

The Unwanted yet Unavoidable Implementation of Religious Tolerance in Early Modern Transylvania

Koloman Marschik
Trinity College Dublin

Abstract

While most of early modern Europe was plunged into confessional strife, the central European principality of Transylvania managed to survive the period with no inter-confessional warfare. Rather, the state recognized multiple confessions and allegedly advocated tolerance between them. Drawing from differing theories on the rise of toleration and on the context of early modern Transylvanian history, this article argues that this regime of tolerance arose not due to any enlightened thinking about toleration but out of immediate political necessity. More precisely, the motivation of the Transylvanian elite lay in protecting their nascent state's existence in a dangerous international environment.

Article

Introduction

In order to assess how and why the emerging central European principality of Transylvania implemented religious tolerance even as most other countries descended into interconfessional conflict, one must first define what “tolerant” means in the context of the period. This subject has a rich and developing historiography. Henry Kamen provided an assessment of the emergence of tolerance across Europe in the sixteenth century as a “new and more liberal attitude to religion.”¹ States, so Kamen suggested, were initially wary to adopt tolerance as a policy. However, they were convinced of the merits of this new liberal attitude through campaigning by proponents of this philosophy of tolerance.² These campaigns paved the way for tolerance to be accepted among states' inhabitants, creating tolerant societies. One perspective on the laws that created the legal space for alleged tolerance in Transylvania might seem to support this motive. The Transylvanian diet, responsible for creating legislation, met at the town of Torda (today Turda) in January 1568 and enacted an edict that proclaimed “ministers should everywhere preach and proclaim the Gospel according to their understanding of it,” and that “no one should harm any superintendent or minister, nor abuse anyone on account of their religion ... and no

¹ Henry Kamen, *The Rise of Toleration* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), 8.

² Jeffrey R. Collins, “Redeeming the Enlightenment: New Histories of Religious Toleration,” *The Journal of Modern History* 81, no. 3 (2009): 629.

one is permitted to threaten to imprison or deprive anyone of their position because of their teaching.”³ This appears at first sight to be a statement that might support Kamen’s view of the emergence of tolerance on the basis of a more liberal attitude towards religion. Yet in the same text, one also reads in a statement addressed to the ruler of Transylvania, János Zsigmond Szapolyai: “There are many in your Majesty’s country who disobey the Wallachian bishop, who was appointed to this position by your grace; they prefer to follow the former priests and their heresies, and prevent the bishop from properly fulfilling his duties; therefore we beg your Majesty to graciously grant the advancement of the Gospel according to your Majesty’s earlier decree concerning the country, and to punish those who dare oppose it.”⁴ Kamen’s view of an emerging philosophy of religious liberalism (however this might be understood in the context of the sixteenth century) that preceded the emergence of tolerance suddenly seems misplaced. The 1568 Diet of Torda rather seems to offer support for religious tolerance, while simultaneously expressing a desire to persecute on religious grounds. Another motivation for tolerance must be at play.

Returning to the developing historiography on the question of tolerance in early modern Europe, we can find discussion by a broad range of scholars from Herbert Butterfield to Benjamin Kaplan. In his widely cited 2007 study on the practice of toleration in early modern Europe, Kaplan saw tolerance not as “an embrace of diversity for its own sake,” but as a “pragmatic move, a grudging acceptance of unpleasant realities, not a positive virtue.”⁵ Such ideas about tolerance were not new. Some thirty years prior, Butterfield put the case in starker tones: “It [tolerance] was not so much an ideal, a positive end that people wanted to establish for its own sake; but, rather, a *pis aller*, a retreat to the next best thing, a last resort for those who often still hated one another, but found it impossible to go on fighting any more.”⁶ Such motivation might offer some explanation for the seemingly opposing decisions declared at Torda. Butterfield went so far as to call into question whether tolerance can be called an “idea” at all: “It was hardly even an ‘idea’ for the most part—just a happening—the sort of thing that happens when no choice is left and there is no hope of further struggle being worthwhile.”⁷

This language about the history of tolerance as a pragmatic legal regime and everyday social practice from Butterfield to Kaplan now seems more convincing than Kamen’s idealistic argument. In the following assessment, we will come to see that this pragmatism in Transylvania was undertaken by those who had the means to enact change in Transylvanian society—the nobility, the burghers, and the princes of Transylvania—in

³ Sándor Szilágyi, ed., *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek. Monumenta Comititalia Regni Transsylvaniae* [Records of the Transylvanian Diet], 21 vols. (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1875-1898), 2.343, trans. Graeme Murdock, qtd. in Graeme Murdock, “Turda, 1568: Tolerance Transylvanian Style,” in *A Sourcebook of Early Modern European History Life, Death and Everything in Between*, ed. Ute Lotz-Heuman (London: Routledge, 2019), 234-236.

⁴ Szilágyi, ed., *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek*, 2.343, qtd. in Mihály Balázs, Judit Gellérd, and Thomas Cooper, “Tolerant Country—Misunderstood Laws. Interpreting Sixteenth-Century Transylvanian Legislation Concerning Religion,” *The Hungarian Historical Review* 2 (2013): 5.

⁵ Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (London: Belknap, 2007), 8.

⁶ Herbert Butterfield, “Toleration in Early Modern Times,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38, no. 4 (1977): 573.

⁷ Butterfield, “Toleration in Early Modern Times,” 573.

order to further their own spiritual, political, and material interests. These elite actors primarily focused on the protection and advancement of their own confessional and material interests, but also included foreign policy considerations and, perhaps to some degree, pressures driven by the complex social context of urban and rural communities in their decision-making processes. It was the nature of the pragmatic self-interests of its elite that led Transylvania to become “tolerant.” First, however, some historical context is required to frame the decisions reached by the Transylvanian diet.

Historical Background

The political entity that came to be known as the Principality of Transylvania, which existed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in central Europe, had emerged from the partition of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary, following its defeat at the hands of the Ottoman Empire at the Battle of Mohács in 1526.⁸ Before its defeat, Transylvania had been a province of the medieval Hungarian Kingdom, ruled by a governor chosen by the Hungarian Monarch. Pre-Mohács, this man would have held the title of *vovoide*. In the wake of the Battle of Mohács, Hungary was de facto partitioned. The Ottoman army had dealt a deathblow to the Hungarian army: Most of the Hungarian nobility, as well as the man who would become known as the last king of medieval Hungary, King Louis II, were killed at the battle. In its aftermath, Ottoman armies advanced deep into the Hungarian heartland, taking its capital Buda. But they did not finish the conquest of all of the Hungarian crown lands.⁹

Lands to the west, north, and east remained out of Ottoman hands. Upon the death of the king, decision makers in these territories readied the kingdom’s constitutional contingency plans. The medieval Hungarian kingdom was an elective monarchy. The king was voted into office by the members of the Hungarian diet, made up mostly of Hungarian nobles. And even though many had died at Mohács, enough remained to commence proceedings. Representatives of the northern and western estates of the kingdom, which had eluded Ottoman control, elected Ferdinand Habsburg, archduke of neighboring Austria and brother to the Holy Roman Emperor.¹⁰

After the defeat at Mohács, however, the easternmost provinces of the kingdom were almost cut off from the western part of the kingdom. Yet in order to retain political continuity, these provinces also called a diet to elect a monarch. The province of Transylvania had its own provincial diet within the medieval Hungarian kingdom, and given the circumstances, representatives of the noble estates of the other eastern counties that had not come under Ottoman control joined it. They elected as king of Hungary the native Transylvanian magnate, János Szapolyai.¹¹ Szapolyai ruled from Transylvania but laid claim to all of the medieval kingdom’s territory. As did Ferdinand Habsburg.

⁸ Paula Sutter Fichtner, *Terror and Toleration: The Habsburg Empire Confronts Islam, 1526-1850* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 31-32.

⁹ Paula Sutter Fichtner, *The Habsburg Empire: From Dynasticism to Multinationalism* (Malabar: Krieger, 1997), 7-9.

¹⁰ Fichtner, *The Habsburg Empire*, 7-9.

¹¹ Graeme Murdock, “Multiconfessionalism in Transylvania,” in *A Companion to Multiconfessionalism in the Early Modern World*, ed. Thomas Max Safley (Boston: Extenza Turpin, 2011), 396-397.

For the following decades, Transylvania thus not only had the Ottoman Empire to its south looking to it as a target of territorial expansion, it also had the most powerful European dynasty to the west with a claim to its territory.¹² Both of these powers would make incursions into Transylvania over the following decades. Indeed, the entire territory of the medieval Hungarian kingdom was to become a near constant theatre of war for much of the middle and latter decades of the 1500s.¹³

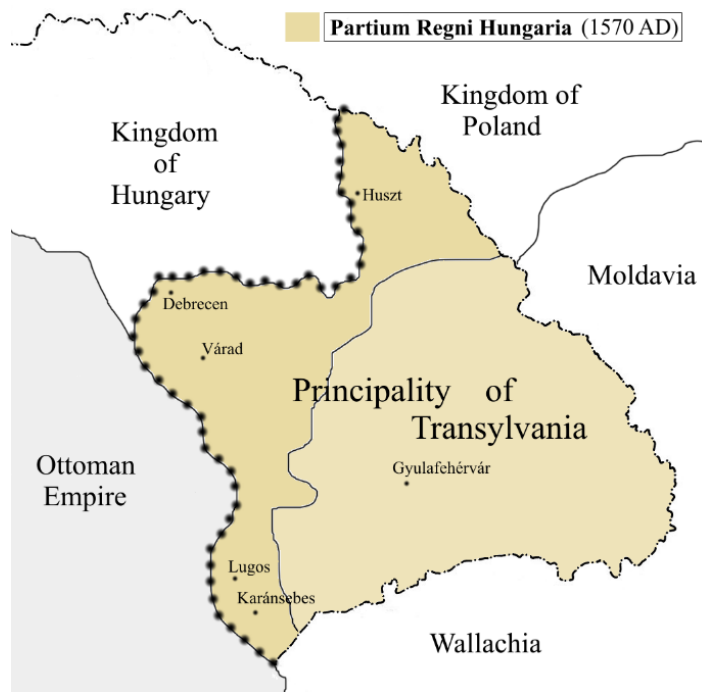


Figure 1: Borders of the Principality of Transylvania as outlined by the 1570 Treaty of Speyer. The Partium is shown in dark beige.¹⁴

The title of Prince of Transylvania, and the identification of the territory as the Principality of Transylvania, was itself a slow product of this geopolitical conflict: a means to formalize de jure what had until then remained a de facto political reality. In the 1570 Treaty of Speyer, the Habsburgs and the realm now ruled by Janos Szapolyai's son, Janos Zsigmond Szapolyai, agreed on a legal framework to coexist without laying claim to each other's territory. Ferdinand would recognize Szapolyai as ruler of Transylvania, in return for which Szapolyai renounced his claim to the Hungarian throne and guaranteed that, having no children, he would name Ferdinand's son as his successor. The nascent Transylvanian state encompassed the Transylvanian province formerly ruled by a *vovoide*, as well as the surrounding eastern Hungarian counties, which had joined the Transylvanian diet, known as the Partium (see figure 1). However, on the death of the childless Szapolyai, the

¹² Graeme Murdock, "Transylvanian Tolerance? Religious Accommodation on the Frontier of Christian Europe," in *Religious Conflict and Accommodation in the Early Modern World*, eds. Marguerite Ragnow and William D. Philips, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Libraries, 2011), 106-107.

¹³ Fichtner, *The Habsburg Empire*, 9-10.

¹⁴ Fz22, "Partium 1570," *Wikimedia Commons*, December 23, 2006, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Partium1570.PNG>, accessed November 25, 2021.

Transylvanian diet instead elected István Báthory as their new ruler who pursued continued political independence of the emerging Principality from the Habsburgs.¹⁵

The decades following Transylvania's birth into political existence saw it perched in a precarious geopolitical position. Survival depended on balancing the relations and intentions of the two superpowers at its borders. Transylvania's rulers needed to side with the Ottomans (and paid annual tribute to the Sultans) when the Habsburgs looked poised to gain the upper hand in the region and turned to the Habsburgs if the Ottomans seemed ready to incorporate the Principality under their direct control.¹⁶

Path to Tolerance

If the rise of tolerance in Transylvania was the result of the promotion of political self-interests in pursuit of the stability of the state, the fact that a coalition of what might be inaccurately described as "Protestants" were able to preserve their self-interests stems from the fact that they dominated the elite and held sway in the political decision-making processes of the principality. The fact that the emerging principality of Transylvania was an elective monarchy meant its central political institution was to be its diet. It was made up of representatives of the three "nations" of Transylvania: Hungarian nobles, Szekler lords, and the German towns. The elected sovereigns of Transylvania oversaw the diet's meetings and could also invite officials of their administrations to attend sessions. It was this body that was not only tasked with voting on laws, determining the privileges of the estates, and providing decisions on military as well as religious matters but also with electing the state's sovereign.¹⁷ Both Transylvania's rulers and the estates in the diet had the power to initiate legislation, and measures required the consent of the prince and of all three "nations."

In the middle decades of the sixteenth century, the Reformation spread rapidly through Transylvania's communities. Lutheranism quickly became popular in German-speaking Saxon towns. Calvinism or Reformed religion later spread widely among Hungarian-speaking nobles in Hungarian- and mixed German- and Hungarian-speaking towns, and Antitrinitarianism or Unitarianism found a foothold among both Hungarian and Szekler communities in the 1560s.¹⁸ This spread of different ideas about reform was reflected among the elite, the large majority of which had abandoned Catholicism for Lutheranism, Calvinism, or Unitarianism by the mid-1560s.¹⁹ Since the passing of legislation on religious rights required the consent of the prince and all three "nations" in the diet (now divided in different ways by religious loyalty), retaining earlier legislation against either Lutheran, Reformed, or Unitarian churches through the diet became impossible from the mid-1560s, not least considering the shifting and uncertain religious views of then-sovereign János Zsigmond Szapolyai.

¹⁵ Murdock, "Multiconfessionalism in Transylvania," 396-397.

¹⁶ For an overview of the important dates, figures, and religious settlements, see the chronological table in Appendix A at the end of this article.

¹⁷ Murdock, "Transylvanian Tolerance?," 107.

¹⁸ Murdock, "Transylvanian Tolerance?," 107-108.

¹⁹ Murdock, "Transylvanian Tolerance?," 110.

What followed was legislation that provided rival confessions with practical freedoms to worship. This legislation did not make reference to Kamen's high-minded liberal ideals. Rather the diet understood its decisions in Kaplan's and Butterfield's pragmatic sense. When legal provisions for religious tolerance were put in place, they came piecemeal and begrudgingly. When the diet made provisions for Lutheranism to be recognized as a church in 1558, this followed failed attempts by the state to seek unity between Lutheran and Catholic clergy. In 1557 it had ordered a synod to be held for the clergy of the two churches to reconcile their views.²⁰ Rather unsurprisingly this failed, but interestingly it was in the interim of this decision, the time between the ordering of the synod and its failure, that the first measures of tolerance can first be observed. The diet had allowed that both religious doctrines could be practiced until its synod had reached an agreement.²¹ Officially speaking, tolerance came into being when Lutheranism was granted recognition the following year, but the practice of allowing two religious communities that self-identified as being distinct from one another to cohabitate in Transylvania is first observed in the diet's decision of 1557. This path that tolerance took echoes Butterfield's analysis of how tolerance first came about. A set of polices was enacted out of expediency when all other options had been exhausted. The diet also first made use of tolerance as a means to an end, while perhaps still hoping that religious unity might be restored. When this failed, the diet simply continued and enshrined in law the practices it had used in the interim. However, unlike what Butterfield predicted, the diet acted without prior bloodshed to propel the elite towards accepting the need to compromise. This suggests that in the Transylvanian case study something additional was at play.

Kaplan's and Butterfield's argument is nevertheless bolstered by the fact that this practice of begrudging and limited action to offer religious rights and legal recognition to a new church was repeated. By the mid-1560s Calvinism had spread from the German-speaking world to Transylvania and was gaining ground there. The diet's strategy of recourse was again to order a reconciliation of doctrinal differences. In 1564 it ordered Lutheranism and Calvinism to reconcile their theological differences by means of debate. Again, equally unsurprisingly, these efforts failed. Again, it was only after the failure of these efforts that the state granted legal recognition to both Lutheran and Reformed churches in June of the same year.²² When it put this decision in writing, the diet provided a justification for its actions. It saw them as a means to preserve "the peace of the realm," not as a declaration of tolerance.²³ Tolerance is expressed once more as a pragmatic move resorted to after preferable measures could not be taken. But again, the decision was taken before violence erupted, not after.

This intention of the diet—to preserve and advance the self-interests of its "nations" as well as those of the sovereign, rather than an aspiration to a tolerant society—also explains the oppressive measures taken by the diet against a number of religious groups in the same

²⁰ Graeme Murdock, "Multiconfessionalism in Transylvania," 401.

²¹ Murdock, "Multiconfessionalism in Transylvania," 401.

²² Murdock, "Multiconfessionalism in Transylvania," 401.

²³ Szilágyi, ed., *Erdelyi Országgyűlési Emlékek*, 2.226-227, 231-232, trans. Murdock, qtd. in Murdock, "Multiconfessionalism in Transylvania," 401.

period. These measures reflected the desire of the diet to act only to offer religious rights when politics demanded they do so and to maintain the status quo (that is, protect their own confessional interests), or to advance the spread of their own confession in the principality. Tolerance then reflected the confessional fragmentation of the political elite rather than their unification behind an interest in universal toleration.²⁴ This conservative, status-quo minded conception of tolerance is as old as the practice of tolerance in Transylvanian legislation. Shortly after its 1558 edict that allowed Lutheranism, the diet sought to prevent any further doctrinal innovation and outlawed a sect it called “sacramentarians”—by which it meant none other than the Reformed preachers who would receive its legal protection only six years later.²⁵

Catholicism was also a target of the diet. This was because support for Catholicism had lost so much ground within the state by the 1560s; the diet, consisting overwhelmingly of Lutherans, Calvinists, and Unitarians, was decidedly anti-Catholic.²⁶ Even though the direction of the state’s ire changed, the principle of self-interest held firm. The members of the diet were still acting to advance their confessional interests. The only thing that had changed was their confessional affiliation. In 1566 the diet expelled all Catholic clergy from the country, issuing the order that “all priests who insist upon the papal teachings and upon what was made up by humans, and refuse to convert, should be ousted.”²⁷ This anti-Catholic measure was also evident in the diet’s 1568 edict from Torda. In a passage that asked the prince to persecute a Christian sect, as quoted in the introduction above, a reference to the Gospel was included that reflected this sentiment against churches deemed not to promote Gospel teaching: “They prefer to follow the former priests and their heresies, and prevent the bishop from properly fulfilling his duties; therefore we beg your Majesty to graciously grant the advancement of the Gospel according to your Majesty’s earlier decree concerning the country, and to punish those who dare oppose it.”²⁸ Support for religious tolerance based on a freedom of reading and teaching the vernacular Gospel provided a shared language around which Lutherans, Reformed, and Antitrinitarians could agree as a reasonable basis of their own rights. All three religions promoted the idea that individuals (or at least clergy) should read the Gospel themselves and come to their conclusions from this experience, even though they disagreed about the proper conclusions that would be derived from this engagement. Catholicism and Orthodoxy did not agree with the idea of individual engagement with Gospel; neither endorsed vernacular translations of the Bible. Rather, they preferred official interpretations of the Latin and Greek editions, respectively. This shared language of advancement of the Gospel thus provided Lutherans, Reformed, and Antitrinitarians a mechanism with which they could protect their doctrinal

²⁴ Murdock, “Multiconfessionalism in Transylvania,” 401.

²⁵ Szilágyi, ed., *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek*, 2.226-227, 231-232, trans. Murdock, qtd. in Murdock, “Multiconfessionalism in Transylvania,” 401.

²⁶ Szilágyi, ed., *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek*, 2.226-227, 231-232, trans. Murdock, qtd. in Murdock, “Multiconfessionalism in Transylvania,” 402.

²⁷ Szilágyi, ed., *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek*, 2.302-303, qtd. in Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, “Tolerant Country,” 9.

²⁸ Szilágyi, ed., *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek*, 2.343, qtd. in Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, “Tolerant Country,” 5.

interests, while simultaneously keeping the peace with each other and persecuting the two religions, which by that point held no sway in Transylvanian political decision-making.²⁹

The number of Catholics in Transylvania at the time had decreased drastically, and those who were left lived primarily on the estates of remaining Catholic nobles and in the Szekler lands to the east.³⁰ This is in line with the conception of Transylvanian tolerance as the guarding of self-interests: On their lands, Catholic nobles might in practice be allowed to choose priests for their churches. This privilege, the *ius patronatus* (right of patronage), dated back to the Middle Ages and was used during the Reformation by the nobility to further the confession of their choice in their lands.³¹ Thus while Catholic clergymen faced persecution in most parts of Transylvania and could find safe haven on the lands of sympathetic Catholic nobles, the legal mechanism that allowed for it remained unchanged. Lutheran and Calvinist nobles acted on the same privilege they shared with the Catholic nobility of having control over the selection of churchmen on their lands. In this, nobles oversaw the removal of traditional objects of worship from the churches on their estates, and there is evidence of clergymen from multiple churches being forced to flee from the lands of nobles unsympathetic to their confession.³² Despite the radical and uneven nature of these disturbances, they all took place within the established legal framework of the Transylvanian principality.

The fate of Catholicism in Transylvania provides a case study for how self-interest informed the creation of space for religious practice in particular (rather than freedom of conscience) and proselytizing. In 1571 a Catholic was elected to rule Transylvania in the person of István Báthory. Báthory was respectful of the existing legal framework on religious rights and the context of the overwhelming support for Lutheran, Reformed, and Unitarian churches across the principality. He chose a Lutheran as his court preacher and saw himself as the patron of all his subjects on religious affairs.³³ But despite this recognition, Báthory also tried to advance his own religion in the country by settling Jesuits in the principality.

Bathory, who from 1576 was also ruler of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, had to impose his decision on the Transylvanian diet, which only accepted the Jesuits if they limited their activities to particular villages and founding specified schools and colleges.³⁴ The Jesuits sought to convert the local inhabitants but were only given the opportunity to do so in the surroundings of the monasteries given to them and on the lands of Catholic

²⁹ Szilágyi, ed., *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek*, 2.343, qtd. in Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 5.

³⁰ Szilágyi, ed., *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek*, 2.343, qtd. in Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 11.

³¹ Maria Crăciun, "Traditional practices: Catholic Missionaries and Protestant religious practice in Transylvania," in *Religion and Superstition in Reformation Europe*, eds. Helen Parish and William G. Naphy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 80.

³² Murdock, "Transylvanian Tolerance?," 118.

³³ Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 18; for further information on Bathory's career, see Felicia Roșu, "Free from Obedience: Constitutional Expressions of the Right of Resistance in Early Modern Transylvania and Poland-Lithuania," *European History Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2017): 14-16.

³⁴ Crăciun, "Traditional practices," 75.

nobles.³⁵ In non-Catholic lands, the Jesuits were prevented from preaching by the local elites. Since the diet had made clear its opposition to Jesuit proselytizing, the Jesuits refrained from undertaking actions that they knew could get them expelled from the principality altogether.³⁶ Their survival depended upon the support of a Catholic prince, for without such protection, the nobility and burghers that made up the diet would quickly move against them. In fact, the diet openly discussed their removal from 1581, and after István Báthory's death in 1586, it gave the order a three-week ultimatum to leave the country.³⁷

István Báthory was succeeded upon his death by his nephew Zsigmond. Zsigmond was still a minor at the time, and the diet made Zsigmond's election to the Transylvanian throne conditional upon his removing the Jesuit order from the country. Zsigmond accepted only to renege on this commitment in 1593, when he forced the diet to resettle them.³⁸ When Catholicism finally became one of the "received religions" of the principality in 1595, it was only done so through rather brutish negotiating tactics: Prince Zsigmond held the diet at his royal palace surrounded by his army.³⁹ It took hard negotiations and bitter compromise to widen Transylvanian "tolerance" to include Catholicism, as would be expected of grudging, and deeply anti-Catholic, pragmatists.

However, religious loyalties were not the only factor in the diet's anti-Catholic stance. The Transylvanian nobility had a vested interest in maintaining only minimal Catholic influence in the region. After the initial Catholic collapse in the 1550s and 1560s, the estates had appropriated lands formerly held by the church. As part of the standoff initiated when Zsigmond Báthory began inviting Jesuit missionaries back into the principality in 1588, the diet passed a resolution reminding Prince Zsigmond that the monastic property that had been taken from the church was confiscated in perpetuity.⁴⁰ The fears of the diet appear obvious; if Catholic orders regained authority in the principality, it stood to reason that they would make claims on the lands that they had been driven from and which had since been incorporated into the domains of the Transylvanian nobility. The same nobility that was present in person at the diet lobbied to keep Jesuit influence in their principality at a minimum. In this instance, it appears as if members of the Transylvanian diet acknowledged that material self-interest played a role. While it is difficult to ascribe any single intention to the members of the diet, it seems that religious solidarity was not the only motivating factor involved in the creation of the balance of power of Transylvanian tolerance, at least in this instance.

The anti-Catholic bias of the diet could of course also be interpreted as some sort of Protestant solidarity. However, this does not mean that Protestants within Transylvania were allied or even respectful of each other. The early modern period saw widespread persecution and attempted proselytization between Protestant groups. Antitrinitarianism

³⁵ Crăciun, "Traditional practices," 80-81.

³⁶ Crăciun, "Traditional practices," 80-81.

³⁷ Crăciun, "Traditional practices," 76.

³⁸ Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 19-20.

³⁹ Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 19-20.

⁴⁰ Murdock, "Transylvanian Tolerance?," 114.

rejected the notion of the Holy Trinity, and for some Antitrinitarians in Transylvania, this also implied a rejection of worshipping Jesus as God. This concept was known as non-adorantism. The Antitrinitarian movement had grown out of Calvinism in the 1560s and was subject to repeated oppression throughout its early existence.⁴¹ After 1568 Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Antitrinitarianism were the only received religions in the principality, but the Transylvanian diet later passed numerous laws that served to constrict Antitrinitarianism, especially acting to prevent what they called doctrinal innovation, which targeted non-adorantist Antitrinitarianism in particular.⁴² These laws laid out explicitly the purpose of this persecution; they were to prevent any fundamental changes in the confessional landscape of Transylvania. In a 1571 decree that promoted tolerance, the diet simultaneously warned of “criminal excess” in matters of religious freedom.⁴³ The punishment for practitioners found to be in excess was to be severe—expulsion from their offices and from the principality altogether. In the following years, church superintendents were empowered to investigate and excommunicate “innovators” who advocated “distinct and new things in their confession.”⁴⁴ If church superintendents would not intervene, the prince was not only given the right to execute capital punishment on the innovators themselves but also invested with the power to reprimand towns or noblemen who were found to support these preachers. The diet’s use of the word “innovators” perhaps most succinctly underlines their conception of tolerance as a conservative force. Even though the members of the diet hailed from different confessional backgrounds, they all found common ground in maintaining the status quo in which their churches alone were granted legitimacy in the principality.

In 1576 the Antitrinitarian church was warned by the diet not to introduce any doctrinal changes and the places in which they could hold synods were restricted to two towns. A year later, the right of Antitrinitarian clergy to visit parishes was limited, and the Calvinist church’s superintendent was allowed to warn members of not just his own but all other churches of such visits, as long as force was not used.⁴⁵ Despite instructions not to become violent, the goal of these decrees was clearly to limit the spread of Antitrinitarianism, despite its legal status and related concern for the emerging theological opinions of some Antitrinitarian clergy whose views were seen as beyond the pale of what was acceptable among the recognized churches. In this, another familiar strain in Reformation thought emerges: the fear that the existence of heresy in the community could endanger its wellbeing through divine punishment.⁴⁶

While Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Unitarianism had considerable doctrinal and theological disagreements, they were also all churches that claimed as authority their distinct interpretations of the same Scripture (a problem neatly side-stepped by the terms of the 1568 law). The Antitrinitarian movement seemed to have ventured beyond a tenet

⁴¹ Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, “Tolerant Country,” 19-20.

⁴² Murdock, “Transylvanian Tolerance?,” 112-113.

⁴³ Murdock, “Transylvanian Tolerance?,” 112-113.

⁴⁴ Murdock, “Transylvanian Tolerance?,” 112-113.

⁴⁵ Murdock, “Transylvanian Tolerance?,” 112-113.

⁴⁶ Natalie Zemon Davis, “The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth Century France,” *Past and Present* 59 (1973): 59.

fundamental to all three received religions to the point where the diet openly referred to it as dangerous. Already in 1570 the diet had moved against the Antitrinitarian church on the grounds of having to punish heresies that could inspire divine wrath upon the principality.⁴⁷ In the decade that followed the diet's decision, it would reference "heresies" in its warnings about what it called "blasphemous innovations."⁴⁸ This oppressive effort was directed against those Antitrinitarians who rejected the adoration of Jesus and culminated in the imprisonment of the Antitrinitarian superintendent Ferenc Dávid for breaking the law prohibiting doctrinal innovation.⁴⁹ If they believed the survival of their community was at stake, Transylvanians did not hesitate to dismiss the strategy of tolerance in favor of oppression, as would be expected of those embracing tolerance only for pragmatic reasons.

The Sabbatarians, a group of non-adorantist Antitrinitarians that emerged from the Unitarian church but also adopted some Jewish ritual practices, are a case study for how the Transylvanian confessional establishment reacted when it perceived that the line of what had been permitted by the 1568 law had been crossed. Sabbatarianism in Transylvania was founded by András Eőssy, a wealthy Szekler nobleman. The faith held that Jesus, while indeed the Messiah, was not divine and had not set out to create a new covenant between man and God. They adopted some Jewish texts into their tradition.⁵⁰ Sabbatarianism started to gain ground at the end of the sixteenth century and officially split from the Unitarian church in 1618. In this case, the diet went so far as to outright ban the church.⁵¹ Sabbatarians were forced to go underground and worshipped in secret on the lands of supportive nobles. In response to the continued existence of the church, the heads of the other Protestant churches in Transylvania jointly complained to the prince to condemn Sabbatarianism. In doing so they used language that clearly showed their view on the competing theology, saying of it that it "spreads like the plague."⁵² Again, members of the established faiths in Transylvania were intolerant to novel denominations of worship, which further undermines the idea that tolerance emerged as an end in itself rather than as a coping mechanism for the complex political and confessional conditions of the 1560s.

The different Protestant churches thus did not get along harmoniously with one another. But if their persecution of one another shows anything, it is that the rival confessions did not put up fences and try to ignore each other. Persecution served the purpose of proselytization. In this the Protestants were not alone. Throughout the early modern period, all churches in Transylvania tried to win over members of the others' congregations to their own belief. The degree to which the rival churches were still intent on following

⁴⁷ Davis, "The Rites of Violence," 59.

⁴⁸ Szilágyi, ed., *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek*, 2.343, qtd. in Murdock, "Transylvanian Tolerance?," 112-113.

⁴⁹ Murdock, "Transylvanian Tolerance?," 112-113.

⁵⁰ Gábor Győrffy, "Back to the Origins: The Tragic History of the Szekler Sabbatarians," *East European Politics and Societies* 32, no. 3 (2017): 569-573.

⁵¹ Győrffy, "Back to the Origins," 569-573.

⁵² Samuel Kohn, *A szombatosok: történetük, dogmatikájuk és irodalmuk, különös tekintettel Péchi Simon főkancellár életére és munkáira* [The Sabbatarians: Their history, dogmas, and literature, with a special reference to the life and works of Chancellor Simon Péchi] (Budapest, 1889), 86-97, qtd. in Győrffy, "Back to the Origins," 572.

their proselytizing missions is best exemplified by the case of the Calvinist attempt to reform the Orthodox Romanian Church in the seventeenth century.

Anti-Orthodox attitudes had been present in the diet's decisions from the start of the Reformation—the “former priests and their heresies” referred to at Torda in 1568, as mentioned above, were none other than the Romanian-speaking Orthodox clergy.⁵³ But the proselytizing effort of the Calvinist church is not worth study because of its success—it only resulted in the creation of a small community of Romanian-speaking Calvinists. Rather, it is exemplary of how the rival churches in Transylvania made use of all means at their disposal to further their interests. The effort was backed not just by the full force of the Calvinist clergy in the state but also by the then-Calvinist princes of the principality.⁵⁴ In order to receive their backing, the Calvinist clergy actively tried to convince these Calvinist princes to put their weight behind the effort. The Orthodox church was protected by princely privileges rather than enjoying rights equivalent to those offered to the Lutheran, Reformed, Unitarian, and, from 1595, Catholic churches. István Geleji Katona, the Calvinist superintendent in Transylvania who had led efforts to curb the practice of Sabbatarianism, pleaded with then Prince György Rákóczi to push reform on the Romanian-speaking Orthodox community by telling him that “Romanians, although they are stupid, are still human beings and your Highness, as a Christian Prince, has a duty to care for their souls.”⁵⁵ Proselytizing intent can be clearly seen in the clergyman's words, in addition to the clear contempt for what he sees as adherents of a false religion. Katona and his co-confessionalists succeeded in gaining the support of the prince, which led to the creation from the 1640s of the aforementioned small Romanian-speaking Reformed community in and around some towns of southwestern Transylvania in particular.⁵⁶

This effort by Calvinist princes to support this campaign of the Reformed church is most enlightening when contrasted with the work of the Jesuit missionaries fought over by then Prince Zsigmond Báthory and the diet decades earlier. Just like the Calvinist missionaries, the Jesuits used all means at their disposal to execute their proselytizing mission. The only difference is the nature of the rights and resources at their disposal; while the Calvinist clergy enjoyed the backing of the state, the Jesuits found themselves constricted by the state apparatus, even in spite of their being backed by the then Prince. What stays the same is the intent of all religious communities to pursue their universal proselytizing missions. Tolerance as espoused by the state was an obstacle to this, and the individuals pursuing these proselytizing missions constantly sought to lobby key state actors to grant them greater leeway to execute their proselytizing efforts. In all of these examples, Transylvanian nobles, urban elites, and leading clergymen acted to further their own confessional or material self-interest, not to make the state a welcoming home for all.

⁵³ Szilágyi, ed., *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek*, 2.343, qtd. in Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, “Tolerant Country,” 5.

⁵⁴ Maria Crăciun, “Building a Romanian Reformed community in seventeenth-century Transylvania,” in *Confessional Identity in East-Central Europe*, eds. Maria Crăciun, Ovidiu Ghitta, and Graeme Murdock (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 99-100.

⁵⁵ Letter by Geleji published in *Új Magyar Múzeum* [New Hungarian Museum] 1 (1859), pp. 203-204, qtd. in Crăciun, “Building a Romanian Reformed community,” 102.

⁵⁶ Crăciun, “Building a Romanian Reformed community,” 99-120.

Motives for Tolerance

If the preceding examples may be seen as an argument that Transylvanians became tolerant out of pragmatic reasons and an explanation for how this worked, it begs the question why Transylvanians chose this path. It clearly was not their preferred course of action. The following section lays out an explanation for what motivated Transylvanians to become accepting of religious diversity. Here one must not look inside the principality, but outside. It was their international position that led Transylvanians to pragmatically accept tolerance.

Recall the geopolitical position of the Principality, already outlined above: two superpowers, surrounding its borders, both with territorial claims or designs on its territory and with ongoing conflict between the two sides. An ever-shifting web of alliances. A need to play the two superpowers against each other to keep the principality politically independent from either.⁵⁷ This precarious international position lent a powerful incentive to local Transylvanian leaders to resolve peacefully their internal political situation. Any civil conflict, but especially one rooted in religious divisions, would be detrimental to the state's security by drastically weakening its ability to defend itself from external attack.⁵⁸

This foreign policy calculation further incentivized the Transylvanian elite to pursue domestic peace due to the confessional nature of their geopolitical opponents. The Habsburg Monarchy remained a bulwark of Catholicism, while Transylvania had become a majority non-Catholic state by the middle of the sixteenth century.⁵⁹ The danger of a Catholic monarchy seizing control of Transylvania was especially present for the nobility, usually granted more safety due to their social status. Starting towards the end of the sixteenth century, the Habsburgs encouraged the aristocracy in the parts of Hungary under their control to choose to convert to Catholicism—or face marginalization in the political affairs of the Hungarian kingdom and across the Habsburg Monarchy.⁶⁰ Over the course of the following decades, this would lead to waves of conversions among the Hungarian nobility. If the Habsburgs were to gain control of the Transylvanian principality, it stood to reason that the Protestant nobles who wielded considerable amounts of political influence from their seats in the diet would be faced with the same fate. When sovereignty over a political entity had changed hands in the past, the members of the region's nobility had not necessarily seen change for themselves. After the Battle of Mohács, it was the same Hungarian noble families who had served on the Hungarian diet who elected Ferdinand Habsburg and János Szapolyai to the throne of Hungary. The confessional question posed a direct threat to the continuity in authority the members of the Transylvanian diet would otherwise have expected. The majority-Protestant diet thus had a large impetus to do whatever necessary to retain its independence as the multi-religious legal settlement became embedded in the political and social character of the principality.

⁵⁷ Murdock, "Multiconfessionalism in Transylvania," 396-397.

⁵⁸ Murdock, "Transylvanian Tolerance?," 106-107.

⁵⁹ Fichtner, *Terror and Toleration*, 31-32.

⁶⁰ Gabriella Erdélyi, "Confessional identity and models of aristocratic conversion in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Hungary," *Social History* (2015): 3.

Curiously, this rationale explains the election of a Catholic to the Transylvanian throne in the middle of the sixteenth century by a majority-Protestant diet, István Báthory. As already mentioned, Báthory retained an ambiguous relationship towards Protestantism. On the one hand, he committed to view himself as patron over all the received religions in the principality and even took a Lutheran as his court preacher. On the other hand, he appears to have shown personal disdain for Protestantism and initiated laws against religious innovation.⁶¹ It was due to considerations of its international position that the diet overlooked these issues. Despite his Catholicism, Báthory was no friend of the Habsburgs. He was favored by the diet precisely because of his dedication to an anti-Habsburg political movement—he was once even imprisoned in Vienna during a diplomatic visit. Báthory's election in Poland was also a product of his platform as the best anti-Habsburg candidate available. Báthory let these international circumstances dictate the course of action of his Catholic agenda within Transylvania. When he invited the Jesuit order to return to Transylvania, he took care to ensure that those dispatched to the principality would hail from the order's Polish province, of which he had control given his position as King of Poland, rather than from its Austrian chapter, which would have been under the influence of the Habsburgs.⁶²

The Ottoman Empire constituted a similar confessional threat. The Ottoman interpretation of Islam allowed for the enslavement of infidels and the confiscation of their property, giving Transylvanians a stark reminder of a possible future for themselves personally should the empire conquer their land. Transylvanian nobles were also well aware of the restrictions faced by their co-religionists under Ottoman rule in southern Hungary.⁶³ Finally, the answer to the last question remaining about Butterfield's hypothesis comes to our attention. Transylvanian decision-makers adopted tolerance out of expediency before violence erupted because they knew that if violence did erupt, the decision on the religious orientation of the principality and its inhabitants would be taken out of their hands, and most definitely be decided to their disadvantage.

But in a landscape where the boundary between the political and confessional was ambiguous at best, foreign policy considerations could also factor into decisions on religious toleration. Elias Gezmidele was one of the many travelling preachers who entered the principality in the early modern period. Gezmidele was exiled by a city's church court—in this case Cluj (Kolozsvár)—for his teachings. Gezmidele had been preaching communitarianism and pacifism.⁶⁴ While contemporary clergymen would have taken issue first and foremost with Gezmidele's apparent Anabaptist leanings, he also conveyed a pacifist interpretation of Luther's thoughts on the Ottoman Empire. Gezmidele advocated pacifism in the face of the Turks.⁶⁵ The ideas that he was spreading were thus conceived of as dangerous not only in a religious sense but also in a political sense: If the concept of

⁶¹ Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 18.

⁶² Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 18-19.

⁶³ Fichtner, *Terror and Toleration*, 27.

⁶⁴ Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 7-8.

⁶⁵ Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 7-8.

inaction in the face of outside aggression were to gain a foothold in the principality, the ability of Cluj's church court to do as it saw fit may well soon have been greatly inhibited. As posited previously, Transylvanian tolerance found its boundaries when those in positions of power saw their own interests threatened.

Indeed, in the precarious political circumstances of Transylvania pacifism was an unwelcome philosophy. Zsigmond Báthory, as part of his struggle with the estates to bolster the position of Catholicism in Transylvania, ordered the execution of several notable representatives of his opposing political camp. Among them were Protestants and Catholics alike, as well as humanist scholars from outside Transylvania. At the next meeting of the diet, the one held in 1595 at his royal estate surrounded by his army at which Catholicism would become a received religion, Báthory had the diet thank him for disposing of these pacifist philosophers.⁶⁶ Whether this description was accurate is of less importance than the fact that it was used. To legitimate the murder of political opponents, one simply had to label them as pacifists.

The fear that Transylvanians had of both these empires is best encapsulated in a prayer overheard in a Lutheran church in a southern Transylvanian village near Kronstadt (now Braşov) by Jesuit priest Pierre Lescalopier in 1574. At the end of the service, the congregation prayed "for the destruction of papal and Turkish tyranny."⁶⁷ Clearly, the Transylvanian Lutheran citizenry was aware of the danger that the existence of these two powerful empires of different confessions posed. They provided a stark reminder for Transylvanians that if religious affairs got out of control internally, their arguments about which religion they should adhere to might end up being forced upon them by an outside power.

The Unknown

Throughout this article, emphasis has been placed on the role played by elite actors within Transylvania in establishing the principality's framework of legal toleration and extension of rights of worship to a number of confessions. The omission of analysis of the role played by the common laity, those who made up the bulk of the preachers' congregations, is not due to a verifiable lack of initiative on their part. Rather it reflects a problem in source material of the period. Not enough primary sources survive, or are known to scholars, for anyone to claim to be able to reconstruct the role of commoners in the construction (or reception) of Transylvanian tolerance.⁶⁸ Written records come in the form of legal documents drafted by powerful institutions or personal testimony of those capable of writing—a skill learned by only a select few at the time.

To gauge the role of the lay folk in Transylvania in establishing the regime that allowed for confessional coexistence, one is left with the uneasy task of inferring through other

⁶⁶ Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 20.

⁶⁷ Maria Holban, ed., *Călători străini despre Țările Române* [Foreign travelers in the Romanian Lands], 8 vols. (Bucharest: Editura Științifică, 1968-1983), 2:430 (Lescalopier), qtd. in Maria Crăciun, "Traditional practices," 82.

⁶⁸ Murdock, "Transylvanian Tolerance?," 117.

sources. For example, recurrent emphasis in Transylvanian legal documents on prohibiting religious violence may lead one to suggest that these laws must have been created out of necessity. That is, that tensions almost certainly could arise at a local level. The 1568 Diet of Torda stating that no one should “abuse anyone on account of their religion” presupposes that instances of violent language or behavior had either happened or were immanently feared to happen.⁶⁹ One does not create laws without impetus. Similar examples abound in laws decreed throughout this period about the diet’s concern to maintain social peace through legal regulation of competing religious rights.

Ascribing commoners too active a role in perpetuating religious upheaval, however, runs afoul of what does survive in the historical record. Recall the *ius patronatus* that gave the Transylvanian nobility the power to select the preachers of their choice to promote their faith on their lands. Instances of persecution and expulsion of clergymen opposed to their lord’s confession have also been attested to.⁷⁰ The nobility clearly had control over the practice of religion on their property. Recall as well the laws implemented throughout the 1570s against religious innovation that gave the sovereign of the principality the authority to reprimand not only religious innovators but also the towns and noblemen who sheltered them.⁷¹ These historical realities greatly constricted the agency of those on the lower rungs of the feudal social ladder in deciding on matters of religious life at the level of government.

What the historical record can attest to is that the local population was conscious of the differences between the rival confessions and had opinions on them. Recall of course the prayer heard by Pierre Lescalopier in 1574, as taught to a village’s Lutheran congregation against Catholicism and the Ottoman Empire. Another example is provided by the reception that Jesuit missionaries received when they insisted on clerical celibacy during one their proselytizing missions. Many Protestant clergymen had married, and when Jesuits spoke out against this, popular opinion condemned them and sided with the Protestant churchmen.⁷² Differences in religious practice and doctrine were capable of enjoying deep-seated popular support. Whether those not born into privilege had much agency in deciding the religious policy of their state cannot be attested to, although one may infer that it was limited.

Conclusion

Early modern Transylvania did not become such a tolerant country because its citizenry was imbued with a liberal zeal of acceptance of diversity. Those who had the power to make decisions (the nobility and burghers represented at its diet as well as its prince) adopted it out of necessity to avoid internal conflict. Such conflict was extremely dangerous due to Transylvania’s position caught between two imperial powers with designs on its territory. Transylvanians therefore acted before confessional violence flared up and created a legal framework that was meant to prevent such internal conflict that would

⁶⁹ Szilágyi, ed., *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek*, 2.343, trans. Murdock, qtd. in Graeme Murdock, “Turda, 1568,” 234-236.

⁷⁰ Crăciun, “Traditional practices,” 80.

⁷¹ Murdock, “Transylvanian Tolerance?,” 112-113.

⁷² Murdock, “Transylvanian Tolerance?,” 84.

weaken it against external attack, all the while still doing everything to advance their own confessional and material self-interests within the framework they had created.

Appendix A: Chronological Table

Year	Event	Ruling Monarch
1526	Battle of Mohács: defeat and de facto partition of medieval Hungarian kingdom, coronation in Transylvania of Janos Szapolyai as King of Hungary	Janos Szapolyai
1540	Janos Szapolyai dies, succeeded by his son Janos Zsigmond Szapolyai	
1556	Roman Catholic Church property seized by diet	
1558	Lutheranism recognized as received religion by Transylvanian diet	Janos Zsigmond Szapolyai (King of Hungary)
1564	Calvinism/Reformed recognized as received religion by Transylvanian diet	
1566	All Catholic Clergy exiled from the state by Transylvanian diet	
1568	Diet of Torda: Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Antitrinitarianism are recognized as received religions	
1570	Treaty of Speyer: state now officially recognized as the Principality of Transylvania. Szapolyai gives up claim to Hungarian throne	Janos Zsigmond Szapolyai (Prince of Transylvania)
1571	Death of Janos Zsigmond Szapolyai; Istvan Báthory elected Prince	Istvan Báthory
1586	Istvan Bathory dies; Zsigmond Báthory elected Prince	Zsigmond Báthory
1595	Catholicism recognized as received religion by diet (which was held at Báthory's estate surrounded by his army)	