

Theses of University Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**The Anti-Ottoman Policy of John Hunyadi
(1444–1456)**

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I. Objectives of the Dissertation and Delimitation of the Topic

The present dissertation examines the **anti-Ottoman policy of John Hunyadi between 1444 and 1456**, with particular emphasis on two aspects: on the one hand, Hunyadi's relations with the buffer states, and on the other, his diplomacy directed westwards in order to launch an international coalition against the Ottomans. In addition, considerable attention is devoted to the periods between the major campaigns and battles. Since no previous research has yet approached this subject with these aspects simultaneously in focus, I also briefly outline the genesis of my choice of topic.

Throughout my studies, my research has consistently centred on the age of John Hunyadi. Both my undergraduate and master's theses, as well as my OTDK (National Scientific Students' Associations Conference) paper, focused on this period, which enabled me to gain a thorough familiarity with the relevant scholarship and source material. The limited secondary literature and my own research experience have reinforced my conviction that even today there is a lack of detailed, source-based investigations of the military, diplomatic, and political history of the mid-fifteenth century, particularly concerning Hunyadi's anti-Ottoman policy. Several factors may account for this deficiency. On the one hand, although Hunyadi's person and campaigns have fascinated Hungarian public opinion and historiography since his death, most works have focused primarily on the large-scale crusading campaigns, the battles against the Ottomans, and Hunyadi's political conflicts. On the other hand, the quantitative and qualitative limitations of the available sources make a detailed study of the period challenging: the extant documentation is mostly fragmentary and sporadic, and falls far short of the wealth of sources that survive from later decades. Moreover, the period cannot be compared with the reign of King Sigismund, whose outstanding international authority and active involvement in European politics ensured that he appeared in a wide range of foreign sources, unlike John Hunyadi, who—having risen to power as a *homo novus*—held only the office of governor.

Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that numerous outstanding military-historical studies have been written on Hunyadi's major battles, which makes it difficult to contribute new information or interpretative perspectives. Yet, the events between campaigns, Hunyadi's relations with the political entities referred to as buffer states in Sigismund's time, and the diplomacy directed against the Ottomans have so far received little attention in the literature, and historiography has not attempted a detailed exploration of these processes and interconnections.

The topic of this dissertation therefore calls for a new, more comprehensive approach. Instead of viewing John Hunyadi's anti-Ottoman policy from the perspective of the well-known

campaigns, I place emphasis on the intervening periods. In order to draw a fuller picture, I aim to analyse four main areas:

1. **John Hunyadi and the buffer states**

This section seeks to answer three main questions:

- How did Hunyadi's relations with the concerned states (Serbia, Wallachia, Bosnia) evolve?
- Did he provide assistance to them, and if so, in what form?
- In what ways was Hunyadi able to involve these states in the struggle against the Ottomans?

2. **Diplomacy**

The second thematic unit presents Hunyadi's diplomacy, which, with few exceptions, was directed toward action against the Ottomans.

- By what means did Hunyadi attempt to secure external support for the fight against the Turks?
- Who were his most important allies in this struggle?
- To what extent were these diplomatic initiatives successful?

3. **The periodization of John Hunyadi's anti-Ottoman policy**

How can Hunyadi's anti-Ottoman activity be divided into phases? Public opinion often holds that Hunyadi pursued an offensive and proactive strategy, in contrast to the more defensive policy associated with King Sigismund's reign. This perception is partly justified, since Hunyadi indeed did not abandon offensive strategies; however, two consecutive defeats against the sultan's forces made him realise that Hungary's resources were limited, and that such a strategy could not be sustained in the long term.

Defining the chronological framework of the dissertation is a particularly difficult task. Can we speak of Hunyadi's anti-Ottoman policy before he became governor (1446–1452), and thus the foremost leader of the kingdom and principal architect of its foreign policy? I argue that following the battle of Varna—and perhaps even earlier, under King Władislaus I—Hunyadi's authority and unquestionable military experience against the Turks enabled him to exercise decisive influence on the kingdom's anti-Ottoman policy. Moreover, Hunyadi possessed the ambition to claim these decisions as his own and to take their implementation into his own hands. This is illustrated, for example, by the papal crusading bull renewed at his request in 1445, or by his statement to Waleran de Wavrin, commander of the Burgundian fleet fighting on the Lower Danube in the same year: "Now the kingdom, the nobility, and the people are entrusted to my care." A similar ambiguity arises after the accession of King Ladislaus V and

the termination of Hunyadi's governorship. Although Hunyadi formally resigned the office, as captain general of the realm and administrator of royal revenues, he continued to be responsible for the defence of the kingdom and the direction of anti-Ottoman policy.

The structure of the dissertation is divided into three major parts. The first examines John Hunyadi's network of relations with the southern neighbours of the Kingdom of Hungary, with particular attention to Serbia, Wallachia, and Bosnia. From the reign of King Sigismund onwards, these states had—with shorter or longer interruptions—been vassals of the Hungarian Crown, forming together the so-called “system of buffer states,” whose primary function was to check Ottoman incursions. After Sigismund's death, this defensive structure weakened, and from the late 1430s Ottoman forces were able to attack Hungary unhindered. With Hunyadi's rise, however, the system was reorganised, and from 1444 until 1456 it effectively fulfilled its role of preventing Turkish armies from reaching the borders of the Kingdom of Hungary.

The second major part discusses Hunyadi's attempts to extend his sphere of influence. Its first subsection analyses the relationship between Tallóci Petkó and Hunyadi, with particular attention to the ways in which Hunyadi sought to expand his authority over Croatia. Although this region was part of the Kingdom of Hungary, following the civil war of the 1440s the central government exercised only limited control there. The next subsection examines the acquisition of the strategically significant port of Kilia at the mouth of the Danube. Since attempts had already been made to capture the port under King Sigismund, this section somewhat precedes the strict chronological framework of the dissertation, but its importance warrants discussion of these earlier antecedents. The third subsection addresses the war between the Republic of Ragusa and the Duke of Saint Sava, Stjepan Vukčić Kosača, which took place between 1451 and 1454. In its early stages there was a real possibility that Hunyadi would intervene, thereby subjecting the duke to the authority of the Holy Crown.

The third main part constitutes the backbone of my dissertation. Here I attempt to integrate the events presented in the previous chapters into a unified framework. I supplement this analysis with a discussion of Hunyadi's diplomatic initiatives and activities, in order to construct a more comprehensive picture of his anti-Ottoman strategy. The structure of the subsections within this part reflects the strategic shifts, showing how Hunyadi adapted and modified his anti-Ottoman policy in response to the new challenges arising from the expansion of the Ottoman Empire.

II. Outline of the Applied Methods

The multifaceted nature of the research topic—from the political circumstances of the Balkan Peninsula to the diplomatic relations established with Western states—made it clear from the

outset that the writing of this dissertation would require a prolonged, methodical, and systematic process of source exploration. In examining the Balkan political actors, the Ottoman conquest and the relatively low level of literacy meant that I could not rely solely on local documents but had to draw upon foreign sources as well. For Bosnia and Serbia, therefore, in addition to Hungarian charter and narrative sources, I also incorporated Ragusan and Venetian materials. These two states maintained extensive economic relations in the region, and their frequent clashes of interest resulted in detailed records of regional events. In the case of Wallachia, however, due to its geographical situation, Ragusan and Venetian documentation was either not applicable or only of limited use. Here, primarily Hungarian sources proved decisive, many of which have been preserved thanks to the economic interests of the Transylvanian Saxon towns in Wallachia.

John Hunyadi's Western diplomatic activity, aimed at forging an international coalition against the Ottomans, necessitated the inclusion of the sources of the countries concerned. Accordingly, in addition to the aforementioned Venetian and Ragusan documents, I also analysed papal and German sources, and, where possible, Milanese, Czech, and Polish material. Although this dissertation has primarily been written from a Hungarian and Christian perspective, I could not disregard the extant narrative sources of the opposing party, the Ottomans.

In order to make my dissertation as comprehensive as possible, alongside the most recent results of Hungarian and Western historiography, I also incorporated the research findings of the national historiographies of the Balkan states under examination. This has proved to be an important contribution, since these results—with a few exceptions—had not previously been integrated into Hungarian scholarship on Hunyadi, and certainly never to such a broad extent.

The focus of my work lies in foreign policy. Domestic political circumstances and the general condition of the kingdom are addressed only insofar as they are indispensable for understanding anti-Ottoman strategies and diplomatic relations.

The structure of the dissertation posed a considerable challenge. The chronological strands of the individual themes—campaigns, diplomatic initiatives, and domestic political developments—overlap repeatedly, which at times led unavoidably to the repetition of information. I sought to ensure that each significant event was presented in detail only once, and, where necessary, referred back to earlier discussions in footnotes. A particular difficulty arose in the interpretation of conflicts between the rulers of the buffer states and Hunyadi. My working hypothesis was that these disagreements primarily stemmed from the princes' search for relations with the Ottomans or from their desire to break free from Hungarian influence. However, this proved not to be universally true, and in no case can it be definitively asserted that such motives alone lay behind these conflicts. Nevertheless, the examination of these disputes is essential, as they directly influenced Hunyadi's cooperation with the southern vassal rulers and thus indirectly shaped his anti-Ottoman policy.

Another problem arose with regard to who determined Hungary's foreign policy following the return of King Ladislaus V. The king's isolated situation and prolonged absences placed him in a difficult position. Although during the three years of their "shared rule" much time was consumed by conflicts over the exercise of supreme authority and the possession of royal

revenues, even in this period Hunyadi and the king held a common position on the Ottoman question and acted in coordination against their shared enemy.

III. Theses (Summary of Results)

In this dissertation I have sought, through multi-perspective analysis, to nuance John Hunyadi's anti-Ottoman policy and to expand the currently available body of historical knowledge. I examined Hunyadi's relations with the buffer states and the ways in which he was able to integrate these vassal territories into the wars against the Ottomans. I also addressed how Hunyadi sought to extend his authority over certain regions and thereby broaden the Ottoman–Hungarian front. Finally, by incorporating diplomatic sources and synthesising the findings of the previous chapters, I attempted to present a chronological account of Hunyadi's anti-Ottoman policy, with particular focus on the often-neglected intervals between the major campaigns. The results may be summarised as follows:

1. The periodisation of Hunyadi's anti-Ottoman policy

In traditional scholarship Hunyadi was long regarded as having pursued an unambiguously offensive strategy, in contrast to King Sigismund's effective yet predominantly defensive approach. This view is only partly justified. Hunyadi did not wholly abandon an initiative-seizing strategy; however, two consecutive defeats at the hands of the sultan's forces made it clear that Hungary's limited resources could not sustain permanent offensive warfare over the long term. Gradually he reverted to Sigismund's defensive, protection-centred concepts.

The question, then, is how Hunyadi's strategy can be periodised, and how he moved from an initially aggressive approach to a later phase in which defensive considerations came to the fore. Two turning points can be identified. The first is linked to the Kosovo (Second Battle of the Field of Kosovo) campaign of 1448. The pre-campaign years unequivocally belong to the offensive phase. The failure at Varna did not break Hunyadi's determination to continue with further offensive campaigns; he attributed the defeat not to his own weakness but primarily to the lack of support from Balkan princes. Consequently, he began organising the next great campaign the very next year and, year after year, sent embassies to the pope and to other Christian rulers to obtain the necessary backing. Although he initially intended to launch the campaign in 1446, unfavourable responses forced postponement in both 1446 and 1447. In 1448 he was again urged to defer action; nevertheless, once his envoy returned from the Holy See he no longer halted preparations. He feared that another year's delay would dissipate zeal and momentum and prevent him from raising a comparable army. Even though the support of Pope

Nicholas V, Alfonso V, and other Italian powers ultimately failed to materialise, he managed to assemble nearly 30,000 troops—the largest force of his career. The long-planned major clash ended disastrously: his army suffered a catastrophic defeat against Sultan Murad II.

The next period extends from the defeat at Kosovo to the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The reverse at Kosovo definitively ended the era of grand Hungarian offensives and dispelled hopes that, without substantial international assistance, Ottoman power could be expelled from Europe by armies led from Hungary. Although early the following year Hunyadi told the pope that he intended to continue the war, he soon recognised that a strategic shift was necessary. To preserve the security of the kingdom, a truce with the sultan and the strengthening of the buffer-state system became indispensable. As a result of negotiations, a one-year agreement was concluded in December 1449—with the mediation of the Wallachian voivode—followed in November 1451 by another truce for three years, mediated by the Serbian despot, between the governor and the sultan. These truces secured not only the peace of the Kingdom of Hungary but also that of the buffer states, whose renewals of homage Hunyadi meanwhile required. There is no evidence that any concrete anti-Ottoman campaign was organised in this interval. Until 1453 the truces created a relative calm in relations between Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. A severe rupture then forced a new phase in Hunyadi's policy. Upon his accession in 1451, Mehmed II captured Constantinople on 29 May 1453, and by the summer it was clear that he planned a campaign against Serbia and Hungary the following year. Even so, Hunyadi's strategy did not fundamentally change. He continued to seek truces, attempting this three times between 1454 and 1455. His 1454 campaign in Serbia did not substantially alter the situation; beyond assisting one of the buffer states, it likely aimed to demonstrate Hungarian military strength in order to compel another truce.

The decisive shift was brought about by the sultan's intransigence. Once Mehmed II violated the existing truce, the Hungarians immediately joined in organising the great crusading expedition. By spreading false reports—that the sultan wished to conclude peace with Hungary in exchange for free passage—they also put pressure on the crusade's leaders. This did not amount to a full return to the earlier offensive line, since there was no longer any question of Hungary again bearing the greater part of the burden or acting as the principal organiser of the entire enterprise.

In sum, Hunyadi's anti-Ottoman policy divides into three clearly distinguishable phases. The first runs to the defeat at Kosovo in 1448 and is dominated by an emphatically offensive strategy. The second extends from Kosovo (1448) to the fall of Constantinople (1453), when it became evident that, without significant external aid, the kingdom could not drive the sultan's

forces from Europe; Hunyadi therefore sought truces and simultaneously reinforced the buffer states' orientation toward Hungary. The third period begins in 1453, when Mehmed II's conquest of Constantinople made clear his further plans for operations against Hungary and Serbia. Even then Hunyadi did not revert to the aggressive conception characteristic of the early 1440s; aware of the disparity of forces, he again aimed at concluding truces and, while promoting crusading efforts diplomatically, in practice adopted a more wait-and-see posture. This evidences a replacement of earlier offensive ideas by a moderated, defensive policy that prioritised securing external assistance. In this light, King Matthias's later foreign policy appears not as a radical departure but as an organic continuation of his father's strategy.

2. Diplomacy

Hunyadi's principal ally in the struggle against the Ottomans was, unequivocally, the papacy. Over the course of his career three popes—Eugene IV, Nicholas V, and Callixtus III—occupied the See of Peter, and none refused his requests for assistance. The popes acted not merely as proclaimers of crusades but as their chief driving forces. Their tasks included international coordination and, where necessary, the smoothing of conflicts among participating Christian powers. To secure support, they issued bulls granting indulgences and crusading tenths, thereby facilitating the mobilisation of financial and human resources. For this reason Hunyadi turned to the pope virtually every year in which he planned a campaign—and generally succeeded in obtaining aid.

It is often asserted that Nicholas V failed to support Hunyadi in the 1448 Kosovo campaign and merely urged postponement. This is not entirely accurate. Early in 1448 the pope promised support for the following year, 1449, but Hunyadi refused to delay. Even so, in April 1448 Nicholas proclaimed a crusading bull so that adequate time would be available to prepare the following year's campaign; it is highly likely that Hunyadi already drew upon the bull's "spiritual and material" advantages during the 1448 operations.

The other pivotal figure was Alfonso V of Aragon. As one of the strongest Christian rulers in the Mediterranean, king of Naples, and a papal vassal, he could not ignore the crusading cause. He thus became an indispensable candidate to lead any large-scale expedition. The prospect of cooperation was further enhanced by the fact that Alfonso had been mooted as a possible king of Hungary in 1438 and again in 1446. Intense negotiations took place between Hunyadi and Alfonso in 1447–1448, during which Hunyadi offered him the possibility of the Hungarian crown in exchange for military support. The proposal was understandably attractive and led to a treaty on 6 November 1447. The agreement envisaged preparations for a major campaign

whereby Alfonso would provide 100,000 gold florins, from which Hunyadi would recruit 16,000 troops; in return the king of Aragon would obtain the Hungarian crown. The arrangement ultimately came to nothing. The death of Duke Filippo Maria Visconti of Milan in August 1447 created a power vacuum in Italy, offering Alfonso the prospect of extending his sway in central Italy and Tuscany. He accordingly focused his attention there, and—if indeed he had ever seriously contemplated it—the anti-Ottoman expedition receded. The expected assistance failed to arrive, though Alfonso maintained an interest in the Balkans and in expelling the Ottomans from the region; after the fall of Constantinople the Hungarians continued to regard him as a potential ally.

A third potential ally was Emperor Frederick III, but relations with Hungary were far from cordial. He held King Ladislaus V in custody, refused to surrender the Holy Crown, and occupied several western Hungarian territories, producing constant friction. Although Frederick's power play benefited Hunyadi insofar as it allowed him to retain the governorship until Ladislaus's release, no open anti-Ottoman alliance was concluded. The situation changed after the fall of Constantinople, when public opinion in Europe, alongside the pope, expected decisive action from the emperor. Frederick convened imperial diets to which the rulers of virtually all European states were invited. Hungarian envoys also appeared, though they did not attend the first assembly owing to the existing truce. By then the emperor had released Ladislaus V, but he still retained the Holy Crown and the western towns.

The Hungarian envoys reported the so-called "offer of Mehmed," which had no basis in fact but, in substance, suggested that the sultan would grant peace to Hungary in exchange for the free passage of his troops—thus exerting pressure on the emperor and the estates at the diet. Initially this strategy influenced the imperial estates and foreign envoys present; however, internal conflicts within the Empire, Frederick's inaction, and strained relations with Hungary ultimately frustrated cooperation, and the expected support did not materialise.

Venice, as a maritime power, was indispensable to any successful expedition. Without its considerable fleet it was virtually impossible to close the straits linking Anatolia and Rumelia. Since Venetian prosperity rested on Levantine trade, which Ottoman expansion gravely threatened, the security of the republic itself was at stake. Accordingly, Hunyadi's envoys invariably stopped in Venice when travelling to Italy to seek support. On these occasions the senate invariably offered assurances, but it conditioned assistance on the alignment of major powers behind the campaign. While this might appear a polite refusal, given Venice's prior policy it was likely a serious position. Venetian merchants pursued a pragmatic course: had a genuine coalition formed—or had Venice itself gone to war with the Ottomans—it would

probably have participated actively, as it had in 1444. Since Venetian decisions were driven above all by economic interests, the republic, like Hungary, exploited opportunities and concluded truces with the sultan when it could—in 1446, 1451, and 1454 during the period under review—to safeguard uninterrupted commerce and economic stability.

Nor should the Burgundian duke, Philip the Good, be overlooked. In 1444–1445 he provided tangible military support to the crusade and later, at the imperial diets of 1454–55, declared his willingness to participate, though he too conditioned his aid on the launching of a broad international expedition. The role of the Central European powers, especially Bohemia and Poland—linked to Hungary by dynastic ties in the mid-fifteenth century—must likewise be acknowledged; these bonds could have furnished a basis for support in the event of a campaign..

3. Hunyadi and the Buffer States

It is important to ask anew whether we can meaningfully speak, in the case of the southern countries, of the buffer-state system that had existed under King Sigismund but disintegrated after his reign. In Sigismund's time, the buffer-state system constituted a closed defensive line whose primary function was to arrest Ottoman attacks and prevent the passage of Ottoman forces through the intervening territories. Its basic preconditions were the absence of a direct frontier between Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, and the recognition by the intermediary polities of Hungarian suzerainty together with the assumption of a role in anti-Ottoman defence. After Sigismund's death these criteria no longer obtained. In 1438 the Ottomans, with the assistance of the Wallachian voivode, devastated Transylvania, and in 1439, following the fall of Serbia, Hungary and the Ottoman Empire became immediate neighbours along a broad frontier. This eliminated the possibility of the buffer-state system's continued operation.

The situation changed temporarily, however, with the Treaty of Várad of 1444: the peace removed the direct Hungarian–Ottoman border and again created an opportunity for the buffer states to function. As a result, between 1444 and 1455 Hungary suffered no direct Ottoman attack, indicating that the system once more fulfilled its function to some extent. The question nevertheless arises whether Hunyadi in fact intended such a role for these countries throughout his tenure. Determining this would require an examination of the oaths of fealty of the states concerned, but unfortunately a usable source survives only in the case of King Thomas of Bosnia. In 1444 Thomas concluded a traditional vassal treaty in which he swore loyalty and service. By 1449, however, he had undertaken obligations explicitly corresponding to the buffer-state role: he promised neither to lead nor to allow Ottoman forces to pass towards

Hungary, and if so large an Ottoman army were to attack Bosnia that he could not defend the Hungarian crossings, he would notify Hunyadi immediately.

This shift suggests that the revival of the buffer-state system was not merely a theoretical possibility but formed part of Hunyadi's deliberate policy. He knew and adapted Sigismund's defensive system, recognising its strategic significance. The chronology clearly aligns with the periodisation outlined above, which confirms the existence and operation of a defensive phase. What, in return, could the buffer states request of Hunyadi? Primarily protection and military assistance in the event of an Ottoman attack, for which there are several examples. In 1454, when Serbia was endangered, Hunyadi took an active part in its defence; in the following year, when Wallachia came under threat, he likewise began preparations to provide aid. All this indicates that agreements concluded with Hunyadi were not merely formal promises but entailed concrete military support. A further key expectation was likely inclusion in truces concluded with the Ottomans, which could shield them from direct assault. A concrete example is the truce of 1451, into which Hunyadi secured the inclusion of the affected states, thereby granting them temporary respite from Ottoman pressure. On this basis it may be concluded that Hunyadi not only maintained the buffer-state system but ensured its functioning through active military and diplomatic means.