

The Hungarian Revolution of 1848

Laszlo Deme

The Lawful Revolution: Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians, 1848–1849. By Istvan Deak. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979. xxi, 415 pp.

The 1848 revolution is the central event in modern Hungarian history. More has been written about the various aspects of the revolutionary years than about any other period in the long history of the Magyars. For a short while Hungary was in the mainstream of European developments and her struggle for freedom and independence from Austria was met by an enthusiastic response among contemporary progressives abroad and liberal Western historians ever since. In the Hungarian collective consciousness the revolution and the War of Independence became sacred. The leaders, above all Lajos Kossuth, are considered national heroes, and will be probably forever in the spiritual Pantheon of the Magyars.

The exalted place of 1848 in Hungarian history appears justified because through the liberation of the serfs the immense majority gained significant new freedoms, and because the national cause inspired truly extraordinary human effort and sacrifice. But the generally positive attitude of most historians has tended to justify rather than explain and critically analyze the events which took place in Hungary during the revolution. Mihály Horváth, Hungary's outstanding nineteenth-century historian, began this trend and through his monumental works a romantic-heroic view of 1848–49 was firmly established. After 1945, Marxist historians in Hungary gave greater emphasis to economic factors, the conditions of the peasantry were more thoroughly examined, and the radical left was given more attention. Thus, the traditional picture became somewhat more complex. But recent Hungarian historians also tend to emphasize primarily the positive aspects of 1848, as did their pre-

1945 predecessors. Mistakes in the treatment of the non-Magyar nationalities are now frankly admitted, but other political errors or blunders of the Hungarian leadership are usually underplayed and passed over in a few sentences. In short, the treatment of the revolution in many ways remained essentially romantic down to our own times. In essence, this view changed relatively little in a century.

There are certain obvious advantages to treating a great romantic revolution in a romantic fashion. But for our own age other modes of explanation appear to be more meaningful. Istvan Deak brings a new and different approach to the study of 1848. In his new book, *The Lawful Revolution, Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians, 1848-1849*, he consistently applies the critical-analytical method to the Magyars and their adversaries and to different political groups among the Hungarian revolutionaries. The result is not a romantic but a realistic and critical account interpreting political developments and the actions of participants objectively and with sophistication.

The author characterizes his work as “a political history with brief excursions into social and institutional history” (p. xviii). His book is a combination of a detailed biography of Kossuth during the most important two years of his life and a systematic scholarly account of the Hungarian revolution. Such an approach gives primacy to the human element in the historical process. Consequently, Deak’s book is interesting and exciting and will certainly hold the reader’s attention.

In the introductory chapter, Deak presents the Vormärz in Hungary and acquaints us with the political institutions, parliamentary politics, and most important political figures of the Reform Period. We also follow Kossuth’s career from the modest position of a country lawyer in northern Hungary to that of a nationally known leader of the liberal opposition and Pest county’s representative at the 1847-48 session of the Diet. Kossuth’s leadership role in the Diet in March and April is well documented and the new constitutional setup created by the April Laws is thoroughly described. The historic significance of the reform in the spring is considered to be that “it guaranteed the economic and political survival of the landowning class; it opened the way to spectacular economic and cultural development; and it provided the Magyar nation with an eternal romantic legacy” (p. 106).

The months between April and August 1848 are regarded as a period “between legality and rebellion.” The author deals with the negative reaction of the non-Magyar nationalities of Hungary to the April Laws and shows the beginning of the civil war. Deak correctly points out that the Court and the Austrian Cabinet cooperated with the Hungarian

Government in the spring and early summer and sees weakness, desire to gain time before a counter-offensive, and sincere good intention as the combined motivation for this cooperation. The coming of the conflict between Austria and Hungary is also explained on the basis of a combination of factors, but Deak believes that the primary cause was the April Constitution itself: "Two foreign services, two armies, and two fiscal administrations were simply too much for a European great power" (p. 133).

The mistakes of the Hungarian side are clearly pointed out, for instance, Hungary's refusal to shoulder one-fourth of the Imperial State debt is regarded as "politically and morally indefensible" (p. 134). But it is also stated that in June 1848 not the Hungarians but the Croats acted revolutionary when the Zagreb Assembly declared readiness to secede from Hungary and join Austria. The situation is presented though, not primarily in terms of right or wrong, but as it truly was, confusion. The confusion was caused by conflicting loyalties, contradictory orders, and a complete lack of clear lines of authority. Above all, it was due to the fact that to obey the Austrian Emperor in Hungary was treason and directly contrary to orders issued in the name of the King of Hungary. Both Majesties being the same person, Ferdinand, the situation indeed left the loyal subject with the idea that no matter what one did, one was bound to violate His Majesty's laws "by the very act of obeying them" (p. 141).

After surveying the work of the First Representative Assembly during the summer, Professor Deak correctly regards the "month of defiance," September, a turning point and notes that after Jelačić's attack, Hungary was a constitutional monarchy in name only. In reality it had become a parliamentary dictatorship. To the author, the responsibility for the conflict seems to be a divided one. He considers the Austrian accusation about a planned invasion of Croatia by the Hungarians nonsense, but also points out that the Hungarians had forced the Court into excessive concessions in March, and they should have been more accommodating on such matters of common concern as military and financial affairs. Contrary to most Hungarian historians, Deak does not consider the appointment, at the end of September, of Count Ferenc Lamberg as royal commissioner and commander-in-chief of all armed forces in Hungary a counter-revolutionary act. Lamberg's appointment is seen in the interest of peace and autonomy of Hungary, and it is considered to be the last effort to save the Monarchy in its old decentralized form.

After "September Days," the author describes the opposing armies

and, using the latest research available, gives a detailed and thorough account of the military potential of both sides. Apart from regiments, armaments and equipment, we learn such rather astonishing facts that the officer corps of the Hungarian revolutionary army had a larger proportion of nobles than the Imperial side, which prompts Professor Deak to say that "it is an apt commentary on the 'gentlemanly' character of the Hungarian revolution that its army was less open to talent than the Habsburg army" (p. 197).

The fall offensive of Prince Windisch-Graetz against Hungary, the evacuation of Budapest, and the Hungarian parliament's move to Debrecen are well outlined. Although the months of "near-disaster" and those of the "recovery and ecstasy" are described in terms of Kossuth's dictatorship, in examining the events of the winter and the spring Deak presents the vast panorama of the war and often diverts attention from Kossuth. He explains political and military motives of various army leaders, different political groups, and early attempts to arrive at some accommodation with the Austrians. The main course of the victorious spring offensive is clearly presented. Following traditional interpretation, Deak considers it to be the worst military mistake of the Hungarians that, instead of pursuing the retreating Austrian army to the frontier or beyond, they turned to the siege and capture of the castle hill at Buda. He believes, however, that the fate of the Hungarians had been sealed already by the defeat of the Vienna October revolution, and after that they fought "only a costly delaying action" (p. 184).

The author's contention that Austria would not have needed Russian help to defeat the Magyars seems justified from a military point of view. He argues that the new Austrian commander Haynau rejuvenated the Austrian army. He fought a dozen important engagements against the Magyars and did not lose any of them. Thus, ultimately "it was the Austrians, and not the Russians, who put an end to the Hungarian War of Independence" (p. 302). The Russian army in Hungary is presented as "a witless but benevolent giant" which "inflicted only limited harm on its opponents and in turn suffered little harm from the Hungarians" (p. 305).

Although the facts as presented above are undoubtedly correct, it appears to this writer that a large invading foreign army cannot be regarded as benevolent under any circumstances, and that the harmful effect of the Russian intervention is generally underestimated. It certainly is true that the Austrians fought the major battles. But Professor Deak himself teaches us the importance of the fact that the peasant masses did not answer Kossuth's appeals against the Russians in June

because submission to the enemy seemed to offer more protection than armed resistance (p. 293). He also properly calls attention to the fact that by early August there no longer was a Hungarian national will to go on fighting (pp. 318–320). It does not seem very likely that without the Russian intervention the Hungarian national will to continue with the war would have disappeared so rapidly. After all, the Hungarian forces numbered about 170,000 against an Austrian army of ca. 175,000, and the Magyars had certainly proved a few weeks earlier that the Austrians were by no means invincible. The sudden loss of confidence and a change in the national psyche seems very much connected with the appearance of the “Russian colossus,” an army of 200,000 backed by the vast resources of the enormous Russian Empire. The Russian forces may not have inflicted much actual damage on the Hungarians, but their presence must have been the deciding psychological factor for unconditional surrender.

After describing the capitulation of the Hungarians, Professor Deak surveys Austrian retribution and briefly outlines Kossuth’s career in exile in the epilogue. There is no separate chapter at the end of the study for the author’s conclusions. But since description and analysis are combined throughout the entire work, the reader is certainly not left in the dark about the author’s views on the major issues and the most important participants.

Among the *dramatis personae* in Deak’s book there are no complete villains or faultless heroes, and he avoids seeing things in black and white. It is noted even about Metternich that in the spring of 1848 there was no fundamental difference between Kossuth’s and Metternich’s socio-economic programs for Hungary (p. 105). Contrary to most Hungarian historians, Palatine Archduke Stephen is regarded not as a traitor to Hungary or to anyone else, but is simply presented as an “embattled leader trying to mediate between two hostile camps” (p. 92). Similarly, Deak stresses the conservative features of the Windisch-Graetz regime set up after the occupation of Budapest, but also describes its essential moderation and respect for the territorial integrity of Hungary.

In terms of personalities the period before 1848 is symbolized by the rivalry between István Széchenyi and Kossuth and the history of the War of Independence by the competition between General Arthur Görgey and Kossuth. Although Széchenyi is dealt with rather briefly, the author regards him as Kossuth’s “much greater contemporary” (p. 62). On the other hand, while Görgey is considered to be modern Hungary’s greatest military genius, of the two Kossuth was undoubtedly the greater

figure, according to Deak (p. 183). Görgey's military talent and leadership qualities are clearly recognized, and he, too, is considered to be a Magyar patriot. Unlike Kossuth, however, Görgey fought for the more limited aims of securing the April Laws and maintaining a dignified place for Hungary within the Habsburg Monarchy. The author's sympathies are obviously with Görgey when on January 1 Kossuth ordered him to fight a decisive battle near Budapest, but "without endangering the safety of the army." Deak goes on to point out, however, that after the victorious spring offensive, Görgey's behavior became incomprehensible. He, who had always seemed to hope for some kind of reconciliation with the ruling house, now openly denounced the "perfidious dynasty" and talked about the "funeral ceremony of the House of Austria." One is indeed inclined to agree with Deak's evaluation, giving Görgey credit for his military talent, but considering him a confused amateur in the art of politics. Kossuth's final charge of treason against Görgey and his attempt to place the blame on the General for the defeat Deak sees as a calculated move "to find a scapegoat to provide the nation with the traitor its broken pride so badly needed" (p. 322). The available evidence supports this opinion.

The most interesting and challenging aspect of *The Lawful Revolution* is the presentation and assessment of Kossuth's role. The author is more critical of Kossuth than most other Hungarian historians have been. The tone is set in the introduction. The author states that the principal actor of the drama of 1848 was Kossuth, and refers to his organizational abilities and towering personality. But he adds:

In him, Hungarians recognize their spokesman and their hero, but also the symbol of much that they see as calamitous in the national character: pomposity, excessive pride, a penchant for theatrical gestures, naivete, and easy enthusiasm. (p. xiv)

Indeed, *The Lawful Revolution* provides ample evidence for both the positive and negative features attributed to Kossuth. A systematic presentation of the March Days shows Kossuth's immense parliamentary victories and his success and great popularity even in Vienna. Later, we see him time and time again as an extraordinarily successful orator able to influence deputies in the parliament and induce masses of peasants to take up arms for the defense of the country. Similarly, Deak shows and demonstrates Kossuth's assiduity in crisis situations. He points out, for instance, that between September 1 and 15 Kossuth made sixteen parliamentary speeches, drafted at least thirteen decrees and five other lengthy communications, and wrote several newspaper articles. But in other contexts Deak rejects Kossuth's boast that had he wanted to be

could have put an end to the Habsburg role in Vienna on March 15. Similarly, Deak does not quite believe Kossuth's claim that he would rather have been "a dog than a minister or prime minister" (p. 205). He makes repeated references to Kossuth's lack of physical courage and considers him "energetic but somewhat weak and irresolute" (p. 225). He even calls attention to Kossuth's opportunism and to the fact that he often declined to shoulder responsibility for his decisions (p. 254).

Thus, admiration for Kossuth's great accomplishments is mixed with some criticism. Should the book be translated into Hungarian, no doubt it would create quite a stir among Budapest intellectuals. It is based on a very thorough mastery of both primary and secondary sources and on substantial archival research. Its greatest value is in the brilliantly incisive application of the critical-analytical method. Deak also has obvious literary ability, and tells an interesting story vividly and elegantly. His *Lawful Revolution* will remain the best single-volume study on the Hungarians in 1848 for a long time to come.