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Research Article

War, Innovations and Cultural Transfers in East-Central Europe: The Army of Transylvania in the Age of Transition from Voivodeship to Principality (Second Half of the 16th Century)

Florin Nicolae Ardelean*

Abstract:
This article aims to provide an overview of the early modern processes of military innovation and adaptation in Transylvania, focusing particularly on the influence of foreign practices. A former province of the Hungarian Kingdom, Transylvania underwent significant transformation during the second half of the 16th century, emerging as a distinct polity under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire. The political and geographical context of this borderland region, shaped by the intense rivalry between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy, played a critical role in defining the military organisation of the nascent state. The armed forces of the Transylvanian rulers were marked by enduring medieval traditions and customs, especially in terms of recruitment, mobilization and organization. However, some innovations, coming from neighbouring war cultures, were introduced and adapted during the decades following the Ottoman conquest of Buda (1541). The evolution of recruitment methods, the increasing importance of light cavalry and irregular warfare and the evolution of infantry between western and oriental models are some of the most important topics approached in my analysis.
Key words: warfare, cavalry, mercenaries, Habsburgs, Ottoman Empire.

* Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
ORCID: 0000-0001-9071-889X; E-mail: florinardelean1@yahoo.com

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Introduction

Analysing war and military organization in a broader political, social, economic and cultural context is not a new practice among historians[1]. However, the last few decades have witnessed a systematic effort of building theoretical frameworks and research paradigms, which explicitly seek to further our understanding of war as a complex phenomenon, strongly interconnected with all aspects of the human past. A particular attention has been given to the wider cultural impact of armed conflicts but also to the creation of war cultures defined by specific customs and practices of waging war[2].

In the case of the early modern period, the "military revolution" thesis has exerted a tremendous influence on historiography, not necessarily as a very successful theoretical model but mostly through the constructive criticism it has inspired during the last seven decades[3]. A significant contribution to this debate has been brought by Jeremy Black[4] who has emphasized the importance of cultural issues in military change rather than the technological and tactical innovations, which played an important role in the argumentation of Michael Roberts[5], and to some

[1] In his long term analysis of military historiography, Peter Paret has identified such preoccupations in the works of Thucydides - who saw deep connections between the structure of society and its military organization; Machiavelli – with his complex analysis of the political and social background of armed conflicts and Voltaire – credited with one of the first cultural histories of war in his book dedicated to reign of Louis XIV, see Peter Paret, "The History of Armed Power," in *A Companion to Western Historical Thought*. eds. Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 243-261.

[2] Wayne E. Lee, "Warfare and Culture," in *Warfare and Culture in World History*. ed. Wayne E. Lee (New-York: NYU Press, 2011), 1-18.

[3] One of the most recent and critical approaches to the "military revolution" thesis, Frank Jacob and Gilmar Visoni-Alonzo, *The Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe: A Revision* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); A more nuanced and diverse perspective on the concepts of revolution, change and continuity in the military history of the early modern world is provided by the essays gathered in the volume *Global Military Transformations: Change and Continuity, 1450-1800*. ed. Jeremy Black (Roma: Nadir Media, 2023).

[4] Jeremy Black has approached the issue in several of his publication, in the particular case of early modern period but also from a wider timeframe and a global perspective, see for example Jeremy Black, *Rethinking Military History* (London: Routledge, 2004); Jeremy Black, *European Warfare, 1494-1660* (London: Routledge, 2002), especially chapter 3, *A Military Revolution?*, 32-54.

[5] Michael Roberts, "The Military Revolution," in *Essays in Swedish History*. ed. Michael Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966), 195-225.

extant in that of Geoffrey Parker[6]. New questions regarding the validity of the thesis arose as researchers confronted the theoretical model proposed by Roberts with regions situated beyond Western Europe[7]. Looking at the Eastern part of the continent, Robert Frost concluded that there were multiple distinct "military revolutions", which changed the face of warfare during the early modern age. He also underlined the limits of technological determinism and the need to analyse the adaptation of military innovations in a broader political, social and cultural context.[8]

The interplay of foreign influences and local customs shaped the war culture of medieval and early modern states. In Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, this process was marked by long term interactions (both violent and peaceful) with the Ottoman Empire. As Gábor Ágoston has demonstrated in his publications, the transfer of military knowledge and technology between the Christian states of the region and the Ottomans were not hindered by religious or cultural barriers. Weapons and military know-how were an important part of cultural exchanges in the area and foreign specialists (mercenaries, gunsmiths, architects etc.) were the most important agents in this process[9]. Following a similar logic, but not from

[6] Parker expanded the discussion initiated by Roberts and added new arguments and examples to the theory of "military revolution". One of his most significant contributions regarded the evolution of military architecture, namely the development of *trace italienne* fortifications, Geoffrey Parker, "Military Revolution", 1560-1660–A Myth?," *The Journal of Modern History* 48, no. 2 (1976): 195-214; Geoffrey Parker, "The Limits to Revolutions in Military Affairs: Maurice of Nassau, the Battle of Nieuwpoort (1600), and the Legacy," *The Journal of Military History* 71 (2007): 331-372.

[7] It has been demonstrated that some of the most important innovations associated with the "military revolution" have reached Hungary and Transylvania during the sixteenth century. The construction of bastioned fortifications, the proliferation of firearms and the increasing size of armed forces are identified as the most important changes in the field of military organization, see Jozsef Kelenik, "The Military Revolution in Hungary," in *Ottomans, Hungarians and Habsburgs in Central Europe. The Military Confines in the Era of Ottoman Conquest*. eds. Géza Dávid and Pál Fodor (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2000), 117-159; Tamás Kruppa, "The Military Revolution in Hungary and Transylvania in the 16th and 17th Centuries," *Dimensioni e Problemi della Ricerca Storica* 2 (2022): 37-54.

[8] Robert I. Frost, *The Northern Wars: War, State and Society in Northeastern Europe, 1558–1721* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), 310-329; Robert I. Frost, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Military Revolution," in *Poland and Europe: Historical Dimensions Selected Essays from the Fiftieth Anniversary International Congress of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences of America*. eds. James S. Pula and Marian B. Biskupski, Vol. 1, East European Monographs 390 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 19-47.

[9] Gábor Ágoston, "The Ottoman Empire and the Technological Dialogue between Europe and Asia: The Case of Military Technology and Know-How in the Gunpowder Age," in *Science between Europe and Asia. Historical studies on the transmission, adaptation and adaptation of knowledge*. eds. Feza Günergun and Dhruv Raina (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 27-39; Gábor Ágoston, "Empires and warfare in east-central Europe, 1550–1750: the Ottoman–

an Ottoman perspective, János B. Szabó has argued in favour of a "common military culture" in East-Central Europe, which was the result of prolonged contacts between the various states and provinces of this region. In his view, this "East-Central European culture of war" adopted influences coming from both Western and Southern Europe and adapted them to the specific conditions of this area. The important role of cavalry warfare and the use of fortified camps (of Hussite inspiration) are some of its dominant features, while the mobility of foreign mercenaries within the confines of this region ensured the spread and consolidation of common war customs[10].

In this article, my analysis will focus on some of the most important features of military organization in Transylvania, during the complicated decades of transition from a voivodeship within the Hungarian Kingdom to a distinct state, the Principality of Transylvania. The survival of medieval military elements, the influence of the political context (Ottoman suzerainty), the evolution of recruitment methods, the dynamic relation between cavalry and infantry and the importance of irregular warfare (*Kleinkrieg*) are some of the most important issues discussed in the following pages.

Political context

The birth of the Transylvanian Principality remains a rather complicated topic that has led to divergent interpretations. However, there is some sort of unanimity in acknowledging that it was a long process rather than a distinct event.[11] In the decades following the battle

Habsburg rivalry and military transformation," in *European Warfare, 1350-1750*. eds. Frank Tallett and D. J. B. Trim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 110-134; The Ottomans also acted as agents of diffusion for gunpowder technology and tactical innovations in Asia, Gábor Ágoston, "Firangi, Zarbzan, and Rum Dasturi: The Ottomans and the Diffusion of Firearms in Asia," in *Şerefe. Studies in Honour of Prof. Géza Dávid on His Seventieth Birthday*. eds. Pál Fodor, Nándor E. Kovács and Benedek Péri (Budapest: Research Center for the Humanities, 2019), 89-104.

[10] János B. Szabó, "The Army of the Principality of Transylvania in the Period of the Thirty Years War," in *The Princes of Transylvania in the Thirty Years War*. ed. Gábor Kármán (Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2022), 21-58; János B. Szabó, "Bethlen Gábor, az újjászervező. A kora újkori hadügyi fejlődés Kelet-Közép-Európában: az Erdélyi Fejedelemség példája a XVII. század első felében (1.rész)," *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, 126/4 (2013): 963-988.

[11] Cristina Feneşan placed this process between the Peace Treaty of Oradea (1538) and the death of Queen Isabella Jagiello (1559), Cristina Feneşan, *Constituirea principatului autonom al Transilvaniei* (Bucureşti: Editura Enciclopedică, 1997), 97-118. According to Pál Fodor and Teréz Oborni, the process began with the separation of the eastern parts of the kingdom after the battle of Mohács (1526) and was concluded with de death of John Sigismund Szapolyai and the ratification of the Speyer Peace Treaty in 1571, Pál Fodor and Teréz

of Mohács (1526), the Kingdom of Hungary was divided in three parts. The southern and central parts, including the royal seat of Buda, became Ottoman provinces. The western and northern parts were reorganized as a Kingdom of Hungary with a Habsburg ruler. The eastern parts, consisting of Transylvania and some counties in Eastern Hungary were gradually transformed into the Principality of Transylvania.[12]

It took several decades for the new state to gain its identity, in a political context marked by the Habsburg – Szapolyai rivalry. In the years after the Ottoman conquest of Buda (1541), the eastern parts of the Hungarian Kingdom, including Transylvania, were ruled by the heirs of King John Szapolyai (Queen Isabella and her son John Sigismund) and their councillors, as vassals of the Ottoman Empire. Among the councillors, the bishop of Oradea, George Martinuzzi, held the most influential position until his death in 1551.[13] Because of his political schemes, the Habsburgs were able to extend their control over Transylvania for a brief period, between 1551 and 1556. The failure of Giovanni Battista Castaldo and his army of Habsburg mercenaries to withhold the Ottoman expansion, and in particular the loss of Timişoara in 1552, amplified the anti-Habsburg attitude among the Transylvanian estates.[14] The return of Queen Isabella and her son John Sigismund in Transylvania in 1556 with consistent Ottoman support, rekindled the old confrontation for the Hungarian Crown, and the two factions engaged into an intermittent military conflict lasting until the signing of the

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Oborni, "Between Two Great Powers: The Hungarian Kingdom of the Szapolyai Family," in *A Forgotten Hungarian Royal Dynasty: The Szapolyais*. eds. Pál Fodor and Szabolcs Varga (Budapest: Research Centre for the Humanities, 2020), 127-161. Recently, the process of state formation has been analysed from the perspective of the foreign dynastic policy of the Szapolyai family, with a particular emphasis on relations with the Valois dynasty, Zsuzsanna Hámori Nagy, "Az Erdélyi Fejedelemség kialakulása és nemzetközi megítélése a dinasztikus külpolitika tükrében (1526–1576)," *Erdélyi Múzeum* 86, no. 1 (2024): 49-62.

[12] Géza Pálffy, *The Kingdom of Hungary and the Habsburg Monarchy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 35-52.

[13] Adriano Papo and Gizella Nemeth Papo, *Frate Giorgio Martinuzzi: Cardinale, soldato e statista dalmata agli albori del Principato di Transilvania* (Canterano: Arcane editrice, 2017).

[14] Zoltán Korpás and János B. Szabó, "If they came as a Legation, they are many, if they are soldiers, they are few" - The military background of the 1551 attempt to unite Hungary," in *Isabella Jagiellon Queen of Hungary (1539-1559)*. eds. Ágnes Máté and Teréz Oborni (Budapest: Akadémia Kiadó, 2020), 147-162; Florin Nicolae Ardelean, "On the Foreign Mercenaries and Early Modern Military Innovations in East Central Europe. The Army Castaldo in Transylvania and the Banat 1551-1553," in Mozgó Frontvonalak. Háború és diplomácia a várháborúk időszakában 1552-1568. eds. György Bujdosné Pap, Ingrid Fejér, Ágota H. Szilasi, Studia Agriensia, 35 (Eger: Dobó István Vármúzeum, 2017), 117-128.

Speyer Peace Treaty in 1570 and death of John Sigismund in the following year.[15]

The election of Stephen Báthory as voivode in 1571 was the beginning of a new phase in the history of Transylvania, marked by institutional consolidation and international affirmation, especially after Báthory became ruler of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1576. In the first years of his reign in Transylvania, Báthory had to deal with the opposition of Gaspar Bekes, which led to two military confrontations, the siege of Făgăraş fortress in 1573 and the battle of Sânpaul in 1575.[16] Afterwards, for almost two decades, Transylvania was spared from direct military conflicts, although many soldiers form this region fought in the Polish-Lithuanian army at the siege of Gdańsk (1577) and in the Livonian campaign of 1577-1582.[17]

The political situation took a radical turn in the last decade of the sixteenth century with the beginning of the Long Turkish War (1591/1593-1606). The major Habsburg-Ottoman confrontation couldn't be avoided by the vassals of the sultan, but the leaders of Transylvania, Moldavia and Wallachia chose to rebel against their liege lord and joined the Holy League. Throughout the duration of this military conflict, the political elite of Transylvania remained divided. It was not uncommon for the prince or for the members of the estates to change their allegiance several times in just a few years. The devastations of war were felt strongly throughout the whole duration of the conflict but in the end, the principality passed this terrible test of endurance and was able to maintain its status for one more century.[18]

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[15] On the military confrontations of this period, see Imre Lukinich, "Az északkeleti várháborúk történetéhez 1561–1565," *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, 14 (1913): 370–394; 584–605; Nándor Virovecz, "Shifting Allegiances and the Questions of Resilience: Lords of the Hungarian and Transylvanian Border During the Fortress Wars of 1560's," *Politics and society in Central and South-East Europe: life under the shadow of the Ottoman Empire's expansion (15th-16th centuries)*. ed. Zsuzsanna I. Kopeczny (Cluj-Napoca, Editura Mega, 2021), 101-117; Florin Nicolae Ardelean, "Political Boundaries and Territorial Identity in Early Modern Central Europe: The Western Frontier of Transylvania during the Sixteenth Century," *Territorial Identity and Development* 6, no. 1 (2021): 21-38.

[16] On the career and reign of Stephen Báthory in Transylvania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, see Felicia Roşu, *Elective Monarchy in Transylvania and Poland-Lithuania, 1569-1587* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Ildikó Horn, "A hatalom pillérei: A politikai elit az Erdélyi Fejedelemség megszilárdulásának korszakában (1556–1588)" (PhD Diss. Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Budapest, 2012).

[17] Szabó, "The Army of the Principality", 34-35; Kruppa, "The Military Revolution", 51.

[18] This military conflict has been and still is a major topic for both Hungarian and Romanian historiographies. For some of the most recent and relevant contributions, see Ovidiu

Throughout this long period of transition, lasting more than half a century, Transylvania emerged as a consolidated state. Its institutions, including the army, underwent an almost constant process of adaptation. War, in its various forms, was a common occurrence and Transylvanian troops were involved in many military operations, ranging from small skirmishes and raids to major pitched battles and prolonged sieges. Their enemies and allies changed with the political context. In 1551-1552 and during certain phases of the Long Turkish War, they fought against the Ottomans in alliance with the Habsburgs. However, for most of the time they fulfilled their vassal duties and fought against the Habsburg Kings of Hungary, especially between 1556 and 1570.

Methods of recruitment: levies and mercenaries

The composition of the Transylvanian army was influenced by the particular social structure of the country. The three estates (nobility, Szeklers and Saxons) provided the largest military contingent. In addition, the rulers of the eastern parts of the Hungarian Kingdom organized some permanent and semi-permanent military structures, which were placed under their direct authority like the court army (*exercitus aule*), the garrisons of border fortifications and some groups of semi-privileged peasant-soldiers who performed military service in exchange for tax exemptions.

In theory, in case of a major military threat, the ruler could order a general levy and the estates were expected to join the army with all their able-bodied men. In practice, the ruler and the Diet sometimes agreed upon a partial mobilization of military contingents, representing the three Transylvanian estates. For example, in 1540 the county nobility agreed to mobilize 1,000 cavalry, the Szeklers had to provide a similar contingent of mounted soldiers, while the Saxon agreed to contribute

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Cristea, "A Second Front: Wallachia and the 'Long War' against the Turks," *in Europe and the Ottoman World. Exchanges and Conflicts (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries)*. eds. Gábor Kárman and Radu G. Păun (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2013), 13-27; Zoltán Péter Bagi, *Stories of the Long Turkish War* (Beau Bassin: Globe Edit, 2018); Sándor László Tóth, *A mezőkeresztesi csata és a tizenöt éves háború* (Szeged: Belvedere, 2000); Liviu Cîmpeanu, "'Domnul fie lăudat [...] turcii au predat cetatea': Cucerirea Lipovei Otomane de către Transilvăneni în august 1595," *Historia Urbana*, XXVI (2018): 97-111; Florin Nicolae Ardelean, "The Siege of Timişoara from 1596 in the Works of Bernardino Beccari da Sacile," in Politics and Society in Central and South-East Europe: life under the shadow of the Ottoman Empire's expansion (15th-16th centuries). ed. Zsuzsanna Kopeczny (Cluj-Napoca: Mega, 2021), 117-123; Florin Nicolae Ardelean, "Contested Borderlands: war and territorial disputes between Transylvania and The Ottoman Empire (1594-1595)," *East European History Review* 5 (2022): 31-44.

with 1,000 infantry, raising the total size of the detachment to 3,000 men. It was also implied that these soldiers would receive regular wages for the duration of their service.[19] The size of this military detachment was decreased or increased depending on the level of threat. The smallest size was 1,500 men in 1543[20] while the largest contingents of up to 6,000 men (2,000 soldiers provide by each estate) were mobilized especially after 1556, when the Transylvanian army took part in several campaigns against the Habsburgs.[21] This was an innovation in terms of mobilization and recruitment, justified by the need to support a small force of experienced soldier at the expense of the estates. However, the estates were not able or willing to maintain such a financial burden on the long run and preferred to return to their traditional manner of military service. The nobles would personally attend musters and campaigns with small retinues of armed servants (lesser nobles and conscripted peasants) depending on the size of their estates, while the Szeklers were expected to fully mobilize according to their traditional customs until 1562 when their privileges were suspended[22]. The Saxons were the only ones who continued to provide a pre-established number of mercenary infantry, armed with gunpowder weapons, who would receive regular payment while they were on campaign.[23]

Locals and foreigners in the court guard

The prolonged periods of war and the prospect of facing a superior enemy (either the Ottomans or the Habsburgs) motivated the prince and to some extent the Diet, to increase the size of permanent military contingents. The best troops available, both locals and foreign mercenaries, were part of the court guard (*exercitus aulae*).

In the troubled years following the battle of Mohács (1526), the size of mercenary units was on the rise. This process was favoured by the climate of political instability and rivalry between the factions who fought for the heritage of the Hungarian Crown. In such a context, political authority was conditioned by the ability to efficiently mobilize

[19] Sándor Szilágyi (ed.), *Monumenta Comitialia Regni Transylvaniae*, vol. I (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akad. Könyvkiadó Hivatala, 1876), 40.
[20] Szilágyi (ed.), *Monumenta Comitialia*, vol. I, 177.
[21] Szilágyi (ed.), *Monumenta Comitialia*, vol. I, 583.
[22] Florin Nicolae Ardelean, *On the Borderlands of Great Empires: Transylvanian Armies 1541-1613* (Warwick: Helion&Company, 2022), 37-39.
[23] Liviu Cîmpeanu, "The Transylvanian-Saxon University at War: Trabanten in John Sigismund Szapolyai's Campaigns at the North-Western Borders of Transylvania (1561–1567)," *Acta Musei Napocensis* 58, no. 2 (2021): 11-29.

and deploy armed forces. In 1531, King John Szapolyai kept a consistent cavalry retinue of 1,056 men. Among them, 895 were hussars (*Aulici hwzarones*) while 161 were men-at-arms (*armigeri*). Most of them were Hungarian and Transylvanian nobles but there were also many Serbian and Polish retainers.[24] Two decades later, George Martinuzzi had an even larger retinue of paid mercenaries consisting of 4,118 infantry and cavalry. Local nobles but also Croatians, Serbs, Szeklers and a few Wallachian boyars received regular wages for their service to the bishop of Oradea.[25]

The court of Isabella Jagiello and John Sigismund Szapolyai was a "melting pot" of cultural influences and this situation was also reflected in the composition of the court guard. Polish and Italian courtiers were favoured because of the family background of Queen Isabella, daughter of the Polish King Sigismund I and Bona Sforza. Mercenaries form the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were a constant presence between 1556 and 1571, and even after that date, with numbers varying between 500 and up to 2,000 men.[26] Giovanandrea Gromo was the most remarkable Italian mercenary captain in Transylvanian service during this period, with a smaller retinue of 100 horsemen and 200 infantry recruited around Venice.[27] These foreigners coexisted for years or even decades with local soldiers, fighting together and sharing their knowledge and experience on the battlefield.

The rulers from the Báthory family maintained a similar approach towards the issue of mercenaries, although the number of foreigners was decreased compared to the previous period. In 1574, French traveller Pierre Lescalopier observed that the court of Stephen Báthory at Alba Iulia was defended by two companies of Polish lancers, four companies

[24] Zsolt Simon, "Szapolyai János familiárisainak egy lajstroma 1531-ből," in *Tanulmányok Szapolyai Jánosról és a kora újkori Erdelyről*. eds. Jozsef Besenyei, Zita Horvath and Peter Tóth (Miskolc: Miskolci Egyetem, 2004), 315-332.

[25] Teréz Oborni, "Fráter György szervitorainak és familiárisainak jegyzéke a Castaldo-Kódexben, 1552," *Fons* 25, no. 4 (2018): 435-451.

[26] Giovannandrea Gromo, *Compendio di tutto il regno posseduto dal re Giovanni Transilvano et di tutte le cose notabili d'esso regno (Sec. XVI)*. ed. Aurel Decei (Alba Iulia: Tip. "Alba", 1945), 31.

[27] János B. Szabó, "The Army of the Szapolyai Family during the Reign of John Szapolyai and John Sigismund (Baronial, Voivodal and Royal Troops, 1510-1571)," in *A Forgotten Hungarian Royal Dynasty: The Szapolyais*. eds. Pál Fodor and Szabolcs Varga (Budapest: Research Center for Humanities, 2020), 236; János B. Szabó, Gábor Kármán, "Külföldi zsoldosok az erdélyi udvari hadakban," *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 135, no. 4 (2022), 775.

of local cavalry and 500 infantry, roughly 1,100 soldiers in total.[28] In times of war the size of the court guard was increased accordingly. While he was preparing to join the Holy League in the Long Turkish War, Prince Sigismund Báthory raised the size of his mounted retinue to 2,067 men, while 212 additional horsemen were kept by various officials who performed administrative tasks at court. The local nobility represented the largest proportion among this elite cavalry unit but some South-Slavic and Romanian names are also mentioned in the muster list.[29] Transylvania's involvement in this military conflict determined an unprecedented influx of foreign mercenaries in the region. Italians, Germans, Cossacks, Scots and soldiers form various Balkan nations fought in the armies of Transylvanian rulers during these years.[30]

Defence in the borderlands: garrisons and semi-privileged peasant-soldiers

In order to survive in the hostile environment created by the Ottoman-Habsburg rivalry, Transylvania needed a reliable defensive system. Sieges were already a dominant feature of sixteenth century warfare in the South-Eastern European borderlands and the rulers of Transylvania acknowledged the necessity of building a strong network of fortifications, especially on their western frontier. They tried to keep the most important fortresses and the surrounding villages on the so-called "fiscal estate" - the lands, which were placed under the direct authority of the ruling prince.[31]

Keeping a large enough military force to defend these fortifications was a complicated matter from a financial point of view. Permanent garrisons were very costly and thus they were kept to a minimum size. The rest of the manpower needed for military and auxiliary service was provided by various groups of peasant-soldiers, which appear in contemporary documents under various denominations: harquebusiers (*puşcaşi/puskasok*),[32] guardsmen (*drabanţ/Trabanten*) or freemen

[28] Maria Holban, Maria Matilda Alexandrescu-Dresca Bulgaru, Paul Cernovodeanu (eds.), *Călători străini despre Ţările Române*, vol. II, (Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, 1973), 443.

[29] Lajos Merenyi, "Bathory Zsigmond Fejedelem Udvari Lovassaga," *Hadtortenelmi Kozlemenyek* 7 (1894): 108-113.

[30] Florin Nicolae Ardelean, *Organizarea militară în principatul Transilvaniei (1541-1691): Comitate şi domenii fiscale* (Cluj-Napoca: Academia Română. Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2019), 179-189.

[31] Ardelean, *Organizarea militară*, 115-127.

[32] Harquebusiers were encountered, for example on the Gilău estate. According to a collective privilege issued by voivode Cristophor Báthory in 1581, they had to join the army

(*libertini/szabadosok*). From a social point of view they can be defined as an intermediary or semi-privileged group, because they were not nobles but not simple peasants either. They were rewarded with a partial or complete tax exemption and some other benefits in exchange for periodic military service at a specific fortification or in the main army.[33] A good example of this dual solution for military defence is provided by Şimleu (*Somlyo*)[34] fortress at the end of the sixteenth century. According to a conscription issued in 1594, Şimleu had a small permanent garrison of 10 ordinary guardsmen (*közdrabantok*) who resided inside the fortification and received regular wages. However, an additional number of 113 free guardsmen and 19 free horsemen lived in the nearby villages and were ready to join the permanent garrison in case of necessity.[35] Those who were recognized as free guardsmen or horsemen were quite wealthy, significantly above the other serfs living on the same estate. Of course they remained landless peasants and thus their most important possession was livestock. According to the same conscription, the average ownership of domesticated animals among the infantry guardsmen was approximately four oxen and five sheep per head of household. At the same time almost half of them also owned one horse. The free horsemen were even wealthier, with each of them owning an average of five oxen, two horses and ten sheep.[36]

Guardsmen (*drabant/trabant*) were a new type of infantry that was widespread in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe during the later middle ages and the beginning of the early modern period. They also represent a very interesting case of cross-cultural transfer in the field of warfare. However, there are two divergent interpretations regarding

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on request and in exchange they were exempted from all taxes and work obligations, including the contribution for the Turkish tribute, David Prodan, *Iobăgia în Transilvania în secolul al XVI-lea*, vol. I (Bucureşti, Editura Academiei, 1967), 411. In 1590, 94 harquebusiers are mentioned in the villages surrounding Gherla fortress. They were exempted from all taxes and work obligations in exchange for military service. They had to join the army at the order of the prince and join the garrison of the fortress in case of danger, David Prodan, *Iobăgia în Transilvania în secolul al XVI-lea*, vol. II (Bucureşti, Editura Academiei, 1968), 193.

[33] Florin Nicolae Ardelean, "Frontiers and Military Organization in Transylvania: The Guardsman (Drabant/Darabont) during the Second Half of the Sixteenth Century," in *From Medieval Frontiers to Early Modern Borders in Central and South-Eastern Europe*. eds. Florin Nicolae Ardelean, Liviu Cîmpeanu, Gelu Fodor and Livia Magina, (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2022), 177-191.

[34] The main estate of the Báthory family was also an important border fortress during the age of the principality, Rudolf Wolf, "Cetatea Şimleului. Schiță monografică," *Acta Musei Porolissensis* 5 (1981): 395-409.

[35] András Kovács, "Szilágysomlyó vára a 16. Században," *Dolgozatok az Erdélyi Múzeum Érem- és Régiségtárából* 8 (2013): 95-106.

[36] These estimations are based on the data collected by Prodan, *Iobăgia*, vol. II, 599.

the origins of the word designating this specific group of foot soldiers. Many historians consider that the German word *Trabant* to be the original term, which was later adopted in the other languages of the region (*drabant/darabont* in Hungarian; *darabant/dorobanț* in Romanian etc.). The term was first used during the Hussite Wars (1419-1434) and it referred to the infantry troops that defended the wagon forts (*Wagenburg*) of the Bohemian rebels.[37] According to another interpretation, the word has Persian origins, derived from the word *darband*, meaning barred or closed gate.[38] In the Ottoman Empire, a derived term was used to describe the *derbendci*s, an auxiliary military group tasked with the defence of strategic crossing points.[39] Although the precise origin of the word and its spread in the region remains very hard to assess it represents, nevertheless, a case of cultural transfer connected with the changing nature of military conflicts and frontier defence.[40] The Ottoman *derbendci*s and the Transylvanian free guardsmen (*drabant*s) share many similarities in terms of social status and military role. Both can be described as semi-privileged groups who enjoyed tax exemptions in return for military service. They were also irregular infantry troops assigned to defensive tasks, particularly in borderland areas.

Cavalry and infantry: an attempt of qualitative and quantitative assessment

Throughout the long period of transition from the medieval to the modern period (roughly form the fourteenth to the eighteenth century)

[37] Cathal J. Nolan, *The Age of Wars of Religion 1000–1650: An Encyclopedia of Global Warfare and Civilization*, vol. II (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 868; Dimitrie Cantemir claimed that the Romanian word *dărăban* derived from the German word *Trabant*, Dimitrie Cantemir, *Descrierea Moldovei* (București: Editura Librăriei Socec & Co, 1909), 154; Nicolae Stoicescu, *Curteni și slujitori: contribuții la istoria Armatei Române* (București: Editura Militară, 1968), 116; Caludiu-Ion Neagoe, "Mercenarii unguri (Dărăbani) în oastea Țării Românești și a Moldovei în secolul al XVI-lea," *Istros* 27 (2021): 271-274.

[38] Henri Grégoire, "Aux confins militaires de l'orient byzantine. Hussards, Trabans, Tasnaks," *Byzantion* 13 (1938): 279– 282; János B.Szabó, "A székelyek katonai szerpe Erdélyben a mohácsi csatától a Habsburg uralom megszilárdulásáig (1526– 1709)," in *A Határvédelem évszázadai Székelyföldön: Csíkszék és a Gyimesek vidéke. Szerkesztette és a jegyzékeket összeállította*. ed. József Nagy (Szépvíz: A Szépvízért Egyesület kiadása, 2018), 105.

[39] Adrian Gheorghe, *The Metamorphoses of Power: Violence, Warlords, Akıncıs and the Early Ottomans (1300–1450)* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 65, 73-78, 81-82; Mesut Uyar and Edward J, Erickson, *A Military History of the Ottomans: From Osman to Atatürk* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2009), 62-63; Ayşe Kayapinar and Levent Kayapinar, "Application of Derbend Organization in the Balkans: An Example of Continuity of Balkan Institutions in the Ottoman System," in *State and Society in the Balkans Before and After the Establishment of Ottoman Rule*. eds. Srđan Rudić and Selim Aslantaş (Belgrade: The Institute of History Belgrade, 2017), 205– 210.

[40] Ardelean, "Frontiers and Military Organization," 177-191.

the battlefields of Eastern Europe continued to be dominated by mounted troops.[41] This was a major contrast with the "supremacy of infantry" in Western Europe, which represents a fundamental component in the "military revolution" thesis.[42] The importance of cavalry in East-Central Europe has been underlined by many authors. Recently, the research emphasis has been shifted to the interplay of local customs and Western influences, the survival of "steppe warrior" tactics, the high frequency of "small wars" (*Kleinkrieg*) and the adaptation of Eastern European light cavalry models into the military organization of western states.[43]

Early Modern Transylvania offers an interesting and relevant case study for these developments in East-Central Europe. The increasing role of the lightly armed hussars and the significant decrease of heavy cavalry in the sixteenth century have been noticed by cotemporary observers like the Croatian humanist Antun Vrančić. Furthermore, Vrančić identifies the wars against the Ottomans as the main cause for this drastic shift between light and heavy cavalry.[44] The Ottoman/Oriental influence on the evolution of the Transylvanian cavalry was manifested in several ways, from the preference for the swift and resilient Turkish horses to the

[41] In the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the reign of Stephen Báthory, the size of cavalry detachments was usually twice the size of infantry, Dariusz Kupisz, "The Polish-Lithuanian Military in the Reign of King Stefan Bathory (1576-1586)," in *Warfare in Eastern Europe, 1500-1800*. ed. Brian L. Davies (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 74.

[42] Christer Jörgensen, Michael F. Pavkovici and Rob S. Rice, *Fighting Techniques of the Early Modern World. AD 1500 ~ AD 1763. Equipment, Combat Skills, and Tactics* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2006), 7-67; Thomas Arnold, *The Renaissance at War* (London: Cassel&Co, 2001), 53-83; The situation of early modern cavalry has been revaluated by recent scholarship with a strong emphasis on its capacity to adapt to the new tactical and technological challenges, see for example Gervase Phillip, "Of Nimble Service: Technology, Equestrianism and the Cavalry Arm of Early Modern Western European Armies," *War & Society* 20, no. 2 (2022): 1-21.

[43] Liviu Cîmpeanu, "Before Hussars: the Cavalry Hosts of Hungary, Moldavia and Wallachia between 1350-1550," in *Cavalry Warfare: From Ancient Times to Today*. ed. Jeremy Black (Roma: Nadir Media, 2024), 103-140; Michal Paradowski, "Organisation, tactics and the role of the cavalry in the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth's warfare in 17th century," in *Cavalry Warfare: From Ancient Times to Today*. ed. Jeremy Black (Roma: Nadir Media, 2024), 141-161; Alexander Querengässer, "Croats, Hussars and Uhlans. The influence of the Eastern European military on the Western European military - A research outline," in *Cavalry Warfare: From Ancient Times to Today*. ed. Jeremy Black (Roma: Nadir Media, 2024), 261-292.

[44] Antonius Wrancius, *De Rebus Gestis Hungarorum ab Inclinatione Regni*. In László Szalay ed. *Monumenta Hungariae Historica: Scriptores*, vol. II., (Pest: Magyar Tudományos Akademia, 1857), 149.

use of specific weapons and pieces of equipment of oriental origin like sabres, wing shaped shields or *sisak* helmets.[45]

Mobility and versatility were defining features for the Transylvanian armies in the second half of the sixteenth century because skirmishes and raids were very common, while sieges and especially pitched battles were rare. This was the situation during the long confrontation between the Szapolyais and the Habsburgs in the disputed borderlands of the Tisa region (1556-1570)[46] and to some extent during the Long Turkish War (1591/1593-1606).[47] This is one of the reasons why infantry didn't evolve into a dominant branch in the Transylvanian armies. However, the role of the foot soldier must not be underestimated. Following the general trends of this region, Transylvanian infantry was lightly equipped and focused on firepower. Harquebuses were considered the main weapon for the various groups of Transylvanian infantrymen regardless of their social background: the blue guardsmen of the court army, the hajduks from the western borderlands, the militias provided by the Saxon seats and districts or even conscripted peasants.[48] In 1557, for example, all nobles were expected to join the army with an additional armed servant for every 16 serfs living on their estates. The conscripted troops had to bring gunpowder weapons and those unable to afford such equipment had to be armed with bows and spears according to their old customs (*quibus se poterunt pixidibus, alij cum arcubus, reliqui cum lanceis, iuxta antiquam eorum consuetudinem)*.[49] The detachments provide by the Transylvanian Saxons were almost exclusively armed with gunpowder weapons and are usually designated as *pedites pixidarios*.[50]

Throughout this period (second half of the sixteenth century), the number of mounted soldiers usually exceeded the size of infantry detachments. In March 1562, at the battle of Hadad, Francis Némethy and Stephen Báthory (commander of Oradea fortress at the time) commanded an army of 9,000 soldiers, among which the vast majority were mounted. According to Giovanandrea Gromo the army consisted of 8,000 horsemen

[45] Florin Nicolae Ardelean, "Hussars, lancers and dragoons: The evolution of cavalry warfare in the Principality of Transylvania," in *Cavalry Warfare: From Ancient Times to Today*. ed. Jeremy Black (Roma: Nadir Media, 2024), 163-184; Ardelean, *On the Borderlands*, 29-34, 37-39.
[46] Imre Lukinich, *Erdély területi változásai a török hódítás korában, 1541-1711* (Budapest: Kiadja a Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1918), 79-166; Virovecz, "Shifting Allegiances", 101-117.
[47] Ardelean, "Contested Borderlands," 31-44.
[48] Ardelean, *On the borderlands*, 34-47, 39-45.
[49] Szilágyi (ed.), *Monumenta Comitialia,* vol. II, 85-86.
[50] Cîmpeanu, "The Transylvanian-Saxon University at War," 11-29.

and only 1,000 infantrymen.[51] Of course, there were also exceptions, like the 1595 campaign in Wallachia. On the eve of this expedition, Sigismund Báthory and his allies were able to gather an impressive fighting force of more than 50,000 men. About 20,000 of them were cavalry troops including Transylvanian nobles and their mounted retinues, Szeklers, Moldavians, Wallachians, Cossacks, Tuscan mercenaries and a detachment of 1,500 Silesian heavy cavalry dispatched by Rudolf II. The number of foot soldiers was even greater, allegedly 32,000 men, because the Transylvanian prince promised to restore the privileges of the Szeklers. This Transylvanian "nation" alone provided about 22,000 soldiers, most of them on foot and poorly equipped. Among them, only 8,200 were armed with gunpowder weapons.[52]

At the battle of Şelimbăr (28 October 1599), Transylvanian troops were divided between the two opposing factions: Michael the Brave of Wallachia and the recently elected prince of Transylvania, Cardinal Andrew Báthory. The two armies had a similar structure, with a consistent proportion of cavalry. According to the description provided by chronicler István Szamosközy, who was an eyewitness of this event, the Cardinal's army consisted of 5,000 men, among whom 3,200 (64%) were mounted.[53] The outcome of the battle was decided by cavalry attacks. Initially, the Transylvanian cavalry from the vanguard performed a successful assault against the first enemy battle line. Michael the Brave was able to hold back their advance with a counterattack from the flanks, executed by his Polish and Cossack cavalry. In the second phase of the battle, the Wallachian ruler defeated his enemy through a general cavalry assault directed against the second and third enemy battle line.[54]

The tactics of frontal and flanking charges, associated with the virtues of bravery and prowess, were deeply rooted in the military ethos

[51] Gromo, *Compendio*, 62-63.

[52] Although the total numbers presented by these narrative sources might be exaggerated, we must keep in mind that this was a coalition army that included all the allies of Sigismund Báthory and a general levy of the Szeklers, Ioachim Crăciun, "Scrisoarea lui Petru Pellérdi privitoare la ajutorul dat de Sigismund Báthory lui Mihaiu Viteazul în campania din 1595," *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie Națională* 6 (1931-1935), 494-502; Andrei Veress, "Campania creştinilor în contra lui Sinan Paşa din 1595," *Academia Română. Memoriile secțiunii istorice* 4, no. 3 (1925): 103-104; Ardelean, *On the Borderlands*, 80-81.

[53] The small size of the Transylvanian army was determined by the political division in the country and by lack of time for a proper mobilization, Sándor Szilágyi, (ed.), "Szamosközy István történeti maradványai (1566–1603)," *Monumenta Hungariae Historica, Scriptores* 28 (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1876), 322-325.

[54] Ardelean, *On the Borderlnds*, 86-89.

of the Transylvanian nobility. Sometimes this resulted in a lack of flexibility on the battlefield and impacted the outcome of battles. A very telling episode is the battle of Mirăslau (18-19 September 1600) where Michael the Brave was confronted by a coalition of Transylvanian rebels and the troops of the Habsburg commander Giorgio Basta. Neither faction had a clear superiority in numbers (both armies are estimated at around 12,000 combatants) but Michael held the high ground on hillside along the Mureş valley. Realising this significant tactical disadvantage, Giorgio Basta wanted to perform a fake retreat to lure his adversary away from his favourable position. The Transylvanian nobles led by Stephen Csáki of Cheresig protested against such a shameful proposition, which in their view would decrease the morale of their own troops and give courage to the enemy. The Habsburg commander insisted and eventually won the argument with his allies. Seeing his enemies depart form the battlefield the Wallachian voivode ordered a general cavalry assault. However, his mix of light and semi-heavy cavalry was met by salvoes of muskets from the flanks and a counterattack of the heavy Silesian cavalry, armed with pistols and swords. Michael the Brave suffered a crushing defeat and barely escaped the battlefield alive.[55]

Conclusion

Recent and older trends in historiography have approached the subject of war from a variety of perspectives. Adding a cultural component to the research of warfare brings new and valuable insights into this complex and global phenomenon. The particular case study approached in this article, Transylvania in the second half of the sixteenth century, illustrates the wide reaching impact of foreign influences and the following process of adaptation. Political context had a major influence on the evolution of military institutions. The Ottoman advancement in Europe not only defined the political status of Transylvania but it also influenced its war culture. The actions of their rivals, the Habsburgs, opened the way for military knowledge and technology coming from the central and western parts of Europe. However, foreign innovations and influences were always adapted to the specific conditions of Transylvania and especially to its enduring medieval customs and traditions in military matters.

The composition of the army reflected the particular social structure of Transylvania and a significant number of soldiers were provided by

[55] Andrei Veress (ed.), *Documente privitoare la istoria Ardealului, Moldovei şi Ţării-Româneşti, Acte şi scrisori*, vol. VI (Bucureşti: Cartea Românească, 1933), 205-213.

the three estates (nobility, Szeklers and Saxons) in the form of levies. However, throughout this period, there was a clear tendency to organize permanent or semi-permanent military groups of experienced soldiers (the court army, the free guardsmen, permanent garrisons etc.) motivated by regular wages or/and tax exemptions. These types of troops, locals but also foreign mercenaries, represented an intermediary phase between medieval military service based on social status and the standing armies of the modern age.

The dominant role of cavalry remains one of the most striking features of war culture in East-Central Europe, strongly linked to the violent and peaceful contacts between the Ottomans and the Christian states in the region. The army of Transylvania is yet another case study that confirms this premise, although its geographical conditions (high hills and mountains) were not ideal for mounted warfare.

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