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Review by Eric Covey, Miami University (Ohio)

Popular historians and their histories have long maintained—and their publics often embraced—an impermeable divide between the Christian West and Islamic Orient. In “Lajos Kossuth and the Permeable American Orient of the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” Tim Roberts challenges this facile narrative by reading American responses to Kossuth and his 1851-52 visit to the United States as windows into a much more sophisticated history of American attitudes towards the ‘East.’

Roberts’s essay builds on scholarly work that has investigated the U.S. wars with the so-called ‘Barbary states’ and American responses to the Greek revolution.¹ By the time Kossuth arrived on the scene, the U.S. wars with Tripoli and Algeria had been displaced by forty years of encounters that did not involve disputes over seaways and enslavement (808). And Roberts’s material also complicates the idea of ‘western civilization’ that arose out of Americans’ embrace of the Greek cause in the 1820s, and their demonstrations of hostility towards the Ottoman Empire (798). In regards to the role of religion in all this, Kossuth was especially effective at communicating to Americans the relative liberty of worship that Hungarians experienced under Ottoman rule—quite different than their experience during Austrian rule. For Americans, this was a significant insight that helped to crystalize a new vision of the Orient that had been fermenting for some time (809-810).

Beyond simply being concerned with religious liberty, American responses to Kossuth were enabled by and shaped by shifts in governmentality and the economics of commercial exchange, both in the United States and the Ottoman Empire. In the United States, Kossuth’s desire to visit had meaning for Americans

concerned over a host of problems that were coming to a head in the 1840s. Roberts argues that the embrace of Kossuth and his Hungarian cause by supporters in both the north and south allowed for a brief respite from sectional tensions (818). Like the United States, the Ottoman Empire was also experiencing a period of social change. In 1839, Abdülmecid I became Sultan and worked to continue the reforms of his father Mahmud II (803). As part of his work to reform the empire and remain influential in the eastern Mediterranean, Abdülmecid sent his representative Amin Bey to the United States to tour naval facilities in 1850 (804). These developments meant that for many Americans, distant places like Turkey were viewed “not as static societies but as permeable zones of exchange” (796). By 1853, after Kossuth departed the United States for England, the Knickerbocker extended the good feelings that Americans had developed for Kossuth to the Sultan, whom the magazine commended for protecting religious freedoms (813). As time passed and Americans became more familiar with continental- and Anglo-Orientalism, they frequently criticized these ideas (814-815). The implications of this, of course, could have been tremendous had events at the turn of the century and leading up to World War I played out differently.

Roberts adeptly uses the concept of celebrity to understand Kossuth’s reception in the United States. From this perspective, what is perhaps most interesting is that Kossuth was embraced and feted not because he seemed ‘Western’ to the Americans who encountered him, but because he seemed ‘Oriental.’ Prominent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, for example, described Kossuth’s “oriental eloquence.” And in Boston, Kossuth was described in a ceremonial description as the George Washington of the Orient (803). Kossuth embraced this discourse, and positioned himself as a figure capable of translating between the east and west. In Kossuth’s own proclamations and media accounts of his visit, this “trans-civilizational empathy” is not entirely unproblematic, but it demonstrates that East and West were neither totally distinct nor morally opposed, at least not in the minds of many Americans. (806, 807).

If Roberts’s article is to be criticized for anything, it is for drawing on—or at least citing in several instances—Michael Oren’s sweeping text Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present (2007). For all its magisterial intent, Oren’s text is distorted by his politics and filled with misrepresented and contrived material. The work of James Fields, whom Roberts draws on elsewhere, is far less problematic as a secondary source. Other than this one misstep, however, Roberts’s bibliography is strong and he draws from an impressive range of material. In addition to the old standbys like the New York Times, Roberts also draws on southern publications like Southern Quarterly Review and DeBow’s Review (810, 815). Roberts also sought out and had translated several Turkish sources thanks to Veysel Şimşek and Sera Öner of Bilkent University in Ankara.

Detractors may disagree with Roberts’s appraisal and prefer to characterize American responses to Kossuth as strategic, or exceptions affected for the sake of positioning the United States as superior to European nations vis-à-vis the democratic revolutions of the 1840s whose legacies were as yet unclear. And perhaps this is true. Roberts certainly recognizes that negative stereotypes of the Ottoman Empire persisted (813). But he also recognizes the power of considering future pasts. And the potential of this future past is not entirely promising given that a proslavery review in the United States could imagine, in the context of Turkey’s experiments in growing cotton, that in the future “a holy alliance had been formed between the Republic of Turkey and the United States to enter upon a crusade to break down the monarchies of Europe” (815).

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Presumably the author imagined slavery as the labor system that would unite the two empires as they laid waste to Europe.

This never came to pass. But as Roberts concludes, the shifting cultural and geographic imaginations in the United States that he examines “helped to lay the groundwork for American interventions abroad” (818). In the years following Kossuth’s visit, Americans did not grow “more contemptuous of the Muslim ‘Orient’ the more they became familiar with it” (818). Indeed, Americans—or at least those in the government and in business—often developed intimate relationships with their contemporaries in the Middle East. As Roberts demonstrates, celebrities like Kossuth have played a significant role in shaping the attitudes that made this possible.

Eric Covey is Visiting Assistant Professor in the department of Global and Intercultural Studies at Miami University in Ohio where his research and teaching focus on the United States in Africa and the Middle East. He is the author of Americans at War in the Ottoman Empire: US Mercenary Force in the Middle East, which is forthcoming in 2017 from I.B.Tauris.

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