Peasant Movements in Hungary in 1790

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1790 was a turbulent year in the Habsburg Empire. The crisis was caused by the French Revolution, the still raging Ottoman War, a mounting Prussian pressure on Austria, the revolt in Austrian Netherlands, the unrest in Galicia and the feudal revolt in royal Hungary.[1]) The troubles were not of that year alone: they had their beginnings much earlier. The last five years of the reign of Emperor *Joseph II* were filled with signs of the coming storm. The war with the Ottoman Empire[2]) brought about increases in war taxes, enlistments and army requisitioning. The burden of these fell, above all, on the peasantry and almost wiped out the beneficial effect of *Joseph II's* abolition of serfdom.[3]) The peasants who were to have derived the most benefits from the Josephinian reforms became increasingly disillusioned and restive, while the privileged classes had long been dismayed by *Joseph's* enlightened ordinances. The census of 1785[4]) which registered the households, dwellings and

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[1]) The term "royal Hungary" refers to the Kingdom of Hungary, exclusive of Transylvania, Croatia, and Slavonia as well as of the Military Frontier Zones.

The term "feudal revolt" has hitherto not been applied by Hungarian historiography. It refers to an effort of the *bene possessionati* in 1790 to dominate the power of the state and to restrict royal power. The gentry, the upper stratum of the lesser nobility [untitled nobles], comprised the *bene possessionati* and the *possessionati*. The *possessionati* owned land cultivated by a few serf families. The *bene possessionati* owned middle-sized estates, several villages, and a great number of serfs, and were men of learning, a great many of whom had received higher education. Only a few *bene possessionati* were to be found in each county, but they dominated the county administration, and were the natural leaders of the lesser nobility.

[2]) From December 2, 1787, to the armistice of September 23, 1790, and the Peace Treaty of Sistova, signed on August 21, 1791.

[3]) The institution of serfdom was abolished by a royal rescript in 1785.

[4]) For details of this remarkable, and rather modern census, see Gusztáv Thirring, *Magyarország népessége II József korában*. Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1938.

property of all classes, including the nobility, thoroughly alarmed the nobles, who believed it to be the preliminary to their taxation. It kindled hitherto smoldering discontent into open, active, but unarmed resistance to the enlightened despotism of *Joseph II.* The peasant unrest and the opposition of the nobility, added to the Empire's other difficulties in 1790, made the year an extremely trying one, even for a man of *Joseph's* energy and strength of character. With his death, on February 20, 1790[5]), these difficulties blossomed into a full-scale political crisis for Hungary.

The new Emperor did not hurry to Vienna but stayed on where he was in Florence, and arranged for the transfer of power from Tuscany, making it his first concern to attend to his many sons' interests. Only after an appreciable length of time did he set out for the imperial capital, arriving in Vienna on March 12, 1790.[6]) Meanwhile, the government, under the temporary head of state, Archduke *Francis*[7]), had temporized on all important matters pending the new Emperor's arrival. The power vacuum gave the restive Hungarians time to organize themselves. By the time *Leopold* finally took up the reins of government, the Hungarian feudal revolt, an effort by the *bene possessionati* to dominate the state and to restrict royal power, was in full swing. The crisis lasted until mid-summer — to be precise, until the *Convention of Reichenbach* — when it began to recede, and by the end of the year it was all over.

During the crisis of 1790, the diverse social classes, the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, the Serb, Croat and Rumanian national groups all made proposals, demands, complaints; some of them even took some action. The peasants' share in the crisis, their projects and activities in 1790 will be analyzed below.

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[5]) A bulletin in the official journal of the Court, the *Wiener Zeitung,* February 21, 1790, No. 16, p. 1, announced that the Emperor, born on March 13, 1741, died on February 20, 1790, at 5:30 a.m.

[6]) Adam Wandruszka, *Leopold II., Erzherzog von Österreich, Großherzog von Toskana, König von Ungarn und Böhmen, Römischer Kaiser.* Wien: Herold Verlag, 1965, II, 252.

[7]) Archduke Francis, eldest son of Leopold II, later Emperor Francis I.

Peasant Leaflets of 1790[8])

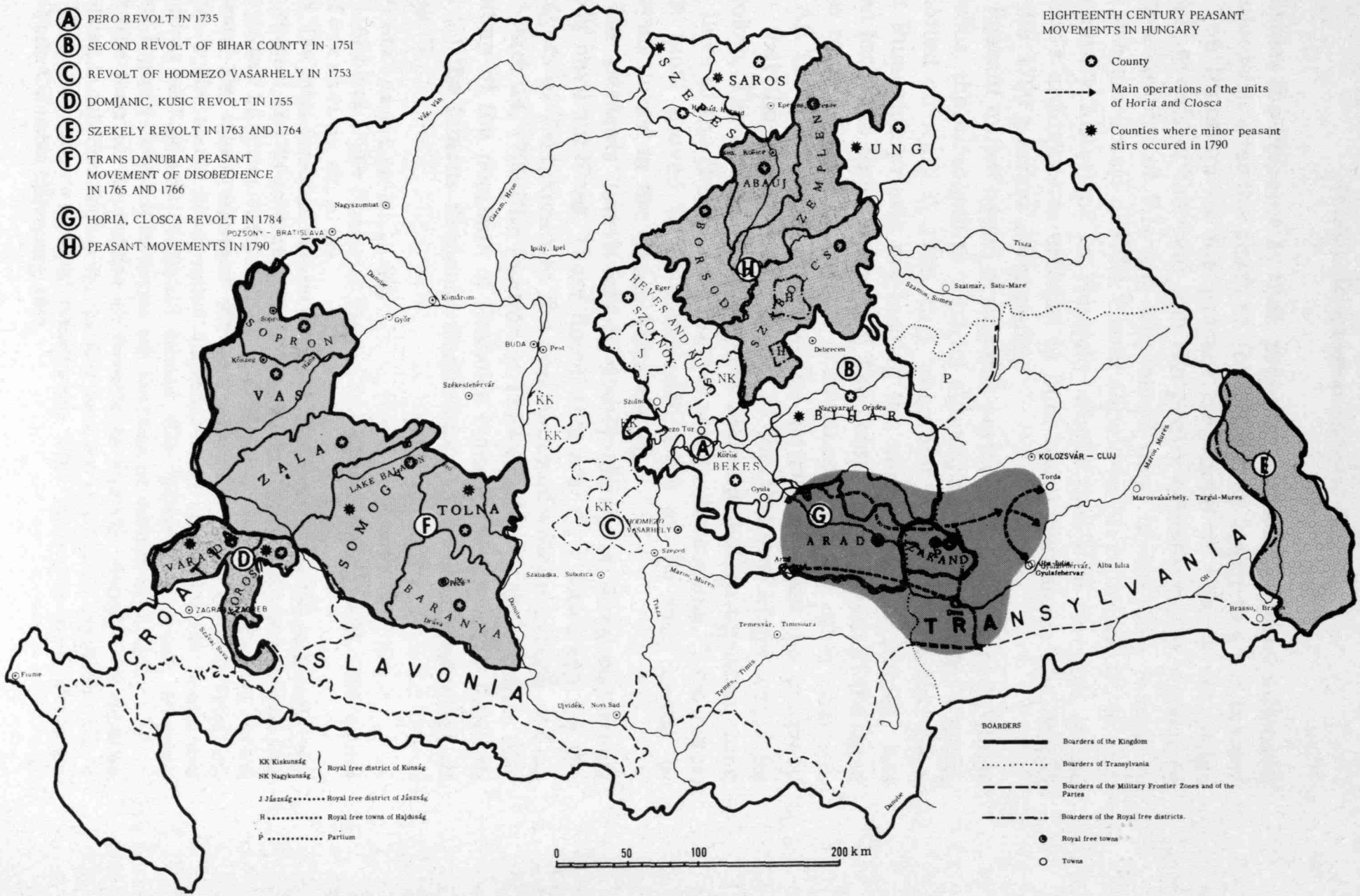
By 1790, the aristocrats and the gentry were enjoying a period of cultural progress and had already achieved a certain degree of intellectual sophistication. Among the peasantry, too, intellectual advances had begun. *Pál Almássy*, Emperor *Joseph's* commissioner at Pest, noted that "the peasants possess not only natural talents, but even a certain degree of culture and well-being".[9]) A confidential report addressed to the Court at Vienna stated, "Ipsa rudior plebs legere suevit" (even the uneducated people were used to reading).[10]) Priests, ministers and village notaries began reading magazine and newspaper articles to the peasants. Peasant lads of this generation, like their fathers and grandfathers fighting the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War, saw much of Western lands during their service in the Habsburg standing Army. The serfs were thus able to compare their miserable living standards with those of the West, and began to give serious thought to their backward state. While they enjoyed improved conditions as a result of the reforms of *Maria Theresa* and *Joseph II*[11]), and had come to

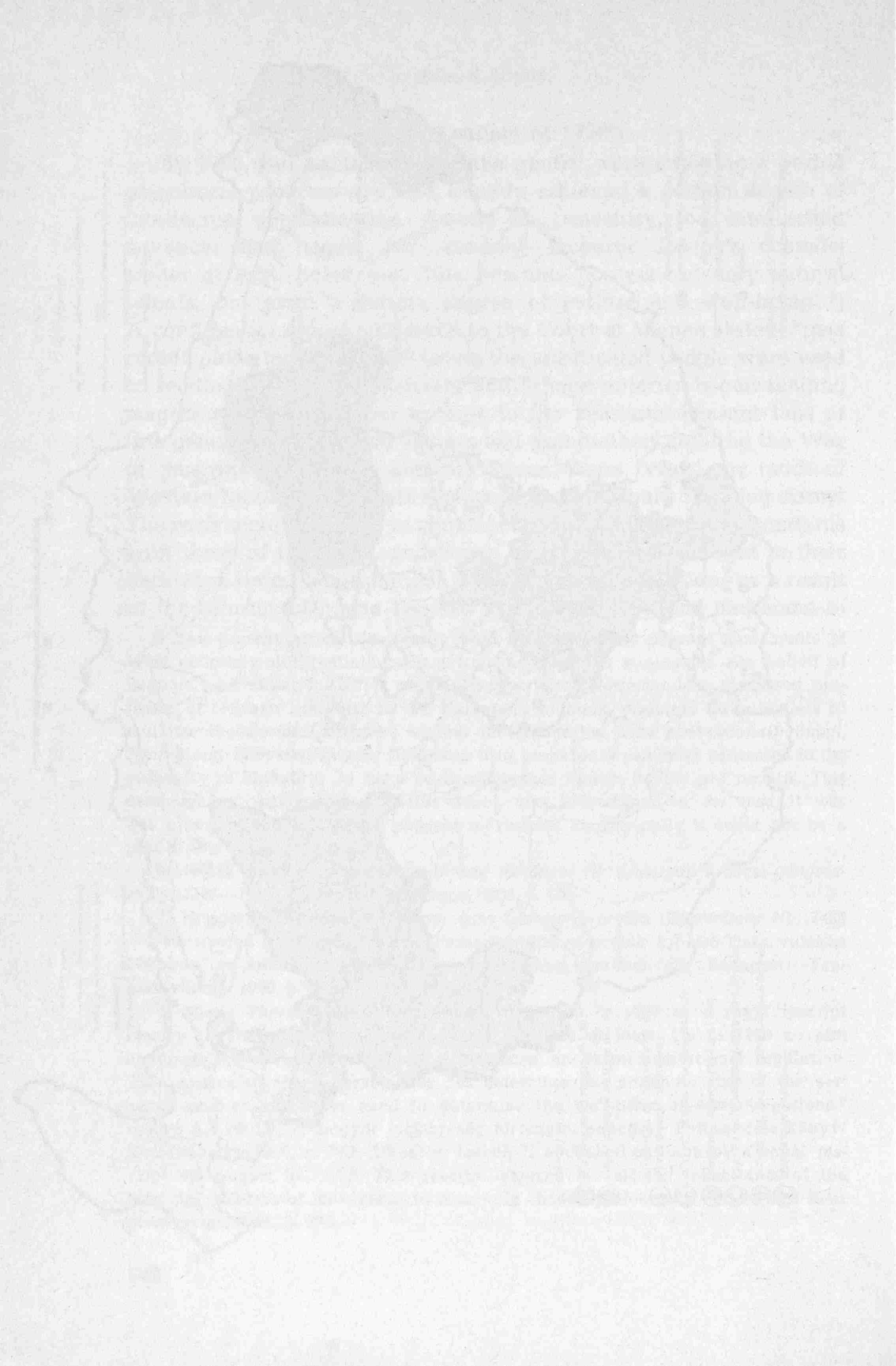
[8]) The present article deals only with the indigenous peasant movements of 1790, definitely differentiating them from *Leopold* II's stratagems. On behalf of *Leopold*, and under his strict personal supervision, *Hoffmann*, the dismissed professor of German literature in the University of Buda, prepared three leaflets to mobilize the German burghers against the Hungarian *bene possessionati: Babel, Ninive* and *Plan und Zweck. Hoffmann* also prepared a pamphlet addressed to the peasantry of Hungary: *Jó hir a parasztoknak* or *Bonum novum pro rusticis.* This campaigning, without the slightest doubt, was *Leopold's own.* As such, it was not a part of the indigenous peasant movement, consequently it could not be a part of this essay.

[9]) Henrik Marczali, *Magyarország története III. Károlytól a bécsi congressusig (1711—1815).* Budapest: Atheneum, 1898. p. 479.

[10]) Hungarian National Archives, *Acta Generalia of the Chancellery No. 7430—1790,* quoted by Itsván Rácz, "Parasztzendítő röpiratok a Felső-Tisza vidékén 1790-ben" in István Szabó (ed.), *Agrártörténeti tanulmánvok.* Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1960, p. 232.

[11]) *Maria Theresa* issued her famous *urbarium* in 1767 as a royal rescript clearly regulating lord-serf relations, in principle at least. Up to 1790 no diet endorsed the *urbarium,* therefore it remained an extraconstitutional regulation. The essence of the *urbarium* was "to determine the minimum size of the serf *sessio* and on the other hand to determine the maximum of serf obligations." Ignácz Acsády, *A magyar jobbágyság története.* Budapest: Politzer-féle könyvkiadóvállalat, 1906, p. 357. Emperor *Joseph II* abolished serfdom by a royal rescript on August 22, 1785. This rescript assured for all the inhabitants of the land the freedom of movement, to marry, to choose professions, and to will their possessions. *Ibid.,* p. 379.


A PERO REVOLT IN 1735
B SECOND REVOLT OF BIHAR COUNTY IN 1751
C REVOLT OF HODMEZO VASARHELY IN 1753
D DOMJANIC, KUSIC REVOLT IN 1755
E SZEKELY REVOLT IN 1763 AND 1764
F TRANS DANUBIAN PEASANT MOVEMENT OF DISOBEDIENCE IN 1765 AND 1766
G HORIA, CLOSCA REVOLT IN 1784
H PEASANT MOVEMENTS IN 1790
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY PEASANT MOVEMENTS IN HUNGARY
County
Main operations of the units of Horia and Closca
Counties where minor peasant stirs occured in 1790
SAROS
SZEPES
ABAUJ
TORNA
UNG
BORSOD
HEVES AND KUN SZOLNOK
HAJDU
BIHAR
SOPRON
VAS
ZALA
SOMOGY
TOLNA
BARANYA
VARAD
CROATIA
SLAVONIA
BEKES
ARAD
ZARAND
TRANSYLVANIA
KOLOZSVÁR — CLUJ
Pozsony - Bratislava
Buda
Pest
Debrecen
Szatmar, Satu-Mare
Nagyszombat
Komárom
Győr
Székesfehérvár
Szolnok
Nagyvarad, Oradea
Kőrös
Gyula
Torda
Marosvásárhely, Targul-Mures
Hodmezo Vasarhely
Szeged
Arad
Szabadka, Subotica
Temesvár, Timisoara
Ujvidék, Novi Sad
Fiume
Zagrab - Zagreb
Brasso, Brasov
Gyulafehervar, Alba Iulia
KK Kiskunság / NK Nagykunság } Royal free district of Kunság
J Jászság ..... Royal free district of Jászság
H ..... Royal free towns of Hajdúság
P ..... Partium
0 50 100 200 km
BOARDERS
Boarders of the Kingdom
Boarders of Transylvania
Boarders of the Military Frontier Zones and of the Partes
Boarders of the Royal free districts.
Royal free towns
Towns



consider the Emperor as their protector against the depredations of the lords[12]), after the death of *Joseph II* they began to grow restive.

The literature on the peasant movement of 1790 is very slim. Other events of the year and the gentry-oriented early Hungarian historiography of this era suppressed most of the facts related to the peasant unrest of 1790. Credit should be given, however, to contemporary historians in Hungary whose intensive research in the nation's archives has brought to light many documents and details of the 1790 peasant movements.

Peasant unrest began during this period in Zaránd county. *Miklós Kovács,* the *alszolgabiró* (district submagistrate) of Zaránd county, reported on April 9, 1790, that "rebellion is openly preached here, and Rumanian priests are leading the movement. The nobility has been forced to begin arming".[13]) The central government at the same time received news of similar occurrences in many other counties.

All these scattered disturbances merely reflected the peasants' fear that the enlightened reforms of the last two kings would be revoked. The nobles, in turn, were alarmed that an uprising along the lines of the *Horia-Closca revolt* was in the making.[14]) However, both fears proved to be unfounded even at the very center of peasant unrest in the Upper Tisza region.

The peasants' uneasiness is clearly shown in three documents which have survived. These documents are: (1) a letter sent by the villagers of Taktakenéz to the headman and village council of Dob on March 14, 1790 (the *Petition of Taktakenéz);* (2) the minutes of a meeting of the peasants of Szabolcs county (the *Szabolcs Project*); and (3) the famous *Peasants' Declaration,* the most important of all three.[15])

[12]) M a r c z a l i, *op. cit.,* p. 480.

[13]) Archives of the Hungarian Royal Court Chancellery No. 4825, 1790, quoted by M a r c z a l i, *op. cit.,* p. 480.

[14]) The most ferocious peasant revolt in Hungary during the eighteenth century erupted in 1784 in Transylvania. The leaders were *Horia* and *Closca,* who were joined by about 30,000 Rumanian, Hungarian and Transylvanian Saxon peasants. The rebels destroyed 232 noble mansions at 80 different locations, mostly in the Maros River valley. Imperial forces suppressed the revolt, and executions and general bloodshed ensued. The *Horia-Closca* revolt, however, caused Emperor *Joseph II* to decree the abolition of serfdom in Hungary.

[15]) The texts of the *Petition of Taktakenéz* and the *Peasants' Declaration* translated in full into English for the first time are attached as appendices No. V and VI to this author's doctoral dissertation, "1790: Society in Royal Hungary". New York: Columbia University, 1966.

The Petition of Taktakenéz

On March 14, 1790, the villagers of Taktakenéz in Szabolcs county gathered for an extraordinary meeting. Normally, in the past, such meetings were held annually, and participation was compulsory. They were convoked and presided over by the village *biró* (headman) who acted as the representative of the landlord, for by the 18th century village self-government by the peasants, a flourishing institution of earlier centuries, had virtually disappeared. At this special meeting on March 14, 1790, however, the serfs were joined by the *bocskoros nemesek*[16]) (taxed lesser nobility), whose conditions were particularly miserable in the Upper Tisza region. Lesser nobles working on serf holdings in the counties were not subject to urbarial fees or *robot* but paid only fees *(taksa)* to the lords. Here in the Upper Tisza region, however, contrary to law, these taxed nobles were compelled to perform all urbarial duties and pay fees just like the serfs. Thus, the only difference between the two groups was that the taxed nobles possessed the political rights of nobility.

The Taktakenéz affair is of particular interest not for any results it yielded, but as an indication of the nature of the whole peasant movement of 1790. The petition approved at the village meeting is significant for the program it contained, the tactics outlined by the village leaders, and the light it sheds on the social and political relationship between the serfs and the *bocskoros nemesek* in this period.

The program laid down in the petition was of a radical character rather than a revolutionary one. It did not strike at the foundations of the feudal system, but merely called for elimination of the major grievances of the serfs and taxed nobles. It demanded total abolition

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[16]) *Bocskoros nemesek,* the poverty-stricken majority of the Hungarian lesser (untitled) nobility. They were also called *taksás nemesek* (taxed nobles), referring to the fact that everywhere in the county officials forced them to contribute to the county taxes, and periodically the state also taxed them. The *bocskoros nemesek* were divided into three groups. The *armalis* nobles had no landed property but lived and worked on serf *sessiones* owned by a lord. *Curialis* nobles owned a plot not larger than a serf *sessio* and, naturally, they cultivated it themselves. *Profugus* nobles were those who escaped from Turkish-occupied regions and lived either as the *armalis* or as the *curialis* nobles. Despite the poverty the *bocskoros nemesek* lived in, their political rights were, in principle, equal to those of the higher strata of the nobility.

of *robot,* the most obnoxious of all serf obligations, and proposed that in future the lords should receive only a tithe and one florin in cash annually. The petition also demanded that the taxed nobles be relieved from paying the *portio*[17]) and suggested that all these reforms be incorporated into "the country's books of law". They insisted that the harsh urbarial obligations of both serfs and taxed nobles were violations of the law of the "fatherland". (This was a widespread view of significant importance similar to that of the Russian serfs who believed after the emancipation of 1861 that the lords had robbed them of land belonging rightfully to them.) From these demands it is obvious that the people of Taktakenéz were reformers who wanted to reaffirm and strengthen the old laws of the land, rather than overthrow them.

The principal leader behind the protest, *Gábor Kövér,* a *bocskoros nemes,* called for immediate and forceful action. "Let us destroy houses, let us lay waste (the properties of the lord), and we shall be second Horias", he declared.[18]) When his appeal for action fell on deaf ears, he complained, "The Hungarians are foolish, subordinating themselves to the lords now when they have an opportunity to take action and raise their heads . . ."[19])

In addition to *Gábor Kövér,* the leadership at the Taktakenéz meeting consisted of *Ferenc Vágó,* the village *biró,* and *István Jász Szabó,* another *bocskoros nemes.* They decided to present their petition to the Szabolcs county congregation that was to be convoked on March 18 in the town of Kálló. Providing the county congregation endorsed it, they would then present it to the diet scheduled to meet in Buda soon after. Thus, the leaders envisaged not merely a local protest, but one of national scope and significance. Here lies the importance of the whole affair.

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[17]) *Portio,* matériel for the Standing Army, divided into three categories. *Portio oralis,* the daily mess ration for men: one pound of meat and two pounds of bread per man. *Salganum,* provisions other than foodstuffs for men: wood, light, salt and bed. *Portio equalis:* provender for each horse: six pounds of oats and eight pounds of hay a day and three units of straw a week. The *portio* was supplied to the units of the Standing Army by the serfs, and the royal free towns and mining cities. In several places like the Upper Tisza region the *bocskoros nemesek* also were forced (without such stipulation in the law) to contribute to the *portio.*

[18]) The minutes of the county meeting of Szabolcs, quoted in R á c z, *op. cit.,* pp. 252 ff.

[19]) *Ibid.,* p. 216.

In a significant passage the Taktakenéz leaders warned the county congregation that the serfs and taxed nobles would obey only the king if their demands were not met: "We will, in loyalty to His Majesty our King, obey his orders alone." Indeed, in 1790, a real possibility existed for the Habsburgs to incite a *jacquerie* against the estates, similar to the Polish peasant uprising of 1846. The state of the Habsburg Empire was, however, much too volatile to risk such a policy.

From the records of several county courts, it can be established that the petition was circulated widely and its existence was known even farther afield as the news traveled by word of mouth. At county fairs and in village inns people talked about it and, again locally, some peasants and *bocskoros nemesek* took to advocating its demands. Several village leaders did their best to make the project successful, among them the village headman of Tiszalök, *Pál Kocsis.*[20])

Yet the masses were impassive and the majority of their leaders shied away from the petition. The idea of a pressure group, based on the voice of an aroused peasantry, was stillborn. Soon the enthusiasm of its first advocates burned out and the entire project failed. There were several reasons for this. The village leadership, as already shown, was well subordinated to the lords. Village leaders were dependent on their masters and afraid to risk their special privileges and perquisites, such as exemption from paying urbarial duties. Furthermore, the project had no support from outside the peasantry. There might have been a chance of *bocskoros nemes* participation in a serf movement, with the possibility of the landless nobles giving the leadership; the meeting in Taktakenéz suggested such a possibility. The majority of the *bocskoros nemesek,* however, looked down on the serfs and were unwilling to mingle with them, much less to ally themselves with them. One of them, *Péter Fazekas,* declared, "It would be a shame to sully ourselves by (associating) with the peasants."[21])

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[20]) Testimony of several witnesses from May 5 to July 8, 1790; *ibid.*, p. 267.

[21]) *Ibid.*, p. 218. This writer could not agree with Zoltán V a r g a 's view, which takes for granted the cooperation of the *bocskoros nemesek,* as a group, with the serfs in 1790. "A magyar nemzeti mozgalom kezdetei 1790—1794" in Gyula M é r e i & György S p i r a (eds.), *Magyarország Története 1790—1849.* Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1961, III, 30.

But perhaps the most important reason for the failure of the Taktakenéz petition was the strategy of the *bene possessionati*. At a very early stage they realized the importance of *bocskoros nemes* loyalty to the *bene possessionati* and set about purchasing it with promises, dividing them from the serfs for whom the *bocskoros nemesek* were the only natural ally. The peasant movement at the time of the Taktakenéz petition was already losing strength owing to the combination of all these factors.

The Szabolcs Project

The chronologically second document to be circulated was an outline for a peasants' village meeting which bore the misleading title: "Minutes of the Meeting of the Peasants of Szabolcs County." The title was misleading because no such meeting took place; the Project referred simply to the manner in which a village meeting should be held. Like the Petition of Taktakenéz, the *Szabolcs Project* was circulated both outside and inside its county of origin; it had no immediate results, but assumed significance because of its historical and sociological setting.

The style of the document, the legal knowledge of its authors, its intelligent organization, all suggest that the men who wrote it must have been other than simple peasants. Another point is the Project's surprising sympathy for the large landowners with hundreds of serfs but sizzling hatred for the petty nobles who wrung the utmost from just two or three serfs. The Project's impassioned attack on county administrators is more understandable when one realizes that the petty nobles formed the main body of the county administrators, who were objects of especial hatred for the serfs. The Project demanded strict limitation, if not outright abolition, of these county officials' administrative and judicial authority.

The Project suggests that as early as the end of March, 1790, just when *Leopold II* began to take up the reins of government, the peasants were becoming aware that the nobility was trying to undo the reforms of the last two enlightened despots.[22]) Specifically, they were suspicious of the speed with which the nobility was altering county administrations back to their pre-Josephinian form and re-

[22]) Erik Molnár (chief editor), *Magarország Története*. Budapest: Gondolat Könyvkiadó, 1964, I, 398.

installing reactionary officials dismissed by *Joseph II.* The Project emphatically rejected any return to a system of political patronage in the counties and planned to call peasants' meetings to discuss the problem. It was concerned with the "burden of the county being carried by the peasant", the exorbitant salaries and expenses of county officials, and the high county budgets which the peasants had to finance.

The Project listed a series of proposals to alleviate the peasants' lot:

1. A proposed criterion would recognize as lords only those who owned at least a quarter of a village and would exclude all others from power over the peasants. "True landlords", the Project stated, "when seeing our just intentions, will endorse our plans and will agree with us."
2. Local administration should be improved.
3. County officials' judicial authority should be abrogated.
4. No new officials should be added to county governments.
5. Legal procedures should be streamlined. A limit should be set on the time that a serf could be imprisoned without trial.
6. Rules should be established for filling public offices. The peasants demanded the right to eliminate those candidates who had been dismissed during the reign of Joseph II, and those whom they believed to be incompetent, biased or of bad character.
7. The local landlords should supervise the activities of village magistrates.
8. Magistrates should lose their authority over criminal prosecution.
9. All plans approved by the lords should be sent to the diet, as such reforms may be beneficial for the whole nation.

The *Szabolcs Project* was distributed in Szabolcs county as early as the end of March. The source of its first version is not known, but soon it spread throughout Szabolcs's neighboring counties, just like the Petition of Taktakenéz. The first copy of the Project to reach official hands was received by the village headman of Tokaj, *Mihály Killer,* on April 9, 1790. For some days he talked about it only to his most trusted associates and then he sent it to the head of the local *Kammer* at Tarcal in Szabolcs county. From there, the document was forwarded to the district *Kammer* director at Kassa, *Baron Miklós Vécsey.*

Vécsey informed the *Föispan* (High Sheriff) of Szabolcs county, *Mihály Sztáray*, as well as the president of the *consilium locumtenentiale*[23]), the Lord Chief Justice *(Országbiró)*, Count *Károly Zichy*, who immediately informed the Royal Court Chancellery in Vienna.[24]) The quick presentation of the Project to the highest governmental authorities clearly indicates how much significance the officials attached to this document. The District *Kammer* of Kassa received a report that the "slowly spreading peasant movement is something against which effective remedies must be found."[25])

The Peasants' Declaration

The most important, widely distributed and violent of the peasant leaflets was the *Peasants' Declaration*, a document that attacked the very foundations of feudal society. The *Peasants' Declaration* flatly rejected the idea of lords' right to enforce urbarial services. The Declaration stated that peasants would no longer need to serve the lords but only to offer their services to the king. It boldly claimed rights for the peasants: "Do we not all . . . deserve in this country at least a tiny lot?"

Like the *Szabolcs Project*, the Declaration found county administrations the main threat to the interest of the peasants. It bluntly told county administrators to quit their jobs and give up their titles. Going a step further, the Declaration even turned on the household servants of the lords as puppets of the oppressors, enemies of their own people. It warned the servants to leave the lords' households within one week lest they "be tied to the stake and burned like witches".

The Declaration opposed the holding of any diet but it also enounced a democratic principle in case the diet were held: it demanded that any diet "should act in our (peasants') behalf". The

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[23]) *Consilium regium locumtenentiale hungaricum [Helytartótanács]*, the executive branch of the central government of Hungary established by Act No. 97—122 of the Diet of 1723. The *Consilium* was abolished in 1848, giving way to the first Hungarian Parliamentary Government.

[24]) The Presidency of the *consilium locumtenentiale*, in the absence of a Palatine, was temporarily filled by the *Országbiró* (Lord Chief Justice), Count *Károly Zichy*. Elemér Mályusz (ed.), *Sándor Lipót főherceg nádor iratai, 1790—1795.* Budapest: Magyar Történelmi Társulat, 1926, p. 26 *[Fontes Historiae Hungaricae Aevi Recentioris]*.

[25]) Rácz, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

Declaration affirmed the peasants' loyalty to the Crown, to the despots of the Enlightenment, with the words: "We stand by all the regulations of our Emperor and King, Joseph II; we shall not let one jot of them be abolished, for all of them are as sacred, just and beneficent as if God himself had suggested them to him."

The principles of the Declaration constituted a major, unprecedented attack on the social, political and economic foundations of the feudal system. Demands alone, however, do not make a revolution which, basically, means the use of force to alter an existing system. The Declaration, however vehement in its threats, colorful in devising fantastic tortures for the peasants' enemies, and prolix in its advocacy of violence, never actually called for the unconditional use of force. Almost every paragraph includes an "if", an out for the offenders, a way to avoid the application of its dire threats by doing this or that. Hanging by the feet, burning at the stake, flaying alive — all these threats were conditional. It did indeed call on "every peasant who can stand up" to "take up arms immediately, sound the horn, raise the banner", but only "as soon as the slightest skirmish occurs". Even its call to battle is conditional on the peasants' being attacked first.

Professor Palmer felt its violence to be the crux of the Declaration.[26]) He even claimed to have detected the flavor of Mau Mau terror tactics in it. The primitive and wordy cruelty of the Declaration implies no such thing: it has too many ifs and buts to be classified as a document of terror, one that relishes violence for its own sake.

When considering the possible use of force, the Declaration wisely took into account the probable behavior of the Army under such circumstances. Its authors were aware that without army support their revolution would be doomed in advance, but they were optimistic, perhaps too much so: "What have we to fear from the soldiers? Nothing, for they are our sons." This premise, moreover, gave further grounds for the peasants' demands: "Is the Army not made up of our sons, who serve our King faithfully? Do we not sustain the King and his troops? Do we not all, therefore, deserve in this country at least a tiny lot?"

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[26]) R. R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760—1800.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959, I, 392.

Setting out their claims to have rights of their own led the peasants of the Declaration to deny all the privileges of the lords, whom they depicted as "cruel, lazy, good for nothing . . . who destroy the country and rob the King". At the same time, to the king were ascribed the attributes of a veritable saint, all-good, all-powerful. The Declaration thus went a significant step further than all other peasant documents in inciting the peasants against the nobility while allying them with the Crown.

The men who drafted the Declaration were never discovered or convicted. One can only speculate about their class. The first logical assumption about their identity would be to suppose that they were simple peasants expressing their bitterness. Another supposition, based on the style and phraseology of the text, would be that the Declaration was the work of either *honoratiori*[27]) or, less likely, of *bocskoros nemesek*. The latter speculation is grounded specifically on such things as the mention of the books of law as the source of the nobility's privileged position, which indicates considerably more knowledge than the average peasant of 1790 could be expected to possess. The indelicacies in the language of the Declaration, in this case, could have been interpolated as a deliberate screen for the authors. A third theory would have it that the Declaration was nothing but a trick played on the nobility by the Court — something that actually happened later on in Hungary.[28]) Certainly, the combination of excoriation of the nobility and unqualified praise for the monarch would support this possibility.

This writer would tend to the belief that the Declaration was drafted by persons whose interests were similar to those of the peasants, afraid of the abolition of Josephinian reforms. This would suggest authorship by *honoratiori* and, as a secondary possibility, by *bocskoros nemesek*.

The place where the Declaration was drafted is also unknown. Most probably it was written either in Szabolcs or in Zemplén counties. The congregation of Szepes county appears to be right in sug-

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[27]) *Honoratiori* [intelligentsia]: educated lawyers, engineers, physicians, etc. not of noble origin. In their outlook the *honoratiori* were much nearer to the gentry than to the *bocskoros nemesek*. During the reign of Emperor *Joseph II* several of them assumed responsible and influential positions in the state. During the feudal revolt of 1790 the lesser nobility tried with partial success to oust several of them from office.

[28]) For R á c z's views see *op. cit.*, pp. 246 ff.

gesting that the writers must have been *majoris ingenii impostor.*[29]) In whichever county it originated, the Declaration was disseminated in leaflet form mostly in the upper Tisza region. The first official report about it was dated May 8 and written by *József Pogány*, the Deputy High Sheriff of Borsod county, who sent it to the President of the *consilium locumtenentiale.*[30]) This report said the leaflets were distributed at the county fair in the town of Tarcal where it was also read aloud to the peasants by persons unknown.

It was Zemplén county which, as early as June 21, appealed to the Court for military aid in case of trouble, although the nobles' spies mingling with the peasants found no signs indicating the possibility of an uprising. The congregation of Abaúj county announced a reward of 100 gold pieces for information leading to the arrest of the Declaration's authors and immunity for any member of the group who would denounce the others. The *consilium locumtenentiale* raised the reward to 200 gold pieces[31]), to no avail. Borsod county presented a copy of the Declaration originating in Szabolcs county to the *locumtenentiale* on May 8. Five days later Szabolcs county itself sent a copy with a letter from High Sheriff *Sztáray* pointing out that the Declaration's attack on the nobility could spell disaster for the dynasty; the letter also included an appeal for military help. The county congregation appealed to the clergy in the thoroughly feudal conviction that the Church must teach the peasants to obey and be loyal to their masters. They showed less piety, however, in discussing the possibility of using military force to suppress any future peasant uprising.

In May reports came from Transylvania of a Rumanian priest reading the Declaration to peasants at Maroskeresztur, a village near the town of Marosvásárhely. The congregation of Abaúj discussed the Declaration on May 17. Though in Szatmár county no copy of the document had yet been found, there also the county leadership discussed it and the need for preventive action. During the months of May and June, copies of the Declaration spread around the country with reports of them coming in from Zemplén, Szabolcs,

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[29]) Hungarian National Archives, *Consilium Locumtenentiale,* Pub. Pol. F. 83, p. 17, F. 163, 1790, cited by R á c z, *op. cit.,* p. 226.

[30]) *Ibid.,* p. 228.

[31]) The instructions of the *consilium locumtenentiale* to the county of Abaúj, cited by R á c z, *op. cit.,* p. 229.

Borsod, Abaúj counties and the city of Debrecen. The Court in Vienna considered the problem serious enough to order military preparations for possible trouble. Officials in Szepes, Zaránd, Ung and Sáros counties expressed fear of such a possibility. The "alarming news", as it was called, circulated as far as Croatia. The reaction of the nobility to it was summed up by an official of Szepes county who wrote: "Haeret lingua et titubat calamus" [the tongue cleaves and the pen trembles].[32])

Authorized by a secret court order, troops moved into the village of Tokaj on May 14. On the same day the High Sheriff of Borsod county was informed by the *consilium locumtenentiale,* "if there is trouble, appeal to the military for help, for they have received instructions to offer assistance". All this was communicated to the Court Chancellery by the Lord Chief Justice. *Leopold* himself took action by ordering all cases of irregularities to be reported to the Court immediately by special courier.[33])

Most counties immediately affected introduced special preventive measures, such as searching those traveling between villages; inaugurating a passport system for peasants to travel; requesting the clergy to pacify the peasants; sending nobles in disguise to spy on the peasants; arresting those suspected of incitement (among these were *Gábor Kövér* and *István Jász Szabó,* the writers of the *Petition of Taktakenéz,* both *bocskoros nemesek);* imposing strict censorship; putting military units on alert, and speeding up formation of the *banderia.*[33a])

The general mobilization of the nobility in Szabolcs county on May 21, may be considered the climax of precautionary measures against the peasantry. In Zemplén county, as well as in Abaúj, Bihar and Szatmár, all these measures were implemented, including the mobilization of the nobility.

Leopold II, in addition to the authorization for local action by the counties, ordered a number of specific measures himself, especially in the counties most affected by peasant unrest, such as Abaúj, Borsod, Szabolcs and Zemplén. His instructions called for the search for the authors of the Declaration and any arrests to be undertaken with utmost caution, avoiding mass arrests if possible and detaining

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[32]) *Ibid.,* p. 231.

[33]) *Ibid.,* p. 232.

[33a]) Banderia were the paramilitary organizations of the nobility.

only those on substantiated charges; the use as spies only of loyal noblemen used to mingling with peasants and wearing their clothes; keeping meetings of the nobility about the peasant danger private and secret; maintaining regulations affecting taxpayers without change; treating peasants with restraint, and avoiding demands for illegal taxation.

Leopold also instructed the military not to help with the collection of taxes *[executio]*, leaving it entirely up to the county police forces in order to avoid generating any peasant hostility toward the military or even the king.[34])

Leopold's orders show him at his best as a master of secret dealings, spying, and politics. The steps taken by the counties bore quick fruit. By mid-June, reports from the counties of peasant unrest began to drop off and soon no complaints at all were received by the authorities or the Court.

An Evaluation of the Peasant Movements of 1790

The peasant movements of 1790 came as the culmination of the Hungarian peasant movements of the 18th century, or even of that 160-year period between the *Rákóczi* and *Kossuth* wars of independence. 1790 was the peak of the 18th-century class struggle, in the sense of the ideological content of the documents of the time. The demand for diminished urbarial obligations in the *Petition of Taktakenéz*, the attack on county administrations in the *Szabolcs Project*, and the call for fundamental changes in the social order in the *Peasants' Declaration* — with variable clarity and emphasis, all these documents embody legal, social and political aims marking a true high point in the history of Hungarian peasant movements.

The events of 1790, however, also marked a curious downgrade in the use of force. Less violence occurred in the movements of that year than in any of the other peasant disturbances of the century, ending what was virtually a tradition of violence of more than 50 years. Between the era of continual, although small-scale, violence and the revolution of 1848 only once after 1790 did the peasants resort to the use of force: in the "plague revolt" of 1831. The mild nature of the 1790 peasant movements is evident in documents

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[34]) Henrik Marczali, *Az 1790/91-diki országgyülés*. Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1907, II, 162.

of the era which indicate no mass preparations to use force.[35]) One may even be inclined to believe that the nobility's exaggeration of the risk of peasant violence might have stemmed from their own guilty conscience. Another possibility, of course, is that for political reasons the counties issued scare reports on possible serf violence, in order to induce the Court to yield to the estates in the face of the danger from the peasantry.[36])

The fact of peasant unrest in 1790 is indisputable, but there was no revolution in the making. Even the most violent of the documents, the *Peasants' Declaration,* was more evolutionary in concept than revolutionary. The use of force even in this document was mentioned only for an act of self-defense, as a last resort if all else failed. Every aspect of the peasant unrest of 1790 was a symptom of the crisis of that year. It erupted immediately upon the death of *Joseph II,* fed by the fear that the nobles might turn back the clock on the peasantry. The climax came in May through early July; by the end of July the tide was already on the ebb.

On August 15, 1790, eleven Imperial regiments marched into Hungary from the Prussian frontier zone, where, after Reichenbach, they were no longer needed. The military occupation was intended to serve as a warning to the recalcitrant nobles — but at the same time it also served as a shield for the estates in case of a peasant revolt. The dual purpose of the military's presence was understood by nobles and serfs alike. The subsequent compromise between the estates and the dynasty cleared up the situation, going far to meet the demands the estates had made on the Court, and safeguarding the Habsburgs' constitutional prerogatives in Hungary. The compromise put an end to the peasant movement which was not to be revived again for a very long time. The mere fact that an outside factor [estates-Court compromise] could stop the peasant movement so short indicated the very weakness of the movement itself. Yet in the long range it bore fruit. Among many others, the peasant

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[35]) The newly edited impressive opus of leading Hungarian historians suggests that "... the peasantry organized themselves standing ready for an armed revolt." Molnár, *op. cit.,* I, p. 398. This distinguished group of primarily Marxian historians, however, do not present documentary evidence for this contestable statement.

[36]) Zoltán Varga suggests among the possible intentions behind the *Szabolcs Project,* that the authors might have tried to curtail rather than incite the peasant movements. Mérei & Spira, *op. cit.,* p. 31.

movements of 1790 were an important cause of the social legislation of the 1790—1791 diet. That diet passed important legislation on the serf problem: the *Urbarium of Maria Theresa,* hitherto an extraconstitutional royal rescript, was incorporated into the laws of the land; the abolishment of perpetual serfdom was solemnly reendorsed, thereby reaffirming the freedom of movement of the serfs; and a diet committee of very distinguished personalities was appointed to elaborate new reform projects, etc.[37]) While these measures may not have had tremendous impact, they do indicate that the peasant movements of 1790 were not entirely without effect.

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The map was planned by author and drafted by Mr. Mark Binn, Time Newsmagazine, New York City.

[37]) A c s á d y, *op. cit.*, pp. 390, 391.