

Book Reviews

Joseph Széplaki, comp. and ed., *Louis Kossuth "The Nation's Guest."* Ligonier, PA: Bethlen Press, Inc., 1976.

John H. Komlos, *Kossuth in America 1851-1852.* Buffalo: East European Institute, 1973.

A panegyric in an American publication hailed Kossuth's visit to the United States as "one of the bright chapters in our history," and proclaimed that Kossuth's "eloquence, as described by those who heard him here in 1851, has not been surpassed by any political speaker in the century."* This extravagance was only one among many heaped upon Kossuth in the half century following his sojourn, when the exiled Hungarian leader had solicited American moral and political support, as well as funds for the restoration of freedom in his homeland.

Joseph Széplaki of the Wilson Library at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis has assembled a "preliminary" bibliography of Kossuth's American travels. His work, which commemorates the bicentennial of the American Revolution and the 125th anniversary of the Kossuth tour, contains 1,632 non-annotated entries including books, pamphlets, documents, poems, manuscripts, and collections. The brief supplemental collection of essays, paeans, and poems dedicated to Kossuth by admiring Americans is typical 19th century adulatory literature. But in his anticipated enlarged edition Széplaki ought to augment these pro-Kossuth flatteries with examples of anti-Kossuth diatribes for the sake of realism and balance.

This book offers specialists a valuable bibliographic nucleus for the further study of Kossuth's visit in America. A map and a chronological itinerary chart, a number of contemporary illustrations, and other useful embellishments, are also included.

**The Review of Reviews* (April 1894) pp. 133-4.

In the Introduction to *Kossuth in America*, Komlos described Kossuth's personality as a synthesis of rationalism and romanticism. He was allegedly also naive, vain, lachrymose, sensitive, gave vent to uncontrollable passions, could not cope with life, and was constantly plagued by impulses to do away with himself. Yet "his full beard, his deep set eyes, his self-assured bearing, his mannerism, his ability to charm, and his attire..." awed Americans (p. 14). Not surprisingly, Kossuth rapidly captured the public's imagination. He was wined and dined, celebrated, toasted, acclaimed as an international hero, and huge crowds generally turned out to cheer him. This is the conventional view, and Komlos has done it justice. But he also wanted to show the hidden underside of the visit, the dark shadows beneath the bright images, not to debunk Kossuth, but to demystify him. Komlos complained that the only major Kossuth biography (by Dénes Jánosy, in Hungarian) was not sufficiently critical, whereas Marxist writers have tended to identify Kossuth with their own concepts, and English-speaking scholars have virtually ignored him. Komlos' book would benefit "...those who might want to continue the task of reinterpreting Kossuth the man, the statesman, and the revolutionary" (p. 28).

Whereas Széplaki's work offered no hint of darkling skies over the Kossuth mission, Komlos has related the seamier aspects of what has been universally hailed as a triumphal march. From the onset, the visit was fraught with controversy. In the American Congress some senators impugned Kossuth's credentials, especially scorning his ambiguous republicanism. Although hailed as a hero, Kossuth was denied an instantaneous official congressional reception. An embarrassing round of anti-Kossuth diatribes in Congress permanently marred Kossuth's image. Thereafter, undercurrents of hostility followed him wherever he travelled.

Komlos explained the reason for these fiascos and why Kossuth's American mission ultimately failed. Kossuth was a poor diplomat; he should not have demanded instant recognition of Hungary's revolutionary government, nor advocated an Anglo-American alliance "to counteract the alliance of despots," *i.e.*, Austria and Russia. Kossuth had promised not to meddle in American internal affairs; yet "he reserved the right for himself to decide what issues constituted matters of internal concern and what issues did not" (p. 79). He hectored

an American audience: “Should Russia not respect the declaration of your country (protesting Russian intervention in Hungary) then you are obliged — literally obliged — to go to war.” The speech was generally condemned. This episode not only harmed Kossuth’s cause, it polarized American public opinion. Kossuth antagonized Americans because he interpreted the intentions of the Founding Fathers regarding American foreign policy. His outbursts produced strong hostility and healthy skepticism. President Fillmore ventured that Kossuth’s mission had “dangerous tendencies if encouraged beyond the limits of sympathy” (p. 101). Indeed, Komlos related an incident in which Kossuth tried to trick Fillmore into launching a more active foreign policy. Consequently, Kossuth’s visit to the capital was disappointing. Congress would not rescind the 1818 neutrality statutes for the sake of intervening against Austria on Hungary’s side, and Kossuth’s contact with the President and Secretary of State Webster became chilly and produced no prospects of official succour. Kossuth thereupon sought out West what had eluded him in the East, again without success.

Komlos summarized the negative consequences of Kossuth’s American journey. He failed to sway American foreign policy, secure Hungary’s diplomatic recognition, or promote an Anglo-American alliance; and financial as well as political support from the public also failed to materialize. He alienated the abolitionists *and* the Southerners, and enraged the commercial interests, the Irish, and the Roman Catholic Church. Ultimately, however, his failure was caused by “the overwhelming propensity in America to continue the neutral foreign policy bequeathed to the nation by Washington” (p. 139). After this fiasco, Kossuth never again turned to the United States for aid in liberating Hungary.

This valuable work fills a gap on Kossuth; it is well researched and competently organized, though only tolerably written. The analysis is first-rate, however, thanks partly to the author’s expertise in 19th century American regional and federal politics. Considered in tandem, these two publications are worthy companions among the growing numbers of English language books on East Central Europe, including Hungary.