20. századi transzszilvanizmus korai történetéhez* (Csíkszereda: Pro-Print, 2007). See also Lucian Nastasă and Levente Salat, eds., *Maghiarii din România și etica minoritară (1920–1940)* (Cluj-Napoca: Centru de Resurse pentru Diversitate Etnoculturală, 2003).

46 Sata Kinga-Koretta, “The Idea of the Nation in Transylvanism,” in *Nation-Building and Contested Identities*, ed. Balázs Trencsényi et al., 42.

47 According to the resolution of the Romanian National Assembly, the new Romanian state granted “full national freedom for all the co-inhabiting peoples”. It also stated that each people will study, manage and judge in its own language and led by individuals of its own stock, and each people will have the right to be represented in the law bodies and to govern the country in accordance with the number of its people.

48 Bárdi, *A romániai magyarság kisebbségpolitikai stratégiái*, 64.

49 Nándor Bárdi, “A szupremácia és az önrendelkezés igénye. Javaslatok, tervek az erdélyi kérdés rendezésére (1918–1940),” in *Források és stratégiák. A II. összehasonlító magyar kisebbség történeti szimpózium előadásai*, ed. Nándor Bárdi and György Éger (Csíkszereda: Pro-Print, 1997), 67–68.

In 1931, Árpád Paál, who had become a right-wing public figure and a prominent Catholic journalist, issued another plan for Szekler autonomy that referred to Article 11 of the 1919 Paris Peace Treaty. However, unlike his 1919 version, Paál defined what he called the “community” (*Székelty közösség*) in terms of an ensemble of different levels of autonomy: the neighborhood, the street, the borough, the city or the village, whose membership only referred to the “community of those residents in the Szeklerland who declare themselves to be of Hungarian mother-tongue.”⁵⁵ Paál was not a racist ideologue, even if he had gradually shifted towards extreme right positions and political anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, he gave his communitarian Szeklerland an exclusive content: local inhabitants could be Szekler only by language, culture and, albeit not clearly specified, birth. Conservative conceptions of Szekler autonomy, based on cultural rather than territorial claims, were better received in the mainstream of Transylvanian Hungarian politics. The general assembly of the HNP, held in Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureș on 2 July, 1933, approved two motions, one calling for Szekler cultural autonomy and another protesting against the Romanian government for having failed to fulfill its obligations under the Minorities Protection Treaty.⁵⁶ This last motion, despite winning unanimous approval, was never discussed by the Parliament. The last attempts to assert the Szekler cultural autonomy were made between 1934 and 1937 at the initiative of Senator Gábor Pál from Csíkszereda/Miercurea Ciuc. As the recently published minutes of HNP Central executive council meetings show, resistance came not only from the central government in Bucharest and the Romanian parties, but also from the non-Szekler representatives.⁵⁷ Following the 1937 elections, the introduction of royal dictatorship and the ban on all political parties ended any plans for regional autonomy. Due to the intensification of juridical and social discrimination and the implications of the First Vienna Award of November 1938, which returned the southern strip of Slovakia to Hungary, territorial revision again became a realistic goal, one that was shared by the overwhelming majority of the Szekler population.

Throughout the interwar period internal debates within the Hungarian minority over territorial autonomy to be granted to Szeklerland were influenced

by various conceptions of the meaning of “autonomy.” Did autonomy imply a system of privileges (a kind of self-government) limited to the Szeklerland? Or should it be intended as a network of cultural and linguistic rights the exercise of which could not be linked to a specific territory? The restrictive view (Szeklerland as a *corpus separatum*, being Szekler as opposed to being Transylvanian Hungarian) gained the support of many Szeklers, but was always opposed by the traditional Kolozsvár/Cluj-based Hungarian elite and by Budapest, which had always considered a complete or partial border revision as the only possible solution to the Hungarian question in Transylvania. Moreover, the HNP itself considered Szekler autonomy a contrivance, or at any rate a dangerous issue. Calls for territorial autonomy could also help the Romanian government drive a wedge between the Szekler community and other Hungarians. This risk—real or presumed—weakens the position of Transylvanian autonomists.

Internal debates of the interwar period produced a generational gap between the old élites whose cultural politics were forged in the Austro–Hungarian period, and a younger generation of intellectuals and professionals who had come of age as ethnic and religious minorities in Romanian Transylvania. The latter included notables such as József Venczel and Imre Mikó, who were trained at the Romanian State University of Kolozsvár/Cluj, and the later, very influential Roman Catholic Bishop of Gyulafehérvár/Alba Iulia, Áron Márton, who was born of a Szekler peasant family. They were all inspired by the Hungarian populist movement; by social ethnography (sociography), which was enjoying outstanding literary popularity in Hungary and detailed the arduous living conditions of villagers;⁵⁸ by the social doctrine of Catholic Church and Christian socialism; and also by the fieldwork of the Bucharest sociological school led by Dimitrie Gusti.⁵⁹

Their ideological horizon differed from the traditional one because of its unprecedented social openness and its rejection of intellectualism. These young, modest intellectuals and clergymen were less interested in political and legal debates over territorial rights and instead focused their attention on *népszolgálat* (“serving the people”), an ideology that would influence the collective identity of the Transylvanian Hungarian élites throughout the twentieth century.⁶⁰

55 Bárdi, “A szupremácia és az önrendelkezés igénye,” 100–3. On the popular reception of Paál’s project, Sz. Ferenc Horváth: *Elutasítás és alkalmazkodás között. A romániai kisebbségi elit politikai stratégiái (1931–1940)* (Csíkszereda: Pro-Print, 2007), 110–15.

56 Horváth, *Elutasítás és alkalmazkodás között*, 113.

57 György, *Iratok a romániai Országos Magyar Párt történetéhez*, 174 (1934), and 191–97 (1936).

58 See Dénes Némethi, *A népi szociográfia, 1930–1938* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1985).

59 For a comprehensive account of the intellectual trajectories of Hungarian populism see Gyula Borbándi, *A magyar népi mozgalom* (New York: Püski, 1983). See also the most recent synthesis by István Papp, *A magyar népi mozgalom története, 1920–1990* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2012).

60 Bárdi, *Tény és való*, 51–55.

The Szeklerland as a Cultural Battleground: Post-Imperial Trauma and the Revival of a Mythical Past

Besides the diplomatic struggle between Romania and Hungary for territorial possession of the Szeklerland, the region fueled a complex intellectual competition over the “correct” interpretation of national past and the ethnic essence of Szeklerness. If one adopts the theoretical framework developed by Rogers Brubaker and then adapted by Zoltán Kántor to the case of the Transylvanian Hungarians, the Szeklers were subjected to competing nationalizing projects from above (Bucharest as the center of a new nationalizing state and Budapest as the capital of the external homeland⁶¹). After World War I the Szeklers also started to redefine their national identification codes and elaborated a two-level (micro and macro) allegiance system, in which belonging to the Hungarian nation as a whole went along with the promotion of the sense of local community. Following Balázs Trencsényi’s comparative analysis of the interwar discourse on national character, one could argue that the new Szekler normative paradigms did not constitute an exception, but fit into the general search for the “essence” of national belonging.⁶²

As recent scholarship has pointed out, part of this ideological production was a reaction to state-promoted Romanian cultural nationalism. During the interwar period, historians and geographers such as Aurel Nistor, Nicolae Iorga, Sabin Opreanu and Gheorghe Popa-Lisseanu dealt extensively with what they defined as an advanced process of denationalization of the formerly ethnic Romanian population, which had made possible the emergence of a uniform, “Szeklerized” Hungarian-speaking population. According to their theories, biology and not cultural belonging or language determined one’s ethnic affiliation. In the second part of the 1930s and—even more intensively—after the 1940 partition of Transylvania, biologists, anthropologists, and eugenicists also focused their attention on the Szekler question. Racial anthropologists such as Gheorghe Popovici and Petre Rămneanțu compared the average blood agglutination of a Szekler sample with the averages of Romanian and Hungarian

samples, with the result that the figures were closer to those of Romanians. As such, most of the Szeklers *had to be* declared Romanians because their ancestors had likely been “ethnically” Romanian.⁶³ Nevertheless political enthusiasm for ethno-biology did not prevail over scholarly realism. After the crucial 1930 census, a methodological milestone for modern Romanian demography, Sabin Manuilă allegedly explained his refusal to introduce a nationality sheet for Szeklers and Moldavian Csángós (i.e. separate from Hungarians) by noting that there were no separate Szekler or Csángó languages.⁶⁴

Szekler nationalism—or better, the ideologization of common sense nationalism—was the Hungarian answer to external challenges and—not surprisingly for an over-centralized country like Hungary—emerged first in Budapest.⁶⁵ The psychological shock of losing their home country had a powerful impact on the tens of thousands of middle-class Szekler teachers, intellectuals and civil servants who took refuge in Hungary after 1919. State-sponsored promotion of a strongly idealized and uncontaminated virtual Szeklerland became for them an instrument to promote cultural revival and struggle against denationalization by Romanians. After Trianon, national imagology supported new identity-building agendas from *above* and *outside*: the Szekler came to represent the “purest” Hungarian, who lived uncontaminated in an alien urban culture. This also implied an extension to the Szeklerland—where the Jewish question had always been a non-issue—of the increasingly popular anti-Semitic claims according to which Jewish and German elements had dominated urban environments since the time of Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Thus the Szeklerland became a meta-historical space to be memorialized in living memory, where brave Hungarians restlessly struggled against Romanian oppression. The mythical Szekler king, *Csaba vezér* was portrayed proudly holding Transylvania’s coats of arms as one of the four characters of the statue composition erected in 1921 at Szabadság square in

63 Marius Turda, “The Nation as Object: Race, Blood, and Biopolitics in Interwar Romania,” *Slavic Review* 66, no. 3 (2007): 429–36. See also R. Chris Davis, “Rescue and Recovery: The Biopolitics and Ethnogenealogy of Moldavian Catholics in 1940s Romania,” in *Local and Transnational Csángó Lifeworlds*, ed. Sándor Ilyés et al. (Cluj-Napoca: Kriza János Ethnographical Society, 2008), 95–111.

64 Manuilă’s statement is taken up as a quotation by Gyula Benedek, “Vélemény Varga E. Árpád A romániai magyarság népesség-csökkenésének okairól c. tanulmányáról,” *Magyar Kisebbség* 8, no. 4 (2002): 9–16.

65 Miklós Zeidler, *A magyar irredenta kultusz a két világháború között* (Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 2002).

61 Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed. National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External Homelands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Zoltán Kántor, “Nationalism, Nationalizing Minorities and Kin-State Nationalism,” in *Interculturalism and Discrimination in Romania: Policies, Practices, Identities and Representations*, ed. Francois Ruegg et al. (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006), 249–76.

62 Balázs Trencsényi, *The Politics of National Character. A Study in Interwar East European Thought* (London: Routledge, 2011).

central Budapest.⁶⁶ Another powerful instrument of memory building was urban toponymy. Many streets of Budapest and other cities were assigned the name of cities, rivers or mountains that were situated in the territories Hungary had recently lost. As an example, the Hargita/Harghita mountain group was for the first time put onto the mental map of average Hungarian citizens as a symbol of Hungarianness.⁶⁷

In the early 1920s the *Székegy Egyetemi és Főiskolai Hallgatók Egyesülete* [SZEFE – Association of Szekler University Students] was founded on the initiative of five refugee students. Their leader was György Csanády, the author of the poem “Szekler Anthem”.⁶⁸ The poem, the music for which had been composed by Kálmán Mihalik, was first performed in 1922, but only published in 1940 and was secretly played in Transylvania, where it became the second, non-official Hungarian anthem under Hungarian rule between 1940 and 1944.⁶⁹ The SZEFE worked independently in Budapest and Szeged until 1939, after which it joined *Erdélyi Szövetség* [The Transylvanian League]. Through the end of World War II, the SZEFE played an outstanding role in the promotion of Szekler culture and moral values. Its hierarchy even replicated the ancient Szekler social hierarchy.⁷⁰

Even more interesting was the promotion of the community of Hargitaváralja (*Hargitaváralja jelképes székegy község*), a virtual Szekler village supposed to perpetuate organically the ancient rites and the social structure of a mythical Szeklerland within post-Trianon Hungary. The Hargitaváralja project was launched in Szeged in 1921 by a group of refugees to Hungary. It immediately won the patronage and financial support of the town's prefect, Dr. György Imecs, himself of Szekler origin. It organized dances and Szekler parties, collections, and cultural events, and also supported a Szekler library in Szeged. Its public meetings were called *falugyűlés* [village assembly]. Among its members, one found Szekler-born high ranking army officers, including Lajos Veress Dálnoki, head of the anti-Fascist coalition government installed in Debrecen

in 1944, and Vilmos Nagy Nagybaczoni, the wartime minister of defense. Its chief judge was the vice-president of the Hungarian railway company, Gábor Veress, while other prominent members included the Catholic priest Vilmos Apor, who later became bishop of Győr; historian István Kiss Rugonfalvi; and writers Áron Tamási and József Nyírő. From August 1936 to October 1944, *Hargitaváralja* also published a weekly house organ in one thousand copies.⁷¹ The journal not only informed its readers about the cultural events sponsored by the nearly one hundred Szekler communities scattered across Hungary, but also carried out investigations into the condition of Romania's Hungarian minority and advertised Szekler-owned shops, pubs and restaurants, seen as champions of a “true,” national-minded business spirit.

Parallel to the Szekler revival in interwar Hungary, which was stimulated by private initiative but had been immediately recognized by the authorities as an excellent instrument of propaganda, the Szeklers in Romania began to rediscover and openly discuss their past, beginning of course with their ethnic origins. Although the aim could not have been clearer, namely to reinforce the consciousness of a peculiar Hungarian identity, they did not take up the “bio-political,” eugenic approach of certain Romanian scientists and policy makers, which in the 1930s influenced the Transylvanian Saxons as well. Instead, they preferred a culturalist stance rooted in a complex network of historical myths and popular legends, helping to spread a *völkisch*, non-urban Szekler identity whose traces can still be found in Szekler popular culture.⁷² According to semi-professional authors and self-proclaimed intellectuals speaking on behalf of the wider Szekler community, they were the descendants of the noble Hun nation, and not “simply” Magyars belonging to the Finno-Ugric family. To prove that, they made use of scholarly research on the diffusion of Hungarian runic script (*rovásírás*), the old runic writing with an ancient alphabet which had been used in most parts of Hungary until the sixteenth century, but traces of which had been found in some Szekler villages as late as the mid-nineteenth century.⁷³

66 Ibid., 18. In 1945 the statue was demolished to make room for a monument that still stands celebrating the Red Army's victory.

67 Ibid., 30–32.

68 No one knows to where fate takes us / on this rough road in the black night. / Csaba, our prince riding in the sky / Show us once more the path / Through triumphant stars! / Handful of Szeklers, ancient remnants / of a fortress in the sea of warring millions / time and time again the waves / close above us / Oh Lord, do not perish our Transylvania! English translation by Angéla Molnos (2000).

69 Ildikó Kriza, “A Székely himnusz születésének háttere,” *Honismeret* 32, no. 5 (2003): 57–68.

70 In descending order: rabombán, lófő, öreg lófő, góbé, gyalog székegy.

71 *Szegedi Hargitaváralja jelképes székegy község hivatalos közlönye – Tudományos szépirodalmi és társadalmi hetilap.*

72 On the practices of falsification of Szekler history over the course of the last two centuries by local identity-makers, see Gusztáv Mihály Hermann, *Az elértélt múlt – Oklevél- és krónikahamisítványok a székegyek történetében* (Csikszere: Pro-Print, 2008).

73 Gyula Sebestyén, *A magyar rovásírás hiteles emlékei* (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1915). See also István Vásáry, “A magyar rovásírás. A kutatás története és mai helyzete,” *Keletkutatás* 2, no. 1 (1974): 159–71.

Nevertheless, the most durable historical myth was the myth of a supposed medieval chronicle (*Csíki Krónika*). This chronicle, believed to have been written in 1533, narrated the heroism of warrior Szekler kings, the *rhabonbán*, and described the mystical, protective function for all Szekler tribes of a Szekler chalice (*székely kehely*). Although professional historians (among them, the Szekler-born Lajos Szádeczky) had convincingly demonstrated at the beginning of the twentieth century that the *Csíki Krónika* was in fact a forgery composed in the second half of the eighteenth century, the legendary Szekler past survived in the collective memory. Moreover, it stimulated the reproduction of a collective identity that challenged not only the “negationist” Romanian narrative (the Szekler as denationalized Romanians), but also the integrationist (of all Magyars), Budapest-driven Hungarian national discourse. Nevertheless, polemics with both official Hungarian and Romanian narratives prevented academic historians from constructing an altogether separate national identity. Hesitation and embarrassment are particularly evident in case of István Rugonfalvi Kiss, a reputable Szekler-born professor of history at Debrecen University. While publishing a historical synthesis in 1939 which represented a more ambitious attempt to give the Szekler nation a scientifically based past, Kiss had to admit that the most treasured proof of an ancient, virtuous Szekler past, the *Csíki Krónika*, was an “infamous falsehood” on which no Szekler collective identity or historical consciousness could ever rely.⁷⁴

Less controversial and more fruitful for the long-term cultural development of the Szeklerland were the efforts of local intellectuals who worked to uncover and promote Székely cultural heritage. Artistic treasures and archeological findings represented an ideal link between the past and the present. Hungarians from both Romania and Hungary were encouraged to discover the Szeklerland’s natural beauties and enjoy a still “untouched” Hungarian world. A major proponent of this movement was the outstanding geologist János Bányai, professor at the Székelyudvarhely/Odorheiu Secuiesc Calvinist College and fellow of the Geological Institute of Bucharest, who after 1945 pioneered the Szeklerland’s industrialization. In 1929 he launched the *Hargita* expedition, an annual summer event for those who wanted to explore the Szekler countryside.⁷⁵ In 1931 Bányai, along with fellow colleagues of Székelyudvarhely/Odorheiu Secuiesc College, launched a periodical called

Székelység [Szeklerness], intended as a national review, and published short essays on a wide range of topics: local history, geology, human geography, folklore, literature, and poetry.⁷⁶

The difficulties faced under Romanian rule also stimulated a more resistance-based cultural revival, focused on the preservation of some endangered features of the traditional Szekler lifestyle (costume, cuisine, associative life), while also creating new traditions. One example is the Szekler cult initiated by Hungarian ethnographer Pál Péter Domokos, who in 1926 returned to his birthplace, Csíkszereda/Miercurea Ciuc, as a high school teacher and became the promoter of an initiative to make this periphery a place of pilgrimage and ritual for young people. On 7 June, 1931 he organized at the Roman Catholic monastery of Csíksomlyó/Șumuleu Ciuc a holiday called *Ezer Székely Leány Találkozó* [Reunion of a Thousand Szekler Girls]. The devoted Catholic, Pál Péter, wanted to make the center of Transylvanian Roman Catholicism the spiritual center of the Szekler people, regardless of their confessional belonging. The remarkable success of the first event encouraged the organizers to transform it in annual one. However, in 1935 the Romanian authorities suspected the *Ezer Székely Leány Találkozó* of becoming a Hungarian nationalist demonstration and therefore had it banned. Nevertheless, this invented tradition reemerged after 1940 and once again in 1990. In fact, in the interwar period the Szeklerland was a multi-confessional environment: in the 1930s only a slight majority of Szeklers (257,009 out of 474,127) were Roman Catholic, with a substantial proportion of Calvinists (around 170 thousand), Unitarians (over 45 thousand), Orthodox (55 thousand) and Greek Catholics (40 thousand).⁷⁷ But even before the Szekler clergyman was appointed in 1939 as Roman Catholic Bishop, religious faith and national (minority) identity had begun to overlap more strictly than at any time before, as demonstrated by the growing attendance to the annual pilgrimage to the Franciscan monastery of Csíksomlyó/Șumuleu Ciuc. The Catholic Church stood up for minority rights of its Szekler/Hungarian believers, but also started to support charity actions and social projects in the Szeklerland.

74 István Rugonfalvi Kiss, *A Székely nemzet képe*. 2 vols. (Debrecen: Lehotai Pál Kiadása, 1939).

75 On Bányai see Gábor Csíky’s entry in *Magyar Tudóslexikon A-tól Z-ig*, ed. Ferenc Nagy (Budapest: Better, 1997), 148–49.

76 Lajos András Róth, “A Székelység (1931–1944) néprajzi tárgyú cikkei,” *Örökségünk* 1, no. 2 (2007): 8–9.

77 Rugonfalvi Kiss, *A Székely nemzet képe*, 324–55.

Epilogue: Failed State Integration and Its Long-term Consequences

During the interwar period the Romanian authorities regarded the Szeklerland as a *corpus separatum* the population of which passively accepted what they perceived as “foreign occupation” of their homeland but refused any civic commitment to the state and its local agencies, instead displaying attachment and loyalty to the Hungarian state and Hungarian national symbols. In the interwar period, the cultural and the political debate among the Romanian majority and the Hungarian minority tended to focus on the more theoretical question of the ethnic origin of the Szeklers. Historical, biological and cultural arguments over the “national belonging” of the community collided. Meanwhile, Szekler intellectuals began to rethink their cultural identity and escape competitive grand narratives by presenting the Szeklers as a distinct group among Hungarians, or even the purest group, the former status of which, as an egalitarian warrior community, predestined it to isolation and territorial autonomy. For students of ethnic relations interested in the social construction of national symbols in an internal periphery, the case of the Szeklers within the context of the broader Hungarian Transylvanian population of 1.5 million is an excellent example of how one ethnic community—unable and unwilling to develop its own modern ethnic institutions such as language and national culture—attempted to construct or articulate new identity markers after becoming a minority within another minority.

With the Second Vienna Award the Szeklerland experienced a period of short-lived Hungarian rule (1940–1944) during which Budapest made considerable efforts to re-establish Hungarian social and cultural supremacy (even through the mistreatment of ethnic Romanians) and promote economic development. The lack of sensitivity to local issues, however, stimulated conflicts between the center and the periphery.⁷⁸ After the controversial Hungarian intermezzo, the early Romanian communist regime provided the Szekler community with some cultural and linguistic rights. Between 1952 and 1960, Soviet-style territorial autonomy was granted to the Szeklerland

in the form of the Hungarian Autonomous Region (HAR).⁷⁹ The collective memory of Hungarians living in the HAR preserved the years following its establishment as a period of cultural development. This could sound rather paradoxical when taking into account the high level of ideological pressure, the massive political reprisals and the extremely low standards of living suffered by a large part of the population in the first decade of the communist regime. One possible explanation can be found in the underlying role of “cultural ghetto” attributed by Moscow to the HAR.⁸⁰ The Romanian authorities were aware of the fact that a reprisal against Hungarians, at least in the first period, would have given rise to the suspicion of oppressing the nationalities. The administrative umbrella represented by the HAR made it possible to preserve a *particular kind* of Hungarian cultural tradition for the local majority. Universities, newspapers, reviews, folk dance groups, and professional and amateur theatres played an outstanding role in reproducing elites and preserving Hungarian identity.

At the same time, the national forms of the “greenhouse” offered by Stalin to the Hungarians of the Szeklerland should have softened its socialist content: the “little Hungary” represented by HAR should have strengthened loyalty to the Romanian state. But the enthusiastic reaction of a great part of the population to the Hungarian revolution in 1956/57, which was the first major political test for the region and its leadership after the death of Stalin, revealed all of the internal contradictions of the “Hungarian policy” imposed on Romania by Stalin. The coexistence of a Romanian *civic* identity (being a loyal citizen of the Romanian state) and a Hungarian *cultural* one (feeling part of another community) proved to be an illusion. As a logical consequence, the Romanian communists led by Gheorghiu-Dej, who had never been enthusiastic about the HAR, decided to eliminate this “alien body” in 1960.

After the Szekler administrative unit was dismantled, the region’s former capital, Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureș, was transformed by the agenda of Romanian national communism. Nicolae Ceaușescu replaced the Hungarian/Szekler elite of the city with a new, ethnic Romanian one. After this, Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureș became a bi-national city with a growing Romanian presence. Nevertheless, Ceaușescu’s population policies did not aim to dissolve the Szeklers and their Hungarian cultural identity into the Romanian

78 A policy of economic interventionism and administrative centralization was carried out by the Hungarian governments in all of Northern Transylvania. The situation in the Szeklerland is described well by Sándor Oláh: “Gyakorlati gondolkozásmód és megmerevedett etatizmus (1940–1944),” *Korall* 5, no. 4 (2004): 98–113, and Sándor Oláh, “Kedvezmények és konfliktusok kora. Gazdasági változások Csík vármegyében 1940–1944 között,” in idem, *Kivizsgálás. Írások az állam és a társadalom viszonyáról a Székelyföldön 1940–1989* (Csíkszereda: Pro-Print, 2008), 10–216.

79 Bottoni, *Sztálin a székelyeknél*, 21–66.

80 This is underlined by Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 340–42.

one, but rather to suppress/subordinate it to that of the ethnic/national majority. According to recent scholarship, during the first ten years of Ceaușescu's rule a fragile compromise was signed with the Hungarian communist apparatus, allowing bilingualism and the survival of Hungarian social and cultural networks in the newly established (1968) provinces of Harghita and Covasna.⁸¹

The relationship between the Romanian state and this minority throughout the last century cannot be regarded as uniform and entirely conflict-dominated. Anthropologists Zoltán A. Biró and Julianna Bodó described well how the socialist system stimulated after the administrative reform of 1968 a local identity, *Hargitaiság*, with the unveiled aim of weakening the Hungarian master ethnic narrative.⁸² This fluctuating, often contradictory central policy could also explain why popular dissatisfaction with the Romanian authorities' actions both in the interwar period and in the communist era did not result in major riots, uprisings or ethnically motivated clashes produced by secessionist movements or terrorist actions (limited violence only occurred during periods of political turbulence or warfare: 1919, 1940, 1944 and 1989–90⁸³). Constraining factors clearly influenced the Szekler population's passive acceptance of its minority fate after 1918. In addition, Romanian governments soon recognized that the Szeklerland could not be entirely “nationalized” by the establishment of colonizing villages and settlements, discriminative policies against the local majority or forced industrialization.⁸⁴ The persistent lack of economic development, administrative know-how, and human resources prevented the Romanian state from fully nationalizing this minority-inhabited region. As a result, the Hungarian/Szekler

community still numbers roughly 600,000 persons living in a compact ethnic and linguistic mass in the geographic middle of Romania, where they still make up 85 percent of the population of Hargita/Harghita County, 74 percent of Kovászna/Covasna County, and 40 percent of Maros/Mureș County (concentrated mainly in the eastern half of this county and in its capital, Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureș). Almost one hundred years after Greater Romania came into being, the Szekler issue still holds the marks of a low-potential conflict and remains politically and culturally unsettled.

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81 Zoltán Novák: *Aranykorszak? A Ceaușescu-rendszer magyarságpolitikája I. (1965–1974)* (Csíkszereda: Pro-Print, 2010).

82 Zoltán A. Biró and Julianna Bodó, “A ‘hargitaiság’. Egy régió kultúraépítési gyakorlatáról,” *Átmenetek* 2, no. 2 (1991): 77–89. See also Julianna Bodó, ed., *Fényes tegnapunk. Tanulmányok a szocializmus korszakáról* (Csíkszereda: KAM—Pro-Print, 1998).

83 This circumstance is recognized by postcommunist nationally committed Romanian historiography: Anton Drăgoescu, ed., *Istoria României. Transilvania*, vol. 2 (1867–1947) (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Gheorghe Barițiu, 1997), 1255–1394.

84 Since 1919 the Romanian state and Masaryk's Czechoslovakia had undertaken colonizing policies in southern Dobrogea and southern Slovakia (respectively), but effective measures of ethnic engineering were being carried out during the interwar period in different contexts. Under fascism the Italian authorities transformed the formerly German-inhabited Bozen/Bolzano, the capital of the South Tirol region (formerly belonging to the Habsburg Empire), into a predominantly Italian city through the creation of an industrial area inhabited by immigrants mostly coming from Southern Italy and Veneto. Similar policies were carried out in the Soviet Union after the reversal of the so-called “affirmative action” in 1932–33. Cf. Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 344–461.

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Note on Nomenclature: City and Place Names

For the first reference to each place, we will give alternative versions of the place name for that location. Here are the most frequently mentioned city and other place names in their various forms, for quick reference.

Brassó (Braşov, Romania, German: Kronstadt)
 Csík County (Ciuc, Romania)
 Csíkszereda (Miercurea Ciuc, Romania)

Csíksomlyó (Şumuleu Ciuc, Romania)
 Csucs (Ciuca, Romania)
 Gyergyószentmiklós (Gheorgheni, Romania)
 Hargita County (Harghita, Romania)
 Háromszék County (Trei Scaune, Romania)
 Kolozsvár (Cluj, Romania, German: Klausenburg)
 Kovászna County (Covasna, Romania)
 Maros County (Mureş, Romania)
 Marosvásárhely (Târgu-Mureş, Romania)
 Szatmárnémeti (Satu Mare, Romania)
 Segesvár (Sighişoara, Romania, German: Schässburg)
 Sepsiszentgyörgy (Sfântu Gheorghe, Romania)
 Székelyudvarhely (Odorheiu Secuiesc, Romania)
 Tusnádfürdő (Băile Tuşnad, Romania)
 Udvarhely County (Odorheiu, Romania)