



*Some Candidates for the Vacant
Throne of Interwar Hungary:
International Approaches to Finding
a Resolution*

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Hungary” or “The Hungarian Throne,” with some topics of interest in subheads.²³ Moreover, in 1924, *The Times* published a series of articles entitled “A Bid for a Throne,”²⁴ based on the memoirs of Baron Aladár Boroviczény,²⁵ the last head of Charles IV’s cabinet office. These articles also described the two return attempts of 1921 to the throne from the view of the former ruler.

Of course, not only the sensationalist newspapers were preoccupied with the problem of the “vacant throne” and the “aspirations” associated with it, but neither had official political nor diplomatic circles been left without interest. That is clearly shown, for example, by the conversation of the already quoted diplomat Count Nemes with the Italian Foreign Minister Count Sforza, regarding which he sent the following information to Prime Minister Teleki in early January 1921:

In his [Sforza’s] opinion the desire to re-establish the former monarchy was so strong a tradition of the Habsburg family that renunciation thereof could not be expected from any Habsburg. I did not discuss this point but called his attention to the dangers of a civil war which might result if Hungary were forced to elect a Hungarian to the throne, excluding the Habsburgs. I also pointed out that the invitation of a foreign prince to the Hungarian throne is inconceivable. My arguments obviously had some effect on Count Sforza; as far as the last point is concerned, he remarked that if the crown of Hungary was offered to an Italian prince, he himself would oppose its acceptance. Count Sforza did not bring forward any argument in refutation of my analysis of the situation, and he concluded our conversation by the suggestion that I myself had made to him repeatedly, namely, that the question is not acute. He expressed the belief that the Hungarian Government was acting wisely in adopting a position of watchful waiting.²⁶

This quotation also shows that diplomatic and political circles tried to handle the issue with caution despite the fact that it was precisely the consequence of continuous postponement and “watchful waiting” that the problem of the “vacant Hungarian throne” regularly recurred in official statements and in the unofficial public discourse of the time. Moreover, sometimes it even gave rise to pejorative commentaries, which made the Hungarian “kingdom without a king” appear as an outdated and outmoded state to the foreign public, especially to that overseas, as was written, for instance, in a Washington newspaper in July 1923:

The government of Hungary is in a most anomalous condition. It may fairly be said to be a kingdom with the king lacking. All public institutions are designated by the term “royal”. The Hungarian ministers are “royal” ministers, the Hungarian legations abroad are “royal”

²³ Such as “The Throne of Hungary. An Elected King Wanted,” *The Times*, 6 December 1920, 12; “The Throne of Hungary. Charles and the Regent,” *The Times*, 18 February 1924, 12; “The Hungarian Throne. Archduke Otto as Pretender,” *The Times*, 20 November 1930, 15–16.

²⁴ “A Bid for a Throne. I–III,” *The Times*, 18–20 February 1924, “A Bid for a Throne. King Charles and Hungary. The Regent’s Case,” *The Times*, 16 April 1924, 15–16.

²⁵ Aladár von Boroviczény, *Der König und sein Reichsverweser* (München: Verlag für Kulturpolitik, 1924).

²⁶ “The Representative of the Hungarian Government in Rome, Count Nemes, to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Count Teleki,” Rome, 3 January 1921, in *Papers and Documents Relating to the Foreign Relations of Hungary*, Volume II, ed. Dezső Ujváry (Budapest: Hungarian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 1946), 11–12.

legations, the Hungarian post offices are “royal” post offices. On the Hungarian visa [sic] on my passport are stamped the words “Royal Hungarian Legation.”²⁷

Later, the prestigious *Chicago Tribune* did not even predict much of a future for the kingdom form of state:

Of course, it is not impossible that the monarchy will be restored in Hungary, but it is difficult to believe that, if it is, the kingdom will long endure as such. The forces of history are moving in the opposite direction. ... It is scarcely credible, then, that the Hungarians, with centuries of struggle for human freedom in their history, will long submit themselves to it.²⁸

The quote suggests an apparent contradiction arising from an outside observer’s misunderstanding of some circumstances and factors. In fact, the Hungarian “love of freedom” was not coupled with a democratic tradition. The short-lived non-royal forms of state were soon rejected because of the “bad memory” of the 1918 and 1919 revolutionary experiments. These experiences reinforced the idea of the monarchy, which contributed to the spread of rumours surrounding the various royal candidates, including the other members of the Habsburg family.

The Habsburg Candidates

The Habsburgs who did not belong directly to the royal line were particularly affected and noteworthy actors in the set of candidates since their “candidacy” proved that certain groups of Hungarian “free king-electors” did not generally reject the Habsburg dynasty, only the former ruler and his legal descendant. The thinking of the “free king-electors” might have had several motives in this respect. On the one hand, the Habsburg family—especially some of its members—enjoyed considerable prestige and even relative popularity in Hungary. On the other hand, the “free king-electors” who supported other Habsburgs could also hope that the success of their “candidate” would promote their own progress and prosperity, too. Many followed this idea even though the Great War caused significant losses in the international prestige of the Habsburgs. The basis of this thought rested on the fact that they still enjoyed the advantages of the relationship network built over centuries which linked them to almost all the ruling dynasties and many other aristocratic families in Europe.

In the contemporary flow of rumours, the two most frequently discussed “candidates” from the Habsburg dynasty were, after Charles IV and his son Otto, Archduke Joseph August of Habsburg-Lorraine—addressed simply as Archduke Joseph in Hungary—and Archduke Albert Francis—simply Albrecht in public discourse—of Habsburg-Teschen. Neither of them belonged to the immediate family of the former monarch Charles IV. The elder of the two, Archduke Joseph, coming from the so-called Hungarian palatine line of the Habsburg-Lorraine house, born at Alcsút in 1872, was not unknown in Hungarian public life even at the beginning of the period.²⁹ He took an active part in the Great War and, as a “homo regius,” he substituted and represented Charles IV in Budapest in autumn 1918. In August 1919, following the fall of the Soviet Republic

²⁷ “Hungary Still Kingdom, No King,” *The Sunday Star* (Washington, D.C.), 8 July 1923, 5.

²⁸ “A Kingdom Without a King,” *Chicago Tribune*, 28 April 1931, 14.

²⁹ Palatine Joseph, grandfather of Joseph August, was the brother of Emperor and King Francis.

and referring to his former position, he declared himself “governor,” but due to international pressure and rejection, he could only hold this position for two weeks. Certain circles of society regarded Archduke Joseph as a relatively “popular” figure, upon which also he himself was convinced. Other sources, however, shaded the archduke’s “popularity” along with his abilities and suitability. For example, General Bandholtz, a member of the American Entente mission stationed at Budapest from August 1919, did not speak, on the whole, in flattering terms of Joseph Habsburg. In one of his diaries, he wrote:

The Archduke himself has shown that when it comes to diplomacy, political matters and the administration of a government, he is still a babe in swaddling clothes. ... He is probably, when all is considered, quite popular in Hungary, but his popularity is neither so extensive nor so deeprooted as he seems to imagine. It is believed that he has been misled by his intimates, who have lured him into believing that he is the almost unanimous choice of the people of Hungary.³⁰

The American general’s diary also shows the ambition that fuelled the archduke. According to Bandholtz, at the end of August 1919, Joseph told the following to General Mombelli, an Italian member of the Entente mission:

... he himself was personally very fond of his cousin Karl [Charles IV], but that he hardly thought that Karl could fill the bill. He then continued that he felt that he (the Archduke Joseph) was popular in all Hungary, that the people were clamoring [sic] for him, and that he should be invested with the royal dignity.³¹

According to the sources, Joseph Habsburg’s “king candidacy” was the strongest just in the period of total uncertainty, i.e. between the spring of 1919 and the beginning of 1921, when some foreign press agencies had already expected his coronation.³² Some news also generated considerable tensions in certain international political circles. An excellent example of this is the speech of a British politician delivered at the House of Commons in March 1920:

After the fall of the Bela Kun Government the Allied representatives at Budapest met under the chairmanship of the British General Gorton, and proposed for election, as King of Hungary, the Archduke Joseph of Hapsburg, this without any election at all such as has been quoted against me by the hon. and gallant Member for Lanark. If there was any responsibility for the War to be fixed upon any Royal house in Europe, then it should be fixed on the Hapsburg Dynasty, whose guilt was of the deepest dye. The British representative took the chair at the meeting of the Allied representatives, and proposed for election as King the Archduke Joseph. Fortunately, the American Government protested.³³

³⁰ Harry Hill Bandholtz, *An Undiplomatic Diary by the American Member of the Inter-Allied Military Mission to Hungary, 1919-1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), 25. It says much about Joseph’s judgement that towards the end of his mission, the American General, in his diary entries, referred simply to the Habsburg archduke as “Joe.” Bandholtz, *An Undiplomatic Diary*, 273.

³¹ Bandholtz, *An Undiplomatic Diary*, 48.

³² See, for example, “Expect Hungary to Elect Archduke Joseph as King,” *The New York Times*, 27 October 1919, 15.

³³ British Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Vol. 127, 25 March 1920. Orders of the Day, Foreign Affairs, Column 714, *Hansard*, accessed 22 November 2021, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1920-03-25/debates/2e5028ef-3013-4fec-927b->

The consistent American opposition to the Habsburg Restoration is also well illustrated in Bandholtz's diary. In November 1919, he declared emphatically to the then Hungarian Prime Minister István Friedrich "that the Entente certainly would not stand for the return of Karl or the immediate restoration of any Hapsburgs."³⁴

As a consequence of international opposition, the appointment of Horthy as Regent, who was gaining increasing prestige, the two unsuccessful attempts to return by Charles IV in 1921, and the subsequent dethronement made Joseph retreat into the background, but he certainly did not give up his ambitions. That is why the combinations about him may have got into the press even later on, too. In the autumn of 1926, for example, a completely unfounded rumour was published that Horthy would soon renounce the Regency in favour of Joseph, who would accept this dignity on the condition that Otto would be crowned king of Hungary on the next favourable occasion.³⁵

His ambitions also motivated the archduke to get close to the far right. In the autumn of 1944, after the failed exit attempt from the war, Horthy had to hand over power to Ferenc Szálasi, the leader of the Hungarian National Socialist [Arrow-Cross] Party. The born conservative Joseph Habsburg enthusiastically advocated the new dictatorship and the continuation of the war.³⁶ However, not even then did he receive the respect and position that he would have expected. At the end of the war, he emigrated and died in Germany in 1962.

Like Joseph, the other Habsburg aristocratic [self-chosen] candidate, Archduke Albrecht, born in Baden in Lower Austria in 1897, also hoped to realise his ambitions by the far right. Foreign newspapers have frequently reported that mainly the so-called racist radical right-wing circles supported him in Hungary.³⁷ According to different sources, his nomination emerged first as far back as spring 1919. Just as Queen Zita proceeded in the case of Otto, Albrecht's mother, Archduchess Isabella, also did her utmost for the sake of the realisation of the ambitions of her son, even by finding him a fiancée matching his ruling endeavours.³⁸ His king candidacy gathered more intense impetus in the mid-1920s. The fact that his mother descended from a family that traced its alleged origin back to the House of Árpád fired up the young archduke's desire, embedded in historical perspectives, for the Hungarian throne.

However, the archduke became discredited in public life very early. In addition to his far-right political orientation, his private life, being unworthy of a member of a ruling family, was also against him. In the mid-1920s, there were rumours yet about his planned marriage to the Romanian royal princess Ileana,³⁹ while later, one of the daughters of the Italian King Victor Emmanuel was also often mentioned as his potential fiancée.⁴⁰ Both marriages would have had promising political

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³⁴ Bandholtz, *An Undiplomatic Diary*, 218.

³⁵ "Hungarian Regent Clears Way for New King," *Chicago Tribune*, 1 September 1926, 2.

³⁶ Levente Püski, *A magyar Felsőház története 1927–1945* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2000), 149.

³⁷ "The Hungarian Monarchists. Claimants to the Throne," *The Times*, 8 December 1925, 15; Carlile A. Macartney, *October Fifteenth. A History of Modern Hungary 1929–1945*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1956), 455–456.

³⁸ See for example "Proposes Albrecht for King of Hungary," *The New York Times*, 15 October 1921, 12.

³⁹ "Tells of Marriage to Link 2 Thrones," *The New York Times*, 18 November 1926, 3; "Report Austrian Archduke Will Marry Ileana," *Chicago Tribune*, 18 November 1926, 4.

⁴⁰ "Hungary Seeks a Wife for a Monarch – Marriage of Archduke Albrecht and Princess Giovanna of Italy Is Proposed," *The New York Times*, 23 January 1927, 4.

perspectives. However, despite these prospects, he entered into two morganatic marriages in the 1930s. This caused general consternation not only in aristocratic circles but in other political groups, too, providing a constant subject of discussion in the press, which sometimes presented such rumours in a sarcastic tone to the readers.⁴¹ His commitment to the far right forced him to emigrate at the end of World War II. He died in Buenos Aires in 1955.⁴²

In addition to archdukes Joseph and Albrecht, albeit much less frequently than they were, three other members of the Habsburg dynasty were also mentioned as candidates for Hungarian king in the 1920s. In April 1922, after the death of Charles IV, the newspapers reported that the eldest son, Prince Maximilien Hohenberg, of Francis Ferdinand, murdered in Sarajevo, as well as the deceased ruler's younger brother, Archduke Eugen Maximilien of Habsburg-Lorraine, allegedly joined the race for the throne. Of the two, the former—and his supporters—proved to be the more active. In the mid-1920s there were several press reports about monarchist groups in Czechoslovakia aiming to turn their country into a kingdom, with Maximilien Hohenberg on the throne. At the same time, the son of Francis Ferdinand had also become a target person among Austrian royalists regarding the restoration of the reign of Habsburgs in Austria.

In the following decade, another Habsburg aristocrat—the seventh [!] in a row, including Charles IV and Otto—appeared as a candidate for the Hungarian throne. The background to this rumour was that Princess Ileana, daughter of the Romanian King Ferdinand I (already mentioned previously), had married Archduke Franz Antony, cousin of Charles IV, a member of the so-called Tuscan line of the Habsburg family. That gave rise to further speculation. Although the Hungarian press interviewed them only on the occasion of their honeymoon trip to Budapest, the *Chicago Tribune* of October 1932, with reference to British sources, introduced Francis Anthony already as a candidate for king, with the absurd justification that “His choice would be more acceptable to Rumania [sic], whose armies helped put down the soviet government of Bela Kuhn [sic], rulers in Hungary for nearly two years [!] at the close of the world war.”⁴³ This quote clearly shows how the foreign press, especially Americans, sometimes misinterpreted the Hungarian circumstances and the feelings of the Hungarian people.

Illusory European Dynastic Relationships and Unrealistic Political Alternatives

Concerning the rumours about the other candidates, let us return to the very beginning of the interwar period. The chaotic aftermaths of the conflict and the subsequent two revolutions created and provided the best conditions for the emergence of many candidates. This is unsurprising: the political circumstances were unstable, consequently providing the possibility of numerous and sometimes even clandestine initiatives. Furthermore, certain political circles hoped to gain public advancement by “king-creation,” while candidates expected the internationally appreciated respect for themselves.

It is characteristic—especially in the case of the two archdukes, but this could be related to other Habsburg candidates, too—that the motivation for the candidacy for the Hungarian king was the relative political and social embeddedness in Hungary and the ambition resulting from the

⁴¹ The Catholic Albrecht married first a divorced Protestant woman, the mother of a teenage son, in Brighton in August 1930. Their marriage was dissolved in 1937. His second marriage to a schoolteacher was in May, the next year. “Archduke Albrecht,” *Chicago Tribune*, 29 April 1930, 7; “A Throne Seeker Gets Rid of His Commoner Wife,” *Chicago Tribune*, 3 June 1937, 24.

⁴² “Archduke Albert of Hapsburg,” *The Times*, 13 August 1955, 9.

⁴³ “Royalists Plot to Seat Pretender on Empty Throne,” *Chicago Tribune*, 9 October 1932, 65.

family upbringing. In the case of other non-Hungarians, this was often based on certain dynastic connections already existing or to be established.

At the beginning of the period, a short-lived dynastic idea linked the solution of the Hungarian “king question” to a smaller European monarchy. Some sources already indicated at the very beginning of the 1920s that certain Hungarian aristocratic circles had been thinking about inviting the second-born son of the Belgian King Leopold II to the throne.⁴⁴ The idea, which would have met with the approval of the French, was reported in the foreign press, too. The basis of the idea was that the first wife of King Leopold II was Princess Maria Henriette, daughter of the former Hungarian Palatine Joseph Habsburg. This initiation was, however, made completely unrealistic by the fact that the second-born son of Leopold II was not born of this marriage.

In the months immediately after the world war there were many rumours linking the Hungarian throne to several states in the Central and Eastern European and Balkan regions. This is no coincidence, as the whole region underwent radical transformations during this period: new states were created, such as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes; some, like Romania, expanded significantly; and others, such as Hungary, were trying to find a way to regenerate themselves as losers of the war—Bulgaria, for example. In addition to their fragile conditions, these states had a feature in common: they were monarchical states, so it is not surprising that candidates from these countries also presented themselves for the vacant Hungarian throne.

One of the most frequent combinations was the creation of a personal union with neighbouring Romania during the reign of King Ferdinand. However, this had not been a new idea. In order to avoid a crushing defeat, during the course of the Great War there had already been reports in the press that Romania, on the Romanian initiative, should join Austria-Hungary, based on the Romanian imperial dream fed by the Dacian-Romanian theory.⁴⁵ The idea, however, was far from becoming reality. Towards the end of the war Romania re-entered the fight on the side of the Entente. After the armistice, the Romanian Army occupied the whole eastern part of Hungary, including the capital. According to some sources, the unification of the two countries was forced by the Romanian side.⁴⁶ However, general Hungarian public opinion was also against the realisation of the plan: after Romania had been an enemy in the world war and had plundered the eastern part of Hungary during the occupation, unification under a Romanian ruler was completely unimaginable—even though Ferdinand was not a Romanian, but a descendant of the Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen family.

Much less frequently than the plan for Romanian-Hungarian unification, but also in the months immediately after the war, news reports appeared claiming that Hungary would become part of the emerging South Slav state under the reign of the Serbian King Alexander. However, both the Hungarian and Serbian sides quickly refuted this rumour.⁴⁷ Another short-lived example from the Balkan Region is the one of the Bulgarian king’s son, Prince Cyril, whose name appeared in the press at the turn of 1919 and 1920. He was related to Charles IV’s family on his mother’s side—his mother was the half-sister of Archduchess Zita—and had partly Hungarian ancestors

⁴⁴ Magda Ádám and Mária Ormos, ed., *Francia diplomáciai iratok a Kárpát-medence történetéről 1919-1920* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2004), 205.

⁴⁵ Mihály Réz, “Románia,” *Budapesti Hírlap*, 11 September 1917, 1–2.

⁴⁶ Bandholtz, *An Undiplomatic Diary*, 3–4; “Hungary May Propose Union with Rumania,” *The New York Times*, 10 September 1919, 15; Romsics, *István Bethlen*, 110–112, 115–116, 166.

⁴⁷ “Hír Szerbia közeledéséről,” *Budapesti Hírlap*, 15 January 1919, 3.

on his father's side. Given that his career took a different direction, the idea of his candidacy was soon left out of further consideration.⁴⁸

From the beginning of the era, the "free king-electors" had based their approach on the principle that if Hungary could not elect a national king, the crown, according to several historical examples, should be offered to one of the great European dynasties. The core of their views was that such a solution could have increased Hungary's weight in continental politics, helped preserve her territorial integrity, and later achieved her revisionist goals. These well-known and favoured arguments stood behind the reason why the "free king-electors" turned their attention to the royal family of Great Britain.⁴⁹ Hungarian political circles made no secret of this. A British diplomat recorded the following about a conversation he had with an unnamed government member of Mihály Károlyi in December 1918:

When questioned by me on the point one of the members of the Károlyi Government frankly admitted that the main reason underlying the proposal which is still in an extremely vague state was that the offer of the crown to an Englishman and still more his acceptance of it would win the sympathies and support of the British Government for Hungary.⁵⁰

At the turn of 1918 and 1919, the "free king-electors" focused attention on the Duke of Connaught and Strathearn, which surprised even the British diplomatic circles.⁵¹ It was, however, probably due to the enormous chaos of the time that the Hungarians failed to consider the age of their candidate, since he was approaching seventy. Consequently, he would certainly not have been an ideal long-term aspirant to the Hungarian throne. The Anglican religion was another critical aspect. For the Hungarian Catholic Church, having the right of coronation, it would have been unimaginable putting the Holy Crown of István I on the head of a person of a religion practised by no one in the country but him. A further problem was the British foreign policy thinking. The acquisition of the Hungarian throne would have been an extremely bold step for British foreign policy, always cautious and striving for the status quo, because this would have provoked the countries surrounding Hungary and the other European powers, especially France and Italy. Nevertheless, there were rumours about other British "candidates" at the beginning of the period. In November 1919, articles appeared about the possibility that Prince Adolphus, Duke of Teck, the brother of King George V's wife, Princess Mary, might become the new king of Hungary.⁵² The basis for this idea also could have been a Hungarian family connection because Adolphus'

⁴⁸ "Say Bulgar Prince Wants Magyar Throne," *The New York Times*, 22 December 1919, 1.

⁴⁹ "T. Fullham's Answers to Questions in Two Questionnaires Prepared by M.I.3.b. (Extracts. Received in the Foreign Office on 24 March 1919). Questionnaire. M.I.3.b.," 10 March 1919, in *British Policy on Hungary 1918-1919. A Documentary Sourcebook*, ed. Miklós Lojók (London: School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 1995), 88–89. It is worth noting that the dynastic relationship with the British monarchy was not only raised in Hungary during the period, but also in Poland, especially during the Second World War. See Marcin Michał Wiszowaty, "Shaken or Stirred? Polish Constitutional (Dis)continuity between 1917-2017," *Hungarian Journal of Legal Studies* 60, no. 1 (2019): 104.

⁵⁰ "Letter from 'G. 65.' (Geneva) for Military Intelligence, Political Section (War Office, London). The Political Situation in Hungary. Count Karolyi's Position" [PRO FO 371/4354 No. 161 (file 52)] Geneva, 17 December 1918, in *British Policy*, 42–43.

⁵¹ "Letter from G.B. Beak (Zurich) to Sir H. Rumbold (Berne. Extracts)" [HDLM ACC 727/35] Zurich, 19 December 1918, in *British Policy*, 43.

⁵² "Magyar Royalists Active. Some Talk of Duke of Teck or Duke d'Abruzzi for Throne," *The New York Times*, 17 November 1919, 17.

grandmother was Countess Klaudia Rhédey, a descendant of the former princely family of Transylvania.⁵³

In the second half of the 1920s, another name from the British Isles became public as a new candidate. Its motivating circumstances were also typical of the thinking of “free king-electors,” who were sometimes completely far beyond reality and rationality. In 1927, one of Britain’s greatest press magnates and the third richest man of that time, Sidney Harold Harmsworth, better known as Lord Rothermere, published a lengthy article in the *Daily Mail* entitled “Hungary’s Place in the Sun.” In this article, he spoke out against the injustice of the Treaty of Trianon and argued for the need for territorial revision. Official circles responded moderately on both sides, but it was well received in other parts of public life and the broader society of Hungary. Even later, he continued to be an ardent supporter of the “Hungarian cause,” which resulted in a veritable cult for Lord Rothermere in Hungary. He received hundreds of thanksgiving letters, streets bore his name, and a commemorative plaque was even unveiled in his honour on the tenth anniversary of the publication of his article. In the late 1920s, all this resulted in his or his son’s nomination for the king of Hungary. However, the nomination of the English lord or his son, respectively, was neither in Hungary nor in the United Kingdom considered earnestly by official policy; what is more, the idea made Hungary ridiculous in front of European public opinion.⁵⁴

At the same time, another great European dynasty was also associated with the Hungarian throne.⁵⁵ Particularly after 1927, when Fascist Italy and Hungary forged closer political ties, it was rumoured, not only in the press but in diplomatic circles, too, that the establishment of a future relationship with the ancient House of Savoy had also been taken into account. Most frequently, the coronation of the Duke of Aosta, Emanuele Filiberto, nephew of King Victor Emmanuel III and son of the King of Spain, came up. Although Hungarian government circles had consistently denied these Italian-Hungarian combinations, this dynastic relationship would have been mutually beneficial.⁵⁶ On the one hand, the Duke of Aosta might have had established dynastic relationships not only with the great power Italy but with Spain, too. Succession to the Hungarian throne would have also been attractive for the Italian side, as that would have enabled them to achieve one of their significant foreign policy goals, namely, to counterbalance the strong French influence in the Little Entente countries. The Italian dynastic solution came up again in diplomatic circles in the late 1930s and the first half of the Second World War to counterbalance the growing dependence on Nazi Germany. Several sources emphasised the importance of the Duke of Aosta’s coronation, and even the invitation to the throne of Victor Emmanuel III himself came into question. These ideas are well reflected in the diary of the Italian Foreign Minister, Count Ciano, who also often mentioned his discussions with Hungarian politicians and diplomats. However, exactly his records

⁵³ “Hungarian Strain in British Royalty,” *The New York Times*, 1 December 1929, 62.

⁵⁴ Miklós Zeidler, *A revíziós gondolat* (Budapest: Osiris, 2001), 97–119; Éva Mathey, “Lord Rothermere and Hungarian Revisionism,” *Eger Journal of American Studies* 13 (2012): 243–251.

⁵⁵ This dynasty also appeared in rumours even at the beginning of the period. See “The Representative of the Hungarian Government in Rome, Count Nemes, to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Count Teleki,” Rome, 3 January 1921, in *Papers and Documents*, Volume II, 11–12; Andrea Bern, “Az aostai herceg és magyar királysága – I. felvonás: 1921,” *Napi Történelmi Forrás* (blog), 2017, accessed 12 May 2022, <https://ntf.hu/index.php/2017/11/10/az-aostai-herceg-es-magyar-kiralysaga-i-felvonas-1921/>.

⁵⁶ “Seek New Candidate for Hungarian Throne,” *The New York Times*, 29 May 1930, 9.

refer clearly to the fact, as well, that already Germany had the final say regarding the fate of the region, and Hitler opposed the Italian plans for the solution to the Hungarian “king question.”⁵⁷

Hungarian Candidates

In the summer of 1927, when Lord Rothermere’s son, Esmond Harmsworth, paid a visit to Hungary, he had a personal interview with a reporter for a daily newspaper. Naturally, the issue of the “kingdom without a king” came up. The young lord also expressed his views on the alternatives to the British royal family and the Romanian-Hungarian personal union. He said that the former would be “somewhat delicate and difficult to resolve,” while the latter would be a “too Balkanic policy,” which was also difficult to imagine, and added: “We think it would be most appropriate to elect an old Hungarian aristocratic family, more precisely, one of the members of the oldest one, as ruler. All the world would receive it with sympathy.”⁵⁸

The opinion of Harmsworth junior reflects the naivety of an outside observer who is unaware of the inner functions of the Hungarian aristocracy. Although, as a primary goal, the “free king-electors” also wanted to see a national ruler at the head of the state, such a solution would have automatically led to internal conflicts. That is why they began to orient primarily toward foreign ruling families as well, because it was unlikely that a Hungarian aristocrat would have been able to enforce the revisionist demands. Perhaps because of strict requirements, only a few candidates emerged, mainly unknown in public life. Most of them were quickly refused, or the candidates themselves shied away from the nomination.

During the whole interwar period, perhaps Miklós Horthy proved to be the most considerable candidate of the “free king-electors.” Many people believed that he was the person best qualified to occupy the royal dignity in Hungary. In his memoirs written during his exile, the Regent mentioned that, as early as August 1922, shortly after the death of Charles IV, a delegation led by former Minister of Interior, Count Gedeon Ráday, offered him the crown of Stephen I “in the name of all classes of the people.” However, Horthy, as he put down in his memoirs, refused the invitation:

I thanked them for the confidence in me that their proposal showed, but said that I did not feel able to accede to their request. For what was it that gave me courage and strength to work at the reconstruction of our shattered Fatherland? Only the feeling that, in my status as Regent of the Realm, I could count on the confidence shown a trustworthy and honourable man. Were I to stretch my hand towards the crown, I should cease to be selfless and worthy of respect, and my own brothers would turn against me. Never, not even should a plebiscite be unanimous, would I accept the royal crown.⁵⁹

In later years, though Horthy took a similar position also in other cases, there were several occasions when his person, or a member of his family, even despite their denominational affiliation—being Calvinists—had become associated with the solution of the “king question.”

⁵⁷ Hugh Gibson, ed., *The Ciano Diaries 1939-1943. The Complete, Unabridged Diaries of Count Galeazzo Ciano, Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, 1936-1943* (Safety Harbour: Simon Publications, 2001), 111–112, 124, 195, 226, 517–518; Macartney, *October Fifteenth*, Vol. 1, 361.

⁵⁸ Tibor Korda, “Trianonnak, a tévedések várának össze kell dőlnie...,” *Újság*, 28 August 1927, 3–4.

⁵⁹ Nicholas Horthy, *Memoirs*, 152, Corvinus Library, accessed 7 December 2021, <http://www.hungarianhistory.com/lib/horthy/horthy.pdf>

There had been two decisive factors behind this. One was the cult around the Regent, which started to develop from the beginning of his office period and gradually expanded by adding new elements over time and raised to the state level.⁶⁰ It contained several elements which compared Horthy to the Hungarian kings of bygone days. Symbolically, all these elements contributed to raising the Regent to the level of a constitutional ruler—he was only a step from nominating him as the king of Hungary. The other factor linked intrinsically to the cult was the sphere of authority of the Regent. Though in some respects this had never reached the level of previous “apostolic kings”—for example, regarding the right to confer the title of nobility or to appoint leaders of the Hungarian Catholic Church—the previously mentioned continuous extension of his rights strengthened Horthy’s position as constitutional ruler at the head of the nation. It was no coincidence that ideas about his election for king arose most often either at events—also dominant for cult building, concerning his person, like his birthday, the anniversary of his appointment—or in connection with the extension of his powers.⁶¹

The most striking example of this was the extension of his authority in the summer of 1937, after which the Regent was also referred to in the foreign press as the “uncrowned king”. An American newspaper summarised it thus:

Hungary was a kingless kingdom until the end of June, when the Budapest Parliament invested the head of the state, Regent-Governor Nicholas Horthy de Nagybanya, with royal rights, which make him a king in all but the title. He is responsible to no one except himself, and only death can part him from his high office. The new law gives him sweeping veto rights over legislation and authority to recommend his successor. This arrangement is of importance not merely to Hungary but also to the whole of Central Europe. It means that the House of Hapsburg has lost whatever chances it may have had of recovering its throne in the Budapest royal palace. On August 20 Hungary’s great national holiday, Horthy will appear as Hungary’s uncrowned king for the first time. Then he will head a colorful [sic] procession, when tens of thousands pay homage to the Magyar Kingdom’s founder, St. Stephen, whose withered hand, a religious relic, will be displayed to reverent visitors from all over the country. On that day Hungary will also pay homage to a new sovereign.⁶²

The predominant part of the contemporary opposition received the extension of authority with hostility. They argued that the extension of the Regent’s authority was nothing else but the conservation of the political system and acknowledgement of establishing a dynasty. In October 1937, in response to the increase of Horthy’s power, the legitimist camp formed a coalition—with the participation of liberals, small landowners and social democrats that rejected it earlier—for the theoretical possibility of the Habsburg restoration.

⁶⁰ About Horthy’s cult see Dávid Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz 1919-1944* (Budapest: MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet, 2015). For some aspects of this topic in English, see 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.

⁶¹ For details on the authority and status of the Hungarian Regent, refer to György Képes, “Regent without a King? Nicholas Horthy’s Position as “Governor” in the Light of Hungarian Constitutional History,” in *Medzi Trianonom a retribúciou Slovensko-maďarské vzťahy z právneho pohľadu. Between Trianon and Retribution Slovak-Hungarian Relations from Legal Point of View*, ed. Tomáš Gábris, Dagmar Lantajová, and Martin Bulla (Trnava: Trnavská univerzita v Trnave, Právnická fakulta, 2021), 217–251.

⁶² “Horthy – Uncrowned King,” *The Sunday Star* (Washington, D.C.), 8 August 1937, 3.

That activated another political force, the Party of Hungarian National Socialists, which proclaimed the Regent as King “Miklós I” at their general assembly in Debrecen in November 1937. Consequent to this action, the far-right leaders hoped to increase their influence, even suppressing their political opponents. They had been in the belief that if Horthy accepted the crown from them, he would have legitimised them and even put them ahead of all other political movements. Of course, the “king-election” operation failed, and Horthy, in public, sharply rejected this gesture of the extreme right.⁶³ However, the royal plans with Horthy and his family did not sink into oblivion after these events either. The new planning wave had become rather intense following the death of Deputy Regent István Horthy in August 1942. Yet no more was the Regent the target person at this time, but his grandson, the barely one-year-old István Horthy Junior. Although Horthy stiffly rejected these plans, they seemed to be so earnest that even Prince Primate Justinian Serédi, the leader of the Hungarian Catholic Church, contacted Horthy to clarify the issue.⁶⁴ Afterwards, in the heat of the Second World War, the coronation was no longer seriously on the agenda, except for the rather fluid suggestion for a Hungarian-Croatian personal union mentioned below.

Conclusion

As discussed above, sometimes the even duly justified nomination of the best-known persons to the royal dignity failed. The fate of all the other ideas, some with extremely poor foundations and backgrounds, could not be different. The findings have shed light on both political and personal reasons that blocked a resolution to the issue of the kingless kingdom in interwar Hungary. At the same time, the source materials processed in the course of the research also provided an opportunity to outline certain features of an “ideal” new Hungarian king who, both in Hungary and abroad, would have been accepted under the given political and social circumstances of the time. Quite simply, such a person would have been required whose rise to power would have been based on sufficient domestic political consensus and approval of major European powers. A significant requirement of him was the Roman Catholic religion and unconditional respect for Hungarian traditions—since he would have worn the crown of a thousand-year-old state—but, at the same time, a modern approach and way of thinking for the times. In case the Hungarian decision-makers would have elected a foreign person, it was essential for him to be familiar with Hungarian circumstances and the characteristics of the “Hungarian folk-soul,” should he be accepted by society. Finally and above all, there was the expectation that the new Hungarian king would have the international recognition and influence to take on and succeed in Hungary’s most important foreign policy goal: the revision of the Trianon Peace Treaty.

Finding such a person was practically an unsolvable task, “Almost as complicated as Einstein’s relatively [sic] theory is the monarchic question in Hungary—the kingdom without a King”—a very apt remark for the tangled Hungarian situation, used by, for example, the American *The Sunday Star* in August 1930.⁶⁵ We could also see that, sooner or later, all initiatives failed already at the first requirement, as none of the above-named candidates had reached domestic political consensus, simply because the legitimists had never been ready to deviate from their position,

⁶³ “Horthy Rejects Kingship,” *The New York Times*, 21 December 1937, 17; “The Throne of Hungary. Regent on Constitutional Development,” *The Times*, 22 December 1937, 11; Macartney, *October Fifteenth*, Vol. 1. 188.

⁶⁴ Balázs Csíky, *Serédi Jusztinián, Magyarország hercegprímása* (Budapest: MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet, MTA–PPKE Fraknói Vilmos Római Történeti Kutatócsoport, 2018), 353–367.

⁶⁵ “Boy Fights for a Throne,” *The Sunday Star* (Washington, D.C.), 17 August 1930, 3.

constantly rejecting any compromise, and even treating the various concepts with detestation and contempt.

It is also evident that none of the emerging alternatives offered the possibility of consensus, but there can be other similarities noticed, as well. In fact, except for Charles and Otto, none of the candidates had publicly claimed the Hungarian crown. The other similarity was that each candidate would have only been a temporary solution to the current circumstances instead of a long one. It is reasonable to suspect that none of the alternatives would have brought lasting domestic political stability. Implicitly, this could be one of the reasons why the “kingdom without a king,” which initially caused a constitutional stalemate, had been conserved. That was coupled with the fact that, in later years, the power of the head of state became more and more tailored to Horthy’s person and dependent on him. These two facts suggest that the interwar system got into a constitutional and political trap set by those legislators and politicians who were only able to give ad hoc responses to the challenges of the time. This is another reason why the interwar political establishment had no chance to survive after World War II.

The emergence of various rumours also allows us to establish when the Hungarian “king question” became the focus of international interest. The quoted sources reveal that the appearance or re-intensification of the rumour was always in connection with certain events. We could see that most of the candidates emerged collectively at the beginning of a very eventful period, which is understandable, given the instability and volatility of the domestic and international political situation. Speculation about the “king question” has often been fuelled by events linked to the former monarch or his family members. These included, for example, the attempted return of Charles IV in 1921, followed by his death the following year, and Otto’s coming of age as a monarch in the tradition of the Habsburgs, and then of his actual majority—1928 and 1930.⁶⁶ The ideas were also strongly induced by several domestic political events, among which occurrences related to Horthy’s person or the institution of the Regent—anniversaries, extensions of powers, the election and death of the Deputy Regent—played a central role. Finally, certain international events may have triggered a revival of rumours about the “king question”—the strengthening of Italian-Hungarian relations or the action of Lord Rothermere in 1927. The many rumours, often accompanied by the opinion that the Hungarian “kingdom without a king” was an outdated and anachronistic form of state, precisely because of the numerous and often unrealistic combinations, sometimes became ridiculous to some extent. So this situation ultimately affected Hungary’s international image, too. At the same time, the sensationalist press kept continuously maintaining the question of succession to the Hungarian throne.

But the Hungarian throne left vacant in the middle of Europe offered diplomats from other countries a gossip opportunity that they could use to achieve their political goals. An example from World War II illustrates this. In the spring of 1941, Croatia seceded from Yugoslavia and, with Italian-German support, became an independent kingdom, essentially a Nazi puppet state. The head of the new state was Aimone Roberto di Savoia, a member of the Italian royal family who became the fourth Duke of Aosta, named Tomislav II. According to a note by the German diplomat Ernst von Weizsäcker, he spoke about this with a Croatian minister who was unhappy with the way events were unfolding, and Weizsäcker said that he aimed to “create an anti-Italian mood” in him:

⁶⁶ “Otto’s Age Revives Magyar King Issue,” *The New York Times*, 18 November 1928, 3; “Otto Comes of Age – Hapsburgs at Fete,” *The New York Times*, 20 November 1930, 7.

for instance by peddling the rumour that the new King of Croatia had already been taken into consideration as a candidate for the Hungarian throne. A link with the old Croatian-Hungarian tradition was to be established thereby and the road prepared toward a new Rome-Zagreb-Budapest bloc.⁶⁷

This example clearly shows that, despite the wartime circumstances, the problem of the vacant Hungarian throne remained a recurring theme in international public discourse throughout the period though in its second half, there were already fewer names mentioned in the rumours, and the circle of non-Hungarian “aspirants” significantly decreased.

The final chapter of the long and varied history of the Kingdom of Hungary ended with World War II. As one of the last allies of Nazi Germany, Hungary found itself again on the losers’ side. After 1945, there were still some supporters—such as Cardinal Joseph Mindszenty, the leader of the Hungarian Catholic Church—of the kingdom as the state form and the coronation of the only remaining Otto, but the new power of state formed with Soviet assistance, and the new regime codified in 1946, definitively tied up the loose ends of the various “possibilities” for solving the “king question.”

Finally, the question rightly arises as to why the conserved Hungarian “kingdom without a king” was the basis of so many international rumours. On the one hand, the Hungarian “king question” was an interesting exotic subject outside Hungary, which tempted many foreign journalists to write an exciting article with an attractive title. On the other hand, in Hungary, the issue of the king was a significant source of political conflict; any decision could have influenced the fate of the country, so the interest of journalists was not accidental. These different motivations prompted the appearance of the issue, both in the Hungarian and international press.

⁶⁷ “Memorandum by the State Secretary,” Berlin, 20 May 1941, in *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918–1945. Series D (1937–1945), Volume XII: The War Years. February 1–June 22, 1941* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1962), 851–852.