

Balogh, Máté Gergely. The Kossuth Emigration and the Civil War.

Review of *Hungarian Émigrés in the American Civil War: A History and Biographical Dictionary*, by István Kornél Vida. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012 and *Világostól Appomatoxig: Magyarok az amerikai polgárháborúban*, by István Kornél Vida. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2011.

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The Kossuth emigration, which took place after the fall of the 1848-49 Revolution and War of Independence, was the first major wave of Hungarian immigration to the United States. It is named after Lajos Kossuth, regent of Hungary during the revolution, who visited America in 1851-52 to gather support for the cause of his homeland. He returned to Britain, but many of his followers chose to settle in the New World. Less than a decade after his trip the Civil War (1861–65), the bloodiest military conflict in the history of the United States, broke out. In *Hungarian Émigrés in the American Civil War: A History and Biographical Dictionary* István Kornél Vida examines the reasons why Hungarians decided to join the war, the extent and consequences of their involvement, and provides a detailed survey of the known Hungarian-American participants of the Civil War.

István Kornél Vida is assistant professor at the North American Department of the University of Debrecen. His main research areas are migration studies, Hungarian-American relations, and 19th century American history, mainly the Civil War and the preceding years.

Hungarian Émigrés in the American Civil War is the result of ten years of his research in Hungary, the United States, and Germany. While there were some earlier attempts to present Hungarian involvement in the Civil War, these were not scholarly works.¹ Myth-making is a common practice when ethnic authors write about the contributions of their own ethnic groups, but it is obviously not proper history writing in a scholarly sense. Vida's work is the first book that discusses the role of Hungarians in the Civil War on an academic level.

The book was published both in English and in Hungarian, and, for obvious reasons, there are certain differences between the two versions. It can safely be assumed that the target audience of the Hungarian edition is more or less aware of the events and the most important figures of the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–49, while it needs a more detailed introduction to the history of the American Civil War and the preceding years. At the same time, the English-language audience is in all likelihood more familiar with the American events, and oblivious of the Hungarian situation. In the English version, after the acknowledgements, a preface places the work in the current body of scholarship. This is followed by an introduction, entitled “Martyrs of Freedom,” a short overview of the Hungarian revolution, Kossuth's role, and the story of the Kossuth emigration. The introduction precedes the acknowledgements in the Hungarian edition, and consists of a concise summary of the history of the Civil War, a presentation of the current state of scholarship, and the enumeration of sources.

The structures of the two editions are also slightly different. The content of the English version is divided into two parts: “History,” which is composed of eight chapters, and a “Biographical Dictionary.” In the Hungarian book the list of biographies of Hungarian participants in the American Civil War is not a separate part, but it is the ninth chapter of the work. The two lists are identical, but the distinction between the historical and biographical sections is stronger in the English edition.

The first chapter is about Hungarian immigration to the United States in the 1850s, while the second examines the life of Kossuth

¹ *Hungarians in the American Civil War* by Eugene Pivany, *Lincoln's Hungarian Heroes* by Edmund Vasváry, and *Magyarok az észak-amerikai polgárháborúban* by Tivadar Ács, see: István Kornél Vida, *Hungarian Émigrés in the American Civil War: A History and Biographical Dictionary* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 1 (hereafter cited as *Hungarian Émigrés*).

émigrés in the new country. The importance of the Kossuth emigration does not lie in the number of people who arrived from Hungary, which was relatively low compared to some other nationalities in the same period (e.g. the Irish), or the extent of later immigration waves from Hungary.² The real significance of the Kossuth emigration was that it placed Hungary on the map for Americans, and it created the long-lasting image of the Hungarian freedom fighter. Afraid of the retaliation that followed the Revolution, these *émigrés* left their homeland and were greeted enthusiastically as champions of liberty by the American public; many saw a close resemblance between the American and the Hungarian wars of independence. But this interest in the struggle of Hungary proved to be short-lived, and many *émigrés* quickly found out that there was no such thing as a free lunch in the land of the free. Many of them had qualifications that they could not use in the United States, and while their financial situation improved by the end of the 1850s, it still remained below the national average.

Being veterans of the 1848–49 War of Independence, many Hungarians saw the outbreak of the Civil War as an opportunity to put their military skills to use, and joined either the Union or the Confederacy. The third chapter discusses the motivations of Hungarian immigrants for fighting, and the fourth presents the military units they joined. Earlier works on Hungarian-Americans in the Civil War ignored the fact that, although in smaller numbers, there were also Hungarians fighting for the South, and argued that the freedom-loving Hungarians wanted to abolish the evil institution of slavery. Vida argues against this allegation and points out that the abolition of slavery was initially not among their war aims. The preservation of the American system of government, and the fight for their chosen country were the main reasons why many Hungarians decided to get involved in the war, but material gains and the possibility of social advancement were also important factors for a lot of them. The reason why more Hungarians joined the Union than the Confederacy was that there were much fewer of them in the South, and the Confederacy was generally more suspicious of foreigners. No matter which side they fought for, Vida argues convincingly, slavery was not an important issue for Hungarians when they decided to join the Civil War. The involvement of Hungarians was similar to that of other nationalities, and they often

² According to the federal census in 1860 there were 2,170 Hungarians living in the United States *Hungarian Émigrés*, 38.

enlisted in units that had a high number of immigrants; most notably, the Hungarian-American community was often closely linked to the German-Americans. Most Hungarian soldiers concentrated in New York, around General Frémont in Missouri, and in the Midwest.

Chapters five, six, and seven present the careers of some Hungarian-Americans who fought in the Civil War. Chapter five is about Alexander Asboth, Julius Stahel, and Charles Zagonyi. Asboth was a skilled soldier, who started the war as chief of staff of General Frémont, and finished it as major general. Stahel was the only Hungarian-American who got the Congressional Medal of Honor in the Civil War, and also received the rank of major general. The story of Charles Zagonyi is slightly different: he became famous when led Frémont's bodyguards to a cavalry charge in the battle of Springfield. This act might have had slight military or historical significance, but gained special importance when it was turned into a Hungarian-American myth by the community. Chapter six introduces another well-known "Hungarian," Béla Estván, the author of a popular book on the Civil War, *War Pictures from the South*. But it turns out that Estván was not Hungarian after all, but an Austrian, who was born as Peter Heinrich in Vienna. He was a real impostor who claimed his fake identity because he hoped to benefit from the positive attitude towards Hungarians as a consequence of the 1848-49 Revolution and War of Independence. The next chapter is about Hungarian officers in the colored regiments. Most immigrants from Hungary were shocked by the existence of slavery, and rejected the "peculiar institution." Many applied to serve as officers in the black units, some because of sympathy for blacks, and some believed in the usefulness of the colored regiments. Vida, however, concludes that the higher pay was probably the main attraction and some expected advancement in their careers.

The last chapter deals with the aftermath of the Civil War: it looks at the consequences for Hungarian-Americans, and their situation after the end of the war. Quite a number of Hungarians died and were wounded in America's bloodiest war. Vida asserts that most of those who survived the war benefitted from their military service. They advanced in rank: 87% of Hungarians finished the war as officers. Their involvement in the war gained them respect and acceptance in their respective communities. This is why only a few of them returned to Hungary. At the end of the chapter we are presented an overview of the memory of Hungarians in the Civil War: places and institutions named after them, memorials, literary depictions, and a single movie.

The second part of the English and the ninth chapter of the Hungarian book are a biographical list of Hungarian participants of the Civil War in alphabetical order, combined with an appendix listing the most common misspellings of their names, which can help the work of future researchers. In the Hungarian edition a small Union or Confederate flag indicates which belligerent the particular soldier fought for, unfortunately, this is missing from the English version. Vida did an enormous job by collecting all this data on every known Hungarian who fought in the war; surely, the biographical dictionary will prove to be immensely useful for anybody who does research on the topic.

Hungarian Émigrés in the Civil War processes a field that was previously not covered on an academic level. It disproves many previously held myths about Hungarian involvement in the Civil War. The book is based on solid research, and it will be useful for both scholars who are interested in the American Civil War and those who study Hungarian emigration to the United States. Though it is a scholarly text it is easily readable, and is also recommended to those who are not experts in the field.