

Open Letter to Kossuth

Josiah Warren

February 17, 1864

This remarkable letter, published in the Boston Investigator (XXXIII, 41 (Feb. 17, 1864)), was located by Shawn Wilbur. For Kossuth, see the note to the previous selection. Kossuth had gone from resistance fighter to ruler, a success that Warren regarded as no less a danger than complete failure. He adduces the great revolutionaries of France, and history has since provided many examples of noble fighters of oppression who mutated into oppressors: Mao and Lenin, of course, come particularly to mind.

For the Boston Investigator.
A Letter to Louis Kossuth
Governor of Hungary
Boston, Feb. 1, 1864

Beloved and Honored Man:

When you visited this country years ago, and put forth those heart-stirring appeal in behalf of your bleeding country, my sympathies went out towards you with more than a brother's yearning, with an intensity that no other man in the political sphere ever commanded from me. This almost idolatry, however, was mixed with a tinge of sadness from the fear of your ultimate disappointment from a cause apparently too subtle for ready detection. This was, that in resisting tyranny, your national policy might include the mistake which would convert itself into a tyranny. My fears are already confirmed at the very first step taken by your committee in their report of the 24th December. They say, on your responsibility, that they ³will know how, and are determined to secure obedience to its (their) orders and the accomplishment of the measures which it (they) must take.² Here is, again, the whole issue between the freedom to differ, (or the right of individuality,) and the demand for conformity; the latter being the very essence of tyranny, against which you would array your countrymen, and ask for the sympathies of the civilized world.

That you, with your great heart and deep humanity yearnings should fall into this common error, confirms, more than anything else ever did, my standing excuse for Robespierre, Marat, Danton, and despots and tyrants all over the world, and through all the ages. It is simply a

mistake—a fatal oversight.¹ The mistake is inventing well meant systems or theories, and then endeavoring to enforce obedience thereto, by treating involuntary dissent as a crime.

Opinions and preferences are as involuntary in their action as the circulation of the blood; and to threaten dissenters with the ³fate of traitors,² as your Committee have done, is to proclaim that your cause is, for the present, already lost. Remember that the freedom of dissent in subordinates might have saved Gorgey's army—obedience to Gorgey's ³orders² lost it, and perhaps defeated your cause at that time.²

Look, my brother, at this distracted and already desolate country (America) and behold the consequences of this same fatal error. The people here, in 1776, arrayed themselves against despotism, and resolved on having ³Free Institutions;² but no sooner are these institutions put into words on paper than it is found that no two persons understand them alike. In order to have them administered at all, they must be administered by some one person, according to his particular interpretation of them, which is a return to despotism; and which, as usual, threatens the ³fate of traitors² to all who remain faithful to the original idea of American freedom! Are we never to see a prospective end to the blind imitation of barbarian precedents?

You and your committee will soon find grave subjects arising, upon which you will find it impossible to agree, and no external power on earth can make any two persons agree when their mental capacities make them to differ. Difference is inevitable. It grows out of the inherent and inalienable individuality of every person and every thing; and the true statesman, instead of making war upon this diversity, will foster and cherish difference of opinion and preferences as the very balance wheel of society; and will provide for this diversity and its full exercise to the greatest practical extent; and instead of threatening dissenters from political creeds with ³the fate of traitors,² the true statesman will see that when two parties differ, one is as much a dissenter or traitor (in the vulgar sense in which the latter word is commonly used) as the other.

This word ³traitor,² so flippantly and ignorantly used in this country just now, against some of its very best and wisest citizens (because they dissent from the policy of our centralized government) has, as it appears to me, no proper application to any person who has not voluntarily accepted some specific, definite trust, and betrayed that trust; and in this sense, it is applicable to those who being entrusted with power in order to promote public peace and prosperity, defeat these very ends, and bring on war and destruction instead; but, as this may happen through incompetency, I do not use the offensive word traitor even towards them.

I entreat you to hesitate in forming any institutions. You cannot form any that will work successfully any more than you can form fruit upon a tree. To be successful they must be allowed to grow, like fashions, customs, or the use of the railroad, according to their demonstrated utility, or the preferences felt for them.

A child may lead where a god cannot govern; and Kossuth should be the counsellor — not the governor — of Hungary.

With most respectful and fraternal regard, I give you my particular address.

¹ Maximilien Robespierre (1758–1794, Jean-Paul Marat (1743–1793), Georges Danton (1759–1794): radical leaders in the French Revolution.

² Artúr Görgey (1818–1916), Hungarian military man, who had a long and stormy relation with Kossuth.

JOSIAH WARREN
Counsellor in Equity
15 Scollay's Building
Boston, Mass., America.

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