

## From Rustics to Model Hungarians: The Transformation of Szeklers in Interwar Hungarian Academic Discourse

Gergely Romsics 

### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the shifting academic and political constructions of Szekler identity in interwar Hungarian discourse, tracing how a once rustic and peripheral ethnic group came to be reframed as a racially pure and culturally exemplary pillar of the Hungarian nation. Beginning with nineteenth-century nationalist representations that saw Szeklers as traditional but backward border-dwellers, the study examines how post-World War I territorial losses and the rise of völkisch ideology triggered a reevaluation of their role. Interwar Hungarian scholars, influenced by German Volksgeschichte and ethno-essentialist thinking, reimagined Szeklers as martial, racially untainted, and spiritually aligned with the alpine ideal of national authenticity. This image served not only political revisionism but also popular and scientific narratives, including ethnography, tourism, and eugenics. At the same time, conservative and historicist currents pushed back against this essentialism, emphasizing historical contingencies and integration into a multiethnic kingdom. The paper situates this identity transformation within broader European trends of reactionary modernism and transnational cultural transfer, highlighting the interplay of domestic nationalism and imported conceptual frameworks. Ultimately, it shows that the Szekler image was instrumentalized in multiple, competing visions of the Hungarian nation, reflecting deeper anxieties and ambitions regarding statehood, ethnicity, and modernity in the interwar period.

KEYWORDS: Szeklers, interwar Hungary, völkisch ideology, ethnogenesis, ethnohistory

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Ass. Prof. Dr. Gergely Romsics, Center for Research in the Humanities, Budapest–University of Vienna,  
romsics.gergely@abtk.hu, <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8973-416X>

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## Introduction

The Hungarian inhabitants of the Eastern Carpathian regions, known as Szeklers (*székelyek*) have held a prominent place in various political and cultural imaginaries for well over a century. They are usually represented as an ancient “branch” of the Hungarian (*magyar*) people/nation.<sup>1</sup> Beyond their standard characterization as a tribe of Hunnic or Turkic origin hailing from the early Middle Ages, Szeklers were often accorded a special position in both academic and popular literature due to their uniquely mountain-dwelling culture, warrior traditions, perennial survival or a combination of these and other attributes. “Rediscovered” as a backward branch of the rapidly modernizing Hungarian nation in the second half of the nineteenth century, Szekler identity was romanticized and initially depicted as rustic.

Following World War I, the image of the Szeklers was reconfigured in multiple movements to represent a reservoir of ethnic strength, achieved through the reevaluation of their rural/alpine character and rusticity. This shift facilitated the integration of German *völkisch* ideas organized around the perenniarity of ethnic character and the collective will to rule over and shape “soil.” Such notions were juxtaposed with the notion of *Volkstumskampf*, the struggle to preserve the primordial character of the ethnic group threatened by (liberal) modernity and other ascendant nations vying for land and political hegemony. By the time the Hungarian elites embarked on the reintegration of the Szekler-land (returned to Hungary as a result of the Second Vienna Award in August 1940), the image of the racially/ethnically pure, fighting Szekler was being reproduced across sites of academic knowledge-making.

### Rusticity and Backwardness in Hungarian Representations of Szeklers before World War I

Hungarian nationalism prior to 1914 was predominantly imperial in the sense that its adherents tended to perceive the assimilation of non-Magyars and the projection of state power both within and beyond state boundaries as key challenges and tasks for the political class.<sup>2</sup> Public opinion therefore tended to turn to Szeklers with sympathy and interest, casting them as Hungarians who lived in a border region and were settled amongst alien ethnic groups, yet without the ambition of placing them on a particularly high pedestal. Before the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise, Mór Jókai, the most popular novelist of the era, wrote a concise national history of Hungary in which he described the

1 The traditional appellation of the group in English language scholarship (Szeklers) has recently been used in tandem with Székely, the Hungarian language endonym. This paper follows the older convention, allowing for better distinction in English between the singular and the plural.

2 BÁLINT VARGA: The Two Faces of the Hungarian Empire, in: Austrian History Yearbook 52 (2021), pp. 118–130, here pp. 122–127.

Szeklers as people “hard as iron” who had successfully preserved “ancient customs.” He did not, however, suggest they were a “model population” in any sense for a modernizing nation.<sup>3</sup> This assessment remained characteristic of the national elites for much of the dualist period. Half a century later, leading anthropologist and politician Ottó Herman reproduced several standard evaluations familiar from Jókai’s short history. These extended to the ancient (Hungnic) origins of Szeklers and the ancient character of their customs, without major novel insights beyond ethnographical observations concerning folk art.<sup>4</sup>

Amidst the state-building triumphalism of the late nineteenth century, however, at least one further aspect of Szekler life and its present-day consequences was discussed with increasing frequency. “Traditionalism” as a concept and an attribute of the Szeklers in general was only a single semantic step removed from the notion of backwardness and/or rusticity. The first systematic collector of Szekler folk poetry and ballads, János Kriza, while from the region himself, did not hesitate to describe his collection in these terms, while also affirming their uniqueness and importance to the Hungarian national identity.<sup>5</sup> In the context of political discourse, this rusticity translated to backwardness, and there were calls for state investment and modernization in the region. The liberal Gusztáv Bekcsics and the nationalist neoconservative Miklós Bartha both extolled Szekler qualities while highlighting the need for economic development in these provinces.<sup>6</sup> These metropolitan voices were often joined by local spokespeople: in Gyergyószentmiklós (Gheorgheni), the jurist and political activist Arthur P. Vákár published several pamphlets around the turn of the century, each suggesting the need to keep up with the heartland “across the mountains” in development, while also lavishing praise (as Bartha, too, had done) on Szekler communities for their resilience and commitment to national culture.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the trope of rusticity seemingly firmly attached to the group, by the turn of the century a distinct growth in the interest directed at Szeklers was becoming palpable. At the end of the late 1870s the author of the first modern and systematic survey of Szekler lands, Balázs Orbán, was forced, at least ac-

3 MÓR JÓKAI: *A magyar nemzet története* [History of the Hungarian Nation], Pest 1854, pp. 16, 26, 55.

4 OTTÓ HERMAN: *A magyar nép arcza és jellege* [Portrait and Character of the Hungarian People], Budapest 1902, pp. 26, 133.

5 Vadrózsák: Kriza János székely népköltesi gyűjteménye. [Wild Roses: János Kriza’s Collection of Szekler Folk Poetry], Bukarest 1975, pp. 35–36.

6 MIKLÓS BARTHA: *Nemzeti követelések a hadseregeben* [National Demands Regarding the Army], in: JÁNOS SAMASSA (ed.): Bartha Miklós összegyűjtött munkái III: Politikai beszédek és nemzetiségi cikkek, Budapest 1910, pp. 240–311, here p. 259; GUSZTÁV BEKCSICS: *A nemzeti politika programmja Erdélyben és a Székelyföldön* [The Program of a National Policy on Transylvania and the Szeklerland], Budapest 1896, pp. 28–30.

7 Bartha was himself a Szekler, but had become a national politician and was best known for his research and activism regarding the Subcarpathian Ukraine. P. ARTHUR VÁKÁR: *Gyergyószentmiklós r. t. város jövője* [The Future of Gergyószentmiklós Township], Gyergyószentmiklós 1908.

cording to tradition, to personally deliver ordered copies of his magisterial work to his subscribers.<sup>8</sup> 20 years later, Orbán was becoming recognized as a trailblazer in the emergent field of nationalist sociography. This found reflection both in increasing coverage in the press and in the proliferation of works dedicated to the Eastern Carpathians and its inhabitants.

Parallel to the increasing interest in Székler life, Hungarian academics during the final decades of the nineteenth century had become embroiled in a bitter debate about Székler origins. The theory of their Hunnic ancestry had stood unquestioned for many centuries, yet the spread of modern, critical methodologies had brought about a gradual re-interpretation of the medieval tradition. From Pál Hunfalvy, the first scientist to discard the “Hunnic continuity” thesis, to later critics of the origin story such as János Karácsonyi, these scholars referenced the old myth of Székler ethnogenesis as a “tale.”<sup>9</sup> Their iconoclastic claims created furor among traditionalists, launching a public feud between the camps that lasted for several decades and spanned two world wars.<sup>10</sup>

Around the turn of the century, Hungarian nationalist and nationalizing elites, however, tended to focus more on modernization and overcoming backwardness both within and beyond the borders of Hungary and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.<sup>11</sup> The first internal large-scale and highly public “action” (as they were called in the public discourse of the day) targeted the Subcarpathian region.<sup>12</sup> Its goals included helping the local Hungarian minority in the region, but also the Ruthenian majority—in the hope of promoting its assimilation.<sup>13</sup>

8 ISTVÁN RUGONFALVI KISS: Bevezetés [Introduction], in: ISTVÁN RUGONFALVI KISS (ed.): *A nemes székely nemzet képe*, vol. 2, Debrecen 1939, pp. 5–10, here p. 5.

9 PÁL HUNFALVY: *Magyarország ethnographiája* [Hungary’s Ethnography], Budapest 1876, pp. 302–304; JÁNOS KARÁCSONYI: *A székelyek eredete és Erdélybe való települése* [The Origins of the Széklers and Their Settlement in Transylvania], Budapest 1905, pp. 29–36.

10 ZOLTÁN KORDÉ: *A székelykérdés története* [A History of the Székler Question], Székelyudvarhely 1991, pp. 24–25.

11 KRISZTIÁN CSAPLÁR-DEGOVICS: “Nekünk nincsenek gyarmataink és hódítási szándékaink”: Magyar részvétel a Monarchia gyarmatosítási törekvéseiben a Balkánon (1867–1914) [“We Have No Colonies and Desire to Conquer”: Hungarian Participation in Colonial Projects of the Monarchy in the Balkans (1867–1914)], Budapest 2022, pp. 22–24, 50–55; GÁBOR EGRY: Regional Elites, Nationalist Politics, Local Accommodations: Center-Periphery Struggles in Late Dualist Hungary, in: BERNHARD BACHINGER, WOLFRAM DORNIK et al. (eds.): *Österreich-Ungarns imperiale Herausforderungen: Nationalismen und Rivalitäten im Habsburgerreich um 1900*, Göttingen 2019, pp. 334–355, here pp. 343–348.

12 BARNA GOTTFRIED: A “rutén akció” Bereg vármegyében (1897–1901) [The “Ruthenian Action” in County Bereg (1897–1901)], in: Szabolcs-Szatmár-Beregi Levéltári Évkönyv 13 (1999), pp. 195–202.

13 LÁSZLÓ BRAUN: A hegvidéki akció első évei Egán Ede irányítása alatt [The First Years of the Subcarpathian Action under the Guidance of Ede Egán], in: *Új Nézőpont* 4 (2017), 2, pp. 105–132.

The experiences in the Subcarpathian region exerted considerable influence on public discourse. The idea of state sponsored intervention to help underdeveloped Hungarian islands prosper and expand was one that was adopted by Székler and other Transylvanian intellectuals after the turn of the century. The three-day gathering of Székler elites in Tusnádfürdő (Băile Tușnad) in late August 1902 had a program featuring glorious historical accounts and origin stories alongside practical issues such as how to limit emigration from the region, develop local projects and establish credit and investment opportunities in agriculture, industry and even tourism.<sup>14</sup> The initiative conceptualized the eastern borderlands of the Kingdom of Hungary as an underdeveloped but unique region in need of assistance.<sup>15</sup>

### Shifting Interpretations of Széklers in the Wake of the Trianon Peace Treaty

The Széklerland as underdeveloped, yet beautiful and rich, the Székler as rustic, yet heroic and reliable—these narratives constituted the final iteration of pre-1914 Hungarian nation- and state-building ambitions with regard to the region and its people. World War I, the continuation wars of 1918/19 and the subsequent Peace Treaty of Trianon rendered this assessment, the product of a dynamic, expanding nationalism, untenable. As Hungarian nationalism found itself on the defensive, the ethnic foundations of national belonging and identity came to be highlighted more and more frequently and with increasing emphasis.

A prelude of the political transformation to come, the Romanian invasion of the Széklerland in 1916 came as a stark warning of the vulnerabilities that had been obvious to Transylvanian Hungarian leaders for some time, but tended to be downplayed in Budapest. After the summer of 1916, these groups started to enjoy greater public support and political clout, and soon relaunched the 1913 initiative of the Transylvanian Association (Erdélyi Szövetség) with the ambition of making the whole of Transylvania secure and prosperous—especially for ethnic Hungarians.<sup>16</sup> These plans, finalized in 1917, augmented the standing

14 LAJOS SZÁDECZKY-KARDOSS: *A székely nemzet története és alkotmánya* [The History and Constitution of the Székler Nation], Budapest 1927, p. 168.

15 PETRA BALATON: *A székely akció története: Források I. kötet* [The History of the Székler Action: Sources, Vol. I], Budapest 2004, pp. 14–26; BARNA BUDAY: *A Székely Kongresszus szervezete, tagjainak névsora, tárgyalásai és határozatai* [The Structure, Participant List, Proceedings and Resolutions of the Székler Congress], Budapest 1902, pp. 622–636.

16 NORBERT FALUSI: *Két nemzet határán: Erdélyi magyar nemzetépítők az európai nagy változásban (1900–1925)* [On the Border of Two Nations: Transylvanian Hungarian Nation Builders in the Great European Upheaval (1900–1925)], Kolozsvár 2020, pp. 61–65; GÁBOR EGRY: *Regionalizmus, erdélyiség, szupremácia: Az Erdélyi Szövetség és Erdély jövője, 1913–1918* [Regionalism, Transylvanianism, Supremacy: The

of Szeklers as a reliable “marcher” element to be settled around the future eastern border as widely as possible, removing ethnic Romanian populations to make room for the new guardians of the frontier.<sup>17</sup>

Any continuities notwithstanding, the shifts in public discourse after the Great War were striking and sweeping. They had at least three distinct sources: antecedents from the Austro-Hungarian dualist period, post-1919 New Right thinking and, finally, direct ideational transfers, usually from German *völkisch* thought, encompassing the spectrum from conservative revolutionaries to national socialists. The “refashioned,” increasingly ethno-essentialist image of the Szekler was the product of a multidirectional history where the effects of political change, domestic discourses and transnational influences became integrated into a set of complex representations.<sup>18</sup> Of these, the turn-of-the-century discussions of an unfolding *Volkstumskampf* in the contested soil of Transylvania bore multiple similarities with contemporary Bohemian and Moravian German perspectives. Similarities extended to (former) liberal nationalists adopting increasingly radical discourse in the emerging conflict situation: as Schönerer and other former progressives turned to ethnonationalism in the 1870s, especially from the 1890s onwards, similar processes unfolded in Hungary.<sup>19</sup> The once liberal Gusztáv Beksics pleaded in 1895 for development and state assistance for the region, while extolling the “racial” virtues of Szeklers. As he observed in a telling passage, under ideal conditions “the Wallachian woman could not compete with the Hungarian, or rather Szekler woman, and even in Western Europe one would be hard pressed to find a race which has women who could match the great qualities of their Szekler counterparts.”<sup>20</sup> In the course of the following years, the demographic argument grew into an important backchannel through which proto-*völkisch* ideas gained exposure in the broader public.

In the context of the *Volkstumskampf* and with Transylvania as the ultimate prize, the Szeklers emerged as historical warriors who were now fighting

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Transylvanian Alliance and the Future of Transylvania, 1913–1918], in: Századok 147 (2013), 1, pp. 3–32.

17 IGNÁC ROMSICS: István Bethlen: A Great Hungarian Statesman, Boulder, CO 1995, pp. 76–78; ZSOLT K. LENGYEL: Erdély újjáalkotásának a magyar terve 1917/1918 során [A Plan to Reorganize Transylvania in 1917/1918], in: Korunk 28 (2017), 2, pp. 64–75, here p. 69.

18 MICHAEL WERNER, BÉNÉDICTE ZIMMERMANN: Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtung: Der Ansatz der *Histoire croisée* und die Herausforderung des Transnationalen, in: Geschichte und Gesellschaft 28 (2002), pp. 607–636.

19 PIETER M. JUDSON: “Whether Race or Conviction Should Be the Standard”: National Identity and Liberal Politics in Nineteenth-Century Austria, in: Austrian History Yearbook 22 (1991), pp. 76–95; ANDREW G. WHITESIDE: The Socialism of Fools: Georg Ritter von Schönerer and Austrian Pan-Germanism, Berkeley, CA 1975.

20 GUSZTÁV BEKSICS: A román kérdés és a fajok harcza Európában és Magyarországon [The Romanian Question and the Racial Struggle in Europe and Hungary], Budapest 1895, pp. 159, 171, 189.

through culture and demographics. This discourse also highlighted a historical tradition of clinging to cultural heritage and harmonious adaptation to the mountain.<sup>21</sup> This image was capitalized on rapidly by numerous authors arriving from the region in the wake of the Romanian occupation and annexation. Perhaps the best known was Benedek Jancsó, advisor to Prime Minister István Bethlen and president of the Székler national council. His 1921 survey of Székler history and culture ended on a positive note: not only were Széklers accomplished fighters, but even under Romanian rule their superior civilization would protect them from attempts at Romanization.<sup>22</sup> The rustic Székler was becoming a culturally superior Hungarian—at least in relation to Romanian society, a *topos* that became ingrained in interwar discourse.<sup>23</sup>

The positive shift in representations of Széklers was further reinforced by the memory of the Great War and the subsequent continuation wars. The connection between the traditional military prowess of the group and the recent experiences in the World War became canonical in the aftermath of the war.<sup>24</sup> It was echoed soon after the war by Jancsó, who wrote that the “eastern bastion [...] had fallen into ruin,” but not the century-old military traditions.<sup>25</sup> This latter idea found representation in the story of the so-called Székler division, a more or less ad-hoc unit of the post-war Hungarian army that had stood firm in the face of much larger Romanian units in the early months of 1919 in Western Transylvania.<sup>26</sup> The memory of this fighting unit rapidly grew into a cult in its own right, and the memory of the division permeated thinking about the Széklers into the 1940s.<sup>27</sup> Together with the militarized image of the “civilian” Székler standing guard over the former lands of the Kingdom of Hungary that had been temporarily lost, this overtly martial *mnemotopos* contributed significantly to the representative shifts concerning Széklers during the interwar period.

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21 ZOLTÁN FÖLDES: *A magyarságért!* [For the Hungarian People!], Ditró 1913; JÓZSEF S. KOVÁTS: *A székely ház és udvar a gyergyói medencében: Tárgyi néprajzi tanulmány* [The Székler House and Yard in the Gyergyó (Giurgeu) Basin: A Study in Material Ethnography], Kolozsvár 1909, pp. 28–29.

22 BENEDEK JANCSÓ: *A székelyek: Történeti és néprajzi tanulmány* [The Széklers: Historical and Ethnographical Studies], Budapest 1921, p. 46.

23 GYULA ZATHURECZKY: *Erdély, amióta másképp hívják* [Transylvania, since Its Renaming], Budapest 1939.

24 SZÁDECZKY-KARDOSS, pp. 4–7.

25 JANCSÓ, pp. 45–46.

26 TAMÁS RÉVÉSZ: *Nem akartak katonát látni? A magyar állam és hadserege 1918–1919-ben* [Did They not Want to See Soldiers Anymore? The Hungarian State and Its Army in 1918–1919], Budapest 2019, pp. 137–150.

27 PÁL GERGELY: *Székelyföld mindig zöld!* [Szeklerland, Ever Green!], Budapest 1941, pp. 19–28. For an analysis of these processes, see: BALÁZS ABLONCZY: “Székely fiúk”: Az Erdély-kultusz magyarországi hálózata, 1920–1970. [“Szekler Boys”: The Network of the Cult of Transylvania in Hungary, 1920–1970], in: LÁSZLÓ BÓKA, ANNA-MÁRIA BIRÓ (eds.): *Értelmiségi karriertörténetek, kapcsolathálók, írócsoportosulások* 4. kötet, Oradea—Budapest 2021, pp. 213–236, here pp. 218–226.

## Academic Transfers and the Völkisch Image of the Szeklers<sup>28</sup>

The post-war reconceptualization of Szeklers was at the same time also the product of an ideational transfer. As a strongly ethno-essentialist current emerged in the late nineteenth century German Empire, its *völkisch* undertones—which emphasized the unchanging essence of every *Volk*, each seeking self-realization in an inherently conflict-prone world of ethnic communities—soon resonated in Hungary and were further amplified during the years of defeat and political weakness that characterized much of the 1920s.<sup>29</sup>

The intellectual imports arriving from Weimar and later from Nazi Germany offered seductive parallels with regard to the distinct historical trajectory of Transylvania in Hungarian history, including the special position of the Szeklers within this framework. Austrian identity was similarly being integrated into a greater German construct, facilitated especially by the proposition that border tribes of larger ethnic groups are both vital to and distinct from the greater unit to which they belong.<sup>30</sup>

The concept of “border Germans” (*Grenzlanddeutschen*) constituted an essential element in the *völkisch* interpretation of Austrian identity. It was through this special position that the distinctiveness of this branch of the German people could be explained and legitimized, with reference to “its mission [...] to form and guard the border [as] an integral component of the Austrian state for a millennium.”<sup>31</sup> In this interpretation, Austria figured as the scene of a perpetual *Volkstumskampf*, where it was necessary to fight for territory both within the borders and at the borders themselves.<sup>32</sup>

During the late Weimar period and in the first years of Nazi rule, the contributions of Max Hildebert Boehm, who conceptualized the border regions as marked by the duality of an ever present threat and existential, identity-shaping

28 This subsection contains updated passages adapted from: GERGELY ROMSICS: The Memory of the Habsburg Empire in German, Austrian, and Hungarian Right-Wing Historiography and Political Thinking, 1918–1941, Boulder, CO 2010, pp. 82–108.

29 STEFAN BREUER: Die Völkischen in Deutschland: Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik, Darmstadt 2008, pp. 25–35, 98–108; GÜNTER HARTUNG: Völkische Ideologie, in: UWE PUSCHNER, WALTER SCHMITZ et al. (eds.): Handbuch zur “Völkischen Bewegung,” 1871–1918, München 1996, pp. 22–41; MIKLÓS SZABÓ: Az újkonzervativizmus és a jobboldali radikalizmus története (1867–1918) [The Conservative Revolution and the History of Right-Wing Radicalism (1867–1918)], Budapest 2003, pp. 297–322.

30 JÜRGEN KOCKA: Ideological Regression and Methodological Innovation: Historiography and the Social Sciences in the 1930s and 1940s, in: History and Memory 2 (1990), 1, pp. 130–138.

31 Quote from WILLY ANDREAS: Österreich und der Anschluß, Berlin 1927, p. 18; For the canonization of these concepts during the national socialist period, cf. RUPERT VON SCHUMACHER: Die Ostmark und der Donauraum, in: KARL HAUSHOFER, HANS ROESELER (eds.): Das Werden des deutschen Volkes: Von der Vielfalt der Stämme zur Einheit der Nation, 3rd ed., Berlin 1941, pp. 439–483, here p. 474.

32 ALBRECHT PENCK: Nationale Erdkunde, Berlin 1934, p. 8; SCHUMACHER, p. 455.

experience of a higher order, played an especially important role in defining and enriching the *völkisch* lexicon. As he argued,

“[t]he *Grenzland* is not a racially pure territory. The peoples of the borderlands are almost an independent race, a race that is continuously uncertain about its own racial belonging, and is capable of rising if it catches the *völkisch* rhythm that keeps it in motion, boosts its strength, and inspires it to acts of heroism.”<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, the Innsbruck school of *Volksgeschichte*, first and foremost Hermann Wopfner, Adolf Helbok and Harold Steinacker, undertook to detect the periods of *völkisch* strength and decline by establishing the relationship between rural social “reservoirs” of ethnic strength and politics as a key direction of historical research.<sup>34</sup>

Implicit in this claim was the opposition between the “original” culture of the Austrian peasant and the crucible of Vienna, contrasting the culture of the capital with the innate ethnic consciousness of Tyrol and Styria.<sup>35</sup> In these provinces, Boehm himself saw a “land of longings” (*Sehnsuchtslandschaft*) of the German people, the character of which had been shaped by German civilizing efforts that ensured a special position for it as a contested region requiring constant vigilance, lest it be lost to other, hostile ethnic forces. Like almost every other author, he too placed emphasis on the Tyrol as the region that had preserved the character of the German *Volk* in its purest form.<sup>36</sup>

The Hungarian reception of the increasingly intricate German discourse regarding borderlands and “marcher tribes” occurred at several levels. Academic historiography engaged systematically with German *Volksgeschichte* or ethno-history in the 1930s. Some conservative historians, notably the Hungarian *Geistesgeschichte* school, staunchly refused the conceptual underpinnings of the new German approach.<sup>37</sup> Innovators in Hungarian academic historiography, on the other hand, saw in the new methods a way forward and an approach to be learned and emulated.<sup>38</sup> This was particularly true of the Hungarian ethnohistory school led by Elemér Mályusz, but many other scholars came

33 MAX HILDEBERT BOEHM: *Die deutschen Grenzländer*, 2nd ed., Berlin 1930, p. 17.

34 WILLI OBERKROME: *Volksgeschichte: Methodische Innovation und völkische Ideologisierung in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft 1918–1945*, Göttingen 1993, pp. 36–37.

35 For an example, see: ANDREAS, pp. 3, 18–19; for a survey, cf.: ROMSICS, *The Memory*, pp. 103–107.

36 MAX HILDEBERT BOEHM: *Deutschösterreichs Wanderschaft und Heimkehr*, Essen 1939, pp. 23–52.

37 VILMOS ERŐS: *A szellemtörténet [Geistesgeschichte]*, in: *Valóság* 58 (2008), 5, pp. 20–35.

38 VILMOS ERŐS: *Szellemtörténet versus népiségtörténet: Szekfű Gyula és Szabó István különböző értelmezései a nemzetiségek magyarországi történetéről az 1940-es évek első felében [Geistesgeschichte Versus Ethnohistory: The Divergent Interpretations of Gyula Szekfű and István Szabó in the Early 1940s about Non-Hungarian Ethnic Groups in Historical Hungary]*, in: *Történelmi Szemle* 61 (2019), 3, pp. 479–498.

to adopt some aspects of German *Volksgeschichte* in the course of the 1930s.<sup>39</sup> Representatives of the ethnohistorical school tended to emphasize the regional permanence and specialized culture of the Szeklers, but this did not mean they reproduced origin myths.<sup>40</sup> In fact Mályusz was often attacked by Szekler intellectuals for his theory denying the Hunnic/Avar origins of the group and identifying the border tribe as an artificial, royal construct for assimilating certain foreign elements into the Hungarian nation.<sup>41</sup> There was agreement, however, about the especially strong commitment to *Volkstum* that centuries on the ethnic border had begotten in Szeklers.

The impact of scholars and other experts with direct experience of German *völkisch* science should also not be underestimated. In this regard, the best example is perhaps Miklós Asztalos: a Szekler and former officer of the aforementioned Szekler Division, he was a community organizer for his compatriots congregating in counterrevolutionary Hungary after 1920.<sup>42</sup> Asztalos would go on to study in Germany, popularize the advances of *Volksgeschichte* and experiment with transposing some of its perspectives into his discussions of Hungarian history in the course of the 1930s. His admiration for these latter did not entail his full political radicalization: he remained close to corporatist, Catholic New Right circles.<sup>43</sup> Altogether, these multiple channels had an easily detectable effect by the late 1930s and contributed to the *völkisch* reconfiguration of Szeklers in the public mind.

### Main Components of the Völkisch Image of the Szeklers in the Late 1930s and beyond

The emergent, *völkisch*-tinged image built on several key semantic components. Four main and interconnected themes frequently recurring even in works with otherwise different outlooks anchored these representations. They included an emphasis on the communal culture and collective character of Szeklers, deriving from their history and alpine borderland experiences. Second, this mountain people, like the Tyroleans, came to represent an idealized authenticity of *völkisch* character, often referenced as “purity,” with connota-

39 VILMOS ERŐS: Ethnohistory in Hungary between the Two World Wars: Elemér Mályusz and István Szabó, in: Hungarian Studies Review 44 (2017), 1–2, pp. 53–80.

40 ISTVÁN SZABÓ: A magyarság életrajza [The Biography of the Hungarian People], Budapest 1990 [1941], p. 118.

41 ELEMÉR MÁLYUSZ: A székelység eredetéről [On the Origins of the Szeklers], in: Emlékkönyv Melich János hetvenedik születésnapjára, Budapest 1942, pp. 254–262.

42 BALÁZS ABLONCZY: Székely identitásépítés Magyarországon a két világháború között [Szekler Identity Building in Hungary between the Two World Wars], in: ZSOLT ORBÁN (ed.): Székelyföld és a Nagy Háború: Tanulmánykötet az első világháború centenáriuma alkalmából, Miercurea Ciuc 2018, pp. 467–485, here pp. 477–481.

43 BÉLA POMOGÁTS: Magyarság és Erdélyiség—Asztalos Miklós emlékezete [Hungarianness and Transylvanianness—The Remembrance of Miklós Asztalos], in: Bárka 7 (1999), 4, pp. 50–54; ROMSICS, The Memory, pp. 461–462.

tions ranging from the cultural to the outright racial and biological. Often, the idea of authenticity would be connected with the notion of *Volkstumskampf*, the struggle for the *völkisch* essence, encompassing both cultural efforts for the self-preservation of the community and physical confrontation with competing ethnic groups. Finally, a distinct discourse unfolded around biopolitical concerns of maximizing reproductive rates, minimizing emigration and preserving an optimal gene pool through careful population management. While also embedded in discourses of authenticity and purity, this concern merits separate discussion due to its emphasis on demographic strength rather than cultural values.

A survey of the first two, intertwined components of this image—historical experiences shaping the alpine community and its ethnic and racial “purity”—highlights how domestic discourse integrated elements of German conceptualizations of borderland societies. Bálint Hóman, later to serve as minister for culture for over a decade (1931–1942), had already argued in 1927 that Szeklers represented a group of Hunnic origin who had early on joined and embraced the Magyar majority and had made vital contributions as “guardians” to the nation throughout the centuries.<sup>44</sup>

Hóman’s later work offers evidence of the effect of *völkisch* transfers on Hungarian public and academic discourse from the (late) 1930s onwards. Writing an introductory essay in a representative 1940 volume on Transylvania as the minister of culture and as a historian (the author of the other essay being the prime minister and geographer Pál Teleki), Hóman framed Szeklers once again as protectors of the Hungarian state, but this time in distinctly ethno-essentialist terms. He argued that the eastern borderland and its people “combatively defended the Hungarian kingdom and Western civilization against the Eastern enemies that would threaten these” and even today served as the “uncompromising carrier and protector of Western, Hungarian civilization and Hungarian *völkisch* (népi) self-consciousness.”<sup>45</sup>

The partly German-educated Miklós Asztalos emphasized the adaptation of what he considered to be a Hunnic-Avaric relative of Hungarians to the alpine forests, having lived in the Carpathians and thus preserving its collective body largely “untouched.”<sup>46</sup> His account is distinguished by the emphatic use of the notion that the strength of an ethnic community is measurable, *inter alia*, in the way it can “muster force to conquer space”—what German scholarship referenced as *raumüberwindende Kräfte*.

A further example of German influence may be found in writings by Ferenc Zajti. Zajti was one of the heads of the main Budapest public library and an

44 BÁLINT HÓMAN: *A magyar hún-hagyomány és hún-monda* [The Hungarian-Hunnic Tradition and the Hunnic Myth], Budapest 1925, p. 17.

45 BÁLINT HÓMAN: *A magyarság történeti hivatása* [The Historical Vocation of Hungarians], in: JÓZSEF DEÉR (ed.): *Erdély*, Budapest 1940, pp. 21–35.

46 MIKLÓS ASZTALOS, SÁNDOR PETHŐ: *A magyar nemzet története ósidőktől napjainkig* [A History of the Hungarian Nation from Ancient Times to the Present], Budapest 1933, pp. 231, 277.

avid Turanist who promoted the Eastern Turkic origins of Hungarians, a subject on which he published two separate books in 1928 and 1939. The differences between the two texts provide important evidence about *völkisch* tropes and how they were disseminated in Hungarian academic discourse: over the course of the decade between the two published works, he came to integrate specific *Volksgeschichte* concepts such as racial pride, state-forming ability and *völkisch* consciousness into his portrayal of Szeklers. His 1939 protagonists—unlike those in his 1928 book—were no longer just heroic and persevering. They were all these things, but were also guided by and aware of a timeless, unchanging essence, acting as conscious protectors of Hungarian *Volkstum*.<sup>47</sup>

By the start of the second year of World War II and the concurrent restoration of the Szeklerland to Hungary by the decision of the Axis powers in August 1940, ethno-essentialist discourse regarding its inhabitants had made its way even into travel books and popular literature about Transylvania. This had been a recent shift in vocabulary. Pieter Judson has drawn attention to Austro-German *völkisch* tourism as a phenomenon predating World War I.<sup>48</sup> While some parallels could be detected in the case of Hungary, pre-1918 engagements by Hungarian elites and the urban upper middle class with faraway mountainous areas tended to be characterized by a colonial-assimilationist outlook, a direct consequence of the areas in question having non-Hungarian majorities in most cases (especially Upper Hungary, today Slovakia).<sup>49</sup> Transylvanian Saxon hiking associations of the time, in a different socio-political position from that of the hegemonic and colonizing Magyars, were in fact quicker to appropriate the proto-*völkisch* attitudes of their Cisleithanian predecessors.<sup>50</sup>

A generation later, however, the focus of tourism and hiking had shifted towards the “re-acquired” Transylvania and especially the Szeklerland. This new direction of alpine tourism very much lent itself to the ethno-essentialist lexicon, well established by then. Balázs Ablonczy’s analysis of guidebooks from the period highlights sections that discuss the “exemplary *völkisch* cohesion”

47 FERENC ZAJTI: *A hun-magyar östörténelem* (Uj szempontok a magyar östörténet feltáráshoz) [Hungarian-Hunnic Ancient History (New Perspectives on Uncovering Hungarian Ancient History)], Budapest 1928; FERENC ZAJTI: *Magyar évezredek (Skythat-hun-magyar faji azonosság)* [Hungarian Millennia (Scythian-Hunnic-Hungarian Racial Identity)], Budapest 1939, pp. 166–167, 195.

48 PIETER M. JUDSON: “Every German Visitor Has a Völkisch Obligation He Must Fulfil”: Nationalist Tourism in the Austrian Empire, in: RUDY KOSHAR (ed.): *Histories of Leisure*, New York—London 2002, pp. 147–168, here pp. 152–155.

49 BALÁZS ABLONCZY: *Védkunyhó: Idegenforgalmi fejlesztés és nemzetépítés Észak-Erdélyben 1940 és 1944 között* [Mountaintop Shelter: Tourism Development and Nation Building in Northern Transylvania 1940–1944], in: *Történelmi Szemle* 50 (2008), 4, pp. 507–533, here pp. 508–511.

50 CATHERINE ROTH: *Naturaliser la montagne? Le Club Carpatique Transylvain, XIXe–XXIe siècles*, Rennes 2022, pp. 83–90.

of Szeklers who inhabited a “land of unbreakable racial power.”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, perhaps the first guidebook dedicated exclusively to the Szeklerland following its “return” to Hungary featured racial/völkisch strength as a variable in its historical overviews, arguing county by county for the interconnectedness of such forces and the prosperity of regions.<sup>52</sup>

Besides travel books, diverse publications that fell into the category of “popular science” similarly reproduced and disseminated perspectives reflective of German academic and cultural transfers. The first dogmatically völkisch discussion of Szekler history was provided by István Rugonfalvi Kiss in 1939. A former political liberal and once a conservative historian, Rugonfalvi Kiss was now calling for a re-evaluation of Szekler contributions to Hungarian history, since earlier eras “failed to grasp and acknowledge the struggles of the Szekler people for their völkisch rights.” The current era and the new generation “filled by the völkisch idea,” he opined, should be better equipped to appreciate the accomplishments of the formerly ridiculed mountain-dwellers.<sup>53</sup> To some extent he was right: numerous new intellectuals in Transylvania and beyond were adapting the new concepts to their retelling of Carpathian history.<sup>54</sup> Their group also included politicians from the region, who availed themselves of the new vocabulary to establish their position in Hungarian political life as representatives of a stronger and purer “branch” of the nation.<sup>55</sup>

An apparent feature of the ongoing integration of völkisch thought into interpretations of the “Szekler contributions” to Hungarian history remained the malleable character of the standard *topoi* associated with the group. Despite their often mixed provenance, including German cultural transfers, such *topoi* could be easily repurposed to support anti-Nazi Hungarian nationalism, as attempted by Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky. He placed Szeklers at the very top of the “tree” of the Hungarian people, calling them the “perhaps most valuable

51 ZOLTÁN ANDORY ALADICS: Erdély északi része és a Székelyföld: Útikönyv [Northern Transylvania and the Szeklerland: A Traveller’s Guide], Budapest 1941; KÁROLY KAFFKA (ed.): Az utas könyve: Magyar utazási kézikönyv és útmutató: Kiegészítő rész: Keletmagyarország, Északerdély [The Traveller’s Book: Hungarian Travel Book and Guide: Addendum on Eastern Hungary and Northern Transylvania], Budapest 1941. Both cited and discussed by: ABLONCY, Védkunyhó, pp. 508, 516.

52 JÓZSEF DÁVID (ed.): Székelyföld írásban és képben [Szeklerland in Words and Pictures], Budapest 1941. For an example cf. the discussion of Csík county, pp. 236–240.

53 ISTVÁN RUGONFALVI KISS: Előszó [Preface], in: ISTVÁN RUGONFALVI KISS (ed.): A nemes székely nemzet képe, vol. 1, Debrecen 1939, pp. 3–4, here p. 4.

54 JÚLIA VALLASEK: Elváltozott világ: Az erdélyi magyar irodalom 1940–1944 között [A Changed World: Transylvanian Hungarian Literature 1940–1944], Debrecen 2004, pp. 123–124, 179.

55 GÁBOR EGRY: Az erdélyiség “színeváltozása”: Kísérlet az Erdélyi Párt ideológiájának és identitáspolitikájának elemzésére, 1940–1944 [The “Transformation” of Being Transylvanian: An Analysis of the Ideology and the Identity Politics of the Transylvanian Party, 1940–1944], Budapest 2008, p. 129.

branch.” He described their history as marked by the incessant struggle against foreign imperialisms, more or less fashioning them into Hungary’s Tyroleans.<sup>56</sup>

During the same period, pro-Nazi authors also instrumentalized established tropes about the Szeklers. In this latter context, however, they appeared as pioneers for a nation headed towards its rightful place in a new, German-led and properly *völkisch* Europe.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps best known in this corpus is the work by Tibor Baráth, a professor of history in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca). Adept at German geopolitics and *Volkswissenschaft*, he specified the Szekler contribution as adding an alpine dimension to the nation’s relationship with “space,” which not only extended Hungarian control over precious “soil” but also made possible the protection of the Carpathian basin and Europe as a whole.<sup>58</sup>

No branch of academia focused more on notions of authenticity than ethnography and folklore, long-established disciplines in Hungary and ones that had evolved in a close relationship with their German counterparts for decades. *Völkisch* influences impacted scholarly discourse even in the case of authors who remained opposed to Nazi influence—let alone dominance—in Hungary. The Péter-Pázmány University (Budapest) circle around the new interdisciplinary field and journal defined as Hungarian Studies (*Magyarságtudomány*) put this duality into sharp relief. The periodical published by the eponymous, newly formed research institute reflected the ongoing absorption of German *Volkswissenschaft*. Among the researchers, the architect and art historian Virgil Borbiró, who had edited the first survey of peasant architecture in Hungary over a decade earlier, ranked as a committed modernist often associated with the Hungarian left. In his 1942 discussion of Szekler folk architecture, however, he too availed himself of the German-inspired lexicon, theorizing about the significance of “*völkisch* organization” and its “form-giving force” in shaping Transylvania’s alpine culture, which made the Szekler region into a reservoir of “the Hungarian life of old.”<sup>59</sup>

The historian and ethnographer György Györffy, before his definitive post-1945 turn to early medieval history, contributed a chapter on Szekler origins and on the history of their settlements to a 1941 volume about Transylvania edited by Elemér Mályusz, the doyen of Hungarian *Volksgeschichte*. He too emphasized the ability of Szeklers to “safeguard their original racial and na-

56 ANDREW [ENDRE] BAJCSY-ZSILINSZKY: *Transylvania: Past and Future*, Geneva 1944, pp. 80–82, 131; ÁKOS BARTHA: Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre: Életút és utóélet [Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky: Life and Afterlife], Budapest 2019, pp. 398–405. For the broader story of an anti-Nazi radical nationalism in Hungary, see: ÁKOS BARTHA: *Fajvédelem és ellenállás* [Racialism and Resistance], in: *Regio* 29 (2021), 2, pp. 251–271.

57 KÁLMÁN FÜLÖP, ALBERT ÁCS: *A székelyek őstörténete* [The Prehistory of the Szeklers], Budapest 1944, p. 58.

58 TIBOR BARÁTH: *Az országépítés filozófiája a Kárpát-medencében* [The Philosophy of State-Building in the Carpathian Basin], Kolozsvár 1943, pp. 32, 70–77.

59 VIRGIL BIERBAUER: *A székelyföld templomairól* [On the Churches of Szeklerland], in: *Magyarságtudomány* 1 (1942), 1, pp. 140–154, here pp. 153–154.

tional traits,” which, he predicted, would “enable them to solidly preserve their *völkisch* character in the future as well, despite being surrounded by foreign peoples.”<sup>60</sup> At this point in time, however, Györffy was only repeating a long-canonical trope about the Szeklers, corresponding to their image and representing a point of agreement between the academic *Volksgeschichte* circles and the *völkisch* intellectuals who otherwise feuded over ancestry myths and other tales espoused by the latter group.

The connection between Szeklers and the notion of a *Volkstumskampf*, constituting the third pillar of the *völkisch*-influenced construct, was by no means simply a reflection of German academic transfer. Hungarian revisionism routinely made references to the assimilationist practices of neighboring states as instances of a struggle between ethnic groups from the early 1920s onwards and could rely on the remembrance of pre-World War I language struggles.<sup>61</sup> The impact of more specific German inspirations started to become more and more tangible especially from the second half of the 1930s onwards. This latter category covered a broad range of texts, from *Volksgeschichte* treatises to novels and other literary works. The above-mentioned 1941 volume of essays edited by Mályusz included a chapter by Domokos Gyallay entitled “The Connection between Soil and People in the Szeklerland.” Gyallay argued that the “liberal economic system” before 1914 had undermined the agricultural foundations of Szekler life, and so “*völkisch* unity, racial and social cohesion began to falter.” Accordingly, these were the processes that needed to be reversed if Szeklers were to continue playing their familiar role in Hungarian history.<sup>62</sup>

Gyallay was one of the New Right ideologues who harbored strong reservations against German ethnopolitical ambitions in the Danubian basin, but around 1942 he became a full-fledged supporter of the war efforts. He was himself a Szekler, and had in fact worked with Miklós Asztalos in the pedagogical association Magyar Népművelők Társasága. Unlike Asztalos, however, his drift towards radicalism continued throughout the war. This drift also left its imprint on his output as a fiction writer, although in this field he met with far less success than József Nyirő. A former member of the diverse intellectual and literary circle behind the periodical *Erdélyi Helikon*, during these years Nyirő produced works that reflected an increasing engagement with *völkisch* ideology. By the late 1930s, his reflections on the unchangeable character

60 GYÖRGY GYÖRFFY: A székelyek eredete és településük története [The Origins and the Settlement of the Szekler], in: ELEMÉR MÁLYUSZ (ed.): Erdély és népei, Budapest 1941, pp. 37–86, here p. 80.

61 ANDOR BORBÉLY: Román uralom Erdélyben [Romanian Rule in Transylvania], Budapest 1935, pp. 96–103. For a German parallel, cf.: PAUL MOLISCH: Politische Geschichte der deutschen Hochschulen in Österreich von 1848 bis 1918, Wien—Leipzig, 1939, pp. 78–79, 179–190. See also: PIETER M. JUDSON: Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria, Cambridge, MA 2006, pp. 25–26.

62 DOMOKOS GYALLAY: A föld és nép kapcsolata a Székelyföldön [The Connection between Soil and People in the Szeklerland], in: MÁLYUSZ, Erdély, pp. 203–216, here p. 214.

of ethnic identity as well as the unavoidable fate implicit in it came to occupy a central position in his work, much as had happened to the popular Ljubljana-born Austro-German writer, Bruno Brehm at around the same time.<sup>63</sup>

In his 1936 novel “My People,” Nyirő explores precisely this topic, composing inner monologues for his leading characters who “recognized” the impossibility of assimilation—a theme familiar from scores of patriotic German novels of the time. Even the chief Romanian character in the novel, an intellectual dispatched to the mountains to tame the wild Szeklers, is portrayed as reserving a modicum of respect for Hungarian nationalist, but not for those Szeklers who choose to try to integrate into the new, Romanian-dominated order. In the end, the breakdown of the novel’s Szekler antihero is related with the following words: “I have sinned greatly. I denounced my faith, my race, I was a vengeful and lowly man who did wrong to whomever he could.” Other Szeklers call him “race-betrayer” (*fajáruló*) in the novel, which is a term without precedence in literary or spoken Hungarian, and represents in fact a direct translation of the received and widely used German term *Volksverräter*.<sup>64</sup>

In a later novel set in the eighteenth century, Nyirő proceeded to narrate the “race betrayal” committed by the Hungarian aristocracy against the Szeklers in 1764, exposing them to Habsburg oppression and mass murder (known as the “Siculicide of Madéfalva”). Once more, ordinary Szeklers denounce guilty aristocrats as *Volksverräter* and even “race-deniers.” The use of these artificial terms is reflective of the degree to which Nyirő’s language—once celebrated as representing a rejuvenation of Hungarian literary language through the influx of Szekler vernacular—had become burdened by ideologically loaded terminology of German völkisch origin.<sup>65</sup>

Through a variety of printed media, these notions of *Volkstumskampf*, implying the slow withering of the Szekler “branch” of Hungarians were spreading in public discourse around the time the prestige of Nazi Germany peaked in Hungary (1939–1941). It characterized the discourse of the Transylvanian Party (Erdélyi Párt) of which Nyirő became a deputy, although the party also integrated a number of moderates.<sup>66</sup> The same ideas fueled almost forgotten initiatives such as the resettlement plans of 1939/40, when border revision seemed unlikely to many, given Romania’s apparent good relations with the Third Reich. The proponents of population exchange and Szekler resettlement referenced Boehm’s work, as well as Adolf Hitler’s call for resettling to justify their position, while conservatives protested the ideas they considered dangerous with regard to the reconstitution of the pre-1918 Kingdom of Hungary.<sup>67</sup>

63 ROMSICS, The Memory, pp. 291–295; JÓZSEF NYIRŐ: *Az én népem* [My People], Budapest 1936, pp. 136, 159; JÓZSEF NYIRŐ: *Madéfalvi veszedelem* [The Madefalva Terror], Budapest 1939, pp. 12, 70.

64 NYIRŐ, *Az én népem*, pp. 136, 159.

65 NYIRŐ, *Madéfalvi veszedelem*, pp. 12, 70.

66 EGRY, *Az erdélyiség színeváltozása*, p. 87.

67 ENDRE MORAVEK: *Áttelepítés?* [Resettlement?], in: *Magyar Szemle* 19 (1940) 9, pp. 178–186, especially p. 184.

Altogether, these interventions contributed to strengthening the image of Szeklers in the public mind as uniquely forceful and “valuable” for the entirety of the nation, while also remaining ever threatened by internal and external forces, much like Boehm had characterized the essence of *Grenzland*.

References to race and its primordiality—the fourth and final component in the reconfigured image of the Szekler—had been present in Hungarian public discourse about the people and the nation since at least the late nineteenth century. Concomitant with this, Marius Turda has documented the appearance of biological race in discussions about Szeklers by the early 1900s.<sup>68</sup> By the time the novel *Gestalt* of the Szekler came to emerge in the mid-to-late 1930s, such references had become more widespread and constitutive of their image. The “racialization” of the Szeklers went hand in hand with the abandonment of the notion of “historical race,” according to which the “Hungarian race” (*magyar faj*) was a historical product without shared biological ancestry. By the 1920s, New Right theoreticians and politicians had reinterpreted the term “race” to refer primarily to a community with shared and similar ancestry determinative of some or most of the individual characteristics of its members, as well.<sup>69</sup> These processes were supported by scholarship, in part on the Szeklers: An abundance of anthropometric-eugenicist research claimed to be able to define the biologically distinguishable, “valuable” and miraculously preserved Szekler.<sup>70</sup>

The racialized image of the Szekler was therefore not propagated exclusively by Hungarian national socialists proper, although the latter contributed to it. Ödön Málnási, who authored the perhaps most characteristically “Nazi” history of Hungary, availed himself of the standard tropes regarding the Szeklers, from persistence in the face of history to military values. What distinguished his account was the emphasis on the repeated betrayal of Szeklers by Hungarian aristocrats, and his use of the soldier folk of the mountains as antecedents of the World War veterans that he considered the founders of a new, just society.<sup>71</sup>

The same racialized lexicon was also evident in the three-volume synthesis edited and co-authored by Rugonfalvi Kiss. In the survey chapter on Szekler history, the elderly historian, drifting from his liberal nationalist roots towards fascism, observed how “the Hungarian people became intermixed to a great degree with foreign races, affecting its stature and soul alike.” Szeklers ranked

68 MARIUS TURDA: Eugenics and Nation in Early 20th Century Hungary, Hounds-mills—New York 2014, p. 77.

69 JÓZSEF VONYÓ: Gömbös Gyula [Gyula Gömbös], Budapest 2014, pp. 123–145, 217–227.

70 MARIUS TURDA: Modernism and Eugenics, Hounds-mills—New York 2010, pp. 112–113; LAJOS BARTUCZ: A magyarság antropológiája [The Anthropology of Hungarians], in: LAJOS BARTUCZ (ed.): A magyar nép, Budapest 1943, pp. 10–68, here pp. 39–40.

71 ÖDÖN MÁLNÁSI: A magyar nemzet őszinte története [An Honest History of the Hungarian Nation], Budapest 1938, pp. 74, 184–185.

among the “dots on the map which escaped such admixture of blood, but increasingly lost their influence and formative power in the life of our nation.”<sup>72</sup> These thoughts resonated among the growing number of social policy experts who, in their quest for a modern ethnic state, focused on health, reproduction and fertility, as well as raising living standards and other, more conventional methods of social policy.<sup>73</sup>

Similar conceptualizations also appeared at the confluence of right wing radicalism and reformist thinking, in the various forums of the so-called agrarian populist (*népi*) intellectuals and their sympathizers, including the largest university association of the era.<sup>74</sup> It extended to the intellectual circles of younger Transylvanian writers, and even some figures of the previous generation.<sup>75</sup> Those among them who resisted the adoption of race as an analytic concept in discussion of Székler life—such as György Bözödi in Transylvania or Lajos Pálóczi Horváth from pre-1938 Hungary—would soon find themselves in the minority.<sup>76</sup>

Altogether, the “racialized Székler” represents a nigh-perfect fit and an illustrative case for Roger Griffin’s notion of hybrid reactionary modernism, linking the emphasis on “objective” and progressive science and the obsession with a return to a pure or originary state.<sup>77</sup> Relying on the four pillars analyzed above, this construct was buttressed by what was seen as innovative science and ancient mythology all at the same time, and its preserved original essence was deemed necessary for creating a new state that was expected to “assume an altogether different form compared to the liberal state.”<sup>78</sup>

72 ISTVÁN RUGONFALVI KISS: A székely nemzet története [The History of the Székler Nation], in: RUGONFALVI KISS, A nemes székely nemzet képe, vol. 1, pp. 41–447, here p. 43.

73 PÉTER HÁMORI: Magyar társadalomszervezési kísérletek Észak Erdélyben 1938–1944 [Hungarian Social Policies in Northern Transylvania 1938–1944], in: Korall 5 (2004), 18, pp. 65–97, here pp. 76–78; LEVENTE BENKŐ: Magyar nemzetiségpolitika Észak–Erdélyben 1940–44 [Hungarian Minority Policies in Northern Transylvania 1940–44], in: Pro Minoritate 7 (2002), 3, pp. 7–41, here p. 29.

74 ANDRÁS SZÉCSENYI: A Turul Szövetség kettészakadása 1943-ban: Adalékok a Horthy-kor második felének ifjúsági-értelmezési törésvonalainak megértéshez. [The Split in the Turul Association in 1943: A Contribution to Interpreting the Cleavages among Young Intellectuals in the Second Half of the Horthy Era], in: Múltunk 25 (2013), 1, pp. 65–100, here pp. 70–71; FERENC VAJTA: Faji forradalom vagy nemzeti evolúció? [Racial Revolution or National Evolution?], Budapest 1937.

75 VALLASEK, p. 194.

76 Ibid., see also: GYÖRGY BÖZÖDI: Székely bánja [Székler’s Lament], Budapest 1939, pp. 48–49.

77 ROGER GRIFFIN: Tunnel Visions and Mysterious Trees: Modernist Projects of National and Racial Regeneration, 1880–1939, in: MARIUS TURDA, PAUL J. WEINDLING (eds.): Blood and Homeland: Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900–1940, Budapest 2006, pp. 417–456, here pp. 435–436, 446–448.

78 ANDRÁS VIZY: Új nacionalista államrendszerek [New Nationalist Regimes], Budapest 1942, p. 12.

## The Limits of the Völkisch Transformation: The Geistesgeschichte School in Hungary

As shown in the previous section, ethno-essentialist thinking had created a new image of the Szekler by the late 1930s, but that image, while dominant, did not become hegemonic even during the war years. Conservatives held on to important political and academic positions. These intellectuals and public servants, while nationalist in their political outlook, tended to embrace the legacy of the multiethnic Kingdom of Hungary which they viewed as a unique historical construct that had enabled the hegemony of Hungarian elites while it stood. Consequently, this brand of conservative thought remained critical of essentialist perspectives concerning ethnicity and sought instead to resuscitate a twin idea of the state and the nation as rooted in and shaped by history, rather than by primordial, biological determinants.<sup>79</sup>

In terms of broader cultural traditions beyond the political Right, this approach was able to find support in the traditions of transylvanism, an umbrella term representing (in the context of Hungarian history) multiple streams of thought that emphasized the distinct, multi-ethnic culture and society of the region. Transylvanism, as envisioned by leading centrist and progressive intellectuals such as Károly Kós, was naturally opposed to essentialist thinking, highlighting the exchange of cultural goods across ethnic frontiers.<sup>80</sup> This perspective did not exclude valorizing the mountain dwelling lifestyle of Szeklers, nor attempts to build an ideal society in secluded Transylvanian villages as evident in the works of Ferenc Balázs, *inter alia*. In fact, ideas about a more genuine, natural life characterizing the alpine regions of Transylvania predated the influx of German-inspired notions into Hungarian public and academic thought both in interwar Hungary and in Romania.<sup>81</sup> Yet for transylvanists, the turn to an essentializing *völkisch* interpretation of Szeklers remained antithetical to their undertaking and outlook, focused on identifying modes of self-preservation through co-existence and cooperation. Under the aegis of this loosely defined notion, even a traffic of ideas could be preserved even with opposition progressives, who also warned about the dangers of adopting a race-focused framework to argue for the rights of Hungarians in Transylvania.<sup>82</sup> Most importantly, however, they preserved the pre-eminence of *Erdélyi*

79 GERGELY ROMSICS: Magyar Szemle and the Conservative Mobilization against *Völkisch* Ideology and German *Volksgeschichte* in 1930s Hungary, in: Hungarian Studies 24 (2010), 1, pp. 81–97.

80 ZSOLT K. LENGYEL: A meghiúsult kompromisszum: A transzilvanizmus eredete és alakjai az 1920-as években [The Failed Compromise: Origins and Forms of Transylvanism in the 1920s], in: ZSOLT K. LENGYEL: A kompromisszum keresése, Miercurea Ciuc 2007, pp. 217–264.

81 VALLASEK, p. 179.

82 SÁNDOR CSERESNYÉS: Fajvédelmi közeledés a Dunavölgyében [The Rapprochement of Racists in the Danube Valley], in: Korunk 10 (1935), 12, pp. 947–951.

*Helikon* (Transylvanian Helicon) in Hungarian cultural life in Transylvania, a periodical backed by a loose association of writers that united a broader front of moderates.

The network included authors who created some of the most successful contemporary representations of Szeklers, including Áron Tamási, author of a series of novels about Ábel, a Szekler lad navigating Romanian rule, modernity and eventually emigration overseas. Tamási was a successful writer taking on topics typically found in *völkisch* novels, yet he largely avoided essentializing his characters, a contrast especially evident when comparing him to Nyirő.<sup>83</sup> While politically and culturally these institutions found themselves pressured by *völkisch*/radical challengers, they did not lose their clout completely.

Within the academic establishment, however, it was the loose network of conservative traditionalists who resisted the *völkisch* re-interpretation of the Szeklers. Their outlook was influenced first and foremost by the *Geistesgeschichte* approach, which was used in Hungarian academia as a broad term and largely synonymously with later generations of historicism. These scholars emphasized the importance of the history of ideas and the power of history to shape collective identities. Much of their more popular writing represented contributions towards the construction of an idealized image of the Hungarian Kingdom as a multiethnic realm led by a Hungarian elite (open to assimilated individuals) and firmly Western (but not democratic) in its institutions and outlook.<sup>84</sup> Harking back in many ways to the outlook of the historiography of the pre–World War I period, it also tended to consistently overlook or deny the special role accorded to Szeklers by Hungarian history.

Even Transylvanian and Szekler intellectuals associated with the late historicist school refused the reification of Szeklers. The Calvinist bishops László Ravasz and Sándor Makkai both affirmed the existence of a Szekler mindset and culture, but treated it as the product of historical circumstance and did not embed their respective analyses into the perennialist framework of ethnohistory. Especially Ravasz, who was from Central Transylvania, sought to present a portrait of Szekler identity as shaped by historical circumstance: reflective of its Saxon and Romanian neighbors, the geography of the native region and a historical experience different from that of the Lowlands.<sup>85</sup> Makkai joined Ravasz in highlighting the different historical evolution of Szekler society, and extolled the ability of the alpine small towns to find a distinct path towards

83 ERZSÉBET BUJOSÓNÉ DANI: The Intercultural Communicative Habits of Noncolonizable Székely Identity: Áron Tamási's Ábel Trilogy, in: International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences 5 (2015), 4, pp. 143–154.

84 ROMSICS, Magyar Szemle, pp. 88–93.

85 LÁSZLÓ RAVASZ: A székely lélek (Rádió-felolvasás a Székely-est keretében) [The Soul of the Szekler (Broadcast Lecture Read in the Framework of the Szekler Thematic Evening)], in: Napkelet 10 (1932), 3, pp. 169–174.

embourgeoisement.<sup>86</sup> Authors like Ravasz ranked as important allies of the political projects associated with interwar modernizing conservatism, aiming towards the partial or full reconstitution of a multiethnic realm under firm Hungarian hegemony, with their understandings of Transylvania and the Szekler-land a function of these convictions.<sup>87</sup>

Academic historians at times went further, directly challenging elements of the Szekler myth. Ferenc Eckhart, one of the leading proponents of *Geistesgeschichte* in the 1930s, argued for an interpretation of Szekler identity as determined by its history and collective function: a once ethnically-distinct, later assimilated group with special roles in feudal society.<sup>88</sup> In this framework, any theorizing about a perennial commonality of fate and soul between Szeklers and Hungarians could only be classified as unscientific retro-projection from the vantage point of the present. This historicist approach survived into the late 1930s and even the 1940s. While ethnohistory and *völkisch* discourse in general were clearly ascendant, conservatives continued to argue for the traditional view of the past which accorded to Szeklers a less special role, or none at all, in Hungarian history.<sup>89</sup>

This logic was reiterated by other contributors to the *Geistesgeschichte* discourse about the character of state and nation. Their works viewed Szeklers as ethnically distinct Hungarians representative of the integrative and tolerant character of the Hungarian nation.<sup>90</sup> The most frequently cited contribution to these debates, Tibor Joo's "The Hungarian National Idea," also reaffirmed the ethnic distinctiveness of Szekler communities and emphasized their cultural difference—marking out for them a niche as a color in the tapestry of the nation, rather than being carriers of an "ethnic essence."<sup>91</sup>

The most influential member of the *Geistesgeschichte* school, Gyula Szekfű, weighed in on the relationship between Szeklers and the Hungarian nation in his 1942 volume "State and Nation," containing essays on the history of na-

86 SÁNDOR MAKKAI: Erdély társadalma [Society in Transylvania], in: DEÉR, Erdély, pp. 255–265.

87 PÁL HATOS: "Mikor Magyarország Erdély volt": Ravasz László erdélyiségének rétegei [“When Transylvania was Hungary”: Layers of László Ravasz' Transylvanian Identity], in: Kommentár 6 (2011), 4, pp. 34–57, here pp. 48–53.

88 FERENC ECKHART: Magyarország története [The History of Hungary], Budapest 1933, pp. 153, 165–166.

89 ISTVÁN CSEKEY: Faj és nemzet [Race and Nation], Szeged 1939, pp. 3–4.

90 JÓZSEF SOMOGYI: Fajiság és magyar nemzet [Racialism and the Hungarian Nation], Budapest 1941, p. 92; JÓZSEF SOMOGYI: A faj [Race], Budapest 1940, pp. 70–72; JÓZSEF DEÉR: Pogány magyarság kereszteny magyarság [Pagan Hungarians, Christian Hungarians], Budapest 1938, pp. 210–215. For more context, see: LAJOS OLASZ: Nemzet és etnikum kereszteny-konzervatív szemmel: Somogyi József politikai nézetei [Nation and Ethnicity in a Christian-Conservative Perspective: The Political Views of József Somogyi], in: SÁNDOR KARIKÓ (ed.): A fenomenológiától a nemzeteszméig: Somogyi József életrajzról, Budapest 1998, pp. 159–176.

91 TIBOR JOÓ: A magyar nemzeteszme [The Hungarian National Idea], Budapest 1939, pp. 43–47, 179.

tionality and nationalities in Hungary published originally between 1935 and 1941. His arguments summarized the historicist views on Szeklers and embedded them in the greater story of a tolerant Hungarian statecraft that alone had been able to organize the Danubian basin (and which therefore had the rightful claim to do so once more, defying the terms of the Trianon peace treaty). According to Szekfű's historical synthesis, Szeklers were ethnically distinct from Hungarians and their autonomy a reflection of Eastern/Turkic statecraft which prescribed generosity and tolerance towards ethnic and cultural difference within the realm.<sup>92</sup> Hungarian historicism continued to focus on highlighting historical paths towards integration into European civilization and politics and saw only modest narrative or ideological usefulness in the image of the mountain-dwelling Szeklers as paragons of ethnic purity.

## Conclusion

As emphasized throughout the preceding discussion, a comprehensive reconstruction of the discursive functions of the Szeklers and associated *topoi* in interwar Hungarian public discourse represents a vast challenge beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the analyses attempted above sought to interpret a multicausal transformation process that took place in academic discourse during the interwar period, “spilling over” into the broader public sphere. This transformation was the product of multiple impulses, some predating World War I, others contemporary and either the outcome of domestic shifts in mentalities or the result of transnational knowledge/cultural transfers.

The totality of this process amounted to the *völkisch* reconfiguration of the image of the Szekler, the outcome of a sequence of discursive interventions by intellectuals who tended to view history as shaped by perennial collectivities of people held together by organic bonds of solidarity and shared characteristics, rooted at least partially in biological heritage. What is interesting in this process is to what extent it reached beyond the mere adoption and adaptation of German *Volkstumsforschung* and its ideological underpinnings. While the influence and importance of these latter should not be underestimated, the formation of a considerable coalition of domestic intellectuals ready to receive and instrumentalize the German cultural transfer appears just as important. There were literati and politicians whose outlook on the world had been conditioned much earlier by the notion of the struggle between monolithic and primordial ethnicities. The most important experiences of many such authors reached back as far as the last years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and their writings prepared the ground for the next generation that rose to prominence during the 1930s. Further groups of adopters included Szeklers in Transylvania

<sup>92</sup> GYULA SZEKFŰ: A magyarság és kisebbségei a középkorban [Minorities in Medieval Hungary], in: GYULA SZEKFŰ: Állam és nemzet: Tanulmányok a nemzetiségi kérdésről, Budapest 1942, pp. 39–53, here pp. 43–47.

but also in post-Trianon Hungary whose recent experiences resonated with *völkisch* perspectives.

When all of these factors are taken into consideration, the production and dissemination of the “new” image of the Szekler opens up to historical interpretation as an elite enterprise integrating multiple traditions. While the *völkisch* turn never succeeded in completely colonizing Hungarian public discussion on Szeklers or ethnicity, it certainly experienced, as a result of this integration, a sharp rise in the country during the late 1930s and the early 1940s. It was this *völkisch* turn—shown in this paper to constitute an instance of multidirectional history—that superseded older impressions of the Szeklers as rustic or backward, or even as representing a colorful, historically unique addition to the complex body of the nation.

One aspect, however, connects the various stories spun about Szeklers from the late nineteenth century onwards. Whether portrayed as rustic and backward, or heroic and pure, or even as not particularly significant from the perspective of Hungarian history, all representations of the faraway dwellers of the Carpathians were embedded into broader discourses on nationality and modernity. It was these discourses that governed the ways in which Szeklers were described, making these interpretations ultimately functions of the various conceptualizations of the ideal state and society to which the authors subscribed. Neither of the three main streams discussed here—the developmental discourse of triumphant Hungarian nationalism before 1914, or the competing ethno-essentialist and historicist perspectives of the later interwar years—framed Szeklers as a community with the potential and the right to define their position with regard to changing sovereignties and societal majorities. The numerous intellectual and political leaders hailing from the Szeklerland were either co-opted by competing streams of Hungarian nationalism or marginalized, with the oft-romanticized Szeklers themselves relegated to playing their part in the panopticon of the nation.

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