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Under the Influence of His Leader Cult: Miklós Horthy's Self-Image During World War II

Dávid Turbucz, HUN-REN Research Center for the Humanities, Hungary

ABSTRACT | After World War I and the collapse of the Hungarian Kingdom via the Trianon Peace Treaty, a leader cult developed around Miklós Horthy, regent (the head of state) of Hungary between 1920 and 1944. This cult existed throughout the so-called Horthy era, but its intensity and emphasis changed. According to the official image of Horthy, created by many cult-makers and disseminated through different propaganda techniques, he was the only one capable of restoring the national glory and greatness that Hungary had lost after the Great War. As in the cases of other European leader cults of that time, it is very important to analyze the impact of the Horthy cult on the man who was the object of such adulation. This issue has not received sufficient scholarly attention from historians. This article shows how the uninterrupted propaganda, and his oversimplified and exaggerated official image, had a significant impact on Horthy's self-image during World War II.

KEYWORDS | Miklós Horthy, Horthy cult, leader cult, territorial revision, Trianon

The leader cults appearing after World War I are analyzable in different ways. Historians can, for instance, examine the process and techniques of cult-making, or the constituent elements of a leader's image. Another important issue may be the cult's reception. In addition, the impact of the cult on the leader's self-image and personality can be analyzed.¹ Here I attempt to show how Miklós Horthy's self-image was influenced by his cult during

World War II, a fateful period of twentieth-century Hungarian history. How did Horthy identify himself with his public image? How did his leader cult strengthen his sense of duty? By bringing these questions into focus, I hope to contribute to the understanding of Horthy's role as regent of Hungary. Why did he not resign after the German occupation? What were his motives for remaining in office after March 19, 1944?

Some Hungarian historians have already addressed these issues, but they have not received sufficient scholarly attention so far. Lóránd Dombrády has only focused on the Horthy cult in the Hungarian army. He writes, in reference to Horthy's seventy-fifth birthday in 1943, "The orators, the officers, and the military delegations assured Horthy that they would carry out his commands without restraint in critical situations. They expressed their full and unwavering determination to persevere under all circumstances. These pledges confirmed Horthy's belief that his officers would follow him unreservedly if Hungary would break with Nazi Germany."²

In his seminal monograph, Thomas Sakmyster analyzes the factors that played a decisive role in Horthy's decision-making—e.g., after the German occupation—but he does not highlight the significance of the Horthy cult, as I feel is necessary.³ Péter Sipos emphasizes that Horthy was often motivated by his sense of duty. Nevertheless, Sipos fails to notice the connection between the regent's sense of duty and his leader cult.⁴ Some brief references to the effect of the Horthy cult on his decisions have been made by Catherine Horel. She does not analyze this theme systematically.⁵ Unfortunately, Krisztián Ungváry, in his book on the political role of the regent during World War II, also does not consider it important to point out that Horthy fell victim to his larger-than-life image.⁶ The German occupation in 1944, of course, has received much scholarly attention, but the impact of the Horthy cult on the regent's self-image has not been emphasized to the extent it might have been.

In a treatment of the impact of the Horthy cult on the regent, I analyze the whole period between 1919 and 1944; but the focus is on the World War II period.⁷ My monograph, based on my PhD dissertation on the Horthy cult between 1919 and 1944, contains only some references to this topic.⁸

Horthy and His Leader Cult

Critical social and political conditions led to the emergence of leader cults in many European countries after World War I.⁹ A leader cult was also built up around Miklós Horthy after the collapse of the prewar multiethnic

Hungarian Kingdom, part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy before 1918. The propaganda emphasized that he, the national leader, was capable of leading the nation from “darkness” to a “brighter future,” restoring lost national greatness—that is, achieving the revision of the Trianon Peace Treaty. This treaty sanctioning the dismantling of the kingdom was signed by the victorious allies of World War I and Hungary on June 4, 1920. As a result, the territory of Hungary was reduced from 325,000 to 93,000 square kilometers, and its population decreased from 20.9 to 7.6 million. 3.3 million Hungarians found themselves in the successor states.¹⁰

The Horthy cult existed between the years 1919 and 1944, though its intensity and emphasis fluctuated over time. From the mid-1920s onward, the entirety of the state apparatus, in conjunction with the traditional churches, local authorities, nongovernmental organizations, public education, and other institutions engaged in the construction and preservation of the cult. It is evident that the government played a central role in the cult-making process, despite the absence of a ministry of propaganda. Various techniques were used to maintain Horthy's image. The most significant events in the cult-building process were those commemorating the regent; his birthday (June 18th) and name day (December 6th); and the anniversaries of his entry into Budapest (November 16, 1919) and the commencement of his “reign” (March 1, 1920). His oversimplified and selectively constructed official image posited that the successes achieved between 1919 and 1944 were inextricably linked to the regent. His exaggerated, imagined, and propagandistically interpreted rather than his actual role was emphasized. As with all leadership cults of the era, the primary goal of the Horthy cult was to integrate society and the nation, reinforce national identity, present a promising outlook for the future, and legitimate the political system.

No document has been found showing that Horthy contributed to the emergence of his leader cult in 1919. On the one hand, he did not demand that his close political fellows create a leader cult around him. On the other, there is no evidence that he rejected his cult. Overall, Horthy accepted it, and never distanced himself from it. But he did not actively participate in the cult-building. In contrast to numerous political figures of the period, he did not prioritize controlling and censoring his image. This study will present a few illustrative examples, for which comprehensive monographs exist, to demonstrate the divergences between Horthy's and other leaders' attitude toward their cults.

It is well documented that Adolf Hitler paid meticulous attention to his public image.¹¹ Ian Kershaw asserts that “he was above all a consummate actor,” as evidenced by his gestures, body language, and the phrases in his well-constructed speeches. The Nazi dictator was fully aware of the pivotal role his cult played in bolstering the regime and integrating German society.¹² A comparable phenomenon can be observed in the case of the Mussolini cult, which served as a model for the Nazis and other dictatorships.¹³ Benito Mussolini considered politics as art, theater, performance, and manipulation.¹⁴ Ioannis Metaxas, the dictator of Greece between 1936 and 1941, also deliberately employed some elements of Nazi and fascist propaganda to create a charismatic leadership style. The cult-building process was based extensively on Metaxas’s countless orchestrated public speeches.¹⁵ Paul von Hindenburg is not known as a modern type of political leader, but his “efforts to censor his image in the cultural realm prior to 1933 show how closely he was involved in mythmaking process, and how aware he was of its power.”¹⁶ Józef Piłsudski, Marshal of Poland, deployed a similar strategy in utilizing his image as a successful former military commander to establish charismatic leadership.¹⁷ Finally, there is the (Joseph) Stalin cult, the most important example of a leader cult not of right-wing origin. The Soviet dictator, as Ian Plamper emphasizes, “wanted his own cult.” He sanctioned, controlled, censored, and corrected the cult products in many ways. He “masterminded his own cult, often acting as the ultimate filter of its products before they were released for social circulation.”¹⁸

A review of the available sources indicates that Horthy’s attitude toward the development of his cult differed from that of his contemporaries. The propaganda apparatus was not centered around the regent. Nevertheless, Horthy had the capacity to influence his public image through the use of various tools at his disposal; however, he did not seem to employ these resources. He may have failed to recognize the political function of the phenomenon in question. As might have been anticipated, he was not a politician in the modern sense and was more akin to a nineteenth- than a twentieth-century figure.

Horthy did not absent himself from the alchemy of symbolic power, yet his influence was not a determining factor. He did not hesitate to approve the plans for anniversaries related to himself. In 1930 and 1940, he gave his approval for the tenth and twentieth anniversaries of his “reign” to be celebrated throughout the country.¹⁹ The respective prime ministers transmitted the relevant documents to the head of state, notifying him of the forthcoming anniversaries and requesting his authorization.²⁰ Some biographies were

published with Horthy's permission. For example, Lily Doblhoff explicitly expressed her gratitude to him for "permitting me to deal with his life and career in [her] book."²¹ He undoubtedly read these books, though there is no proof of it. There is no evidence to suggest that he requested any alterations to the content of the Doblhoff biography. Similarly, there is no evidence that he demanded that the government modify the program of anniversaries, although he expressed his desire not to be celebrated. In January 1935, Horthy conveyed to the prime minister his intention to cancel the planned commemorations marking the fifteenth anniversary of his "reign."²² Additionally, in 1930, 1940, and 1943, Horthy requested that the government and the state apparatus refrain from celebrating him. The Hungarian political dailies published his letters to the prime minister.²³ These gestures were purely political in nature, as the planned celebrations were ultimately not canceled. Such gestures played a pivotal role in the construction of his cult, as they reinforced the notion that his cult was a direct reflection of popular adulation.²⁴

There was another reason why Horthy was not isolated from his leader cult. He visited countless settlements in Hungary. Representatives of local authorities gave public speeches in which they used various elements of his official image. In 1940, when the twentieth anniversary of his "reign" was celebrated, the prime minister and other ministers personally saluted him for his extraordinary deeds. On his birthdays the prime ministers sent admiring telegrams to the regent in which they referred to some important element of his cultic image. Between 1938 and 1941, during the period of the territorial revision, patriotic speeches were held when Horthy marched into the recaptured cities. The speeches emphasized his ability to fulfill his God-given mission, the revision, which was interpreted as the restoration of Hungarian national greatness. Posters of Horthy were displayed in these towns. In Szatmárnémeti (Satu Mare) and Nagyvárad (Oradea), the regent sat on the podium above one of his placards.

These examples show that he was not separated from his cult. Not only did he read about his image in newspapers and biographies, but there were regular occasions when he experienced the veneration personally.

Before World War II

In the first years of Horthy's reign, he made innumerable speeches throughout the country, in which he argued that Hungary should lead by firm and active leadership, in an authoritarian manner. He undoubtedly

identified himself with this role because he gave orders and instructions, but not suggestions.²⁵

Horthy always spoke of himself in the first-person singular ("I") and never used the pronoun "we."²⁶ He regularly used the phrases "I expect," "I want," and "I demand." The regent expressed his own and the government's vision of the future Hungary, and expected the nation to accept it. These statements, which reflect the main message of the Horthy cult, do not prove that the cultic interpretation of his role had already become an integral part of his self-image, since his cult only began in 1919. In my opinion, at that time these statements were rather expressions of his political ambition, but not of his self-image. His cult started influencing Horthy because, for instance, he used some elements of his image to explain his political role. He depicted himself, for example, as standing alone above bickering political parties, and able to guarantee stability, order, and happiness in Hungary. He began to master the use of propagandistic language. This means that Horthy certainly started to identify himself with his charismatic image. He made the first steps in order to integrate the cultic elements of his image into his self-image.²⁷

Due to the lack of relevant primary sources regarding the period before World War II, it is not known exactly when Horthy was finally captured by his cult. It is misleading to rely solely on his public statements. This is why I have argued that his speeches between 1919 and 1923 expressed his political ambitions, but not his self-image. The latter started to change, but this process did not end, of course. Every individual's personality and self-image changes throughout life, even radically. When a political and/or military leader speaks of himself as an extraordinary personality, both privately and publicly, it is reasonable to say that there is a significant degree of overlap between the leader's public image and self-image. In the case of Horthy, we cannot use egodocuments such as diaries, letters, and memories to explore this change. He never kept a diary; he did not describe himself often in his letters, which are in any case not very numerous; and, unfortunately, the diaries and memories of most of his close acquaintances do not reflect his self-image. But they show that his contemporaries were aware of the regent's intellectual limitations.²⁸ The official reports of German, British, and American diplomats portraying him, his personality, his worldview, and the like do not confirm that the regent had a larger-than-life self-image before World War II.²⁹

In the twenties, during the political, financial, and economic consolidation of Hungary led by the conservative statesman István Bethlen, prime minister between 1921 and 1931, Horthy was not involved in decision-making on a daily basis. He played a representative role in governmental politics. This shows that Horthy did not think that he was an all-powerful leader. But Horthy saw himself as a man determined to take an active role at critical moments.³⁰ Why? First of all, he became the “national” leader of Hungary during a critical period following World War I, one emphasized regularly by the cult-makers after 1919. This was why he became more active in politics during and after the Great Depression (1929–33), which negatively influenced Hungarian politics, economy, and society in many ways.³¹ From then on, and especially during World War II, the regent’s role was much more than representative.³²

In the second half of the 1930s, there were significant signs that Horthy started to believe in his “God-given mission,” “selectedness,” and extraordinary qualities. The main reason for this was the territorial revision between 1938 and 1941, as Hungary, with the support of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, regained lost territories.³³ The partial reversal of the Treaty of Trianon played a decisive role in the cult-building process, because the cult of Horthy had started as a symbolic reaction to the collapse of historic Hungary.³⁴ According to the propagandists, Horthy was chosen, blessed, and sent by God to save the Hungarian nation from “darkness,” to guide the Hungarians on the route to “resurrection.” His most important goal was the rectification of Trianon. The successful territorial revision had two important results. First, Horthy symbolically became the “enlarger” of Hungary. Second, he was already more or less captured by his cult. Consequently, as Sakmyster underlines, Horthy could not “show any restraint in the pursuit of additional territorial revision.”³⁵ Of course, his official image was not the only influence on the Regent’s deeds; irredentism also dominated the public sphere in interwar Hungary. Not only the propagandists but also the regent himself attempted to link his image with the territorial revision.³⁶ After the First (1938) and Second (1940) Vienna Awards, Horthy solemnly entered the regained cities on horseback. In his patriotic speeches he talked about himself as the leader of “national resurrection.”³⁷

During that time, when his cult reached its peak, the government propagandists relied on the symbolic potential of his cult to counterbalance tendencies in society brought to the fore by World War II. They intended

thereby to stabilize the political regime, threatened by the extreme Right and its parties.³⁸ This use of the cult was the result of conscious government decision.³⁹ However, its unintended effect was that Horthy's self-image started to resemble his public larger-than-life image, disseminated by the cult-makers via a myriad of techniques. It seems reasonable to posit that as the cult of Horthy gained considerably greater influence over public discourse, particularly in the context of the territorial revision, it also exerted a more significant influence over the self-image of the Regent. Accordingly, from that point onward, Horthy was largely persuaded of his own role as a providential figure within the context of Hungarian history.

When Hungary entered the world war in 1941, Horthy had more or less identified himself with his imagined image, which was an important factor in decision-making during that time.

During the World War

Unfortunately, most members of the Hungarian political elite of that time did not keep diaries. Ferenc Zsindely, a minister in the Miklós Kállay government (1942–44), often reflected on the regent's self-image in his diary between 1941 and 1944.⁴⁰ Zsindely respected Horthy but pointed out the regent's inability to neutralize the influence of propaganda on himself.

In the entry for April 15, 1941, Zsindely underlined that neither the then-prime minister, László Bárdossy, nor anyone else dared to contradict Horthy. "Horthy was convinced, Zsindely emphasized, that he had to settle everything, otherwise Hungary would inevitably fail."⁴¹ Some days later he had an audience with the regent. In his diary he repeated that nobody was willing to talk openly with Horthy. Everyone wanted to avoid having a debate with him because of his authority.⁴² Therefore, the regent was convinced that "God had placed the fate of Hungary exclusively in his own hands."⁴³ Another important element of his self-image was optimism about Hungary's future. At the end of July 1942 Zsindely invited some of his close friends to dinner, where they anxiously discussed the future prospects of Hungary. In his diary he stressed that Horthy was inclined to neglect the negative factors, troubles, and dangerous tendencies in Hungarian domestic and foreign politics. "He is obdurately sanguine," the minister wrote, "he is leading himself on his unique vocation and selectedness by God. . . . What will be the end of this?"⁴⁴ Six months later, in the spring of 1943, Zsindely

returned to descriptions of the servile nature of Hungarian public life. The minister of justice put forward a bill at a cabinet meeting.⁴⁵ The minister said that he had not agreed with its content. “The regent ordered it,” he confessed, but he was not brave enough to refuse the regent’s wishes. It was said that Horthy’s proposed bill was legal nonsense. Kállay also defended the bill. Zsindely was shocked at the absolute subservience in the government. “Will we elect one of the regent’s horses as consul?” he erupted.⁴⁶ In the summer of 1943, when the defeat of Nazi Germany was already foreseeable, Horthy was still confident about the brighter future of Hungary, because he steered the ship of the country with his strong hands.⁴⁷

These selected examples show that Zsindely, who had sincere respect for Horthy, noticed several times between 1941 and 1944 that the regent had become detached from reality—in other words, had exaggerated his own political skills. György Barcza, the former ambassador of Hungary in London, also often detected and mentioned in his memoirs that “the regent, surrounded by inexperienced but all the more ambitious politicians who flattered him, found himself in an atmosphere that plunged him into an artificially constructed, nonexistent fake world.”⁴⁸ It is important to note that these sources are indirect and contain impressions and experiences of contemporaries, who had direct knowledge of the regent and, to some extent, Horthy’s self-image. While the memoirs may not be entirely accurate in their portrayal of past events, they do provide valuable insights into the essence of the phenomenon under discussion.

The most convincing example proving that Horthy was captured by his leader cult is his role after the German occupation of Hungary on March 19, 1944.⁴⁹ Hitler decided to invade because he had lost confidence in Kállay. Because of the regent’s symbolic role and authority, the Nazi leaders successfully attempted to persuade Horthy not to resign and to approve the occupation so that it would be smooth, without resistance. The most important reason for why he remained in office was that Hitler had made an insincere “promise” on March 18 that the German army would leave Hungarian territory if the Hungarian political and military leadership would demonstrate its loyalty and commitment to Nazi Germany. Horthy took his promise seriously.⁵⁰

After receiving Hitler’s invitation to Klessheim on March 15, Horthy’s first reaction was not to accept it.⁵¹ Later, however, Ferenc Szombathelyi, chief of the general staff, argued that Horthy should meet Hitler in order to

restore trust between Hungary and Germany.⁵² According to Kállay's memoirs, Szombathelyi said that only the regent could achieve "national" goals. He expressed his argument during a discussion in which the regent himself took part. Szombathelyi added, "the regent has undertaken everything for the nation for twenty-five years, and now, at the most difficult moment, he cannot evade taking on perhaps the most serious task that fate has thrown at him, knowing that the regent is willing to risk his life for the nation. . . . He is confident that nothing will happen to him, and he will return home, and he hopes to return as the savior of the nation."⁵³

These arguments made Horthy change his mind and accept the dictator's invitation. According to Kállay, if someone appealed to the regent's sense of duty and courage, it would certainly persuade him. The prime minister tried but failed to convince Horthy that he had made a wrong decision. The regent insisted on his resolution.⁵⁴ This clearly shows that Szombathelyi used some elements of his leader's image in order to persuade Horthy. In his memoirs Kállay did not refer to the Horthy cult as such, but there is no doubt that in this case it is the influence of his leader cult that is at issue.⁵⁵

On March 18, Horthy negotiated with Hitler three times. Hitler told him that he had decided to invade Hungary. The regent at first rejected Hitler's declaration, but eventually accepted that Hungary would be occupied.⁵⁶ He decided not to resign, because he was convinced by the Nazi leader's aforementioned promise that there would be a way to end the occupation. Szombathelyi also played a decisive role in this important decision.⁵⁷ On March 19, Horthy explained his decision to the prime minister. According to Kállay, Horthy said that "he cannot resign . . . [and] be replaced by others," because "he swore to the nation that he would not betray it in a critical situation."⁵⁸ Horthy continued, "he is the one who is really responsible, the so-called responsible prime minister is only responsible until he is replaced, but he cannot take this convenient path, no one can replace him." He, the regent added, "does not leave the sinking ship"; "he will hold out until the last moment."⁵⁹ Kállay attempted to explain why Horthy should indeed resign, but failed. Horthy asked the following questions, which highlighted his conviction that there was no one to replace him: "Who will protect the Army? . . . Who will protect the Jews if he resigns?"⁶⁰ Later, the regent summarized his decision: "He cannot resign because the situation will change soon," and he was the only one who could lead the resistance, who could lead the nation. "What would the Hungarian nation think if it could recover

and he was not in office?”⁶¹ In his memoirs, Horthy also used the metaphor of a sinking ship: “But to leave a sinking ship, especially one whose captain was needed more than ever, was a step I could not bring myself to take. At the time it was more important to me that Hitler promised to withdraw his troops from Hungary as soon as a government acceptable to him had been appointed.”⁶²

In June 1944, Horthy wrote a letter to Prime Minister Döme Sztójay, in which he offered an explanation for why he had not resigned in March, right after the occupation. He confessed that “from my point of view” resignation “would have been the most natural solution.” This was his first thought, but he changed his mind. He added, “I had the feeling that it was my obligation to the nation to persevere in my position, for otherwise in the extraordinarily grave circumstances of the country the consequences of a situation thus brought about would have been incalculable.” This sentence originally continued, but Horthy crossed out the following words: “and the events likely to follow would have brought about the wholesale annihilation of all the work I had done through nearly two and a half decades. Therefore, I had to stay in my place, and in the interest of the continuity of the nation’s life, moreover, in order to save the nation, I had to appoint the new government”⁶³ It shows that Horthy wanted to “save the nation.” One of his *epitheton ornans* was the “savior” of Hungary, who had been able to save his nation in 1919. The impact of his cult may have been the reason why Horthy wanted to “save” Hungary (again).

In mid-October Horthy made an unsuccessful attempt to withdraw Hungary from the war. He concluded an armistice with the Soviet Union, but ultimately his attempt was unsuccessful, partly because not all of the Hungarian generals obeyed his orders.⁶⁴ Why? Among other reasons, because of their strong anti-Bolshevik sentiments and gratitude to Hitler for the Hungarian territorial revision, the majority of the military officer corps was committed to Nazi Germany.⁶⁵ This is not to mention the fact that Horthy was also staunchly anti-communist, so he refused to have any contact with Moscow until the last minute.⁶⁶

According to some contemporaries’ memories, Horthy often expressed his conviction during the war that the army would follow him with blind and absolute discipline. Some of his close advisors tried to explain to the regent that the whole army in fact did not stand behind him, but they failed.⁶⁷ This topic can also be reconstructed on the basis of reminiscences, thus

necessitating source criticism. However, as the essence is identical in all of them, independently of each other, the analysis can rely on them.

Kálmán Hardy, a former naval officer, in summer 1938 after a meeting with Horthy came to the conclusion that Horthy was convinced that “the sworn and uniformed man is a gentleman.”⁶⁸ Kállay also emphasized that “unfortunately the Hungarian army was not what he thought it was.” Kállay described the army as an organization that “wanted to organize everything, [and] deeply despised parliamentarianism, liberal, and democratic ideas. And [at the end of the thirties] the first signs of German influence began to show.” He could not persuade Horthy to exercise strict control over the army before it was too late. The regent “blindly believed the reports that came to him, was convinced of the loyalty of every officer, and saw in every general a gentleman of integrity.”⁶⁹ It was impossible for him to discuss the pressing problems of the military with Horthy because the regent “blindly believed and trusted in the valor and honesty of the Hungarian soldier.”⁷⁰ At the end of 1943 Gyula Kádár, the head of Hungarian military intelligence, had an audience with the head of state. Horthy spoke to him in a friendly tone. He broached a number of subjects, including the question of possible resistance to the Germans. He declared that, if necessary, he would lead the army and defend the country from the invaders. Kádár listened to him with concern and replied, “What does it mean to lead the troops? Which ones? I said that the resistance should be prepared. The army would hardly follow your orders, the pro-German spirit in the officer corps is very strong.” Horthy was apparently surprised. He asked, “What makes you think that army officers would disobey?” Kádár told him that it was mainly because the majority of the officers had distanced themselves from him, because he was very isolated from the army. The regent did not understand what Kádár was suggesting. It is not surprising that Horthy did not do anything to establish close relations with the officer corps.⁷¹ His generals had led the head of state to believe that his orders would be followed.⁷² For instance, in June 1943, when Hungary celebrated Horthy’s seventy-fifth birthday, the representatives of the officers corps, the minister of defense, and the chief of staff expressed their “honest and boundless” loyalty to the regent.⁷³

All in all, Horthy did not accept the realities of the situation. He insisted that the officers would follow him without wavering in critical circumstances. His conviction was primarily based on the influence of his leader cult. From 1919 onward, propaganda had emphasized that the whole nation

stood behind the “national” leader unconditionally. That may have been the decisive factor for him, and not the warnings of his political advisers. The former minister of defense, Vilmos Nagybaczoni Nagy, also underlined in his memoirs that “[t]he regent was convinced that the officers would keep their oath and line up behind him when it came to a historic step, the magnitude of which he might not have grasped at first. Horthy could not imagine that there would be those in the officer corps who would conspire in the interests of a foreign power and betray their own people, and who would have the interests of the German Reich at heart rather than those of their own country.”⁷⁴

Conclusion

The examples analyzed here, in my opinion, prove that Horthy was under the influence of his leader cult. The regent could not resist the sycophancy, the adulation, and the excessive reverence the cult provided. This does not mean that his personality was as deformed as, for example, Hitler’s was.⁷⁵ The dearth of available sources precludes a comprehensive psychological analysis and the creation of a nuanced profile of Horthy. In some instances, only inferences can be drawn; thus not all claims are supported by reliable primary sources. It is evident that historians would undoubtedly benefit from egodocuments, in which Horthy would have reflected on his own actions on a regular basis. Consequently, an examination of official documents, the regent’s memoirs, and the recollections of those who were his contemporaries is the only means of finding statements made by the regent about himself.

During World War II, especially in 1944, Horthy made his decisions more or less in accordance with the essence of his larger-than-life image. His advisors used some key elements of his public image to influence these decisions.

This means that his cult was a tool for decision-making. It is very important to note that Horthy did not describe himself as a leader chosen, blessed, and sent by God, the embodiment of the Hungarian nation, and so on; namely he did not interpret his political role in accordance with the most irrational elements of his image. The regent rather emphasized that without him the nation could imagine neither the present nor the future, and without him the nation could not overcome its difficulties. His leader

cult strengthened his sense of duty, his readiness to make sacrifices for the Hungarian nation. Dedication was one of the most important principles of the navy of Austria-Hungary, in which Horthy spent thirty-six years between 1882 and 1918. The slogan of the Austro-Hungarian Naval Academy in Fiume was "Duty is higher than life."⁷⁶ His decades spent in the navy provided natural soil in which the propagandistic statements concerning his duty and responsibility could easily take root between 1919 and 1944. The impact of his cult was one important reason why Horthy did not resign after March 19, 1944. I argue that the regent's commitment was more than the so-called "normal" sense of duty, because it was supplemented between 1919 and 1944 by statements about his leader's larger-than-life image. It can be described as a special mixture of his "normal" (pre-1918) and "cultic" (after 1919) sense of duty. As a result of cult-making, it seems that Horthy saw himself as a person without whom the Hungarian nation could not achieve its great goals. He was convinced of his exceptional abilities and perceived himself as indispensable. In this regard, Horthy may have become detached from reality and lost the capacity for a realistic self-assessment.⁷⁷

As we have seen, the significant impact the cult had on Horthy's self-image can be demonstrated in three cases. First, he could not show restraint in the case of the territorial revision, which was linked to his name. As a result of the territorial gains and other factors between 1938 and 1941, Hungary became increasingly committed to Nazi Germany. Therefore, Hungary's room for maneuver increasingly narrowed.⁷⁸ One reason for this growing commitment to the Axis powers was the self-image of the Hungarian head of state. Secondly, the regent did not resign after March 19, 1944. By maintaining his own position and legitimizing political changes, Horthy contributed significantly to the effective regime of occupation, to the military and economic mobilization of Hungary in support of the Reich, and finally to the crimes against humanity and the deportation of a large part of Hungarian Jewry.⁷⁹ Thirdly, in October 1944, in his attempt to withdraw Hungary from the Axis alliance, he trusted the army unconditionally, convinced that the soldiers would follow his orders. It appears that he did not perceive the situation with sufficient objectivity and was not cognizant of the fact that his authority and influence were not absolute. He may have believed that the solemn speeches and the constant

declarations of loyalty on his birthdays, name days, and other political anniversaries reflected the realities. There were, of course, other reasons for the failure in October (some of them mentioned above).

Of course, historians must take into account all relevant aspects of Horthy's decisions. The impact of his cult is only one of them. But this factor can contribute to a balanced portrayal of his political role. The lack of relevant egodocuments makes it impossible, of course, to explore all aspects of his life in this way. Thus his self-image, as captured by his leader cult, would be the general framework for historical analysis.

DÁVID TURBU CZ obtained his degree in history and political science from the Eötvös Loránd University. He proceeded with his doctoral studies at the Doctoral School of History of Károly Eszterházy College (Eger). He successfully defended his doctoral thesis on the Horthy cult, 1919–1944, in 2014, receiving the highest academic distinction. His thesis supervisor was Dr. Ignác Romsics, a distinguished professor and full member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Dávid's research primarily focuses on the life and reception of Miklós Horthy.

NOTES

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1. From the non-Hungarian specialized literature, for example, I refer to Ian Kershaw, *The "Hitler Myth": Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford University Press, 2001); Ian Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (Yale University Press, 2012); Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (University of California Press, 1997); Heidi Hein, *Der Piłsudski-Kult und seine Bedeutung für den polnischen Staat 1926–1939* [The Piłsudski cult and its significance for Poland, 1926–39] (Herder-Institut, 2002); Anna von der Goltz, *Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Marina Petrakis, *The Metaxas Myth: Dictatorship and Propaganda in Greece* (Tauris Academic Studies, 2006).

2. Lóránd Dombrády, *A legfelsőbb hadúr és hadserege* [The supreme warlord and his army] (Zrínyi, 1990), 197. All translations are by the author.

3. Thomas Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral on Horseback: Miklós Horthy, 1918–1944*. (Columbia University Press, 1994), 335–43.

4. Péter Sipos, "Egy Horthy-életrajz problémái" [The problems of a Horthy biography], *Történelmi Szemle* 18, no. 10 (2007): 432.

5. Catherine Horel, *L'Amiral Horthy: Régent de Hongrie* [Admiral Horthy: the regent of Hungary] (Perrin, 2014).

6. Krisztián Ungváry, *Horthy Miklós: A kormányzó és felelőssége, 1920–1944* [Miklós Horthy: the regent and his responsibility, 1920–44] (Jaffa Kiadó, 2020).

7. Dávid Turbucz, "Horthy Miklós önképe: a vezér és kultusza" [The self-image of Horthy: the leader and his cult], in *Lélek és történelem: örökség* [Soul and history: heritage], ed. Barbara Papp (ELTE BTK, 2021), 137–47.

8. Dávid Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz 1919–1944* [The Horthy cult, 1919–44] (MTA BTK TTI, 2015), 81–82, 99, 201, 285–87.

9. On the definition of leader cults, see Balázs Apor, "Communist Leader Cults in Eastern Europe: Concepts and Recent Debates," in *Cultic Revelations: Studies in Modern Historical Cult Personalities and Phenomena*, ed. Anssi Halmesvirta, Spectrum Hungarologicum 4 (Faculty of Humanities, Hungarian Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland, 2010), 37–38; Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (Yale University Press, 1946), 39–40; Aristotle A. Kallis, "Fascism, 'Charisma' and 'Charismatisation': Weber's model of 'Charismatic Domination' and Interwar European Fascism," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religion* 7, no. 1 (2006): 25–43; E. A. Rees, "Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions," in *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc*, ed. Balázs Apor et al. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 3–26.

10. On the Trianon Peace Treaty see Ignác Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary: The Peace Treaty of Trianon, 1920* (Columbia University Press, 2002); Miklós Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision in Hungary, 1920–1945* (Columbia University Press, 2007); Zeidler, "Trianon, Treaty of," in *1914–1918-online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel et al. <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/trianon-treaty-of/>.

11. Kershaw, "Hitler Myth," 3, 81–82.

12. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler* (Penguin Books, 2009), 174, 184–89, 213–14, 264–65, 320–57; quoted at 174.

13. Kallis, "Fascism, 'Charisma' and 'Charismatisation,'" 32.

14. Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, 15–41, 191–92.

15. Petrakis, *Metaxas Myth*, 26–63, 96–115.

16. Goltz, *Hindenburg*, 217.

17. Hein, *Piłsudski-Kult*, 43–61, 300–15.

18. Plamper, *Stalin Cult*, 119–64, 223–24; quoted at 123 and 223; Sarah Davies, "Stalin and the Making of the Leader Cult in the 1930s," in Apor et al., *Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships*, 29–46.

19. Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 120, 223–24.

20. Documents regarding the preparation for the tenth anniversary of Miklós Horthy's reign, Budapest, February 1930, 24, 43–53. 1364, 2, K 26. A Miniszterelnökség iratai [The documents of the Office of the Prime Minister], Hungarian National Archives, Budapest.

21. Lily Doblhoff, *Horthy Miklós* (Athenaeum, 1938), 5.

22. Letter of Miklós Horthy to the Prime Minister, Budapest, January 13, 1935, 4–7. 898, 1, K. 148. Belügyminisztérium [Minister of the Interior], Hungarian National Archives.

23. Daily report, February 8, 1930; February 19, 1940; June 12, 1943, K. 428. Magyar Távirati Iroda [Hungarian News Agency], a) Napi tudósítások [Daily reports], Hungarian National Archives; Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 120, 223–24, 272, 303.

24. Plamper, *Stalin Cult*, 120–22.

25. Dávid Turbucz, "Horthy Miklós beszédei 1919 és 1923 között" [The speeches of Miklós Horthy between 1919 and 1923], *Századok* 154, no. 1 (2020): 183–208.

26. Kirill Postoutenko, "Performance and Management of Political Leadership in Totalitarian and Democratic Societies: The Soviet Union, Germany and the United States in 1936," in *Totalitarian Communication: Hierarchies, Codes and Messages*, ed. Kirill Postoutenko (Transcript Verlag, 2010), 91–121.
27. Turbucz, "Horthy Miklós önképe," 139–40.
28. Kálmán Hardy, *Az Adriától Amerikáig* [From the Adria to America] (Kairosz Kiadó–Hadtörténeti Intézet és Múzeum, 2008), 165, 423; Orsolya Fürj, "A brit diplomáciai jelenlét Magyarországon 1924 és 1941 között: A British Legation szervezete és működése" [The British diplomatic presence in Hungary from 1924 to 1941: structure and activity of the British Legation] (PhD diss., University of Debrecen, 2017), 130; László Ravasz, *Emlékezéseim* [My memories] (Kálvin, 1992), 158–59; Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral*, 353; György Barcza, *Diplomataemlékeim 1911–1945* [My memories as diplomat 1911–45] (Európa–História, 1994), 1:902; Mór Kornfeld: *Trianontól Trianonig: Tanulmányok, dokumentumok* [From Trianon to Trianon: studies and documents] (Corvina, 2006), 221–22; Judit Pihurik, "Horthy Miklós alakja kortársak naplói, visszaemlékezései és emlékiratai tükrében" [The figure of Miklós Horthy in the mirror of his contemporaries' diaries and memoirs], *Hitel* 8, no. 11 (1995): 25–33; Erich Heyssler, vol. 2. 16, Nachlässe, B/1174, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv, Vienna.
29. Turbucz, "Horthy Miklós önképe," 141.
30. Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral*, 123–66.
31. Ignác Romsics, *István Bethlen: A Great Conservative Statesman of Hungary, 1874–1946* (Columbia University Press, 1995), 285–89.
32. Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral*, 167–380.
33. On Hungarian irredentism see Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision*.
34. Dávid Turbucz, "Miklós Horthy in Poland: Official Visit, Image of Charismatic Leader and his Leader Cult: The Hungarian Interpretation," *Hungarian Studies* 32, no. 2 (2018): 291–304; Turbucz, "Nation Building and Religion: The Horthy Cult in Hungary between 1919 and 1944," *Historical Studies on Central Europe* 3, no. 2. (2023): 68–89.
35. Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral*, 230.
36. Ignác Romsics, "Horthy-képeink" [Our Horthy images], *Mozgó Világ* 33, no. 10 (2007): 18; Dombrády, *A legfelsőbb hadúr*, 121–22.
37. Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 199–215.
38. Ignác Romsics, *Hungary in the Twentieth Century* (Corvina–Osiris, 1999), 191–216.
39. Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 215–21.
40. Nóra Szekér, ed., *Miniszter a frontvonalban: Zsindely Ferenc naplója (1941. február 25 – 1946. március 9)* [Minister on the front line: the diary of Ferenc Zsindely (February 25, 1941–March 9, 1946)] (ÁBTL–Kronosz Kiadó, 2021).
41. Zsindely emphasized this statement again on January 14, 1942. Szekér, *Miniszter a frontvonalban*, 62, 181.
42. Szekér, *Miniszter a frontvonalban*, 63.
43. Szekér, *Miniszter a frontvonalban*, 75.
44. Szekér, *Miniszter a frontvonalban*, 226.
45. Unfortunately it is not known which bill this was.
46. Szekér, *Miniszter a frontvonalban*, 344.

47. Szekér, *Miniszter a frontvonalban*, 344.
48. Barcza, *Diplomataemlékeim*, 210.
49. Turbucz, "Horthy Miklós önképe," 142–44.
50. On German occupation see, for instance, Christian Gerlach and Götz Aly, *Das letzte Kapitel: Realpolitik, Ideologie und der Mord an den ungarischen Juden, 1944/1945* [The last chapter: realpolitik, ideology, and the murder of the Hungarian Jews, 1944–45] (Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2002); Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral*, 322–33.
51. Miklós Kállay, *Magyarország miniszterelnöke voltam 1942–1944* [I was the prime minister of Hungary, 1942–44] (Európa-História, 1991), 2:171.
52. Kállay, *Magyarország miniszterelnöke*, 2:172.
53. Kállay, *Magyarország miniszterelnöke*, 2:172.
54. Kállay, *Magyarország miniszterelnöke*, 2:173. The regent's daughter-in-law confirmed in her memoirs that Ferenc Szombathelyi persuaded Horthy to meet with Hitler. Ilona Edelsheim-Gyulai, *Becsület és kötelesség 1: 1918–1944* [Honor and duty, vol. 1, 1918–44] (Európa, 2007), 226.
55. Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral*, 336–37.
56. Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral*, 327–32.
57. Dávid Turbucz, *Horthy Miklós* (Napvilág, 2011), 200–201.
58. Kállay, *Magyarország miniszterelnöke*, 2:190.
59. Kállay, *Magyarország miniszterelnöke*, 2:190.
60. Kállay, *Magyarország miniszterelnöke*, 2:190–91.
61. Kállay, *Magyarország miniszterelnöke*, 2:191. Horthy's daughter-in-law mentioned that "he was expected [during World War II] always to rise to the occasion and do what would save the country from harm." Edelsheim-Gyulai, *Becsület és kötelesség*, 210.
62. Nicolas Horthy, *Memoirs* (Simon Publications, 2000), 260–61. Horthy often used this metaphor to justify his decisions. Elek and László Karsai, eds., *A Szálasi per* [The Szálasi trial] (Reform, 1988), 590; Barcza, *Diplomataemlékeim*, 117–18.
63. Miklós Szinai and László Szűcs, eds., *The Confidential Papers of Admiral Horthy* (Corvina, 1965), 301.
64. Krisztián Ungváry, *Kiugrás a történelemből: Horthy Miklós a világpolitika színpadán* [Leap out of history: Miklós Horthy on the stage of world politics] (Open Books, 2022); Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral*, 364–80.
65. Lóránd Dombrády, *Hadsereg és politika Magyarországon 1938–1944* [Army and politics in Hungary, 1938–44] (Kossuth, 1986); Lóránd Dombrády, *Werth Henrik, akiről nem beszélünk* [Henrik Werth, about whom we do not talk] (Argumentum, 2005); Lóránd Dombrády, *Szombathelyi Ferenc vezérezredes* [General Ferenc Szombathelyi] (HM Hadtörténeti Intézet és Múzeum, 2012).
66. Dávid Turbucz, "Anti-Bolshevismus im Weltbild Miklós Horthys: Vorstellung und Wirklichkeit" [Anti-Bolshevism in the worldview of Miklós Horthy: imagination and reality], in *Die ungarische Räterepublik 1919 in Lebensgeschichten und Literatur* [The Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 in life stories and literature], ed. Albert Dikovich and Edward Saunders (Institut für Ungarische Geschichtsforschung in Wien, Balassi Institut Collegium Hungaricum, 2017), 215–34.
67. Károly Vigh, ed., *Vattay Antal naplója, 1944–1945* [The diary of Antal Vattay, 1944–45] (Zrínyi, 1990), 32, 38.

68. Hardy, *Az Adriától Amerikáig*, 339.
69. Kállay, *Magyarország miniszterelnöke*, 2:162.
70. Kállay, *Magyarország miniszterelnöke*, 2:167.
71. Gyula Kádár, *A Ludovikától Sopronkőhidáig* [From Ludovika to Sopronkőhida] (Magvető, 1978), 2:635–36.
72. Kádár, *A Ludovikától Sopronkőhidáig*, 2:742.
73. Dombrády, *A legfelsőbb hadúr*, 197.
74. Vilmos Nagybacsoni Nagy, *Végzetes esztendők 1938–1945* [Fateful years 1938–45] (Gondolat, 1986), 316.
75. Kershaw, “Hitler Myth,” 81–82.
76. Dávid Turbucz, *Horthy Miklós, a haditengerésztiszt* [Miklós Horthy the naval officer] (Jaffa, 2022), 22.
77. After 1944, as an emigrant, in his letters, interviews, and memoirs there was no sign of self-criticism. Ádám Gellért and Dávid Turbucz, “Egy elmaradt felelősségre vonás margójára: Horthy Miklós Nürnbergben” [On the margin of a missed prosecution: Miklós Horthy in Nuremberg], *Betekintő* 6, no. 4 (2012), https://betekinto.hu/sites/default/files/betekinto-szamok/2012_4_gellert_turbucz.pdf.
78. Miklós Zeidler, “Mozgástér a kényszerpályán: A magyar külpolitika választásai a két háború között” [Room for maneuver on the forced path: the choices of Hungarian foreign policy between the two wars], in *Mítoszok, legendák, tévhitek a 20. századi magyar történelemről* [Myths, legends, and misconceptions about twentieth-century Hungarian history], ed. Ignác Romsics (Osiris, 2005), 162–205.
79. Turbucz, *Horthy Miklós* (2011), 197–204.