

From the Hungarian Plains to the Balkans: János Asztalos's Revolutionary Exile and the Idea of a Danubian Confederation (1869–1870)

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The article examines the revolutionary activities of János Asztalos, leader of the 1868 Hungarian peasant movement, during his exile in the Balkans and his efforts to promote a Danubian Confederation. Drawing on archival documents, including Austro-Hungarian consular reports and contemporary press accounts, it reconstructs Asztalos's initiatives in Vidin, Bucharest, and Constantinople, including the founding of his “Hungarian–Bulgarian Secret Committee” and his attempts to unite Hungarian émigrés, South Slavs, and Romanians in a common struggle against Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian domination. The study situates Asztalos within broader nineteenth-century transnational revolutionary networks, highlighting the circulation of the ideas of Lajos Kossuth and Asztalos's interaction with émigré movements and local nationalist initiatives. While the committee's activities were brief and primarily Hungarian in character, they reveal an ambitious attempt to coordinate anti-imperial efforts in the Balkans. Asztalos's political work, though limited in direct impact, provides valuable insight into the strategies, connections, and ideological exchanges of revolutionary émigrés in Central and Southeastern Europe.

Keywords: Danubian Confederation, agent network, Hungarian revolutionaries in exile, Bulgarian national awakening, Vidin, 19th century

In the late 1860s, the Balkans and the Danubian region entered a period of intensified political mobilization, driven by the aspirations of various peoples for national emancipation and greater political autonomy. The Ottoman Empire continued to dominate most of the Balkan Peninsula, while the Austro-Hungarian Empire controlled large parts of Central Europe and the Danube basin. Within these imperial spaces, however, national and revolutionary movements increasingly sought forms of cooperation that transcended ethnic and state boundaries. At this time, Bulgaria remained under Ottoman rule, yet revolutionary circles inside the country and among the émigrés had already placed the issue of political liberation on the agenda. Serbia and Romania enjoyed broad autonomy and limited statehood, while Hungary, after the Compromise of 1867, obtained the right to internal self-governance, which, for the radical

opposition circles, was still an inadequate solution to the question of independence. On a broader European scale, Poland remained partitioned among the Russian, Austrian, and Prussian empires, while newly unified Italy emerged as an important source of republican and federalist ideas circulating among revolutionary émigré networks. Against this backdrop, projects for Danubian or Balkan confederations began to circulate, seeking to combine national independence with political solidarity and joint action against imperial domination. Although such initiatives often remained short-lived or unrealized, they reveal the shared political horizons of revolutionary circles across the region. The activities of the Hungarian émigré János Asztalos and the attempt to establish a Hungarian–Bulgarian revolutionary committee in 1869–1870 should be understood within this transnational context of political exchange and experimentation. Asztalos's efforts to organize Hungarian opponents of dualism in coordination with Bulgarian and South Slavic revolutionary networks exemplify this transnational world of political exchange and limited but meaningful cooperation.

The years 1869–1870 marked a turning point not only for the Bulgarian national liberation movement but also for the broader revolutionary and émigré world of the Danubian–Balkan region. In a context of increasing mobility of political activists, émigrés, and revolutionary exiles, national movements reassessed the experience of the previous decade and sought new forms of cooperation that transcended state and ethnic boundaries. In the Bulgarian lands of the Ottoman Empire, this process coincided with the activities of Vasil Levski, the leading organizer and ideologist of the internal revolutionary network, who began constructing a system of clandestine committees. Among the revolutionary émigrés in Romania, it led to the establishment, in the autumn of 1869, of the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee, an attempt to centralize and coordinate the struggle both inside and outside Bulgaria. There are precious few primary sources on the work of this committee from the autumn of 1869 to the spring of 1870 (a moment crucial from the perspective of the development of the Bulgarian national liberation movement and its trans-Balkan dimensions).¹ Of particular interest, however, are some documents from the Hungarian National Archives in Budapest, which concern the impact of the Dalmatian (Krivošije) uprising on the Balkan peoples, the possibility of a joint revolutionary action, and the idea of establishing a Danubian Confederation.

1 Шарова, "Към историята на българското освободително движение през 1869 г.," 195.

These sources also reveal previously unknown facts about the political activities of the Hungarian emigrant János Asztalos in Bulgaria and about his “Hungarian–Bulgarian Secret Committee” in Vidin.² His activities offer insights into the circulation of Kossuth’s ideas among the networks of revolutionary émigrés in the Balkans, illustrating how such initiatives reflected broader patterns of political engagement, ideological dissemination, and transnational connections at the time. The abovementioned archival documents are official reports from the Austro-Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, intended to inform the then Prime Minister of Hungary, Count Gyula Andrassy, about the interactions of a Hungarian political émigré with revolutionary activities in exile.³ These reports were prepared based on information provided by the Austro-Hungarian consular officials in Vidin, Ruse, Constantinople, and Bucharest during the period from September 13, 1869 to July 24, 1870. Some of them include copies of consular reports addressed to the Austro-Hungarian minister of foreign affairs, Count Friedrich Ferdinand von Beust, and there are documents originating from Asztalos himself. Furthermore, we seek to clarify when and under what circumstances attempts were made to establish the Hungarian–Bulgarian Secret Committee, what its intended goals were, and how Austrian and Hungarian intelligence services monitored Asztalos’s activities abroad, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which revolutionary ideas, political initiatives, and émigré networks operated across borders in Central and Southeastern Europe in the nineteenth century. The present study is based on analyses of the aforementioned documents from the Hungarian National Archives,⁴ supplemented with reports published in the contemporary Hungarian and Bulgarian press.⁵ Despite the shortcomings of consular reports as historical sources,⁶ in regard to the activities of Asztalos there is no reason, for the most part, to call the data into question, since they originate from the Hungarian police agent Mihály Takács, who was assigned to Asztalos upon his arrival in

2 *Българското национално революционно движение*, т. 1, 328, 357.

3 MNL OL, K 26-VII-1869-1332; K 26-I A 24-1870-410, 521, 541, 606, 647, 671, 713, 740, 753, 807, 826; K 26-III-1870-787; K 148-XIVa-1870-965. See their publication in Bulgarian: Пейковска, “Политическата дейност на Янош Асталош в българските земи през 1869–1870 г.”

4 The published sources have also been taken into account: *Българското национално-революционно движение*, (particularly documents no. 206 and no. 225, in which Asztalos’s name is also mentioned).

5 Including the following newspapers: *Magyar Újság* (Hungarian News), *Македония* (Macedonia), *Отечество* (Fatherland), and *Свобода* (Freedom).

6 Alongside interesting and varied information, these sources also contain rumors and inaccuracies.

Vidin, quickly gained his trust, and subsequently passed information to Baron Adam Schulz, the Austro-Hungarian consul in Vidin.

In Hungarian history, János Asztalos is known as the leader of the movement of poor peasants in the Great Hungarian Plain (Alföld) that broke out in 1868 in protest against the sociopolitical system of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. Asztalos's movement advocated Hungary's independence. He was born in Pécs in 1822,⁷ and little is known about his life prior to the Compromise, apart from information derived mainly from the trials conducted by the Hungarian judicial authorities against him and from his 1868 autobiography.⁸ In his youth, Asztalos traveled abroad extensively and received a higher education. There is no evidence that he participated in the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–1849. He returned to his homeland after the defeat to work as an independent lawyer. Initially, he worked in Pécs, where in 1851 he came into conflict with the Hungarian judicial system for the first time. In 1858, he served as a lawyer for the orphanages on the outskirts of Buda, but he was later subjected to an official investigation after having filed a lawsuit against a court counselor. In 1861, Asztalos abandoned his practice as a lawyer and settled in Bócsa (in Pest County), where he rented land to cultivate it. However, he was unsuccessful and fell into debt during 1863 crisis.⁹ In April 1867, he moved to Kecskemét, where, as a lawyer, he defended the urban poor, seeking to expose the city council's detrimental policies. Asztalos expanded his activities in late 1867 and early 1868, when he became involved in the struggle of the Hungarian radical left against the 1867 Compromise. Following the movement's initiative, he established democratic clubs through which he organized mass actions under the banner of Lajos Kossuth, who was in exile. His movement called for the democratization of central and local government, the reform of legislation, and the redistribution of municipal lands.¹⁰ These efforts were seen as subversive by the authorities, and Asztalos was arrested on April 15, 1868 and taken to Pest on charges of treason. He remained in prison there until May 22, 1869, after which he was transferred to the prison in Vác. With the help of his wife, he escaped on July

7 *Magyar életrajzi lexikon*, vol. 1, 60. According to Ferenc Pölöskei, in 1824. See Pölöskei, *Az 1868-as parasztmozgalom*.

8 MNL BKVL, Court records, 4 March 1868, fol. 1491.

9 The 1863 crisis in Kecskemét and its surroundings (including Bócsa) was caused by a catastrophic drought that devastated the Great Hungarian Plain. The resulting total crop failure and mass loss of livestock led to a complete economic collapse and a credit crisis, leaving tenant farmers and landowners unable to meet their financial obligations or service their debts.

10 Pölöskei, *Az 1868-as parasztmozgalom*.

17, 1869 together with his ally and the movement's second-in-command, Vilmos Madarász.¹¹ The three of them fled through Romania to the Ottoman Empire.

According to the documents from the Hungarian National Archives, Asztalos spent seven months in Vidin (from mid-September 1869 until the end of March 1870). Adam Schulz's report of September 13, 1869 states that "the Hungarian lawyer, known for his revolutionary intentions," had arrived in Vidin from Wallachia¹² (where Asztalos had lived for some time in Turnu Severin).¹³ Asztalos was accompanied by his wife and Madarász, who, however, departed for Calafat and from there to Craiova, where he settled.

Asztalos immediately set about arranging his life in Vidin, as he intended to settle there permanently. The specific reason for this was likely connected with his revolutionary plans and his earlier activities in Wallachia.¹⁴ He introduced himself to the governor of Vidin, Aziz Pasha, to whom he explained that he intended to organize the publication of a "Hungarian newspaper" in Bucharest and that he needed a regular Turkish passport in order to travel without hindrance.¹⁵ Vidin was particularly suitable as a place where he could pursue his ambitions, and his choice of the city was certainly not accidental. After the defeat of the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–1849, the town became a center for Polish, Romanian, and Hungarian émigrés and refugees who nurtured revolutionary visions. It was the first stop, after the failed revolution, on the way to the Ottoman Empire for the Hungarian political exiles who followed or supported Lajos Kossuth, some of whom remained in the Bulgarian lands. The governor of Vidin, Aziz Pasha, was known for his sympathy for the Hungarians. The Austro-Hungarian consul in Belgrade, Benjamin Kállay, wrote in his travel diary from his journey along the Serbian-Bulgarian border in September 1868 that Aziz Pasha not only loved the Hungarians but had helped the refugees after the revolution and had continued to maintain contact with some of them later on.¹⁶ In the summer of 1869, György Szilágyi, another émigré with ties to Kossuth, was also residing in Vidin, where he worked as a pharmacist in the First Cavalry Dragoon Regiment of the Second Ottoman

11 Born in Győle on May 2, 1836 (MNL OL, R 130, 2. cs., 4. t.), Vilmos Madarász was the son of László Madarász, who was a former ally of Lajos Kossuth. From exile in Wallachia, Vilmos Madarász guided the actions of the Hungarian radical left in 1868.

12 In 1859, the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia united, forming the state of Romania.

13 MNL OL, K 26-VII-1869-1332. 4.

14 The investigated documents do not contain any information about J. Asztalos's activities in Wallachia.

15 MNL OL, K 26-VII-1869-1332, 10.

16 *Чужди пътеници за Балканите. Том 2: Маджарски пътеници за Балканите XVI–XIX в.*, 86.

Army.¹⁷ It is very likely that Asztalos was already aware of Szilágyi's presence in Vidin while staying in Wallachia, where he maintained contacts with Hungarian émigrés. Moreover, Vidin was among the towns visited in the spring and summer of 1869 by Bulgarian revolutionary activists, including Georgi Mirkovich, Vasil Ganchev (known as "the Plevneliya" or "the man from Pleven," a historically important center in northern Bulgaria), and Brayko Ts. Kofardzhiev. They sought to prepare the population of northwestern Bulgaria for a coordinated uprising against Ottoman rule.¹⁸ Concrete steps were taken by the Bulgarian revolutionary émigrés, while within the Tuna Vilaet itself, the efforts of the aforementioned Vasil Levski were soon combined with the organization of an armed (*cheta*) campaign.¹⁹

It is quite possible that Asztalos learned something about the planned uprising²⁰ while in Wallachia. A direct connection to his arrival in Vidin is provided by the figure of György Bogáti. In the reports of the Austro-Hungarian consuls, Bogáti is mentioned as an agent of the Romanian prince Alexandru Cuza, who abdicated in 1866 and had since been living in exile.²¹ Very little is known about Bogáti.²² In the spring and summer of 1869, his activities were linked to the anti-dynastic campaign in Bucharest against Prince Carol I.²³ Bogáti also visited Vidin before Asztalos's arrival, and he later traveled to the Banat, where the Romanian national-liberation movement was consolidating its ranks. In the Banat, Bogáti sought contact with Romanian politicians who, as supporters of active resistance, were striving to secure their national rights, but within the

17 BIA-NBKM, f. 570, a.u. 39, fol. 9.

18 Ликовски, "Спомените на Брайко Ц. Кофарджиев от Копривница (1838–1914)." Manuscript preserved at the Bulgarian Historical Archives, St. St. Cyril and Methodius National Library: II A 9149.

19 For further details, see Грынчаров, "Васил Ганчев в българското революционно движение през 60-те години на XIX в."

20 In 1868, Kállay, consul in Belgrade at the time, also paid a visit to Vidin. He was motivated by his suspicions concerning revolutionary activities among Bulgarians.

21 In mid-1867, Cuza sought to return to his homeland, but Carol I did not allow entry into the country, fearing that he would attempt to reclaim the throne. The press also leveled similar attacks against Cuza, claiming that he would use Russian assistance to try to claim the throne. See Bogdan and Stribu, *Pe urmele lui Alexandru Ioan Cuza*, 208–25.

22 He is also mentioned as "Major Georgescu." In 1864–1865, he settled in Bucharest at the request of Baron Karl von Eder, the Austro-Hungarian consul there. Bogáti was suspected of being involved in the assassination of the Senate president Catargi. In 1871, he was arrested for his revolutionary activities. (MNL OL, K 26-VII-1869-1332, fol. 10-11, K 148-1871-3403, 3491).

23 According to Alexandru Cantacuzino's letter to Cuza, written in 5/17 November 1868, the dynasty had been compromised due to the Stroussberg railway line.

framework of the existing structure (the unified Hungarian state).²⁴ This allowed them to undertake tactical cooperation with Hungarian parties, and particularly with the Hungarian opposition, which still regarded the national minorities who opposed the Dual Monarchy as potential allies.

Asztalos and Bogáti had known each other from Wallachia. Initially, they had lived together in Vidin in the same house. However, Bogáti intended “to wait [in Ruse] for the imminent removal of Prince Carol.”²⁵ Asztalos, for his part, sought to settle in and establish connections among the local population, particularly the Hungarians living in the area. In Ruse, he met the pharmacist János (or Johan²⁶) Mohos, the name by which Baron Majthényi was known in the local Austro-Hungarian colony.²⁷ Majthényi acted as his guarantor for a *teskere* (an official permit or identification document issued by the Ottoman authorities that allowed one to travel freely). Asztalos also became involved in two enterprises in Vidin, a sawmill and a small steam-powered mill. In October 1869, he diligently maintained correspondence with acquaintances in Kecskemét, Debrecen, and Turnu Severin and also with Madarasz in Craiova. He was also in contact with János Vidács,²⁸ one of the leaders of the Party of 1848-ers.²⁹ Vidács managed the agricultural machinery factory in Pest founded by his father. From Vidin, he wrote to request two millstones for the aforementioned mill.

At that time, the Vidin consul Schultz described Asztalos’s behavior as “calm.”³⁰ If Asztalos was indeed calm or restrained in his efforts, this was probably due in no small part to the fact that he needed permission from the Austro-Hungarian authorities to travel to Hungary. The forthcoming official visit of Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria–Hungary to the Ottoman Sultan

24 In the late 1860s, two centers of the Romanian national liberation movement emerged: Timișoara (in Banat) and Sibiu (Transylvania). Unlike the organization in Banat, the Sibiu center advocated passive resistance to the Dual Monarchy and managed to establish itself in the following years. See *Erdély története*, vol. 3, 1648–49.

25 MNL OL, K 26-VII-1869-1332, fol. 6–7.

26 Николчев, *Материали за историята на аптечното дело в България*, 79.

27 Lukács, Gyula. “Ruszcsek a bombázása után.” *Egyetértés*, July 15, 1877.

28 János Vidács (1826–1873), son of István Vidács. The latter was the founder of the first Hungarian agricultural machinery enterprise in the mid-nineteenth century. By the 1860s, he owned a steam mill in Craiova. János Vidács actively participated in the revolution of 1848–1849. After its defeat, he was sentenced to death, but he was later pardoned and given a long-term prison sentence. From 1861, he lived in Pest. He remained a member of parliament for his party in the Hungarian Parliament until his death.

29 The Hungarian radical left was formed as an independent party in 1868 under the name “1848-as Párt,” or Party of 1848-ers.

30 MNL OL, K 26-VII-1869-1332, fol. 14–15.

provided an appropriate opportunity to request such permission. For this purpose, Asztalos drafted a petition in which, explaining the reasons for his escape from the prison in Vác, he asked to be allowed to return “unpunished to Hungary for 14 days to arrange his wife’s property matters.” He promised not to engage in politics while in Hungary.³¹ He informed Consul Schultz of his intentions, but his request was denied. At the end of 1869, an uprising broke out in southern Dalmatia among the Serbian Krivošije clan.³² The uprising was triggered by widespread discontent over a newly introduced military law and in response to the Austro-Hungarian government’s attempt to introduce military conscription in the region.³³ The insurgents, supported by Montenegrins and Herzegovinians, managed to repel imperial troops and extract concessions from Vienna. This event resonated strongly among South Slavic and Hungarian opposition circles. This revolutionary atmosphere gave new impetus to Asztalos’s political activity in Bulgaria, which he intensified in November 1869, after the outbreak of the uprising in Dalmatia against the Austrian authorities. As Hungarian army units were also sent to fight against the insurgents, Asztalos, who had acquaintances among the officers of the Hungarian “Franz Karl” regiment, sent them a proclamation urging the regiments stationed in Dalmatia not to fight against their “Bokeši brothers.”³⁴ Although the text of this proclamation has not survived, Asztalos later stated that it had the desired effect: the far-left (oppositional) newspaper *Magyar Újság* (Hungarian News) repeatedly reported in its “Dalmatian Movements” column about the defeats of the imperial troops. On this occasion, Asztalos “expressed great joy” and circulated “the latest battle reports described [in the newspaper] in the darkest possible tones.”³⁵ Then, the Austro-Hungarian consul in Ruse, Karl Wolfart, described him as having a “rowdy” and “scandalous” character. Wolfart suggested that Asztalos should not be extradited from Vidin, since he could be monitored more easily there.³⁶ Asztalos became even more suspicious because of his connections with the

31 MNL OL, K 26-VII-1869-1332, fol. 21.

32 It is worth noting that Dalmatia had been a province of Austria since 1816, despite the Hungarian Parliament’s claims for its return to Hungary.

33 The so-called Dalmatian Uprising (1869) is referred to in more recent historiography as the Krivošije Uprising, after the mountainous region of Krivošije to the north of Kotor. Both names refer to the same event.

34 They were given this name because the insurgents were active in the Bay of Kotor, historically also known as Bocche di Cattaro.

35 MNL OL, K 26-VII-1869-1332, fol. 30–31.

36 MNL OL, K 26-1 A 24-1870, fol. 4.

Russian vice-consul in Constantinople, Konstantin Arkadyevich Gubastov. Austro-Hungarian foreign policy was particularly sensitive to Russian behavior, Russia being the main regional rival. Although at that time Russia had adopted a policy of temporary reconciliation with the Ottoman Empire and restraint regarding popular independence movements, Austro-Hungarian consuls attributed every revolutionary manifestation in southeastern Europe to Russian influence. Moreover, the Austrian press claimed that the Dalmatian Uprising was the result of “Pan-Slavist intrigues.” At the end of November and the beginning of December 1869, Asztalos founded a secret committee in Vidin. Sources unambiguously confirm that he took this step due to the surge in the South Slavic movement on Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman territory in the wake of the outbreak of the Dalmatian Uprising. The uprising inspired independence fighters in southeastern Europe, including Bulgarians in exile, and rekindled their hopes for a coordinated revolutionary movement in the spring of 1870. In this context, the Bucharest-based newspaper *Svoboda* (Freedom) reported the following:

We, the Christians living in the Turkish and Austrian empires, today are bound by the same interests and the same ideas... and soon we will show to all the peoples of Europe that we are worthy of being free not only as nations but also as individuals. Thus, we prophesize that 1870 will be a year in which our fallen national rights and our human freedom will be restored.³⁷

The Istanbul-based newspaper *Macedonia*, edited by Petko Rachev Slaveykov, also reported on preparations for a “general uprising of the Austro-Turkish Slavs.”³⁸ In December 1869, the arrival of the Montenegrin commissioner Nikola Kovačević caused great “excitement” among the Bulgarians in Bucharest. An Austro-Hungarian Foreign Ministry note mentions that, in connection with this visit, a rumor spread about a general uprising of Dalmatian, Montenegrin, Bosnian, Serbian, Bulgarian, and Greek groups that was to take place the following spring.³⁹

Regarding the impact of the Dalmatian Uprising on the Bulgarians, as early as the beginning of December 1869, *Magyar Újság* reported that in the western parts of Bulgaria people were arming themselves and that “detachments had

37 *Свобода (Svoboda)*, February 12 (February 25), 1870.

38 *Македония (Macedonia)*, October 23 (November 5), 1869, November 18 (December 1), 1869.

39 *Българското национално-революционно движение*, т. 1, 347.

been formed there which were in close connection with the insurgents.”⁴⁰ According to the report of a Polish émigré from Ruse,⁴¹ at the end of December 1869 and the beginning of January 1870, representatives of twelve Bulgarian committees, including one central committee, gathered in Bucharest to discuss the tasks of the revolutionary movement in the political context of the Balkans following the outbreak of the Dalmatian Uprising. At the meeting, two proposals were formulated: first, to organize armed detachments immediately and send them to Bulgaria and, second, to assess the readiness of the people for an uprising and take preparatory measures. A decision was reached to send four people to Bulgaria, but only the name of “Dyakon [deacon] Levsky” was mentioned, as he was to “prepare the minds and organize the detachments.”⁴²

The reports of the Austro-Hungarian consuls show that Hungarian opponents of Dualism attempted to unite their efforts in the struggle for independence with those of the South Slavs, including the Bulgarian revolutionaries. Judging by the information provided by Consul Schulz, preparations for the uprising had begun as early as December, with the creation of Hungarian–Slav committees. Schulz’s first report concerning such an initiative refers specifically to Vidin and is dated December 10, 1869.⁴³ In his reports to Beust and Kállay, he mentions the imminent establishment of a committee in Vidin under the chairmanship of Asztalos, along with information on the emergence of committees in Bulgaria, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia.⁴⁴ In mid-December, Schulz claimed that there already existed a network of Hungarian–Slav revolutionary committees in Dubrovnik, Shkodra, Zvornik, Cetinje, Sarajevo, Derventa, Belgrade, Tulcea, Tarnovo, Niš, Sulina, Dumaleprovac, Gradac, and Kodjes. He also mentioned, albeit vaguely, a central leadership in Cetinje.⁴⁵ The newspaper *La Turquie* likewise writes about a “central insurgent committee,” which, as usual, it portrays as Pan-Slavist.⁴⁶

According to Consul Schulz, the Hungarian radical left (who were opponents of the 1867 Compromise) took an interest in the activities of the early Hungarian–Slav committees. It is known, however, that after the unexpected revolutionary

40 *Magyar Újság*, December 2, 1869.

41 *Българското национално-революционно движение*, т. 1, 335–36.

42 See Шарова, “В. Левски и Л. Каравелов в началната история на БРЦК (1869–1870),” 78–82; Шарова, “Събрания на революционната емиграция,” 26.

43 *Българското национално революционно движение*, т. 1, 328.

44 *Ibid.*, 327–28; MNL OL, K 26-I A 24-1870, fol. 3-4.

45 MNL OL, K 26-I A 24-1870, 3. o., K 26-VII-1869-1332, fol. 31.

46 Cited in *Македония*, November 11 (December 1), 1869, January 17 (January 30), 1870.

turn of the peasant movement in 1868, the views of the moderates gained predominance within the ranks of the left. As a result, the radicals' program envisaged as its main goal the further achievement of Hungary's independence (including an autonomous military, foreign policy, and finances, which were missing from the Compromise of 1867) and the restoration of the laws of 1848, but only through constitutional means.⁴⁷ In practice, among the members of the radical party there were differences regarding the appropriate methods for the struggle for independence. "The radical left has split into as many factions as it has members," wrote Lajos Kossuth in a letter from November 1869.⁴⁸ Thus, if indeed any member of the Party of '48-ers had been associated with the Hungarian-Slav committees, it must have been János Vidács and his supporters. They are referred to in several sources as the "Vidács Party," "to which J. Asztalos also belonged."⁴⁹ Consul Schulz suspected that Kossuth, living in exile in Turin, may have been directing the preparations for joint revolutionary action, with the start of the operations merely awaiting his signal. Kossuth probably knew of the ongoing activity, as the Hungarian radical left maintained tight connections with him. However, there is still no reliable documentary evidence that he was directly involved in the events surrounding the Dalmatian Uprising. The letter cited reflects Kossuth's pessimism regarding the effectiveness of the efforts of the Hungarian radical left. Kossuth himself emphasized that, among the political parties in Hungary, the one closest to his views was the Party of '48-ers, but he underlined a crucial difference between them: while the Party of '48-ers accepted the personal union (a common ruler for Hungary and Austria as separate states) and opposed only the closer links between the two countries (such as joint ministries and delegations), Kossuth had always advocated full independence for Hungary. These claims, which also appear in Schulz's reports, were based on statements from Asztalos, who presented himself as an "agent" of Kossuth. Despite the consul's reports, any possible direct connection between Asztalos in Vidin and Kossuth in Turin appears highly unlikely. First, in 1868, Lajos Kossuth, who had initially hoped that Asztalos's movement might develop into a national movement and secure Hungary's independence, later rejected the social demands of the poor peasants for land and forbade any association of his name with the movement of poor peasants.⁵⁰ Second, Kossuth feared Russian foreign policy

47 *Magyarország története*, vol. 6/2, 828.

48 MNL OL, R 195, 3. cs., 7. t. Letter from Lajos Kossuth to Gyula Tanárky, November 22, 1869.

49 MNL OL, K 26-VII-1869-1332, fols. 15, 19.

50 Pölöskei, *Az 1868-as parasztmozgalom*, 631.

and the “Pan-Slavism aligned with Russia.”⁵¹ Asztalos himself also expressed concern that Kossuth would hardly approve of his acquaintance with Gubastov.

Contrary to Schulz's reports, the formation and the very existence of Hungarian–Slav committees in the Balkans was questioned by the aforementioned Wolfart, Austro-Hungarian consul in Ruse.⁵² In this context, the few documents appended to the reports of the Austro-Hungarian consuls acquire particular significance. The nature and activities of the Vidin committee are illuminated by an impression of the committee's seal in red wax, as well as copies of four documents produced during its operations: an indictment addressed to the Hungarian government (dated, for unknown reasons, in Istanbul, January 5, 1870), a proclamation to the “people's leader” Jovo Radanović in Dalmatia (place not indicated, January 12, 1870), an oath to be taken by the members of the committee (Vidin, November 3, 1870), and a letter to the Romanian liberals containing a draft for a Danube Confederation (Shumen, November 4, 1870).⁵³ These documents were undoubtedly drafted by Asztalos, chair of the committee, and, as noted in them, they were approved at meetings of the committee council.

The formation of the committee can be dated to early January 1870. Its headquarters was in Vidin, where the principal agitator resided, though it also had a branch in Shumen. Among its members were the abovementioned Mihály Takács and György Dobrovics (a former lieutenant who had been dismissed from Prince Albrecht's infantry, in whose name the oath was written).⁵⁴ The members of the committee were drawn from among the Hungarians living in the Bulgarian towns along the Danube who were either refugees with attachments to Kossuth or his political circle or people who supported his cause. One of the consular reports mentions that in Shumen there was an individual “from Asztalos's party,” who was “strongly possessed by Kossuth's fantasies.”⁵⁵ It is highly likely that this refers to the aforementioned Hungarian revolutionary György Szilágyi, who had taken part, as a companion of Lajos Kossuth in the 1860s, in the Polish uprising, the American Civil War, and Garibaldi's Italian liberation movement. In August 1869, Szilágyi left the Ottoman army and Vidin

51 *Kossuth Lajos iratai*, vol. 8, 223, 385–87.

52 MNL OL, K 26-I A 24-1870, fols. 3–4.

53 MNL OL, K 26-I A 24-1870-410, fols. 6–11, K 26-1 A 24-1870-510, fols. 12–24.

54 “I, György Dobrovich, swear by the God of the Hungarians and by my honor...” and at the bottom it is written, “signature” in brackets and then his name in parentheses.

55 MNL OL, K 26-1 A 24-1870, fol. 3.

and settled in Shumen as a pharmacist.⁵⁶ The fact that Szilágyi was on close terms with the aforementioned Mohos,⁵⁷ the pharmacist in Ruse who acted as guarantor for Asztalos, indirectly confirms his connection with Asztalos.

While in the reports of the Austro-Hungarian consuls the committee founded by Asztalos was referred to as “Hungarian–Slav,” in the four documents mentioned above it appeared under the name “Hungarian Secret Committee in Bulgaria” (*Bulgáriai magyar titkos comité*). On its seal, however, the inscription read “Seal of the Hungarian–Bulgarian Secret Committee” (*A Magyar–bulgár titkos comité pecsétje*), which is a bit different. These discrepancies in naming naturally raise the question of what the actual nature, aims, and intended function of this committee were, and to what extent it was connected with the Bulgarians and their revolutionary committee network.

The four documents were written in an anti-Habsburg spirit, in harmony with the ideas of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, and identified the struggle for Hungary’s independence as the committee’s principal objective. In this respect, there was continuity between the committee’s views and those of the peasant movements in the Great Hungarian Plain in 1868. The negative attitude toward the Compromise was expressed most strongly in the indictment of the Hungarian prime minister Gyula Andrássy and the ministers of his cabinet and in particular of Ferenc Deák, the theoretician and ideologist of the 1867 Settlement. Deák was accused in this indictment of treason against the homeland (having served as a minister in 1848, as Kossuth had) and of having used armed force against the democratic clubs in 1868.⁵⁸ The oath taken by the members of the committee was intended exclusively for Hungarians. It states that they swear “by the God of the Hungarians” to fight for “the independence of their Hungarian homeland and for the long-awaited restoration of the laws of 1848.”⁵⁹ In his proclamation to Radanović (the aforementioned leader of the Dalmatian insurgents) raising the banner of freedom, fraternity, and equality, Asztalos summarized the committee’s most immediate task as follows:

In the very near future, we shall place at your disposal several proven, courageous men who will attract under your banners (...) the freedom-loving, valiant soldiers from (...) the army, from neighboring countries,

56 BIA-NBKM, f. 570, a.u. 39, fols. 1, 4.

57 BIA-NBKM, f. 570, a.u. 15, fol. 1.

58 MNL OL, K 26-I A 24-1870-521, fols. 14–23.

59 MNL OL, K 26-I A 24-1870-410, fol. 7.

especially from Hungary; who will organize the youth streaming to you in defense (...) of our common freedom; and who, once incorporated into the *honvéd*⁶⁰ battalions, will fight under your supreme command for your freedom and, through you, for the freedom of the Hungarian people. (...) Put your faith in Garibaldi, Kossuth, and Mazzini (...) put your faith in the universal European revolution, which is destined to break out in the month of April.⁶¹

The sources indicate that the committee over which Asztalos presided as chair was indeed “Hungarian” in character. It was intended to organize Hungarians opposed to Dualism who were residing in the Bulgarian towns along the Danube for participation in a common uprising, together with the South Slavs. The committee was “Hungarian–Slavic” only insofar as it advocated the unification of the efforts of Hungarian and South Slavic fighters for independence. Did Asztalos maintain correspondence with various “Pan-Slavist,” that is, Slavic committees, as claimed by the Polish émigrés?⁶² He did indeed seek contacts with existing Bulgarian and other Slavic committees. This is also confirmed by a report of the Austro-Hungarian ambassador in Constantinople, Baron Anton von Prokesch-Osten, who noted that when Asztalos arrived there in early April 1870, he immediately met with Josef Pečko, the chair of the Slavic society.⁶³ There is, however, no reliable evidence indicating that Asztalos maintained contacts from Vidin with Bulgarian or other South Slavic committees. Thus, the designation he gave the committee (“Hungarian–Bulgarian”) was more an indication of his intentions and ambitions.

The seal of the Vidin committee was produced some time after its establishment. From a letter bearing an impression of the wax seal and dated November 22, 1870 we learn that it had been received “recently from Bucharest.”⁶⁴ The design of the seal features a shield with the Hungarian coat of arms but without any image of a crown, divided vertically. On the dexter side appear the alternating horizontal stripes traditionally associated with the Árpád dynasty, while on the sinister side a double cross rising from a triple mound is depicted

60 The term “honvéd” refers to the revolutionary tradition of the Hungarian national forces of 1848–1849. In the context here, it functioned as a symbolic and programmatic model of national revolutionary armed struggle, invoked in transnational revolutionary discourse.

61 MNL OL, K 26-I A 24-1870-410, fols. 8–10.

62 *Българското национално-революционно движение*, т. 1, 356.

63 MNL OL, K 26-I A 24-1870-740, fol. 39.

64 MNL OL, K 26-I A 24-1870-521, fols. 12, 13, 24.

beneath the year 1870. The double cross and triple mound are well-established heraldic elements of the Hungarian coat of arms, symbolizing Christian kingship and historical geography, and the striped field refers to the historic Árpád stripes on Hungarian heraldic shields. The inscription itself, “Seal of the Hungarian–Bulgarian Secret Committee,” suggests a dual character. This, however, is not reflected in the iconography itself, which corresponds to the so-called Kossuth coat of arms of 1848, encircled by a laurel wreath with the year 1870 beneath it. Thus, while the sources offer no clear, incontrovertible evidence of this, it is nonetheless quite possible that Asztalos entertained ambitions to have Bulgarian participation on the committee, and he may even have taken some initial efforts in the service of this aim. The available documents allow us to conclude that the committee originated primarily as an organization of Hungarian émigrés, and the inclusion of Bulgarian revolutionaries was either anticipated at a later stage or partially realized.

Although Vasil Levski had not yet established a fully developed secret committee network at that time, revolutionary groups did exist in Bulgaria. These groups included followers of Georgi Rakovski, members of the 1866 Secret Bulgarian Central Committee, and groups that Levski began organizing in 1869. The establishment of “Bulgarian clubs” toward the end of 1869 was also encouraged by Svetoslav Sapunov, secretary of the Bulgarian political committee founded in Constantinople.⁶⁵ It remains difficult to determine whether Asztalos’s committee in Vidin maintained direct links with revolutionary committees in Bulgaria. It is nevertheless plausible that he was connected, through György Szilágyi, to the so-called “Shumen Private Revolutionary Committee.” This hypothesis rests on the fact that Szilágyi was among the initiators of the revival of the Shumen cultural society *Archangel Michael* in the autumn of 1869 and was one of its most active members. The founders of the Shumen Committee emerged from among these cultural activists.⁶⁶

In early 1870, Asztalos intended to travel to Bucharest to establish contact with the “local committees” and arrange for the printing of both the proclamation to the Dalmatian insurgents and the indictment. He himself did not have a passport, however, and thus was unable to undertake the journey, so he decided to entrust the mission to Mihály Takács. Accordingly, Asztalos drafted a letter to the “Romanian democratic party,” or in other words, the liberals associated with

65 Шарова, “Към историята на българското освободително движение през 1869 г.,” 198–203.

66 Джумалиев, “Шумен и шуменци в революционните борби преди Освобождението.”

Constantin Rosetti and Ion Brătianu, the so-called “Reds.” This letter was accompanied by an “instruction” for Takács outlining a proposal for negotiations concerning the establishment of a Danubian confederation.⁶⁷ Although the Dalmatian uprising had by then been suppressed, preparations were underway in Bucharest for a meeting of revolutionaries from various Balkan countries, at which the prospects for joint action were to be discussed. In March, through the mediation of Aziz Pasha, Asztalos obtained the necessary travel document, and on March 29, he departed for Ruse, together with his wife. He intended to proceed to Bucharest if the anticipated meeting took place. Otherwise, he planned to travel onward to Constantinople.

Asztalos arrived in Bucharest on April 1, 1870 as a representative of the Hungarian–Bulgarian Secret Committee.⁶⁸ He remained there for three days. The consular reports provide only fragmentary and sometimes inaccurate information regarding his stay in Bucharest. According to these reports, Asztalos held several meetings with the leaders of the Romanian liberals (“the Reds”) and “especially with Rosetti,” who placed their printing press at his disposal. One report from the Austro-Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Prime Minister Count Gyula Andrásy claims that, during Asztalos’s stay in Bucharest, a meeting of “foreign republican emissaries”⁶⁹ took place, at which it was decided to continue preparations for planned incursions into Transylvania and Bulgaria. The commencement of these actions was allegedly postponed by several months and made contingent upon the possible “assassination” of Prince Carol I of Romania, reportedly to be orchestrated by the “Bucharest emissaries.” In this case, however, it is unclear exactly who sought the “removal”⁷⁰ of Carol I (and why). At that time, the Romanian liberals with whom Asztalos was in contact supported the prince, whom they had brought to the throne.

The sources do not decisively reveal whether representatives of the Bulgarian revolutionary emigration were present among the “foreign republican emissaries.” According to Wolfart, the above decision was made “by the ‘Reds’ and by the Bulgarians, with Russian approval.”⁷¹ If Bulgarians did indeed participate in the meeting, they were most likely representatives of the radical “Young” faction. As early as March 1869, this group, influenced both by Romanian liberals and by

67 MNL OL, K 26-I A 24-1870-541, fols. 26–28.

68 MNL OL, K 26-I A 24-1870-606, fol. 31, K 148-XIVa-1870-865, fol. 1.

69 MNL OL, K 26-1 A 24-1870-606, fol. 31. The information comes from Wolfart.

70 MNL OL, K 26-1 A 24-1870-713, fol. 37.

71 MNL OL, K 26-I A 24-1870-606, fol. 31.

the generation of 1848, had formed the organization “Young Bulgaria” in Bucharest.⁷² The members of this organization embraced republican ideas and maintained close personal ties with the leaders of the “Reds.” In the summer of 1869, two of their representatives, Teofan Raynov and Raycho Grablev, met Giuseppe Mazzini in London. Mazzini advised them to coordinate Bulgarian efforts for an armed uprising with those of the neighboring peoples. Mazzini himself advocated a federal republic including Serbs, Montenegrins, Croats, Dalmatians, Slovenes, and Bulgarians.⁷³

By early April 1870, when the aforementioned events were unfolding, the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee already existed in Bucharest under the leadership of Lyuben Karavelov, and Vasil Levski was also in Romania. Both figures were influenced by Mazzini’s ideas and by the “Young Bulgaria” movement.⁷⁴ The committee newspaper, *Svoboda*, promoted the idea of revolutionary cooperation among the South Slavs and, more broadly, among the Balkan peoples, including the establishment of a South Slavic and Balkan federation. “The Slavs have begun to strive for a single goal, namely to create a federative dominion while each people lives independently. Among the Austrian and Turkish Slavs, this idea matures very quickly and will bear fruit,” wrote *Svoboda* in December 1869.⁷⁵ In February 1870, the newspaper contained the following bold prediction: “In the hands of the Bulgarians, Serbs, and Romanians lies the knot of the Eastern Question, and the Danubian federation will soon untie it and liberate 14 million people from the heaviest bondage... Our common happiness lies in a free Danubian federation.”⁷⁶

According to Takács, during his stay in Bucharest, Asztalos took part in a “conspiracy to create a confederation of the principalities of Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Montenegro.”⁷⁷ According to the aforementioned report from the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Ministry to Andrassy, at the meeting, the “foreign republican emissaries” also discussed the future of the region. They resolved to establish a “Hungarian–Romanian branch of the Republican Danubian Confederation.” Asztalos probably advanced his own proposal, which presumably would have shown continuity with earlier plans from 1848–1849 and 1859–1862 for

72 The group disbanded in the autumn of 1869. Велики, *Румъния и българското революционно движение*.

73 Арнаудов, *Любен Каравелов. 1834–1879: Живот, дело, епоха*, 228.

74 Велики, *Румъния и българското революционно движение*, 130.

75 *Свобода (Svoboda)*, December 11 (24), 1869.

76 *Свобода (Svoboda)*, January 29 (February 11), 1870.

77 MNL OL, K 26-I A 24-1870-753, fol. 41.

a Hungarian–Romanian–South Slavic confederation.⁷⁸ In the spirit of Mazzinian republicanism, he envisioned a confederation “on a broad democratic basis... for mutual defense in the Danube valley,” in which Hungary would achieve its independence “shoulder to shoulder with Romania” and “with the accession of Serbia and Bulgaria.”⁷⁹ Asztalos upheld equality and fraternity among peoples as fundamental principles for coexistence within the confederation. Presenting his views on the question of national minorities and most notably with regard to the demands of the Romanians in Hungary and Transylvania for the recognition of their national rights, he advocated the formation of independent states “without any restrictions whatsoever on nationalities and religions.”⁸⁰ Asztalos's vision drew on the broader currents of revolutionary thought circulating among émigrés in Europe, combining Kossuth's federal concepts with Mazzini-inspired republican principles. In the early 1860s, Kossuth envisaged a Danubian Confederation encompassing Hungary, Transylvania, the Romanian principalities, Croatia, and Serbia, with shared federal institutions for foreign relations, defense, commerce, and customs. Bulgaria was not explicitly included, likely because Kossuth focused on territories associated with the former Habsburg domains, while regions under Ottoman rule, such as Bulgaria, were perceived as within the Russian sphere of influence. These federal concepts emphasized equality, autonomy, and cooperation among nations, providing an institutional framework for coexistence. In contrast, Mazzini emphasized revolutionary solidarity, national self-determination, and the creation of democratic republics, often independent of existing imperial structures. Together, these intellectual currents informed Asztalos's proposals and shaped his vision of a Danubian confederation “on a broad democratic basis... for mutual defense in the Danube valley,” in which Hungary would achieve its independence alongside Romania, with the accession of Serbia and Bulgaria.

From Bucharest, Asztalos traveled to Constantinople, where he intended to meet with Russian ambassador Count Nikolay Pavlovich Ignatiev, for whom he carried a letter of introduction by Gubastov.⁸¹ Since the Austro-Hungarian ambassador regarded Asztalos's activities as increasingly dangerous, Asztalos was not permitted to return to Vidin. Pressured by the Ottoman authorities and threatened with internment in Asia Minor, Asztalos chose to remain in

78 Mérei, *Föderációs tervek*, 35, 58.

79 MNL OL, K 26-I A 24-1870-541, fol. 26.

80 Ibid.

81 MNL OL, K 26-I A 24-1870-740, fol. 40.

Constantinople and resume his legal practice. After the Congress of Berlin and during the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (undertaken as a measure to restore order following the Herzegovinian–Bosnian uprising against Ottoman rule), he attempted to continue his political activity. In September 1878, he issued a new proclamation on behalf of the “Secret Hungarian Committee in Constantinople” calling upon Hungarians not to participate in the occupation but to unite with the South Slavs in a common struggle against both Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian domination, in the name of independence and religious and national freedom. In keeping with Kossuth’s views, he openly criticized the self-serving aims of “Pan-Slavism and imperialism,” and he again urged the unification of Hungarians, South Slavs, and Romanians within a confederative framework.⁸² In the years that followed, Asztalos attempted to establish himself in various cities across the Balkans. In 1877, he sought to return to his homeland, but the Austro-Hungarian authorities denied his request. The sources reveal little about the final years of his life. We know only that he fell into poverty and died by his own hand in Belgrade in November 1898.

Taken together, the archival evidence and biographical data examined in the discussion above illuminate the activities of János Asztalos against the backdrop of a broader landscape of revolutionary mobilization and political experimentation in the Danubian–Balkan region in the late 1860s. Although his individual historical impact was limited and the Hungarian–Bulgarian Secret Committee founded by him existed only briefly, these initiatives provide valuable evidence of and insight into the circulation of revolutionary ideas, federalist concepts, and strategies of cooperation among émigré networks operating across imperial borders. The committee founded by Asztalos was primarily Hungarian in composition and orientation, rooted in opposition to the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 and inspired by the political legacy of 1848. At the same time, its proclaimed openness to cooperation with Bulgarian revolutionaries and other South Slavic movements reflected wider efforts to link national struggles within a common framework of anti-imperial solidarity. The idea of a Danubian confederation, as articulated in the committee’s documents, should therefore be understood not as a concrete political project but as an expression of the shared political horizons of revolutionary circles seeking alternatives to imperial domination in Central and Southeastern Europe. Asztalos’s initiatives demonstrate how individual émigré actors could function as intermediaries between different

82 *Árnyéka eltűnő nevemnek*, 215–19.

revolutionary milieus, transmitting ideas shaped by Kossuth's federal concepts and Mazzini-inspired republicanism into new regional contexts. Asztalos's activities in Vidin, Bucharest, and Constantinople illustrate both the potentials and the limitations of such transnational engagement. While these kinds of efforts fostered ideological exchange and momentary coordination, they remained dependent on personal networks and were vulnerable to surveillance, repression, and shifting political circumstances. Despite its short lifespan and limited scope, the Hungarian–Bulgarian Secret Committee occupies a distinctive place in the history of nineteenth-century Balkan and Danubian political movements. It represents a rare attempt to connect Hungarian opponents of Dualism with the Bulgarian revolutionary movement, the liberation struggles of other Balkan peoples, and the political projects of Romanian liberal circles. Viewed in this light, János Asztalos emerges not as a marginal revolutionary figure but as a revealing example of the transnational circulation of political ideas and initiatives that shaped the revolutionary imagination of the Danubian–Balkan world in the decades following 1848.

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