PHD DISSERTATION – THESESES

NÁNAY MIHÁLY

THE MILITARY AND POLITICAL ROLE OF ARCHDUKE JOSEPH AUGUST OF HABSBURG-LORRAINE

1914–1924

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Budapest, 2016.
1. About the chosen topic

Archduke Joseph August of Habsburg–Lorraine was a popular person of WW I and of the period between the two world wars. As a member of the royal family, not only by his noble origins but as a high ranking and successful military officer and occasionally a politician, he was an important member and eyewitness of his age. Despite, he vanished from historical memory after 1945 because as a person being right-winger and having supported revision was evaluated in the most negative way during the communist era. His memory was condemned to damnatio memoriae. After 1990, his person was not paid attention either which is understandable in the aspect that looking back from a century, he was not among the most defining politicians of his era having political long-perspective plans and wide geopolitical awareness, like István Tisza, István Bethlen or Pál Teleki. Although, in that period, in the eyes of his contemporaries he was a popular and respectable figure, who had an important political role at the end of WW I and at the beginning of the counter-revolutionary period, not to mention his political carrier reaching the highest levels.

Contrarily, there is a very negative, cynical and schematic image of him in many memoires, in superficial popular works and even in history books, which is not justified and needs revision. Besides his popularity, authority and political-military role, as a third factor it is important to mention that the thoughts of Joseph August, who was an influential person in the social elite, in general decisive questions can be worthy of attention of historical researches.

Nowadays, the memoires of even the relatives of the major figures of the era are published and based on their opinion events are reconsidered. Although, they were not even in the position of decision making, their opinion is important only in the point of view of contemporary insiders. Therefore, it is justified to have an objective research on the political-military activities and opinion on the major questions of the era of Joseph August being a significant sideman of that period. Especially, that his well-known seven-volume memoires published between the two WWs and his never published diaries written before 1944 are available.

Therefore, this dissertation makes an attempt to describe the military-political role of Joseph August of Habsburg–Lorraine in his most active ten years of his life in details based on a massive amount of written sources. The dissertation also aims at being a basis of a yet lacking useful and modern biography. It is an important aspect, that this study compares the monographs and syntheses containing information on the archduke and his role with his own diaries revealing his thinking and inner and outer motivations of his decisions. This way, a
more realistic and precise portrait on one of the most successful and popular general of the Monarchy and influential and characteristic figure of the era can be achieved.

Besides the above mentioned facts, rewriting the political history of the studied period is not an aim, but putting Joseph August in the context of the given period is the goal. Furthermore, the dissertation intends to give contribution to the better understanding of the political history of WW I and the following stormy period. In addition, processing the activities of a significant member of the Hungarian branch of the Habsburg family can modify the Habsburg image of the Hungarian historical common thinking as well.

2. Sources, bibliography, methods

The modern, professional and objective processing of the life and military-political career of Joseph August of Habsburg–Lorraine has not done yet. Despite the fact, that he was an important witness of his era. His evaluation, when it was considered at all, changed at the extremes. During the period between the two WWs the works about him praised him without critic, while after 1945 historical research neglected him or mentioned him in a negative way in summative works on the period.

The research on the life of Joseph August did not start due to only the lack of intention but the paucity of sources. As the files of many great families can be found in the national or local archives, the archive of the Hungarian branch of the Habsburg dynasty ceased to exist with the castle at Alcsút during WW II. Despite this fact, there are invaluable pieces of information on the archduke being popular figure of that era in many contemporary memoires and journals. Concerning his political role the mostly already published documents can give orientation.

The longer works on archduke Joseph were already published during WW I (Margit Jakó, Hugó Payr) and János Gabányi published his book on the life of the archduke in 1931. These works are far from the objective scholarly approach and describe the activities of the archduke in a pathetic tone accordingly to the popular thinking of the era. Although, they give details on the major events of the archduke’s life.

The historiography after 1945 did not deal with the archduke, and after the change of regime research were not started on the military or political career of Joseph August either. In 1986, István Katkó published a short article, in which he brought out a letter of Joseph August to his wife on the events of the bloody Thursday. In the 90s, another study was published in the Turul on one of the investiture of Joseph August. Beside them, the author of this dissertation published articles and a book on the topic.
The dissertation used several groups of sources but the most important guide were the diaries of Joseph August. Its bigger part is the 6000-page and 7-volume-long diary published between the two WWs under the title of “The WW as I have seen”. This source requires careful critic as it was published 10 years after WW I. Although, it is invaluable as it is full of details and provides the experience of a contemporary eye-witness. The other part of the diaries consists of notes between 1919–1924 and 1937–1944. Its speciality is that the archduke did not want to publish it; therefore it was not made for publicity. In addition, this group of sources were handed out for research by the relatives for the very first time. Naturally, critical attitude is also inevitable here. Beside the diaries, as Joseph August was an important public member of the era, there are innumerable references on him in various memoires which got serious role in the research. The contemporary journalism is also an unavoidable fount especially on the representative public and political activities of Joseph August. Mainly, for study on political questions using archives and publications of sources was essential. Therefore, common and local authority reports, parliamentary diaries, MTI news and even French diplomatic documents also appear in the sources used by the dissertation. On the archduke’s life in the emigration after 1945, his private correspondence in my possession gives information.

Writing the dissertation there were some methodological principles. This monograph evaluates the events of the period in the archduke’s point of view, therefore the diary is the most suitable source to reconstruct personal motivations and opinions considering the subjective elements as well. It is also inevitable to avoid retrospective approach putting the portrait of the archduke into the context of the given era instead of decades of afterthoughts evading black and white judgements as it is not the historian’s task to do. In addition, the personality has to be described in a dynamic model as it changed during the decades while regimes fell. He can’t be expected not to change during this time.

3. Content and structure of the dissertation

In the dissertation, the explanation of choosing the topic and historiographical and methodological introduction are followed by the detailed study on the most active period of the career of the archduke between 1914 and 1924. In the latter, a long chapter describes Joseph August’s career in WW I. The paragraphs describing his service on different frontiers (Serbian, Russian, Italian, Romanian and finally Italian again) follow each other in chronological order sometimes disrupted by topic based parts – such as on his military thoughts – and framed by an introduction and a summary.
The second and bigger part of the dissertation consists of the political thoughts and role of Joseph August. Here, there is a chronological order as well. First, his political thoughts during WW I and his role in the fall of Tisza, then his activities as a homo regius during the Aster Revolution and his cooperation with the Károlyi government is introduced. Later on, his hardships during the Council Republic and the problems rose by the counter revolutionary take over and governorship, then the legal relationship (governmental aspirations and question of kingship) are explored. The last chapters of the dissertation explains the causes of the popularity of Joseph August and a short outlook outlines the archduke’s activities after 1924 until the emigration period followed by summary.

At the end of the dissertation, there is a detailed bibliography and many appendices. Among them, the genealogic tree showing Joseph August’s place in the Habsburg dynasty and the tables summarising his military career are the most important ones. Moreover, there are maps on military frontiers and own photos as well.

4. Major conclusions

The biography of Joseph August in general. The making of the biography of the archduke (or its most important period) is a scholarly result in itself, as there is not any modern monograph on him, what’s more studies on connected details haven’t been written yet.

The military career of archduke Joseph in WW I. In the centenary years of WW I, there is a serious social interest in the questions of the “apocalypse”. Despite, apart from a few exceptions there is a total lack of monographs on the life and career of major leaders, although in other countries the situation is different (e. g. Italy). Therefore, the introduction of a high ranking officer is a new result in itself. It has to be added, that archduke Joseph was not only a successful general of the monarchy, but he was among the few who reached the highest rank (marshal) and he was considered to be Hungarian. A further significance of his career is that his 7-volume-diary is known for military historians but hasn’t been processed in one monograph. Finally, the archduke served on locations, like the Carpathian Russian frontier, Doberdo or at the defence of Transylvania from the Romanians, which burnt into the historical memory of WW I.

The military promotion of Joseph August. The bibliography dealing with the military quarter-deck of the Monarchy generally highlights that the Habsburg archdukes had a special awarding in the quarter-deck and were promoted faster and to a higher rank. This point of view can be modified based on the career of archduke Joseph. It is a fact, that for bourgeois or
noble origin officer it was impossible to achieve so high positions in such a short term with less education, but it is also not true that the Habsburg archdukes gained their position without merit.

At the beginning of the 19th century they were appointed without any experience to lead bigger divisions, while by the 20th century even the archdukes had to step through the hierarchy from the lowest rank, although not as slowly as their fellows. On the other hand, the authority of the dynasty could not stand in front of the publicity having a completely incompetent archduke at a high position in a war at a high stake.

During the research, it was revealed that Joseph August did not suffer serious defeat in WW I, although he did not achieve strategic break through either. However, the 1-year-long defence of Doberdo was a serious achievement. In this sense, the promotion of the archduke was not without merit, even if his Habsburg family name helped a lot. Supporting this statement, after the break through at Luck archduke Joseph Ferdinand was dismissed, what’s more in 1915 the idea of dismissing Joseph August was also come up in the AOK which signs that they also had to take responsibility and only the name was not enough.

*Military principles of archduke Joseph.* In the historical common knowledge, there is a strong image of the meaningless shambles-like trench war in which waves of infantry mass attacks followed each other inflicting huge losses to both of the opponents without the least success. This view is modified by the chapters on thoughts of Joseph August. One of the most important ideas of the archduke is that he realised to use new innovative methods, tools and solutions like using battalions equipped with grenades or the precise cooperation between different branches of the army. Thanks to this the number of causalities could be decreased and later the warfare of WW II developed into this direction as well. Joseph August also realised that the morale could rather be maintained with care with soldiers than Spartan rigor. Therefore, he made an attempt to provide better conditions to his soldiers and he often appeared in the first line to have a personal contact with his soldiers and to show example as well. He was respected by his soldiers which is shown by the expression “Our father Joseph.”

*The role of Joseph August in the Aster Revolution and during the Károlyi-government.* With one or two exceptions, monographs dealing with the history of the fall of the Monarchy and of the Aster Revolution do not give details on archduke Joseph’s participation in the events in which he was a key figure, moreover he wrote about them in his memoires. This way, processing the events of October-November 1918 in his point of view is an achievement. His behaviour was contradictory in November as he wanted to change his name and had an oath on the Peoples’ Republic. Later, these actions were evaluated in a cynical way in
different memoires and even in monographs. Putting it in context comparing with other members of the ancient regime it can’t be considered strange. In addition, it has to be evaluated in a different way as he had the explicit authorization given by king Charles IV.

*Evaluation and existence of the counter-revolutionary centre in Budapest.* Monographs about the counter-revolution would outline two power-centres, the Horthy led one in Szeged and the other one in Vienna connected to Bethlen. Despite this, the counter-revolution as a putsch in a legal sense was accomplished independently from these two centres in Budapest by the Friedrich led White House group. Based on archduke Joseph’s diaries it turned out that the group had been planning the coup since spring and made contact with the archduke who tried to inform the other party at Szeged. Naturally, as they operated in the region under the control of the Council Republic they could not act openly as the others at Szeged or Vienna but they got the advantage with their fast putsch in the decisive moment on 6th August 1919. Moreover, the Budapest centre became the basis of the establishment of the new regime, which is signed by the fact that foundation of the new government in autumn negotiated by Clerk originated from the Friedrich-government and they created the most important article of autumn on the electoral law of 1920. Besides, the governorship of Joseph August was short lived not due to the internal support but because of explicit external forces. From these, it is justified to consider the Budapest centre as a key factor just like counter-revolutionary groups at Szeged and in Vienna.

*The re-evaluation of the role of Horthy in 1919 in Joseph August's perspective.* Monographs and syntheses on the period between WWs summarily comments the half year of 1919 highlighting that the only serious power centre was Horthy and the National Army which means that he became the key figure of the period. In general, this statement can be accepted, but based on the archduke’s opinion it has to be revised in details. First, it is important to say that even though Horthy was the commanding admiral of the fleet he did not have country-wide popularity, although monographs published under his governorship tried to emphasize this retrospectively. In this aspect, the leaders of the ground forces, like archduke Joseph, were more well-known and popular. Apart from the fact that Horthy served as adjutant of emperor Francis Joseph, the would-be governor did not have any political experience and as a reformate common noble he was not embedded in the contemporary Hungarian aristocratic political elite. Archduke Joseph pointed out several times that it was questionable at what extent could Horthy use his naval experience as ahead of the National Army as a ground force. It is also not completely true that Horthy’s military force was the only one in the country since in the summer of 1919 Anton Lehár had a bigger army in
Feldbach on the western border of Hungary. Although, it is visible that Horthy purposefully intended to gain the position of governor which is showed by his separation from the declining Szeged-government, his flexible and cooperative manners with English diplomats (Clerk, Hohler) and the Entente or having intensive self-propaganda. It is also not correct that in January and February 1920 Horthy was the only one candidate for governorship. Both Apponyi and archduke Joseph was supported by many, but the pressure of the National Army, the serious Horthy-propaganda and the Entente declaration against Habsburg supported by Horthy made it clear that having another candidate was not advisable. The controversial situation is signed by the fact that Apponyi got few votes, although he rejected his candidacy. Joseph August as a member of the ruling dynasty, a field marshal, former homo regius and governor had a very good reference for the position of palatine or governor. It is not by chance, that there was a strong opposition between the governor and the archduke during the whole period, due to which Horthy displaced Joseph August from every important military or political position, although, the latter was ready to take place of the governor in case of his fall.

The regal question in archduke Joseph’s point of view. The contemporary memoires and journals mentioned Joseph August as a candidate for the position of the king at the first place after Charles IV and Otto. However, the problem is more complex than that. The available direct sources written by archduke Joseph do not verify that he had open claims for the throne against the legitimate king. Mostly he imagined a kind of regent role (e.g. governor or palatine) until Charles IV can return. The situation changed remarkably after the two return attempts, dethronisation and death of Charles IV. From this on, Joseph August considered the question of the throne opened and did not accept the Pragmatic Sanction or the validity of the family law. What’s more, he wrote in his diary that if the international circumstances changed and the country voted on his person he would not reject the crown.

The phenomenon of the popularity of Joseph August. Formally, archduke Joseph had a decision making position last at 23 August 1919. Later, although his name regularly appeared as a candidate for kingship, became a member of the Upper House of the Parliament and chairman of the HAS, practically he did not have real power but he had only a representative role. Despite, looking back he remained inexplicably popular; he was a guest of every social event and journals reported on his appearance at the first place. What’s more, new prime ministers and foreign minister visited him first right after the governor. This phenomenon is an interesting conclusion of the neobaroque society of the Horthy-era in which the rank of an archduke gave such a respect to its owner which ceased to exist after 1945. On the other hand,
the other component of the popularity of the archduke was his jovial and paternal relationship with soldiers, due to which they clung to his person. Last but not least, in the Hungarian popular thinking there was a long felt-want that a foreign dynasty, which rarely visited its domain, had the throne of the country. It lent popularity to Joseph August that apart from his being Habsburg he did not only speak Hungarian as his native language but in his person, Hungarians got a “national archduke”.
5. Publications of the author


