

The Significance and Consequences of the Battle of Mohács for Central Europe

On 29 August 1526, a substantial part of Hungary's armed forces perished at the Battle of Mohács. The toll on the ecclesiastical and political elite was severe: seven prelates and twenty-eight magnates were killed. During the two-month campaign that followed, the Ottomans burnt some 2,000 villages and 100 towns. The estimated decline in population was between 150,000 and 200,000, or roughly 5 per cent of the country's inhabitants.¹ Yet the gravest loss was the death of a young man of twenty, King Louis II (1506–1526), who left no heir just as the Ottoman menace that had long threatened the kingdom became a reality. In the autumn of 1526, Hungary witnessed a familiar response to such a succession crisis in the feudal world: rival candidates and their supporters began their struggle for the throne.

Among the contenders was John Zápolya (c. 1487–1540), voivode, or governor, of Transylvania. He held the second-highest dignity in the realm and was one of its wealthiest magnates, if not the wealthiest. An experienced politician and military commander, he had largely succeeded in defending his province against the Ottomans in the preceding years. His family connection to King Sigismund I of Poland enhanced his standing: the king's first wife had been Zápolya's sister Barbara (d. 1515). He was unquestionably the most eminent surviving member of the Hungarian elite decimated on the battlefield of Mohács.²

The other candidate was Archduke Ferdinand of Habsburg (1503–1564), husband of Anna Jagiellon and brother-in-law of the late king. His claim rested on two dynastic settlements: the Treaty of Pressburg (Pozsony, now Bratislava) of 1491 and the double marriage agreement of 1515. He had fewer adherents in Hungary, but enjoyed the backing of his elder brother, Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain, and his younger sister, Queen Mary, Louis's widow, as well as the prestige of the Habsburg dynasty. Ferdinand's position was by no means easy. He had lived in Central Europe for only a few years and was still learning to navigate its complex political circumstances. Born in Spain, he remained there until the age of fifteen, then completed his education in the Low Countries. He moved to the Austrian lands only in 1521; his reluctant brother ceded the duchies to him in two stages. This owed much to the intervention of the Hungarian Estates – the privileged orders represented in the Diet, Hungary's assembly – who were unwilling to see a Hungarian princess married to a landless prince. The young ruler restored order in the Austrian hereditary lands after the turmoil that followed Emperor Maximilian I's death – by force, let us add. He also brought the upheavals of the German Peasants' War under control as they spread into the region. Yet I am certain that the Hungarian Estates still had surprises in store for him over the ensuing decades.³

John was elected king by the Hungarian Estates at Székesfehérvár in November 1526; in December, a group gathered around the dowager Queen Mary elected Ferdinand at Pozsony. Such

¹ István Brodaries: Igaz leírás magyaroknak a törökökkel Mohácsnál vívott csatájáról. In: *Mohács emlékezete*. Selected by Károly Kiss, ed. Tamás Katona. Bratislava–Budapest, Madách–Európa, 1979, 45–48. For an overview of new research undertaken for the 500th anniversary, see the three-volume publication *Mohács 500. I–III*. Editor-in-chief: Szabolcs Varga. Budapest, Martin Opitz, 2026.

² Recent research on John Zápolya and his family is brought together in *Tanulmányok Szapolyai Jánosról és a kora újkori Erdélyről*. Miskolc, Faculty of Arts, University of Miskolc, 2004; and *Egy elfeledett magyar királyi dinasztia. A Szapolyaiak*. Ed. Pál Fodor, Szabolcs Varga. Budapest, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2020.

³ Two important biographies from the extensive literature on Ferdinand I are Paula Sutter Fichtner: *Ferdinand I. Wider Türkennot und Glaubensspaltung*. Graz–Cologne–Vienna, Styria, 1986; and Alfred Kohler: *Ferdinand I. 1503–1564. Fürst, König und Kaiser*. Munich, C. H. Beck, 2003. On the early years of his rule as archduke, see Alphons Lhotsky: *Das Zeitalter des Hauses Österreich. Die ersten Jahre der Regierung Ferdinands I. in Österreich (1520–1527)*. Vienna–Cologne–Graz, Böhlau, 1971.

a double election need not have proved disastrous, nor was it unprecedented in Hungarian history. There were numerous examples of such contests when a king died without an heir or the legitimacy of his successor was in question. After the death of King Albert of Habsburg in 1439, the supporters of the infant Ladislaus V fought those of Vladislaus I of Hungary, who was also King of Poland. Matthias Corvinus, too, had to overcome Frederick III, while his successor, Vladislaus II, contended with Maximilian I, among others, for the Hungarian throne. On this occasion, however, matters took an unfortunate course: neither side could gain a lasting ascendancy, and neither would relinquish its claim to the entire kingdom. The result was prolonged civil war, which continually ravaged the country and bred anarchy. It further weakened the fabric of a society already shaken by Mohács and still struggling to recover from the shock of defeat, while the most formidable military power of the age stood at its borders.⁴

John initially had the advantage: by early 1527, he had taken possession of almost the entire country. This did not last long. Ferdinand soon gained the upper hand and, thanks to Charles V's money and Queen Mary's knowledge of local politics, drove John out of Hungary in the autumn of 1527. The displaced king refused to yield. While Ferdinand was away attending to affairs in the Holy Roman Empire, John returned with Ottoman support. He could not have done so unaided: his only recourse was to accept the sultan's suzerainty and become his vassal. On 18 August 1529, John had to kiss the hand of the sultan who had come to his aid: a telling act of submission on the plain of Mohács. There was, after all, a third actor in the Hungarian struggle for power: the Ottoman Empire. For Sultan Suleiman, it must have been a bitter realisation that Louis's death had in effect helped his greatest adversaries, the Habsburgs, to the thrones of Hungary and Bohemia. It is hardly surprising that he seized upon John's offer. In 1529 and again in 1532, he sought to advance beyond Hungary and bring his rival to his knees. The failure of these campaigns, particularly the events of 1532, nevertheless made clear that Hungary could not simply be bypassed. Vienna was too distant for a successful military operation, and the Holy Roman Empire was prepared to assist the Habsburgs if necessary.⁵

Hungary's elite also recognised the dangers of the division created by the two kings. Attempts to find common ground at the so-called "kingless Diets" of 1531 and 1532, assemblies held without either monarch, came to nothing. John and Ferdinand, for their part, were reluctant to acknowledge that they must come to terms. They concluded their first extended truce in 1535, and only in 1538 signed the Treaty of Várad (now Oradea), not least through Charles V's intervention. Under its provisions, the kingdom was to be reunited under Ferdinand after John's death.⁶ The hard-won settlement did not endure. It was overtaken by the birth of a son to John, who had unexpectedly married in 1539. In his will, he instructed his followers to retain the kingdom for the child. They duly elected the two-month-old infant king, although he was never crowned.

The conflict in Hungary escalated once more. Ferdinand sought to take the country by force but failed in two attempts to capture Buda. These Habsburg offensives drew the third participant, the sultan, back into the contest. Having driven Charles V back in the Mediterranean in the preceding years, he could again concentrate his forces on a land campaign in the Hungarian kingdom, where he feared Habsburg expansion. In 1541, he captured Buda and brought the central third of the country under direct Ottoman rule, leaving the eastern territories, including Transylvania, to Zápolya's followers. He probably intended to incorporate these lands into the Ottoman Empire as

⁴ The most detailed account of the period of the two kings remains Ignác Acsády: *Magyarország három részre osztásának története 1526–1608*. Budapest, Athenaeum, 1897, 9–206.

⁵ In addition to Acsády's work cited above, Géza Perjés: *Mohács*. Budapest, Magvető, 1979, remains important for this period, despite some debatable arguments. See also László Bárdossy: *Magyar politika a mohácsi vész után*. Budapest, University Printing House, 1943.

⁶ *Österreichische Staatsverträge. Fürstentum Siebenbürgen (1526–1690)*. Ed. Roderich Gooss. Vienna, 1911, 69–81.

well, but resistance in the Habsburg-held areas forced him to abandon the plan.⁷ The territory ruled by John II Zápolya, also known as John Sigismund, ultimately became a vassal state, the Principality of Transylvania. It enjoyed relative autonomy, but its very existence remained a threat to Habsburg rule in Hungary and a persistent source of instability. Ferdinand I retained the western part of the kingdom. Under the Ottoman–Habsburg peace of 1547, he was obliged to pay tribute, or an “honorary gift”, for these territories, since the sultan regarded Hungary as conquered land.⁸ What the Hungarian Estates most feared had come to pass: the partition of the country into three had become a lasting reality. That the Ottoman Empire could not complete its conquest of Hungary was due to the Habsburg dynasty.

Louis II’s death also meant that the next occupant of the Bohemian and Hungarian thrones would not be a Jagiellon. The Habsburgs permanently replaced them in Central Europe and established a different form of rule over their dominions. What distinguished their approach from that of their predecessors? Above all, the Jagiellons had not sought to integrate their kingdoms, which shared only a monarch: a personal union. The Habsburgs, by contrast, sought closer institutional links between their territories, moving towards a real union. The centralisation that later historians saw as evidence of empire-building had not yet occurred; indeed, the conditions of the time made it impossible. Nevertheless, some cohesion was already developing between the Austrian hereditary lands, Bohemia, and Hungary. The Habsburg composite state in Central Europe was beginning to take shape. It would endure through four hundred years of historical change. Perhaps its longevity owed something to its ability to adapt to the particular circumstances of each kingdom and province, securing lasting cooperation between the monarch and the Estates. Admittedly, this depended on considerable external pressure, exerted for several centuries by the Ottoman Empire.⁹ That threat repeatedly drove the two dominant forces in political life, crown and Estates, towards compromise.

Although only some 100,000–120,000 square kilometres of the Kingdom of Hungary came under Habsburg rule, this territory supplied the new polity with valuable mineral resources and agricultural produce.¹⁰ Nor should we overlook the network of 120–140 frontier fortresses that ran through it, keeping the Ottomans away from the heart of Europe.¹¹ The means available to the Central European Habsburg Monarchy still fell well short of those of its adversary, so maintaining this defensive line depended on outside assistance. In addition to contributions from the Austrian and Bohemian lands, regular financial aid came chiefly from the Holy Roman Empire; during open warfare, papal support was also substantial.¹² At the same time, we must remember that the Ottoman frontier with Europe extended for several thousand kilometres. The Danube valley was merely one theatre of war alongside the western Mediterranean and the Russian plain. This explains why the Hungarian sector sometimes received little attention.

Belonging to this composite state ensured the survival of the Hungarian people, but entailed a loss of sovereignty that their assertive Estates found difficult to accept. The strength of Hungary’s Estates, together with the country’s distinct language, legal system, and outlook, would cause the

⁷ Pál Fodor: *Magyarország és a török hódítás*. Budapest, Argumentum, 1991, 68–119.

⁸ Ernst Petritsch: Der Habsburg-osmanische Friedensvertrag des Jahres 1547. *Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Staatsarchivs*, 1985, 49–80.

⁹ István Fazekas: A közép-európai Habsburg Birodalom a 16. század derekán: összetartó és széthúzó erők. In: *Harc Közép-Európáért. Szigetvár ostroma, Nagy Szulejmán és Zrínyi Miklós halála, 1566*. Ed. Pál Fodor. Budapest, HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities, 2023, 229–244.

¹⁰ For an overview, see Géza Pálffy: *A Magyar Királyság a Habsburg Monarchiában a 16. században*. Budapest, Institute of History, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2010.

¹¹ Géza Pálffy: A török elleni védelmi rendszer szervezetének története a kezdetektől a 18. század elejéig. *Történelmi Szemle*, 1996, nos. 2–3, 163–217.

¹² Géza Pálffy: A törökellenes védelmi rendszer fenntartásának költségei a 16. század második felében. In: *Végvár és ellátás*. [Papers from the conference on frontier fortresses, Noszvaj, 13–14 October 1999.] Ed. Tivadar Petercsák and Mátyás Berecz. Eger, Heves County Museum Organisation, Dobó Castle Museum, 2001, 183–219.

ruling house considerable trouble. Even so, Hungary was worth fighting for. Possession of the Crown of St Stephen carried immense prestige: this was a kingdom with a distinguished past, and its royal titulature embodied claims to numerous other territories. It was an independent realm outside the Holy Roman Empire, roughly equal in area, population, and resources to either the Austrian hereditary lands or the lands of the Bohemian Crown.¹³

Ferdinand I, the composite monarchy's first ruler, did much to shape its institutions. Fortunately, he had ample time to become acquainted with his Central European dominions: he ruled the Austrian lands as archduke for forty-three years and reigned as King of Hungary and Bohemia for thirty-eight, including twenty-four after John's death. It is no coincidence that his most significant measures in Hungary came not at the outset but in the 1540s, once he had acquired sufficient experience of government. The arrangements then established made it possible to coordinate the resources of the state and the Estates and, at enormous sacrifice, to build and maintain the frontier defences described above.¹⁴

At this stage of his reign, Ferdinand also benefited from the support of a gifted group of Hungarian magnates and prelates. They had begun their careers in the late Jagiellonian period and believed that the kingdom could survive within the emerging Habsburg Monarchy in Central Europe. Particularly influential were Pál Várday (1483–1549), Archbishop of Esztergom; Elek Thurzó (1490–1543), judge royal, a senior judicial officer of the realm; Miklós Oláh (1493–1568), Archbishop of Esztergom; Tamás Nádasdy (1498–1562), palatine, the kingdom's highest secular officeholder after the monarch; and Ferenc Batthyány (1497–1566), former ban, or governor, of Croatia. Their example also shows that the Jagiellonian state, where crown and Estates shared authority, was not as weak as earlier historians assumed. The political experience they had gained in their youth proved useful under the new circumstances and helped to establish the administrative system outlined above. Before Mohács, Hungary was, after all, neither better nor worse than other European states governed in conjunction with the Estates.¹⁵ Research undertaken for the anniversary clearly demonstrates that the kingdom had mobilised all its resources against the Ottoman Empire. Unfortunately, it could do no more: its opponent was simply too powerful, commanding at least four to five times Hungary's resources.

It is essential to remember that, without the cooperation of the Estates, the small central administration would have been powerless. Ferdinand I deserves credit for devising a complex system of government that preserved the constitutional arrangements of each kingdom and province, including the position of its Estates. Within these structures, he sought to give effect to his will through royal prerogatives and central institutions, or, where necessary, to negotiate a compromise acceptable to both sides.

Suleiman won a great victory on the plain of Mohács, yet his triumph helped his most dangerous adversaries, the Habsburgs, to the Hungarian throne. Although Ferdinand I did not distinguish himself as a military leader, his tenacity and willingness to compromise made him an able statesman. He laid the foundations of a political order that served the peoples of Central Europe for four hundred years. The Battle of Mohács was the opening act.

¹³ Pálffy: *A Magyar Királyság*, 74.

¹⁴ István Fazekas: *A Magyar Udvari Kancellária és hivatalnokai 1527–1690 között*. Budapest, Institute of History, Research Centre for the Humanities, Eötvös Loránd Research Network, 2021, 40–56. István Kenyeres: I. Ferdinánd magyarországi pénzügyigazgatási reformjai és bevételei. *Történelmi Szemle*, 2003, nos. 1–2, 61–92.

¹⁵ Tibor Neumann, Norbert C. Tóth, and Tamás Pálosfalvi: Két évszázad a sztereotípiák fogságában. Helyzetkép a Jagelló-kor kutatásáról. In: *Több mint egy csata: Mohács. Az 1526. évi ütközet a magyar tudományos és kulturális emlékezetben*. Ed. Pál Fodor and Szabolcs Varga. Budapest, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2019, 11–73.