Before 1848 Hungary had been a kingdom under the Habsburg scepter, with its own Diet, a powerful nobility and enjoying a considerable amount of political autonomy. Under the impact of almost simultaneous events in Paris, Italy and Vienna in the spring of 1848, Hungary, too, became involved in what was to become a pan-European quest for constitutionalism, civic liberties and, in many cases, national freedom. This set off a rapid chain of events which totally changed, if not the political regimes in East-Central Europe in the short term, at least people’s political behaviour and expectations. In the initial enthusiasm for change, Lajos Kossuth, a deputy in the lower house of the Hungarian Diet at Pozsony (today Bratislava, in Slovakia), assumed unofficial leadership of the Diet and, by extension, of Hungary, a position he would retain until the end of the revolutionary events in August-September 1849. His speech of 3 March 1848 practically inaugurated the Hungarian revolution. As the government of Chancellor Metternich collapsed in Vienna on 15 March under popular pressure, the State Conference was compelled to approve the formation of a new Hungarian government under Prime Minister Lajos Batthyáni, with the Habsburg Palatine Archduke Stephen as the Austrian emperor-king’s plenipotentiary in Hungary. On 11 April the new Hungarian Parliament promulgated the “April Laws” which, like the Proclamation of Islaz in neighbouring Wallachia, would operate effectively as a new constitution. According to its terms, Hungary would be a

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69 This section is intended as a mere contextual guide to the main issues involved in the ethnic conflict in Transylvania, with an emphasis on Wallachian reactions to it. There is a vast literature on the history of Transylvania and on the Hungarian revolution of 1848–49 which, for obvious reasons, could not be covered here. For a comprehensive bibliography of Hungarian-Romanian relations in the mid-nineteenth century, see Béla Borsi-Kálmán, Hungarian Exiles and the Romanian National Movement, 1849–1867 (Boulder, Colorado, 1991), 149–51, note 3. Professor Keith Hitchins’ A Nation Discovered: Romanian intellectuals in Transylvania and the idea of nation, 1700–1848 (Bucharest, 1999) is an update of his earlier work on this topic and has a useful “Bibliographic Guide”, 221–7.

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constitutional hereditary monarchy, with a bicameral Parliament, co-existing in union with the other kingdoms and provinces of the Austrian crown. Also like the Islaz Proclamation, the “April Laws” enshrined civil liberties and limited noble privilege, making all citizens equal before the law. So were, too, all the religious denominations in the kingdom, with the exception of the Mosaic faith.

One of the main setbacks of the new constitutional arrangement was the incipient dualism it instituted. The Hungarian leaders were uncertain whether Hungary should or could in the long term stay in the monarchy, and they oscillated between their need for Austrian support and their nationalist-separatist ambitions.71 Count István (Stephen) Széchenyi, the reformist Hungarian politician, had captured this conflict of identity amongst Habsburg subjects as early as the 1820s when he noted in his diary: “The fault of the Austrian Monarchy and Hungary is that God in his wrath joined them together.”72

The second conundrum was Hungary’s nationality problem: the national minorities, Germans, Czechs, Slovaks, Ruthenes, Romanians, Serbs and Croats, had their own divisive national agendas, and the quest for a common cause with the Hungarians was to prove elusive. Essentially, the tension underlying the history of Austria and Hungary for the rest of the century was to be between the vision of a centralist, unified Hungarian nation-state and the reality of its multi-ethnic nature. Revolutionaries of all nationalities were going to be haunted and ultimately defeated by three broad categories of factors: the ambiguities of Hungary’s relations to the Habsburg monarchy (to which she should have been loyal under the terms of the Pragmatic Sanction of 1713), the relative conservatism of the peasant masses, who formed around 80 per cent of the population and who by and large were loyal to the Habsburg dynasty, and the alternative agendas of the national minorities.

According to contemporary statistics, out of the Austrian Empire’s total population of 36 million, only under 17% were Austro-Germans. The Czechs and Slovaks formed 19%, the Magyars 14%, the Italians and Romanians 8% each, the Serbs 5% and the Croats 4%, to cite only

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