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A Legal Revolution or a Misguided Rebellion?
Another Look at the Hungarian Events of 1848


Istvan Deak's new book is the most important work on Hungarian history written by one of the Hungarian emigré literati since George Barany's work on Stephen Széchenyi appeared in 1969. With a penchant for detail, Deak probes carefully, and at times audaciously, into the difficult questions associated with these tragic years. A man of great intellectual curiosity, he writes forcefully and with apparent incisiveness. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that The Lawful Revolution will probably be translated and published in Hungary. Yet this book, although it is indeed a significant contribution to historical scholarship, is by no means without flaws.

The discussion of Kossuth's ethnic origins, for example, leaves much to be desired. The fact that A.J.P. Taylor has made a few acerbic remarks about Kossuth's apostate fervor does not justify Deak's devoting a page and a half to Kossuth's ancestry. Deak is unable to demonstrate to my satisfaction that Kossuth's paternal ancestry was Magyar. The mere mention of the family name by a Hungarian king in an obscure thirteenth-century document does not prove much. The author does not even try to define what the word "Magyar" means. In any case, it does not really matter whether Kossuth was Magyar or Slovak on his father's side, since his mother was, by Deak's own admission, Germanic.

I doubt that the entire issue is worth discussing at all, except as part of an attempt to answer the broader question of how representative the leaders of the revolution were of a cross-section of contemporary Hungarian society. A casual reading of the evidence leads one to suspect that a disproportionate number of these men came from the geographic periphery of the country: the highlands and Transylvania. These areas might very well have coincided with the cultural periphery of Hungary as well. If one were delving into psychohistory, which Deak is not, one might speculate about how the leaders' backgrounds, by making them uncertain of their place in Hungarian society, might have influenced the way they dealt with the crucial issues of their age. If one
is not concerned with psychohistory, however, it might be more useful to
skip the topic of Kossuth's ancestry entirely. Discussing it in terms of ethnicity
alone might mislead non-Magyar historians into reading into the author's
words a Magyar nationalistic pride that I know was not intended.

In Hungary today, Louis Kossuth still seems to be a symbol of that inde-
pendence and self-respect as a nation to which the Hungarian people have
been aspiring, mostly in vain, for centuries. He certainly embodies this hope
more than anyone else in Hungarian history. At one level, this Kossuth cult is
understandable, since societies need unifying myths and images to create co-
hesion. Until recently, however, Hungarians were so devoted to the Kossuth
myth that they almost entirely lost sight of Kossuth the man.

It is welcomed, therefore, that Deak is bold enough to depict Kossuth in
human, rather than godlike, dimensions, and to point out explicitly the Hun-
garian leader's many weaknesses. Unfortunately, Deak does not go far enough:
he tries to be evenhanded, but only up to a point. The author's frequent at-
ttempts to straddle controversial issues make one feel that he is far too fearful
of potential criticism. Deak is too easygoing in his judgment of Kossuth's in-
competence: whenever possible, the Hungarian leader receives the benefit of
the doubt.

"Szechenyi was right," writes Deak, "and Kossuth was wrong: Hungary
ought not have embarked on its great political adventure without having first
developed economic strength. . . . On the other hand, once the Empire showed
signs of falling apart . . . it is hard to see how the Hungarians could have ab-
stained from trying to secure the greatest advantage from this political turn." Kossuth was wrong, but then he was right. Although Deak's equivocal state-
ment does have a grain of truth in it, it appears to me to be far too charitable
an assessment of the decisions made by Kossuth and his fellow Magyar liberals
in 1848.

These men should not have tried to secure the "greatest" advantage from
the revolutionary upheaval in Vienna in 1848, but only the greatest possible
advantage. A world-class statesman would have conceded that the Magyars by
themselves did not possess the strength to resist the Imperial forces while at
the same time holding at bay half of their own countrymen. The Magyar lead-
ers wanted the best of all possible worlds, one in which they would obtain the
freedom from Austrian domination that they coveted without paying any po-
litical price for it. They did not possess sufficient political acumen to abandon
the political structure of the feudal past and relinquish continued hegemony
over the non-Magyar nationalities living within the Carpathian basin.

Had the Magyars, during the summer of 1848, appealed to the nationalities
to form a coalition with them and had they in turn granted these nationalities
autonomy, the combined strength of Magyars and nationalities might well have
blocked the eastward march of the Imperial forces, especially since these Im-
perial forces were composed of peasant recruits of the very ethnic groups that