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ARTICLE

Memory Wars and Emotional Politics: “Feel Good” Holocaust Appropriation in Central Europe

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Abstract

This article analyzes the patriotic turn in Holocaust memory politics, exploring the processes through which the narrative of a morally upright national majority has been pitted against transnational entities such as the European Union. The EU is considered to foster multiculturalism, leading to interpretations of what some perceive as national guilt. The article investigates invocations of shame and pride in Czechia and Slovakia, two countries that are often overlooked in works on Holocaust memory politics yet are symptomatic of larger changes in the region and history appropriation in general. Building on research into emotional communities, it traces how and why political actors across the ideological spectrum have adopted notions of pride to mobilize domestic audiences against “accusations” of local guilt and complicity in the Nazi genocides of Jews and Roma. By doing so, our article demonstrates how Holocaust memory has become entangled with Europeanization and highlights the role of emotions in shaping national identity and belonging.

Keywords: Holocaust; European Union; guilt; shame; pride

There has hardly been a time when the reading of World War II history mattered more than today. Political leaders across Europe seem energized to debate the war’s outbreak, who was responsible for the devastation that followed, who were the victims, and who can claim moral authority for defeating fascism (see Grabowski and Libionka 2017; Kowol 2020; Bershidsky 2020). Nazism has also been directly invoked by Vladimir Putin in the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022). While Putin’s denazification claim is clearly a manipulation, the language of Russian aggression builds on truly problematic aspects of the Ukrainian past during the Holocaust.

With mnemonic politics on the rise, there has also been a notable shift in how national agents have appropriated World War II and Holocaust history over the last fifteen years. This patriotic turn in Holocaust memory places the ethnic majority, rather than the Jewish or Roma victims or minority groups in general, in need of protection (for a broader take on patriotic histories, see Kónczal and Moses 2022). Instead of focusing on the memory of Jews or Roma, it is “the good name” of the state and the majority ethnic nation that is purportedly under siege by transnational bodies that advance multiculturalism, most notably the EU (Soroka and Krawatzek 2019). The research, examining questions of complicity and collaboration during World War II, which is often portrayed as a source of national shame, is framed within broader narratives aimed at diminishing national identity and pride, and promoting “cosmopolitanism” and “multiculturalism.” The disputes over Holocaust memory and the language used in these disputes are intricately linked

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to the ongoing European culture wars (see Ray and Kapralski 2019). However, terms such as "multiculturalism" have been extensively used to encompass a wide range of concepts (immigration, EU institutions, LGBTQ rights, and gender equality) to the point where they can be interpreted as meaning everything and nothing, lacking analytical value.

In attempting to explain what rekindled the memory wars, scholars typically point to the ascendency of nationalism in the 1990s, a period when the past was intrinsic to nation rebuilding following the collapse of the Communist regimes (see Grabowski and Libionka 2017). This was also a time when the first legal codifications of history were adopted, in the form of lustration acts, statutes on the illegality of Communist regimes, and laws prohibiting Holocaust denial (Koposov 2022). Seeing the recent memory battles as part of the same old wars, scholars often cite democratic backsliding, a term used to capture illiberal turns in the politics of Central and Eastern Europe, as the main factor. Much of the existing literature centers on developments in countries where right-wing populist parties dominate, specifically Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Serbia, and Hungary. Most of these states have serious democratic deficits and have been accused of whitewashing the historical record of the Holocaust at the highest political level.

Attacks on historical memory are on the rise in other places as well, as is nationalist mobilization around Holocaust history. This includes Czechia, where a moderate government remains in place, and Slovakia, whose government was led by pro-EU parties until the last elections in September 2023. In these two countries, which are still considered functional democracies, outright Holocaust revisionism remains on the political fringe. If the defense of traditional values has been tied to social conservatism, Czech politics has been long defined as technocratic, which in theory places limited value on cultural issues, including identity politics, as well as historical memory. In both the culturally liberal Czechia and conservative Slovakia, the nationalist agenda seemed to have moved from diatribes against the Roma – permanent social outcasts – or Germans and Hungarians as the enduring national enemies, to the alleged external threats to the nation's ethnic and cultural coherence, specifically non-European migration and Islam (see Strapáčová and Hloušek 2018).

This could imply that interest in war and Holocaust history should have been in decline. As recently as ten years ago, debates about complicity in the Holocaust were, for the most part, considered cold cases. In Slovakia, the wartime fascist state's responsibility for the persecution of the Jews was reluctantly acknowledged as part of the country's accession to the EU in 2004. Conversely, in Czechia, the narrative of national victimhood seemed cemented in Czech-German reconciliation efforts, tied to the same accession talks – in particular, the Czech-German Declaration on Mutual Relations and Their Future Development of 1997. Popular movies, such as *Musíme si pomáhat* (*Divided We Fall*, 2000) and *Protektor* (2009), have drawn attention to the persecution of the Jews and questioned the entrenched notions of Czechs as heroes and victims. Yet, seen as fictional accounts and thus not tarnishing the otherwise good image of the nation, they failed to generate controversy or public debates, at least when compared to films focusing on the violence accompanying the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans, such as *Habermannův mlýn* (*Habermann* 2010). In contrast to discussions about the expulsion of Sudeten Germans, there was limited engagement when it comes to the Czech or Slovak attitudes toward the Jews and the Roma during the war, and these debates have largely taken place away from public discourse (see Renner 2011).

Yet in the absence of any clear catalyst, Czechia and Slovakia have now embarked on establishing "memory comfort zones" regarding the persecution of Jews and Roma during World War II. Recent controversies have exposed the emotional capital of the Holocaust, as a surge of patriotic sentiment has sparked a fresh interpretation of history. This interpretation emphasizes a "national perspective" that prioritizes pride while rejecting any lingering sense of guilt or shame. Expressions of remorse for the Holocaust have recently led to a domestic backlash, with unusual political alliances mobilizing against guilt or shame in historical grievances. This raises a question: What is the cause of the "feel good" Holocaust appropriation in Czechia and Slovakia, and elsewhere?

By studying the recent public invocations of national pride and shame in connection to the Holocaust, this article exposes the role of emotions in and for communities. This research builds upon

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the growing literature on emotion norms in community construction and erosion (Wohl, Branscombe, and Klar 2006; Rosenwein 2007; Hutchison and Bleiker 2008; Bar-Tal, Halperin, and De Rivera 2007; Koschut 2014; Terzi, Palm, and Gürkan 2021). In line with much scholarship, we understand feelings as not solely a bodily process but as being at the core of politics. Regardless of the community, whether it be professional (such as a scholarly association), religious (like a church), or athletic (in the context of a specific club), emotions serve to unite individuals who share similar sentiments, simultaneously creating a sense of exclusion for those outside the shared emotional experience. Through rituals and symbols, communities connect with their members and draw a line between those who belong and those who do not. Importantly, emotions create order within communities. Arising in response to moral violations of community members, shame directed at the trespasser is meant to bring the black sheep back into the flock (Koschut 2014). That being said, history apology-making has a rather asymmetric effect on public opinion. It typically appeases the recipient state but alienates domestic constituencies, especially those with strong nationalist sentiments, those with greater social-dominance orientation, and conservatives (Kitagawa and Chu 2021). This is why the literature on apologies and expressions of remorse for historical grievances includes policy guidelines and recommendations on how to minimize domestic backlash (see, e.g., Lind 2008; Andersen and Törnquist-Plewa 2016). But what if national narratives rooted in pride are so significant that they have led to the widespread acceptance of "the good nation" narrative in the Holocaust memory, even among those who consider themselves liberals?

This article proceeds in four steps. We begin by outlining three ideas that form the foundation of our theory: states seek belonging as much as physical or material security; acknowledging guilt for the Holocaust has become an expression of "belonging to Europe;" and protecting a nation's "good name" is an effort to mobilize domestic audiences along national lines, and often also against the European Union. We then examine public discussions that have accompanied official apologies and expressions of guilt, identifying the patriotic turn of the last decade or so. We work here with publicly available declarations of national pride and shame concerning Holocaust history made by current and former representatives of states, or as mediated by national media, especially public television, radio, and the respective major presses (in Czech, Slovak, and English). We focus on declarations that directly include words of sorrow or remorse (in Czech: *lítost*, in Slovak: *ľútosť*), apology (in Czech: *omluva*, in Slovak: *ospravedlnenie*), or pride (in Czech: *hrdost*, in Slovak: *hrdosť*). Our thinking here is in line with Nicholas Tavuchis's seminal work on apologies (Tavuchis 1991). Initially, our aim was to align these against lists and databases of political apologies, but this approach proved to be ineffective. These databases, while comprehensive, exclusively cover former Czechoslovakia or Czechia, but completely omit Slovakia. Furthermore, they do not encompass local expressions of remorse for the Holocaust (see "Political Apologies Database" 2021; "Political Apologies" 2022). We conclude by addressing the broader implications of studying belonging to "Europe," as well as national communities, through emotions of pride and shame.

Emotional Communities, Emotional Histories

The first crucial idea for our argument is that a feeling of belonging is as important to state governance as physical or material security (see, e.g., Subotic 2018; Sala 2018; Steele and Homolar 2019; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020). A sense of confidence in who one is and where one's place is, comes with rituals and habits, as well as a shared desirable historical narrative (Subotic 2018, 298). A growing body of literature across disciplines recognizes the role of history and memory for the collective identity of states and supranational bodies, and shows that states strive for routine and stability, whether in domestic relations, in bonds with others, or simply in who they are. Stability that is rooted in the past and informs the present is part of ontological security (i.e., the security of being). National narratives provide stability during times of change and challenges, and a recognizable path that can be controlled (see Olick and Robbins 1998; Berenskoetter 2014; Sala 2018; Subotic 2018; Subotic 2019; Steele and Homolar 2019).

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Second, we treat the Holocaust as the global and cosmopolitan memory of "the West" and the foundational narrative of the European project (Levy and Sznaider 2006; Stone 2018). While not an idea present at its actual foundation (see, e.g., Hansen and Jonsson 2014), the European project now rests on the articulated premise that "nationalism brought the continent to the point of ruin in the twentieth century, but it was in its darkest moment that the vision for a new order took root" (Sala 2018, 270; see also, e.g., Assmann 2007; Probst 2003). In this sense, the "real Europe" became deeply connected to the collective memory of World War II, and emotions of guilt and shame for the Holocaust. The efforts of Poland, the Baltic states, as well as Czechia and Slovakia, to secure a unified European condemnation of the crimes committed by Soviet communism in Eastern Europe and place these crimes on par with the atrocities of Nazism "signals their fundamental insecurity about their immediate pasts' compatibility with the Western European states' own, and thus their persistent sense of 'liminal Europeanness' in the enlarged EU" (Mälksoo 2009, 655). The role of the Holocaust as this "core European memory" explains why our focus here is on mnemonic battles surrounding collaboration and complicity in the genocide of Jews and Roma.

Third, we built our main argument on the scholarship on the securitization and/or politicization of Holocaust memory within the post-Communist space (see Subotic 2018; Subotic 2019; Subotic 2020; Mälksoo 2009; Mälksoo 2015). The complexities of coming to terms with the Holocaust for "new Europeans" have stemmed from the additional layer of suffering they endured under Soviet rule after 1945 (Judt 2006). Furthermore, these complexities are compounded by the experiences of the Holocaust in the eastern regions, where it was perceived as a communal genocide, blurring the traditional categories of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders (Bartov 2018). Turning Holocaust recognition into a soft accession criterion by the EU, even if the genocide is not at the core of the national narratives here, initiated, according to Subotic, "a national particularistic backlash, which then created further insecurities both in the states themselves and between the post-Communist states and the larger European Union" (Subotic 2018, 42). In what follows, we challenge the assertion that the Holocaust "does not have the emotional or mnemonic impact" on Eastern Europe compared to the West (Subotic 2019, 176). As we argue, it is precisely the association with Europeanization that has granted the Holocaust its significance within these contexts (and increasingly so over time).

The Czech and Slovak Apology-Making

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, whether prompted by the process of joining the Western political, economic, and military structures, or as part of genuine efforts to come to terms with the legacies of the war, both Slovakia and Czechia expressed their share of guilt and apologies for events during and shortly after World War II. Furthermore, official incentives were launched that brought greater recognition to various victim groups, Jews in particular. The varied wartime experiences in both countries influenced the tone and focus of these gestures and policies.

The history of the fascist Slovak state (1939–1945) has long been a central point of contention in mnemonic battles within Slovakia. During the war, the state served as a model ally of Nazi Germany, exhibiting a large degree of autonomy in its policies toward Jews and Roma. These policies persisted until the August 1944 national uprising, which was followed by the German occupation of the country. Notably, Slovakia enacted one of the most oppressive anti-Jewish laws, the Jewish Code, in September 1941, surpassing even the notorious Nuremberg Laws of Nazi Germany. Furthermore, Slovakia played a direct role in the deportations of 58,000 Jews in 1942, acting largely under its own auspices (Kamenec 1991). The mnemonic debates have focused on three interconnected issues: the legitimacy of the wartime state (with some apologists prioritizing statehood over any of its "mishandlings," meaning the Holocaust), the role of President and Roman Catholic Priest Jozef Tiso in the genocide (a particularly sensitive issue, given that more than half of the population identifies as Christian, predominantly Roman Catholic), and the role of the Slovak National Uprising (which apologists of the fascist state have dismissed for going against statehood, thus

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being far from either Slovak or national). “Feel good” history writing has been traditionally backed by organizations including the Roman Catholic Church; its representatives have even been among the most vocal Holocaust revisionists in the country (“Arcibiskup chváli Tisa a jeho štát” 2007). On the political scene, history alteration has had equally strong allies, such as the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana; SNS) or in the People’s Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (Ľudová strana-Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko; HZDS), which dominated the Slovak political system for much of the 1990s. SNS has been consistently critical of the 1944 uprising, claiming that it served as a pretext for the Communist takeover of the country and destroyed the first independent state in modern Slovak history. In the position of the Ministry of Education (1993–1994), the SNS also promoted a revisionist book by Milan Ďurica as a supplementary textbook for history classes at primary and secondary level schools, wherein he distorted and manipulated the Slovak role in the Holocaust (see, e.g., Samuel 1997). Despite the numerous factual errors and falsehoods present in the book, such as the idealized portrayal of life in the Jewish labor camps and the claim that Tiso opposed the deportations, approximately 90,000 copies of the book were printed using EU funds intended for the development of democratic education in post-Communist countries, causing international scandal and controversy (Sniegoň 2014, 83–84). At first, Slovakia dismissed the criticism from the European Union, labeling it as interference in its internal affairs and a deliberate effort to undermine its international reputation. However, the then Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar eventually announced its temporary and eventually permanent withdrawal from schools (see “Ďuricova kniha stiahnutá na dva mesiace” 1997).

While the Slovak government was largely focused “on making excuses for the Slovak guilt” (Sniegoň 2014, 178), it was also never fully able to deny its responsibility for the Holocaust. The first steps to prove the country was serious about coming to terms with its past came early on into the post-Communist transition, in December 1990. In a joint declaration, the legislative Slovak National Council and the Slovak government articulated emotions of shame and guilt as a form of moral obligation:

> We sincerely apologize for everything our predecessors committed against our Jewish fellow citizens during World War II. Our deep traditions of humanism and democratization, rooted in the Slovak nation’s past, justify this apology. We are also aware that many Slovaks actively resisted violence and provided assistance to our persecuted Jewish fellow citizens (“Vyhlásenie Slovenskej národnej rady a vlády Slovenskej republiky k deportáciám Židov zo Slovenska” 1990).

The declaration made a direct link to a statement of regret put together by members of the then anti-Communist opposition in 1987, on the 45th anniversary of the first deportations of Jews from Slovakia (Jelinek 1989). The signatories made it clear that they reject any efforts to explain or contextualize the past, as doing so could potentially undermine the sincerity of their “expression of remorse and forgiveness” (see also “Stanoviská biskupov, vyhlásenia a ďalšie správy k tragédii holokaustu” 2021). More than 100 memorials and plaques dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust were unveiled in the subsequent years, including the Central Memorial to the Holocaust of Jews in Slovakia in Bratislava (1997) (Paulovičová 2018). It was in preparation for EU accession, as shown also by Subotic, that the country “made a number of gestures to indicate its seriousness regarding Holocaust remembrance” (Subotic 2019, 209). The Museum of Jewish Culture was established as a separate entity (1994) and soon started to publish its scholarly journal *Acta Judaica Slovaca*, focusing on the history of Jews in the country, including their experiences during the fascist rule. Two years later (1996), Comenius University in Bratislava opened its new Institute of Judaism. September 9, the day on which the Jewish Code was adopted in 1941, became the Memorial Day to the Victims of the Holocaust and Racial Violence (2001). New research initiatives were launched, questioning the anti-fascist image of Slovakia. In 2002, the government established the Nations’ Memory Institute (*Ústav pamäti národa*) and mandated it to explore the period of the two

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"totalitarianisms" between 1939 and 1989. The institute initiated important inquiries into collaboration and complicity, establishing a database of looted Jewish businesses or lists of former members of the paramilitary Hlinka Guard. Many of the works that were published because of or as part of these initiatives have shed critical light on the national past.

Since 1995, particularly following the launch of a new exhibition at the Museum of the Slovak National Uprising in Banská Bystrica in 2004, coinciding with Slovakia's accession to the EU, the rebellion has been transformed into a European narrative in official speeches and representations. This was demonstrated in several ways, two of which we will discuss. First, there was the emphasis on the European dimension of the uprising, highlighting the involvement of 32 nationalities in the rebellion, thereby making it a Slovak contribution to the European project (Findor and Lášticová 2011). Second, to meet a European standard – to paraphrase the words of the then director Ján Stanislav – the museum also provided information about Roma victims of the reprisals following the suppression of the rebellion. In 2005 then, the first monument to Roma victims of the Holocaust was unveiled in Slovakia at the walls of the museum. A handful of other monuments to the Roma victims followed, typically installed at the sites of former labor camps ("Pamätníky obetí rómskeho holokaustu môžu ľudia navštíviť aj online" 2021). Yet, crucially, if openly denying Slovak responsibility in the Jewish Holocaust was getting harder with the amount of historical research on the topic, this cannot be said about the genocide of the Roma. The few published books on the subject have had serious methodological flaws. This is especially true of the research by Karol Janas, a university professor and politician who thus far published the only book on the persecution of local Roma available in Slovak (Janas 2008; Janas 2010). His reproducing of prejudices about Roma and his shifting of the blame for their wartime persecution onto Nazi Germany resulted in critical reviews in academic journals (Jurová 2010), but his downplaying of the Slovak contribution to the Roma genocide did not hinder his political career. In 2023, Janas actually secured a position in the national parliament, marking an upward trajectory from local to national politics.

The situation in Czechia was different. This stemmed from a different wartime experience, when the country was fully occupied by German troops between March 1939 and April/May 1945. As a result, the region of Bohemia and Moravia became a German Protectorate, under their military and civil control. Despite this, a local Czech administration remained. Although it operated within the confines of German authority, the Protectorate government had its own administrative functions and carried out certain day-to-day tasks within the region. Furthermore, Nazi agencies assumed full control over the process of the ghettoization and deportation of the Jews only in October 1941. In public perception, the dominance of the German civil and military administration made it much easier to address the history of Czech complicity in the Holocaust than in the case of Slovakia. Even the Theresienstadt (Terezín) ghetto, through which nearly 150,000 prisoners passed during the war, with 33,000 perishing there and most others being deported to the East, has become detached from Czech history. Its memory primarily revolves around its role in the pan-European "final solution" and Nazi propaganda depicting it as a seemingly "model ghetto" and settlement, or emphasizes the cultural activities of the prisoners, including children. The fact that Terezín was situated in the predominantly Czech countryside and was never completely isolated from the Czech population has not prompted significant discussions regarding local complicity and responsibility. Since the 1990s, debates have rather ensued regarding the recognition of Czech violence against the Sudeten Germans during the postwar "transfer" (expulsion of almost three million Sudeten Germans to Germany in 1945–1946) and the fate of the Czech Roma during the war. Officially, the postwar expulsion of the Sudeten Germans was presented as a just punishment for the German minority betraying interwar Czechoslovakia before 1938 and the brutality of the Germans during the occupation, as well as a way to safeguard peace in Europe after 1945. It was also sanctioned by the major Allied powers in the Potsdam Agreement in August 1945. From the political point of view, this chapter was officially closed with the reciprocal Czech-German Declaration on Mutual Relations and Their Future Development in August 1997. In this declaration, the Germans acknowledge the "suffering and injustice inflicted upon the Czech people through National Socialist

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crimes committed by Germans" and the Czechs expressed emotions of regret for the violence that accompanied the postwar expulsion – in particular, regretting "the excesses which were contrary to elementary humanitarian principles as well as legal norms existing at that time" ("Czech-German Declaration on Mutual Relations and their Future Development" 1997). It was a pivotal document adopted during Czechia's accession negotiations to the EU, marking the formal closure of the most troubled chapter in modern Czech-German history. Yet despite the official closure, the topic has continued to permeate Czech public space and political campaigning, with prominent politicians, including the last two presidents, conservative Václav Klaus (in office 2003–13) and former Social Democrat Miloš Zeman (2013–23), attacking opponents who criticized the postwar expulsion or the violence that accompanied it, rejecting any guilt or shame for the transfer ("Zeman: lepší vyhnání Němců než trest smrti" 2013; see also, e.g., Renner 2011).

Over time, memory battles began to cohere around Czech complicity in the Holocaust of the Roma. The history of the former Lety u Písku camp in southern Bohemia has been at the forefront of these debates since the 1990s. The camp existed from July 1940 until May 1943, first as a penal labor camp, later an assembly camp, and from August 1942, a Gypsy camp. Over 1,300 Roma men, women, and children went through the camp, and 326 of them perished because of the unsanitary conditions, typhus, lack of food, and the brutality of the Czech guards. Additionally, 511 inmates were deported to Auschwitz, where most of them perished. The memory battles in the early 1990s were triggered by the work of American journalist Paul Polansky (Kunštát and Kopeček 2007; Renner 2011; Velinger 2005). In his journalistic account, Polansky documented the largely forgotten history of the camp and accused wartime Czech authorities in the Protectorate of contributing to the deaths of Roma prisoners, and the post-1989 political elites of failing to recognize the "historical guilt" (Sniegoň 2014, 134–165; Donert 2017, 247–270). The public debate that followed focused on three issues: the nature of the camp, including whether it was a concentration camp or a labor camp, with the latter apparently seen as a less horrific place; the involvement of Czech Protectorate officials, including camp guards; and whether the government should purchase and then shut down a pig farm built in the 1970s along the perimeter of the former camp. These discussions gained prominence during the post-Communist transition period, placing pressure on Czech authorities to address both historical legacies and the marginalized and socially disadvantaged position of the Roma population (Polansky 1992; Polansky 1994; Polansky 1998). European institutions might have considered Roma "a European minority," but recognizing Roma suffering during the war has been largely unsuccessful in Europe (Kucia 2016). In 1995, when unveiling the first, modest memorial near the site of the former camp, Czech President Václav Havel made a half-hearted acknowledgment of Czech complicity in the Roma Holocaust, though at the same time also praising parts of Czech society for their upstanding behavior during the war:

> The Gypsy internment camp was established at the order of German Nazi officials. However, Czech police administered the camp and guarded the prisoners, and Czechs living in the neighborhood of the camp exploited the cheap labor force of the Gypsy prisoners. Very few of those Czechs found enough compassion and courage to ameliorate the tragic destiny of those prisoners. However, there were also Czech doctors who treated the prisoners and other Czechs who risked their lives to help Gypsy families avoid deportation, or who adopted Gypsy children to rescue them. ("Václav Havel's 1995 Speech at the Unveiling of the Lety Memorial" 2015)

This early apology did not lead to any deeper engagement with the topic of Czech complicity, and the issue of the pig farm in Lety, despite promises made by successive social democratic governments (1998–2006), remained unresolved for more than twenty years. It was not until 2017, shortly before parliamentary elections, that the Czech government bought the Lety pig farm intending to build a proper memorial. The backing of Andrej Babiš, then vice-chairman of the government and finance minister, was integral to this decision. A billionaire, chairman of the ANO2011 party, and a

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technocratic populist, Babiš dominated Czech politics between 2013 and 2021. On a 2016 visit to northern Bohemia, to a locality with one of the highest unemployment rates, he praised the government of post-Munich Czechoslovakia and the Protectorate for creating forced labor camps for the unemployed, particularly Roma, thus forcing them to perform labor for the state. Political opponents accused Babiš of Holocaust denial or praising the policies of the Third Reich. But the affair forced the government to finalize the buyout of the farm. Babiš, embarrassed by the outcry, now backed the plans for the memorial, and in a likely attempt to repair his public image, visited several Roma museums and memorials ("Koncentrák v Letech je lež, řekl Babiš. Čelí vlně kritiky" 2016). While by then also other politicians supported the plan, Romani groups and networks played a key role in the decision, be it by exerting pressure through the EU or by shaming the Czech government for its inactions (see, e.g., Černochová 2021; "Czech Vice PM pays his respects at the Lety memorial to Romani Holocaust victims – but no Roma are invited" 2016).

It took 28 years after Havel's visit for another Czech President to visit Lety. In May 2023, the newly elected president Petr Pavel, a non-aligned politician who represents the pro-European part of the Czech political scene, attended the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the deportation of Roma from Lety to Auschwitz. On that occasion, in his official speech, he remarked on the necessity "to commemorate these events as a dark chapter of history, including our own history." Later, during a meeting with journalists, he added that Czechs should "admit our share of the blame" for this part of history. The head of the lower chamber, Markéta Pekarová-Adamová, who accompanied Pavel to the commemoration, went even further, suggesting that Czechs should "apologize" for the behavior of the guards in the camp ("VIDEO: Czech President says the buyout of the industrial pig farm at Lety took too long and was undignified, the state has to acknowledge its culpability for this history" 2023). The election of Pavel in January 2023 followed the victory of a broad coalition of largely pro-EU parties in October 2021. The long break between the two official visits to Lety by the head of the state sharply contrasts with official visits in Terezín, the former Jewish ghetto and nearby Gestapo prison, as well as Lidice, a village razed by the Germans in June 1942.

Apology-Shaming of a Proud Nation

Over the last decade, the politics of Holocaust memory in Europe has shifted. Poland illustrates best the national backlash to what came to be treated as a progressive narrative fostered by the EU. Since 1989, and under the slogan of "return to Europe," a great number of Holocaust memoirs, novels, films, and academic works on the plight of the Jews have appeared in Poland (Törnquist-Plewa 2002). Polish universities opened their first Jewish studies programs. Teachers' training activities were launched to help create balanced curricula on the history of Jews in Poland. In the early 2000s, Holocaust research centers were founded, with some of its outputs presenting "members of Polish society under the wartime German occupation as perpetrators responsible for the death of Jewish fugitives who were trying to escape extermination by the Germans" (Michlic 2017, 297). Now fast-forward to 2015, when the Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) won both the parliamentary and presidential elections. The party has mobilized emotions of fear, shame, and pride to secure its position, and it did so on many issues: traditional values, opposition to migration and multiculturalism, opposition to "gender ideology," and also a particular representation of the national past (Fomina and Kucharczyk 2016; Hackmann 2018; Kazlauskaitė and Salmela 2022). On the topic of the Holocaust, the PiS government has repeatedly called for an end to the "pedagogy of shame" allegedly fostered by progressives wanting to blemish "the good name" of Poland at home and abroad (Kazlauskaitė and Salmela 2022). The government has ordered the establishment of new foundations and museums to underscore a new sense of patriotic pride, replaced museum directors to secure this message, introduced gag laws to suppress the works of historians who research Polish complicity in the Holocaust, and even directly attacked Holocaust scholars, specifically Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski. The officially endorsed patriotic account has

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aggressively promoted stories about Polish rescuers and the Righteous Among the Nations, an honor bestowed by Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust Memorial, to non-Jews who risked their lives to aid Jews during the Holocaust. In June 2023, Grzegorz Brown, head of the far-right Confederation Liberty and Independence (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość) party, which scored almost 7 percent in the 2023 elections, attacked the efforts of Holocaust historians to research Polish complicity with the words that "Germans and Jews will not be teaching us history" (Baranowska 2023). Similar efforts to suppress the supposed shaming of national history and boost national pride emerged also in Slovakia and Czechia.

Increasingly anxious about the changes and challenges of the 21st century, Slovakia's new power player after 2002, the nominally left-wing SMER – Social Democracy (*Smer – Sociálna demokracia*) embraced patriotism and nationalism as part of its mobilizational strategy. Winning four elections in a row (2006, 2010, 2012, 2016), SMER presented itself as the defender of a Christian, national, proud, and socially conscious state. Robert Fico, head of the party and three-time prime minister, often resorted to nationalist language directed against the internal and external "others:" Hungarians, Roma, Muslims, and increasingly also the European Union. Criticizing even the ethnic Slovaks for not being patriotic enough, SMER declared 2008 a year of national awakening. While in government with the nationalist SNS, SMER promoted historical falsehoods and named opponents or mere critics of these claims as "national nihilists" and "pseudo-historians" who despised everything Slovaks should be proud of (Burzova 2012, 883). The two parties originally introduced a national pride law in 2010, requiring schools to play the national anthem every week and public employees to take an oath to the state as a way to boost patriotism and love for one's country. Where SMER and SNS differed was in how they viewed the history of the fascist Slovak state. Their respective guilt avoidance strategies – cementing the myth of resistance and focusing on "good" stories of the war, be it rescue or social progress – have, however, introduced a new patriotic reading of the war, one in which wartime history is no longer "used to defame the nation."

SMER constructed their reading of history on the legacy of the Slovak National Uprising, using it to make bold, self-pleasing claims about the nation and its courage, sacrifice, and inherently anti-fascist nature. Attending the 63rd anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising in 2007, Fico appealed to citizens "for historical reconciliation and an open discussion about controversial aspects of Slovak history," except for the 1944 rebellion. The "cabinet will take serious measures" against anyone daring to question the importance of the uprising, Fico asserted (Vražda and Piško 2007). SMER repeatedly turned to the memory of the war to boost morale in the country. When meeting with Rabbi Andrew Baker in 2009, the American Jewish Committee's director of international Jewish affairs and personal representative of the OBSE Chairmanship on combating antisemitism, Fico proposed to build memorials not only for the Jewish victims of the Holocaust but also for their rescuers ("Pri školách by sme mali stavať pamätníky holokaustu, vyhlásil Fico" 2009). By incorporating narratives of Jewish rescue by Slovaks alongside the resistance myth, a tactic employed in neighboring Poland, a diverse range of public initiatives have emerged (see, e.g., Aleksiun, Utz, Wóycicka 2024). These include televised galas that honor the Righteous and are graced by influential political figures. Additionally, a new Holocaust Museum in Sereď, the site of a labor, transit, and later concentration camp during World War II, has unveiled an exhibition dedicated specifically to the Righteous, as a testament to their courageous actions (see, e.g., Vrzgulová 2019). The radio series *Encyclopedia of the Righteous*, broadcast on the public Radio Slovakia, includes life stories of both those recognized as rescuers by Yad Vashem (the World Holocaust Remembrance Center) and "brave Slovaks" who do not hold the award but who "nevertheless helped save human lives during World War II." At the end of each radio episode, the moderator and producer of the Radio Slovakia series, Dagmar Mozolová, tells listeners: "Taking the population size into consideration, we belong to countries that hold the highest number of awards in the world" ("Rádio Slovensko: Encyklopédia spravodlivých" 2021). The larger the number of awardees, the clearer the conscience, the prouder the nation it seems. These statements imply that with 638 awardees as of January 2022, compared to 125 from Czechia, Slovakia should be

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proud of its history ("Names of Righteous by Country" 2022). In short, the righteous resister does not avoid the Holocaust but misuses its legacy, turning complicity into rescue, perpetrators into victims, and shame into pride.

Fighting against the alleged shaming of national history, the Slovak radical and extreme right over the years has also shifted its tactics from minimizing the Holocaust to highlighting the "positive" sides of the wartime fascist state. The Nation's Memory Institute is a case in point. In 2007, following the tragic death of Ján Langoš, the first director, SNS pushed through its candidate for the position, Ivan Petranský. A historian of the Catholic Church, Petranský defended what he called "diversity of scientific research and interpretation" on the fascist state, bringing with him to the institute several apologists of the wartime regime, most notoriously Martin Lacko ("ÚPN o Sidorovom antisemitizme pomlčal" 2010). Lacko initiated a series of conferences and publications on the fascist state, aiming for "a third way" in which the Holocaust would no longer diminish national pride. As Lacko put it in his numerous public appearances, Slovaks ought to stop beating themselves up with cosmopolitan historiography. Probably to demonstrate his "national approach" to writing history, Lacko attended events commemorating the existence of the fascist state and the life of President Tiso. Ahead of the 2016 elections, Lacko was dismissed from the Nation's Memory Institute for, officially, gross violation of work discipline, meaning promoting the wartime regime. Later, he also officially endorsed Marián Kotleba, the far-right leader of the People's Party-Our Slovakia, to the parliament.

Receiving 8 percent of the votes in 2016, three times what the opinion polls predicted, the People's Party-Our Slovakia was a newcomer on the national scene, but Kotleba, the party leader, was a well-known figure. He made his political entry around 2004, heading the movement Slovak Togetherness (*Slovenská pospolitosť*). Wearing uniforms modeled on the paramilitaries of the fascist state, and inciting violence against the Roma, the movement was dissolved by the Supreme Court in 2006 for attempting to eliminate the democratic system. Kotleba's real breakthrough came in 2013, when it elected the governor of the Banská Bystrica region. In the campaign leading up to the national elections of 2016, and while utilizing anti-minority and anti-elite public attitudes, Kotleba focused on the enemy "other" outside of the nation: the European Union as the destroyer of anything national, be it sovereignty, national coherence, or national pride (Kluknavská 2015; Štefančík and Hvasta 2019). No longer publicly denying the Holocaust, the Kotleba party turned to returning pride to Slovakia, reversing the trend attributed to the influence of Brussels. As MP Grausová stated, "From an early age, we have been forced to learn that we have no history, and if we happen to have a history, it is one that we must be ashamed of" (Grausová 2016a; Grausová 2016b). Historian Lacko became employed by the Kotleba party, as Grausová's advisor. Similar sentiments depicting the European Union as a source of national shame have been echoed not only within the People's Party-Our Slovakia but also by Republika, a new political project spearheaded by former Kotleba party members.

More recently, voices calling for an end to the eternal shaming of Slovak history came from Anton Hrnko, former MP for the SNS party who has served since 2020 as the advisor on national and minority questions for Boris Kollár, the Speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic. In 2018, after the public Slovak TV removed Tiso from the television poll broadcast "The Greatest Slovak," Hrnko publicly and rather emotionally expressed his disgust "with the way we interpret national history, because I see no one cares about the truth, but only about how to spit on the Slovak national past as much as possible, how to whip Slovaks as much as possible with their history" ("Hrnko: Je nezmyselné, aby NAKA vykladala dejiny, ktoré nie sú uzavreté" 2018). In 2021, Hrnko founded the *Slovak History Journal* (*Slovenský časopis historický*) as a platform for national scholars banned for their patriotic views from so-called cosmopolitan outlets (see also Lacko 2021).

In recent years, Czechia has also become increasingly active in its efforts to combat "history shaming," although initial attempts to defend the reputation of the Czech society and the reading of history from an ethnic standpoint had begun earlier. Conservative and nativist politicians, most notably President Klaus, have been vocal in their opposition to any suggestion of Czech

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involvement in the Roma Holocaust. In 2005, Klaus suggested that Lety, the camp originally established by Czech Protectorate authorities, was not a concentration camp as we all "subconsciously understand it," meaning "Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and these places." The prisoners, Klaus added, were not only Roma but also those considered "work-shy." By implication, Klaus defended the proud Czech national narrative against what was perceived as a falsification of history and an attempt to shame Czech history by portraying the Roma "genocide during the war as a Czech crime" (Mlynárik 2006).

More recently, two events dealing with the questions of Czech complicity and victimhood spurred efforts to combat the "shaming" of Czech history: the government's decision to buy out the pig farm at the perimeter of the former Lety camp, and a report on Czech TV alleging that a resident of Lidice had betrayed a Jewish woman living in hiding in the village. Unlike in Slovakia, in the Czech case, the defense of the Czech nation's reputation was joined by mainstream politicians and commentators. The affairs also revealed a deeper undercurrent of entrenched historical narratives in the country. These modern history battles became part of Czech "emancipation" from efforts to satisfy Western political structures, especially when those entities criticized Czechs for lacking humanitarianism and solidarity with refugees coming to Europe from the Middle East and North Africa during the 2015 crisis. Those who opposed the EU's humanitarian efforts used memorials commemorating victims of Nazism to contrast the patriotism of the brave Czech resistance fighters against "millions" of "economic migrants" from Muslim-majority countries who come to Europe to improve their economic situation instead of fighting for their homelands ("Pohoršení v Terezíně. Projevy Vodičky a Štěcha vyvolaly kritiku" 2016). Furthermore, in 2017, then President Zeman criticized the short-sightedness of the British and French governments during the 1938 Munich crisis that emboldened Hitler and contrasted "cowardly" contemporary Western politicians who accepted migrants from Muslim-majority countries with those opposing the arrival of refugees from the Middle East, "Islamist radicals […] whose culture is incompatible with European culture." Terror attacks in Europe, Zeman continued, were the result of "our cowardness," which took the form of "a multicultural tolerance" imposed from Western political structures (Zeman 2017).

In 2017, when the government announced its plans to demolish the Lety pig farm, the far right and populists accused them of caving to pressure from foreign agencies. Businessman Tomio Okamura used his political projects, including his latest party, Freedom and Direct Democracy (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie*; SPD), to spread anti-Roma prejudice, Euroskepticism, anti-globalism, and anti-Islamist hysteria. The SPD has veiled their criticism of the recognition of the Roma suffering in patriotic statements about the need to defend Czech history and opposition to what they portrayed as the interference of European elites into Czech national affairs. Prior to this, in 2014, one year after he entered the lower chamber of the Czech parliament for the first time, Okamura spoke openly about the "myth of a Roma concentration camp," claiming that it was, "according to the available information, a lie" ("Ohromná ostuda, řekl kníže k věci, která trápí Romy. A Ransdorf mu připomněl tuto nehezkou věc z minulosti" 2014). Against all evidence, Okamura continued, saying that "nobody was ever killed" in this "labor camp," where "people were dying as a result of old age and the diseases they had brought into the camp because of their previous nomadic lifestyle." By no means should they be considered victims of the Holocaust in any sense, he concluded. That would be "a disrespect to the real victims of the Holocaust, whether Roma or Jews, in real concentration camps" ("Ohromná ostuda, řekl kníže k věci, která trápí Romy. A Ransdorf mu připomněl tuto nehezkou věc z minulosti" 2014). Similarly to Klaus, the downplaying of the events in Lety, of the role that the Czech Protectorate government played in establishing and running the camp, and of the brutality of the Czech Protectorate guards served the emotional needs for a strong and positive historical narrative of the war.

Okamura again turned to the topic of the Roma Holocaust, emboldened by his success in the 2017 parliamentary elections (SPD receiving more than 10 percent of the vote). SPD repeatedly criticized the government for spending 450 million crowns (roughly 17.5 million euro) on the buyout of the pig farm. Okamura, then in the prominent position of vice-chairman of the lower

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parliamentary chamber, stated that "the camp was not fenced in and that basically those people were free to come and go," thus denying that Lety had contributed to the genocidal campaign. After criticism ensued, Okamura withdrew part of his comments, admitting that there was a fence, but that "the fencing of the camp was wooden, a picket fence in places" and that there were "holes." He also added that the camp was fully guarded only after an outbreak of typhus epidemics in early 1943, when it became a health hazard for the neighboring villages, and that the Czech guards were there to prevent prisoners from spreading the disease, which also led to the death of "one third" [*sic*] of the Czech guards (in fact, three or four employees and guards died) ("Tábor pro Romy v Letech nebyl hlídaný, míní Okamura. Za plot se omluvil" 2018; Klínovský, 2016; "Neexistující pseudokoncentrák? Policie nebude stíhat Okamuru a Roznera za výroky o Letech" 2018).

SPD used the Lety affair for its political offensive against the EU, and their alleged efforts to enforce a progressive, unpatriotic reading of history. Radim Fiala, the vice-chairman of SPD, described it as a patriotic movement that viewed any focus on the plight of a specific group, such as the Romani people, as a form of "discrimination against some victims" that disregards the suffering of others: "The liquidation of the Czech nation was part of the plans for a racial solution of the European space. […] The Czech nation is thus in the same position in terms of a final solution as other groups of Holocaust victims" (Fiala 2018). This argument maintains that as a victim nation, the Czechs cannot be accused of complicity in the Holocaust ("Neexistující pseudokoncentrák? Policie nebude stíhat Okamuru a Roznera za výroky o Letech" 2018). The efforts of other politicians and political commentators to present SPD as Holocaust deniers, because of their opposition to the buyout of the pig farm and the rejection of Czech complicity in the Roma Holocaust, Fiala concluded, were simply a defamation campaign led by elites in Brussels, globalists, George Soros NGOs, and neo-Marxists against Europe's patriotic political parties, and were an attempt to imply that "Czechs were co-responsible" for Nazi crimes (Parlament České republiky, Poslanecká sněmovna 2013–2017, 9. schůze, část 4 [7. 3. 2018]; "Sněmovna se mimořádně sejde kvůli odvolání Okamury" 2018; Weigl 2018). Such efforts attempted to question the political memory of the war in Czechia, one of the cornerstones of Czech national identity, which presents Czechs as heroes and victims.

Similar ideas emerged in 2020, during the first public discussion that touched on the highly sensitive issues of Czech victimhood on one side, and Czech complicity in the Holocaust of European Jews on the other. The June 1942 destruction of Lidice, in retaliation for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, the Reich Protector, holds a central place in the Czech collective memory of World War II. During this massacre, 173 men were shot on the spot (those not present were killed later), all women were sent to concentration camps, and 82 children were gassed in the Chelmno extermination camp. Lidice remains a symbol of Czech victimhood: "To allow this attack on Lidice to continue unopposed is out of the question," exclaimed Hana Lipovská, while pounding her fists on the table at a meeting of the Czech TV Council, which supervises the public broadcaster. Anyone who touched Lidice, she continued, entered a "conflict of interest" with all Czechs (Jetmar 2020). Lipovská had only recently been elected to the Council, representing the nationalist and populist end of the political spectrum, with the likely support from the Communist Party. She made this statement during a discussion of official complaints regarding TV reportage on the wartime destruction of Lidice. Since 1942, the horror of Lidice has served as the centerpiece of the Czech historical memory, though it also suffered from political manipulation by the Communist regime (Koura 2019; Frankl 2013). But the reportage shed new light on its history. Based on a book by historian Vojtěch Kyncl, reporters discussed the fate of a Jewish woman who lived in hiding for three years in Lidice. Kyncl alleged that one week before the liquidation of the village, her non-Jewish landlady denounced the Jewish woman, and she was murdered in Auschwitz two months later. The TV report, which included an interview with Kyncl, also suggested that the affair had been intentionally erased from the history of the village, so as not to cast a shadow over the martyrdom of the village (Jetmar 2020).

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In response, politicians, historians, and activists mobilized to dispute the story and asked if it was even ethical to publish it. Crucially, some also attempted to use patriotic outrage to attack Czech TV, which is often seen as supportive of the country's pro-Western, pro-EU, and liberal democratic orientation. The head of the Lidice Memorial was forced to resign because she did not outright reject the allegations and planned to commemorate the fate of the Jewish woman in the memorial. Later, she added that her critics "know the story is true, but the problem is that the narrative of Lidice is no longer as crystal clear as they want. It spoils the pure-victim status" (*The Guardian* 2020).

A coalition of EU skeptics, nationalists, and Communists led the opposition to Kyncl's allegations. But on this occasion, they were supported even by historians of the Czech resistance, who believed that historians had a right to suppress such evidence for ethical reasons, because the daughter of the alleged denouncer, another survivor of the Lidice tragedy, was still alive (Stehlík 2020). These historians were driven by their determination to defend the memory of the village, and hence the image of the nation. Their primary response was to reject the allegation that a woman from Lidice, the symbol of Czech suffering, could commit such a heinous crime. But historians and archivists who questioned the evidence could only speculate about other possible explanations. Moving the guilt onto others, far from the Lidice community, they fabricated unrealistic claims, which triggered complaints from relatives of those who were now being baselessly accused (Stehlík 2020; Šarapatka 2020). Responses from this idiosyncratic group soon assumed pathetic and almost religious dimensions. Historian Eduard Stehlík, the newly appointed director of the Lidice Memorial, encouraged all Czechs to make a pilgrimage to Lidice at least once in their lives. Lipovská even drew a parallel to Muslims visiting Mecca and urged people to kneel at the site of the destroyed church (rather than the location where the men of Lidice were murdered as suggested by Stehlík). Stehlík also created a commission, composed of Czech and Slovak historians, to reach a conclusion, based on the available evidence, about whether the Lidice woman was guilty of betraying her Jewish subtenant. When most of the responses suggested that the available evidence did not allow for a clear conclusion, Stehlík suggested that at this point in time "unless new, hitherto unknown historical documents are discovered and presented, […] it is not possible categorically to blame [the Czech woman] for the contribution to the denunciation of her Jewish subtenant […]. The Lidice Memorial hereby considers the matter, for its part, closed" (Lidice Memorial 2021).

In this simplified and ethnic reading of history, the group was supported by Presidents Klaus and Zeman. As early as 2018, representatives of Klaus's Institute (*Institut Václava Klause*, IVK) praised the newly adopted Polish law, which criminalizes efforts to imply that the Polish nation contributed to the extermination of European Jews. They claimed that the "false notion" that not only Germans but also other nations shared the guilt for the Holocaust aimed "to discredit [our] national history, destroy the pride of our contemporary generations to our own history, traditions, and culture, and erode love for our homeland and our nation." It was part of efforts by EU elites at "reeducation" and "overcoming" nationalism through "mass immigration" (Klaus 2020). For Klaus himself, the Lidice affair was just another link in a chain of events that attempted to rewrite the history of World War II and relativize German guilt (Jetmar 2020). Zeman even contacted the daughter of the accused Lidice woman in a letter, claiming that "most citizens of our beautiful country do not forget the suffering of Lidice, do not forget the innocent victims of the German occupiers, do not forget the survivors" (Zídek 2020). At the conclusion of his term, Zeman bestowed high Czech awards to two historians who had opposed the allegations. This recognition took place during a traditional ceremony held to commemorate the day of Czech independence ("PŘEHLEDNĚ: Za dva roky přes 60 osobností. Kdo dostal vyznamenání?" 2022).

Most recently, a similar discussion has emerged among historians in connection with the publication of a new history of the Jewish community in the Bohemian lands, which contains a chapter on the Holocaust by the American historian Benjamin Frommer (Frommer 2020). Frommer argues that Czech officials contributed to Nazi Germany's persecution of the Jews of the Protectorate. In response, Ivo Cerman, a historian of the early modern period, accused Frommer of anti-Czech bias, adding that he "felt anxious" about how "they" write about Czech

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history. "Their" writing, according to Cerman, was part of a larger American effort to place the blame for the Holocaust on the "morally backward" Eastern European states, partly for their unwillingness to accept Muslim refugees during the 2015 crisis. Furthermore, because the volume containing Frommer's study was initially published in German, and the German embassy launched the book, Cerman and other historians also presented it as a German effort to relativize their guilt for the Holocaust. In what is often characterized as far-right "alternative media," Cerman confronted the editor of the book, the Czech historian Kateřina Čapková, suggesting that Čapková and other Czech historians "curry favor with influential American colleagues," and called the book a piece of "radical anti-Czech propaganda" (*Parlamentní listy* 2020; see also Cerman 2020). In this way, Cerman tried to persuade his readers that the notion of Czech complicity is imposed from abroad, and not a result of any serious scholarly research.

Conclusion

In recent years, numerous developments have generated a multitude of anxieties in global and national politics: the Global Financial Crisis of 2008–2009; the 2015 migration wave; the numerous crises faced by the European Union, particularly Brexit; the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine. These anxieties have reshaped the political landscape, questioning established norms and structures (on the challenges these stressors pose to the EU, see, e.g., Mitzen 2018). In the midst of these changes and challenges, countries including Czechia and Slovakia, have grappled with their own search for ontological security, including their place within Europe. Processing the history and emotions of World War II, especially the Holocaust, has been a significant aspect of this process. While mnemonic politics surrounding the Holocaust were not always at the forefront in the post-Communist space, emotions of guilt and shame have played a pivotal role in the European integration process for many Center and Eastern European countries, including the political leadership in Prague and Bratislava.

There has been a prevailing sentiment among the new EU member states that "the West," in particular the EU, has imposed a cosmopolitan reading of World War II history, often perceived as a form of national shaming. As a result, politicians from various ideological backgrounds have increasingly turned to promoting a sense of pride in their country's World War II history. Rejecting perceived "accusations" of local guilt has become a tool for mobilizing domestic audiences against "multiculturalism," affirmative actions, and the European Union institutions, even if the definitions of these terms and the skepticism about the European project may vary.

The years 2020 and 2021 initially brought a change to Czech and Slovak politics, when coalitions of pro-European parties won the respective parliamentary elections and formed governments. Representatives of both governments turned to the Holocaust to accentuate the place of the Czechs and Slovaks in Europe. In doing so, they attempted to craft a compromise between shame and pride without offending either side. On September 9, 2021, commemorating the publication of the Jewish Code in Slovakia eighty years before, the then Prime Minister Eduard Heger expressed regret about the wartime Slovak government's persecution of the Jews and asked the Jewish community for forgiveness. He also immediately expressed pride that there were Slovaks who in those dangerous times resisted the government and supported the Jews. Similarly, in May 2022, Miloš Vystrčil, the pro-European chairman of the second chamber of the Czech parliament, acknowledged in a speech that the Czech Protectorate government had handed over their Jewish and Roma fellow citizens to Nazi terror. He also highlighted how ordinary Czechs had denounced and betrayed the Jews during the war. Nevertheless, Vystrčil immediately moderated the tone of his speech, adding that the persecution had been condemned by the Czechoslovak exile government in Britain, and there were "scores of our Czech citizens" who had risked their lives and helped the Jews. Although possibly triggered by the Lidice affair, the name of the village was not mentioned in his address ("Projev předsedy Senátu Miloše Vystrčila na Terezínské tryzně" 2022; "Premiér: Nedovoľme, aby svedectvá z holokaustu prekričali hlasy plné nenávisti" 2021). In contrast, the 2023 Slovak parliamentary

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elections not only brought to power a nationalist coalition of SMER, SNS, and a new social democratic party HLAS, made up of many former SMER members, but also ushered in pro-- Russian voices and harsh criticism of European structures. This criticism was accompanied by assertions that these structures impede feelings of national pride. The upcoming elections in Czechia, scheduled for 2025, will determine whether Prague will follow a similar path or resist such sentiments.

The most recent expressions of regret voiced in either Czechia or Slovakia showcase the limitations of the cosmopolitan narrative, even within liberal circles. However, the activation of a guilt-free past should not be seen as a mere continuation of the nationalism of the 1990s. Instead, calls for optimistic interpretations of what transpired during the war have become a tool for arousing old resentments and fostering new ones. Tempted by the illiberal push in and beyond Europe, politicians – be they extreme, radical, or nominally mainstream – have recently mobilized against shame and guilt for the genocide of Jews and Roma to voice dissent against multiculturalism, political correctness, gender equality, and other products of a supposedly "Western" world. Consequently, the appropriation of Holocaust history has evolved into a political and emotional battleground that extends beyond mere historical interpretation. It has become a battle over belonging, and the definition of a "good" nation.

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