

### Civil War Treasures: "Louis Kossuth and the Unwinnable Dilemma of Slavery"

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## Feature Essay

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February 24, 2023, marked the one-year anniversary of the most recent escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War, a conflict that lately has elicited the romanticized enthusiasm of broad reaches of the American public. Despite this extensive support, the Ukrainian war effort nonetheless has run up against contemporary American domestic politics, stirring up considerable opposition among many conservatives and a few Republican members of Congress. This dilemma of how the United States should respond to conflict in Eastern Europe, especially when accompanied by a mass emotional groundswell of sentimentalism and Russophobia countered by a more traditional posture of Washingtonian non-intervention, has happened before.

Lajos Kossuth (more commonly Anglicized as Louis Kossuth) was the most prominent leader of the short-lived Hungarian Revolution of 1848-49, a nationalist struggle for Hungarian independence against the Austrian Empire that eventually was put down with Russian military assistance. Kossuth managed to escape to the Ottoman Empire and eventually secured an offer of asylum in the United States and a ride through the Mediterranean Sea to Gibraltar aboard the USS *Mississippi* in September 1851. After a month's stay in England, he toured the United States between December 5, 1851, and July 14, 1852, seeking American economic aid and military assistance to restart the Hungarian independence movement. Kossuth initially received an ecstatic welcome from statesmen and common people alike, but his efforts eventually foundered on the rocks of the vicious sectional domestic politics of the 1850s.<sup>1</sup> He was the Volodymyr Zelensky of his day, an Eastern European nationalist lionized by Western Europeans

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Donald S. Spencer, *Louis Kossuth and Young America: A Study of Sectionalism and Foreign Policy, 1848-1852* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1977); Timothy Mason Roberts, *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 146-67.

and Americans as a symbol of liberty standing in resistance to autocratic tyranny. Conversely, other Americans distrusted him severely as an opportunistic manipulator attempting to draw the United States unnecessarily into a foreign war.<sup>2</sup> The LSU Libraries holds several primary sources from this brief episode of the intersection of domestic politics and foreign policy. Although all of their authors produced books highly favorable of Kossuth and the Hungarians, their work still betrayed evidence of the troubles that erupted when he wrestled irresistibly with slavery, the pervasive bugbear of the antebellum era.

The Hungarian Revolution captivated Americans long before Kossuth's tour of the United States. Benjamin Franklin Tefft, a professor of Greek and Latin at DePauw University who had served as US consul at Stockholm during the Civil War, produced *Hungary and Kossuth, or, an American Exposition of the Late Hungarian Revolution (1851)*. In addition to spawning the excessive hyperbole with which he and many others romanticized the Hungarian cause, Tefft attributed to all Americans the reeling emotions he felt while following news of the conflict, "seeing, as all men saw, that republican principles and the Protestant religion, in the whole south of Europe, would rise or fall with these brave defenders of the truth."<sup>3</sup>

The American mania for Louis Kossuth began in earnest as soon as he arrived in New York City in early December 1851. The **John McKowen Papers** include a letter from a correspondent there writing to John McKowen, a merchant in Jackson, Louisiana, describing Gotham's exuberant welcome:

Nothing could exceed the enthusiasm of the people of this city at the arrival of Casuth [sic]. The whole city was Literally Crowded almost to Suffocation in parts. Banners with inscribed mottos of 'Welcome' and 'Thousands of Welcome' Crossing the Streets in every part. But most splendidly arranged as he advanced from the Battery to the 'Irvine [i.e., Irving] House' where he still remains. Casuth is a man of middle stature perhaps about your own size and make. Appears to be naturally of a Sereous [sic] thinking Mind. And in his addresses shows great, but becoming fervor, and animation strongly calculated

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<sup>2</sup> For previous comparisons of Kossuth and Zelensky, see Tim Roberts, "Can Volodymyr Zelensky Follow the Footsteps of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Hungarian Liberal Lajos Kossuth?," History News Network, March 20, 2022, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/182716>; John Allen Gay, "Zelensky's Visit, 'Kossuth Mania,' and America's Altered Foreign Policy Debate," Realist Review, December 22, 2022, <https://realistreview.org/2022/12/22/zelenskys-visit-kossuth-mania-and-americas-altered-foreign-policy-debate>

<sup>3</sup> B.F. Tefft, *Hungary and Kossuth, or, an American Exposition of the Late Hungarian Revolution*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: John Ball, 1852), 6. [Hill LARA DB935 .T25]

to attract the attention of his audience. In every sense he appears to be the man for War if Power had not failed.<sup>4</sup>

Kossuth received an equally spirited welcome from various members of Congress, at least from those receptive to the idealistic interventionist foreign policy position embraced at the time by the Young America movement that affected members of both parties. An example of such effusive praise is *Welcome to Kossuth: Speeches of William H. Seward, on the Joint Resolution in Honor of Louis Kossuth (1851)*. Seward, then a Whig senator from New York, delivered extensive admiring remarks in support of welcoming Kossuth as a guest of the nation, not unexpectedly comparing him to the Marquis de Lafayette: "Kossuth found the duty which first devolved upon him was to wage a struggle for freedom in his own country. When overborne there, he became, like Lafayette, a champion of liberty throughout the world."<sup>5</sup> Louis Kossuth later became the first foreigner to address Congress since the beloved Lafayette.

The honeymoon ended almost as soon as it had begun. Kossuth's prudent reluctance to speak on the always contentious matter of slavery appalled some abolitionists, who had expected this hero of human freedom to expand his vision of liberty to include the most downtrodden of the Americas. Kossuth's statement of December 12, 1851, pledging not to "meddle with any domestic concerns of the United States," alienated the most radical abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass overnight. Nevertheless, he retained the support of the more moderate antislavery advocates like Gamaliel Bailey, Cassius Clay, and Horace Greeley.<sup>6</sup> Phineas Camp Headley, a Presbyterian and Congregationalist minister, published *The Life of Louis Kossuth, Governor of Hungary (1852)* with an introduction by Greeley written in February 1852, even after the controversies over Kossuth had become well known. Greeley echoed the familiar celebration of the revolutionary for his tragic opposition to Austrian despotism, but he also expressed an ultimately vain hope that his visit would convince Americans to overcome their own political differences: "He is here, though unconsciously, to rebuke the degeneracy and factiousness of our partisan squabbles, the hollowness of our boasted

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from John Monahan to John McKowen, December 11, 1851, John McKowen Papers, Mss. 1353, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

<sup>5</sup> *Welcome to Kossuth: Speeches of William H. Seward, on the Joint Resolution in Honor of Louis Kossuth, Delivered in the Senate of the United States* (Washington: Printed at the Congressional Globe Office, 1851), 11. [Hill LARA DB937.3 .S51]

<sup>6</sup> Spencer, *Louis Kossuth and Young America*, 65-81, 108-9.

love of liberty, if we turn a deaf ear to the cry of the oppressed in either hemisphere, the sordidness of our common life and the meanness of its aims.”<sup>7</sup>

Not only did Kossuth fail to inspire healing of America’s vicious sectional oppositions, but he never secured any substantial support for the Hungarian cause either. Despite his ability to sell Hungarian bonds to enamored supporters in New England and the Old Northwest, President Fillmore politely rebuffed his request for intervention. Franklin Pierce, the Democratic presidential nominee, offered no encouragement either. Southerners, both Democrats and Whigs alike, rejected him almost to a man, owing to the traditional *realpolitik* approach to foreign relations embraced in the South, and Kossuth’s undeserved guilt by association with abolitionism, the Free Soil movement, Young America, and Yankee misguidedness in general. By the time Louis Kossuth wound up his circuit of the country in July, the mania had played itself out. Most Americans had grown tired of him, and the country’s leaders had come to their senses and soundly rejected the Young America program of intervention in European affairs. With few friends and no hope, Mr. & Mrs. Kossuth quietly boarded a steamer for England, incognito.<sup>8</sup>

Kossuth’s traveling companion in the United States had been Ferencz Pulszky, a fellow Hungarian politician and revolutionary, who published *White, Red, Black: Sketches of American Society in the United States during the Visit of their Guests (1853)* one year after their tour. Partly an account of their travels and partly an exposition on themes in US history for the edification of Europeans, Pulszky’s work stridently sought to dispute claims that Kossuth’s visit to the United States had been a failure. He cited the US government’s transportation of Kossuth from Turkey, his warmish reception by President Fillmore and by Congress, invitations proffered by the legislatures of mostly northern states, and the support of the populace in general, but his list of opponents, though offered dismissively, nonetheless revealed the depth of division in the country: “nor could the violent opposition of the Jesuits, and of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, the reproaches of the Garrison Abolitionists, or the coolness of the South, dam up the

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<sup>7</sup> P.C. Headley, *The Life of Louis Kossuth, Governor of Hungary* (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1852), x. [Hill Rare DB937 .H43] About the same time, William Lloyd Garrison responded with his lengthy *Letter to Louis Kossuth Concerning Freedom and Slavery in the United States in Behalf of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (Boston: R.F. Wallcut, 1852).

<sup>8</sup> Spencer, *Louis Kossuth and Young America*, 147-83.

great movement.”<sup>9</sup> Pulszky’s zeal to defend Kossuth’s reputation led him to wade blatantly into the fetid waters of US domestic politics, a faux pas the Hungarians had steadfastly tried not to commit when actually in the United States. He cited an imaginary endorsement from Franklin Pierce and harangued the conduct of conservatives of both parties:

The Old Hunkers and the Silver Greys were alarmed; they felt how deep the impression is, which Kossuth has made; and President Fillmore, seeing power slipping from his hands and from those of his party and coterie, found it necessary to warn the people in his last address against ‘its generous impulses,’ and against any alteration in the foreign policy of the Union. Involuntarily he paid the highest tribute to the genius of Kossuth, bearing evidence to the influence of the foreigner.<sup>10</sup>

The following year, a devotee of Kossuth going by the initials “E.O.S.” published *Hungary and Its Revolutions from the Earliest Period to the Nineteenth Century with a Memoir of Louis Kossuth (1854)* for the prolific publishing house of Henry Bohn in London. It presented Kossuth’s tour of the United States as an unalloyed success fueled by cheering crowds and accommodating statesmen. The author acknowledged only two classes of malcontents: Jesuits and Catholic bishops who allegedly still “could not prevent the Irish population attending the meetings given in his honour” and proslavery southerners who “believed the Czar not to be so bad as he is generally represented, and despotism to be not inconsistent with an enlightened administration.” Lastly, “E.O.S.” almost grudgingly acknowledged the most important dissidents of all:

There were, besides, a certain number in the United States who kept aloof, not from any hostile feeling towards Kossuth or Hungary, but from the fear of his embroiling their nation in European contests; forgetting that America owes her own liberty to aid from Europe, and becomes daily more closely connected with all the nations of the world, whose prosperity or adversity must essentially affect her own.<sup>11</sup>

It was a tight little argument, but too late to do the many exiled revolutionaries of 1848 any good.

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<sup>9</sup> Francis and Theresa Pulszky, *White, Red, Black: Sketches of American Society in the United States during the Visit of their Guests* (New York: Redfield, 1853), 2:254. [Hill Rare E166 .P98 1853a]

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. “Old Hunkers” were conservative Democrats. “Silver Greys” were conservative Whigs allied to Millard Fillmore.

<sup>11</sup> E.O.S., *Hungary and Its Revolutions from the Earliest Period to the Nineteenth Century with a Memoir of Louis Kossuth* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854), 531. [Hill Rare DB925.1 .H9]

In the end, the United States declined to become embroiled in the Hungarian independence struggle. No American men or arms ever made it to Hungary, but ironically, many Hungarians who had immigrated after the Revolution of 1848 did fight for the United States during the Civil War, as committed to the defense of democracy in their adopted country as they had been in their former homeland.<sup>12</sup> Oddly enough, the most lasting legacy of Louis Kossuth's tour of the United States was probably the bizarre tendency for some people to name children after him. One such babe was Jean Kossuth Sandoz (1854-1912), the third child of a Swiss-born father in Opelousas, Louisiana.<sup>13</sup> J. Kossuth Sandoz (as he was known professionally) initially went into the newspaper business under the tutelage of his uncle, who had founded the *Opelousas Courier* in 1852. He tried to establish the first newspapers in the small town of Washington in St. Landry Parish—the *Washington Enterprise* and the *Washington Argus*—but both quickly failed.<sup>14</sup> Sandoz later spent twenty years in the mercantile business in Opelousas, became a St. Landry Parish police juror, and lost a race for the Louisiana House of Representatives in 1908.<sup>15</sup> In 1891, he named his own newborn son Jose Kossuth Sandoz, thus carrying on the name of a failed Hungarian statesman who captivated so many in the United States who just could not resist the romantic allure of Europe's midcentury liberal revolutionaries.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> István Kornél Vida, *Hungarian Émigrés in the American Civil War: A History and Biographical Dictionary* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012), 50-62.

<sup>13</sup> US Census 1860, St. Landry Parish, La., sheet 288, line 16; US Census 1900, St. Landry Parish, La., sheet 12, line 9.

<sup>14</sup> The only surviving issues of the *Washington Enterprise* (August 9, 1876) and the *Washington Argus* (August 22, 1885) are in the LSU Libraries Special Collections.

<sup>15</sup> "J. Kossuth Sandoz, Prominent Citizen, Joins Great Majority," *St. Landry Clarion*, March 30, 1912.

<sup>16</sup> Jose Kossuth Sandoz had a first cousin named Oscar Kossuth Sandoz (1883-1903).