

BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
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(ABSTRACT)**

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**THE OUTSTANDING ACTORS OF THE MILITARY TRADITION PRESERVING
IN HARGHITA COUNTY: THE TRADITIONAL HUSSARS**

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Keywords: tradition keeping, military tradition keeping, Hussar movement, self-image and identity, historical reenactment, commemoration, invented tradition, custom, representation, use of symbols, Hussar costume.

After the period of communism in Romania, the opportunities for Hungarian traditional activities increased and gradually festivals, folk customs and events emerged, in which the public experience and representation of national identity is given a prominent role. Ethnographers and anthropologists have always attached a prominent role to these activities, which they have tried to place and analyse in a pragmatic framework using the method of custom research.

My interest was aroused by the activities of the social groups of traditionalists who are involved in military heritage in Harghita County. These individuals and their associations are involved in the traditional Hussar movement through their activities. As members of ethnic minorities living in Romania, they are linked to and perpetuate the image of the Hussar, a prominent figure of Hungarian culture. The hussar is a military unit belonging to the light cavalry unit, which also had its historical antecedents in Harghita County.

In the course of my thesis, I will give a broad overview of the history of the Szekler-Hungarian Hussars, which interests me mainly from an ethnographic point of view. I will try to map the extent to which certain facts and events have influenced the members of the society, their identity and which historical events and elements are still present in the military tradition of today.

The members of the Szekler society have always attached great importance to horses and horse-keeping. This form of tradition is also connected to the horses. This phenomenon is a reinterpretation and actualisation of an old social role and military tradition, which I analyse and interpret with the help of invented traditions, historical reenactment studies and the theoretical background of custom research.

The number of traditional Hussar units is gradually increasing in the area I am researching, in Harghita County. In addition to their traditional activities, it is important for these groups to operate as formal, legally registered institutions. The initial procedures of the movement date back 35 years. Since that period, this form of traditionalism has changed a lot, but I believe that I have been able to get a sense of their initial objectives and activities, while examining their current activities. I have carried out an analysis of the present, because

this type of traditional activity is still going on today and is part of the present, which is why I believe that these manifestations can be well described, analysed and presented.

My fieldwork followed the observation method, supplemented by semi-structured individual and focus group interviews. My research approach was heavily influenced by my theoretical knowledge of this subject. In order to gain a better understanding and insight into the currently active traditional associations of the county with a historical past, which also served on horseback, I used a mixed research methodology. The events and activities associated with the traditional Hussars are rich in visual and representational elements, so I documented their activities with photographs and videos during my fieldwork.

In the course of my research I reviewed the etymology of the word *hussar* and tried to interpret the phenomenon with the help of the appropriate theoretical background. I also benefited from the context of the literature related to my topic in my choice of research methods.

During my research period, I also thought it important to reflect on the fact that the initial steps of the movement are linked to a specific post-communist situation, which has an impact on the development of the Szekler self-image and identity. The figure of the Hungarian Hussar is a cultural heritage, since 2017 is Hungarikum¹. The figure of the Hussars can therefore be considered a Hungarian national symbol and has been a dominant part of high and popular culture and folklore not only in the past, but also today. In the course of my research, I also considered it a fundamental task to gain and visualize the levels at which the hussar as a folklore element can be understood. Legends, anecdotes, music and dance folklore, gastronomic elements, visual and material culture, as well as children's folklore are all linked to the figure of the hussar.

Traditional Hussars perform activities in Harghita County in their traditional military costumes. In my work I focused on the changes in the historical Hussar costumes and on the uniforms worn by the actors of military traditionalism today. I was interested in how their current attire relates to the historical Hussars' attire, what the similarities/differences are, and I also investigated who and how create these uniforms.

I reviewed the early days of the movement, and then examined the active traditional Hussar groups, one by one. At the moment of the conclusion of my research, in March 2025, it can be said that there are 10 traditional hussar units operating in Harghita county, whose operational history, customs and events I have also mapped. Based on my fieldwork

¹<https://www.hungarikum.hu/en/content/hungarian-hussar> (viewed 01/03/2025)

experience, I estimate the number of active traditional hussars in the county at 130. I also examined the virtual representations of the activities of traditional Hussar associations.

I was also interested to know who are the people who are involved in this traditional activity, so in addition to using qualitative methods, I also felt it necessary to compile a questionnaire to collect quantitative data about the traditional Hussars. In this part of the research, I wanted to gain a better understanding of their demographic backgrounds, their national identity, their associations and their consumption habits.

The activity of the traditional Hussars is not only present in Harghita County, as the movement has both international (for example: In Hungary, in Germany, in Poland, etc.) and Romanian parallels. The activity of the traditional Hussars of Harghita County is closely connected with the projects of the traditional Hussars of Mures and Covasna Counties, so I will also mention the Hussar troops of these counties in my thesis.

The movement can be described as a masculine traditionalist activity, in which women are involved in a small number. I also examined the situation of female traditional hussars in the county in a case study. During the period of my research, I met and interviewed six women traditional hussars from different associations.

In my interpretations I tried to look at the movement from several levels and planes, so I tried to examine the social and cultural role of the traditional Hussars' associations, which are still active today, using an interdisciplinary theoretical approach. My answers to the questions raised in my research, my novel findings and conclusions are summarised in the following theses:

1. In Harghita County, there is a wide range of equestrian and hussar programmes, which have the undisguised aim of promoting equestrian culture. These activities are supported at local level by local sponsors, organisations and municipalities, as well as by the Harghita County Council. The operation and spread of the movement is also supported by grants from Hungary.
2. One of my basic working hypotheses was that in the years following the regime change, in the uncertainty years and the absence of compulsory military service (which was abolished in 2007), Szekler men felt the need to reach back to a stable image that had a significant role in Szekler social history. And therefore chose the brave and prominent figure of the glorious past, the hussar (and hussar activities) as an identity-strengthening and community-building symbol. Since the inhabitants of the county were already familiar with this *element*, thanks to the martial past or even folklore, the members of the community could identify

with the chosen symbol, the idea of Hussarism, and could emotionally connect with it, and this is how the movement was consolidated and spread in Harghita County.

3. Also at the beginning of my research period, I assumed that in the absence of compulsory conscription, it might be important to experience virtue and camaraderie, which is why men engage in traditional Hussar activities. I believe that this hypothesis has been confirmed, since camaraderie and a sense of belonging to the masculine community are also important in traditional military activities, as are the equestrian skill and speed competitions, which involve disciplinary requirements and training. The imitation of historical battle scenes and the holding of living history lessons can also be linked to the image of the military of the past. But my research also shows that half of the traditional Hussars have actually served in the military.
4. It is important for traditional Hussars to live and represent their identity in public spaces. They do so at many celebrations and events, with parades and demonstrations rich in visual elements. Their actions are often theatrical and sublime, and there is also a sense of strategic, movement-like, conscious ambition behind them.
5. Not only do today's leisure hussars keep up with calendar customs, religious and historical festivals and commemorations, but they also create new occasions for celebrations and gatherings, and create invented traditions to entertain and educate themselves and the public. Through their new events, they prevent national traditions from being eroded or their transmission from one generation to the next from being interrupted.
6. The image of the Hussars can also be a cultural heritage, folklore element, Hungarian national symbol, commemorative figure and part of the nation-building effort. Both positive and negative images and stories are associated with the Hussars within the genres of folklore, sometimes the figure of the Hussar and the Hussar way of life is presented as an idealised image, while in other cases it is presented in a derogatory context.
7. Historical reenactments can help to revive a nation's battles, to preserve and perhaps transform collective memory, but they can also symbolise a sense of nostalgia for members of a lost community. Many traditional actors believe that by imagining themselves in the past, trying to relive and reenact historical events,

they gain a better understanding and knowledge of history. They imagine and try to relive and reenact what a battle scene, a horse pilgrimage or a past life on horseback might have been like.

8. The literature on historical reenactments emphasises that reconstructions in the present allow variations between the historical and the reenacted events. The possibility of this variation, I believe, also appear in their military dress. Historical authenticity is important to them when ordering the costumes, but comfort is also substantial for them, so they 'update' their uniforms to the present.
9. Together with their presence in costume, their parades, their use of symbols, their commemorative rites, they operate and animate a specific national consciousness. By wearing (or wanting to wear) a uniform that resembles the costume of the historical Hussars, they link historical events of the past with the present. They revive and incorporate the events of the past into the present and are thus able (by reenacting historical events and imitating battle scenes) to blur the boundaries of time.
10. In my work, I tried to map the social and cultural reality through the study of customs and the specificity of their events. Traditional Hussars bring certain parts of the past into the present and relive it in a reimagined form, endowing it with elements of identity. The Hussars I have studied are (or can be) shaping and defining actors of culture in their local environments. They have a prominent part and role in the societies in which they live, and their activities are a resource in these communities.
11. Historical reenactments can also be a means of reconciliation through their regular repetition and recollection, as the public experience of collective identity in community, repeated several times a year, can help to process historical traumas. These reenactments and reconstructions can have an affirming function for viewers who speak Hungarian and are familiar with Hungarian language and history, while for the majority Romanian population they can have an alienating and tension-inducing effect.
12. The work and movement of the traditional Hussars appeared in Harghita County for 35 years ago, where their activities are great importance for the culture of memory and celebration, as well as for folk customs and traditions. The symbols and representational tools they use have an identity-strengthening function, both for those who use them and for those who watch them. They pay homage to the

heroes of history by recalling military traditions on horseback and create community occasions that involve members of their local society. It is of the utmost importance to them to create memorials, set up statues and headstones and to occupy the spaces of the county in a symbolic way. Their activities also have an impact on identity, nation-building efforts, cultural and social life. Without the activities and events of the traditional Hussars, the county would also be poorer in tourism terms.

13. The activities of the traditionalist hussars can be paralleled with the theory and characteristics of deep play, social drama and social play in the literature. It is such a diverse activity and phenomenon that I consider it to fall into all three categories.
14. Traditional Hussar activities are leisure activities undertaken voluntarily by the members, taking into account that this type of activity can often involve financial sacrifices and self-time, or family-time sacrifices.
15. The Hussar movements in Hungary and in Harghita County are related and parallel to each other, and I believe that there is a mutual interest in the image of traditional Hussarism. The traditionalist teams visit each other's events and in many cases the desire to learn and the opportunity for development motivates the members of the associations I examined to maintain contact with Hungarian teams and their leaders. Many of the teams I have studied are members of the Hungarian Hussar and Military Traditionalist Association.
16. For many of the traditional Hussars, the process of learning and the need to expand their historical knowledge is important. Thus, they organise Hussars academies, (equestrian) training courses and historical lectures, primarily for their own development.
17. In the years following the change of regime, the traditionalist Hussar movement spread as a specific social and cultural phenomenon. It began as a traditional activity of individuals and small communities, as part of popular culture, and was gradually embraced by church, administrative and political leaders and the institutions behind them. Over the years, the image of the traditional Hussars has also become part of electoral propaganda, political parties often using the image of traditional military units, closely linked to the concept of national identity, to legitimise their own power. Today, the movement has also received support from above through tendering opportunities.

18. A characteristic feature of the hussar movement in county is that it symbolically divides social groups, separating them into a mainly masculine company, for whom horse-keeping, the equestrian lifestyle, patriotism, discipline and the preservation of traditions are important. My questionnaire research shows that 51.4% of the 109 respondents believe that the sense of being a Hussar is not linked to occasions. For them, this way of life is important in everyday life and even when they are not wearing Hussar costumes or attending to a Hussar event.
19. Closely linked to the projects and ideas they represent are the concepts of identity, national identity, tradition, invented tradition, historical reenactment, heritage, custom, commemoration, remembrance, homeland, patriotism and homeland. The specificity of the role of the military traditionalist bands of Harghita County also stems from the fact that, although they live in a block Hungarian community, they are members of a minority with a Szekler-Hungarian identity.
20. The teams have no secret intention of trying to involve children from a very young age in traditional activities and equestrian programmes. This is demonstrated by the fact that they organise live history lessons in kindergartens and schools, open days for pupils (which also give them the opportunity to learn about riding and the traditional Hussar way of life), and drawing competitions for pupils with a riding/Hussar/historical theme.
21. I think that this particular social group is struggling with the duality of trying to attract new members to their traditional activities, trying to open up the boundaries of the group (at least) on a theoretical level, but at the same time, being close-knit groups and friendly societies, in many cases their well-established and disciplined behaviour, and the expectation of this, together with a number of other military minimum requirements, from new members and applicants, can be a boundary-former.
22. In many cases, excessive alcohol consumption and political involvement give traditional hussars a negative image. In the course of my fieldwork, attending their events, it became clear to me how they would like to portray themselves at group level. To this end, an internal resolution has been created which uniformly regulates the existence and behaviour of traditionalists. Together, the leaders, officers and enthusiastic members of the associations strive to be as authentic, military and disciplined as possible in this kind of traditional activity, and to be seen by outsiders as such. Traditional Hussars are paying more and more attention

to their uniform appearance, to the care of their horses (and equipment) and to the expected behaviour as stated in the resolution.

23. By presenting the activities of the traditional Hussars, I wanted to show that they have similar events and similar symbolism and representation. Inwardly, they differ, they are divided, they may have different costumes, different attitudes, different rules and initiation rites, but outwardly they are still the traditional Hussars of Harghita County, characterised by cohesion, unity and mutual participation in each other's events. There is also a significant difference between them in the degree of individual and group level attitude. Many are committed to this movement, they are the ones who are ready for action, who want to improve and who do not spare time, energy, practice and financial resources for this leisure form, while others have a more insignificant presence in their lives.
24. Of course, as a researcher, I can see that the connection of their events with history is often contrived, but I do not see any justification for the researcher's debunking, exposing and exploring the invented traditions of the traditionalist Hussars associated with the name of Ákos Kovács. I support this with the argument that I believe that the picture is more nuanced in the case of invented traditions in minority existence and that these events have a value-saving, value-creating and value-transferring function, not only the purpose of recreation and entertainment. The practice of trauma processing, the fate, historical loss and identity of the Hungarians in Transylvania, which is also known as the specificity of reenactment movements, can be seen in these events. The survival, maintenance and transmission of national identity are also the underlying content of these actions. Thus, my research opinion and conclusion in this regard is that there are many fictional traditions that can be found in the activities of traditional hussars, but in all these cases there are also strong cultural, emotional, communal, self-organising and social contents behind them, which make these events relevant and justified in the minority situation.

I became a PhD student in the autumn of 2019 and started the fieldwork and data collection on my topic in 2020. I continued the fieldwork until the beginning of 2025, with varying degrees of intensity. This collection and process, which lasted for almost 5 years, was greatly influenced by the pandemic situation caused by the coronavirus.

Throughout my research, I could fully identify with James L. Peacock's idea that one of the most difficult, even insoluble, dilemmas is that as researchers we are both participants and observers, both inside and outside, both engaged and yet detached (Peacock 2001:74).

My impressions of my fieldwork and the processing of data are also in line with Peacock's idea that the proceeding of fieldwork can be seen as a kind of ritual. The field experience can radically change the individual and bring him to a new level of maturity. Peacock likens it to a conversion experience, like the rebirth of Saul on the road to Damascus, who began to see the world from a new perspective. Apart from the dramatic analogy, the person doing the fieldwork may undergo an inner transformation and develop a certain identity with the group and culture being researched through the experiences, encounters and experiences, and therefore often view/refer to the groups being researched as their own people (Peacock 2001: 70).

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