

# DEATH OF A HERO: HUNGARIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE FUNERAL OF LAJOS KOSSUTH

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The War of Independence of 1848–1849, fought against Habsburg domination, ended bitterly for the Hungarian nation with the execution of Batthyány, thirteen leading officers of the revolution, and the flight of its governor president Lajos Kossuth into exile. Hungarians suffered for a decade under the vindictive rule of Bach, but with time a reconciliation was sought between the two nations, represented in the historic *Ausgleich* or the Compromise of 1867. In the decades to follow, many Hungarians would resign themselves to their continued association with the Habsburg dynasty; Lajos Kossuth never did. His staunch voice from the Italian wilderness called unceasingly for Hungarian independence from the Habsburgs. Forty-five years after the revolution, in 1894, Lajos Kossuth died in exile at the age of ninety-two.

Today I wish to consider the funeral of Lajos Kossuth. Mounted without the public or financial support of the Hungarian state, it was nonetheless one of the most momentous events to occur in Hungary during the latter half of the 19th century. Indeed, Kossuth's funeral may have excelled in majesty and expression of popular sentiment the grand ceremonies celebrating the millennial anniversary of the Hungarians' conquest of the Carpathian Basin held two years later, in 1896. One newspaper columnist even suggested that the second millennium of Hungarian history should be dated from the moment of Kossuth's death. News of his worsening health, and eventually his death, threw the nation into throes of grief. His funeral in Budapest alone was attended by half a million people, while all throughout the country—in every town, village and hamlet—ceremonies were held to commemorate his passing.

What accounts for the intensity of emotions surrounding this gallant figure of a man, who was called Father of the Nation, Father of Freedom, the Pride of the Hungary? Was it not near blasphemy when, five days after his demise, both tabloids in Budapest depicted in cover drawings his resurrection on Easter Sunday? Or when columnists referred to his coffin as the ark of the covenant?

I shall argue that the funeral of Lajos Kossuth, far from the grand burial of a lone national hero, signified the apotheosis of the Hungarian nation, and so constituted a significant moment in the construction of Hungarian national identity and historical consciousness. In this paper I wish to chronicle the acts taken and controversies waged in this brief three week period of national mourning. The primary sources used for the analysis were three daily newspapers, and two daily tabloids, covering the approximately three weeks of his dying, death, journey home, and funeral.

After his flight into exile in 1849, Kossuth lived for several years in Turkey, and then set off on journeys to America and England to further the revolutionary cause of Hungary. Although he was never successful in garnering substantial political or financial support for his cause from the great powers of Europe, his fame as an ardent revolutionary spread far and wide. In the 1860s, he appeared, along with Mazzini, Garibaldi and other famous men, in portraits depicting the most illustrious democrats of Europe (Vayer, 1952: 453). Until his death he continued to play a role in domestic politics, even from afar. Parties and newspapers solicited his opinion on various legislation and policies, and he was called upon time and again to resolve internal squabbles in the party most closely associated with his name and heritage, the '48 and Independent Party.

Pictures of Kossuth were first allowed to be printed in Budapest in the year of the Compromise, though the reproduction available portrayed him as he appeared during the revolution, underscoring, as Vayer notes, that Kossuth was merely a figure of the past (1952: 454). By the 1880s, the popularity of Kossuth was visibly on the increase; reading clubs and other peasant societies were frequently named after him. Cheap reproductions of Kossuth as elderly gentleman were peddled with great success at market and village fairs (Vayer, 1952: 455), coming to adorn the humble walls of many a peasant home alongside devotional pictures of saints. In 1889 a delegation of 850 Hungarians—primarily teachers, intellectuals, doctors and county administrators—visited Kossuth in Turin, a trip organized in concert with an excursion to the Paris Exhibition (Vas, 1965: 817). Other groups also sought to pay him homage in exile. Throughout the 1880s Kossuth had been elected to Parliament in absentia from numerous districts across the country (Deák, 1979: 350), and by 1889 he had been named honorary citizen of 31 Hungarian cities (Vas: 817). On the occasion of his 90th birthday, the town council of Budapest marked the anniversary by naming him honorary citizen, quite a blow to Franz Joseph, Kossuth's arch enemy, as it was also the 25th anniversary of Franz Joseph's coronation in Budapest (Vas: 823–24; 848).

News of Kossuth's failing health in mid-March of 1894 paralyzed the nation. Traditional ceremonies usually held on March 15th to commemorate the outbreak of the War of Independence were cancelled in many communities, or transformed into services in Kossuth's name. As his death approached, hourly telegrams were published chronicling the deterioration of his bodily functions, in all the most intimate of details. With final confirmation of his death on the 20th of March, a pall of mourning enveloped the nation. Within days, the Easter eggs and other joyful artifacts of the upcoming holiday were removed from shop windows, to be replaced by somber and ever more elaborate displays commemorating the great hero. The famous Kossuth hat, Kossuth's trademark, came quickly back into fashion, and was even modified for female attire. Tailors advertised short-order and ready-made mourning clothes at competitive prices, while street hawkers pedaled commemorative medals and pins. The leaders of the preeminent gypsy orchestras of Budapest pledged not to play a single note on Easter Sunday until dusk, and requested permission to greet the casket at the train station with strains of the famous song, "Don't cry, don't cry, Lajos Kossuth".

The funeral was held on the 2nd of April. The mass of mourners—aristocrat and peasant, shopkeeper and clerk—blackened the streets of Budapest, drawn together in their grief and sorrow. The steep steps of the National Museum, the site of the funeral, were obliterated with wreaths and flowers. As the coffin was drawn through the streets, mourners were said to turn away, unable to gaze upon it. He was laid to rest in Kerepesi Cemetery, between the mausoleums of his great contemporaries: Batthyány, first head of the 1848 government, later executed, and Deák, 1848 revolutionary and politician responsible for negotiating the Compromise in 1867.

Yet the tranquility of sorrow and the permanence of death were not to be Kossuth's bequest to the Hungarian nation. Controversies surrounding his funeral fueled bitter parliamentary fights and sparked riots in the streets. Even before his demise, there was speculation that Kossuth's body would not be returned home, and if it were to be allowed back on Hungarian soil, it was not at all sure whether the state would sponsor his funeral. In deference to Franz Joseph, the leading party managed to steer the debates in Parliament away from state obligations to Kossuth's family and admirers, and engaged rather in grand soliloquies of homage. In the meantime, the prime minister struck a compromise with the city of Budapest by requesting the town council shoulder the obligation and costs. Though cleverly negotiated, the compromise bred anger and dissatisfaction. Government buildings did not fly the black flag of mourning, and performances at the National Theater and the Opera House were not cancelled. On the 22nd of March, within a day of learning of

Kossuth's death, university students staged demonstrations at the National Theater and the Opera, respectfully requesting the few patrons in attendance to quit the theater and return home as the nation was in mourning. First at the National Theater, then at the Opera House students scaled the façade to raise a flag of mourning, as thousands gathered to watch. The police attempted to disperse the crowds at both sites with brutal tactics: with swords drawn, they descended upon the crowd on horseback. Fleeing the Opera House, the crowd reassembled under the bright lights of a neighboring casino, and when the revellers refused to go home, they threw bricks through the windows. In the following days editorials lambasted the police chief's methods, and Kossuth's sons threatened to bury their father in Italy if the violence and demonstrations did not cease. By the Easter weekend, soldiers were parading on city streets with their bayonets prominently displayed to discourage demonstrators, giving the impression that the center of the city was under siege.

Controversy was not limited to the secular domain. The Roman Catholic Church in Budapest refused to display any mourning paraphernalia for Kossuth, since he had been a Lutheran. The bishop claimed that their position was firmly based on Catholic dogma, although Catholic officials did display flags of mourning in other cities. The memory of lengthy debates on anti-clerical legislation in Parliament, supported by Kossuth and his faction, had undoubtedly influenced the bishop's decision. The Catholic hierarchy of Budapest eventually consented to allow the bells of Catholic churches to be rung for the funeral, since apparently no issue of dogma was involved. An Easter procession in Ó-Buda was disrupted by what the newspapers described as "a tactless and unpatriotic civic orchestra". In the midst of the procession, the band struck up the "Gotterhalte", unofficial anthem of the House of Habsburg, provoking young men to shout them down. When the musicians, reported by the newspapers to be Czech, struck up the anthem a second time, they were set upon, and it took police intervention to stop the fighting.

During the weeks of turmoil and gloom in late March of 1894, eulogies and editorials, speeches and songs evoked images of Hungarian national pride and integrity. But the country was far from tranquil. Trial hearings had been set for the coming month of May to hear the libel case, known as the Memorandum trial, against Romanian nationalists for publishing their grievances against the government. During March 15th celebrations in the rural community of Hódmezővásárhely, clashes involving agrarian socialists prevented the ceremony from concluding peacefully. Later, on the 20th of April János Szántó Kovács, a prominent leader of the agrarian socialist movement of the Great Plain, was arrested, prompting demonstrations and widespread unrest.

All these battles and demonstrations surrounding the death and burial of Kossuth were manifestations of a larger problem: the problem of the politics of history. The rise of the cult of Kossuth in the 1880s was associated with a broader trend: interpretation of historical events and figures across time as expressing the essence of Hungarian national identity. Central to this "myth" of nationhood was the War of Independence in 1848. Other events often cited were the War of Independence led by Prince Rákóczi in the 18th century, the kuruc revolts and Thököly's rebellions in the 17th century, and the reign of King Mátyás in the 15th century. The construction of a teleology of imminent national identity required that historical events be stripped of their own specificities, that the universe of intention and meaning peculiar to divergent events and actors be eliminated. One anecdote from Kossuth's funeral demonstrates this very neatly. After Kossuth's death, a movement was begun to transport to Budapest clumps of soil from all the sites where the blood of patriots was shed during the War of Independence, to be mixed with the soil of Kossuth's grave. The original intent seems to have been to commemorate Kossuth's role, and that of his compatriots, in the fight for Hungarian freedom. Soon, however, the category of historical events and actors to be implicated broadened. One editorial expressed surprise that no one had thought to include clods of earth from the site where Kossuth had been hanged in effigy, and from the building where he had been imprisoned for four years in the early 1840s. The newspaper then listed sites from which boxes of soil had already been sent: from the site of the national assembly in 1532, from the birthplace of King Mátyás, who ruled in the 15th century, from the site of a famous exchange between King Endre and his younger brother Béla in the 11th century, and from graves from the pre-Christian period of the tribal leader Árpád.

The boxes of soil sent to Budapest epitomize the process of creating national identity and historical consciousness, a knowledge of history and a form of identity which, ironically, depend upon a radical destruction of historical and cultural complexities drawn from the past. Furthermore, the makeshift grave of Kossuth shows that the creation of historical consciousness was not solely the work of poets and intellectuals, but also a popular phenomenon. The historical aggrandizement of Kossuth's grave was an event open to anyone wishing to scoop previous gifts of nationhood out of the earth. In past work I have emphasized the role of Hungarian poets in creating an elaborate ideology of history, building a symbolic edifice out of 1848. Kossuth's funeral — undoubtedly a significant moment in the development of Hungarian historical consciousness and national identity — was far more than the product of a narrow group of intellectuals, much less the exclusive creation

of the *Entreprise des pompes funèbres* hired by the Budapest Town Council to mount the affair. As so many of the events I discussed above illustrate, this was a ritual of grand proportions, in which prime ministers and peasants, bereaved family and irreverent rabble-rousers all took part.

Yet my description of events also makes it very clear that the imperative to construct an historical destiny, to define the *meanings* of Hungarian identity was and is a preeminently contentious process. For although the symbols of national identity and historical fate were relatively constant, the political interpretations of historical identity varied widely. Regardless of the party affiliation or profile of the paper, Kossuth is represented as the soul, the spirit of the nation. In images reminiscent of the frontispiece of Hobbes' *Leviathan* — where the king's body represents the true body politic — Kossuth's body is portrayed as the body of the nation. His death and resurrection is the death and birth, the very apotheosis of the nation. He is the father of the nation, the father of freedom. In fact, the campaign for augmenting Kossuth's grave with historic soils was a practice reinforcing and substantiating the image so commonly evoked in print of Kossuth's body and soul becoming one with the nation's soil, and so one with the nation.

Yet on closer examination, commentators clearly differ in their understanding of why this is so. For conservative writers, those most devoted to the monarchy, in 1848 Kossuth laid the foundations of freedoms now enjoyed, which were then institutionalized by the *Ausgleich*. On the other end of the spectrum, Kossuth was a revolutionary thwarted in his goals, the father of freedoms yet to be truly secured for the nation. These differences of opinion and interpretation were continually voiced, debated, contended: the battles in Parliament and in the streets illustrate the ferocity of feelings which could be brought to bear. Each and every group was fighting dearly to render the historical heritage and national identity their own, to fix the meanings they sought to have embodied therein. The conservative *Pesti Napló* glorified Kossuth in death, yet marked the event a true reconciliation between the monarchy and the nation. Other newspapers ridiculed the conservative prime minister, portraying him hidden underneath his bed as the power of revolution and resistance manifested itself in the hearts of mourners across the nation. In Volosinov's terms, the construction of national identity represented a battle over possession of the sign.

Appropriating symbols, constructing meaning, chronicling the past, living history — this was the funeral of Lajos Kossuth. The nation paused to honor an old warrior, and thereby to honor itself. But the battles waged for Kossuth at his bier would not die. They would continue well into the 20th century, championing the old heros for new causes, for new revolutions. Interpretations

of the past would weigh heavily upon succeeding generations who, in glorifying an old tradition, would radically reshape its boundaries.

During the initial days of the '56 revolution, the symbols of 1848 would be prominently displayed and sites in the city associated with the tradition of '48 would constitute the starting-grounds for dissent and resistance. Kossuth's shield would be sewn onto national flags and his portrait would adorn the drab shop windows. He would become for many the symbol of democratic socialism. In a recent rock opera *Stephen the King*, the forces of the good Christian king Stephen were pitted against the leader of the evil and recalcitrant pagans. People were heard later to remark that the very popular rock musical was a sinister revisionist shadow play, pitting the compromising Deák (in the form of Stephen) against the truly Hungarian Kossuth (the pagan), or for a more recent comparison, the sell-out Kádár against the doomed Nagy, executed as leader of '56. Thus the logic of historical consciousness: the first party secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party has been recast as St. Stephen.

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