

Holger Fischer (Hrsg.): Lajos Kossuth. Wirken – Rezeption – Kult.

Hamburg: Reinhold Krämer 2007 (= Beiträge zur deutschen und europäischen Geschichte), 198 S., zahlr. Abb.

One of the trends of the 19th century Hungarian liberalism was the so-called national liberalism represented by Lajos Kossuth and influenced by German liberalism that emphasized the significance of nation as substantial to the meaning and final cause of liberalism.¹ Kossuth believed that liberalism was necessary on the path to the creation of modern society and to the improvement of the overall conditions of the nation. He subscribed to the idea that the emergence of civil society was the best way to assure and accelerate national development and was able to synthesize the idea of nation with that of social reform.

Lajos Kossuth, considered as one of the greatest Hungarian Statesman, was not only a professional politician, the person who established modern journalism in Hungary, an excellent orator and publicist but also became a national hero, an icon of independence and freedom for the Hungarians. However, the complex nature of his historical past and images gave rise to changing and sometimes contradicted and critical interpretations of his life and work.

The book »Lajos Kossuth (1802-1894). Wirken – Rezeption – Kult« edited by Professor Holger Fischer includes the written materials and speeches held at the symposium organized by the University of Hamburg in 2002 in the framework of series of commemorations of the 200th birthday anniversary of the Hungarian Statesman. The book is a remarkable and scholarly well founded contribution to the literature on the work and achievements of Lajos Kossuth and the myth and cult that surrounded and still surrounds his name. The authors introduce the influence and cult of Kossuth from many different angles providing the reader with a comprehensive assessment of his life-work. As many of the contributors underline, the history of the Kossuth cult is as vibrant, far-reaching and manifold as his path of life. It is a cult that has become an indispensable part of the Hungarian national identity and an integral part of the so called historical memory. This historical memory – Professor Fischer underlines in his introduction – has to be seen as a cohesive and politically legitimizing factor in Hungarian society.

¹ Gerő, András: Hungarian Liberalism in the nineteenth century, Characteristics and Roles (1830-1867), in: Hungarian Liberals (edited by Gerő, András), Budapest, Új Mandátum Publisher, 1999, 7-26.

The Kossuth cult was widespread and popular, but was later exploited for political ends. The Kossuth myth reached its peak at the end of the 19th century. By the 1890s a number of national symbols were linked to Kossuth's name, such as the Kossuth-song, Kossuth-shield, Kossuth-flag, Kossuth-hut, and Kossuth-moustache. At the beginning of the 20th century the Great Statesman became the mythological icon and the Father of the Hungarian nation, the great composer Béla Bartók, for instance, dedicated a whole symphony to his memory and his character inspired the finest poets of the time. The Kossuth cult was filled up with newer and newer contents throughout the history and was interpreted, used and abused by various political ideologies for various purposes. Ironically the communist totalitarian regime of dictator Rákosi ought to legitimize its power by establishing continuity between the revolutionary traditions.

Kossuth was one of the most remarkable champions of equality of all citizens. He advocated the principle of equality calling it a sacred corner-stone of the democratic creed that implies the raising and not the lowering of society to one level.² This is why he fought for emancipation of peasants and for the abolishment of tax exemptions of the nobility, which was a privilege unique in Europe. He strongly believed in the worth of the individual, and saw individual freedom as a precondition of national unity. He was convinced that eliminating serfdom was one of the most essential components to social transformation. Kossuth strongly opposed all forms of discriminations by stating that »I consider the principle of discrimination based on race, language or religion not only a moral but a political impossibility«. He fought for equality before the law and full emancipation of Jews. He advocated religious liberty for all and emphasized that religion was a matter of conscience that belongs to the private realm. He believed that religious dogmas have to be separated from the political institutions. He also stood up for the same rights to all denominations without discrimination.

Kossuth, as the leader of the liberal reformists aspired to modernize feudal social structures via constitutional means. He was the main drafter of the new constitution, the so called April Laws of 1848 that laid the foundations of modern Hungary declaring the liberation of serfs, freedom of press, equality before the law and establishing an independent government responsible to the democratically elected parliament.

Kossuth termed himself a man of freedom, »not aspiring for my country to the vanity of conquering glory, but for real liberty and the happiness of complete democracy«. He was a man ahead of his age who recognized as early as in the mid-nineteenth century that »the history of Europe is ... advancing towards liberty and therefore democracy, [which] is nothing else but self-government

2 Haraszti, Éva: Kossuth an English Journalist, 1990, Budapest, Akadémiai Publisher, Preface

by the people³. Democratic self-government played an utmost important role in his draft constitution developed in his Turkish exile in Kütahya. His democratic constitution called for basic civil rights, such as the freedom of press and association, freedom of religion and universal suffrage, and for political freedom of communities as a base for the realization of the rights of minorities. While Kossuth passionately fought and advocated national independence he also believed in the importance of cooperation among the nations along the Danube as formulated in his plan for a Danubian Confederation, a document closely connected to his draft constitution. The plan, published in 1862, envisioned the alliance of the states of Hungary, Croatia, Transylvania, the Romanian Principalities and Serbia.⁴ In addition to common governing bodies for foreign affairs and defense, the document also envisaged an economic community. Kossuth sought to resolve the nationalities question through the principle of self-government and decentralization. In his vision the rights of minorities would have been recognized in a system of autonomies constituted by villages and provinces based on a free assent of the individual people. The ideas and principles that Kossuth envisioned in his draft document were deemed useless and unrealistic in his time, but became so timely and realistic one century later.

As noted by András Gergely, one of the contributors to the book, Kossuth's early political views on the German question could be comparable to the views represented by the so-called »Vormärz-liberals«. Kossuth believed that the German development and a future constitutional and unified German state play a key role in the democratic transformation of the Central-European Region. For Kossuth as a revolutionary democrat and an advocate of national independence, who never accepted the Compromise of 1867 with the Habsburgs, it was natural that he supported the idea of German Unity even at the expense of the Habsburg Empire. Professor Christian Jansen, another contributor to Fischer's book, gives a remarkable account on the different Kossuth images that developed in German publications throughout the second half of the 19th century. However, the way how the German liberals assessed the 1848 Hungarian Revolution and Kossuth's role was by far not homogenous. Right after the Revolution was defeated and throughout the eighteen fifties Kossuth was depicted as a hero, a freedom-fighter, a symbol of national independence and as a realistic politician (Realpolitiker) contrasted with the German ideologists.⁵ Those democrats who were ready to cooperate with Bismarck and subscribed to a »gouvernemental-autoritären Einigungspolitik«,

3 Pajkossy, Gábor: »Liberty and Democracy for My Country – Lajos Kossuth, in: Hungarian Quarterly, Volume 35, Spring 1994, 139.«

4 Szabó, György: Kossuth's role in the Conceptualization of a Danubian Federation. In: Geopolitics in the Danube Region. Hungarian Reconciliation Efforts 1848-1998. (edited by Romsich, Király), Budapest 1999, 88.

however had a more critical picture of Kossuth. Ludwig Bamberger and the philosopher Arnold Ruge for instance disapproved and held critical opinion of »his sentimental nationalism built upon ethnical arguments«.

The Kossuth cult and narrative almost disappeared from our political discourse by our time. Though Kossuth's views on feudalism and the Habsburg Empire disappeared from the political discourse a long time ago his views on self-governance, as an integral part of democracy, and individual freedom, as a precondition of national unity, are still timely and viable especially when the Hungarian society is divided more than ever. »All for the people and all by the people; nothing about the people without the people. That is democracy.« Kossuth's conception of democracy still carries an important message to us. A principle not to be abandoned.

I would warmly recommend Professor Fischer's enhancing book to anybody interested in the influence and cult of a great Hungarian Statesman, a liberal ahead of his time.

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Enikő Gal

5 Carl Mayer, a radical liberal democrat who lived in Swiss emigration, while iconizing Kossuth saw his politics developed in his Turkish emigration as a chance for a second revolution.

Ralf Zerback: Robert Blum. Eine Biografie

Leipzig: Lehmstedt Verlag, 2007, 360 S.

Robert Blum war 1848 der populärste deutsche Politiker, und der Achtundvierziger Hugo Wesendonck hat später über ihn geschrieben, Blum sei der »beste Mann« der Frankfurter Nationalversammlung gewesen. Gleichwohl ist Blum heute weithin vergessen. Die Skatspieler kennen wenigstens noch seinen Namen. Viele von ihnen sagen, wenn sie dem Alleinspieler begreiflich machen wollen, daß er »fertig« ist, er sei »verschossen wie Robert Blum«. Ralf Zerback, ein Schüler Lothar Galls, hat nun eine vortreffliche Biografie Blums vorgelegt, und sie wird hoffentlich dazu beitragen, diesen Mann der Vergessenheit zu entreißen.

Z. schildert mit vielen Details den erstaunlichen Aufstieg seines Helden. Blum, 1807 in Köln geboren, wuchs in ärmlichen Verhältnissen auf. Sein Vater war Fassbinder. Er starb, als Robert sieben Jahre alt war. Robert war begabt, doch für den Besuch eines Gymnasiums oder gar ein Universitätsstudium war einfach kein Geld da.

Der junge Blum erlernte den Beruf eines Gelbgießers und arbeitete dann einige Jahre lang als Angestellter einer Firma, die Straßenlaternen herstellte. Als Vertreter dieser Firma lebte er fünf Monate in München und fast zwei Jahre in Berlin. Beide Metropolen haben seinen Bildungshunger mächtig angeregt. Mit eiserner Zielstrebigkeit erwarb er als Autodidakt umfangreiche Kenntnisse. Das Jahr 1830 weckte dann in Blum die Leidenschaft für die Politik. Er begeisterte sich für die Juli-Revolution in Paris und für den Freiheitskampf der Polen. 1832 wurde er Sekretär am Leipziger Stadttheater. Er begann nun zu schreiben: Historiendramen, Gelegenheitsgedichte, Artikel für oppositionelle Blätter.

Blum forderte Freiheitsrechte für alle Bürger. Wie alle Liberalen und Demokraten erstrebte er die Errichtung des deutschen Nationalstaats, der für ihn nur als Republik denkbar war. Über sein soziales Engagement schreibt Z.: »Das meiste Herzblut hat Blum dem Thema Armut geopfert. Er kannte Not und Hunger aus der Kinderzeit, das hat ihn empfänglich gemacht« (S. 102). Blum trat auf zahlreichen Schiller-Feiern auf, engagierte sich bei den Deutschkatholiken. Er erwies sich als begnadeter Redner, der es verstand, das Gefühl seiner Zuhörer anzusprechen. Seit 1839 nahm Blum an den geheimen jährlichen Treffen deutscher Oppositionspolitiker in Hallgarten teil.

Am 12. August 1845 erschoss königlich-sächsisches Militär in Leipzig ohne eigentlichen Grund acht Menschen. Blum fiel die Rolle des Wortführers der empörten Bürger zu, wobei er die Leipziger ermahnte, auf den Boden des