

**Thesis of PhD Dissertation**

**The Organisation of the Turul Association in  
Hungary and Debrecen (1919–1945)**

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## **I. Sources and historiography. Some notions about the chosen topic**

After the World War I and mainly following the Soviet Republic, the initiator and the main basis of the Hungarian rightist radical, so-called “Christian-national” movements was the youth, especially the intellectual young people. The members of this generation went to the battle-line willingly and being enthusiastic about the war, immediately before their university studies or left them unfinished. They “grew up” in the trenches with the experience of the bloody battle, and then, with the experience of the defeat, they came back to home, in a country filled with political-social tensions. This serious situation led the significant part of the intellectual youth to the radical nationalist movements which wanted to construct a new Hungary. In this public feeling, in August 1919, the “Christian-national” university students formed the Turul Association, which became a determinant organisation and characterized the Horthy Era just as – among others – the Magyar Országos Véderő Egyesület (MOVE, Hungarian National Armed Forces Association), the Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete (ÉME, Awakening Hungarians Association) or the Levente-movement.

The greatest challenge of the chosen topic arose from the disunity and the deficiency of the historical sources. So it is not accidental that many historians tried to write the entire history of the Turul, but sooner or later they turned away from this theme. There are some useful studies, but not overall and objective monograph about this significant organisation of the Horthy Era which developed into a country-wide organisation. The reason of the serious deficiency of the sources is that the university central of the association was destroyed with bombs during the siege of Budapest, in winter 1944, so the most of their documents got lost or perished. In spite of, the archive papers are the primary sources of the topic: beside of the Turul’s survived documents, the papers of the other youth organisations connecting with this association, the different government offices (Ministry of Religion and Education, Ministry of the Interior, the Prime Minister’s Office), the institutions (for example, the Rector’s and deans’ offices of University of Debrecen, Calvinist Church District of Tiszántúl) and the executive authorities (for example, the correspondence of the lord-lieutenant of Hajdú County and Debrecen, the reports of the Police and the Valiant Order).

Beside of the archive documents, the next great group of sources is the publications, primarily the press and the journals of the member-societies of the Turul and the associations similar to Turul. It can be laid down as a fact that the life of the press was extremely active and variegated at the Hungarian universities owing to exactly the Turul in the Horthy Era. This press is a very important and significant source of the mentality of the youth between the

two World Wars. The specific feature of this press is that the regional districts and member-societies may have started their own journals beside of the centre of Budapest which may have expressed their view related with public, student politics and social question in contradiction with the Turul's central board of leaders. The fundamental rules of the Turul and the association's different publications are connected with this group of sources: primarily the almanacs, guides, reports, ideological and propaganda books and pamphlets. The Turul-mentality, the association's opinion about the internal and foreign policy and the social problems, as well as its relations connected with other social and youth organisations are outlined from these publications. The significant part of these sources was not used by our earlier scientific literature yet.

Besides, the national and local daily papers and the well-known public figures dealt a lot with the problems of the intellectual youth and the Turul Association. Especially because of the anti-Semitic student demonstrations in every year, the parliamentary interpellations and speeches often were about these incidents, so the parliamentary publications were extremely important sources of our topic. These can clear how the different political movements and parties judged this association. The contemporary statistical publications may give some important contributions about the social circumstances of the university students, the primary members of the Turul.

Of course, the other significant group of sources is the contemporary memoirs. The autobiographies of the university professors (like Dávid Angyal and Jenő Gaál), the former Turul-members (for example Elemér Bakó, Lajos Fehér, Albert Wass) and the politicians near to the Turul (István Antal) can give also some useful information. The others, who mentioned the Turul in their memoirs or diaries, are unconcerned spectators, and they may have written their opinion about the association (at least theoretically) independently of the universities and the students (for example Kálmán Shvoy). The oral history is also a special source, especially Pál Péter Tóth's some interview volumes compiled in the 1980s. Of course, his interlocutors was leftist (or declared themselves leftists after the World War II), but they took more or less active part in the life and activity of the Turul's district of Debrecen, even some of them leaded a member-organisation of the Turul (for example Gedeon Barcza or Szilárd Újhelyi).

The last but not least important group of sources includes some other publications in which the Turul, the university students or the ideology of Turul appeared in some respects. These are contemporary books or articles about the Hungarian higher education and the history of the institutions. In connection with this group of sources, it is necessary to mention the almanacs of Tisza István University of Debrecen, because the Turul's local member-

societies published their brief (1–3 pages) reports about their activity carried out in that academic year in these yearbooks. These reports are essential basis for the research of the regional Turul in spite of their changing value, contents and structures.

The majority of the scientific literature closely connected with our topic was written before the change of regime in 1989, so one of their features is the spirit of the communist age, and they are sufficiently (sometimes extremely) biased against the rightist youth organisations. The another feature of these scientific works is that they focused their attention on the leftist youth movements called consistently “progressive” by them, and they were only interested in the Turul, if they found connection or disagreement between the rightist and leftist youth organisations (for example the Front of March). The Hungarian historical science began to take an interest in the national youth movements only in the 1970s, we refer to the works of Andor Ladányi, Pál Péter Tóth and István Pintér. In the years around the change of regime, the studies of Gábor Ujváry and András Rozs tinged the former widespread and biased scientific opinion about the Turul, and they tried to sketch the organisation of the association, the motivations of its development and its general features. In spite of the Turul’s great impression made on the life, world-view and activity of the contemporary university students, this organisation is not presented objectively and in detail, although it is true that there are many scientific works which are more or less connected with our topic (enough to mention József Vonyó’s studies about Gyula Gömbös, Miklós Zeidler’s works about the irredentist cult and movements, as well Ignác Romsics’s and Balázs Ablonczy’s books, etc.)

## **II. Methodological questions, purpose and the structure of the Dissertation**

It is extremely hard to form a general and unbiased image about the Turul Association, first of all, because of the actuality of the topic (we refer to the recent political debates about a Turul-statue in Budapest). It is necessary to mention that the Turul-bird was an important Hungarian historical symbol before the forming of the student association. This bird took a prominent part in the Hungarian world of legends, on the medieval coat of arms, and it can be found on the emblems of the Hungarian military and national security organisations to the present day. It became the most important symbol of the revisionism and the regular decoration of the irredentist monuments between the two World Wars, but it appeared on the emblems of the different Hungarian national socialist and Arrow-Cross parties. However, because of the university student organisation, the Turul’s name has become inseparable from

the *numerus clausus*, the aggressive nationalism and the anti-Semitic demonstrations. Because of these unquestionable contacts, basically influenced by the Marxist historiography, the posterity has an expressly negative image about the Turul Association which included some true components, but it gave also a biased judgement. Owing to the actual connections, this topic is very complicated, but this was its greatest challenge to compose a scientific opinion about the Turul Association, which is based on many different sources (archival documents, contemporary press and publications, memoirs, etc.) aspiring to the historical objectivity.

From methodological point of view, beside of the disunity of the sources and the mentioned features of the scientific literature the another difficulty of the topic was the Turul's activity which was very branching out not only at the Hungarian universities and in the life of students, so apart from the history of higher education, it has many important connection in the social and political history. The most significant social historical relation is that the Turul and its all member-societies defined themselves as *social associations*. On the one hand, it was very important because the Turul might make itself appear as a true national organisation exempt from the policy. On the other hand, it is necessary to mention that the role of the social associations was very significant in the consolidation of the Horthy regime.

The Turul emphasized its *brother-in-arms* character. There were two different types of the brother-in-arms associations in the Horthy Era. The organisations in the first group were formed by the survival soldiers of the First World War, and their purpose was the financial assistance of the membership and the care of traditions and contacts. Besides, these associations defended and aided the so-called "counterrevolutionary" Horthy regime, and this is not accidental because they played a significant role in fighting out this political system of government. The second group of the brother-in-arms associations in Hungary includes the organisations of the university students. The first of this type was the Turul Association which was formed in August 1919. The second was the Hungária Society of the Hungarian Technicians at the Technological University (Műegyetem) in Budapest, after that the short-lived Christian-socialist Centrum Association was founded in 1920. The following was the catholic and often legitimist (supporter of the Habsburg Dynasty) Foederatio Emericana two years later, and the last one was the expressly legitimist Szent István Brother-in-Arms Association formed in 1927. They became the top organisations at the Hungarian universities, and the construction of these associations was very similar, but their main features were different, so they were often hostile towards each other. The main basis of these associations was the same: the "Christian-national" idea, the militarist, anti-Semitic and irredentist character, but the emphasis of these features was very different in the various organisations.

These associations had an important place between the age-class societies (the Scouting movement, the Levente) and they were very close to the famous Hungarian social organisations of this period like the mentioned MOVE and ÉME, the Magyar Asszonyok Nemzeti Szövetsége (MANSZ, National Association of the Hungarian Women), as well as the Egyesült Keresztény Nemzeti Liga (United Christian National League).

Turul got the greatest influence and played the most significant role among the presented brother-in-arms university associations. There are many reasons for this. First of all, the Turul was not restricted by only one institution of higher education, like the Hungária whose members were just the students of the Technological University in Budapest. Besides, because of its undenominationalism, the Turul stood opposite the Emericana where only the Catholics might join. In contrast with the legitimism, the members of Turul were “free electors” which point of view arose from the significant and well-known contemporary opinion, that the “liberalism of the Habsburg-policy” had great responsibility for the territorial losses of Hungary, and this was more popular among the university students, than the Habsburg-friendship of the Szent István Association. In addition, the importance of Turul was increased by its great influence in the other university associations (the religious and relief organisations), because their leadership was in the hands of Turul-members. The very important purpose of the Dissertation is the clearing up the difference between these brother-in-arms associations, their relationship, their construction and the Turul’s place among them.

In the Turul’s 25 years, there were some differences in time and space because of the conflict between its regional districts and its national centre in Budapest and the generation gap between the Turul’s members of 1920s and the university students of 1930s. It is necessary to mention that joining a social association or a political party the new member usually identifies himself with the ideology, the social and political views of the organisation. However, it is more difficult in case of the Turul Association, because it was not compulsory but very recommended for the first-year students to join the Turul-members, especially if they matriculated at the Hungarian higher education with poor social background. Namely, in accordance with the Turul’s fundamental rules, the association often gave its needy members differing financial aid or loan, and its leadership helped them to obtain scholarships and accommodations in the students’ hostels.

It follows from this that the Turul determined basically the public feeling at the universities and the life of young intelligence. It was closely connected with the circumstances of higher education in this period. In accordance with the peace treaty of Trianon, two of the four universities of the former Hungarian Kingdom (the University of

Kolozsvár and Pozsony) got outside the new borders, but first these were transferred to the capital, then Szeged and Pécs. The university students escaped from the lost territories found their place in the brother-in-arms associations, especially in the Turul. There were two reasons for this. On the one hand, these organisations were entirely new without traditions at the institutions of higher education, so this young intelligence might take part in the forming of the associations' features. On the other hand, the former traditional youth organisations (for example the Egyetemi Kör) could not express the anti-Semitic and irredentist interests and desires of the young generation after the World War I. So it is not accidental that the protest against Trianon, the "Jewish question" and the Hungarian nationality meant the cohesive force for the brother-in-arms associations.

This Dissertation is focused on the history of Turul's organisation, and from methodological point of view it approaches its topic thematically and chronologically. The thematic approach was employed for the showing of Turul's construction, development into a country-wide organisation, customs and purposes. The chronologic methods were useful for the knowledge of a regional district, the Turul's societies of Debrecen and the analysis of their activity. The Turul's member-societies were regionally got into districts, and at the end of 1930s there were more than hundred Turul-societies which were included in ten regional districts. Beside of the author's local connections, the main point of view in the choice was that the other brother-in-arms associations (Emerican, Hungária, etc.) could not form their own organisation in this district. Debrecen was the capital of the 1848 Hungarian War of Independence, and its Calvinist spirit was very strong, so the Catholic Emericana and the legitimist Szent István Association had no chance to organize here, and the Hungária's basis was only at the Technological University. It is easy to understand that only the Turul made an impression on the university students of Debrecen, so it was necessary to describe the Turul's importance for the local young intelligence, the university and the town, besides, the main purpose of the Dissertation was the description of the local features and the public opinion of Debrecen about the Turul.

In addition, the Turul-societies and leaders of Debrecen gave voice to their opinion opposite to the main centre of Budapest, even their judgment against the central board of leaders in the 1930s. It is not accidental that we can find a society in this district which joined the Front of March initiated by the leftist intelligence. Besides, the Turul's very special and interesting member-society was formed in the district of Debrecen, too. This was the Méhely Lajos Brother-in-Arms Society of the unemployed graduates, which was unique in the history of Turul from many points of view. Of course, the Dissertation does not ignore the life and

activity of the other regional Turul-districts (Pécs and Szeged), because there were decided differences between the Hungarian institutions of higher education which affected significantly the life of local brother-in-arms societies (for example, owing to the numerous clausus, the rate of Jewish students was higher at the countryside universities in the first half of 1920, and this circumstance made the local Turul more radical).

The methodological point of view appointed also the framework and the time limits of the Dissertation. The brother-in-arms organisations, so the Turul, were formed just after the collapse of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919 to strengthen the new regime among the university students (because of the Romanian occupation, the district of Debrecen was founded in 1921), and they disappeared in 1945 when the Caretaker National Government dissolved them by decree with many rightist radical and extreme right associations and parties marked the Horthy Era. Of course, the author could not adhere to these limits, because it is necessary to sketch in the Turul's background, where some parts of the its mentality appeared before: for example the so-called "Cross-movement" after the turn of the century, the rightist youth groups against the Bourgeois Democratic Revolution and the Soviet Republic. Besides, it is important to mention that the decree of the Caretaker Government in 1945 could not disappear the Turul's ideology which was implanted the world view of the young generations for 25 years. This raises the question, how the former Turul-members could continue their life with this rightist radical "legacy" after 1945, and how they could adapt themselves to the changed political-social order, to the Rákosi and the Kádár Era? The question leads to the branching out problems of the social mobility following the World War II, but the answer is not organic part of the Dissertation, which focused on just the opinion of the new political elite about the Turul. When writing our work, it was very important to describe the "portrait" of some Turul-leaders (for example György Bánsághy, József Végváry, Béla Lendvay, Gedeon Barcza, József Simon, etc.), whose carrier was typical in the Horthy Era.

Of course, our topic has some other important social historical aspects beside of the personal paths of life. Primarily, it can give many new and important contributions to the social history of the middle-classes between the two World Wars, mainly the knowledge of the contemporary intellectual class. The vague and hardly definable "middle class" is an important subject of the historians' debates in the earlier periods and in our time, but it is not to be questioned that the young intelligentsia and the university students was belonged to this social stratum. It is not a negligible circumstance, because the "leading" social class of the 1930s was exactly this middle class. The contemporary university students prepared for this



role knowingly, and this fact gave a special importance to their movements, organisations and activity.

This question leads on to our other important point of view, the analysis of Turul's ideology, the so-called "brother-in-arms idea". The component parts of this world view were the anti-Semitism, the "free electors" opinion, the revisionism and the "Hungarian imperial idea". By these means it becomes understandable how the Turul-members saw and judged the surrounding world, the social and political questions and their circumstances. Besides, the Dissertation describes the Turul's relationships with the other societies and parties, because these were sometimes full of contradictions, and they can give some important contributions to the history of the Horthy Era.

In the history of the Turul, one of the most important questions was the Act on numerus clausus (Act XXV of 1920). This law restricted the rights of the Hungarian Jewry, because it ordained the number of the nationalities (especially that of the Jews') to be admitted at Hungarian universities. The Turul-members played a significant role in fighting out the numerus clausus, and they considered this Act as their 'own'. However, in 1927/1928 the Hungarian Parliament relieved the limitations of the earlier regulations (Act XIV of 1928), consequently more Jewish students could matriculate at Hungarian universities. This brought about an expressed indignation of the anti-Semitic Turul-members, and after 1928, serious incidents and demonstrations occurred at Hungarian universities (for example, the Turulist students beat and chased out their Jewish classmates from the universities) almost in every year. The Dissertation tries to present the motivation of these demonstrations, the reactions of political circles and the public opinion about these incidents, respectively.

Summarizing, our main purpose is the shaping of a tinged and more detailed image about the Turul Association, its leaders' career and some unknown aspects of its activity and mentality (for example the role of women in the Turul, the ideal image of the women according to the association) with many unused archival documents and other sources.

### **III. The new scientific achievements of the dissertation**

It is not to be questioned that the Turul-members kept the anti-Semitism before the public eye with their demonstrations for the numerus clausus and other anti-Jewish restricts. These incidents affected not only the general feeling of the universities, but the public life too, and this was the reason why the leftist policy after 1945 tried to present the Turul as a "fascist"

and Hungarian national socialist organisation. It is true that these demonstrations took a prominent part in the framing of the anti-Jewish laws and – by this means indirectly – in the Holocaust. The Turul-members and leaders admitted their “connection” with these restrictive Acts, even they were proud of their role. One of their publications remarked the followings in 1943: “it is not surprisingly that the youth held many demonstrations, although everybody knew that the Jewish question was not solvable with the beating of the Jews, but it is undeniable that without these beatings we could not have reached the first anti-Jewish laws”.

In addition, it is necessary to mention that the anti-Semitism was the most important part of the contemporary public life and the leading idea, the so-called “Christian-national” ideology because of the revolutions in 1918/19. This anti-Jewish atmosphere was strengthened by the negative influences of the Great Depression, and almost every significant character of the contemporary policy professed this view radically or less aggressively. The Turul remained relentless and consistent in this question. It is important to emphasize this because of the connections with Gyula Gömbös, who was the leader of the racist policy in the 1920s, but when he became the prime minister of Hungary in 1932, he “revised” his point of view. He divided the Jews into two groups, and he thought that there were “good” Jews, who declared the common fate with the nation. The Turul did not want to categorize the Jews and the significant part of its membership withdrew from Gömbös, who proclaimed in vain that he was the “protagonist of the same world view”.

For this very reason, the Turul is not regarded as the “satellite” of the political parties or movements, so much the more, there were some political parties (the Reform Generation and the National Front) for a short time which were the manifestation of the Turul, and they declared the association’s view and opinion in the policy. These parties were the evidences of that the members demanded significant places in the leading of public life. However, it is not to be questioned that Turul was connected to the every political party because of the personal relations. Our sources testify that the Turul tried to preserve its independence, so it got often an ambivalent connection with the other rightist political parties. From this point of view, the most interesting is its behaviour against the Hungarian Arrow-Cross movements. This proves the anti-German feelings of the Turul, because the association refused the Arrow-Cross ideology owing to its relations with the Nazi Germany.

The association’s unquestionable purpose and function was making of the young intelligentsia loyal to the “Christian-national” Horthy Regime and forming their world view with its very militarist, irredentist and racist ideas which were also influenced by the peasant writers in the 1930s. This world view was created and formed by some young people, who

were not qualified political ideologists, but the social and political circumstances of Hungary embittered them after their military service in the World War I, and they wanted to construct a new country. For this reason, their world view was very similar to the well-known ideologies between the two World Wars, and it is statable that the Turul-leaders and members were easily influenced by the other rightist ideas and politicians. So we can place the Turul's "brother-in-arms idea" between Gömbös's rightist radicalism and the Arrow-Cross ideology.

The Turul had a significant place among the most important social organisations (like the mentioned ÉME, the MOVE, etc.) and it rose above the other associations of the university students. The Dissertation points up that the Turul's ideology was not unique in the European history, and many organisations similar to Turul were formed in other countries following the World War I. These declared the same world view, and the same incidents were appeared in their institutions of higher education (for example the anti-Semitic student riots in Germany, Romania, Spain, etc.). It is very important that the Turul's extremely hierarchic organisation was formed by the foreign (primarily German) samples, but the new Turul-generation of 1930s tried to withdraw from these, and these members emphasized emphatically the specifically Hungarian character of their association.

However, this was not the only one crucial difference between the 1920s and the 1930s. The most significant was that the Turul-ideology was determined only by the racist ideas in the first decade of the Horthy Era, but after the Great Depression in the 1930s there were other important purposes (the agrarian reform, the universal and secret right of voting, the modernizing of the fiscal policy, the safeguarding of public health, the improving the social circumstances of lower classes). So the Turul became the important starting point for the intellectual seeking ways of the youth, and its members might be orientated both to the extreme right movements and to the left political parties. These new purposes refuted that Turul was insensible and unconcerned towards the lower social classes. It is also true that these were impressed by the foreign and internal politics (for example the Great Depression, the Anschluss or prime minister Kálmán Darányi's Programme of Győr), so the Turul and its members always adjusted themselves to the historical circumstances. Dezső Szabó, the well-known writer of the Horthy Era wrote the followings ironically and scornfully in 1941: "The university youth was warmongering, when everybody wanted the war. They were anti-Jewish, when the dark days made everybody anti-Semitic. They were counter-revolutionist with the biggest part of the country, when every Hungarian interest wanted the peaceful realizing of a restful and unified Hungarian revolution. They were in the legitimist wind and in the free electors' draught. They were irredentist, when everybody was. (...) They declared their

Turanian background, when similarly some older people made their Hungarian nationality conspicuous.” He thought that “the youth was always the ‘megaphone’ of the most popular ideas and feelings”.

From the above mentioned opinion of Dezső Szabó, the important conclusion of the Dissertation is that the historical circumstances and the older generations were responsible for the Turul's and its membership's mentality. The association's world view and ideology was suited to the Interwar Hungarian atmosphere, so the knowledge and understanding of this period become more obvious and easier by the Turul Association.

#### **IV. Presentations**

1. *A bajtársi egyesületek tevékenysége a Debreceni Egyetem (1921–1939)*. VI. Nemzetközi Hungarológiai Kongresszus, Debrecen (2006. augusztus). [The Activity of the Brother-in-Arms Societies at the University of Debrecen (1921–1939). Presentation]
2. *A bajtársi egyesületek szerepe a magyar társadalomban és az egyetemek életében a két világháború között*. V. Vajdasági Magyar TDK, Újvidék (2006. november). [The Role of the Brother-in-Arms Associations in the Hungarian Society and in the Life of the Universities between the Two World Wars. Presentation]
3. *A debreceni „Árpád” Bajtársi Egyesület története (1922–1943/44)*. XXVIII. Humántudományi OTDK, 1945 előtti magyar és egyetemes történelem szekció, Székesfehérvár (2007. április). [The History of the Árpád Brother-in-Arms Society of Debrecen. Presentation]
4. *A zsidókérdés és az egyetemi bajtársi egyesületek a két világháború közötti Magyarországon*. Tradíció és modernizáció Európában a XVIII–XX. században, Debrecen (2007. november). [The Jewish Question and the Brother-in-Arms Societies in Hungary between the Two World Wars. Presentation.]

#### **V. Publications**

1. A numerus clausus 1928. évi módosításának hatása Debrecenben. *Múltunk*, 2005/4. 42–75. Online: <http://www.polhist.hu/multunk/letoltes/kerepeszki.pdf>

2. Ifjúsági egyesületek a debreceni Tisza István Tudományegyetemen a két világháború között. In: *Közlemények a Debreceni Tudományegyetem történetéből IV.* Szerk. Hollósi Gábor. A Debreceni Egyetem Történelmi és Néprajzi Doktori Iskolájának kiadványa. Debrecen, 2006. 51–62.
3. A Debreceni Egyetemi Kör újjáalakulása és tevékenysége a második világháború után. *Szkhólion*, 2008/1. 27–43.
4. Adalékok a Turul Szövetség szolnoki kerületének megalakulásának körülményeihez. *Jászkunság*, 2008/3-4. 161–169.
5. A zsidókérdés és az egyetemi bajtársi egyesületek a két világháború közötti Magyarországon. In: *Tradíció és modernizáció Európában a XVIII–XX. században.* Szerk. Bodnár Erzsébet és Demeter Gábor. Hungarovox, Budapest, 2008. 224–237.
6. A Turul Szövetség debreceni kerületének megalakulása és működése. In: *Juvenilia II. Debreceni Bölcsész Diákkörösök Antológiája.* Szerk. Pete László. Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, Debrecen, 2008. 130–144.
7. Turul. *Rubicon*, 2009/1-2. 90–97.
8. A Turul, a diáktüntetések és a sajtó (Források). *RubicOnline*, a Rubicon internetes melléklete, 2009/1-2. [http://www.rubicon.hu/index.php?page=online\\_plusz](http://www.rubicon.hu/index.php?page=online_plusz)
9. A Turul Szövetség. In: *A magyar jobboldali hagyomány, 1900–1948.* Szerk. Romsics Ignác. Osiris Kiadó, Budapest, 2009. 341–376.