

# **DISSERTATION THESES**

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**"THE TRUE CAUSE OF FREEDOM": THE KOSSUTH  
EMIGRATION AND THE HUNGARIANS' PARTICIPATION  
IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR**



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## I. The Goals of the Dissertation; Identifying the Subject

My dissertation can be considered as a linear continuation of a research project set out with my paper prepared for the 2003 Hungarian National Students' Conference (*Doing Away With Myths: A New Look at the Hungarians' Participation*), however, it offers a much deeper and more comprehensive analysis. I had already made the recognition back then that the literature of this subject is not only out of date, occasionally biased, but entirely lacks any aspiration to present the Hungarian-American community as one of the numerous ethnic groups in the United States, and seek what Hungarians had in common with the representatives of other ethnic groups, thus contributing to the study of Hungarian-American historical links and contacts as well as American migration history. This is the reason why — although my dissertation acknowledges the trail-blazing efforts of the students of this subject (Eugene Pivány, Edmund Vasváty and Tivadar Ács) in researching the Kossuth Emigration and the Hungarians' involvement in the American Civil War — more often than not I opted for starting from scratch, and I ventured to fields which had been neglected or which are still in their infancy.

Considering all these, the major objectives of my dissertation can be summarized in the following 8 points:

- (1) To try to place the so-called Kossuth emigration within the wider context of the Old Immigration in general, and the emigrés of the European revolutionary wave of 1848/1849 in particular.
- (2) To correct earlier estimates regarding the number of people of Hungarian origin in the United States in the 1850s by analyzing various archival sources, particularly passenger lists of ships arriving in American ports between 1848 and 1865; Federal Census data from the years 1850 and 1860.
- (3) To place Hungarians in mid-nineteenth century American society a) by making use of data mainly from the above-mentioned federal population records b) by identifying some similar and dissimilar characteristics of Hungarians in the United States with those of other ethnic groups.
- (4) To find the major motivating forces which induced many Kossuth emigrés to enlist in the American Civil War.
- (5) To draw an objective picture of the role Hungarian emigrants played in the conflict between North and South.

- (6) To place some of the legendary Hungarian figures of the Civil War (Charles Zagonyi, Julius H. Stahel, Alexander Asbóth, Béla Estván) under my magnifying glass, and take a measure of their activities. In the case of Stahel and Asbóth this meant merely refinements, in the case of Zagonyi, however, I investigated the hero-making mechanisms of the Hungarian-American authors which definitely correspond to the similar tendencies of historians of other ethnicities. I tries to differentiate between the actual military importance of Zagonyi's 'Death-Ride in Springfield' and its significance in serving as a 'community glue' for Hungarian-Americans, playing a major role in legitimizing their presence overseas.
- (7) To study the Post-Civil War careers of the Hungarian soldiers for indications of whether their military service meant a step forward in the process of their integration into American society and their assimilation into American life.
- (8) To compile the so-far most accurate biographical list of Hungarian participants in the Civil War. I made sure to include extensive referencing in order to advance further related research.

I sincerely hope that my work is going to raise the attention of not only those interested in Hungarian-American links and contacts. Despite the immense number of books — academic as well as popular — discussing the American Civil War, the international dimensions of the conflict have been rather ignored so far. The pioneer works of Ella Lonn (*Foreigners in the Confederacy* (1940) és *Foreigners in the Union Army and Navy* (1951) were written more than half of century ago, and they rely too much on the works of — often amateur — historians of the various ethnic groups, taking over many of their misconceptions. Although the works published during the past decade (William Burton: *Melting Pot Soldiers: The Union's Ethnic Regiments* [1998] és Dean B. Mahin: *The Blessed Place of Freedom: Europeans in Civil War America* [2002]) are more comprehensive, they are not entirely void of such errors. There is much need for research directly linked to the Civil War participation of individual ethnic groups which have special demands due to the nature of the study of historical contacts: the accessibility of the sources in two countries (or even two continents), the necessity of the reading knowledge of at least two languages. The applied methodology came from the field of historical demography, social history, and military history, consequently, it is rather complex.

## **II. The Methodology of the Dissertation**

I started out from the assumption that the participation of Hungarian (and other foreign) soldiers in the American Civil War cannot be studied isolated, but it is closely connected to the immigrant experience in their adopted country, which requires the comparative analysis of the histories of the various ethnic groups. In case of the Hungarian-American community this only resulted in the realization that research of this kind is stuck on the level of first-generation analysis, and I had no other option but to undertake this task, as well. The 'from the bottom up' (starting out from the microhistorical investigations of communities) and comparative analysis of history is a prerequisite of the discussion of the two key issues of immigrant experience: 1) Connections between immigrants and their homeland, and (2) Assimilation into American life.

The general analysis of the Kossuth Emigration necessitated the extensive application of the methodology of migration history, furthermore, due to the nature of the subject both sources in the United States and in Hungary had to be studied, although in my work I focused on the American history of the emigrés. Therefore, I used primarily archival material accessible in the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

Due to the complete lack of Hungarian governmental sources of this kind, I paid special attention to census and immigration statistics in the United States. I started out the collection of material in the National Archives with the Passenger Arrival Lists, enabling me to determine the exact number of Hungarians arriving in America in the period under my scrutiny. Processing data from the Census of 1850 and 1860, I managed to compile a database which provides detailed information concerning the Kossuth emigrés' family structures, financial conditions, occupations, geographical distribution, etc. I made excellent use of the naturalization records which generally include declaration of intention, petitions, depositions, and a record of naturalization.

Of course, one of the most crucial group of sources I worked with were the military records of the National Archives. I had to carry out the investigation of the service records of each individual, which made it possible to reconstruct their military careers. The investigated material contained various sources: muster and pay rolls, rank rolls, returns, hospital and prison records. Occasionally the information they provided was insufficient, therefore, I had to turn to the Pension Records, which contained summaries of the individuals' military careers, and — unlike the muster rolls — often indicated the soldiers' place or country of birth.

Other collections of the National Archives also provided crucial bits and pieces of information. I made use of the Land Records, Passport application files as well as the papers of the Union and Confederate governments.

The material I used was by no means confined to the federal papers in the possession of the National Archives. I located a number of sources held by research institutes, libraries, and individuals, and naturally I came across several documents in Hungarian archives shedding light on various aspects of the subject matter.

During the traditional archival research I found several obstacles. The frequent mis-spellings of the Hungarian names and the fact that the soldiers' country of birth was often not indicated had meant insuperable obstacles for a long time in the past, therefore, in my work I did my best to apply modern computer-based genealogical research softwares which made it possible to: 1) have access to the documents quickly 2) revise the mis-spellings of names by comparing the research aids with the original documents 3) offering search functions unavailable in microfilm collections (for instance, searching for the country of birth in census records).

I found contemporary American daily papers useful, as the Kossuth emigrés frequently appeared in articles, and their ads, obituaries provided important extra information.

One compendium of primary sources has to be highlighted. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, published between 1880 and 1901 in 128 volumes is definitely the most comprehensive collection of the primary sources of the conflict, and it is by all means the foundation of all Civil War-related research. It contains personal accounts, reports, correspondence, and a high number of documents linked to Hungarian soldiers.

My dissertation necessitated the application of methodology from a number of fields of study: from migration history through social history to military history. I used the microhistorical approach to study Hungarian settlements, and similarly, reconstructing the individual careers also required using the methods of several disciplines: from psychology through medical history to genealogy.

### **III. Enumeration of Theses**

My doctoral dissertation is one of the first attempts to give an objective, scholarly analysis of the Hungarians' involvement in the American Civil War. The most significant results, findings and conclusions of my work can be summarized as follows:

- (1) I have found that after the failure of the Hungarian War of Independence in 1849, the so-called Kossuth emigrés turned their attention towards the United States due to two reasons: None of the Western-European countries offered them more than temporary shelter; Starting with the Reform Age the United States had an overwhelmingly positive image in Hungarians which prompted many of them to try their luck overseas.
- (2) Meticulous analysis of passenger lists and federal census data from 1850 and 1860 shows that earlier works often over-estimated the number of Hungarians living in the United States during the decade prior to the Civil War. No more than 3,000 Hungarian people had settled down in America by 1860.
- (3) After Kossuth had left America in 1852, the Kossuth-emigration almost entirely lost its political nature; its members tried to integrate into American society. The immense majority of them applied for American citizenship and actually became naturalized by the coming of the Civil War, giving unequivocal evidence for their intention to stay in America, which they considered their adopted country. Earlier approaches to the history of this wave of immigrants, emphasizing accounts of homesickness, revealed the hardships of assimilation and acculturation rather than a longing to return.
- (4) Population records from 1850 and 1860, that allow the mapping of the Hungarians' living conditions in America in the Ante-bellum era show that especially due to the lack of employment (many Hungarians had no marketable qualifications or professions), a high proportion of Kossuth emigrés left the big cities of the East Coast for the Midwestern Frontier. Although no exclusively Hungarian settlements appeared, New Buda and Davenport in Iowa, Chicago, and St. Louis had considerable Hungarian communities. The Census of 1860, with information concerning both real estate and personal wealth, provided glimpses of Hungarians on the contemporary American social ladder. The financial situation of Hungarians was below average as compared to the national level, and this was more or less regardless of the place where the immigrants settled down, although those who tried their luck on the frontier were slightly more likely to accumulate wealth.
- (5) Abhorence of slavery played a minor role in Hungarians' decision-making, and their choice had more to do with the fact that the Southern society seemed less receptive towards foreigners.

Nevertheless, approximately ten percent of the Hungarians did settle in one of the states that seceded from the Union in 1860-61, a smaller portion than among other ethnic groups in America at the time.

(6) The issue of slavery was almost entirely negligible for soldiers both in the Union and Confederate armies in the initial phase of the conflict, and the motives for joining either of the two armies showed remarkable similarities. The major motivating forces were as follows: a) loyalty to their adopted country b) perceived parallels between the present struggle and the Hungarian freedom fight for Hungarians serving on both sides c) utilization of their military talents d) promise of higher bounty e) thirst for adventure f) and rarely emancipation of African-Americans.

(7) The extensive study of the military records of Hungarian Civil War participants offered me an insight into various aspects of this chapter in the history of the Kossuth emigration: I have managed to get a clear picture of the regiments they served at, the ranks and commissions they held, furthermore, I have been able to reconstruct the major stages of their careers. Similarly to the total number of Hungarians, I have found that the number of those who actually took part in the War of the Rebellion was exaggerated, too.

(8) The rate of Hungarian participants in the war was around 8 percent, which more or less corresponded to the average proportion of foreign volunteering, but was lower than, for instance, that of German-Americans (13.8%). There was no considerable difference between the proportion of Hungarians who enlisted in the Union and the Confederacy army, as I found that it accurately corresponded to the territorial distribution of Hungarians. (88 percent in the Union and 12 percent in the Confederacy)

(9) There were no all-Hungarian regiments in the Civil War. Except for General John Frémont's Western Department Headquarters in St. Louis, Missouri, the Hungarians' locations of enlistment corresponded to their actual state of residence. Accordingly, there were three major centers of enlistment: New York, Frémont's Western Department, and the Midwest (Illinois, Indiana and Iowa). Although in none of them were exclusively Hungarian regiments formed. Nor were there entirely Hungarian companies.

(10) Béla Estván, frequently mentioned as the only Hungarian who achieved prominence in the Confederate Army, and author of the Civil War era bestseller *War Pictures from the South*, never held responsible position in the Confederate Army. He was not Hungarian, and his real name was not even Estván.

(11) In the case of another — at least real — Hungarian, Charles Zagonyi, I found that his role in the conflict, particularly surrounding his famous Death Ride at Springfield, Missouri, has been greatly exaggerated. However, I pointed out that no matter how negligible its military importance might be, its historical significance was great since it strengthened the legitimacy of the Hungarian-American community.

(12) Hungarians who cherished outright abolitionist sentiments constituted only a minority. However, there were among these soldiers some who volunteered for commissions in colored regiments; primary sources indicate that they were true friends of the African-American race.

(13) Most of the Kossuth emigrés did not return to their homeland, even after the Compromise of 1867, which brought general amnesty to those who took up arms against the Habsburg rule in 1848/49. This was partly due to the fact that the vast majority of them had become naturalized American citizens by 1865, and also, many of them did their best to make use of their military successes in the War of the Rebellion.

(14) Several Hungarian-born Civil War veterans were awarded consular appointments in the American Diplomatic Corps, and served for various terms in countries ranging from Tahiti to Russia.

(15) I present the so-far most complete biographical list of Hungarian soldiers who provably born in Hungary and served in the American Civil War either in the Union or in the Confederate army. The list contains the biographies of 100 soldiers.

#### **IV. Publications in connection with the subject**

##### ***Books***

Charles Loring Brace. *Magyarország 1851-ben.* (Szerk. Lévai Csaba és Vida István Kornél) (Máriabesnyő-Gödöllő: Attraktor Kiadó, 2006.)

##### ***Articles***

”A régóta elnyomottak barátai”: Magyar katonák az észak-amerikai polgárháború néger ezredeiben,” in *Aetas*. (2008/2), pp. 68-82.

”Abraham Lincoln és az emancipáció kérdése” in *Aetas* 2001/1. pp. 165-176.

”Abraham Lincoln és az Unió táborkainak viszonya az észak-amerikai polgárháborúban” in *Hadtörténeti Közlemények*. 2002/1 pp.111-139.

”All Quiet for Forty Years: The Hungarian Participation in the American Civil War. A Historiographical Essay,” in *Europe and the World in European Historiography* (Ed. Csaba Lévai) (Pisa, Italy: Pisa University Press, 2006.)

”Doing Away with Myths: A New Look at the Hungarians’ Participation in the American Civil War”. Országos Diákkonferencia Versenymunka, 2001. Szeged, Hungary.

”International Fraud or Southern Hero?: Col. Bela Estvan, Hungarian(?) Cavalry Officer in the Confederate Army,” Vasváry Collection Newsletter (2007/2) (38.) Accessible: <http://www.sk-szeged.hu/szolgaltatas/vasvary/newsletter/07dec/estvan.html>.

”Két nemzet határán: a Kossuth-emigráció és az állampolgárság amerikai megítélése a XIX. század derekán.” *Nemzet és Állam a XIX.-XX. században.* (Szerk.. Bodnár Erzsébet és Demeter Gábor) (Debrecen, 2006.)

”Magyar katona a Konföderáció fogáságában” – Recenzió Beszedits, Stephen. *The Libby Prison Diary of Colonel Emeric Szabad*. B&L Information Services, Toronto, 1999. *Klió* 2001/3 pp. 108-115.

”Magyar katonák a Konföderáció hadseregében. Estván Béla szélhámos pályafutása.” In *Gyarmatokból Impérium: Magyar kutatók tanulmányai az amerikai történelemről*. (Szerk. Frank Tibor) (Gondolat Kiadó: Budapest, 2007.), pp. 72-87.

”The Concept of Citizenship and the Hungarian Immigrants in the United States in the 1850’s: A Case Study,” in *Citizenship in Historical Perspective*. (Szerk. S.G. Ellis, G. Hálfdanarson, A.K. Isaacs) (Pisa, Italy: Pisa University Press, 2006.), pp. 227-236.