
GLOBAL CRISIS IN MEMORY

The Appropriation of Holocaust Memory in Post-Communist Eastern Europe

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This short essay explores the ways in which the visual and symbolic repertoire of cosmopolitan Holocaust memory has become appropriated to represent other types of historical crimes. Specifically, I examine to what extent has this instrumentalization of Holocaust memory fed into a crisis in cosmopolitan memory and the rise of its nationalized, particularized and populist variants. Focusing on post-communist Eastern Europe, I demonstrate how the familiar narratives and images of the Holocaust have been repurposed for two main goals: firstly, to normatively elevate the suffering of non-Jewish national majorities and equate it with the Holocaust; and secondly, to reposition the crimes of communism as the dominant criminal legacy of the twentieth century on a par with, and sometimes overtaking, the legacy of the Holocaust. I illustrate these arguments with brief examples of revisionist museum and commemorative practices in Poland, Hungary, Lithuania and Serbia. I conclude by thinking through some methodological and ethical dimensions of this research.

Holocaust memory, East and West

In the aftermath of the communist collapse that began in 1989, as East European states started applying for membership in various European bodies, and especially membership in the European Union (EU), they were expected to join the already established and solidified Western European narrative of the twentieth century. One of the most important elements of this was the narrative of the Holocaust as the singular most consequential event of Europe's twentieth century, its tale of genocide and the promise of 'never again' becoming a foundational story of the EU (Assmann), and a broadly shared and accepted 'cosmopolitan memory' across borders and across national imaginations (Levy and Sznajder).

In fact, as the EU made its Eastern European enlargement conditional on many domestic reforms, education about and memorialization of the Holocaust were some of the explicit expectations for candidate states.¹ After a series of EU resolutions that dealt with the memory and legacies of the Holocaust, a major European institutional push to regulate its remembrance across the continent was the 2000 Stockholm Forum on the Holocaust, which

¹ For example, already in 1995, the European Parliament passed a Resolution on the return of plundered property to Jewish communities, which contained explicit demands from East European states to return property looted in the Holocaust (European Parliament, "Resolution on the Return of Plundered Property to Jewish Communities").

defined a common framework for European Holocaust remembrance, research and education (Allwork). In 2005, the European Parliament adopted its most complete resolution on the Holocaust, the Resolution on remembrance of the Holocaust, antisemitism and racism, which established 27 January, the day of the liberation of Auschwitz in 1945, as the European Holocaust Memorial Day across the whole of the EU (European Parliament, "Resolution on Remembrance of the Holocaust, Anti-Semitism and Racism").

While many governments in East European states accepted this new regulation, signed relevant documents and adopted major parameters of the memory framework, being careful not to jeopardize the delicate process of EU accession, they also rejected much of the established canon of European memory politics (Mälksoo; Littoz-Monnet). This was especially the case with conservative and populist governments in countries where the more liberal embrace of Western European memory practices (such as in Poland) was quickly marginalized. EU accession then further created a moment of memory divergence, as joining the European family provided a space for a much more direct and critical assault on the Western European mnemonic canon, without concern for international political consequences.

The main point of rupture was that the cosmopolitan Holocaust memory as developed in the West did not align with the very different set of Holocaust memory traditions in post-communist Europe (Levy and Sznajder). This failure to fit was evident in the lack of centrality of the Shoah as the defining memory of the twentieth-century experience across the post-communist space. Instead, Eastern European states after communism constructed their national identities on the memory of Stalinism and Soviet occupation, as well as on the search for continuity with pre-communist nation-states. The Western cosmopolitan centrality of the Holocaust, then, was set to replace the centrality of anti-communist and ethnic nationalist frames as the dominant organizing narrative of post-communist states.

This was threatening and destabilizing to these states, especially to conservative and populist forces for whom the introduction of liberal values to the region was unwelcome, but also because it drowned out nationalist appeals to their own victimization and diluted it with appeals to memorialize past Jewish suffering. There was also an issue of resentment about having to 'perform' Holocaust memorialization as a condition for EU accession. To resolve these different memory pulls, many states in post-communist Europe chose instead to embark on radical projects of criminalizing communism, using much of the language of memory developed to commemorate the Holocaust to, instead, commemorate communist crimes.² They pushed for a series of resolutions and legislation about anti-communist memory through the European Parliament, which created much intra-EU political conflict (Neumayer). These efforts were also decidedly transnational – in addition to working with other right and far-right political parties in the European Parliament (many of them under the European People's Party group), these reactionary movements have also organized networks of transnational memory entrepreneurship as in, for instance, the international Platform on European Memory and Conscience.

The centrality of the Holocaust as a foundational European narrative, however, is also soundly rejected across much of post-communist Europe (some of the early leaders of this counter-memory were Poland and the Baltic states) because of its perceived elevation of Jewish victimhood above the victimhood of other regional majority ethnic groups – a move that is increasingly openly resented (Baer and Sznajder). Further, the European Holocaust memory's focus on Jewish suffering is also rejected in much of post-communist Europe because it brings about discussion of extensive and deep local complicity in the Holocaust, and material and political benefits of the complete Jewish absence across Eastern Europe

² For a full elaboration of this argument, see Subotić.

(Himka). Jewish businesses, homes and property have over decades of looting followed by communist seizures slowly morphed into the general economy, with difficult and sporadic attempts at restitution (Charnysh and Finkel).

It is against this background that the destabilizing effects of Holocaust memory in post-communist Europe can be best understood. Holocaust memory, as institutionalized in the Western mnemonical canon, created significant stress and anxiety but also deep domestic conflict and contestation in much of the region. It brought up undesirable memories that were contrary to these states' identities of victimization at the hands of German and Soviet occupiers. To resolve this dilemma – how to nominally accept the Western European memory canon while rejecting its focus on Jewish suffering and local East European complicity – post-communist states embarked on a new kind of Holocaust remembrance, where the memory, symbols and imagery of the Holocaust became appropriated to represent other historical crimes. This type of Holocaust remembrance, I suggest, is *memory appropriation*, where the memory of the Holocaust is used to memorialize a different kind of suffering, such as suffering under communism, or suffering from ethnic violence perpetrated by other groups.

In the next two sections, I illustrate some of these dynamics by grouping Holocaust appropriation into two main forms: commemorative practices that normatively elevate the suffering of non-Jewish national majorities and equate it with the Holocaust, and secondly, commemorative practices that reposition the crimes of communism as the dominant criminal legacy of the twentieth century, on par with, and sometimes overcoming, the legacy of the Holocaust.

Holocaust appropriation as competitive victimization

In 2017 in Warsaw, a commemorative plaque was unveiled 'In Memory of the 200,000 Poles Murdered in Warsaw in the German Death Camp KL Warschau.'³ This was a sombre ceremony, with the local priest performing Catholic rites and a representative of the army honouring the dead.

The only problem: almost none of this was true. There did indeed exist a camp in Warsaw, where a several thousand Polish citizens died during the German occupation. But after the burning of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, this camp was turned into a concentration and extermination camp for Jews brought in from other parts of Europe, who were used as slave labour to clear the charred remains of the ghetto. Some 20,000 people died in this camp, most of them Jews.

The Polish group behind this project was not just commemorating victims of their own ethnic group at the expense of other victims – this is an unremarkable and ubiquitous feature of commemorative politics everywhere. What is, however, remarkable is that the very clear purpose of this commemoration was to put it in direct competition with the memory of the Holocaust, especially in Poland, the geographic heart of the genocide. One likely reason for the invented number of 200,000 killed ethnic Poles in KL Warschau is that – when added to the roughly 200,000 Poles killed in the Warsaw Uprising – the total number reaches 400,000, which is often cited as the estimated number of Jews imprisoned (and most consequently killed), in the Warsaw Ghetto. Moreover, the myth of KL Warschau also includes a truly fantastical story about a tunnel under the railway lines where, so the conspiracy alleges, the Germans created a massive gas chamber to murder the Poles. This myth thus places Polish victimization by the Nazis on the very same plane as the victimization of the Jews, by equating not only the number of the dead but repurposing the known symbolic and visual imagery

³ For a detailed investigation of the KL Warschau claims in contemporary Poland on which this summary is based, see Davies.

of the Holocaust (gassing) to elevate the suffering of non-Jewish others and chip away at the dominance of Holocaust memory where it is not welcome.

In a similar vein, in Hungary, the Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation erected in 2014 in Budapest memorializes Hungary – the country – as the main victim of the German occupation, through a not very subtle depiction of Germany's imperial eagle crushing of Hungary, which is symbolized by Archangel Gabriel. The memorial was unveiled overnight and with no accompanying official opening ceremony, in order to avoid any public debate and expected protests (Pető).

The memorial, however, immediately produced deep domestic contestation. Holocaust survivors or their family members have placed hundreds of handwritten notes, pictures and objects next to the memorial, telling the story of 430,000 Jews who were deported from Hungary, mostly to Auschwitz – the quickest rate of deportation in the history of the Holocaust, taking less than two months and done with the active participation of Hungarian civil servants.

This memorial uses architecture as a tool to express myths of nationhood, as part of a state strategy of visual remembrance that the Hungarian government under the rule of the Fidesz party has been promoting for more than a decade (Palonen). Specifically, it narratively replaces the memory of the Holocaust and the catastrophe of Hungarian Jewish annihilation as the central memory of the Second World War in Hungary with the memory of Hungarian victimhood and innocence. It also purposefully shifts the responsibility for the murder of Hungarian Jews from Hungary's Axis-allied government, placing it firmly with Germany, presenting fascism and its exterminationist policies as alien, foreign intrusions into the Hungarian body politic.

This intervention is important because it provides the current Hungarian far-right government a bricks-and-mortar visual device to claim a mythical continuity with the pre-Axis sovereign Hungary and its (illiberal, fascist and antisemitic) regime (Rév 610). In doing so, it presents the history of the Second World War as being exclusively the history of Hungary's victimization – through the loss of state sovereignty – and not as the history of genocide of Hungarian Jews. Here, the greatest victims of the German occupation – Hungarian Jews murdered in the Holocaust – are erased to make room for the memory of the Hungarian state, which not only was not the largest victim of the German occupation but in fact directly participated in the genocide. The very purpose of this type of Holocaust appropriation, this 'pathological mourning' (Murer), is ethnic narrative replacement and competitive victimization, which itself serves as an attack on liberal cosmopolitan politics of remembrance.

Holocaust appropriation as criminalizing communism

In 2014, the Historical Museum of Serbia put up a highly publicized exhibition *In the Name of the People – Political Repression in Serbia 1944–1953*, which promised to display new historical documents and evidence of communist crimes, ranging from assassinations, kidnappings, detentions in camps, to collectivization, political trials and repression carried out by communist Yugoslavia in the first post-war years. The most stunning visual artefact was a well-known photograph of prisoners from the Buchenwald concentration camp, including Elie Wiesel, taken by US soldier Harry Miller at camp liberation in April 1945. In the Belgrade exhibition, this canonic image was displayed in the section devoted to the communist-era camp for political prisoners on the Adriatic island of Goli Otok. The exhibition describes the display as 'the example of living conditions of Goli Otok prisoners'.⁴ In response to an outcry from Holocaust historians (Radanović), a few weeks after the opening a small note was taped underneath the display caption that read: 'A photograph of prisoner boxed beds in Dachau

⁴ Author observation at the exhibition, May 2014.

camp.' That nobody bothered to check that the photograph was, in fact, from Buchenwald and not Dachau, is symptomatic of the broad sense of irrelevance with which the Holocaust is met in Serbia.

The direct and crude replacement of victims of the Holocaust with victims of communism also affected the memorialization of Judenlager Semlin (or, Sajmište), the largest concentration and extermination camp in occupied Serbia during the Second World War, where 6,300 Jewish women, children and the elderly were gassed in a mobile gas van over the course of a few months in 1941–42 (Bajford). At the same 2014 Historical Museum exhibition, next to the recaptioned Buchenwald photograph of Elie Wiesel, there was another photograph. This was a pre-war image of the main tower of Belgrade's Fairgrounds, the building that housed the administration of the Judenlager Semlin during the occupation. The caption read: 'The parachute tower becomes a machine gun nest, period 1952–1953 [...] enemies of all colours were held at Sajmište.' This completely fabricated statement gives the visitor an impression that Semlin camp was a communist prison for enemies of the state, with discipline maintained through machine guns. The visitor would not know that Semlin was where half of all Jews in occupied Serbia were killed in a few spring months of 1942.

But what *was* extremely relevant for the exhibition organizers was to use well-known visual imagery of the Holocaust, and especially photographs and material objects that invoke immediate recognition and emotional response, to connect semiotically the horrors of the Holocaust with the horrors of communism and thus make the two appear the same. The problem with this memory project, however, is that it flattens the experience of both the Holocaust and of communism into an artificial level playing field which does tremendous violence to the histories of both. This equating of the Holocaust with communism is especially absurd in the case of Yugoslavia, which implemented a variant of communism that differed dramatically from its significantly more brutal Soviet version, and where the narratives of concentration camps and the Gulag made no historical sense. With this commemorative project, however, Serbian historiography has attempted to retroactively make early Yugoslav communism appear more like early Soviet communism and, in doing so, criminalize the entire communist project by representing it as murderous and totalitarian.

Similarly, in Hungary, the House of Terror museum which opened in 2002 in Budapest narrates the story of Hungary's twentieth-century experience as a nation victim of the foreign communist, and to a much lesser extent, foreign fascist regime. The museum truncates Hungary's twentieth century to 1944–89, so that the fascist era begins with the German occupation in 1944, and not in 1940 when Hungary joined the Axis alliance. This shift therefore completely removes the history of the Holocaust in Hungary before 1944, the period that left 60,000 Hungarian Jews killed as early as 1942, with the extermination carried out not by Germans but by Hungarian forces under the rule of regent Miklós Horthy (Braham). This chronology also presents communism as a much longer and far more damaging terror in Hungary than fascism ever was, while there is virtually no mention of anti-fascism and communist resistance in the museum's exhibition narrative.

The House of Terror goes out of its way to bring home the message that fascism and communism were two sides of the same coin – there are multiple visual representations of black totalitarianism and red totalitarianism – of the black arrow cross juxtaposed with the red star, of the fascist uniform juxtaposed with the communist uniform. Equation of the two regimes is not new nor particularly surprising. What is more interesting is that the blunt message of this state institution is presented through the appropriation of not just Holocaust imagery, but also Holocaust museum visual display. Most directly, the House of Terror uses the model of the 'Tower of Faces' – portraits of Holocaust victims projected onto the entire length of walls in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC – to project portraits of

'victims of communism', while the 'Hall of Tears' in the basement of the Budapest museum is a visual repurposing of the Children's Memorial at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem (Radonić 283).

Meanwhile, in Vilnius, Lithuania, the top tourist destination is the Museum of Victims of Genocide.⁵ But in a country that was ground zero for the Holocaust, where 95 per cent of pre-war Jewish population was exterminated (the highest number of any occupied country anywhere in Europe), this is not a museum to those victims of that genocide – but rather to the victims of the Soviet occupation that in Lithuania is considered the real genocide (Budrytė).

Opening in 1992, only a year into Lithuania's independence, in a former NKVD/KGB building (which also served as Gestapo headquarters during the Nazi occupation), this museum continues to be the most visible institution of memory in Lithuania. The museum describes its object of representation as 'genocide performed by the Soviet occupiers against the Lithuanian inhabitants, demonstrat[ing] the methods and extent of resistance to the occupying regime, and commemorat[ing] genocide victims and freedom fighters'.⁶ The mission of the museum, then, is to generalize Soviet violence to Lithuanian 'inhabitants' – not specific political or economic classes, but all Lithuanians – making the narrative link with what the visitor may understand as 'genocide' more direct. This link is made visually clear by the use of extremely graphic images of executions, death and torture, images that many visitors would associate with the Holocaust. The visual repertoire of the Holocaust – as well as the term 'genocide' – is again used to represent the suffering of non-Jewish others, to elevate the memory of ethnic majoritarian victimization, but also centrally to criminalize communism as a system of violence indistinct from the Holocaust – to make communism as a historical project reinterpreted as a project of genocide (Mark, "Containing Fascism").

Conclusion

This short essay has aimed to put these episodes of memory inversion in a contemporary political context by arguing that they are not isolated instances of competing memory, but instead critical elements of national strategies of political legitimacy. They serve to reposition national narratives in opposition both to those of communism but also those historically embraced by Western Europe, and instead reclaim a national identity that rejects cosmopolitanism and is rebuilt along ethnic majoritarian lines. I will now conclude by thinking through both methodological and ethical issues that arise out of this research.

It has become quite obvious that the politics of memory have played a momentous role in the rise of populist and far-right movements in Eastern Europe since at least 2010. The sharp tilt to authoritarianism and illiberalism in Hungary and Poland, and also encroaching illiberalism in Bulgaria, Serbia and Croatia, cannot be explained without understanding the strength of the appeal to a particular type of memory politics that these regimes have engaged in to gather votes. History, quite clearly, has become a 'handmaiden of populism' (Rév 621).

But here is the methodological problem: which way does the causality go? Did these populist movements emerge first, and then shape the politics of memory to further solidify electoral support? Or did this new/old/inverted memory already exist, or develop on its own, through various official and unofficial cultural institutions, and the new populists just dipped into the already deep pool of revisionism and anti-cosmopolitan resentment?

I would suggest, instead, that public memory and populist leadership are best understood as mutually constitutive as they are both products of a social environment that is saturated with a particular notion of the past and a very specific national identity of victimization that

⁵ After intense pressure, much of it international, in 2018 the museum changed its official name to Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights.

⁶ Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, <http://genocid.lt/muziejus/en/708/c>.

both promotes this revisionist history and gives rise to populist movements that capitalize on it. In fact, it is quite clear that cultural issues of identity and history have been integral to the ascent and consolidation of populism in post-communist East Europe, as the question of who are the real victims of history has been central to the populist enterprise. The fact that East European victimization under communism is not adequately understood and appreciated is the central grievance of these movements, and it feeds into a new cycle of victimization – this time the perceived oppression by Western liberal ideals, such as ‘gender ideology’, feminism, LGBTQ rights, or even more dramatically, Middle Eastern migration and refugee flows (Mark, “A World without ‘1989’”). The core of populist resentment is the issue of cultural imposition – and the deepest cultural imposition is the imposition of memory of their own pasts.

Finally, this research brings up a number of ethical issues, such as the questions of engaged scholarship and research positionality. Through studying changes in political memory, we insert ourselves in that memory by being arbiters of which memory is historically sound, and which is not. We become part of the historiography, as well as part of the political debate about that historiography. In highly politicized environments, such as that of the rising populist far right which is radically altering established historical facts about past events, as well as memory of the past, this may not be a place most scholars would be comfortable to find themselves. Confronting the crisis in dealing with the past, however, will require continuous scholarly engagement.

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