

Doctoral theses

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**History of the institution of deputy-regent
(1941–1944)**

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Introduction

On 19th February 1942 István Horthy, the elder son of the Regent, was elected as Deputy-Regent by the Hungarian Parliament. The establishment of the office of deputy-regent, the activity, role of the second highest public dignitary of the country has been a less known chapter of Hungarian political history so far.

Why was the new public position created? Was the Regent driven by dynastic ambition or by the intention to strengthen the existing constitutional arrangements when he initiated the establishment of the institution? What made István Horthy, who did not have major experience in public life, a suitable candidate for a high state office? What was the reason for the intense domestic political debate erupting in connection with the election, and what was behind the positions taken by the individual parties, political groups? What were the plans, ideas presented by the Deputy-Regent, and what expectations were placed on him? What was the actual weight, role of the new institution in political life? Why was the position considered so important earlier left unfilled after the death of István Horthy? Finally, what was the attitude of the wider public to all this, and why were legends surrounding the person of the Deputy-Regent, which often serve as a basis for judging him even today? The paper discussing the history of the institution of deputy-regent searches for answers to these questions.

In the examination of the history of the institution and the activity of István Horthy in office, sources are relatively abundant and scarce at the same time. The name of István Horthy is often mentioned in historical reviews of the era. The few sentences devoted to him, however, usually relate only to some aspects of his life, his professional career, sports achievements, rumours concerning his private life or the circumstances of his death, without dealing with his public life activity or the operation of his office in any detail. Diaries, memoirs of the contemporary actors of public life also mention István Horthy, the debates concerning him, his election as Deputy-Regent, and his death. These documents, however do not reveal much about his political role, the significance of his office, or his daily duties either. As the authors themselves also participated in the contemporary political struggles, they discuss the events quite subjectively. The numerous press sources and other protocol related documents draw only a rather formal picture of the Deputy-Regent, or reflect the positions taken by the groups debating with each other, and can be used only with strong source criticism.

In spite of the apparent abundance of sources, in fact sources are rather scarce with respect to the establishment and operation of the institution of deputy-regent, the activity of István Horthy in office, and his political initiatives, relations. Confidential steps, behind-the-scene discussions, due to the nature of the matter, were often not recorded in written documents. The relevant documents of official bodies were in part lost, destroyed at the end of the war. The source material available today is quite fragmented, scattered in various collections. Although with meticulous research the majority of the most important documents can be discovered or reconstructed, it is still difficult to outline every detail of the story.

The elder son of the Regent

István Horthy was born in 1904 in Pula. He attended school in Vienna and Baden, then, following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, he completed his education in Budapest. After obtaining his General Certificate of Education, he studied at József Nádor

Technical University and graduated as a mechanical engineer. After graduation he went to the United States of America for one year and worked in the Ford factory, first as a labourer, then as an engineer at the pilot plant in Detroit.

Returning to Hungary, he worked at MÁVAG, where due to his abilities and the influence of his family he rose quickly in the hierarchy: in 1935 he was promoted to assistant director, in 1937 to director, and in 1939 – at the age of 35 – he was appointed director general. As a well-known public figure, he had several social positions. He took part in the management of the Hungarian Polo Association, the Hungarian Athletics Club, the Hungarian Aero Club, the Miklós Horthy National Aviation Fund, the National Council for Tourism, the Hungarian Society for Transport Sciences, the Hungarian Society for Foreign Affairs and the Hungarian Scout Association.

István Horthy always tried to perform his increasingly important duties conscientiously. Slowly his formerly wild private life settled, in April 1940 he married Countess Ilona Edelsheim Gyulai. His social, public role gradually expanded further. Because of the prestige of his family, he was elected as a member of the Upper House for Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County. He had a new position, he was appointed president of MÁV. Through the management of the largest state-owned and at the same time military corporation, he became involved in governmental decision-making. In this capacity he was made under-secretary of state in June 1941. However, he was still not engaged in current politics and party affairs.

The political activity of István Horthy in that period was manifested in a kind of an intermediary role. The moderate pro-government or opposition circles tried to forward their views, questions, proposals with respect to certain delicate issues to the Regent with his help. In other cases, when for some reason he did not want to make an official statement, the Head of State himself also gave certain indications to the various political forces through his son. István Horthy played such an intermediary role in 1937, during the period of debates concerning the expansion of the powers of the regent. Many saw the expansion of the powers of the regent as a counterweight ensuring the protection of the parliamentary arrangements against the spread of the idea of a totalitarian state and the headway made by the domestic extreme right – which probably only strengthened even further with the introduction of secret ballot. Certain opposition circles, on the other hand, feared the excessive expansion – to almost royal power – of the powers of the regent. The hottest issue was the initiative concerning the right of the regent to appoint his successor, which some saw as an attempt to found a dynasty. István Horthy appeared at several events of the legitimist and the liberal-democrat camps. He assured the opposition politicians that the Regent wanted to use his increased powers only for fighting off extremism, and he would not try to get the throne, or block the way to a constitutional settlement of the question of royal succession in the future.

There was a similar situation at the end of 1938, when Prime Minister Béla Imrédy, enjoying the support of German diplomacy and the domestic extreme right, took steps to gradually develop a prime ministerial dictatorship. His initiative was opposed not only by the moderate opposition, but by the majority of his own governing party as well. But the „constitution-defending” forces were not unified, and the Regent did not want to have an open conflict without a proper explanation over the dismissal of Imrédy with the extremist forces, or the German leadership to which the country was indebted with respect to the revision. In secret, however, he continued to seek an opportunity to dismiss the Prime Minister. Through the mediation of his son he tried to make it clear to the forces opposing Imrédy that he expected of them a solution with which he could dismiss the Prime Minister without a major political storm. Subsequently, through the co-operation of the opposition and certain government circles, the Jewish origin of an ancestor of Imrédy came to light. This was an

appropriate pretext for making him resign, without allowing Germany to side with him, or the extreme right to organize large-scale demonstrations in order to keep him in office.

Following the German attack on Poland, and the Soviet occupation of Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia in September 1939, around 100 000 Polish soldiers and civilians fled to Hungary, many of whom, in spite of the protest by Germany, went on to Western states with the knowledge and assistance of the Hungarian authorities. The Regent in several cases took personal action to ensure the free movement of leading politicians and military officers. The Head of State expressed his intentions through the Minister for Home Affairs and the Adjutant-General, as well as the mediation of István Horthy. The young Horthy was in contact with several government officials and influential private persons who helped the Polish to get to Western Europe.

The political views of István Horthy crystallized by the end of the 1930s. From the great predecessors he regarded primarily the intellectual heritage of István Széchenyi as the one to be followed. His way of thinking was characterized by a nationalist attitude and an affinity to the idea of the state of St. Stephen. His conservative-liberal views were mixed with a pragmatist approach to the necessity of economic and social modernization. With respect to foreign policy he was a supporter of Western orientation. He regarded it as extremely important to maintain good relations with the Anglo-Saxon powers. He was well-known to be anti-German. He definitely rejected the totalitarian arrangements of Nazi Germany, and the German imperial ambition to establish a hegemony over the whole of Europe. He regarded the expansionist policy of the Third Empire as a permanent threat to Hungary. From this aspect he regarded the implementation of the revision with the help of Berlin as very unfortunate, only further increasing the exposure of the country to German influence.

A new factor in the power structure

The establishment of the institution of deputy-regent was first proposed by political forces surrounding Miklós Horthy in 1937, during the period of the expansion of the powers of the regent. They regarded it as an important step from the aspect of strengthening the position of the Head of State, his moderate conservative political line and the constitutional parliamentary arrangements of the country, and against the activation of the extreme right. According to the idea the introduction of the new office would have solved the question of head of state succession. For the time being, however, the relevant plans were widely received with political rejection, thus it could not be officially submitted to the Parliament. But the idea survived in the following years, several confidential documents, memoranda were written on the necessity of the establishment of the institution of deputy-regent and the possibilities of practical implementation. Those insisting on the introduction of the new office generally took the position that István Horthy would be the most suitable for the position. However, in the view of the Regent that step was not timely yet. Although he increasingly involved his son in the making of major political decision, for the time being he did not intend him to have such a high public position.

With the expansion of the war the Hungarian leadership was forced on a course set by the performance of the increasing German demands. They tried to retain the status of „armed neutrality” and the sympathy of the Anglo-Saxon world, but they did not dare to openly oppose the German economic, political and military expectations, they feared occupation, or that the extreme right would come to power with German help. In addition, they did not want to renounce the Hungarian territories that could have been recovered with the help of Berlin. The German attack on Yugoslavia and the German demand for Hungarian participation led to a serious political crisis. The attempt of Prime Minister Teleki to make the Hungarian

participation understandable and acceptable to the Western world failed, which led to the suicide of the Prime Minister.

The increasing indebtedness to the Third Empire and the lack of political force required for fighting off the domestic extremist forces put the settlement of the deputation and succession of the regent on the agenda again. Miklós Horthy started to make confidential inquiries about how the dominant political forces would receive the establishment of the institution of deputy-regent, and the nomination of his son to that position. The behind-the-scene discussions, however, were terminated in June 1941, because of the German attack on the Soviet Union.

In the first days the Hungarian government refused to enter the war, in spite of the pressure from German military circles, the domestic extreme right, the Army leadership and certain pro-government groups. On 26th June, however, Kassa suffered a severe air attack. Although the identity of the attackers could not be established, the Army Chiefs of Staff attributed the bombing to the Soviet air-force. Upon urging by the military leadership, the Regent regarded the event as a sufficient *casus belli*, approved the declaration of a state of war, and ordered the deployment of the Hungarian military force beyond the borders. István Horthy regarded the entry into the war against the Soviet Union as a blunder. Seeing the strength of the Anglo-Saxon powers, he did not believe in the quick and total victory of the Germans. In his view Hungary should have retained her military forces and her capacity to act, to be able to enforce her national objectives independently at the end of the war. Therefore he insisted on the withdrawal of the Hungarian forces participating in the military operations as soon as possible, and on the dismissal of the main supporters of the participation in the war, the Chief of the General Staff and the Minister of Defence.

The optimistic forecasts, according to which the main Soviet forces would be destroyed in 6 to 8 weeks, proved to be wrong. In addition to significant successes, the German and Hungarian troops also suffered sensitive losses. Unfavourable changes occurred in other theatres of war as well. There were more and more signs that the war would end not with the expected German victory, but with the victory of the allied forces, or with some kind of a compromise peace. As a result, the Hungarian government revised its position on the participation in the war. They were not ready to openly break with Berlin, only to perform the German demands less readily, without provoking them into occupying the country. They regarded it as important to maintain relations with the Western powers, and tried to make that compatible with the role of a „reluctant ally” forced to fight on the side of Germany. The Regent and his surroundings hoped that the Western powers, in the event of their victory, would be interested in maintaining the traditional European balance, and would appreciate the restrained Hungarian behaviour.

One of the first actions indicating a change in the direction of Hungarian politics was the dismissal of Henrik Werth, Chief of the General Staff. The Regent himself, who some months before, in the period of a seemingly invincible series of German victories shared the opinion of Werth in many respects, in the new situation regarded it as necessary to reduce the participation in the war. The newly appointed Chief of Staff, Ferenc Szombathelyi regarded the entry into the war against the Soviet Union as a strategic mistake, but once it had been made, he wanted to ensure that the country participated in the war with as few forces as possible. His position was that they had to prepare for a protracted war of uncertain outcome, which would by no means end with a total German victory, as the economic and military potential of the Western powers would sooner or later prevail.

István Horthy also played a role in the dismissal of Werth and the appointment of Szombathelyi. It was the young Horthy who called the attention of his father to the person of him after a visit to Kassa, during which he had a long conversation with him. Szombathelyi prepared a memorandum evaluating the situation, which was forwarded by István Horthy to

the Regent. The recommendation of his son and the memorandum convinced the Head of State that in the given situation Szombathelyi was the best person for the position of chief of staff.

In the field of domestic policy the further strengthening of the extreme right presented a serious problem. In the summer there was an attempt to create organizational unity, or at least close co-operation between the extreme right forces. The German leading circles regarded primarily Béla Imrédy and his party as a possible factor, and expected him to unite the extreme right. Prince Albrecht was also making preparations for a change of power, he tried to gather sufficient support to take the lead of the country in the event of a vacancy in the seat of the head of state. He established good relations with influential German leading circles, primarily the surroundings of Himmler, and had close political and financial links with the party of Imrédy, and with certain arrow-cross groups as well. By the end of the summer rumour had it that the Germans would soon force the crowning of Albrecht. For the time being Berlin did not want to interfere with Hungarian domestic policy in a radical manner, however, should it become necessary, obviously that option was also considered.

In the middle of November the Regent became ill and was forced to take a longer rest. That raised the question of what would happen if the Regent, due to his old age, illness or unexpected death was no longer able to perform the duties of head of state. At that time Hitler took the position that until Regent Horthy was alive, on the German side there would be no direct interference with the power status quo in Hungary. In the event of the death of the Regent, however, Berlin was expected to do everything to help to raise such a person to power who would be suitable for them and would fulfil their wishes without reservations, possibly even Prince Albrecht.

In the given situation, in order to protect the sovereignty of the country, to preserve the existing constitutional parliamentary arrangements, to maintain the relations with the Western Anglo-Saxon powers, and to ensure the succession of the regent, Miklós Horthy made an official proposal for the establishment of the institution of deputy-regent. He did not name any candidate, but it quickly became well-known that he intended the position for his elder son.

The idea of the Regent to make his son his deputy and also his successor led to intense domestic political debates. István Horthy was seriously criticized from almost all sides. The conservative and liberal circles reproached him mainly for his inexperience in public life, lack of political prestige and his former wild lifestyle. The extreme right lashed out at him for his well-known anti-German attitude, Western orientation and liberal views. The debate, however, was actually not about the person of István Horthy, but about what he represented, personified in the eyes of the various groups in political life.

The legitimist circles and the clergy rejected through him the intention to make the institution of regent permanent, which would have been a serious obstacle to the return of Ottó Habsburg later on to take the throne. In addition, the leadership of the Catholic Church feared that with another Reformed public dignitary in office, the social influence of, and the moral and financial support for the Protestant Churches would increase, and the Catholic Church would lose significant positions. The civil opposition, the liberal and democratic circles saw István Horthy as a trustee of the existing Christian-conservative, limited parliamentary system, therefore they expressed serious reservations against him. The extreme right regarded him as one of the main obstacles to their own power ambitions and to even closer co-operation with Germany, and did everything to discredit him politically. Many rejected the plan to elect István Horthy because they suspected an underlying dynastic ambition. They regarded it as the first step for the Horthy family to get the throne later on. The establishment of the institution of deputy-regent, however, was justified not by family ambitions, but by obvious political realities.

Election of a deputy-regent

The election of a deputy-regent with the right of succession – especially as the presumptive candidate to the office was István Horthy – was received with certain reservations not only in opposition circles, but among the political forces supporting the government as well. Bárdossy, who himself did not agree with the ideas of the Regent in every respect, tried to ensure primarily that the legislation would be passed by the Parliament with as little opposition as possible. Therefore, to avoid a more serious political confrontation, he omitted the right of succession from the bill. According to the provisions, a deputy-regent was to be elected only at the express request of the Regent. If the Head of State nominated someone, the Parliament voted on the election of only the named person. If the Regent did not exercise his right to nominate, the Parliament could put forward a candidate. In the event of the incapacity of the Regent, the deputy-regent should be empowered to act with the full powers of head of state. The only difference was that, contrary to the Regent, he was not entitled to recommend a successor, and was not exempted from accountability.

Although István Horthy was not an official candidate, his person and the bill became inseparably connected. A significant part of the political elite increasingly accepted that under the given circumstances the young Horthy would be the best person for the position. His election could contribute to the strengthening of the political line represented by the Regent, the protection of the parliamentary arrangements, and the prevention of the extreme right from coming to power constitutionally. Theoretically his well-known Western orientation, anti-Nazi attitude and ambition to reduce the participation in the war made him suitable for a kind of an integrating role, the unification, mobilization of the moderate political forces. At the same time it was also obvious that he was the only person with such a political attitude, against the election of whom as deputy-regent Germany would not take open action, as she had important interests in maintaining good relations with the Regent. The nomination of anyone else would only have divided the parliamentary forces even more, and led to a serious domestic political crisis. Most of the members of Parliament regarded the election of the young Horthy as an expression of loyalty to the Regent, therefore in return for certain constitutional guarantees, primarily in the event of leaving the succession open, they were ready to support it with more or less enthusiasm.

The extreme right saw exactly that the stabilization of the existing power-political arrangements and the political position of the Regent was at stake in the election of a deputy-regent. Imrédy and Szálasi knew well that the German leading circles had serious reservations concerning István Horthy, and thought that even if the Third Empire did not wish to take open action against the son of the Regent, it probably expected it from the domestic extreme right forces. In Berlin they really had a bad opinion of István Horthy. He was seriously criticized for his pro-Western stance and his relations with Jewish circles. Numerous German politicians thought that his election as deputy-regent could cause serious problems for Germany. Hungary, however, although not without any opposition, met most of the economic and military expectations of the Third Empire, therefore Berlin was not interested in a political confrontation with the Hungarian leadership. Thus the Germans took a wait-and-see position on the matter of the election of a deputy-regent.

During the Parliamentary debate of the bill on the election of a deputy-regent, the Imrédyists and the arrow-cross party fiercely attacked the government, the existing political arrangements and the proposals concerning the election of István Horthy. Practically a press war broke out as a result of the act of the extreme right in the Parliament. In response, the pro-government and liberal newspapers launched harsh attacks against the extreme right.

While the Imrédyists tried to take action against the establishment of the institution of deputy-regent primarily in the Parliament and through the press, the arrow-cross party launched an attack using the means of street politics in order to put the government into an impossible situation, to discredit the representatives of the moderate conservative elite in power. Following the submission of the bill, at the instruction of Szálasi the arrow-cross party started a planned whispering propaganda campaign. The party activists spread all kinds of slanders about the leading personalities of political life, the members of the government and István Horthy everywhere, at events, offices, plants, universities, barracks, markets and pubs.

Gyula Sütő, an arrow-cross member of Parliament, launched a nasty attack against the policy of the Teleki and Bárdossy governments in an open letter. The writing was widely distributed in the form of illegally produced leaflets. It was sent to all members of Parliament, higher level public officials, county and town leaders. The arrow-cross party circulated three additional leaflets as well. In these the emphasis was on discrediting István Horthy, and indirectly the Horthy family. They used a formerly unimaginable vulgar tone with respect to the son of the Regent, an under-secretary of state of the government. The authors did not even attempt to keep up the appearance of a political debate or disclosure, but they tried to stir up passions with obviously baseless allegations, defamatory words. The leaflets of the arrow-cross party urged the people to fight against the ambitions of the government, even with arms, and to prevent István Horthy from becoming deputy-regent.

The flood of leaflets caused a huge uproar. Most of the political public opinion, the majority of the newspapers, among them even some papers close to the extreme right, definitely condemned the arrow-cross propaganda of objectionable tone. The home affairs leadership regarded the leaflet campaign as a public security problem. The authorities found not only the content of the leaflets to be dangerous, but the organization, efficiency of distribution as well. The police took firm action and solved the case quickly. At the central office of the arrow-cross party they seized the equipment used for the production of the leaflets, and a lot of undistributed leaflets as well. They arrested several members of the arrow-cross party, and action was taken against several extremist members of Parliament as well.

The extreme right discrediting campaign failed to achieve its objective, in fact it had the opposite effect. The moderate political forces were shocked by the aggressiveness of the action of the arrow-cross party, the open attempt to overthrow the government, to stir up the street, to politically mobilize the university youth, the staff of officials and army officers. All that urged the dominant conservative, liberal and democratic forces to take firm action to protect the domestic political status quo, to strengthen the position of the Regent and the government. The election of István Horthy as deputy-regent was supported even by those who formerly had serious reservations against him. The government tried to make use of this response and put the matter of the election of a deputy-regent in such a light that anyone not accepting István Horthy was actually an enemy of the constitutional regime itself and the national ambitions.

The election of a deputy-regent was held on 19th February at the joint session of both Houses of the Parliament. As the Regent did not exercise his right to nominate, the Parliament had to put forward a candidate. The nomination sheet for István Horthy was signed by 422 members of Parliament in stead of the minimally required 150. His election required a qualified majority vote of the 483 members present, which the son of the Regent received already during the nomination procedure. In the end István Horthy was elected as Deputy Head of State without a formal vote, by acclamation. Upon taking the oath and the immediate enactment of the legislation, the Deputy-Regent entered office on the same day.

The moderate political circles noted with satisfaction that with the inauguration of István Horthy they managed to consolidate the domestic political situation that became

strained in the past few weeks, before the development of a more serious general crisis. In the domestic political battles surrounding the election the extreme right, the parties of Imrédy and Szálasi suffered a serious loss of prestige, somewhat weakened, and were driven to relative passivity for months. The political position of Prime Minister Bárdossy also weakened. Due to his foreign policy blunders, his willingness to co-operate with the extreme right and his ambitions to expand the prime ministerial powers, he already lost the trust of the Regent by the end of 1941. Many blamed him for the political storm surrounding the election of the Deputy-Regent, thus he was soon forced to resign. His successor, Miklós Kállay belonged to the Anglo-Saxon oriented group of the political elite. He regarded it as the most important to preserve the constitutional regime and relative sovereignty, and to maintain the economic and military strength of the country. In his view co-operation with Germany was unavoidable, however, on certain issues he opposed the wishes of Berlin, and took steps to establish relations with the Western powers in secret. The appointment of Kállay was supported by the Deputy-Regent as well. They were on good personal terms, and their views on strengthening and preserving the existing regime, on co-operation with the Western powers and on retaining the military forces had much in common.

The second highest public dignitary of the country

The Deputy-Regent was helped in the performance of his daily duties by two newly established institutions: the Secretarial Office and Military Office. The scope of activities of the Secretarial Office included the management of the correspondence of the Deputy-Regent, the processing of the petitions, applications received by him, the compilation of the background material for each case, maintaining relations with governmental bodies, state institutions, the organization of audiences and protocol-related events. The coordination of events related to the army and inquiries into issues relating to the military were performed by the Military Office. The head of the office also acted as an aide-de-camp and a military advisor to István Horthy.

After his entry into office the Deputy-Regent performed mainly representative duties. He participated in state, social and military events, relieving the Regent from many exhausting public appearances. For the time being he was not given major political assignments. Upon his election, from the outset he was intended to be not a practicing politician, but rather a security factor strengthening the position of the Regent, and a potential leading figure of a possible later change in political direction. The surroundings of the Head of State, in a certain sense deliberately, held him back from making political statements, so that he would not have to commit himself publicly to the German ally and the emergency war measures. Many thought that this held-back manner would gain him some political capital later on. It could reinforce the trust of the domestic moderate circles in him and increase his acceptability to the Western allies, which could have a significant role in the event of a withdrawal from the war, or in the settlement after the war.

The Deputy-Regent did not have a scope of activities precisely specified by law, his relations with governmental bodies and other state institutions were not regulated in detail. Therefore he usually only requested information on issues raising his interest from the competent ministries, supreme authorities, and recommended to their attention certain aspects for the handling of individual cases. Nonetheless, his inquiries and proposals naturally had a major influence on the development of the given case.

He had discussions on several occasions with the competent offices on the current and future possibilities for the development of transportation and the infrastructure, the situation of the public utilities of the capital, the tasks related to the electrification of Székely land, the

planning of road and canal construction, as well as river control works to be carried out after the end of the war. He regarded it as an important task to help the further education of talented but poor youngsters, the operation of schools, colleges training the next generation of public servants and public officials. He placed great emphasis on preserving the independence, relative diversity and moderate tone of the domestic mass communication, the press, the radio, against an increasingly open pressure from Germany and the expropriation attempts of the domestic extreme right. He played a role in the appointment of Antal Náray, a person of moderate attitude, committed to the nation and a supporter of Western orientation, as the new head of the Hungarian News Wire Agency and the Hungarian Radio.

István Horthy insisted on the reorganization of the state security agencies, the military and civilian secret services, and on the harmonization of their activities. He urged the appointment of new leaders who were unconditionally loyal to the Regent and would be ready to support even a change in political direction, if necessary. He regarded it as important to strengthen the civilian control over the military secret services, and the political control over the investigating authorities. He supported the attempts to negotiate with the Western powers in secret. He requested and received information on such steps from the Minister of Foreign Affairs. In several cases he had personal discussions with the diplomats, public figures sent by the government to neutral countries in order to establish relations.

The election of the Deputy-Regent was regarded by many as a kind of a preparatory step, so that in the event of a possible turn in the course of the war there would be a person of appropriate prestige in the country who did not side with the Germans in the previous pro-German period, behind whom the moderate political forces could align. Although István Horthy was not an unanimously popular figure in Hungarian public life, and had by no means a prestige comparable to that of his father, in the eyes of many he seemed to be suitable for becoming the key figure of a withdrawal from the war. The conclusion drawn from the political compromise reached at the time of his election was that in the event of a decisive turn the ambitions represented by him would receive sufficient social support.

The decision that István Horthy would also do active service in the 2nd Hungarian army going to the front was already made at the time of the election of the Deputy-Regent. He wanted to gain more serious military experience, form comradeships in order to reduce the distrust of the staff of officers against him. He wanted to have personal information on the situation of the Hungarian troops sent to the front, to allow him to make more weighty statements on military issues in the possession of factual knowledge, and to influence the decisions related to the participation in the war. Miklós Horthy supported the decision of his son. In his view it was only natural that the Deputy-Regent was among the first ones to perform his patriotic duty and participated in armed combat. Many, however, disagreed with the active service of the Deputy-Regent. Numerous pro-government and opposition politicians, public figures were opposed to István Horthy going to the front, especially as he wanted to serve not at the army staff, but requested to be assigned to a fighting unit, a fighter plane squadron.

After two months of domestic preparation István Horthy flew to the Eastern front, to the Hungarian troops fighting at the River Don. During his military service he did not demand or accept any favouritism, special treatment. He tried to avoid even the appearance that the regulations binding on others did not apply to him. He had his share of combat missions. Similarly to the other pilots in his squadron, he lived under simple conditions, he shared all the hardships of life on the front with them. His correct conduct, direct manner, comradeship won him the respect and esteem of both his co-officers and the troops. At dawn on 6th August István Horthy and his companion became engaged in air combat with an enemy formation superior in number, and the Deputy-Regent shot down a Soviet fighter plane. Both Hungarian planes were also hit in the air combat, but they could return to their base.

István Horthy went to the front as a fighter pilot, but he also performed duties associated with his position as deputy-regent. He gathered information on the general situation of the 2nd Hungarian army, collected experience regarding the conditions, activities of the troops. He held discussions with the representatives of the army command, and the military chiefs arriving on a tour of inspection of the front. Although these meetings were primarily of protocol nature, the opinion, proposals, requests of the Deputy-Regent obviously had a weight, and could not be put aside without an acceptable answer, explanation or promise.

István Horthy received weekly summaries from the army staff on the development of the military operations, the suffered losses. He made personal visits to several fighting units. On the basis of the received documents and his own experiences he prepared written reports to the Regent. In these he mentioned, in addition to the evaluation of the performance of the troops, the problems, irregularities making difficult the situation of the army, hindering the success of the military operations. In addition to the official reports, he sent confidential private letters to his father about his personal impressions of the front, and the details of delicate issues. He stated that Hungary was already carrying a much greater burden in the war than she could afford, considering her national objectives. With reference to the heavy losses he emphatically requested the Regent not to send additional fighting troops to the front. He pointed out that most of the officers were unsuited for performing their duties both professionally and humanly. Because of the serious military situation and the internal problems of the army he again raised the responsibility of the Minister of Defence, overly committed to Germany, and insisted on his dismissal as soon as possible. The Deputy-Regent also spoke up for the Jewish labour camp inmates sent to the front, because of the inhuman conditions and the cruel treatment. He proposed that they should be returned home as soon as possible, and used for work at home in stead.

The death of the Deputy-Regent

In the middle of August the wife of the Deputy-Regent arrived at the front to serve as a volunteer nurse at a military hospital in Kiev, and she requested her husband to visit her because she had news for him from home. István Horthy requested a few days of leave and flew to Kiev. When he talked to his wife, he had a gloomy view of the war prospects. His experiences gained at the front convinced him that no good could be expected from the German side, because in the eyes of Berlin the status of ally meant making use of the human and material resources of the country to fullest possible extent. He decided that upon his return he would try to prompt his father to take action. Feeling the strong pressure from the extreme right, and experiencing the illusions of the staff of officers and considerable groups of the political elite concerning the war, however, he did not see much hope of a quick radical turn.

István Horthy was not pleased by the news he learnt from his wife that at home the official decision had already been made to end his fighter pilot service, and that from then on he should only perform duties associated with his position as deputy-regent at the front. Members of the government, members of Parliament and public figures had urged for weeks that the Deputy-Regent should be ordered home. Prime Minister Kállay requested the Regent on several occasions to call home István Horthy. However, in the view of the Head of State it was not justified for the time being. Finally, Kállay took the decision upon himself. Through a Cabinet resolution he ordered the termination of the fighter pilot service of the Deputy-Regent with immediate effect, and his transfer to the army staff. The official orders with respect to that, however, arrived at the front only after a delay of almost one week.

On 19th August Colonel-General Jány, commander of the 2nd army, informed István Horthy that his fighter pilot service ended. The young Horthy responded that, besides his duties as deputy-regent, he wanted to fly a few more combat missions. Jány did not object to that. The transfer of the Deputy-Regent to the army staff was not prepared anyway. No action was taken to issue the relevant orders, to perform the required administrative tasks. By the evening of 19th August the direct superiors of István Horthy received no official notice from the army command informing them about the departure of the Deputy-Regent, and the concrete tasks related to it.

At dawn on 20th August István Horthy, together with his companion, went on a routine mission. It was his 25th combat flight. They escorted a reconnaissance plane over enemy territory. Flying at low altitude, he tried to line up behind the reconnaissance plane to be escorted by making a very sharp turn. During the sharp turn made at low speed he went into a spin and began to dive. After several rotations the pilot seemed to be able to regain control over the plane, but he was too low to avoid the crash. The pilot lost his life at the moment of impact. According to the findings of the official investigation the accident was caused by a combination of several factors. The well-known poor flight characteristics of the Italian made plane, the low flight altitude, and a momentary loss of concentration, a misjudgement by the pilot all contributed to the incident.

The news of the death of the Deputy-Regent caused a general shock. His tragic death touched many of even those who did not especially sympathize with him. His death was the first thing to cause general concern in the population regarding the fate of the army and the outcome of the war. News had been received of losses before, however, they affected in most cases only the next-of-kins of the deceased and injured. The death of the Deputy-Regent, on the other hand, affected everyone to a great extent. Not only because he was the son of the Head of State, himself holding a high public position, but also because it proved wrong the earlier confident war reports, optimistic statements by politicians, calling attention to the tragically high price of the participation in the war, the heavy losses to be expected. Many asked the question what fate awaited the simple soldiers if the second highest public dignitary of the country could not be saved from a sad end.

The death of István Horthy was surrounded by all kinds of theories and speculations from the first moment. From the numerous urban legend theories everyone could choose the most convincing, depending on their political attitude, social ties or individual sympathies. Those who saw him primarily as a moderate, anti-German, Western-oriented politician, suspected an assassination organized by the Germans or the domestic extreme right. Those, on the other hand, who regarded him as a spoiled playboy, were convinced that his death was caused by his own irresponsibility, blunder.

An unfilled office

After the death of István Horthy intense political debates erupted. Due to the vacancy in the seat of the deputy-regent the issue of the deputation and succession of the head of state was put on the agenda again. The delicate compromise reached half a year before as a result of long negotiations fell apart. The radical nationalist groups in the circles of the Regent launched a campaign to crown the two-year-old son of the Deputy-Regent killed in action, naturally the Regent would have continued to exercise power in his name. The news that the new presumptive candidate to the vacant position was the younger son of Miklós Horthy was also widely spread. Miklós Horthy Jr. worked earlier as Hungarian Ambassador to Brazil, but he had to return home upon the entry of the South-American states into the war on the side of the USA.

However, most of the political forces firmly opposed both the filling of the throne, and the nomination of another family member as deputy-regent, thereby making the office of head of state quasi-hereditary in the Horthy family. Not only the legitimists, but certain groups of the conservative opposition supporting the free election of the king, as well as most of the liberal, smallholder and social democratic politicians rejected such intentions. They wished to postpone the final settlement of the exercising of the power of head of state (the filling of the throne or the changing of the constitutional form of government) until after the war.

The political debates erupting around the issue of succession were watched by the domestic extreme right with relative passivity. After the political defeat suffered during the election of the Deputy-Regent neither party wanted to have an open confrontation with the government. In their view Berlin did not attach special significance to the matter either. No indications were received from Germany that could have clearly oriented the behaviour of the Imrédysts and the arrow-cross party. After the death of István Horthy Prince Albrecht tried to make steps to obtain the vacant office. The German leadership, however, did not want to take open action to support the power ambitions of Albrecht.

The position taken by the Regent on the disputed issues was that he was a firm supporter of the monarchy, in his view the filling of the throne was not timely yet, and he did not plan to crown his grandson either. After the end of the war the country could decide freely who should be the monarch. However, he left the possibility of the nomination of a new deputy-regent open. He did not initiate an immediate election, but he considered that his son Miklós could possibly get the position later on. The Regent insisted that the Parliament should pass legislation in memory of István Horthy killed in action. The legislation provided that the name and figure of the Deputy-Regent should be immortalized in memorials and in the names of institutions, authorized his descendants to use the title of Serene Highness, and the state undertook the obligation to provide proper education for his son. The inclusion of a high public role and the education for that in the wording of the legislation could be used later on as terms of reference to secure some high state position for István Horthy Jr. after some years.

The propaganda popularizing the family of the Regent peaked in 1943. By that time the cult surrounding István Horthy also took shape. The media, by separating his person from his concrete political or military activity, slowly turned him into a legendary figure, whose credibility and qualities were made unquestionable by his death in action. He was used as an example that it was not always a spectacular victory, but a self-sacrificing effort for the country that made a man and a country great. His person served primarily as a symbol of national unity, solidarity extending across social barriers, and committed patriotism.

There were numerous youth, cultural, sports and charity organizations, institutions bearing his name. Across the country streets, squares, in some towns districts, housing estates were named after him. The publications about his life, in appreciation of his activity, dozens of major biographies, memoirs, photo albums and numerous small booklets of a few pages played a significant role in the development of his cult. The Post issued a commemorative stamp with his portrait, and his photo taken in pilot dress uniform was distributed in the form of a postcard. Several institutions, bodies, social organizations had paintings made of the Deputy-Regent for their offices. Great attention was paid to commemorate him in public spaces. Although the central memorial planned in Budapest was finally not erected because of the development of the war situation, sculptures were unveiled in his honour in Szolnok, Siófok, Székesfehérvár and other towns. His features were immortalized in about 50 sculptures and reliefs.

In his life István Horthy was seen as a prospective leading figure of a withdrawal from the war and the personal guarantee of the continuity of the existing political arrangements. And in his death he became the symbol of all that. He became the personification of the

values, ambitions of the Christian conservative elite governing the country, free from appeasement and blunders, symbolizing the best side of the regime.

The filling of the vacant position of deputy-regent was not initiated by the Regent later on. The Secretarial Office and the Military Office were dissolved. The possible nomination of Miklós Horthy Jr. was not mentioned officially. The younger son of the Regent played a kind of an intermediary, conciliatory role between the moderate pro-Western circles and the Head of State. It was easier to contact the Regent through him, circumventing the rigid rules of official protocol and political etiquette. He was soon elected by the leadership of Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County as a member of the Upper House, to the vacant seat of his brother. However, no qualities of head of state were attributed to him, and even his father requested him to perform only confidential background duties.

After longer preparation Miklós Horthy Jr. received an official position under the Regent, and a separate Office was established for him. His activity was aimed primarily at coordinating the initiatives, actions related to seeking a way out of the war, and at serving as a link between the government and the Head of State. The position, outside the government structure and without clearly specified powers, ensured him a considerable scope of action with respect to confidential matters, and thereby indirectly also expanded the possibilities of the Regent for action. With the assistance of Miklós Horthy Jr., through the office later called only as the „pull-out office”, the Regent continuously monitored the development of the secret armistice negotiations and the preparation of peace, and could contact various anti-German political circles.

Conclusion

The institution of deputy-regent established in February 1942 and expected by many with high hopes, due to the circumstances could not play a dominant role in Hungarian political history, in the fate of the country in the war. Due to the government strategy of wait-and-see of the time and the unexpected death of István Horthy, its wide powers, constitutional prestige and potential possibilities for action remained unutilized. After the death of the Deputy-Regent the office was never filled again. On the one hand, because the position was in effect tailor-made to the person of István Horthy, and the role, with the same contents, could not be taken by anyone else, not even the other son of the Regent. On the other hand, because another election would have led to serious domestic political debates again, upsetting the public life and dividing the pro-government and opposition forces supporting the political line represented by the Head of State, or at least accepting it as a temporary compromise.

In the view of Miklós Horthy and his surroundings the prestige of the Regent, the cult developing around the Deputy-Regent killed in action, and the confidential activity of Miklós Horthy Jr., performed in the background, were a better solution for the protection of the Parliamentary arrangements, a successful withdrawal from the war and the preservation of the regime for after the war than another election of a deputy-regent involving intense debates and unforeseeable consequences.

The institution of deputy-regent and the figure of István Horthy were surrounded by myths already during World War II. Many projected on him their opinion of the Horthy-regime, and judged his behaviour, role, the activity of his office on the basis of that. The debates about him were in fact clashes between various power ambitions, foreign policy concepts, ideological directions, and government strategies. The opposing parties often tried to give credibility to their own political views by referring to him, making him an example. The István Horthy cult developing during the war had a political function. It was primarily not

about the person of the Deputy-Regent, but it served rather as a propaganda tool to stabilize the regime, strengthen the prestige of the Regent, and justify the activity of the government.

In the years following World War II the former political elite generally referred to the Deputy-Regent as the symbol of the moral and political stance, progressiveness, will to act of the national conservative forces. In the view of many the events would have taken a different turn if at the end of the war István Horthy had been at the side of his father, and the Regent had transferred the power to him at the right moment, to allow him to act quickly and firmly. After the development of the left dictatorship the judgement on all elements, each representative of the Horthy-era was annihilating. István Horthy was presented as a shallow puppet of the regime, who became the victim of the lack of conscience, thirst for power of his own class, his own family. By that time even his Western orientation and civil mentality were to be condemned.

After the change of regime the fabricated presentations were gradually ousted from the specialized sciences. However, the highly politicized discussion of his role, activity, the circumstances of his death, the myth surrounding his person, and the symbolic talk in connection with him are far from disappearing from public thinking. At best, compared to the former one-sided presentations, the various legends, historical interpretations arguing with each other are equally accepted. The institution of deputy-regent, and the person of István Horthy in many cases is still only a suitable symbol, under the pretext of which the past and present, traditions, values and current politics, the attitude to history and party sympathies are debated, in an irrational mix.