

“Lawful” Revisionism? The Lawful Revolution and the Revision of 1848 in Hungarian Historiography

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Abstract | *The article dissects the reception of István Deák’s The Lawful Revolution within Hungarian historiography. It argues that strangely the book was a precursor of a deeper revision of the history of 1848, and still it is not a major reference. Deák’s ambiguous position as a US-Hungarian historian made possible to read his work less with an eye of the broader historical revisionism it promoted, a nonnationalist reading of Habsburg history, and to use it instead to make various arguments within the field of the politics of memory.*

Keywords | 1848, historical revisionism, Hungarian historiography, Lajos Kossuth

It was in a graduate school seminar that I first heard of István Deák’s second book, *The Lawful Revolution: Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians, 1848–1849*. Toward the end of the class, my professor, an eminent scholar of the Hungarian reform era (Vormärz), quipped about a very interesting take on the 1848 Revolution, written by an American-Hungarian historian. He was not being dismissive, not even critical, but I understood that *The Lawful Revolution* was a good work that somehow differed from the bulk of Hungarian historiography. Also clear was that Deák was not a household name for those (like me) who were not specialists of the period. In the Budapest of the 1990s, the names of people like György Szabad, András Gergely, and Domokos Kosáry traded as some of the most important historians of 1848; and their prominent political roles no doubt helped their names to stick. Szabad was speaker of the



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parliament between 1990 and 1994; Gergely a leading figure of József Antall's government party Hungarian Democratic Forum; Kosáry president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Yes, the emigrant in New York City Deák was lauded in Hungary—being named an external member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1990 and giving his inaugural lecture in 1994—but he wasn't front and center of who was considered an expert. For an aspiring historian like me, however, hearing about a take on 1848 that was different but relatively undiscussed piqued my interest, and so I went to a used bookshop, found a poorly bound copy of a paperback edition of Deák's take on the burgeoning Hungarian national movement, and started reading. I turned the pages initially curious but not yet convinced about what reading it would really be.

Did I like it? Definitely. I thought, if I were to switch to this topic, the carefully balanced assessments, the critical sympathies and almost invisible negative opinions on personalities, the distance taken with the prose and style that was invigorating after all my wooden-language seminar readings would be my guiding lights. But in the end I decided not to switch topics, so when I finally got to meet István, this book was not our subject of exchange, instead it was part of a process of what kind of writer of history I wanted to become.

If anyone reading this subjective introduction to István's work on nineteenth-century Hungarian nationalism is under the impression that his work was and is still on the margins of Hungarian historiography—I would not really object. Yes, *The Lawful Revolution* was reviewed quite soon in Hungary and published in translation just a few years later. But, still, the ubiquitous referencing to it ever since is mostly based on the works of other Hungarian scholars and not on readings of Deák's original. In this way, his second book is invisible yet solidly present in historiography: it is consistently categorized as a piece of historical revision, with few reading it in its original to see what work this historian had tried to revise.¹ Its fame, in part, stems from the fact that it wasn't uniformly welcome for which the late László Péter—for example—named István as the flagbearer of what he called “closet revisionism,” a stance that he thought only dressed up in more fashionable clothes otherwise profoundly misconstrued historical views on the legality of the Hungarian 1848, which for Péter was essentially the same as the classic anti-Habsburg reading of Hungarian history.

How is it possible for a book to be influential and almost invisible simultaneously? The answer is that probably Deák's insider-outsider position in

1. Ferenc Velkey, “‘A’la Talleyrand játszottam (?): Széchenyi István önértékelő dilemmája 1848,” *Történeti Tanulmányok* 13 (2005): 74–95, here 93; László Péter, “Vaskalaposok és óvatos revizionisták Gondolatok Kosáry Domokosnak az 1848-as magyar forradalomról írt legújabb könyvéről,” *AETAS* 17, nos. 2–3 (2002): 212–30, here 216.

Hungarian historiography has undergone significant shifts within the context of a purposeful politics of history. What this means becomes clearer when we take a look back from the present. Many reviewers of *The Lawful Revolution* emphasized that a new, de-idolized portrayal of Lajos Kossuth was one of its main contributions to scholarship. Deák's Kossuth, unlike the national hero of previous scholarship, was sometimes hesitant, vainglorious, easy to influence or eager to escape political responsibility. Early reviewers also pointed out how Deák made Artúr Görgei, the military leader whose capitulation on August 13, 1849, ended the revolution, an actor of almost the same standing as Kossuth but without apportioning to him the blame customary in Hungarian works.² For Deák, Görgei was not a traitor; instead, he was a talented soldier and commander who committed mistakes, especially when political stances were involved. Evaluation like this was certainly intended as praise and not an undeserved one. *The Lawful Revolution* itself set as one of its goals to produce a new interpretation of Kossuth in particular but also to set the way for reconsidering the role of significant personalities in history.

Such an approach inevitably touched a nerve, however, especially in Hungary. 1848 was and is the foundational myth of the modern Hungarian nation, with Lajos Kossuth as the central hero, thought of and often portrayed in historical works as someone without any failings. Kossuth time and again is imagined as the one who alone raised the passions of the nation, organized the defensive war, financed it, and recruited the soldiers. After the fall of the revolution, he has been said to have continued to stir passions and preserve the light of national liberation abroad, while those responsible for the defeat in 1849—wavering liberals, moderates, and the traitor Görgei—deserved only condemnation. This was the Kossuth of most professional historians, school textbooks, and it was the version of 1848 that post-1948 “Marxist” historiography easily appropriated.³ Any attempt to nuance Kossuth's character, to pinpoint his own weaknesses and mistakes, to claim that the majority of the nation did not support Kossuth at the end of the war, and to understand Görgei not as a traitor but a soldier-politician whose goal was victory (although with mistakes made), went against public sentiment and against a significant part of Hungarian historiography. Again, István did all these things, which in a world where nationalists were eager to prop up their founding fathers and tear down their fifth-column enemies, were pretty explosive things to do.

Deák's *Lawful Revolution* did not stop with demythologizing Kossuth's person; he also shed light on the preponderance of petrified views of popular

2. Domokos Kosáry, *A Görgey-kérdés története I–II* (Budapest: Osiris-Századvég, 1994).

3. Martin Mevius, *Agents of Moscow: The Hungarian Communist Party and the Origins of Socialist Patriotism, 1941–1953* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 87–111.



Figure 1 | Two Hungarians “on the move” in the United States: Iván Berend and István Deák – longtime best friends and colleagues – at UCLA in 1997. (Photo courtesy of Kati Radics)

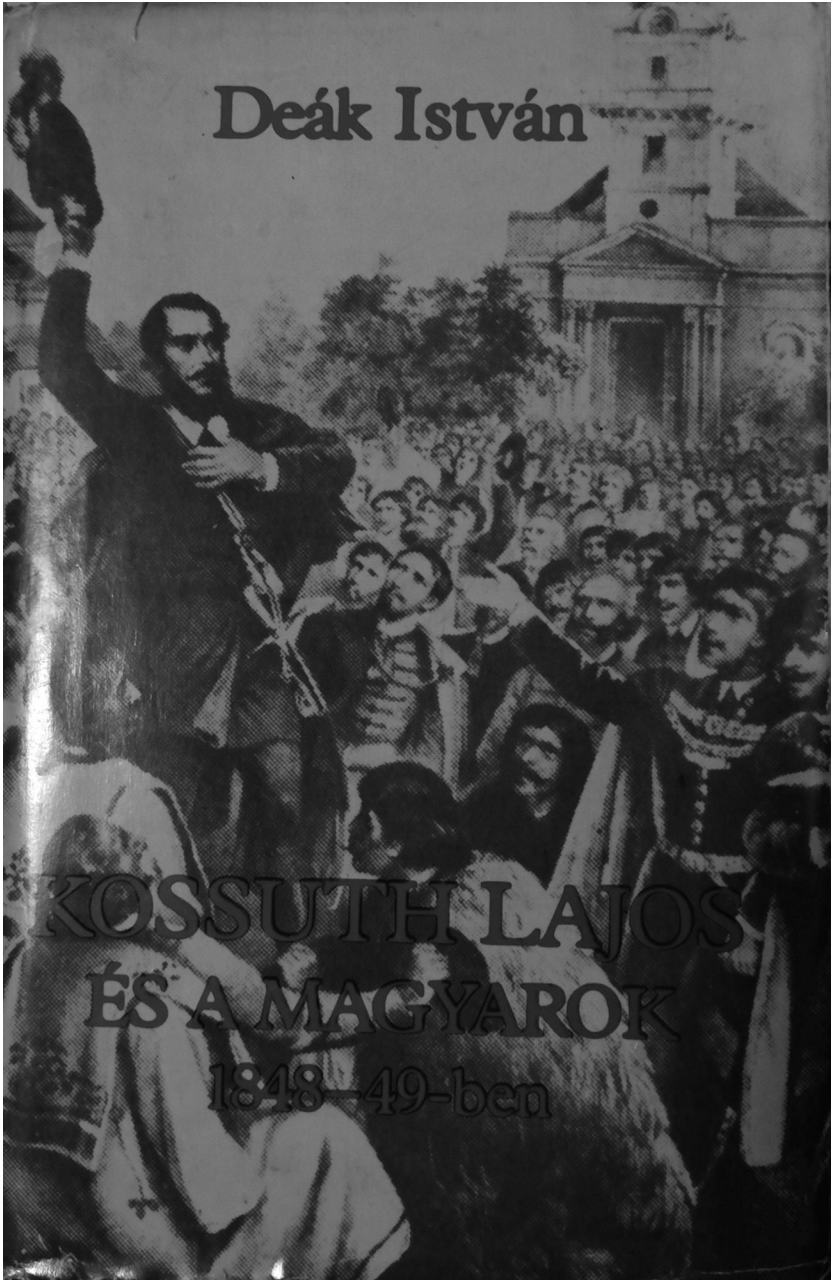


Figure 2 | The Hungarian-language version of István Deák's 1979 monograph, *The Lawful Revolution: Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians 1848-1849*. (Photo courtesy of Attila Pók)

historical imagination. He rejected the idea that the Viennese court was under the influence of a vicious “camarilla” that wanted to strike down the Hungarian revolution by force from the very beginning. He attributed responsibility to Hungarian foreign policy for the war to come. He concluded that the armed conflict between Hungarian troops and local national groups (like subject Romanians) was a civil war and not the result of the instigations from imperialist Vienna. Deák went even further, in a way anticipating what is considered to be his most important “revisionist” argument about the Habsburg empire, when he hinted to the possibility of a necessary balance between nationalism and broader political integration.⁴ Finally, István was unequivocal in claiming that Hungary stood no chance of a military victory even without Russian intervention. The stakes involved in recasting 1848–1849 in this way were clear to many and not uniformly popular.

Not being a historian in Hungary certainly helped Deák write this kind of history, and the reception shows how much it did because of the delicacy of these issues both for historiography and for contemporary politics of history. Critique to accompany praise in reviews is customary. But what was praised and critiqued is revealing. His nuanced portrayal of Kossuth was commended uniformly; his incorporation of Hungary’s 1848 with the rest of the European experience received praise from all; his critique of nationalism (including his thesis of a civil war) also induced commendation, but some reviews have found his words on *Hungarian* nationalism too harsh; his doubt regarding the camarilla, and his assessment that Hungary’s revolutionary war could never succeed met a more lukewarm reception.⁵ István Diószegi found his portrayal of other historical figures besides Kossuth and Görgei vague, stereotypical, and simplistic.⁶

Most of these reviews were scholarly ones, published in scholarly journals. But Deák’s ambiguous position as an American-Hungarian scholar and a go-between for Hungarian historians, instead of a Hungarian historian per se, colored his reception. To many, including state security services, Deák did not do proper research in Hungary; he was someone more likely to be found visiting youth clubs where he talked about the US rather than ordering files in the

4. András Gergely, “Deák István: Kossuth Lajos és a magyarok 1848–1849-ben,” *Tiszatáj* 38, no. 3 (1984): 86–90, here 90.

5. Aladár Urbán, “István Deák: The Lawful Revolution: Louis Kossuth and the Magyars in 1848–1849,” *Századok* 114, no. 6 (1980): 1048–53, here 1051–52.

6. István Diószegi, “Deák István: Kossuth Lajos és a magyarok 1848–1849-ben,” *Századok* 119, no. 5 (1985): 853–55.

national archives.⁷ This view of him probably explains why it was that in 1980 the main scholarly reviewer of the English version was Aladár Urbán.⁸ Urbán was a specialist of 1848 with groundbreaking work, but he was not among the authors of the presumably canonical work on the revolution, volume 6/1 of the ten-volume Hungarian history (published in 1979 by the publishing house of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences). Unlike György Spira or György Szabad, Urbán was not a public flagbearer of “Kossuthist” history. Furthermore, he was a historian of the United States, creating, perhaps, a strategic ambiguity and plausible deniability regarding why Deák’s work was reviewed at all. As a counterpoint, András Gergely—member of the authorial collective of the ten-volume Hungarian history—and István Diószegi wrote their reviews only after the publication of the Hungarian edition (1983), signaling to all that now Deák’s work was part of Hungarian historiography. When Urbán reviewed it three years earlier, it was not.

Interestingly, this seemingly “outsider” scholarly reception did not mean that Deák’s book was hidden from nonspecialist audiences. In *Valóság*, the journal of the Association for Public Science (Tudományos Ismeretterjestő Társulat), a foreign policy journalist, Ambrus Oltványi, gave lavish praise to the book.⁹ In *Élet és Irodalom*, the most important literary and cultural weekly of the country, the eminent historian Péter Hanák praised and critiqued *The Lawful Revolution*, arguing that the book’s final assessment suffered from the moralism of hindsight; he objected to Deák’s argument that the absence of a decision by Hungarian politicians on how they wanted to reconfigure the monarchy had significantly contributed to the outbreak of armed conflict. For Hanák—much like other historians, including Gergely and Diószegi—the ambiguity of Hungarian goals that may have provoked the armed intervention was the result of external and not internal factors.¹⁰ Loss was because of what happened on the battleground, not because of what happened in the planning sessions.

Articles like Oltványi’s and Hanák’s channeled the main arguments of the book to a broader, but still elite, intellectual group, as reading the English edition itself was hardly possible for most. These texts also highlighted that Deák’s work was to become part of a politics of memory—not surprisingly because

7. Béla Révész, “Hírszerzés, propaganda és ellenzék Magyarországon: Állambiztonsági jelentés 1976-ból a külső ellenség és a belső ellenzék viszonyáról,” *Múltunk* 50, no. 3 (2005): 162–225, here 181; Diószegi, “Deák István.”

8. Besides the Hungarian-language review in *Századok* he published an English-language one that was not simply a translation. Aladár Urbán, “The Lawful Revolution: Louis Kossuth and the Magyars in 1848–1849,” *Acta Historica* 16, nos. 3–4 (1980): 475–79.

9. Ambrus Oltványi, “Deák István: A törvényes forradalom,” *Valóság* 23, no. 8 (1980): 122–26.

10. Péter Hanák, “Kossuth ‘törvényes forradalma,’” *Élet és Irodalom*, August 9, 1980, 3.

many of his theses fit well with the antinationalist Kádár-era, which also supported the historiographic reevaluation of the Habsburg empire, led by eminent economic historians such as Iván T. Berend. While the academic reception downplayed the novelty of the book—with Urbán, for example, criticizing Deák for replicating much of what Hungarian historiography had already done—the nonspecialist press integrated it into current concerns around nationalism and the state.¹¹

The 1983 Hungarian translation did not just trigger the big Kossuth scholars to engage with the book, it also created a larger echo throughout Hungary. The party-organ *Népszabadság* featured a column by György Spira, several county newspapers discussed it, and even popular magazines, like *Képes Újság*, gave precious space to discuss this “new take” on Hungary’s 1848. The book’s visibility in the still well-controlled media made clear how important its argument was for the politics of memory at the time and how far its reach was within educated circles.¹² Without significant new praise or criticism, some of these articles revealed how much debates around the revolution still pertained to the essence of national identity and the living memory of 1848. *Napjaink*, the monthly cultural and literary journal of the Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County Council, which counted as its readership mostly the local intelligentsia, was enthusiastic, especially about what Deák considered to be his most important argument: criticism of nationalism on all sides.¹³ Péter Takács leveled against *The Lawful Revolution* only minor criticism, the most important of which was its apparent simplistic assessment of the local hero of Borsod, the revolutionary politician and minister Bertalan Szemere, whose tomb in the spectacular Avas cemetery of Miskolc was the site of an annual commemoration in the form of a torch-light procession.

An article in *Kelet-Magyarország*’s extended weekend edition makes real how the translation of István’s book rose in importance in nonspecialist circles, regardless of what the historians said. Zoltán Speidl—most famously known as the post-1990 right-wing politician he would become—mentioned in a one-page report on the Soviet-Hungarian border hospital Kisvárdá of how an ER doctor on night-shift duty, upon finishing his surgery on a patient’s broken vertebra, returned to his duty room with an open book on the table: “István Deák’s work. Lajos Kossuth and the Hungarians in 1848–1849.” Not to let readers fall

11. Urbán, “István Deák,” 1052–53.

12. Ferenc G. Simon, “Amerikai könyv Kossuthról,” *Képes Újság*, December 3, 1983, 12; György Spira, “Egy józan számvetésre készítő forradalomtörténet,” *Népszabadság*, January 19, 1984, 7; Sándor Tidrenczei, “Deák István: Kossuth Lajos és a magyarok 1818–49-ben,” *Kelet-Magyarország*, March 24, 1984, 10.

13. Péter Takács, “Tanulni kell a hazát szeretni . . .,” *Napjaink*, March 1, 1984, 31–32.

behind, on the following weekend the magazine published a review of just that book that the hardworking ER doctor thought important enough to engage with after a grueling surgery.¹⁴ In the 1980s, a history like Deák’s questioning the importance of nationalism in state formation was something ever greater circles of well-read Hungarians cared about.

Looking back from 2023, most readers of history books would not find the arguments presented in *The Lawful Revolution* shocking or revisionist. While the cult of Kossuth is not dead, since the late 1980s not only historiography but the politics of history has pivoted away from Kossuth as the sole hero of 1848 and populated it instead with a pantheon of figures, like prime minister Lajos Batthyány, István Széchenyi, Kossuth’s customary opponent in the classic historical narrative, or the “architect of the Compromise” of 1867 Ferenc Deák. Moreover, a key point made in *The Lawful Revolution* about how the 1867 Compromise meant a final triumph of the Hungarians is now the most mainstream interpretation in Hungarian historiography.

Still, *The Lawful Revolution* is not the book historians have been trained to think of as one that changed how we think about 1848. The number of references to its pages is rather thin given how much its core arguments are now mainstream, and these references often cite facts regarding Kossuth, less than the general argument. Meanwhile, however, many of the research directions recommended by Deák for future work bore fruits. His call for more attention to the social composition of the military, attitudes of different social groups, and the peasantry serve as some of the core questions most historians tackled after him. There is even still pushback from Hungarian historians about Deák’s argument that Hungary could never have won the war, even without Russian intervention. The preeminent historian of the revolution today, Róbert Hermann, regularly criticizes this aspect of Deák’s work in some of his key publications, explicitly contending that Deák was wrong and that the revolution was hardly doomed militarily.¹⁵

While we may see Hermann’s works as a desperate rearguard action of the classic nationalist camp—that is not the case; Hermann is usually a sober voice when it comes to debates around the old tropes. Instead, this last hold-over emphasizes the opposite; it shows how much other arguments of Deák’s are now so common, they might even be characterized as banal. Moreover, in a sense Hermann’s objection signals a new cycle of revisionism because the inevitability of defeat is today rather the mainstream view. Thus, it is not

14. Zoltán Speidl, “Kórház az ország szélén,” *Kelet-Magyarország*, March 17, 1984, 6; Tidenczei, “Deák István.”

15. Róbert Hermann, “A magyar szabadságharc katonai esélyei,” *Limes* 10, no. 3 (1997): 7–25, here 20–21.

necessarily a sign of the ambiguities of the previous revisionist turn in Hungarian historiography. Instead it may be its slightly paradoxical continuation. Nevertheless, it is still telling that Hermann is focusing on an issue of national pride that has limited historical significance. Even if he is right, it can only lead to a counterfactual history and not an alternative narrative or a reinterpretation of what happened in and to the country. Whatever *The Lawful Revolution* achieved in a very subdued way, one of Deák's metahistoriographic points about the dangers of entangling national identity and history had a more limited impact than his interpretations of the concrete history. Asking whose failure that is—István's or ours—is beside the point. History remains still too important for the strengthening of national identity, and unfortunately even historians fail to answer the call that Deák gave us.

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