Nation and People in the Late Middle Ages*

Functional Disorders Debated Yet Again

Many years ago Géza Perjés introduced the notion of “national self-esteem (or alternatively: public sensibility) disorder” into the debate about nationalism, together with diagnostic criteria and therapeutic recommendations; noteworthy in many respects, but provoking contradiction in other dimensions. It would be foolish in principle to deny the existence of certain disorders, especially as regards the diverging visions on history where differences of opinion are framed with a special emphasis; discussions over the past decade have provided a good many examples of that by now. All these confusions not only in self-esteem and general disposition but also in notions and attitudes did not arise in recent years, but long before. Old psychological conditioning and habits of thought, often

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* This essay by Szűcs illustrates the intensive public polemics evolving around the problem posed by the history of “nation,” “nationalism,” and “patriotism” in Hungary in the 1960s and early 1970s. Szűcs is responding here to the criticism made by an early modernist colleague, Géza Perjés (1917–2003), an expert in military history, directed at the arguments in his abovementioned, polemical book. Perjés, referring principally to the history of popular resistance to the Ottoman aggression after the 1526 Battle of Mohács, and to views formulated in the Reformation, claims that Szűcs was erroneously hypercritical by denying the historical existence of “some kind of” idea of the “nation” among the “people”; a “popular patriotism” existing since the Middle Ages. Szűcs responds in the rhetorical style of public polemics, but with clear historical reasoning; this is why we decided to include the translation of this article in our volume. On the other hand, we decided to omit the first and the last part of the essay, which dissect the argumentation of Géza Perjés on early modern and Reformation matters, with a number of further references to contemporary Hungarian writers, such as Gyula Illyés, whose influential essay on “Rootlets,” alluding to the archaic historical roots and sources of popular national consciousness and emotional identification became an oft-mentioned metaphor in these historical and ideological debates. All this seemed to us very hard for a foreign audience to understand, even with contextual explanatory notes.

appearing in a new pattern or form, continue to have an impact; inherited frames of mind and vicious circles of logic burden public discourse and historical consciousness today. Not long ago I devoted a book to the analysis of this phenomenon,2 in which, addressing the neuralgic points and zones of the debate—with regard, among other things, to “pre-national” forms of consciousness and popular patriotism—I attempted to find more solid conceptual starting points and historical answers. My ideas were perhaps debatable; nevertheless, it does not help matters any if misunderstandings turn into the focus of a controversy, with the neuralgic spots of the debate needlessly proliferating through the addition to the existing disorders in “public sentiment” and concepts of a new one: a functional disturbance in the debate. Sadly, the latest contribution to this historical controversy, the concluding part of an extensive historical essay recently published by Géza Perjés,3 is itself not free from this kind of malady, precisely at those very same neuralgic spots where he takes issue with alleged assertions from my work mentioned above.

Humanist Side Currents in Medieval Concepts of Nation

As regards medieval concepts of nation in Hungary, alongside the mainstream nationalism of the noble class there are also two narrower, humbler streams. The mainstream, with its feudal bent and “political” makeup, sprung forth from the soil of the “premature” society of estates around the 1280s from a source tapped by Simon of Kéza, forming a current which coursed through the mindset of the nobility of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and Thuróczy’s Chronica Hungarorum to Werbőczy’s Tripartitum, to spread out into a broadly surging river at diets on the Field of Rákos in the Jagiellonian era. Parallel to this, one of the “narrower” streams arose in the 1440s at the home of János Vitéz, the bishop of Nagyvárad (Oradea, Romania) and swelled into the swift, clear mountain brook of Janus Pannonius’s poetry. Its fountainhead corresponded to the aforementioned bodies, but its current flowed with undiminished force on its own autonomous path and into the sixteenth century. Without going into any detail, it is worth noting the double enrichment of motifs in this humanist stream.

2 Jenő Szűcs, A nemzet historikuma és a történetszemlélet nemzeti látószöge [The historicity of the nation and the nationalistic viewing angle of history] (Budapest, 1970).
One is a certain degree of social criticism (self-criticism) in place of the arrogant and illusory nationalism of the nobility and its plentitude of social and moral fictions. For instance, it appears in the poetry and pamphlet literature of Mihály Keserű, Bálint Hagymássy, and Márton Nagyszombati from the early 1500s up until the eve of Mohács. Nagyszombati’s 1800-line piece of poetry (from around 1522) is nothing less than a single grandiose acclamation, exhortation, and appeal to the Hungara nobilitas to heed its conscience, acknowledge its crimes, weaknesses, sins of belligerence, and lies, and finish with its discord, abandon its oppression of the misera plebs, the wretched masses, and put an end to disregarding the honor of the throne with the aim of “defending the beloved homeland (dulcis patria) with heavy weaponry” against the Turks. The other motif is the aspiration for cultural refinement (civilitas or urbanitas) and preoccupation with the humanist ideal of virtue (humanitas)—though not, as yet, an appreciation of the splendor of the mother tongue—coupled with the concept of “nation” (natio, gens) and the professed welfare of the homeland (salus patriae). That is why, around 1510 Janus Pannonius, the humanist poet whose intellect could ennoble the “barbarians,” would become an emblem for Hungary’s humanists, stemming largely from the ranks of the lesser nobility but by this time already with sporadic cases of burgher origin. The general intention of this undercurrent, which had been haunted by the image of the “fallow Hungarian land” since Janus, was to fructify and enrich the spirit of the homeland by cultivating the literature. All this was wholly alien to the mainstream current, or if such ideas arose at all, it was only in the form of puffed-up justifications for the absence of such motifs, in the shadows of “Scythian virtues”; as the otherwise not exactly uncultured Werbőczy himself summed it up: “It is widely recognized that Hungarians have always been readier to wield arms and working tools without which they could not have sown or reaped, than the volumes of Cicero, Livy, Sallust, and Aulus Gellius …” The inference here is that basically this is how it should be.

Notwithstanding a certain reshuffling of motifs, when speaking of the makeup of “national” consciousness during Jagiellonian-era humanism we should not lose sight of two factors which made that generation deviate from the attitude of Vitéz or Janus. One of these is the fact that the stated social critique becomes typically two-way: accordingly, the “homeland’s ruin” was caused on the one hand by the misdeeds of the great lords and corruption of the nobility and on the other by the peasant war and the breach it had caused in the “fatherland’s welfare.” After 1514, this dual logic became commonplace among the
humanists. The second factor is that the desire for learning and reverence for the values of the era so often transformed seamlessly into empty swagger (as was the case with, for instance, Sebestyén Magyi: this land “gave birth to the greatest, most outstanding poet of our age” who is “fully the equal of Virgil; indeed, surpasses him...”). It also took the form of a characteristic apologetic reflex (as with Benedek Bekényi: the only reason the homeland’s glory is not as resplendent as it might be is that due to the ceaseless wars there are too few Hungarian writers and poets, and foreigners “with malicious envy” refrained from speaking of their deeds). At times it is hardly possible to distinguish these kinds of stock phrases from the nobility’s head slogans.

None of this, of course, alters the fact that this was on the whole still a new current which, from the 1530s onwards, added yet another new motif—the discovery of the value of the mother tongue, to the extent that Gábor Pesti, in the foreword to his Hungarian translation of *Aesop’s Fables* (1536), formulated the abovementioned program: the need for “diligence” “to contribute a droplet to the glory of their homeland by refining their own language and intellect, and to promulgate these in an ever-widening circle.” In any event, traces of continuity for this idea can also be perceived since the 1440s–50s, with Janus Pannonius, at the heart of this late medieval process, becoming able to proclaim in the voice of a liberated individual: “With my intellect, homeland, I made thee noble...!”

### Medieval Conditions for Another Side Current

The second side current deserves attention because it is the organic medieval precedent of the metamorphosis in consciousness that Géza Perjés attributed to the Reformation alone; it deserves particular attention because it has remained, until now, largely unidentified. Perjés was right about the fact that over the course of the sixteenth century, mainly under the influence of the Reformation and in the form of a novel symbiosis in many respects, a number of interrelated elements alien to the Hun-Scythian mindset became part of the transformed national consciousness in the early modern era. He is incorrect, however, in frequently emphasizing that the abovementioned elements were first articulated by the representatives of the Reformation. Most of these elements were already *in statu nascendi* at the twilight of the Middle Ages. In this manner, a medieval world in crisis and undergoing disintegration had laid the groundwork for everything that the Reformation was a consummation of, and gave ample expression to, around the mid-sixteenth century in Hungary.
The notion itself, fostered from Old Testament reminiscences of “election”—albeit at that juncture without “nationalist” tuning—stretches back to medieval heretical sects, in Hungary to Hussite doctrines arising in the 1430s in the country’s southern regions, which the Inquisition proved incapable of completely eradicating; indeed, all the signs indicate that around 1514 they became an influential force. It is common knowledge that Hussites also translated the books of the Old Testament into Hungarian, including the story of the Maccabees, with passages surviving in the so-called Vienna Codex. The fate of the Jews lent itself particularly well as an analogy for Hungarians: among the tenets noted by Hungary’s Hussites we can find the theme of “God’s people.” In a similar manner it can be demonstrated (as I outlined briefly in my book) that the idea of “election” galvanized the crusading peasants of 1456 in their defense of Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade, Serbia), and the ensuing rebellion (nipped in the bud as the insurrection was beginning to flare). This very same idea (which I shall return to below) propelled the crusading peasants of 1514 in their march from Buda to Temesvár (Timişoara, Romania) to go battle the Turks and the nobility alike.

Similarly demonstrable as early as 1470—though for the time being, equally not, of course, in “nationalist” colors—is the chiliastic-inspired doctrine of the “Fall,” the calamities being the consequence of “our Sins.” This doctrine was also present outside Hungary, precisely in those areas of Latin Christendom where the Turkish menace triggered internal social problems (e.g., in Styria, Carinthia, and Carniola). The general mood of crisis within Christianity in the declining Middle Ages projected an Apocalyptic mysticism onto these concrete issues. Also widespread in Hungary, such approaches to the matter were first summarized by Oswald of Lasko (Laskai Osvát) in his work Sermones Dominales, printed in 1498 (cf. Sermo 123). The role Oswald played here is especially interesting from the perspective of what is about to be said. Already at this time, the work claimed that the Antichrist to come was to be identified with the Turks, and the Turks’ seizures counted as one of the signs of the approaching Doomsday, and its imminent arrival at that! The moralizing theological explanation: the blows of the “ungodly people of Mohammed” were inflicted by the Lord on his own (Christian) people for the sins of the Christians. What, then, were the indisputable signs that pointed towards the impending coming of the Antichrist? Among others, it consisted of the weakening of faith, the reign of evil, the end of wisdom, and “the wealthy living without mercy or sense of justice. And it will most certainly be the case,” it continues, “that the highborn are more concerned about the afflictions of their dogs and animals than those of
their people; they will torment their subordinates, harass them with different duties, and flay them unlawfully.” For these reasons the first adherents of the Antichrist would be the high and mighty (magnates et potentes). As we see, the general apocalyptic mood of the late Middle Ages and the lines of reasoning gleaned from almost contemporaneous tractates got tangibly focused upon the distinctive problems of the Jagiellonian era. In this train of thought the Turkish problem and the social tensions fused into an organic ideological bond.

We have now reached the third important constituent which Perjés aptly terms “social conscience” but again ties it to the Reformation alone. The social tensions in late medieval society did not only fulminate in heresies; the problem was latent in direct and oblique forms in spiritual movements which signaled a crisis in Catholicism: in currents of the “new piety” or devotio moderna; in Hungary, for instance, the mysticism of the Pauline Fathers, and other paths like in the down-to-earth activities of the Observant Franciscans, the most popular of the mendicant orders in Hungary. The deeds of Pelbart of Temesvár, who was active mainly during the reign of Hungary’s Matthias Corvinus (indeed, personally opposed to Matthias) are fairly well known in this area; but a “nationalist” cast or label was still absent from his social criticism. The situation was quite different in the case of the only slightly younger Oswald of Lasko (who died in 1511, whereas Pelbart died in 1483). The elements of his conceptual frame of reference, which are designated here, were bound together in a wholly individual fashion.

A few words about his person and the current he belonged to are necessary here. The stricter, reformed branch of the Order of Friars Minor (the Observants) was the sole religious order in Hungary which, unlike all other orders, prospered and thrived with special vehemence at the twilight of the Middle Ages. Suffice it to say that whereas around 1450 they had thirty convents, by 1517 there were seventy spread out over the country—an expansion that was unparalleled in an age of the general decline of monasticism and their more or less ineffective internal reforms. Naturally, the fact that the order was favored by the ruling powers and magnates (with the Hunyadi family at the forefront) played a major role in this development, since the spiritual army of the bare-footed friars who lived among the people in their grey habits, could be used both as a militant force against heretics and “schismatics,” and for anti-Turkish propaganda and mobilization, as “army chaplains” of sorts. Indeed, they were practically the only ones who could be utilized for all this successfully. The emergence of Observantism per se was originally a conservative reform intended to restore the original
strictness of the Franciscan Rule and, more widely, the faltering religious life, and even more broadly the shaky authority of the Church. But, as is often the case, the return to the tenets of “Christlike poverty” and “true” Christianity continually produced heretics and near-heretical modes of behavior within the movement itself. At the same time, the Observants did not cut themselves off from the “world”; indeed, in keeping with their mission they always circulated among the general population and preached in their native tongue. It is well known that it was the Observant Franciscans, along with the Dominicans, who assisted at the birth of the nascent monastic literature in the Hungarian language around 1500. As to what they preached, this can largely be pieced together from the collections of model sermons that the occasional erudite member of the order would write in Latin for didactic reasons but with the purpose that it should be used in the native language. These collections, which had relatively large print runs and were published repeatedly, served the purpose—as we learn in the aforementioned prologue by Oswald of Lasko—of placing in the hands of less-educated friars guidelines on how they were to preach “most especially for the spiritual development of the rural, that is to say, peasant, population.” But the Observants not only retained a close connection to the world, they also did not cut themselves off from secular currents. Oswald of Lasko himself, who played a prominent role in the leadership of the Hungarian vicariate from the beginning of the sixteenth century onwards, while acting as guardian (custos) of the order’s monastery in Pest (in 1497 and 1506), also maintained close contact with Mihály Szobi and István Werbőczy, leaders of the party of the lesser nobles, and with the nobles themselves, who assembled at Rákos field and were eager to offer money and valuables to the convent in Buda (it was located next to the place where a Franciscan church stands today). This is where Oswald of Lasko produced his works, just opposite Werbőczy’s residence in Pest on the other side of the Danube, and barely half an hour’s walk from Rákos field, immediately to the east of Pest. Something of the ambiance of the Rákos field assemblies would have filtered into the Observant convent; in any event around this time one can already perceive an imprint of the “Hun-Scythian” consciousness on the order’s constitution of 1499, which was at that moment still quite alien in ecclesiastical circles. Moreover, the prologue to Gemma fidei (Faith’s Bud), a collection of sermons that Oswald of Lasko had published in 1507, is virtually a programmatic summary of the principles of the nobility’s nationalism. In the shadow of this “program,” which was conceived clearly in the tone of the celebrated Decree of Rákos (1505), and was not unknown to scholarly literature,
Oswald’s other speeches, attesting to a different content than the slogans from Rákos field, remained largely unacknowledged. Above all, in his earlier *Sermones de sanctis* (first published in 1497), in the sermons on Hungarian saints—primarily King Stephen I and King Ladislas I—another concept of “nation” resounds, one that is much more deeply embedded in contexts other than that which has been prevailing on nearby Rákos field.

**A New Concept of “Nation” at the Twilight of the Middle Ages**

While the term “nation” found in the documents of the estates from around 1500 (and even much earlier) is normally identified unambiguously with the nobility, the text selected by Oswald of Lasko for the beginning of the second sermon *De sancto Ladislao* (*Sermo*, 49) was already approaching the matter from a different angle: “And remember that I am your own flesh and bone,” said Abimelech to the men of Shechem (Judges 9:2). “These words,” wrote Oswald, “might also have been uttered by St. Ladislas to all Hungarians from whose lineage (progenies) he had descended.” A short disquisition follows: In what manner do the Hungarians belong together? Before all else through ties of kinship, comes the answer. To the foreigner we are only bound by the friendship of Christian love (*amicitia charitatis*), but something more binds us to our own people: “the natural order, that is to say, the origins (*naturalis ordo vel origo*) from which we cannot sever ourselves.” He deems it necessary to add to this, however, that such a bond may be stronger or weaker depending on one’s degree of virtue (*bonitas virtutis*). St. Ladislas was truly Hungarian with respect to descent and nation (*natione*), “therefore we should love him and, befittingly, more than others.” But not for this reason alone. In line with the three-part order of reasoning of scholastic models, the second argument consists in the fact that this is what fairness and justice (*aequitas*) demand in return for his good works: “he governed our nation, protected us from enemies, and sustained our faith.” Thirdly, we must love him for his unusual virtues (*virtutes*). With this the first part of his reasoning ends. The second begins thus: nevertheless, how many of us, among others noblemen, knights, and even papal legates, have called his sainthood into question! And why? Among other things, because by his own hand he shed a great deal of blood, not only of pagan Tatars but also of Christian Germans (!) of the true faith. This objection, asserts Oswald, may be dismissed with two arguments. On the one hand, he had to do this because this was what the natural order of things—“bone from bone, blood from blood”—demanded; on the other, it can be demonstrated
by the authorities (auctoritate) that “he shed blood lawfully (licite)—in defense of himself and those who belonged to him.” At this point a string of quotations follow, which are drawn from authorities ranging from St. Ambrose to St. Thomas Aquinas. The point of interest here is that whether transmission consists of patristic, canonical, or scholastic sources, in the final analysis all the principles aligned originate from antiquity. For instance, as passed on by St. Thomas Aquinas, a maxim of Roman law was the precept for driving away hostile forces using lawful force (vim vi repellere), occurring in a number of places in the Pandects, the sixth-century codification of Roman law (e.g., Digesta 1, 1.3; 9.2, 44.4: 43, 16.1, 27). This was the foundation of the medieval theory of a just war (justum bellum), which was also absorbed into canon law, insofar as even the clergy, in certain circumstances, had the right under natural law, as Oswald of Lasko puts it: “to defend themselves and kill their assailant.” The most powerful argument is a tenet quoted directly from Cicero: “Anyone who fails to defend against or to oppose aggressive force, even though he might, commits the same sin as that of betraying his parents or friends or homeland!”

Omitting now further interesting details and sparing also a detailed commentary, let it suffice to highlight three important circumstances. One of these is the appearance of a concept of “nation” (with its theoretical underpinnings) which embraces incontrovertibly every Hungarian. In this case, we should not be disturbed that this new notion is conceptually cemented with the theoretical bonds of blood or descent, because not only archaic but also medieval discourse had no other way of expressing the notion of a tight, organic social cohesiveness than by relying upon the ancient, “natural” conceptual model of consanguinity and kinship (as opposed to modern thinking, in which such features appear only in base discourses). Nevertheless, what is noteworthy here is the modifying function of virtue—i.e., not a “natural” but an acquired attribute. The second circumstance is that blind xenophobia, inseparable from the nationalism of the nobility is totally absent here, with love tying us to foreigners, just more of it to one’s own nation. Lastly, the moral duty to defend the homeland, underpinned by strong theoretical references, speaks for itself, and thereby the whole chain of thought is rounded off. It is not difficult to recognize here, with references to pagans and (in an ahistorical context) Germans and a portrayal of the ideal ruler (not detailed here), a longing for a redemption of the Jagiellonian era which had been thrust into helplessness.

With all this, however, we still do not have the complete picture. There are three sermons on St. Ladislas and two sermons on St. Stephen. Motifs which are
subordinated elsewhere get here a stronger voice. The emphasis, naturally, is on contrasts: “O, exemplar of Hungarians born today! O, model of perfection for the highborn! O, light of every Christian!” King Ladislas, the supplication goes, how different is this age we live in! The central thought of the first sermon (Sermo, 48) is the corruptness of the judicial system (“...when justice is defended least of all, the law is stifled”). Hard words from the prophet Isaiah are leveled at the reader by the author: “...contrary to many a merciless judge today,” for instance; whereas the sermon closes, in contrast, with the idea that in his own era the saintly king “preserved justice for the poor on trial. O, King Ladislas, if only you could pass judgment on the greedy and liberate the just, since injustice rules and deceitfulness is triumphant nearly everywhere.”

The third exhortation sermon (Sermo, 50) delves even deeper into social conditions. Here the central idea is abuse of authority, misappropriation (usurpatio), and gaining the upper hand. Wherever one looked, properties were extorted and innocents cheated out of their inheritance: “Anyone who carries out such things is a thief and malefactor and shall find himself in eternal sin... no servant should be obliged to submit to a lord such as this and pay taxes!” Step by step, the sermon leans towards the serfs and against the usurpation of power in this sphere:

O, God of truth, look down from your throne on how your heritage is being squandered! Justice is being trampled in the dust by highborn men (principes) inasmuch as they do not pay their servants, claiming that they have not entered into agreement with them. Furthermore, they do not permit their servants to dispose of their goods as they wish on death, and they confiscate for themselves the inheritances of those who die without relatives, which is robbery!... Furthermore, they engage frequently in hunting, compelling people to take part to their detriment, and they also trample the crops and vines of the poor. They compel their servants to enter marriages against their wishes. Furthermore, they plunder, imprison and coerce under oath those who wish to relocate to the property of another, thereby depriving them of their freedom, although that cannot be purchased with any amount of gold. ... They burden their servants with unduly heavy taxes, and collect these, if need be, through imprisonment and by forcing them to reap crops, to fell the hay, to gather mounds of grapes, to dig moats around their castles and build walls, such that the poor people, incapacitated by exhaustion and hunger under the weight of these burdens, cry out to the Lord, begging for vengeance, and their cry reaches the
ears of the Lord, who in the words of the prophet Micah: “Hear, I pray you, O heads of Jacob, and ye princes of the house of Israel; is it not for you to know judgment? Who hate the good, and love the evil; who pluck their skin from off them, and their flesh from off their bones. Who also eat the flesh of my people…” Oh, thee wellborn lords [domini principes] who thrive from the sweat of the poor and grow fat on the fasting and hunger of the poor, if you do not contritely abstain from the injustices that have been listed and fail to remedy what you have done, ye shall not be permitted to behold the glorious face of the Lord!

The limits placed upon freedom of movement, the central levy of an additional tithe on the income of serfs, the increase in burdens of the serfs, the curtailing of peasant rights, and an aggravation of the corvée demanded of serfs—all of these are combined here with formidable precision (this is before 1497!), so already in the first decade of the Jagiellonian era all this points towards 1514, the year of vengeance. Also appearing in the sermon is the statement that “nature created all men equal,” which may well have been commonplace in medieval thinking, but in the context of a text where, alongside its many details the tenet is further augmented with St. Gregory the Great’s argument (“nothing is more beastly than a man who has been granted reason but does not avail himself of it; for as long as men live by reason, their condition [that is, their social rank] is equal”) and where the “doctrine of resistance” is also promulgated on a theoretical level, the commonplace begins here to assume a more concrete position. This latter doctrine can also be detected in Sermon 49: “And anyone may take up defense against even his own superior, inasmuch as that superior unlawfully seeks to do him harm.”

Of course, we need to be aware that some of the sermons of this nature were aimed at awakening the conscience of the ruling class: details administering moral lashings and the intention to agitate were not necessarily delivered to the common people or peasants. In another sermon which inveighs against the state of the Church, Oswald of Lasko warns: “none of this is to be stated before the general public (in vulgo populo) lest they [the priesthood] make themselves hateful before the people.” It is also indisputable that the tone here is to a large extent one that aims to shift the blame. It is suggested that the magnates and barons alone are responsible for the depravation of public affairs: they alone are the guilty ones. With this in mind, the storyline partly corresponds with the propaganda that the lesser nobility’s party began to spread during that same
period. As a whole, however, it should not be brushed aside in its entirety with a label of “social demagoguery”; the sermon is all too clear and unambiguous for that. I personally find it more fitting to speak here of the awakening of a “social conscience,” something that Géza Perjés associated with the Reformation. With regard to the topic at hand, in the 1490s this social conscience, this social criticism with a Christian essence appears together with and also relates to the concept of “nation”—not in a narrow, estates-bound sense but in a socially broad sense, and with the notion of “election” projected onto it. In the second sermon on St. Stephen (Sermo, 77)—which, incidentally, reflects views similar to the latter notion—one motif is noticeably sonorous, that is: “This strong people, whose blood and bones cover the valleys and mountains of different lands, was intended by God to be the shield of Christianity against the Grand Turk [i.e., the Sultan] so that, through their uprightness and bravery, holy Christianity should enjoy a much longed-for peace.” In light of the above, this parlance, with by this time several centuries of history behind it, conveys something different from that we hear from the documents produced by the estates; in all likelihood for Oswald of Lasko the term “people” (gens) cannot have been utterly different as a category from the “natio,” which he uses in the sermon on Ladislas. Taken together, the cognitive framework which emerges here is exactly the same—not only in essence but also in detail—as what Géza Perjés related to the Reformation in his study.

But let us not jump too far ahead. It would be premature to declare that here we have evidence of the “popular patriotism” which has long been sought and speculated on. It would hardly be methodologically sound to conclude that these ideas mirror the worldview of the “people.” The appearance of a cognitive object at the threshold of consciousness is not identical to its popularization. Indeed, there are cogent arguments that would oppose such hasty conclusions. Though it is true that some 1400–1500 Observant Franciscan friars were active throughout Hungary during the 1510s and 1520s (the order had 1,472 members in 1523, a significant number under the conditions of the day), Franciscan sources of that period contain no evidence that this concept had taken root or become popularized within the circles of the Barefoot Friars. Viewing the matter with modern logic, could anything have been more opportune in April and early May of 1514 than to employ this type of conceptual material—provided that this material was indeed at hand for the fomenters themselves and could be expected to seriously resonate among those who were to be fomented—in provocative sermons aimed at rallying the population into an
army of crusaders to fight the Turks (and when no one was yet aware that this venture would soon erupt in a peasant revolt). Purely by chance I happened to come across sources that, while fragmentary, still preserved some of the stock phrases that resounded in those decisive spring months. Among them was the internal correspondence of the Observants, a copy of a rousing address (exhortatio) as well as a circular letter and a letter of commission from the vicar which directs members of the order who were proclaiming the crusade “to animate and ignite the hearts of the faithful who will fight in this military undertaking.” As had also been the case in 1456, the charge of publicly proclaiming the bull and organizing recruitment were activities that belonged almost exclusively to the Observant Franciscans. A minute indication of the motif analyzed above can indeed be detected in the following: “For nearly a century Hungarians have been carrying the shield of the Christian faith and manfully sheltering the entire Catholic Church.” There was, however, nothing new in this because the notion itself was already a hundred years old by this time. In any case not a word, thought, or trace of a thought can be related to Oswald of Lasko’s ideas described above. On the other hand, there is much more affinity between the ideological vocabulary within these sources and authenticated documents from May and June of the leaders of the peasant uprising (more on this, briefly, below). It is normal that a long period of time elapses between the birth of an innovation in reasoning and its widespread adoption.

As for its genesis, there is no question that the initial configuration of the metamorphosis of the discourse is crucial. A unique amalgam took place between certain (conceptually prior) elements in Christian thinking and a store of motifs rooted in estates-bound and humanist political thinking; its pattern became more “closed” from a Christian point of view, but more “open” from the societal point of view (in other words, it allowed more possibility for a plebeian interpretation). Discovering these hidden developments, however, is a task that awaits future efforts. Analysis is the mechanism through which historiography proceeds and sources are its raw material. This cannot be replaced by sheer speculation or a priori hypotheses. In consideration of this, let me close this short digression by repeating what was stated at the outset: at the twilight of the Middle Ages, within the complex process of the evolution of the early form of national consciousness, this is only one side current, and one which, for the time being still remains close to its fountainhead.
Clarification of Recent Misunderstandings about Nationality-Related Group Consciousness

All this, of course, is no more than makeshift notes on the interesting questions raised by Géza Perjés. Its purpose is to trace back along the fine strands that have been articulated (and which I do not “want to neglect” in the least, as Perjés infers) to reach the source of these phenomena; in that way, it is not meant to refute but rather to supplement his discourse.

As I stated in the opening paragraphs, I also have to call attention to issues where Perjés himself, I regret to say, labors under a misapprehension. It is a minor detail, barely worth mentioning, that he calls me to account for an abstract of a paper related to the Reformation (published in 1963), the full text of which only deals with the period up to the 1470s, which would have made it difficult to address the effects of the Reformation. Much more striking is the manner in which the raw nerve of the decade-long debate comes to the fore here as well. Perjés claims that I asserted in my book *The Historicity of the Nation* that the elaboration of the feudal framework “eradicated . . . from the hearts and minds of the peasantry any notion of a Hungarian homeland and nation.” On the contrary, as Perjés puts it: “the common people did indeed have *some sort of notion or concept* of a homeland and nation” (the italicization is, of course, my own — J. Sz.).

Neglecting “rootlets,” at least in the way that Perjés interprets and employs the metaphor of Gyula Illyés, is something I cannot be accused of. What I already intimated in effect in in my above-mentioned book, and have since reinforced in great detail with source material in a work of 450 pages (relying upon what can be teased out with the combined resources of philology, historical linguistics, historical ethnography, and comparative social anthropology), is that *some sort of notion* of a wider ethnic community was present not only in the seventeenth or even the fifteenth century but as far back as the ninth and tenth centuries (indeed, in all likelihood, even earlier). The Hungarian people held *some sort of notion* of a wider ethnic community, which, by all indications, appears to have Iranian origins but undoubtedly was already formed in Ancient Hungarian by the words *nemzet* (nation) and *nemzetség* (clan or nationality). Not only can traces of this notion be substantiated but its constituent and structural elements, or general contours at least, may be reconstructed; indeed, much direct and indirect evidence and ethnosociological considerations suggest that the concept (which is more than a concept—it is referred to as “We-consciousness” in the field of social psychology) may have been more “ideologi-
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cal” and more powerful among society’s armed freemen than among the masses, who after the eleventh and twelfth centuries, gradually sank into local isolation. It was definitely still in existence around 1200. The Anonymus and the wealth of Hungarian legends surviving into the thirteenth century are prominent witnesses to this, but there are also important supportive elements which are less familiar. Never and nowhere did I suggest that after this period this consciousness disappeared without a trace, though undoubtedly another kind of mental structure arose among the emerging nobility and the newly formed serfdom. I would like to make mention of this for the record and would refer to pages 54, 59–61, and 96 of the booklet under discussion,* where pertinent results of a larger manuscript soon to be published may be found; these results lack extensive documentation, of course, but are explicitly stated. For the sake of a conceptual distinction (and following a usage that is widespread internationally), I have termed this cognitive object a “nationality-related group consciousness,” and I have ascribed to it specific functions, although it is precisely in the functional sense that I differentiated it from the ideological notion of “national consciousness” that was developing secondarily, bit by bit, during the Middle Ages. I never imagined or claimed that a Transylvanian peasant did not feel connected in some way—specifically through bonds, partly through language, and partly as a result of the state framework—with a noble in Upper Hungary or Transdanubia. I never wrote anything of the sort in my work; what I attempted to present was something entirely different. Is there any need for me to explain to Perjés, who was trained in sociology and psychology, that the socio-psychological group consciousness ties an individual in many a manner to a wide variety of possible relationships, yet with varying degrees, among which certain grades, hierarchies, and loyalties may be observed? These, in turn, are distinguishable with regard to social stratum and historical era creating typical (and under certain conditions “normal”) configurations. Need I explain to Perjés, with his excellent sense of history, that in this connection the medieval framework is utterly different from the modern one? And need I ask Perjés, who possesses great erudition, to reread in my work the pertinent, but necessarily abridged, passages which address this issue? What would transpire from this is that I did not deny the existence of the stated “some sort” or “any kind” of notion he calls me to account for; what I was talking about was that this cognitive content of the “popular” (peasant) mentality, universal (peasant) outlook which

* Reference is to Szűcs, A nemzet historikuma és a történetiszemlélet nemzeti látószöge.
is barely discernible in historical sources, this archaic, “nationality-related” group consciousness, broken up in a powerful and primary feudal division of society, is of another nature than the sense of “national” identity of the nobility since the late thirteenth century. The new sensibility was clearly isolated from and alien to the peasant cognitive worldview for a long period; the latter consisted of a group sensibility, not an idea; a feeling, but not an ideology embracing primary group loyalty; and thus, of necessity, was not a political factor. It is precisely in the sub-political sphere that it served an important function inasmuch as it was capable of withstanding the dynamic and multidirectional shifts in political loyalty and community structures over many long centuries. The ethnic group’s principal bond consisted in safeguarding—and simultaneously having the capacity of absorbing—language and customs.

Allow me to remind Géza Perjés of the political dimensions, or at least fragments, of the cognitive content of this mentality; let me call his attention to the text of the so-called Game of Polish Ladislas, together with the related literature. This text, also adapted by Zoltán Kodály, is one of the most archaic dramatic relics of Hungarian folk origin, extant in a great many (more than a hundred) variants, and degenerated into a children’s rhyme (the so-called “bridge rhyme”) and a wedding party amusement in recent centuries. In its original form, it emerged in the 1440s and is the folkloristic legacy of a destructive internal party strife, of which a passionate criticism—and also its characterization as an “Iron Age” of anarchy—is known from the same time, from a book of correspondence (“epistolarium”) of János Vitéz. It was a time when havoc was wreaked on the country and its population because of the fights between the German party (the future infant Ladislas V, his mother Elizabeth, and their body of loyal supporters) and the Hungarian party (Wladislas I and his body of loyal supporters). The story itself could have been formulated in the mid-fifteenth century by a schoolteacher for his pupils, recording his words, but its original meaning gradually became blurred and it ended up being turned into a children’s game. Its historical and narrative core consists of a discussion between the army of Good King Wladislas (“Polish-Ladislas”), preparing to cross a river, and ferrymen. The former say to the latter: “We are the army of Good King Wladislas/We are weary from travel/Good ferrymen, carry us over the Danube!” The essence of the conflict is that the ferrymen (by whom we should understand the “people”) are suspicious and have no intention of taking them across, so they respond to ever-newer promises with ever-newer counterarguments:
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- Whose people are you?
- Good King Polish-Ladislas’s
- And where is your Polish King Ladislas?
- We bring the king with a crown of diamonds

- He is our enemy, too!
- On what basis your enemy?

- You are pagans!
The other day you passed by
You broke the leg of our bridge
You still have not repaired it

Thereupon the army offers everything it can. It promises to repair the bridge with pinewood, brass-pewter, or pure gold, but:

- Where would you get pure gold?
- We went up to the Blessed Virgin’s little garden
  Asked nicely and she gently gave . . .
- That’s a lie, because you stole it!

And on it goes. In some variants the designations of people and German people (“army, exercitus”) appear in the text, where “Hungarian” and “German” are, of course, ethnic or national categories, but in what context? There is one variant where the question “Whose people are you?” continues with: “of Elizabeth or of Polish Ladislas?” If Elizabeth’s, they will be carried over the river, but if of Polish (that is, “Hungarian”) Ladislas, i.e., of Wladislas, then they will not! To be sure, it is not easy to adjust the cognitive world of the peasant of the time to the categories of “nation” at that time. In any event, an analysis of this nugget of pure gold that fortunately survived may discover a wholly different alloy from what some historians would like. Visceral mistrust, antipathy, and hatred of all men bearing arms, all men who are braggarts and pompous (“Where would you get pure gold? That’s a lie, because you stole it!”), towards an “enemy” who is not necessarily foreign but eo ipso “pagan”—these are the categories. The dominant tone: “He is our enemy too!”, however much he was Hungarian, like the army on the far bank of the river. None of this, however, means that there did not exist in the ferrymen some perception of Hungarians belonging together; it is
Just that it was not a *political* perception. It is quite another matter that when the Turks—a truly “pagan” people—appeared on the far side of the river, the ferrymen did not merely engage in a game of questions and answers but drew their concealed weapons, including hatchets, bows and arrows, straightened scythes, and swords (despite a ban on weapons in principle, landlords would turn a blind eye to this because of their own brawls and private wars). Thus, they would attempt to prevent their crossing—because they were their enemy too.

Yet another matter, and of a different nature from that of the nationality-related group consciousness of the peasantry, is to what extent the “ethicized” or “territorialized” emotions, which I have termed in my book patriotism (in a well circumscribed sense) might have been part of that sunken worldview. It is within that context that the issue of Transylvania and Upper Hungary addressed by Perjés came to be mentioned in my book. To be precise, in the sense that it is ahistorical to suppose that “the idea of a broad political territory from the Northern Carpathians to the lower Danube from Dévény [Devin, Slovakia] to Brassó [Brașov, Romania], known at one time as the kingdom of Hungary (*regnum Hungariae*), would have occupied the same place in the psyche of the people from that time—and from every social strata at that—in the same way that today it is natural to us to call the political territory of the national community ‘our native land.’” The peasantry, by and large, was “aware” of the existence of a political and geographical entity of this nature. This is not the issue, however, but whether they recognized it as their *homeland*, in the sense that the notion and its related concrete sentiments, experiences, and ethical demands would determine their decisions and put the weapons in their hand? It is also an abstract matter, for even today who is familiar with all the remote regions of one’s homeland? This distinction and along with it the significance it might have for historical theory and methodology, which were outlined in my book, are not unreasonable taken together. Because the position is not, as Perjés suggests, that “philology can offer only meager evidence” to substantiate a “spontaneous” ideology “coming from the people” and a broad concept of homeland. No, philology has no evidence at all to offer with regard to this question. For what it does offer meager evidence (indeed, I made some reference to these data in my book) is that *homeland*, according to sources with peasant origins, or which might be connected with the cognitive sphere of the peasantry, is *always* the village, the immediately surrounding countryside, the familiar frame of life, where a man is “at home”—up to the end of the sixteenth century at least. Until meager evidence to the contrary is dug up, this is a reasonable premise.
“He Is Our Enemy Too”: A Few Words on the Ideology of the Dózsa Uprising

On the far bank of the river, precisely at Belgrade, on the lower Danube the fearsome army of Mehmed II (the “Conqueror”) appeared in early July of 1456. On the near bank (indeed, breaking through to the Turkish camp on the far bank) around 30,000 peasant crusaders stood their ground. In mid-May of 1514 around 50,000 armed peasant crusaders were to turn weapons that had been intended for use against the Turks against the nobility. How do these facts fit into the theoretical framework outlined here?

It would be ill-advised, within the scope of this essay, to attempt to summarize even the most basic conclusions that might be drawn about the ideological motivations of these two movements. At the same time, it is not merely the symbolic anniversary of the birth of György Dózsa, designated by general consensus—symbolic by common consent*—a duty of obligatory commemoration, but above all the subject itself that demands that at least a few words be said in connection with the matter under discussion.

Let it be noted from the very start that relatively few reliable sources are available on the ideology behind Dózsa’s uprising, at least in comparison with other roughly contemporaneous large peasant movements. The humanist narratives of historians of the day that have been preserved possess many kernels of truth but many more fictional elements. From the point of view of the history of ideas, however (especially with regard to utterances attributed to peasant leaders and their conceptual makeup), they do not possess much credibility because they are little more than stylistic exercises in classical-style humanist orations. There are altogether four documents originating from the crusaders themselves; apart from a few eyewitness reports (reliable because they were produced during the course of the events themselves and were intended exclusively for informational purposes) and the internal logic of the events themselves, these serve as our only sources.

If this material is examined to determine which conceptual devices were used to express the aims of the crusaders themselves, then two classes may be clearly discerned. The first is the wealth of Christian motifs of the period, plain and simple. The “sacred undertaking” is therefore “by the will of God the Almighty,” “for the cause of Christianity in its entirety” against “the most infidel

* Szücs is referring here to the quincentenary of György Dózsa’s birth which is undocumented but widely accepted to have been in Dálnok, Transylvania [Dalnic, Romania] c. 1470.
and most treacherous (*perfidissimi*) Turks” and later, by mid-May, simultaneously against the “infidel-faithless” nobility (*infideles*), and those who oppose this venture will “be excommunicated as the Devil’s accomplices” and will have “the punishment of eternal damnation” inflicted upon them (and of course, by the by, loss of their head and livestock and impalement). The second source is the common secular and political argumentation of the age, well known from documents that number in the thousands, according to which the whole venture, undertaken not only to the call of the pope and Archbishop Bakócz, but “by the will of the whole kingdom (*totum regnum*),” “for the protection of this kingdom (*hunc regnum protegere*, etc.)” in order to thwart “the destruction of the kingdom,” which with the aim of “assisting this kingdom” everyone had to support, because otherwise “he is rebelling against this kingdom,” or to put it differently, acting “against the entire kingdom, which is to say (*seu*)! the Christian faith.”

Just as this “state propaganda,” which highlighted the ethical and political duty to rally to the defense of the *regnum*, had already been employed in Hungarian documents for two hundred and fifty years, the characteristic fusion of secular political and Christian argumentation in itself had a history of more than a century: this has been the general tone in the mobilization against the Turks since the end of the fourteenth century. This is how the Crusade had originally been declared. The circular letter of the vicar of the Franciscan province, which may be dated to April 1514 and survived in the aforementioned letter-collection of the order, entrusted all *custodia* in Hungary with announcing the bull, proclaiming “the defense of the Christian faith and especially this kingdom of Hungary” (*pro religionis Christiane et presertim huius regni Hungarie defensione* . . . ), whereas the order given to the army priests referred merely to the “sacred campaign/enterprise against the enemy” (*sancta expeditio*). The connections are obvious, but it does not hurt to mention that in the written order that György Dózsa had distributed from Cegléd and in the writ, still dated the early half of May, from the crusader lieutenants Tamás Aszalói Kecskés and Lőrinc Megyaszói Mészáros it is exclusively the stock of Christian motifs that is drawn on, whereas in the letters of crusader army commander Ferenc Bagoly from Gönc (May 31) and a crusader from Sárospatak whose name is unknown (tentatively, early June), the Christian and, let us say “state” arguments, interweave. It should also be noted that no words, allusions, or motifs in the writings of the crusaders betray any knowledge of the reasoning or intellectual subject matter analyzed above in connection with the sermons of Oswald of Lasko.
One may raise the question of whether the written record of the crusaders may be regarded as homogeneous, since from the middle of May what was originally a crusader army had become a rebel camp and “illegitimate” enterprise (the bull had been withdrawn) and combat against the nobility was openly proclaimed. What is distinctive about this is the fact that this volte-face had no effect on the ideological charge; it remained homogeneous, the goals being expressible with the self-same topoi. The rebels, at least in respect to Dózsa’s main force, did not abandon the original aim of it being a campaign against the Turks until the end of May; they wanted to simultaneously vanquish their lords and the Turks. This demonstrates, among other things, Dózsa’s moral grandeur and, equally, the movement’s vulnerability. The Turkish affair was not a side issue even after the movement switched to an overt uprising. A keen-eyed Italian wrote from Buda at the time (June 15) that the Hungarian barons and nobles, who even during the period of the late Matthias “had long been absent from the constant fighting,” were still idly at leisure and yet inflicted intolerable burdens on their serfs “on the pretext that this was to defend the border castles.” The connection between these two matters, the mixture of social and moral outrage, was quite apparent in the beginning of the uprising, when, on the morning of May 25, as an eyewitness testifies, the crowd charged menacingly at the Buda monasteries of the Dominicans and the Franciscans, shouting things like “How long have the lords and nobles been preparing to fight against the Turks? It’s been twenty years or so by now! It’s all just a scam!” Gáspár Heltai, a sixteenth-century chronicler of the deeds of the Hungarians, recalled the incident in this way: “They have sucked our sweat and blood and now they hide and dare not fight against the Turks for our country! Rally, let’s march on these cowardly frogs!” The fact that Dózsa did not lose sight of the cause of the Turkish campaign even as half the country was aflame in a peasant war is corroborated, first and foremost, by the determined and persistent southward progression of his main forces.

The preservation of the balance of this dual objective could only be assured conceptually through one thing: the chiliastic sense of “election,” the consciousness of being a “chosen people” which had guided the Hussites (along with most plebeian movements in the Middle Ages) and, according to available sources, was also the ideological leitmotif of the peasant war in Hungary. Dózsa himself called his own army a “blessed crusader people” (benedicta gens cruciferorum) and “holy squadron, blessed assembly” (sancta turma et benedictum conventicum), and referred to a “holy mission” against the “infidel-faithless” nobility.
Warriors themselves were calling each other “brother” like the Hussites and “devout servants of the holy cross” (in the Gönc letter), who would be helped by “God on high and the holy cross,” “the victorious symbol of which is emblazoned on our breasts” (in the letter from Sárospatak). The motifs of denial of services in money that were extorted unjustly and with force (vi et iniuste, in the letters from Kecskés and Mészáros) and of the legitimacy of “revenge for oppression” (in the letter from Sárospatak), on the other hand, are eerily similar to what appeared in Oswald of Lasko’s ominous (and admonitory) vision, published more than a decade earlier.

Of course, this by no means suggests that the peasants learned all of this from the Franciscans. The latter were no longer leading recruitment by mid-May, though individual friars (including Observants) and priests, students and lesser noblemen still continued to proceed with them, and even, in more than a few cases, belonged to the body of the general leadership and wrote these documents that remained to us. It is more likely the case that certain ideas present in the peasantry’s sphere of thought triggered certain intellectual mechanisms under these conditions. In large part these ideas inevitably were derived from a Christian frame of reference (no other system of motifs was yet in existence in that era for the formulation of social problems). The mechanism comprised a radical interpretation of this set of ideas, and the stimulus was supplied by a combination of factors which interacted together in unascertainable dimensions, including latent heretic currents, lively and morally based currents of social criticism within the official branches of the Church, the internal crisis of the medieval world, and the peasants’ instinctively anti-feudal “biblical exegesis.” This set of ideas did not exclude secular political categories (for instance, the notion of defense of the regnum), and was exceptionally open, and in a highly flexible manner, towards the ecclesiastical sphere, but all the signs indicate that it remained, as yet, resolutely closed to the era’s ideas about “nation” and “patriotism.” But how can one state this with certainty? For historians of ideas the fragments of the written heritage of Hungarian peasants which have survived through happenstance are the same type of evidence as excavated fragments of the pedestal of a column, a keystone, or a window frame would be to an archaeologist. Often the archaeologist and art historian are obliged (and able), on the basis of such fragments, to reconstruct an entire column or window, or indeed the structure of an entire church, as medieval master craftsmen worked according to certain defined systems; if all that is found at a certain place are Gothic stone fragments from the fourteenth century, they can state with complete certainty, at
Why Did the Matter of Popular Patriotism Become a Neuralgic Spot?

For all that, why should it not be permissible to discuss popular patriotism in a vague or general, analogical manner in connection with the Dózsa rebellion and other early peasant movements? Assuming no attempt is made to fashion out of it a foundational historical category or a guiding principle of historical theory; after all, to a greater or lesser extent, one is always obliged to work with retrospective categories.

Let me pose the question once more emphatically: Why and to what extent has the issue of popular patriotism become a neuralgic spot, and in that sense almost a “public concern” in our debates? Certainly not through any weight of its own but rather through its historiographic connections.

It could not have possessed such force on its own, as it is inconceivable for such theoretical matters, which are as good as intangible in the historical
sources, to stir up such a tempest. In full awareness of the pertinent international literature, I can vouch that nowhere in Europe, in either historiography or common knowledge, is there, or has there ever been, any ominous meteorological disturbance around this question. Firstly, it has been presumed or acknowledged to a greater or lesser extent that “some sort of notion” of nationality was also general among the lower social strata, especially in ethnic frontier zones and during situations of conflict (at times of war, in cases of foreign occupation, or when social tensions coalesced with ethnic antagonisms). Secondly, any sober researcher is well aware that this became a historical factor along with and indeed subordinate to other factors; just as there is little disagreement that in the Middle Ages, and in feudal structures in general, the structure of consciousness had a characteristically estate-bound articulation; there were no “germs” of latent mystical cognitive elements lurking in it that were subsequently brought to flower, by long centuries of historical development, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (though naturally, as we have seen, these were not without precedents). The peasantry gained access to the intricate ideas related to nation and patriotism (and the sentiments that are inseparable from them) with the abolition of serfdom: this was when the “people” started to become part of the “nation.”

Translated by Tim Wilkinson