

Short Thesis for the degree of doctor of philosophy (PhD)

**The cholera epidemic of 1831 in the royal
commissioner districts of Zsigmond Perényi**

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I. Aim of the thesis, outline of the topic

Throughout history, humanity has fought against epidemics. Over the millennia, religious and rational explanations have been given to explain their occurrence. From the earliest civilisations, an important question has been how human communities, powers and states have fought epidemics.

The subject of this dissertation is the history of the Hungarian cholera epidemic of 1831 in the north-eastern part of Hungary, in the Galician border region and in the counties of Máramaros, Szatmár, and Ugocsa, under the supervision of the Royal Commissioner Baron Zsigmond Perényi, with special regard to the activities of the Royal Commissioner. There are several reasons to focus on this issue. Although there are numerous accounts of the cholera epidemic of 1831, little historical research has so far explored the history of the cholera epidemic in the north-east of the country. Through the specificities of the region, we can come closer to a deeper understanding of the social, political and economic challenges of the first cholera epidemic.

The dual direction of our research has focused on a deeper understanding of the cholera epidemic in Hungary in 1831 and on Perényi's role as royal commissioner. The surviving traces of central instructions and decrees, the county measures that governed the practical tasks of local defence, the activities of the royal commissioners who played a key role in these, and the communication between them, reveal how the epidemic was controlled and how the actors interacted in the decision-making process. This work presents both the initial phase of the fight against the epidemic, which has been less researched and explored so far, and the history of the epidemic in the territories entrusted to Royal Commissioner Zsigmond Perényi, with the activities of the royal commissioners at the centre.

The time and the area that were the focus of the research covered the events of 1831 and the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary. In order to explore the topic adequately, there was need to have some knowledge of the history of the development of cholera epidemics and the preventive and epidemiological measures taken by various states, mainly neighbouring ones, which goes beyond the relatively narrow territorial and chronological framework. Although not explicitly intended to cover the history of cholera as a pandemic, the period under study ranges from its development as a pandemic to its arrival on the borders of Galicia, part of the Habsburg Empire. This was the turning point that led to the closure of the Galician border and the mandate of the Royal Commissioners. It was important to examine the protection measures in other European countries and to compare them with the procedures implemented in Hungary. It was not possible to present a complete pre-history and history of

the epidemic, but it was primarily sought to describe the basic mechanisms of action of the states and their response to the epidemic, and to put it into a framework that makes sense from the perspective of the Kingdom of Hungary.

The period between the appearance of cholera at the borders of the Habsburg Empire and the first declared outbreaks in Hungary was a significant one, and had a major impact on the control of the disease, its success or failure, and the activities of the Royal Commissioners. In practice, at least two periods – and in some respects more than two – can be mentioned in matters concerning the epidemic, the Kingdom of Hungary and the Royal Commission of Perényi, which must be separated. The research has focused mainly on the areas of activity of these two periods of the Royal Commissioners, firstly the Galician borderland, mainly the counties of Bereg and Máramaros, up to Transylvania (from the end of 1830 to June 1831), and secondly the combined area of the counties of Máramaros, Ugocsa and Szatmár, created by the regionalisation of the Royal Commissioners in accordance with the development of the epidemic situation. Since the organisation of the epidemic control can be considered as a joint effort of the county authorities and the royal commissioners, its analysis cannot be rigidly linked to the royal commissioners' missions. This would be particularly difficult because, at the end of his mandate, Perényi was still carrying on with his current affairs for long weeks, even months, in connection with the Royal Commissioner's activities in relation to the cholera epidemic on both occasions. It was therefore considered appropriate to extend the epidemiological investigation of the areas under Perényi's jurisdiction from its inception to its conclusion, irrespective of the duration of the Royal Commissioner's mandate.

II. Sources and methods

The cholera epidemic has a somewhat alien effect in the chapters of Hungarian historiography dealing with the reform era. Despite the fact that many historical studies have dealt with the cholera epidemic of 1831, and many historical works have been published over the years and even decades about this series of events, a monograph about the cholera epidemic covering the entire territory of Hungary and examining it from several segments has not yet been written. The history of the uprisings recorded as a direct consequence of the cholera epidemic has a very abundant academic literature. However, hardly any professional reports about the role and activities of the royal commissioner during the cholera epidemic can be read. The historical knowledge is also incomplete about the event history of the initial period of the cholera epidemic raging in the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary, until the emergence of the national epidemic situation. The first stage of the defence measures, as well

as the Galician border region and Zsigmond Perényi's activities as royal commissioner could therefore be limited mainly to processing primary sources and archival research. In the course of the present investigation, it was not the lack of sources, but rather their abundance that caused a problem in exploring the fundamental questions.

The vast majority of Hungarian epidemiological works only examine events from the time the disease spread within the country's borders; our predecessors did not feel it important to describe the events that happened before then. A significant period of time elapsed between the appearance of cholera at the border of the Habsburg Empire and the first declared cases of the epidemic in Hungary. This period had a significant impact on the defence, its success or failure, and the activities of the royal commissioner. In the case of the dispatch of royal commissioners, we can also talk about several periods of the epidemic, which must be separated in terms of the questions affecting the Kingdom of Hungary and the royal commission of Perényi. The research mainly covered the areas of activity of these two periods of the Royal Commissioners, first of all the Galician borderlands, mainly the counties of Bereg and Máramaros, up to Transylvania (from the end of 1830 to June 1831), and the combined area of the counties of Máramaros, Ugocsa and Szatmár, created by the national districting of the Royal Commissioners in accordance with the epidemic situation. In light of the collaborative nature of the epidemic defence measures implemented by both the county authorities and the royal commissioners, it is imperative to transcend the limitations imposed by solely considering the periods of the royal commissioners' official appointments. Therefore, a comprehensive examination of the epidemic within the territories under Perényi's jurisdiction, encompassing the entire duration of the outbreak, irrespective of the specific timeframe of the royal commissioners' mandates, is deemed necessary.

The research focused on primary sources and archival research for the first phase of the defence measures, as well as the activities of the Galician border region and Royal Commissioner Zsigmond Perényi. Archival research was conducted in the archives of three countries: Hungary, in the National Archives of Hungary (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára) and in the Hungarian National Archives Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County Archives (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg Vármegyei Levéltára); in Romania, the National Archives of Romania in the Cluj County (Serviciul Judeţean al Arhivelor Naţionale Cluj); in Ukraine, the State Archives of the Transcarpathian Region (Державний архів Закарпатської області).

In the National Archives of Hungary, archival records concerning the person of Zsigmond Perényi and the documents of the Governor's Council concerning the cholera

epidemic were processed. In addition, it was also possible to process the 1831 cholera documents of the Governor's Council archive in the National Archives, which contained the decrees, instructions, regulations of the Governor's Council, as well as county reports.

In the Hungarian National Archives Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County Archives, the surviving documents from the Szatmár county period were examined. It was possible to collect the minutes and correspondence of the noble assemblies of Szatmár county, the documents of the permanent committee on cholera, and the decrees of the Governor's Council regarding the cholera epidemic. A significant part of the documents relating to the county of Szatmár can be found in the archives of Cluj, among the documents related to the cholera epidemic of 1831. The following are noteworthy sources in the State Archives of the Transcarpathian Region: the records of the Bereg county lord-sheriff, the Perényi family, the Ugocsa county lord-sheriff, and the Ung county lord-sheriff collections, which provide numerous sources on the initial period of the cholera outbreak and the events of the epidemic in the counties. The relevant documents from the archival collections of the former royal market towns of Máramaros are also remarkable. It should be noted that during the organization of the archival materials of Transcarpathia, the most important records of the county administration were primarily placed in the lord-sheriff's funds, and the Bereg county deputy lord-sheriff's Fund No. 283 is currently not available for research.

The central question of the work required primary research. The main sources for the investigations were the administrative files. The hierarchical system established during the epidemic required that the flow of information from the lowest level (the municipalities) to the highest (the Hungarian Royal Governor's Council) be as perfect as possible. The archival documents of the county, those of the Governor's Council and Perényi's personal archives thus form a set of sources that can be compared and verified with each other, which, in coordination with the academic literature, makes it possible to learn about and map the struggle of these areas against the epidemic, and to present and evaluate Zsigmond Perényi's role as royal commissioner from the preventive measures through the development of the epidemic until its abatement.

Although the role and activities of Zsigmond Perényi as royal commissioner are of particular importance in the presentation of epidemiological events and have remained the focus throughout, it was not our intention to take an explicitly ego history approach.

III. Findings

The thesis can be considered chiefly as a work on the history of epidemics, but institutional history, public administration history, social history, and historical demography also play a prominent role in several aspects, and in many respects it straddles the boundaries between these fields. The work mainly describes the events of the cholera epidemic, the control procedures and their consequences in north-eastern Hungary, the Galician border region and the counties of Máramaros, Szatmár, and Ugocsa.

First, a literature review of the history of the cholera epidemic was presented. In particular, the role of the epidemic in the universal history of European states and in Hungarian historiography was discussed. A short biography of Zsigmond Perényi was included, which was supplemented by archival research in addition to the inventory of already known works.

Secondly, the antecedents of the disease's evolution into epidemics and the mechanisms of control by the state authorities were examined. It was found that Europe's conservative powers opted for centralised and decisive action, mainly through the closure of external borders and then the isolation of infected areas. The Habsburg Empire served as a model for other states, as its defence of its southern borders and its response to previous plague epidemics laid down a set of best practices, which led to a basic arrangement and formed the basis for the measures taken in the Kingdom of Hungary.

One of the innovations of the thesis is the temporal separation of the cholera epidemic, the established state power protection procedures and the consequences, and the examination of the initial phase. Indeed, the preventive phase of the defence from the epidemic situation in Galicia and the dispatch of the royal commissioners to the border areas can be considered a success. This early phase of the history of the cholera epidemic in Hungary is discussed in Chapter Three.

A significant part of the previous research and most of the Hungarian historiographical works examine the events from the outbreak of the epidemic in June 1831. The epidemic, which suddenly spread explosively in Galicia in June, resulted in the refortification of the border barriers and the repeated dispatch of the commissioners. The first phase of the royal commission of Perényi can thus be broken down into two further phases, with one interruption. Control was back on track, but now that the disease had emerged, internal closures and isolations were failing. The management of the situation entered a new phase. From this point onwards, our research focused primarily on the Royal Commissioner's region of Zsigmond Perényi, but parallel analysis and comparison with events in the country and on the other side of the border remained an important aspect. Although the earlier generalised

factual claim that the introduction of the epidemic into Hungary was caused by the salt-carrying boatmen of Máramaros could not be refuted in the course of the research, a deeper examination of the activities of the county of Máramaros and the region of the north-eastern part of the country made it possible to conclude that the actions of the county could not be clearly blamed for the emergence of the disease, but that the shipping on the Tysa and the inaccurate implementation of the regulations certainly played a role in the spread of cholera. This was proven by the cases discovered during the investigations of Perényi and the chief physician Pál Bugát, who was on duty alongside him.

It was the task of the royal commissioners to harmonise the regulations and local defence. Their activity can hardly be universally judged: while the initial period of protection was successful, the wave of disease from June 1831 onwards led to a collapse. In Perényi's view, the sudden and powerful spread of the epidemic was largely caused by the population's misbehaviour, non-observance of the rules and disobedience.

The long period of closures caused significant problems in areas affected from the initial stage. As the epidemic abated, a change in the central narrative of protection was observed. Social tensions and supply problems caused by closures pushed the authorities towards mitigation. Although the epidemic was still raging in many parts of the country in August 1831, in those counties where the disease had already appeared, complete closures were lifted, agricultural work was made free, and travel from places declared healthy to healthy localities was also permitted with a passport. The isolation was reduced to infected houses, the curing of the sick and their proper care. One of the main concerns of the Royal Commissioner Perényi at this stage was to ensure the transport and delivery of Máramaros salt to the centres of the region.

As the most significant effects of the epidemic are primarily social, the social and economic situation of the region, the role of the church in the fight against the epidemic, the uprisings and the demographic impact of the epidemic were also examined. The management and implementation of protection tasks in an epidemic situation in almost the entire country can be considered as fire-fighting, with the central role being taken over by the provision of living conditions and supply problems. The closures, which lasted for several weeks, sparked discontent and led to riots in many places. In the region under study, there was no widespread uprising, which can be explained by the fact that in Máramaros the chamber's jurisdiction and the sparsely populated mountainous areas were not suitable for this, but also by the fact that in Ugocsa and Szatmár, too, the royal commissioner issued mitigating orders in response to the general discontent. In Bereg and Máramaros counties, a large military force was stationed

from the beginning of the epidemic, and the serfs of the manors and the chamber estates located in these two counties were kept under control.

According to the final report of May 1832, the number of affected localities at the national level was 4,806: 87 in Bereg county and 91 in Ung, making 178 localities in the 15th royal commissioner district (3.7% of the national figure). In Máramaros county 79, in Ugocsa 19 and in Szatmár 51 settlements were affected, for a total of 149 localities in the 16th district (3.1% of the national figure). The negative demographic impact of the epidemic was very significant at national level. Even if official statistics are not accurate, the more than half a million cases and nearly a quarter of a million deaths can be considered as serious consequences. The morbidity rate, i.e. the morbidity rate in relation to the population, was 2.59 in the Royal Commissioner's district of Bereg and Ung counties and 0.63 in the districts of Máramaros, Szatmár and Ugocsa. The number of deaths from cholera in Bereg was 680, in Ung 2,295, 1.2% of the national mortality rate; in Máramaros 468, in Ugocsa 110 and in Szatmár 787, for a total of 1,365 deaths from cholera in district 16, almost 0.6% of the national rate. Forty-four percent of cholera patients died, similar mortality rates are found in other parts of Europe. In Ugocsa county, the rate was 64.7%, which is very high compared to the national average. Szatmár 42.8%, Máramaros 35.2%, but the uniform rate of 40.9% for the district still remained close to the national average, slightly below it. Bereg's 52.2% and Ung's 49% fatality rates were not exceptionally high, but slightly above the national average. In the areas under consideration, the epidemic was significantly milder than in the rest of the country.

In many cases, the first cholera epidemic was met with considerable underdevelopment, and even leading figures of the time voiced many criticisms. It was difficult to understand exactly who was taking action, in what role and with what authority to prevent the spread of the disease. However, all those involved in the control of the epidemic, whether officially, individually or voluntarily, played a crucial role in containing the spread of the disease and many did a very trying job in combating it.

It can be said that Perényi was particularly dedicated to the task entrusted to him, had considerable local knowledge and was at home in the field. However, he had to comply with the central instructions at all times and enforce them with the county administration and the cholera committees. A comparative analysis of the Royal Commissioner's institution during the cholera epidemic is not included in the research findings, but the work can contribute to a comparison and further research into the role and the people who fulfilled it. It is known that some royal commissioners strictly required and controlled all actions, while others did not

even stay in the area entrusted to them. In the person of Zsigmond Perényi, this thesis presents an account of an office that has been little researched and explored, and which has not been the focus of historical research until now. The study of the epidemiological events in the territories under the jurisdiction of Royal Commissioner Zsigmond Perényi can enrich the knowledge of the cholera epidemic of 1831.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (3)

- Dancs, G.:** Az első kolerajárvány elleni védekezés szereplői Magyarországon.
In: Társadalomtudományi tanulmányok. Szerk.: Molnár D. Erzsébet, Molnár Ferenc, II. Rákóczi Ferenc Kárpátaljai Magyar Főiskola és "RIK-U" Kft., Beregszász-Ungvár, 111-133, 2021. ISBN: 9786177868643
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