

Nyirády, Kenneth. Vida, István Kornél. *Hungarian Emigres in the American Civil War: A History and Biographical Dictionary*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. Pp. 256. AHEA: E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 5 (2012): <http://ahea.net/e-journal/volume-5-2012>

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Vida, István Kornél. *Hungarian Emigres in the American Civil War: A History and Biographical Dictionary*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. Pp. 256.

Reviewed by Kenneth Nyirády, Library of Congress

Although the number of books about the American Civil War are too numerous to count, not much has been written about the role of Hungarian émigrés in it. And what has been written has been more popular than scholarly, lacking footnotes and documentation, and often exaggerating the roles of individuals and the group as a whole within that struggle. The work reviewed here is different; it is a scholarly and dispassionate look at the role of the Hungarian emigration in the Civil War, as well as a history of that emigration from its arrival starting in the late 1840s through the American Civil War (1861-65) and beyond. It is the first such work to be based on the systematic use of archival materials, such as census, military, and immigration records. The author, István Kornél Vida, Associate Professor of History at the University of Debrecen, attempts to clear away the myth- and hero-making that has traditionally enshrouded this subject, and examines this early Hungarian immigration and its participation in the Civil War, and post-war life, drawing upon the methodologies of migration and ethnic studies, and modern Civil War studies. The book is the result of ten years of research and refinement, and appears to be a somewhat condensed version of the author's dissertation *The True Cause of Freedom: The Kossuth Emigration and the Hungarians' Participation in the American Civil War* (University of Debrecen, 2008).

Vida is correct in noting that the three most notable monographs on the subject -- Eugene (Jenő) Pivány's *Hungarians in the American Civil War* (1913), Edmund (Ödön) Vasváry's *Lincoln's Hungarian Heroes* (1939), and Tivadar Ács' *Magyarok az észak-amerikai polgárháborúban 1861-1865* (Hungarians in the North American Civil War, 1861-1865; 1964) -- were not written by trained historians, and tended toward mythmaking. These facts did not prevent their being cited by subsequent works. Vida points out that far from being unique to Hungarian-Americans, this tendency toward exaggeration and myth-making has been true of much of ethnic history writing in the United States. In fact, one could say that the post-1849 Hungarian immigration was birthed in myth and exaggeration. Americans could not help but view the Hungarian struggle as similar to their own against the British during the American Revolution. They had followed Hungary's clash with Habsburg Austria with great interest, were shocked and dismayed by Hungary's defeat on the battlefield, and naturally sympathized with the refugees who fled the tyrant's wrath after their unsuccessful struggle for liberty and independence. The first refugees, arriving in December 1849, were greeted as celebrities, with open arms, fanfare, and much assistance. In fact, to be a Hungarian refugee was such a mark of distinction that some claimed to be Hungarian who were not. The enthusiasm reached its peak with the arrival of Kossuth (1851-52), whose welcome and subsequent tour of the United States generated unprecedented excitement, bordering on a national hysteria. Many descriptions from that time of Kossuth's visit read more as hagiography rather than history.

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As the title suggests, the book is divided into two sections; the first is a general history of the emigration from 1849 through the Civil War, while the second is a biographical dictionary of nearly one hundred verifiable Hungarians who fought in the Civil War. This division in the text is not as clear-cut, as Vida includes in his general history section the biographies of the four most famous Hungarians in the Civil War, three of which he designates “the triumvirate”: Alexander Asboth, Julius H. Stahel, and Charles Zagonyi. The fourth famous Hungarian personage Béla Estván, is included for being a notorious fraud and impostor, who, as it turns out, was not even Hungarian but merely posed as one.

What one cannot glean from the title but is amply evident throughout the book is the vast quantity of new statistical data that Vida has unearthed from the archives. For this alone this book would be a significant contribution to Hungarian-American history. A listing of some of the titles of his charts, graphs, and tables hints at the wealth of new information within:

- Hungarians on ship passenger lists (1847-1865);
- proportion of women among Hungarian passenger arrivals in the US (1850-60);
- Hungarians in the US by professions (1850, 1860);
- the ten U. S. cities with the highest Hungarian population (1860);
- territorial distribution of Hungarians in the United States (1860);
- territorial distribution of Hungarians in five future Confederate states (1860);
- average dollar value of the personal property of Hungarian families, compared with all families (1860);
- proportion of Hungarians with real estate property, by state (1860);
- number of Hungarian household heads and the mean value of real estate owned by Hungarian families, by state (1860);
- number of Hungarian volunteers in the Union Army, by year;
- muster-in and muster-out ranks of Hungarians in the Union Army; and
- branches of arms Hungarians volunteered in for the Union and Confederate armies.

This new data forces us to examine previously held theories. The numbers of Hungarians listed on ship passenger lists from 1847 through 1865 shows quite conclusively that Hungarian immigration peaked in 1851 and again in 1857, but that the alleged (by earlier works) spike in immigration following the Treaty of Villafranca in 1859 did not take place; in fact, the levels for 1859-1861 were lower than the average for all the years covered. The spike in immigration in 1851 coincided with Kossuth’s visit, as did American sympathy for the immigrants; after Kossuth’s departure cordiality turned to indifference and the later immigrants did not receive the assistance that the earlier ones had. Importantly, Vida places this immigration in its proper context; compared with the three million immigrants (primarily Irish and German) arriving in the United States between 1845-1855, Hungarian immigration, numbering about one thousand, was a mere drop in the proverbial bucket.

Most Hungarian immigrants arrived in the United States knowing no English and possessing few marketable skills. Vida found occupational data for 245 of the 452 Hungarians from the Census of 1850, and for 914 of the 1,125 heads of households (2,710 including wives and children) reported in the Census of 1860. Data from the New York state census of 1855 reveals that only 26% of the Hungarians living in New York

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City were employed, which explains why many moved away from New York and the Northeast to what they believed was more opportunity in the Midwest. Vida also shows that less than 10% of Hungarian-Americans in 1860 lived in states that would soon form the Confederate States of America, which parallels his later discovery that roughly 10% of the Hungarians who served in the Civil War fought for the South.

The Civil War brought a new opportunity for many of the Hungarian immigrants - the military skills they acquired 1848-49 placed them in high demand at a time when the northern army desperately needed skilled officers to mould the mass of volunteers into an effective fighting force. Vida demonstrates that the chief motive for Hungarians fighting for the Union was the same as for northerners in general; that is, for the preservation of the Union and its democratic ideals. Their primary motive was not the abolition of slavery, as asserted by previous authors, even though there is evidence that many if not most abhorred slavery as a "blemish" on American republicanism, as one émigré put it. And of the ten Hungarians who served as officers in African-American units, only one can be shown to have done so out of abolitionist sentiments. This should not be surprising, as the abolition of slavery was not an official goal of Lincoln's government for the first two years of the war, the time when most of the Hungarian enlistment took place. Considering that even today most Americans believe the primary reason the Civil War was fought was to abolish slavery, the misconception of the earlier writers is understandable.

Vida shows that the most of the Hungarian émigrés who fought in the Civil War benefitted from their experience, bringing into the war their much-needed military skills, and leaving it with the respect for their service that that helped them to better integrate into American society. After the Compromise of 1867 only ten percent of these veterans returned to Hungary, whereas eight were appointed to high diplomatic positions in the U.S. Department of State, as were several in the emigration who did not serve. Vida traces the post-Civil War lives of many of the émigrés, showing that their economic difficulties of the 1850s were replaced by economic successes after 1865.

In general, ethnic authors in the United States have tended to exaggerate the numbers and importance of their ethnic groups in the Civil War, Vida notes, and the Hungarians were no exception. Pivány estimated the number serving at about 800, but even Vasváry had his doubts about such a high figure. Vida positively identifies only 99 Hungarians fighting in the Civil War; 87 for the North, and 12 for the South. He shows that Hungarian participation in the Union forces stood at about 9% of heads of households (87 of 993), roughly the same proportion as to be found among Irish-Americans, but less than that for German-Americans.

Previous estimates of Hungarians serving in the Garibaldi Guard, long considered to be a Hungarian outfit, Vida shows to be false. Pivány based his estimate that the regiment was half Hungarian on what he was told by Major-General Julius (Gyula) Stahel, the Hungarian who achieved the highest rank in the Civil War. Stahel should have been better informed, but it appears that he was not. Even Vasváry disputed Pivány's estimation; he could find only seven Hungarians in the Garibaldi Guard and, after much research, Vida identifies only ten.

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Vida provides detailed information about the “triumvirate” of Alexander Asboth, Julius Stahel, and Charles Zagonyi and attempts to assess their military role in the war independently of their historical significance for the Hungarian-American community. Two of the three —Asboth and Zagonyi -- served under General John Frémont, the controversial commander of the Western Department, whose notoriety undoubtedly affected contemporary views of both men. But Frémont was served well by Asboth, his chief-of-staff, who was assisted by another Hungarian, Albert Anselm, and Asboth’s chief topographical engineer was yet another Hungarian, John Fiala. Asboth was wounded in the Battle of Pea Ridge (1862) and again, more severely, in Florida in 1864. Zagonyi achieved fame in October 1861 for leading a charge against superior Confederate forces at Springfield, Missouri, the news of which raised Northern spirits at a time when victories were hard to find, but militarily of little strategic value. The record of Major General Julius H. Stahel (Gyula Számwald), the only Hungarian to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, was generally positive: from successfully providing cover for the Union retreat at the First Battle of Bull Run, being wounded in the Battle of Piedmont, yet unsuccessful at what probably was the impossible task of tracking down the guerilla band of John Mosby in northern Virginia.

Vida devotes an entire chapter to Béla Estván, who achieved fame during the Civil War primarily for his book *War Pictures from the South* (1863). Estván, who served in the Confederate Army, appears to have been a soldier of fortune who had difficulties telling the truth, but previous writers (Pivány, Vasváry, Ács, et al) accepted his self-glorification at face value. Vida states that Estván’s real name was Peter Heinrich and that he was not even Hungarian! A bold assertion like this demands a separate footnote, and even some explanation in the text, but unfortunately both are lacking.

The last third of the book consists of biographies of the more than 90 additional Hungarians who fought in the Civil War. In this section Vida brings new information to light, and rejects any assertion that cannot be proven, no matter how widely held in the past.

One understands that in the process of converting a dissertation to a book, much material is removed/abridged for readability. (I should add here I have read the dissertation and it is highly readable). In this case, the dissertation chapter on methodology was jettisoned. Such editing is usual and customary in that the general reader is often not interested in such things. But its inclusion or at least the inclusion of more information on methodology would have strengthened the author’s arguments and given the reader a better sense of the enormous amount of research that has gone into the book. Nonetheless, the author is to be commended for this very readable and informative volume.