THE POLITICS OF HISTORY: HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTIONS OF 1848/49

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History weighs heavily on the Hungarian nation. For a century poets and intellectuals have pondered the meaning of their past, and fought desperately to assert their varying interpretations of its political message. With time a repertoire was created, a repertoire of events, historical figures and significant images which gave specific form to the debate. Yet the creation of Hungarian historical consciousness was not confined to the fantasies of oracles taking shelter in academies or coffee houses; popular representations and occasions for their production were to be found in communities all across the country. Thus an ideology of the past, which explained a series of disparate events, came to be a formative principle in social action and accordingly, a crucial component of Hungarian national identity. The central event of historical consciousness is the War of Independence waged against the Habsburgs in 1848–1849. Today I wish to illustrate how the representation of history became a crucial political event in Hungarian society by looking at two significant moments in its construction: the funeral of Lajos Kossuth, once governor-president of the provisional revolutionary government in 1848–49, and the beginning day of the Hungarian revolution in 1956.

The War of Independence, ignited by the flash of revolutionary fervor blazing across Europe in the spring of 1848, ended bitterly for the Hungarian nation. Lasting more than a year and half, far looger than any other insurrection at the time, the battle for Hungarian national independence against Habsburg domination was crushed by the combined forces of Habsburg and Czarist armies. Thirteen leading officers of the revolution were executed, along with Count Batthyány, who had been appointed prime minister by Archduke Stephen in the early days of the revolt. Kossuth, who replaced Batthyány as governor-president of the provisional government, fled into exile. For a decade, Hungarians suffered under the vindictive rule of Bach; by the 1860s, however, police measures were relaxed, and once more citizens took to the streets to engage in angry demonstrations commemorating the revolution and agitating for change. By 1867 a reconciliation was sought between the political elites of the two nations, represented in the historic *Ausgleich* or Compromise, elevating Hungary to the status of partner in the governing of the empire.

In the decades following the Compromise, many Hungarians would resign themselves to their continued association with the Habsburg dynasty; Kossuth never did. His staunch voice from the Italian wilderness called unceasingly for Hungarian independence. Forty-five years after the revolution, in 1894, Lajos Kossuth died in exile at

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the age of ninety-two. His funeral, mounted without the public or financial support of the Hungarian state, 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.

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. Atlhough 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. 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 that Kossuth was merely a figure of the past. 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, coming to adorn the humble walls of many a peasant home alongside devotional pictures of saints. Throughout the 1880s Kossuth had been elected to Parliament in absentia from numerous districts across the country, and by 1892 he had been named honorary citizen of 32 Hungarian cities, including Budapest.

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 pre-eminent 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.

All throughout the three week period leading to the funeral, eulogies and editorials, speeches and songs evoked images of Hungarian pride and national integrity. Kossuth was called Father of the Nation, Father of Freedom, the Greatest Hungarian, the Pride of Hungary. In near blasphemous remarks, Kossuth's coffin was referred to as the ark of the covenant, and five days after his death, both tabloids in Budapest depicted his resurrection, and that of the Hungarian nation, on Easter Sunday. Yet the tranquility of sorrow and the permanence of death were not to be Kossuth's bequest to the Hungarian nation. Major controversies surrounded the funeral, fueling bitter parliamentary fights and provoking 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, who considered Kossuth his arch enemy, 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 re-assembled under the bright lights of a neighboring casino, and when the revelers 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 seige.

Controversy was not limited to student protests. The Roman Catholic Church in Budapest refused to display any mouring paraphernalia for Kossuth. The bishop claimed that since Kossuth had been a Lutheran, he was under no obligation to note his passing. Moreover, to do so would contravene 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, and the strong relationship between the Church and the Habsburg throne, had undoubtedly influenced the bishop's decision. Eventually, the Catholic hierarchy of Budapest consented to allow the bells of Catholic churches to be rung for the funeral, as no issue of dogma was apparently involved. An Easter procession in Óbuda 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 the country was far from united. The 1890s were marked by intensified nationalist movements mounted by ethnic minorities, and agrarian socialism had become a significant force in the countryside. 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, promting demonstrations and widespread unrest.

The funeral of a popular national hero, the saint of peasant families and resurrected hope of national self-determination, was far from peaceful, rent through by controversies. Conservative factions worked hard to dispel any radical traditions from association with 1848 and attempted to paint the revolution as a preliminary legal step towards the Compromise of 1867, while leftists proclaimed Kossuth's progressive heritage alive in the soul of the nation. Sixty years hence Hungary would be shaken with new controversies, couched once more in the traditions of 1848.

Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress in February of 1956 precipitated major crises in Eastern Europe. The post-Stalin transition sent a heavy shudder of uncertainty throughout the party and bureaucratic apparatus, staying their hand and emboldening critics. Throughout the summer and into the fall writers, University students, and disgruntled party members raised awkward questions of the regime and asserted their dissenting views in increasingly public ways. In Poland, widespread dissatisfaction culminated in strikes and urban unrest throughout the summer.

Prompted by increasing dissatisfaction and continuing reports of unrest and violence in Poland, Hungarian students compiled a list of demands of the government on October 22nd with hopes that they would be broadcast over the radio. The demands addressed economic, political and cultural issues, and were modeled explicitly in both form and content on the Twelve-Point Manifesto printed on the first day of revolt in 1848. It was further decided that a silent demonstration would be staged the following day to express solidarity with workers and students still fighting in Poland. The site chosen for the demonstration in Budapest was the statue of the Polish General Bem, who had fought alongside the Hungarians against the Habsburgs and Russians in 1848 and '49.

The next morning the country awoke to radio broadcasts discouraging participation in the students' demonstration in Budapest. The measure backfired, as hundreds took to the streets in anticipation of the day's events. Many gathered in the center of the city at March 15th Square, named for the first day of the 1848 revolt. The Romantic poet Petőfi, who is believed to have incited the citizens of Pest to revolt on March 15th by reciting a poem, is commemorated in stone at the far end of the square. As the crowd mulled around awaiting news of the Bem demonstration a few began to sing patriotic songs, especially the famous Kossuth call to arms in 1848. Suddenly, the actor Sinkovits jumped up onto the Petőfi statue and recited Petőfi's poem, entitled "The National Song".

> Magyars rise! Your country calls you!
> Now or never! Time enthralls you.
> Shall we live as slaves or freemen?
> These the questions. Choose between them!
> By the God of every Magyar
> Do we swear
> Do we swear the tyrant's handcuffs
> Not to bear!

His boldness was greeted with cheers and the singing continued, amidst cries of "Russians go home!"

[illegible]

By 3 : 00 o'clok in the afternoon, the students had been granted permission by the party to stage their demonstration. In contrast to the spontaneity on March 15th Square, here organized units with banners and placards were scattered throughout the crowd numbering over tens of thousands. There were groups representing students and professors from the Central University, the Polytechnic, the Agricultural University, the High School of Physical Education, the Petőfi Military Academy (Mikes:75), and the Lenin Institute, the party's training college. Banners proclaimed Polish–Hungarian solidarity, huge posters displayed the white eagle, symbol of the Polish nation, and wreaths and Hungarian and Polish flags bedecked the Bem statue. Virtually everyone in the crowd was wearing the red-white-green cockade reminiscent of 1848. The despised Communist shield depicting a hammer and a sheaf of wheat which had been imposed on the national flag in 1949 was torn from the center, sometimes to be replaced by the Kossuth emblem designed for the 1848 Republic. The Writers' Union

announced their list of demands to the crowd while copies of the students' manifesto were circulated and posted.

Emotions flew high. Demands were shouted, including a call to resist Russification of the army and reinstate the Hungarian tradition of the *Honvéd*, name of the army recruited to fight the Habsburgs in 1848. Soldiers stationed in a barrack adjacent to the square were beckoned to join the crowd. The following account describes what happened:

> The windows opened. There was a moment of terrified silence: then something fell among the crowd. There was a deep, spreading murmur of delight. The soldiers had torn the Soviet star from their caps and started to throw them among the crowd. A veritable rain of Soviet stars followed. The mood of the crowd changed: they laughed and cheered as they trampled the Soviet emblem underfoot.
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> (Mikes: 78)

The escalation of emotions and actions typified in the above description continued apace through the evening. The colossal statue of Stalin was felled, cut off at the knees by a blow torch. Red stars were torn off buildings, party placards and literature were destroyed, and pictures of the heroes of 1848 and earlier centuries appeared all over town.

The revolution had begun. A confrontation at the Radio Station turned bloody as secret police shot into the crowd. The police and army surrendered arms to the insurgents, and fighting began in earnest. Strikes were declared, and steps taken to establish workers' councils. Peasants left cooperative farms in droves, repudiating the imposition of state control over their production. As the revolution proceeded, references to 1848 diminished, and workers' councils came to dominate the rhetoric and direction of revolutionary action. Learning that Russian troops had crossed the border on the 31st of October, the revolutionary government declared neutrality and withdrew from the Warsaw Pact on the 1st of November. On the morning of the 4th Russian troops invaded Budapest to crush the revolution.

Why, in a revolution fought for national independence within the socialist world, were references to 1848 so prevalent? What could be so controversial about burying a defeated enemy? What was meant by invoking and sharing songs, poems, cockades and emblems reminiscent of 1848? The explanation for the emerging form of resistance in 1956 lies in understanding the rise of Hungarian historical consciousness, of which Kossuth's funeral was a significant moment.

Historical consciousness addresses the nature of the past, providing an explanation for the whys of history, the whys of national identity and of politics. In the latter half of the 19th century Hungarian history came to be represented as eternally motivated by the paradoxical complementarity of fate and revolution. The need to revolt was necessarily implicated in the concept of an unalterable fate of subjugation and humiliation. The very permanence of oppression demanded that the Hungarian national spirit realize itself in glorius revolt. In the metaphor of one poet, the thread-bare strand of Hungarian history has been adorned with pearls of revolution. These were familiar

themes throughout Europe during the Romantic period, but their social and political significance did not wane in Hungary, or in Central Europe at large, where problems of politics and identity, of national sovereignty and ethnicity continued well into the twentieth century.

To explain the eternal verities of the Hungarian past, actors, dates, objects were removed from their specific context and reassembled into an elaborate symbolic set. Sixteenth century peasant rebels became the strange bedfellows of eighteenth century princes; anti-Turkish Catholics were equated with anti-Habsburg Protestants. Historical consciousness was thus constructed by decontextualizing events and personages from their own time, from their particular universe of intention and meaning. In fact, a theory about the enduring meaning of history entailed constant controversy and reinterpretation, for although the imperative to define the nation in terms of its past may be dated to the mid-19th century, the concern with historical metaphor in politics and social debate persisted, and became ever more elaborated. Thus, contrary to the explicit message of continuity and a belief in the integrity of original referents, historical consciousness was constantly being refashioned and reformulated.

One particular anecdote from Kossuth's funeral demonstrates the jumbling of referents, the construction of enduring historical identities very clearly. After Kossuth's death, a movement was begun to transport to Budapest clumps of soil from all the sites where the blood of patriots had been 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 in 1851, 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 the great and beneficent 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.

Although Benedict Anderson has focused on the novel and newspaper in his argument about the development of national consciousness, the "imagined community" of the Hungarian nation was to have its historical destiny forged and contested in poetic verse. This ethnographic fact may be attributed to a particular synthesis of historical, political and logical factors. The Romantic legacy of poetry as politics, epitomized in the works of Byron and Wordsworth, struck deep roots in the Hungarian national tradition. Far beyond his practical role as General Bem's adjutant in the 1848 uprising, Petőfi conceived of himself as a pillar of fire in the wasteland leading the nation to the promised land of national sovereignty. His oeuvre was replete with odes to historical figures he deemed to exemplify the Hungarian national spirit, from the pagan hordes invading in the ninth century, to the fifteenth century Hunyadi who vanquished the Turks, to Prince Rákóczi, leader of the eighteenth century war of independence aga-

inst the Habsburgs. Yet Petőfi's contribution to national consciousness transcended the construction of historical equivalence among such diverse figures. His legacy would be the definition of poetry as the preeminent medium for political dissent.

Following Petőfi, succeeding generations of poets donned the mantle of critic for the nationalist cause. Each in their own time and own voice, the greatest of poets eloquently pondered the conundrum of identity and politics. The expectation that poets become the nation's political conscience, and shape the debate over nationality, led to their own apotheosis in the nationalist pantheon, alongside political and military figures. Just as Petőfi enshrined Rákóczi as the embodiment of the Hungarian spirit, so did József Attila write of Petőfi as the nation's hearth fire, and of the great poet Ady as permeating the Hungarian soil, cleaved by every furrow plowed by the nation's rural poor, his revolutionary flesh soon to reap new hope and new life. Bemoaning the absence of a critical political voice in the 1950s, one poet cried plaintively, "How many years has it been, since I've forgotten I was a poet?"

József Attila described poetry as "word-magic acting in the soul of the nation." The magic of poetic form, its stylistic density and hence ambiguity has rendered it particularly suited to serve a tradition of political dissent, resistance and revolution. The poetic panoply of metaphor, obscure reference, and antiquated expression all gird the literary revolutionary with power to incite his fellows and confuse his foes. Finally, a logical correlation adheres between the relationship of form to creativity in poetry and the relationship of fate to revolution. The poet's task is a continual struggle to create a form which overcomes the restrictions of past forms, thereby altering the nature of poetic form itself. Analogously, revolution would cheat fate and so create a new form of Hungarian society.

The developing polemic over national identity and politics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries broadened concern with these issues beyond narrow intellectual circles. The boxes of soil sent to Budapest at the time of Kossuth's funeral epitomize the process of creating national identity and historical consciousness. 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 precious gifts of nationhood out of the earth. Kossuth's funeral was far more than the product of a narrow group of intellectuals, much less the exclusive creation of the Entreprise des pompes fünebres hired by the Budapest Town Council to mount the affair. It was truly a ritual of grand proportions, in which prime ministers and peasants, bereaved family and irreverent rabble-rousers all took part.

The debate over a truly Hungarian society as reflected in historical necessity served the purposes of a wide range of political ideologies. Politicians of every stripe sought to make the nationalist cause their own. In 1898, fifty years after the War of Independence, lengthy debates were mounted contesting the true holiday commemorating the revolution. Liberal parties argued relentlessly that it should be March 15th, as 1848 is a radical holiday, symbol of long needed social change. Conservative factions allied

with the monarchy insisted that the official holiday be April 11th, anniversary of the king's recognition of legal reform passed by the Diet.

At the turn of the century the poet Ady decried the reduction by conservative forces of Petőfi to a Romantic fop. In an essay whose very title evokes one of Petőfi's angry poems, Ady writes, "We declare and proclaim that Petőfi does not belong to those who have been living on him since 1849, but he belongs to us, to all those who in Hungary yearn and fight for change, renewal and revolution." By the interwar period, the state actively used schools and other institutions to inculcate the ruling party's vision of 1848, while poets and other dissenting voices continued to contest their claims to such legitimacy. In the famous Petőfi Debate in the 1950s, poets and writers denounced the appropriation of Petőfi by the Communist regime, who lauded his simplistic Romantic rhetoric. Rather than embrace his outmoded poetic style, poets wished to emulate his spirit of critical dissent. As Gömöri notes, after June of '53 Petőfi came to be increasingly a weapon against the regime, a regime which like others before it, had portrayed itself the moral heir of 1848.

Through such debates a whole range of actions, emotions and ideas became embedded in notions of Hungarian destiny and character. A century's sedimentation of act and affect came to be as powerful as explicitly rhetorical or literary forms of historical consciousness. Thus, actions taken in the name of 1848 became inseparable from its complex narrative exegeses, despite the constant imperative to purify and simplify its form and political message. The progressive traditions represented by the March Front and other anti-fascist organizations who staged demonstrations at Petőfi's statue in 1942 find resonance in nationalist consciousness, as do memories of uglier, less democratic actions taken by conservative groups before and during the war. Thus, the emerging form of resistance in 1956, though initiated by student and writers who envisioned a more humane socialist society, could inspire a much broader public, as attested to by the rapid spread of acts of defiance in the city and the heady emotionalism at Bem Square, when 50,000 people burst into tears after singing the national anthem.

This brief story about a funeral and about '56, told by wandering through the maze of Hungarian historical consciousness, has been offered to raise questions about the construction of cultural knowledge and social intention. To comprehend the emerging form of so complex an event as revolution, and so too to comprehend the making of society at its most mundane, requires we investigate how the attribution of meaning and consequence to past actions becomes a formative aspect of the social dynamic called history. In the Hungarian case, a structure of causality called fate is imputed to past events which then acquires significance as these understandings of historical necessity become lived in the present. Interpretations of the past, rendered ever more elaborate through an on-going polemic in poetry and politics, thus come to qualify or give explicit form to history as it is being made. In classic terms, people make their history by living their ideas of the past.

A recent rock opera *Stephen the King* depicts the struggle in 998 between the forces of the good Christian king Stephen and those of Koppány, 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. Kádár, the Russians hand-picked leader in '56 against the doomed Nagy, executed as leader of the revolution. Thus the logic of historical consciousness: the first party secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party has been recast as St. Stephen.