

Lajos Kossuth

“Retrospect and Prospect,” Speech given in Utica, NY, 1852

Lajos Kossuth, “Retrospect and Prospect” in *Select speeches of Kossuth condensed and abridged with Kossuth’s express sanction of Francis W. Newman* (New York: C. S. Francis, 1854), pp. 392-398.

Retrospect and Prospect

At Utica, in New York State, the elegant Saloon of the Museum was arranged for Kossuth’s reception and the Hon. W. Bacon made a powerful address to him. Kossuth in the course of his reply, said:—

Ladies and Gentlemen,—The history and the institutions of the United States were not only the favourite study of my life from my early youth, strengthening my conviction that with centralization and with parliamentary omnipotence, which absorb all independence of municipal life, there is no practical freedom possible:—but the history and institutions of the United States exerted also a real influence upon the resolution of my people to resist oppression, and not to shrink before the dangers and sacrifices of a terrible conflict.

Never yet was there a people against which all the arts of hell had been combined worse than against the people of Hungary in 1848. Neither dreaming to attack any, nor suspecting to be attacked, never yet was a people less prepared for a war of defence, or more surprised by the danger than my country was.

In those frightful days, when many of the stoutest hearts prepared mournfully to submit to the imperious necessity, I called Hungary to arms and while on the one side I pronounced a curse against those who would forsake the fatherland, and were willing to bow cowardlike before a sacrilegious violence, and accept the degradation of servitude—on the other side, in order to cheer up the manly resolution of my countrymen, I pointed to the heart-raising example of your history. And that history became the guiding star to us, from the lustre of which we have drawn self-reliance and resolution to bear up against all danger and all adversities.

But while we on our part readily yielded to the heart-ennobling influence of your history, we were disappointed in some expectations which we derived from it. We saw that you were not forsaken in the hour of need; yet your grievances were by far less heart-stirring than ours, and should you have failed in the noble enterprise of independence, such a failure, at that time, would by no means have teemed with such immediate results of positive mischiefs to the world outside of you, as every considerate mind might have foreseen from our fall.

I therefore confess that I trusted to that instruction also of your history, and hoped that should we prove worthy of the attention of the world, that attention would not be restricted to a mere looking at our contest with barren sympathies. But allow me to mention that it was not from America alone that I hoped our struggle would not be regarded with indifference: the example of former political transactions in Europe entitled me to just expectations from other quarters also in that respect.

When Greece heroically rose to assert its independence, Great Britain, France, and even Russia herself, interposed together to pacify the two contending parties, on the basis of the establishment of an independent Greece. And so very anxious were those great powers to stop the effusion of blood, that they solemnly declared they would insist upon the pacification, should

eves the conflicting parties decline to consent to the proposed arrangements. And thus Greece took its sent among the independent States, though that was possible only by reducing the territory of the Ottoman Empire, the integrity of which was considered essential to the equilibrium of political power on earth.

Besides, what were those powers which interposed their mediation in favour of bleeding Greece? It was Russia, despotical as she is: it was legitimist France, then scarcely to be called constitutional; for it was before the revolution of 1830: and it was the ministry of Great Britain, if I am not mistaken, a Tory one.

Now was I not entitled with this precedent before any eyes, to hope that the bloody struggle in Hungary Would not be regarded with indifference? We had not risen from any reckless excitement to assert new rights, or to experiment on new theories; we should have been contented to keep what we lawfully possessed. It was not we who broke the peace; we were assailed with a perjury more sacrilegious than the world has ever seen:—we merely took up arms to defend ourselves against national extermination, against the nameless cruelties inflicted upon our people,—men, women, children,—by fire, murder, war, and royal perjury. And besides, when we took up arms in legitimate defence, it so happened that in France there was a republic established which proclaimed the principle of universal fraternity; and there was in England a ministry claiming to be liberal, which on a former occasion had solemnly vouched its word to the British parliament, that *constitutional independence any country, great or small, would never be a matter of indifference to the English government*; adding emphatically, *that whoever might be in office, conducting the affairs of Great Britain, he would not perform his duty if he were inattentive to the interests of such States*. Am I to blame for having thought that there is and should be morality in politics?

And besides, there was republican America, quite in another shape than she was twenty years before, at the time of the war of independence in Greece. Then she had not yet extended her sway to the Pacific, and was not yet exposed to be so much affected by the political issues of Europe and Asia as she now is: then she had not yet a population of more than twenty millions, who now are in the necessity to claim the position of a power on earth then she was indeed a world teeming with the mysteries of the future, but yet was far from being what she is today; nay, even the Erie Canal, the great artery which now acts as a miraculous link between Europe and the interior of your republic, was only about to be completed at the time. And still what mighty sympathy! a sympathy warm in expression, and not barren in facts, thrilled through all America, much like that which I now meet, and pervaded even your *national* councils:—would I were entitled to say, much like as now! Although the question of Greece was of course worthy of all interest (as the rouse of liberty always and everywhere is), yet it was only an isolated cause, and by no means of such surpassing influence span the condition of the world as the cause of Hungary was, and is.

And yet I was disappointed in the expectation which derived from your own history, that a just cause will find supporters and never will be forsaken by all. Oh, we were forsaken, gentlemen! We were forsaken even at the crisis, when, single-handed, we had defeated our cruel enemy. And Russia, that personification of despotism, stepped in with its own weight, tearing to pieces the law of nations, and overthrowing upon our ruins the balance of power on earth.

That Russia if invited, would snatch at the opportunity to gain preponderance amongst the powers on earth—of this I entertained not the slightest doubt; but I must confess, I did not

believe either that Austria would claim, or that the other powers of the earth, and chiefly Great Britain and America, would permit the intervention of Russia. I could not believe that Austria would resort to this desperate remedy, because (and it is a remarkable circumstance which I mention now for the first time) it was Austria which, but a few years before, when, in the transactions with Turkey, the question of foreign interference for the maintenance of the integrity of the Turkish empire was agitated in the councils of the world (and from which you of course were excluded, as to the present day you always yet have been, as if you were nothing but a patch of earth); yes, it was Austria, which objecting that the guarantee of interference should be even claimed, pronounced in a solemn diplomatic note these memorable words:--

“A State ought never to accept, and still less request, of another State, a service for which it is unable to offer in return a strict reciprocity; else by accepting such favour she loses the flower of her own independence—a State accepting such a favour becomes a mediatized State: it makes an act of submission to the will of the State which takes the charge of its defence; this State becomes a protector, and to be dependent upon a protector is insupportable.”

Thus spoke Austria. How then could I imagine that the same Austria which thus spoke would accept the degradation of Russian interference? And should even the house of Austria, ruled by a guilty woman, under the name of a witless, cruel child, be willing thus to ruin itself; how could I imagine that England, that America, that the World, would allow such a preponderance to Russia as makes her almost the mistress over the world, at least opens the way to become such? No, that indeed I could not imagine,

And still it was done. We fell, not “unwept, unhonoured, and unsung,” but still we fell. Well: sad though be our fate, it is but a trial, and no death. Perhaps it was necessary that the destinies of mankind should be fulfilled. I have an unbroken faith in Him, the Heavenly Father of all; the heart of mortal men may break, but what he does; that is well done.

The ways of Providence are mysterious. The car of destiny goes on unrestrained, and the weight of its wheels often crushes the happiness of generations; floods of tears and of blood often mark its track. Mankind looks up to heaven, and while measuring eternity with the rule of the passing moment, sometimes despairs of the future, and believes the sun of Freedom sunk for ever! It is a delusion: it is the folly of anxiety! Night is the darkest before dawn, and the misfortune of the moment often leads to the happiness of eternity.

Yes, gentlemen! the ways of Providence are miraculous. Let me cast a look backwards into the last struggles for freedom in Europe, that their history may become the book of future, and that, when we perceive the salutary action of Providence even in our misfortunes, we may be strengthened in our faith in the future freedom, and that you may see that for us, down-trodden but not broken, there is full reason to pursue our way, not only with the resoluteness of duty, but also with the cheerfulness of a sure success, courageous as strength, untired as perseverance, unshaken as religious faith, self-sacrificing as maternal love, cautious as wisdom, but resolute as desperation itself.

But where is the action of Providence visible in the failure of 1848? is your question. Gentlemen, I will tell you. The continent of Europe was afflicted with three diseases in 1848—monarchical inclination, centralization, and the antagonism of nationalities. With such elements and in such direction, deception was unavoidable, lasting liberty was not to be achieved.

It was the lot of the peoples to be freed from these diseases, because God had designed the peoples to freedom and not to deception; therefore the revolution of 1848 had to fail, but it was still not a mere accident in history; it was a necessary step in the development of mankind's destiny, and it will shine for ever in history as a glorious preparation for the ultimate triumph of liberty, to carry which a positive, practical direction is necessary. And that now exists.

France, Germany, and Italy are no more to fight for the deception of monarchical principles, not for the triumph of dynasties, but for republics. Hungary took this direction already in 1849, by dethroning the Hapsburgs. France, Germany, and Italy will not follow in the track of centralization. Hungary never followed it. And the governments may ally themselves for the oppression of the world's liberty;—they have already allied themselves—but nations will no more rise in arms against one another. They will rise, not to dominate, but to be independent and free. Instead of the antagonism of nationalities, it is now the idea of the solidarity and fraternity of nations, which is become the character of our times. And this is to be the source of our success in future; this explains the fear of the tyrants which manifests itself in such blind rage. This is the direction which I pursue; this is the secret of the sympathy of the people, unparalleled yet in history, which I met in both hemispheres, and of the coalition of despots, aristocrats, and ambitious intriguers, to persecute me.

I hope, gentlemen, with these considerations before your eyes, you will not share in the opinions of those who despair of the cause of freedom in Europe, because the revolution of 1848 has failed.

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