



Reinterpreting a ‘Founding Father’: Kossuth Images and Their Contexts, 1848–2009

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Abstract

The present article reconstructs the ways the public and historiographical image of Lajos Kossuth, the central figure of the 1848–49 revolutionary tradition in Hungary, was negotiated during the last 150 years. Similar to the images of other founding fathers and national heroes in other cultures—such as Garibaldi, Piłsudski, Atatürk, Mazzini, Herzl, Masaryk, Bismarck, or Al. I. Cuza—the competing representations of Lajos Kossuth formed a central part of the political and scientific discourses throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In addition to the most common images of the cultic “father of the nation” and “national Messiah,” one can encounter such different schemes of collective self-projection as the “overly emotive opposition politician,” the “successful gentry,” the nobleman “defending his class privileges,” or the “inconsistent revolutionary.” Arguably, these images to a large extent fit four political languages determining Hungarian public discourse in the given period, such as “conservative realism,” ethno-protectionism, Marxist socialism, and communism. While these political languages were very different from each other, they were strikingly similar in the sense that they were built on strong enemy images. Consequently, analyzing their historical projections we can learn about the traumatic ways their adherents related to political modernity, manifested in visions of a fundamental enemy endangering the future of the community.

Keywords

Lajos Kossuth, Hungary, historiography, imagology, nationalism

The images of Kossuth, whether conceived in terms of cult or condemnation, of deheroization or expropriating idealization, influenced one another and often overlapped in the political and scholarly discourses of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the historical interpretations of Kossuth, the attitude toward independence has played a key role. The differentiation between political and academic discourses is often impossible or only artificially successful. Therefore, I am first going to outline the background to the Kossuth-related

symbolical politics before I embark on the contexts of the Kossuth images from 1849 to the late Kádár era. Then the main characteristics of these images will be summarized. Finally, I am going to review the conclusions of monographs and studies published since 1957 which have departed from the dominant schemes of the “radical, emotive, and troublemaking politician,” the so-called “successful politician of the lesser nobility,” the “spokesman for the privilege-protecting nobility,” and the “inconsistent revolutionary.”

The Cult of Kossuth

The images of Kossuth abroad are varied and, naturally, of a political character. At one extreme, Kossuth is depicted as a nationalist dictator in Romanian and Slovakian discourse (Evans 2003). On the wall of the once Hungarian Parliament in Pozsony (today Bratislava, Slovakia), a commemorative tablet reminds the spectator of the Slovak politician Ľudovít Štúr, and not of the Hungarian diet and Kossuth. In Zagreb, there is a square named after the Croatian Ban Josip Jelačić and a statue as well (Sked 2003), while in Kolozsvár and Marosvásárhely (resp., Cluj and Târgu Mureș, Romania), the leader of the Romanian irregulars, Avram Iancu, is commemorated with statues (Varga 1995; Varga 2001). All three were Kossuth's adversaries.

Kossuth's memorial in New York City and his bust in the vestibule of the Congress in Washington, on the other hand, pay tribute to the ardent apostle of political freedom, similarly to the memorial plaques in his honor in London, Paris, and Turin. They honor him as a statesman who claimed that democracy was coequal to governing in the interest of the people, by the people, and for the people. This tenet articulated in Columbus, Ohio, on February 6, 1852, inspired the famous phrase by Abraham Lincoln in his funeral oration at Gettysburg (Lincoln 1989, 536).

Similarly, in Hungary, Kossuth's historical image underwent radical reconfigurations. His cult started already in 1848/49, especially among the peasantry of the Great Plain. The paintings, prints, and sculptures along this line represented Kossuth as the personification of freedom, abolition of serfdom, and independence of Hungary. A sepulcher for Kossuth's ashes was built between 1903 and 1909, erected with public contributions, and inaugurated amidst great ceremonies in Budapest on November 24, 1909. This somewhat oversized mausoleum was erected at the Kerepesi cemetery as a monumental homage to the impersonation of Hungarian freedom. Five years later the ashes

of one of his two sons, Ferenc Kossuth (1841–1914, an engineer in Italy, a politician and minister in Hungary), were placed there.¹

Until their disunion, the Independence Party and the Party of 1848 regarded Lajos Kossuth as their spiritual leader. At Kossuth's funeral, the Hungarian public was united in mourning the nation's hero. When in 1905 the pro-independence coalition of the opposition won the parliamentary elections, the monarch ignored the election results and appointed an acting cabinet of administrators. The administrative government's minister of the interior, József Kristóffy (1857–1928), promised universal suffrage and was supported by the advocates of suffrage. The pro-independence opposition coalition rose to power in 1906 because their leader had practically backed away from the coalition program aiming at greater independence from Vienna. Consequently, they tried to offset their failure with various substitutes, through symbolical politicking and the creation of anti-national minorities and pro-independence cults. The leader of the national opposition, Ferenc Kossuth, was the personification of symbolic "national" politics.

In 1910 the pro-independence coalition was defeated in the elections. The reshuffled former governing party rose to power again headed by its former leader István Tisza. The political schizophrenia already noticeable earlier was further intensified by the political frustration. The pro-independence side was faced with two options: either to open towards democracy, which threatened the hegemony of ethnic Magyars, or to continue to keep aloof, which implied a commitment to the status quo, and that, in turn, excluded independence. The advocates of democracy appeared to be foreign, anti-national forces as long as they refused to put the slogan of independence on their banner, but the moment they adopted the slogan, they had to face up to the problem of the nationalities (Dénes 1999, 157–173, 203–212).

The following parties all honored Lajos Kossuth as their predecessor and ideal: the National Republican Party founded in the first decade of the twentieth century, then the National Lajos Kossuth Party, and the adherents of the bourgeois democratic revolution and the republic (proclaimed on November 16, 1918) also depicted Kossuth as their most important predecessor.

¹⁾ The eclectic mausoleum was planned by Kálmán Gerster. The decorative sculptures (the winged *genius*, *Hungaria*, *Patrona Hungariae*, and the leopards) were made by Alajos Stróbl. Lajos Kossuth's ornate sarcophagus stands under a dome supported by six Doric columns, the mosaic adorning the ceiling of the dome was the work of Miksa Róth. (Éri and Jobbágyi 1997, 86; www.nemzetisirkert.hu/panteon-html/kossuth).

The Monarchy crumbled together with historical Hungary. As Kossuth predicted, Hungary became the stake at which the two-headed eagle would be burned. Democracy and independence were legally realized. However, historical Hungary crumbled in a way that surpassed the strangest nightmares, and with that, democracy was soon gone. In his *Három nemzedék* (Three generations), Gyula Szekfű (1883–1955, historian, journalist, politician, and conservative thinker) turned Kossuth into the scapegoat (Szekfű 1920; Szabó 2003).

On March 1, 1920, the legislative body of the Hungarian Kingdom appointed the acting temporary head of state, Miklós Horthy (1868–1957), as governor. On the 125th anniversary of Kossuth's birth, in September 1927, he and the minister of religion and public education, Kuno Klebelsberg (1875–1932), unveiled a memorial to Kossuth outside the Parliament which showed all members of the Batthyány cabinet overcome by sorrow and pain (Szekfű 1927). In September 1950, on the 150th anniversary, the minister of public education and member of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Workers' Party, József Révai (1898–1959, communist politician, ideologue, minister, and journalist), delivered a speech at the unveiling of a monument, erected in place of the demolished earlier "pessimistic" monument, showing the "optimistic," "revolutionary," and "popular orator" Lajos Kossuth surrounded by subsidiary figures symbolizing the coalition of workers, peasants, and intellectuals (I. Tóth 1952, 1:5–8). In a way, Révai turned against the mainstream pre-1945 socialist narrative established by Ervin Szabó (1877–1918, scholar, anarcho-syndicalist revolutionary ideologue). In the interpretation of Ervin Szabó, Kossuth was a politician of feudal particularism, and 1848/49 was aimed at preserving the feudal privileges, instead of a bourgeois revolution (E. Szabó 1948). Ervin Szabó's main ideological source was Marx's *Herr Vogt*, whereas for Révai it was this work he had to depart from.

Inspired by this new ideological drive to incorporate Kossuth, an official two-volume commemorating work was published for the anniversary and included writings by prestigious historians as well. It is significant that the studies of three prominent historians were not included in the volume: István Hajnal's (1892–1956) *Kossuth külpolitikája 1848-ban* (Kossuth's foreign policy), István Szabó's (1898–1968) "Kossuth és a jobbágyfelszabadítás" (Kossuth and the liberation of the serfs), and István Barta's (1910–1966) "Kossuth alföldi toborzó körútja 1848 őszén" (Kossuth's recruiting tour of the Great Plain in the fall of 1848) and "Kossuth és Csányi" (Kossuth and Csányi) (Hajnal 1957; Szabó 1952; Barta 1952a and 1952b). Also, an ideological and political witch-hunt was initiated against the 1948 book

A szabadságharc fővárosa Debrecen. 1849. január-május (Debrecen, the capital of the war of liberation, Jan.–May 1849), edited by István Szabó (Szabó 1948).

The revolutionary youth of 1956 looked upon Kossuth as the symbol of Hungarian liberty, independence, and democracy. The Kádár establishment thereafter regarded the symbols of independence as taboos. Wearing a Kossuth beard (just as in the post-1849 Bach era), the Kossuth coat of arms, the cockade of the national colors, and the celebration of March 15th (the outburst of the 1848 revolution), all became signs of resistance. In a series of articles communist politician Erik Molnár (1894–1966) sought to do away with the ideological legacy of the 1848 revolution, qualifying the pro-independence traditions as the preservation of feudal privileges, national consciousness as false consciousness, and nationalistic feeling as a maneuver of the ruling classes to hoodwink the working classes. The framework of progress set in opposition to national sentiments in this vision was a broader economic and political unit; the community of socialist countries based on proletarian internationalism, the Comecon, and the Warsaw Pact. This interpretation was turned upside down by communist literary scholar István Király (1921–1989) in 1973, claiming that the pro-independence traditions, as precedents to socialist patriotism, served the socialist model (Király 1973; 1974a; 1974b). Under the “shifting system of illusions” (to borrow the apposite phrase of historian György Szabad) it was again Révai’s national communist interpretation that came into the fore of indoctrination, and not Molnár’s or Ervin Szabó’s (“Hazafiség...” 1974, 32–35, 52–3).

Révai depicted Kossuth as an inflammatory and revolutionary agitator; a revolutionary, though, who was reproached for inconsistency by the professional defendants of the revolution and revolutionary violence. The official Kossuth concept of the Kádár regime bore signs of deheroization similarly to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hungarian conservative interpretations, resembling first of all the interwar scheme of the emotive politician. Kossuth was again judged in contrast to Széchenyi, just as between the two world wars, under the dichotomous presentation of politics and economy, passion and sobriety, emotion and reason, desires and possibilities, words and deeds. The other symbol of independence and democracy, March 15th, was joined together with March 21 (the start of the experimental Republic of Councils in 1919) and April 4 (the liberation of Hungary in 1945) under the combined *Revolutionary Days of the Youth*, thus falsifying it and diminishing its significance. The title of one of Ferenc Kunszabó’s (b. 1932, writer, sociographer, right-wing journalist and editor after 1989) books on Széchenyi was

Itt alkotni, teremteni kell! (We must work and create here!), and it was too easy to add the suggested continuation of the title: “and not politicize, caper, and irresponsibly incite passions ignoring the geopolitical possibilities” (Kunszabó 1983a; 1983b).

The 175th anniversary of Kossuth’s birth in 1977 was far more modest than the 100th, 125th, or 150th. The historian György Szabad (b. 1924) discussed the role of Kossuth in the ceremonial room of the New Townhall after Gyula Kállay (communist politician, president of the Patriotic People’s Front) spoke. In his book published for the anniversary, Szabad turned against the deheroicizing trend in his discussion of the continuity of Kossuth’s lifework (Szabad 1977). No new statue was unveiled at the 200th anniversary either, but Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy spoke about the republican tradition outside of the Parliament.

Iconoclastic Voices

The two most important interpretations in this vein, Zsigmond Kemény’s (1814–1875, novelist, journalist) view of Kossuth as an emotive radical, and Szekfű’s concept of a radical irresponsible troublemaker and agitator, were elaborated in political and literary pamphlets after 1848/49 and 1918/19, respectively. It was the genre, for all who had the chance, used as an outlet for their emotions and thoughts. After 1848/49 Kemény, György Fejér (1766–1851, catholic priest, librarian, historian, novelist, and translator), Antal Csengery (1822–1880, politician, economist, and journalist), Ágoston Trefort (1817–1888, economist, journalist, and politician), László Szalay (1813–1864, lawyer, historian, and politician), József Eötvös (1813–1871, novelist, liberal thinker, and politician), and on the conservative side, Pál Somssich (1811–1888, politician, journalist) and Antal Szécsen (1819–1896, minister, politician), put to paper their respective *After the Revolution*.² The list of names could almost be continued without end: among others, Mihály Vörösmarty (1800–1855, poet) in his poem *Preface* and *The Old Gypsy*, János Arany (1817–1882, poet) in *The Gypsies of Nagyida*, and, of course, Kossuth himself

² The *After the Revolution* type pamphlets written after 1848/49 were analysed by Ágnes R. Várkonyi (Várkonyi 1973, 2:239–244). See also: Fenyő (1997), Gángó (2006). As is well known, Antal Csengery published his essays on Széchenyi and Wesselényi in his collection after Zsigmond Kemény’s two pamphlets (Csengery 1851, 85–185, 333–512). See also Asbóth (1892).

in the *Letters from Viddin* expressed bitterness. After 1918/19 there were also many thinkers who wrote down their interpretations, including Szekfű, Ede Ormos (1873–1944, journalist, writer, and sociologist), Oszkár Jászi (1875–1957, journalist, scholar, and politician), Elemér Mályusz (1898–1989, historian), and István Bibó, Sr. (1877–1935) (Ormos 1921; Szekfű 1920; Mályusz 1923; 1928; Bibó 1923).

An important trendsetter was János Asbóth (1845–1911, journalist, publicist), the ideologist of the conservatives in the 1870s. He drew a lot on Kemény's pamphlets. In turn, Szekfű borrowed from Asbóth's scheme of the emotive radical politician who incited people to wrong action, unleashing passions, and gave him an even more marked image of a radical politician of grievances.

Pál Gyulai (1826–1909, poet, writer, critic) saw Kossuth as the epitome of hubris and excessive virtue leading to vice (Gyulai 1956, 2:234–414, esp. 2:387–410). The first two volumes, especially the second, of Kossuth's *Irataim az emigrációból* (Writings from emigration; Kossuth 1880–1882) elicited in 1881 studies by Gyulai and Ferenc Salamon (1825–1892, critic, historian) in the *Budapesti Szemle*, edited by Gyulai. There was, in addition, a public letter by Artúr Görgei (1818–1916, general, commander-in-chief of the Hungarian army in 1848/49), and a book review by Henrik Marczali (1856–1940, historian). László Arany (1844–1898, poet, writer) also wrote an essay inspired by Kossuth's *Irataim az emigrációból*. They all accused Kossuth of bias, distortion, vanity, ignorance of the Hungarian conditions, demagoguery, and the reveries of the permanent revolution—the disregard for honest, patient, and meticulous daily work (Gyulai 1881; Salamon 1881; Görgei 1881; Marczali 1881; Arany 1960).

In Kemény's and Szekfű's opinion—in accordance with Gyulai's concept of hubris—Kossuth jolted Hungarian politics out of its old rut with his emotive radicalism and his political recalcitrance (Kemény 1982: 81–559; Szekfű 1933, 155–156, 158–159, 166–168; 2002, 310–382). Most importantly, Kemény, Asbóth, and Szekfű looked upon and demonized Kossuth as the inflamer of national sentiments, the most influential radical politician of the grievances of the estates, and as an early representative of modern mass politicians hankering after popularity. In their interpretation, Kossuth was the scapegoat.

In his essay entitled “Három nemzedék” (Three generations), Asbóth paired the key politicians of the mid-nineteenth century with the most important poets of the cultural revival: István Széchenyi (1791–1860, politician, a pioneer of the Hungarian liberal reform movement whose *oeuvre* was later

expropriated by the conservatives) with Mihály Vörösmarty, Lajos Kossuth with Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849, poet, radical democrat), and Ferenc Deák (1803–1876, liberal politician, mastermind of the Compromise) with János Arany. In contrast to the other four, he regarded Kossuth and Petőfi as detrimental and condemnable. The model for János Asbóth's parallels of politician and poet was Pál Gyulai's biography of Vörösmarty (Asbóth 1876, 121–162; Gyulai 1956, 2:387–410. See also Lackó 2000; Mester 2002; Tattay 2004).

In the early twentieth century, Mihály Réz (1878–1921, conservative political thinker and journalist) praised Kossuth's conservative opponent Aurél Dessewffy (1808–1842, politician and journalist) in defense of Hungarian hegemony, branding Kossuth a demagogue neither for the first or the last time (Réz 1909, 355). Interpreting the nationality issue in terms of democracy and universal suffrage, Oszkár Jászi (who wrote a book under a pseudonym in 1896 to rehabilitate Artúr Görgei from the accusation of high treason) regarded the Hungarian independence movements as the action of noble oligarchs for the protection of their privileges in his 1912 book *A nemzeti államok kialakulása és a nemzetiségi kérdés* (The emergence of the nation states and the nationality issue). Even so, he still expressed appreciation at the liberation of serfs, but he defined the nationality issue as the weak spot of 1848/49 (Jászi 1896; 1912. Cf. Deák 1979; Kosáry 1994; Varga 1964; Dénes 1999, 201–203). Later on, Jászi revised his opinion: the English version of his political memoirs of 1918/1920 was already dedicated to the memory of Kossuth, and in his *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy* published in Chicago, he wrote highly of Kossuth (Jászi 1924; 1929). In his interpretation, Kossuth was definitely not the politician of feudal particularism, as Ervin Szabó described him in his *Társadalmi és pártharcok a 48-49-es magyar forradalomban* (Societal and party struggles in the 1848/49 Hungarian revolution) (Jászi 1929; Szabó 1921; Litván 1978; 2006).

In both his studies on the topic, the prominent representative of Hungarian *Volks-geschichte*, Mályusz, argued with Szekfű's historical vision of the national revival. In the view of Mályusz, the work of the regular committees delegated by the parliament of 1790/91 did imply the possibility of a policy of constitutional reform. He thought that it was Ignác Martinovics's (1755–1795, monk, scientist, political gambler) Jacobin plot that prevented this possibility from being realized. By generating mistrust in the monarch who had been a supporter of reforms until then, Mályusz defined the Martinovics conspiracy as the model for the revolutions in 1918/19. This interpretation was tied to the discourse after the 1918/19 revolutions and the Trianon shock, and so were the anti-Semitic closing passages of his study "A vörös emigráció" (The red

emigration) (Mályusz 1926a; 1926b; 1926c; 1928a; 1928b; 1931; 1942; 2002). Similarly, his interpretation of Kossuth's political role was created in opposition to Szekfű's scheme of the "gravaminalist politician," and he judged Kossuth to be a successful statesman of the lesser nobility of the *ancien régime* (Mályusz 1923; 1928a).

The left-wing populist Ferenc Erdei (1910–1971, sociographer, politician) wrote about Kossuth in 1939 as the symbol of democracy, independence, and the cooperation of the small East-European states. Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky (1886–1944, journalist, politician, martyr of the anti-Nazi resistance) wrote in the same vein (Erdei 1939; Bajcsy-Zsilinszky 1941; 1942) while László Németh (1901–1975, writer), on the other side, listed Kossuth among the "shallow" Hungarians, following in the footsteps of Kemény, Asbóth, and Szekfű (Németh 1989, 408–82; Bibó 1986–1990, 2:571–619; Kovács 2004, 112–153, 193–215, 434–464; Trencsényi 2007, 183–336).

The Kossuth image of the communist indoctrination drew on several sources and is attributed to Révai, Aladár Mód (1908–1973, journalist, historian), and Erzsébet Andics (1902–1986, communist politician, historian). These ideologues discarded Ervin Szabó's interpretation, reversed Kemény's demonization of the great orator who whipped up passions, and, rather, idealized him as such. The novelty of this Kossuth image was Révai's interpretation in which the "third estate" of the mid-sized landowners, substituting for the missing bourgeoisie, was evaluated positively, giving new meaning to Gusztáv Beksics's (1847–1906, journalist, historian) nineteenth-century and Szekfű's twentieth-century theses (Beksics 1907; Szekfű 1920; Révai 1949. Cf. Cserne 2004; Lackó 2006).

This fit into the scheme of the closed social model of anti-liberal nationalism reaching back to Szekfű and Dezső Szabó (1879–1945, writer, ideologue). The myth of "national self-centeredness" was tied up with the mythology of expropriated progress, in the manner of a mystery play of progress and reaction, angels and devils, good and evil. The ideologues of this indoctrination ranked Kossuth as an inconsistent revolutionary and inserted him into the prehistory of the Communist revolutionary movement. They overlooked that Kossuth was a consistent opponent to any (including Russian) despotism, a committed politician of liberalism and democracy in Hungary (Révai 1949; 1966; Mód 1945; 1948; I. Tóth 1952; Lukács 1952; Andics 1955).

Révai drafted the following notes:

It is specific to Kossuth: (1) He in one person represented a development that a whole row of fractions had undergone in France. He was not only Danton and Carnot, but also

Mirabeau in one person. (2) He did not go as far as Robespierre in his shift to the left. (3) Hence, he is a 1789 type and an 1848 type in one. The June failure had its effect! ... The universal bourgeois revolution was in Hungary: (a) Purely only in Petőfi. (b) Mixed in Kossuth. (c) Missing from most, which is the limitation of the bourgeoisie and the nobility. (Révai, quoted from Lackó 1996, 203–259)

The youth of the 1956 Revolution interpreted Kossuth's figure as a symbol of national independence and democracy, set against despotism. The interpretation initiated by Erik Molnár (communist ideologist, politician), far from independent of the party resolutions after the quenching of the revolution, defined the place of the traditions of national independence among the struggles for feudal, particularistic privilege protection, and not progress. From then on, that was how these traditions featured in the political and scholarly discourse. Though Erik Molnár's position eliminated several earlier taboos of the indoctrination, it created new ones as well. As against the scheme of "popular, hence national, national, hence progressive," he inculcated the proposition (not free from actual political implications) that the larger imperial unit was a more advanced entity than the national, and that absolutism was preparing progress. That, indirectly, rehabilitated Ervin Szabó's interpretation of 1848/49 and Szekfű's positive view of the Habsburg Empire and negative view of the Hungarian drives at independence. As mentioned above, the new turn in indoctrination in 1973 was effected by Király's again revived scheme of "national self-centeredness" (Molnár 1959; 1960; 1962; Király 1973; 1974; Szűcs 1974; Dénes 2002).

Towards a Scholarly Re-evaluation

Szekfű's anti-liberal interpretation (running as a clue through his whole life-work and still being the most effective interpretation of history in Hungary) repeated and systematized the accusations articulated by Kossuth's contemporaneous opponents (the conservatives, the centralists, and Széchenyi) and his later critics (such as Asbóth and Réz). In Szekfű's view Kossuth was a liberal, but his liberalism, patterned on foreign schemes generated first of all nationalism, gravaminalist and emotive politicizing, sweeping diletantism, and a hunt for popularity. These, in turn, paralyzed the sense of responsibility and reality in the actors of the Hungarian political scene.³

³ In his study entitled *Az öreg Kossuth 1867-1894*, published in the *Kossuth emlékkönyv* in 1952, Szekfű did not rehabilitate Kossuth's policy. Despite his article in *Szabad Nép* (September 17,

In 1943, Domokos Kosáry (1913–2007, historian, conservative diplomat, leftist icon figure in the first part of the twenty-first century) wrote a scientifically well-grounded monograph on the basis of thorough source exploration and criticism concerning the beginning of Kossuth's career and his activity in the age of Reform. Published in 1946, and republished in enlarged form in 2002, the book echoes Szekfű's image of the gravaminalist politician in its use of concepts, interpretational frame, value judgments, and implied polemics. The author incorporated Mályusz's view of the politician of the lesser nobility, but his own source research and the biographical aspects pointed beyond both interpretations, making the intellectual role and personality of Kossuth quite palpable (Kosáry 2006; I. Tóth 1952: I, 1–86).

Since then, fundamental scientific works have been published exploring the political history of Hungarian liberalism in the age of Reform, the conclusions of which do not fit into the scheme of Kossuth as a feudalist-gravaminalist politician. Thanks to these works, the reader, having discarded the romantic approaches, is no longer obliged to choose from various types of conservative interpretation and totalitarian indoctrination.

In the 1960s, István Barta's in-depth studies of the county debates, as well as of Kölcsey and Kossuth, retraced the birth of the Hungarian liberal opposition in the 1820s and 1830s and its organization in the age of Reform (Barta 1952a; 1952b; 1959; 1963a; 1963b; 1966). In his monograph on Miklós Wesselényi (1796–1850), Zsolt Trócsányi (1926–1987, historian, archivist) distinguished the policy of the liberals in the 1830s from both the aulic party and the gravaminalist opposition, and defined the role, strategy, and tactic of Wesselényi, the first leader of the liberals (Trócsányi 1965). Both did pioneering work in outlining the precedents, the background, and the medium in which Kossuth's political beginning in the 1820s and 1830s can be perceived and interpreted.

The historian János Varga (1927–2008) published several fundamental monographs and studies on the theme (Varga 1971; 1983; 2001). He explored a wide range of pertinent issues: the change in Metternich's imperial policies after 1840; the political goals, strategy, and tactics of the "neo-conservatives"; Széchenyi and his following; Eötvös and the centralists; and the liberal opposition led by Deák and Kossuth, as well as their attitudes towards the

1952), and one of his letters to Mátyás Rákosi (*Magyar Nemzet*, March 11, 1952), Szekfű rejected Kossuth's political concept and strategy. However, he wrote with deep empathy about the human concerns and age of the senior Kossuth, probably relying also on the experiences of his own ageing (I. Tóth 1952, 2:341–433. Cf. Csorba 2006, 213–251).

nationalities, the county system, certain reform issues, and the imperial conception of which they were unaware. He elaborated on the *Kelet népe* (People of the East) dispute between Széchenyi and the more radical group of liberal nationalists and shed light on the background of the polemics, as well as the replacement of the editor of *Pesti Hírlap* in 1844. He has shown how the liberals split into opposition and middle of the roaders during the debate of 1841, and how the attack by the “neo-conservatives” against *Pesti Hírlap*, in connection with government decisions, was linked to the dispute (Varga 1983; Dénes 2009).

It was known earlier, too, that Kossuth had to yield the editorship of *Pesti Hírlap* to the centralists, but the motives underlying it were not known. In 1843 Kossuth resigned from the position of editor of *Pesti Hírlap*, and from 1844 the paper became the forum of the centralists. Now it is clear that the resignation was provoked by the owner of the daily, Lajos Landerer (1800–1854, publisher), a secret police agent, upon Metternich’s initiative. In vain did Kossuth apply for permission to edit a paper—his requests were denied, quite intentionally, as Varga’s research has revealed. From the summer of 1844 the paper was edited by Szalay, then by Csengery, members of the centralist fraction. The paper leveled attacks by the centralists at the county program of the liberal reformist opposition (the only remaining counterweight to central power). It did so parallel with the unfolding conservative offensive, the introduction of an administrative system designed to suppress the liberal majority in the county assemblies and the diet, and with the strengthening of the conservative journal warfare in the service of the former program.

In 1843, the reform plans of József Eötvös and the centralists (primarily the parliament of popular representation) were already coupled with the conviction that the opposition was incapable of implementing the reforms, and only the government was capable of doing so. Eötvös, who did not know about Metternich’s conception or measures to modernize absolutism and to modernize through absolutism, sought out the chancellor and offered his cooperation in two memoranda in order to get the government to put through the proposed important reforms. However, as he told Metternich, he had not informed his comrades in the opposition about this step. Metternich grabbed at this opportunity to rid the liberal reformist opposition of the influence of its most suggestive thinker and press organ (Varga 1980–1981, 1:177–243, 2:155–194, esp. 2:179–189).

On the whole, Varga did no less than define the political context in which the political decisions of the 1840s were taken and prepared; these polemics

were expressed at the county assemblies, the national diet, and in the press. All this allows for the understanding, comparison, and interpretation of Kossuth's political role in the 1840s. The conception of Hungarian liberal nationalism in the age of Reform—as the research by Trócsányi, Barta, and Varga revealed—was determined by emancipating assimilation, whereas the conception of the conservatives (as my own research also confirms) was based on the discarding of both the extension of rights and assimilation.⁴

In the 1970s, Szabad summarized the fundamental elements of Kossuth's thinking as uninterrupted throughout his career (Szabad 1975; 1977; 1979; 1985; 2002). By exploring the political crisis of 1860/61 and synthesizing the whole period of absolutism, he confronted the possibility of the revived policy of the reconciliation of interests proposed in the Reform age and the agreement with the nationalities, with the reversed interest reconciliation and compromise with the empire. By doing so, he enabled research to deliberate, understand, and articulate the alternatives and dilemmas of politics in the studied period. In addition to the significance of this contribution to scholarship, it also had a political implication—it conveyed the conviction that an independent and democratic Hungary was desirable and possible, and the efforts made for it could not and did not sink into oblivion. Szabad, quoting Lucan with the words “*Victrix causa diis placuit, sed victa Catoni*,” spoke in memory of the opponents of the *Ausgleich* and—implicitly—the advocates and victims of the 1956 Revolution.⁵

Adding to Árpád Károlyi's (1853–1940, historian, archivist) research, Varga also explored the process and background to the liberation of the serfs (Károlyi

⁴ A schematic interpretation and a great amount of sources are paired by Andics (1973). For the regional contextualization of liberal nationalism see Dénes 2006, 1–20, 155–196. On the conservatives, see Dénes 2009.

⁵ See, Szabad (1967, 611). This citation is a line from *Pharsaliae Libri X. Marcus Annaeus Lucanus*. www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-in/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0133-39k: “This famous line was quoted by Lamartine when addressing the French Assembly in 1848. He was advocating, against the interests of his own party (which in the Assembly was all-powerful), that the President of the Republic should be chosen by the nation, and not by the Assembly; and he ended by saying that if the course he advocated was disastrous to himself, *Victrix causa Diis placuit, sed victa Catoni*” (*Pharsalia. M. Annaeus Lucanus*. Sir Edward Ridley. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Luc.+1>). At the public deliberation of Szabad's monograph submitted for the qualification process to become a Doctor of Historical Sciences of the Hungarian Academy, it was ardently criticized by Lajos Lukács and András Siklós (earlier political notables) as a non-Marxist bourgeois work. So much so, that the defense of the thesis lasted for two days and the exceptional tension, so unusual at such events, was felt by the large audience.

1932; 1936; Varga 1971; 1993). Some historians between 1957 and 1989 have shed light on the roles of the political actors of the age of Reform; the political processes, the foreign policy of the Hungarian government, and the interplay between the processes of domestic and international politics in 1848/49, exposing them for further interpretation (Hajnal 1957; Trócsányi 1965; Barta 1966; Szabó 1976; Urbán 1986; Varga 1993; Brunczel 2004).

The complete professional edition of Kossuth's writings is still a matter for the future nearly 110 years after his death and after the bicentennial of his birth. There was at one time some progress made in this direction, which we will examine here. Hajnal published the documents of Kossuth's emigration in Turkey in the 1920s (Hajnal 1927). In the 1940s, Dénes Jánossy (1891–1966, archivist) published the English and American documents from Kossuth's emigration in 1851–52 (Jánossy 1940–1944). In 1949, Jenő Koltay-Kastner (1894–1966, philologist) edited the documents of the year 1859 from Kossuth's exile in Italy (Koltay-Kastner 1949). Barta, István Sinkovics (1910–1990, historian), and Gábor Pajkossy (b. 1951, historian) edited twelve volumes of Kossuth's *Complete Works*. Ten of them were the work of Barta alone. He edited most of Kossuth's writings in the age of Reform and of 1848/49, the *Parliamentary Reports*, the *Municipal Reports*, the documents of Kossuth's role in the parliament of 1847/48, as well as Kossuth's documents while president of the National Defense Committee and as governing president in 1849. István Sinkovics published Kossuth's documents as minister of finance, and Gábor Pajkossy collected the documents of Kossuth's imprisonment and trial (*Kossuth Lajos összes munkái* 1948–1989).

These exemplary source publications meant a great stride forward in the objective and systematic elaboration of the *oeuvre*. The majority of Kossuth's journalistic writings of the 1840s (including articles in *Pesti Hírlap*) and the pertinent documents, however, still have not been republished, just as the bulk of the documents of the emigration are also awaiting critical publication.⁶ It is truly unbelievable that there are no well-grounded biographical monographs with sensitive psycho-historical approaches to Kossuth's personality.

Several useful publications appeared on the bicentennial of Kossuth's birth and during the next four years.⁷ Kosáry's book, written in 1943 and published

⁶ There are, of course, good source publications covering certain themes and connections, such as Vízota (1927–1930), Spira (1989), and Pajkossy (2002, 2003, 2006).

⁷ A selective list only: *Tiszatáj*, no. 9 (2002), 54–106; *Magyar Napló*, no. 9 (2002), 5–45, no. 10 (2002), 27–35, no. 11 (2002), 35–50, *Századok*, no. 4 (2002), 741–957; *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, no. 3 (2002), 539–912; *Rubicon*, no. 8 (2002), 4–60; *Valóság*, no. 9 (2002), 20–41;

in 1946, came out in an enlarged form in 2002 in which the author also interpreted the diet of 1847/48 and extended his own text at places. However, he did not incorporate the achievements of the more recent works listed in the bibliography pointing beyond the schemes of a gravaminalist and lesser noble politician, but rather polemicized with them, mostly covertly. The frame within which he interpreted Kossuth's figure was still Szekfű's scheme of the gravaminalist politician and Mályusz's statesman of the lesser nobility, instead of the intellectual politician that could be obviously deduced from several (and his own later) works. That is why he was forced to use generalities, and sometimes even platitudes (Kosáry 2002). Szabad's most recent book—as well as his work of 1977 in which he introduced Kossuth through his own texts so as to free him of the layers that settled upon him—will be useful and instructive for future biographers (Szabad 2002).

The interpretations of Kossuth prevalent in nineteenth- and twentieth-century political and academic discourse were superseded by the research results of the past decades, primarily by Barta, Hajnal, Kosáry, Szabad, Varga, and Aladár Urbán (Brunczel 2004). This tendency was continued more recently by the research of László Csorba, Gyula Erdmann, Gábor Erdődy, András Gergely, Róbert Hermann, Ambrus Miskolczy, and Gábor Pajkossy. Their findings disproved the earlier cult—the interpretative frames of conservative journalism and historiography as well as the socialist and communist interpretations—which depicted Kossuth as the Moses of the Hungarians, irresponsible popularity hunter, politician of grievances, successful statesman of the lesser nobility, a nobleman in defense of the privileges, and the inconsistent revolutionary. At the level of symbolic politicizing, these more recent works were in opposition to the official discourse asserting that independence and democracy were possible and timely. They did not, however, always draw explicit conclusions from their research.

One conclusion was drawn by István Bibó (1911–1979, the eminent democratic political thinker of twentieth-century Hungary) with reference to Szabad's book published in 1977. In his opinion, Kossuth was an intellectual politician, a “realistic prophet,” representing a third alternative to the false dichotomy of “false realists” and “overstrung prophets”:

[W]hat surprised me most was the unimpaired sense of reality in Kossuth who has mainly been famed for his grandiloquence. So far, I have always declared that I identify with

História, nos. 9–10 (2002), 51–66; *Magyar Szemle*, nos. 7–8 (2002), 39–65, nos. 3–4 (2003); *A bűnbaktól a realista lényeglátóig. A magyar politikai és tudományos diskurzusok Kossuth-képei 1849–2002; Lajos Kossuth Sent Word; Kossuth Lajos, a magyarok Mózese.*

Kossuth's historical truth but I am not certain about his personality and character. I was not attracted by him as a great orator. I kept in mind an alleged case of embezzlement of a countess in his youth, his flight in the company of a foreign lady towards Orsova, his clownish clothing during his foreign tours, and such immaterial things. Having read your book, I feel you could say some words about these and I regret a bit that you did not think it worth while to touch on these questions, thus giving rise to the suspicion that you only want to speak about the good side. I am increasingly convinced by your [György Szabad's] thesis that he caused the greatest irritation by acquiring a decisive political role in a completely modern, novel way, through the profession of journalism, without having any landed property[.] (Quoted from Bibó's letter to Szabad. Budapest, June 10, 1978 [Bibó 1991])

Conclusion

On the whole, the academic works of last five decades contributed to the formation of a more balanced image of Kossuth. He was not the Moses of the Hungarians, a great, lonely, romantic, fairytale, or Biblical hero, nor was he a devastating demon, inciter, and personification of Hungarian vices, the source of all evil, the great enticer, or the scapegoat. The schemes of the cult and the condemnation are projections, self-reinforcements, and manifestations of the need for a strong and great father. He became the symbolic figure of national independence, democracy, and the Republic of Hungary in 1918 and 1956, and one of the great pioneers of cooperation among the East-European small nations in the interwar period, during WWII, and between 1945 and 1947. Conversely, he was held as the bogeyman, a *va banque* gambler who was the original reason of all the distresses of the Monarchy and historic Hungary and their disastrous consequences for the aristocracy and the national middle class in the interwar period.

Neither was he a politician of the lesser nobility, for despite his origins and family socialization, his role and outlook were those of an intellectual. His mentality and role were not determined by the cunning drive to protect the privileges, but by a conception of eliminating them through their extension. What distinguished him from his fellow Hungarian liberal nationalist politicians was a greater openness to democracy. Thus, he belonged among the founders of political and personal freedom, a liberal nation-state, and a middle-class society—and as one of the prototypes of the liberal nationalist intellectual politician.

He was not an inconsistent revolutionary either. He was not a revolutionary, but a reformer, a consistent and passionate advocate of constitutional relations, popular sovereignty, and the division of power, moving gradually from

the model of constitutional monarchy to republicanism. No doubt, of course, he was a nationalist, but a liberal nationalist who walked a long way along liberal nationalism towards republican patriotism and the self-government of the local, national, and regional communities.

His political socialization was based on the circle of the local Zemplén liberals led by Gábor Lónyay, then in national politics on the liberal reformist opposition headed by Miklós Wesselényi. His name became known nationwide from his *Municipal Reports* and his political imprisonment. He became one of the outstanding politicians of the liberal reformist opposition as the editor of *Pesti Hírlap*. As a politician, his role was decisive as a deputy in the 1847/48 parliament, the finance minister of the Batthyány government, the president of the National Defense Committee, and the acting head of state of Hungary as governing president. During his emigration he insisted on the latter title, as the representative of independent Hungary.

His role and realm of values are to be compared with those of his fellow Hungarian liberal nationalist politicians and in part to the liberal nationalists in European countries facing more or less similar situations and dilemmas: the Irish, Scottish, Norwegian, Finnish, Polish, Czech, Italian, and Greek politicians, and indirectly, to German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Mexican statesmen such as Daniel O'Connell, John MacAdam, Giuseppe Mazzini, Camillo Benso Cavour, and Simon Bolivar (Trencsényi and Kopeček 2006–2007; Denes 2006, 37–80, 197–307, 345–499). His biographies also need to be written from a psycho-historical angle facing his character, roles, self-image, and the imprints and mechanisms of processing conflicts and frustrations. First and foremost, however, the romantic and heroic projections of the father figure and redeemer must be discarded, and so must the conservative, ethno-protectionist, socialist, and communist schemes of the *emotive troublemaking politician*, the *successful lesser noble*, the *nobleman protecting his privileges*, and the *inconsistent revolutionary*.

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