

# The Memory Discourse of the Holocaust in Hungary: Distortion of Memory

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Article abstract

*This article studies the memory of the Holocaust in Hungary and its distortion within the official narrative. This research, alternating between past and present, demonstrates the abyss between the “official” memory put forward by the Fidesz’s government, and the familial and personal memories. In line with Memory Studies, this research focuses on the past and historiography to underline the instrumentalization of the memory of the Shoah within the country. To conclude, the example of the monument of the German invasion at the Szabadság Tér (Liberty Square) in Budapest and its counter-memorial, Eleven Emlékmű (Living Memorial), are underlined to contrast “official” memory with personal and familial memories.*

## The Memory Discourse of the Holocaust in Hungary: Distortion of Memory

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**RÉSUMÉ** Cet article porte sur la mémoire de l'Holocauste et sa distorsion en Hongrie. Alternant entre passé et présent, cette étude démontre l'abysse entre la mémoire « officielle » mise de l'avant par le gouvernement Fidesz et les mémoires familiales et personnelles. L'étude se concentre, à l'aide des Memory Studies, sur le passé et l'historiographie, afin de situer l'instrumentalisation de la mémoire de la Shoah au sein du pays. Pour conclure, l'exemple du monument de l'invasion allemande au Szabadság Tér (Place de la Liberté) à Budapest et son contre-mémorial vivant Eleven Emlékmű (Living Memorial) seront soulever pour souligner le contraste entre ces deux pans de mémoires.

**ABSTRACT** This article studies the memory of the Holocaust in Hungary and its distortion within the official narrative. This research, alternating between past and present, demonstrates the abyss between the “official” memory put forward by the Fidesz’s government, and the familial and personal memories. In line with Memory Studies, this research focuses on the past and historiography to underline the instrumentalization of the memory of the Shoah within the country. To conclude, the example of the

*monument of the German invasion at the Szabadság Tér (Liberty Square) in Budapest and its counter-memorial, Eleven Emlékmű (Living Memorial), are underlined to contrast “official” memory with personal and familial memories.*

In 2009, Human Resources Minister Zoltán Balog told visiting Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel that Hungarians “will not tolerate that the sufferings of Jewish people are used to distract attention from the difficult problems of [their] country.”<sup>1</sup> In 2015, a research focusing on Holocaust survivors showed that trauma related to changing political regimes and the persistence of antisemitism in Hungary made psychological adaptation more difficult for survivors in Hungary than their counterparts in the United States and Israel<sup>2</sup>. The research stressed how social milieu plays a significant role both in the perpetration of trauma and in the facilitation of coming to terms with the past. In accordance with this research, this paper delves into the current memory discourse of the Holocaust in Hungary and show the government attempts to instrumentalize the past to fulfill its political and nationalistic agenda<sup>3</sup>. Divided into three parts, this study includes a short historical context, and focuses on the historiography of the Holocaust in Hungary and Fidesz’s politics on memory. It finally analyzes a case study that epitomizes the culmination of Fidesz’s politics of memory; the Monument of the

1. Bernard Rorke, “Hungary’s Fidesz and its ‘Jewish Question,’” in *OpenDemocracy*, September 22, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/hungarys-fidesz-and-its-jewish-question/>.
2. Eva Kahana, Boaz Kahana, and al., “Trauma and the Life Course in a Cross-National Perspective: Focus on Holocaust Survivors Living in Hungary,” *Traumatology*, American Psychological Association, 21, 4 (2015): 319.
3. This research was made possible through a funded research trip in Budapest in 2019, where I interviewed scholars and Hungarian citizens. I want to thank Tom and Irene Mihalik for their generosity, Prof. Robert Austin, and the CERES program at the University of Toronto for making this research possible. I would also like to thank those I interviewed. They provided rich insights that have shaped my understanding and have brought great memories.

German invasion at Szabadság Tér in Budapest, while considering its counter-memorial, the Living Memorial, to contrast “official” memory with personal and familial memories.

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a result of both antisemitic legislation before the Holocaust in Hungary and the Holocaust, Hungarian Jews constituted the single largest group of victims of Auschwitz-Birkenau<sup>4</sup>. To understand better Hungary’s implications during the Holocaust, I start my historical overview with the first official antisemitic *numerus clausus* in Hungary, dating from 1920. This juxtaposition of events helps understand why the official discourse of Holocaust memory in Hungary prefers to start with the German invasion of 1944. Indeed, specific events in Hungary are currently either (mis)used or (mis)represented to explain why the Hungarian state was so distraught. Such representations allow the state to minimize its responsibility toward the Holocaust. I thus choose to start the historical context with the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, where the Kingdom of Hungary lost two-thirds of its territories.

The territorial losses led the nation to believe that re-establishing Christianity in the state would produce internal stability and restore the country<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, under the prescriptions of Christian Nationalism, antisemitism reframed Jews in religious and racial terms. By linking Jews to secularism, liberalism, communism, capitalism, and anti-christianism, the campaign ended up taking “biblical proportions,” and Jews were seen as a threat that could potentially destroy Hungary<sup>6</sup>. In September 1920, the Hungarian government limited Jews from attending

4. Ferenc Lazc6, “Integrating Victims, Externalising Guilt? Commemorating the Holocaust in Hungary,” *Südosteuropa* 64, 2 (2016): 167.

5. Paul A. Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 42-79; 80-93.

6. Michelle Valletta. *The Jewish Genocide in Hungary: A survey of Hungarian collective memories and history* Rhode Island College, History Department, June 25 (2012): 8.

universities, making them the victims of the first anti-Jewish law in post-war Europe<sup>7</sup>.

The Great Depression additionally enhanced antisemitic resentment. During the interwar years, the guiding principle of a “Greater Hungary” that followed the clauses of Trianon, shifted from “magyarization to exclusion<sup>8</sup>.” Xenophobia and drive of ethnonational homogenization were taking further importance as “Greater Hungary” stood as “the heart of the political consensus in Hungary and fostered the rise of increasingly exclusionist and violent ideas as legitimate political futures<sup>9</sup>.” As economic and ideological interest and Germany’s influence helped move the discriminatory process forward, decrees and antisemitic legislation defined first Hungary’s later trajectory which helps us understand the state’s agency<sup>10</sup>. According to historian Ferenc Laczó, Hungary’s later Nazi alliance was foremost due to Hungary’s desire to revise the punitive terms of the Treaty of 1920<sup>11</sup>.

### Before and After the German Invasion

Several measures were implemented between 1938 and 1944 to concretize authorities’ desire: “to remove as many of the region’s minority populations as possible<sup>12</sup>.” Consequently, in May 1938, an anti-Jewish law limited to twenty percent Jewish employment in the press, business, medical, engineering, and legal professions. In May 1939, another anti-Jewish law defined Jewish people in racial terms as being people with at least two

7. Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary*, 53.

8. Raz Segal, “Beyond Holocaust Studies: rethinking the Holocaust in Hungary,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, 1 (2014): 4.

9. *Ibid.*, 5.

10. *Ibid.*, 6.

11. Ferenc Laczó, “Caught between Historical Responsibility and the New Politics of History: On Patterns of Hungarian Holocaust Remembrance,” in *Life Writing and Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe*, Simona Mitroiu, ed. (Berlin: Springer, 2015), 189.

12. Segal, “Beyond Holocaust Studies,” 14.

Jewish-born grandparents. The law also prohibited Jews working in legal fields from government jobs, and private businesses were forbidden to employ more than twelve percent of Jews<sup>13</sup>. In 1941, an anti-Jewish law prohibited marriage between Jews and non-Jews, and sexual intercourses between Jewish men and non-prostitutes Hungarian-Arian women<sup>14</sup>. In addition, clause 7 of Decree 1850/1941 explicitly excluded Jews from the possibility of regaining Hungarian citizenship status based on citizenship before the Treaty of Trianon<sup>15</sup>. These procedures surely helped to confirm discrimination processes into mass violence.

From 1941 to 1942, the violence against Jews intensified under Prime Minister Laszlo Bárdossy, among others with the Nazi German massacre in Kamenets-Podolskyi in July 1941, where 23,600 Hungarian Jews were killed in Ukraine<sup>16</sup>. This event, described in 2014 as “a police action against aliens” by Sándor Szakály (Director of the controversial Veritas Research Institute), influenced regent Miklós Horthy to remove Bárdossy and appoint Miklós Kállay<sup>17</sup>. Although the latter exercised some restraints when dealing with the “Jewish Question” and Germans, he nevertheless supported antisemitic laws. Moreover, internal and external pressures pressed Kállay’s administration for more severe anti-Jewish laws that predisposed mass deportations<sup>18</sup>.

13. Valletta, *The Jewish Genocide in Hungary*, 10.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Segal, “Beyond Holocaust Studies,” 9.

16. Éva Kovács, “The Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year 2014,” Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (vwi), s.i.m.o.n, 2017, 114 (See also the Újvidék-massacre on January 1942 resulting in the death of 1000 Jewish and 2000 Serbs).

17. The Veritas Institute is considered the “quintessence of Fidesz’s politics of memory.” Simone Benazzo, “Not all the Past Needs to be Used: Features of Fidesz’s Politics of Memory,” *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics* 11 (2017): 208; JTA, “Hungarian Jewish Leaders Accuse Government of Minimizing Holocaust,” Haaretz, [Online]; <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/hungary-minimizes-holocaust-jews-say-1.5313498>; Paul A. Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary, 192-193*; Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 210-215.

18. Valletta, *The Jewish Genocide in Hungary*, 12.

On August 15, 1941, Hungary's leaders put an end to large-scale deportations<sup>19</sup>. German occupying forces in East Galicia emphasized that they would not allow further deportations. They grasped the significance of words such as “foreigners” and “non-Hungarian citizens” and understood that Hungarian authorities threatened many more than solely Jews without Hungarian citizenship<sup>20</sup>. The Hungarian state thus cautiously started to distance itself from Nazi Germany in 1942–1943 and pursued its own agenda of territorial reconquest while excluding masses of its own citizens—many of whom would have qualified themselves as Hungarians—based on ethnic and racial discriminations<sup>21</sup>. Antisemitic policies thus evolved according to Hungarian interests, which provoked mass violence that targeted Jews, but also Roma and Carpatho-Ruthenians in Subcarpathian Rus'<sup>22</sup>.

On March 19, 1944, Kállay resigned while German troops took over Hungary. German Nazi official Adolf Eichmann was put in charge of organizing the deportation of the Jews. However, Miklós Horthy remained in power and Döme Sztójay became the head of the Hungarian government<sup>23</sup>. Hence, while the German occupation radically altered Hungarian behavior, the decision-making process resulting in the deportation and extermination of most Jews was a joint decision. The collaboration was chiefly executed by Hungarian authorities up to the border of

19. Referring to a decree by Sándor Siménfalvy. Kinga Frojimovics, *I have been a stranger in a strange land: the Hungarian State and Jewish refugees in Hungary 1933–1945*, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem (2007), 126; See Segal, “Beyond Holocaust Studies,” 8.

20. For more information, see Segal, “Beyond Holocaust Studies,” 8–9.

21. For instance, in January 1942, Hungarian military units murdered 3,000 Jews and Serbs in Novi Sad, the major city in Hungarian-annexed Yugoslavia. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Hungary before the German Occupation,” [Online] <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/hungary-before-the-german-occupation>, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Consulted on February 21, 2020.

22. Árpád Siménfalvy, lord lieutenant of Ung County and the town of Ungvár, wrote in 1942: “[W]e Hungarians have to literally liquidate this [Jewish] question based on our own strength and resolution [...] because it would mean a terrible threat to our homeland if we postpone this question or wait for external forces to solve it.” See Segal, “Beyond Holocaust Studies,” 12–13.

23. Valletta, *The Jewish Genocide in Hungary*, 12.

Košice (Kassa in Hungarian), today in Slovakia, where control was handed over to the Nazis<sup>24</sup>. The German invasion seems to have only given the Hungarian authorities “an opportunity to move rapidly in their quest to remake society in the frame of Greater Hungary,” provoking mass violence<sup>25</sup>. The Hungarian government herded the following months, “up to fourteen thousand Jews a day into cattle cars destined for Auschwitz<sup>26</sup>.”

On July 7, 1944, under international pressure, Miklós Horthy stopped the deportations and was forced to resign on October 15, 1944, as the Hungarian fascist Arrow Cross took over<sup>27</sup>. Horthy's intervention, nowadays often praised by Viktor Orbán's government, did little to save the approximately 420,000 Jews already in Auschwitz and was of short-range. The Arrow Cross continued to deport Hungarian Jews and murder them on the banks of the Danube until February 1945, when Budapest surrendered to the Soviet army<sup>28</sup>. By the end of the war, most Hungarian Jewry had perished, with less than twenty percent of the Hungarian-Jewish population alive<sup>29</sup>.

The Holocaust in Hungary and its magnitude could not have happened without the endorsement of “a society guided by political and religious leaders that appeased and supported genocidal perpetrators” for their own interests and ideologies<sup>30</sup>. Since Horthy's persona is often praised, studying Horthy's and the Hungarian state's measures helps us underline agency and reiterates the necessity of the Hungarian state to acknowledge their actions and responsibilities. Notwithstanding official discourses that distort and shadow the past, beginning our historical

24. Lazc6, “Integrating Victims, Externalising Guilt?” 170.

25. Valletta, *The Jewish Genocide in Hungary*, 16.

26. *Ibid.*, 13.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Henriett Kovács and Ursula K. Mindler-Steiner, “Hungary and the Distortion of Holocaust History,” *Politics in Central Europe* 11, 2 (2015): 54.

29. Eva Kahana, Boaz Kahana and al., “Trauma and the Life Course in a Cross-National Perspective,” 312; “On the Buda-side of the Danube, since the end of June 1944, not a single Jew lived,” László Karsai. Correspondence on March 2, 2020).

30. Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary*, 222-224.



background from 1920 helps us better understand the slippery slope in which Hungary has ensured its actions and allows us to contrast the main current historical discourse of this past. Having highlighted Hungary's past and its participation in the Holocaust, it will now be engrossing to study the historiography and the politics of memory.

#### *HISTORIOGRAPHY & FIDESZ'S POLITICS OF MEMORY*

Followed by early scholarly works, survivors such as Béla Zsolt published several memoirs and literary pieces on the Holocaust between 1945 and 1948<sup>31</sup>. However, the communist era imposed an apparent rupture<sup>32</sup>. Despite the condemnation of the pre-1945 Hungarian regimes, attempts to externalize guilt were extensively practiced. Fascism appeared to be a crucial legitimating tool since German Nazis tended to be held responsible for what happened in Hungary<sup>33</sup>. It is thus not surprising that the first account of the Holocaust in Hungary that discusses the question of responsibility is considered to be published in the United States in 1981 by the American historian and political scientist Randolph L. Braham<sup>34</sup>. As emphasized by Ferenc Laczó, and despite early condemnations, Hungarian Holocaust historiography remained relatively marginal in the country until 1989<sup>35</sup>.

The fall of communism in 1989 and 1990 and the birth of the parliamentary democracy in Hungary then brought a certain freedom of research and publications<sup>36</sup>. An emerging challenge was to preserve an anti-fascist perspective without "reproducing the abuses of anti-fascism, and [to] create an effective form of

31. László Csósz and Ádám Gellért, "Holocaust Research and Infrastructure in Hungary," *DAPIM: Studies on the Holocaust* 31, 2 (2017): 146.

32. Laczó, "Integrating Victims, Externalising Guilt?" 172-173.

33. Laczó, "Caught between Historical Responsibility and the New Politics of History," 193.

34. H. Kovács and Mindler-Steiner, "Hungary and the Distortion of Holocaust History," 52.

35. Laczó, "Integrating Victims, Externalising Guilt?" 173.

36. Csósz and Gellért, "Holocaust Research and Infrastructure in Hungary," 147.

anti-communism without thereby relativizing Nazism and its crimes<sup>37</sup>.” However, the new regimes’ political leaders failed to confront the Holocaust openly<sup>38</sup>. Indeed, after the collapse of communism, Hungary, like other countries in Eastern Europe, sought to reinvent its national identity by rewriting and re-staging its recent history. Hence, the spread of more critical Hungarian perspectives on the Holocaust after 1989 was followed by attempts to weaken their impacts and influences since forgetting and historical errors are “essential” to create a nation<sup>39</sup>.

### On collective memory

Collective memory “serve[s] current political and societal goals” for the development of a collective identity and hence “deal[s] with the past in very selective ways<sup>40</sup>.” Consequently, collective representations do not necessarily seek historical accuracy but offer “a combination of historical facts with shared myths and beliefs essential in forming and maintaining a group identity<sup>41</sup>.”

Maurice Halbwachs argues that under the influence of particular needs and circumstances, groups construct collective memories by “selecting only threads of the past that warrant remembering, since humans seek evidence that validates and legitimizes the truths of their social and cultural past<sup>42</sup>.” As groups constitute a crucial source of personal value and esteem, people

37. Laczó, “Caught between Historical Responsibility and the New Politics of History,” 192.

38. Kahana and al., “Trauma and the Life Course in a Cross-National Perspective,” 312.

39. Ernst Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation, What is a nation?* (Toronto: Tapir Press, 1996), 19.

40. Karel van Nieuwenhuysse and Idesbald Goddeeris, “Why ‘colonialism’ as a concept causes confusion, and exploration of alternatives within historiography,” in *Colonialism and decolonization in national historical cultures and memory politics in Europe: modules for history lessons*, Uta Fenske, ed. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang Edition, 2015), 201.

41. Gilad Hirschberger, Anna Kende and Shoshana Weinstein, “Defensive representations of an uncomfortable history: The case of Hungary and the Holocaust,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 55 (2016): 33.

42. Valletta. *The Jewish Genocide in Hungary*, 2.

will tend to selectively forget historical episodes that threaten their social identity.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, in the process of forgetting and tapering specific elements, several defense mechanisms may appear.

For instance, defensive representations can include attempts to revise the collective perception of uncomfortable historical events by attributing wrongdoings to external pressure. Such modifications can potentially absolve and put members of a group “on the same moral pedestal as the victim group<sup>44</sup>.” This can create a competitive victimhood mechanism, wherein members of a group feel that their victimhood is not adequately acknowledged and deepen intergroup tensions<sup>45</sup>. Suffering, here, begets other forms of suffering without fulfilling any restorative processes. The case study I have chosen for this paper exemplifies such a defense mechanism by attributing the external pressure to Germany<sup>46</sup>.

The past can also be relativized. Historian Dominick LaCapra suggests that this interpretative procedure—for example, the comparison of Nazi crimes with other modern genocides methods such as the use of the Gulag—tends to normalize events to make them disappear in vast historical contexts, generating a less decisive process of responsibility<sup>47</sup>. Insofar as this process works, it can also “mitigate or obliterate the trauma caused by the Shoah and obviate the need to come to terms with it and to

43. Bajlinder Sahdra and Michael Ross, “Group identification and Historical Memory,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 33, 3 (2007): 384-395.

44. Hirschberger, Kende and Weinstein, “Defensive representations of an uncomfortable history,” 33.

45. Nyla R. Branscombe and al., “The Context and Context of Social Identity Threat,” in *Social Identity: Context, Commitment, Content*, Naomi Ellemers, Russel Spears and Bertian Doosje, eds., (Oxford, England: Blackwell Science, 1999).

46. The House of Terror, a museum in Budapest that deals with the terrors perpetrated by both the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party and the Communist regime, is another example of such a maneuver. The museum uses discourses of victimhood and survivors’ testimonies of the Gulag or the Communist secret police. Yet, the museum that also tries to represent the Holocaust (to a certain extent) fails to find a space for Jewish voices since it would mitigate and undermine the generalization of Hungarians as victims. Although both non-Jewish Hungarians and Jewish Hungarians suffered under those regimes, the specificities of both periods are erased and relativized.

47. LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 50.

mourn the principal victims of the Holocaust<sup>48</sup>.” Thus, members of the nation’s involvement and actions can be neglected while a more “positive” collective identity can emerge<sup>49</sup>.

### Rewriting Memories—Treaty of Trianon

The last two decades thus witnessed “several attempts in Eastern Europe to rewrite history and exercise various forms of state control over the interpretations of major historical events<sup>50</sup>.” Specific events such as the Treaty of Trianon played an impressive extent in nationalizing the history of Hungary. Within this context, the nationalistic interpretation of Hungarian history gained such an overwhelming hegemony that it blocked any development of reflective and critical memory politics and led to the integration of the Treaty of Trianon as a national trauma<sup>51</sup>. As historian László Karsai mentions, “The greatest tragedy was Trianon, and everything else was not so important<sup>52</sup>.”

However, the Treaty was not always understood as this national trauma. Indeed, in 1990, Fidesz’s members left the room in protest as the Speaker of the Parliament György Szabad asked the assembly to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon<sup>53</sup>. For Ferenc Laczó, this particular trauma is “in a way a cultural-political construct [where one] can really track how something that was in the late 90s only discussed with the far-right and not discussed in the mainstream parties is now very mainstream<sup>54</sup>.” Perhaps, the contemporary memory of the Treaty of Trianon could only have been created when no living witnesses of that event would have questioned it. After all, there was no such thing as a common and uniform experience of

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48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*

50. Csósz and Gellért, “Holocaust Research and Infrastructure in Hungary,” 150.

51. É. Kovács, “The Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year 2014,” 111.

52. Karsai, (interview on December 9 and 10, 2019).

53. Benazzo, “Not all the Past Needs to be Used,” 212.

54. Laczó, (interview on December 19, 2019).

Trianon<sup>55</sup>. Ferenc Laczó notes that even though the majority of people suffered from the border changes, they were also people for whom this was a positive change.

If you do not talk about that, then you really ethnicize history and you kind of claim victimhood. [...] You cannot compare a genocide with border changes. It is very problematic because it emphasizes things in a way—it says that the Holocaust is the trauma of the Jews, and Trianon is the trauma of the Hungarians, the non-Jews<sup>56</sup>.

The trauma of Trianon can be considered as a cultural trauma developed by conscious mediated and repeated efforts to educate the nation. It stresses that Hungarians and Hungary were victims of Trianon, allows to find explanations for Hungarians' actions during the Holocaust, and permits practicing guilt's externalization. This exploitation of vagueness, currently beneficial to Fidesz's government and national memory, can be related to Jean Baudrillard's *simulacra*, in which, after the collapse of an empire, "nothing remained but the map, or the simulation of the land that once was a powerful empire<sup>57</sup>." It keeps the past alive in contemporary society and gives an orientation for the future of that society. Hence, the Holocaust constituted this threat of the past that must be reworked to validate and legitimize the nation's history, whereas the Treaty of Trianon underwent the theory of invented traditions emphasized by Halbwachs—whereby nations exist through symbolic practices and beliefs.

In sum, the research's delay regarding the Holocaust in Hungary and the early guilt externalisation's practices have given more ways to occasional denunciations that often dismiss the victims' voices and scholars' critics while enhancing a nationalistic agenda on Hungary's past that is instrumentalized by

55. As historian Gábor Egry highlights; See also Benazzo, "Not all the Past Needs to be Used," 211.

56. Laczó, (interview on December 19, 2019).

57. Pető, "Hungary's Holocaust Simulacrum," in Project syndicate (2019), 19, [Online], <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/hungary-holocaust-museums-simulacrum-by-andrea-peto-2019-08> (Page consulted on March 3, 2020).

the government. While more and more scholars are currently criticizing this predominant view, the nationalistic memory discourse still prevails.

### Fidesz's politics of Memory

During Fidesz's first term in office (1998–2002), the 20<sup>th</sup> century was officially reinterpreted in an anti-totalitarian setting, and the Hungarian nation was presented as the victim of two foreign totalitarian aggressors. Prior to its full inclusion into the European Union structures, when Hungary was eager to be a full member of the EU, it dedicated itself to participating in international efforts for furthering Holocaust remembrance<sup>58</sup>. This can be underlined by the laying of the foundations of the Holocaust Memorial Centre in 2004—the same year of Hungary's accession to the EU. However, the Holocaust also served as a point of comparison for the Communist terror. Indeed, Fidesz's policy has incorporated into a larger narrative both the German Nazism and Soviet Communism era as “twin evils<sup>59</sup>.” As Ferenc Laczó highlights, this anti-totalitarian narrative “serves the purpose of nationalist self-exculpation,” while the anti-communist impulse “overshadows and relativize the fascist past<sup>60</sup>.” Although both

58. Laczó, “Integrating Victims, Externalising Guilt?,” 168; “It is only in the 90s, when Hungary sort of ‘Europeanized’ and ‘Westernized’ that there is a serious effort to commemorate the Holocaust.” (Interview with Ferenc Laczó on December 19, 2019).

59. Laczó, “Integrating Victims, Externalising Guilt?,” 175.

60. Laczó, “Caught between Historical Responsibility and the New Politics of History,” 193; The museum House of Terror in Budapest, through uses of technologized remembrance, juxtaposition of images and names of perpetrators of antisemitic crimes placed directly with victims of the Holocaust in a room reserved for victims, and by implementing a cocktail of historical facts not fully and rightly represented, is again an obvious example that absolves Hungary of any responsibility. I must thank historian László Karsai who guided me through the museum. A room presents several pictures of victims of the Nazi and Communist rule in Hungary. Closer attention allowed us to see names such as Remenyi-Schneller Lajos—Minister of Economy from the Pál Teleki cabinet (that proposed and enacted far-reaching anti-Jewish laws), who regularly informed the Germans about the Hungarian political developments and who was hanged in 1946 in Budapest for war crimes and high treason. We also found Kun Andras—a Roman Catholic priest of the Franciscan Order who was the

non-Jewish Hungarians and Jewish Hungarians suffered under those regimes, the specificities of both periods are erased and relativized.

The rejection of Hungarian responsibility and historical revision took on additional forces. The nationalist approaches to history have been centered on Hungarian traumas and victimhood while accompanied by much more positive assessments of the interwar period and regime. For instance, the Horthy period (1920–1944) presents an essential element of national continuity. Nowadays, Miklós Horthy's era not only provides the current government with a historical precedent to base its own legitimacy but also inspires policies and legitimizes Fidesz's rule<sup>61</sup>. Consequently, attempts have been made to downsize Horthy's implications in implementing antisemitic measures and the Holocaust in Hungary<sup>62</sup>.

Orbán's second term in 2010 has devoted particular concern and economic resources to implementing Fidesz's vision of history. For instance, since 2010, Hungary has held the Trianon Remembrance Day on June 4, nowadays one of the most important memorial days<sup>63</sup>. Hungary's EU membership provided the government with substantial leverage against the EU, allowing Fidesz to find itself in the best position to construct its own version of history with even fewer obstacles<sup>64</sup>. As a result, in 2011, the new Hungarian Constitution (which the process remained hidden from the public) officially claimed that Hungary lost its

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commander of an antisemitic death squad for the Arrow Cross Party—and Pálffy Fidél—a Hungarian nobleman who was a leading supporter of Nazism in Hungary and became an important contact for Wilhelm Höttl during his work on behalf of the SS in Budapest. See Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 201; Kati Marton, *Wallenberg: Missing Hero* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1995), 137; and Philip Rees, *Biographical Dictionary of the Extreme Right Since 1890* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 287.

61. Benazzo, "Not all the Past Needs to be Used," 212.

62. For instance, Deborah Cornelius argues that Horthy actually "saved the Budapest Jews," hence why Horthy was not indicted in the Nuremberg war-crimes trials. Deborah S. Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II. Caught in the Cauldron* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 393.

63. É. Kovács, "The Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year 2014," 112.

64. Benazzo, "Not all the Past Needs to be Used," 200.

independence and sovereignty when it was occupied by Nazi Germany in March 1944 and only regained them in March 1990, after the fall of the Communist regime<sup>65</sup>. With this statement, Hungary has officially constitutionalized the state's innocence for the atrocities committed and has denied its responsibility for the deportation of Jews following the spring and summer months of 1944 and after mid-October of the same year, while silencing all the anti-Jewish laws and restrictions that were present before the German invasion.

Specific collective memories, such as the Treaty of Trianon, the Holocaust, and the Communist period are targeted to enact a sense of national belonging through trauma and exculpate wrongdoing. There is a longing for the "homogenization of national history by marginalizing the unfitting elements"<sup>66</sup>. These events serve as a prolific strategy to carry out a nationalistic discourse and divert the nation from internal problems<sup>67</sup>. The main goal of Fidesz's politics of memory is to present the current government as the ultimate political actor that can restore "Hungary's sovereignty, liberate the country from oppressive external encroachment, and carry out the nation's will"<sup>68</sup>. Orbán's government operates as a *simulacrum* to achieve political means and restore and protect what is believed to be lost or under threat. This achievement can then drive the party's construction of national history and serves as a canvas for other contemporary issues. To better understand Fidesz's politics of memory and its concretization, I argue that a specific case study symbolizes the cumulation of Orbán's policy on the memory discourse in Hungary and highlights dissident voices.

65. *Ibid.*, 206, and É. Kovács, "The Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year 2014," 113; For Ferenc Laczó, dating the independence in March 1990 is historically incorrect since even if one accepted the narrative of the lost independence in 1944, the most appropriate date should be 1989 or 1991. (Interview on December 19, 2019).

66. Benazzo, "Not all the Past Needs to be Used," 198.

67. *Ibid.*, 212.

68. *Ibid.*, 199.



## CASE STUDY—MONUMENT IN LIBERTY SQUARE

In October 2013, as part of an effort to dispel the growing international perceptions that Fidesz's government was being weak in combating antisemitism, the government hired a New York public relations office to better reach out to the Jewish community<sup>69</sup>. In the same month, Deputy Prime Minister Tibor Navracsics stated at the conference "Jewish life and anti-Semitism" held in Budapest that it was time for Hungarians to accept their responsibility for their role in the Holocaust. This statement was followed by a declaration by the Hungarian Ambassador Csaba Kőrösi at the United Nations, highlighting that the Hungarian state was guilty of the Holocaust in Hungary and that country owes an apology<sup>70</sup>.

The year 2014 seemed to be a perfect opportunity for the government to apply this reasoning. It was the 70<sup>th</sup> remembrance anniversary of the deportation of Hungarian Jews, the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hungary's accession to the EU, and a parliamentary elections year<sup>71</sup>. 2014 was hence dubbed the Holocaust Memorial Year. The official document created for the commemoration year described the Holocaust as a "tragedy of the entire Hungarian nation"<sup>72</sup>, and the government created a Civil Fund of 1.8 billion Forints (approximately six million Euros) to sponsor civil-society remembrance, which supported 400 applications by January 8<sup>73</sup>. The program included nationwide commemoration services, funding for memorial projects and publications, renovation of synagogues, and the establishment of the House of Fates at Józsefváros railway station—which caused a huge controversy<sup>74</sup>. While the commemoration year was considered a necessary opportunity to have a platform of discussion between

69. Rorke, "Hungary's Fidesz and its 'Jewish Question.'"

70. January 24, 2014. *Ibid.*

71. Kovács and Mindler-Steiner, "Hungary and the Distortion of Holocaust History," 56.

72. Lazsó, "Integrating Victims, Externalising Guilt?," 175-176.

73. É. Kovács, "The Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year 2014," 114.

74. H. Kovács and Mindler-Steiner, "Hungary and the Distortion of Holocaust History," 55.

the two polarized memory discourses, by May, eighteen of the winning applicants refused the government funding due to several controversies such as the establishment of the House of Fates and the Veritas Research Institutes<sup>75</sup>.

One of the controversies that sparked fuel concerned the government's announcement on January 17, 2014, to erect a monument on Budapest's Szabadság Tér (Liberty Square) that would commemorate the German occupation and present all Hungarians as victims of the Nazi regime<sup>76</sup>. Approved by a derisory five-member committee, this process materializes in a memorial site the victims into wartime causalities<sup>77</sup>. Since monument-buildings are "a hallmark of modern nationalism and formation of modern nation states," the monument operates just as the rehabilitation campaign of the Horthy regime, allowing the restoration of a nationalistic memory discourse to erase all responsibility and enable a victimization discourse<sup>78</sup>. Nevertheless, Pierre Nora and Luís António Umbelino's conceptions of space have shown that "space cannot be but intertwined with memory thus becoming a battlefield for opposed memory actors"<sup>79</sup>.

For the historian Randolph L. Braham, the memorial is "a cowardly attempt to detract attention from the Horthy regime's involvement in the destruction of the Jews and to homogenize the Holocaust with the 'suffering' of the Hungarians"<sup>80</sup>. It is seen as a governmental effort to rewrite history and "exonerate the country from its role in the Holocaust"<sup>81</sup>. Following the announcement,

75. Ferenc Laczó, "Integrating Victims, Externalising Guilt?," 176.

76. H. Kovács and Mindler-Steiner, "Hungary and the Distortion of Holocaust History," 57.

77. Erőss, "In memory of victims': Monument and counter-monument in Liberty Square, Budapest," in *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin* 65 (2016), 241.

78. *Ibid.*, 239.

79. Benazzo, "Not all the Past Needs to be Used," 204-205.

80. Rorke, "Hungary's Fidesz and its 'Jewish Question.'"

81. In reaction to this monument, historian Randolph L. Braham returned the high state award he had received from the Hungary in 2011. Associated Press, "Holocaust survivor and historian returns award to Hungary in protest," in *The Guardian*, 26 January (2014), [Online]; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/26/holocaust-historian-braham-hungary-award-protest>

Krisztián Ungváry and around two dozen other historians (including Gábor Gyáni, Mária Ormos, etc.) denounced in an open letter the government's distortion of history<sup>82</sup>. Moreover, the Federation of the Hungarian Jewish Communities (MAZSIHISZ) ended up calling for a boycott of the commemoration year and returned the state's subvention it had been awarded. Expressing regrets at the failure to establish a dialogue successfully, András Heisler, the head of MAZSIHISZ, told me:

They gave my federation a lot of money, about 1 million dollars. [...] They erected a new monument in the Freedom Square, [which] is a lie showing the German army and the occupation with the "poor Hungarians." We had a big [general assembly] and decided to commemorate separately and give back the money. [...] It is a strong statement and reaction by us<sup>83</sup>.

Some of those who refused to cooperate with the Civil Fund also launched an alternative platform, *Memento 70—Tisztán emlékezzünk* (Memento 70—We Remember Purely) on April 17, 2014. This independent movement of Holocaust commemoration included crucial Hungarian Jewish institutions, such as MAZSIHISZ, the Magyar Zsidó Kulturális Egyesület—one of the leading Jewish cultural associations of Hungary—the Budapest University of Jewish Studies, the Hungarian Jewish Museum, the Hungarian Jewish Archive, and the Hungarian Zionist Alliance<sup>84</sup>. The monument, which was supposed to be inaugurated on March 19, 2014 (70 years after the German invasion), was postponed due to the criticisms. Nevertheless, on April 8, two days after Viktor Orbán's party won the parliamentary elections, the construction began, and the last parts of the monument were put into place during the night of July 20–21, under police surveillance<sup>85</sup>.

82. Kovács and Mindler-Steiner, "Hungary and the Distortion of Holocaust History," 57.

83. Heisler (interview on December 10, 2019).

84. Laczó, "Integrating Victims, Externalising Guilt?," 176–177.

85. Kovács and Mindler-Steiner, "Hungary and the Distortion of Holocaust History," 58.

## The Liberty Square Monument

The monument depicts Hungary as an archangel with its arms outstretched, holding an orb in its right hand (fig.1). Over its head, a black German imperial eagle is carrying a ring bearing 1944, referring to the year of the German invasion<sup>86</sup>. According to the artist's project, the composition is "an allegory displaying the battle between 'two cultures,' where the eagle is brutal and aggressive while archangel Gabriel stands still and serene<sup>87</sup>." The monument distorts entirely and, in a new unprecedented way, Hungary's role in sending Hungarian Jews and Roma to the death camps by blaming external forces and silencing the procedures that influenced these actions. The dedication to all victims also glosses over the fact that different people were targeted for specific reasons. In contrast to Orbán, who suggested that the monument is "morally precise and immaculate," the monument completely falsifies the past by confusing the clear line between perpetrators and victims<sup>88</sup>. It symbolizes the government's approach to the past; instrumentalizing historical facts not fully and rightly represented, mixed with a strong nationalistic view that is strengthened by the lack of explanation and allows the state's self-victimization.

However, the government's politics of memory did not go uncontested. Scholar Simone Benazzo stresses that overestimating the monument's impact and perceiving the public as passive can be misleading, which allows us to study the ongoing struggle between these conflictual memories<sup>89</sup>. The creation of a counter-memorial and the actions taken to criticize Fidesz's memory discourse thus need further investigation.

86. Erőss, "In memory of victims," 242.

87. *Ibid.*

88. É. Kovács, "The Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year 2014," 116.

89. Benazzo, "Not all the Past Needs to be Used," 214.

## The Living Memorial

The announcement by the Fidesz's government of the construction of the memorial was followed by a new form of protests which emerged on March 23, a flashmob, titled *Eleven Emlékmű—az én történelmem* (Living Memorial—My History)<sup>90</sup>. These protests mobilized domestic and international journalists, intellectuals, artists, families, Hungarian Jewish institutions, and curators. Attendees were asked to bring personal items from Holocaust victims, which provoked the second phase of the protest and the beginning of the counter-memorial while allowing them to “broke the barriers of silence among the second generation of Holocaust survivors<sup>91</sup>.”

The second phase of the protest started on April 9 and lasted until July 20, which is considered to be the most active period of the protest, where “every day a group of protesters was present taking care of the items of the ever-growing counter-monument, and regular cultural events were organised<sup>92</sup>.” The counter-memorial, under the name *Eleven Emlékmű* (Living Memorial), contains objects gradually accumulated, such as written messages and everyday artefacts. Family pictures, testimonies, and personal belongings are displayed to counter the government's memory discourse.

In response to the official monument, the counter-memorial created in March 2014 allows to exhibit an alternative form of memory and presents an ever-evolving composition (fig.1 and 2). Situated in front of the monument, it represents a powerful image of how to challenge the official and imposed narrative of Hungary's history and “defies the legitimacy of the official conception of victimhood by direct references to the suffering of Hungarian Jews” and other victims<sup>93</sup>. It has since become the

90. Erőss, “In memory of victims,” 247.

91. É. Kovács, “The Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year 2014,” 118.

92. Erőss, “In memory of victims,” 247–248; Ph.D. candidate and activist (interview on December 11, 2019).

93. Erőss, “In memory of victims,” 237.

longest prevailing regular opposition movement against Orbán's government<sup>94</sup>. Besides, the group *Living Memorial—My History* organizes public discussions on topics like the politics of memory and sociopolitical issues. The Living Memorial encourages conversations and questions with these public gatherings, while short descriptions are available in several languages (English, German, Hebrew, Italian, French, and Russian) to explain the protest and the context.

Consequently, the monument of the German invasion became an example of the Hungarian government's failure to create national consensus in collective memory. One could argue that Fidesz's attempt to build a national and homogenous memory has aggravated the polarization and reinforced divisions. The Holocaust commemoration year has most probably shown the clash between personal and national memories (fig.2). Fortunately, as Ágnes Erőss suggests, the state monument's failure offered civilians an opportunity to gain visibility and develop a successful counter-memory discourse over the imposed nationalistic one<sup>95</sup>. Moreover, it seems that the internet and social media have become increasingly essential for sharing memories and testimonies, organizing and sharing information. For instance, the Facebook group *A Holokauszt és a családom* (The Holocaust and My Family) collects personal accounts, memories, pictures, documents, and (re)connects people to their family histories<sup>96</sup>. Nowadays, with over 8,100 members, some stories were performed in a Budapest theatre in 2014 and published in a book a year later<sup>97</sup>.

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Even in its falsifications, repression, displacements, and denials, memory may nonetheless be informative not in

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94. *Ibid.*, 242.

95. *Ibid.*, 252.

96. É. Kovács, "The Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year 2014," 118-119.

97. *Ibid.*

terms of an accurate empirical representation of its object but in terms of that object's often anxiety-ridden reception and assimilation by both participants in events and those born later. —Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*.<sup>98</sup>

Memory is a pillar for the central component of a group's collective consciousness. It influences social construction and constraint and shapes people's thinking, understanding, actions, and commemorations. Memory practices are produced and manipulated by institutional actors while being active amongst society. They orient action in the present, as they also construct the past to embody present's concerns. Thus, the government's chosen memory discourse is alarming, especially since Henriett Kovács and Ursula K. Mindler-Steiner reiterate that these issues are not followed by the entire country and that the majority of the Hungarian nation does not engage actively in this issue<sup>99</sup>.

Nevertheless, and as seen with the Living Memorial, collective memory is a form of "a galaxy of scattered individual memories that do not necessarily overlap with the more established historical accounts, nor aim to join any of them"<sup>100</sup>. Hence, despite the government's substantial financial effort and commitment, this paper concludes with a more optimistic view that so far, Fidesz's actions have not allowed the erasure of the plurality of memories since collective memory is not homogenous<sup>101</sup>.

There is, however, a considerable danger that has already provoked consequences in reevaluating and instrumentalizing the "official" memory discourse. Indeed, using George Soros' figure for political aims (which has increased the level of antisemitic incidents) and having antisemitic tropes circulating within the

98. LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 19.

99. H. Kovács and Mindler-Steiner (interview on December 11, 2019); and "people don't really care and don't know why this narrative is problematic." Ph.D. candidate and activist for the Living Memorial (interview on December 11, 2019).

100. Benazzo, "Not all the Past Needs to be Used," 215.

101. See Reinhart Koselleck, "Gibt es ein kollektives Gedächtnis?", *Divinatio* 19, 2 (2004): 6.

government (while using their close relationship with Israel to expiate any comporments) only reiterate the danger of a nationalist memory discourse that facilitates the current political agenda<sup>102</sup>. As a study has shown that states play a central role in building interethnic relationships, which are then internalized by members of the groups, the consequences of following such programs are becoming more apparent and surge over other issues (e.g., “Refugee Crisis” in Hungary)<sup>103</sup>.

Hence, a lack of common language between the two main discourses is contributing to the polarization of the Hungarian memory culture. This article stresses the imperative necessity to continue such discussion and be aware of the dangers of the distortion of memory in Hungary and other countries, such as Poland, for political and nationalistic aims. Counter-memory works such as the Living Memorial and discussions such as this one are required not to silence the real victims of this past and enable double violence to their story. Further reflections on competitive victimhood, which currently hinders discussions and restorative processes and begets additional suffering, must additionally be deepened in future academic conversations on violence and responsibility.

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102. “With 4500 billboards of Soros 4 years ago, and the iconographic representation, we saw that antisemitic incidents (such as graffiti) became higher.” (Andrea Heisler, interview on December 10, 2019); Moreover, his speech at the 170th anniversary of the revolution of 1848 has shown antisemitic and xenophobic images: “We must fight against an opponent which is different from us. [...] they do not fight directly, but by stealth; they are not honorable, but unprincipled; they are not national, but international; they do not believe in work, but speculate with money; they have no homeland, but feel that the whole world is theirs. They are not generous, but vengeful, and always attack the heart—especially if it is red, white and green [Hungarian national colors].” Joshua Shanes. “Netanyahu, Orban, and the Resurgence of Antisemitism: lessons of the last Century,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 37, 1 (Spring 2019): 112.

103. Diana Dumitru and Carter Johnson, “Constructing Interethnic Conflict and Cooperation: Why Some People Harmed Jews and Others Helped Them during the Holocaust in Romania,” *World Politics* 63, 1 (2011): 1-42.



ANNEX

*Fig. 1:*

The German Memorial and the Living Memorial facing each other and representing the dichotomy between the "official" memory and familial memories of the Holocaust in Hungary.



*Fig 2:*

Few days after my first visit, the Living Memorial was vandalized. Here lies the Hungarian Flag. The Living memorial is often vandalize

