

From Kazinczy to Kossuth: How developments in Magyar language and literature influenced the Hungarian Revolution of 1848.

“Talpra magyar, hí a haza!”, goes the opening line of Sándor Petőfi’s *Nemzeti Dal*. Delivered in Pest on March 15, 1848, to a raging crowd of students (although not on the steps of the Hungarian National Museum as according to legend¹), the poem sparked a series of peaceful protests that briefly put an end to over 300 years of Habsburg rule in Hungary. Although the nation’s stint at independence was short-lived – military defeats at the hands of both Russian and Austrian armies, as well as pressure from a third Croatian one, led to total Hungarian capitulation on 13 August 1849 – the *Nemzeti Dal* remains one of the most poignant statements of Hungarian national identity in the country’s history.

March 15 is one of Hungary’s three national holidays, and Petőfi is broadly hailed as Hungary’s national poet.² To an English speaker, the reasons for the importance of Petőfi and his work become apparent upon reading the translation of the *Nemzeti Dal*’s opening line: “On your feet, Magyar, the homeland calls!” Emblematic of Hungarian patriotism and representative of the dual waves of liberalism and nationalism sweeping Europe in 1848, the opening line strives for the right to self-determination. Yet it also belies the discrepancy that undercut, and later played a part in defeating, the Hungarian Revolution of 1848. Petőfi makes an impassioned plea to the Magyar people, yet, despite being the largest ethnic group, they only compromised just over a third of the total population³ of the “homeland” they sought to liberate. Nominally, to be ‘Hungarian’ was to be Magyar, yet the Magyar shared their country with numerous other ethnic groups, each possessing disparate identities. As such, the seemingly Magyar-oriented nationalism that came to dominate the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 was only made possible by the ‘Magyarisation’ of the Hungarian nation. A standardised Hungarian language gave post-enlightenment writers and *intelligentsia* a vehicle to create an inclusive Magyar identity on a national scale, one predicated, not on ethnic or geographical lines, but rather on literary and linguistic ones. Furthermore, the development of a native literary culture hitherto novel to Hungary provided an artistic tradition illustrative of the nation’s uniqueness. Now in 1848, to be Hungarian was not a matter of tracing genealogical records but rather one of speaking the Hungarian language and associating with the ‘myths’ that bound Hungarian identity. Perhaps, therefore, it is of no surprise then to learn Petőfi himself was ethnically Slovak.⁴

The first challenge reformers faced in cultivating Hungarian nationalism was in defining their ‘nation’. In much of Europe the essence of a nation was vested in its respective monarch, who in turn extended the national community to the general population; England’s economic prosperity created a bourgeois society of ‘free-born Englishmen’ under the benevolent guidance of the King. In Hungary however, the nobility alone stood as the nation incarnate: “Elsewhere the nobility was a leading

¹ Edina, Juhász. “Csak Legenda, Hogy Petőfi Elszavalta a Nemzeti Dalt a Múzeumkertben.” index.hu, March 15, 2019. https://index.hu/tudomany/til/2019/03/15/petofi_sandor_nemzeti_muzeum/.

² Illyés, Gyula. “Sándor Petőfi: Poet, Imagination, Nation.” *Mosaic* 6, no. 4 (1973): 51.

³ Circa 1842 there were 4,812,759 Magyars out of a total population of 12,880,406. Other major groups included Romanians (2,202,542), Slovaks (1,687,256), Germans (1,273,677), Croats (886,079) and Serbs (828,365). Fényes, Elek. “*Magyarország statisztikája*. Vol. 1-3.” Trattner-Károlyi Tulajdona, 1842.

⁴ Illyés, Gyula. “Sándor Petőfi: Poet, Imagination, Nation.” *Mosaic* 6, no. 4 (1973): 51.

privileged order, but in Hungary it was the ruling nation itself."⁵ This unique arrangement stemmed from the fact that, from 1526, the Kings of Hungary were members of the Habsburg dynasty, and as such it fell to the nobles to safeguard Hungarian interests and independence from Austrian impositions and incursions. Although the possibility of shaking the nobility's pre-eminent standing in Hungarian society was slim – it would not be until the Red Army rolled into Budapest in 1945 that such an arrangement was finally undone – the Hungarian *literati* recognised the need to amalgamate elements of the French definition of nationhood into their own structure (the beheading of Louis XVI saw the French transfer their allegiance from King to "the French Nation," i.e., themselves⁶).

The most evident way to bridge the divide between the nobility and the general population in order to forge a cohesive Hungarian identity, in the eyes of Magyar nationalists, was through shared language. In line with much of *gentilissime* Europe, the Hungarian nobility spoke either German or French, with many speaking little to none of the Magyar language itself. This was perhaps not wholly unjustified; Magyar existed solely in the vernacular and lacked many of the words necessary for scientific or academic discourse.⁷ Reformers argued that a simplified and supplemented Hungarian language would expand its use from being primarily the dialect of serfs to one of all members of society. Consequently, a movement emerged to reform and enrich the Magyar language, headed by poet Ferenc Kazinczy. Within the language reform movement there existed two groups: the "neologists" (to which Kazinczy belonged), who favoured the incorporation of foreign words or the assignment of new meanings to old words, and the "orthologists", who stressed the need to adhere to the rules and the spirit of the language with as little incorporation from foreign influences as possible. Kazinczy was able to balance the excesses of each side against each other, stating that an author wrote "well and beautifully if he was both a fiery neologist and an orthologist,"⁸ and by 1819 the Magyar language in its modern form existed. A resounding success, the language reform movement added thousands of new words (ranging from the Magyar terms for literature, sculptor, virtue and gracefulness to circle, stock market, pay-in-instalments and factory) and streamlined Hungarian into an accessible and artistic medium, suitable for the needs of a modern society.

Language reform was not merely an exercise in academic and communicatory practicality, however. Seizing upon Kazinczy's notion that "A nyelvében él a nemzet", or "the Nation lives in its language," Magyar nationalists turned the Hungarian language into a pre-requisite for nationhood, as opposed to it being the by-product of an independently cultivated national identity. Benedictine monk Izidor Guzmics argued in 1822 that language was the ultimate factor in determining the character of a nation. He saw native language as an irrefutable precursor to the development of organic culture, art and knowledge, an outlook echoed by many contemporaries. Writer and poet Peter Vajda stated that "If we do not have our own language we are not a nation",⁹ and declared that with a modern Hungarian language nationalist revolution was inevitable, regardless of extenuating factors. Whilst the importance placed on language by Magyar nationalists over elements that constitute a more 'orthodox' understanding of nationhood, such as literary tradition or education, at times verged on the excessive, it nonetheless had a profound effect on the fabric of the country. Kazinczy's work in linguistic reform formed the foundation upon which the Hungarian Reform Era was built, a period in which the Magyar language permeated into, and later became the very essence

⁵ Dorn, Walter L. "Competition for Empire, 1740-1763." (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1940).

⁶ Hobsbawm, Eric. "Age of revolution: 1789-1848." Hachette UK, 2010.

⁷ Almási, Gábor. "Latin and the Language Question in Hungary (1700–1844)." (2014).

⁸ Tudományos Gyűjtemény, 1819, 11:25

⁹ Tudományos Gyűjtemény, 1832, 6:63

of, the Hungarian state. Throughout the 1820s and 1830s Hungarian was introduced into the judiciary and civil service in conjunction with Latin, which had been the *de jure* language of Hungary since 1790. Speaking Hungarian now became a necessary qualification for certain positions, such as lawyers or priests, and many elements of civil administration now operated in both Latin and Hungarian. Cultural institutions began to open to reflect these changes too. Arch-reformer Count István Széchenyi founded the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1825, and in the 1830s the Hungarian National Theatre was built following an influx of public donations. The Hungarian National Museum, initially founded in 1802 as a small library, saw an influx of funding and interest, and in 1846 moved to a new, purpose-built site. Such institutions were seen as both centres for cultural discourse as well as emblems of national honour, and contributed to the burgeoning sense of Hungarian national identity. Efforts to Magyarize Hungarian society eventually culminated in 1844, when the National Assembly adopted Hungarian as the sole language of the state. Uptake of Hungarian amongst the nobility, which had initially been low (at the time of founding the Academy of Sciences, Count Széchenyi, the “Greatest Magyar”, spoke Hungarian with a foreign accent), increased dramatically as a result, which in turn stimulated a patriotism and national consciousness amongst the upper classes.

Many nationalists realised, however, that a national identity delineated by language alone was effectively formless. “Knowledge of the Hungarian language [was now] a prerequisite for claiming Hungarian national and cultural identity”¹⁰, yet a Hungarian “cultural identity” was yet to exist. As such, Magyar poets turned to Magyar historical traditions to cultivate a national consciousness. Ferenc Kölcsey, acquaintance of Kazinczy and liberal poet, published *Himnusz* (“Hymn” or “Anthem”) in 1823. Subtitled “*A magyar nép zivataros századaiból*” (“From the stormy centuries of the Hungarian nation”), the poem invokes the years of “torturous slavery” the Magyar people endured under the Turks as cause for a brighter future for their “beautiful homeland”.¹¹ Dramatist Mihály Vörösmarty wrote *Zalán futása* (“The Flight of Zalán”) a year later in 1823, an epic poem which described creation of Hungary by Árpád at the turn of the 10th century, whilst poet János Arany wrote the poem *Toldi* in 1846, which recounts the medieval stories of Miklós Toldi as the champion of Hungarian King Louis the Great in the 13th century. The result was the emergence of Romantic nationalism as the defining characteristic of nationalistic discourse. Magyar nationalists cultivated a hyperbolic self-aggrandisement of their own country, with one going so far as to claim “the Magyars’ talents included the talents of all other peoples,”¹² often to the dismay of more moderate writers who saw a need to balance fanatical patriotism with constructive work to improve the country. Yet the result was nonetheless profound; Hungarian identity was now a quantifiable and tangible amalgam of achievement and product, as opposed to solely the individual meeting of a singular criteria. Language remained important undoubtedly, but it now precipitated access to a nascent Magyar cultural heritage and identity, one unique in its own right.

Buoyed by the emergence of a literary culture they could point to as evidence of their nation’s distinct inheritance, and encouraged by the subsequent fervent patriotic sentiment, Magyar nationalists established literary journals as a means to expand the reach of the burgeoning revolution, both physically and ideologically. The most important of these journals was *Tudományos Gyűjtemény* (“Scientific Collection”), which was founded in 1817 but grew to prominence in the

¹⁰ Marác, László. “The roots of Modern Hungarian Nationalism: A Case Study and a Research Agenda.” (2016).

¹¹ *Himnusz* was later put to a musical score in 1844 and has been the official national anthem of the Third Hungarian Republic since 1989.

¹² *Tudományos Gyűjtemény*, 1831, 5: 39-41

1820s. In its various monthly editions a myriad of writers, poets and politicians set out their designs for the future of Hungary, some vastly contrasting – one writer made the case for forcing the use of the Magyar language onto Hungary’s non-Magyar inhabitants in the style of the Roman imposition of Latin in conquered lands¹³ - but all committed to the nationalist cause and all, typically, quite popular. The arguments made within were often quoted in the Diet, the Hungarian parliament, and held significant sway over both public sentiment and government policy, a fact recognised by parties as diverse as Kazinczy and the Viennese police. The former accused the journal of stoking patriotic bigotry, whilst the latter “blamed it for the entire Magyarizing trend in Hungary.”¹⁴ However, the concerns of the Viennese police, although dramatic as *Tudományos Gyűjtemény* is typically understood to be a manifestation of Magyar nationalism rather than a cause of it, were not unfounded. Whilst many continued to bicker over pedantics, some writers began to focus their energies on forging a path to independence, such as politician, nobleman, and later governor-president of Hungary Lajos Kossuth. Inspired by the romantic nationalism cultivated by the Magyar literary upsurge Kossuth became an advocate of assimilation by Magyarization, seeing it as the only way in which Hungary could ensure, not only her survival as a cultural entity, but also to develop a sufficient military capacity with which to fight for independence. In the political newspaper *Pesti Hírlap*, of which Kossuth was an editor, he pleaded for the rapid advancement of such a policy: “Let us hurry, let us hurry to Magyarize the Croats, the Romanians, and the Saxons, for otherwise we shall perish.”¹⁵

The extreme policy of assimilation Kossuth advocated was reflective of the broad sentiment amongst the Magyar population. Moderates and liberals, best epitomised by the reformer Count Széchenyi¹⁶, had lost influence in the Diet in favour of Kossuth’s firebrand nationalists who still bore the legacy of the Romantic Nationalism extolled by the literary renaissance of the 1820s and 1830s. Although this was in part tapered by the practicalities of a necessary liberal agenda – one of the primary ambitions of reformers was the abolition of feudalism and the liberation of the serfs – it still had a major impact on Hungary’s non-Magyar minorities. To some, such as Hungary’s Jewish population, the impact was positive. Many Jews accepted the opportunity to become Magyar quickly, as to do so would mean that many of their legal disabilities were eliminated and they would now be fully protected under Hungary’s laws. To many others however, the policy resulted in alienation from the Magyar nationalist cause, something which became painfully apparent during the Hungarian Revolution of 1848. This becomes most evident when examining the Croats, whose autonomy, despite the Kingdom of Croatia existing in a personal union with the Kingdom of Hungary since the 12th century, had been gradually eroded under the increased Magyarization advocated by the Hungarian Diet. This had resulted in a reactionary growth of Croatian nationalism, and with the promulgation of the April Laws in 1848, which ignored the unique rights of the Kingdom of Croatia,

¹³ Antal Sztrókay, "A nemzeti nyelv előmozdításáról" ("On Promoting the Use of the National Language"), *Tudományos Gyűjtemény*, 1821, 2: 70-71.

¹⁴ Deme, László. "Writers and Essayists and the Rise of Magyar Nationalism in the 1820s and 1830s." *Slavic Review* 43, no. 4 (1984): 624-640.

¹⁵ Lupaş, Ioan. "*The Hungarian Policy of Magyarization.*" Vol. 1, no. 1. Romanian Cultural Foundation, 1992.

¹⁶ In his most famous work *Hitel* ("Credit"), Széchenyi implored nationalists to cease their obsession with the past to instead turn to the future: "Let us not bother with futile reminiscences but awaken our dear fatherland through purposeful patriotism and loyal unity to a brighter dawn. Many think: 'Hungary has been.' I like to believe: she will be." Széchenyi, István. "*Hitel.*" Trattner, 1830.

the Croats rebelled against Hungary and pledged allegiance to the Habsburg monarchy.¹⁷ A similar case is found with regards to Hungary's Serb, Slovak, and, to a limited extent, Hungarian, minorities. Each group placed themselves in opposition to Magyar nationalist attempts at state-building through forced assimilation, and as such played a role in the eventual demise of the briefly independent Kingdom of Hungary.

It would be an act of folly to pretend that an independence movement had not emerged in Hungary before the 1820s. In 1703 nobleman Franci II Rákóczi had launched a war of independence against Habsburg rule. Yet it was the product of the machinations of a small group of nobles who had lacked the support of the broader gentry and population, and after 8 years it had petered out on account of its unpopularity amongst the Hungarian nobility.¹⁸ By comparison, it took war with three armies to defeat the Revolutionary Army of 1848, principally due to the ability of the nationalist movement to mobilise all aspects of Magyar society with a Jacobin-esque fervour. It was only in the 1820s and 1830s that the groundwork for a concerted and authentic independence movement was laid in Hungary for the first time, itself the result of the work of Magyar writers and *intelligentsia* in cultivating a Hungarian national identity. The elevation of a reformed and modernised Magyar language created a vital delineator of Hungarian national consciousness, offering a means of uniting the peasantry, nobility and nascent bourgeoisie, as well as opening the possibility of Hungarian citizenship to non-Magyars. In turn, it was the subsequent literary upsurge that gave the revolutionaries of 1848 a nationalism of tangible proportions, offering them a cultural phenomenon they could point to as evidence of Hungary's inherent uniqueness, as well as a social heritage to guide the development of the Hungarian state. It was the developments in language and literature of a post-Enlightenment Hungary that shaped the Revolution of 1848 into its nationalistic and virulent form, with the impacts of the era in curating a Hungarian identity still felt today.

¹⁷ Staff.lib.msu.edu. "Nationalism in Hungary, 1848-1867," 1996.
<https://staff.lib.msu.edu/sowards/balan/lect07.htm>

¹⁸ Rákóczi, Ferenc II. *Mémoires du Prince François II Rákóczi sur la guerre de Hongrie*. Edited by Béla Köpeczi. Budapest, 1978.