

The Hungarian Declaration of Independence of 1849. Függetlenségi Nyilatkozat: A magyar nemzet függetlenségi nyilatkozata — Unabhängigkeits-Elklärung der ungarischen Nation — Déclaration d'indépendance de la nation hongroise — Declaration of Independence by the Hungarian Nation. Edited by JÁNOS ANGI, BOTOND G. SZABÓ and BÉLA TÓTH. Photographs by József Hapák. Postscript by Botond G. Szabó. Translations by Marianna Balogh Feketéné (German), Attila Györkös (French), Zoltán Kovács (English). Debrecen: Multiplex Media - Debrecen University Press, 1999, 56 unnumbered folio pages.

From the late 18th through the 20th century, modern history is littered with declarations of independence. This is particularly true for the post-World War II decades, which saw the emergence of about hundred-fifty independent states, largely in consequence of the rapid decolonization of the British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and Belgian overseas possessions, and of the subsequent collapse of such multinational states as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. Comparable declarations of independence that lead to the creation of new states, however, used to be much less common in the period between the late 18th and the mid-19th century; the period that opened with the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, and closed with the Hungarian Declaration of Independence in 1849. In terms of its impact upon human history, the former of these was much more significant than the latter, partially because it was successful, and partially because it planted the seeds of a future superpower.

By means of the American Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776, Britain's thirteen North American colonies made known their decision to separate from the mother country and follow their own path to prosperity and well-being. This brief but compelling document proclaimed the principles of human equality, as well as the inalienable right of all peoples to choose their own form of government and to follow their own path to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness".¹ The American Declaration of Independence and its successful

¹ For the complete text of the American Declaration of Independence, which has been reproduced thousands of times in scores of languages, see for example the *Encyclopedia of American History*. Guildford, CT: The Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc., 1973, p. 95.

implementation by George Washington's colonial armies had untold consequences not only for the New Continent, but also for humanity in general. Within a half a century after its issuance, similar declarations were issued by more than a dozen Latin American colonies, who thus severed their ties to Spain and Portugal, and established themselves as independent states. Another quarter century later, Hungary did the same, although with less circumspection and foresight, and fewer chances of success.

The Hungarian Declaration of Independence was issued by the Hungarian Parliament on April 14, 1849, and the final text ratified by the same Assembly on April 19th of that year.² The ratification occurred thirteen months after the start of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 (March 15), more than a half a year into the defensive war against the Habsburg Imperial Armed Forces, and five days after the dethronement of the House of Habsburg, whose members had ruled Hungary as absentee monarchs ever since 1526. In retrospect, this declaration was both unwise and inopportune. Instead of leading to Hungary's independence, it actually made certain that the country's independence would not be achieved — at least not in the mid-19th century. Its successful implementation would have resulted in the destruction of the Habsburg Empire (between 1804 and 1867 known as the Austrian Empire), which in turn would have upset the balance of power on the continent. The likelihood of such a dissolution went against the interests of all of the contemporary great powers that were founding members of the post-Vienna Conservative Alliance System (i.e., "Metternich System"). Given this reality, in 1849 Hungary could not even expect an attitude of "benevolent neutrality" from these great powers.

While not applauding openly the Russian intervention — which sealed Hungary's fate and pushed her back into the fold of the Habsburg Empire — the European powers basically agreed with its goals. And what is even more meaningful, many of Hungary's top political and military leaders likewise disagreed with Lajos Kossuth's attempt to pull out from the multinational realm of the Habsburgs. Many of these spokesmen of the nation — among them Baron József Eötvös, Ferenc Deák, and Generals Artúr Görgey and György Klapka — basically believed, along with Czech national leader František Palacký, that if the Habsburg Empire would not exist, it would have to be created as a protector of the small nationalities, situated between the large and powerful German and Russian behemoths. Naturally, all of these leaders wanted the restoration of

² This ratification took place in the city of Debrecen, which had served as the temporary capital of Hungary in the course of January through May, 1849. Cf. István Szabó, ed. *A szabadságharc fővárosa Debrecen: 1849 január - május* [The Capital of the Hungarian War of Liberation, Debrecen: January - May, 1849]. Debrecen: Debrecen Város és a Tiszántúli Református Egyházkerület Könyvnyomda Vállalata, 1948.

Hungary's autonomy, but most of them felt that remaining part of the Habsburg realm was in Hungary's interests. It would assure the territorial integrity of historic Hungary (which was dangerously multinational in an age of growing nationalism), and it would also give the nation a greater voice in European power politics. Kossuth and the Radical Party disagreed with these conclusions and pushed through the Habsburg dethronement and Hungary's Declaration of Independence, and thereby sealed the country's fate in 1849.

In light of the nation's failure to break away from the Habsburg Empire in consequence of the Revolution of 1848-1849, the Hungarian Declaration of Independence was never viewed as a document of major significance; certainly nothing comparable to the American Declaration of Independence. For this reason it has not been studied as assiduously, nor reproduced with so much frequency as its more famous American counterpart. But it is still a document that represents a significant, if unsuccessful milestone in the history of the Hungarian nation.

The folio-size volume under review was published on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Hungarian Declaration of Independence, with the intention of making this relatively unknown document widely available to the Hungarian reading public. The editors have achieved their goal, for the result of their work is a beautiful volume that contains the Hungarian Declaration of Independence in four languages: These include the facsimile reproduction of the calligraphed but unsigned original Hungarian text;³ the official German and French versions printed in April 1849 at the orders of the Hungarian Government;⁴ as well as the English versions reproduced four years later in a collection of Kossuth's speeches.⁵ All three of the foreign translations are supplemented with appropriate modern documentations that point out the inaccuracies and omissions in the original translations. In addition to the above, the volume also includes a modern printed rendition of the Hungarian text; a proclamation of the Debrecen-based Hungarian Calvinist Church, dated June 16, 1849, supporting the Declaration of Independence; a historical essay by Botond G. Szabó, explaining the events and conditions leading

³ Because of the flight of the Revolutionary Hungarian Government from Debrecen soon after the ratification of the Declaration of Independence, the calligraphed version of the document remained unsigned.

⁴ The German and the French texts were printed as independent documents.

⁵ The English text is taken from *Selected Speeches by Kossuth. Condensed and abridged, with Kossuth's express sanction*, by Francis W. Newman. London: Trübner & Co., 1853. Although the Declaration of Independence was also printed in English in 1849 (at least so we are informed in a note to the English text), for some reason the editors of the volume decided to reproduce the English text from the above-cited published collection of Kossuth's speeches.

up to and analyzing the results of the issuance of the Declaration of Independence; short German, French and English language summaries of the content of this historical essay; the first page of the original draft of the Declaration of Independence in Kossuth's own handwriting, which proves conclusively that — although not among the three signatories⁶ — he was in fact the primary author of this document, just as Thomas Jefferson was the primary author of the American Declaration of Independence; and finally a fresco by Kálmán Gáborjáni-Szabó on the wall of the Great (Calvinist) Church of Debrecen, which temporarily housed the Hungarian Parliament when it issued its momentous resolutions concerning Hungary's independence and the dethronement of the Habsburg dynasty.

The editors and the publisher of this volume have done an impressive job in bringing this important, but not too well known document to the attention of the reading public and the scholarly world. The fact that they have reproduced, documented, and commented upon the Declaration of Independence in three major languages outside of Hungarian, should make it available to virtually everyone anywhere in the world.

My only meaningful critical comments have to do with the lack of adequate explanation of the relationship between the dates April 14th and April 19th. The author of the essay, Botond G. Szabó, asserts that "in general consciousness... the Declaration of Independence ratified on April 19th, and the five-point resolution of the Hungarian Parliament dated April 14th, which declared independence and dethronement are completely merged."⁷ In my estimation it is virtually impossible not to merge the two dates. After all, it was on the 14th of April that the Hungarian Parliament declared the country's independence, and all it did on April 19th was to ratify the specific text of the Declaration of Independence.⁸ This confusion, by the way, also persists in the original documents, as reproduced in the volume under review. The German and the French texts are dated April 19, 1849, while the English text is dated April 14, 1849. In light of the above, we may safely assume that not even the authors of this document, nor the participants in these momentous events made a clear distinction between these two dates. Although the official text was approved

⁶ The three signatories were: Baron Zsigmond Perényi, Vice President of the House of Magnates; Pál Almásy, President of the Lower House; and Imre Szacsuvay, Notary of the Hungarian Parliament.

⁷ Page 1 of the introductory essay of the reviewed volume. (As none of the pages in this book are numbered, it is impossible to cite a quotation based on page numbers.)

⁸ This is evident even from G. Szabó's own written explanation cited about. But for other similar explanations, see for example the way these events are describes in *Magyarország történeti kronológiája* [Hungary's Historical Chronology], 4 vols., ed. Kálmán Benda. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982, III, pp. 695-696.

only on April 19th, the actual declaration of independence took place five days earlier on April 14th, in conjunction with the ill-timed dethronement of the Habsburgs.

Notwithstanding this minor critical comment, the reviewed volume is a beautiful, impressive, and commendable work. It should focus renewed attention upon this important document — the Hungarian Declaration of Independence— which represents a momentous, if ill-conceived and unsuccessful attempt to reassert the complete sovereignty of Hungary. The nation had to wait another seven decades before achieving its independence. But when that independence came, it came under circumstances that few Hungarians foresaw or wanted. By that so-called independence following the Treaty of Trianon (1920) Hungary was thrust into the ranks of several insignificant Central and East Europe states; many of them new creations with no real national traditions, whose main motivating force was an artificially inspired anti-Hungarianism. This is certainly not the kind of independence that Kossuth and his disciples have dreamt of when they pushed through the Hungarian Declaration of Independence in 1849. But it was precisely this kind of “independence” that such thoughtful contemporaries of Kossuth as Széchenyi, Deák and Eötvös had feared and wanted to avoid at all cost.

Steven Béla Várdy